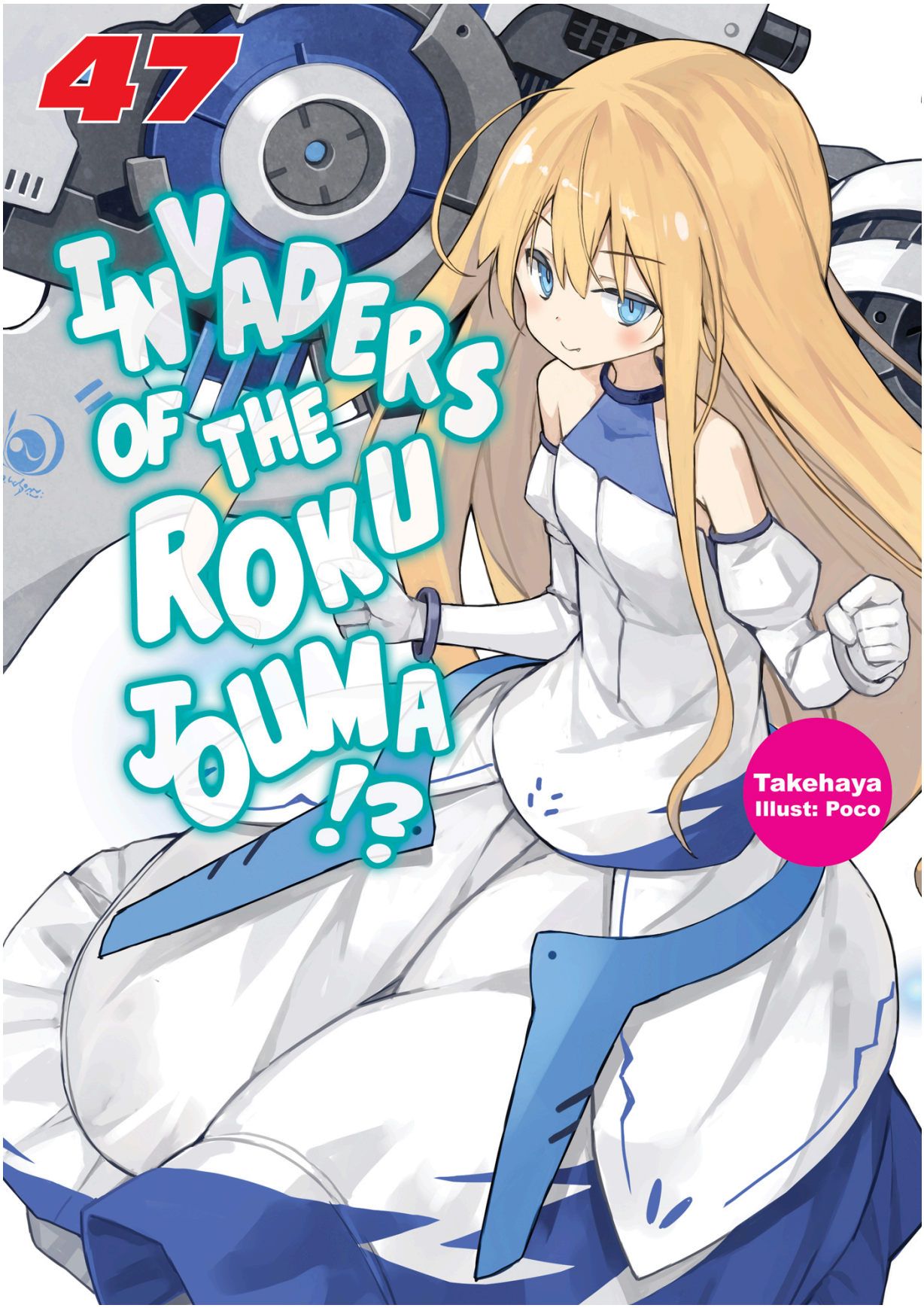
47

Invaders of the Roku Jouma!?

Takehaya
Illust: Poco



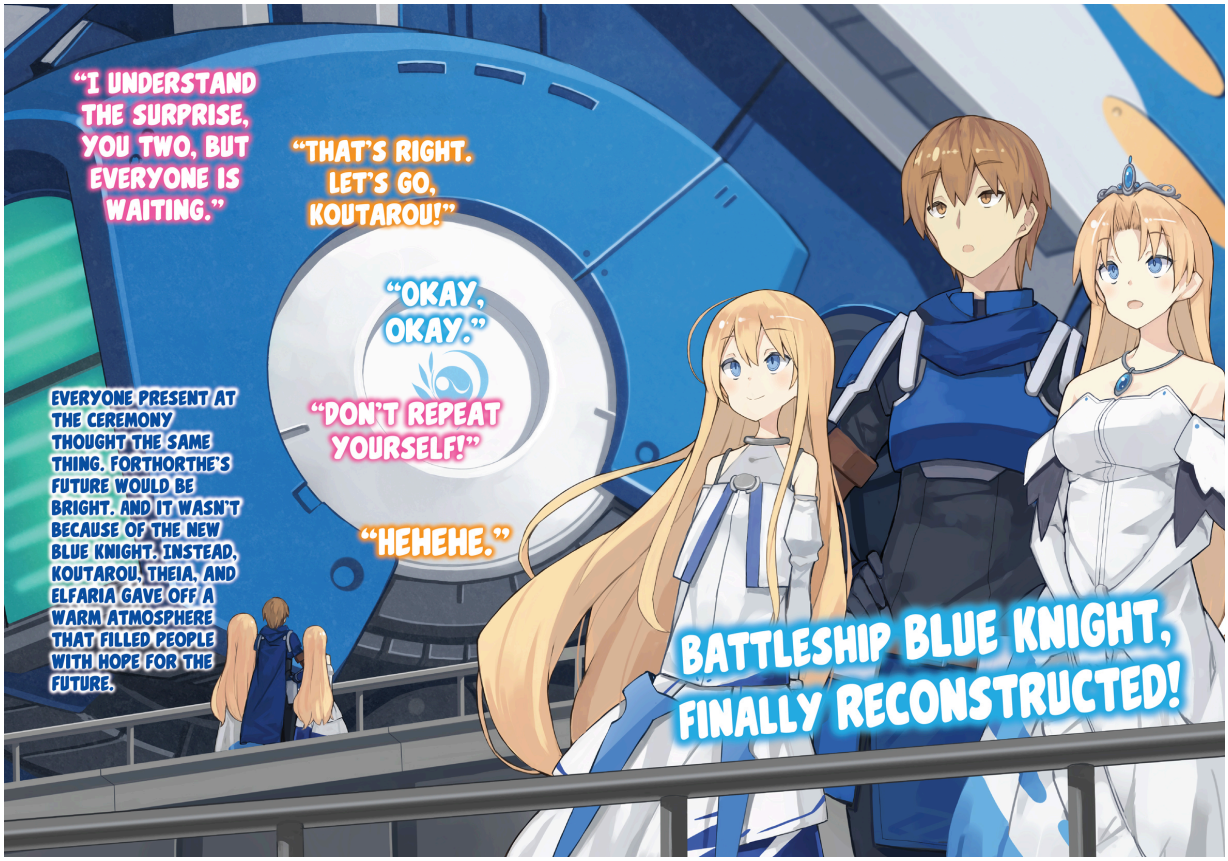

47
Invaders of the Rokujouma!?
Takehaya
Illust: Poco



INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 47



KONA HOUSE ROOM 106


"I UNDERSTAND THE SURPRISE, YOU TWO, BUT EVERYONE IS WAITING."
"THAT'S RIGHT. LET'S GO, KOUTAROU!"
"OKAY, OKAY."
"DON'T REPEAT YOURSELF!"
"HEHEHE."
EVERYONE PRESENT AT THE CEREMONY THOUGHT THE SAME THING. FORTHORTHE'S FUTURE WOULD BE BRIGHT. AND IT WASN'T BECAUSE OF THE NEW BLUE KNIGHT. INSTEAD, KOUTAROU, THEIA, AND ELFARIA GAVE OFF A WARM ATMOSPHERE THAT FILLED PEOPLE WITH HOPE FOR THE FUTURE.
BATTLESHIP BLUE KNIGHT, FINALLY RECONSTRUCTED!


Wielding a new sword, the guardian of the empire soars through space yet again.
Length 2044m
weight 16,450,200t
Combat Rating
(RBS Average = 1.000)
Output 8.020
Attack 3.969
Defence 4.433
Mobility 1.103
Main Weapon
Star-to-Star Superior Energy Sword “Signalteinn A1”
Double Barrel Anti Matter Artillery Gun “Genesis Buster D”
Variable Property Beam Cannon “Powder Snow”
High Concentration Laser “Shiny Flower”
Multiple Launch Star-to-Star Missile System “Fairy Dust M”
FGI 1st Guards Army Chivalry Battle Star-1
“The Guardian of Fortorthe Layous Fatra Veltlion”

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FACTIONS MAP



KASAGI SHIZUKA
Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House. Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA
Heiress of the underground who's finally found her beloved. With her quick wits and big heart, she's a master of both tactics and love.

UNDERGROUND DWELLERS
(OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)



SATOMI KOUTAROU
Our protagonist, and the formal tenant of room 106. Also the Blue Knight.

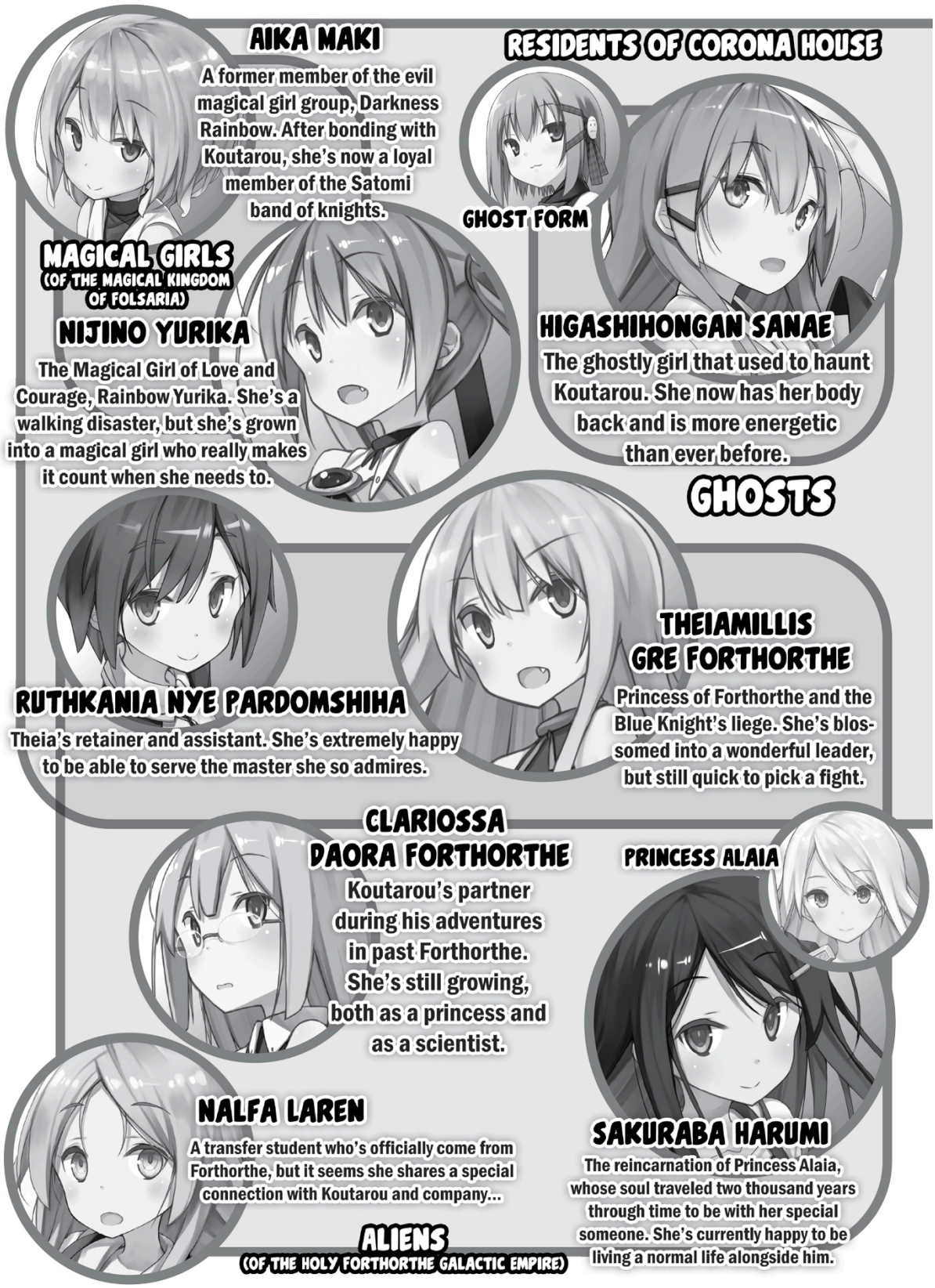


MATSUDAIRA KENJI
Koutarou's best friend and partner in crime. He can be a bit tasteless, but he's a good guy at heart.

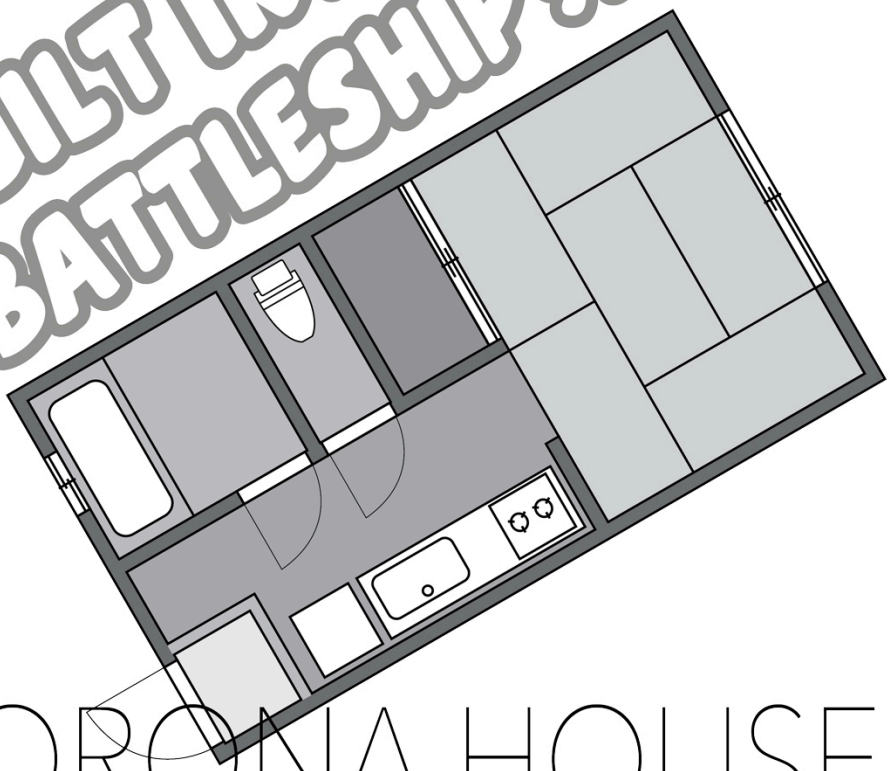


MATSUDAIRA KOTORI
Kenji's little sister, but you'd never know it. An introvert through and through. She's now enrolled at Harukaze High.

KOUTAROU'S CHILDHOOD FRIENDS


AIKA MAKI
A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. After bonding with Koutarou, she's now a loyal member of the Satomi band of knights.
RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE
GHOST FORM
HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE
The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back and is more energetic than ever before.
MAGICAL GIRLS
(OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)
NIJINO YURIKA
The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow Yurika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.
GHOSTS
RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA
Theia's retainer and assistant. She's extremely happy to be able to serve the master she so admires.
THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE
Princess of Forthorthe and the Blue Knight's liege. She's blossomed into a wonderful leader, but still quick to pick a fight.
CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE
Koutarou's partner during his adventures in past Forthorthe. She's still growing, both as a princess and as a scientist.
PRINCESS ALAIA
NALFA LAREN
A transfer student who's officially come from Forthorthe, but it seems she shares a special connection with Koutarou and company...
SAKURABA HARUMI
The reincarnation of Princess Alaia, whose soul traveled two thousand years through time to be with her special someone. She's currently happy to be living a normal life alongside him.
ALIENS
(OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

BUILT INTO A BATTLESHIP?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

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Everyone's Circumstances

Friday, December 9th

Due to the nature of magic, the court magicians directly served the empress. Since magic was being kept out of the public eye for the moment, they were forced to keep its existence a secret. Even so, theirs were official positions, and the girls could freely enter the palace.

"If you are coming to see me in the middle of the day," Maki started off, "you must have brought some serious problem with you, Crimson."

"That is some greeting, Maki," Crimson replied. "I am still a government employee, so of course I'll come to you in the open."

Crimson had come to see Maki. Her coworker, Green, was with her, and they were currently in a guardroom near the palace entrance. Rather than searching for Maki all over the vast palace, Crimson had called her to the entrance.

"Well, it is certainly trouble, Navy," Green said.

"And it's something we can't talk about here?" Maki asked.

"Yes, that is how serious it is." Green nodded. She normally felt a sense of rivalry toward Maki, but not right now. Considering that Crimson was in a rush as well, Maki decided to hurry and take action.

"In that case, follow me. We can talk in my room." With that, Maki began walking, and Crimson followed right behind her.

"I'm glad you're so quick on the uptake, Maki," Crimson said.

"You always come barging in with something, so I've gotten used to it."

"And you're as sharp as always," Crimson shot back.

"By the way, Green, how is everyone doing?" Maki spun around and looked at Green, who was following slightly behind Crimson.

“They are keeping busy,” she answered. “We just don’t have enough people.”

“Well, there’s only a few of you,” Maki replied.

The girls spoke while omitting the subject. Even though they were in the palace, there was no telling who was listening.

“We are getting reinforcements, but...” Green said.

“Space is vast.” Maki smiled wryly. “I understand your struggle.”

Since there were only a few magicians to begin with, the court magicians suffered from a constant shortage. Because of that, the girls needed to fly all over the galaxy like Koutarou and his group. As the three of them were talking about recent developments, they reached the courtyard.

“Oh, looks like they’re doing something fun over there!” Crimson’s eyes shone as she spotted some familiar faces in the courtyard.

“You hold the bat like this, okay?” Koutarou explained.

“Like this?” Nalfa asked nervously.

“Hold your hands the other way around,” Kenji told her.

“So...like this?” Nalfa asked once more.

“You got it!” Koutarou exclaimed. He and Kenji were teaching Nalfa how to play baseball in the courtyard.

Kotori, meanwhile, was filming them. They all had their hands full with work but occasionally took breaks to move their bodies in the courtyard. That was when Crimson and the others passed by.

“All right!” Crimson gleefully ran over to the group.

This prompted Green to sigh. “Didn’t we come here for a serious discussion?”

“Oh, what’s the harm?” Maki asked.

The conversation was something that could wait until later in the day. It was an urgent matter but not life-threatening, so there was still time for a diversion.

“She can’t be stopped when she’s like this,” Maki said. She didn’t seem particularly upset and casually followed Crimson. If anything, she was glad to see that Crimson was the same as always. Besides, if it was something important, she would have to tell Koutarou anyway, so it wasn’t a serious loss of time.

“Jeez, she’s always so selfish!” Green cried.

In the end, Green relented and followed them. Although she might complain, she always ended up doing what Crimson wanted.

Nalfa wasn't the type to be proactive when it came to relationships, but she could watch the people she loved forever. Filming or streaming was an extension of that, and she found value in making records. Anything beyond that was a bonus, as with today. When she spotted Koutarou and Kenji playing catch, she simply watched them.

"Couldn't you throw some real curveballs with those psychic powers?" Kenji asked.

"I've never tried it, but I think I could," Koutarou answered.

"Why don't you try it out?"

"Okay, then watch out, Mackenzie. I've never done this before, so I don't know where the ball will go!"

"Let's see it."

Koutarou looked happy. He always had a lot of important work, so spending time with friends like this was precious. Since he was able to relax, his smile looked kinder than usual.

"Are you sure you just want to watch, Nal-chan?" Kotori asked.

"Ugh..."

Kotori's words shook Nalfa. She had the urge to go to Koutarou as well.

"But Mackenzie-sama is the only one who can bring out that expression in Koutarou-sama," Nalfa observed.

In her mind, she couldn't get Koutarou to smile like that, which was what kept her from getting closer to him. She didn't want to ruin that special smile on his face, not when he finally had a chance to relax.

But Kotori had a different opinion. "Of course not," Kotori said. "You're not my brother, Nal-chan. I'm sure Kou-niisan has a different smile that he only shows you." There should be a special smile that he only showed Nalfa. And there was no way of saying which was better or worse, so there was no need for her to compare them.

"But I like that smile..." Nalfa looked over at Koutarou and Kenji again. They really looked like they were having fun.

“Did you see the curve on that thing?! What did you do?!” Kenji exclaimed.

“I used psychic powers and imagined the ball being sucked in by my finger,” Koutarou replied.

“Ah, so that increased the spin. Wouldn’t you be able to throw an amazing fastball with that method?” Kenji pondered.

“I’ll give it a shot,” Koutarou said with a nod.

It would be impossible for Nalfa to replace Kenji and get Koutarou to smile like that. And she had a strong desire to see that smile all the time.

“Well, that kind of girly situation is something Kou-niisan would never understand,” Kotori commented.

“You two came at the perfect time. Could you get in the batter’s box?” Koutarou asked, having come up to the girls at some point. He put a helmet on Nalfa.

“Huh?” Nalfa exclaimed.

“Great, now it’s much easier to imagine,” he told her.

Pulling Nalfa by the hand, he returned to Kenji, who could guess at what Koutarou was doing and drew a line in the dirt. They were switching from playing catch to adding in a batter for a more realistic experience.

“That’s Kou-niisan for you.” Kotori smiled. “He won’t let a girl even have the time to worry. Hahaha!” She nodded in satisfaction. Koutarou’s actions had surpassed her expectations. She’d assumed that he would notice Nalfa and call her over, but he’d gotten her directly involved instead. There wasn’t any time for Nalfa to worry or resist.

“Uhm?!” Somehow, Nalfa had been caught up in the scene she had been gazing at. Moreover, Koutarou’s appearance was unchanged. He looked like he was enjoying himself just the same as before, giving her a serene glance from time to time.

“You hold the bat like this, okay?” he explained.

“Like this?” Nalfa asked nervously.

“Hold your hands the other way around,” Kenji told her.

“So...like this?” Nalfa asked once more.

“You got it!” Koutarou exclaimed.

Nalfa stood in the makeshift batter's box, receiving a lesson from Koutarou and Kenji. She was still confused, not sure what was happening. Kotori grinned at the sight and pointed a camera at them to record the scene. She would later show the footage to Nalfa to prove that Koutarou gave her a special smile as well.

Koutarou's eighth throw flew right under the bat that Nalfa swung as hard as she could. So far, Nalfa had swung her bat three times, but as a beginner, she didn't have the skill to hit the ball. Koutarou and the others were satisfied with that, though.

"The insane backspin made the ball rise up and through the upper side of the strike zone. A normal batter would never be able to hit a ball thrown with psychic powers using the same form as a straight pitch!" Kenji said excitedly.

Koutarou's throws using his psychic powers clearly far exceeded the level of baseball pitchers.

"Well, I'm not throwing it normally either." Koutarou smiled wryly. He wasn't pitching by the rules of the sport. It was like he was doping through spiritual energy, akin to using adhesives. That said, it was a lot of fun, so it was satisfying enough.

"But maybe there're cases of ace pitchers unconsciously using psychic powers?" Kenji proposed.

"That might be possible." Koutarou nodded in agreement. He got his powers from Sanae, but there were people who had an innate talent for it, such as Sanae herself or her mother, Kanae, who was likely so skilled in archery thanks to her psychic powers.

"I imagine some batters would have them too," Koutarou said. "Some skilled sluggers unconsciously using psychic powers." He was looking at Nalfa's bat. It was likely just as possible that some batters had a latent talent for psychic powers too.

"In that case...it'll be hard to tell how much one could allow in sports," Kenji said.

"Wouldn't the line be drawn at people willingly trying to develop those powers?" Koutarou asked.

"Well, that's about the size of it."

It would be too hard to forbid the unconscious use of psychic powers. Even an athlete's instincts could be affected by them.

Koutarou and Kenji concluded that the line should be drawn at whether they intentionally trained their psychic powers.

"Then how about challenging a slugger who's learned magic?" A figure suddenly appeared, speaking in a provocative and confident tone.

"You're—" Kenji started.

"Crimson! You're back!" Koutarou exclaimed.

It was the court magician Crimson. She had just happened to spot Koutarou and the others while passing by.

"It's been a while, Blue Knight. Or maybe it hasn't been that long," she replied. "Let me take over, miss."

"Um, okay!"

Nalfa nodded and gave her bat to Crimson, who took a few practice swings. Rather than the swinging form of a baseball batter, she looked like she was wielding a weapon.

"So, this is how it feels..." Crimson muttered.

"Haha, you're looking the part, Crimson," Maki said as she arrived. Seeing Crimson's strong swings, she saw potential in her. Of course, since they weren't normal bat swings, there was no guarantee that the ball would fly forward, but at the very least, Maki was sure that Crimson could hit the ball.

"Nice. A magic slugger. I welcome it," Koutarou said with a fearless smile while swinging his own arm. Pitching was a matter of the range of motion of the arm and shoulder. He was going to pitch with everything he had.

"Ah..." Nalfa's gaze was stuck on Crimson and Koutarou, and her eyes opened wide as if something had surprised her.

"All right, bring it, Blue Knight!" Crimson challenged him.

Having stepped into the batter's box, her body started glowing green. Green had cast an information-type spell on her. Its effect allowed Crimson to foresee Koutarou's movements to some degree. With that, Koutarou and Crimson were enhanced by spiritual energy and magic respectively. They should be able to have an even match.

"Here I come, Crimson," Koutarou said.

"Do your worst, Blue Knight!" Crimson retorted.

"Haaaaaaaah!!!" Koutarou raised his leg up high and threw his

best pitch so far. The ball was given a fierce backspin and changed its trajectory in flight, flying toward Kenji's glove.

"Yaaaaaah!!!" Crimson fought back by swinging her bat. Thanks to Green, she knew what type of pitch it was. It was the same straight ball she'd seen just before, and she accurately swung her bat but struck nothing but air. The ball was just a bit higher than she'd expected.

The ball landed in Kenji's glove with a thump. It had passed by the top of the strike zone. If it had gone a little lower, Crimson would have hit a home run, but the backspin had exceeded her expectations.

"You're pretty good," Crimson remarked. Although she was praising Koutarou, she looked a little upset. She gave her bat a few more practice swings before getting back in the batter's box.

"You've got a good swing," Koutarou replied.

"I'll take you down a peg, just you watch!" Crimson held her bat at the bottom of the handle and stood at the front of the batter's box. She would hit the ball before it could deviate from its course too much.

In response, Koutarou's second pitch used the exact same form as the first.

"Got you!" Crimson grunted. She swung her bat a little higher than before. As she was holding the bat at the bottom of its handle and standing at the front of the box, she didn't need to adjust her swing too much.

Yet she struck nothing but air once again. This time, the ball flew under her bat before landing in Kenji's glove. Koutarou hadn't put a spin on it.





"What's going on?! That ball wasn't the same as before!" Crimson shouted.

"That's part of the game!" Koutarou answered. "If I only pitched the same way, you would hit them all!"

"In that case, say so earlier," Crimson demanded.

"Well, you stepped in the batter's box so confidently, I figured you already knew..." Koutarou scratched his head.

"Jeez..." Crimson griped. "So you have to hit it while anticipating all kinds of pitches?"

"Sorry about that," Koutarou apologized.

"Hehehe," Maki giggled, looking at them.

Crimson glanced over at her before readying her bat again.

This is bad, Kou. I've got a bad feeling about this... Kenji thought. He used his expressions and gestures to convey the danger. His intuition when it came to these kinds of things was never wrong. If they had been in a match, Koutarou and Kenji would have avoided a direct confrontation. At the very least, Koutarou would have thrown a ball outside of the strike zone and changed gears.

I know, Mackenzie. But that's why we have to do this, Koutarou thought.

He smiled at Kenji in response and wound up his pitch. Kenji immediately understood what Koutarou's intentions were and readied his glove. A similar smile formed on his own face.

"Show her what you've got, Kou!" he cried.

"Haaaaah!!!" Koutarou threw another straight ball with a serious backspin on it, just like his first pitch. There was no particular reason, but he felt like having a head-on contest.

"Got yooouuu!" Crimson responded with full force, swinging her bat in the same place as the second. She had a beautiful swing, and she hit the ball just as aimed. However, the ball didn't fly forward. With her lack of experience, she was unable to send the ball in her desired direction; instead it flew high up into the air above Koutarou.

"Good job hitting that, Crimson," Koutarou said sincerely. The ball sailed smoothly through the air and landed safely in his glove.

"Ugh, I wanted to send it flying farther," Crimson said.

"You'll need some more practice for that. In fact, normally, you

wouldn’t even be able to hit the ball.”

“Don’t assume I’m a normal woman!” Crimson retorted.

“Which is why I’m praising you,” Koutarou shot back.

“I don’t feel like getting praised even a little with results like this!” Crimson was sulking. Superior physical abilities or not, hitting the ball on your first try was surprising. Koutarou felt like Crimson should have been proud of that, but she wasn’t satisfied. She frustratedly got back into the batter’s box. “Throw another one, just one more!” she pleaded.

“Crimson, I know how you feel, but shouldn’t we save that for after what you came here to talk about?” Maki asked.

“Ugh...” Crimson relented. Having let her emotions get the better of her, Maki’s words calmed her down. She reluctantly left the batter’s box and returned the bat to Nalfa. Crimson knew the importance of what she’d come there to do. “We’ll settle this later.”

“Okay, okay. But why are you even here?” Koutarou asked. “Weren’t you in the middle of a mission at that enemy base?”

The court magicians Crimson was one of were often stuck cleaning up after Koutarou’s and the others’ battles. That was true now as well, as they should have been in the process of cleaning up the waste polluting an enemy base.

“This concerns you too, so come with us, Blue Knight,” Crimson answered.

“Yeah, sure...” Koutarou said. “You heard her; I’m off for a while.”

“Yeah, see you later,” Kenji replied.

Koutarou handed his baseball equipment to Kenji and walked after Crimson. Maki and Green followed suit, leaving the Matsudaira siblings and Nalfa behind.

“She came and went like the wind,” Kotori murmured. Seeing how Crimson was full of drive and did as she pleased, it was a rather accurate assessment of her.

“I wonder why so many radical people like that gather around Kou,” Kenji muttered as he stared at the ball in his glove. It had what looked like scorch marks where it had been hit, a sign of just how fast the bat had been swung.

“Thanks to her, I was able to understand something,” Nalfa said.

"Understand what?" Kotori asked.

"Koutarou-sama had a very wicked smile on his face when facing Crimson-sama," Nalfa explained.

"Ah, that." Kotori nodded. She quickly realized what Nalfa was saying. It was a continuation of their prior discussion, where Kotori had said that Koutarou had a different smile for everyone. Koutarou's smile for Kenji differed from his smile for Crimson. Still, both had a strong sense of joy in them. Thanks to Crimson, Nalfa felt a little more confident in herself.

"What are you talking about?" Kenji asked.

"It's a girls' secret," Kotori replied.

"Then I'll pretend I didn't hear anything."

"Good."

Nalfa laughed. "Still, I worry that Koutarou-sama doesn't get enough rest." Nalfa looked with concern in the direction that Koutarou and the others had gone. He and Kenji had been playing catch to change gears, which meant that he had taken a break because he had so much work. Nalfa worried about his well-being.

"Which is all the more reason for you to be at his side," Kenji said.

"Mackenzie-sama..." Nalfa murmured. "But wouldn't I get in the way?"

She felt that it was best for Koutarou to be alone to get some rest, and she worried that it would only be a burden on him if she was around. But Kenji shook his head.

"No, the more danger he's in, the more he'll push people close to him away. He'll try to do it all on his own. That's why you shouldn't let him be on his own, Nalfa-san." Kenji could understand Koutarou because of their long relationship. He was one of the few people who understood the complex feelings Koutarou had deep down.

"O-Okay!" Nalfa vigorously nodded. Kenji's words were very convincing, and she was moved by them.

"If anything, I think you should cling to Kou-niisan more, Nal-chan," Kotori said.

"Cling?! That's a little too much..." Nalfa was a girl too, and also wanted to be close to the person she loved, but she didn't want to one-sidedly force her feelings on anyone.

"But that's how Kotori succeeded," Kenji explained.

"Really?!" Nalfa was shocked.

"Yes, I was always following him around." Kotori laughed. Thinking back on it, she'd always been following Koutarou around. To put it in a bad way, she had been stalking him. Her childish innocence had prompted her to run after him. "So you should try it too, Nal-chan. It'll be fine."

"I... Okay..." Nalfa was still not convinced and nodded weakly. But she knew that she couldn't stay like this. She couldn't act like Kotori right away, but surely she could take a first step toward change.

Upon reaching Maki's room, Crimson started talking before tea was prepared. That was partially because she was in a hurry, but also because there was a lot to talk about.

"It all began with a call from Elexis," Crimson said.

"From Elexis, huh?" The name caught Koutarou's attention. "What is he doing right now, anyway? I heard he was something like a mercenary."

During the battle for Ralgwin, he had seen that Fasta had joined up with Elexis. So he knew that Elexis had some sort of shady dealings, but he didn't know any specific details. That interested him.

"Elexis is working as an illegal carrier," Green answered.

"An illegal carrier? Well, he's always doing something illegal." Koutarou shrugged.

Whether or not Elexis felt the same as before, he had once tried to overthrow the state, so he wouldn't be able to find any decent jobs. Therefore, anything he did would inevitably be illegal.

"Apparently, they started off doing legal transports under a fake name. But after you and the empress messed with the transport industry, he couldn't do that anymore," Crimson said and grinned. She found the situation funny and teased Koutarou.

"Well, sorry about that...even though it was his own fault..." Koutarou smiled wryly.

After DKI had earned too much through PAF sales, Koutarou had decided to invest the returns into the struggling transport industry of

remote regions. By helping out those regions, he returned the profit to society. But since Koutarou felt like the money had come from the people, he didn't want it to be spent irresponsibly, so he wanted to confirm that companies were legitimate. That had ultimately caused problems for Elexis. If his company was scrutinized, his deception would be exposed. Before that could happen, Elexis had shut down his business and gone underground. That naturally meant that their cargo had become shadier.

"Anyway, after going underground, Elexis got a job from Fasta," Crimson said. "And the cargo was—"

"Ralgwin, huh?" Koutarou started seeing the full picture. Fasta had needed a skilled carrier who could take on a shady job. Elexis and Maya most certainly had the skill, and they also had a high performance ship they'd taken from DKI. It must have been both luck and destiny that had brought them together.

"Yeah, that's right." Crimson nodded. "Ever since then, Elexis and Maya have been allied with Fasta. Not that I don't know how they feel..."

Maki giggled.

"What?" Crimson looked at her.

In response, Maki put down a cup of tea in front of Crimson. "I was just happy the tea turned out so well."

"Hmm, if that's all..." Crimson said, taking a sip. Like Maki said, it had a refined smell and taste.

So, it's not like you don't know how they feel, huh? Hehehe... Maki thought. She had laughed after sensing how close Crimson and the others had become. Back when they had been in Darkness Rainbow, they had only seen each other as people to be used. But the girls were different now. She didn't think it was strange of them to cooperate with Fasta, who wanted to save Ralgwin. What had happened to Maki had now also happened to Crimson and the others, which made her happy. But there were plenty of things it was best not to say out loud. So Maki kept her thoughts to herself.

"And that's when Elexis and Maya contacted us," Green concluded. Since Crimson was drinking tea, she answered in her place.

"So it's not just some catching up, then," Koutarou said.

"Yes, they asked for our help."

"What did they say?"

"They want help casting a ritual spell to resurrect Ralgwin," Green answered.

"Resurrect Ralgwin?! Is that even possible?!" Unable to hide his shock, Koutarou shot up from his seat. While this was a welcome event, it would clearly be difficult.

"We'll do the same thing they did," Crimson said. "Remove Maxfern's elements from the soul and use Ralgwin's residual thoughts to fill up any gaps."

"And since Maxfern is already an example of success, it's definitely possible!" Koutarou couldn't accept Maxfern taking over Ralgwin's soul. It was far too unfair an end. But now a way to correct that unfairness had appeared, and Koutarou's expression brightened.

"But there's a problem with that, isn't there, Crimson?" Maki said, looking serious.

It wasn't like she was against Ralgwin's resurrection, and Koutarou's wishes were hers. The problem she saw however, was a technical one.

"You get it." Crimson nodded.

"How are you going to get your hands on Maxfern's residual thoughts?" Maki asked.

Maxfern's current soul was a fusion of Ralgwin and Maxfern. In order to extract Maxfern's soul from that, they needed fragments of Maxfern's soul, namely residual thoughts. But it would be difficult to collect enough thoughts to remove Maxfern. Maki knew that, which was why her expression was so serious.

"Grevanas has already collected most of them. If not, he never could have resurrected him," Crimson said.

Grevanas had needed a large number of residual thoughts to resurrect Maxfern. He had used Ralgwin's soul as a base and overwritten it with the gathered fragments of Maxfern's soul. Since it had been over two thousand years since Maxfern had died, that was the only possible method. Grevanas had had no other choice.

"Which means it would be impossible to find any more residual thoughts," Maki said.

Grevanas had gathered Maxfern's residual thoughts on Earth, mostly centered around the People of the Earth. And after returning to Forthorthe, he had gathered more residual thoughts from places and items connected to Maxfern. Since it was his precious lord, Grevanas wouldn't have taken any risk, and him choosing to resurrect Maxfern meant that there were no more residual thoughts to be found.

"It would be impossible to resurrect Ralgwin like that," Maki said with a bitter expression. She thought it would be better for him to be resurrected as well, but she couldn't find a good way to bring him back.

"It's not impossible," Green said. "Although it depends on how cautious Grevanas is..."

"What do you mean, Green?" Maki looked up at her.

"We're predicting that not even Grevanas could be completely assured that his resurrection spell would work on the first try," Green explained.

"Right! That's definitely possible!" Maki's expression brightened.

With her wealth of magic knowledge, she understood why Green felt like it was possible.

"He should have gathered enough residual thoughts to have some spares in case he failed," Green continued. "Not to mention, they are planning on starting a war, so Maxfern could die in battle. He should have been gathering spare residual thoughts in case of that as well."

"So we just need to steal those?!" Koutarou exclaimed.

Grevanas was likely to have gathered even more residual thoughts in the event that the resurrection spell failed or Maxfern died in battle. If they stole those, they could resurrect Ralgwin.

"But the problems start there, Blue Knight."

"What do you mean?" Koutarou asked. Crimson had spoken with a more serious expression than usual. Seeing that, a chill washed over him.

"Where do you think Grevanas would keep something so

important?”

“Ah...” His eyes opened wide.

“That’s right, Blue Knight. Grevanas is going to keep those residual thoughts in their main base or somewhere similar. Right where you’re itching to get into right now.”

“So that’s why you hurried here,” Koutarou said.

“That’s right.” Crimson nodded. “We need you to act as a decoy to draw Grevanas and Maxfern away until we can get those residual thoughts. Naturally, that means not blasting it away with your main batteries.”

That was the reason Crimson and Green had come to see Maki. They needed Maki and the others to cooperate with them in order to bring Ralgwin back.

It was a very slim chance. There was no guarantee that there were any extra residual thoughts at all. But they couldn’t disregard the possibility, given their indignation at the evil act of hijacking a soul.

“I don’t mind.” Elfaria calmly smiled. “Do as you wish, Koutarou-sama.”

He had come to report to Elfaria, but her response was strangely casual. He had decided to work with Elexis and the others, but the court magicians reported directly to Elfaria. Koutarou had visited her room to talk things over with her.

“Are you sure?” Koutarou asked. “Elexis did try to overthrow Forthorthe, you know.”

“I can’t say that I don’t have any repulsive feelings toward him,” Elfaria answered. “Not after everything he’s done.”

“Then—”

“Even so...there are some things that must be protected. Maxfern’s actions go against the laws of the human world. A world where you can live as yourself must be protected.”

Elfaria hadn’t forgiven Elexis, but there were things more unforgivable than what he had done. Stealing somebody’s soul was an offense that had to be corrected. And for that, she was willing to overlook Elexis’s attempt to overthrow the country for the moment.

“I see,” Koutarou said with a smile. “You’re kind...or perhaps strict

is more accurate?”

Elfaria’s desire to save Ralgwin could be considered kindness. But that wasn’t all. She would never forgive Maxfern, and that was the strictness of an empress.

“That said, there is a calculated decision mixed in,” Elfaria said.

“Calculated? What do you mean?”

“If we resurrect Ralgwin, we will get our hands on a lot of information from Maxfern’s side,” Elfaria explained.

Overwritten or not, the soul belonged to Ralgwin. So if he was returned to normal, he should remember everything that Maxfern had done. The information they could extract from him would be well worth the risk.

“I see...” Koutarou nodded. “It would help shorten the war and the cleanup afterward.”

Ralgwin would have all sorts of information on Maxfern’s dealings, from the locations of strongholds and armies and what politicians they had dealings with. That information would hasten the end of the war and subsequent restoration efforts. In other words, Elfaria had concluded that resurrecting Ralgwin would bring about a better result.

“As empress, I need to always be looking at the greater picture,” Elfaria said.

As such, she had decided to cooperate with Elexis to resurrect Ralgwin. Considering how much they stood to gain, she was willing to overlook his past crimes. In other words, it was the same treatment given to Darkness Rainbow, which had been reborn as the court magicians.

“So you’ll look the other way regarding his crimes to reduce the strain on the citizens.” Koutarou smiled. “It makes me happy to hear that the royal families haven’t changed in two thousand years.”

“There were times where that ideal was in peril,” Elfaria added.

“That’s just how things go.” Koutarou shrugged. “Nothing is ever perfect, be it people or countries.”

“So you say, but you are always perfect, Koutarou-sama,” Elfaria replied. “When are you going to show some proper selfishness and desires?”

"Well, not right now at any rate," Koutarou said. "We have to end this war quickly. Once that's over, I'll do as I please."

"As you wish. For as long as you please, until you're satisfied..."

"All right, then let's go!"

"Yes." Elfaria nodded.

Having finished their secret talk, the two stood up. A strategy meeting awaited them. They'd asked everyone to hold off until they arrived. Before they talked about their plans with the group, Koutarou had needed to talk things through with Elfaria.

Leaving her private room behind, they quickly headed for the palace's command room.

Forthorthe wanted to bring an end to the war as soon as possible. Nothing good would come of dragging it out. Not to mention that they were still in the middle of a restoration after the previous war. Everyone was of one mind in that regard, from politicians to soldiers.

"Giving Maxfern time will let him move strongholds and reinforce his defenses," Kiriha warned them.

"Which means that we'll have to initiate things, even if it's risky," Koutarou concluded.

Although this course had been roughly decided on some time ago, subsequent information they had gathered further corroborated their decision, and it was made official.

"The faster the attack, the better. That way, we'll be able to seize the initiative," Kiriha agreed. She, Clan, and Ruth had put their lives at risk to get information from Maxfern's side. A quick attack was necessary in order to make the most of that.

"Are we fine troop-wise?" Koutarou did have some doubts. The sooner they moved, the fewer troops they would be able to deploy. Gathering forces took time, so if they were too fast, they might not be able to gather the necessary forces. As the supreme commander, it was a serious risk that he could not ignore.

"I will be able to handle that," Ruth confidently stated. "I have made plenty of preparations."

The three women had been preparing for battle ever since they'd

chosen to get shot down. Even if they didn't strike a main base, they were likely to find an important facility, so they had gathered troops for a surprise attack.

"The ideal would be to end this before they have a chance to move their main fleet," Clan said, her arms crossed as she studied a war map.

Hostilities were yet to begin, but the map had plenty of information on it already. The problem was that it was mostly just information on their allies. They had almost no intel on the enemy troops, forcing the Imperial Army to spread itself thin. Facing Maxfern's army head-on would lead to a lot of casualties. So Clan wanted to take down the main base with a surprise attack.

"Of course, they should be on guard against that as well," Koutarou remarked.

"They might be scheming something themselves...or they might be looking to intercept us at a key point."

They had been able to locate Maxfern's stronghold after the failed assassination attempt on Kiriha and the others. Naturally, that meant that Maxfern would want to move the main base, but it would take time, for largely the same reason it took time to gather troops. Until they could move, they would be forced to keep their guard up. An effective way to buy time was to position troops at a key point to ambush and delay. They could also use diversionary tactics in order to make it harder to launch an attack. Regardless, Maxfern would surely make some kind of move.

"So the sooner the better," Koutarou said. "Ruth-san, when do we set out?"

"I am expecting it to be six hours after the launching ceremony," Ruth answered.

"Excellent! Make sure everything works out, Ruth!" Theia said.

"Leave it to me, Your Highness!"

"Very good." Theia nodded.

"Veltlion, Theiamillis-san, we should be setting out too," Clan said. "If we're too slow, Elfaria-san will leave us behind."

"How hectic." Koutarou sighed.

"But you will be able to take it easy until the launching

ceremony," Clan told him.

"Then I'll do just that."

As the strategy meeting came to an end, Koutarou left the command room with Theia and Clan. Since they would be taking part in a public event tomorrow, they would spend the day traveling. The event was a launch ceremony for the new Blue Knight made to replace the one destroyed in the civil war.

Having failed to assassinate Kiriha, Ruth, and Clan, Maxfern's band of knights, as well as the Forthorthe Liberation group it was affiliated with, had made the mistake of allowing their main base to be discovered by the Imperial Army. The reason was that several ships containing commanding officers had been discovered as they got too far ahead of themselves, but they didn't have the time to discuss that. Countermeasures had to be taken as soon as possible.

"Moving the stronghold and preparing an interception at the same time is foolish," Maxfern bitterly spat out. He had been put into a predicament, but he wasn't planning to go down without a fight. He had immediately hurried to make preparations to move their stronghold. But in the end, there hadn't been enough time, so he'd also made preparations to intercept the Imperial Army. But the interception preparations had delayed the move of the stronghold, which irritated Maxfern.

"I certainly agree...but in this situation it is unavoidable," Grevanas explained.

"How vexing," Maxfern muttered.

"I am terribly sorry. I am one step behind when it comes to handling magic in the modern world."

"Those damn brats!" Maxfern slammed his fist into his armrest.

Kiriha and the others had used themselves as bait to lure out his forces in order to obtain information on them. Maxfern and Grevanas had fallen hook, line, and sinker for their plan, leading to the Imperial Army acquiring crucial intel. The biggest failure of all had been using magic in space. Since mana practically didn't exist in space, magic stood out a lot. Because of that, Grevanas had been discovered and ended up leading his pursuers most of the way to

their stronghold. But it was hard to blame him for failing. Instead, Koutarou and the others should have been praised for bringing magic and modern technology together. Several similar circumstances had led to their stronghold being discovered. Maxfern's anger had nowhere to go, so he slammed his armrest two, three more times.

"Calm down, I'll go stop them." a calm voice called out.

Maxfern looked with irritation in the direction of the voice and took a short breath before answering. "It's you, Gray One."

"The situation looks like it's more serious than I thought," the Gray Knight replied. He had appeared as if seeping out from the shadows in the room.

"It is my failure as an advisor," said Grevanas. He lacked knowledge when it came to combining modern technology and magic. As an advisor for Maxfern's forces, he had no choice but to accept that he had been defeated due to his lack of knowledge and experience—an advisor's very purpose. His dry face twisted and he ground his teeth.

"But there's no time for regrets," the Gray Knight said. "We must move forward."

"I will bear that in mind," Grevanas answered with a serious expression. If he misstepped further, the blame would fall squarely on his shoulders, which he had to avoid.

"So, did you gather a fleet, Gray One?" Maxfern asked.

Gray Knight or not, he couldn't stop an entire fleet himself, so Maxfern had given him the authority to form his own.

"I have...but only the minimum. That said, I can't afford to wish for more."

Taking the situation into account, the Gray Knight had gathered fast ships that were nearby. He felt a swift response was the most important fix for the situation. Naturally, that limited the number of ships he could use, but his intuition told him that he just barely had enough. Ships were being called up from far away regardless of speed, but it was unclear whether they would make it before the start of the battle.

"I see...then I will uphold the authority I've given you," Maxfern

said. “Replenish your forces as you fight.”

“I appreciate it,” the Gray Knight answered.

Maxfern was in a bad mood. They were in a tough situation, and he didn’t like that the Gray Knight had become their trump card. Even though he came from another universe, he was still Maxfern’s former nemesis. But if he could slow down the Blue Knight’s forces, Maxfern might be able to finish preparing their stronghold defenses. For that reason, he held back his bitter emotions.

“I’ll leave handling the Blue Knight to you,” Maxfern told him. “We will use the time to prepare to intercept them.”

“Got it, I’ll head out immediately,” the Gray Knight agreed, calm in contrast. Their discussion had been serious, but he sounded detached, as if he were neither concerned nor interested in the slightest.

“I will pray for your good fortune,” Grevanas said.

“What I need this time isn’t fortune,” the Gray Knight responded. What he needed was speed. There were other words that were more fitting.

Grevanas knew that as well. “Then...I wish you a good voyage.” He understood that it would be foolish to stop him, so he opened the path to the exit and saw him off.

The Gray Knight left the room without sparing either Grevanas or Maxfern a single glance.

If a large-scale battle is starting, there’s a pawn I’ll need to get my hands on...

The Gray Knight had some ideas. That was why he’d volunteered to stop the enemy. He couldn’t afford to let Maxfern lose now, for the sake of his own goals. Having finally started making his move, he was getting excited. If Maxfern had seen his expression, he might have been surprised. But there was nobody around to see it, and the Gray Knight blended into the shadows and disappeared, just as he had appeared earlier.

Launching Ceremony

Saturday, December 10

Blue Knight had taken major damage during the civil war that Vandarion had started last year, and it had been decided that a new one would be made rather than repairing the current one. It had barely been able to move and had taken heavy damage. It had been cheaper to start from scratch.

"Today is the day that the new Blue Knight is finally unveiled," Theia announced.

"Haha, a lot has happened on the way..." Elfaria smiled.

They were currently on their way to the launching ceremony for the new Blue Knight. It was being built on the planet Waragthorn in the Bandiet system, so the group was heading there aboard Elfaria's personal space battleship, Silver.

The Bandiet system had long been a thriving shipbuilding system, with many manufacturers' factories lined up next to each other. There were plenty of planets and moons in the system that were rich in minerals, and it was also a transit hub for trade in the surrounding region, which made it easy for shipbuilding companies to expand their business.

When the order for the new Blue Knight had come in, those companies had cooperated and started up a new business called the Bandiet Shipbuilding Association. The decision was made to avoid a fight over which company would take the order and to avoid quality issues from organizations competing for the lowest price. The new Blue Knight was sure to draw the attention of the populace, so if the ship was well-built, the building company's reputation was sure to rise, but if it failed, the entire industry in that system would be in danger. So all of the shipbuilders had come together. The appeal of that unity allowed the Bandiet system to just barely beat out another

one known for its shipbuilding.

"Ralgwin attacked here too, after all."

The first thing that came to Koutarou's mind upon hearing Elfaria's words was Ralgwin's attack. He had launched an assault when Koutarou's group had come to inspect the construction.

"That could have been a disaster if Fasta-san hadn't helped us," Ruth said and lightly furrowed her brows.

The attack had been defended against with Fasta's assistance. There would undoubtedly have been more casualties if not for her. Ruth was also worried about Fasta herself. All kinds of things had happened during the construction of the new Blue Knight, but Ralgwin's attack had certainly been the biggest.

"I recall all of the arguing over the design and blueprint," Clan said with a shrug and a wry smile. She had been involved with the design and blueprint, and the Blue Knight had been a task she'd been racking her brains over for a long time. The design selection had left a particularly deep impression. It had been difficult to choose, as everyone had their own opinion of what the ship should look like. Some had argued that it should look like a normal battleship, others had wanted it to be a structurally strong round shape, and others had felt that it had to be humanoid. There had been several meetings about it, and several designs had been considered. Having been brought into the process as a technical expert, Clan had been caught up in the arguments.

"Still, why would they choose to make it humanoid? It would definitely be stronger if it had another shape," Kenji said and laughed. He didn't have any particular military or space flight knowledge, but he'd come to this conclusion from his experience building plastic models. A tank was clearly more stable than a humanoid of the same size. It was more difficult for a humanoid to aim in a firefight. When made with the same technology, a tank was definitely stronger, and the same applied to battleships.

Koutarou fully agreed, as if he'd hit the nail on the head, and nodded vigorously. "You'd think so, right? But in the end, they decided to brute force it."

"Brute force?"

“In order to make the new Blue Knight humanoid, they created a new ship class even larger than the Royalty class,” Koutarou explained.

The discussion had ended with a brand-new Chivalry class of ships being established, and it was decided that the new Blue Knight would be built in a humanoid shape. Those who had pushed for other designs had been considering Koutarou’s safety, so making the ship larger and stronger than even a Royalty-class ship would have removed any reason to object.

“Seriously?” Kenji smiled bitterly. “They must be obsessed with that.”

Forthorthians were so fixated on the humanoid shape that they had even changed the rules. That was how much it meant to them, but Kenji couldn’t understand.

“You just don’t understand the dream, do you?” Theia said with a frown.

The Blue Knight had a profound meaning to Forthorthians. How could they ever allow the newly built Blue Knight, which would serve as his symbol, to look ugly? In contrast, Earthlings like Kenji and Koutarou himself didn’t feel that same meaning. Koutarou in particular hadn’t really seen himself as a hero. While Theia knew that was unavoidable, she was still unhappy about it.

“How do you feel about it as a fellow Forthorthian, Nal-chan?” Kotori asked with a smile. Nalfa looked up to Koutarou, and she was a local. Since Kotori got along well with both of them, she was interested in their differences in thought.

“You mean about the new Blue Knight?” Nalfa asked.

“Yeah.” Kotori nodded. “Theia and the others are royalty and related to this, so I was wondering what a citizen thinks about it.”

Just as Koutarou was involved in the legend, so too was the royal family. The legend of the Blue Knight and Silver Princess had existed for two thousand years. In that sense, it was inevitable that perception would shift in the opposite direction from Koutarou’s. So Kotori was curious about how the common populace felt.

“In my case, um...” Nalfa began. “I only wish that Koutarou-sama would stay somewhere safe forever.”

Those were Nalfa's true feelings. Koutarou had done so much for Forthorthe. He had even saved the country twice. She couldn't ask any more of him. If possible, she wished that he would be able to live the rest of his life in peace.

"But in reality, we can't pull back Veltlion." Clan felt the same, as did all people close to Koutarou. These weren't opinions based on the will of the people or political convenience. With a powerful enemy like Maxfern before them, the name of supreme commander Layous Fatra Veltlion weighed too much.

"In that case...I would want him to be in an invincible spaceship," Nalfa said. "I'm not sure how to put it... Um, I want him to have fun and win. No, that's a weird way of saying it. Um...he has already fought enough, so I don't want him to be in danger anymore, so I agree with the Chivalry class."

Nalfa chose her words carefully and expressed her complicated feelings. If Koutarou couldn't stay in the safety of the rear, then she would prefer that he armed himself like a hedgehog when he went to the front. In that sense, the new Blue Knight had taken on her preferred shape. In fact, many people had a similar mindset to varying degrees.

"But your circumstances are a little different from other people's in Forthorthe, Nal-chan," Kotori whispered so that only Nalfa could hear.

In response, Nalfa's face turned red as she looked down. Koutarou having fought enough wasn't the only reason she wanted him to be safe. She had private reasons as well.

"In the end, this was the decision due to all kinds of circumstances and feelings," Theia concluded.

"Even so, it's costing way too much," Koutarou said.

"The people sure do love you, Kou," Kenji teased him.

"This isn't a laughing matter." Koutarou sighed.

Fortunately, he hadn't noticed Nalfa's state. He was discussing things with Theia and Kenji. Nalfa looked up ever so slightly to gaze at him. After confirming that he wasn't looking at her, she finally raised her head.

As they descended onto planet Waragthorn, they were able to see the shipyard. The new Blue Knight was being built in six separate parts: head, torso, and both arms and legs. Each part was over a kilometer long. The torso alone was bigger than the old Blue Knight. As such, the shipyard could be seen from the spaceport. The six shipyards were strung together like a mountain range.

"Oh, was it this close?" Harumi tilted her head. When she had last visited, it had felt a little more distant.

But Elfaria smiled at her. "It's not closer; it's just that the shipyards are bigger than before. Scaffolding is needed around the perimeter as armor and equipment is put on."

The six parts had been built from the bottom up. In response, the shipyards had expanded upward until the entire ship was covered. That was why the shipyards had gotten bigger since their last visit and now seemed closer to Harumi.

"Construction has also begun on two additional parts," Elfaria said.

"New parts? What are they making?" Harumi asked.

"Extra equipment," Elfaria answered. "The first is a spaceport that can be detached before battle."

The new Blue Knight was meant to be used in both Forthorthe and Earth. As such, a small-scale spaceport was being added. It had lodging and meeting rooms, so when equipped with the unit, the Blue Knight could function as a small space station. It was meant for long-distance travel and political activities and had no combat function. Therefore, it was built to be detachable.

"The other is an anti-ship energy sword. Its function is the same as before but made bigger to match the new ship," Elfaria said, looking at Harumi. "You could say that this is a ship made for you."

Harumi's eyes opened wide in surprise. "For me?!"

"Yes." Elfaria nodded. "The crest you made the other day has been engraved on it, and the beam flag raises your battle flag. So while you may not legally be able to have a ship, it is without a doubt yours."

The new Blue Knight was equipped with the anti-ship energy sword Signaltin, just like the old one had been. And its functions

were the same, making it the largest sword, capable of cleaving ships. But there were differences, such as its size and the fact that it was its own structure.

This increased size was of course to match the enlarged Blue Knight. The old one would have been closer to a short sword in the hands of the new ship. The separate structure was a little more complicated. The old Signaltin had been integrated into the Blue Knight's right arm, but if the larger Signaltin were integrated into the right arm of the new Blue Knight, it would easily exceed a kilometer in length. So it had been decided that it would be created independently.

However, Signaltin was a name with a lot of meaning as well, so it had been decided that Signaltin could also be piloted as a ship. In addition, each part of the Blue Knight could be flown on its own, but none of them reached the standards of what one would call a battleship, making them markedly different from Signaltin. Moreover, neither the crest engraved on it nor the flag it flew were Koutarou's or Alaia's. They were Harumi's. In that sense, Signaltin distinguished itself from the other parts of the ship.

"Are you sure that's okay?!" Harumi asked. In her mind, she had no connection to Forthorthe and was just an individual related to Koutarou. Yet now she was clearly starting to get embedded into the legend and core of Forthorthe. It was a startling turn of events to Harumi, who only saw herself as an ordinary girl caught up in events from time to time.

"Haha, don't worry, Harumi-san," Elfaria said. "We don't expect anything in return. It's simply that those of us who know your circumstances can't ignore your existence and role. There's nothing more to it."

Those in the highest positions in Forthorthe, as well as the soldiers in the Nefilforan unit, knew where Harumi's powers and role originated and who her soul had been before. And they couldn't ignore that. But at the same time, they didn't demand anything from her. They wanted her to be a normal girl if possible. Just like someone else had once desired.

"But I can't help but feel sorry if you do this..." Harumi said.

"Just think of it as a benefit and accept it," Elfaria replied.

"I don't know anything about politics or the military..." Harumi had no desire for power. Her only wish was to live a peaceful life with the people she loved. In that sense, she didn't need the military or politics.

"Oh, that isn't what I meant," Elfaria whispered to Harumi, narrowing her eyes. "If we lay the groundwork like this, there will be less opposition to you marrying Koutarou-sama."

Legally, Koutarou might have been able to accept any number of wives. But what about their statuses? Wouldn't they have to come from worthy families? And any who didn't would have to have achieved something special. At least, that would be the opinion of those who cared about history and tradition. Naturally, there would be discussions about Harumi. But if her status and position were established through the new Blue Knight, most opposition would be removed. The administrator of Signaltin would no doubt be seen as far more advantageous to the people of Forthorthe than a senior who looked after Koutarou in school.

Harumi was left speechless. But it was true that as a commoner, she wasn't at all suitable as the Blue Knight's wife. That was a problem she had never thought about before. She was fundamentally different from Theia and Clan. Feeling that she'd need to put in some effort to make up for the difference in status, she didn't object to Elfaria's methods, even if she did feel like they were heavy-handed.

"How about it, Harumi-san?" Elfaria asked.

"I... It's not like I'm against it..." Considering the future, Harumi, who only had the title of a member of Koutarou's band of knights, realized that having a proper status in Forthorthe was very welcome. While she did feel apologetic, she couldn't ignore the attractive proposal.

"I am glad to hear it." Elfaria smiled in satisfaction.

That solves the issue with Harumi-san. Now if we can just do something about Sanae-san and Shizuka-san...

Elfaria's scheme was steadily progressing. She would do anything in her power to get Koutarou to stay in Forthorthe. By establishing

Harumi's position there, she was giving Koutarou another reason to become a Forthorthian. Being as responsible as he was, he couldn't leave Harumi behind and go home. Getting Koutarou to stay in Forthorthe would have a big effect on Elfaria's future as well.

"And so the shipyards have grown and gotten bigger," Elfaria continued as if nothing had happened. "And that's why they seem closer."

Her sudden shift was partially because Theia was walking up to them but also because she didn't want to corner Harumi.

"I-I see... It's so big, I can't really understand it." Harumi was somewhat shaken, so the change of topic was a blessing to her. She managed to calm herself down as she spoke.

Elfaria winked at her and continued speaking. "I am actually quite surprised too. It's not unusual for transports to be this big, but a battleship this large hasn't been built in a few hundred years."

If one searched for it, they could quickly find a spaceship of the same scale, like a large-scale transport ship that was unable to land on planets. There were tankers that were larger than aircraft carriers on Earth as well, so it was an easy example for Harumi to understand. But when it came to battleships, there were next to no examples of ships of the same size being built. Only a few dating back hundreds of years could be found, such as experimental ships in the early days before warp technology had been miniaturized or special purpose ships that had been assigned on research missions in remote regions.

"Mother, it's about time to head to the docks. But what are you talking about?" Theia came over and asked.

"Oh, I was talking with Harumi-san about how the new Blue Knight is too big," Elfaria answered.

"Yes, that!" Harumi nodded along.

"Oh? Well, it certainly doesn't look like it's very maneuverable." Theia looked a little confused but agreed.

"We'll have to put our hope in the engineers for that," Elfaria said.

"Yes. Anyway, it's time to go, you two!" Theia urged them along.

It was clear why ships of this size hadn't been built. They were so big that they were inconvenient. Large transport ships could carry a

lot but lacked maneuverability and couldn't enter the atmosphere. Battleships needed both, so they couldn't be made so large that they lost those abilities. Yet the new Blue Knight was being built beyond that size, and behind the hull lay the blood, sweat, and tears of the engineers. For example, the ability of the individual parts to move was a trick to help it enter the atmosphere.

After passing the main gate of the dock, they reached a vast landing site. Shipbuilding required a large amount of materials, so a place for transport craft to land was necessary. That was where the launching ceremony would be held. The venue had already been prepared and all that was left was to wait for the main participants to join.

"I see not all of the parts have been put together," Koutarou said.

Theia nodded. "Yes, it's just the head and torso for now."

The two were looking up as they walked side by side. In front of them was a structure over a thousand and several hundred meters tall. It was like a mountain, but shockingly enough, it was man-made. The vivid blue structure was part of the new Blue Knight. The torso was over a kilometer, and the head was several hundred meters. The ship was looking down at the people who had come to the launching ceremony from far above.

"When will the other parts be added?" Koutarou asked.

"The rest will be done in space after it has launched," Theia answered.

"I guess it would be dangerous to do it on the surface."

"Yes, that's right."

The torso was the part that had been built at the shipyard they were now using as the venue for the ceremony, so it hadn't yet moved from its original location. But since having only the torso would look bad, the head had been attached the day before. It had been built next to the torso, and cranes, rails, and frames had been used to support the head and put it in place. Merging the other parts was impractical for various reasons such as cost and safety, so that would be done in orbit after the launching ceremony. That was why the new Blue Knight was being launched as just a head and torso.

Camera shutters sounded constantly as reporters took pictures of

the two from behind as they looked up at the new Blue Knight. The Blue Knight and Golden Princess looking up at it together was a sight the news reporters couldn't pass up. But a moment later came something that they'd been waiting even more for.

"I understand the surprise, you two, but everyone is waiting," Elfaria announced.

With the appearance of the empress, the sound of the cameras became several times louder. The sight of the real Blue Knight, with Theia and Elfaria on either side looking up at the ship, was strangely moving. The sound of the cameras never stopped.

"That's right," Theia started. "Let's go, Koutarou!"

"Okay, okay," he answered.

"Don't repeat yourself!" Theia said.

"Okay." Koutarou nodded.

Elfaria laughed, and Theia took the lead with light steps. Koutarou jogged after her while saying something, and Elfaria elegantly held up the hem of her dress and calmly walked after the two with a smile.

"Hey, over there..." a reporter said.

"Wow..." another one gasped.

"This might be a rude way to put it, but...that's great..." the first reporter said.

"I know how you feel. Forthorthe will be safe with them," the other agreed.

Everyone present thought the same thing. Forthorthe's future was bright. And it wasn't because of the new Blue Knight. Instead, Koutarou, Theia, and Elfaria gave off a warm atmosphere that filled them with hope for the future.

The launching ceremony began with them addressing the guests. Naturally, Theia and Elfaria spoke, but so did Koutarou.

"To be frank, there would be nothing better than not having to build battleships. But reality won't allow for it. As you know, the Forthorthe Liberation Army has declared war," Koutarou stated.

He wished that there wasn't any fighting, but the situation demanded it. Maxfern, whom the public believed was Ralgwin, had declared war, and there was no option to avoid combat.

"Criticizing the government by way of political activities would have been fine. So would protesting for the sake of political reforms," Koutarou continued.

Forthorthe had freedom of speech. Ideology and political beliefs weren't punished. If the enemy legitimately increased their allies and began discussing constitutional revisions and democratization, Koutarou wouldn't have had anything to object to, since that would have been the will of the masses. Alaia would surely have obeyed the choice of the people as well.

"In the coming battle, I am convinced that this new Blue Knight will be of help to me. This is the product of the people coming together and a symbol of their faith. I swear to use this power and faith to protect Forthorthe."

The new Blue Knight was a power granted to him by the people. At the same time, it was a sign of their faith in Koutarou and the royal families. Koutarou declared that it would be used justly to return Forthorthe to normal. A storm of applause erupted from the crowd that filled the venue, and Koutarou stepped down from the stage.

"Good work, Veltlion. That was a good greeting." Clan welcomed Koutarou back with a smile. She'd already finished her own speech, so she looked equally relieved.

"I have a good ghostwriter," Koutarou replied with a shrug.

Clan was the one who had prepared his speech. They'd spoken beforehand and she had summarized the contents of their discussion. Koutarou didn't understand all of Forthorthe's circumstances, so Clan's cooperation had been very welcome.

"It is an honor to hear you say that." Clan smiled happily.

Koutarou normally teased her, but he was honestly praising her now. Like Clan, he was relieved to have safely finished his role, so the appreciation naturally welled up and poured out of him.

"Due to the larger size of the ship, the main cannon has been replaced by an antimatter gun. The old main guns cover any blind spots as secondary weapons."

After Koutarou left the stage, the engineers began explaining the new ship's functions. They were accompanied by holograms that

displayed the results of their efforts.

"The placement of some of the weapons has been changed accordingly. Moreover, generators have been installed in all parts, making energy weapons easier to use than on the previous Blue Knight."

"Are you sure you shouldn't be up there? You were involved in most of that, right?" Koutarou asked Clan while listening to the explanation.

Clan probably knew more about the new ship than anyone else. She'd been involved in the design of the main system and its programs as well as communications protocols for it to cooperate with Hazy Moon, weapon systems, and more. She had been involved in a lot of the work, and as such was well-versed in everything. So Koutarou wondered if she shouldn't be the one onstage.

"Today is their moment to shine," Clan said. "I don't want to get in the way."

She wasn't the only one who had put in an effort. They had reached this point through the hard work of a lot of engineers and scientists, and Clan had no intention of taking the spotlight away from them.

"However, as the head serves as the bridge, it primarily uses its energy for defense. I am sure you all understand why. We engineers are proud of the defensive power that we have achieved..." the engineers continued.

"I guess so," Koutarou replied to Clan with a nod.

"Besides, I think it is about time I get to take a break," she added.

This was also a chance for Clan to relax. For the past few months, she had been exceedingly busy with no chance to catch her breath.

"You're right, there," Koutarou said with a smile. *Clan's been running around for months with these guys to put everything together. Of course she'd want to let them have the glory.*

Despite his thoughts, however, he didn't say anything out loud. Today was a big day for her as well. The conclusion of the launching ceremony was the naming ceremony. So far, the ship had only been

called the "new Blue Knight." But from today it would be given an official name, launched into space, and merged with the remaining parts in orbit. That was the ceremony's finale.

"As for its given name, we see it as an important matter for our country and its people. After much discussion, investigation, and time, we finally reached a decision." Elfaria would be the one to announce the new Blue Knight's name. As such, she stepped onto stage once more. The guests and those watching the broadcast held their breath.

"I will now announce the name. As of today, this ship will be called..."

The sound of shutters rang out as the moment came. Elfaria made the announcement with a calm and dignified voice.

"Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire of the First Royal Guard, the first Chivalry-class ship. Guardian of the Empire Layous Fatra Veltlion!"

Cheers erupted from the guests. It had been more or less expected that it would inherit the name of its predecessor. But when it was announced, the venue was filled with shouts of joy, to the point that the sound engineers needed to quickly bring down the speaker volumes.

"Its abbreviation and call sign will be Blue Knight, as before," Elfaria added, although it was doubtful anyone could hear her. That was how heated the crowd had gotten. She had anticipated the reaction, but it still exceeded her expectations. She watched over the venue with a strange mix of emotions.

"In the end, not much changed." After the din died down, Koutarou spoke to Clan again.

"You're the only one who thinks that," she retorted.





"Really."

"The ship is officially part of the royal guard, which makes you part of the royal guard as well."

Since the new Blue Knight had been made a part of the royal guard, it meant that Koutarou, who was aboard it, was a royal guard as well. It was a perfect fit for the title of Guardian of the Empire. Koutarou's role had been made clearer so that he would normally be protecting royalty while acting as supreme commander in emergencies.

"So I'm a bodyguard again..." Koutarou muttered and looked at his chest. On it was a small piece of wood decorated with wool with the text "Insignia of Forthorthe's Blue Knight, Super Important Bodyguard for Charl and Alaia." It had been handmade by the people in his memories. Until now, it had been the only thing that had shown Koutarou's standing. He'd once joked with Elfaria about becoming a guard, and now it was official.

"Do you not like being called a royal guard?" Clan cautiously asked after seeing Koutarou's reaction. She couldn't tell if there were positive or negative emotions behind it.

"No. Fighting for you guys isn't bad. I was just feeling a little nostalgic," he answered. He didn't hate being called a guard. A royal guard in particular had the job of protecting the royalty. They also had more work than that, as they could be given missions directly from royalty. In other words, he felt like nothing much would change.

"This is the first time that you've been officially appointed a royal guard," Clan said with a gentle expression, feeling somewhat relieved.

Two years ago, I would have punched this face...but I can't do that now...

Two years ago, he and Clan had gone missing while fighting. Back then they had been outright enemies. That was why Koutarou could have punched her back then. But everything had changed over the last two years. Such a thought would never come to his mind now. Clan had changed so much, and he found it impossible to direct any hostility toward her when her expression looked the way it

did now.

"Then are you going to return to being a servant for the first time in two years too?" Koutarou asked. Half of the reason for his words was to hide his embarrassment, with the remaining half driven by nostalgia.

"If that is what you seriously wish of me," Clan answered.

Koutarou's words could have been interpreted as him teasing her, but Clan was unusually unperturbed by it. That, or she might have been feeling something similar to Koutarou. Going on a journey with him as she had back then didn't sound all that bad.

"If I...make you my servant, you might just go around saying that the real Blue Knight is dead." If anything, it was Koutarou who was perturbed. He was shaken up because he didn't think it was that bad of a future either. Even so, he was stubborn, so he squeezed out what gripes he could.

"That's why...I will have the real Blue Knight die this time," Clan said, smiling happily at him.

"What?!"

"I will have you die in my arms...although I don't know how many decades from now that will be," Clan explained.

Koutarou wouldn't die until far in the future, because Clan would protect him. He would grow old and die peacefully, surrounded by his family, and Clan would be at his side so that she could witness the last moments of the man who'd once been her nemesis. She wouldn't fail again, staying by his side and witnessing the death of the Blue Knight.





The people were looking up at the ship, eagerly waiting for it to launch. The craft itself was in the final stage of the process. Koutarou and the others had already moved to the bridge and were making preparations for the launch.

"Master, the auxiliary generators have stabilized, and the main generator has ignited."

Ruth used the term "ignite," but the Blue Knight's generators didn't emit fire. The main generator was made with special distortion technology, and its power source was a singularity—a black hole. But the image of being powered by fire never disappeared from the minds of Forthorthians. The image of fire was alive and well as a symbol of beginnings and ends.

"Main generator on. It's finally time..."

Koutarou acknowledged Ruth's words, partly nervous and partly excited. He had lingering attachments to the old Blue Knight, having overcome several dangerous situations with it. While this ship was newly built, the old AI had been transferred over, so in Koutarou's mind it was like the original vessel had been revived and powered-up. And that was a welcome sight to him.

"Main generator active. It is stable at twenty percent output," Ruth reported.

"It's about time you wake up, Blue Knight! It's your time to shine!" Clan announced.

With the start of the main generator, the AI started to function. It had been at work nonstop, processing the vast amount of information involved in starting up a new ship. Due to the size of the ship, it took a lot of time, but it managed to finish and activate its speech interface.

"Greetings, Princess Clariossa," the AI said.

"Are there any errors?" Clan asked.

"Everything is functioning normally. All defective parts from the last startup have been corrected."

Since today was the launching ceremony, the ship had been reset and restarted, but there had been multiple activation tests before, perfecting the launch procedures until it had reached Clan and the engineers' standards. While the spaceport unit, Cloak of Emperor,

and the massive anti-ship energy sword Signaltin A1 were still incomplete, they had made sure that the other parts were complete.

"Hey, Blue Knight, it's been a while since we met on the bridge," Koutarou called out to the AI the same way he always did. Until now, the old AI had been installed in the command room in the palace, but it had finally been installed in the new Blue Knight with enhancements to every part of it. In other words, all of the accumulated data was still usable, and the AI remembered Koutarou.

The AI greeted him as usual. "It is an honor, Your Excellency. This system positively views being installed on a bridge."

"You're as stiff as always." Koutarou sighed. "In times like this, you should just say you're happy."

"This system is happy to be able to return," the AI answered.

"Good work. Can you fly?" Koutarou asked with a smile.

"How far, exactly?"

"Who knows? Until we're satisfied." Koutarou laughed. His order was vague, so a brand-new AI would be confused by it.

"Understood. Starting the takeoff process," the AI replied. "Forming system link... The arms and legs will follow the main ship."

The Blue Knight's AI was different. It could read Koutarou's intentions and take action. Through experience, it had learned that Koutarou was a person who would fulfill his duty and role regardless of what he might say. The AI had already learned how to interpret his unsaid orders. That was why it had been added to the new Blue Knight. Many people felt that it would be a waste to let such experience disappear. The AI's actions were correct too, as it attempted to launch into orbit where it could merge with the other parts of the ship.

"That kind of irritates me..." Theia pouted. She was getting upset over how Koutarou and the AI got along, and griped to Ruth.

"I know how you feel, Your Highness, but..." Ruth replied with a wry smile.

Koutarou was always straightforward with his demands to Blue Knight. The ship could even read his unvoiced intentions. It felt like there was something special between them, like a conversation

between adults. So Theia was a little unhappy about it, and Ruth understood how she felt. But it was an artificial intelligence, and there was no need for Theia to feel that way.

"Hmph..."

Despite the consolation, Theia's cheeks were still puffed out. Ruth felt it was a shame that Koutarou couldn't see her expression.

Just then, the bridge shook slightly.

"Launch successful," the AI reported.

The shaking was due to the ship taking off. However, it was just a minor tremble. Thanks to inertia control technology, it was minimal. Normally, this technology would eliminate any shaking altogether, but it hadn't been set to maximum because they wanted people to notice the takeoff.

"Arms and legs have also taken off. They are following the main ship," the AI announced.

Since the new Blue Knight could be taken apart, there was a rule of sorts for referring to the main ship. The standard was the head and Koutarou was on board, so any parts connected to the head were referred to as the main ship. In other words, if the torso and right arm merged, the three would be called "the main ship." Since only the head and torso were connected now, they comprised the main ship. Of course, there were exceptions, like if the head was attacked and Koutarou moved to the bridge of another section. In that case, *that* would be considered the standard for the main ship. Essentially, the rule was that the main ship was wherever Koutarou and the primary crew were.

"How long will it take to reach orbit?" Koutarou asked.

"It is estimated to take thirty minutes," the AI answered.

"That's surprisingly long."

"It would only take a few minutes in a hurry, but the process has been extended to thirty for the sake of the ceremony."

"That makes sense. I'll leave it to you," Koutarou said with a nod.

Since he found himself with some spare time, he got up from his seat—the commander's seat. Since it was located above all other positions, he walked down to the rest of the bridge. He then made his way to Theia, who was in an operator's seat. For some reason,

she was in a bad mood.

"Mmm..."

"What's wrong with you?" Koutarou asked, squeezing her cheeks and rubbing them.

"There's nothing wrong with me! And don't..." In response, Theia's anger flared up for a moment, but it was quickly extinguished for some reason. "Never mind. Play to your heart's content," she said with a somewhat satisfied smile.

"Hmm?" Koutarou was perplexed, but he continued rubbing her cheeks. *What's with her?*

An uncomfortable Koutarou looked over at Ruth in another operator's seat, and after Ruth glanced at Theia, she made a pleading gesture to Koutarou.

So, something must have happened to put her in a bad mood... All right. Koutarou gained a rough understanding of the situation and removed his hands from Theia's cheeks.

"Ah..." Theia glanced at Koutarou's hand with a look of reluctance. However, he wasn't done yet.

"Let's go, Theia," he said. "We have some time to kill."

"Oh?!" Theia exclaimed.

He picked her up and walked down the stairs. Their friends were gathering a little farther down.

Theia quietly entrusted her body to Koutarou and wrapped her arms around him. Ruth laughed as she saw her lord and knight captain off. From her point of view, Theia hadn't wrapped her arms around him to avoid falling but rather because she didn't want to let go of him. And while Ruth couldn't see her face from where she was, Theia's expression was no doubt full of joy.

A short moment later, Ruth snapped out of it and got back to her own work. She still had a lot to do, checking the condition of the ship and the process of the ceremony. Once in orbit, the five parts began to align, with the head and torso in the center and the limbs in close proximity to where they connected. When the signal came, the ceremony would continue and the parts would merge.

"It's finally here!!!"

"It's time to merge!!!"

Sanae-chan and Sanae-nee were clamoring over the situation. They had a lot of emotional attachments to giant robots, and when it came to merging, their excitement was at its peak. They were glued to the largest hologram, eagerly awaiting the moment.

"I am so sorry about us being so noisy!" Sanae-san, on the other hand, was repeatedly bowing to the people on the bridge. Out of the three, she had the least interest in giant robots. She didn't hate them, but her consideration for the people around her won out over her excitement. However, she wasn't able to stop the other two when they were so excited. As such, she was stuck apologizing on their behalf.

"It's fine," Koutarou casually said. "Let them do as they please. It's only us here anyway."

To him, Sanae had always been like that. And while he'd been surprised by the appearance of another Sanae from a different world, all three of them were very much Sanae. So Koutarou didn't particularly mind, and the other girls were likely the same.

"Thank you for saying that," Sanae-san said with a relieved expression, but she didn't forget to bow one final time.

"The bridge isn't cramped enough for the two of them making a racket to be a problem," Koutarou said as he looked around the bridge. He was actually looking forward to the merge as well.

"Not cramped, huh... Hmm..." Kenji muttered and looked around as well.

Noticing that, Koutarou called out to him. "What?"

"It's nothing, just...I was thinking how the bridge is pretty much the same size as before," Kenji remarked. He was thinking about the size of the bridge. He figured that since the ship was over twice the size, the bridge would have gotten bigger as well.

Kiriha was the one to answer his question. "That is because the number of people piloting it hasn't changed, Matsudaira Kenji."

"Oh yeah, now that you mention it, I guess so," Kenji said. "Too many people would just make it inconvenient."

The bridge had enough seats for Koutarou's crew. There were only a few spare seats aside from those. Just like the old Blue Knight, battleships had been made to be operated by only a few

people. That was in large part thanks to the development of artificial intelligence, and it was also the reason the AI had been transferred from the old Blue Knight. They needed an AI that had learned how they worked the ship, which was why the bridge was more or less the same size as before.

"That said, this is still expected to serve as the flagship of a fleet and the command center for an expedition," Ruth added. "That's why there is a subbridge right below, which is as large as you were expecting, Mackenzie-sama."

She projected footage of the subbridge for Kenji to see. It was as large as a wedding hall and would be able to serve as the command room for the Imperial Army. However, it was much too large for them alone to use—given the size of the room, one would have to shout to reach someone on the other side.

"Wouldn't that make *this* the subbridge, then?" Shizuka wondered. From her point of view, the functions made the subbridge below them the actual bridge, while the one they were on seemed more like it was just for them.

"Most astute, Shizuka," Clan said. "You know your way around buildings. The architect had exactly what you said in mind when creating the design. These rooms were named accordingly, but Elfaria-san changed the names."

Clan looked at Elfaria sitting in the seat reserved for the empress. The original design had called the subbridge the main bridge. Like Shizuka had said, their designations had been flipped. The designer had naturally thought that the larger bridge was the main room, but Elfaria had overruled that call.

"Elfaria-san did?" Shizuka asked.

"You meddled with something weird again, didn't you?" Koutarou said in exasperation. Elfaria had been interfering in all sorts of issues regarding the new Blue Knight.

"You may say that, Koutarou-sama," she replied with a somewhat troubled smile, "but keeping those original designations would have caused confusion."

"What do you mean?"

Elfaria explained: The new ship was intended to fight alongside a

fleet, so making a local rule that the subbridge must be contacted first would cause confusion. Even if everyone was aware of the rule, operators might still hesitate for a moment. That was why changing the main and subbridge to what would be more commonly used would reduce confusion. So it wasn't just something Elfaria had thought up and changed for no reason.

"I guess so. Sorry for doubting you," Koutarou said.

"Not at all; I don't mind," Elfaria answered.

"Liar! That's the face you make when you're thinking something bad!" Koutarou shouted.

"I wouldn't dare," Elfaria replied with a composed expression.

But there was actually another reason the bridges had been split in two. Koutarou's group had magic and spiritual energy technology that they would rather not show their allies, if possible. So they needed to split the bridges to have secret talks. They also didn't want the soldiers to see Koutarou in distress. Mentally, he was still a young man with plenty of troubles, and his heart could get hurt in battle. So it was a necessary measure to settle things with only the people on the bridge and make sure that the usual Koutarou was the one shown to the outside world. But Elfaria would never tell Koutarou that.

"Sorry to disturb you while you're talking, master," Ruth spoke up. "We just received the signal from the ceremony committee on the surface. The merge will begin in thirty seconds."

A message had come in from the committee managing the ceremony on the surface. As the new Blue Knight was launching, there had been an introduction to the history of Forthorthe, as well as the history of the construction of the new Blue Knight. That introduction had just finished, and it was time for the Blue Knight to merge.

"I approve the merge," Koutarou said.

"Understood. I will begin the process," Ruth replied.

"As you wish, Your Excellency. Changing system link mode from synchronous mode to merge mode. Commencing laser measurement. All vessels are moving to their initial positions," the AI reported.

The Blue Knight was merging and transforming. It began by measuring and making minute adjustments.

"It's kind of slow, isn't it?" Yurika remarked.

"This is not what I was expecting! It should be snappier!" Sanae complained.

Like they'd said, the Blue Knight's merge was very slow. The five parts were slowly drifting in the hologram monitors. Being used to merging scenes from robot anime, Yurika and Sanae thought the speed left much to be desired.

"Sorry for not living up to your expectations," Kiriha apologized. "There are reasons for this." Ruth and Clan had their hands full with the merging process, so she took over the explanation.

"Reasons?" Sanae asked.

"Like what?" Yurika tilted her head.

Both of them gave Kiriha a perplexed look.

In response, Kiriha smiled and explained. "They are actually merging at an extremely fast speed."

"But they're going so slow," Sanae pointed out.

"That's what it looks like to me too," Yurika agreed with a nod.

"That's because they are too big," Kiriha explained. "This ship is dozens of times bigger than a giant robot. That's why the speed looks like it's dozens of times slower."

"Really?!" Sanae exclaimed.

"They are actually moving at hundreds of kilometers per hour," Kiriha said.

"Wow, I didn't know that..." Yurika said with a nod, impressed.

Now that they thought about it, large objects did look like they moved slowly, like the sun or moon. The Blue Knight was the same, and because of its size, the perceived speed was lower. In other words, it was merging at the speed of giant robots, but it didn't look like it.

"In order to show you what you want to see, the parts would have to move faster than Mach 10," Kiriha said.

"So it's impossible," Sanae replied, resigned.

"Yeah...Mach 10 is just too fast..." Yurika sighed.

Even they knew that merging at ten times the speed of sound

was impossible. They exchanged looks and smiled bitterly.

"The engineers are trying their best," Kiriha said. "It may look slow, but it's pretty much a miracle to merge at speeds like this."

"Yeah, I can tell that Clan and Ruth are doing their best," Sanae said with a nod.

"It must be really hard to move big things..." Yurika agreed.

The merging was supported by the engineers' untiring devotion. As proof of that, Clan and Ruth didn't have any time to talk with Sanae and Yurika. Even on Earth, accidents with tankers colliding made it clear that they were extremely hard to steer. In order for a tanker to make a right angle turn, they needed to move the rudder a kilometer beforehand. If even some momentum remained, the tremendous masses would crash into each other and destroy both ships. In other words, on a larger scale, maneuvering required anticipating the future, while on a smaller scale, it required delicate control. Forthorthe had spatial distortion technology that supported the merging. But even then, the speed at which the Blue Knight was being put together was practically miraculous.

"I learned something new today," Sanae said. "In order to have a cool merging scene, there's a limit to how big the robot can be!"

"What a shame," Yurika said. "But...you don't seem very depressed about it, Sanae-chan."

"I still have the hope called Sun Fighter left!" Sanae exclaimed.

"Oh! There is still thaaat!" Yurika exclaimed.

The new Blue Knight's merging hadn't been as cool as they had hoped. But there was still the Sun Fighter that the Sun Rangers had on Earth. The two hadn't given up hope yet—surely *that* merging scene would be cool.

While the pair talked, Ruth and Clan were taking the lead to merge the Blue Knight.

"Beginning merging of the arms," Ruth reported. "Three, two, one...contact."

"Arms are stable at the proper position," Clan added. "Safety device activated. Locking each part. Engaging system."

The arms were using the thrusters to make fine adjustments for the approach of the torso, which was relatively stationary. The torso

received them using a distortion field, guiding them to the correct locations and slowing them down. As the relative speed between the arms and torso neared zero, they physically connected, and the arms were safely fixed to the main ship. Incidentally, the arms had been merged first because weight was added to either side of the Blue Knight, meaning that the torso practically didn't move. Only some minor adjustments would be enough to move on to merging the legs.

"System linked to arm parts established. All operations functioning normally," the AI reported.

"Next are the legs!" Clan said.

"Adjustments of relative speed complete, Princess. You can proceed when you are ready," the AI said.

"Beginning merging of the legs," Ruth stated. "Three, two, one...contact!"

"Legs are stable at the proper position," Clan confirmed. "Safety device activated. Locking each part. Engage!"

If the legs had been merged first, things would have been different. Since both legs merged diagonally at the end of the torso, the combined force would have exerted an upward force on the torso. Even with the relative speed close to zero, the sheer mass made such an outcome inevitable. And if the ship was pushed upward, the distance to the arms would greatly increase. Because of that, the arms had been done first.

"System linked to arm parts established. All operations functioning normally," the AI reported.

"Reboot," Clan instructed.

"As you wish, my princess. Rebooting the entire ship in synchronous mode. Parameters reset. The main ship can now function as a single battleship," the AI confirmed.

With a sigh, Clan finally stopped. She'd been a busy bee until now, and she leaned into her chance now that she finally had a moment to relax.

"Good work, Clan-sama," Ruth said with a smile.





Merging was a continuous series of minor adjustments. Since making adjustments was pretty much Ruth's core job, she wasn't as exhausted as Clan. That said, Ruth still had the same look of relief.

"You too, Pardomshiha..." Clan managed.

"You honor me..." Ruth replied. "Master, the merge has been completed."

"Good work, you two," Koutarou answered.

"Now it's my and Koutarou-sama's turn," Elfaria announced.

"All right, let's wrap this last bit up!" Koutarou exclaimed. He headed toward the back of the bridge with Elfaria, approaching the helmsman's seat. But not to sit down. Koutarou walked past the seat, aiming for the floor where several concentric circles had been engraved. "Elle, don't walk inside of this circle; it's dangerous," he warned her.

Upon standing in the center, his body was lifted up into the air. The circles were actually part of the Blue Knight's piloting equipment. The movements he made in his armor were directly conveyed to the ship, allowing him to freely control it. Since Koutarou would be moving around in the circle, it would be dangerous for Elfaria to step inside.

"Yes," Elfaria agreed with a nod. She knew more about the unique piloting device than anyone else, since she was the one who'd had it installed in the old Blue Knight. Even if Koutarou hadn't said anything, she wasn't going to step into the circles. But since he was looking out for her, she felt it would be tactless to point that out.

"Citizens of Forthorthe, this is the Blue Knight from orbit," Elfaria announced. "We are calling out to you from far above. The Blue Knight has safely merged, and Lord Veltlion is now piloting it."

"We can hear you clearly, Your Majesty. For starters, allow us to offer our sincerest congratulations on the completion of the new Blue Knight."

Each part of the ship had been completed prior, but it wasn't until now that they had all been put together. So this moment was when the Blue Knight was truly finished.

"I can hear the blessings of the people from the surface, as well as from every corner of the galaxy," Elfaria said. "Thank you for

celebrating our fresh start."

A hologram was displaying the launching ceremony venue, as well as public viewing venues all over the galaxy, showing the people cheering. They reacted particularly strongly to Elfaria's use of the phrase "our fresh start." That would normally mean a fresh start for the Imperial Army and the empress who controlled it, but it could also be interpreted as a fresh start for the royal families and Koutarou. The Blue Knight's strong connection to the royal families was well-known, so it wasn't surprising for the people to interpret it that way.

"Layous-sama..." Since they were at a formal function, Elfaria referred to Koutarou in that fashion. Since she had often been calling him Koutarou lately, it took him a moment to react. But he quickly remembered the role given to him and spoke.

"Being able to fly aboard this ship fills me with joy. I swear not to betray the trust placed in me by the citizens and Her Majesty."

Koutarou flew the resurrected battleship Blue Knight. Elfaria stood next to him, gently smiling. Their appearance was broadcast across the galaxy and generated a public frenzy. Many called for them to defeat the Forthorthe Liberation Army led by Ralgwin.

Elle really is amazing when it comes to this kind of thing. By holding the new Blue Knight's launching ceremony now, she's united the people against the Forthorthe Liberation Army. The way she uses the cards she has in hand is impressive...

Koutarou was amazed. The ceremony was being held just before raising an army to take down the Forthorthe Liberation Army, which was officially led by Ralgwin. The timing was so perfect that it was like she'd planned it from the start. Most of the opposition would be quelled. When it came to political maneuvering like this, Elfaria was a genius. Koutarou felt like he was no match for her, and he wanted to ask just how much of this had been planned.

The ceremony ended smoothly and without issue. Freed from their duties, the crew took advantage of the chance to take the ship for a test-drive. The interface was made to look as much like the old Blue Knight's as possible, but even so, there had been plenty of changes, which meant that some practice was needed.

“It feels a little sluggish,” Koutarou muttered while moving the arms and legs. The method of control hadn’t changed, but compared to the old one, the new ship’s movements were slow. That was because it was bigger, and there was nothing they could do about it.

“Haha, please don’t say that,” Elfaria replied. “It is shockingly fast for its size.”

“I guess it’s the same reason the merging appeared slow,” Koutarou surmised.

“That’s right.”

The bigger it was, the slower it felt. In reality, even if it moved faster, it wouldn’t feel that way, since the ship was more than twice as big as before. That was the reason large battleships weren’t common.

“That is why we are here,” Nefilforan broadcast.

“Princess Nefilforan, we are in your care,” Koutarou replied in greeting.

Having gotten bigger, the Blue Knight was more likely to be hit by attacks, but it wouldn’t be too much of a problem if both sides were just shooting at each other from the front. The increased firepower meant that they would win. The threats were attacks from blind spots, which meant the rear and somewhat toward the bottom of the humanoid-shape, which had to be covered in some way.

That was where Nefilforan came in. Nefilforan from the Glendad family specialized in close combat, and her ship, Hidden Leaves, was similar in performance to an assault landing craft, excelling in maneuverability. It was that maneuverability that would cover the Blue Knight’s blind spots.

Today was just a ceremony, so there wouldn’t be much danger, but it was clear that such battles would happen from now on. Even ignoring Nefilforan’s status, she was worthy of respect.

“Rest assured, Your Excellency, we won’t let anyone lay a finger on your ship,” Nefilforan said.

“Please don’t force yourself and remember to take care of yourself as well,” Koutarou answered. He had fought alongside Nefilforan and her regiment before, so he knew their power. Although he was grateful for the offer, he was a little uncomfortable

with the idea of being protected by royalty.

"I am well aware of your circumstances, Your Excellency. With that in mind, you can be at ease," Nefilforan replied with confidence. She had likewise fought plenty of battles alongside Koutarou and knew how he was. If she was in danger, he would no doubt come to help her. So her job was to take the utmost care so that didn't happen.

Standing next to Nefilforan on the bridge of Hidden Leaves was Nana. She'd quietly listened in on the conversation between Koutarou and Nefilforan, and once the call ended she spoke up.

"Commander, a person who is an unheroic hero, who is without a doubt a hero, can be a handful, don't you think?" Nana said with a smile.

Koutarou was not a hero by nature. But that was why his actions had led to great results. Koutarou was without a doubt a hero. Because of that, people like Nefilforan and Nana, whose job was to guard Koutarou, had a difficult job on their hands. They would protect his mind and body, and create a path to victory. But at the same time, they had to protect themselves. Since Koutarou would never abandon them, danger for them meant that he would be in danger as well.

"You're right," Nefilforan agreed with a smile.

But shortly after she shook her head.

"No, only he could have protected Forthorthe. So you could say he's heroic after all."

"That's true."

Would a so-called hero have been able to protect Forthorthe? Nefilforan thought it impossible. She believed the world was protected thanks to Koutarou being himself. In that case, wasn't he a true hero?

"Still...if His Excellency the Blue Knight had some more heroic desires, then they would be more easily fulfilled, vice commander," Nefilforan said.

If Koutarou's personality had been a little closer to those of the many heroes of history, then the people around him wouldn't have to fret as much. But from what Nefilforan could see, Nana was yet

another person fretting about him.

"Commander!" Nana exclaimed. Nefilforan's judgment had been correct, and Nana's description of Koutarou as a handful had a deeper meaning behind it. Since Nana hadn't expected that to be exposed, she was left unusually speechless. But that only lasted for a few seconds.

"Pardon my interruption, Commander!" an officer announced. "We have received an emergency call from a frontier region that is under attack by an unidentified fleet!"

An emergency request had reached the Imperial Army. Normally, it would have been sent to Koutarou as the supreme commander, but command had been transferred to Nefilforan during the launching ceremony. As such, the initial report reached her first.

"Commander!" Nana repeated. Her restless expression from before was nowhere to be found; she was now very serious. In order to fulfill her desires, she had to be focused. She jumped into her own seat and began confirming the information.

"I know! Contact the Blue Knight! Let His Excellency know we need to hold a meeting right away!" Nefilforan was the same. Her expression wasn't that of a troubled friend. In its place was an expression ready for battle.

I am glad it happened after the launching ceremony ended! Now we can fight back! she thought.

If the enemy had attacked before the ceremony, it would have been dangerous. The ceremony would have to have been canceled, and the fleet would have been sent without the new battleship. But with the ceremony over, the new Blue Knight could be counted as part of their force. All paperwork for its sortie had already been finished. That made a huge difference, and Nefilforan began to think about all kinds of ways to fight.

Ash and Rainbow

Monday, December 12th

This unidentified enemy had targeted a strategic transit point. Even with Forthorthe's advanced technology, they hadn't perfected space travel so that people could fly freely. Space distortion navigation, or warp travel, had margins of error caused by the state of the destination, measuring instruments, the limitations of the computer's calculating abilities, and more. All those reasons overlapped to create a discrepancy over where a ship would exit warp.

The differences in distance were very small, but on a large scale, such mistakes became enormous. For example, say that the margin of error was one percent. At a one-hundred-meter warp, there would be a one meter difference. While that might not have been a big problem, when traveling a hundred light-years, the difference became a full light-year. So if anything existed within a light-year radius, there was a chance of collision. Therefore, warp travel required warping to destinations where there was nothing, or rather so little that the probability of a collision was negligible.

Moving through such stepping stones was the basis of Forthorthe's space travel. As a result, many ships gathered in specific passages while traveling the galaxy. These empty spaces weren't conveniently available, so spaceships ended up congregating across a few limited routes that would take them to their destinations. In a sense, they were like highways.

The enemy had targeted a junction where multiple highways intersected. The Imperial Army defending the junction had a base in a nearby system, and it was that base that was under attack.

"Considering the location, it's almost definitely Maxfern," Koutarou concluded after looking over the information. "They must be trying

to stall us."

Kiriha nodded. "Indeed. There is the off chance that it is another anti-government organization, but they have little reason to attack that location. And even if they're not explicitly cooperating, it would almost definitely be a coordinated move."

"That's Ralgwin for you, I suppose..." Koutarou folded his arms and pondered. They would have to pass that location to reach Maxfern's stronghold anyway. Ralgwin must have chosen the base because it was easy to defend.

"Hmm...I am sure they didn't expect their stronghold to be discovered at this time," Clan informed them. "They must have quickly gathered their forces to defend it. In which case...there probably isn't a large fleet."

Her senses told her that the enemy was moving too fast. If they had predicted this series of events, they might have prepared a large fleet, but considering the situation, that didn't seem probable. The Imperial Army discovering the Liberation Army's stronghold had been unlikely. She didn't think the enemy had a large enough fleet prepared for an attack.

"The defending force hasn't been wiped out immediately," Theia said. "The enemy is panicking. Of course, they should be sending reinforcements, so we can't let our guard down." She agreed with Clan's thoughts on the matter. The basis for that reasoning was that the defending forces were still present. Even now, they were holding the line while sending information. If that information was reliable, they would be able to hold out for a while longer. Still, the fleet couldn't let its guard down. The forces on-site wouldn't be able to deploy enough troops for protection, so if the enemy called in reinforcements and took the junction, Koutarou's side would be severely hampered.

"All right, let's go save them immediately!" he swiftly decided.

They had no time to waste. Grevanas and the Gray Knight might also show up as well, in which case Koutarou's group was best suited to resolving it. Moreover, avoiding battle and giving the enemy more time was bad. If their opponents managed to move their stronghold, everything would be for naught. They had to set out

immediately.

Fortunately for Koutarou and the others, the launching ceremony had finished. They flew up into orbit with all their equipment, and Nefilforan was nearby with her Hidden Leaves. They could omit any time spent on changing ships and quickly take action.

"So, we'll head straight to the site," Koutarou said. "The, uhm, Kularia system."

"I will pray for your fortune, Koutarou-sama," Elfaria replied.

Koutarou had command of the Imperial Army, so although it was unnecessary, he'd decided to report to Elfaria, who had returned to the Imperial Palace. She had gone to the surface when they had taken the Blue Knight for a test-drive. Even on days like these she had work to do.

"It's a good thing you returned to the surface," Koutarou said.

"What a blunder. I missed my chance to get you to take me with you without a fight," she replied with puffed-up cheeks.

Normally, Koutarou would have a remark about that gesture, but not this time. "Sorry about that," he said. "I'll leave the rest to you."

He didn't complain about Elfaria and instead gave her a satisfied nod. While Elfaria had been joking, her eyes weren't smiling. She was by no means taking the situation lightly. Koutarou knew that as well.

"Yes," she said with a nod. "I will gather reinforcements to send after you, Koutarou-sama. I will also have the reconnaissance unit head over there."

"Tell them not to get too close."

"I understand. I should keep them at a distance where not even Sanae-san or Yurika-san can tell, right?"

"That's right. It's better to be safe, knowing who we're up against," Koutarou agreed with a nod.

They really were lucky. Koutarou and most of his friends were already aboard the Blue Knight, and Elfaria had returned to the surface. It was helpful to have someone who understood his group to send backup from Forthorthe.

"Koutarou-sama, please take care, considering who you're facing,"

Elfaria cautioned him. If possible, she didn't want him to fight on the front anymore, personally, politically, or militarily. But the enemy wouldn't allow that. Although worried, she had to send him out.

"That's the plan, but it won't be that easy."

"In which case, I will pray for your fortune."

"Thank you."

It was frustrating for Elfaria that all she could do was to pray over the comms. *Perhaps this is how Empress Alaia felt...*

She was on the surface, while the woman who had inherited Alaia's soul and powers left with Koutarou. Elfaria could understand why Alaia had wanted to be a normal girl.

Military spaceships had better warp devices installed than civilian ships. The same was true for the new Blue Knight, which came equipped with the latest model. But because of the size of the ship, it could only warp with roughly the same performance as Hidden Leaves. At first glance it looked like there hadn't been any technological advancements, but the engineers deserved praise for making a Chivalry-class ship capable of warping like a Royalty-class ship.

"Master, we have finished the spatial distortion navigation," Ruth reported. "Our course is set for the Kularia system."

"Your Excellency, Hidden Leaves has finished warping as well; we are currently following the Blue Knight," Nefilforan said over the comms.

"I'm counting on you, Princess Nefilforan," Koutarou answered.

Having completed navigation for the last spatial distortion, the Blue Knight was facing the Kularia system. Hidden Leaves followed slightly behind and below it. Because of the Blue Knight's legs, that area was a blind spot, so their current formation had been decided beforehand for when the two ships operated together.

"How does the situation look, Ruth-san?" Koutarou asked.

"It appears the battle in space has finished and they have moved the fight to the surface. But due to the strong fortifications, they are still fighting," Ruth reported.

"Fortifications?" Koutarou tilted his head. He knew that important

planets had fortresses on them, but he found it strange that a system in a region like this would have one.

"This has been a strategic transit point for a long time," Theia explained. "They knew there would be fighting here if a war broke out, so the base was fortified."

To Theia and the other Forthorthians, this historical background was common knowledge, but Koutarou didn't have the same understanding.

"I see..." he said with a nod. "So the transit point is not a recent development."

As warp technology advanced, traffic points usually changed. Since warp technology relied on stepping stones, several points could be set aside as technology improved. Even so, junctions where multiple routes intersected remained key locations no matter how much technology advanced. In some cases there weren't many stepping stones around them, and those locations had always been militarily important, with fortresses built near many of them.

"That said, the situation looks bad," Kiriha placed her thin finger on her chin and started thinking. Her expression was as serious as the circumstances. "If they've moved to a ground battle, the Imperial Army's fleet must have been damaged. If enemy reinforcements arrived first, the Imperial Army would have lost a lot of time."

If the enemy was trying to occupy the region, they would have set up a jammer to interfere with spatial distortion navigation after reducing the local army's strength to a degree. That way only they would be able to use the junction. Moreover, a ground battle meant that the Imperial Army had likely lost some of their fleet's fighting power. But the enemy hadn't occupied the area yet. That might have been because they wanted to wipe out the rest of the Imperial fleet, or perhaps because they didn't have the numbers, or any other number of reasons. Regardless, the area would have been occupied if enemy reinforcements had arrived. If Kiriha's conjecture was correct, they had arrived in the nick of time.

"Then the enemy should be coming to intercept us," Clan said somberly. "The enemy fleet is still present, after all."

If the Imperial Army had been forced down to the surface, then the enemy fleet should still be around. It wouldn't be strange if it was in position to intercept any reinforcements.

"It would appear Clan-sama is right," Ruth reported. "Eight enemy ships have appeared above our direction of travel."

As if waiting for Clan to finish speaking, the ship's radar detected enemy ships approaching. Ruth remained calm in spite of being overwhelmingly outnumbered.

"Four times our number, huh... Hahaha, this is getting interesting!" Theia, on the other hand, was excited. She laughed fearlessly as she stared at the eight dots that had appeared on the screen. She was eagerly awaiting the enemy.

"The analysis of their fleet's silhouette and identification code is completed. They are all disguised, but the majority belong to the old Vandarion band of knights. It is safe to assume that the enemy is the Forthorthe Liberation Army," Ruth confirmed.

"There's nowhere near enough of you!" Theia taunted. "I will show you the power of this new Blue Knight!"

Ruth's calm and Theia's excitement came from the same place. They were confident in the abilities of the new Blue Knight, sure that when it was combined with their own powers, there was no way they could lose.

"All ships get ready for battle," Koutarou ordered. "We will destroy the enemy fleet. Princess Nefilforan, if you would." Koutarou, too, believed in himself, the girls, and the engineers. The new battleship was a power granted to them by the people of Forthorthe. It would never lose, and it could never be allowed to.

"Understood, Your Excellency! Hidden Leaves, open your gunports! Follow the Blue Knight!" Nefilforan followed suit and got ready for battle.

Their general positions remained the same. Hidden Leaves remained behind and somewhat below the Blue Knight. Nefilforan would have preferred to launch the first attack, as the Glendads were a warrior family who had made a name for themselves, but this time, she ceded the first strike to the Blue Knight. She hoped for the ship to make a splendid debut.

In Forthorthe fleet battles, surprise attacks were hard to pull off. A single ship with stealth technology like that of Hazy Moon could exist, but gathering an entire fleet of that caliber was hard. The reason for that was warp travel. Everyone would want to attack the enemy when they exited warp, but because of the margin of error, the appearance point was more or less random. Outside of having a massive fleet covering all potential appearance points, it wasn't a realistic way to intercept the enemy. That left intercepting the enemy on the way between the appearance point and destination the only option, but space didn't have any terrain to lend itself to an ambush. Asteroid belts existed, but few ships ever passed through them due to the danger they presented. So unless there were other circumstances, such as betrayal or an attack by ships disguised as civilian vehicles, fleets would face each other in empty space.

"This is the Blue Knight of the Royal Guards of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire Imperial Army. Unknown fleet, disarm and surrender yourselves." Koutarou followed standard procedure and called for the enemy fleet to surrender. He always believed it was best if there was no fight at all. However, never once had an enemy obeyed those instructions.

"The unknown fleet is keeping its channels closed. The spatial distortion energy is increasing. They are planning on fighting!" Ruth reported.

"I guess we have no choice..." Koutarou sighed. In the end, the enemy had responded the same as always. His shoulders dropped in disappointment, and he got up from the commander's seat to head for the pilot's seat—or, more accurately, the concentric circles behind it. He planned to steer the ship himself.

"Master, the armor's and ship's systems have been linked," Ruth said.

"Start it up," Koutarou said.

"Understood!" Ruth answered with a nod.

Standing in the center of the concentric circles, Koutarou's body floated up. The armor he was wearing and the circles on the ground were part of the piloting device. Since the Blue Knight was a humanoid spaceship, aside from normal piloting, it could also be

controlled by his movements. He was used to moving in his armor, so through the same method, he could intuitively move the ship. It was a piloting method that was easier to use, but it came with some drawbacks: Since Koutarou had to move his body, it used up his stamina, so it didn't work well for drawn-out battles.

"Leave the shooting to me," Theia said, jumping into the gunner's seat. "You just focus on steering."

Koutarou could shoot without Theia, but she was more accurate. It also reduced the strain on him, so her presence was welcome.

"Don't miss, Theia!" he cried.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" she shot back.

"Koutarou, Koutarou, those ships are a little strange." That was when Sanae-chan's astral projection appeared, floating in the air. It was more convenient to talk next to each other, so the soul had left the body.

"What do you mean? What about them?" Koutarou asked.

If Sanae was calling them "strange," it must have been something spiritual, but he couldn't see anything himself.

"I feel like they're lacking power. There might not be many people on board."

The strangeness that Sanae was sensing was a distinct lack of spiritual energy from the enemy fleet. People aboard a battleship should have been emitting more spiritual energy, yet Sanae wasn't feeling that much. The difference was obvious when compared to Nefilforan's Hidden Leaves.

"What do you think, Kiriha-san?" Koutarou asked. He couldn't immediately come up with a reason for the lack of spiritual energy, not to mention he wanted to focus on piloting. So he asked for Kiriha's opinion.

"I can think of several possibilities." In contrast, she already had several ideas. "The first is the possibility that there just aren't many people on board. Having sent soldiers to attack the surface, they don't have much of a crew."

Spiritual energy roughly corresponded to the number of people. Her explanation was simple, but it was possible. Since the battle had shifted to the surface, any combat troops on the ship had left.

Depending on the situation, personnel might have been reduced even further. The outcome of the battle was extremely important to the Liberation Army, so they could have sent out even the noncombatants.

"I see, so there's the possibility that they're in a bigger rush than we are," Koutarou said with a nod. "Clan, how would that affect the battle?"

If crew members who were noncombatants had been sent out as well, there wouldn't be enough people to properly handle the ship. Koutarou wanted to know how that would affect the space battle.

"In that scenario, the AI would be responsible for handling more of the ships, and their performance would drop to a degree," Clan explained. "At the same time, choices will be made quicker, so we should avoid a contest of speed."

Battleships were typically piloted by people and AI working together. When one side was lacking, the overall performance would drop. For example, it would no longer be possible to disengage safety devices on the generator to swiftly retreat. Unless given special orders, AI couldn't break the rules. So when left to the AI, ships would be piloted in a much more honest, straightforward way. That did come with some benefits, though. With more reliance on the AI, there would be fewer discussions between people, which meant that actions would be taken faster. In short, the ship would be able to handle chaotic situations where everything constantly changed. Specifically, the ships would have an advantage when dogfighting with lasers.

"So a dogfight is out of the question," Koutarou said. "Well, the Blue Knight isn't suited to that anyway."

The new Blue Knight had plenty of mobility, but its size made that difficult to capitalize on, so dogfights where the situation constantly changed should be avoided as a rule.

"The other thing I can think of is that they have countermeasures for psychic powers in place," Kiriha said. "They know that Sanae has Spirit Vision and that you pilot the Blue Knight. Camouflage for spiritual energy would help them a lot."

Even if they felt only a small amount of spiritual energy, that

didn’t mean that was true. Just as Yurika could use spells to hide mana, it wouldn’t be strange for the enemy to be able to hide their spiritual energy.

“We’re slower, so I’d like to be able to foresee their movements...but they won’t let me, huh,” Koutarou said. He preferred to use his psychic powers to read how the enemy would attack and prevent it. It was the best way for the Blue Knight to fight, so spiritual energy being camouflaged put him at a slight disadvantage.

“It is a little hard to get a grasp of the enemy’s goal,” Sanae-nee said. “If he is the enemy, he will show himself. He’s used this kind of obstruction before.”

If the enemy really was camouflaging their spiritual energy, she believed that it was the Gray Knight. Chaos was the power to make things vague, making it suitable to obstruct spiritual energy and mana.

“Another possibility is the Gray Knight depriving the crew of their free will. That would also lower their spiritual energy,” Kiriha said.

Spiritual energy fluctuated depending on a person’s emotions. As was clear when looking at Sanae, it could greatly elevate spiritual energy. On the contrary, there was next to no spiritual energy coming from someone who wasn’t thinking about anything. So if the Gray Knight was using magic or something to control the crew, they would move without thinking much at all, reducing their spiritual energy. Moreover, anyone who had their free will stolen would quietly follow orders without mixing in any personal opinions, making them quicker to take action. So Kiriha thought it was a possibility.

“Right...if they are only following orders, they won’t emit any spiritual energy,” Koutarou said with a nod.

While he’d borrowed his power from Sanae, he could use psychic powers as well, so he could understand what Kiriha was saying. He’d personally experienced more power when he was angry.

“There are plenty of other possibilities, but I think we can narrow it down to these three,” Kiriha concluded. “Or perhaps a mix of the three.”

She guessed that it was either a lack of crew, camouflage, or stolen free will, or alternatively, a combination of them. For example, stealing free will to increase action speed due to a lack of crew.

"It would appear it's just like Kiriha is saying!" Theia said, opening fire. She was using a defensive anti-space-laser cannon.

An explosion rang out near the Blue Knight. Koutarou couldn't hide his surprise. "Missiles?!" he exclaimed.

"They fired stealth missiles so that you wouldn't pick up on it!" Theia shouted.

The enemy had responded to Koutarou's request to surrender with missiles. With stealth missiles, as long as Koutarou and Sanae didn't detect the launch, they could work as a surprise attack, especially since the Blue Knight was so large.

"How impudent!" Theia said.

The attack had failed because she had remained on guard and the Blue Knight had a wide suite of defensive equipment. Not only was it a flagship, but it also carried a lot of important people, so it was packed with defenses. The composite radar had detected the presence of the stealth missiles, and Theia had shot them down.

"Don't you have any honor?!" Theia shouted as she shot down the missiles one after another. While it would have been okay if it was after the battle started, a surprise attack at the start went against what she felt was proper war etiquette.

"Ruth, I'm sure you're busy, but keep an eye on the communications," Kiriha said. "They might be keeping in touch with someone."

"I understand," Ruth said with a nod.

"And, Theia-dono, the enemy is desperate too. They don't have the time to care about manners," Kiriha continued.

After giving instructions to Ruth, she called out to Theia with a wry smile. The enemy had their backs to the wall. It was an important battle for them since their stronghold had been located, and an attack was incoming so they were doing everything they could to stall it. Moreover, they didn't have the numbers to fight fair and square. They would use whatever means possible to occupy the region and stop the Imperial Army.

“I can understand their circumstances, but I have no sympathy for them,” Theia replied.

That was all the more reason for her to crush them. If the Imperial Army was stalled, the war would be prolonged, leading to a decline of Forthorthe.

“You are right,” Kiriha naturally agreed. “We have to win.”

A peaceful Forthorthe meant a peaceful People of the Earth. They were already bound by an inseparable connection, so defeat was not an option.

“Theiamillis-san, the secondary batteries are about to enter effective range,” Clan said.

Missile attacks weren’t very effective in space battles in Forthorthe, since they would be shot down by lasers like Theia had just done. Stealth missiles had almost hit them this time, but normally there were specialized ships with radars and sensors that would detect missiles ahead of time. It had only worked as a surprise attack this time because of the irregular situation, but the battle normally started when ships entered gun range.

“Good!” Theia said.

She shot down missiles with the lasers while taking aim at the enemy destroyer in the front of the enemy fleet with the secondary batteries. The reason the main cannon wasn’t being used was that it was an antimatter cannon. Because of its firepower, it wasn’t something they wanted to use unless the situation really demanded it. Moreover, the enlarged Blue Knight’s secondary batteries were as powerful as the main cannons of other battleships, not to mention it had a lot of them. Theia chose a laser cannon from among them. The laser was made of light, so it was pinpoint accurate and hit very quickly. Moreover, since they were in empty space, there was nothing to reduce its power or twist its trajectory. Because of that, space battles in Forthorthe almost always started with a firefight using lasers.

“You won’t be able to escape my aim with some simple evasive maneuvers!” Theia fearlessly said with a smile while pulling the trigger. The high-performing, stable, and powerful laser cannon that had also been on the old Blue Knight flew straight through space

and hit her target.

"Direct hit! Enemy distortion field is down, but they have taken minimal damage!" Ruth reported.

"What?!" Theia's eyes opened wide. She was surprised that the enemy ship had endured a direct hit from the laser bombardment. The laser might have lost some power from this distance, but it was hard to imagine that a direct hit would only be able to destroy the distortion field from within the effective firing range.

"It's those missiles!" Clan exclaimed. "The warheads were fired with particles to diffuse lasers!"

The stealth missiles fired at the start had been for defense. The outcome would have been the same whether the missiles had been shot down or self-destructed. Particles had been scattered that lowered the power of lasers, allowing the enemy destroyer to endure the hit.

"The enemy knows how we, or rather how Forthorthe, fights in fleet battles. It would appear that this is no simple foe," Kiriha noted while looking at the hologram with a sharp stare. As she said, it was apparent that they weren't up against their average opponent.

They used stealth missiles to be sure to scatter the particles, and used that to close the distance, Kiriha thought. *They are very good. Is it Grevanas? No, considering the lack of spiritual energy it's probably...*

She had a bad feeling about this. The new Blue Knight's strengths were its large generators, its range, and its firepower. Theia made use of those strengths to attack the enemy from outside of their range. But the enemy had predicted that and taken measures against it. Moreover, the stealth missiles had ensured that the particles would be scattered near the Blue Knight. If the enemy blocked the first shot and got within range, the Blue Knight wouldn't be able to one-sidedly attack. It was clear the enemy was commanded by someone who understood how to fight. They were no easy foe. Kiriha felt the commander was someone as intelligent as Grevanas.

"The enemy ships are in range! They are firing!" Ruth reported.

"Not bad! But this kind of frontal clash is how you properly fight

battles! Let's go, Koutarou!" Theia said.

"Yeah!" Koutarou agreed with a nod.

The battle had unexpectedly turned into a frontal clash like Theia preferred. Koutarou accelerated the Blue Knight and rapidly closed the distance to the enemy fleet.

The size of the ship makes everything feel slow, but it is a little faster than the previous Blue Knight... Koutarou thought.

The new ship's mass was ten times that of the old one, so flying at even the same speed as before required ten times the amount of propulsion. While Koutarou felt sluggish because of the doubling of the ship's size, the maneuverability was sufficient. In fleet battles it was necessary to keep pace with allies, so excessive speed was pointless. In fact, Hidden Leaves was closely following the Blue Knight, covering its blind spots.

"Your Excellency, please focus on attacking! We will handle the defense!"

"Please do, Princess Nefilforan!" Koutarou answered.

The eight ships in the enemy fleet began firing their laser cannons all together. Each ship had two gunports, and they fired sixteen spears of light to attack the Blue Knight and Hidden Leaves. Since lasers moved at the speed of light, dodging them was impossible.

"Ruth-san!" Koutarou shouted.

"Yes! Deploying the active distortion field!" Ruth responded, as if she'd read Koutarou's mind.

In addition to the standard distortion field that battleships came equipped with, the new Blue Knight had a second, sturdy distortion field that was limited in scope and the time that it could remain active. It had been built into the left arm and worked like a giant shield. Using that, the twelve lasers aimed at the Blue Knight were blocked, leaving the hull unscorched.

"And then I do this!" With the shield still deployed, Koutarou twisted the ship to the left, skillfully putting Hidden Leaves behind the shield, blocking the four lasers aimed for it as well.

"Thank you, Your Excellency!" Nefilforan said.

Understanding the situation, Hidden Leaves moved a little closer

to the Blue Knight, making it easier for Koutarou to cover it.

"We'll stay like this until we get close enough, Princess!"

The area behind and slightly below was a blind spot, but that only needed protection when the enemy was close enough. Right now, it could be ignored and the shield could be used to approach.

"Please do!" Nefilforan's ship had been built to make full use of the Glendad family's ideology. It was well suited for charging, and its front-facing hull and distortion field were extremely tough. Even so, it would be in danger if it were targeted by multiple destroyers simultaneously, and saving energy for later in the fight was important as well.

"Hmph, that was all sixteen shots." Theia didn't overlook the opening and immediately employed the beam cannon from the right arm as they came into firing range.

The unknown fleet that they were engaging was indeed from the Forthorthe Liberation Army. The battle was following the plans of the Gray Knight, who was nowhere to be seen on the bridge, with the captain of the destroyer handling the finer details. The captain had an abundance of experience and had skillfully brought together the ragtag fleet. It wasn't his first time fighting with a group like this, and he wouldn't let his guard down, knowing that the enemy was the Blue Knight.

"I don't know who he is, but that Gray Knight is quite the strategist," the captain said with folded arms.

The battle was proceeding like the Gray Knight had said. When he'd been told to start off with stealth missiles to scatter particles to diffuse lasers, the captain had wanted to use normal warheads instead, but the missiles had allowed them to survive the enemy's long-distance bombardment. The attacked ship was fine, having retreated to the rear to recover its distortion field. Finally, the time they had waited for arrived.

"Captain, we're in range!" an operator said.

"All right! All ships, open fire! Fill that giant with holes!" the captain ordered.

His only failing was ordering everyone to fire at once. Following the order, the eight ships began their laser bombardment.

"Captain, they have an active barrier! The attacks are ineffective!" the operator reported.

It was an unfortunate outcome, but the captain had expected as much. The bombardment had been made to confirm it.

As expected, it will be impossible to shoot it down from the front. The generator output difference is too high. We should focus on Hidden Leaves...

The Blue Knight could be taken down from its blind spot, which meant that the smaller ship covering it should be taken out first.

"Captain! The Blue Knight is barrel-rolling to the right!" the operator announced.

Koutarou had twisted to the left, but from the other side's point of view, he was tilting to the right. The tilt moved the active distortion field and covered Hidden Leaves.

"Ah, so they believe it to be their weak spot as well," the captain murmured.

Despite not suffering critical damage from the laser bombardments, the Blue Knight had moved to protect Hidden Leaves. In other words, the Blue Knight's pilot wanted to preserve the other ship as well as they could. It was an action that proved the blind spot was a weak spot.

"All right, once we enter beam range—" the captain began, about to give an order to focus fire on Hidden Leaves with beam cannons. But just then, explosions and screams could be heard over the comms. The destroyer that had fallen back to the rear had been hit by a beam.

"Destroyer Salaguru was sniped! Its propulsion system has been seriously damaged, and it can't navigate on its own!" the operator said.

"From this distance?!" The captain couldn't believe it.

A beam cannon from the Blue Knight had sniped Salaguru when it was being protected by the remaining ships. Its distortion field had been knocked out by the first laser attack, so it didn't stand a chance against a direct hit from a beam. But the distance was too far to snipe a ship. A beam cannon fired white-hot heavy-metal particles that were accelerated electromagnetically, so it had more

power than lasers but it wasn't suitable for sniping. If lasers signified the start of a battle, beams were meant to end it. Not to mention it was behind the other ships, so it was bizarre for a beam to be able to accurately shoot past them.

"Is this the Blue Knight's doing too?" the captain wondered. "No, this is—"

The shot wasn't totally impossible. When the captain had ordered all of the ships to fire, Salaguru had shot past the other ships as well. If the gunner had aimed at that laser cannon they could have weaved through the other ships' distortion fields to score a hit. Logically, it made sense, but it was like sniping through the eye of a needle. Only a handful of people in all of Forthorthe could have done that.

"Princess Theiamillis!" the captain exclaimed.

One of the people in question was the renowned prodigy Princess Theiamillis. She was known as the Blue Knight's partner, and her battle flag was majestically flying over the Blue Knight along with two others: a knight and dragon, a golden flower, and a moon shimmering on the surface of a body of water. They were the Blue Knight's, Theia's, and Clan's crests, respectively. Considering the size, actual flags were unrealistic, so these were drawn with beams. However, real or not, they told the truth—the Blue Knight and two princesses had sortied. The beam flags could be seen from far away, and the truth shook the Liberation Army soldiers.

"I thought I already knew, but to see it with my own eyes..." the captain muttered. He could feel the unrest spreading across the bridge like a wave. The crew who would normally fulfill their orders calmly and efficiently were whispering to those next to them. He couldn't hear exactly what they were saying, but it wasn't hard to imagine.

They were fighting the history and tradition of Forthorthe. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that they were facing a legend. The crew would naturally be shaken. The captain couldn't criticize them for that. Even he felt like running away.

Our resolve was lacking... It was like we didn't know what we were up against... he thought.

Even so, they had to fight. The curtain had already risen, and if they stopped here, their uprising might end in failure. They couldn't let Ralgwin, who they thought was still in control, down by ending his battle here.

"I know how you feel," the captain told them. "Our enemies are the Blue Knight and the princesses. But I want you to fight calmly. This is a critical juncture for our cause, and our allies are fighting even now!"

The soldiers were shaken up, but the captain's mention of their allies still fighting moved them. They valued their allies more than anything. That was thanks to Ralgwin's influence. He would never abandon his subordinates. Even in situations like these, his popularity supported the troops.

"We'll buy as much time as we can for the people on the surface!" The crew recovered and responded, getting back to work. Their job was to delay the Blue Knight for as long as possible. They didn't think they could win, but until the Imperial Army's fortress fell, the Liberation Army wouldn't be able to suppress the region. So their job was to buy enough time for the ground forces to accomplish that.

"Captain, the Blue Knight is charging in!" the operator announced.

"Get ready to intercept! Wait, what is that?!" the captain exclaimed.

The approaching ship's appearance was bizarre. It was pushing an asteroid with its massive arm and using it as a shield as it charged.

"How are we supposed to fight that?!" the captain shouted.

Humanoid-shaped battleships were said to be weak, but that wasn't the case here. The Blue Knight made full use of its size to grab an asteroid as a shield to cover its approach. Such a fighting method deviated from that of a normal fleet battle. The captain had never seen it before, nor had he been taught anything like it in the military academy. His earlier resolve crumbled.

Old or new, Koutarou didn't think of the Blue Knight as a

battleship. That was probably because he used his armor to pilot it, so he viewed it more as a giant robot. When he passed by an asteroid, it seemed natural to use it for cover, like one would hide behind rocks in a shoot-out.

"There are times I think that man is a genius," Clan muttered in exasperation.

The new ship, which she had packed with all kinds of technology, was pushing a rock in front of it. That sort of idea had never occurred to her. There had been suggestions to give the ship a large shield, but that had ultimately ended up becoming the active distortion field. Yet now, the Blue Knight wasn't even using a shield but a rock. It had arms and thrusters in its legs, making it suitable for carrying something. Moreover, Ruth was controlling the distortion field from the operator's seat, supporting the joint as well as using the distortion field to accelerate and decelerate the asteroid, allowing for the Blue Knight to push one of considerable mass. Even so, Clan couldn't help but want to curse at the idea of using something so basic.

"He's just an idiot, surely," Theia said bluntly. "There's a fine line between genius and stupidity."

She was sniping from behind the rock. Though she felt it was effective, she was unhappy that it lacked any semblance of elegance. The asteroid was blocking most enemy attacks. Some lucky hits landed, but they couldn't take down the Blue Knight's distortion field. Still, the price for its sturdy defense was how lame it was. Theia didn't think royalty should be hiding behind a rock and taking potshots. But it was producing results, as she succeeded in shooting down another ship.

"I like this asteroid plan!" Sanae added her opinion. "Go, asteroid! Burn away the original sin of humanity!"

In an episode of her favorite anime, *Hyper Dimension Yamato Nadeshiko*, an asteroid was dropped on Earth, rendering it uninhabitable. Sanae had gotten excited when she remembered that.

"We're not burning anything away," Koutarou said. He knew the anime she was thinking about, so he looked at her with a hint of

disappointment. In fact, they'd even had the AI calculate their movements to ensure that the asteroid wouldn't be caught in the gravity well of any planets.

"I know," Sanae said. "If you really did that, we'd be over." She knew that Koutarou would never do such a thing, nor was it something she actually desired. She was just happy that the situation was similar to an anime episode.

"Regardless of our circumstances, the enemy is shaken," Kiriha said. "I am glad you are on our side, Koutarou."

The asteroid actually had another interesting effect aside from just being used as a shield. The enemy had been in a close formation to intercept the ship, figuring that by focusing their fire, they might be able to defeat the Blue Knight. The asteroid had destroyed that plan. Not only did the rock get in the way, but also it forced the ships to spread out and go around it. That meant their firepower was spread out, and based on their movements, Kiriha could tell that they were confused.

"Satomi Koutarou, keep the asteroid between us and most of the scattered enemies," she said.

"Got it!" Koutarou replied with a nod.

Kiriha wanted to make full use of the confusion. Having scattered, the enemy's formation was uneven. The denser part of the formation was the more dangerous one, so the most effective way to use the asteroid was to block those ships.

"All that's left is for Theia-dono to shoot down the enemies that appear from the shadow of the asteroid," Kiriha noted.

"The fact that this asteroid is surprisingly useful bothers me..." Theia grumbled.

Six enemy ships remained. Three of them were still in a position behind the asteroid where they couldn't be seen, while the remaining three were gradually emerging. That would create a series of one-on-one battles that the Blue Knight could push through with its firepower. At least, that was the image in Theia's mind.

"But they should know that as well," Clan said. "They've sent out a bunch of fighters."

The enemy did what they could to respond to the bizarre

situation. Though initially confused, they started calming down as time passed. By sending out fighters, they were making up for the uneven formation.

"So, it's finally our time." Nefilforan had been equally confused by the situation, but with the enemy taking a familiar action, she was finally able to come around. She sent out fighters from her Hidden Leaves to intercept the enemy. The Blue Knight had a clear weak spot, so it was her time to shine.

The Imperial Army had been thrown into confusion by the asteroid being pushed toward them, but as time passed, they became capable of rational thought again. The captain had ordered the fighters to be sent out.

"I can't say I have any experience with this situation. This is a surprise," he muttered as he looked at the deploying fighters. His name was Dalize. He had joined the Imperial Army at a young age and risen through the ranks thanks to his talents. He had already been a vice captain when he met Ralgwin, whom he looked up to, and continued fighting at his side. There had been all kinds of battles, from aliens from outer space to simple pirates. As a result, the captain had been promoted to the position he now held. But not a single one of those enemies had used an asteroid. Dalize was finally starting to understand what it meant to fight the Blue Knight.

"An enemy you can't read is hard to deal with," the vice captain said. "It's amazing His Excellency, Ralgwin, was able to fight against this."

They had lost two ships while gripped by confusion. When calmly assessing their situation, it was clear how excellent Ralgwin was.

"Let's believe we can do the same," the captain replied. "This war might be over if we can't hold our ground."

He understood the situation perfectly. With the location of their stronghold having been leaked to the Imperial Army, everything would be decided based on whether they could pass through the junction they were at. Without this area, the Imperial Army couldn't reach the stronghold. It might be possible if they took a detour, but by then it would have been moved. So the enemy had no choice but

to attack from the front, which means it all depended on how long the Blue Knight could be stalled and whether the fortress could be taken down. They were currently doing a very dangerous tightrope walk. But they continued in spite of that.

The vice captain voiced his concerns. “But can we really do it with our current forces? We are up against the Blue Knight.”

They had fewer fighters than usual, as the majority of them had been sent to assist with the ground battle. So they had only launched twelve ships. It was probably more than the Blue Knight and Hidden Leaves had, but they couldn’t afford to take it easy.

“Not bringing a slower carrier with us is making a big impact,” Dalize said.

“Well, we set out as quickly as we could,” the vice captain said with a nod.

“But nothing will come from complaining.” Dalize sighed. “The battle on the surface has already begun.”

It didn’t matter who the enemy was; that was something the Blue Knight had said in the past. And Dalize believed in those words, even if he was up against the Blue Knight himself. He had to fight so that he wouldn’t betray his allies on the ground.

“Have all fighters focus on the Blue Knight’s weak spot! The fleet will shoot down Hidden Leaves! Destroy that thing scurrying about the Blue Knight’s feet!” Dalize ordered.

The fighters had anti-ship missiles, and a swarm of those from close range was a threat even to the Blue Knight. Long-distance missiles would only get shot down by lasers, so they needed to be fired from next to the blind spot. The question was whether the fighters could survive long enough to get within range. Naturally, Hidden Leaves and the Imperial Army would send out their own craft to prevent that.

“Any more delays will be just what they want! Charge in without any concern!” Dalize ordered.

Time wasn’t on their side either. Though they had to buy time, a drawn-out fight would allow the gap in power to surface. Unfortunately, as Dalize was in command of a ragtag fleet, their skill didn’t compare to that of the Blue Knight and Hidden Leaves. Rather

than allowing a blunder to ruin their chances in a long fight, it was safer to quickly finish the battle.

Kiriha predicted that the Liberation Army would fight in one of two ways: either by buying time or with an immediate showdown. They most likely wanted to draw things out, but there were circumstances that could push them to make the fight brief. Fighting while buying time was exceedingly difficult. The coordination of their forces was absolutely vital, and success depended on their skill. Assuming the Liberation Army had gathered all of the quick ships they could spare, they might find that difficult to achieve.

"So they've chosen a quick showdown," Kiriha muttered. Even as the Liberation Army charged in, Kiriha remained calm, and she gave orders in a calm voice.

"Ruth, ask Hidden Leaves to send out their fighters."

"Understood. What should the Blue Knight do?" Ruth asked.

Kiriha asked for the Hidden Leaves fighters, the kind that could be used in space, to be deployed. The Blue Knight naturally had such ships as well. Ruth wondered if it was unnecessary to launch them too.

"Considering the circumstances, we won't need to deploy them now," Kiriha said.

"I understand. I will ask only Hidden Leaves to send out their fighters," Ruth confirmed.

Though her question wasn't resolved, Ruth contacted Hidden Leaves. If Kiriha said it wasn't necessary, Ruth had no reason to doubt her.

"Hidden Leaves has received the instruction and is launching its fighters."

By the time Ruth made her report, Hidden Leaves had already begun launching the fighters. There were three of them in total. They smoothly deployed, speaking to their experience.

"Satomi Koutarou, could you steer as I say?" Kiriha asked.

"Sure thing. What should I do?" Koutarou replied with a nod.

"Good, first..."

From there, she gave Koutarou instructions. Nobody but her

understood the reasons for them.

The Imperial Army launching fighters of their own was well within expectations. Captain Dalize had been sure they would respond in that fashion, though the number was unexpected.

"Only three? Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes, there are only three fighters. All launched from Hidden Leaves," the operator reported.

"What is the meaning of this? Does the Blue Knight not have any fighters loaded?" Dalize asked.

He had heard that the Blue Knight had left right after the launching ceremony, so it was possible that it wasn't fully equipped. As proof, it still wasn't equipped with Signaltin, which one could say was its symbol.

"Still, we don't have the leeway to doubt it... All right, have our fighters shoot down those three first!"

Dalize quickly made a decision. It could be an Imperial ploy, but they would need to use their numbers to attack the Blue Knight while it was using an asteroid as a shield anyway. They needed to get the ship away from the shadow of the asteroid—a move it would have to make if surrounded.

"The fighters have entered combat with the enemy craft!" the operator reported.

"Have them continue! Our enemies are skilled, so make sure to put at least two fighters on each one!" Dalize instructed.

"Understood!"

The fighters engaged in combat. With the numerical advantage on their side, they forced the enemy to retreat, which meant they could continue advancing on the Blue Knight.

While observing the results on the hologram, relief washed over Dalize. *I thought they were planning something, but it seems I was just worrying about nothing...*

He had assumed there was some plan at work but had abandoned that idea when the fight had started without incident. Instead, he focused on the battle itself. The next problem was Hidden Leaves.

"How is the fleet doing?!" he asked.

"We are being thrown around by Hidden Leaves's mobility but are managing to keep up," the vice captain said.

"Push it away from the Blue Knight somehow! Make a path for the fighters!" Dalize ordered.

His ship was in the rear with the remaining five craft pursuing Hidden Leaves. The group was made up of battleships and destroyers. They were five against one but facing a Royalty-class battleship. The difference in strength wasn't as big as the numbers might suggest. They couldn't afford to let their guard down.

But at present, the biggest problem was Hidden Leaves's anti-ship cannons. It was using those to intercept the fighters approaching the Blue Knight. However, the fighters' numbers were gradually winning out, and the Liberation Army was gaining an advantage.

"What is the Blue Knight doing?!" Dalize asked.

"It is firing, but it appears it is bad at fighting at close range," the operator answered.

"Good, then—" But before the captain could finish his sentence, the Blue Knight, which had only sporadically attacked them until then, made a strange move.

"The Blue Knight is firing its multimissile launchers!" the operator shouted.

"What?! That won't be enough to take out the fighters or battleships! Have they lost their minds?!"

Dalize was confused. Forthorthe's lasers were well-developed for interception, and the missiles had already been detected. Those missiles wouldn't hit any ships. It would be a different story if multiple ships launched their own salvos at the same time, but when it was just the Blue Knight, it was meaningless.

"No, the enemy isn't targeting us! They're targeting the asteroid!" the operator announced.

"What?!"

The Blue Knight's side had had yet another idea that surpassed Dalize's imagination. The missiles ignored all the ships and headed for the asteroid.

Ships carried more than one type of missile, such as anti-ship and

anti-surface missiles. They were changed depending on what they would be used for, making them fundamental to battle. As such, battleships carried not only lasers and beams, but also missiles as well as a weapon for when lasers and beams weren't enough.

"Three, two, one...impact," Ruth reported.

For some reason, there were no explosions right away. Instead, those came a short while after the impact. These were the special kind of missiles that Kiriha had instructed them to fire. A tremendous explosion and vibration were conveyed to the bridge by observation equipment that had been put on the asteroid ahead of time.

"It's a success. Roughly a third of the asteroid has been destroyed," Ruth stated.

"Indeed, good work," Kiriha replied.

The Blue Knight had launched a type of missile known as "bunker busters." They were made to destroy underground installations, so the warheads had been made sturdy and heavy. By accelerating them with boosters, the crew could make them fast enough to penetrate concrete and bedrock. Once buried deep down, they exploded. That was what Kiriha had used on the asteroid. As a result, a portion of it had been destroyed, but the problem was the whereabouts of the rocks that had been blasted away.

"Rock lumps are coming," Clan announced. "Deploying distortion field."

Of course, it wasn't a problem for the Blue Knight. The ship had a sturdy distortion field befitting its large size, and it wasn't difficult to repel the shattered asteroid chunks.

"How are our fighters holding up?" Koutarou asked.

"Not to worry, Your Excellency," Nefilforan answered. "They safely retreated to the designated location."

"That was some good flying; it was like I was looking at an aerobatic flight," Koutarou said.

Nefilforan bowed. "Your praise honors us."

The three fighters from Hidden Leaves were safe. They had dived into the Blue Knight's shadow and protected themselves from the asteroid chunks, having swept past the enemy with skilled flying and

ended up behind the Blue Knight. That was why Kiriha hadn't sent out the Blue Knight's fighters. They were tired from training with a new model, and an increase in numbers would work against them.

"Your Excellency, we leave the rest to you," Nefilforan said.

"You have some good pilots, Princess," Koutarou answered.

"We have gone through a lot together. They are my proud subordinates."

Hidden Leaves was in a more dangerous situation. Its distortion field was weaker than the Blue Knight's. However, since it specialized in charges, its front was extra sturdy. It had just barely been able to turn the front of the ship toward the asteroid chunks in time.

Through their efforts, they had all escaped danger, but the Liberation Army wasn't so lucky. The fighters had taken the biggest hit, and Dalize could hear the screams of the crew through the comms.

"A meteor shower?!"

"No! This is debris they intentionally made!"

"Now's not the time for that!"

They had no idea what was going on and had been by the Blue Knight's feet in pursuit of the Hidden Leaves's fighters. They had been sure they were cornering the enemy until the missiles had hit. As a result, they'd been defenseless when chunks of asteroids had come flying. The result was disastrous, with not a single craft unharmed. The ones that were the best off had lost the ability to fly, while the worst had been shot down.

"Was this what they were after from the start?!" Dalize slammed his fist into his armrest. Even as he did, damage reports continued coming in.

"Change course and deploy distortion field! We'll get caught up in it!"

"We're not going to make it!"

"What is going oooonnn?!"

The fleet had suffered major damage, although less than the fighters thanks to their distortion fields.

"What's the damage?" Dalize asked.

“Three ships are unable to navigate!” the operator answered.

“That many?!”

Two vessels had been shielded by the others, and Dalize’s ship in the rear had avoided the chunks of asteroid. Not even Forthorthe’s battleships could have fully blocked the enormous masses that were raining down on them. But their misfortune wasn’t over yet.

Another scream and the sounds of explosions came over the comms. For a second, Dalize thought these were secondary explosions, but the reality was different.

“What is it?!” he shouted.

“It’s the Blue Knight!” the other ship reported.

“The Blue Knight?!”

“It appeared from behind the debris and—”

Suddenly, the comms cut out. At the same time, one of the unharmed ships’ identification signals shifted to display that it was disabled. For some reason, it had taken more damage and been rendered unable to fight. If the last report was to be believed, it had been an attack by the Blue Knight.

“Where is the Blue Knight?!” Dalize demanded that his subordinates locate the ship. If he didn’t quell the confusion and counterattack, they would be defeated.

“We can’t tell! There’s too much debris!” the operator answered.

“Preposterous!” Dalize exclaimed.

They were unable to locate the Blue Knight as the chunks of asteroid filled the area. The asteroid in question had a common composition with a lot of iron. With it covering their surroundings, the radar wasn’t functioning normally.

“There it is! It’s the Blue Knight!” the other remaining ship reported before its identification signal shifted to “disabled” as well.

The Blue Knight could locate the Liberation Army and was taking them down one after another, and Dalize was panicking.

“They should be in the same situation as us! How can they locate us so accurately?!” he asked.

“I have no idea. What is going on?!” the vice captain replied.

“He’s a monster... This is the legendary hero...” Dalize muttered as he stared at the monitor in front of him, filled with a sense of

helplessness.

On the monitor, he could see the enemy flagship slipping into view. It rapidly grew bigger and swung its massive right arm. By blending in with the debris, it was sneaking up on ships and taking them down with hand-to-ship combat. And while that made it less likely to be detected, it went against all logic in fleet battles. They wouldn't be able to intercept it in time, and Dalize knew there was nothing they could do.

Nobody could believe it when Kiriha had first suggested that they shatter the asteroid. Not even Koutarou, who had been the one to bring up the asteroid in the first place. They couldn't understand what she meant, but in the end, they had done what she wanted. Everyone knew that Kiriha wouldn't suggest something for no reason.

"I think that's the last spaceship that can fight," Sanae noted. "They're just running around instead of taking aim at us."

"Good work. That's mission complete, Sanae," Kiriha said in relief.

Scattering chunks of asteroids around the area rendered the radar unusable for a while. But with Sanae, they could still locate the enemy. The fleet being damaged was just a side effect. Kiriha's goal had always been to blind them.

That should limit casualties to a minimum... A satisfactory result, she thought.

A regular fleet battle would result in a lot of death regardless of victory or defeat. They would be forced to use weapons with high firepower, and damaged ships could explode. But that could be avoided if they snuck up on the ships and took each one out in a single strike. Kiriha had come up with the plan to reduce the number of casualties, but she hadn't been able to tell what the outcome would be like and didn't tell Koutarou what she'd been after. So she let out a sigh of relief.

"So, this is what you were after. I was surprised," Shizuka commented. Her eyes were wide open. Now that she'd seen the results for herself, she understood what Kiriha had meant, but she hadn't understood it at all at the start.

"Considering how confused we were, they must have been even more confused," Harumi said with a somewhat troubled expression. She'd been surprised when Koutarou had brought out an asteroid, but she was amazed by Kiriha's skill to take advantage of even that.

"Harumi, you overestimate me," Kiriha replied. "Being able to successfully fracture the asteroid was fortunate. It was still an extremely dangerous choice."

Kiriha didn't think she'd done anything impressive. She hadn't studied the power of the missiles or the composition of the asteroid in detail. It had been a vague move that she had hoped would bring about the desired outcome. If it hadn't worked out, she would have done something else; it had just happened to work out when they'd given it a shot.

"That doesn't matter as long as it stops the fighting," Koutarou said. He didn't care if it was luck or ability that had caused it. The important part was ending the battle quickly so that neither enemy nor ally suffered many losses. Friend or foe, there would be someone who mourned people of Forthorthe being hurt. Koutarou welcomed this result for their sake.

"Yeah, that's it. I'm glad it ended quickly," Yurika agreed.

"I think so too. And now that I can relax, I'm feeling hungry," Sanae added.

They wanted any fighting to end quickly and for as many as possible to be safe. Although their ways of expressing these feelings differed, it seemed all of the girls wished for that outcome.

But that assumption was mistaken. There was actually someone who had long awaited this moment.

Considering the new Blue Knight had been deployed, the Liberation Army that had been scraped together had no chance of winning. Assuming that only the new Blue Knight and Hidden Leaves would be deployed after the launching ceremony, they might have just barely won in firepower in spite of losing in every other regard, be it gathering information, planning, fighting experience, coordination, or anything else. But overall, no matter how anyone thought about it, there was no way to beat the Blue Knight, so one

person had taken a chance.

"As expected. You have a clear opening at this moment, Blue Knight..."

That person was the Gray Knight. He had used almost the entire fleet as a decoy so that he could launch an ambush when it lost. Koutarou's side would obviously be weakened from an energy and ammunition point of view. On top of that, most of the abilities that the enemy possessed were evoked by willpower, so that moment of relief was when they were most vulnerable. The Gray Knight believed that the Liberation Army's only chance of victory was to strike at that moment. With much of the crew having been sent to fight on the surface and the rest used as decoys, they leaked very little spiritual energy. Psychic powers were also being blocked so that thoughts couldn't be read, but as Kiriha had thought, there were very few people on board.

"And right now, you have no way of blocking this attack!" the Gray Knight said.

He could see their auras clearly. And while they weren't completely without vigilance, they were nowhere near as cautious as before. There was also misfortune working against them, as chunks of asteroids were still scattered across space. Just as it had worked in their favor before, the asteroid chunks were now concealing the Gray Knight's presence instead. He was staking everything on this moment.

He was approaching in his ship, using science, magic, psychic powers, and even chaos to hide himself. It would be impossible to detect the craft he was on with all of those powers working together.

"Take this, Blue Knight! This war will be drawn out!" he shouted.

Inserting enough energy to burn out the generator, he fired the main cannon. It was meant to be an anti-ship beam cannon, but not even the Gray Knight himself knew if the beam fired was made up of heavy metal particles anymore. He had poured the power of chaos into the cannon to its limit, transforming it into a throbbing and writhing thing.

Sanae was the first to notice the Gray Knight's attack. The three of them had noticed the explosively increasing amount of chaos near

them.

"Oh no! He's here, Koutarou!"

"He's shooting with that disgusting power with everything he has!"

"We have to defend! There's no time to run!"

All three said something different, but they all agreed: There was no time to run. They needed to protect themselves with everything they had, as an attack was imminent, but they couldn't tell how powerful it would be. However, seeing that the chunks of asteroids around them were becoming hazy due to how much chaos power had been stored, a direct hit would be dangerous.

"Emergency deployment of the distortion field!" Ruth immediately activated the Blue Knight's defenses. It was unclear if the distortion field would help against the asteroid debris, but there was no reason not to try.

"Karama, Korama!" Kiriha called.

"Deploying a concentrated Spiritual Energy Field, ho!" Karama said.

"Limiter removed; sorry, but you'll have to change the spiritual energy capacitor later, ho!" Korama said.

The new Blue Knight had an unofficial Spiritual Energy Field generator installed. It had been set up in one of the warehouses and used the accumulated spiritual energy of the crew. But since the output would be going over the limit, the Blue Knight would end up needing repairs immediately after the launching ceremony. That is, if the ship survived.

"Signaltin, please!" said Harumi.

"Yurika, give all your mana to Sakuraba-san," Maki instructed.

"Y-Yes, please make iiit!" Yurika cried.

Harumi hurriedly called out to Signaltin's power to create a defensive spell, with Maki and Yurika helping her. They already knew that Signaltin's power was effective against chaos. The problem was if the rapidly gathered mana would be enough. The trio deployed the defensive spell as if praying.

"Active distortion field engaged! Hurry, Veltlion!"

"Yeah!"

Clan and Koutarou were the last. An active distortion field had been installed in the left arm. It was technologically the same as the one Ruth had activated, but its area of effect was limited, making it more concentrated. The shield, which could block even a battleship's main cannon, was supported by all of the girls' power to stand against the attack. Koutarou spoke to the residential area of the ship via the comms as he protected the Blue Knight.

"Brace yourselves! Whatever you do, don't move!"

There might have been a serious impact incoming, so it was dangerous to stand up.

We've done what we can, Koutarou thought. *But even then...*

He had a feeling that even with all these measures, they wouldn't be able to block the Gray Knight's attack. With the same level of technology, offense held the advantage over defense. But even if offense and defense were equal, there was a difference in quality between a prepared attack and a hastily put-together guard. He didn't think they would be able to completely block the attack, which was why he'd warned Kenji and the others.

"It's over, Blue Knight. Even if you survive, the Imperial Army will be weakened by the loss of another Blue Knight ship, and their hopes will be dashed. You will also lose the Kularia system, which will turn this war into hell..."

The Gray Knight felt the same. He hadn't opened his comms, so Koutarou couldn't hear his muttering, but they shared the same opinion.

According to the original schedule, the Blue Knight would have been moored at a spaceport while in orbit. From there, the results of the test-drive would have been analyzed, maintenance would have been performed, and they would have waited for the additional equipment to arrive. However, Koutarou and the others were busy, so they would have returned to the surface via the spaceport instead of waiting for the results. Nalfa and the others who had participated in the launching ceremony had planned to return to the surface at the same time. But with battle commencing in the Kularia system, the Blue Knight had rushed to the scene with Nalfa's group in tow. Throughout the battle, they had been in the center of the residential

area, the safest part of the ship.

"Kotori, it looks like the battle is over. They did well, and apparently, there were only a few casualties," Kenji announced.

"Right, thank goodness... That's better than a fight like in the movies..." Kotori answered with a relieved expression.

Kenji was equally relieved. Like Koutarou, they weren't suited to fighting.

"There's nothing to worry about now, Nal-chan. Wait, what's the matter?" Kotori asked.

The Matsudaira siblings were smiling in relief, but Nalfa still had a serious expression. For some reason, she was staring at the wall, as if there were a sworn enemy there.

"Nal-chan?" Kotori prompted. She had never seen Nalfa like that. Confused, she peered at Nalfa's face, puzzled, yet Nalfa's attention didn't shift to her. She was still staring at the wall, or rather what was beyond it.

Sensing that something was wrong, Kenji approached as well. "What's happening?" he asked.

"Nal-chan is acting strange."

"Nalfa-san?" Kenji asked worriedly.

"You are intervening too much... You cannot change reality like that... You cannot rush results... That will make all existence pointless..." Nalfa was acting like a sleepwalker. She couldn't see Kotori and Kenji in front of her. She was just muttering in a quiet voice.

"Something seems wrong. I'll call for help," Kenji said.

"Please do, Nii-san!" Kotori pleaded.

Worried, Kenji left the two behind and returned to the comms on the wall panel with the plan to call for a medical team. However, before he could, the room suddenly shook.

"Whoa?!"

"Aaah!"

The Blue Knight was suddenly moving. Forthorthe had already solved the mysteries of gravity and mass, so some slight movement wouldn't shake the ship. That meant the Blue Knight was making some very reckless movements.

"Brace yourselves! Whatever you do, don't move!" Koutarou's voice came through the comms system.

Realizing they were still in combat, Kenji threw himself to the ground and shouted, "Kotori!"

"I know!"

All it took for Kotori to understand everything was Kenji calling her name. She grabbed hold of Nalfa, who was zoning out, and got on the floor. However, she was a girl, and by the time she had accomplished as much, she was squeezing her eyes shut in fear.

"I can't allow that... Koutarou, no, the people of this world are not puppets on strings..."

Because of that, she missed the rainbow light that flowed out of Nalfa's hand and toward the wall.

The Gray Knight no doubt wanted to destroy the new Blue Knight. He had used his allies as a decoy, snuck up behind the asteroid chunks, and attacked with all his might. He couldn't kill Sanae-nee yet, so his attack avoided the bridge, but he could expect to do enough damage to prevent the ship from functioning. However, when a rainbow wall appeared to block his attack, he was delighted.





"She defended against it?! But why more than just the bridge...? I see, so *that's* what it was, Goddess of Dawn!"

She never used her powers to protect herself. But Kotori, Kenji, and a lot of the crew were in the torso of the Blue Knight, so she'd had no choice but to use her powers. That was a large change, as she had never used them for anything but protecting Koutarou. Yet now she was using it for others, be it out of camaraderie or a love for humanity. At any rate, something had changed inside her, and that meant the restrictions on her power were growing lax. In order for the Gray Knight to accomplish his goal, he needed the Goddess of Dawn to fully release her abilities. That meant that the moment he was waiting for was approaching, which was why he was happy despite the chaos being blocked.

"Still, now it's just a normal bombardment. The ambush failed," he muttered.

When the attack had touched the rainbow glow, the beam had lost its power of chaos. It had been erased by the power of order, its opposite, which meant the latter had become merely a powerful beam attack. It wouldn't bring the result he had hoped for.

I can't just be happy, the Gray Knight thought. *I'll need some other plan to stall them.*

He had drawn much closer to his long-term goal, but his short-term goal was now looking unrealistic. He couldn't dance for joy; he needed to do something to stall the Imperial Army.

Something strange had happened. The Blue Knight had been attacked by a beam infused with the power of chaos. They had hurriedly taken defensive measures but couldn't fully protect themselves. Frankly, Koutarou had believed they would be shot down, but something nobody had expected occurred. Despite being hit directly, the Blue Knight had endured the attack.

"What happened?" Koutarou was confused. According to Ruth's report, the effect of the bombardment was less than expected, being nothing more than a powerful beam cannon.

"I don't know. All of a sudden, I couldn't feel anything."

"We didn't just misjudge it...right?"

"I can't imagine all three of us and the haniwas misjudging it at the same time."

Their first thought was that the first ones to discover it had been wrong, which meant the three Sanaes. However, the haniwas and even the Blue Knight's spiritual energy had detected it as well. They had been, in fact, attacked by the power of chaos.

"Did you not feel it, Satomi-kun?" Harumi asked. She had been thinking about something since the attack had ended.

"Feel what?" he replied.

"Just before the beam hit, a rainbow light mixed in with Signaltin's mana. But I can't be entirely sure, since it was just an instant."

"Really? I didn't notice."

"Yes... What was that? Or was I just seeing things?"

When she'd asked about it before, Maki and Yurika hadn't noticed either. Harumi's connection to Signaltin was stronger than anyone else's; perhaps that was why she had been able to sense it. That was why she'd asked Koutarou, who also had a strong connection to Signaltin, but he hadn't noticed anything either. Harumi was starting to doubt herself.

Having heard Harumi, Kiriha looked over at Sanae-nee, who was looking at Kiriha too. When their eyes met, she nodded and then shrugged.

So, the Gray Knight can launch attacks like that. And Sanae-nee has experience with those types of attacks, but she can't tell why this one was negated.

That was how Kiriha interpreted Sanae-nee's gesture. Trying to get any more information would require referencing the Gray Knight's identity, so Sanae-nee couldn't say anything else about it. Kiriha also had information that she couldn't say out loud.

But if this is the same as last time, that rainbow power is... Kiriha had seen the power manifest before. She also knew who had done it, and that person was aboard the Blue Knight right now. *She might be reaching her limit. The enemy is wielding powers beyond humanity. At this rate, eventually she'll...*

Great power brought misfortune in any era. Signaltin was a good

example of that. Maxfern had killed Alaia's parents out of desire for that power. That was why Kiriha had kept quiet about the rainbow power, not telling anyone she was keeping it safe. But that was reaching its breaking point now. The enemy was wielding the power of chaos without holding back, and Kiriha was secretly worried that the power of the rainbow, or power of order, would be necessary.

The appearance and disappearance of the power of chaos had confused the others, but it had become clear that the Gray Knight was leading the enemy fleet.

"I guess Maxfern and Grevanas are too busy, so the Gray Knight scraped together some forces to stall us," Koutarou said.

Because of that, they were able to get a general grasp of the situation. So far, the Gray Knight had given Koutarou the impression that he was something of a wanderer. Rather than being in any of the main forces, he always seemed to act as backup or as a commando. He was close to something like a lone wolf mercenary. Even this time, he had acted in accordance with Koutarou's impression of him. Maxfern and Grevanas were working on moving the stronghold, so the Gray Knight had stepped out in their place. But even during the battle, he had used the fleet as a decoy for his surprise attack. It seemed as though he rejected others.

"That power is well suited to diversions and covert operations," Kiriha agreed.

The Gray Knight was a powerful fighter, but the power of chaos stood out even more. The power to make things vague could be used for not only attacking, but also confusing and hiding things. So his abilities made him suited to his role.

"But this time, it backfired," Sanae declared with confidence.

Sanae-chan and Sanae-san had become one, and she was sitting in her personal seat, opposite the two haniwas, who were connected to a seat. It was a new piece of equipment that would enhance Sanae's psychic powers.

"No matter how much you hide, you can't escape our friendship power, ho!"

"On the surface is one thing, but there aren't enough places to hide in space, ho!"

Sanae and the haniwas had known each other for a long time now, so they had an easy time syncing, which in turn powered Sanae up even more. The haniwas could also integrate the information from sensors and radar to display what Sanae was seeing on the monitor, so one could say it was a feat made possible by their friendship.

"I can see him; he's running along this route!" Sanae announced.

"I will show it on the star map, ho!" Karama said.

"The accuracy is only ninety percent, ho! He's a tough one, ho!" Korama said.

The haniwas displayed what Sanae was seeing with her Spirit Vision on a star map. On it was a solid line showing the route the Gray Knight had taken, along with dotted lines for his continued course. However, the Gray Knight wasn't just running away. He was using the power of chaos to hide his traces, blurring the actual route.

"So he's not going to group up with the ground forces?" Koutarou muttered.

The Gray Knight's path wasn't headed for the fortress where there was currently a battle going on. Even considering the extreme possibilities, he would need to make a drastic change of course or he would end up somewhere completely different.

"He is probably considering being caught in a pincer attack," Kiriha said.

"I see. He knows we're chasing him, after all," Koutarou replied with a nod.

Like Kiriha said, if their opponent was to join the ground forces, Koutarou would hit them from behind. With the Imperial Army in front of them and Koutarou behind them, the outcome was clear. The Gray Knight was landing somewhere else to avoid that, or perhaps trying to make it look that way. It was a gamble to keep the Blue Knight from making an immediate move.

"He would also want to lose his pursuers," Clan added while adjusting her glasses. She believed that the first thing he would do would be to properly get away.

"Now that you mention it, if Sanae loses sight of him, it'll be

dangerous no matter where he goes," Koutarou said.

Once the Gray Knight got far enough away to escape Sanae's Spirit Vision, it would be very difficult to detect him again, since the surface was full of life. If he then headed for the Liberation Army, it would work out better for him.

"We have no choice but to go back up the fortress. I don't like this," Shizuka said.

"And we'll have to go help even though we know the Gray Knight will attack from behind," Alunaya added.

Neither of them was very happy with that outcome. They would have to fight knowing the Gray Knight could attack from behind at any time. Since it was Shizuka and Alunaya's job to run rampant, the situation would make it very difficult for them to move. That sensation was even stronger because of the previous ambush. The Gray Knight's talent for gambling was considerable.

"Um, Satomi-san, can I say something?"

"What is it, Yurika?"

"In that case, wouldn't it be better to let Mackenzie-san and the others get away?" Yurika asked.

A ground battle awaited them. Naturally, they couldn't bring Kenji, Kotori, and Nalfa with them, which meant that they would be left aboard the Blue Knight. But if they were going to do that, Yurika pointed out that it could be better to leave them somewhere safe outside of the battlefield.

"Ruth-san, is there any good place for that around?" Koutarou asked.

Bad timing or not, they couldn't take those three to a battlefield. The ideal would be for Koutarou himself to protect them, but that wasn't possible at present—even more so if the Gray Knight was going to ambush them again. So Koutarou bent his beliefs somewhat to let Kenji and the others get away.

"There is an old mining colony on our path," Ruth answered. "It wasn't made for battle, and it is distant from the battle. It is also a rallying point for the remaining Imperial Army, so it's not completely undefended."

Ruth was recommending an old colony in their region of space. It

was a crude structure with port facilities and living quarters added to an asteroid, and it had no defenses. That also kept it from being a military target, which meant that it was almost definitely not going to be attacked. Moreover, the remnants of the Imperial Army that had been defeated by the attacking Liberation Army were gathering there, making it unexpectedly protected, which would make it even harder for something to happen. It was a great place to evacuate the trio to.

Koutarou found handling those three tricky. If they were left on Earth, they might be used as bargaining chips, so they had to be brought to Forthorthe so that Koutarou could protect them himself. Satomi Yuuichiro, Koutarou's father, was also being secretly guarded. There was always the risk of the people around Koutarou being used as bargaining chips. However, bringing them to Forthorthe came with its own problems, such as now when they were caught up in battle. Koutarou did feel bad about that.

"Sorry about always getting you caught up in something, Mackenzie," he apologized with a bitter smile.

They were currently at a landing spot for fighters inside of the Blue Knight. Since they had gotten close to the mining colony, the trio would switch to a smaller ship and move over to the colony.

"Having a legendary hero as a friend can be tough." Kenji looked unconcerned. His words suggested he found it troublesome, but his expression and tone implied the opposite. The situation wasn't Koutarou's fault, and Kenji knew that his friend had only ended up becoming a hero due to the flow of events. That was why he was the same as always.

"Yeah, I'm more unhappy about having less time to talk to you, Kou-niisan, than you becoming a hero." Kotori was also the same as usual. She still hadn't properly gotten used to Koutarou being Forthorthe's legendary hero. Even today, he was just a childhood friend to her, although she was a little sad that he was so busy they couldn't hang out as much anymore.

"Once this is all over, why don't we go out and hang out somewhere?" Koutarou said.

"Really?! That's a promise! I'll have to get a swimsuit ready!"

Kotori replied.

"So...it's set in stone that we're going to the ocean?"

"You have to see more of Nal-chan in a swimsuit or it won't be fair."

"M-Me?! Nobody wants to see me in a swimsuit!" Nalfa cried, imagining Kiriha, Shizuka, and Harumi in swimsuits. She was afraid to line up next to them.

"Once we get back, let's go shopping for one," Kotori whispered so only Nalfa could hear. "A really amazing one." In contrast to Nalfa, Kotori was having fun.

"No way; that's impossible! I don't have the courage to stand in front of people wearing something like that!" Nalfa didn't have a clear image of a so-called "amazing" swimsuit, but she couldn't imagine her scrawny body looking good in something like it.

"But in the end, you'll go into the decisive battle not wearing anything, right? I think you should try a little while you can," Kotori continued whispering. She really did look like she was enjoying herself.

Nalfa had somebody she was romantically interested in, and ultimately, she wanted to become lovers with him and move their relationship to the next step. So hesitating over a swimsuit should have been out of the question. Kotori wanted Nalfa to do a trial run with a bold swimsuit so that she could build up her courage.

"Kotori! That's not right now! You have to take the proper steps first!" Nalfa whispered back. To her, dating was a more modest affair. She didn't want to take drastic measures that would work as a shortcut; she felt it would only bring about a superficial change.

"But if you're going to step into that, you'll have to do something incredible, you know?" Kotori said, pointing at Theia, Shizuka, and Yurika. Those who had time on their hands were seeing Koutarou off. There was a princess, an elder dragon's priestess, and a magical girl. Nalfa would need to throw herself among them and stand out. Kotori didn't think she could be picky about her methods.

"M-Maybe so! But even then—" Nalfa started.

"If you don't do anything, you'll just keep losing," Kotori interrupted her.

"Ugh..."

Nalfa was vaguely aware of that. She was just too plain. She might not be suitable for a legendary hero, but she had fallen in love with him. There had been a time she'd just been a dreaming girl, looking up to the hero. But that wasn't the case anymore. By staying at his side, she had touched upon his struggles as well as his kindness, and had come to love the sensitive part hidden within him. That was all the more reason not to take drastic measures, but it ran the risk of her feelings being buried. Nalfa had stumbled upon a dilemma.

What is Kotori getting up to now? Koutarou wondered as he looked at the expressions of the two girls constantly changing.

Kenji, on the other hand, had an idea based on his little sister's expression. He doted on her, so he could tell immediately. Kotori was fastidious and reserved, yet enthusiastic, about love. She saw it as supreme and sought purity in it, which was why she hated any darkness in it. So she sometimes went too far. That was why Kenji decided to lend a helping hand to one of his sister's few friends.

"The ocean sounds nice," he cut in. "It's been a while since we last went fishing, right, Kou?"

"That sounds good," Koutarou answered with a nod. "I hear you can find some pretty big catches in Forthorthe's oceans. At least, that's what people from the Nefilforan unit told me." He immediately jumped on the topic of fishing, shifting his and Kotori's attention away from Nalfa, who seemed relieved.

"Would you like to come fishing too, Nalfa-san?" Kenji asked, trying to keep her at the center of the discussion. This kind of consideration was why Kenji was popular, but his only goal this time was to encourage his little sister's friend.

"Fishing?" Nalfa asked.

"Yeah, Kou and I will teach you," Kenji replied.

"Yes, I'll come too!" Nalfa said, mustering her courage to not let the chance escape her. *If I don't do anything I will just keep losing... I have to avoid that!* she thought. Her opinions on love differed from Kotori's quite a lot, but she completely agreed with what her friend had said before.

Koutarou didn't know what the girls had been talking about or the feelings behind it, but he could tell that Kenji had helped out Nalfa when he saw the tension leave her after Kenji's words. He hadn't used Spirit Vision; he'd just happened to see it, so he didn't know what kind of feelings had been stirred up, but perhaps that was for the best. At least he knew it was thanks to Kenji.

You can always rely on Mackenzie when there's trouble.

Kenji was a big help to him. And it was why he felt like he could leave Kotori and Nalfa to him. As long as Kenji was with them, Koutarou could fight without reserve.

That was when the hatch of the spacecraft parked next to them opened. It was a passenger hatch, and that meant the craft was ready to depart. This naturally led to the discussion coming to an end, and they faced each other.

"Take care of them, Mackenzie," Koutarou said.

"Yeah, if something happens, we'll hide somewhere safe," he answered.

"Can't you be a little cooler, Nii-san?" Kotori complained.

"Ahaha, that suits us just fine," Kenji laughed.

"I guess so," Kotori said with a nod. "Nal-chan won't have to, though, with Kou-niisan coming to save her."

"Kotori!" Nalfa exclaimed.

"See you later, Kou," Kenji said with a wave. "I'll get some more information on fishing."

"I'll leave it to you," Koutarou answered. "See you later."

"Yeah."

With that, the trio got on the spacecraft and left. After transferring to the mining colony, they would board a transport ship to the Forthorthe system. That would keep them safe.

"All right, then..." Koutarou said to himself. Having seen the spacecraft off, he turned his back on the air lock. He no longer wore the friendly face he had shown them. Instead it was the face of a hero about to head into battle.

Fortress Attack and Defense

Monday, December 12th

The Kularia system had three populated planets. However, two of them were uninhabitable, requiring spacesuits to survive on the surface. They were planets for large-scale mining and agriculture. The mining planet was rich in minerals but didn't have an atmosphere, which was pretty common in space. The large-scale agriculture planet was a little more complicated. Farming required a lot of water, but the planet had its own unique ecosystem. Its atmosphere was not suitable for humans to breathe, requiring spacesuits. For the same reason, the work itself was done in large encapsulated greenhouses. The crops brought over from Forthorthe weren't a good match for the planet's atmosphere.

The third planet, Urashidau, didn't require a spacesuit. Thanks to that, it had a considerable population, with cities all over the place. The Imperial Army had their fortress in a very old city, and the Blue Knight was headed for that.

"Any sign of the Gray Knight?" Koutarou asked.

"It looks like he went past the big city. He may even be in the sea, but I can't tell from this distance. Sorry," Sanae apologized.

"It can't be helped. I guess he'll attack again sometime after hiding his tracks," Koutarou replied.

They wanted to go help the fortress under attack, but the problem was the Gray Knight, who could ambush them from behind. The Gray Knight and his battleship had disappeared instead of heading for Urashidau. The planet was rich in people and nature and had a vast sea. It was also rich in spiritual energy, and the Gray Knight had blended in with it, rendering Sanae unable to pursue him with her Spirit Vision.

"If we go down to the surface and ignore him, we're definitely

going to have a hard time," Koutarou said.

"Indeed," Kiriha agreed with a nod. "We will end up in a pincer attack as well."

The Imperial Army's fortress was under attack by the Liberation Army's ground forces, so they would naturally end up being pincered by the Blue Knight. However, with the Gray Knight behind them, they would end up in the same position in turn. Since both sides would be pincered, the outcome would be hard to predict. They had to assume the worst possible outcome, but Clan had a suggestion.

"In that case, Sanae should remain in orbit aboard the Blue Knight."

The Blue Knight had a device that amplified Sanae's psychic powers, so if they left her there to observe, she should be able to discover the Gray Knight before he could ambush them. It wasn't a flawless plan, but it was necessary.

"Which one is going to stay?" Sanae asked while looking up at Sanae-nee.

There were two Sanaes, so one would stay while the other went with Koutarou. Since there was only one device, there was no reason for both of them to be there.

"I will stay," Sanae-nee answered without hesitation.

The answer surprised Sanae, and her eyes opened wide. Though Sanae-nee might have been from another universe, she was still the same person, so Sanae had been sure that Sanae-nee would hate being left behind. After all, that was how she herself felt.

"Are you sure?!" Sanae asked.

"He was my enemy to begin with..." Sanae-nee answered.

"Right..."

Sanae-nee and the Gray Knight had been enemies before coming to this universe, so it was only natural for her to volunteer to keep watch.

Forthorthe's science was advanced, but even then the landing craft shook a little when descending through the atmosphere. The irregular shaking caused by contact with the atmosphere couldn't be perfectly controlled. A battleship was so big that the inertia would keep it from shaking much in the first place, so the shaking could be

completely eliminated, but that wasn't possible with the smaller mass of a landing craft. It was a technological limit.

"This shaking is making me anxious," Shizuka said over the comms. She wasn't very good in situations when tension lasted for a long period of time, so she didn't like the landing craft shaking either.

"Hang in there," Koutarou answered. "You're the keystone this time, Landlord-san."

"You owe me one. Jeez..."

With Koutarou's encouragement, she fired herself up. Imperial Army soldiers were fighting below them even now, so she couldn't afford to whine.

"Ugh, Satomi-saaan..." Another person was fighting the shaking sensation: Yurika. The ever-considerate Ruth always had medicine for motion sickness ready, but Yurika had forgotten to take it.

"Don't throw up! Whatever you do, don't throw up in here!" Koutarou said. He was in the same craft with her, so it would be a disaster for him if she threw up. It might even have an effect on the battle, so it was a small but serious bind.

"Yurika-chan, you can heal that yourself, can't you?" Nana said, saving Koutarou from the disaster. She was with Shizuka, accompanying them because of her talent.

"Oh, yeah! Cure Disease!" Yurika chanted her spell. Nana had reminded her that she was a magician, prompting her to quickly heal her illness.

The spell worked just as hoped, and Yurika's motion sickness was resolved, allowing Koutarou to breathe out a sigh of relief.





“Good grief, that was close,” Koutarou called out to Yurika. He really did think that he’d been in danger.

“Sorry, I will be more careful next time...” Yurika was equally relieved and apologized from the bottom of her heart. A lot of lives were at stake in the coming battle. She would have been ashamed for the rest of her life as a magical girl if people had died because she’d forgotten to take her motion sickness medicine.

“Master, we are almost at the planned altitude,” Ruth reported. The time for battle had arrived.

“All right, let’s go, Yurika!” Koutarou said.

“Yes!” Yurika answered with resolve. She knew that they were about to start.

“Ten seconds until the final deceleration finishes,” Ruth said. “The hatch is opening!”

“End standby mode; release the joint locks!” Koutarou instructed.

“As you wish, Your Excellency,” the AI responded. “Mana amplifier activated.”

“The mana amplifier is working normally. Everything is ready, Satomi-san!” Yurika said.

She and Koutarou were in the successor unit for Warlord III Rev, which had been half destroyed. Its parts were interchangeable, and aside from the standard equipment, it was equipped with the Blue Line backpack. The Blue Line was additional gear for when Yurika was sitting in the machine, and it functioned like a small mobile base of operations for a magician with its mana amplifier, mana supplier, and more. It allowed the fragile Yurika to stand at the front.

“Change from operation mode to combat mode,” Koutarou ordered.

“Your Excellency, combat mode requires an official authorization,” the AI said.

“Yeah... Wait, what the heck is this?” Koutarou exclaimed.

The monitor in front of him displayed a strange string of words. It said, “Show the bravery and dignity of the emperor who rules the galaxy,” and below it were two buttons that said “yes” and “no.”

Hah, this must be Elle’s doing. She really is a handful.

Koutarou had experienced something similar when he had first

activated Garb of Lord. It must have been some sort of good luck charm, and he laughed while pressing yes. However, he didn't know how the footage of GoL had been used afterward.

"Your Excellency, please enter your authentication code," the AI said.

"Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire Supreme Commander and captain of the Royal Guard, Layous Fatra Veltlion," Koutarou stated.

"Official authentication code confirmed. War Emperor changing to combat mode. Your Excellency, this system will pray for your fortune and glory in place of the nation of Forthorthe."

The new unit had been named War Emperor. It was based on the Warlord series but had been improved and enhanced to handle Koutarou's piloting. That was why its name had naturally been enhanced as well, and it hoped to live up to the name with its massive power.

"War Emperor launching!"

As the sunlight reflected off of the vivid blue armor, War Emperor shot out from the landing craft. The knight in heavy armor had a design that looked like it had a silver crown, and it stood out from afar. Enemies who saw it trembled, and allies celebrated. And so the emperor of the battlefield landed on Urashidau.

Warlord III Rev had been damaged by Koutarou's and Maki's reckless piloting, but one of the reasons was that it had been a mass-produced machine. A common weapon had been altered to fit Koutarou's and the others' needs, and its structure had been able to endure Koutarou's movements. But War Emperor was different. It had been built with him in mind, and its durability had been greatly improved. Movements impossible for Warlord III were easy for the new machine. Even so, it was best not to push too hard. No matter how strong it was, there were still physical limits.

"Yurika, make sure you pay attention to reducing friction and restoring the structure," Maki said over the comms. "When Satomi-kun gets serious, the knees and ankles will take damage first!"

She was giving advice to Yurika, which the latter found helpful since it was her first time on the machine.

"I understand, I will keep an eye out!" Yurika answered. That put

a little more work on her plate, but it was a fair trade for not having to worry about protecting herself while on War Emperor. She always mustered her courage to fight, but she was a timid person deep down, so having Koutarou protect her at all times removed a psychological burden for her.

"Yurika, you don't have to do what Aika-san does! Just fight the way you do best!" Koutarou said.

"Okay!" Yurika answered with a nod. Right now, she was strong. Her eyes were filled with bravery, supported by a strong sense of trust. She had resolved to carry the future of Folsaria and Forthorthe, and she could fully focus on magic. The enemy was truly unfortunate.

"Satomi-san, the Nefilforan unit will cover your flanks!" Nana announced, standing next to War Emperor. "If you punch a hole in the enemy lines we will rip it open! Also..."

She was guarding Koutarou like before. War Emperor was five meters tall, making it something like a tank on the battlefield, which also meant it had the same weakness as a tank. It was invincible from the front, but it would be in danger if someone got behind it. That was why Nana would protect it. It was a collaboration between the Blue Knight and Hidden Leaves. She was well-known for her genius and swift movements, so she was perfect for the role.

"Let's do our best together today, Yurika-chan!"

"Yes! I'll do my best!"

Nana and Yurika were teacher and student. Since they were standing shoulder to shoulder on the battlefield, they were both fired up.

"All right, let's go!" Koutarou said. He couldn't watch over the teacher and student forever. After confirming that his allies were in place, he moved War Emperor forward.

At first, the ground shook with each step, but before long War Emperor started floating and gliding just barely over the ground. The machine stabilized and the shaking stopped. The Warlord series could freely fly in any case, but it had also been adjusted to skim the ground like a hovercraft for stability. It had been Clan's idea to reduce the strain on the ankles. The smoother the movements, the

less strain on the joints. In combat in particular, Koutarou put a lot of strain on the machine when stepping forward while using swordsmanship.

"So, this is how hovering feels," he remarked.

"If you disable that function in combat, you can fight like normal," Clan explained.

"Great!"

Koutarou made War Emperor draw its sword. With its legs stationary, it had a majestic appearance befitting the emperor of the battlefield. With its vassals in tow, it attacked the rear forces of the Liberation Army.

The Forthorthe Liberation Army knew that the Blue Knight was coming to attack. They had seen all of the landing craft and had observed a lot of enemies sortieing. In response, they had the antiair weapons to shoot down the landing craft and bombarded Koutarou's forces. But in the end, they were unable to stop the advance.

"Give me a report! What is going on?!" One of the commanding officers of the ground attack forces tried to keep the battlefield from turning chaotic. He was confused but desperate to do what he could.

"It is probably some sort of advanced compound camouflage!" a soldier answered. "The enemy's position is different from what we observed!"

The antiair weapons had failed to hit, and the bombardment had ended in failure. They had taken aim at the brilliant blue armor, yet no shot had hit home. Meanwhile, the return fire had struck the Liberation Army. It wasn't even a battle.

"The aerial bombardment is too heavy—we can't move! Based on the crest, it's Thei—"

Suddenly, the comms cut off and the officer could see a different encampment engulfed in an explosion. The enemy attack had destroyed their communications. He could also see something small and red circling above the destruction. It was smaller than a fighter.

"Princess Theiamillis, is it? She's making a path for the Blue Knight," the officer stated.

The Blue Knight and Princess Theiamillis lining up on the front was a famous combination. Theiamillis's accurate sniping and bombardment confused the enemy while the Blue Knight broke through.

So, the princess has begun her signature move, which means that the Blue Knight is already at our back! the officer thought.

As things stood, the enemy would break through in an instant, in which case they shouldn't be sending reinforcements to the front but farther to the rear instead.

The officer's thoughts were interrupted by an explosion. "Impossible! The Blue Knight?!"

He believed the bombardment of the other encampment had been to clear the path for the Blue Knight, yet there was a five-meter-tall blue giant right in front of him. It was the Blue Knight—he could not mistake him for anyone else.

"Sorry, but we're desperate too," the Blue Knight said.

"Urk?!"

The next moment, the officer felt a strong impact in the pit of his stomach. The strike quickly robbed him of his consciousness. He barely had time to gasp out a few broken words.

"Impossible... How did you know...this place..."

With that, he passed out and fell to the ground. The last thing he saw was the small girl who had driven her elbow into his solar plexus and the back of the Blue Knight passing through.

In order to avoid being shot down, Koutarou's group needed to land outside of the enemy's range and head over by ground. However, that would take too long to save the Imperial fortress. Instead, they used illusions: a spell called Perfect Illusion, which had substance so that it even appeared on radar. This allowed them to fool the enemy into thinking they were a few hundred meters away from their actual location. It would be unnatural to completely hide themselves while descending, so they had chosen this method instead, which had proven more effective than expected.

"Very impressive, Yurika," Koutarou said.

"Thank you very much," Yurika replied, slightly out of breath.

The large-scale spell had tired her. Perfect Illusion wasn't meant

to be used in such a way. It was an advanced spell, so it could only be used to create the illusion of a single person. Yet Yurika had succeeded in re-creating all of their allies. That was partially thanks to the mana amplifier and mana capacitor the Blue Knight had, but it was also thanks to her own talent. Yurika was likely the only one who could pull off such a spell, even if someone else had the same equipment.

"Satomi-san, I have finished up over here," Nana's voice said over the comms. She had been the one to take down the officer in control of the area. The Nefilforan unit was suppressing other areas in parallel. Thanks to that, they could continue on.

"Good work, Nana-san," Koutarou replied.

"Not at all; I can do this all day."

"And good work to you too, Sanae," Koutarou added.

"Good! Pour a mountain of praise on me, my disciple," Sanae huffed. It was she who had discovered the officer. She was a little behind Koutarou, and when Theia had bombarded the enemy encampment, she had discovered someone who had reacted differently than everyone else, desperately trying to stay calm and paying attention to his surroundings. Sanae had figured it was an officer and reported it to Koutarou, which had led to their success.

"Master, the enemy's vanguard has entered the fortress!" Ruth reported.

"We didn't make it?!"

"No, it's not over yet! They are still fighting in the courtyard; we can make it if we hurry!"

"Then we'll have to pull out all the stops," Koutarou said. "Princess Nefilforan, Landlord-san, come with me!"

He would have preferred to keep Nefilforan away from the front. She might have been a skilled warrior from the Glendad family, but she was still a princess. However, they couldn't let the enemy take the fortress, so there was no choice but to force their way through with superior firepower, using Koutarou, Shizuka, and the Nefilforan unit.

"I have waited for those words. The Nefilforan unit will follow you, Your Excellency!"

"Make sure you protect me, Satomi-kun."

The answers he got were opposites: Nefilforan was full of motivation, while Shizuka was somewhat anxious. It need not be said that Shizuka wasn't used to war.

"I was hoping *you* would protect *me*..." Koutarou muttered with a wry smile.

Shizuka was overwhelmingly powerful. Even with War Emperor, Koutarou stood no chance against her when she used her full might. She was likely the only person he wouldn't have to protect.

However, Shizuka didn't agree with that assessment. "That doesn't matter! It's the appearance that matters!" She really was scared. But her friends were here, and it was Koutarou who would protect her heart.

"I'll protect you; leave it to me," Koutarou said, relenting. He didn't understand everything that was on her mind, but he agreed with her request, aware that he was forcing her into this situation on some level.

"Very good," Shizuka replied.

"You have it rough, Blue Knight. I don't understand human couples," Alunaya chimed in.

"Me neither, Alunaya-dono," Koutarou answered. He did, however, have something that reassured him: the fact that with Shizuka was Alunaya—a living legend who would surely protect her.

So, Satomi-kun doesn't deny being a couple... Hmm, well then... Shizuka suddenly became surprisingly motivated.

The reason for this change was unclear, but it was another reassurance for Koutarou.

"Things are going to get a little busy, Yurika," he said.

He was worried about Yurika and looked over at her as he spoke.

"Yes, I'll do what I can," she answered.

"That's the spirit. I'm counting on you."

Fortunately, her expression was bright and willful. She was squeezing together every bit of courage to protect lives. While Koutarou was grateful for that, he did feel like he'd have to follow up on it later.

"You be careful too, Nana-san," he continued.

“Oh, you’re worrying about me today?” Nana answered playfully. He normally never worried about her, so it was unusual for him to call out to her at times like these. While that was a sign of trust, it was disappointing, so she was happy to hear that he was worried about her now.

“If the Gray Knight shows up, you’re the first one he’ll go after,” Koutarou explained. He really was worried about Nana. Taking out the infantry protecting tanks and humanoid weapons was a basic tactic. Moreover, the Gray Knight’s powers exceeded human knowledge. Even Nana might lose her life if she was hit by the power of chaos.

Hearing the concern in his voice, Nana switched to a direct channel. “Don’t worry. Your angel will always protect you,” she whispered. She then changed back to the wireless channel and continued speaking. “If he shows up, I’ll send him packing. I’m not called a genius for nothing, you know.”

“I’m counting on you,” Koutarou answered.

“Yeah!” After that energetic answer, Nana cut the call.

Koutarou heard someone laugh.

“Hehe.”

It had come from Yurika. Since she was in War Emperor, she had heard what Nana had told Koutarou.

“What?” he asked.

“I was thinking that Nana-san has changed. She almost never shows others her defenseless side like that.”

That was a truth that only she knew. Nana had had a tough life since childhood. She had grown up without learning how to interact with people close to her. Yet she was very honest while interacting with Koutarou. She spoke her true feelings and acted selfishly. She didn’t hide her desires. Yurika thought it was wonderful that Nana was now able to do that.

“Then we’ll have to win this,” Koutarou stated.

“Yes!” Yurika answered energetically.

Protecting love and courage, and the dreams and hopes of children, was a magical girl’s job. Since her teacher had finally learned to act like a child sometimes, Yurika had to win no matter

what.

There was a reason the fortress that the Imperial Army was holding had been breached: The enemy had used the trump card that they had been holding in reserve.

“Captain, what is that? It looks like people...” a soldier said.

“They’re moving through a series of transformations,” the captain answered. “Those aren’t people. They must be some kind of biological weapon.”

New enemies had appeared in front of the soldiers protecting the fortress. They were gray, undefined monsters. They appeared humanoid, but their movements were anything but human. Their limbs transformed as they walked, making them look simply uncanny.

“Captain, it’s no use! The lasers aren’t working!” the soldier reported.

“Bullets have mass, and that seems to work to some degree! Keep firing!” the captain ordered.

A large number of the gray monsters had appeared, and they advanced like they were shields for the Liberation Army, which was tailing close behind them. Not knowing how to handle them right away allowed the Imperial Army to be quickly pushed back. That then allowed the enemy to breach the gate, though the Imperial Army was managing to fight back somewhat. Lasers and beams, which the Imperial Army preferred, did little damage, but physical and close combat weapons were effective. Such attacks allowed them to push the enemy back. Explosives had an effect as well. Thanks to that, the Imperial Army still held the courtyard, but things were looking bad.

“Are they immortal?” a soldier asked.

“We can stop them but not take them out. At this rate...” the captain muttered.

No matter how many bullets the gray monsters were hit by, they just stood back up again. Explosives could blow their bodies to pieces, but those pieces just came back and stuck together like clay. In fact, it wasn’t even clear if the monsters next to one another were individuals, as sometimes two would merge into one or one would

split into two. Fighting them felt completely pointless, as their numbers remained the same no matter what the Imperial Army did. Considering they were only slowly being pushed back, they were fighting well.

"Keep it together! Raise your heads! His Excellency the Blue Knight is on his way! Just hang on until then!" the captain said, encouraging his subordinates.

Knowing that reinforcements were en route was the only thing helping the soldiers maintain their morale. The fact that it was the Blue Knight, who had defeated Vandarion, helped even more. Even though Vandarion had surpassed human understanding, the Blue Knight had cut him down. And the soldiers believed that he could surely do the same this time.

However...His Excellency might not make it in time... the captain thought.

While the soldiers looked up to him, the captain feared the opposite would happen. Descending from orbit to the front line would lead to massive casualties. The Blue Knight would also have to fight those gray monsters at the same time, so it seemed unlikely that he could win. In other words, the captain feared that they would die here.

"I wouldn't be so sure."

An unfamiliar voice suddenly rang out. The captain looked over in the direction it came from and spotted a young girl looking up at him.

"A child?! How did you get in here?!"

The girl looked like she was still in her early teens, maybe even younger than a high schooler. It certainly wasn't someone who should be on the battlefield.

"From above," the girl answered.

"From above?! It's dangerous here! You have to—"

"This is more important. Can you tell everyone to get down?" she interrupted. Her unusually calm behavior caught the captain's attention, so he decided to ask more.

"What do you mean?"

"Um...in five seconds, Theia is going to open fire, so you should

get down if you don't want to die," she answered, glancing at her watch as calmly as before.

But the captain couldn't stay so calm. "Theia... Oh! You mean Her Highness?! Everyone, get down! Her Highness's supporting fire is coming!" the captain shouted.

"A bombardment?! What kind of idiot would do that now of all times?!"

The captain and his subordinates all panicked. Even so, they followed his orders and crouched down on the spot. There was nothing more stupid than being blown away by friendly fire.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," the girl said, calmly standing in place. It was as though she didn't realize the danger.

The next moment, something red appeared in the sky above them, accompanied by several unmanned crafts. Immediately after that, shells rained down, sweeping away the front row of monsters. The shells didn't explode; they had been made to fire faster and more often. Instead, explosions were happening farther back, where the Liberation Army soldiers were, caused by missiles fired by the unmanned craft. The Liberation Army had antiair weapons, but before they could intercept, the link to the weapon operator had been cut, rendering the weapons inactive. The Liberation Army took a lot of damage, while the Imperial Army was mostly unharmed thanks to the distance and ducking down.

"You can stand up now," the girl said. "But be careful. Koutarou—I mean, the Blue Knight—will be charging through the enemy force from behind."

Despite supposedly being hit by the blast of the explosions, the girl acted like nothing had happened. The captain wondered who she was before picking up on something even more shocking in her words.

"His Excellency is already here?!"

"Yeah, he made it over here in a hurry," the mysterious girl said with a smile. She looked proud, as if she were the one being praised. It was finally at that moment that the captain realized who she was. The uniform she was wearing had the crest of a knight fighting a dragon: the Blue Knight's crest, which meant that the girl

was part of his band of knights.

In order for Theia to fly freely, she needed some kind of defensive measure or evasive methods, and to eliminate the antiair weapons along the way. If not, then no matter how much of a genius she was, she would be under focused fire from saturation attacks. So she initially flew low and stayed with the ground forces. Her Combat Dress had the same new hover function as War Emperor, so she could be protected by the large-scale distortion fields the infantry had. While fighting with the troops, she would occasionally fly up and unleash a volley of fire. But it wasn't until Clan and Maki made their moves behind the scenes that she could properly fly around.

"Maki, we will aim for that next," Clan said.

"Got it; please guide me there," Maki answered.

Clan jammed communications and radar in a specific area while Maki used the opening to take down the antiair weapons there. They specialized in such attacks, and they were effectively destroying the antiair weapons. From the Liberation Army's perspective, it was a nightmare in which their allies were just disappearing.

"There she is! It's Princess Theiamillis!" an enemy soldier cried.

"What are the antiair weapons doing?! Shoot her down!" another yelled.

"We can't contact them!" the first soldier said.

"Impossible! Try it ag— Aaahhhhh!!!"

The antiair weapons had fallen silent, and they couldn't contact the soldiers in charge. They didn't know what was going on, and before they knew it, Theia's bombardment had rained down on them.

"What's happening?!" a soldier yelled.

"Sorry, we're passing through," Koutarou answered.

"It's the Blue Knight! He's here!" the soldier cried.

"Ahhhh!" another screamed.

"It's rude to look at a girl and scream..." Shizuka said.

"I don't feel all that bad about it," Nefilforan answered.

"You're a warrior to the core, Nefi-san."

Even if the enemy endured Theia's bombardment, War Emperor,

Shizuka, and the Nefilforan unit were charging through them, so they stood no chance. It was an unfair situation.

At last, War Emperor landed inside the fortress courtyard, allowing Koutarou to see the gray monsters.

"So, those are the creatures..." Koutarou muttered.

"Satomi-kun," Harumi called.

"Can you feel it too, Sakuraba-senpai?" Koutarou asked.

"Yes, Signaltin is on alert."

She could feel Signaltin's power increasing on its own. She believed that it was on guard against the gray monsters. Koutarou felt it too, albeit not to the same degree, which lent credibility to Harumi's claim.

"Koutarou, they're on alert too. They look like they're going to try something," Sanae warned them. She could feel hostility from the gray monsters, but she couldn't sense any intent to attack. Instead, she felt that they had some kind of desire. The monsters' thoughts were chaotic, and she couldn't tell what they were, but it was clear that they were trying to do something.

"Koutarou, those gray things are going to merge. Like the waste did. Fighting individually would just get them burned up by Signaltin, so they're merging to fight back!" Sanae-nee reported.

The haniwas' spiritual energy sensor had detected that the gray monsters were slowly starting to merge. Two became one, and their spiritual energy swelled to more than twice of what they had individually. By repeating that, they hoped to withstand Signaltin's power.

"Master, the Liberation Army is headed your way! You have to hurry and defeat the enemy!" Ruth reported.

If this is the Gray Knight's plan, he has a rotten personality, Koutarou thought.

Using these monsters of chaos to break through the fortress's gate meant that Koutarou's group had to hurry. While the monsters merged into one and fought back, the remaining Liberation Army soldiers would gather and attack them from behind. Koutarou's side had to force their way through to save the fortress, so most of the Liberation Army remained, and they could cut off his retreat.

"This is bad, Satomi-san; I can sense magic everywhere! They probably have spiritual energy weapons too," Nana commented, giving Koutarou even more bad news. She had lost most of her ability to use magic, but she could still sense it. And that sense was telling her that the Liberation Army was using weapons integrated with magic.

Naturally, one could assume that they were using weapons with spiritual energy technology as well. Spiritual energy weapons and magical weapons couldn't be mass-produced, so there was a limit to their number. The Gray Knight was likely planning on using all of them against Koutarou's group.

It's just one thing after another! You're pretty good to have calculated all this, Gray Knight! Koutarou thought. His group had come as reinforcements knowing that they would be at a disadvantage, but the situation had exceeded his expectations. The Gray Knight was walking a narrow path to make the best moves to take his side down. But it wasn't so much outwitting them as depriving them of all of their options. It was a plan that was being carried out after considerable information gathering and deliberation, and Koutarou had no choice but to acknowledge the Gray Knight.

"Then there's only one thing to do," Shizuka said.

"Leave your back to us, Blue Knight!" Alunaya cried.

"I'm counting on you!" Koutarou answered.

"You take care of that monster!"

"Let's go, uncle!" said Shizuka. Despite the situation, she didn't hesitate to turn her back to the gray monsters. Alunaya was very strong against physical and magical attacks, but he was a bad match for the power of chaos. So he'd decided that it was best for him to face the normal soldiers approaching them.

There was another who had made the same choice.

"I will come with you," Nefilforan stated.

"Thank you, Nefi-san," Shizuka answered.

"It is an honor, Princess Nefilforan," Alunaya added.

Nefilforan and the soldiers under her command were a bad match for the monsters of chaos as well. Rather than being a hindrance, she believed it was more effective to join Shizuka.

"Nefilforan unit, secure the main gate! On our honor, do not allow anyone to get inside!"

"As you wish, my princess!" the soldiers answered in unison.

"Let's go!" Shizuka declared with Alunaya's voice, revealing her fangs. Alongside the Nefilforan unit, they headed toward the rear. The gray monsters were no longer on her mind. She was sure that Koutarou could handle them.

"Sounds like a heavy responsibility, Satomi-san," Nana commented.

"Please take care of the defense, Nana-san," Koutarou answered.

"You don't need to tell me that," Nana told him. "I already said I would."

"Your angel will always protect you." Those words hadn't been a lie. She opened her artificial limbs' exhaust ports and forcibly began cooling down. At the same time, a rainbow light started flowing out of her body. The safety device on her artificial limbs was released, and she would protect Koutarou even if it meant danger to herself. She had concluded that the enemy was dangerous enough for her to go that far.

"Yurika, your teacher is an amazing person," Koutarou said in admiration. "Normally, a person can't resolve themselves to fight that easily."

Nana had calmly weighed the risk and odds of winning and decided to shut off her safeties. Normally, making such a calm decision was difficult. Most people would put it off until later.

Yurika laughed.

"What?" Koutarou asked.

"No, it's nothing. It's just...I was thinking that even you can have incredible misunderstandings at times, Satomi-san."

Nana had indeed resolved herself, but it wasn't to fight. Yurika had laughed because Koutarou didn't understand that. And now their usual roles had been reversed, and Koutarou was the one to tilt his head in confusion.

"Fine. I guess we can talk about that later," Koutarou said and fixed his posture in the War Emperor. The enemy was right before him, and they would surely attack soon. There was no more time for

casual chatter.

The monsters of chaos hadn't completely become one. Ninety percent had merged into one, while the remaining ten percent stayed at a human size and filled the surroundings. The giant monster attacked War Emperor while smaller ones attacked any openings.

"They are being pretty clever," Koutarou said.

"They might be getting orders from the Gray Knight," Yurika commented.

"Maybe. He could be nearby," Koutarou agreed.

Unless the Gray Knight had spent all of his strength summoning the gray monsters, he would appear to attack. In that case, it was possible that he was nearby, giving instructions to suit the situation. However, his intentions were still unclear, which made the battle so suspenseful.

"But complaining will get us nothing. Let's go, Yurika!" Koutarou said.

"Yes! Lightning Reflex, Reduce Friction," Yurika answered, casting spells.

Koutarou advanced War Emperor toward the giant gray monster. As he did, Yurika cast a spell to enhance his reflexes and remove friction from the joints as she'd been advised to do.

"Keep it up!" Koutarou said.

"Yes!"

The massive monster of chaos was now more than twice the size of War Emperor, but Koutarou didn't hesitate to charge at it. He had fought giant enemies several times, so that wouldn't stop him.

"How about this for a start?" he shouted.

War Emperor's sword glowed silver as he drove it into the monster of chaos. The glow came from Signaltin's mana. Like with Warlord, Signaltin had been stored inside of War Emperor's sword, with the mana being conferred to the blade.

The monster roared and raised its left arm to ward off the sword.

The sword and the monster's arm came into contact, creating an intense shock and flash of light. The forces of order and chaos canceled each other out, emitting pure heat and vibrations.

“It turned out just like I thought! In that case, take this!” Koutarou shouted.

The monster was taken aback by the impact and flash, and its strength faded for a moment. In contrast, Koutarou was unfazed, as he’d experienced similar things before, and he forcefully pushed his sword forward using War Emperor’s strength.

“Sakuraba-senpai!” Koutarou called.

“Okay! Signaltin!” Harumi answered his call and elevated Signaltin’s power. By doing that, the sword glowed even more than before. Koutarou wasn’t going to overlook the monster’s opening and hoped to finish it immediately.

“Roooaaar...”

Instead, the remaining ten percent of the gray monsters that hadn’t merged attacked War Emperor. Some attacked physically, others used magic to create lightning, and others threw balls of spiritual energy. There were even some that created something like guns to open fire. There were all sorts of attacks, but they were all aimed at War Emperor.

“Satomi-san, get back!” Nana shouted. She ran across the battlefield with a rainbow glow, firing her guns, Over the Rainbow. They were special guns that could shoot mana, spiritual energy, and physical bullets. This time, she was only using physical bullets covered in magic for as much power as possible.

“Roaaaar!”

The bullets Nana fired burst on small monsters approaching Koutarou from behind. In total there were three. The bullets worked as expected, and the three monsters were blown away.

“Thanks!” Koutarou said. He distanced himself from the giant monster. Since Nana had taken out the monsters that would have gotten in the way, it wasn’t difficult for him to do.

Shortly thereafter, all sorts of attacks landed where he had just been standing.

“Jeez, this won’t be easy,” Koutarou said, in a cold sweat upon seeing the attacks. No individual attack was particularly powerful, but if he had taken all of them at once, even War Emperor would have been in danger.

“It’s okay; just fight like usual, Satomi-san,” Yurika said as she handled the magical equipment and ritual materials prepared within the Blue Knight. She was unusually calm.

“Yurika?” Koutarou said in a perplexed tone. “Yeah!” He soon shifted his focus back to the enemy. He didn’t have the time to hesitate, and most of all, he believed in Yurika’s strength when she was serious. “Let’s go, Yurika!” he said.

Trusting in Yurika, Koutarou advanced forward. If he stayed still, the smaller monsters would rain down attacks on him again, so believing in her was all he could do.

“Nana-san, are you good at whack-a-mole?!” Yurika asked.

“You already know! I am good at everything!” Nana answered.

“In that case, High Gravity Field!” Yurika said, casting a spell.

In the next moment, everyone in the area stopped moving. Yurika had used a spell that increased the gravity around War Emperor, making them all several times heavier. The smaller monsters in particular lost their ability to fly and crashed into the ground.

“Yurika-chan, how am I supposed to—” Nana began, but stopped herself before she could finish her sentence. Her expression turned into a smile.

“I see! I get it!”

In the next moment, things proceeded as anticipated.

“High gravity detected, changing to high-gravity environment preset. Distortion field reset,” War Emperor’s AI announced.

The machine was made for Koutarou’s personal use, but its origin was the Warlord series. In other words, they had taken high-gravity planets into account while building it. The distortion field was reset in an instant, and they could move freely like before.

“Heave-ho!” Nana said. She set her spiritual energy generator to full output and moved her heavy body inside of War Emperor’s distortion field. With that, she was immediately free of the gravity’s effects.

“Yurika-chan, do it!” Nana said.

“Acid Swamp!”

That was the moment Yurika had been waiting for. She cast yet

another spell with War Emperor at its center. This time, the ground was turned into an acidic swamp. The monsters being pushed down by the gravity continued to sink into the swamp.

"You really are incredible, Yurika," Koutarou said in admiration. He continued to advance War Emperor. The ground had no effect on the machine. It slid forward as if skating on ice.

"I have a good teacher," Yurika answered.

"Ahaha, you can proudly say that you have surpassed her," Nana said with a wry smile while whacking moles.

The gray monsters could probably manipulate gravity to fly, but they were currently stuck in an acid swamp. There was only one thing they could do before melting and burning in the acid. If they manipulated gravity, they could free themselves, but the acid would still be stuck on their bodies, doing a lot of damage. That said, if they blocked the acid, they could avoid instant death, but when they stopped to use magic, Nana would shoot them. It could truly be called whack-a-mole. By giving the enemy the two obstacles of acid and gravity, they left the monsters unable to defend themselves in any other way. That was where Nana's accurate shooting came in. The monsters stood no chance of winning.

"Besides, I couldn't protect Satomi-san like this," Nana continued.

The wide-area spells Yurika had cast were normally grand spells that required rituals to reach the scale Yurika managed on her own, and casting them one after another was out of the question. It was only made possible by the equipment and Koutarou protecting Yurika. Normally, one couldn't cast even simple rituals in the middle of a battlefield, which meant that Koutarou and Blue Line were drawing out the limits of Yurika's abilities.

Looking at these results, what Yurika-chan needed was the composure she got from experience and fundamental knowledge, Nana thought.

Yurika was overflowing with talent, but in the past, she'd consistently failed her missions. But after gaining a lot of experience and knowledge, she had transformed. Koutarou and Blue Line were just an opportunity, and she would have produced results even if she were in a different situation.

In contrast to Yurika, who was in a good shape, Theia and the others were in a more precarious situation. There were simply too many enemies. There were also enemies with weapons that used magic and spiritual energy technology, so going on a bold offensive was difficult. Theia in particular was stuck on the ground, since she would be targeted if she tried to fly.

"This situation is bad," she muttered in frustration while sniping enemies. "At this rate they will be able to push through."

She was good in a shoot-out too, but air strikes were especially important in battles like these. Their position could be turned around if the enemy's rear could be cut off and their artillery was destroyed. But if Theia tried to fly now, the magic and spiritual energy weapons would shoot her down. The Gray Knight narrowing down the use of magic and spiritual energy weapons to antiair equipment was nothing short of brilliant.

"Shizuka is the only one winning right now," Theia muttered.

Even in their current situation, Shizuka was doing well. Alunaya's overwhelming power was protecting her from the enemy's attacks. The only exceptions were spiritual energy weapons, but since they were limited to antiair, there were only a few weapons that could be aimed at Shizuka, and they weren't enough.

"Theiamillis-san, Shizuka-san is going too far forward," Nefilforan said, concerned about the situation. "At this rate she will be surrounded and cut off from us."

Shizuka would want to cooperate with the Nefilforan unit, but the unit was slowly being pushed back, and only Shizuka was left behind. If she was completely cut off from everyone else, she would lose her tactical value. If Shizuka was cut off in a distant area, the front gate's defenses would collapse.

That said, there's not much we can do to make a comeback, Theia thought.

They weren't losing in fighting power, nor was morale bad. But they were overwhelmingly losing in numbers, and they had also forced their way through. Moreover, the enemy was equipped with magic and spiritual energy weapons for antiair use. At this rate, a

horde of enemies would rush down Koutarou's group. If that happened, they would be back to square one. Despite knowing that, there was nothing Theia could do.

It was at that moment that a certain person's voice came over the comms. "That's not very like you, Theiamillis-san."

"Harumi?!" Theia exclaimed.

"Sorry to keep you waiting; I'm here to help," Harumi announced. This meant that reinforcements had arrived.

"You fool! If you come out—" Theia began, but Harumi interrupted her.

"Now's not the time for that. Am I wrong?"

"Ugh..." Theia groaned.

The Nefilforan unit actually had some leeway in the form of the troops protecting Harumi. This time was no different as they protected her, the Blue Knight's Achilles' heel. They also had another role assigned to them: to attack the Gray Knight from behind if he was to strike. However, they couldn't stay quiet under the circumstances. The Gray Knight hadn't revealed himself, but the situation was shaping up as originally envisioned. Harumi's forces could attack the enemies approaching Theia and the others from behind.

"Sorry about this, Harumi," Kiriha apologized. "Normally you shouldn't have to come out."

Harumi's appearance had actually been on Kiriha's orders. She'd realized that it was dangerous to leave the situation as it was. That said, if the Gray Knight did show up and attack, they would be in trouble. Therefore, the soldiers protecting Harumi had been ordered to retreat with Harumi if the Gray Knight appeared.

"It is certainly dangerous, but now is the time to fight," Harumi said. "Not to mention, if the Gray Knight has even more strength remaining, we won't have a chance of winning anyway."

"So you've noticed, Harumi," Kiriha commented.

"Yes. I know a little more about Signaltin than everyone else."

In terms of forces, the Liberation Army was at around the most they could field, considering the forces that would have been on board the enemy battleships. Even if the Gray Knight ambushed

them with additional forces, those numbers wouldn't be enough to change the outcome of the battle. It was the Gray Knight himself who was the problem. If he could use even more power of chaos, Koutarou's side was likely to lose. Harumi's forces would be attacked from behind and fall, and the Nefilforan unit's battlelines would collapse.

However, Harumi and Kiriha surmised that was unlikely. The Gray Knight had already used a large amount of chaos power when he'd launched his surprise attack in space. On top of that, he had summoned the gray monsters. Harumi's senses told her that he had overused that power. Moreover, if he had more power and fought normally, he would lose. He no longer had enough strength to fight back against Signaltin, so the outcome would be the same whether or not Harumi fought.

"You're not wrong there," Kiriha said.

"So I will be going too," Harumi stated.

"Please do."

"I will be waiting," Theia fearlessly said.

"Yes!" Harumi agreed with a nod.

With that, the call ended, and Theia looked surprisingly energetic.

"Haha, I can't let you be the only one looking good!"

Her hands instinctively gripped her gun tighter. If Harumi was coming forward, there was no time for Theia to be feeling down. She had to show that she was the Golden Princess, the Blue Knight's lord, to herself and those around her.

When that unit appeared, the first thing the Liberation Army saw was a battle flag they had never seen. The crest was a silvery flower with snowflakes on its petals. It was somehow similar to Empress Alaia's crest. The next thing that caught their eyes was the person carrying the flag. She had beautiful long silver hair, fluttering in the wind. After being reminded of Alaia by the battle flag, confusion spread among the Liberation Army's soldiers.

"Brave soldiers of the Imperial Army, hear me! We will now head for His Excellency, the Blue Knight! Do not allow anyone to hinder us! Defeat all who stand in our way, and open a path to the Blue Knight!"

The figure gave an encouraging speech in a dignified and beautiful voice. Hearing that, the morale of the Imperial Army skyrocketed, while that of the Liberation Army dropped. The girl's dignified figure convinced the Liberation Army that another legendary figure had appeared.

A soldier screamed.

"Calm down! Get back to your positions! There is no way she is the real one!" another said.

"But..."

"It's just a plan to make it look like that! Keep firing!"

The pincer attack was already devastating, especially when performed by veteran soldiers. Demanding that the scraped-together forces not to panic was too much to ask. The presence of the figure leading the Imperial Army further accelerated that panic.

"Wind that blows through the heavens, water that moistens the earth, with these two pillars of power, appear, spirits of lightning! Rise up from the black clouds and become the harbinger to vanquish my enemies! Shatter! Hammer of the Lightning God!"

Finally, the powerful lightning attack from the vanguard of the battle flag pulled the trigger. With a bright flash, lightning ran across the battlefield and directly hit the antiair weapons from behind. The strike caused a large explosion, and the antiair weapons blew one another up.

"It's Empress Alaia! She's here!" a soldier screamed.

"We have made a huge mistake! Oh, please forgive us, Empress Alaia! This wasn't what we wanted!" another shouted.

"There is no way that is her! Empress Alaia lived two thousand years ago!" another soldier said, attempting to calm the others.

"Are you blind?! Who is it if not Empress Alaia?! Signaltin is glowing in the Blue Knight's hands even as we speak!"

The Liberation Army started to stampede and flee. Those who saw the girl directly could tell that she looked just like Empress Alaia, whose portrait they had seen since childhood. The legend had also been told to them time and time again.

The appearance of the girl with the battle flag who looked like Empress Alaia caused panic to spread throughout the Liberation

Army. However, even the girl in question, Harumi, was a little confused.

"I feel like I did something unthinkable..."

Everything had been a bluff. The soldiers escorting her had suggested that she acted like Alaia to put pressure on the enemy, and she'd done it in spite of being unconvinced. She didn't have any confidence, but she wanted to do something to contribute to their victory. And since the soldiers around her were risking their lives to fight, she couldn't afford to be picky.

"It worked even better than expected. Thank you very much, Harumi-sama."

The captain of the guard unit—technically the vice captain under Harumi—saluted her with a serious expression. A portion of the enemy was confused, and their allies' morale had increased. There was nothing more welcome than that on the battlefield.

"So, that was what the flag was for," Harumi said, looking at the battle flag in her hands. She had been quite perplexed when they had suggested that she create her own flag, but now she understood. Harumi looked like Alaia and held a battle flag that looked like Alaia's. It encouraged allies and shaved away at the enemy's will to fight.

"Yes. Skill, equipment, and morale are the three factors that determine a soldier's strength. And you have the overwhelming power to change one of those. Your cooperation is a great help," the captain said.

"It's just a shame that it's all a bluff..." Harumi replied with a wry smile.

The outcome wasn't due to her own strength. Alaia's earnest efforts in the past were influencing even the present. Everything was borrowed, so Harumi didn't see it as something she had accomplished herself.

"I hear that His Excellency the Blue Knight was the same at first. But he is without a doubt our hero," the captain said.

"Yes, I suppose so..." Harumi said with a small smile and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she was no longer that unconfident girl.

"Then I will hold my head up high too. I will fight too, for the sake of the people."

"I was sure you would say that," the captain answered and saluted once more.

"We're advancing," Harumi said. "Display all of the Imperial Army's power as we advance. Our allies are exhausted, and our way of fighting shall replenish their strength!"

"As you wish, my princess!"

Harumi would later be called a princess of illegitimate birth, and according to the Imperial Army's official records this would be her first battle.

Harumi's attack began to take a major turn. The Liberation Army was forced to split their attention between enemies on both sides, which stalled them. Clan and Maki took advantage of that opening to operate behind the scenes once more. They only had one target: the antiair weapons that were keeping Theia grounded.

"Theiamillis-san, you can fly now!" Clan said.

"You got them?!"

"Yes. Not all of them, but with so few left, you can handle them with your skill," Maki answered.

"Good job!"

Hearing their report, Theia shot up into the sky. Like they'd said, the antiair attacks had greatly decreased, and she would be able to handle them by herself.

"Koutarou! It looks like we can handle things on our end! How are things for you?!" Theia asked.

"I'm about to finish things up here too! Sorry, but I won't be able to help you out!" Koutarou replied.

He and the others fighting the gray monsters were quickly reaching the end. Yurika's efforts had allowed for the small monsters to be wiped out, so Koutarou could focus on the big one.

"That's fine! We will meet later!" Theia said.

"Yeah!"

The call with Theia ended, and he pointed his sword at the monster once more. The giant monster was twice War Emperor's size, but despite that it wasn't slow. It also had regenerative powers,

allowing it to ignore Yurika's acid swamp. They couldn't let their guard down around it.

"Yurika, how much longer will the swamp last?" Koutarou asked.

"Only another thirty seconds, and I don't have the strength to cast it again!" Yurika answered.

"Got it!"

Koutarou moved forward with War Emperor. The giant monster could ignore the acid swamp, but it wasn't unaffected. It was taking damage from the acid and was constantly regenerating, meaning that it was weakened by the energy it was using. So Koutarou wanted to finish things in the thirty seconds they had left.

"Yurika, we'll finish this with the next attack!" Koutarou said.

"Okay, please give me five seconds!"

"I'm counting on you!"

Yurika was going to use the last of her mana for a final spell, and she needed five seconds to cast it. Of course, the enemy wasn't just going to stand there and wait for it. Judging that it wouldn't be able to catch War Emperor with its speed, the monster created solid bullets of chaos and shot them at the machine.

"Urk, that's a good plan!"

The bullets weren't rapidly fired like from a machine gun; instead they were shot out all at once in a spread pattern like from a shotgun. Realizing that he wouldn't be able to dodge all of them, Koutarou braced himself with the shield in his left arm. It was a distortion field, just like with the Blue Knight.

Thanks to his quick reaction, the power of chaos just barely missed hitting him directly. However, the distortion field was collapsing. The power of chaos made everything hazy. Not even a distortion field was an exception.

"ROOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAR!!!"

Seeing the weakened distortion field, the monster readied another volley.

Oh no! I won't be able to block a second one! Koutarou thought.

The distortion field would completely fall apart if it took another shot. Signaltin's power could block it, but then he would temporarily lose the energy to attack. The thirty second time limit would run out

if he waited for that energy to recover.

"Let me help."

At that moment, there was a small explosion in front of the monster's face. Having no small monsters to deal with, Nana had thrown a grenade. Naturally, that wouldn't do any damage to the giant monster, but it was enough to disrupt its senses.

"Thank you!" Koutarou said.

"You owe me one, Satomi-san."

"Let's go, Yurika!"

"Yes please, Satomi-san!"

The monster of chaos came to a momentary stop thanks to the explosion. Koutarou made War Emperor take a drastic turn and attack the monster. His choice of attack was a stab. It would make the most use of War Emperor's speed and mass.

"RAAAAAAAGGHHH!"

The monster brushed away the flames of the explosion and moved its head around to find Koutarou. It instinctively understood the danger. When it cast its glance to the left, its murky eyes found War Emperor and Koutarou within it. The flaw with a thrust was that movements were direct, which meant that a scatter shot would be very effective. Moreover, the bullets of chaos were still floating around it. If the monster had a consciousness like a human's, it would have been convinced of its victory.

"ROOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAR!!!"

The monster launched the bullets, and War Emperor charged forward. The bullets directly hit War Emperor, or so it seemed.

"You really are a genius, Yurika," Koutarou said.

"That makes me very happy. You almost never praise me, Satomi-san," Yurika answered.

Before the monster knew it, War Emperor was behind it, its sword impaling its back. A bright white light spread out from the tip of the sword, causing the monster to lose its shape.

"Brilliant, my pupil..."

Nana, who had seen everything from up close, was surprised. It hadn't been Koutarou who had stabbed the monster of chaos. Yurika had used a short-distance teleport to move War Emperor, resulting in

the sword stabbing into it. Or rather, it wasn't so much "stabbing" as the teleport having placed the sword inside of it. With Yurika's remaining mana, she could have only teleported War Emperor a few meters, even with the support of Blue Line. The teleportation had also avoided the enemy attack, making it perfectly timed. With Signaltin's power unleashed in the depths of the monster's body, it simply stood no chance, and the enemy vanished without a trace.

Nana couldn't do anything but agree with Koutarou. Yurika was without a doubt a genius, and Nana was proud of her.

Behind the Mask

Monday, December 12th

At the same time that Koutarou defeated the monster of chaos, an anomaly happened aboard the Imperial Army transport ship that had just finished its warp. Somebody had infiltrated the ship and launched an attack. There was only one intruder, but the soldiers were unable to stop them. For the sake of their honor, the soldiers were strong. They fought bravely with all they had, but their opponent was just too strong.

It was the Gray Knight himself. He was after the two people on board the transport ship.

"Don't move, Matsudaira Kenji."

That was the first time Kenji had heard the Gray Knight's voice directly. He'd heard it in recordings and the like before, but not directly from the person themselves. The voice coming from beyond the mask had a chilling tone. It was the same tone Koutarou had once had, the voice of someone who had rejected everything.

"You're—"

"Don't do anything unnecessary or this girl dies," the Gray Knight said, interrupting him.

Nalfa screamed. The Gray Knight had pointed the tip of his sword at her and was threatening Kenji. She'd been captured and was being used as a hostage. Fear filled her expression, and she could neither move nor speak.

"Nal-chan!" Kotori screamed.

Kenji glared at the Gray Knight. "If you're here...what happened to Kou?!" He was imagining the worst possible situation. If the Gray Knight was here, Koutarou might have been defeated.

"Don't worry; he's alive. There's nobody but me who could beat him," the Gray Knight said.

No matter how much power of chaos the Gray Knight might use, that alone wasn't enough to take down Koutarou. There likely wouldn't be a victor and loser until they fought directly with the source of their power: their swords.

"Besides, if I had, I wouldn't have come here," the Gray Knight continued.

Just being told that Koutarou was alive wasn't enough to convince Kenji, but he couldn't imagine the Gray Knight coming after them if Koutarou was dead. It appeared that Koutarou was still alive.

"Then...what are you after?" Kenji asked.

There was still the question of why the Gray Knight had come. Moreover, he was a strange man. Despite this being their first meeting, it didn't feel like that to Kenji. Though he was afraid, he wondered if they had met somewhere else before.

"I came to capture you," the Gray Knight said. "Come with me, Matsudaira Kenji."

"Me?!" Kenji exclaimed. He was confused. He couldn't imagine why the Gray Knight would need him.

"If I want to stall the Imperial Army, stalling the Blue Knight is the best way to do so. Capturing you will be effective in that regard."

Kenji was starting to piece things together. The Gray Knight had come to capture Kenji to blackmail and stall Koutarou.

So...getting captured here wouldn't be a problem for just Kou, but Forthorthe too... Kenji thought.

He steeled his resolve. There was no chance of victory, but he would rather die in battle than be captured. He felt like there was no other choice, considering what would happen after he was captured.

"Don't move, Matsudaira Kenji," the Gray Knight said coldly.

Having anticipated Kenji's resistance, he pointed the sword at Nalfa once more. Kenji grunted. With just that motion, the Gray Knight had blocked any moves he might make.

"Whether this girl lives or dies is entirely up to you. Come with me quietly, otherwise—"

"Okay! Okay," Kenji said in resignation. A regular person like him stood no chance against the Gray Knight. If he didn't obey, Nalfa would die, or perhaps Kotori would. That had to be avoided at all

costs.

"You can't, Mackenzie-sama!" Nalfa shouted. She'd been frozen in fear and unable to move, but she couldn't sit still in the current situation. She struggled in the Gray Knight's arms and tried to appeal to Kenji.

"Take me wherever you want, but don't lay a hand on that girl," Kenji said.

"I'm glad you're so understanding," the Gray Knight answered.

"Mackenzie-sama!" Nalfa exclaimed.

But she couldn't do anything. The Gray Knight didn't budge at her struggling, and she hadn't changed Kenji's mind. Only Kotori was free, but she couldn't move from fear. She had seen the splattered blood past the door, and the Imperial Army soldiers that lay unmoving on the ground.

"Let's go," the Gray Knight said. Nalfa screamed.

"I'm obeying you! Don't be rough with her!" Kenji shouted.

The Gray Knight took Nalfa and Kenji and left the room, leaving a trembling Kotori alone. Once the three left her view, she passed out. She was just a normal girl living in a normal world—the situation had been too much for her.

Looking at the results, Kiriha concluded that even the ground battle had been a decoy. Using the ground forces and monsters of chaos as diversions, the Gray Knight had kidnapped Kenji. In doing so, he hoped to stall Koutarou. She couldn't tell if that had been his goal from the start or if he'd changed goals after seeing how things had gone. However, he had become aware of Nalfa riding with them after seeing the rainbow power erasing his power of chaos during his surprise attack. From that, he could likely have surmised that Kenji was on board as well. Kiriha imagined that had been the turning point.

"Dammit! We knew Mackenzie and the others were likely to be targeted too!" Koutarou shouted.

However, Kiriha didn't say her prediction out loud. It would only hurt Koutarou, and it wouldn't help the situation. She simply stayed quiet and gave the raging Koutarou a sympathetic stare.

Koutarou can't abandon Kenji, she thought. *How dreadful the*

Gray Knight can be...

Realizing that it would be impossible to stop the Imperial Army physically, the Gray Knight had moved to use Koutarou's heroism against him. By kidnapping Kenji, the enemy ensured that Koutarou would be mentally restricted and stopped from acting. As he was the Imperial Army's supreme commander, that also meant that the army's morale would decrease. Koutarou being in a bad condition reflected on them all. It was an effective method, but it wasn't something a decent person would do. It was just too cruel. Kiriha couldn't help but regret the situation.

It was then that the third Sanae, Sanae-nee, approached her.

"Which do you think it is, Kiriha?" she whispered.

It was a question that omitted a lot of information. However, Kiriha fully understood.

"If he was really after Nalfa, you mean?" she whispered back. Kiriha had been thinking that the Gray Knight might have had another goal aside from Kenji.

"Yeah, what do you think?"

"Considering the Gray Knight's style, Nalfa is probably his real goal," Kiriha said.

"I think so too."

At first glance, it looked like Nalfa had been used to kidnap Kenji. But Kiriha and Sanae-nee wondered if he perhaps actually needed Nalfa too. Incidentally, Kiriha was the one who had told Sanae-nee that Nalfa could use the rainbow power. Together, they had exchanged information they kept secret to fight the Gray Knight.

"In that case...who is Nalfa, really?" Sanae-nee wondered.

"It is clear that she has an important role in this world, considering her power."

It was still unclear who Nalfa was and why the Gray Knight was after her. But this wasn't a coincidence. Her presence had to have meaning.

Perhaps the truth is written in that letter... Kiriha thought. She did have one idea: a letter she had written to herself in the past. At the start of April, everyone's memories had been rewritten to conceal something. If the truth was related to Nalfa, it might have been time

for Kiriha to open the letter.

Koutarou had been in a frenzy when he'd learned that Kenji and Nalfa had been kidnapped by the Gray Knight and that Kotori was unconscious. It was similar to when Ralgwin had been taken away, but likely much stronger. But there was one difference from Ralgwin's situation.

"If they'd been left in Forthorthe, this wouldn't have happened!" Koutarou said and slammed his fist into the wall. However, he didn't feel any pain. The regret and sense of loss dulled any real pain.

"Please calm down, Veltlion," Clan said.

"How am I supposed to calm down?!" Koutarou shouted. "Mackenzie and Nalfa-san were kidnapped!"

"If you don't, you won't be able to save even those you *can* save," Clan said.

"Save?! What are you talking about?!" He looked at Clan. It was then he finally realized who he was talking to.

"A kidnapping is normally done to demand something," Clan calmly answered.

Her feelings were a mess too. Kenji and Nalfa were her friends, and she couldn't stand seeing Koutarou suffer. But nothing would come from her losing her composure. That had to be avoided.

"In other words, they will be safe until we receive a demand and answer it. We can use that time to rescue them."

"Is that possible?!" Koutarou asked.

"Do you think we didn't anticipate that those two might be kidnapped?"

Unlike with Ralgwin, preparations had been made in anticipation of such an event. They had brought Kenji, Kotori, and Nalfa with them to Forthorthe because leaving them on Earth could have been dangerous. While that made it easier to protect them, there were still risks in Forthorthe. So Clan and the intelligence department had made preparations in case those three were kidnapped.

There was still hope.

Maxfern was strict about failure. He would often ignore someone pleading for mercy for failing a mission. But this time was different.

The Gray Knight had failed his mission, but he was openly praising him.

"I see, so that man is the Blue Knight's Achilles' heel. With him held hostage, the Blue Knight won't be able to move," Maxfern mused.

The fleet had been lost, and the Imperial Army hadn't been stalled. But the Gray Knight had successfully kidnapped the Blue Knight's best friend. It more than made up for the failure of the mission. It would also let Maxfern torment the Blue Knight. Thanks to that, he was in a good mood despite the report of failure.

"Hence the rescue call. I could handle it by myself, but it's not as easy with hostages," the Gray Knight said.

Like Kiriha expected, the kidnapping hadn't been the initial plan, so there had been no preparations for his escape. Trying to escape with two hostages in tow was far from easy.

"I understand. I'll prepare things right away," Maxfern said, easily agreeing to the Gray Knight's request.

Kenji would be the perfect card for Maxfern to take out his grudge on the Blue Knight. If possible, he would have loved to have gotten the Blue Knight himself.

"Call me again at the same time tomorrow. I'll have an escape plan ready," Maxfern said.

"Got it," the Gray Knight answered. "We'll talk again tomorrow."

"Yes. Good work. Now get some rest."

The Gray Knight was currently in a Liberation Army safe house. However, it wasn't as safe as the name made it sound. As such, the Gray Knight quickly ended the call. Maxfern had been in high spirits until the end.

Kenji and Nalfa were being kept in different locations. They were in the same building, but they were far enough away that they couldn't talk to each other. Kenji could understand why. It was something he'd seen often enough in movies. If the hostages could confirm with each other that they were safe, it would mentally stabilize them. But if they weren't able to see each other, they had no choice but to obey their kidnapper's instructions. Moreover, if kept together, they might start plotting. Unless they were intentionally

placed together to encourage talk, keeping hostages apart was a fundamental rule.

Suddenly, footsteps rang out in the distance. Checking the clock, Kenji could see it was time for food. The Gray Knight must have been bringing it again.

"It's dinnertime," the Gray Knight said after entering the room.

The door was locked, but Kenji wasn't restrained. There was no need for it. He wasn't skilled enough to surprise attack the Gray Knight, and doing so could put Nalfa in danger. Unless he discovered an opportunity too good to pass up, he wasn't going to resist.

Instead, he silently observed the Gray Knight. Ever since they'd first met face-to-face, he'd felt something was strange. That sense of discomfort grew stronger every time he saw him. And now, it turned into conviction.

"I knew it," Kenji said.

"What is it?" the Gray Knight asked.

Until now, the Gray Knight had rarely reacted to Kenji. So his reaction was an exception. Based on Kenji's expression, he'd sensed something unusual.

"You're... You're Kou, right?" Kenji asked.

His words left the Gray Knight speechless. A mask hid his face, and he had changed his voice. They hadn't even exchanged many words. Yet Kenji had easily seen through the Gray Knight.

"What makes you think that?" the Gray Knight said. Those words were practically a confession. The Gray Knight approached Kenji, one step at a time.

Taking another look at him, Kenji nodded. "The first thing I thought was strange was the way you walk. And the sound of your footsteps too. I know those footsteps very well..."

To him, it was an easy mystery to solve. However, it might have been impossible for others. It was only thanks to his kidnapping that Kenji could have observed him and reached that conclusion. The others had fought the Gray Knight only briefly and exchanged few words, so they couldn't have found the answer.

"The same goes for the way you were surprised. Your usual habit is showing," Kenji said. "Yeah, there's no doubting it. No matter how

you may disguise yourself or change your voice, you can’t fool me, Kou.”

Most of all, Kenji knew Koutarou very well. He hadn’t seen through the Gray Knight’s identity with a special talent or ability. There had been no need for that, considering how long they’d been together.

Kenji was Koutarou’s best friend.





Afterword

Takehaya here. Long time no see! This has been the forty-seventh volume of *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* With the side stories, that's forty-nine volumes, so we're really close to fifty, although some may already have fifty books on the bookshelf. Like those who got the *Four Seasons* bonus that came with the anime's DVD and Blu-ray. If someone does have a full fifty volumes, please take a picture and upload it to social media. I'll look it up later (haha).

But that's enough of the circumstances around the volume. I'd like to move on to the contents now. The Blue Knight battleship makes its reappearance, although, aside from the AI, it's pretty much an entirely new ship. Moreover, its size is more than twice that of the original.

In my world, Forthorthe's normal battleships have the best balance of technology and cost. They also need the ability to enter and exit the atmosphere, so they can't be too big. If they are too large, mobility will suffer and the cost of construction will increase. Then why not go smaller, you might ask? Because then they would lack firepower or defense. As such, the Imperial Army makes battleships as big as possible while making sure that they are mobile and capable of atmospheric entry. In other words, the standard for battleships is that they're the strongest and biggest within reason.

But if normal battleships are the strongest, what about Royalty-class battleships that are even stronger? Royalty-class ships are without a doubt vastly superior to normal battleships when it comes to capabilities. The reason is that cost is ignored, and they use a ton of custom parts. Normal battleships are made with mass production in mind, so they don't use parts or weapons that cost too much. In contrast, Royalty-class battleships are made for specific royalty, and there's no reason for parts to be interchangeable. Moreover, they

tend to have more varied designs when compared to normal ships. For example, normal battleships have supply ports for fuel and propellant in a similar location. That makes it more convenient to supply at ports. It's kind of like how the gas tank opening is typically in the same place for cars. But that doesn't apply to the Royalty-class ships. The old Blue Knight had the fuel supply port in the torso, with propellant going into its legs, making it very inconvenient. However, the freer design allows Royalty-class ships to be made stronger.

Incidentally, the Blue Knight loses much of that strength in exchange for being humanoid in shape. All these circumstances create a gap that makes the Royalty-class battleships much stronger than normal ones. In short, if you want a strong team, you get a lot of normal battleships, while if you want the strongest individual unit, you get a Royalty-class space battleship.

That finally brings us to the new Blue Knight. If the Royalty-class is made without much consideration for cost or convenience, then the Chivalry-class completely ignores that and also has quite a strained construction. For example, it is extremely dangerous for it to enter the atmosphere as is. The moving limbs cause gaps in the armor, creating a weakness that doesn't exist on normal space battleships. Because of that, the limbs need to be detached in order to enter the atmosphere. Once separated, the limbs can point their armored parts toward the atmosphere and safely descend.

The engineers took pains to make the new Blue Knight work. Thanks to that, not only is the ship bigger, but its performance is also better than the previous one.

To summarize it, the new Blue Knight ignores cost and convenience, while also pushing the limits of a battleship, creating a ship that includes many special designs but also has many weaknesses. Why would you make it bigger and humanoid shaped (haha)? That said, its primary mission will be to serve as a flagship, so being difficult to operate on its own won't be a weakness. It has more than enough firepower and defensive power to satisfy the role of leading a fleet of ships, which is what the people wanted.

The special design is only allowed because of how special

Koutarou is to Forthorthe. It would never have been allowed for anyone else. By granting Koutarou this power, they knew he would use it for good. The citizens are convinced of that. They are also concerned with his safety, which is why they would allow such a forced ship. You could call it the result of Koutarou walking the path of a hero. Perhaps that is why Elfaria is so insistent on getting Koutarou to take up permanent residence in Forthorthe (haha).

Moreover, Kenji finally realizes the Gray Knight's identity. Considering the situation, it would have been impossible for anyone else to notice. With that, the Gray Knight's story will begin to move, so please pay attention to him in the coming volume.

But that's about all the space I have for an afterword. Most of it was about the new Blue Knight, so I'll have to save the rest for when I have more room.

I would like to thank everyone at HJ Bunko's editorial department for their help in publishing this book, Poco-san for making the new Blue Knight look so cool, and most of all, to you, the readers, for following this series for so long.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 48 (the fiftieth in the series!)

October, 2024
Takehaya

Bonus Short Stories

Elfaria

Among the products that DKI—the company that Koutarou owned—had were some that the royal families had rights to: namely, the plant called Rubustori and the tea made from its leaves. The Rubustori plant had died out over eight hundred years ago due to a disease brought in from a different country, and only a few subspecies had managed to survive. For some reason, the royal families had some in their possession, and in recent years those plants had been offered to research institutes, so their numbers had increased enough that ordinary companies could now offer them. As a result, the plant was actively distributed these days.

There was a reason for Rubustori's rise to popularity: It had been recorded as the legendary Empress Alaia's favorite. Naturally, the populace had taken an interest in it, and its taste was good as well, leading to plenty of people drinking the tea.

"Why does ours sell so well?" Koutarou muttered.

The most popular Rubustori brand was the one that DKI was making. There was an overwhelming difference between it and the second-most popular brand, and DKI was now the leader of the tea industry.

"That is natural since you are replicating the original taste," Elfaria said with a laugh as she sipped her tea.

DKI's tea was called Rubustori Classic. It was made with the intention of reproducing the taste from two thousand years ago, and Koutarou and Clan, who had tasted the original tea, as well as Elfaria, who had a deep knowledge of tea and history, were overseeing its creation. Production had started on a whim of Koutarou's, as he wanted to taste the tea again, and the result had been an overwhelming success. The tea leaves he had brought back

from the past had been almost perfectly replicated, which helped sales.

"Wouldn't the profit belong to you guys, then, since I got the seeds and leaves from Empress Alaia?" he asked.

"Hmm, maybe from a legal standpoint, but Empress Alaia presented it to you, Koutarou-sama, and since it was provided to you for free...we don't want to assert our rights to it," Elfaria answered.

"I guess that's how it works. In that case, I'll need to consider how to use the money," he murmured.

His latest concern was that DKI's profits were rising too much. If that profit was simply set aside, it would have an impact on the economy. So he was always stuck thinking about what to do to benefit society.

"You have a heavy responsibility, Koutarou-sama," Elfaria commented. She put her cup down on the saucer and smiled happily. She did offer some cooperation, but most of it was none of her business, so she was enjoying the sight of Koutarou being perplexed. The fact that his problem wasn't a bad one further spurred her actions.

"This isn't a laughing matter. Good grief..." he replied. He took a sip of his own tea, then crossed his arms and started thinking, but he couldn't come up with a good idea.

When he looked up, he found Elfaria gazing at him calmly. Seeing that, he decided to ask her why.

"Is there something you want me to do, Elle?"

"Oh? Are you sure you should be asking something like that?" she answered.

Koutarou had offered to give Elfaria, who was acting like it had nothing to do with her, some help, but she had her own thoughts on the matter.

Asking to aid an empress with funding... That is the job of someone with an equal standing, Koutarou-sama...

"Stop laughing and help me think of something," he urged her.

"I understand." Elfaria nodded. "How about the protection of rare and endangered species?"

Elfaria welcomed Koutarou acting this way, so rather than pointing it out, she gladly cooperated with him.

Nana

In most situations Nana was the one to teach Yurika, but there was the odd situation where the roles were reversed. Today was one such day, and after accomplishing their goal, Nana thanked her.

"Thank you for this, Yurika-chan. I'm ignorant about this kind of thing..." Nana said.

"Ahaha, that can't be helped," Yurika replied with a laugh. "You're always busy with work, Nana-san."

Nana was extremely talented, so she'd always had her hands full with missions from a young age. Because of that, she had little knowledge of trends, fashion, or makeup, and her talents were of no use to her in those fields. Meanwhile, Yurika had trained in the cosplay society, so she was skilled when it came to such things. Therefore, Nana had asked Yurika to help her put an outfit together.

"If it wasn't for you or Kanae-san, I don't know what I would look like," Nana said.

"But I think there would be a lot of demand for you in your military uniform," Yurika pointed out.

"Stop it, please," Nana answered with a troubled smile. *Demand, huh?* Her smile suddenly disappeared. There was something in Yurika's words that had caught her attention.

"Is something the matter?" Yurika asked in confusion over her friend's sudden change in expression.

"Can I ask you something strange?" Nana said with a serious expression.

"Ask me anything," Yurika answered without hesitation.

"Do you think there's a demand for a girl with small breasts?" Nana squeezed out, casting her eyes down with a red face.

"What kind of demand are you asking about?" Yurika didn't laugh at the question. "Do you mean just being popular? Or—"

"That...other one," Nana answered.

In the past, she'd had a serious complex about more than half of her body being replaced by machines. But now she had overcome that and was okay with her body. However, a new problem had arisen, which was her less feminine figure. If anything, she had a childish form.

"Hmm...in your case, I don't think the size of your breasts matters," Yurika said.

"Really? Don't you just think that because you're pretty big yourself, Yurika-chan?"

Looking at their circle of friends, Yurika's breasts were on the larger side, so that may have skewed her view.

"If that was the case, Kiriha-san wouldn't have struggled as much," Yurika replied.

Among their friends, Kiriha was undoubtedly the largest. Seeing that even she was struggling, Yurika didn't think that breast size mattered.

"Oh...right... You have a point there..." Nana said with a sigh of relief. As expected, it was a big problem for her.

"But...I think that also means our path is very steep," Yurika added.

"That's true too..."

If appearances were all that mattered, it would have been simple. If the party in question was that kind of person, the girls would already have reached their goal. But it was because he wasn't that type of person that they had fallen in love with him. So the path ahead was sure to be steep.

"I think you should be a little more direct, Nana-san. Like not missing your chance in the bath," Yurika told her, imagining scenes from a manga where the girl made the move.

"Are you sure I should do that?! Won't he get angry?" Nana asked.

"Only if you're playing, but it will be fine if you're serious."

"Won't you girls get angry, though?"

"Maybe normally, but right now we're trying to open a hole in the sturdy dam too. And the drills we have on hand might not be

enough...” Yurika explained with a wry smile. Their opponent was too sturdy, and a single drill simply wasn’t enough.

“So, everyone should work together to chip away at it?” Nana asked.

“Yes, even if we use all our drills, it’s probably only barely enough.”

With a dozen or so drills, the girls were trying to open a hole in the dam, but it was difficult. So if Nana could add another drill, they had no reason to refuse her help.

“And if a hole were to open, no matter how small...” Yurika continued.

“Everyone could surge in.”

“Yes, I think that’s the plan,” Yurika agreed with a nod.

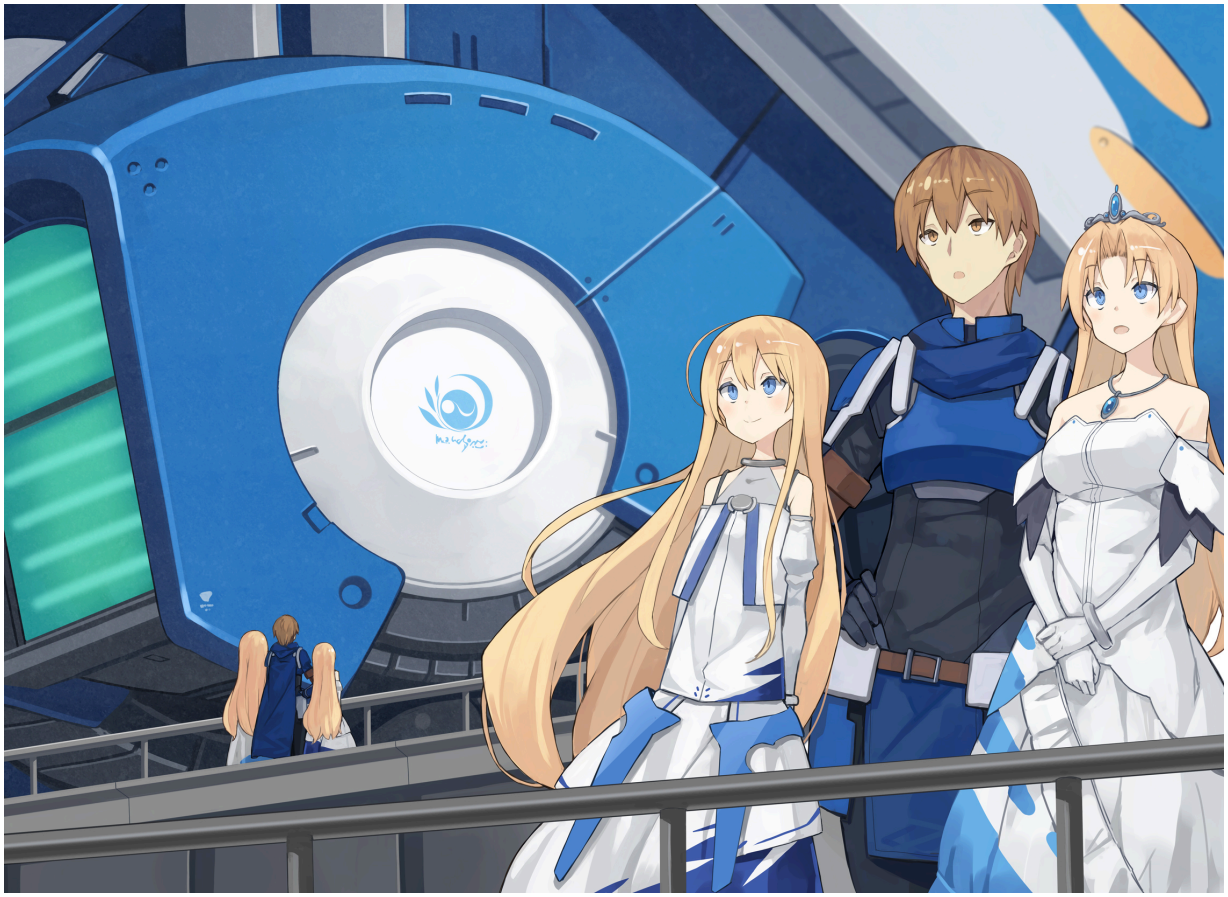
It wasn’t anything that they had formally decided on, but Yurika believed that everyone was more or less thinking the same thing. Their friendships were so strong that they could tell what the others had on their minds.

“So please help us out too, Nana-san.”

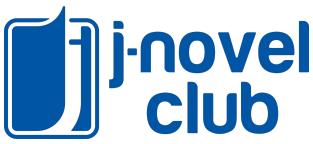
“I understand. In that case, I don’t have to feel bad.” Nana nodded too.

Yurika laughed. There was plenty of time. With today’s purchase, the drill would be made even sharper. The girls would change drills and gradually open a hole.









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