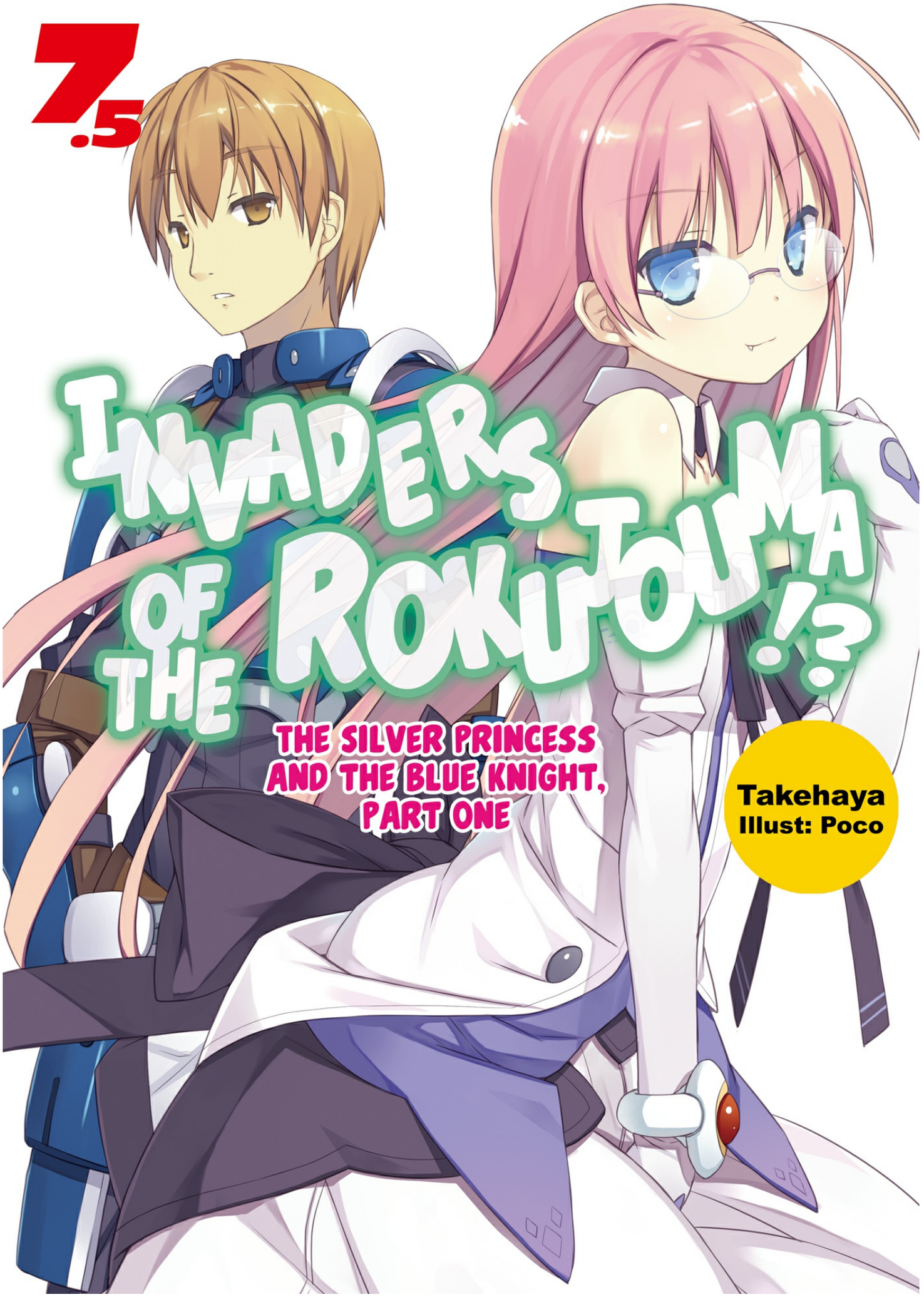
7.5

Invaders of the Rokujouma!?

The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight, Part One

Takehaya
Illust: Poco





INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 7.5

THE SILVER PRINCESS AND THE BLUE KNIGHT, PART ONE


Snow White and the First Star
WHERE IS THIS?!
AND JUST WHO ARE THESE GIRLS...?
ONE QUESTION LEADS TO ANOTHER!
"H-HEY, ISN'T THAT..."
"IT CAN'T BE..."


"CAN YOU STOP ORDERING ME AROUND?!"
"CLAN, RIGHT THERE!"

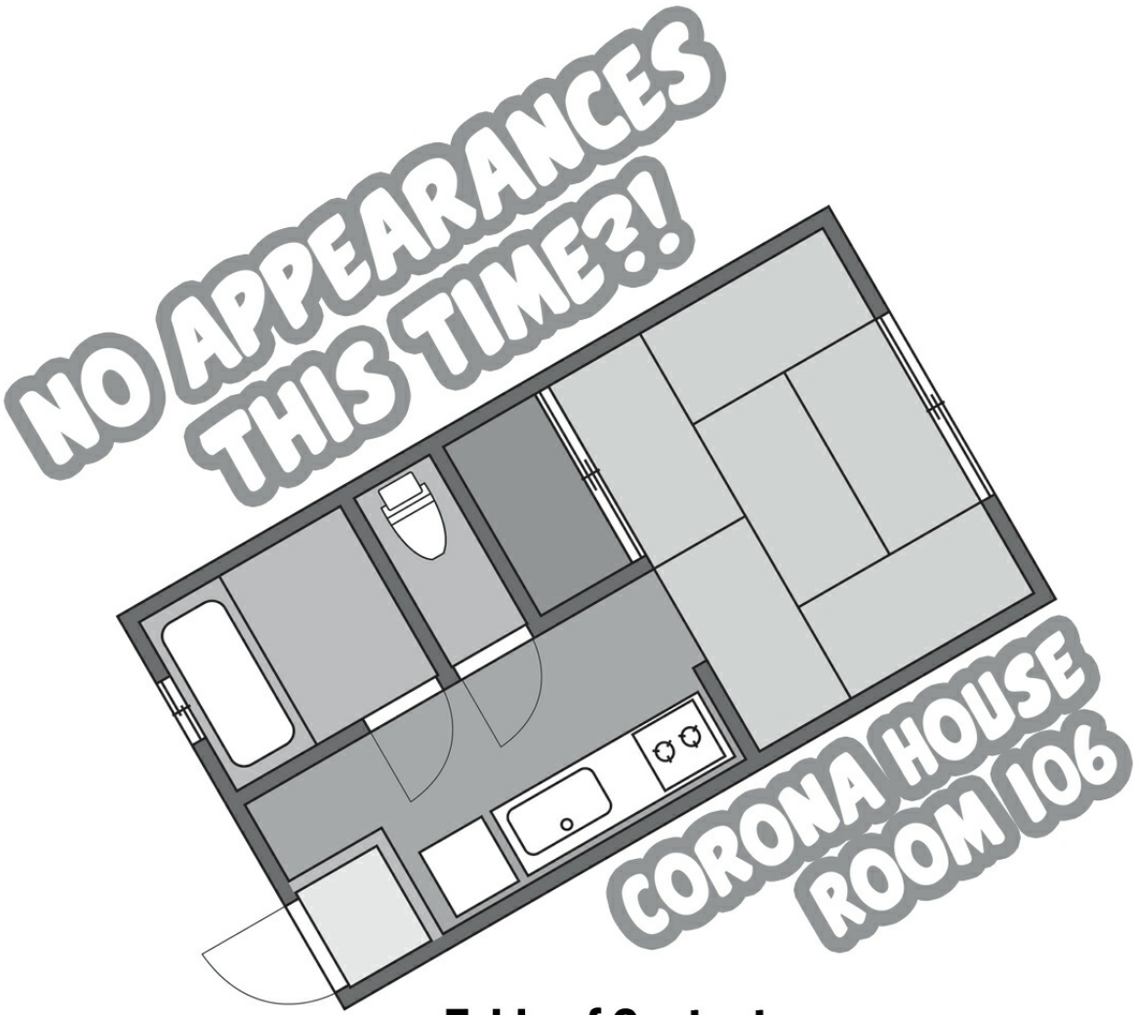


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Outside of Reason

The flow of space and time is similar to that of a river.

The river may start from a small source, but as the volume of water increases, it flows on and meanders as it pleases, splitting here and there for one reason or another. And at the same time, some rivers that have split apart sometimes rejoin down the line. But nonetheless, it flows onward, slowly spreading across and nourishing the soil of the earth.

Space and time work much the same way. Eons ago, there was but one universe, and that universe split over and over again with the passage of time. Sometimes the trigger was something as simple as the flipping of a coin. Perhaps that coin toss would have a significant effect on the outcome of a football game, for example. Heads and tails would thus lead to different realities, splitting space-time then and there, creating a parallel universe.

But still, just as the river, it is possible for those split universes to rejoin. If the tossed coin landed in a wishing well, the outcome wouldn't matter. The result would be buried by countless other coins and lose its meaning as it vanished into the quantum theory of probability. The two diverging universes of heads and tails would then reconcile into a single reality, and it is not uncommon for a universe to reconverge on such a minute chance. Even if a large rock blocks the flow of a river, the river splits to move around it on either side and reunites shortly thereafter. As the universe splits and reunites, history is knitted together, and we live in one of the strings of that knitted history.

Koutarou, however, was thrown out of that string.

The reason for that was the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell that Clan was intent on using to get her revenge against him. Knowing the destruction the shell was capable of, Koutarou split it in half to prevent Clan from being able to fire it. When he did, however, the energy stored in the warhead was unleashed. It detonated, and though it only expanded to a fraction of the area it would

have at full power, it was still enough to swallow up Clan, her spaceship the Cradle, and Koutarou, throwing them out of space-time.

And worst of all, since the shell released its energy in such an uncontrolled fashion, Koutarou and Clan were tossed to the most problematic place possible. They ended up at the very beginnings of the universe. In terms of the river of space-time, they were all the way at its source.

Outside the bounds of the universe was not a hospitable environment. Matter didn't exist there, let alone living creatures. The laws of physics were barely even extant, meaning it could only loosely be defined as a "place" per se. More complicated still, Koutarou and Clan had been thrown to the source of the universe itself where countless realities and unlimited possibilities were all still compressed into one. Yet for all its limitless potential, time there was frozen. Although everything was possible, nothing could be done. Although it was the beginning, nothing was starting. It was the only place like it in the vast, unending knitting of the universe.

The moment they arrived there, Koutarou and Clan should have been infinitely compressed, ending up as something far smaller than even an elementary particle, and then merged with the nascent universe and its unlimited possibilities.

However, that didn't happen.

What saved them was the consciousness that existed there. Since that consciousness was the absolute ruler in this strange place, it sensed Koutarou and Clan's arrival ahead of time and protected them to keep them from vanishing the instant they appeared.

"What is..."

But what the consciousness first felt was a great sense of hesitation. Nothing but that consciousness existed in this place. That had always been the case, and always should have been the case. Here, space was compressed and time frozen, so this was the first time the consciousness had ever felt the presence of someone else. So while it was greatly surprised, it was also greatly curious about Koutarou and Clan.

“Who is this boy...?”

The consciousness was particularly interested in Koutarou. What appeared before this consciousness at the beginning of the universe were three objects: Koutarou, Clan, and the Cradle. Koutarou stood out among them for the extraordinary amount of potential contained within him. If it had just been a matter of energy, the Cradle was easily the most remarkable object there, but the consciousness took a special interest in Koutarou. It was more than just energy. It was the very essence of possibility.

“Nothing but me can exist here... So why is this boy here?”

The consciousness showered Koutarou with attention and examined his body and mind. An existence other than itself. An existence from another time and place. To the consciousness at the beginning of the universe, there was nothing more interesting than that.

Yet when its powers touched Koutarou to examine him, the consciousness hesitated again. This time, however, it was because it realized something strange about itself.

“Boy...? Why am I calling this object ‘boy’?”

The consciousness was puzzled as to why it had called Koutarou “boy.” It wasn’t a term the consciousness had ever used or known before.

“No, more importantly, ‘I’? That’s right, that’s what I call myself!”

The consciousness’s realization concerning Koutarou led to the realization of self-awareness. Up until now, it had never had a clear recognition of itself. Up until now, it had been the only existence present, so there was never any need to differentiate between itself and any other being. However, the appearance of Koutarou and Clan changed that, and thanks to them, the consciousness gained a clear sense of itself.

“This knowledge is flowing from this boy!”

Contact with Koutarou brought further realization still. As the consciousness came into contact with Koutarou’s mind, there was a peculiar sense of familiarity. Koutarou seemed to recognize the consciousness. He knew it, and by observing his mind, his knowledge, and his memories, the consciousness was

able to learn things about itself that had henceforth been unknowable.

“This boy has met me before in his past!”

A small white light appeared next to Koutarou. It was the first form Koutarou had come to know the consciousness by. The light then gradually grew larger, and once it reached a sufficient size, it began concentrating and reshaping itself. It grew more and more distinct, finally taking the shape of an entity.

“At that time, this is the appearance I had. That’s why I have been given this form now...”

The light next to Koutarou now appeared as a girl with calm and gentle eyes. The consciousness’s contact with Koutarou had given it clear shape, but that wasn’t all. Meeting with Koutarou had given the consciousness—no, the girl—self-awareness, awareness of time and space, and even language. It changed the girl’s entire existence.

“This object’s tag is Satomi Koutarou... I see, so you’re called Koutarou...”

And once she learned of herself, she learned of Koutarou. She could now understand such things because the changes within herself had given her perspective.

“There are several descriptors in the ID... In terms of parameters, you seem to be a normal human, but you embody incommensurable possibilities...”

She was analyzing the most basic information that made Koutarou who he was. There were physical characteristics like his weight and height, but she could read his genetic data and what kind of life he had lived up until that. Any and all information regarding Koutarou was flowing directly into her.

“But it seems the memory area is being protected... The me that Koutarou met in his past must have made it so his memory couldn’t be read...”

A portion of the information contained inside Koutarou’s mind was encrypted, preventing it from being accessed by anyone. The girl was very interested in what she could learn from the information behind this mysterious door, but she had no way of unlocking it. That aside, she was able to learn what she wanted to know most of all.

“I see... Eventually stars and life will fill even this empty place... I won’t always be all alone...”

And that was that she wouldn’t always be alone.

Before Koutarou and Clan had appeared, she had never clearly been able to identify the emotion known as loneliness. She’d just felt the vague pain of being alone, and even worse, the pain of knowing she would always be alone. It was torturous. In this place where time was frozen, it was hard to express just how long she’d lived like that. However, to describe it in terms a human could understand, it was something like several hundred lifetimes.

That’s why she rejoiced at the information she gained through Koutarou. At some point in the future, the universe would be born. Stars would shine and life would prosper. It gave her hope that she wouldn’t always be alone after all.

“...H-Huh...?”

That was when Koutarou, who had been unconscious all this time, opened his eyes. Having just woken up, he was unable to comprehend the situation he was in and blankly stared at his surroundings. Seeing that, the girl gently smiled at him.

“Koutarou.”

Drawn by her voice, Koutarou turned towards her.

“You’re...”

Hearing her voice and seeing her face, Koutarou was gripped by a mysterious feeling.

I know this girl...

That was a sense of intimacy with the girl in front of him. As if they had always lived together. It was very similar to the feelings Koutarou had for the invader girls.

But something’s weird... I don’t know this girl at all...

However, it was just as a feeling. Koutarou had no memories of this girl that he could recall, and the disconnect between what he was thinking and feeling stumped him.

“Nice to meet you, Koutarou. But you’ve met me before, so maybe saying it’s been a while would be better.”

When the girl spoke those words, a memory suddenly flashed in Koutarou’s mind. A dim underground room. Stone pavement. Several pillars surrounding a statue. And the girl that seemed to appear from the figure of the statue.

What is this memory from...?

Really, they were fragments of a memory. What the girl said to him had conjured them up from the depths of his mind.

“Guh...”

However, when trying to put those fragments together to remember, a dull pain ran through Koutarou’s head.

Who is this girl...? What am I forgetting...? And what’s with this headache...?

The girl was certainly familiar, but he couldn’t remember any of the details. The more he racked his brain, the worse his headache got. If he’d just stopped trying to remember, the headache would have stopped too, but since he felt this was important, he wasn’t about to give up on it.

“Don’t try to force yourself to remember, Koutarou...” The girl gave Koutarou a sympathetic look. “Your memories have been locked away.”

The girl smiled gently and softly put her hand on Koutarou’s forehead. Her hand was small, and it was slightly colder than Koutarou. The chill sensation of her touch peeled Koutarou’s mind away from his search for his memories.

“...Locked away?”

“Yes. It’s a complex lock that not even I could undo.”

Solving an encryption was overwhelmingly more difficult than creating one. And the odds of solving it were next to impossible if the creator was a more knowledgeable version of yourself from the future.

“Now sleep, Koutarou. You have someplace to go...”

“Someplace to go?”

An important notice had been included in the information she gained from

Koutarou. It was a message she had written to herself from the future pertaining to a specific time and place Koutarou needed to be.

“I’m sure someone is waiting for you there.”

With those words, Koutarou’s consciousness gradually grew faint. One of the girl’s powers was the ability to put him to sleep. However, Koutarou felt no fear as his mind drifted off. That was because the girl was gently smiling in front of him.

“Why are you crying...?”

As his consciousness faded, Koutarou noticed that the girl was crying. Although she was maintaining her smile, tears wet her cheeks.

“It’s because I’m so happy I got to meet you. I had always been alone up until now.”

What had saved the girl from her eternal solitude was her meeting Koutarou. There was no easy way to convey the joy this encounter had brought her. Smiles or words alone wouldn’t be enough.

“It’s also because our parting is so sad. From here on, I’m going to be alone for a while longer.”

There was someplace Koutarou had to go. There was something the girl had to remain to do. Because of that, she would be alone again until the universe was born, and stars and life formed. That saddened her to the point she was incapable of holding back her tears.

“When you’re sad, you have to start by changing yourself... That’s what my old man always says...”

“Heehee, that’s what I’ve just realized.”

As Koutarou’s field of vision faded to white, the girl wiped her tears away.

Good...

Seeing the girl reveal a smile after wiping away her tears, Koutarou felt a little relieved. He then relaxed and surrendered himself to the drowsiness creeping over him. Koutarou chose not to struggle, but instead asked the girl one last question.

“Will... we meet again...?”

This gentle and warm, yet lonely girl... Koutarou couldn’t help wanting to see her again.

“Yes, without fail,” she responded happily.

Then there was a pause.

“But when that time comes, will you want me to exist...?” she asked, the unease audible in her voice.

Is she feeling lonely again...?

Worried, Koutarou now desperately fought to keep his eyes open so he could still talk to her.

“If I didn’t... I wouldn’t have asked... if we would meet... again...”

“...Thank you, Koutarou. Indeed, let us meet again...”

Koutarou hit his limit.

Ah... I forgot to ask for her name...

That was Koutarou’s last thought as he fell asleep. And once she made sure that he was asleep, the girl used her powers to envelop Koutarou, Clan, and the Cradle in a bright light.

“Goodbye... Let us meet again someday...”

The girl then sent Koutarou, Clan, and the Cradle away, far from this frozen place at the beginning of everything. After staring at where Koutarou had been for a while, the girl then put her hands together in front of her chest and closed her eyes.

“I hope the first star shines blue... just like Koutarou’s armor...”

The girl then began knitting time and space, all while dreaming of meeting Koutarou again somewhere several billion years in the future.

Foreign Lands

Koutarou woke up in the thick of a forest.

“Wh-What happened...?”

After shaking his head a couple of times, he stood up.

“Owowow...”

As he moved, pain began shooting through his body. The injuries he sustained while fighting Clan had finally caught up to him. But thanks to that pain, Koutarou was wide awake now. While grimacing in pain, he took a moment to assess his wounds.

I thought I’d be a lot worse for wear, but this isn’t so bad...

Koutarou remembered taking several beam and laser shots during his last charge on the Cradle. But unlike how he remembered it, he hadn’t suffered any serious injury from it. Although it hurt to move certain parts of his body, the worst he had to show for it was light bruising.

“Wait, that’s right! Clan and the Cradle!”

Koutarou put his unexpectedly light injuries out of his mind when he remembered there was something else he should be much more worried about.

“Where’s that girl and her spaceship?!”

Koutarou hurriedly looked around. Clan might still be targeting him, so he couldn’t let his guard down.

I’m in a forest? No, I guess this is more like in the mountains...?

For the first time, Koutarou really took a moment to observe his surroundings. Around him was an abundance of trees all illuminated by the light of the evening sun, and the ground beneath him was at a slight incline. Based on the scenery, he realized he must be somewhere in the mountains and that he was alone.

“I wonder which way Harukaze High School is...”

Koutarou scanned back through his memory while continuing to look around.

Let’s see. A forested mountain near school...

The last thing Koutarou could remember was cutting through Clan’s Super Space-time Repulsion Shell with the sword he’d borrowed from Theia. The next thing he knew, he’d woken up on the side of this mountain. He had the feeling he’d had a dream while he was unconscious, but in true dreamlike fashion, he couldn’t clearly remember it. He also didn’t spend too much time dwelling on it since he couldn’t imagine it had anything to do with his current situation. The best Koutarou could figure was that he must have been blown to a nearby mountain by the explosion from the repulsion shell.

“The closest forest is the one right above the school...”

Kisshouharukaze High School was situated halfway up a small mountain. A little farther up it was untouched forest. Koutarou’s worksite was roughly in that area. The next mountain was several kilometers away, and he couldn’t imagine that he’d been blown that far off.

“So all I have to do is get down from here and I’ll be at school again.”

If he was at the forest above the school, all he had to do was climb down the mountain. Even if he didn’t know where he was, he would eventually reach the road. He’d clearly been unconscious until evening, so he knew everyone would be worried if he didn’t get back as soon as he could. With that in mind, Koutarou began heading down the mountainside.

For each step he took, he bent grass and snapped twigs underfoot. The heavy armor chinked and clunked as he walked along too.

“Jeez... This is all that girl’s fault. Next time I see her, I’ll— Wait, that’s...!”

Shortly after Koutarou began his trek down the mountain, he spotted a familiar face a ways off in a rocky area. It was Clan, who Koutarou was anxious to get ahold of for several reasons. Not far from her was her spaceship, the Cradle. It was on its side, revealing the belly of its hull.

“Clan! Us meeting here was the end of your luck!”

Koutarou was more than ready to give Clan a piece of his mind, so the moment he spotted her, he hurriedly climbed down towards the rocky area where she was. Despite his shouting, however, Clan remained motionless as she lay on the rocks with her eyes closed.

“Hey, Clan!”

Koutarou continued to yell as he made his way over to her.

“Huh?”

But Clan still wasn’t responding. She wasn’t even moving. Koutarou finally realized something was amiss and leaned down, bringing his face close to hers as he stared at her.

“...She’s unconscious.”

Clan may have been unconscious, but her complexion was fine and she was breathing calmly and steadily. It didn’t seem like her life was in any danger.

“Hey, wake up, Clan! Now’s not the time to be sleeping!”

Koutarou began shaking Clan with enough force that her glasses almost fell off her face.

“Uhn, hnngh...”

But even then, Clan didn’t wake up. All she did was let out a pained groan and wrinkle her brow. She was out cold.

“Damn, no good...”

Based on Clan’s response, or lack thereof, Koutarou gave up on trying to wake her up. Even though she might have been an enemy, he couldn’t just continue shaking someone in pain.

“Now then, what to do...?”

Koutarou took his hands off Clan and put his mind to figuring out what to do. With Clan unconscious here, he couldn’t just leave her behind and head back to school.

Right, I should make a call first.

After thinking for a moment, Koutarou pulled out his cellphone and turned it

on. He decided the best course of action now was to try and get in touch with someone. Since Clan had the most to do with Theia, he was planning on calling her first. He hoped that she would make the decision about what to do with Clan for him. With her spaceship here and everything, it wasn't like he could figure out what to do with it on his own anyway.

"Huh? That's weird."

However, when he turned on his phone, it didn't seem to be getting a signal. Seeing that, Koutarou shook it a couple of times. There was no way anywhere on this mountain so close to Harukaze High School didn't get reception. Since the school was designated as an emergency shelter in the event of something like a natural disaster, extra antennas had been put up along the mountain. Even at the top of the mountain at Koutarou's worksite, he still usually got full bars. And since he wasn't picking up any now, Koutarou figured it was more likely that his phone was broken.

"I guess shaking it won't fix it."

No matter how many times he shook his phone, he still couldn't get a signal. After letting out a heavy sigh, he shoved the cellphone back inside his armor.

"Guess I have to bring her with me then..."

Although he was worried about leaving the spaceship out in the open, he couldn't just leave Clan in her current state. So Koutarou picked up Clan and carried her as he began climbing down the slope again.

Even though he was carrying Clan, Koutarou's footsteps were light. Since the armor he borrowed from Theia was power-assisted, it moved according to his movements. Because of that, it was essentially like the armor was carrying Clan. Koutarou barely felt any weight from her at all. It made it easier to check out his surroundings as he continued to move down the mountain.

"What kind of tree is that?"

As he looked around more, he started to notice strange things about the forest around him. This was the first time he realized that the trees here were unlike anything he'd ever seen before. Koutarou then cast his glance downward and realized the grass growing beneath his feet didn't look familiar either.

“What a strange forest...”

With his head tilted, Koutarou continued climbing down the slope. Everything around him—plants, scenery, and all—was completely new to him. He felt like he was walking through a CG forest from a movie, but what he was seeing was absolutely real.

“To think there was someplace like this so close to school...”

I’ll have to tell Sanae and Yurika later. They’ll love this.

While Koutarou was thinking about that, he heard something just as he reached the open area where the Cradle was grounded.

“Cooo, cooo!”

A large bird flew past Koutarou with a shrill cry. It must have been at least thirty centimeters long.

“Wh-What is that?!”

The moment he saw it, Koutarou’s eyes locked on to it and his jaw dropped. At first glance it certainly looked like a bird, but upon closer inspection, it was a reptile with extremely birdlike features.

“It looks like a lizard you’d fight in a video game...”

It reminded Koutarou of some low-level monster from a game, and it was an apt description of the strange flying reptile. The reptile, however, completely ignored Koutarou as it flew off. By spreading its large wings, it grabbed the air like a bird and soared away in mere moments.

“Crap, I should have taken a picture.”

Discovering a new species would be a major achievement, so Koutarou regretted not taking a picture of it with his phone.

“Sheesh, all of this is her fault.”

Koutarou adjusted Clan’s position as she was about to slip off his back. Carrying her was keeping his hands occupied, so there was no way he would have been able to react fast enough to get a picture anyway. Even if he spotted another one, he still wouldn’t be able to photograph it. That slightly irritated

Koutarou, but his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a woman screaming in the distance.

“Kyaaaaaaaah!”

“...What was that?”

As Koutarou turned his head in the direction the scream had come from, he could hear other noises too, but nothing as clearly as the scream. The sounds were all being scattered through the forest, so he couldn’t even tell what was making them.

“Aaaaah!”

Then there was another scream. The voice seemed more desperate than before, but despite that, it wasn’t as loud as the first one had been.



“Sounds like trouble. I should go take a look.”

Koutarou swiftly made up his mind and rushed towards the middle of the empty area where the Cradle was.

“Looks like this is the entrance...”

Koutarou approached a hatch on the Cradle and put his hand on a nearby lever. As he pulled it, the hatch opened by sliding to the side. Past the hatch was a lustrous passageway, similar to the ones on Theia’s ship.

“Good!”

Relieved that the hatch had actually opened, Koutarou laid Clan down inside the ship. He then returned the lever to its original position to close the hatch.

“That solves the Clan problem for now.”

Koutarou put Clan on board the Cradle to keep her safe. There were unknown animals about and he’d just heard screaming. Carrying her unconscious body around with him might be dangerous, but he couldn’t just dump her in the wild. Leaving her inside the Cradle seemed like the best possible option right now.

“Next is, um... What’d Ruth call it?”

Koutarou turned back towards the direction he’d heard the screams and began fiddling with the armor’s right arm, which functioned much the same way Theia and Ruth’s bracelets did.

“Activating battle mode or something, wasn’t it?”

After his faltering order, Koutarou began running much faster than he had before.

The armor Koutarou was wearing had several different modes for a variety of situations. Koutarou primarily used cruise mode and battle mode.

Cruise mode was the most convenient setting. In this mode, the suit’s energy distribution prioritized frequently used functions and equipment, and the computer performed calculations and made accommodations accordingly. By doing that, it efficiently supported the wearer. This was the mode Koutarou

normally used, or rather the one he was made to use.

Battle mode had the opposite settings of cruise mode. Energy distribution and power assistance gave combat functions priority. Compared to cruise mode, it had far more power and mobility, but that largely came at the expense of nimbleness and comfort. Weapon usage, defensive measures, and flight capabilities were programmed to this mode. They were rarely used in everyday situations, but were necessary in emergencies.

Koutarou was now using battle mode, which increased his running speed a great deal. Gravity was being controlled to reduce his weight, and on top of that, the power assistance supplemented his leg strength. Because of all that, Koutarou tore through the forest like some wild beast in its element.

“The source of the sound has been located, my lord. There is a 94 percent probability that there are eleven people present.”

“Whereabouts?”

Koutarou didn’t slow down even a little as the AI in the armor reported its findings to him. He conversed with it as he ran, but he wasn’t even out of breath thanks to the armor’s power assist.

“Forward at 1:30.”

“That doesn’t help me.”

“Ahead and a little to the right.”

“Got it.”

Heeding the computer’s instructions, Koutarou turned a little to the right as he ran. At the same time, two 3D images overlaid his vision. An upside-down triangle marked the sounds’ origin, and something like a filter indicated nearby heat sources.

“That’s very thorough.”

“Your praise honors me.”

Koutarou adjusted his direction so that the upside-down triangle was right in front of him, and he took a careful look at the heat sources that were registering near it. They still seemed to be some distance away. They were all

clumped together, but based on the way the clump was moving, it certainly seemed to be human.

“There is a 90 percent probability that ten of the heat sources are chasing after the eleventh one.”

“That’s enough with the images! Let’s go!”

“As you wish, my lord.”

After ordering for the images to be removed, Koutarou started running even faster.

It seems like I’ve stumbled across an even bigger problem than I thought. Now then, what to do...?

Koutarou was overwhelmingly faster than the eleven in question. Because of that, he didn’t have much time to think about what he was going to do when he caught up to them.

A few seconds later, Koutarou was already upon them.

Well, I don’t know what’s up yet...

Koutarou didn’t join up with the group right away, but rather hid in a nearby bush to watch over the situation. He still didn’t know who had screamed or why.

The group was now gathered on a sheer cliff. Koutarou couldn’t see the bottom of it from where he was, but since he couldn’t see any trees peeking up over the lip of the precipice, he assumed it was probably quite a drop.

“Hmm... They’re surrounding that woman?”

Koutarou squinted his eyes. The evening sun was level with the cliff opposite where he was now, making it hard for him to see, but it looked like a lone girl was being surrounded by the other ten men.

“To think you won’t even scream or beg for your life in this situation...”

“If it’s a scream you want, I gave you one earlier.”

“A scream of surprise from falling off your horse is hardly worth bragging

about.”

“Then I suppose you’re out of luck.”

The people were talking among themselves.

It’s not Japanese? What does all this mean...?

But Koutarou couldn’t understand what they were saying. He was sure that they weren’t speaking English, but he couldn’t imagine what language it might be. Despite the language barrier, however, he could hear the tension in their words.

“The processed footage is ready for viewing.”

“Please bring it up.”

When Koutarou gave the computer the order, another 3D image appeared in his field of vision. It was a recording of what he’d just seen, processed to remove the evening sun.

“What is...”

The moment Koutarou saw that footage, he was left quite perplexed. What he saw was a girl in a dress surrounded by men wielding swords and spears. The outfits they were wearing felt familiar. They looked somewhat like the costumes Koutarou and the others were using for aristocrats and soldiers in their play.

“Is this a continuation of the play? But why are they doing it in a place like this? It’s not like anyone could come see it here.”

Between the costumes and the staging in the woods by the school, Koutarou’s first thought was that this was some continuation of the play. He just didn’t understand why they were doing it here. Whether it was a performance or a rehearsal, he couldn’t think of a reason to do it on a mountain cliff.

As he tried to process this, the evening sun dipped below the cliff and Koutarou was finally able to see the faces of the people ahead of him without the assistance of the armor.

“Sakuraba-senpai?!”

The girl on the cliff looked just like Koutarou's upperclassman Sakuraba Harumi.

"N-No, there's no way! That's not Sakuraba-senpai!"

But Koutarou quickly realized that it wasn't her. Her costume and her part in the scene certainly made it seem like it was, but there was one major difference. Harumi had black hair, but the girl on top of the cliff had shining silver hair. It fluttered in the breeze, reflecting the orange glow of the fading sun.

"Alert: The weapons possessed by target group B are all capable of causing injury. Upgrading threat level from 1 to 2."

"They're real?!"

Koutarou's eyes opened wide in surprise after hearing the computer's warning.

"The probability is near 100 percent. The chances of detecting false positives 28 consecutive times is virtually zero."

The ten men were carrying a total of 28 weapons between them. The armor had used its sensors to examine each and every one of them, and it concluded that they were all capable of spilling blood. In other words, unless it was mistaken 28 times in a row, the men surrounding the girl were all armed with real weapons.

"So, what? This isn't a play... It's exactly what it looks like?!"

Koutarou gradually came to understand what was going on. It was a remarkable coincidence, but something very close to a scene from the play was unfolding in front of his very eyes. There was no way they would use real weapons for the play without appropriate protective barriers around them like what Koutarou's sword used.

So the scream from earlier came from her and these guys are the reason? And now they've cornered her on a cliff?!

Even though he knew what was happening now, Koutarou still didn't know the reason for it or how it had escalated to this. It could be that the girl was an

evil criminal and the men were here to capture her. Or it could be the other way around and the girl was being attacked by villains.

What do I do?! Should I really just be sitting here?!

As Koutarou was contemplating what to do, the men circled around the girl slowly closed ranks. The girl, who had her back to the edge of the cliff, stood frozen. There was nowhere left for her to run.

“Looks like that long-lived royal bloodline of yours ends here.”

“Blood has nothing to do with it. My only regret is not being able to protect the citizens.”

“A brave declaration. But don’t worry. After the royal bloodline has been discontinued, His Excellence the Minister will protect the people.”

“I can only hope that’s true...”

The cliff edge crumbled slightly by the girl’s feet. After taking a glance at her footing, the girl closed her eyes. Whether she fell or was cut down, she was aware that she couldn’t escape death.

“Information: Based on the situation, it is likely that target group B is intent on the murder of target A.”

“They’re trying to kill that girl?! Are you sure?!”

“There is a 92 percent probability.”

Koutarou clenched his fist. Meanwhile, the men closed in on the girl. She clasped her hands together in front of her chest as if in prayer. The men were planning on killing her.

“Damn, I can’t just let this happen!”

Koutarou still didn’t fully understand the situation, but he knew if he did nothing that there was a high chance the girl would be killed. He didn’t have the time or ability to call for the police. To save the girl, Koutarou would have to do it himself. And since the men after her clearly weren’t the police or any other kind of law enforcement, it only seemed right to stop them.

“Let’s go! We’ll stop that target group B or whatever and—”

“Setting group B as an enemy force in the IFF.”

However, what drove Koutarou to action more than anything was the girl’s face. Those eyes that held a powerful will, her sharp eyebrows, her firmly closed lips. She looked just like Harumi when she stood on stage. That’s why Koutarou couldn’t find it in himself to just abandon the girl to her fate. Even if she was a criminal, he still wanted to help her.

“Select your weapon.”

“I want to go with my sword, but can you make it so it won’t kill them?”

After jumping out from the bush, Koutarou ordered the AI in his armor to only use nonlethal force. He still didn’t fully understand the situation and he didn’t want to kill anyone.

“As you wish, my lord. Equipping the blade with a sonic impact barrier.”

Koutarou drew the sword from its sheath at his waist and rushed the ten men.

“Hey, you! What kind of adults would gang up on a lone girl like that?!”

In order to distract the men from the girl, Koutarou shouted loudly on purpose as he approached. And just as he’d hoped, the men’s attention shifted from the girl to him.

“Who is that guy?!”

“What did he just say?!”

“Based on the armor, he looks like a knight.”

“That doesn’t matter! Kill anyone who gets in our way!”

The men turned towards Koutarou and readied their weapons. They were prioritizing killing Koutarou over the girl behind them since they were sure she was powerless to do anything against them.

“I don’t know what you’re saying, but it seems like you really want to do this...”

No stranger to a fight, Koutarou could sense the bloodlust coming from all ten

men. He held his sword with both hands, and as he did, it began to faintly growl. The armor's AI had coated it in a special vibrating barrier that created shockwaves on impact.

"Who is that person? Based on his stance, it seems like he's a Forthorthian knight, but... Why?"

The girl was amazed by Koutarou's arrival. He was a savior that had appeared just as she was preparing for the end. Moreover, she couldn't hide her surprise that it was a knight. She'd already made enemies of several bands of knights, so it was hard to believe a knight had come to save her.

"Ah..."

Before the girl's surprise faded, Koutarou leaped to action. His movements were swift. Despite wearing heavy, Forthorthian-style armor, he moved faster than the ten men in light armor. Thanks to that, he got the drop on all of them.

"Guaaaaahhh!"

After closing the distance between them in an instant, Koutarou swung his sword coated in the special barrier, knocking one of the men out and sending him flying several meters. The man never even had a chance to be surprised, much less defend himself.

"Th-This guy's good!"

"Don't go at him one at time! All together!"

The men determined that Koutarou was dangerous after one of their own had been defeated. Now aware of what he could do, the men tried to work together to take him down.

"That's one!"

"The next target is at six o'clock."

"Like I said, that doesn't help me!"

Koutarou spun around and swung his sword. As he did, he caught the sword of second man charging at him from behind. The power from Koutarou's blow broke the man's sword into pieces and knocked him back. He collided with another man who was right behind him, and they were both sent tumbling

backwards.

“That’s two and three!”

“Emergency alert! A pincer attack incoming!”

“That’s much easier to understand!”

The fourth and fifth men attacked Koutarou from opposite sides, armed with a sword and spear respectively. Since their weapons had different ranges, it was tricky to deal with both at the same time. But Koutarou turned to the man with the sword without panicking.

“Fool!”

“Are you insane?!”

By doing that, Koutarou left his back completely open for the man with the spear. The two attackers then sneered at Koutarou, confident of their victory.

“Look out, Sir Knight!”

Seeing the trouble he was in, the girl who had been quiet so far called out to Koutarou. She wanted to help him somehow.

“I’ll leave that to you.”

“As you wish, my lord. Commencing emergency deployment of the barrier.”

Several translucent white hexagonal tiles appeared in a beautiful pattern around Koutarou. When the tip of the spear collided with it, it bounced right off.

“What?!”

“Impossible!”

The men’s eyes opened wide in surprise, and Koutarou took full advantage of their stupor. He swung his sword around in a wide circle, striking both the enemies to his front and back at the same time. The two men were sent flying with a sound reminiscent of cannon fire.

“A magician! This guy is using magic!”

“Magic?! That’s not possible! Can’t you see the heavy armor he’s wearing?!”

“You saw the spear being knocked back too, didn’t you, captain?! What else could that be but magic?!”

Seeing Koutarou’s handiwork, the other men suddenly began reeling. They had their weapons pointed at Koutarou but were hesitating to attack.

“What’s the matter? Done already?”

With Saguratin in his right hand, Koutarou casually walked towards the remaining men. They were being driven to the edge of the cliff by Koutarou alone.

“I didn’t hear anything about someone with this kind of power...”

“Damn, we should have brought our own magicians with us! We let our guard down thinking they were just women!”

“Quit your yapping! Let’s jump him all at once!”

Leaving behind a single man to guard the girl, the four other men attacked Koutarou all together. They figured that they had no real chance of winning against Koutarou and his mysterious techniques otherwise.

“If this was any ordinary fight, that would be the right choice, but...”

“Deploying barrier.”

This time, the hexagonal tiles appeared in front of Koutarou. The barrier easily deflected the incoming weapons, and the men all grimaced at the outcome. Koutarou then swung his sword wide again.

“Unfortunately, your opponent is too strong.”

The hexagonal tiles parted to make way for his sword, then moved back into place once his sword had passed. Only the tip of his sword ever left the barrier to attack. It was a feat only made possible by Koutarou’s extensive training wielding a sword with the armor. If the armor hadn’t had sufficient data on Koutarou’s movements, it wouldn’t have been able to control the barrier as precisely.

“Releasing the sonic impact energy.”

“Don’t kill them.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

After coming into contact with the third man, the armor’s AI released the energy stored in the sword in the form of a powerful shockwave that assaulted the group of men. Each one that got hit by it was helplessly blown back. Through thorough control, however, the shockwave merely incapacitated them without doing any real harm.

“That makes nine.”

Koutarou readied his sword in both hands and pointed it towards the last man. Although he was holding his weapon, his face was white with terror and it was obvious that he’d lost the will to fight.

“D-Don’t come any closer!”

“So, what are you going to do?”

Koutarou approached the man who was now shaking. As if pushed by Koutarou, the man stepped backward, but it wasn’t long before he reached the edge of the cliff and could retreat no further.

“I’m telling you not to come any closer, you monster!”

“I don’t know what you’re saying, but you’re sure screaming a lot more than that girl did.”

The man swung his sword towards Koutarou in an attempt to scare him. But Koutarou was unfazed by the display. Desperate to find something to save him, the man looked around and quickly laid eyes on the girl next to him.

“Th-That’s right! I’ll use her!”

“What?!”

The man grabbed the girl and pointed the tip of his sword at her throat. When he did that, Koutarou finally stopped moving.

“If you value this woman’s life, throw your weapon down and raise your hands!”

“You can’t, Sir Knight! If you relinquish your weapon, you’ll be killed too!”

“A hostage, huh? Even though you were planning on killing her anyway...”

Although he didn't understand what the man was saying, Koutarou understood the meaning of his actions. If Koutarou got any closer or tried to attack now, the man would cut the girl's throat with his sword.

"What are you waiting for?! Hurry up and drop it!"

"Okay, okay, I get it."

"Sir Knight!"

Koutarou tossed Saguratin aside and raised his hands.

"Heh, what an obedient knight."

"Don't bother with me! Please pick up your sword and fight!"

The man kept his eyes on Koutarou as he started to move away, dragging the girl along with him. She struggled to break free but was unable to do so. The man was just too strong. Her sorrowful voice resounded throughout the area as she begged Koutarou to reconsider.

I could have done something if he'd come at me... But at this rate, that girl's still going to die...

Koutarou had been waiting for the man to attack him while he was unarmed, but now he was trying to get away with the girl instead. Koutarou was certain he'd kill her once they got to the bushes and he could make a break for it. Once he thought about it, Koutarou determined that if he was going to do something, now was the time.

I think Sanae did something like this...

Koutarou focused on his left hand still in the air. On it was the gauntlet that he had borrowed from Kiriha. It was a weapon that used spiritual energy to attack. Since Sanae had used it through Koutarou's body, he had a vague understanding of how it worked.

Following Koutarou's will, the gauntlet began producing a powerful electromagnetic field. He didn't have as much spiritual energy as Sanae did, but even then, the field he was producing with the gauntlet gradually grew bigger. However, it wasn't a lightning bolt or a fireball. It was just an electromagnetic field, so no one but Koutarou knew what was happening. Neither the man nor

the girl had noticed it.

Go!

After gathering enough energy, Koutarou willed the field towards the man. As it got closer, it ensnared the man's sword, just as Koutarou had planned.

"What?!"

"Caught you!"

When the man realized what was happening, it was already too late. Koutarou pulled back on the field as hard as he could. As he did, the sword was yanked out of the man's hand and thrown into the air.

"Impossible!"

The man's eyes instinctively chased the sword that appeared to be floating in the sky.

"Take that!"

Not missing her chance, the girl drove her elbow into the man's stomach with all her might.

"Guaaah!"

The man had completely dropped his guard, so he immediately let go of the girl after taking a blow like that. Now that she was free from his grasp, the girl hurriedly distanced herself from him. The man reached out to grab her as she ran off, but by that time, Koutarou was already on top of him.

"You're better than I thought, lady."

Koutarou buried his fist in the man's stomach. Since the girl had already knocked the wind out of him, Koutarou's follow-up blow knocked him right out.

"And that makes ten."

"The enemy force has been completely neutralized. Attention: Because it is likely that target group B will soon regain consciousness, it is advised to clear the area."

"I know. Thanks for the help."

“Exiting battle mode.”

“Good work.”

After defeating the ten men, the armor’s AI determined that the battle was over and switched back to cruise mode from battle mode.

“Phew, looks like everything worked out...”

Now that the commotion had died down, silence returned to the surrounding area. Koutarou took a deep breath and relaxed his shoulders. Although he had an overwhelming advantage in power thanks to his armor, it was only natural for him to get nervous and tense when people were trying to kill him. He was also relieved that no one had died. Koutarou wasn’t a main character from some game. He was just a normal boy.

“Thank god... Looks like he’s normal after all.”

The girl felt an equal sense of relief as she stared at Koutarou from a distance. She had worried that he might not be human based on the way he fought.

“Silly me... That’s not possible.”

The girl smiled to herself and approached Koutarou.

“Sir Knight.”

She called out to him as he was picking up Saguratin from the ground.

“Hmm?”

Hearing her voice, Koutarou remembered that the girl was still there. He was so relieved after the fight that he’d spaced out a little.

“Ah, right... I was trying to save this girl.”

“Thank you for saving me, Sir Knight.”

The girl grabbed the hems of her dress and bowed to Koutarou. Based on her actions, Koutarou figured that she was thanking him. But he still couldn’t understand what she was saying.

This is a problem... I don’t understand a word of anything she’s said.

Koutarou responded with a small bow of his own, but scratched his head

thinking about what to do next. Fortunately, that was when the armor's AI finally spoke up again.

"Language analysis is complete."

Having returned to cruise mode, the processing power that had been put into prioritizing combat functions was returned to general work functions. One of those functions was language analysis. The computer had analyzed the words the girl and the men had used, and had just now completed its assessment.

"Translation device set to Lower Ancient Forthorthian."

And based on the results, the translation device in the armor was put to work. It was the same kind of device that Theia and Ruth used daily.

"Sorry for the late introduction. My name is—"

Thanks to that, Koutarou was finally able to understand the girl. Her translated voice reminded him of Harumi's.

"My name is Alaia Kua Forthorthe. Though embarrassing as I was just pursued for my position, I am the first princess of this country, Forthorthe."

The girl cautiously presented herself in a resolute manner. She was grateful that Koutarou had saved her, but she didn't know who he was or why he'd intervened.

"...Huh?"

However, Koutarou was so shocked by what she'd said that he didn't pick up on any of the finer nuances of the situation. Really, it was her name that left him completely dumbstruck.

Did she say Alaia Kua Forthorthe?

Koutarou still thought that he was in the woods near Harukaze High School. Although there was clearly something strange about the forest, he couldn't imagine that he'd ended up anywhere else. But here he'd come across a girl that looked like Harumi dressed in something that looked like a costume. A group of men were trying to kill her, but he'd saved her. And now she declared that her name was Alaia Kua Forthorthe.

Is this really the play? No, this is the back of the mountain, not some stage.

And those guys were serious about killing her. But she has the same name as the Silver Princess... Wait, this really isn't Sakuraba-senpai?

It seemed like a play, but it wasn't. Moreover, the girl had called herself Alaia. Things were getting more and more confusing.

"I finally found you!"

But just as he was at the height of his bewilderment, something flew at him and hit him in the head.

"What are you doing here, you fake Blue Knight? Don't move around on your own!"



It was Clan. Koutarou had left her unconscious in the Cradle, but she'd apparently woken up and chased him down.

"That hurts, you stupid girl! You still wanna fight?!"

Being struck by an approaching enemy—Clan—was enough to snap Koutarou back to his senses.

"There's no time to fight!"

However, Clan seemed to be declaring that she had no intention of fighting. But considering they'd been locked in mortal combat not all that long ago, Koutarou didn't buy it.

"You're just trying to trick me, aren't you?! I won't fall for that!"

"I just said there's no time for this! We have to leave this place as quickly as possible or something terrible will happen!"

Clan shook her head and desperately pleaded with Koutarou. The look in her eyes behind her glasses said she was serious.

Could we actually be in some kind of major trouble? Something bad enough for us to put our fight aside?

Clan's attitude was slowly convincing Koutarou. He hadn't forgotten that they were enemies, but it seemed that the situation they'd gotten themselves into would require them to put their differences aside. Her eyes indicated she wasn't lying.

"Hurry and get over here, fake Blue Knight! You're such a pain!"

"H-Hey!"

Clan grabbed Koutarou's arm and forcibly pulled him towards the Cradle.

"Blue Knight...?"

The girl that had called herself Alaia followed the two strangers with her eyes. She couldn't understand what Koutarou and Clan were saying. Clan was currently speaking in Modern Forthorthian, and Koutarou was able to follow what she was saying thanks to his translation device. But the only part Alaia could pick out was "Blue Knight."

That kind of title must mean that he's some lord's vassal, but...

Alaia could imagine Koutarou's status based on a title like "Blue Knight." The aristocracy in Forthorthe worked like a warrior society, very similar to the samurai society of feudal Japan. Even though he was a knight, it meant something rather different here than what it would in Europe.

The class system in imperial Forthorthe had the emperor at the top, and below the emperor was the rest of the royalty. Next were high-ranking knights that governed territory. They ruled over their respective territories as lords and appointed lower class knights as vassals. The lower-ranking knights served as the arms and legs of the high-ranking knights, managing smaller localities within the territory. In times of war, the high-ranking knights would bring their vassals together and act as the head of the unit, known as a band of knights.

Compared to modern Japan, the high-ranking knights would be like prefectural governors while the lower-ranking knights would be akin to mayors. In Forthorthe, high-ranking knights were generally known as established knights or lords, and the lower-ranking knights were called squires. There was a considerable gap in prestige between the two. Although the squires also governed over the land they were assigned, it was still the land of the established knight. Moreover, squires occupied the lowest rung on the ladder of the aristocracy. Anyone below them was a general citizen.

By the way, the Pardomshiha family that Ruth came from was a family of established knights that held a considerable amount of land, and Ruth herself held the highest title of Nye. The Pardomshihas in Forthorthe were a distinguished family among distinguished families, a proud legacy that had been handed down from long ago in honor of their loyalty and service to the royal families.

And Fatra, the Blue Knight's title, was one commonly used among squires. A knight's title was determined by the one who decorated them. Established knights were customarily given personal titles, but it was typical for a squire to be given a title that corresponded to a color, plant, or animal selected by the lord they served. And out of all the options, lords seemed to favor giving titles based on colors so that their squires could color their armor accordingly. So a title like "Blue Knight" naturally led Alaia to think that Koutarou was the squire

of some lord or another.

Such a strong knight that isn't an enemy... He would have to be from Pardomshiha or Wenranka. But I've met the squires from Pardomshiha before, and Wenranka doesn't use colors for titles... And it seems he's using magic too. Just who is this knight?

Alaia understood Koutarou's title, but that made her even more unsure of his identity than before. If Koutarou had a title like Blue Knight, current circumstances meant there was a high chance that he was an enemy. Despite that, he had saved her for some reason.

"Wait a minute! Explain what's happening! I don't have a clue about what's going on!" Koutarou demanded that Clan explain herself.

"Sheesh, guess I have to..."

Clan had mostly ignored him as she dragged him away, but since Koutarou was so persistent, she finally stopped after getting some distance away from Alaia.

"You and I were just fighting. So why on earth would I listen to you when you tell me to stop what I'm doing and come with you?"

"Look, I get it. I'll explain, so I want you listen to me after I tell you what's going on."

"Depends on your explanation."

"Really...?"

After glancing at Alaia in the distance behind Koutarou, Clan let out a small sigh and began explaining.

"The truth is... this isn't Earth."

"What?"

"I said this isn't Earth!"

"This isn't Earth?! What's that supposed to mean?!"

Koutarou's eyes opened wide. He barely trusted Clan as it was, so it was extraordinarily hard to take her at her word making a ridiculous declaration like

that.

“Do you remember the weapon I was trying to use?”

“Yeah. That strange bomb, right?”

“That’s right, the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell. Because of that bomb, we were blown to a different planet.”

Clan gestured an explosion with her hands.

Blown to a different planet?! Is that even possible?! I can’t b— No, thinking about it, it just might...!

Koutarou just couldn’t believe what Clan was saying, but at the same time, something about it was hitting home. The strange scenery, plants he had never seen before, bizarre reptiles. Even the strange language the people here were using.

“On top of that, it seems we’ve gone back in time.”

“Back in time?”

This time he was so dumbfounded by what she’d said that he didn’t even try and argue. He just stared blankly into her face.

“Yes. Simply put, it’s a time slip. We’ve traveled from our own time to a past age.”

“A time slip?!”

Even Koutarou knew that term. He’d heard it before in movies and video games.

“S-So getting caught in the explosion from your bomb... we warped to a different planet and *also* time slipped to the past?!”

“I’m glad you understand.”

Clan let out a loud sigh after Koutarou finally seemed to process what she was telling him.

“R-Really?!”

“Is there a reason for me to lie in this situation?”

“Well...”

Koutarou and Clan were enemies who had been locked in a deadly struggle just a short while ago. Clan calling it off for this... It was just too strange to be anything other than the truth.

Which means she really is serious...

After calming down some, Koutarou decided to give Clan the benefit of the doubt. It seemed like the right thing to do. These were the words of a princess, after all. A proper scheme would be one thing, but this would be far too cheap a lie just to buy time.

“Anyway, this is all your fault.”

“It’s yours too, I’ll have you know”

“Mine? How?”

“The Super Space-time Repulsion Shell was originally designed to open a hole in time and space and cast its target out of the universe. But since you cut it in half, it activated before it was ready, and now here we are.”

Clan shrugged her shoulders facetiously at Koutarou.

“Whatever. If you were staring down death, you would have done the same thing.”

To Koutarou, he was going to get caught in the blast either way, so it made far more sense to cut it in half early and try and keep it from harming everyone else. He wasn’t very receptive to the idea of having responsibility for the whole thing shoved on him.

“And I’d rather use that than lose.”

“...Fine, I get it.”

Koutarou threw his hands in the air and sighed. He realized that carrying on with an emotional argument wouldn’t lead anywhere, so he instead tried asking Clan some questions. It didn’t seem like she was interested in fighting for now. She also had said they were in an emergency situation, so it wasn’t smart to waste time.

“So then when and where are we?”

“This is Forthorthe. And we’re about two thousand years in the past.”

Clan gave him a blunt answer, but hearing it made Koutarou’s jaw drop.

“Forthorthe?! Two thousand years ago?!”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m sure of it since I used the Cradle to observe the stars. This is Forthorthe, just two thousand years in the past. I couldn’t believe it at first either, but there’s no mistaking it.”

Clan nodded with a hint of satisfaction when she saw Koutarou’s surprise. She was happy that he had finally realized the gravity of the situation. She was relieved that they could now move forward with what they needed to do.

“That’s how it is, so let’s hurry back to the Cradle and come up with a plan to return to the future. There’s no need to risk changing the future by dawdling here and doing something unnecessary.”

“I see, so that’s why...”

Koutarou was overcome with disbelief at first, but he was now strangely satisfied and nodded repeatedly at what Clan said.

“What?”

Realizing his change in behavior, Clan curiously asked him about it. In response, Koutarou pointed to the girl behind him.

“See that girl over there?”

“...Yes.”

Clan followed Koutarou’s finger with her eyes towards the girl standing some distance off.

“I saved her as she was being attacked by some strange guys, but she called herself Alaia Kua Forthorthe.”

“Alaia Kua Forthorthe...?”

Now it was Clan’s turn to pick her jaw up off the ground.

“You s-s-saved her...?”

“She said she was being chased because of her position, so we’re probably in the middle of that period.”

Ignoring Clan’s reaction, Koutarou continued his explanation.

“It’s been one weird thing after another since I woke up here, but now I finally get it. No wonder I didn’t recognize this place or the plants. And that explains how it wasn’t part of the play either... It all makes sense now.”

Now that he had his answers, Koutarou repeatedly nodded with a refreshed expression. Not even thirty minutes had passed since he’d woken up, but it had been an excruciatingly long half an hour with so many questions running through his mind. Feeling on top of things was a nice change of pace.

“W-Wait just a minute, fake Blue Knight!”

“H-Hey, what now?!”

Clan, on the other hand, didn’t share his sense of relief whatsoever. She grabbed on to Koutarou and almost burst into tears.

“You can’t just lightheartedly change history! What are you going to do if we can’t return to our world?!”

“Wh-What are you so angry for? C-Calm down, Clan.”

Clan gripped Koutarou’s armor with both hands. Koutarou tried to calm her down as she shook him, but it was to no avail.

“As if I could calm down! D-D-D-Do you have any idea of what you’ve done?!”

“What? I just saved a person in trouble.”

He had traveled to Forthorthe some two thousand years in the past and saved a girl being attacked by a bunch of strange men. Koutarou didn’t see anything wrong with that, but Clan was freaking out.

“Didn’t I explain to you where we are?!”

“You did. Forthorthe two thousand years in the past, right?”

“Don’t you get it?! Anything you do here will change Forthorthe’s history! At this rate, we won’t be able to go home!”

“...What?”

Not being able to return home would be a big problem for Koutarou. There was something he had to do in his own world and time.

“W-Wait a minute! Explain it so I can understand, Clan!”

Koutarou’s expression turned serious. He hadn’t fully understood what Clan meant, but he was starting to grasp the gravity of the situation they were in.

“The history that time and space weave is like the flow of a river! If we casually drift into a different river, we might not ever make it back to the original one!”

Clan began explaining things to Koutarou with a grave expression on her face. Since this could be even more important than life and death, she was beyond serious. She had long put her revenge against Koutarou behind her.

“A different river...?”

“That’s right! In reality, we’ve already entered a different current! In the original timeline, someone else saved her, and it was most likely the Blue Knight! But you just saved her first, preventing that from happening! That means whatever happens from here on out will be different too!”

What Clan was saying made more sense now. Saving Alaia from the ten men should have been the job of someone from this reality. And based on the situation and what they knew, it should have been the Blue Knight. So even if Koutarou hadn’t saved her, the Blue Knight would have eventually swooped in to help. But now Koutarou had interfered, denying the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess their fated encounter.

“So I got in the way of the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess meeting?!”

“That’s exactly right! At this rate, history will never recover!”

Clan nodded. She was blue in the face. Since her skin was quite pale in the first place, it made it all the more obvious just how worried she was. Now that he’d gotten his head around how precarious their situation was, he had more questions for Clan.

“Wait, what exactly is going to happen?!”

“Like I said before, history is like the flow of a river! If we flow into a different

river, we get carried away in a different direction! If we tried to go back home now, it wouldn't be the same future anymore!"

The Blue Knight and the Silver Princess hadn't met. So if Koutarou and Clan returned to the future now, they would return to the future that sprung from the two of them never meeting. They would end up in a world completely different from the one they'd come from.

"If the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess hadn't met, there's almost no chance the empire of Forthorthe would have ever lasted two thousand years! And that would mean Theiamillis-san and Pardomshiha would never go to Earth! They never would have been a part of your life!"

"So if we return to the future now, it'll be a world where I never meet Theia and Ruth-san?!"

Having it explained to him in terms of how it would affect him personally really hit it all home for Koutarou. Now that he was in the past, all of his actions had consequences for the future.

"That's right!"

"That's terrible!"

"That's why I asked you if you had any idea of what you've done!"

At this rate, Koutarou would never meet Theia and Ruth. They would never even be born. And without them, almost everything that had happened since Koutarou started high school would be different. Theia wouldn't come to invade, and there wouldn't be a mess at the sports festival. They wouldn't go to the beach on summer vacation, and they wouldn't have a manuscript for the school play. And those things didn't just affect Koutarou either. Everything that happened between him and the other invaders up until now would be totally different.

"What should we do?! How do we return to our own world then?!"

Koutarou had something he had to do. Something he couldn't do if he returned to a different world. He had to get back home—to his original time and place—no matter what.

“We have to find the real Blue Knight and make sure they still meet! He has to be somewhere around here! And we need to find him as soon as possible!”

“Will that work?! Wouldn’t that still change history a little?!”

“It would be much better than it is now! We have to do what we can to get this timeline back to the way it should be to raise our chances of returning to our own world! All we can do after that is pray that it’s within acceptable tolerance levels!”

While history could easily split, it often rejoined as well. If the split histories were almost identical, there was a high chance of them converging. For example, if someone went to the past and moved a single grain of sand, that alone would technically be enough to change history. But because the change was so minute, the split histories would shortly rejoin. As such, there was a tolerance for change in any given timeline. Clan’s goal was to find the Blue Knight and make sure this timeline still fit within that margin of error.

“G-Got it. So what do we do specifically? What should I do?”

“Well...”

Clan crossed her arms and put her mind to thinking. As she did, she casually glanced at Koutarou’s armor. The next moment, her eyes went wide and began sparkling.

“That’s it! You’ll have to take the Blue Knight’s place for now! Meanwhile, I’ll search for the real one and bring him here!”

The Silver Princess hadn’t met the Blue Knight. At this rate, she would continue her travels alone and defenseless. That was dangerous and might lead to further trouble. So Clan’s plan was to have Koutarou pretend to be the Blue Knight and stay with her to keep her safe until Clan found the real Blue Knight. Then they would just switch him for Koutarou. It would still mean history had changed some, but that way they could ensure everything still panned out the way it was supposed to, meaning they should be able to return to their own world.

“I only have to protect her, right?”

“That’s right. While pretending to be the Blue Knight, of course. But that’s

your forte, is it not?”

“Well, that’s true, but...”

Koutarou understood that Clan’s plan was solid, but he couldn’t hide his hesitation when it came to putting it into action.

Things sure have taken a strange turn...

For their play, Koutarou had ended up taking Kenji’s place. And this time around he ended up taking the real Blue Knight’s place. Of course, Koutarou was incredibly bemused. It seemed like his several months of practice would be useful in a most unexpected way.

“Sir Knight, what’s the matter?”

That was when Alaia approached.

It sounded like they were talking about Forthorthe and Pardomshiha...

Alaia had been watching Koutarou and Clan from a distance, but she’d heard a few words she recognized while they were arguing. That piqued her interest in their conversation.

In this age, it would be... Lower Ancient Forthorthian.

Since Alaia had walked up to them, Clan sneakily activated her translation device.

“No, it’s nothing, Your Highness.”

Koutarou responded in the same language Alaia was using. He was actually speaking Japanese; it was just translated through the translation device automatically.

“My servant and I were just talking about moving out before the men I defeated wake up.”

“‘Servant’?!”

However, when Koutarou’s words reached Clan’s ears through her own translation device, she was none too pleased. Careful to whisper, she leaned in and let him have a piece of her mind.

“So I’m your servant now, am I?!”

“What else was I supposed to tell her?”

“Fine... I suppose we don’t have a choice.”

Being called a servant was extremely displeasing to Clan. That said, she couldn’t exactly reveal her true title, and she couldn’t come up with anything more convincing in this situation. In the end, she acquiesced to Koutarou’s call, albeit begrudgingly.

“I see. It’s true that we should hurry along.”

Alaia nodded and looked behind her. The ten men there were still unconscious, though some of them were starting to groan. It was pretty obvious they’d be opening their eyes soon.

“I have to rejoin with my allies too.”

“I understand. Which way shall we go?”

Koutarou lightly nodded and indicated they should move into the forest behind her. He would be ready to go as soon as she told him the direction to proceed in from there.

“Huh...?”

Alaia looked surprised. She looked up at him, trying to tell what he was thinking.

“You intend to travel with me, Sir Knight?”

“That’s the plan. Is that a problem?”

“That’s—”

Alaia hesitated to say anything. She still didn’t yet know whether she could trust Koutarou or not. If he was an enemy, her allies might be in danger if she led him back to them.

I want to trust him... but there’s a small chance I’ll be putting those girls at risk too...

She didn’t want to distrust her savior, and she personally felt like she could trust in Koutarou. She didn’t sense any evil intentions in his behavior or words, but her responsibilities and her position made her especially cautious.

“Your Highness, I can understand your hesitation, but let us at least move away before these men come to.”

Koutarou picked up on Alaia’s apprehension and lent her a helping hand. He had an unfair advantage though, because it certainly wasn’t something he would have intuited on his own. This was basically what had happened during last year’s play, so Koutarou figured that the real Alaia might be hesitating in a moment like this too.

“Yes, we should clear out...”

Koutarou had suggested to Alaia that they should leave the area before the unconscious men woke up, but she didn’t move right away. In order for her to make up her mind, Alaia decided she needed to ask him something. It was something she’d been wondering all this time.

“Before that, Sir Knight, please tell me something.”

“Anything you ask”

“Why didn’t you cut those men down?”

There was weight behind each word as Alaia asked Koutarou why he hadn’t killed the men. Regardless of whether he was her ally or enemy, killing the men would have made more sense. If he was an enemy, it would serve to fool Alaia. And if he was an ally, they could escape without worry of being pursued. Despite that, Koutarou hadn’t taken their lives and Alaia wanted to know why.

“That’s—”

Koutarou wasn’t sure what to say. That was a question that hadn’t been in the manuscript, so he had to respond with his own words.

“I don’t like cutting people down. And when I came to help, I wasn’t aware of your identity. I couldn’t just kill them without knowing who they were either. That was my reasoning.”

Koutarou decided to answer her honestly. It wasn’t something worth hiding, and he didn’t want to betray the earnest look on Alaia’s face.

I see... So this man was neither friend nor foe...

Hearing his answer, Alaia was a little embarrassed of how hasty she’d been to

try and judge him. She was so focused on whether Koutarou was an ally or an enemy that she'd overlooked the possibility that he was neither. Koutarou was just a neutral bystander that jumped in to stop a fight in front of him.

And... there's something different about him compared to the other knights.

Because of her position, Alaia was acquainted with many knights. She knew good and well what kind of men and women they usually were, but Koutarou's answer wasn't something she would have expected a knight to say.

A knight that doesn't want to kill his enemies? Thinking about it, just now...

Alaia recalled Koutarou's appearance after the skirmish had ended. He'd looked relieved. From what he said, it was probably because the encounter hadn't proved fatal for anyone. He hadn't even boasted of his victory.

He still might be from one of the bands of knights that have become my enemy. But... But I want to believe in this mysterious man...

Alaia decided to put her faith in him, and in what made him different. She wanted to believe this knight in blue armor who was surprisingly strong, but strangely gentle at the same time.

"Please forgive me for my rudeness, Sir Knight. I will believe you."

Alaia gave Koutarou a smile full of gratitude and trust.

"I am honored, Princess Alaia."

Hearing Alaia—whose voice and face were very similar to Harumi's—say that she believed him filled Koutarou with a warm, fuzzy feeling. He felt just like Harumi was saying it herself. Even though that wasn't the case, Koutarou's heart danced with joy.

"Sir Knight, please do me the kindness of giving me your name."

"This was most rude of me. My name is—"

Satomi Koutarou. That's what he was about to say, but Koutarou held his tongue. He had another name he needed to answer by now.

"My name is Layous Fatra Veltlion, and I swear on this sword that I will protect you."

And that was how Koutarou met the Silver Princess.

The Golden Flower

Leaving the cliff side, Koutarou and Clan walked along a thin path in the forest as Alaia guided them. They were walking back down the road she had taken while being chased.

“Just a little further ahead is where I fell off my horse. The scream Layous-sama heard was most likely from then.”

“I see, that must have been what it was.”

Koutarou was actually in the front of the group with Alaia right behind him. A few meters after her was Clan, bringing up the rear.

“I’m glad you weren’t hurt in the fall.”

“The underbrush here cushioned my fall. I was lucky.”

“It surely must have been divine protection from the Goddess of Dawn.”

“One can only hope.”

Koutarou and Alaia’s steps were light.

“W-Wait up, Lord Veltlion! You’re walking too f-fast!”

However, that wasn’t at all the case for Clan. She was already in the back and only falling farther behind the other two. They’d only been walking for a few minutes, but she was already out of breath.

“That’s pathetic, Clan.”

Koutarou stopped and turned around to retrace his steps down the path.

“Heehee...”

Alaia giggled and smiled at Koutarou as she turned to go back and collect Clan with him. Seeing her smile, Koutarou couldn’t help but feel apologetic. Although Clan was his enemy, she was starting to feel more like his incompetent sister.

“You’ve only been walking for a few minutes.”

“C-Criticize me all you want, but this is my first time walking in this kind of place!”

Clan complained to Koutarou while panting. Her face was flush and there were beads of sweat running down her forehead.

The path Koutarou and the two girls were walking along was an animal trail in the middle of the forest. On top of that, there were lots of ups and downs, so it was more like hiking than walking for a sheltered princess like Clan. The more active princess, Alaia, was fine, but to cerebral Clan, this was approaching torture.

When Koutarou got closer, Clan switched off the translation device and complained to Koutarou in her native Modern Forthorthian.

“It must be nice for you, all cushy in that armor!”

When it registered Clan’s voice, the AI in Koutarou’s armor automatically switched the translation device to Modern Forthorthian. This way, they would be able to talk without Alaia understanding what they were saying.

Clan had turned off her translation device exactly because she didn’t want Alaia to hear her whining. Since she was a Forthorthe-born girl, she had a strong sense of admiration for the legendary Silver Princess, and she certainly didn’t want the Silver Princess seeing her weak side. And since they were both Forthorthian princesses, she didn’t want to lose to her either. That girly side to her led to her turning off her translation device.

“Forget me. Even Princess Alaia is fine. And I’m sure Theia would be fine with this too.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t compare me to the people of this time period or the mountain-bred Theiamillis-san!”

In this day and age where the only real method of transportation was a horse, the people had more stamina than modern folk. That was why Alaia was doing all right despite the rough conditions. But even Theia—a princess from her own time period—had more stamina than Clan.

And Clan calling Theia “mountain-bred” was deeply rooted in the long-standing conflict between their families. The Mastir family that had produced

both Alaia and Theia ruled the mountainous region to the north of Forthorthe's capital. On the other hand, the Schweiger family that Clan was from held more modern territory with a merchant town at its heart. Because of that, the Schweiger family had a tendency to treat the Mastir family as country bumpkins.

The Schweiger family, however, wasn't established until several generations after the Silver Princess's era. Because of the advancements made during that time, they naturally gained territory with a developed city at its core. But since the Mastir family was older, they treated the Schweiger family as newcomers. And being from such a modern, advanced territory, Clan felt that it was only obvious she didn't have the stamina that these country folk did.

"I can't take another step!"

Clan turned her head away stubbornly. At first glance it just looked like she was being selfish, but the exhaustion was visible on her face.

Now that I think about it, she must have walked all over the place looking for me...

Seeing that, Koutarou realized why she might be so tired, and he lost his urge to give her grief for it.

"Can't you just fly?"

"And what do you suggest we do when Alaia-san sees that?! I can't let anything else strange happen here!"

"I mean, talk whatever game you want, but those men could be chasing after us while we argue about this."

"That's because you didn't kill them! This is your fault!"

"Hey now..."

While Koutarou put his hands on his hips and sighed, Alaia finally spoke up after observing the two of them talking.

"What is Clan-sama saying?"

"She's saying that it's going to be hard to continue walking at this pace."

Koutarou's translation device switched back to Ancient Forthorthian when Alaia spoke, and Clan was quick to turn her translation device back on too.

"That certainly is a problem..."

Alaia gave Clan a concerned look. Seemingly embarrassed by that, Clan looked away from her.

"Hmm..."

After thinking for a while, Koutarou turned his back to Clan and squatted down.

"Here."

"What's this supposed to mean?"

"Get on my back. I'll carry you."

Fortunately, carrying Clan was nothing for Koutarou in his armor, even on a mountain road in poor condition. And since Koutarou was used to walking around with Sanae on his back, he had no objection to carrying Clan.

"Th-That's quite all right!"

Clan's face turned red and she shook her head. Unlike Koutarou, Clan was a young lady of noble blood, so the thought of anyone seeing her getting a piggyback ride was too embarrassing. She was also a little opposed on premise to the idea of being carried by the man who was her enemy just a short while ago.

"Quit acting tough and get on. There's no time to be childish."

"I-I guess I don't have a choice..."

But after Koutarou urged her again, Clan reluctantly leaned on his back like she was told.

He's got armor on anyways...

Clan tried to convince herself that a piggyback ride from someone that wasn't family wasn't all that embarrassing if she wasn't touching him directly.

"Heehee..."

“...”

However, when Alaia laughed, Clan’s embarrassment levels shot through the roof. She turned her face down and cursed Koutarou out of spite.

“Your armor is too hard.”

“Just bear with it.”

“I-I guess it’s unavoidable...”

“Teehee... Heeheehee...”

Alaia laughed even more. And more red-faced than ever, Clan pressed her face against Koutarou’s back to hide from Alaia.



To think I doubted these people...

But this time, Alaia wasn't really laughing at Clan. After witnessing Koutarou and Clan's heartwarming bickering, she laughed at herself for ever suspecting they might have been enemies.

So this is the kind of person Layous-sama is...

Alaia was both pleased and relieved. Up until now, she had only seen Koutarou fight and present himself as a knight. This was the first she'd seen him act his age and simply be himself.

It seems like he gets along well with his servant too.

What relieved Alaia the most was Koutarou's relationship with Clan. They had identified themselves as a knight and his servant, but she had never seen a knight carry a servant on his back in her life. And since Alaia herself had vassals that were as close as family to her, she felt like she had a lot in common with the two of them as she watched them.

"Heeheehee..."

She really couldn't help laughing at herself. It was just too funny. Her cheerful giggling rang out like the tinkling of bells.

"Pardon my improper appearance."

"You have nothing to be concerned about, Layous-sama. Now, let's go!"

Alaia then took to the front of the group, turning away from Koutarou and Clan with a smile.

Even though she's a legendary princess, she smiles like a normal girl...

That's what Koutarou felt when he saw Alaia smile. Her smile in that moment very closely resembled Harumi's.

Since Princess Alaia looks just like Sakuraba-senpai on stage, it makes perfect sense that her ordinary smile resembles hers too...

While staring at Alaia's back, Koutarou began smiling himself.

"What? Are you falling for her?"

Seeing his smile, Clan gave Koutarou a cold glance.

“I was just thinking that there’s a big difference between you and Princess Alaia, despite you both being princesses.”

“Wh-What was that?!”

Koutarou stayed calm and collected as he followed after Alaia. After dealing with Kiriha on a daily basis, Clan’s words weren’t enough to get his goat.

“Besides, why—”

“Calm down. There’s something I want to ask you.”

“Huh?”

Clan was about to lay into Koutarou just as he interrupted her. He then whispered to her so that only she would hear.

“Can’t you use your powers to find Princess Alaia’s allies? If we just wander around looking for them, those guys really will catch up to us.”

That was part of the reason Koutarou offered to carry Clan. He wanted to be close enough to her that they could talk without Alaia hearing them, so Clan tiring out had worked out great as an excuse.

“We’re not the real Blue Knight and his servant. If the situation is as you say it is, shouldn’t we do something?”

If Koutarou had been the real Blue Knight, they wouldn’t have had to go out of their way to do anything since they would be fated to safely group up with Alaia’s allies. But since he wasn’t, there was a chance that they were currently walking down a path different from the one the Blue Knight was intended to walk. For example, the Blue Knight might have cut down the men that were currently pursuing them. Something like that might make enough of a difference that they could end up getting caught where the Blue Knight hadn’t.

“So that was your reason for—”

“Half of it, yeah. So how about it?”

Clan pulled herself together as she listened to Koutarou’s question.

“It’s possible. I can send out the observation device from the Cradle and scan

the area.”

“Then please do that as fast as you can.”

“I understand. In return, I’ll borrow your back for a while.”

Using her bracelet to remotely control an observation device while hiking through the mountains was hard. It would be a lot easier with Koutarou carrying her. While gently bouncing up and down on Koutarou’s back as he walked along, she quickly began fiddling with her bracelet and sent her observation device forth from the Cradle.

“Sure. You’re heavier than Theia, but not heavy enough that it’s a problem thanks to the armor.”

“Quiet, you fake Blue Knight! Take that back right now! There’s no way I’m heavier than Theiamillis-san!”

However, the observation device was left floating in the Forthorthian sky without a goal for quite some time while its operator was distracted.

Alaia was guiding Koutarou and Clan to a small waterfall where she and her allies had been before they were scattered. They had been taking a short break there, and Alaia was hoping that they would all have regrouped in the same spot.

“I just hope they’ve all come back...”

“There’s no need to worry, Princess Alaia.”

The sun had now set for the day, and Koutarou and the two girls were dependent on the light of lamps they’d borrowed from the men as they moved forward. The light, however, was weak and unreliable. To Koutarou and Clan who were used to the lights of the modern age, the forest seemed especially dark.

“Whoops.”

“Kyah!”

Thanks to that, there had been several times they almost tripped and fell. They were more or less getting a crash course in the dangers of walking through

the mountains at night.

“Keep it together! I don’t want to go down with you.”

“Sorry, sorry.”

Koutarou apologized to Clan, who was still on his back, and then whispered to her so that Alaia wouldn’t hear.

“So what’s up ahead, Clan?”

“There is indeed a waterfall in front of us.”

Clan responded in a whisper as well. She was using her bracelet to control the observation device without Alaia noticing by hiding it between her and Koutarou as he carried her.

“There’s a group of five people and a horse there.”

“Can you tell who they are?”

“I can’t get a good read on them in this darkness. But since the number of people matches Alaia’s description of her party, the odds seem to be in our favor.”

“Good work.”

If Clan was right, Alaia would safely be reunited with her allies at the waterfall.

If we regroup with them, we should be within the tolerance range that Clan mentioned...

Even if things were looking good, Koutarou couldn’t let his guard down yet. Still whispering, he asked Clan about another of his worries.

“What about our followers?”

“I sent out a second observation device to track them, and it looks like they’re heading in the opposite direction. It seems like they’re taking the shortest route to the Mastir checkpoint.”

By now the men that Koutarou had knocked out earlier in the day had long since woken up. After losing sight of Alaia, however, they headed north instead of bothering to look for her.

“The Mastir checkpoint?”

“It’s a checkpoint on the border of Forthorthe’s capital, Fornorn, and the Mastir territory.”

Alaia and the others were on a journey to the Pardomshiha territory. The fastest way of getting there was by going through the Mastir territory in the north. As the Mastir territory belonged to Alaia’s family, she would have plenty of allies there regardless of the situation.

“So rather than looking for Princess Alaia now, they’ve decided to beat her to the punch and make it to the checkpoint before she does, huh?”

“They’ll probably try to ambush her on the road there.”

While there were plenty of roads to the Mastir checkpoint, they gradually connected as they got closer to it. There were only a few roads leading up to the actual checkpoint, so the most efficient place for an ambush would be where the roads in the area converged.

“And they’ll probably bring backup too after seeing what you can do.”

“Hmm...”

Koutarou believed Clan’s assessment was dead on.

So that’s how this is going to go down...

Even if they chased after Alaia as a group of ten, it would be pointless if they were just defeated by Koutarou again when they caught up to her. Instead, it would be better to set up an ambush and call for backup. With enough men, no matter how strong Koutarou was, he would have a hard time defending Alaia.

While Koutarou was thinking, he caught sight of a small light up ahead. It wasn’t a steady, electric white light, but a flickering red one. It was most likely a camp fire.

“What’s that?”

“Layous-sama, the waterfall is ahead. I’m sure everyone is gathered there!”

Alaia’s voice leaped with joy. She was happy that she would be able to regroup with her allies. Especially so after fearing she may have to travel to the

Pardomshiha territory alone.

“Let’s hurry, Your Highness.”

“Yes!”

Alaia quickly passed Koutarou and hurried towards her friends. She was not normally rash, but she was acting without thinking now. Lifting the hems of her long skirt, she dashed forward along the dark road.

“By the way, Clan...”

“What?”

“What would you prefer? Meeting the princess’s allies while being carried, or walking on your own?”

“Let me down right this instant!”

“Yes, yes, as you wish...”

Koutarou and Clan hurried after Alaia shortly thereafter.

“Sister!”

“Your Highness!”

“Alaia-sama!”

Spotting Alaia, the five girls by the bonfire all stood up and welcomed her.

“I’m glad you’re all okay!”

Positively beaming, Alaia joined the group.

“I’m glad you’re safe!”

“We were worried when only your horse returned!”

“Your Highness, I’m so glad to see you!”

“I knew you were okay!”

The girls all smiled and rejoiced that Alaia was safe. But the smallest of the bunch, a young, blonde girl, expressed her joy with her actions as well as her words. She ran up to Alaia and jumped at her.

“Welcome back, sister!”

“Charl!”

Alaia caught the flying girl in a hug. This seemed to be an everyday display of affection, and Alaia reacted accordingly, embracing her little sister lovingly.

“I’m back, Charl...”

“I knew you would be okay!”

Alaia’s silver hair and Charl’s golden locks both reflected the orange firelight. The tears they both were shedding shone much the same way. Of course, they weren’t the only two crying. Tears were forming in the eyes of all the girls present. Alaia wasn’t just royalty to them. She was friend and kin to each one of them, which was why they’d all been worried sick ever since the attack that split them up.

“H-Hey, isn’t that...”

“It can’t be...”

Koutarou and Clan watched over the six girls rejoicing in their reunion by the waterfall. Unlike the delighted girls, however, the two of them looked confounded.

“That’s Theia, isn’t it?”

“Indeed... She looks just like Theiamillis-san when she was a child...”

The blonde girl that Alaia was hugging, the girl she called Charl, looked just like Theia... just not Theia as she was now. Charl was young, probably not even ten years old yet. She was the spitting image of how Clan recalled Theia looking at that age.

“What an amazing coincidence...”

“It might not be a coincidence.”

“What?”

“They are from the same lineage after all.”

Theia and Charl were both descendants of the Mastir family. It wasn’t unrealistic that there would be a family resemblance.

“Oh yeah, that makes sense.”

“Look. That Pardomshiha should look a little familiar too, no?”

“Yeah, her hairstyle and stuff are different, but she does kinda look like Ruth-san.”

Out of the five girls, only one of them was wearing a knight’s armor. Her hairstyle, hair color, eye color, and the way she dressed were all different, but her face had similar features to Ruth’s.

“That’s probably the Pardomshiha of this age, the famous lady knight Flairan.”

“Ah, that’s right!”

That was when Koutarou realized that he already knew the names of the girls. Alaia and the others were all characters that appeared in the play.

“Princess Alaia, who might those two be?”

It was also about that time that Flairan looked over towards Koutarou and Clan. The girls had had their most welcome reunion, but now that the excitement had worn off, they were cautious of the strangers that had accompanied Alaia.

“Flair, these two saved me.”

“Is that so?”

The girl Alaia called Flair stepped forward to guard her. She looked at Koutarou and Clan with a serious expression, clearly assessing them for herself. The stern, powerful look in her eyes indicated she would cut them down on the spot if need be.

“...Who are you?”

Flair put her hand on the pommel of her sword as she addressed Koutarou. The weapon she used wasn’t a knight’s sword like Koutarou’s Saguratin. It was thinner, closer to a saber or rapier. To make up for her feminine physique, she fought using a nimble sword to easily target weak spots.

“I’m Layous Fatra Veltlion. I’m a wandering knight on a training journey. And this is my servant, Clan.”

Koutarou carefully answered her question. The Blue Knight was a squire, and Flair was an established knight. He had to mind his manners. He responded like the Blue Knight in the play, though the part about Clan was ad-libbed. Knowing that he would be struck down if he said something careless, he stayed quite serious.

“I am grateful that you saved Her Highness. However—”

“Flair, please stop. You mustn’t be rude to my saviors.”

Alaia interjected and grabbed Flair’s arm, imploring her to stop. But Flair didn’t stand down right away.

“Your Highness, he’s a stranger we know nothing about! He might have been sent to kill all of us!”

“If that was the case, he would have already done so. This stranger, Layous-sama, defeated the men that scattered us all on his own.”

While admonishing Flair, Alaia put her hand around Flair’s as it grasped the handle of her sword. Alaia was nowhere near as strong as Flair. She knew she wouldn’t be able to keep Flair from drawing her sword, but her action nonetheless had the power to make Flair relent. She was a knight that had sworn loyalty to the royal families, and as such, she decided to faithfully trust in Alaia’s judgement.

“...I understand, Your Highness.”

“Thank you, Flair.”

After thanking Flair, Alaia then turned back to Koutarou.

“I am sorry, Layous-sama.”

“Not at all. A wandering knight just happening upon the princess in her hour of need does sound too good to be true. It is only natural to be wary.”

Alaia had apologized, but Koutarou believed that Flair’s reaction had been appropriate. This wasn’t a movie or a play. Considering the circumstances, it was extremely reasonable to be untrusting of strangers.

If anything, Princess Alaia trusting me is what’s so remarkable... But I guess that’s part of what makes her a legendary princess...

Koutarou started to get a sense of how amazing Alaia truly was, and he was happy that she'd chosen to put her trust in him.

"As long as you are aware of that, there's no problem. But if you try anything strange, I will cut you down where you stand."

"That's fine with me."

Koutarou then realized one more thing.

If they weren't this careful, they probably wouldn't have gotten this far...

He realized just how difficult their journey up until now must have been. If the plays and history books were to be trusted, these girls had already endured hardship after hardship before meeting the Blue Knight. It wasn't hard to imagine that the only knight, Flair, had helped carry them through such dangerous times. Their enemies outnumbered them so dramatically that staying on their guard played a critical role in their survival.

Looks like I need to stay alert too. If I think about this like just following a script, I'm in for a world of hurt... This journey is serious business. This decides the fate of a country after all...

Koutarou had started to relax when Alaia rejoined her group, but seeing Flair's serious demeanor reminded him he needed to stay on top of his game.

"Well then, Layous-sama, allow me to reintroduce my friends."

"Your Highness, calling us friends is going too far..."

"Heehee. It's fine, isn't it? This is an emergency after all."

Alaia smiled at Flair and began the introductions by putting her hand on Charl's head.

"This girl here is Charl. More formally, she is Charldrissa Daora Forthorthe, my sister and the second princess of this country."

On cue, Charl took a step forward and looked up at Koutarou with her large eyes.

"Blue Knight or whatever it was..."

"What can I help you with, Princess Charl?"

Koutarou took a knee before her. Once kneeling, his eyeline was just slightly below Charl's. It was easier to talk to her this way, and he was no longer looking down on royalty.

"It seems you took care of my sister. Good work."

"It was the natural thing for a knight of Forthorthe to do."

Hearing Koutarou's answer, Charl's expression lit up. The innocent smile of such an honest, energetic child warmed Koutarou's heart.

"That's good, Blue Knight! Continue proving your loyalty!"

"Of course. As you wish, my princess."

Charl patted Koutarou on the shoulder a couple of times with a smile before walking around behind him to climb up his back and onto his shoulders.

"Rise, Blue Knight."

"As you wish."

Obeying Charl, Koutarou stood, lifting her small body up with him.

"Oooh, it's so high!"

Riding on Koutarou's shoulders, she stood taller than anyone else there. Pleased by that, her energetic smile grew even bigger.

I wonder if Theia was like this when she was a child...

As he looked up at Charl's profile, Koutarou thought of Theia. And partly because of that, a small smile made its way across his lips.

"Heehee! Oh Charl..."

"Your Highness..."

Alaia smiled too as she watched Koutarou and Charl. With Charl on his shoulders, Koutarou was smiling the same way he had when he was carrying Clan. That made Alaia happy.

I see. So this is the man Her Highness believes in...

Seeing her master now, Flair could faintly understand why Alaia had put her trust in Koutarou. And since Flair herself felt like she could believe in the same

thing, her suspiciousness of Koutarou began to ease slightly.

Not good... It's still too early to let my guard down!

However, she quickly pulled herself together again. Because of her position, it was her duty not to readily trust Koutarou. As she was dealing with those complex feelings, Alaia introduced her to Koutarou.

"Layous-sama, this is Flair. She is my friend and an established knight from the Pardomshiha family that has served the royal families for ages."

"Flairan Nye Pardomshiha. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Layous Fatra Veltlion. I apologize for my appearance."

With Charl still on his shoulders, Koutarou presented his right hand. Because handshakes were a custom in Forthorthe just as they were on Earth, Flair took his hand.

"Blue Knight, Blue Knight!" Charl suddenly whispered to Koutarou.

"What is it?"

"Flair is diligent and stubborn. But she doesn't hate you as much as she says. Don't worry."

"Hearing that puts me at ease. I might not end up being cut down after all."

Koutarou and Charl laughed together.

"Princess Charl!"

"I leave the rest to you, Blue Knight!"

"As you wish, my princess."

Sensing that Flair was in a bad mood, Charl withdrew to Koutarou's back and peeked over his shoulder. Playing around with Charl reminded Koutarou of goofing off with Theia or Sanae, so this almost didn't feel like it was their first time meeting. Thanks to that, they seemed to be making fast friends with each other already, despite their difference in station.

"Ahahahahaha!"

Watching Koutarou's back and forth with the other girls, the girl wearing a

more plain dress than everyone else began laughing.

“You’re no match for Princess Charl, Flairan-sama.”

The girl’s friendly tone helped Koutarou, who was a bit nervous from dealing with Flair, to ease up a little. When she noticed Koutarou looking her way, she started to introduce herself before Alaia could even open her mouth.

“I’m Marietta Alsein. A maid from the imperial palace. So Blue Knight-sama, which of the girls here is your type? Is it Alaia-sama?!”

Hearing her rapid-fire self-introduction, Koutarou was reminded of a certain someone back on Earth.

This girl is like Landlord-san...

Although they didn’t look very similar, her obvious penchant for gossip and friendly way of talking reminded Koutarou of Shizuka. Really, however, those might just have been things they had in common as girls of a particular age.

“Mary, asking Layous-sama that is rude.”

“Ahahaha! But you won’t get angry, right, Layous-sama?”

“I guess not.”

“See?”

“That won’t do at all, Mary. You’re my maid, so it’s only natural for Layous-sama to respond like that.”

Even though this is the ancient Forthorthe, they’re still all just normal girls...

As he had that thought, Koutarou scanned the girls’ faces again. Alaia, Charl, Flair, and Mary. They all had unique personalities, but to Koutarou, they still all qualified as normal girls. His thought process was influenced by his daily life with the invader girls, but Koutarou himself wasn’t conscious of that.

Two more, huh?

Koutarou then looked at the two girls that hadn’t been introduced to him yet.

One had long hair and sharp eyes. She was wearing something flashier than Mary, but it could have been called stylish attire. Together with her figure, she gave off the impression of being rather intelligent.

The other girl was wearing an outfit that had a very different feel to it. She was wearing a long, white robe and had a star-shaped pendant hanging around her neck. She looked less like an aristocrat and more like clergy from a church. Her face had soft, childish features, and combined with her outfit, she gave off a very friendly impression.

“Ah, did those two catch your eye? That’s unexpected.”

Noticing that Koutarou was looking at the other two girls, Mary began running her mouth again.

“Those two are Lidith Maxfern-sama and Fauna Mordraw-sama. Lidith-sama is a famed scholar despite her young age, and Fauna-sama is a priestess that serves the Goddess of Dawn. She was also a classmate of Alaia-sama’s from her seminary days.”

Even though she wasn’t talking about herself, Marietta seemed full of pride as she introduced the two girls. After being introduced, they both greeted Koutarou.

“I am Lidith Maxfern. Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Fauna Mordraw. Thank you for saving Alaia-sama!”

Their greetings were polite and friendly. And it wasn’t just because of their personalities. It also had something to do with their respective professions.

“Nice to meet the both of you.”

Koutarou responded with a nod while thinking about Alaia and her group.

Hmm, an intelligent girl and a mysterious girl, huh?

Charl looked just like Theia when she was a child. Flair bore a resemblance to Ruth. Mary, Lidith, and Fauna didn’t particularly look like anyone, but their personalities reminded him of Shizuka, Kiriha, and Sanae respectively. With that thought in mind, Koutarou couldn’t escape the impression that Alaia’s allies were all very similar to the girls of Corona House.

“This almost feels like deja vu.”

“I guess this might be what you would call synchronicity.”

Clan was getting a very similar feeling, and she agreed with Koutarou's muttering. Ever since her defeat in November, she had constantly been observing room 106, so she knew a lot about its residents and their personalities.

"Synchro-what?"

"Synchronicity. Even though they're hypothetically unrelated, similar people will gather or similar events will occur as if guided by fate."

"But that wouldn't really apply here because we have people connected by the same bloodline, right?"

"That's true. It may indeed just be coincidence then."

That was Clan's ultimate conclusion, and Koutarou felt the same way. If this was fate or what Clan called synchronicity, he felt that everyone gathered here would bear a stronger resemblance to their counterparts from the future.

Wait, everyone?

However, that was when Koutarou realized someone was missing. Theia, Ruth, Shizuka, Kiriha, and Sanae were here in spirit, but there was one more resident of room 106.

"Yurika's not here..."

Alaia's allies all reminded Koutarou of people he knew, but there didn't seem to be an analog for Yurika.

"Well, I guess that would be like her..."

Koutarou smiled wryly. Yurika was truly a hapless girl, so her being the only one not present would, in its own way, be just like her.

"What's wrong, Blue Knight?"

"Seeing everyone here just reminded me of my friends in my hometown."

"I see. People you love?"

"Yes."

Koutarou humbly nodded.

That's right. Right now I can definitely say that I do.

Koutarou was a little surprised at the firmness of his answer. And with that, his urge to return home as fast as possible grew even stronger.

"More than me?"

"Of course I adore you the most, Princess Charl."

In reality, Koutarou loved the friends in his "hometown" more than Charl, who he had just met. But he would feel bad breaking young Charl's heart by telling her that, so made the adult decision to tell her a white lie.

"Well said, Blue Knight! You have my praise!"

Still riding on Koutarou's back, Charl cackled. As Koutarou glanced at her face, he noticed a horse out of the corner of his eye. It was Alaia's steed. After she had fallen off, it had come back here on its own.

A horse. Of course it's a horse...

Koutarou stared at the horse. Although it was certainly a horse, it looked slightly different than ones he was used to seeing on Earth. The body was a similar shape and size, but it had a horn and its mane and hooves were different. Horses on Forthorthe looked more like unicorns. And as Koutarou stared at it, the horse stirred and moved away as if to escape Koutarou's gaze. Its gestures were quite distinct.

"It couldn't be... right?"

"What is it, Blue Knight?"

"That horse..."

"What about it?"

It looked like Yurika. But swallowing back those words, Koutarou approached the horse with Charl still on his back.

"This horse is my sister's. It's very smart. Even if it gets separated from my sister, it comes back on its own."

"If Yurika ever got separated from us, she'd get lost and never make it back."

"Did you say something?"

“This horse has very lovely mane.”

“It does, right?”

Charl strengthened her grip around Koutarou and cheerfully boasted about her sister’s mount. Since Charl and Alaia would often ride the horse together, it was her favorite too.

“Neigh!”

When Koutarou approached, the horse whinnied and turned its head away. Seeing that only furthered Koutarou’s suspicions.

Man, Yurika... Just like always, you have no luck whatsoever.

To Koutarou, the horse turning its head away like that gave off much the same impression Yurika did while she was acting as the horse’s rear in the play and failed at something.

“No matter how good you were at playing the part, ending up a horse is just too much...”

Koutarou muttered to himself while pityingly admiring the animal. There was a girl here that reminded him of everyone back home, except Yurika... who was a horse. Koutarou couldn’t help feeling sorry for her and her extremely bad luck.

But in spite of all Koutarou’s compassion for his roommate, something unexpected happened. Shortly after Koutarou finished mumbling to himself, the horse took off at full speed as if trying to escape.

“What’s going on? Nobody did anything to startle it.”

“Ah, look out!”

But in the settled darkness of the night, the horse tripped not long after running off. That wasn’t the end to the surprises, however. When the horse crashed into the ground, its body was wreathed in white smoke. And once the smoke cleared, what was left wasn’t a horse, but a lone girl wearing a dark robe and holding a large staff.

“Yurika?!”

The costume was cut of plain black cloth. The staff was roughly hewn like it had been hand-carved from a tree branch. But together, this was definitely the appearance of a magical girl, not too dissimilar from Yurika when she was cosplaying.

“A magician?! Your Highness, get back!”

“Okay.”

Koutarou was just surprised that a girl like Yurika had appeared, but Flair’s reaction was different. She quickly put herself between the girl and Alaia, and warned the group to stay alert.

“It’s an enemy spy! Veltlion, I’ll leave Her Highness and the others to you!”

“I got it!”

Despite his astonishment, as soon as Koutarou heard the words “enemy spy,” the urgency of the situation set in on him and he snapped back to his senses. Even though this girl looked like Yurika, she could still be their enemy. The threat of danger was very real.

“Clan, keep an eye on our surroundings!”

“I already am!”

Flair dashed past Koutarou. After Koutarou retreated back to Alaia, he let down Charl from his back.

“Kuh!”

“You’re not getting away!”

The girl in black stood up and tried to run, but it seemed she’d been quite hurt in the fall, and she was slow to move. Because of that, by the time she went to make a break for it, Flair was already right in front of her.

“Gather, spirits of the—”



“You’re too slow!”

The girl quickly pointed her staff at Flair, but Flair was ahead of her. She effortlessly drew her sword from its sheath, and with a firm step forward, knocked the staff out of the girl’s hand.

“That’s enough!”

Flair’s sword stopped just at the girl’s throat. Flair wanted her to know that if she moved a finger or said a word, she would be killed. And the message was received. The girl froze and stopped herself mid-sentence.

“An enemy spy... and a magician at that?”

This would make Koutarou’s second meeting with a real magician.

The masterminds behind the coup d’etat were Forthorthe’s minister of finance, Maxfern, and the head of the court magicians, Grevanas.

Forthorthe was a warrior culture society, so even if someone had a great deal of talent or skill, without the title of a knight, it afforded them no prestige. Not even as a minister or the head of the court magicians. In Forthorthe, those who didn’t stand to fight on the front lines in battle could never gain the same reputation and standing of those who did. Maxfern and Grevanas conspired to usurp the imperial throne because they couldn’t stand that system.

At first they had tried to steal it with machinations of their own design. They fabricated a case against the emperor, alleging misuse of the country’s funds. They claimed the emperor was prioritizing giving land and money to royalty. Using his position as a minister, Maxfern schemed to make the accusations as convincing as possible and planted the seeds of rebellion in the hearts of the established knights. But in reality, Maxfern and Grevanas were the ones siphoning the funds.

Their next ploy was widespread bribery using the large sums of money they had embezzled combined with profits from selling alchemy techniques to foreign countries. They successfully had many established knights under their thumb that way, and they weren’t all just knights blinded by the money either. The established knights that had been sent into poverty because of Maxfern’s

schemes had no choice but to accept the bribes in order to keep managing their territories.

They then set up a trap for the established knights that remained loyal to the throne and wouldn't accept bribes. Between injustice, rebellion, murder, and other intrigue, they used any means necessary to pin guilt on the established knights and reduce their numbers.

And now that this had been carrying on for over a decade, most bands of knights obeyed Maxfern, leaving only a handful still loyal to the royal families. With the numbers in their favor, Maxfern and Grevanas decided that trickery was no longer necessary to achieve their goals, and they finally openly took action against the throne.

They "uncovered" a case and used it to denounce the emperor. They then murdered the emperor and empress and accused Alaia of the crime. They tried to have her arrested in order to effectively bar her from her position as princess.

At the time the murders took place, Alaia was being visited by Fauna, her old classmate, and Flair. Charl had joined them as well. Suddenly, Mary—who had witnessed the murder of the emperor and empress—burst into the room, exclaiming Alaia and the others needed to flee.

Since Maxfern had already seized the palace, escape was incredibly difficult. However, through the guidance of Maxfern's niece Lidith and some of the alchemists, they were able to make it out. At that time, most of the alchemists were already under Maxfern's thumb, but there were still a few that were loyal to the royal families.

Once the girls escaped the palace, Alaia and her cohort decided to flee north to Pardomshiha territory. The Pardomshiha family had strong ties to the royal families, and their lands were Flair's homeland. Alaia's plan was to flee there to rally her allies before making her return.

However, pursuers were right on their tail as soon as they fled the palace, so their journey was perilous from the very start. Flair was their only capable fighter since the other five girls were all frail. They had never even held weapons before. In contrast, their pursuers were elites of Forthorthe's army

and court magicians. Their goal was Alaia's capture, or if that proved too difficult, her murder. That the girls had made it so close to the Mastir checkpoint while avoiding their pursuers was proof of Flair's loyalty and hard work.

However, there were only two ways to get through the mountains to the Mastir checkpoint, and it was in the mountain pass that their pursuers had finally caught up to them. Although Alaia and the girls had each somehow escaped, they were all scattered. Shortly after that, Koutarou had found Alaia running from the men who'd chased her down.

"That was when Layous-sama appeared."

"I see. So it was under such dire circumstances..."

Alaia's story more or less followed Theia's script. Although minor details were different, the events were largely happening the way they did in the play. Koutarou stopped eating to think about what that meant for them. The meal Mary had prepared was delicious, but there was a great deal on his mind.

If we're following the play, that means that after we get attacked by brigands, we'll make it to the checkpoint, but...

The red flames of the fire lit up Koutarou's face.

"If we keep pressing forward like this, we'll almost certainly get ambushed by the army..."

Unable to gather his thoughts, Koutarou sighed slightly. He was concerned about the differences between the current situation and the script Theia had written. As things were now, it was sounding like the Blue Knight would end up fighting the army. But according to Theia's script, they were attacked by bandits. Yurika had even played one. And right after that was the famous checkpoint scene, so having to fight both bandits and the army didn't seem right.

Did Theia omit the fight with the army? Or is this because history's changed...?

For some reason, Theia's version of the story had the Blue Knight fighting brigands and not the army. But because the reason for that that wasn't very

clear, Koutarou wasn't sure on how he should proceed.

"Clan, what actually happened after this according to history?"

Troubled, Koutarou whispered to Clan sitting next to him to try and get some answers. Clan, however, shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm not very informed about all of the details. I only know what I've seen in plays and movies."

The Blue Knight was a legend in Forthorthe, but Clan was no historian. Her knowledge on the subject mostly came from popular culture. Theia might have known better, but she was two thousand years away right now.

"Listen, Veltlion, it would be reckless to continue forward knowing there's an ambush. And since a spy has slipped into our ranks, it's obvious that an ambush is in the cards."

Flair identified the heart of the matter as she pointed over her shoulder. Not too far behind her was the magical girl in black tied to a tree with rope. She was currently struggling to escape her bonds, but she was tied up well enough that she couldn't slip out.

If I told Yurika, she'd definitely be happy...

Surprisingly, the girl was an actual magician. Before they managed to restrain her, she had used several minor spells in resistance. But since her staff—which amplified her mana—had been taken away from her, the spells hadn't done any real damage. Even so, just learning that magic really existed was a shock for Koutarou and Clan. There were magicians in the play, of course, but they had both just assumed that was a fantastical embellishment.

"Well, it's not like she would have had that many chances to transform herself and sneak in as the princess's horse."

After the group scattered and the magician had lost sight of Alaia, she tracked down Charl and the others instead to observe them. After meeting up with them, she continued to pretend to be a horse so she could wait for her chance to capture Alaia, but she was passing information on to her allies all the while. That's what Koutarou had come up with, and he didn't see any way he could be wrong. She'd just mistaken Koutarou's interest in her as a sign she'd been found

out. She'd panicked and tried to escape, but that led to her being captured instead. If that hadn't happened, it wasn't hard to imagine that Alaia's journey would have come to an abrupt and unfortunate end shortly thereafter. After the group had subdued the magical girl, however, they moved away from the waterfall and deeper into the forest.

"If we keep going, it's almost certain we'll fall into the trap that's already been laid for us."

"That's rough..."

The gears of Koutarou's mind began turning again after what Flair said. Alaia's party mostly consisted of normal girls that couldn't defend themselves. Koutarou's fighting capabilities were considerable thanks to his armor, but he had almost no real experience. Clan was in a similar situation. That meant the only proper soldier among them was Flair. If they clashed with the Forthorthian army as they were now, protecting the girls would be next to impossible.

"Lady Pardomshiha, wouldn't taking a detour be the only option we have?"

Clan finally broke her silence. Playing her role as a servant, she had left the talking to Koutarou up until now, but she suddenly muscled her way into the conversation.

"Clan?" Koutarou asked, a little surprised.

"I'll let you in on the details later," she whispered back to him.

She left Koutarou in the dark, but rather than alleviating his confusion, she continued her conversation with Flair.

"If we take a detour from the highway and cross the mountain instead, we'll be able to avoid the army. The terrain will be difficult to traverse, but it's better than walking into a trap."

"Hmm... If we can do it before they expand their search area once they notice they've lost contact with their mole, it might be worth trying."

Flair agreed with Clan and made up her mind.

"At daybreak tomorrow, we'll take a detour from the highway and cross the mountain towards the Mastir checkpoint. Everyone rest easy for the night."

And so their path forward was decided, and Alaia and her party were given a moment's respite.

Koutarou tossed a piece of wood into the fire to keep it from going out. It popped and crackled as it ignited, and the fire grew slightly larger. Although there was a chance it could give their location away to the enemy, the fire was necessary to keep them warm and to ward off any animals that might attack them in the night. Fortunately, Flair had picked a good spot for their camp. Their risk of being discovered was diminished because the fire was largely concealed by the dense tree cover around them.

"So how does it look?"

"Just wait a minute... Um..."

Clan was sitting next to Koutarou. It was now past midnight, and they were the only two still awake. The other girls were sleeping on the other side of the fire, covered by blankets. Once they'd decided on what to do tomorrow, Alaia and her party went to sleep to rest up for the coming journey. The group would take turns keeping watch and keeping the fire alive throughout the night. Just after midnight was Koutarou and Clan's turn.

"It looks okay. There are no large animals or people in the area."

Using her observation device, Clan watched over their surroundings. She let out a small sigh of relief when the results indicated there was no sign of danger. The campsite Flair had picked was safe.

"I see. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

As she responded to Koutarou, Clan couldn't help but think what a strange turn of events things had taken.

The Blue Knight act is one thing, but to think I'm cooperating with this man...

Just half a day ago, Clan had frantically been trying to kill Koutarou. But through some twist of fate, they had been put in a situation where they had to work together. And now they were even talking to one another in a friendly

manner. To Clan, it was just so utterly bizarre.

“By the way, Clan, why’d you say that before?”

“What?”

Clan emerged from her thoughts when Koutarou asked her that. But since her mind had been on something completely different, she wasn’t sure what he was talking about at first.

“You know, when you suggested to Flair-san that we should take a detour from the highway?”

Koutarou said “Flair” and not “Lady Pardomshiha” because he felt like he could speak freely when it was just him and Clan. In their current situation, she was really the only person he could be himself around.

“Ah, so that’s what you meant.”

“Yeah. I was sure you’d stay quiet so we wouldn’t change history.”

“It’s really the opposite, Veltlion.”

Clan felt a similar openness around Koutarou, and she’d dropped all formalities with him. Oddly enough, they’d found themselves in a situation where they were most comfortable around each other, despite being enemies.

“The opposite?”

“Yes. I realized that’s what the Blue Knight would have done.” Clan seemingly boasted as she explained herself to perplexed Koutarou. “If we continued walking down the road, the army would ambush us. Thinking about it rationally, there’s no way the Blue Knight would have just walked into a trap like that. So he would have led them on a detour, either through the mountains or across the river.”

Since they were currently in the middle of the mountains, they would either need to cross the river with a boat or leave the road and cross the mountain range off the beaten path in order to avoid the highway.

“And remember how the Blue Knight was attacked by brigands?”

“I see! That’s brilliant, Clan!”

Realizing what Clan was getting at, Koutarou's expression brightened up.

"In other words, the Blue Knight and the others ended up getting attacked by brigands because they went into the mountain woods."

"And that's why they were fighting bandits in the play and not the army!"

The group currently had three options: continuing along the highway, crossing the mountains, or crossing the river. And the only one of those scenarios that would lead to them being attacked by brigands would be crossing the mountains. That way they would stay true to history.

"There will probably be less bandits in the mountains than there would be soldiers down the road, and we'll stand out less in the mountains rather than on the river. I came to the conclusion that was what the Blue Knight would have decided as well."

"I see... Clan, I thought you were just sly and vengeful, but now I see that's not all there is to you."

Koutarou cheerfully slapped Clan on the back.

"Ow, that hurts!"

"Sorry, I got a little excited and put a bit too much force into it."

"And what's this about being sly and vengeful?!"

"That's how Theia described you, and I felt the same after meeting you."

"Quit messing around!"

Now that she was riled up, Clan got on her feet.

"Don't you forget! When we get back to our proper time and place, I'll have you hanged for disrespecting royalty!"

"Your laws don't apply to me. I'm not a citizen of your country."

"Then I'll just beat you to death!"

"Yeah, yeah. Okay. Just calm down, Clan."

"Aargh, you...!"

"You're going to wake everyone up."

Koutarou forcibly dragged Clan towards him with his left hand and covered her mouth with his right. Clan unhappily struggled against him for a while, but she eventually wore herself out. Once he confirmed that she had calmed down, Koutarou let go of her.

“Like I said, once we get home, I’ll make sure you regret this.”

“You mean *if* we get home.”

Koutarou then looked up into the night sky. Earth was on the other side of that sea of stars, two thousand years away. He wasn’t sure he and Clan would ever see it again.

“If we can’t return, it’ll just be the two of us.”

“I’ll pass on that.”

“That goes for both of us.”

However, contrary to their words, they were both happy that they weren’t alone. Even if that meant being with an enemy.

“This is all because you were such a fool.”

“There was nothing else I could do. I didn’t know any better. Besides—”

As Koutarou was about to object, he saw someone get up on the other side of the fire.

“What’s wrong?”

“Looks like we woke someone up.”

Clan was wondering why Koutarou had stopped mid-sentence, but he pointed across the fire in response. Whoever had woken up now turned towards them.

“Princess Alaia.”

When they realized it was Alaia, Koutarou and Clan hurriedly stood up, corrected their lazy postures, and presented themselves as a knight and his servant.

“May I speak with you, Layous-sama?”

“Ah, y-yes, of course.”

“Thank you. Oh, and please relax, you two.”

Alaia approached with a small smile. She’d been listening to Koutarou and Clan talking for a while now, so she found it funny that they’d stop so abruptly. Having made her way around the fire, Alaia sat down near Koutarou.

“Veltlion...” Clan whispered as she jabbed Koutarou in the ribs with her elbow.

“What?” he whispered back.

“I’ll leave Alaia to you. Meanwhile, I’ll patrol our surroundings.”

“Hey, that’s playing dirty!”

Clan was planning on leaving this to Koutarou while she feigned ignorance. That was partially because she didn’t want to deal with Alaia, but also because she knew there were no famous stories about the Blue Knight’s servant. It wasn’t even certain if one existed to begin with. There were no records of such a person, so in order to not change history, Clan left all of their dealings with Alaia to Koutarou, their standin Blue Knight.

“Well then, Your Highness, Lord Veltlion, I will take a look around the area.”

“I’m sorry for troubling you, Clan-sama.”

“Not at all. Besides, keeping an eye on the area is important. In return, please keep Lord Veltlion company for a while, Princess Alaia.”

“Very well.”

“H-Hey...”

Leaving behind a smiling Alaia and a panicking Koutarou, Clan quickly scurried away from the campfire.

That insufferable brat... She definitely won’t be back until we’re done talking.

Being deserted, Koutarou decided that he would complain until Clan’s ears bled whenever she did come back.

“Layous-sama?”

While Koutarou was watching Clan leave with complex feelings brewing inside him, Alaia called out to him. When he turned his attention to her, she tilted her

head and giggled.

“Goodness...”

Dumbfounded, Koutarou sighed and sat back down.

“You seem to get along very well with Clan-sama.”

Alaia smiled, but Koutarou lightly shook his head and denied it.

“She and I were just sort of forced together... stuck in the same boat, if you will. It’s not that we actually want to be together or get along.”

They were originally enemies, and if it wasn’t for their current situation, Koutarou and Clan would probably still be fighting.

“Heehee, is that so?”

But that wasn’t how Alaia saw it. Even if what Koutarou said was the truth of the matter, everyone else saw Koutarou and Clan as friendly. Alaia said they got along because that’s exactly what she’d seen.

“So what did you want to talk about, Your Highness?”

It was an embarrassing and problematic topic for Koutarou, so he was quick to change the subject.

“Ah, yes..."

There was a glimpse of loneliness in Alaia’s expression before it turned serious. As she was now, she gave off a powerful, willful impression befitting of a princess.

“Actually, I wanted to say farewell to you and Clan-sama,” Alaia said quietly.

And upon hearing those words, Koutarou—unlike Alaia—was unable to keep his composure.

“Farewell?! What do you mean?!”

If they split up here, history would be completely rewritten. It was a serious problem that would prevent Koutarou and Clan from ever returning home.

“It’s just as I said. I don’t believe that I should involve you two any further.”

“So this is to keep me from getting involved?!”

Despite his surprise, Koutarou did his best to recollect himself.

Ah, this man really did only help me with the best of intentions...

Seeing his reaction, Alaia was reassured that she'd made the right call about Koutarou.

"Yes," she answered with a nod.

"But why?"

"At this rate, the lord you serve will be blamed."

"My lord? My master will be blamed?"

"Yes."

Koutarou served no master. And learning that Alaia's fears were largely unfounded helped calm him down. After taking a deep breath, he urged Alaia to go on.

"Why do you think that?"

"You're very strong, Layous-sama. Strong enough at your age that it must mean you're part of a large band of knights."

Larger bands of knights were known for producing especially high caliber squires. And that wasn't just in regards to their sword skills. The quality of their gear—carrying fine swords, elaborate armor, or even magical items—was a good indicator that a knight was from a large band. So after seeing Koutarou fight, it was only natural for Alaia to assume that he had come from one such band.

"And there are only two bands of knights that large that are still my allies. Pardomshiha and Wenranka."

Both had deep ties with the royal families, and their great financial strength had allowed them both to refuse Maxfern's bribes.

"However, you are not part of either of them. If you were a squire from Pardomshiha, we would have met before, and Wenranka doesn't use colors for their titles."

With what Alaia knew about Forthorthian society, it was obvious that Layous

Fatra Veltlion wasn't part of Pardomshiha or Wenranka. In other words— "In other words, you serve a lord that follows Maxfern. If you continue allying with us, it is only obvious that blame will fall on your lord. That will put your lord in a very dangerous situation where he is rejected by both sides in this conflict. I don't wish for that to happen."

In reality, Alaia wasn't worried about his lord, but the people living in the land he resided over. She was also worried about Koutarou, who had saved her life out of the goodness of his heart. If he remained Alaia's ally, he would be putting both himself and the people of his territory in danger. So to prevent that, Alaia had decided to part ways with Koutarou.

"I asked Flair to arrange the schedule so that you and Clan-sama would be on watch at this hour. Please leave while everyone is still sleeping."

"Princess Alaia..."

Koutarou struggled for an answer. He had to come up with a way to keep traveling with Alaia and her party, but he had trouble arguing with her when she stared at him with such a determined look in her eyes.

How should I answer? What could I say that would satisfy her?

Koutarou wasn't the real Blue Knight. The real one most likely wouldn't have any problems answering her now. But Koutarou was at a loss. He couldn't rely on the script either since this scene wasn't in it.

Tell me, Theia! What would the Blue Knight say here?!

Koutarou thought of Theia back on Earth. He knew lies or deception wouldn't work on Alaia and her deep, piercing, clear eyes. So he had to tell the truth more or less. He just wished Theia was there to tell him exactly what to say.

Theia, what would you do?! How would you answer?!

The current Theia was different from her past self. And the Blue Knight had the qualities that she believed made an ideal knight. What she respected the Blue Knight for, however, also revealed her ideals as a princess. As royalty, Theia also wanted to embody the virtues of the Blue Knight.

Koutarou only knew of the Blue Knight from the script she'd written, but he

knew Theia well. She was selfish, but at the same time lonely and very kind. Despite the adversity she faced, she wanted to become an ideal princess worthy of leading her people. And thanks to how well Koutarou knew Theia now—thanks to all the time they had spent together—Koutarou was able to imagine what she would do in this situation.

Yeah, that's right. That's probably just what you would say, Theia...

Koutarou's hesitation vanished. He now knew how he should answer Alaia.

"There's no need to worry, Princess Alaia."

Koutarou smiled. He'd been so focused on acting as a replacement for the Blue Knight that he'd almost lost sight of himself. In that sense, he wasn't all that much different from Theia when she had first come to Earth. And just like in Theia's case, he only had to remember the basics of what was really important here.

Before becoming the emperor, one had to be a splendid royal. And before becoming the Blue Knight, one had to be a splendid knight. Realizing that erased Koutarou's doubt as he stood before Alaia.

"I will continue staying by your side, Your Highness."

"But Layous-sama, in that case both you and the people of your land will suffer!"

Alaia held fast on the matter. She didn't want to see people suffer, nor did she want to see Koutarou suffer. She was so determined on the matter that words alone wouldn't be enough to change her mind.

"It's okay, Princess Alaia. I can't go into the details, but I don't serve a lord."

Koutarou told Alaia the truth. He also honestly told her that he couldn't fully explain his situation to her.

I just need to do this, right, Theia?

Even though he was acting as the Blue Knight to keep history from changing, he could never become a splendid knight if he built his character upon a foundation of lies. If he did, he would eventually disappoint people and lose the trust they placed in him, casting a shadow over the whole legend of the Blue

Knight. If that happened, he wouldn't be able to return to his own world. So he instead committed to following the path of a knight as best he could, despite the risk it involved. He would borrow the Blue Knight's words, but he would put his own feelings into them. In other words, Koutarou had to be worthy of being a knight himself in order to get through this.

Giving both my mind and body to serve the nobles, huh?

In the past during their practice, Theia would often say that was his duty as a knight. Back then, he hadn't paid any attention to those words, but now he understood what she meant. Just trying to feign knighthood wouldn't fool anyone.

"Wh-What are you—?!"

Alaia's eyes opened wide. She was quite surprised by Koutarou's answer.

A knight roaming the lands without a lord wasn't all that rare. In this day and age, there were plenty of knights traveling the nation to find a lord to serve. But that was usually limited to knights from fallen houses or knights that had caused trouble and been banished. Even stranger, knights generally had no reason to hide the fact that the house they served had fallen, and Koutarou didn't exactly look like a knight that had been banished by a former lord.

"Please rest easy, Princess Alaia. I may be a wandering knight far from my homeland, but my loyalty for the royal families remains unchanged."

Those were words taken straight from the script. Since Koutarou wasn't all that sure how to talk like a knight, he relied on the Blue Knight's words. But even though they weren't his words, Koutarou was sincere about wanting to help Alaia. He put his heart into what he said, and in that sense, made those words his own.

His desire to help Alaia was sincere. At first he had only saved her because she looked like Harumi, but after experiencing the dangers she was in first-hand, he wanted to be of help to her. Moreover, Theia's ideal knight would never lie. Telling Alaia the truth might cost him the ability to return to his own world, but Koutarou was sure that Theia would praise him if she could see him now.

"But becoming our ally when we've lost our positions would make you an

enemy of all of Forthorthe!”

Even then, Alaia earnestly tried to persuade Koutarou to turn back. If he served no lord, she definitely couldn’t put an innocent bystander like him in harm’s way. Alaia’s sincere eyes were fixed on Koutarou, but he simply nodded at her.

“It might be just as you say, Princess Alaia.”

“Then—”

“But that doesn’t mean I have to betray my pride, my loyalty, and most importantly, the hearts of the citizens of Forthorthe. They are not my enemy. Besides, who considers you an enemy is not all that important. What really matters is who stands by you.”

There were certain things Koutarou felt he simply had to protect. Theia’s straightforward and earnest desire to be of help to her mother, for example. The legend of the Blue Knight was an outlet for those hopes, and Koutarou refused to do anything that might jeopardize them. He didn’t want to betray her dreams. They were far more important than protecting history or returning home.

He may be a legendary hero, but in the end, what he felt may not have been all that different from a normal boy like me... He just wanted to protect what was important.

That’s how Koutarou felt as he recited the Blue Knight’s lines. This was starting to feel personal for Koutarou, but he knew the Blue Knight must have felt the same way. And the more and more he identified with the Blue Knight, the less and less guilty he felt about deceiving Alaia and the other girls by pretending to be him. Right now, Koutarou wasn’t even sure what was an act and what wasn’t anymore.

“Layous-sama...”

“And Princess Alaia, I’m sure the person who gave me this sword and this armor wouldn’t forgive me if I abandoned you. So, please, let me stay by your side.”

The girl that had given Koutarou the Blue Knight’s replica armor and the

treasured sword Saguratin was prideful, strong, and kind. If she learned that Koutarou had abandoned a girl being chased down by her enemies, she would most likely erupt like a volcano.

"Your sword and armor..."

Alaia's gaze shifted to Koutarou's equipment.

Ah...

It had been too dark to clearly see before, but now that he was standing in the light of the campfire, Alaia spotted the crest engraved on his armor.

Theiamillis's Blue Knight...?

The crest depicted a knight fighting a dragon, and written on it in Ancient Forthorthian (which was modern language to Alaia) were the words "Theiamillis's Blue Knight." When she saw that title, Alaia was more shocked than she'd been before.

Layous-sama isn't a squire, but an established knight?!

Koutarou had introduced himself as Layous Fatra Veltlion, which implied to Alaia that the only words carved around his crest should be "Fatra" and "Blue Knight." But that wasn't the case. The words that were there—Theiamillis's Blue Knight—were a much bigger deal. It was a personal title, meaning he wasn't just any Blue Knight. He was an established knight that had been directly knighted by royalty.

That's why he doesn't have a lord! But he should have territory then! And there's no land named Veltlion in Forthorthe!

Alaia grew ever more confused. When she saw the title engraved on Koutarou's armor, she understood why he said he served no lord. It was because he himself was a lord. But she couldn't make sense out of the rest of what this meant. Seeing the words "Theiamillis's Blue Knight," she could only assume that a female royal named Theiamillis had appointed him. But she didn't know of any royals with that name, and there was no territory named Veltlion either. As smart as she was, not even the brilliant Alaia had any way of knowing that Theiamillis was a princess from two thousand years in the future, or that Veltlion's territory was a humble six tatami mat room.

That's right, the sword... If I look at the sword...

Alaia had no knowledge of a royal named Theiamillis, but her crest should decorate her knight's sword. It was common practice in Forthorthe to put a family's crest on the swords of the knights who served them.

A golden flower? But no such crest exists among the royal families... Just what is this?

A golden flower was indeed engraved into the handle of Koutarou's sword. Alaia had assumed it was a family crest, but in reality it was Theia's personal crest. Koutarou hadn't formally been bestowed the title of knight either. Because of that, he didn't actually have a knight's sword. What he had was Theia's personal sword—the one forged to celebrate her birth as a princess. As a result, her crest was engraved where a family crest would be on a knight's sword. This was all very confusing to Alaia.

Just who is this person...?

Although they had only met a short while ago, Alaia didn't doubt Koutarou and his intentions. She believed that he could be trusted; she just had absolutely no idea who he was.

"It is not just for your sake that I wish to accompany you, Your Highness. There are things as a knight I must do. Please allow me to stay by your side."

"Layous-sama... Th-Then please tell me one thing."

Alaia chose to confront the matter directly. She also decided that she would trust and accept his answer, no matter how strange it may be.

"Anything you ask."

Koutarou nodded. He had no intention of lying to Alaia or deceiving her in any way. There were things he couldn't tell her, but he would be honest with her when that was the case. Seeing Koutarou nod, Alaia put the question in her mind into words and asked Koutarou for the truth.

"That royal crest engraved on your breastplate... Your appearance, your mannerisms, and your honor indicate you are without a doubt a true knight of Forthorthe, but..."

In that moment, Koutarou felt a strong sense of deja vu.

Sakuraba-senpai...?

The words that had just left Alaia's mouth exactly matched what Harumi had asked him on stage a few months ago.

"I have no recollection of that crest on your armor and sword. Just where have you come from?"

Alaia continued to speak in lines from the play, but Koutarou was even more caught off guard when...

"...From an endless time and an immeasurable distance."

He heard himself replying in the Blue Knight's words, but he now realized just how closely they matched his current situation. The Blue Knight's answer and Koutarou's answer were one in the same. Koutarou had come from over two thousand years in the future, and from the other side of the universe.

Just what is this...?

Koutarou was puzzled by the seemingly bizarre coincidence. Clan had used the term synchronicity to describe this strange phenomenon, and Koutarou was really starting to believe in it. And as uncanny as it all was, he was happy that he didn't need to lie to Alaia.

"From an endless time and... an immeasurable... distance..."

Alaia slowly repeated Koutarou's words.

I wonder what that means... Still, I'm sure it's not a lie...

She was puzzled by Koutarou's words almost as much as he was. But even though she didn't understand what he meant, she could vaguely feel that he was being honest. And since she'd chosen to believe in him, she decided to put that into action.

"Then please lend us your strength, Layous-sama..."

"As you wish, my princess."

Koutarou nodded firmly and looked up into the starry sky overhead.

I've really come quite a ways...

Despite the seemingly infinite stars twinkling overhead, Koutarou couldn’t see Earth among them. Earth was far, far away, well beyond what the human eye could see.

“...Layous-sama...”

As she watched Koutarou like that, Alaia had a thought. Perhaps Koutarou had come from the world of the stars. She knew it was childish, fanciful thinking, but with so many stars shining above them in that moment, she wanted to believe it was the truth.

The Silver Princess

Clan was wearing a robe for traveling over her normal outfit as she stood facing an elderly man.

“A knight in blue armor?”

“He’s called Layous Fatra Veltlion. Have you heard of him?”

The elderly man was the owner of a small inn. He had a mild demeanor and a slight accent. Clan was currently talking to him in an attempt to gather some information.

“I don’t know him. At the very least, he hasn’t been at my inn.”

“I see.”

“Sorry I couldn’t be of help.”

“No, thank you for taking the time to talk to me.”

“Take care, miss. There’ve been some worrisome developments in this country these days.”

“Thank you.”

However, the old man wasn’t able to help Clan with what she wanted to know. After thanking him for his time, she quickly left the inn.

“Looks like this town was a bust as well...”

Once outside the building, Clan sighed. Right now, she was in a small mountain town by the road. The area wasn’t very prosperous and relied heavily on travelers stopping by for income. As such, the main street of the town was lined with inns and bars. They were all very aged buildings made out of stone—the kind of structures Clan was only used to seeing as ruins or sightseeing spots. She’d faithfully checked every last inn and bar, but no one seemed to have the information she was looking for.

“Just where is he?”

Clan's goal was to find the real Blue Knight. Then she had to get him to join up with Alaia in order to prevent irreversible changes to this timeline's history. In order to locate him, she'd split up from Koutarou and the other girls for the time being. Clan focused her search around where she knew Alaia and her companions traveled, and she'd stopped to check each town and village along the way. In the original history, the Blue Knight met up with Alaia before the Mastir checkpoint, so he should still hypothetically be somewhere in the area. Even if he had moved on, there was a high chance that someone had seen him during his travels, so Clan was hoping to get some news of his whereabouts from anywhere he might have stopped to rest or eat.

However, despite visiting many towns and villages, she hadn't caught wind of anything at all. No matter who she asked, no one had seen a traveler wearing blue armor and no one remembered a customer by the name of Layous. With each dead end, Clan only grew more and more worried. At first she was sure that she'd be able to find him right away, but she was now regretting that naive optimism.

"Today makes one full week, huh? That means I need to check in."

Clan had promised to return to Koutarou after a week to report, regardless of what she found. She had parted ways with Koutarou and the others on the day they'd decided to cross the mountains to avoid the army. And today being their seventh day apart, it was time to reconnect with them.

"This is sad. I don't even want to hear what he's going say..."

Clan sighed once more. When she left Koutarou and the others, she was full of confidence and boasted that she could easily find the Blue Knight without trouble. With how things had turned out, however, she was reluctant to return and admit that she hadn't even found a single clue.

"It's possible we're dealing with a worse case scenario..."

Clan had some idea as to why she might not be finding any information on the Blue Knight. It was possible that the real Blue Knight had been fatally caught up in the space quake when Koutarou and Clan arrived in this age. It was even possible he'd been crushed by the Cradle as it crashed.

If he was already dead, that would explain why no one had seen or heard

from him around here. Thinking like that, things started to make sense. But it would also mean that Clan had killed the Blue Knight. As a Forthorthian, she had a certain fondness for the legend herself, and she sorely wanted to believe that wasn't what had happened.

"Hahh... What should I tell him?"

Clan sighed again as she entered a small alley and began using her bracelet to pinpoint the current location of Koutarou's armor. Before they parted ways, she set his armor so that it emitted a signal she could track. Once she picked it up with her bracelet, it showed his location overlaid on a map of the area.

"It's already been a while since he passed into Mastir territory..."

The marker showing Koutarou's location wasn't within the Fornorn territory where Clan currently was, but inside the Mastir territory. That meant they'd made it past the Mastir checkpoint. At least she could rest easy knowing they'd avoided the army thus far and gotten across the border safely.

"Then let's go..."

Once she confirmed his location, Clan discreetly activated the modified barrier generator she'd used when fighting Koutarou, and cloaked herself as she flew up into the sky. She was planning on flying all the way to Koutarou like that.

"That Veltlion is quite sly, despite his looks..."

Though she was effectively invisible as she was, the gloomy atmosphere around her remained.

While Clan was on her way to him, Koutarou was in the middle of an interrogation in a room of a small inn.

"Caris, don't be so stubborn. Just tell us. You even told us your name the other day."

"...Hmph."

The person being interrogated was the girl they'd captured after reuniting Alaia and her party. Based on her outfit, she looked like a court magician, but

they didn't know anything about her other than her name: Caris Webnant. And Koutarou had struggled to get her to tell them even that much.

"You're hungry, right?"

Holding a large, roasted bird in his hand, Koutarou squatted down in front of Caris. Their eyes met.

"I'm not."

Grrrgle...

"If you tell us what your orders were when you were transformed into a horse, you can have some of this."

"I-I don't want any!"

Grrrgle...

"Is that so? Then I'll just eat this village's delicacy, roasted wadowado bird, all by myself."

"Ugh..."

Grrrgle...

"Oooh, delicious! It's perfectly roasted! The texture of the crispy skin and the smell of the spice covering it are the perfect combination! They just make your taste buds sing! And the meat is so tender! Every time I bite into it, it's so juicy it's almost like soup!"

Caris gulped.

This girl—Caris Webnant—had kept her lips sealed during Flair's strict interrogation. She revealed nothing, not even her identity. When it was Koutarou's turn to give things a try, however, she'd loosened up a bit and they were finally able to learn her name.

I honestly wondered about this when we first captured her, but to think something like this is actually working...

Koutarou's method was simple. He was using food as a bargaining tool. Because Flair was a knight through and through, she had never even considered an interrogation tactic like this, much less that it might actually work. But

Koutarou was different, and he had a certain image of girls who used magic—or claimed to. They were sloppy, and most importantly, had a weakness for food. That was thanks to all the time he'd spent with Yurika.

"Blue Knight, I want to have some too."

"Of course, Your Highness."

"Veltlion!"

"My, Charl... It seems you've taken quite a liking to Layous-sama."

"This isn't something to laugh about, Princess Alaia!"

Charl had jumped at Koutarou and taken a bite of the roasted bird he was eating. Seeing such a display of poor manners from Charl, Flair got angry, but Alaia was watching over them all with a smile.

"Delicious! Give me more, Blue Knight!"

"As you wish, my princess."

"C-Curse you, Blue Knight! Just how rotten can you get?!"

Grrrgle...

Seeing Charl stuff her mouth with such a delicious looking roast bird, Caris's stomach growled again. But it wasn't like she was starving. She'd been given meals normally like everyone else along their trip. Koutarou's interrogation technique wasn't working because she was hungry; it was working because of her extraordinary love of food.

"Caris, it's not like anyone will be at a disadvantage now if you tell us what your orders were a week ago."

"Wh-What do you mean?!"

"It's already been a week since you've stopped reporting in. The people who gave you your orders are already well aware that you're incapacitated. That means they'll act now on the assumption that the information has been leaked. So whether you tell us or not won't have any influence on what they do. You see?"

"Th-That's..."

Caris's loyalty began wavering. She really wanted to eat something delicious. She just couldn't betray the court magicians that had taken care of her since she was young. But even if she broke her silence now, it wouldn't affect them, right? So wasn't it just best to speak up and then get something delicious to eat in return?

"No, no, I can't! I can't tell you the orders I got directly from Grevanas-sama, who I'm greatly indebted to!"

Caris let the name of the head of the court magicians slip her lips.

Grevanas... So she got her orders directly from the head of the court magicians?

Caris had unintentionally revealed who she'd gotten her orders from, but she was so distracted by the roast bird in front of her that she didn't even realize it.

"You don't have to tell everyone, Caris. You just need to tell me."

"Just you...?"

Caris's glance shifted between the roast bird and Koutarou. As she did, Koutarou gently smiled and nodded at her.

"That's right. You don't have to tell me who gave you your orders or anything either. That would put you in a difficult position. You only need to tell me what your orders were, and then you can eat this."

Grrrgle...

Caris's stomach growled yet again.

"A-All right, I'll tell you and you alone, so give me one that's warm."

"Well said! We have ourselves a deal!"

And so Caris revealed yet another secret to Koutarou.

"Thank you, Blue Knight, my kindred spirit! I knew you were a knight's knight when I first met you!"

"I-I see. Then eat to your heart's content, Caris."

"So, Caris-san, what do you want to eat first?"

“I’ll leave the spiced one for later. First I want to try a normally salted one to get a feel for the ingredients and the original flavor.”

“Okay, just a moment.”

Koutarou left Mary to take care of feeding Caris, who was still bound up, and turned towards Alaia, who was sitting at a table by the window. With her were Flair, Lidith, and Fauna.

“Blue Knight!” Charl called to him as she reached out her hand.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

Koutarou took her hand with a smile and walked over to Alaia and the others with her.

“Good job, Layous-sama. Please, have a seat.”

Alaia stopped what she had been doing and welcomed Koutarou to the table. Koutarou sat down in the chair she offered to him, and Charl immediately started climbing up into his lap. Koutarou helped her up.

“So how did it go?”

“It looks like things are getting complicated.”

The smile Koutarou had put on for Charl faded and he began speaking in a serious tone. He was mystified by what Caris had said.

“What do you mean by ‘complicated’?”

Flair’s eyes narrowed. She had her opinions on Koutarou’s interrogation tactics, so she was already displeased with the situation, but she put her mood aside and returned to her usual knightly disposition when she heard the ominous tone in what Koutarou said.

“It seems like Caris was acting on orders directly from the head of the court magicians, Grevanas.”

Minding Caris behind him, Koutarou spoke in a slightly lower voice. Caris had only agreed to tell him about her orders, so he kept his voice down to keep her from realizing he was sharing her secret.

“S-Spicy! Water, water!”

“Okay! Coming right up!”

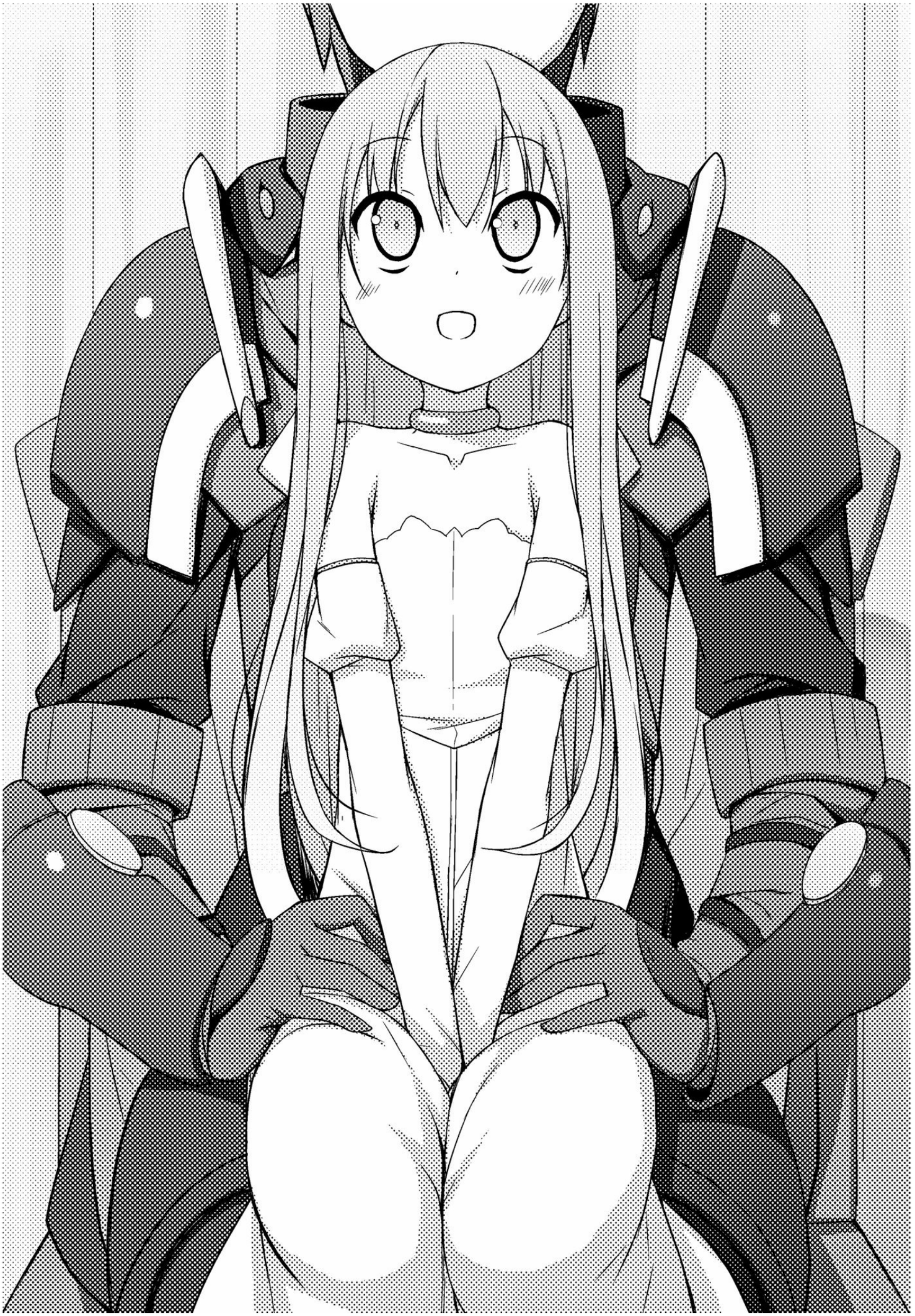
Fortunately, Caris was completely and utterly occupied with her food, so she wasn’t paying the slightest bit of attention to what Koutarou and the others were saying.

“Orders from Grevanas himself? That’s strange.”

Lidith, who had been listening careful until now, slightly tilted her head. Seeing that, Fauna looked at her with a confused expression.

“What do you mean, Lidith-chan?”

“Based on the clothes she’s wearing, Caris isn’t a very high-ranking magician. So if someone were to give her an order, it would be her direct superior and not Grevanas. The only exception would be for special missions.”



Lidith was an alchemist, a scholar who studied things like science, medicine, and religion, but she also dabbled in other fields.

“Then, Layous-sama, what is her special mission?”

Fauna’s naturally curious gaze turned towards Koutarou.

“Watching over Princess Alaia and reporting on the current situation.”

“Anything else?”

Flair urged him to continue, narrowing her eyes even more. She already had an idea of what Koutarou was about to say.

“That was it. Her mission seems to have been those two things specifically. She said that capturing or murdering Princess Alaia wasn’t part of her mission.”

That was the part Koutarou found odd. Caris had been given direct orders from the head of the court magicians, Grevanas, to keep an eye on Alaia. Yet the soldiers chasing her down were told to capture or murder her. It didn’t add up. He’d expected Caris to have a similar mission, but apparently her direct orders from Grevanas were simply to observe and report. He couldn’t help thinking that there was a catch, and the fact that this wasn’t in the script strengthened that impression.

“That is strange. Maybe he doesn’t really have any intention of capturing us?”

“Then is he just having the soldiers pretend to chase us while he’s actually letting us do what we want?”

“Or could it be that Maxfern’s and Grevanas’s goals are different?”

“It seems like their forces weren’t completely united, but right now it’s impossible to tell...”

Flair, Alaia, Fauna, and Lidith all shared Koutarou’s apprehension, and the four girls put their heads together.

Are they trying to flush out Princess Alaia’s allies?

That was Koutarou’s first thought, but without anything to go on, his anxiety only grew.

“Blue Knight, there’s no need to think so hard about it.”

Charl was the only one with a smile still on her face. She poked Koutarou's cheeks and spoke to him with confidence.

"We don't know the details, but it means it's gotten easier for us to escape, right?"

"...I see."

Koutarou found himself agreeing with Charl. If things were as Caris had said, Alaia and her party were perhaps in less immediate danger than they'd thought. While not knowing Grevanas's game was a worrisome point, it was still better than having to flee for their lives.

"As expected from Princess Charl. It's just as you say."

"Heehee! If you now understand my greatness, then continue proving your loyalty, Blue Knight!"

"Understood, Your Highness."

A smile returned to Koutarou's lips. The other girls seemed to be feeling a little relieved as well, and the anxious atmosphere slowly relaxed. Seemingly happy with that, Charl smiled even brighter as she leaned against Koutarou.

"Nothing good will come from overthinking this, so let's just agree with Princess Charl that it's gotten easier to escape."

That was Flair's conclusion. Since they couldn't question Grevanas in person, there was indeed nothing more they could do for now.

"I always thought you were a child, Charl, but you've gotten more mature."

Alaia smiled at Charl and got back to work on what she'd been doing before. It was a new hobby she'd picked up—knitting.

"As much as sister's knitting skills, right, Blue Knight?"

"That's quite the hard question to answer."

"Are my knitting skills that poor, Layous-sama?"

Koutarou stumbled for words, but Alaia cheerfully continued moving her knitting needles. Her skills weren't bad by any stretch. She was quite good for someone who'd just started. But since she had no one to teach her, her

progress was slowing down.

“Heh... Princess Alaia, you should try doing this there.”

“Oh?”

As things were now, Koutarou was a more skilled knitter than she was. Even though he was clumsy, he’d improved quite a bit in the ten months he’d been practicing. And having learned so much from such a good teacher, there was plenty he could teach Alaia.

“You do it here. Like this.”

“I see... Layous-sama, you can knit too?”

“Blue Knight, knitting is for women! Leave that to my sister and continue proving your loyalty.”

Alaia watched Koutarou’s skillful handling of the needles with admiration, but Charl was unhappy. She felt it was wrong for a man to be knitting.

“That’s too bad. Here I was thinking of knitting a muffler for you too, Princess Charl.”

“Well, you can knit that. That falls under proving your loyalty.”

“Your Highness, I’m having a hard time understanding what proves my loyalty and what doesn’t.”

“If you’re a knight, you should know these things.”

Thanks to Charl’s cute behavior, cheerful laughter filled the room. Clan appeared not long afterwards.

Koutarou’s room at the inn was for two people. Since he knew that Clan would be returning, he’d prepared for her in advance.

“H-Hey, Veltlion.”

“What?”

Koutarou answered Clan while playing with an operating panel built into the armor’s right arm. The armor’s upright posture locked in place, and the various parts of the armor opened. Koutarou stepped out of the suit as if shedding a

shell. Once Koutarou emerged from the armor, it closed after him. But without even making sure it had closed properly, Koutarou approached Clan, who was sitting on one of the two beds.

“A-Are we sleeping here tonight?”

Clan’s face was red. Her eyes were wavering with anxiety.

“Yeah. What about it?”

“What about it? I-I’m still not married, and...”

Clan looked down at the ground.

“Ah, I see!”

Koutarou realized what Clan wanted to say and clapped his hands together when the lightbulb came on.

“Don’t worry. I won’t do anything funny in a situation like this.”

“But...”

After living in room 106 with girls all around him every day, Koutarou had built up a certain resistance to women, but Clan was a sheltered princess who had almost no experience with men. She couldn’t even imagine sleeping all alone in a room with a man that wasn’t family.

“I understand how you feel, but it’d be suspicious if a knight and his servant slept in different quarters. I can only ask that you bear with it.”

“I-I understand.”

“You can trust me, Clan.”

Koutarou smiled. Though Clan said she understood, she was hugging a pillow and quietly watching Koutarou from behind it. It was pretty obvious that she didn’t fully trust him.

“Although we were originally enemies, you’re the only one I can depend on right now. There’s no way I’d do anything terrible to you, now is there?”

While saying that, Koutarou glanced towards the armor standing behind him.



Koutarou couldn’t do maintenance on the armor himself, so Clan’s cooperation was essential. And since there was lots he didn’t know about Forthorthe’s history and culture, her advice was indispensable here. Based on the situation they were in, he couldn’t risk doing anything at all that might upset Clan or turn her against him. It would be like cutting his own lifeline.

“Hahh... All right. But in return, don’t look at my sleeping face. Only my future husband can see that.”

“It’s a deal, Clan. Let’s make a partition or something there later.”

“...”

After glancing at Koutarou one more time, Clan let go of her pillow. But even so, the awkward atmosphere didn’t dissipate right away, so Koutarou decided to change the topic. Fortunately, there was a lot they needed to talk about.

“Oh yeah, do you have anything to tell me, Clan?”

“Tell you...? I-I don’t want to see your sleeping face—”

“Not that. I mean your investigation. Did you find anything on the real Blue Knight?”

Clan was about to lose her composure all over again, but her expression turned dark the moment she heard the words “Blue Knight.”

“Ah, ahh... Th-That’s...”

Based on her reaction, Koutarou could guess how it’d gone.

“...Nothing?”

“Ah, auuugh... Y-Yes...”

Clan’s words grew weaker and quieter. She eventually ended up hugging the pillow she had let go of again and burying her face in it.

“Just saying ‘yes’ doesn’t tell me anything. Please explain.”

When Koutarou said that, Clan peeked up from the pillow and took a look at his face.

“You’re not angry?”

“Angry? Why would I be?”

“Because... I said I’d find him right away, so...”

Hearing Clan’s words, Koutarou remembered what she’d said a week ago. Back then she was full of confidence.

So she was embarrassed about not being able to do what she so pridefully boasted she could, huh?

Koutarou smiled a little as he started to understand Clan’s feelings.

“Stupid. I know the difference between when I should be mad and when I shouldn’t. Besides, you leaving so full of confidence made me feel better too.”

Koutarou and Clan coming to this era had distorted history, but forcing all of the responsibility of fixing that onto Clan was wrong. They’d essentially divided their work, and seeing Clan leave to go find the real Blue Knight so confident in herself had given Koutarou a little bit of hope. He felt safe leaving things to her.

“...”

Clan stared Koutarou in the eyes. She was trying to figure out if he was being honest about how he truly felt.

“So don’t get depressed, okay? Just tell me how it went.”

“I understand...”

Clan stared at Koutarou for a while longer, but she eventually collected herself and slowly nodded.

When this man jokes around, he’s incredibly brash, but when he’s serious, it seems he can behave himself like a proper knight...

Clan’s opinion of Koutarou was slowly changing.

“So how’d it go?”

“Well... for starters, I checked all of the towns and villages along the path that Alaia-san and the others took.”

“I see. That was a sensible way of doing it.”

Koutarou was impressed by Clan’s method. If Koutarou and Clan hadn’t

gotten in the way, the Blue Knight would have met up with Alaia somewhere en route to the Mastir checkpoint. So since he was probably traveling normally up until that happened, checking the towns and villages in the area should have yielded something. All Clan would have to do after that was follow his footsteps. It made a lot more sense than randomly looking around for a man in blue armor.

“But nobody knew anything no matter where I went. Not a single person said they had recently seen a man in blue armor or had any guests by the name of Layous.”

“That’s strange...”

“I agree, which means we might be facing the worst possible scenario.”

“...The worst possible scenario?”

Koutarou pensively looked up at Clan’s face. She wore a grim expression and nodded reluctantly.

“Yes, being that we may have killed the real Blue Knight when we were thrown to this age.”

“What... Killed the Blue Knight?!”

Koutarou’s eyes shot wide open. It was a highly unexpected suggestion.

“He may have gotten caught in the space quake, or crushed by the Cradle as it crashed...”

“That would explain why you couldn’t find any trace of him, but... aren’t you overthinking this?”

“Huh?”

This time, Clan’s eyes opened wide in surprise. After hearing Clan’s report, Koutarou had come to a different conclusion.

“Rather than a coincidence like that, couldn’t it just be that he’s traveling incognito? It’s possible he’s just not in his armor too. My armor moves on its own, but wouldn’t it be hard for a knight wearing normal armor to travel in it?”

Koutarou’s armor was fully powered, so it didn’t inhibit him at all as he

moved. If anything, it made things easier. But traditional knight armor was just forged and molded metal, so it was heavy and uncomfortable. It was meant for combat, not traveling. Flair, for example, was wearing a light suit of armor that had been specially designed for long journeys. It had been decorated appropriately for a knight, but it actually used very little metal.

“I see. That does seem much more likely.”

Clan nodded as she thought over what Koutarou said.

It seems that he’s less stupid than I first thought... But that makes sense. If he really was that much of a dunce, I wouldn’t have lost to him twice.

Clan’s opinion of Koutarou slowly continued to change more.

“Then starting from tomorrow, I’ll expand the search area a little and expand my inquiries to cover knights traveling alone.”

“That sounds good. It’s still too early to jump to conclusions.”

Koutarou agreed with what Clan suggested. He had no objections to her search methods.

“That’s true... So how did things go on your end, Veltlion?”

“Oh yeah! About that...”

Koutarou flashed a smile the moment Clan brought it up.

“You’re pretty amazing, Clan! Everything happened just as you said it would!”

Koutarou spoke volubly with excitement. He even inched closer to Clan, which made her start hugging her pillow again as she got embarrassed.

“As we crossed the mountain, we got attacked by bandits. And after chasing them off, we made it to the Mastir checkpoint without facing the army!”

The encounter with the bandits happened just the way it had been written in the script. As Koutarou and the others were crossing the mountain, three bandits blocked their path while two additional bandits cut off their escape. The bandits weren’t as strong as Forthorthian soldiers, and there were only five of them. So just like what happened in the play, Koutarou posing as the Blue Knight easily dispatched the three in the front while Flair got rid of the two that

were flanking them. The only difference was that the bandits weren't like Yurika. They were rough, bearded men.

"And at the Mastir checkpoint, that role model of loyalty, Soldier A was really there!"

Once the bandits were taken care of, Koutarou and the girls had climbed down the mountain and made their way towards the Mastir checkpoint without incident. No one seemed to be pursuing them, and there was no ambush waiting for them. They reached the checkpoint safely.

There, they'd met the real-life inspiration for the character referred to as "Soldier A" in the play. He wasn't known by name, but he was known throughout Forthorthe for his loyalty. When he recognized Alaia, he let her through the checkpoint even though she and her party had no paperwork on them. It was a selfless act of loyalty to the royal families.

"His name was actually Orion. What a shame that A isn't his initial though."

In the play, Koutarou was originally supposed to play the part of Soldier A, so he had some fondness for him. He couldn't help asking his name while they were there.

"It's an approximation. Orion's initial is the first letter in the Forthorthian alphabet, so Soldier A is correct."

Clan smiled at Koutarou, whose eyes were sparkling like a child's. Her eyes behind her antique glasses looked much more gentle than usual.

"Really? But still, the whole thing was incredible. It happened just like in the script. It was a real help that Theia didn't add a bunch of fluff to the story."

Koutarou pulled out two booklets from his armor—his stage costume—and presented them to Clan. They were copies of both parts of Theia's "The Blue Knight and the Silver Princess" plays. Once she had them in her hands, Clan flipped through the pages.

"Theiamillis-san is a history maniac, so of course she'd be faithful to the original story. Well, it's not like I can't understand how she feels..."

What Theia wanted wasn't a fictional knight, but a real one. That's why she

only made minor changes to the story where it was absolutely necessary. And thanks to that, the scripts she wrote were like a prophecy of what was to come.

“So I was thinking, Clan...”

“About what?”

Clan stopped flipping through the pages and looked up at him.

“The next act in the play is about the poisoning of the water source, and I want to stop that.”

“You want to stop it?!”

Clan hastily shut the script booklet and raised her voice.

“Yeah. We know the water source is going to get poisoned, so if we go ahead of the enemy, we can stop it and no one will get hurt, right?”

“You can’t, Veltlion! If you do that, history will change!”

“Now’s not the time to be worried about history!”

Mirroring Clan, Koutarou also raised his voice.

“If we do nothing, lots of people are going to die!”

If things went according to the script, the water source would soon be poisoned on Maxfern’s orders. It would kill everyone who drank from it. Koutarou wanted to prevent such a horrible, indiscriminate attack.

“In the end, they succeed in treating it! So there’s no need to interfere and rewrite history!”

“But even then, people are going to die! Can you still call yourself a princess of Forthorthe knowing that and doing nothing about it?!”

In the play, the Blue Knight ended up stealing an antidote from the enemy to treat those who’d been poisoned. But it still didn’t save everyone. Those who were seriously ill would lose their lives. Koutarou couldn’t ignore that. Up until now, it had only been Koutarou and Alaia’s problems, but this was going to involve the lives of many innocent people.

“Wha...”

Clan was at a loss and was unable to give him a rebuttal.

“Can you still call yourself a princess of Forthorthe knowing that and doing nothing about it?!”

She had been so focused on preserving history that she saw those deaths objectively. As historical fact. An unavoidable loss. But Koutarou’s words had made her realize that she was only thinking of the citizens’ lives as pieces of a puzzle, leaving her appalled at herself.

I see... That would make me a fake princess, wouldn’t it?

Clan recalled Koutarou calling her that before. It was back in November when they first met. Back then, she took it as an insult and lost her temper, but now she felt like he might have had a point. Would she protect history, or the lives of the citizens? A princess would pick the latter, but Clan just couldn’t do it. She then began to understand how flawed she was as a royal.

And this is probably the part of him that Theiamillis-san trusts so much...

The reason why Theia was so obsessed with Koutarou, the real reason she let him use Saguratin... Clan knew she wouldn’t lend out her treasured sword just for the sake of a play. There had to be more meaning to it, and Clan was starting to understand exactly what it was.

“A prideful knight before royalty, huh?”

“What was what?”

“Nothing... Veltlion, it’s just as you say.”

In that moment, Clan changed her mind. Even though there was a good chance this would change history forever, she couldn’t just let her citizens die for nothing.

“You mean...?!”

“Yes. I know what I said before, but after calming down, I also want to prevent the water source from being poisoned. There’s a risk that history will change, but I can’t just overlook this.”

The poisoning incident would eventually come to a conclusion either way. They were just planning on changing how it was resolved. But even a change

like that might still be enough to keep them from returning to their own world on the proper timeline. Even if they couldn't return, however, at least the safety of the citizens would be protected.

"Well said, Clan!"

Koutarou smiled and slapped Clan on the back with his large hand several times.

"Ouch, that hurts!"

"Oh, sorry. I put a little too much force into it."

"Really now, you're always so reckless... Will you take responsibility if we can't return to our own world?"

Clan gave Koutarou a reproachful glance for just a moment.

"Leave it to me. If you lose your place, I'll let you live in room 106 too."

Koutarou understood the meaning of Clan's resolution. She had decided that she would protect the citizens, even if it meant losing the ability to return to her home.

If it comes down it, I'll have to take responsibility for her making a decision like that.

So Koutarou resolved himself as well.

"So Clan, how exactly do we prevent it?"

"That's the problem. There are plenty of water sources, and we don't know when they're going to poison one."

"So we have to use the same method you used to search for the Blue Knight and check every water source in the area?"

"It could be a river, a lake, a well... There's a limit to how much ground the observation device can cover for us, so we need to narrow it down a bit."

"Since a lot of people get sick, we can probably narrow it down to a larger water source that lots of people use."

"I agree. Then for starters, I'll order the observation device to find anything that meets those parameters around here."

“Please do, Clan.”

Clan began operating her bracelet.

“Please do, Clan”? Huh... Really, what am I doing?

Clan couldn’t help finding the situation funny. She had gone to a backwater planet like Earth explicitly for the purpose of sabotaging Theia’s trial. It was there she came across a strange Neanderthal wearing the Blue Knight’s armor. After piling offense upon offense, she became obsessed with killing him... But before she knew it, they were now working together to save the lives of Forthorthe’s citizens. And what’s more, they might end up changing history together.

Clan wondered repeatedly to herself what she was doing. But now, she was just about as sure as she was unsure. And while she tapped away on her bracelet, silence filled the room. In order to not get in her way, Koutarou sat down on his own bed and just watched her work. Suddenly there was a knock at the door to the room.

“Yes?”

“It’s me.”

As Koutarou answered, Alaia’s voice came from the other side. He hurriedly jumped up from the bed and ran to the door to open it.

“I’m sorry for disturbing you so late at night, Layous-sama.”

“Princess Alaia... Is something the matter?”

“Actually, I came here because I have a request to make.”

Alaia smiled as she said that, but her eyes betrayed the expression of a mischievous child. It was a face that Koutarou hadn’t seen her make before.

“What kind of request?”

“Before that, will you promise to do as I say after you’ve listened to my request?”

Alaia continued smiling.

“That depends on the request...”

“Heehee, then I can’t tell you.”

Alaia seemed to be in awfully high spirits. Koutarou thought it was strange, but he couldn’t imagine the ever-considerate Alaia asking anything unreasonable. As such, he agreed to her terms.

“Very well. If you’ll tell me, I’ll do as you ask.”

“Thank you, Layous-sama.”

Alaia thanked him and walked towards the window in the hallway.

“Layous-sama, that...”

“What?”

Koutarou closed the door and approached Alaia at the window. From the window, he could see a crowd of people dancing in a circle around the plaza.

“That’s...”

“In this village, today marks the beginning of the harvest festival. When the sun sets, it seems to be tradition to go out and dance like that.”

“I see...”

Koutarou remembered thinking the village was especially lively when they first arrived. He’d even noticed the decorations lined up around the village. It was all for the harvest festival.

“So I want to dance there too.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said I want to dance there too.”

Alaia smiled. She seemed to enjoy seeing Koutarou so perplexed.

“You jest, Princess.”

“It is no jest. While it might just be a village harvest festival, a dance is a dance. As a girl of age, I too am interested.”

Alaia put on airs for show and spoke like a lady. Of course, Koutarou was opposed to the idea.

“I am against it, Princess Alaia.”

“Oh, but I’m afraid you’ve already promised to do as I ask.”

Alaia returned to smiling and slightly tilted her head to the side as she looked up at Koutarou. Her mischievous look practically said, “What will do you now?”

“But it is too dangerous for you to go alone.”

“That’s why I am asking a knight such as yourself to be my escort, Lord Veltlion.”

Alaia normally called Koutarou “Layous-sama,” but here she chose to call him Lord Veltlion.

I’ve been had. So that’s what she was planning...

Hearing her address him that way, Koutarou was sure of it. She had been planning on taking him to the dance with her from the start. If she had asked Flair, she most likely would have objected.

Jeez...

That was where Koutarou gave up. He knew this was part of the script.

“I am but a mere local knight. I am hardly worthy of the honor.”

“Even though I may look like this, I grew up roaming the fields and mountains of northern Mastir. I am quite qualified to be called a peasant girl.”

Koutarou responded in accordance with the play, and Alaia spoke her lines just as they’d been written. It made Koutarou feel like he was on stage with Alaia now.

“Just wait one moment, Princess Alaia. I’ll tell Clan that I’m stepping out.”

“Thank you, Layous-sama. Please come back before I get tired of waiting.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

With a wry smile on his face, Koutarou left the smiling Alaia in the hallway and returned to his room. He nearly bumped into Clan right as he entered.

“I heard everything.”

“Good. Then this won’t take long. I’m going out with the princess for a bit.”

“I understand. But please take care.”

“Are you worried about enemies? It should be fine. There was nothing about an attack during the dance in the play.”

“No, that’s not—”

Clan looked worried. After glancing in the direction of Alaia on the other side of the door, she leaned in a little so she could whisper to Koutarou.

“I was thinking about this when I got to the inn, but don’t get too friendly with Alaia-san and the others.”

“Don’t get too friendly?” Koutarou whispered back with a questioning expression. He didn’t understand why Clan would say that.

“That’s right. Eventually you’re going to change places with the real Blue Knight, so things are going to get a little difficult if you get too attached.”

“Okay, that’s fair. I’ll be careful.”

The supporting actor shouldn’t get too full of himself, huh? Well, that’s true...

If Koutarou became too involved with these girls, the real Blue Knight might not be needed by the time he appeared. That would be a problem.

“...Could you cover me with the observation device, just in case?”

“...I understand.”

“Then I’ll be going. I’ll leave the rest to you, Clan.”

“All right. Goodbye, Veltlion.”

Once they were finished discussing things, Koutarou lightly waved to Clan and turned to leave.

It’s possible that...

While looking at Koutarou’s back as he turned away, Clan felt a sense of danger. Not noticing anything, Koutarou disappeared through the door into the hallway.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, Princess Alaia.”

“If you had taken any longer, I would have gone out by myself.”

“You jest a little too much, Princess.”

“Heehee, I was just kidding that time, Layous-sama. Shall we go?”

Meanwhile, Clan was still worried. According to the legend, by the dance at the harvest festival, Alaia was already in love with the Blue Knight. And since Koutarou had gotten between them, he’d stolen the precious time they needed to develop their feelings for each other.

“It’s possible that bringing in the real Blue Knight now might greatly change history...”

The village they were in wasn’t quite large enough to call a town. But during the harvest festival, the population swelled. People gathered from other small villages nearby, and they all celebrated together. Since the inn where Koutarou and the others were staying was on the main street, Koutarou and Alaia were swept away by the crowd the moment they stepped out the door.

“L-Layous-sama! Kyah!”

“Your hand!”

“H-Here!”

In order not to get split up in the crowd, the two held hands. They looked like lovers walking along with their fingers entwined.

“This is quite a surprise, Layous-sama.”

Having been raised as a princess, this was the first time Alaia had ever been in such a large crowd.

“Hahaha, I suppose so, Your Highness.”

But that wasn’t the case for Koutarou, who was just a normal person. While pulling the surprised Alaia towards him, he remembered the fireworks festival in Kisshouharukaze City. The crowd here reminded him of how busy the street by the station had been that night.

“That won’t do, Layous-sama.”

“Hueh?”

Alaia clapped her hand over Koutarou’s mouth. She looked slightly angered

with her cheeks puffed up. She then leaned in and put her mouth close to his ear so she could whisper to him.

“Here you need to call me Signa, not ‘Your Highness.’”

“Ah... I’m sorry.”

“Goodness, the least you can do is say it convincingly.”

Calling her Alaia or Her Highness would attract attention. Alaia was still aware that she was being pursued, so she had decided to use a fake name even before stepping out. That name was Signa. Alaia’s full name was Alaia Kua Mastir Signaria Tio Forthorthe. She had picked “Signa” from Signaria Tio, which meant silvery white snow. It was rather simple, but with a name like that, she wouldn’t raise any suspicion.

“I’ll be more careful from now on, Signa-sama.”

“Can you stop adding ‘-sama’ too? You’ll ruin the festive mood.”

“Then you can do the same?”

“That’s... But Layous-sama is Layous-sama.”

“I don’t understand, Signa-sama.”

“You do understand... Layous-sama, you tease.”

Fortunately, nobody had realized who Alaia was yet. Without modern technology, it wasn’t like there were photos of her circulating the realm. And since this was the harvest festival, many people were dressed up in their best clothing. Because of that, Alaia’s elegant dress and her beautiful silver hair didn’t really stand out. Most of all, nobody expected a princess on the run to appear in a place like this.

“These festivals do get lively, don’t they?”

Koutarou pulled on Alaia’s hand while looking around the area. Aiming to participate in the dance, the two of them headed for the plaza, but it wasn’t easy to make their way through the large crowd.

It’s really just like at a fireworks festival...

Lots of people were pushing and shoving against each other, and the air was

filled with cheerful laughter. Stands lined the streets, and all the children who had been allowed to stay up past bedtime looked at everything in wonder. It seemed a festival was a festival, regardless of the era or planet. This all felt very familiar to Koutarou.

“That’s true...”

Alaia looked at the bustling people filling the street and smiled gently.

“I’m relieved.”

“Huh?”

“I was worried that the lives of the citizens would be in disarray after Maxfern sprung into action. But it looks like they’re all okay...”

Alaia turned towards Koutarou. The look in her eyes indicated this had indeed taken a weight off of her shoulders.

So this is what the legendary princess is truly like...

Seeing her smile, Koutarou honestly felt that Alaia was amazing. If he were in her shoes, he was sure that he would be too obsessed with avenging the death of his parents to take notice of things like this.

So when she said she wanted to go to the dance, it was to make sure of this...

She’d used the dance as a ruse to come out and see how the villagers were doing. That was probably her way of keeping her vassals from worrying. Her ability to be so immensely considerate at her age touched Koutarou’s heart.

“Now let’s go, Signa-sama.”

“Kyah!”

But at the same time, Koutarou pitied Alaia. Despite being around the same age as Koutarou, she was shouldered with an incredible responsibility. Alaia had obviously led a very different life than other girls her age.

Then she should at least have some fun now...

As he thought about her situation, Koutarou instinctively put some strength in his grip on Alaia’s hand.

After entering the plaza, the two of them faced each other in a corner. Since

they were still on the run, it wasn't safe to dance out in the open like the rest of the villagers.

"Please allow me this dance."

"Of course. I am inexperienced when it comes to dancing, so please take it easy on me."

The bonfires that surrounded the plaza colored the scene in orange hues. And after Koutarou and Alaia agreed to dance, the music that had stopped between melodies started up again.

"Your hand."

"Here."

Holding hands, the two brought their bodies closer to one another and began taking rhythmic steps in time with the music. The music was mellow and slow, so even the inexperienced Koutarou managed to keep up.

"You're quite good, Layous-sama."

"You jest. I am just barely able to keep up with the music."

With the hour growing late, the band was starting to switch to slower music. If a fast tune started playing like it had been when they first came out, Koutarou would have a hard time with it.

"It's better for the mood if a man isn't too good at dancing, you see."

"Hearing you say that makes me feel a little better."

"Heehee..."

In contrast, Alaia's steps were masterful. They were as light as a butterfly's fluttering, and as smooth and elegant as silk. At the same time, they were more powerful than a bird soaring through the skies. In a town harvest festival where one really only had to move their body in order to dance, it was as if Alaia alone was waltzing in a royal dance party at a castle.

"That said, it pains me that I'm dragging you down with me."

Koutarou was barely able to keep up with her lead. Despite Theia teaching him the basics of dance, there was a serious difference in their levels of skill.

“A princess being skilled at dancing is the same as a knight being skilled at fighting. You could say it’s professionally required. So please don’t be too worried.”

Still smiling, Alaia whispered into Koutarou’s ear. While they were that close together, there was no need to worry about anyone else overhearing them. That’s why Alaia was so casually able to refer to herself as a princess.

Alaia was good at dancing because she’d had a formal education in dance, as well as plenty of opportunities to practice at political and diplomatic parties. In other words, it was one of her skills used to fight against foreign countries. In that sense, it was indeed comparable to a knight’s skill in battle.



“Actually, Your Highness, just between the two of us, I don’t really like fighting.”

“Heehee. I suspected that might be the case. But just between the two of us, I don’t really like dancing with strangers at dance parties either.”

“I shall lock your secret up in my heart and guard it well.”

“I will do the same... But Layous-sama, I’m not sure what to think of a knight confessing that he doesn’t like fighting to the person he’s promised to protect...”

“You are a tease, Princess.”

“Oh? I’ll have you know that if this were the castle, you’d be imprisoned for offending royalty. Heehee...”

“Haha!”

Koutarou and Alaia continued dancing for a while longer. They smiled and laughed together, temporarily free from their burdens. In this moment they were just a normal boy and girl. They both enjoyed it to the fullest knowing that it would be their only chance to be together like this, their hands held tightly together and their fingers intertwined.

The night grew late almost in the blink of an eye. The band was now paused in order to prepare for the last dance.

“Layous-sama...”

After stopping when the music did, Alaia anxiously looked up at Koutarou while still holding his hands. From the surprising strength of her grip, Koutarou could guess at the unease in her heart.

“What is the matter, Princess Alaia?”

Koutarou stared straight at Alaia and whispered to her. Relieved by the sound of his voice, Alaia’s expression slightly eased up.

“Layous-sama, I... am at a loss.”

She spoke of a worry that she had kept secret.

“What is it that troubles you? If you tell me, I might be able to help.”

“Thank you, Layous-sama.”

Alaia smiled and thanked Koutarou before quickly returning to a serious expression.

“I am hesitant that if we continue this travel and safely reach Pardomshiha territory... is starting a war really the right thing to do?”

“You’re hesitant... Why is that?”

In response to Koutarou’s question, Alaia casually glanced around her.

“Layous-sama, look at our surroundings. Even though the emperor has died, the citizens’ lives haven’t changed. The people in the villages can still smile. But if I start a war to defeat Maxfern, it will come at the cost of those smiles.”

Alaia was worried about the chaos a civil war would spread through the country. If she raised a new army to fight against the old Forthorthian army now under Maxfern’s control, it would tear the country apart. Alaia was at a loss, unsure as to whether or not there was any meaning in sacrificing the peaceful daily lives of the citizens to defeat Maxfern.

That said, it wasn’t a worry she could openly confess to her friends. It was obvious that if she consulted with Flair who was very loyal to the royal families, her response would be that Maxfern should be defeated. If she asked her best friend Fauna who was a servant of the Goddess of Dawn, her response would be that justice should be served. As such, this was a problem she’d been wrestling with all alone until Koutarou appeared.

“But Your Highness, Maxfern is a criminal.”

Although Koutarou hadn’t said it out loud, Maxfern had murdered Alaia and Charl’s parents, the emperor and empress. Koutarou wanted to know what she thought about that.

“I know. But if he can establish a good government, I won’t mind. What’s important isn’t my pride, but the lives of the citizens. Isn’t that right, Lord Layous Fatra Veltlion?”

Alaia gritted her teeth. While she meant what she said, it was still painful for her.

“Your Highness...”

She’s trying to ensure the happiness of the citizens, even if she’s denied justice for the death of her parents...

Hearing Alaia’s determination, Koutarou felt humbled. Alaia must have hated Maxfern for killing her parents. And she must have felt that Maxfern should be punished for using a cowardly method such as assassination to take over the country. But more than all that, what she really wanted was to protect the everyday lives of her people, even if they wouldn’t be her people anymore. To Koutarou, Alaia was as noble and as beautiful as she could be. So much so that he hesitated to even speak.

“I will say this much, Princess, knowing that it is disrespectful.”

Koutarou had to tell Alaia to strike down Maxfern. If he didn’t, the history of this world would greatly change, and he would without a doubt be unable to return to his own world. This was a much more serious matter than preventing the poisoning of a water source.

“It’s as you say, Your Highness. There is nothing more important than protecting the lives of the citizens.”

But even knowing that, Koutarou told Alaia that she was right to feel as she did. Alaia’s love for the citizens and her heart trying to give up its hate for Maxfern and Grevanas kept him from saying anything else.

“Layous-sama...”

Alaia’s eyes began tearing up. She had believed that she was right to feel the way she did, but even then, she wanted to hear it from someone. That she was right. That what she was doing wasn’t out of self-righteousness. That it wasn’t because she was afraid of fighting. So when Koutarou agreed with her, her heart trembled. She was overcome with joy that someone had granted her wish.

“Certainly... if you were to say that in the imperial court, you might be imprisoned...”

Alaia wiped her tears away, but it was no use. Her tears kept flowing no matter how many times she wiped her eyes. They glimmered orange in the light

of the festival bonfires.

“Your Highness, to a model knight, his sword is everything. Yet even if that sword were to break, so long as the oath sworn upon it remains unbroken, then the sword is still considered unbroken too. In fact, if a knight can uphold their oath despite their sword breaking, they should take pride in that.”

For a model knight, his sword was his soul. But that was only because the sword was emblematic of the vow sworn upon it. That was really what was important.

Isn’t that right, Theia?

A girl with golden hair had taught Koutarou that. And in order to adhere to those teachings, that was the only answer he could give Alaia now.

“The oath of my parents... My oath too is to protect the lives of the citizens.”

“And even though they may be gone now—”

“As long as the citizens are happy, it will be like they’re still here. And I will take pride in that they lived according to their oath...”

“Yes. It’s just as you say, Your Highness.”

Koutarou nodded firmly at Alaia. He no longer had any hesitation.

This truly is the Silver Princess. But that’s why...!

Koutarou firmly made up his mind. Though he might have been overstepping his place as the Blue Knight’s substitute, he was determined to protect Alaia no matter what. That might have been the moment when Koutarou swore allegiance to Alaia out of his own free will.

“Please rest easy, Your Highness. No matter what you decide, I will definitely protect you.”

“Depending on the circumstances, I may no longer be a princess. I might become just a powerless little girl.”

Alaia wiped away more tears and smiled. She was trying to say that she wouldn’t mind even if he abandoned her.

“Even if you become a normal girl by adhering to your oath, you will forever

be my highly esteemed lord.”

Even then, Koutarou’s answer didn’t change. The girl who had taught Koutarou the way of the knight would never forgive him if he abandoned Alaia.

“Thank you, Layous-sama... I will take pride in those words for the rest of my life...”

Alaia pressed her face into Koutarou’s shoulder as her own shoulders began trembling. Koutarou thought that she was crying, but the band had just started playing again and he couldn’t hear her to tell for sure.

Koutarou and Alaia then spent some time just standing there as they were, Alaia with her face buried in Koutarou’s shoulder. Koutarou simply held her hands and looked up into the starry sky above.

Sorry, everyone... It doesn’t look like I’ll be coming back...

As he stared up into the night sky, he apologized to everyone he knew would be waiting for him back home.

When the last song of the night reached its midway point, Alaia finally lifted her head and looked up at Koutarou.

“Layous-sama, you really are different...”

As she said that, Alaia’s eyes revealed more emotion than ever before. They conveyed feelings of deep trust and affection. It was at that moment that Alaia began realizing that she was in love with Koutarou.

“I was born in the country, so I am aware that my dancing is bad.”

“Heehee, no, that’s not what I meant, Layous-sama.”

Alaia smiled again, but this time it was a defenseless smile that she had only ever shown her parents and Charl before. Koutarou felt like his heart had been pierced when he saw it.

“You are without a doubt a Forthorthian knight. But something about your heart is different. Without losing your mysterious kindness, you are still a strong and proud knight.”

“That’s...”

That was probably because Koutarou had been born into a country that had never known war in his lifetime. He had the gentle kind of heart Alaia desired. But that heart was naive in the ways of war, and that was a fatal weakness on the battlefield. Koutarou, however, had been given extraordinary power. He had the armor that Theia had given him and the gauntlet he had borrowed from Kiriha. He had been able to survive with those. And it was with his naive heart that he stood before Alaia now. Through a series of coincidences, the boy named Satomi Koutarou was able to meet Alaia without changing.

“I am envious of the person you truly serve. Just how did they make someone like you into a knight?”

“Well, at first they tried to kill me.”

“My... Then that truly would be impossible for me, heehee...”

Eventually they began moving to the music once more. More than half of the last song was already over, so there wasn’t much time left to dance. But dance they did, and all who beheld them that night were treated to a wonderful sight that they would never forget.

The Beginning of the Legend

The village's harvest festival spanned the course of three days. As today was now the second day, people had gotten up in the early morning to prepare for it.

"Zzzzz... Zzzzz... Zzzzz..."

Koutarou was not one of them. He was such a heavy sleeper, in fact, that he continued to snooze despite his bustling surroundings.

"Wake up, Veltlion! Hurry and wake up, you!"

"Ow! What are you doing, Theia?!"

However, after taking a powerful blow square to the chin, not even Koutarou could remain asleep. He came to, instinctively snapping at the usual culprit for such a thing.

"I am not Theiamillis-san! It's me, Clariossa! Hurry up and open your eyes!"

"Hmm? H-Huh...?"

Counter to his sleepy expectations, the person he saw in front of him wasn't Theia. It was a girl wearing glasses.

"Keep it together! This is an emergency!"

"Emergency...?"

Koutarou was still in a daze, but seeing Clan's serious expression and hearing the desperation in her voice woke him up completely.

"Clan...?"

"That's right, Veltlion! Something terrible has happened!"

"Something terrible?"

Now that he had his wits about them, Koutarou remembered the situation they were in, and the significance of Clan using the word "emergency" finally sank in.

“What is it, Clan? What happened?!”

Seeing Koutarou come to his senses, Clan felt a little relieved, but she continued talking at the same rapid pace.

“It’s terrible! The people are collapsing all over the place!”

“What?!”

“They’re all in pain and have high fevers!”

“You don’t mean...?!”

“That’s right! Minister Maxfern has already poisoned the water source!”

Any remaining desire Koutarou had to sleep vanished thanks to Clan’s report. She explained that the first ones to come down with symptoms were the elderly and infants. Because of their low tolerances, their conditions grew worse over the course of the night and they developed high fevers and chills. Though the village doctors and priests were taking care of them, the number of patients just kept increasing. By the time the sun rose, normal, healthy adults were coming down with the same symptoms. People were getting sick one after another, and eventually even the doctors and priests took ill. When Koutarou woke up, patients were lying all over the village. By then, the large majority of the villagers had come down with the same thing.

The poison that was plaguing the village wasn’t reacting to any kind of treatment. No antidote, medicine, or even spiritual energy technique would work. No one who had displayed symptoms had yet recovered on their own either. Everyone was still suffering.

Alaia and the others had begun showing the same symptoms too. The first one to collapse was the young Charl. By dawn she had developed a high fever and was in pain, and after her were Alaia and Fauna. Even Flair who had bravely resisted the symptoms was laid down on a bed just moments ago.

But fortunately, neither Clan nor Koutarou seemed much affected. Koutarou showed no sign of any symptoms at all, while Clan was only running a low-grade fever. As such, the two of them were taking care of Alaia and the others.

With a staff in his hand, Koutarou approached one of the beds.

“Caris, I have something I want to ask you.”

“...Huh?”

Lying in that bed was the magician Caris. When she began suffering from the fever, they’d unbound her and put her in bed to rest. And the staff in Koutarou’s hand was the one they’d confiscated from her when she was first captured. It worked as a way to amplify Caris’s magic when she cast spells.

“I’ll free you and give you back your staff. In return, can you try removing the poison with your magic?”

Koutarou was willing to release Caris and return her staff if she would attempt to use her powers to help those who had fallen ill. It was that kind of deal. Normally freeing an enemy spy like Caris would be unthinkable, but things were getting desperate. The village was overflowing with patients and cases had started turning fatal.

“You... want me to heal people...?”

“Yeah, it’s not a bad deal for you. You’ll need to treat yourself too after all.”

Caris was meekly staring up at Koutarou. Her face was getting red, and it was obvious that she was suffering from fever and chills herself. Koutarou looked almost as if he were praying as he stared at Caris.

“...I understand. I’ll give it a try...”

Seeing the earnestness in his eyes, Caris accepted his offer.

“You will?!”

“Yeah...”

He sounds like he’s telling the truth...

Caris nodded and pulled herself up. Koutarou hurriedly rushed over and supported her.

“Then please get to it right away. You can start on yourself.”

“I understand.”

While helping Caris sit up, Koutarou handed her the staff. She took it from him and held it in both hands. She then closed her eyes to focus.

“...Blue Knight, support me like this for a while...”

“Leave it to me.”

She put the tip of the staff to her forehead and slowly began reciting an incantation.

“Gather, spirits of life. Come together and nourish, like a wide river enriching the earth. Pour that rich power into my body, fill my weakening life, and dispel this wicked malady.”

Caris was speaking in the language that was used for ceremonies in Forthorthe during this time period. The complex grammar and expressions guided the mana within her and in her surroundings to focus into her staff. The gathered mana made the staff shine blue so clearly that even Koutarou could tell it was working.

Wow, so this is real magic...!

It wasn’t the first time Koutarou had seen Caris use magic, but it was his first time seeing her use it right in front of him with her staff. He was rapt as he watched this mysterious spectacle unfold before his very eyes.

“Life to life, death to death. Divide the coming shore and correct my fate!”

When Caris finished her incantation, the blue light from her staff enveloped her body. It was a sign the spell had activated.

“Phew...”

Caris let out a heavy sigh. As she did, the blue light enveloping her body disappeared. Guessing that the spell was now complete, Koutarou, slightly excited, asked her about the results.

“So how did it go, Caris?”

However, in contrast to Koutarou’s enthusiasm, Caris regrettably shook her head.

“...Sadly, it didn’t work. I tried using the highest class of healing magic I know,

but there's no change in my condition. It might not be a normal poison or disease..."

"I see..."

Koutarou's shoulders drooped, and Caris's body went limp in his arms. The staff fell out of her hands and onto the floor. After gently laying her back down on the bed, Koutarou put a wet rag on her forehead.

"You did well, Caris. Thank you. Now rest."

"Yeah..."

Caris quickly closed her eyes.

"And when you can move, feel free to leave. I'll let everyone know."

"You're a sincere man..."

"In return, just don't do anything to anyone, okay?"

"I know... You really are a strange one..."

She said nothing more after that. She was either sleeping or was in too much pain to speak. Koutarou couldn't tell, but he had no intention of forcing a girl in her condition to talk anymore either way. He left Caris and went to check on the other girls.

"The Blue Knight stole the antidote from the enemy and used it to treat the afflicted, but at this rate... people are actually going to die..."

Alaia, Charl, Fauna, Lidith, Flair... Counting Caris, there were six girls lying down on the beds in the room. They were all groaning from their high fevers and chills, and it was easy to tell what would happen if their conditions continued to get worse.

"Blue Knight..."

Realizing Koutarou was close by, Charl reached out with her hand. He quickly took it and was aghast at her high temperature.

"Princess Charl, don't push yourself too hard."

"Heh, I'm fine. This is nothing..."

Despite her fever, Charl grinned and giggled courageously. She was determined not to worry Koutarou. Koutarou saw right through her, however, and her bravery was almost enough to drive him to tears.

“I’ll be well soon, so when I am, play with me some more...”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“Heehee...”

The smile on Charl’s lips slowly faded as she lost consciousness.

What kind of idiot would just spread poison around indiscriminately?!

Seeing Charl pass out and lose strength, Koutarou boiled with rage towards Maxfern, a man he had never even met. But the truth was that he was also angry at himself for being unable to do anything.

“Damn it!”

Koutarou’s fist slammed into the table. There was nothing else nearby he could take out his anger on.

“I know it’s rough, Veltlion, but calm down a little.”

“Clan?!”

Koutarou had been so lost in his emotions that he didn’t notice Clan had entered the room until she called out to him.

“I can’t calm down in this situation! Everyone’s in pain!”

“I understand how you feel, but everyone’s sleeping now, so quiet down.”

“S-Sorry...”

Trying to calm himself, Koutarou took several deep breaths. Satisfied with that, Clan explained why she’d come.

“Veltlion, I’ve discovered what the poison really is.”

“Really?!”

Koutarou’s eyes opened wide in surprise. He instinctively leaned in towards Clan. He was hoping that this would lead to them being able to come up with a treatment.

“Yes. But to be accurate, it’s not poison.”

“It’s not poison...? What do you mean?”

“It’s an infectious virus with a very short incubation period. I’m sure the people of this period called it poison because they didn’t know any better.”

Clan had left Koutarou to nurse Alaia and the others while she was in the other room, analyzing the poison. She investigated samples gathered from the patients and the drinking water, trying to find out what poison Maxfern had used.

Though it might not be apt to call it fortunate, they already knew that the poison was coming from the drinking water, so it wasn’t too hard to identify the cause. The device that Clan had summoned from the Cradle to analyze the samples easily revealed the poison’s true colors, although even Clan was surprised when she learned that it was actually a protein containing RNA.

“So you’re saying it’s a disease?!”

“Yes. There were large amounts of the virus in the drinking water. Since the incubation period is so short, it essentially appears as if the people have been poisoned.”

The virus had a very high replication speed, and symptoms would begin to manifest only a few hours after it entered the body. Since there were almost no diseases known to spread that quickly in this day and age, the people naturally assumed it was poison.

The people of this time period didn’t even know what a virus was, so they certainly didn’t have a treatment for it. Even when they tried to heal it using magic, there was no effect because they didn’t know exactly what needed to be removed from their bodies. So their only conclusion was that it was an unknown poison, meaning the treatment options were rather limited.

“So can you treat it?!”

To Koutarou, finding a cure was far more important than what the virus was or where it had come from. And with that mentality, he skipped over several important questions about how this had happened and went straight to asking Clan what he really wanted to know most.

“That would be hard. There aren’t enough materials available to synthesize an antiviral drug. It would have been simple even a thousand years from now...”

Since Clan had already been able to identify the structure of the virus, she could synthesize a serum to inhibit its effects. She had the technology to make that happen, but she couldn’t get her hands on the ingredients she would need to do it in this time period. It was possible to gather the base materials one at a time, but that would take too much time to be an effective treatment for the people who were already suffering.

“Realistically speaking, there are only two options.”

Clan held up two fingers in front of Koutarou’s face.

“What are they?!”

“The first is to steal the cure from the enemy like your play says. That would be the fastest option.”

“What’s the other?”

“The other option is extremely risky and there’s no guarantee it’ll work, but __”

While Clan was about to explain the second option to Koutarou, they heard a shrill voice from outside.

“It’s the army! The army has come!”

A group of several soldiers led by a knight could be seen just outside the village.

The Forthorthian army had come. The force belonged to a band of knights known to be very loyal to Maxfern, the Melcemhein family. The commander appeared to be one of their squires. His force consisted of about thirty commoner soldiers and five magicians. It was a relatively small troop for what squires were capable of leading, but it potentially gave them better mobility considering their mission.

They set up camp a distance from the village, put up billboards nearby, and issued a decree from the government. It was a demand for the capture and

delivery of Alaia, who was believed to be in the area. The reward for bringing Alaia to them would be the antidote.

Since this region was part of the Mastir territory, the citizens here were known for their loyalty to the royal families. It wouldn't have been hard to imagine that they would spurn any demands to hunt down Alaia under normal circumstances. That was why they'd gone to the trouble of poisoning the water supply first. Regardless of their allegiance to the throne, the citizens would be eager to hunt down Alaia if it meant saving their sick wife or child.

After Koutarou explained what was going on, Alaia quickly made up her mind.

"Let's surrender to them..."

She lifted her weak and shaking body ravaged by high fever, and stood up while grabbing on to a nearby pillar.

"Y-You can't, Your Highness! This is a trap!"

Flair objected right away. Desperate, she too got out of her bed and stood in Alaia's way. The other girls also voiced their objections from their beds.

"You can't, Alaia-sama! I think this is a trap too!"

"I'm against it too! These people spread poison just to capture you, Alaia-sama! Who knows what they would do to you?!"

"My uncle is a dangerous man. I'm not sure if they would hand over the antidote even after they get their hands on you, Your Highness..."

However, none of what they said changed Alaia's mind.

"Without the antidote, we're all going to die anyway. In that case, surrendering and getting the antidote as quickly as possible is the best option."

The poison—or more accurately, the virus—had already claimed the lives of several people. They were all elderly folks who were at high risk, but if the situation continued on like it was, even the young and strong would end up succumbing to the same fate. She couldn't put the village through that just so she could survive for a few more days. That was Alaia's primary reason for wanting to surrender.

And I have to protect Charl, no matter what...

But more personally, Alaia was worried about Charl. She was all Alaia had left of her family. If she lost Charl, she would lose her reason to live. She would rather surrender to get the antidote and save Charl. By doing that, at least Charl would survive.

I'll leave the rest to you, Layous-sama...

Alaia stared at Koutarou without saying a word. She believed that Koutarou would protect Charl, even if she wasn't there. And it was exactly her faith in that that drove her decision to surrender.

"Your Highness..."

Koutarou realized that Alaia put Charl ahead of herself, so he understood how she felt. It hit awfully close to home. Koutarou only had his father left, and he was extremely sympathetic to Alaia in her current position.

"Veltlion, you need to stop Her Highness! Surely you don't want to see Her Highness in danger either!"

Flair petitioned Koutarou for his help. By now, even Flair had begun putting her trust in him. After the fight with the mountain bandits the other day, the events at the Mastir checkpoint, seeing his relationship with Charl, and even after watching him dance with Alaia the night before, she had genuinely started to trust Koutarou. She knew Alaia might listen to the Blue Knight even if she didn't listen to anyone else, and that was exactly why she wanted Koutarou to try and stop her.

"Layous-sama..."

Alaia looked at Koutarou with pleading eyes. She weakly clasped her hands together as if asking for something.

Even if it costs you your life, huh?

Looking at Alaia, Koutarou remembered what they'd talked about at the festival.

"Lady Pardomshiha, I support Princess Alaia's decision."

"Layous-sama!"

Alaia's expression eased up. Despite being stricken with illness, her smile was as beautiful as falling silvery white snow.

"Veltlion, what is the meaning of this?!"

Flair lashed out at Koutarou. She was also suffering from the disease, but her anger gave her the temporary power to overcome her symptoms.

"Calm down, Lady Pardomshiha. I'm not suggesting that we just hand over Princess Alaia."

"What?!"

"After Her Highness surrenders and we get our hands on the antidote, we raid the enemy base and rescue her. In our current situation, it's the only way we can save both Princess Alaia and Princess Charl."

Flair flinched at the mention of Charl's name. She then turned to look at her as she slept. There was no denying how grim things were looking for them.

"What do you think, Clan?"

"Lord Veltlion, I agree with you. I've entertained various possibilities, but I think that plan has the highest odds in our favor."

Clan agreed with Koutarou. She had been weighing different strategies in her head, but the most feasible plan was the one that Koutarou had suggested.

"B-But how do you know if we'll succeed?! If things take a turn for the worse, we'll be in trouble!"

"I don't know, Lady Pardomshiha. But I can swear to you on this sword that I will rescue Her Highness."

Koutarou lightly patted Saguratin hanging at his waist. Seeing that, Alaia also recalled their discussion during the dance. She flashed a small smile.

"Even so, I will believe in you, Layous-sama."

"Please wait, Your Highness! They have more than thirty men! Even if we get the antidote, it will be next to impossible to save you on our own!"

"I'm sorry, Flair, but my knight has sworn on his sword. With an oath like that, I'm obligated to put my faith in him."

Alaia knew just how much Koutarou valued Saguratin, and now he had sworn on it that he would rescue her. That meant he would come for her no matter what.

That's right. Even though his sword may break...

Truthfully, Alaia didn't mind if Koutarou failed to rescue her. Whether he succeeded or not wouldn't affect how she felt. She was just happy he'd been willing to swear on his sword that he would come for her. But really, as long as he protected Charl, she was prepared to accept whatever fate may hold in store for her. She believed that she could die in peace as long as Koutarou kept Charl safe.

"Let's go, Layous-sama."

"As you wish, my princess."

And so Alaia left the room with a smile on her face, feeling neither fear nor despair.

The commander of the army troops that had been sent to the village, a squire from Melcemhein named Dextro, was a cruel man. As the third son of a poor farmer family, he'd relied on any means necessary to move up in the ranks. And it was exactly because of his reputation that he'd been appointed commander of the operation to poison the water supply and flush out Alaia. A normal knight might have hesitated at such an order, but not Dextro. He saw this mission as a chance to be promoted, and that was all that mattered to him.

"Heh, what an easy job..."

He had been given a bottle full of black liquid from Maxfern, and poured it into the wells and nearby rivers just yesterday. There were plenty of people out and about to celebrate the harvest festival, so no one had thought the presence of Dextro and his men was suspicious. As the night carried on, the poison began to take effect. Contaminating the water supply made it all too easy to target the entire village since everyone there depended on that water to sustain themselves. All the while, Dextro was simply resting in his tent. Even now he was lounging there and drinking alcohol.

“Dextro-sama.”

The soldier serving as his adjutant approached and called to him from the entrance of his tent.

“What?”

Dextro tossed his cup aside and growled at the man, upset at the interruption.

“We’ve found Alaia-sama. She is currently on her way here.”

However, after hearing what his adjutant had come to tell him, a smile appeared on Dextro’s lips. It was a cruel smile, reminiscent of a cat enjoying playing with its prey.

“Stupid. You don’t need to call her ‘Alaia-sama.’”

“But...”

“She’s an evil woman who killed the emperor and empress after they found out that she had been embezzling public funds. There’s no need to address her as ‘-sama.’”

“I-I see...”

Dextro cackled as he looked at his hesitant subordinate. He knew that Maxfern and Grevanas were behind everything. But he was complicit in their doings and pointed his finger at Alaia too. The reason for that was simple. He was more likely to get promoted that way.

“Well then, let’s go greet the former princess.”

Dextro exited the tent while laughing. In contrast to just a moment ago, he was rather cheerful. Since he was normally in a bad mood, however, it was something of an unsettling sight to his adjutant.

As Alaia walked down the main street of the village, the people flocked there made way for her. Despite being ravaged by disease, Alaia walked down the street in a dignified manner. She appeared almost like a certain prophet who parted the sea.

Koutarou and Clan followed right behind her. Since they were the only two who could properly move, they were the only ones accompanying Alaia now. Flair, Fauna, and Lidith were all worried enough that they tagged along too, but they had blended in with the crowd.

“Princess Alaia, don’t push yourself too hard.”

“Thank you, Layous-sama, but I don’t want them to think I’ve gotten feeble because I’m walking too slowly. I can’t show weakness at a time like this.”

Koutarou was worried for Alaia’s health as she walked along at her normal pace despite her condition, but she courageously shook her head at his worry. It was a cardinal rule not to show any weakness during negotiations. Until she got her hands on the medicine, Alaia was planning on fighting back her illness through sheer willpower.

“Besides, if I stagger, the citizens will worry.”

“Your Highness...”

Koutarou was in awe at Alaia’s gallant determination.

So this is what royalty is like...

People continued to crowd the street. Most were people seeking medicine for their collapsed family members, but there were also citizens who were loyal to the royal families and had come out to show their support for Alaia. For their sake, Alaia was especially determined to show them her strength.

“They’ve come, Lord Veltlion.”

Clan pointed ahead of them. Not far down the road were soldiers approaching from the entrance of the village. At their head was a lone knight wearing heavy, metal armor. In his entourage were thirty armed soldiers and five magicians in black robes holding wooden staffs. In total, their troop was 36 strong. It was more than enough of a force to meet Koutarou, Clan, and Alaia.

“So you’re Alaia?”

Despite standing before a princess, the knight didn’t bow his head out of respect. Instead he proudly puffed up his chest and looked down on her as he spat out uncouth words.

“And who might you be?”

Despite his rude behavior, Alaia didn’t so much as flinch. Her voice and expression were stern. Her demeanor was completely different from when she interacted with Koutarou or Charl. She looked like a princess ready to face her enemy.

“Copper Knight Dextro, and I belong to Melcemhein’s band of knights. I’m currently a squire, but I plan on becoming an established knight soon enough.”

“At this rate, you’ll be a squire forever.”

“Well said. As expected from a former princess. But I’ll become an established knight once I take you back with me.”

Alaia was still calm, but Koutarou was angered by the way he was speaking to Alaia.

Former princess?!

“Calm down, Veltlion,” Clan whispered scoldingly.

If she hadn’t grabbed Koutarou and stopped him, he might have taken a swing at Dextro.

“Heh, don’t get so angry, Blue Knight.”

Dextro laughed and sneered at Koutarou. Perhaps despite his intentions, turning his attention to Koutarou actually helped calm him down. He didn’t really care if he was looked down on; he had only gotten angry because Dextro was being disrespectful to Alaia.

“Sorry, Clan.”

“Please try not to do anything reckless.”

Sensing that Koutarou had calmed down, Clan let go of him.

“Oh, so you’re completely reliant on women?”

“Yeah, almost the same way you’re totally dependent on Maxfern.”

Koutarou was something of a rowdy boy and had been in his fair share of fights. He was used to this kind of taunting back and forth. In a strange way, he was in his comfort zone now. Really, he felt like he’d stepped into the ring and

was only just starting to flex his muscles.

“What was that, you bastard?!”

Dextro was now the one incensed as he glared at Koutarou. He’d grown up believing that power was everything, and he’d used that power to fight for his position. Hearing Koutarou suggest he’d gotten his title by relying on Maxfern was infuriating.

“Calm down, Dextro. If you’re planning on becoming an established knight, you can’t lose your cool over a petty insult.”

“Tch... Whatever.”

After Alaia pointed that out, Dextro clicked his tongue and his smug grin slowly resurfaced.

So he’s the type that gets emotional, but doesn’t totally lose control... He’ll be a tough opponent to deal with.

Koutarou analyzed Dextro’s character from their argument. It was important to him to know his opponent before walking into a fight.

“Let’s cut the greetings here. Come this way, Alaia.”

“You will hand over the antidote, right?”

“If you come with me.”

“Then it looks like I don’t have a choice.”

Alaia nodded at Dextro and turned back towards Koutarou and Clan.

“I’ll be going now, Layous-sama,” she said as if nothing was wrong. “I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“I’ll come get you right away.”

“Thank you.”

Alaia responded to Koutarou’s whisper with a smile, then turned towards Dextro again.

“Have you said your farewells?”

“I only ordered them to have my favorite kurka fruit ready for me when I

return.”

“You’re quite the woman. I like it!”

Alaia began walking towards the laughing Dextro. It was hard to believe that she was desperately ill looking at her now. She was radiating power and nobility.

“Alaia-sama...”

“How sad...”

The citizens seemed to feel much the same way. Sighs were coming from the crowd here and there, and most of the murmuring voices expressed concern for Alaia’s future.

“I’ve come, Dextro.”

Alaia quickly closed the dozen or so meters between her and Dextro.

“Good.”

Dextro grabbed her arm and held on with a strong grip so that Alaia couldn’t shake him off.

Ugh...

Although they were both knights, his touch was almost unbearable compared to Koutarou’s.

“Now, Dextro, give them the antidote you promised.”

She was screaming on the inside, but Alaia spoke in a dignified manner. Even now she refused to break down.

Even though it may cost me my life...!

What kept her strong was the talk she’d had with Koutarou the previous night.

“You’ve captured me now, so there’s no need to make anyone else suffer, is there?”

“That’s true. All right, men!”

What’s going on?

Koutarou sensed something ominous from Dextro's smile. He felt like he was staring into something terribly dark.

"Kill Alaia's followers! Charl too! And if anyone else gets in your way, kill them too!"

"What?!"

Alaia's expression finally betrayed her emotions. Seeing that, Dextro's lips twisted into a dark, eerie grin that sent chills down Alaia's spine.

"That's right, Alaia! That's exactly the face I wanted to see you make!"

"Wait, Dextro! What happened to handing over the antidote?!"

"What antidote?"

"No... You don't mean...!"

Panic, fear, and despair made their mark on Alaia's face. She knew what Dextro was going to say.

"It doesn't exist. It never did. But if I had just said that, you wouldn't have shown me that face of yours, now would you?"

"I..."

Alaia was at a loss for words. Instead, it was Koutarou that spoke up.

"You spread something that you have no way of treating?!"

"What are you talking about? All you had to do was not drink any of the polluted water."

Dextro seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself.

"How could you..."

Alaia, who had behaved courageously up until now, rapidly began losing strength. Her knees gave out. She had been so determined not to cry, but tears now streamed down her cheeks.

Charl will... Flair, Fauna, Lidith... The villagers... Everyone will die...!

Alaia was about to lose everything she wanted to protect. What she had sworn to protect. Everything she had done would all be for naught. Despair

wasn’t powerful enough of a word to describe how she felt. It was like her entire world had been snatched away from her. Weak, she had nothing left to support her and she slumped to the ground.

“Why... Why would you do something so horrible? Why, Maxfern...?”

Alaia lowered her head and shed bitter tears. They trickled down her cheeks to her chin, then tumbled down to the dry ground below where they were absorbed into the earth. As she saw even her tears disappear, Alaia felt even more helpless. She was overwhelmed by the feeling that everything was useless.

“Heh, that’s simple. It was to capture you. And it also serves as an example. With a display like this, any idiot will learn what awaits them if they resist. Although since it’s a chance to get promoted, I don’t want it to stop with just one village.”

Dextro was callous. His impudent words and merciless ridicule butchered Alaia’s heart into pieces.

“Of course, since there’s only one of you, I might need to crush a lot more villages for my next promotion. Ahahaha, muahahaha!”

“Hic... Hn... Hnngh... Waaaaaaaaah!”

Crouched down on the spot, Alaia finally began sobbing. All hope was lost and there was nothing that could be done. Not even the legendary princess could do anything but cry.

“There’s no antidote?!”

“Then what?! We’re all going to die?!”

“I don’t want to die! Why do we all have to die?!”

“At least save the children, I beg you!”

As if responding to Alaia’s cries, panic spread through the gathered crowd. And as soldiers approached to cut down Alaia’s party, the panic escalated and the main street fell into chaos.

“Ahahahaha! Muahahaha! Kill, kill, kill!”

Dextro's loud, laughing voice filled the street as all 35 of his men marched on the town in an orderly fashion. They were planning on going through each home to find Alaia's party. At this rate, Alaia's friends, still weakened by the virus, would be hunted down and slaughtered. Some of the panicking villagers would be mercilessly cut down in the process. And those who were lucky enough to survive the raid would still eventually die from the virus. It seemed no one could escape the fate that would befall this village now. Corpses would line the streets by morning.

"Clan, don't stop me this time."

"I won't stop you, Veltlion. I will only give you orders."

However, there were still those who were willing to fight. A knight in blue armor, and a girl with glasses. They were vastly outnumbered by Dextro's troops, but neither one seemed intimidated. They both bravely stood in the soldiers' way.

"Layous Fatra Veltlion."

"Yes."

"In this urgent situation without an empress, I, Princess Clariossa, will act in her place."

With a metallic ringing sound, Koutarou unsheathed his golden sword. He traced a graceful arc in the air with the tip of the blade and then pointed it at the approaching men. Drawn by the ringing sound, everyone turned towards the knight brandishing his sword.

"This is a royal command. As a knight of Forthorthe, do what you must!"

"As you wish, my princess! I will do so wholeheartedly!"

This was the first time the legendary hero Layous Fatra Veltlion appeared to the people of Forthorthe.



“Curse you, you contemptible dastards, poisoning a river to capture a single woman! That is unforgivable! I’ll have your blood stain my sword!”

Koutarou channeled his anger into his sword and used it to put pressure on the 36 enemies in front of him. The words he chose mirrored the Blue Knight’s lines in the play, but Koutarou no longer cared about that. He was too angry.

I will save you right away, Princess Alaia!

Koutarou directed his rage at Dextro, the one responsible for spreading disease to capture Alaia, and at Maxfern, the one who had given him that order. But the greatest horror of all was learning that it had no cure. It had already started to take the lives of the elderly, and at this rate, many more people would die. That included Alaia and young Charl. There was no forgiveness in Koutarou’s heart for the men who’d committed such a terrible deed.

Meanwhile, Alaia was currently captured by Dextro, and Koutarou couldn’t tolerate that either. Imagining Alaia’s feelings as she so bravely walked over to Dextro of her own free will and how she must have felt when Dextro took sick pleasure in trampling those feelings, Koutarou couldn’t stand it. He wouldn’t wait another moment to save her.

“Stupid! What can you do on your own? Oh right, I suppose even dogs can bark! Hahaha!”

Dextro sneered at Koutarou. He didn’t think Koutarou stood a chance against so many men on his own.

“That’s where you’re wrong. Unfortunately for you, I’m not alone!”

With a hint of a smile on his lips, Koutarou dashed forward. He was planning on tangling with the 36 men in front of him.

That’s right! I have the strength they’ve given me!

The first thing Koutarou did after breaking into run was unleash the power in his armor.

“Activate battle mode!”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Obeying Koutarou's order, the armor paused all nonessential operations and focused its resources into combat functions.

"Select your weapon."

"Go with one I always use!"

"Understood. Activating sonic impact barrier."

The sword in Koutarou's hands began quietly growling. With a direct hit, the barrier surrounding the sword would knock out the enemy without killing them. It had quickly grown to be Koutarou's favored method of attack.

"Information: The enemy force consists of 36 people. Breakdown: One heavy infantry unit, twenty regular infantrymen, ten archers, and five unknown units."

"The unknown five are magicians. You can assume that they'll be in charge of bombardment and diversion!"

"Understood. Reassigning target tags. Defining the five unknown units as magicians."

Clan assisted Koutarou through his armor. Using her bracelet, she adjusted the armor's settings and then pulled out her own weapon through a black hole in the air.

"Don't kill them, Clan!"

"I know!"

Clan now had in her hands an oddly blocky gun. In modern Forthorthe, it was commonly known as a stun rifle. Since its bullets unleashed high-voltage shocks, it was a convenient weapon capable of knocking out its targets instantly.

The reason Koutarou and Clan didn't carelessly kill their enemies was partly because they knew if they accidentally killed people important in the war, history would change. But most of all, they simply didn't want to kill citizens of Forthorthe. That was also Alaia's wish. And in Koutarou's case, he believed that Theia would have wanted the same thing.

"Fire! Turn them into pin cushions!"

Dextro, on the other hand, was quite intent on killing Koutarou and Clan.

Instead of keeping quiet and just watching as Koutarou rushed up to him, he ordered his archers to attack. Obeying Dextro's command, the archers surrounding him drew their large bows and fired their arrows at Koutarou all at once.

"I'll leave the arrows to you."

"Understood. Deploying barrier."

As ten arrows sailed at Koutarou, translucent white hexagonal tiles appeared around him. Each arrow smashed into a tile and bounced off.

"Clan, you deal with the guys with bows! We don't want any stray arrows!"

"Got it!"

Clan agreed to Koutarou's plan and readied her rifle. The rifle, linked to her bracelet, began automatically taking aim at the archers. Since she and Koutarou were being protected by barriers, they didn't really need to worry about the arrows, but they wanted to prevent any stray ones from flying into the crowd.

"The arrows have no effect?! Then, magicians— Damn, he's fast!"

The archers had proved ineffective, so Dextro wanted the magicians to attack Koutarou with their magic. But with the armor in battle mode, Koutarou was moving faster than anyone expected and was quickly closing in on the infantrymen. He was on top of them so fast that Dextro lost his chance to attack Koutarou with powerful magic. If he had the magicians attack now, his soldiers would get hit as well.

"It's only one guy! Surround him!"

With no other option, Dextro gave the word for his infantry to attack. On Dextro's orders, the twenty infantrymen spread out to the sides to surround Koutarou. The spearmen equipped with shields pushed towards him.

How did Sanae do that thing back then...?

Koutarou focused on his own body and tried to recall the sensation he had when Sanae was clinging to his back. As he did, Koutarou could feel his spirit, fueled by his rage, flowing through his body.

"Like this!"

In that moment, Koutarou's view completely changed. A faint white light overlapped with each of the twenty infantrymen. Their intentions to attack manifested as various forms of that light, telling Koutarou exactly where they would attack and when. This was spirit sight, the power to read people and predict attacks that Sanae had used when they fought together before.

"And...!"

Koutarou's movements suddenly got sharper. So much, in fact, that the armor had to quickly adjust its settings to keep up. Now even more nimble than before, Koutarou swiftly dodged all of the spears being thrust at him. That too was the effect of a psychic power Sanae had used to enhance his body. His movements were precise, and not a single one was without purpose. Between his speed and his spirit sight, Koutarou dodged attack after attack with ease, like a leaf dancing in the wind.

Koutarou was able to use these powers thanks to the spiritual energy circuits that Sanae had created when using her powers. While Koutarou had nowhere near the amount of spiritual energy Sanae did and couldn't use the powers as effectively as she could, it was more than enough to deal with twenty normal human enemies.

"Hey, can you protect Princess Alaia with your barrier?"

"It is possible, though it will be weaker because of the distance. Warning: You will be defenseless."

"Do I look like I need a barrier right now?!"

Koutarou exhaled sharply and swung his sword around. The sound of several explosions rang out, and Koutarou sent five spearmen flying.

"As you wish, my lord."

"You're awfully cooperative today!"

However, there were still five spearmen left and their spears were all coming for Koutarou at once. He was able to dodge three of them, but not the remaining two.

"Warning: Please use the barrier to defend yourself."

“I said I don’t need it!”

Koutarou knocked away the remaining two spears, one using Theia’s sword in his right hand and the other using Kiriha’s gauntlet on his left hand.

“Uwaaaaah!”

The man holding the spear Koutarou had knocked away with Kiriha’s gauntlet shrieked and fainted. The current in the gauntlet had flowed through the spear directly into him.

“...Just who is this guy?”

Seeing Koutarou swiftly take out six of his men, the cocky Dextro started to look a little nervous.

“Hey, you guys go too!”

“B-But...! Uwaaaaah!”

Now that he sensed danger, Dextro ordered the archers forward as well. To his surprise, however, three of the archers had already been defeated.

“Damn, it’s that woman!”

Dextro had only seen Clan as a powerless servant of Koutarou’s. He wasn’t paying any attention to her, so he hadn’t seen her draw a weapon. She’d taken advantage of that and sniped three of his men. Together with the six that Koutarou had defeated, that made the total nine men down. Dextro’s forces had already been reduced by one quarter.

“That’s impossible! There’s only two of them!”

Dextro began panicking. He hadn’t even entertained the thought of losing, but now the possibility crept up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. Refusing to accept that, Dextro shouted more orders to his remaining men.

“You guys go kill that woman! Don’t let her do as she pleases anymore!”

“Yes, sir!”

Finally realizing the unrest among Dextro’s troops, Alaia looked up from where she was huddled on the ground.

Layous-sama...?

Through the tears in her eyes, she could see Koutarou slowly advancing towards her.

Layous-sama is fighting... He's protecting everyone...

There was no medicine, but Koutarou was fighting to protect the villagers and Alaia's party.

And he's fighting for my sake...

He was fighting to honor his promise with Alaia. Seeing Koutarou now, a certain question entered her mind.

So... what am I doing?

She asked herself why she was on her knees doing nothing. Wasn't there something else she should be doing? Didn't she also have a duty to fulfil? Even if not, shouldn't she at least get up and make it easier for Koutarou to save her? Those were the questions that ran through her mind one after another as she watched Koutarou approach.

He's still fighting!

A strong will returned to her eyes, but she didn't stand up right away. She was planning on letting Dextro, who was still holding on to her arm, think she was crying for a while longer while she waited for her chance.

"In that case... Hey, magicians, stop him from moving with your magic!"

Dextro ordered the magicians to attack Koutarou.

"But we'll hit our allies too!"

"If you don't, we'll all be in trouble! Quit your yapping and do it!"

"U-Understood!"

Despite knowing that his men would get caught in the spells as well, Dextro ordered the magicians to attack. Koutarou had already defeated another three men, making for a total of twelve. Dextro now considered Koutarou a serious threat, and he needed a surefire way of hitting him even if it involved turning friendly fire on his men.

"Heh, no matter how strong he is, he'll have no way of escaping this..."

Oh no!

Alaia quickly stood up to warn Koutarou.

“Watch out, Layous-sama! The magicians are aiming for you!”

“Shut it! You’re already too late!”

Dextro fearlessly grinned. He ordered all five magicians to attack at once. No matter how fast Koutarou was, he should have no way of avoiding an attack like that.

“The magicians?!”

Koutarou looked over towards the magicians after hearing Alaia’s warning. He could see that they were preparing an area attack against him. It was large enough that it was going to hit the remaining eight infantrymen as well.

“Is he planning on attacking his own soldiers just to get to me?!”

When Koutarou finally put two and two together, the five magicians had summoned a giant fireball. It rested at the tip of the staff of the magician standing in the front of their formation, and it was large enough to light up the area.

“High-density energy reaction from the magicians detected. Warning: Please use the barrier to defend yourself.”

“You just keep protecting Her Highness!”

Koutarou rejected the AI’s suggestion and pointed his left hand towards the fireball. Meanwhile, the soldiers around him began to panic.

“What?! Is the captain trying to kill us with him?!”

“Please save us, captain!”

“You guys just keep fighting the Blue Knight!”

Though the soldiers pleaded for help, Dextro spurned them in a tone similar to Koutarou’s.

“Just how rotten can you get? If you guys don’t want to get hurt, get down!”

As Koutarou shouted, the magicians launched their fireball. They were aiming

for Koutarou, but before it hit, a second fireball appeared from the gauntlet on Koutarou's left hand.

"Go!"

Obeying Koutarou's will, the new fireball flew towards the fireball the magicians had launched. He was trying to negate the fireball with his own.

The two fireballs crashed into each other mid-air, but things didn't go as Koutarou had hoped. The magicians' fireball was bigger and more powerful, so Koutarou's fireball alone couldn't stop it. Although its strength had been considerably compromised, the magicians' fireball was still barreling towards Koutarou.

"Damn, no good!"

"Warning! Use the barrier—"

"Shut up! You were made to be used in space, so suck it up already! It's just a fireball!"

Koutarou crossed his arms in front of his face and braced himself. He was planning on enduring the attack with guts and sheer willpower. The fireball came flying. Its furious red fire lit up Koutarou's face as it closed in, and then it exploded with a loud boom.

"...Huh?"

Despite the explosion, Koutarou was unharmed. The flames had been deflected by a yellow veil that appeared in front of Koutarou and then vanished.

"I-I don't know what happened, but I'm saved..."

It was one of the defensive spells that Yurika had cast on Koutarou while he was fighting against Clan. It had been dormant all this time, and it only activated now—when it sensed the danger Koutarou was in—to shield him from the explosion.

"That's impossible!"

Not even the five magicians working together had had any effect on Koutarou. Dextro had been so confident in their attack that he couldn't believe what had just happened right before his very eyes.

Dextro wasn't the only one stunned by Koutarou's fighting.

"Lady Pardomshiha, just who is that person?"

"That's... what I want to know, Lidith."

Alaia's allies couldn't hide their surprise as they watched Koutarou's battle from the crowd. It was impressive enough that they were able to temporarily forget the pain they were in.

"That sword and armor... Based on their strength, they must have been made with alchemy. I can't imagine anything else considering the device incorporated into the armor that lets him use electricity and fire."

Since Lidith was an alchemist, she could tell that the armor and sword Koutarou was using were products of advanced science and technology. Since the science of this era wasn't especially developed, specialized fields of study had yet to emerge. And it wasn't just science. Pharmacology, medicine, magic, supernatural phenomena, and more were all studied under the broad discipline of alchemy. The technology for refining metal was included in that as well. Certain alchemists monopolized the manufacturing of higher-strength steels and made quite a tidy profit off of it. Lidith had seen Koutarou's armor up close, and now that she'd seem what it could do in battle too, she assumed that it had been created using advanced alchemy of that nature.

And if the sword and armor were products of alchemy, it didn't seem unreasonable to think that his ability to manipulate fire and electricity had an alchemical source as well. The people of this age had already discovered basic methods of generating electricity and creating explosions, so they could potentially be used in alchemical devices.

"It's not just alchemy. It looks like he's using spiritual energy to fight as well. He's not as good as me, but it looks like he's able to read the auras of his opponents. And it looks like he's using spiritual energy to improve his speed."

Fauna added on to Lidith's assessment. As a servant of the Goddess of Dawn, she had considerable spiritual energy powers. She used them to heal the sick and injured, but her attunement to that sort of thing made it obvious to her

that Koutarou was using spiritual energy to fight.

“His skill with the sword is also considerable... This means that the band of knights Veltlion is from not only trains in sword fighting, but also in the ways of spiritual energy while additionally making good use of alchemy...”

Flair was quite perplexed as she summarized the discussion. Koutarou’s fighting defied what she expected of a knight. She had never heard of such a strange yet powerful band of knights before.

“That’s not all. That man is using magic too.”

“Caris?! Why are you here?! Didn’t you join up with the other soldiers?!”

Flair was surprised to see Caris, who had suddenly appeared next to them. Koutarou said he’d freed Caris, so Flair assumed she’d be long gone by now.

“That’s what I was going to do at first.” Caris smiled wryly as she leaned on her staff. “But on my way there, I heard that there was no antidote. That means that they were planning on disposing of me with the rest of you. So I figured before I die for nothing, I should help that man a little. That’s all there is to it.”

Caris had planned to join up with the soldiers to get her hands on the antidote. But once she learned there was no such thing, she understood that they were planning on killing her off right alongside Alaia and her party. It also meant they were indiscriminately killing the villagers, and she didn’t take a liking to that.

She had sworn loyalty to Maxfern, or more precisely to Grevanas, because he had picked her up from an orphanage in the slums. But now that same man was responsible for this indiscriminate attack on the poor populace. It was a remarkable act of betrayal of Caris’s trust in him. Her loyalty shaken and her identity in question, Caris had remembered what Koutarou said to her.

“Thank you.”

She had returned because of those words.

“I see...”

Flair sincerely believed Caris. Caris’s eyes told Flair she was telling the truth. If she wanted to kill Flair and the others, she would have done so long ago.

“So Caris, you said Lord Veltlion was using magic...”

Lidith was more interested in Koutarou than Caris’s intentions, and she wanted to get a more detailed explanation from her. Caris nodded in response.

“It was when he negated the fireball. It was brief, but he unleashed an archwizard class spell. I don’t know if the Blue Knight actually cast the spell himself or not, but at the very least, he’s lived in an environment where he’s had regular access to powerful magic.”

“...Did you say an archwizard class spell?”

Flair was even more perplexed now. The archwizards were the top seven leaders of the court magicians. The head of the court magicians, Grevanas, was included among them. All seven of them were extremely powerful magicians, and they stood at the top of the magic world in terms of ability. Caris was saying that Koutarou supposedly handled magic of an equivalent power. Flair didn’t know what to make of that.

“Swordsmanship, spiritual energy, alchemy, and magic... The pyrotechnic weapon his servant is using is also quite impressive. Just who are those two?”

“Who knows? But it’s quite clear that the Goddess of Dawn is smiling.”

“On Veltlion?”

“No, on Princess Alaia.”

Caris smiled as she spoke, then began walking away using her staff to support herself.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to support the Blue Knight. He’ll probably win, but I’m worried about what the magicians might do. Leave them to me. You guys should go protect the other princess.”

“You’re right. I think we’ll do just that.”

Flair quickly ran through the situation in her head and decided to take Caris’s advice to heart. As sick as she was, Flair would have a rough time standing against the army. But as a magician, Caris still might be able to do something. It seemed best to leave her to her own devices while the others went to protect

Charl. Even in her weakened condition, Flair was confident she'd still be able to protect Charl from the panicked citizens.

"Let's go, Fauna, Lidith."

"Lady Pardomshiha, I'll go with Caris."

"Are you sure?"

"My intellectual curiosity as an alchemist is telling me it's what I should do."

"Then I'll leave this to you. Let's go, Fauna."

"Yes!"

Flair and Fauna headed back to Charl's side, while Caris and Lidith headed to support Koutarou.

"Haaa!"

Koutarou's sword slashed through the air.

"Guwah!"

One of the remaining two archers received the full brunt of the blow and rolled across the ground.

"Uwaaaaah!"

The other archer, who'd just barely managed to dodge the sword, let out a scream and collapsed onto the ground. That was thanks to Clan's shooting. The battle had clearly become one-sided after Koutarou negated the fireball. Koutarou could easily dodge all of the soldiers' attacks, and the magicians' spells hadn't worked. The reeling soldiers were defeated by Koutarou and Clan, one after the other. That was in part because of Dextro's insistence on taking down Koutarou at the cost of his own men. His orders were largely falling on deaf ears now.

"That leaves six more to go."

Clan smiled fearlessly while exchanging magazine on the rifle. There were now only six of the original 36 men standing. All that was left was to take out Dextro and the five magicians. Victory was within their grasp.

“To think you could do this much... Honestly, you’ve surprised me, Blue Knight.”

“I’ll ask you to hand over Princess Alaia now, Copper Knight Dextro.”

Despite his grim situation, Dextro still had an eerie smile on his lips. It bothered Koutarou. Even as he pointed his sword at Dextro, Dextro looked like he had no intention of backing down.

“I can’t just give her back to you that easily. I’m not on some kid’s errand here.”

“Layous-sama, don’t listen to Dextro! He’s trying to buy time! The magicians have been doing something for a while now!”

“Tch, you really need to shut up!”

Dextro yanked on Alaia’s arm and drew her in. He then pointed a knife at her neck.

“Pipe down for a moment, would you, Alaia?!”

“Hnn!”

The courageous Alaia stifled any urge to scream and quickly shut her mouth.

“Your Highness! Hey, what’s going on with the barrier?!”

Flustered at the sight of Alaia being threatened, Koutarou demanded answers from the armor’s AI.

“Target B has been inside the barrier’s defensive range from the start.”

“Damn it!”

The barrier created by the armor had protected Alaia, but it was intended to keep her safe from stray arrows and explosions. It couldn’t shield her from Dextro who had been next to her the entire time.

“Let go of Her Highness!”

“Hey now, Blue Knight, I wouldn’t make another move if I were you. The same goes for the lady behind you.”

Dextro warned Koutarou as he instinctively took a step forward. He moved

Alaia in front of him, intending to use her as a shield to protect himself from Clan's rifle.

"How's it going?" Dextro called to the magicians behind him.

"We're finishing up right now!"

"Good!"

Dextro showed a satisfied grin after hearing the magicians' reply. He had ordered the magicians do something while his other men were being defeated. What he'd asked them to do would take all of their mana, but he didn't care. And now that it was almost complete, he couldn't keep himself from smiling.

"Dextro-sama, here it comes!"

"Here, I'll give you this back! Take good care of her!"

Dextro suddenly and unexpectedly let go of his hostage, pushing Alaia towards Koutarou.

"Kyah!"

Seeing that, Koutarou hurriedly ran to catch her. Still weak and sickly, Alaia fell over after stumbling a few steps forward.

"Princess Alaia!"

And it was in the moment that Koutarou took his eyes off Dextro that it happened.

"Wait, Veltlion! Something's strange!"

"Hahahaha, to think I really have to use even this on you!"

Right behind where Alaia had been sitting on the ground, a giant black hole over three meters in diameter appeared. The five magicians had been working together to create it, and it was very similar to the black holes Theia and Clan used to summon their weapons.

"Let me thank you, Blue Knight. I've always wanted to try this out!"

Dextro got increasingly excited as the black hole appeared. A rush of joy filled his heart similar to what he'd felt the first time he killed someone. A warped smile appeared on his face.

“What is going on?!”

“A space distortion reaction?! Veltlion, something big is coming!”

Something huge appeared from the giant disc. At first glance it looked like a knight wearing black armor, but it was far too large to be called a knight. That would imply it was human size. Once its whole body emerged from the hole, it stood five meters tall. Alaia, who was right next to it, looked like a doll in comparison.

“J-Just what is this giant knight...?”

Alaia was at a loss for words as the giant knight slowly rose up next to her.

“It’s dangerous, Princess Alaia! Hurry and get away from there!”

“R-Right!”

Alaia tried to stand up after Koutarou warned her of the danger, but she was still reeling from the pain of falling and the aches of her illness. It was a struggle to even move.

“I’ll be right there, Your Highness! Clan, do you know what that is?!”

Realizing that Alaia was having trouble, Koutarou ran to help her.

“I don’t really know! It’s definitely made out of steel, but I don’t see anything that seems to be powering it... There are too many strange structural parts for it to be just a statue, but I can’t tell heads from tails...”

The giant’s structure perplexed Clan. Based on the way it was summoned, she believed it was some kind of combat machine. But when she scanned its interior with her observation device, nothing about it seemed to be mechanical. She also couldn’t find a power source. It just seemed to be a metallic frame dressed in armor.

However, further analysis revealed that lots of jewels, animal bones, and other non-metallic materials had been placed inside of it. From an engineering standpoint, that would only lower its structural integrity. What’s more, it was all on the interior and couldn’t be seen from the outside, so it clearly didn’t serve a decorative purpose. There was so much strange about it that Clan wasn’t sure what to think.

“A statue? Ha, not even close! This is an invincible soldier that’s going to kill you all!”

Dextro laughed. All of a sudden, he was holding a glowing, translucent yellow globe in his hand. Inside the globe were three colors—red, orange, and yellow—swirling around together. And as the globe began to glow brighter, a red light filled the giant’s eyes.

Once the light in the giant’s eyes turned the color of bright red blood, it slowly moved its massive arm and reached out with its empty left hand. Next was its leg. It lifted its heavy left leg that was starting to sink into the ground, and took one step closer to Alaia. Its stride was more than twice a normal human’s. Combined with its overwhelming weight, each step was like a small earthquake.

“It started moving?! That’s impossible! There’s no way!”

“Oh, but it *is* possible! Hahaha! And now you’re going to be killed by this giant, the magic soldier!” Dextro boasted triumphantly as he looked up at the moving giant.

Meanwhile, the giant’s body creaked as it continued to move forward, reaching its giant hand out towards Alaia. Before it could reach her, however, hexagonal tiles appeared around her to shield her. It was the barrier that Koutarou had ordered the armor to protect Alaia with.

But the next moment, the barrier completely collapsed. The barrier was much weaker than normal due to the distance between Alaia and the barrier’s source—Koutarou. But the main reason for its collapse was that it simply couldn’t withstand the giant’s overwhelming mass. The five meter tall giant weighed around ten tons. And when that weight crashed into the small surface area of the barrier, it just couldn’t hold up.

“Kyaaaaah!”

Alaia screamed. She had screamed in the past out of surprise, but this was the first time in her life she ever screamed out of fear. The giant grabbed Alaia with its huge hand and lifted her up by the waist.

“Your Highness!”

“Nooo, let go!”

Alaia fought to escape the giant's grasp, but she was practically powerless against the strength of the metallic monster. No matter how hard she tried, it was impossible for her to break free. But she struggled as best she could nonetheless, even as cuts and bruises appeared on her white skin.

"Hahh, I even set her free. This is all because you took your sweet time, Blue Knight."

"Dextro... you bastard!"

"Layous-sama!"

Alaia's repeated screams made the appearance of the giant even more fearsome for the people in the area. It was a steel giant that moved and fought on its own. Just based on its height and weight alone, it was easy to imagine how unbelievably strong it must be. Everyone who saw it could tell just how dangerous it was.

"Uwaaah, it's a monster!"

"We don't stand a chance!"

"S-Someone, save us!"

The villagers who had begun to regain their calm after Koutarou defeated the majority of the soldiers quickly panicked again. It was all they could do. They'd had a glimmer of hope, only to have it stolen away from them by the sight of something so terrifying.

"Run away! Run as far as you can! It will chase you down no matter where you go!"

Dextro watched the panicking villagers with joy in his eyes. He was absolutely confident in the power of the giant. Not even the so far undefeated Koutarou should be able to take it down.

"Go, magic soldier! Kill them all!"

Obeying Dextro's order, the giant lumbered forward. Though it didn't move very fast, it took steps commensurate to its massive size. It was closing the distance to Koutarou at a frightening pace. Alaia, who was still being held in its left hand, shouted out to him as they got closer.

“Please run, Layous-sama! Without any antidote, I won’t survive anyway! So please save as many people as you can!”

It was neither a cry for help, nor an order for him to fight. It was merely a worried plea for Koutarou’s safety. Alaia didn’t think even he could win against the giant, so she wanted him to escape. She didn’t want him to die in vain for her sake. And if it were an option, she wanted him to take as many villagers with him as possible.

Your Highness...

Hearing Alaia’s words, Koutarou shook off the shock of the giant’s appearance and made up his mind. He adjusted the grip on his sword’s handle and called out to Clan.

“Clan, you get away!”

“What are you going to do?!”

“As if I could leave Princess Alaia behind!”

Koutarou pointed his sword at the giant. Alaia was still in enemy hands. That’s why, because of the oath he had sworn on his sword, he couldn’t run away.

Theia, nothing like this was in the play!



While glaring at the oncoming giant, Koutarou internally berated Theia.

“So the Blue Knight kid didn’t run off, eh? Good,” Dextro mumbled in a voice so low that no one could hear him. He was actually feeling relieved.

After he’d confirmed that Alaia was suffering from the poison, she was no longer Dextro’s primary target. The opponent he needed to defeat was Koutarou, the powerful knight who hadn’t even been affected by the poison. Even if she got away, Alaia’s fate was sealed. But if he let someone who could take on several dozen men on his own escape, he would just become a bigger thorn in his side down the line. And since he didn’t seem to be ill, he couldn’t count on letting the poison run its course like he could with Alaia. Worse, he was sure to be scolded by Maxfern if he let him get away. It could cost him his promotion. Dextro considered it a necessity to put an end to Koutarou here and now.

And that being the case, it would have been most troublesome for him if Koutarou had abandoned Alaia and run off. That’s why Dextro was glad to see Koutarou had stayed put and was still willing to fight.

“Tch, this is turning out to be a real pain!”

Koutarou dodged the giant’s huge axe with wide, evasive steps. The edge of the axe buried itself deep into the ground instead. With that kind power, it was uncertain whether or not his barrier could protect him against it.

The giant moved on its own, but it had no mind of its own, so Koutarou wasn’t able to read its moves like he could with the soldiers. All he could do was jump out of the way of its attacks. His only saving grace was that the giant moved much slower than he did, so it wasn’t all that hard to dodge.

“Haaaaaaaah!”

Taking advantage of the opening he had while its axe was stuck the ground, Koutarou leaped towards the giant and swung his sword. The blade crashed into the front of its metal body. It hit, but the sword bounced off the giant’s armor. Because of the giant’s size, its plating was quite thick. Even with the aid of his power-assisted armor, Koutarou could only scratch it.

“Damn, the sword does nothing!”

Koutarou quickly jumped back. As he did, the axe came flying up, almost grazing Koutarou's face.

"Of course not, you idiot. It's useless. You're powerless against it."

"Shut up!"

"Oh, scary. Well, keep trying, Blue Knight. Heh heh..."

As Dextro laughed, Koutarou repeatedly attacked the giant. Every single swing bounced off without any real damage. He started to target the joints on the lower half of the giant's body, but it seemed to have no effect either. They were almost as heavily armored as the rest of the giant.

"Veltlion, use the same attack you used when you cut the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell in half! That should be enough to cut this giant in half too!"

Clan's voice came through the communicator in Koutarou's armor. She had seen Koutarou make his sword shine bright white several times now. It could cut through barriers, split beams, and even cleave her repulsion shells in half. She figured an attack of that strength would surely do something against the giant.

"No can do!"

However, Koutarou shook his head while continuing to dodge the giant's attacks.

"Why not?!"

"I'm not the one doing that! It always lights up and helps me when I'm in trouble! It's not something I do myself!"

"What?!"

The light that made Saguratin glow only showed up when Koutarou was in danger or when he was extremely angry. It lent him power, but Koutarou had no way of controlling it or summoning it.

"And we've been in this world for a while, but it hasn't glowed once yet! We can't count on it!"

"Fine, I guess I don't have a choice! Leave this to me!"

Clan stood up as she spoke. She was currently on top of a roof several dozen meters away from Koutarou and the giant.

“Cradle! The anti-material beam rifle!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

As Clan gave orders into her bracelet, a black hole appeared next to her with a big barrel sticking out of it. Clan waited for it to fully emerge from the black hole before taking the gun with both hands. She was now holding on to a giant anti-material beam rifle. It was the largest weapon she could handle herself, and its power was considerable. There was just one major flaw. The rifle was so large that she couldn’t move with it, so she could only use it for sniping once.

If this doesn’t work, we’re out of options...

Clan took aim from the rooftop. Koutarou was keeping the giant busy, and its massive body was slow to move. It was the perfect target for sniping.

But if this didn’t work, there wouldn’t be anything else they could do. Because of its limited storage capacity, the Cradle didn’t have a lot of weapons on board, and the anti-material beam rifle was the strongest of them all. There was still one more repulsion shell, but if she used that, the entire village would be wiped out.

Clan carefully took aim. Since Alaia was still in the giant’s left hand, she needed to make sure she didn’t hit that area.

If I’d known this was going to happen, I would have gotten in more combat practice!

While she rued the weight of the responsibility on her shoulders, Clan lined up her target in the crosshairs. She was aiming right for the giant’s head.

“I’m firing, Veltlion!”

Clan pulled the trigger as she shouted to Koutarou. He was still fighting the giant, but since she was aiming for its head, there wasn’t much worry about hitting him. Letting him know she fired was mostly a courtesy.

A glowing white beam shot out from the enormous barrel. Since the weapon used electromagnetism to accelerate heavy metal particles, there was no recoil

like with standard weapons that relied on gunpowder. Even so, Clan's body was still pushed backwards by the reactionary force. That's just how powerful the beam was. The beam flew through the air and closed the several dozen meter gap in the blink of an eye. The slow, massive giant had no way of dodging something that fast. The beam struck the giant's head spot on.

"Kyaaah!"

"All right!"

Alaia let out a scream of surprise at the sudden flash, while Koutarou cheered in celebratory joy that Clan's attack had hit.

"Did I hit it?!"

Still holding the rifle, Clan looked up at the giant. There was some smoke around the giant's head, but she could clearly see what had happened from where she was. Having taken a direct hit from the beam, the giant's head had been completely blown off. The beam had pierced through the left side of the chin and exited through the back of the head. The head was shattered by the impact, and steam and steel fragments rained down on Dextro and the magicians.

"D-Damn it! That woman again!"

Dextro swatted away the falling debris and glared at Clan up on the rooftop. He had completely lost his temper. The invincible soldier he had put so much faith in was now injured. And by a young girl, no less. Every time he was sure of his victory, it had been taken away from him. That left Dextro boiling with rage.

"Kill them, and start with that woman!"

Dextro pointed the translucent globe in his hand at Clan. As he did, the headless giant began moving again. Unlike a human, losing its head wasn't enough to defeat it.

"It can still move?!"

"Ahahaha! Die!"

The giant lifted its axe and pulled its arm backward.

"It can't be— Clan, get away from there right now!"

“What?!”

Just as Koutarou tried to warn Clan, the giant hurled its axe with all its might. The steel axe spun through the air in a short arc towards Clan. It was far larger than she was, and made for a terrifying projectile. It would surely kill her instantly if it hit.

“This is not funny!”

Clan threw her rifle down and jumped for cover on the roof. However, the axe’s real target wasn’t Clan, but the building she was on. If it was destroyed, Clan would be caught in its collapse. It was a much safer move than aiming directly for Clan and risking a miss.

“Kyaaaaah!”

“Clan!”

Just as Dextro had planned, the axe easily obliterated the wooden house. Clan vanished from Koutarou’s view in the collapse. All that was left was a mountain of rubble with the axe sticking out of it.

“Clan-sama!”

“Hey, Clan! Answer me!”

Alaia screamed and Koutarou called for Clan through his armor’s communicator. But there was only static on the other end.

“Oh, did that woman die? Too bad. If she’s alive now though, she’ll just get trampled. Muahahaha!”

“Clan! Clan!”

Please be safe, Clan!

Koutarou called for her over and over, but the only thing reaching his ears was Dextro’s laughter. There was still nothing but static coming from the communicator. Not a peep from Clan.

“Now then, you’re up next, Blue Knight!”

The giant reached around to its back and pulled out a hammer. Since it was a spare weapon, it was smaller than the axe, but it was still around two meters

long.

“Here it comes.”

Koutarou put his concern for Clan aside for the moment and readied his sword. However, since he knew that his sword wasn’t going to work, he wasn’t sure what to do.

What am I supposed to do?! How can I win against this thing?!

But the giant didn’t give Koutarou any time to think. It came charging right for him, hammer in hand. Since it was smaller than the axe, the giant could swing it faster. It repeatedly struck the barrier protecting Koutarou, greatly shaving away at the energy reserves used to maintain it.

“Warning: At the current rate of energy usage, it will be impossible to maintain the barrier for longer than a minute.”

“So it’s going to be a battle of attrition at this rate!”

Koutarou dodged away from the hammer while desperately racking his brain. As hard as he tried to think, he couldn’t come up with any good ideas. If he ran away, the villagers and Alaia’s party would be in danger. That said, he had no idea how to defeat the giant. Koutarou was stumped.

“Blue Knight.”

Koutarou’s frantic thoughts were interrupted by a voice he heard inside his head.

“Who’s there?!”

“It’s me, Caris.”

The voice belonged to Caris, but then he heard a second voice too.

“Layous-sama?!”

It was Alaia. As Koutarou looked up, his eyes met with Alaia’s as she was held fast by the unyielding grasp of the metal giant.

“I can hear Layous-sama and Caris-sama’s voice inside my head? What is...”

“Caris, what is this?!”

Koutarou continued fighting the giant, though he was most puzzled by the sudden voices in his head. He started aiming for the thin fingers on the giant's right hand. He was hoping to cut them off in order to keep it from using the hammer.

"Since the situation is urgent, I'll keep it brief. The reason we can talk like this is thanks to the power of magic. You can communicate with people far away without actually having to speak."

"So this is... magic? How convenient."

Koutarou's sword was actually able to do some damage to the giant's fingers, but a single strike wasn't enough to sever them. He would need to land a few more swings to do the job.

"According to Lidith, that giant is a type of magic doll."

A magic doll was a puppet created by giving life to something inanimate via magic. Such dolls were known by different names depending on what they were made out of. If it was made out of soil, for example, it would be a clay golem. Rocks made stone golems, and so on.

Through a control gem, the magic doll followed the orders of anyone it had been registered to obey. That meant that even if the gem was stolen, an unauthorized operator couldn't take control of it. Registering a new operator required a special ritual.

Moreover, once the doll had been given an order, it was capable of making its own decisions to a certain degree. In other words, it was an artificial life form with an incredibly simple mind. Even if they destroyed the gem in Dextro's hand, the giant would probably continue fighting. Such properties made fighting magic dolls rather troublesome.

"That giant's body is made of steel created by Maxfern's alchemists, so it would probably be called a steel golem. Lidith is saying that she saw something like it being produced in the atelier."

Lidith was Maxfern's niece, and she had studied alchemy at his atelier. During her time there, she had seen a large golem being created.

"According to Lidith, various other alchemical enhancements have been added

to it, so it will be hard to defeat. But since it's a magic doll, it has a weakness."

"A weakness?! It actually has a weakness?!"

Koutarou kept swinging his sword while talking to Caris telepathically. This was certainly something he didn't want Dextro to hear.

"It does. Inside the left side of its chest where a human's heart would be, there's a crystal roughly the size of a human fist. Destroy that."

"Will that defeat it?!"

"Yes. I've created magic dolls myself, so I'm absolutely certain. That crystal is absorbing energy from nature and converting it into mana to move its body. You can see the flow of spiritual energy, right? Aim for the spot where the spiritual energy is most concentrated."

"Got it! I'll give it a try!"

Now that he knew what he needed to do, Koutarou's expression eased up. He eyed the left side of the giant's chest... and then he froze.

"By the left side of its chest, you mean..."

"That's right. That's why I'm talking to both you and Princess Alaia."

The giant was covering its left side using Alaia.

"I don't mind. Please do it."

"What are you saying? There's no way I could do that!"

"Layous-sama, I will die from the poison either way. You can't trade your life and the lives of the villagers for mine."

With Alaia in the way, Koutarou couldn't attack from where he was now. He would have to circle around and attack it from behind, but it wouldn't be easy. Aware of that, Alaia asked Koutarou to go ahead and attack regardless of what would happen to her.

"Your Highness, I can't do that."

"You don't have any other options."

Koutarou firmly rejected Alaia's idea, desperately racking his brain for another

plan.

What can I do? How can I attack the left side of its chest without harming Her Highness?

As Koutarou was thinking, the giant brought its hammer down in front of him. While it was stuck in the ground, Koutarou swung his sword at the giant's fingers once more. He hit the same place he had before, deepening the cut that was already there.

Oh?

An idea suddenly flashed through Koutarou's mind.

"Yeah, we could do that!"

"Layous-sama!"

Since they were telepathically connected, the idea was instantaneously transmitted to Alaia and Caris. They both supported his idea, and there was a discernable hint of hopefulness in their thoughts.

"But what do we do before that? How can you crack that thick armor?"

"That's..."

Koutarou's idea hit a roadblock. He had a plan, but he hadn't come up with a way to get to the crystal through the giant's heavy armor.

"Don't worry, Layous-sama."

However, Alaia was smiling quite cheerfully. Really, she was smiling at Koutarou who hadn't yet realized the solution.

After Alaia explained to him how things should happen, Koutarou had a question for Caris.

"Caris, can you stop that thing from moving for just a moment?"

"I'll give it a try. The rest is up to you, Blue Knight."

"Yeah."

Caris's presence got more distant. Sensing that, Koutarou readied his sword. It

was finally time to settle things.

“Layous-sama...”

“Your Highness, I’ll save you right away.”

“I pray for your fortune.”

Koutarou and Alaia made eye contact for a moment, and though it was brief, deep feelings were shared wordlessly between them.

“What’s wrong, Blue Knight? Over already?”

“It’s over for you.”

“Wow, to think you still have the energy to crack jokes... Sounds like you’re a little out of breath though.”

“Why don’t you fight yourself, Dextro?”

“I’ll pass. Breaking a sweat is for underlings.”

Jeez, to think I’d be struggling this much even after bringing out the magic soldier...

Despite his confident tone of voice, Dextro was annoyed that Koutarou hadn’t fallen yet. But even though it wasn’t happening as quickly as he wanted, Koutarou’s movements were clearly becoming slower and more sluggish. Dextro figured that things were nearing their end and victory would be his soon enough.

“I just want to kick back, relax, and enjoy a nice drink... so feel free to die now, Blue Knight.”

“Just try me. You’ll regret not practicing more with your sword.”

“You know, I don’t hate how gutsy you are!”

The giant moved forward as Dextro shouted. It drew closer to Koutarou, putting him in range of its hammer. The giant was always the one to take the first swing since it had superior reach. The hammer roared as it rushed through the air and zeroed in on Koutarou, who then jumped to the side to avoid it.

As the hammer slammed into the ground, Koutarou could feel the earth tremble. And before the rumbling died down, Koutarou moved in to attack.

“The angle’s too shallow?!”

Koutarou’s sword struck the back of the giant’s hand and bounced off. All the attack did was leave a small scratch. But he didn’t have the time to be disappointed. He quickly kicked off the ground and jumped to the side of the giant. The next moment, the giant’s right leg came swinging through right where he had been. If he had still been there, he would have been sent flying.

“How about this?!”

Koutarou slammed the flat of his sword into the giant’s right leg. There was a loud noise, but it didn’t cause any damage to the giant. However, the blow was enough to slightly offset the giant’s balance. Trying to regain its equilibrium, it swung its right arm through the air.

“This time for sure!”

Koutarou swung his sword down at full force. The blade dug into the giant’s fingers, just as planned. After several hits, he finally severed the fingers.

“All right!”

“What?!”

Leaving only the thumb, the other four fingers fell off. The giant also dropped the hammer since it no longer had any way to hold it. The tip of it dug into the earth when it landed. Koutarou stopped his attacks and backed off from the giant some.

“I see, so this was what he was after by only aiming for the fingers!”

Dextro clicked his tongue as he watched Koutarou moving away. As he did, the giant braced itself and regained its balance. The giant then tried to pick up the hammer with its right hand. It paused strangely when it seemed to realize it couldn’t.

Goddess of Dawn, please...

Alaia prayed, unsure if her plea would reach the heavens or not. The next moment, the giant gave up on trying to pick up the hammer with its right hand and instead passed Alaia to its right hand. It only had a thumb left, but it was enough to hold Alaia. The giant had decided that it would use the hammer with

its left hand.

“Now! Do it, Caris!”

However, that was just the moment that Koutarou and the others had been waiting for.

“Release incantation delay! Spirits of water and earth, now is the time to show your bond!”

Caris unleashed a spell she had prepared beforehand. It magically created a large marsh at the giant’s feet, and the giant immediately sank into it. It wasn’t deep enough to submerge it entirely, but the giant was unable to get out under the weight of its own body. The giant sank down to its knees and couldn’t move.

“Damn it, a magician?! Where?! N-No, more importantly, hurry up and get out of there!”

Dextro hastily ordered the giant to move. If Dextro hadn’t taken his eyes off Koutarou at that point, he probably would have been able to do something to stop Koutarou if he’d actually tried. But this was the man who said breaking a sweat was for underlings. In the end, his unwillingness to do anything himself was what decided his fate.

“Emergency boosters to max power!” Koutarou roared.

“As you wish, my lord.”

Though he was shouting, Koutarou’s voice was drowned out by the sound of something like an explosion. It was the sound of the emergency boosters in his armor kicking in. They spewed flames and generated an enormous amount of thrust. They were backups for the armor’s flight ability, and they sent Koutarou’s body up into the air.

“What?! What’s that sound?!”

“Layous-sama, y-you’re flying...”

Koutarou only flew for but a few seconds. While Dextro and Alaia were still surprised, the boosters’ flames cut out and Koutarou landed. In order to keep from sliding too far when he hit the ground, he dug his heels into the dirt with

all his might. He stopped just in front of the collapsed house.

“...You got here quicker than I thought, Veltlion.”

There, he found Clan waiting alongside Lidith. Since she’d gotten there first, Lidith had woken up the unconscious Clan and explained what was going on. Then the two of them had waited patiently for Koutarou to come.

“Despite how I look, I’m the kind of guy who likes to arrive early.”

“How impudent... Quit your lying. You’re always oversleeping.”

Koutarou pulled a large metallic object out from the rubble. Moving it, let alone lifting it up, was something neither Clan nor Lidith could have done. But Koutarou was wearing powered armor that increased his strength. He could grab the heavy object, lift it, and use it with no trouble. It was Clan’s anti-material beam rifle—the very same one she’d used to blow off the giant’s head.

“Wh-What?! When did he get all the way over there?! And that weapon...!”

That was when Dextro finally realized what Koutarou and the others were planning. They would keep the giant from moving using magic, and then use the weapon that destroyed the giant’s head to attack it. That was why they’d gone to the trouble of getting the giant to move Alaia to its right hand.

“Impossible! I’m going to lose... even with the magic soldier?!”

Koutarou and the others were planning on piercing the magic soldier’s armor and its crystal heart with a single shot. Realizing that, Dextro, half-frenzied, screamed at the giant.

“I told you to get out of there! Just how slow can you be?!”

But Dextro’s yelling wouldn’t help the giant get out of the marsh. Its size and weight—exactly what Dextro had been so proud of—were working against it.

“Clan, I’ll point this at the enemy! You do the aiming!”

“I know!”

Koutarou held the beam rifle up using both of his hands. Since it was Clan’s weapon, he couldn’t control it through his armor. Clan would be the one doing the aiming.

And the target is...

Koutarou focused on his eyes. When he did, he could see white swirling light around the left side of the giant's chest.

"Your Highness, right here!"

"I understand, Layous-sama!"

Listening to Koutarou's directions, Alaia put her hand where he indicated—smack on the left side of the giant's chest. Her small hand perfectly overlapped with the center of the white swirling light that Koutarou could see.

"Clan, right there! Aim for where Her Highness's hand is right now!"

"Can you stop ordering me around?!"

Clan adjusted the rifle's aim using her bracelet. The rifle then transmitted that information to Koutarou's armor, causing the armor to move by itself and make fine adjustments in the angle and position of the rifle.

"Your Highness, take cover!"

"Okay!"

Alaia pulled her hand away and curled up defensively. The giant was still struggling to get out of the marsh. Now was the perfect chance.

"Now! Fire!"

"I heard you, okay? Jeez!"

Once she confirmed that Alaia had taken cover, Clan entered the firing order into her bracelet. A white flash fired from its large barrel once more. It soared through the air like an arrow of light and pierced the giant's left side.

Without its power source, the giant stopped moving in the middle of the marsh. Dextro watched on with a blank expression as he fell to his knees. He showed no resistance as Koutarou pointed his sword at him.

"The match has been decided, Copper Knight Dextro."

"Yeah. It's my loss..."

Dextro, unexpectedly enough, admitted his defeat.

“To think I’d lose after using the magic soldier... Blue Knight, just who are you?”

Dextro was supremely confident in the giant’s strength. And now that it was destroyed, he was able to honestly admit he’d lost. He had nothing left to defeat Koutarou with. Seeing Dextro submit, Koutarou put Saguratin back in its sheath.

“I’m a traveler. A simple traveler in a complicated situation.”

“A traveler? Damn, my luck must have run out...” Dextro let out a heavy sigh and simply fell over onto his side. “No, it’s the opposite, I guess... Alaia is just blessed...”

“Tell me something, Dextro.”

“Sure.”

“Just now, why didn’t you use Princess Alaia as a shield?”

Koutarou wanted to know why Dextro hadn’t used Alaia as a shield against the beam rifle. He hadn’t had a problem using her as a shield for himself to keep Koutarou and Clan in check earlier, so Koutarou wasn’t sure why he hadn’t done something like that again.

“I’d be in more trouble if the worst possible outcome occurred.”

“The worst possible outcome?”

“Yeah.” Dextro had a self-deprecating smile on his lips. “My orders were to capture and return with Alaia. However, there was a single condition. I could put her through so much pain that she wanted to die. I could let her drink the deadly poison. I could even let her get away. However, I was forbidden from directly killing her no matter what.”

“You can’t kill her...?”

Dextro had infected Alaia with the virus, and he’d certainly threatened to kill her, but now he was saying he wasn’t allowed to kill her outright. Hearing that, Koutarou recalled something.

Is he in the same boat as Caris...?

What Dextro was saying was similar to Caris's story. She'd been told to observe Alaia, but not to kill her. Both she and Dextro had pursued Alaia, but neither was allowed to put an end to her. Koutarou found that mysterious.

"And the magic soldier doesn't handle complicated commands well. There was no guarantee it would work. It was a different matter from using her as a shield myself."

"I see..."

The giant could follow orders, but it wasn't good with complex tasks. If Dextro had told it to use Alaia as a shield, it might have gone horribly wrong. That was why Dextro hadn't even bothered giving the order.

"Dextro, you should have tried to grasp victory by fighting yourself."

"...You're right there. What a blunder..."

If Dextro hadn't brought out the giant and had instead tried fighting while using Alaia as a hostage, he might have been able to defeat Koutarou and Clan. Winning on his own strength was the principle he had grown up believing in, after all.

"That's all I wanted to say. Bye, Dextro."

Koutarou turned his back on Dextro, who was still lying on the ground.

"Are you sure you don't want to kill me?"

"Her Highness doesn't want citizens of Forthorthe to die, no matter who her opponents are."

Koutarou himself wanted to at least pummel Dextro. He didn't really care if he died. He'd committed enough evil deeds to deserve it. But that wasn't what Alaia wanted, so Koutarou let it be.

"Besides, I trust you."

Koutarou looked back at Dextro as the corners of his lips turned upward.

"You trust me?!"

Dextro sat straight up in shock.

"Yeah. You're cunning and care about your own profit. So you won't make the

mistake of fighting us directly again.”

“Ha...”

Dextro burst into laughter at what Koutarou said.

“Hahaha, you’re damn right, Blue Knight! That’s absolutely true! Ahahaha!”

It was the bright laughter of a man laughing off his own defeat.

After finishing his discussion with Dextro, Koutarou headed towards Alaia. He had left her to Clan, Lidith, and Caris, so they were already with her.

“Aren’t you feeling high and mighty, leaving a princess behind to go enjoy some chatting, Layous-sama?”

“Well, I was surrounded by some pretty unique people in my hometown...”

“Heehee, you’re even good at knitting, Layous-sama.”

Alaia, saved from the giant’s grasp, welcomed Koutarou with a special smile she never showed anyone else.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Princess Alaia.”

“Well done, Layous-sama.”

Both of them relaxed their shoulders as they spoke. Having been on edge all this time, it was a great relief for each of them to finally see the other safe. However, that was when Alaia lost her balance.

“Ah...”

“Your Highness!”

Koutarou was quick to catch her to keep her from falling.

Oh no, Her Highness is still...

During the tense conflict, Koutarou had temporarily forgotten that Alaia was seriously ill and shouldn’t even be walking.

“Your Highness...”

“Kyah!”

Koutarou picked her up, intent on carrying her back to the inn.

“I’m fine, Layous-sama. I can walk on my own.”

“Princess Alaia, you’ve already done enough. Please take a little more care of yourself.”

Fortunately, thanks to his armor, carrying Alaia was nothing to Koutarou.

“...I understand. Th-Then please do...”

As Alaia said that, she relaxed her body and closed her eyes.

That’s right... The problem still isn’t solved. We’ve only survived the immediate danger...



Perhaps because she had started to let herself go, Alaia's complexion was bad. The disease was running its course on her. And it wasn't just Alaia. The entire village was suffering. They had repelled Dextro, but there was still no solution for the disease plaguing the people. The village was still in dire straits.

"Blue Knight, what do we do now?"

Caris was asking him for an answer, but Koutarou just shook his head.

"I don't know. Dextro didn't actually have an antidote. If only there were some other way..."

There was no cure for the virus that Dextro had spread on Maxfern's orders. There was at least medicine in the play, so Koutarou was sure that he'd be able to get some from Dextro. Reality, however, was not that kind to them. Koutarou was at a loss.

Clan, who had been deep in thought all this time, finally spoke up.

"...I guess there's no helping it. I'm not really happy about it, but it looks like we have to use our last resort."

"Last resort?! Clan-san, do you have a treatment method?!"

Lidith, Maxfern's niece, had been feeling guilty about the entire incident. So when Clan suggested she might have a plan, even if it was a last resort, Lidith was the first to ask.

"Y-Yes..."

Clan simply nodded her head, a little overwhelmed by Lidith's reaction. Koutarou's, however, wasn't much different.

"Is that true, Clan?!"

"Veltlion, I told you before that there was another method to treat people."

"You did?"

"Yes. It doesn't have a high chance of success and there's a serious risk associated with it, but we don't have a choice anymore."

After smiling wryly at Koutarou, Clan composed herself. She now looked like a princess who meant business.

Layous Fatra Veltlion

Several days had passed since Koutarou and the others had repelled Dextro and his men. The villagers were about to restart their harvest festival. Because of the disease and all the chaos, it was almost canceled after the first day, but the villagers pulled themselves together and decided to continue it.

“Hey, Blue Knight!”

“What can I do for you, Your Highness?”

“Nothing. Just stay right there.”

“Okay...”

“Don’t go off with just my sister again.”

“I won’t, jeez...”

Koutarou and Charl had promised to walk around the harvest festival together. Charl was holding a grudge over Koutarou going out with just Alaia before.

“Charl-sama, if you don’t hurry up and change, you can’t go out.”

“I know, I know.”

Charl was in the middle of changing her clothes behind a screen. With the maid, Mary, helping her, the two of them had been making a commotion for a while now. Koutarou was sitting in a chair in the room waiting for them to finish up.

“I’m glad you’re energetic again, Charl.”

“That’s true... I wasn’t sure what would happen for a while there...”

Alaia was sitting across the table from Koutarou, with Flair and Fauna on either side of her.

“Everyone feeling better is all thanks to Clan-chan working through the night. You have a great servant, Layous-sama.”

“Hahaha, I’ll let her know that Fauna-san praised her later.”

Fauna called Clan “Clan-chan.” Clan didn’t seem to like it and would frequently complain to Koutarou about it.

“Layous-sama.”

“What is it, Your Highness?”

“After what has happened, there’s something that I have decided.”

While she was showing a faint smile, Alaia’s eyes indicated she was quite solemn.

“I will continue my journey to the Pardomshiha territory and fight against Maxfern.”

“So you’ve made your choice?”

I see, so that’s why the look in her eyes is so serious...

Upon hearing Alaia’s words, Koutarou understood the meaning behind her expression.

“Yes. Maxfern indiscriminately poisoned an entire village in order to capture me. I can’t imagine that someone like that would build a good government.”

Alaia stared right into Koutarou’s eyes and clearly stated her decision.

“So I will defeat Maxfern and carry out my duty as a princess of this country.”

“That’s a marvelous resolution.”

A few days ago, Alaia was ready to leave the country to Maxfern as long as he could create a good government. What she wanted to protect first and foremost was not the law or her pride, but the citizens. However, after Maxfern had ordered such a terrible attack on innocent citizens, Alaia knew she couldn’t trust him. And so in order to truly protect the people, she now knew she had to fight.

“Please allow me to lend you my strength.”

“Thank you, Layous-sama. I feel like I’ve gained the support of a million men.”

“What are you chatting with just my sister about, Blue Knight?! Let me in on it

too!”

“Ah, you can’t go out looking like that, Charl-sama!”

Unable to stand being left out any longer, Charl jumped out from behind the screen wearing only her underwear.

“Excuse me, Layous-sama!”

“Wh-What?!”

“Sister, let’s appoint Blue Knight to be our personal bodyguard!”

However, in order to keep Koutarou from seeing anything indecent, Mary quickly covered his eyes with her hands. He never even got to see Charl’s bright smile.

Hearing loud cheering coming from outside, Clan looked up from the device she was using.

“What could that be?”

“Let me see...”

Hearing the same thing, Lidith, who had been acting as Clan’s assistant over the past few days, opened the window and took a look at what was going on outside.

“Ah, it looks like Alaia-sama and the others went out.”

“I see.”

Pausing her work, Clan walked up to the window and began looking outside together with Lidith. As their room was on the third floor, they had a commanding view of the area. Outside the inn was a large crowd surrounding Alaia, Koutarou, and the others who had gone out with them to enjoy the festival.

“Alaia-sama!”

“Blue Knight-sama! Thank you for saving my daughter!”

“Please retake this country from Maxfern!”

The crowd was shouting words of gratitude and encouragement. The villagers all looked healthy, and there was no sign of the sickness that had ravaged the town just days ago.

“Jeez, they’re completely unaware of my hard work...”

Clan smiled as she watched Koutarou interact with the crowd, Charl on his shoulders and everything. That gentle smile on her lips was a sign her feelings for Koutarou were changing even more.

In order to treat the virus, Clan had rewritten the villagers’ genes. She realized that Koutarou hadn’t developed any symptoms after coming into contact with the virus, and she herself had only come down with a mild fever. So by comparing the genetic differences between the patients, Koutarou, and herself, she was able to identify a gene that was resistant to the virus.

Clan incorporated that gene into a virus and removed its virulence, thereby creating a modified virus. By injecting that into a patient showing symptoms, the resistant gene was quickly written into the patient’s own DNA thanks to how rapidly and prolifically the virus spread. Their bodies could then start to defend against the virus on their own.

All that was left after that was to remove the modified virus from one patient and inject it into the next. That way, one by one, the townspeople were all treated. And by the time the harvest festival started up again, almost everyone had made a full recovery.

Despite the success they’d had, however, the treatment had been a big gamble. The first problem was time. Treating all the villagers wasn’t a quick task. If Maxfern’s soldiers had attacked during that time, everything would have been over.

And there was no guarantee that the modified virus was going to have the desired effect. There was a chance that results would differ from person to person, so there was no way of knowing the rate of success until they actually tried it. Moreover, it was common for viruses to suddenly mutate. Several generations were created as the virus spread, meaning that there was a chance for it to mutate before it had the desired effect in a patient. In the worst case

scenario, the treatment could have failed and created an entirely new virus, which would have been the start of another nightmare.

That was why Clan had been so reluctant to try it, and she'd truly held out on it as a last resort. Everything would have been much easier if Dextro had actually had an antidote for them to steal. But in the end, they had been fortunate, and none of Clan's fears had come to pass.

Maxfern's soldiers hadn't attacked the village. They were all waiting for the poison to run its course and for Alaia to die before doing anything else. While that had given Koutarou and Clan enough time to treat the virus, they couldn't really celebrate. The army was most likely using that time to prepare, and they would probably be waiting for them down the road.

The modified virus had been compatible with all the patients and was able to manipulate their genetic information. There were still a few extreme cases where patients succumbed, but overall it was a great success. There had been no sudden mutations either. That was what Clan had feared the most. So much so that once the treatment was successfully complete, Clan was totally weak in the knees. Rather than rejoicing at the outcome, she simply never wanted to have to make such a dangerous gamble again. Nervously working in fear for so long had completely exhausted Clan mentally.

Overall, the turnaround in the sick patients had been incredible. But since explaining the treatment method to the villagers would be hard, they were simply told that Koutarou had stolen the medicine from Dextro. It was far easier to tell them the medicine was actually real after all rather than explaining that they'd created some using strange technology.

"Just how much did I struggle during these past few days...?"

Clan rested her elbows on the window frame and stared out over the village. Based on the smile on her lips, she didn't consider her struggle to be as bad as she made it sound. She knew that Maxfern's men were waiting up ahead, but even Clan was ready to relish their victory today.

"It's fine, isn't it, Clan-san? If Lord Veltlion becomes famous, you'll benefit as his servant."

"Servant... Yes, his servant..."

Clan disliked being called a servant even more than the thought of what Maxfern might have in store for them.

“If it wasn’t for me, this would have been a tragedy. I can’t just act like all I did was play a supporting role...”

“Now, now, Clan-san...”

Lidith understood how Clan felt, so she offered her a gentle smile. They’d gotten to know each other better while working together.

“Let’s have a toast together later. To me, you were the star, Clan-san.”

Lidith tried to cheer Clan up, but at that point she wasn’t listening. Her complexion was pale and her mouth was agape.

Wait! If it wasn’t for me...?!

Clan was aghast at her own words. They were certainly true. She had treated a virus that couldn’t be cured by the medicine or magic of this age. If the real Blue Knight had showed up, what would he have even been able to do about it?

What’s more, Clan had some resistance to the disease herself. Logically speaking, wouldn’t she—being a Forthorthian from the future—have modified genes from this very incident in the past? The Blue Knight famously spoke of being from an endless time and an immeasurable distance away, and in the right context, it all made sense.

“I see, so that’s what it was! No wonder I couldn’t find him no matter how hard I looked!”

Clan slammed her hands into the window frame and pushed herself up. All the questions she had been carrying around suddenly fit together like pieces of a puzzle, and they pointed to a single answer.

If I hadn’t been here, the disease couldn’t have been cured! If I hadn’t treated the virus the way I did, there’s no reason I should be resistant to it! I had to have been part of the legend of the Blue Knight! There’s no other way! And it’s certainly true that that man’s an endless time and immeasurable distance away from home, which means...

“Veltlion is the real Blue Knight!”

The true identity of Forthorthe’s legendary hero, Layous Fatra Veltlion, was a slightly dim looking boy from Earth.

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. It's the author, Takehaya. I have much more space for the afterword than last time and can therefore take a slower start.

Only three months have passed since the last volume, which is a comparatively fast publication, and I'm sure you can understand the reason why based on the contents. That's right, the invaders don't appear in this volume. Because this is more of a side story, the publishing department and I agreed that we should get things out as soon as possible.

This volume covers what Koutarou and Clan were doing when they disappeared in the previous volume. However, I couldn't fit it all into a single volume, so this side story will get a sequel. What follows will be revealed in volume 8.5.

With some more room in the afterword this time around, I wanted to talk about some of the hardships I had while writing this volume.

The first problem was the timing. I can only write about this now, but I've been wondering when I should release the contents of this volume since the very first volume. If a story without most of the established characters was released before you could get used to the story and characters, it would cause a lot of confusion. That said, there was no guarantee that the series would make it this far. In the end I decided to go with what felt natural to the story, and here we are. Fortunately, thanks to the support of all you readers, the series is sailing smoothly and this risky volume was able to be safely published. So while relieved, I am also grateful for all of the support. I will continue working hard, so please continue to support me in the future.

The second problem was how to treat the time slip to the past. Is there only one true history, or does it branch off like a tournament board? If it branches off, what are the conditions for that? It was necessary to figure these things out for the sake of the story.

There is actually something that I've been wondering about for a while

myself, and that is if it's possible to return to the same time and place you came from once you time slip into the past. The reason I wonder is that if a person was sent back in time in a time slip, the moment that person appeared in the past, the mass of the universe would increase by a single person. The change in gravity from that would slightly alter the universe. Returning from that would then mean returning to a slightly different future. Of course, the change might be so minute that the time traveler wouldn't ever notice it. But the point is that no matter how minute, a change is a change, and while everything might look the same, all of their friends and family would actually be different people. And if parallel universes existed, things would get even more complicated since the time traveler would still be absent from the world they came from originally. These questions can make story composition a little tricky.

So after a long amount of deliberation, I decided that parallel universes do exist, but that they can rejoin. That way as long as the change made is minor enough, history would return to normal right away. As a result, the history of the universe doesn't look like a tournament board, but rather like knitting. In that structure, if a time traveler changed history, they could return to their own world if they tried hard enough. They would be able to see their friends and family again.

I reached this conclusion just before my head was about to explode. Thanks to that, I was able to sort this story out, but I believe I'll come across similar philosophical problems in future works. I'm both scared and excited for that. I keep thinking about it, but story writing really is hard.

I've run out of room now. I felt like I had more space, but I immediately used it all up, so it's time to bid farewell again. I'd like to thank everyone at the editorial department for their hard work; Poco-san, my illustrator; my friends that give me their advice on my ideas; and all the readers who bought this book.

Finally, I pray for all the people affected by the recent earthquake and tsunami.

March, 2011

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 7.5

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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