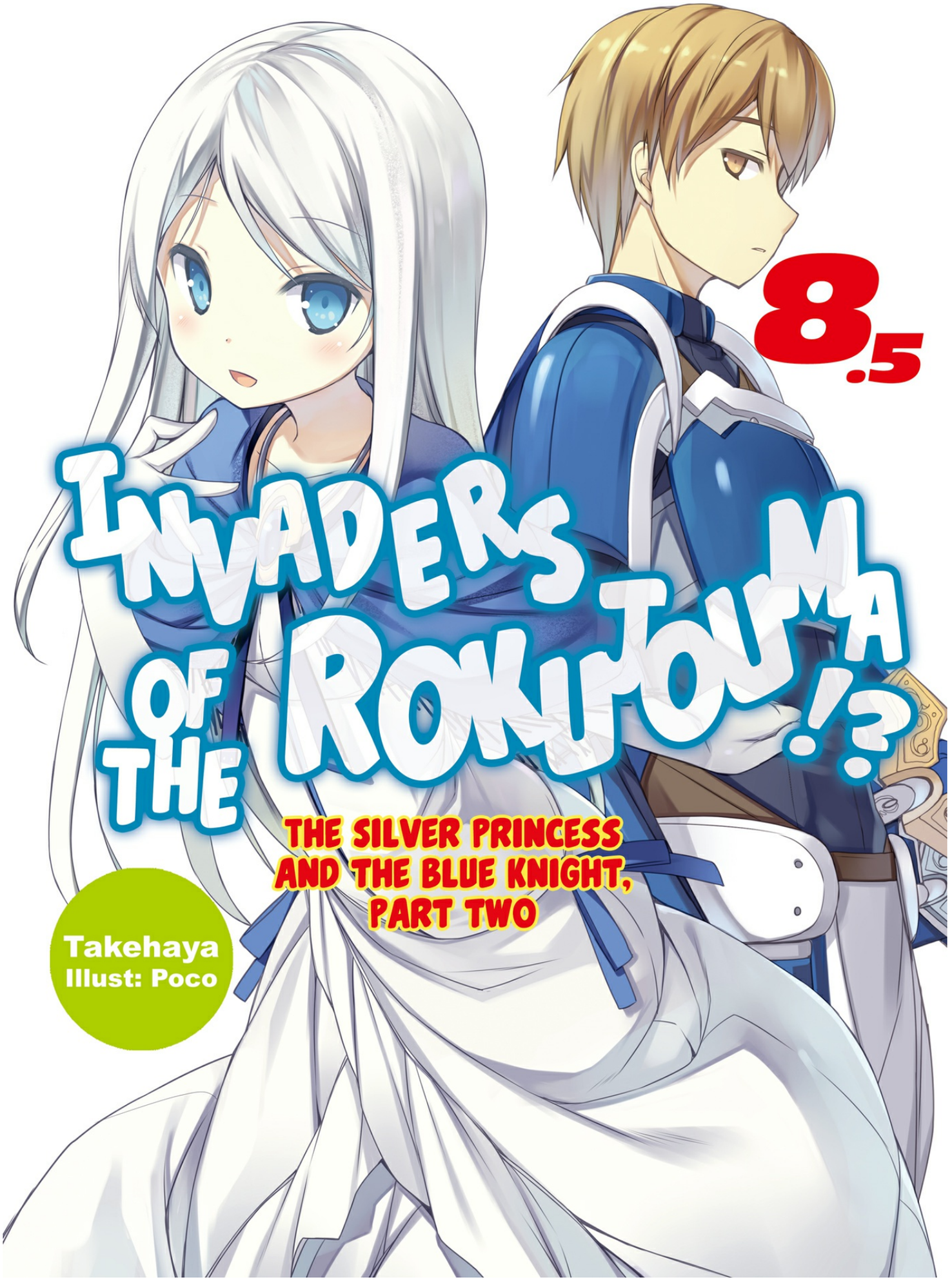


Invaders of the Rokujouma!? 8.5

The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight, Part Two

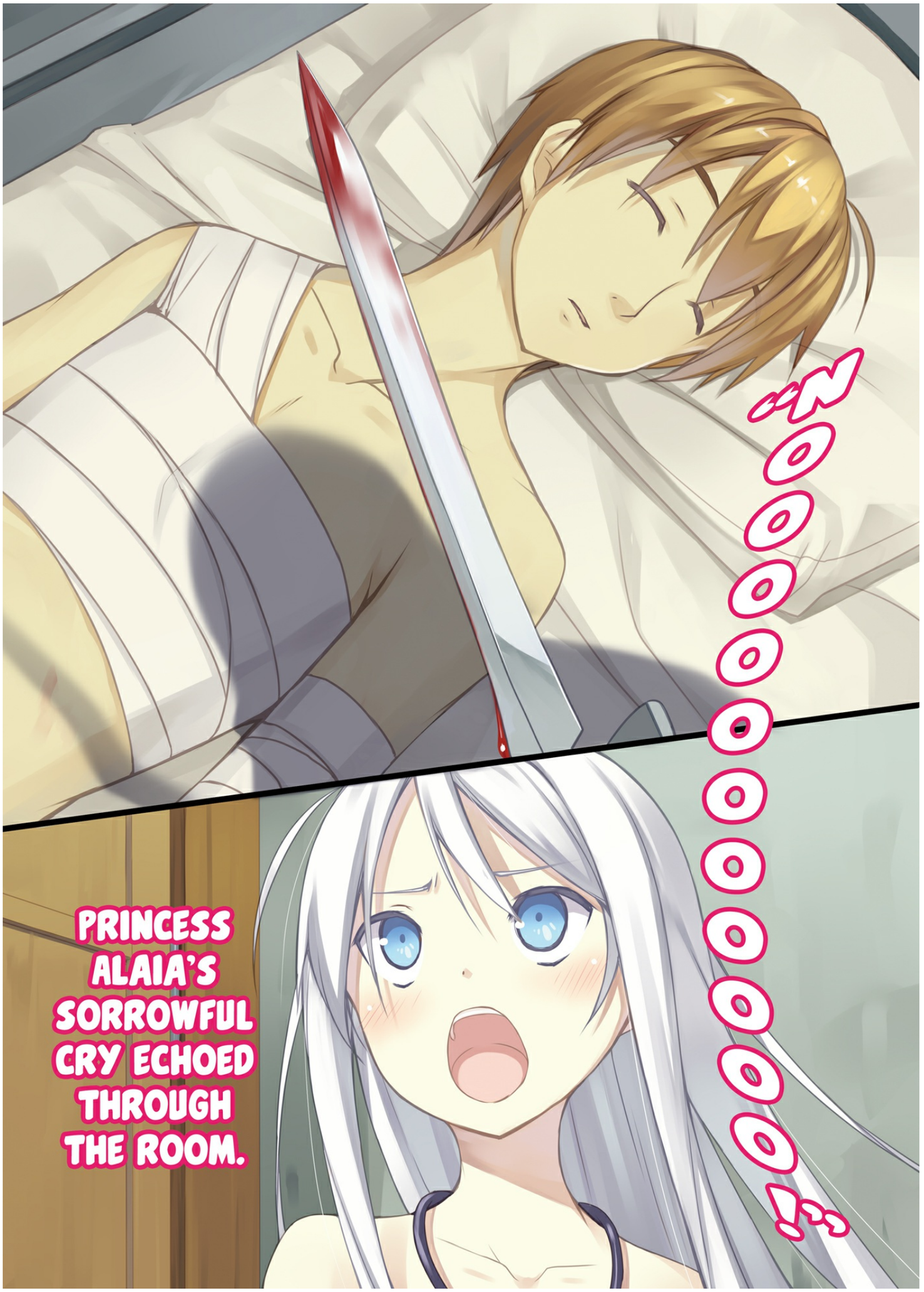
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INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 8.5

The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight, Part Two


Snow White and the First Star
THE CRIMSON DRAGON ALUNAYA STANDS BEFORE THEM!
THE CURTAIN RISES ON KOUTAROU'S BIGGEST BATTLE AS THE BLUE KNIGHT YET!


"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"
PRINCESS ALAIA'S SORROWFUL CRY ECHOED THROUGH THE ROOM.

The Cast of the Legend of the Blue Knight



Satomi Koutarou

The protagonist serving as a substitute(?) for the legendary Blue Knight.



Clariossa Daora Forthorthe

A bitter enemy of Koutarou's stuck in the same boat with him.
Also a princess. Her nickname is Clan.



Alaia Kua Forthorthe

The crown princess of Forthorthe chased out of the capital by a coup d'etat.



Charldrissa Daora Forthorthe

The second princess of Forthorthe, and Alaia's energetic younger sister.
Her nickname is Charl.



Flairan Nye Pardomshiha

An established knight of the Pardomshiha family that has long served the royal family. Her nickname is Flair.



Marietta Alsein

A maid from the imperial palace. Loves gossip. Her nickname is Mary.



Fauna Mordraw

A former classmate of Alaia's, and a priestess of the Goddess of Dawn.



Lidith Maxfern

An alchemist fighting alongside Alaia. Her uncle is the mastermind behind the coup d'etat.



Caris Webnant

A magician who disguised herself as a horse to keep watch over Alaia.

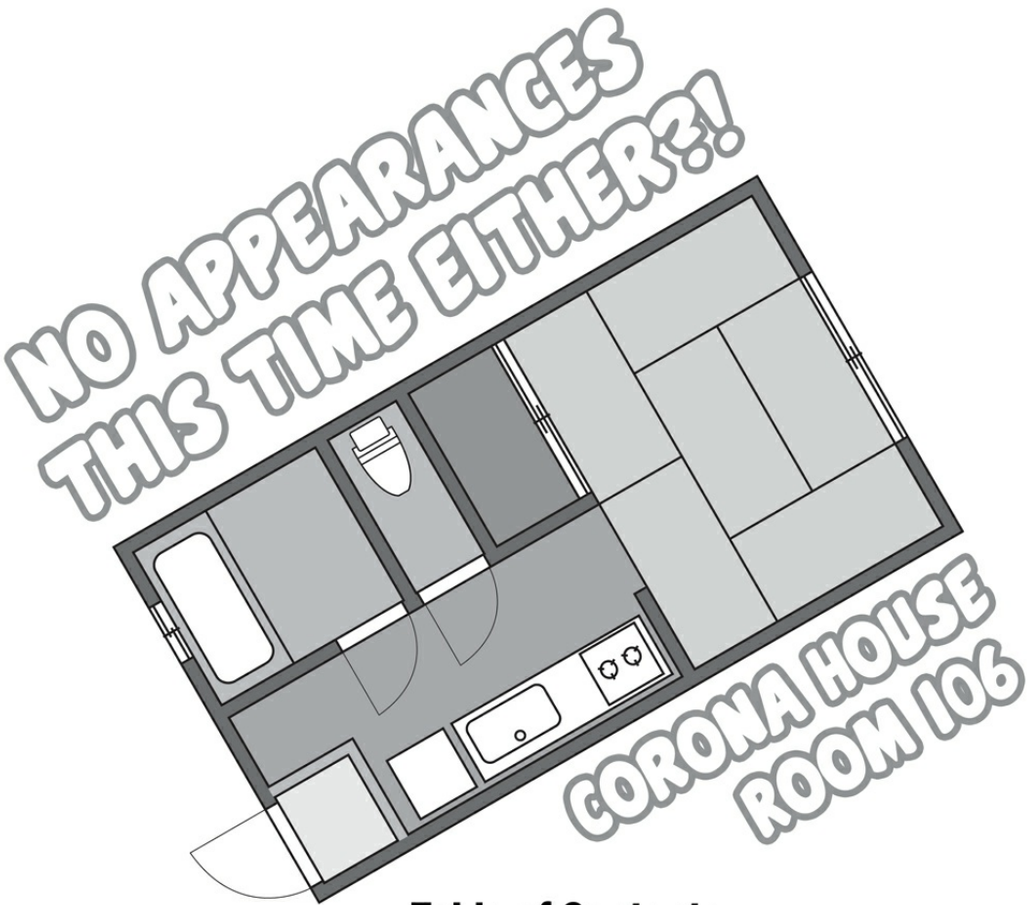


Table of Contents

The Reborn Forthorthian Army

An Oath and an Insignia

Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya

The Holy Sword

The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight

The Golden Sea and Silvery White Snow

The Last Scene to You

Afterword

The Reborn Forthorthian Army

In the northern region of the Mastir territory close to the Pardomshiha border was a great plain called Raustor, meaning “the goddess’s resting place.” It got its name from a local myth that claimed the Goddess of Dawn once stopped there to rest while travelling through. Being the only plain in such a mountainous area, it did make an ideal resting spot. As such, it naturally became a transport hub for the area, and thanks to that, a large number of towns and trade outposts were established nearby.

As things stood now, an army detachment was currently stationed in Raustor to defend those towns. Raustor stood between the Reborn Forthorthian Army and the capital of Fornorn, meaning that they had no choice but to pass through the area to get there. Maxfern knew that and wanted to make their passage as difficult as possible if not stop it altogether, so he’d deployed his soldiers accordingly. A clash in Raustor was inevitable now for the Reborn Forthorthian Army.

The Reborn Forthorthian Army was the army created by Alaia after she escaped to the Pardomshiha territory. The Pardomshiha family had deep ties with the royal family, and they were willing to lend many of their knights in support of Alaia and her cause. Even with Pardomshiha’s band of knights, however, the Reborn Forthorthian Army totaled a mere five hundred men. It was practically nothing compared to the coup d’etat forces, backed by almost the entire Imperial Army. The Wenranka family, also known for their loyalty to the throne, had agreed to join the Reborn Forthorthian Army as well, but it seemed like the Reborn Forthorthian Army would be crushed before they could even join up with them.

However, despite all odds, the Reborn Forthorthian Army had managed to turn things around. Although it was a siege battle with the defenders at an advantage, the Reborn Forthorthian Army achieved victory in their first real battle against the coup d’etat army. The Wenranka reinforcements rendezvoused with them after that, making their second victory that much

easier.

And after their second victory, the Reborn Forthorthian Army's reputation began spreading across the country like wildfire. As a result, they quickly gained the support of the people in the form of supplies and recruits. As their forces swelled to over three thousand strong, Alaia finally made up her mind. They would recapture the capital of Fornorn and defeat Maxfern. At last, several months after escaping from the capital, Alaia started her journey back home to retake what was rightfully hers.

And so the Reborn Forthorthian Army and the coup d'etat army both marched on Raustor. The Reborn Forthorthian Army had some three thousand men while the coup d'etat army had four thousand. The coup d'etat army, however, hadn't brought all of their forces to the region as they needed to leave soldiers behind to guard the borders and put down any riots, both of which were very real concerns. With things in disarray because of the coup d'etat, an invasion from a neighboring country was a dangerous threat. And having suffered several months of tyranny, the citizens were primed to explode.

Yet even though they weren't able to bring their full force to bear, the coup d'etat army was still superior in both numbers and quality. While the Reborn Forthorthian Army had three thousand men, the vast majority of them were untrained recruits. In reality, their actual force only had the strength of roughly 2,500, and they were up against four thousand of the Imperial Army's trained soldiers. It seemed certain the Reborn Forthorthian Army would lose in a direct clash, but things aren't always as they seem.

Clan was currently sitting in a tent in the Reborn Forthorthian Army's encampment. She was operating her bracelet, holograms flashing in and out one after another in front of her. They were all images of armies in formation. Since she was in her and Koutarou's personal tent, there was no fear of anyone accidentally walking in and seeing what she was doing, which was using her observation device to scout the enemy.

"How does it look?"

Koutarou, who was right next to her and watching the feed with her, didn't

quite know what to make of it all. Clan glanced over and began explaining it to him.

“It looks like they’re gearing up for a field battle. They’ve left the fort and are gathering in the plain.”

“Since they have the advantage in numbers, they can afford to go into a straightforward battle, huh?”

“Well, it’s true that we’re more like a mob than an army compared to them.”

The coup d’etat army had left the local fort and deployed almost all of their troops on the plain. Staying in the fort would have given them a defensive advantage, but it would have kept them from making full use of their numbers. So in the interest of offensive power, the coup d’etat army decided to leave the fort to try and crush the Reborn Forthorthian Army in one fell swoop. A full-on assault like that would also likely result in less casualties than a drawn-out battle to defend the fort.

“Which means we’re probably in trouble.”

“It does indeed seem that way.”

While looking at the footage relayed by the observation device, Koutarou and Clan both leaned in and continued to discuss their current situation. Though they were supposed to be a knight and his servant, they looked more like a general and his strategist.

“At this rate, we’re almost certainly going to be destroyed.”

“As strong as this armor is, it’s not enough to hold off several thousand men,” Koutarou said as he knocked on his armor.

The armor he was wearing had been created with cutting-edge Forthorthian science, so in this day and age, it had unparalleled strength. There was simply no way he could lose to normal soldiers. But no matter how strong he was, if his allies were defeated before he could take down all the enemies, that strength would be meaningless. He wouldn’t be able to win this war relying on the power of his armor alone.

“Your armor, huh? Speaking of, Veltlion...” Clan said as she glanced at his arm.

“How’s your left arm? Can you move it properly?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, no problem. I can move it just fine.”

Koutarou held his left arm out in front of him and repeatedly opened and closed his fist. During his battle with Clan, the armor around his left arm had been destroyed. It was replaced with Kiriha’s gauntlet, but Clan had only just recently repaired the armor to incorporate the gauntlet into it.

“Can you use your fire and electricity even with the gauntlet like that?”

“Yeah, it works just fine.”

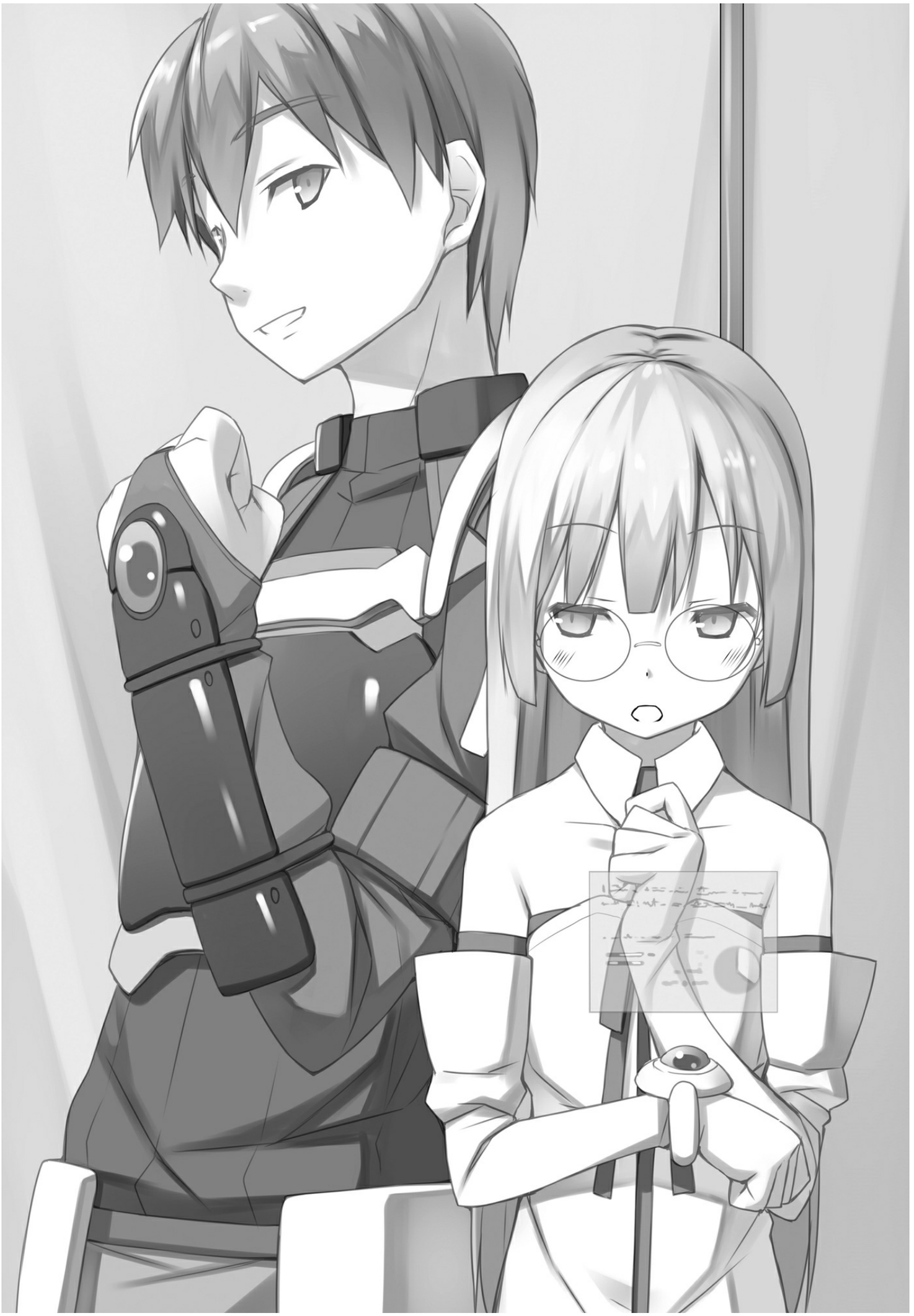
“Good.”

Clan flashed a satisfied smile and adjusted her glasses. She’d been worried about Koutarou, so hearing that was a genuine relief. His defensive and offensive abilities were greatly reduced as long the armor was compromised. And if it was no longer airtight, he would be at a risk underwater or in space.

“Your repairs are perfect. Thank you, Clan.”

“I felt like an idiot having to repair something I broke myself...”

“Yup, I felt the same way. Anyways, you’re a big help.”



“Ugh...”

Hearing that, Clan blushed and coughed a couple of times to hide her embarrassment before returning to the topic at hand.

“M-More importantly, about what we do next... We can’t just face them head-on. What should we do?”

“Heh, that’s where you come in, right, Clan-san?”

While Clan’s face was still red, another girl in the tent called out to her. It was Lidith Maxfern. She was Maxfern’s niece, but she had cut her ties with him and allied with Alaia. Since she was a scholar who studied alchemy, she was incredibly knowledgeable and had been serving as Clan’s assistant. Because of that, she understood that Koutarou and Clan were using extremely advanced technology.

“Ahem... Yes, Clan. Tell us your plan.”

“We could use a decoy to lure them away from the fort completely, seize it while it’s defenseless, and then use it against them. By doing that, we’d gain access to the weapons stored in the fort, and we’d be able to make up for some of the difference between our forces by using the fort for a defensive advantage.”

“So hopefully without their supplies stored in the fort and without any siege weaponry, they’d be forced to retreat, perhaps?”

Clan had consulted with a war support AI, and Lidith caught on to the real gist of the plan before Koutarou did. Everyone believed Koutarou was the one devising the army’s strategies, but in reality, it was Clan and Lidith behind them.

“I see. That’s a good idea. So how exactly will we do it?”

“Veltlion, tonight you will lead the soldiers out and hide in the forest.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll take a decoy force and lead the enemy’s main force away from the town. If I succeed, I will contact you and you will raid the fort.”

“And I’ll be in charge of communications.”

“All right, let’s go with that. I’ll report our plan to Princess Alaia while you guys work out the details.”

“Roger.”

Koutarou left the tent alone. As the standing commander of the Reborn Forthorthian Army, it was his job to report to Alaia.

“Contact all troops. Tell them that if we are found now, everything will be for naught. Proceed with caution.”

“Understood, Your Excellency.”

The recruit Koutarou was talking to saluted and disappeared in the dark woods. Seeing that, Koutarou began walking again, but at a much slower pace than normal.

Koutarou and his troops were currently marching through the forest in the dead of night. He was leading the march of 2,500 men since he could see in the dark thanks to his armor. Between his night vision, an accurate map, and Clan’s observation device covering them, Koutarou was able to navigate his troops through the dark forest without using any light.

However, the people of this age had a tendency to be slightly more fearful of the dark than Koutarou and Clan were. There were a lot of anxious soldiers who wanted to light a fire, so in order to keep them calm and to keep the army together, Koutarou had the troops moving at a slow march. They couldn’t be too rash. They had to hold it together until Clan started her diversion at dawn.

Clan, Flair, and Caris were on the opposite side of the fort, deploying five hundred men in a position where they stood out. They would then cleverly use Clan’s technology and Caris’s magic to make the force look several times larger, and the plan would be set in motion once the coup d’etat army saw them at first light. If all went well, they’d take the bait and sortie to go after them.

“Your Excellency, may I ask a question?”

A young man who served as an adjutant whispered to Koutarou. Hearing his words, Koutarou smiled wryly.

“I don’t mind, but... I keep telling you that you don’t have to be so formal.”

“I understand... but you’re our bastion of hope, Your Excellency.”

Koutarou’s adjutant was a few years older than him, but he always treated Koutarou with utmost respect. Everyone in the Reborn Forthorthian Army did. He’d earned quite a reputation among the people of Forthorthe. Not only had he saved a farm village that had been poisoned and attacked by a giant during its harvest festival, Koutarou had repelled the princess’s pursuers and safely escorted her to the Pardomshiha territory. It didn’t take long for rumors of a knight in blue armor named Layous to begin spreading throughout the kingdom.

“Hahh...”

However, Koutarou himself was perplexed by his current situation. Originally he was only supposed to be acting as a substitute for the real Blue Knight, but they’d ended up reaching the Pardomshiha territory without ever finding him. Now they’d moved into the beginnings of war, and Koutarou was leading an army that should have been the Blue Knight’s. He’d practically stolen his role, and he wasn’t quite sure how to feel about it.

To make matters worse, Koutarou didn’t really have any power to speak of. He had gotten his spirit sight from Sanae, his armor from Theia, and his gauntlet that could create electricity and fire from Kiriha. And while he was unaware of it, he was also being protected by Yurika’s magic. It was all power that had been bestowed upon him by others. It made him feel awkward and guilty that people were acknowledging it as his own.

“...So, what did you want to ask?”

However, nothing would come from worrying about it. He couldn’t tell anyone the truth, nor could he fight on his strength alone. As he changed gears, Koutarou urged the young adjutant to continue.

“If I may, Your Excellency, why don’t you kill your enemies?”

His question concerned how Koutarou fought. Even on the battlefield, Koutarou only used nonlethal force. He used the powers of his armor and gauntlet to knock his enemies out or injure them enough to incapacitate them. In the military strategy of this time period, it seemed like a liability rather than

an act of mercy.

“They’re not the real enemy.”

This wasn’t the first time Koutarou had been asked that question. Clan and Flair had both posed it before, so he knew exactly how to answer and did so without hesitation.

“Huh?”

Koutarou’s answer was the same as the Blue Knight’s in Theia’s play. He didn’t kill his enemies either, and there was a scene regarding that in the manuscript.

“They are not our enemy. They are still citizens of Forthorthe, and Princess Alaia would mourn the loss of any of her people, regardless of the reason.”

Koutarou was using lines from the play, but in reality, he felt the same way. He didn’t want to make Alaia—or Theia—sad.

“And just between us, there’s a strategic significance to it too.”

“A strategic significance, you say?”

“Yeah. It usually takes two men to carry a wounded or incapacitated soldier off the battlefield. In other words, by not killing them, we’re reducing their numbers even more.”

That was a bit of modern strategy Koutarou had learned from Clan. By killing enemies, their forces are only reduced by the number of men slain. However, when merely injuring them, other soldiers try and help them or get them to safety. Time and resources are then devoted to their care. So by hurting one soldier, it was possible to reduce the enemy’s numbers by two or more. Such strategy was commonly employed in modern warfare. Weapons like landmines were often designed to injure rather than kill in order to increase the burden on the opposing force. It was rather devious in its own way.

“That might be true... but you shouldn’t put yourself in danger like that, Your Excellency!”

What worried the young adjutant the most was that Koutarou often ended up in dangerous situations in battle. There were plenty of soldiers who faked being incapacitated, and Koutarou had gotten himself into trouble that way more

than once already. Fortunately, thanks to the power of his armor, he'd made it out all right every time, but it still made his adjutant nervous. He didn't want to lose the army's beacon of hope over something like that. He would rather see their enemies dead than Koutarou.

"There's no need to worry. I made an oath to Princess Alaia. That I would protect her without fail. And in order to fulfill that oath, I cannot die."

"Yes, of course... Forgive me, Your Excellency."

"No, it's okay."

An oath was the most important thing to a knight. And once Koutarou brought that up, the adjutant had no room left to argue. It was an unsatisfying conclusion for him, but there was nothing he could do when Koutarou played his trump card as a knight.

I'm sorry. Here you are all worried about me...

So while smiling wryly, Koutarou apologized to his adjutant internally.

The capital of Fornorn was a small city by modern standards, but it was one of the largest in existence in this day and age. It served as a symbol of the prosperity and strength of Forthorthe, and of the generosity and wisdom of the royal family protecting it. However, right now, there was not a single royal in the capital. There was indeed a palace in the center of the city, but the man sitting on the throne was no emperor.

Violbarum Maxfern was a traitor. He was a member of the Maxfern family, famous for producing scholars and politicians. Maxfern himself served the emperor as a minister, but he had betrayed the royal family, assassinating the emperor and usurping the throne for the sake of his own ambitions.

"So Raustor has fallen, has it?"

A man's voice echoed throughout the throne room. Despite being middle-aged, he was a strong, fit man with a powerful voice to match. It was Maxfern.

"That was faster than expected."

Maxfern had his elbows planted on the arms of the throne with his hands

clasped together as he spoke.

“Yes, I thought it would take a little more time, but it seems like they’re more powerful than we expected.”

The man who answered him was a tall, elderly man with gray hair. Though cloaked in robes, it was obvious he was slight of frame. He gave off the opposite impression of Maxfern. This was the head of the court magicians, Grevanas. He’d served the royal family since the time of the previous emperor. He himself was the strongest magician in the country and was known as one of the seven archwizards. However, alongside Maxfern, he had incited the coup d’etat and betrayed the country.

“It seems they fell for a feint in front of the fort, and when they sent out their forces, the fort was attacked from behind and seized right under their noses.”

“That’s quite a strategy from Alaia. She looked like she couldn’t harm a fly, but she’s come a long way...”

Just moments ago, Grevanas had gotten the report from one of his subordinates indicating that the town of Raustor and the fort within had fallen to the Reborn Forthorthian Army. Yet despite the bad news, neither Maxfern nor Grevanas seemed particularly disappointed. If anything, it was seemingly the opposite. It was as if they were welcoming of Alaia’s success.

“And it seems the rumor of a powerful knight joining Alaia is true.”

“The Blue Knight, was it?”

“Yes. It seems he played a large part in this as well. Apart from planning the feint, he also entered the fort on his own and opened the gates from the inside.”

“So our forces never stood a chance...”

“So it seems. Apparently the fort was captured in mere moments, and once our forces lost their base of operations, they retreated.”

“Hahahaha, splendid! Well done, Alaia and Blue Knight!”

Maxfern burst out laughing and praised both Alaia and Koutarou. He didn’t seem to care that he had lost a vital base without much of a fight, allowing the

enemy to advance further south.

“There was no damage to the town and there were almost no casualties. As a result, the Reborn Forthorthian Army’s reputation is skyrocketing.”

“As expected. It’s the kind of story the people just eat up.”

Maxfern nodded as he listened to Grevanas, but he suddenly narrowed his eyes into a more serious expression.

“Grevanas, if they are able to produce such results, it must mean that Alaia has broken the seal on the royal family’s treasured sword, right?”

“Well... it seems they have been achieving such victories without the help of the holy sword.”

“What?!”

Maxfern was astonished. He slammed his fists into the arms of the throne and stood up. All of his smug confidence from before had vanished.

“Is that true?! You are certain of this?!”

“Yes. The seal at the temple of the Goddess of Dawn is still intact, and there are no signs the sword has been removed. My subordinates on location have confirmed it.”

While listening to Grevanas’s report, Maxfern slowly sank back down on the throne.

“To think... To think that Alaia is winning this easily without using the holy sword... It’s hard to believe...”

“But it’s the truth. They defeated the magical soldier and are successfully advancing despite the difference in forces and without the help of the sword.”

“It seems things have gotten quite complicated...”

Maxfern sighed loudly as his expression turned bitter. Alaia was putting up an unexpectedly good fight, and Maxfern was both surprised and unhappy.

“It looks like that Blue Knight is better than we thought.”

Grevanas’s expression hadn’t changed, but the bitterness was audible in his voice.

“Which means that we’ll have to change our approach too.”

“I believe it is as you say. With this victory, support for Alaia’s cause will likely rise even more. We’re already seeing sympathizers in our own ranks. It’s well within the realm of possibility that they will manage to muster an army that can rival ours.”

“If that happens, our wish will never come true. How can we threaten Alaia as things stand now?”

Grevanas and Maxfern began plotting their next move, but it wasn’t a plan for how to deal with the Reborn Forthorthian Army. Rather, it was a plan to personally corner Alaia.

An Oath and an Insignia

Charl's golden hair swayed as she ran. The sunlight rained down from above, vividly reflecting off of her tresses. It looked like golden stalks of wheat blowing in the wind.

"Blue Knight! Where are you?! Show yourself!" she shouted out as she ran through the confused crowd.

Compared to the people around her, she was extremely short, so she couldn't see ahead. All she could do was shout as she continued to search.

She was at the fort near the town of Raustor. It had previously been a coup d'etat army base, but it was now under the control of the Reborn Forthorthian Army. They had successfully driven the rebel forces out just yesterday.

And with the Reborn Forthorthian Army newly in control, the fort was plenty crowded. When thinking of a fort, one might imagine lots of knights and soldiers, but that wasn't quite the case. When a military force was on the move, they needed almost as many men to carry supplies as they did soldiers. Since trucks and aircrafts didn't exist in this time period, that much was inevitable. They mostly had to manage with manpower, and thusly there were a lot of civilian volunteers helping to support the army, including traders who provided the actual supplies. Between them and the actual army, the fort was quite full.

But despite the crowding, everyone was cheerful and morale was high. They were all excited to retake their home country. Even putting the matter of Alaia and the royal family aside, that much would still be true.

The coup d'etat had begun with the assassination of the emperor and empress, and from there the country's economic situation and public order began deteriorating. The citizens' lives took a turn for the worse over the course of just a few months. However, thanks to victories of the Reborn Forthorthian Army, the citizens felt like the winds were starting to change. As a result, the people began rallying to the Reborn Forthorthian Army and decided to solve the national crisis before them by joining hands. They banded together

around their beacon of hope: a single young knight.

On the battlefield he was peerless, but he was always humble. He showed mercy, even to his enemies. He was a model knight and a loyal subject devoted to protecting Princess Alaia. When people called his name, they did so with great reverence. They called him “Forthorthe’s Blue Knight, Layous Fatra Veltlion.”

Princess Charl was currently looking for exactly that knight.

“Your Highness, if you’re looking for Layous-sama, I saw him at the training grounds.”

“Oh, of course! The Blue Knight is always hiding over there!”

“Heehee, I don’t think he’s hiding, Your Highness. It looks like he’s training with the new recruits.”

“Good work, Mary! You have my praise!”

“I’m honored, Your Highness.”

After hearing of his whereabouts from Mary the maid, Charl ran towards the training grounds by the ramparts. The people made way for her and watched fondly as she ran through the crowd. The sight of such a sunny child had the power to warm hearts even in the midst of war.

“Blue Knight!”

Charl shouted out for him again and again as she approached, but her voice didn’t seem to reach him. He didn’t even notice she was there. He was currently sparring with Flair, a female knight Charl knew very well.

“Veltlion, your sword handling is too proper. I think your moves would be harder to read if you drop your shoulders a little.”

“My teacher was very strict about my posture, so it’s quite hard to break the habit.”

Since Flair was from the Pardomshiha family, famous for creating splendid knights across countless generations, she was an expert when it came to the sword. In order to make up for her feminine physique, she used a thin blade

and quick strikes to target her enemy's weak points. Speed and precision were her specialties.

However, her attacks yielded little result against the knight in blue armor. He was wearing heavy full plate armor and using a large, traditional knight's sword while she was wearing light armor and using a thin sword. Despite her superior mobility, the knight in blue armor evaded each of her attacks at the last moment. On top of that, they had been at it for several minutes already. It was clear that the knight in blue armor must have an absurd amount of stamina as well as great skill with the sword. Of course, the same could be said for Flair. She hadn't taken a single attack yet either.

"Blue Knight!"

Calling out to him again, Charl finally got his attention.

"Your Highness?"

When he realized he was in the presence of the young princess, he instinctively turned towards her.

"You're wide open!"

Flair then made her move on him. However, her sword stopped just before reaching his throat. Any further and it would have pierced right through.

"That's why I keep telling you that you're too honest, Veltlion..."

"Well done, Lady Flairan."

Flair smiled wryly as she returned her sword to its sheath. As she did, the soldiers who had been watching the two erupted. Some rejoiced in Flair's victory while others were bitter the Blue Knight had lost, and some were just excited to have witnessed a good fight. Seeing their commanders' skills up close was a thrill for all of them.

"B-Blue Knight! Ah, oooh! Hey!"

Charl forced her way through the enthusiastic soldiers and appeared on the training grounds. She had momentarily lost her balance pushing her way through the crowd, but she quickly collected herself and cheerfully began running once more as she spotted the knight in blue armor.

“I’ve found you at last, Blue Knight! You certainly made that difficult on me!”

Having finally found the person she was looking for after searching all over the fort, Charl’s smile was so bright that it genuinely appeared to shine.

As Koutarou squatted down and looked her way, Charl dashed forward like a bullet.

“Blue Knight!”

“Your Highness?!”

Just in front of Koutarou, she kicked off the ground with all of her strength in a mighty leap. It was her signature affectionate greeting. Koutarou gently caught her tiny body mid-air. Since Charl frequently jumped at him even though he was wearing his armor, he had to catch her like that in order to keep her from hurting herself. Between his armor calculating her trajectory and the spirit sight he’d gotten from Sanae, he always managed to catch her the right way, but it was a nerve-racking experience every time.

“Your Highness... I keep telling you that you should come over more slowly or you may get hurt.”

“Are you saying you don’t want to catch me anymore?”

After being admonished, Charl looked up at Koutarou with a rather crestfallen expression. Seeing her puppy-dog eyes up close, Koutarou felt like he was the one who’d done something wrong.

“That’s not it, but—”

“Then isn’t it all right? I will jump and you will catch me. Where is the problem in that?”

“That’s not quite it...”

This wasn’t the first time they’d had this conversation, but it always ended the same way: with Koutarou backing down. In the end, he was always unable to reject Charl’s frank and earnest feelings.

“More importantly...”

And this time was no different. Charl casually dismissed the entire discussion and moved on to the next topic. She jumped out of his arms, then pulled out something and handed it to Koutarou with both hands.

“Blue Knight, I present you with this.”

Inside her hands was a small ornament. It was a piece of rectangular wood with a belt of wool around it.

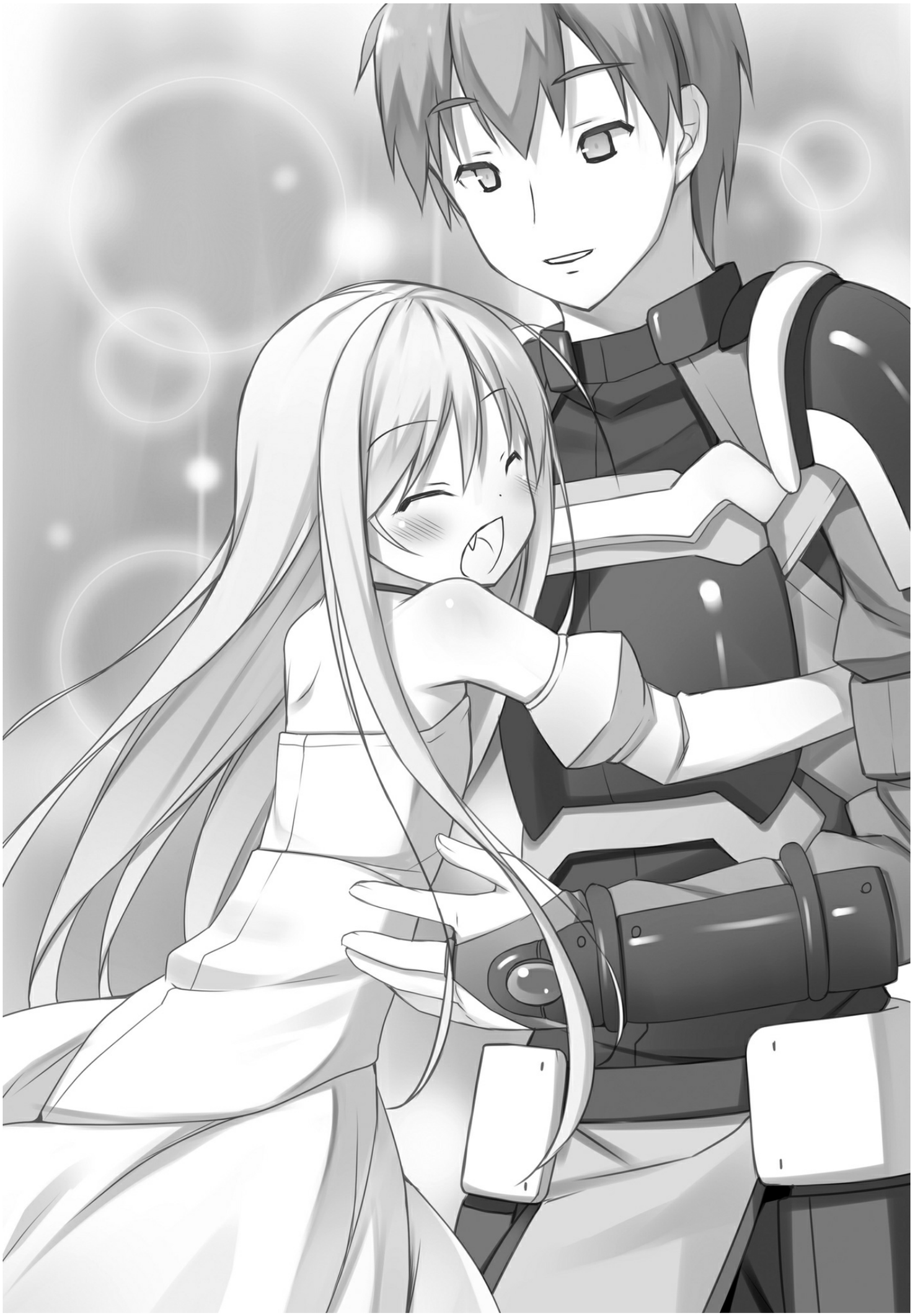
“My, Your Highness, what is this?”

Flair, who peeked into Charl’s hands alongside Koutarou, asked Charl about it with a smile on her face. In response, Charl proudly puffed out her chest.

“This is a rank insignia that Alaia and I made.”

“A rank insignia, you say?”

Having been told what the ornament was, Koutarou stared at the wooden object. On it was something written in ink.



Since Koutarou couldn't read Forthorthian, he tilted his head to the side as his armor began translating the characters on the wooden ornament for him: "Insignia of Forthorthe's Blue Knight, the Super Important Bodyguard of Charl and Alaia."

It was obvious at first glance it had been written by a child, but Koutarou could tell that it had been written with great care. A colorful knitted wool ribbon decorated the wooden ornament. While it too was simple and crafted with care, Koutarou was certain that Alaia had made it.

"We present you with this as thanks for your contributions to us and the royal family."

Charl had asked to make an insignia for him, and she and Alaia had worked together to make it. After staring at it for a long moment and letting everything that it meant soak in, Koutarou smiled at her.

"Thank you very much, Princess Charl. Please give Princess Alaia my thanks as well."

"You can do that yourself later, Blue Knight."

Seeing Koutarou's smile, Charl's proud expression turned into a cheerful smile too. She then reached her hand up towards Koutarou's chest and pinned the insignia in its proper place.

"There. Take pride in this for a long time, Blue Knight."

"I will make it a family heirloom, Your Highness."

"Good!"

Charl was an innocent girl, but by no means stupid. She knew that there was no guarantee that Koutarou would be pleased with the insignia, yet she hadn't been able to come up with another way to show her gratitude. She was anxious as she gave it to him, but fortunately Koutarou liked the handmade insignia. That pleased Charl to no end.

"All right, then let's go."

Satisfied, Charl climbed up onto Koutarou's back while he was still squatting down. After getting into position, she lightly tapped on Koutarou's shoulder

twice.

“You may stand.”

“Yes, Your Highness. But where to now?”

Koutarou got a firm grip on Charl and stood up. Charl pointed to the building in the center of the fort. It was a large, solid building made out of bricks. It was a vital part of the fort, serving as both the headquarters and the barracks.

“Like I said, you can thank Alaia yourself.”

“So to Princess Alaia?”

“Yes, she needs you. And because I had some business with you too, I came to find you myself,” Charl said as she wrapped her arms around Koutarou’s neck and held on tight.

“I see.”

Koutarou now got the bigger picture. Apart from giving him the insignia, Charl had come to find Koutarou because Alaia needed to talk to him.

“Indeed. So as you can see, Flair, I will be borrowing the Blue Knight.”

“Okay. Veltlion, take care of Her Highness.”

“Understood.”

“Enough already! Let’s go.”

“Y-Yes, right away.”

Koutarou was rushed by Charl off the training grounds, leaving Flair and Mary, who had come chasing after Charl, behind.

“Come on, hurry! Sister is waiting for you!”

“I understand, so please stay still! Ah, look out!”

Koutarou ran towards the center of the fort with Charl on his back. Flair and Mary watched them go as they continued their lively discussion. After they ducked into the building, Flair smiled wryly.

“And to think such a man is a peerless knight on the battlefield... The world is full of mysteries,” she mumbled.

Seeing Koutarou with Charl, it was easy to forget how much of a powerhouse he was in battle. If Flair didn't know any better, she never would have even guessed he was a knight, much less one experienced in battle. He simply didn't have that kind of presence about him. Especially not while he was with Charl. But despite what it may or may not have seemed like, he was indeed an impressive knight, and that perplexed Flair somewhat. Mary, however, saw it differently. After Koutarou and Charl vanished, she looked over at Flair and smiled.

"But isn't that why we're winning?"

"What do you mean?"

Flair looked back at Mary, somewhat stumped. She was having trouble understanding what Mary was saying.

"If Layous-sama just went around slaughtering his enemies, we wouldn't have this many allies and there's no guarantee we would have gotten this far."

Koutarou didn't kill people—not even his enemies. It was possible that his way of doing things risked his safety and the safety of those around him, but he hadn't taken a single life. He had shown restraint and mercy, and everyone praised Koutarou as an exemplary knight. The Reborn Forthorthian Army also tried to follow his lead and refrain from any unnecessary killing.

And since they didn't kill people without good reason, there was no ill will among the people for the Reborn Forthorthian Army. In fact, they always had plenty of recruits coming in and there were even Imperial Army soldiers defecting to join them. Regardless of people's political beliefs, no one wanted to be on the side that would slaughter their families in cold blood. The coup d'etat army soldiers were mostly locals, after all.

And the result was profound. As such a peculiar knight in this age, Koutarou's very existence led the Reborn Forthorthian Army from victory to victory.

"That might be true. No matter how strong you are on your own, the war isn't about any single soldier. It's about all of us together as an army."

Flair slowly nodded. Mary might be onto something. If Koutarou did the opposite of what he was doing now and simply killed all of his enemies, the

Reborn Forthorthian Army might have been suppressed by now. Even if he could kill hundreds on his own, he couldn't beat the coup d'etat army alone. And without the cooperation of the people, he wouldn't be able to protect Alaia and Charl. He would just become an object of fear and would eventually die alone, peerless but without allies.

In the short term, it might be effective to use as much force as necessary to kill as many enemies as possible, but that kind of abuse of power often came back to bite those who used it so. Earth's history was full of such examples. Like the Roman Empire, nations that used overwhelming force to slaughter their enemies and expand their reach eventually perished. Though they were only able to appreciate it after the fact, Alaia and the others would consider themselves lucky that Koutarou hadn't gone down that path.

The inside of the building was much warmer than it was outside. The solid brick walls helped keep the warmth in while blocking out the cold wind.

"Blue Knight, Alaia is waiting in her room."

"Understood."

After closing the door to the building behind him, Koutarou headed towards Alaia's private room with Charl still on his back. Koutarou's armored boots clacked with every step he took. The sound rang out through the wide entrance hall, the long stairs leading up to the third floor, and the winding passage that followed before it went silent.

In front of Koutarou was a large door. The room behind it was originally used as a headquarters by the commander of the fort. The Reborn Forthorthian Army was using it much the same way. It was currently occupied by their commander in chief, Alaia. Koutarou was already familiar with the room as he'd visited it several times over the last day. Before he could knock on the door this time, however, it opened from the inside and several government officials carrying a mass of documents practically leaped out.

"Your Excellency! How very nice to meet you!"

"Lord Veltlion! We are in a hurry, so please excuse us!"

When they saw Koutarou, they hurriedly straightened their postures and greeted him politely before scampering off.

“They seem awfully busy.”

“Yes. My sister has been working nonstop too.”

Looking back from the government officials as they left, Koutarou peered through the gap that had been left in the open door. He could see Alaia at a desk at the far end of the room, surrounded by heaps of documents.

“Don’t just stand there and stare. Go in. I told you that she needs you.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Koutarou smiled at Charl and knocked on the door a couple of times. Although the door was already open, he felt it was only polite to announce his presence.

“Jeez, you’re so formal, Blue Knight.”

“We didn’t come here to play.”

“We did.”

“You jester.”

“Yes, who is— Layous-sama?!”

When Alaia looked up from her papers, she saw Koutarou and Charl at the door and her eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Princess Alaia, I am here to respond to your summons.”

“Oh? But I don’t recall calling you, Layous-sama...”

Alaia blinked repeatedly with a confused look on her face. That response confused Koutarou in turn.

“But... Princess Charl came looking for me and said that you’d asked for me.”

“Charl did?”

Koutarou and Alaia both looked to Charl, who was still on Koutarou’s back. As they did, Charl shut the door behind her and Koutarou with a smile.

“I never said that she was calling for you.”

“But...”

“I merely said that she needed you. This misunderstanding is on you.”

In short, Charl had tricked Koutarou into coming to see Alaia. The big, satisfied grin on her face said it all.

“Charl, Layous-sama is very busy, you know.”

“That’s why, sister!”

Despite being admonished by Alaia, Charl showed no sign of remorse for what she had done. In fact, she smiled proudly.

“All you and the Blue Knight ever do is work. You were more relaxed when we were running away from the army! If you don’t rest a little, you’re going to get sick again!”

Though her bringing the two of them together seemed like innocent mischief at first, her appeal was quite serious. Charl clenched her hands into fists and stared at Koutarou and Alaia.

“Charl...”

Alaia had been planning on lightly scolding Charl more, but once she understood the meaning behind her actions, her expression softened. She couldn’t bring herself to reprimand Charl for thinking of her and Koutarou.

So that’s what’s going on... Now that I think about it, she did say something about coming here to play.

Like Alaia, Koutarou wasn’t displeased to learn Charl’s true intentions, yet at the same time, he couldn’t help thinking that her consideration was rather childlike. Imagining himself as a child, he might have done something similar for his parents.

“Come on, don’t just stand there! Go to her.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Koutarou repositioned Charl and approached Alaia. He wanted to respect the young, gentle girl’s innocent feelings. And it did indeed look like Alaia was fatigued. Koutarou believed she could use a break.

“Layous-sama... would that be all right?”

However, Alaia didn’t feel the same way. She had an apologetic expression on her face, clearly worried that her little sister was distracting Koutarou from something important and taking up his precious time.

“I don’t mind. This is part of a bodyguard’s duty as well.”

As Koutarou said that, he pointed to his chest. From his breastplate hung a wooden insignia. “Insignia of Forthorthe’s Blue Knight, the Super Important Bodyguard of Charl and Alaia.” Alaia knew exactly what it was because Charl had pestered her to help make it.

“Layous-sama...”

Seeing Koutarou wearing it, a warmth filled Alaia’s heart. An insignia made from wood and wool was just a child’s handiwork in the end. Although it might have been a gift from royalty, not many knights would so graciously accept being given such a childish thing. But Alaia was happy that Koutarou was one of them.

“Then let’s take a little break.”

Alaia didn’t resist the warm feeling coming over her. She wanted to treasure this moment and the time she spent together with Koutarou and Charl.

“Like Charl said, things might be more tiring now than when we were escaping from our pursuers.”

“See, Blue Knight?! It’s just like I said!”

“Very impressive insight, Princess Charl.”

“Heh, you may praise me more, my knight!”

“We don’t stand a chance against Charl. Heehee...”

If she had noticed the insignia when she was alone with Koutarou, she probably would have blurted out something unbelievable. That’s what Alaia thought to herself as she prepared tea while happily watching Koutarou and Charl.

During their tea break, Charl did most of the talking.

“And then Mary stopped me, saying that it would be dangerous to ride such a large horse. Then I said, ‘What horse should I ride then?’ Turns out there weren’t any smaller horses. Isn’t that rude?”

Charl chatted on and on about all kinds of things. Funny stories, sad one, recent events, what she was going to do later on, and everything in between. She prattled on while gesturing wildly.

“Charl, you’re still too young to ride a horse by yourself.”

“Your Highness, please settle for a pony.”

“Are you insulting me, Blue Knight?”

“I would never dare to insult you, Your Highness.”

“Then let me ride a horse next time. If you do, I’ll forgive you.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

“Very good.”

“Heehee...”

Koutarou and Alaia listened to all of Charl’s stories, smiling and commenting from time to time. While she spoke of nothing of real importance, it gave Koutarou and Alaia a chance to unwind. This continued for about an hour or so before Charl talked herself out. She nodded off in Koutarou’s lap with a satisfied grin on her face. She sat there, innocent and vulnerable, completely trusting herself to Koutarou.

“It looks like she fell asleep.”

Koutarou stood up and carried Charl to a sofa in the corner of the room. After he laid her down to rest, Alaia covered her with a blanket.

“Thank you so very much, Layous-sama.”

After tucking Charl’s wayward arm under the blanket, Alaia stood up and turned to Koutarou. She looked at him fondly, as if they were family. Her eyes were filled with deep trust and love.

“No, this is nothing.”

Koutarou was almost sucked in by those eyes, but it was remembering his duties that called him back to reality. After glancing towards the door, he whispered to Alaia so as not to wake up Charl.

“Well then, Your Highness, now would be a good time for me to take my leave.”

They had rested long enough. It was time for them to return to their jobs. Both Koutarou and Alaia had plenty to take care of. Alaia knew that as well as he did, but she chose to do the opposite.

“Layous-sama, might I have some more of your time?”

“I don’t mind, but...”

“Please, come this way.”

“Okay.”

Following Alaia’s lead, Koutarou returned to the table with the tea set on it. The two of them sat down facing each other. Since they were a bit away from the sofa now, they could speak normally without having to worry about waking Charl. After glancing towards Charl one more time, Koutarou turned to Alaia.

“She sure is fast asleep. I’m glad we didn’t wake her up.”

“Charl is only able to sleep like that when you are by her side, Layous-sama.”

Alaia glanced at Charl too, but she had a sad expression on her face when she turned back to Koutarou.

“I’m sure... that you remind her of our father, Layous-sama. She’s depending on you just like she did on him. Although she would never say so, I’m sure she’s feeling lonely too.”

Of course she’s lonely too...

Koutarou realized what Alaia was saying without putting it into words. She was also mourning the loss of her parents.

I’m powerless. I really can’t do anything for them...

Koutarou had no power of his own. At first glance it looked like Koutarou might be helping Alaia and the others, but in reality, the only reason he was

useful was because of the powers he'd borrowed from others. On top of that, he couldn't even console Alaia and Charl as they grieved. Having lived such a peaceful life, Koutarou couldn't find any words to console these girls whose parents had been murdered. He felt useless. He couldn't be of help to Alaia or Charl, and that frustrated and saddened him.

"So, Layous-sama..."

Alaia's words brought Koutarou out of deep thought.

"After this war is over, I want you to continue to help us."

Alaia had stopped Koutarou from leaving to tell him that specifically. It was something she couldn't say to him unless they were alone.

"Your Highness..."

Koutarou was puzzled by Alaia's request. He knew better than anyone how powerless he was. Moreover, there was somewhere he needed to be. Somewhere he needed to get back to.

"I won't be of much help. I'm sure you're already aware of that, Your Highness."

Koutarou was convinced that somewhere along their journey, surely this intelligent girl had realized that he didn't have any power.

"Layous-sama..."

And that was the truth. Having seen the way Koutarou fought and the weapons Clan used, she had a faint understanding of the way things really were. And the fact that Alaia didn't argue with him conveyed to Koutarou that he was right.

"I'm not strong. It's only thanks to the power of others that I can fight. But even that power has its limits. Eventually I will lose these powers and return to being a weak human. Once that happens, I will only be in your way, Your Highness."

The ability to manipulate spiritual energy that Sanae had given him was gradually growing weaker. She had forged spiritual circuity in Koutarou's body in order for him to use that power, but being separated from her and without

any way to maintain it himself, that was slowly breaking down.

And it wasn't like Theia's armor would last for all eternity either. There was nowhere in this age for him to get parts to repair it. Clan was doing her best with what she had aboard the Cradle, but eventually she would use up all of what she had on hand and they would no longer be able to service the armor.

The same was true for Kiriha's gauntlet and Yurika's magic. There was a definite point in the future that Koutarou would exhaust all of his power. He wouldn't be able to maintain his current strength but for so long. That's why Koutarou believed he would eventually have to part with Alaia and the others, just like the real Blue Knight. The very premise of his power was dangerous, and he didn't want it to become a seed of conflict. Since he himself wasn't strong, he wouldn't have any other option than to bow out of their lives altogether.

"Layous-sama, it doesn't matter if you are strong or not to Charl. She adores you because of who you are."

And knowing all of that, Alaia responded without hesitation. Charl wasn't so attached to Koutarou because of his strength. She simply loved him. That's why she'd given him the insignia.

"That insignia is proof of how she feels, and the fact that you're wearing it validates how she feels."

Dangling from Koutarou's breastplate was the handmade insignia. Charl adored Koutarou because he was willing to humor her in such a way. He understood her feelings and honored them.

"The same is true for me too. If I hadn't met you, I probably wouldn't be able to share my feelings with someone and smile like this."

Alaia felt similarly. Koutarou's moral support was worth far more to her than his strength. Alaia had lost heart many times along the way, but every time that had happened, Koutarou was there to encourage her. A knight that was simply strong wouldn't have been able to protect Alaia the way he had. Koutarou's true strength was something much greater.

"Please be more confident in yourself, Layous-sama. If you uphold your oath even as a normal human, then you are a knight we can put our trust in for all

eternity.”

A knight’s sword was his soul. However, the sword was only meant to be a symbol for the oath sworn upon it. And to Alaia, Koutarou—a man who kept all his promises—was without a doubt the strongest knight in Forthorthe.

“Your Highness... I am not worthy.”

Learning how Alaia truly felt, Koutarou was so happy he could cry. What Alaia and Charl needed wasn’t strength; it was simply Koutarou. He was overjoyed at the sentiment and could now look past his own lack of power.

“But I will forever take pride in those words.”

“Then—”

Alaia’s expression brightened and she gracefully stood up. To her, whether or not Koutarou would always be by her side was a very important question.

“No, Your Highness. I can’t do that.”

However, Koutarou simply shook his head. That was the best he could answer.

“L-Layous-sama...?”

Wide-eyed, Alaia fell back down into the chair. Her moist eyes looked imploringly at Koutarou.

“There is somewhere I must return. There’s a promise I have to keep... No, an oath I must uphold.”

“An oath...”

The strongest knight, the knight Alaia and Charl yearned for, was a knight that always did his best to keep his word. If he had sworn to return, then return he must.

But the truth was that it wasn’t just one oath. He had told himself he’d help Theia in her trial. He had promised Kiriha that they would look for her first love together. He was planning on graduating from high school together with Yurika. He had no intention of making Sanae wait for her parents alone. And most of all, he had sworn to the invading girls, Harumi, and the drama club that they

would make the play a success together.

Koutarou would have to make it home from Forthorthe if he were to keep any of those promises. If Alaia and Charl yearned for Koutarou because he was honest and upheld his duties as a knight, and if Koutarou was to stay true that image, he had to return to the invaders.

“I... see...”

Strength left Alaia’s body as she leaned back in her chair. Her disappointment shook her. However, Alaia understood the meaning of what Koutarou was saying. Koutarou—quite true to the way he’d always been—had to be himself. That’s why Alaia loved him. And the part of him she loved the most was exactly the reason he had to leave. There was nothing she could do to stop him.

“I am sorry, Princess Alaia.”

“It’s okay. That’s just who you are, Layous-sama...”

Alaia desperately struggled to keep herself from crying as she smiled at Koutarou. She didn’t want to become a burden for him. She felt her tears would only look like weakness now, and that was the last thing she wanted.

“In... In exchange, please tell me something.”

Alaia tried to hold back her sadness and her love for Koutarou, but the feelings she was unable to suppress left her mouth in the form of a question.

“Anything you ask.”

Koutarou was planning on truthfully answering anything she asked of him. He didn’t want to lie to Alaia. In a way, it was a demonstration of his loyalty to her.

“Please forgive me for repeating something I’ve asked before.”

Alaia stared straight at Koutarou as she spoke. Her question was straightforward and sincere.

“That royal crest engraved on your breastplate. Your appearance, your way of moving, and your pride. You are without a doubt a true knight of Forthorthe.”

“Princess Alaia...”

Alaia was asking him what she had when they first met. It had been several

months since that day, but Koutarou could clearly remember her words like she had asked him just yesterday. It was something that had left a very deep impression on him.

“But... I have no recollection of that crest engraved into your sword. Just where have you come from?”

Alaia wanted to know where Koutarou was from—where it was that he’d be returning. If he wouldn’t stay by her side, then she at least wanted to know where he was going instead.

“I...”

Koutarou faltered, but it wasn’t because he was hesitant about telling her the truth. It was because he was trying to think of a way he could tell her without inviting misunderstanding. And after pondering that for a moment, he looked out of the window.

“I came from the other side of that sky... from the world of stars...”

Through the window, he could see the first star shining in the crimson evening sky. It wasn’t Earth, but Koutarou and Alaia’s gazes were still symbolically drawn to it.

“The world... of stars?”

Koutarou’s answer was about what Alaia had suspected. She’d noticed that every time Koutarou looked up into the sky, he looked wistfully nostalgic. But even though she’d known an answer like that was a possibility, she was still quite surprised to hear it.

“And...”

Koutarou removed his sword in its sheath from his waist and showed the crest on the handle to Alaia. It was a detailed engraving of a golden flower.

“This sword was given to me by Princess Theiamillis Gre Mastir Sagurada von Forthorthe. The crest on the handle isn’t a family crest, but Princess Theiamillis’s personal crest.”

“Mastir...?”

Alaia’s expression changed. Part of the name Koutarou uttered stumped her.

“That’s not... There is no one by the name of Theiamillis in the Mastir family.”

Currently, there were only two surviving members of the Mastir family: Alaia and Charl. And since this was before the royal families had branched off, Alaia and Charl were the only two of royal blood. A seventh royal princess from the Mastir family shouldn’t exist.

“But there is. Just two thousand years from now...”

“Two... thousand years?”

More unexpected words left Koutarou’s mouth and Alaia was shocked once more. If she accepted that a royal princess named Theiamillis existed two thousand years in the future and that she had given Koutarou his sword, then that could only mean one thing. To Alaia, it seemed unthinkable.

“That’s right, Princess Alaia. I’m also from two thousand years in the future.”

However, though it seemed impossible to Alaia, every word Koutarou said was the truth.

Koutarou then explained everything to Alaia, concealing nothing and sparing no detail. He believed that Alaia, who said earnestly said that she needed him, deserved that sincerity.

He told her how he met Theia and how, after fighting, they began to live together and cooperate. He told her how his fight with Clan had led to them both accidentally being thrown out of their own universe. He told her how he had gotten in the way of her meeting with the real Blue Knight and how he was merely acting as a replacement while working together with Clan.

Koutarou tried his hardest to convey his story to Alaia. He himself had a hard time piecing everything together, and Alaia had next to no knowledge of science. Because of all that, by the time he finished explaining everything, night had long since fallen.

“That’s why... I’m not even a real knight. I’m just a normal student without any special powers. I’m not even a noble. Just a commoner.”

To wrap up his story, Koutarou revealed his true identity. He was a normal

teenage boy who had only borrowed the powers of the remarkable people around him on Earth. That was a harsh reality for him to face in the moment, but he had to confess it to the person he respected most. And with that confession came a sense of relief. Now he no longer had to lie to Alaia.

“You’re wrong.”

However, Alaia saw the whole thing differently. With a wry smile on her lips, she shook her head. She had the expression of a sister scolding her poor little brother.

“You are without a doubt a real knight. Theiamillis’s feelings behind that sword and armor are real too. As a princess myself, I can tell.”

Alaia was confident. She hadn’t met this Theiamillis, but since they were both princesses, she understood the significance of her gifts. She trusted Koutarou as much as Alaia did, and possibly loved him just as much. Alaia believed that her personal crest on the handle of his sword and the title of “Theiamillis’s Blue Knight” engraved into his breastplate proved that much.

“Just what kind of princess would lend the sword forged to commemorate her birth to someone that didn’t matter? If you were truly so unimportant, she would have just given you any old sword.”

“But—”

“And even if that wasn’t the case...”

Alaia held her hands to her chest and smiled at Koutarou. It was a smile so beautiful that Koutarou forgot what he was about to say.

“Charl and I appointed you to serve the royal family,” Alaia said as she pointed to the insignia on Koutarou’s chest. “That makes you Forthorthe’s Blue Knight.”

The insignia on Koutarou’s chest had been handmade by Charl and Alaia, and though it looked like a toy, it had an important inscription: “Insignia of Forthorthe’s Blue Knight, the Super Important Bodyguard of Charl and Alaia.” As long as that remained on his chest, even if he was born a commoner, Koutarou was a knight of Forthorthe.

“Please take pride in that. You are a true knight, acknowledged by four of Forthorthe’s princesses.”

Alaia, Charl, Theia, and Clan. In total, four princesses acknowledged Koutarou as a knight. Even in Forthorthe’s long history, it was an unusual prestige.

“I wonder about Clan...”

Koutarou smiled as he gave in. If he was declared a knight by Alaia, a princess of Forthorthe, he had no choice but to accept it. After all, he was wearing an insignia she had helped make. The only princess he was uncertain of was Clan.

“Clan-sama acknowledges you as well. I can tell.”

Alaia recalled when Koutarou and Clan were fighting the steel giant. Back then, Clan had issued him a royal command.

“As a knight of Forthorthe, do what you must!”

Alaia was far enough away that she’d had trouble hearing most of what they talked about, but she was certain she heard those words and she remembered them quite clearly. It was something Clan never would have said if she didn’t acknowledge Koutarou as a knight.

“Your Highness...”

Koutarou truly felt happy that someone of Alaia’s caliber would place such deep trust in him. The only thing that bothered him was that he was still just a substitute for the real Blue Knight, otherwise he might have burst into a little dance.

“But... it’s true that if you’ve sworn an oath to return to the people of your homeland, then you must return.”

Alaia was also happy. She felt like Koutarou had revealed everything to her because he acknowledged her as his true lord. She wouldn’t be able to keep Koutarou by her side forever, but that much made her happy.

“You really believe such an extraordinary story, Your Highness?”

Koutarou couldn’t help asking. He knew how outrageous it all must sound, and he had his doubts that anyone would truly believe that he had come to Forthorthe through the stars and through time.

“A princess who doesn’t have faith in the knight she appointed herself is hardly fit to rule a country.”

However, Alaia had absolute faith in Koutarou. If it wasn’t for him, she might not have gotten this far. She would believe anything that Koutarou, who had been a pillar of support to her, said, even if he claimed the sun would suddenly vanish tomorrow.

“Your Highness... I truly am not worthy.”

If she put this much trust in him, there was nothing else he could do. Regardless of whether or not he was the real thing or a standin, he resolved himself again to protect Alaia from Maxfern.

“Please just tell me one last thing, Layous—”

Alaia was about to ask Koutarou something, but then she remembered that there was something else she wanted to know more. Alaia smiled and decided to pose that question first.

“Before that, Sir Knight, please do me the kindness of giving me your name.”

Again, Alaia beseeched him the same way she had when they first met. Koutarou had told Alaia that he wasn’t the real Blue Knight, and she believed him. But that made her realize she didn’t know Koutarou’s real name.

“This was most rude of me. My name is...”

In response, Koutarou began to answer her the same way he had that day. Except this time, he gave her the answer he had held back then.

“My name is Koutarou. Satomi Koutarou. And I swear on this sword that I will protect you.”

Koutarou swore on his sword to defend Alaia just as he had before, but this time he did so with his real name. He was no longer swearing an oath to Alaia as the Blue Knight’s substitute, but as himself—Satomi Koutarou. It was a far more emotional experience for both of them than it had been the first time.

“Koutarou-sama... So you are called Koutarou-sama...”

It was an outlandish name in Forthorthe. Unaccustomed to the sound of it, Alaia repeated it several times.

“I am truly sorry for using a fake name up until now.”

“There was a time I called myself Signa, so you could just say we’re even now.”

“Hahaha, that did happen, didn’t it?”

Alaia was talking about at the harvest festival dance. It was just a few months ago, but so much had happened since then that it felt like years. Still, it was a precious memory that neither of them would ever forget.

“So, Your Highness, what was your last question?”

Koutarou and Alaia were both smiling. It was similar to the smile they had shared during the dance that night. Ever since then, their feelings had intertwined.

“That’s...”

Alaia smiled and held her hands to her chest. She then whispered to Koutarou in a very gentle voice.

“If I had met you first... If... I had asked you to help me first... what would you have done, Koutarou-sama?”

Alaia knew that what she was asking hadn’t happened. That it never would. But... what if? What if she had met Koutarou before anyone else? Would Koutarou then be willing to stay with her? She knew that it was a foolish thing to ask, but she couldn’t help herself. That was simply how much she loved him.

“If that had happened... I probably would have served you my entire life.”

That was what Koutarou truly believed. He wouldn’t mind devoting himself to Alaia. She was such a splendid princess that he couldn’t help feeling that way. They’d been through so much together that Koutarou felt for Alaia the same way he did the invaders.

“Koutarou-sama, please come meet me first next time...”

Alaia was satisfied. She had learned that Koutarou was only leaving her because he had a prior duty to uphold. It wasn’t that he was rejecting her feelings.

“As you wish, my princess.”

“Oh, Koutarou-sama...”

But even though she was happy, it didn’t stop her tears from falling.

Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya

As on Earth, Forthorthe was home to a plethora of wildlife. Unlike Earth, however, the creatures were quite different. While some appeared to be similar at first glance, evolution in a different environment had produced very different beasts. For example, Forthorthian horses had horns and strange manes.

In addition, Forthorthe was home to several species that were already extinct on Earth. Though their numbers had diminished over the years thanks to changes in climate, several kinds of giant beasts were active under the surface of the planet, some of which occasionally posed a threat to surface-dwelling humans.

The most fearsome creature of all, even among the giant beasts, was none other than the dragon. Like the dinosaurs of prehistoric Earth, dragons were on the top of the food chain. Dragons were large reptiles that continued to grow for every year they aged. It wasn't uncommon to see them standing over ten meters tall. There were also dragons known as elder dragons that could exceed thirty meters in height. They were massive creatures, and they used their enormous fangs and claws to kill and devour any enemy.

However, dragons weren't feared for just their size. After all, creatures larger than that existed. There were two other reasons the dragons were so feared. The first was that, despite their staggering size, they had the ability to fly. The second was that they possessed a unique breath weapon.

Dragons had large wings on their backs, shaped similarly to those of a pterosaur, and they could freely fly through the sky. They were very mobile despite their size. Of course, their wings alone weren't enough to lift their massive bodies, so they used the latent mana in their bodies as well. In other words, though only to a limited extent, dragons were also magicians.

But flight wasn't the only way dragons used their magic. They could also concentrate it in a special way, using their breath to attack. Thanks to their colossal stature, they were able to exhale at unbelievable speeds, making it

especially dangerous. Dragons used their mana to elementally charge their breath, sometimes even changing its form. Most dragons spewed flames, but there were also dragons that could spew ice, poison gas, or even acid. There were all kinds of variations, and from time to time there were specimens that would spew out something surprising. Largely, however, it was possible to guess what a dragon would spew based on the color of its scales. Red dragons used flame breath, white dragons used ice breath, and so on.

Between their extraordinary flight ability and their incredible attacks, dragons were feared far and wide. It was next to impossible to run from them because they could fly, and there was no way to defend against their breath attacks. It was true that there were highly intelligent and peaceful dragons, but most of them were brutal predators. When faced with a dragon, people had good reason to say their prayers. So until climate change reduced their numbers even further, they would continue to dominate the food chain.

The Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya mentioned in the legend of the Blue Knight was one such dragon. His giant red body was easily twenty meters long. He moved as fast as a jet plane through the sky, but he was also just as dexterous as an eagle or a hawk. On top of that, he could spew flames so hot that they could be considered plasma.

Accordingly, when he appeared on the horizon flying towards Raustor, the fort got real noisy. And fast. The Reborn Forthorthian Army consisted mostly of volunteers. Lacking any proper training, they were shaking in their boots at such a sight. They all knew just how frightening a dragon was. On top of that, the weaponry of this age wasn't meant for taking down a creature of such size and power. Like a storm, once a dragon appeared, the best the people could do was take cover until it passed.

"Veltlion, this is bad!"

After receiving the report from the soldiers on watch, Flair burst into Koutarou's quarters in the barracks. The sun had just risen, and Koutarou, who had just woken up, was in the middle of changing.

"Lady Flairan?!"

A shirtless Koutarou stared at Flair in stark amazement. The surprisingly bashful Flair would normally have run right back out of the room red-faced after seeing him like that, but now wasn't the time for that. She was already panicking about something else.

"It's a dragon! A dragon is attacking! We're going to be destroyed before we even reach the coup d'etat army!"

"A dragon?! That kind of thing— No, of course! With this timing, it must be Alunaya!"

Koutarou was flabbergasted at Flair's declaration at first, but he quickly recalled Theia's play. It was hard to forget Yurika's performance as the Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya.

"What's the situation?!"

Koutarou quickly scrambled into his shirt as he asked Flair for the details. He didn't have any time to waste. He was more worried about getting ready for battle than he was getting dressed properly.

"The soldiers on watch have spotted a red dragon coming this way! It's too far out to tell exactly how big it is, but based on how fast it's moving, it'll be here any moment!"

From the lookout tower, the horizon was a dozen or so kilometers away. But based on a dragon's birdlike speed, it would be at the fort in a matter of minutes.

"I got it! You go on ahead, Lady Flairan! Prepare the soldiers to intercept it! I'll be there as soon as I'm ready!"

"Good! Make sure you hurry!"

Flair dashed out of his quarters without saying anything else. With a dragon approaching, there was no time to spare.

"Did you get that, Clan?!"

After changing his clothes, Koutarou called out to Clan on the other side of the screen as he ran up to the armor standing by the wall. He touched the right arm of the armor, and it opened up as if it to welcome him.

“Yes! I knew it’d be coming, but this timing is quite a pain!”

Clan was also hurriedly getting dressed on the other side of a folding screen. If Alunaya was as powerful as the legends claimed, he would be too much for the normal soldiers to handle. The only effective way of intercepting him would be for Koutarou and Clan to take the front line.

“We just took this fort after all...” Koutarou said with a sigh as he entered the suit of armor.

The Reborn Forthorthian Army had only captured the Raustor fort the day before yesterday. They were still in the middle of preparing men and supplies for their next battle. Because of that, no one had really gotten proper rest since the fort had been seized. It was really the worst possible timing for an attack. And what was worse, their enemy was a monster that the people of Forthorthe feared more than anything. If they wasted even a minute now, they’d pay for it in casualties.

“Hey, Clan.”

As Koutarou sealed himself into the armor and locked the various parts in place, he brought the armor’s systems online. And as he ordered the AI to scan for the enemy, he called out to Clan.

“Do you think this armor will be a match for a dragon?”

“I’m not sure.”

Clan answered Koutarou as she stepped out from behind the changing screen. She was already holding a large rifle, and she ran up to Koutarou after picking up Saguratin, which was leaning against the screen.

“The dragon population steadily declined as the climate changed, so there are no modern records of any battles with elder dragons. There are some on battles won against smaller dragons that managed to survive, but—”

“That won’t be of any help when dealing with this monster, huh?”

Koutarou’s armor projected a hologram in front of him. Combined with incoming data from Clan’s observation device, it was reporting information on the dragon flying towards them.

“Target is 26 meters long, flying at 198 kilometers per hour. Warning: High-density energy reaction detected. Be wary of energy weapons. Space distortion detected. Take care when attacking.”

The report was nothing but bad news. According to the armor’s AI, everything except its speed was on the level of a fighter craft. Things weren’t looking good for the Reborn Forthorthian Army. This wouldn’t be an enemy they could take any chances with.

“That’s right, sadly.”

Clan nodded as she handed Saguratin to Koutarou. Both of their expressions were serious.

“Thanks.”

Koutarou hung Saguratin from his waist and left the room with Clan right behind him.

“This is the moment of truth.”

“Most likely. Whether or not we can return to our own world all depends on this fight.”

Clan believed that Koutarou was the actual Blue Knight, but she had no real proof to back up her theory. In Theia’s script, the Blue Knight won against Alunaya, but Clan had no way of knowing if she and Koutarou could do the same.

And if they lost, history would greatly change. Once that happened, their chances of being able to return home would be next to nothing. Granted, there was a possibility that it wouldn’t even matter. There was no guarantee they would survive this fight.

“What was your god called again?”

“The Goddess of Dawn.”

“Then please pray to her for our victory.”

“I don’t mind, but... why now, all of a sudden?”

Koutarou didn’t strike Clan as very religious, so him suddenly turning to

prayer struck her as quite odd.

“I feel like we should do whatever we can, even if it’s praying.”

If it was just his fate at stake, Koutarou might not have been so desperate. But since this was to protect Alaia and the others, he was intent to do whatever he could. That was just how much he treasured them.

“I understand how you feel. I will pray for us, but please keep it together in front of the soldiers.”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m counting on you, Clan.”

“I’m not sure if that means that you trust me or if you don’t...”

They flashed slight smiles at each other and hurried out of the barracks. The Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya was almost upon them.

Once Koutarou and Clan stepped outside, the dragon was already close enough to be seen by the naked eye.

“So that’s the Fire Dragon Emperor, huh?”

“He really is huge...”

They both instinctively gasped as they saw Alunaya’s massive figure on the horizon.

That’s nothing like Yurika’s costume...

The real deal was on a completely different level from the dragon the drama club had created for the play. Koutarou could now see why they called him an emperor of dragons, and he couldn’t escape the feeling that the coming battle would be intense.

“Veltlion, there’s no telling if the weapons in this fort will have any effect on him.”

There were ballistas and catapults installed around the fort. They were intended to keep attacking soldiers at bay and destroy siege weapons before they could be deployed, but they were untested against a gigantic flying dragon.

“We don’t have any time to waste. We’ll just have to do things ourselves.”

“And as fast as possible at that.”

Fitting of the title “Fire Dragon Emperor,” Alunaya could spew scorching hot flames. If not stopped, he would burn down both the fort and the town. And if that happened, any victory the Reborn Forthorthian Army managed would be a hollow one. They had to bring down Alunaya before he could reach them.

“Kou... No, Layous-sama!”

“Blue Knight!”

That was when Alaia appeared outside of the headquarters. With her were Charl, Mary the maid, and Fauna the priestess.

“Your Highness! What are you doing here?!”

“With that thing here, it won’t matter where we are! More importantly, Layous-sama, I want you to position the soldiers closer to the town!”

There was no way to block a dragon’s breath attack. But as a princess, Alaia couldn’t just sit idly by as her people were destroyed. Aware it may lead to serious casualties in her troops, Alaia wanted the soldiers to try and protect the town. Anything they could do to help the townspeople.

“Got it! I’ll let Lady Flairan know! Hey!”

“Yes, sir?”

Koutarou called for his young adjutant and asked him to convey a message to Flair. She was currently busy mobilizing troops, so as long as she was informed of Alaia’s wishes, she’d be able to move the soldiers accordingly. After seeing the adjutant run off to find Flair, Koutarou looked up towards Alunaya with a serious expression once more.

“Clan, how long can this armor fly?”

“There’s no limit while using the standard flight module, but there’s only a certain amount of propellant for the emergency boosters. You’ll only be able to fly at max speed for about ten minutes that way, so please be careful.”

While answering Koutarou, Clan readied the rifle she was carrying on her shoulder. It was the one she normally used, but this time it was loaded with different ammunition. It was something she had prepared ahead of time,

knowing that Alunaya would appear sooner or later. They were high-penetration rounds that exploded on direct hits. It was a forward-facing charge, giving it extra power to blast through even the thickest armor. She wasn't sure what it would do against a dragon's hide, but it was far better than trying to attack using normal bullets.

"Ten minutes, huh? Not sure if that'll be enough..."

With such a massive opponent, Koutarou knew that if he was really out of his league, things would be over in an instant. And even if he could win—if he really stood a chance—there was no telling how long it would take to defeat Alunaya. But now that had been decided for him. He only had ten minutes before the propellant ran out. Koutarou and Clan were armed with extremely advanced technology, but it was still just the two of them against an elder dragon. The odds weren't in their favor. But since the Cradle hadn't been fully repaired yet, they had no choice but to defeat Alunaya in the allotted time with the weapons they already had on hand.

"All right!"

Koutarou steeled himself. There was no time for weakness, doubt, or hesitation. There was no question about what he had to do. He simply had to do it.

"Princess Alaia, please take Princess Charl with you and take cover somewhere safe."

"Blue Knight, what will you do?" Charl asked, looking up at Koutarou with a worried expression.

"We're going to keep that thing from getting any closer."

"Please leave it to us, Princess Charl."

Koutarou and Clan smiled at Charl. They were both ready for what was to come.

"Blue Knight..."

However, Charl's expression didn't change. Thanks to her good intuition and her keen ability to read people, she could tell that Koutarou and Clan were

preparing to take part in a dangerous battle.

“No! You can’t, Blue Knight! You and your servant can’t win against that thing on your own! You can’t go!” Charl pleaded, grabbing the hem of Koutarou’s mantle and shaking her head.

“Your Highness, if I don’t go, a lot of people will die.”

The best case scenario would be defeating Alunaya right away, but they had to at least buy enough time for the soldiers to position themselves around the town. If they didn’t, it would be the citizens who suffered.

“I know that! But I don’t want you to go!”

Tears began forming in Charl’s eyes as she clenched Koutarou’s mantle in her tiny hands. She didn’t want to let him go, and she didn’t know what else to do. Charl was desperate. She didn’t want Koutarou to die.

“Charl, you mustn’t trouble Layous-sama any more.”

“Sister! Don’t you care if Blue Knight dies?!”

Alaia smiled at Charl and gently wrapped her hands around Charl’s, still clutching Koutarou’s mantle.

“Of course I do.”

Alaia then gently uncurled her fingers one by one.

“But Layous-sama swore an oath to protect us. If he died here, he wouldn’t be able to uphold that. Charl, your Blue Knight isn’t the kind of man to go back on his word, is he?”

Alaia was well aware how dangerous this fight was going to be. There was an undeniable possibility that Koutarou might die. But as a princess, Alaia had to trust in the oath her knight had sworn to her. And as a woman, she believed in the man she loved. If she had no faith in him and his promises, then who would?

“Sister...”

Understanding how her sister must feel, Charl let go of Koutarou’s mantle. Having been released, Koutarou smiled at her.

“Your Highness, I will return victorious. I haven’t let you ride a horse yet after all.”

“You better! You better return!”

“I swear it.”

Koutarou nodded at Charl and turned towards Alaia.

“I’m going now, Princess Alaia.”

“I scorn the part of me that won’t let me say ‘don’t go,’ Layous-sama...”

Alaia was smiling courageously, but her eyes were moist with tears. Though she believed in him, it wasn’t like she wasn’t worried. In reality, she wanted to stop Koutarou more than anyone.

“Don’t. That’s how my princess should be.”

Koutarou himself was nervous, but he wanted to repay her trust in him more than anything else.

What let Koutarou and Clan float in the air was the localized ability to manipulate gravity. Because of that, it made no noise like a jet engine or even the flapping of wings would. They flew through the sky in silence.

It was nearing the end of the fall season in Forthorthe. Winter was approaching and the cold, dry wind felt even colder to Clan and Koutarou at the speed they were moving. However, neither one of them paid it any mind. All of their attention was focused on the gigantic red dragon in front of them.

“You often see dragons in movies and things, but seeing one in real life like this... It’s almost like a joke.”

“Look at how mobile it is despite its size. This is no laughing matter.”

Alunaya seemed to have noticed Koutarou and Clan as well. He’d turned his head towards them and changed his course. Despite being over twenty meters long, he maneuvered through the air like a deft bird of prey. Clan had seen Forthorthian movies about the Blue Knight, but Alunaya was never this big or quick. Koutarou and Clan trembled more before this threat that was beyond all imagination than they did from the bitter pre-winter cold.

“I’ll be lending a hand too, Blue Knight.”

Someone had followed Koutarou and Clan into the fray. She was sitting on a long staff, flying quietly alongside them.

“Caris...”

It was indeed none other than Caris. She was using her own magic to make her staff fly, which was child’s play for a magician like her.

When Caris’s eyes met with Koutarou’s, she smiled as her black clothes fluttered in the wind.

“To think you’d go without telling me first... You must not trust me at all.”

“I wouldn’t ask you for help in a situation like this where I’m unsure we can win.”

Caris used to be one of the court magicians under Grevanas. She defected after Grevanas tried to kill her along with Alaia at the harvest festival, but she had no real obligation to help Alaia or Koutarou. She had been working with them along the way to repay them for curing her when she was sick, but Koutarou wasn’t willing to ask her to fight against Alunaya for that.

“But with me here, we might have a better chance of winning.”

“...Are you sure about this?”

“Not really, but... after this is over, you’ll treat me to a ton of delicious food, won’t you?”

Caris, an orphan, had thought of the court magicians as her family. But after being betrayed, she had nowhere to go and nothing left to lose. All she really had was Koutarou and the others. To Caris who had lived a rough life since she was a child, they were nice people. She thought of them fondly, and after everything she’d been through, being with them was nice. That’s why she was willing to fight to protect them. Deep inside, she hoped these kind, accepting people might become her new family.

“Leave it to me. I’ll ask Her Highness about it once we’re done.”

“All right! Now I’m getting all fired up.”

As Caris cheerfully nodded, Alunaya, who was closing in fast, let out a roar so loud that it made even the air around Koutarou and the girls tremble. It was intense enough to make them all instinctively recoil.

“Well, aren’t you something? To think anyone would go up against that thing of their own free will,” Clan sighed with a shake of her head.

Clan herself was still steeling her nerves. She was as calm as she could be, but she was still afraid. They were fighting a beast of legend, after all.



“You two were going to fight it on your own, weren’t you? I think that makes you much more eccentric than me.”

Caris smiled wryly as she spoke, but she secretly felt like she may have been too rash. Her opponent was said to be the strongest elder dragon in the area. No other dragon of its kind dared to come near Forthorthe because Alunaya was there. Caris now realized that she must be some kind of crazy to want to fight something like that.

“That’s enough chatting.”

Koutarou flew up ahead of Clan and Caris. He was frightened by Alunaya as well, but he had the strength of the promises he’d made driving him forward.

“He’s almost here.”

Thanks to Sanae’s powers, Koutarou could feel Alunaya’s bloodlust. His handle on the power was weakening as time passed, but he had no trouble telling when something so strong was directed his way. Alunaya was clearly targeting the three of them, particularly Koutarou who was in the lead.

Koutarou pulled Saguratin from its sheath and pointed it at Alunaya. As he did, the blade reflected the morning sun. It was almost as if his determination to keep his promises was making the sword shine.

“We don’t have much time, so let’s just settle this for now by saying we’re all eccentric.”

“Yes, let’s. We can save the matter of who’s more eccentric for lunch.”

Clan readied her rifle and Caris began incanting a spell. Even though they were preparing for battle, just one look at the giant dragon in front of them made them both tremble.

“I’m counting on you two.”

But there was also a young man wearing blue armor in front of him.

“Please leave it to me.”

“I know. Don’t you forget your promise.”

Watching him, their trembling settled down. In its place, they were filled with

a strong fighting spirit.

Alunaya made the first move. The crimson dragon took a deep breath and exhaled flames from his mouth. But it wasn't like an ordinary flamethrower. No, this was a giant pillar of fire. It was a strong opener, even for a declaration of war.

"Spread out!"

Since Koutarou could see Alunaya's intent to attack, he knew where he was aiming. And thanks to Caris's spell creating a mental connection between the three of them, he was able to let everyone else know to get out of the way.

"ROOOAAAAAAARRR!"

Yet even though they had all dodged the flames, they could still feel the flickering waves of heat and the shockwave the blast created. The pillar of white flame continued flying through the sky and vanished across the horizon.

"That's practically a plasma cannon. We won't stand a chance if we're hit by that."

"Make sure you don't eat that, Caris."

"As if I would!"

The flames of Alunaya's breath attack were so hot and condensed that they came out in plasma form. The only other weapon Clan knew that was capable of producing such a blast was the kind of plasma cannon mounted on large spaceships. She was honestly staggered at Alunaya's power.

"Blue Knight, dragons only use magic to fly and breathe fire, but their bodies are large enough to store a great deal of mana! Be very careful!"

Alunaya had used magic to change his breath to flames, but based on the power of the effect, Caris could tell just how massive the dragon's mana reserves were.

"I'll take the front! Cover me!"

Koutarou had used his emergency boosters to dodge the flame pillar, and he now set them to full thrust to accelerate forward in an instant. Cutting an arc

across the sky, he approached Alunaya at top speed. He was getting closer to the dragon so he could attack and to make it harder for Alunaya to use his breath weapon against him.

“Grrrrr...”

Alunaya responded by turning his head and opening his mouth once more. He was planning on frying Koutarou before he could get close.

“I won’t let you do that!”

However, before Alunaya could bellow flames again, a small explosion occurred near his face. The barrel of Clan’s rifle was smoking. The explosion was the result of a bullet she fired. Both Koutarou and Alunaya were moving at several hundred kilometers per hour, but Clan’s firearm control system allowed her to accurately snipe at those speeds.

“ROOOAAAAAAARRR!”

Because of the shockwave and the fire from the explosion, Alunaya temporarily lost sight of Koutarou. He shook his large head, shaking off the smoke and scanning for his target, but during that time, Koutarou closed in on him.

“ROOOAAAAAAARRR!”

Alunaya was quick to recover and swung his giant claws at the approaching Koutarou. The force behind such a blow from a twenty-meter giant was equivalent to a car smashing into something at high speeds. It would inevitably obliterate Koutarou if it hit, and it was currently approaching him dead on. Since Koutarou was moving forward at high speed too, dodging the attack would be difficult.

“Too bad that Blue Knight is a fake!”

However, the moment the dragon’s giant claws touched Koutarou, he vanished like a mirage. At the same time, a second Koutarou appeared behind Alunaya, aiming right for his neck.

The first Koutarou was an illusion that Caris had created while Alunaya was distracted by the explosion from Clan’s bullet. Alunaya then targeted the fake

Koutarou while the real one got into position to attack the dragon from behind.

"Haaaaaaaah!"

Koutarou's sword struck Alunaya's neck exactly where he'd been aiming, but his sword bounced right off his hide like it was rubber. It was similar to trying to strike Dextro's magic soldier.

"It didn't work?! These scales are tough!"

Despite the distance between them, Koutarou's thoughts were directly transmitted to Clan and Caris's minds thanks to Caris's magic. Hearing Koutarou's concern, Clan shook her head.

"You're wrong, Veltlion! He's being protected by a powerful barrier!"

Clan's bracelet, linked to the scope of her rifle, had captured the moment when Koutarou's attack hit the dragon. In the footage, she could see that Koutarou's sword had been repelled before it even reached the scales.

"A barrier?!"

Though Koutarou was shocked by what Clan said, he continued to evade Alunaya and tried to maneuver into his blind spot without getting too far away. Distancing himself from Alunaya would only put him at a disadvantage, both offensively and defensively.

"Looks like it's not just flight and fire! He has a third spell!"

Generally speaking, dragons only used two spells. The first was to fly and the second was to attack with their breath weapon. In addition, Alunaya also used a spell to protect his body. It was originally an ability that he had developed to stabilize himself in the air. By wrapping his entire body in a streamlined barrier, he could fly more aerodynamically at high speeds. The protective barrier also granted him the ability to briefly fly at extreme altitudes where there was little oxygen. And although the ability wasn't initially intended for combat, it made an excellent shield.

"I see! So that's why he was completely unharmed even with a direct hit from my rifle!"

Though Clan's bullet had temporarily blinded Alunaya, it hadn't injured him.

The barrier had protected against both the bullet and the following explosion.

“Clan, what do we do?! Don’t you have any good ideas?!”

Koutarou repeatedly dodged Alunaya’s claws while getting in an attack where he could. Each time, however, his sword was blocked by the barrier. Since things were basically at a standoff as they were, Koutarou turned to Clan for advice.

“Use your left hand!”

“My left hand? You mean Kiriha’s gauntlet?”

“That’s right! Even though that barrier can block physical attacks, it shouldn’t be able to block electricity or magnetic fields! Aim for its nervous system at point blank!”

Clan’s plan was to use the gauntlet built into the armor’s left arm. Physical attacks were blocked by the dragon’s barrier, but electromagnetism that had no physical form might be able to get through. If things went well, they might be able to shock him inside of his barrier. If not, they could still expose Alunaya to an electromagnetic field.

Alunaya’s nerves operated through minute electrical signals just like any living creature. Striking him with a powerful electromagnetic field should be enough to interrupt those signals and keep him from moving properly. If they aimed for the cerebellum or cerebrum, they might even be able to knock him unconscious. Closing in and using the gauntlet at point-blank range seemed like the best option they had right now.

“Got it! I’ll give it a try!”

“I’ll try using optical weaponry! It’s not as powerful, but it just might work!”

Clan could see Alunaya, so there was a chance that using an attack that relied on light might do the trick. Barriers in present-day Forthorthe were designed to block both physical attacks and the light from lasers, but Alunaya’s barrier had never been exposed to lasers before. It was quite possible that they would work against his magical protection.

“Let’s do this, Clan!”

Koutarou pointed the tip of Saguratin at Alunaya once more. This time, he held the blade with his left hand and generated an electromagnetic field. The field expanded past the tip of the sword, turning it into an invisible spear. Under the influence of the powerful electromagnetic field, electrons began gathering a few centimeters from the tip of the sword. They began a huge, negative discharge, and the sword began sparking and glowing.

As Koutarou was about to charge forward, several more people appeared around him. They all looked like Koutarou, dressed in blue armor and wielding swords.

“Is that your doing, Caris? Thanks!”

“It’ll be hard for me to do any damage with my magic, so I’ll be in charge of defense and diversions. I’ll leave the attacking to you, Blue Knight!”

Koutarou was surrounded by eight mirror images of himself. They were all illusions created by Caris. She had determined that her spells wouldn’t have much offensive power against the dragon, and defending against a dragon’s claws or flame breath would be quite an undertaking even with defensive magic. She figured her best bet was to keep Koutarou from getting hit at all, so she’d chosen to shield him in a collage of illusions.

“Veltlion, here he comes!”

Clan squeezed the trigger while warning Koutarou. As she did, the barrel lit up for an instant. What was fired wasn’t a bullet, however, but light imbued with incredible energy. And since lasers moved at the speed of light, by the time the attack could seen, it had already hit. No matter how mobile Alunaya was, he wouldn’t be able to dodge that.

“ROOOAAAAAAARRR!”

The laser burned the crimson dragon’s hide. As Clan anticipated, Alunaya’s barrier couldn’t block lasers. Not even a dragon could block something it didn’t even know existed. Alunaya writhed in pain and howled as the laser bored through his scales and into his flesh.

“It’s working! Now, Veltlion!”

Since Clan’s laser was designed as an anti-personnel weapon, it didn’t have

enough power to fully penetrate Alunaya's body. However, the pain and surprise of the attack gave Koutarou an opening.

"Taaaaakeeeee thiiiiisss!"

Koutarou charged in with his sword thrust out in front of him. Since he was already in close range, it was only a matter of seconds before he was upon Alunaya. While his sword was repelled yet again, the electromagnetic field passed through the barrier with ease. As it did, the gathered electrons scattered, though they immediately gathered back up once on the other side.

"How about thiiiiisss?!"

The moment the electromagnetic field came into contact with Alunaya's body, Koutarou focused on his left hand. As he did, his spiritual power—enhanced by Sanae—began flowing into his left hand and extended the electromagnetic field, which in turn created an enormous difference in electric potential between the tip of the sword and Alunaya's body.

The white flash that followed prevented Koutarou from seeing anything. At the same time, a sharp snapping sound, as if someone had cracked a large whip, shook the atmosphere around him. Though it might have sounded like a whip, it was much, much louder. It was the sound of the electric current flowing into Alunaya.

"ROOOAAAAAAARRR!"

The artificial lightning bolt created by Kiriha's gauntlet struck Alunaya and ran through his body. It was an effective attack, even against a dragon like Alunaya. Doubly so since it had hit a gathering of nerves. The AI in Koutarou's armor had guided Koutarou's aim after analyzing Alunaya's anatomy. And just as they'd hoped, Alunaya lost control of his own body.

"Uwaaah!"

The only miscalculation was that Koutarou had failed to dodge Alunaya's swinging tail while he was momentarily blinded by the flash of light. Not even his spirit sight could have helped him since Alunaya had flailed his tail out of reflex in response to the shock. It wasn't an intentional attack. The heavy blow, however, sent Koutarou flying.

“Veltlion!”

Koutarou was disoriented from the hit and spinning out of control. He’d lost his bearings and was having trouble recovering.

“Leave it to me!”

Caris began chanting a spell to use on Koutarou.

“Gather, spirits of the wind! Like the gusts that fill great sails, show us your tremendous power! Become as a whirl! Dance with him and correct his rhythm!”

Caris cast a spell that would use the wind to slow down Koutarou’s rotational speed. It activated at the same time the armor’s control system kicked in, using gravity controls and boosters to slow the spinning. So between Caris and his armor, Koutarou was able to stop spinning altogether and stabilize himself.

“Ugh, d-damn it... What...?”

But even though his body might have stopped spinning, his eyes hadn’t. His armor kept him upright, but he had no sense of balance. He shook his head repeatedly to try and regain his equilibrium. As he did, his armor let out a warning.

“Alert: High-density energy reaction detected. Immediate evasive maneuvers required.”

The shock from before apparently hadn’t been enough to defeat Alunaya. Now recovered, he was shooting flames from his mouth at Koutarou again.

“I’ll leave that to you!”

“As you wish, my lord. Evading using irregular algorithms.”

Unlike Alunaya, however, Koutarou was still reeling. Realizing that it would be difficult to evade on his own, Koutarou left that job to his armor. The AI began accelerating and decelerating at sporadic intervals and angles to dodge the flames. However, since the armor couldn’t see the attack’s trajectory like Koutarou could, he didn’t escape the attack unscathed. Although he avoided any direct hits, he was burned several times by the flames.

“Veltlion!”

“I’m fine! Don’t worry!”

Fortunately, Koutarou was finally able to recover before taking any serious damage from the fire. He used his spirit sight to read where Alunaya was going to attack, and then took over dodging.

“All this just because I let my guard down for a moment...”

Now that he’d made it through the immediate crisis, Koutarou looked at the damage he’d taken and pulled himself together. The blue plates of his armor had scorch marks here and there from the flames and a dent from when he had been hit by the tail. Any one of those attacks could very well have been lethal.

“Theia... The real Alunaya is far stronger than the one you imagined...”

Koutarou gripped the handle of Saguratin firmly while looking at Alunaya’s gigantic, intimidating figure.

Alaia prayed as she looked up, watching Koutarou and the others battle.

Koutarou-sama...!

Koutarou’s opponent was a monster well over twenty meters long. He was brave to face it, but it was like a cat challenging a lion. No matter how strong Koutarou was, there was no way for him to overcome the sheer gap in strength between him and an opponent over ten times his size. Even though Clan and Caris were helping him, it seemed it was all for naught.

At this rate, Koutarou-sama will die...!

That dreadful thought slowly creeped over Alaia. When it set in on her, she realized that she was feeling insecure for the first time in a long while. Ever since she had met Koutarou, she had always felt safe. She was certain that even if something were to happen to her, Koutarou would protect Charl and support the country. That certainty had brought her great comfort in desperate times.

But more than anything else, after losing her parents, Koutarou was the only one who knew Alaia’s heart and truly understood her. And knowing her situation—all of the details and all of her emotions—Koutarou had told her that she was doing the right thing. Regardless of how she felt as a princess, that

comforted the girl named Alaia.

Losing Koutarou would mean losing both those pillars of support at the same time. Just the thought was terrifying. And now that it seemed like an imminent danger, her delicate, pale hands began to tremble.

“I should have broken the seal on that sword before this happened...”

Alaia uttered those words in her anxiousness. Upon hearing them, Fauna, who was next to Alaia, looked troubled.

“Your Highness... that’s...”

As a priestess of the Goddess of Dawn, Fauna knew the true weight of those words. It was something she never would have said were it not for her impassioned concern for Koutarou.

“You can do it, Blue Knight! I’m with you!”

“Please refrain, Princess Charl! It’s dangerous to lean out like that!”

“Let go, Mary! I won’t hide any longer! Our knight is out there fighting! How can we not cheer him on?!”

Charl’s heartfelt words helped ease Alaia’s worries.

“Charl... you’re so strong...”

At first Charl was worried and didn’t want to let Koutarou go, but once she did, her belief in him was unshakable.

“Sister! You should be cheering for the Blue Knight too! If you do, he will surely return home safely!”

She believed in him, and she was willing to do whatever she could to support him. In her position, all the young Charl really could do was cheer, but she was determined to do it with all her heart and soul.

Charl... you might be more suited to be empress than I am...

Charl’s unrelenting will dazzled Alaia. Seeing her like this was like looking at the sun or watching a large flower bloom at dawn.

“You’re right, Charl... I’ll cheer for him too.”

Alaia decided to take a lesson from Charl. She would put all her faith in Koutarou and cheer for him from the sidelines. Everything else could wait.

“Sister! Over here!”

Charl smiled and beckoned for Alaia to stand with her. Alaia nodded and walked over next to Charl.

“Blue Knight! You can do it! Alaia is cheering for you too!”

“Layous-sama! Stay strong!”

They had no way of knowing if their voices could actually reach Koutarou or not, but they chose to believe they would and continued to shout with all their might. It was all they could do to support him now. Following their lead, the soldiers nearby began shouting as well, and before long, the entire fort was shouting the Blue Knight’s name.

Koutarou was fighting several hundred meters away from the fort, and between the wind, his boosters, and the dragon’s roaring, he never heard Alaia and Charl.

“Tch, I definitely can’t lose! Her Highness and everyone else are waiting for me to come back!”

However, even though their voices never reached him, their feelings certainly did. Koutarou knew that everyone at the fort was cheering for him. Having played baseball for years, Koutarou knew exactly what it felt like to be cheered for even when you couldn’t hear any distinct voice in the crowd. And feeling that now lit a new fire within him.

“I can do this! It’s not like he hasn’t taken any damage!”

Koutarou glared at Alunaya, his newfound will to fight burning in his eyes, and pointed his sword at the giant dragon. Just as Koutarou had said, Alunaya was weaker now than when the battle first began. The damage from Koutarou’s gauntlet and Clan’s laser had gradually taken its toll on the dragon’s body. And having been flying at full speed for several minutes now was taxing Alunaya’s stamina. Alunaya may have been a legendary dragon, but Koutarou no longer saw him as unbeatable.

“Veltlion, only a third of the propellant is left! The entire frame has taken considerable damage too! There’s no time to slack off!”

However, Alunaya wasn’t the only one worse for wear. And since he was much smaller, the damage Koutarou had taken was much more significant. The armor had taken hits from both Alunaya’s flames and claws, and each blow put him more at risk. The armor’s systems were currently making up for the damage, but if he took any more, he would be in danger.

“My mana is running low as well. I’m restricting healing magic to serious injuries only.”

It wasn’t just Koutarou’s armor that had been a target, either. Koutarou had suffered everything from cuts, bruises, and burns to dislocation and fractures. Caris had used her magic to heal them all, but now that her mana was running out, it was getting harder to take care of Koutarou.

“Don’t worry. Just focus on what you can do.”

“Let’s all do our best then.”

“I am kicking it into high gear here, just for the record.”

“You’re just reckless.”

“This isn’t exactly the kind of opponent I can beat without being reckless!”

Koutarou readied Saguratin with both hands, pointed it towards Alunaya, and charged. The eight illusionary Koutarous created by Caris surrounded him. The nine of them swapped positions repeatedly as they closed in on Alunaya.

“Grrrrrrrr!”

Alunaya bared his fangs to intimidate Koutarou, but he wasn’t bothering to use his breath weapon like before. He was well aware by now that the majority of the Koutarous were fakes.

Not good. He’s learning.

Koutarou clicked his tongue in his mind. Alunaya was calm. In Koutarou’s experience, the winner of a fight was always the one that could keep their composure the longest.

“Blue Knight, if you want to finish this faster, I have an idea.”

Sensing that Koutarou was beginning to panic, Caris came up with a proposal.

“Tell me.”

Alunaya waited for Koutarou to close in before swinging his massive tail at the nine Koutarous. Koutarou responded to Caris while defending with his sword. The moment he did, the armor’s AI inundated him with alerts.

“The first and third top left drive units as well as the load-bearing right elbow joint have exceeded the maximum tolerance. Bypassing circuits. Readjusting balance of drive units. Left arm output reduced by 20 percent. Mobility of the right elbow joint decreased by 14 percent. In addition—”

In addition to reporting the situation, Koutarou’s armor displayed a hologram mapping the damage. It was littered with red marks.

“That’s enough with the detailed report! I know I’m in trouble! Just tell me what won’t move!”

“As you wish, my lord.”

The next moment, the red marks on the hologram all disappeared, leaving only a yellow mark on the right elbow indicating a loss of mobility.

“Are you okay, Blue Knight?!”

“Veltlion!”

“I’m still fine! So what’s this idea, Caris?”

The illusions around him vanished, leaving Koutarou all alone. If he backed off from Alunaya like this, he would inevitably go for the fire breath again. Koutarou figured he was better off sticking close and trying to attack. He put his left hand on his sword and generated another electromagnetic field. He was planning on attacking with that again.

“A strange gathering of mana is focused in the back of that dragon’s neck. Attacking there might be a good idea.”

Caris had already used a spell to determine what kind of magic Alunaya was using, and she had detected several spells doing so. There was the

strengthening spell surrounding his body that assisted with flight, the defensive spell that worked like a barrier, and the spell that turned his breath into a pillar of flame. Caris had expected that much, but she'd used a detection spell to try and discern their exact power, hoping that information would be of use.

The real surprise had come when she detected a fourth spell. It wasn't something she knew, either. It was a spell she had never come across before, but she could tell where the mana for it was gathering. It was right on the back of the dragon's neck. She hoped that attacking it might have an effect on Alunaya. It was a gamble, but Caris believed that it was a better bet than just letting things continue the way they were.

"The back of the neck, right?!"

Koutarou quickly made his decision. He felt the same way Caris did. He was willing to try anything that might give him a chance. And so while aiming for Alunaya's neck, Koutarou put his boosters to full thrust in order to get behind him.

"Be careful, Blue Knight! He's about to use his flame breath!"

"At this range?!"

Koutarou had assumed that Alunaya wouldn't be able to use his flame breath once he was up close, so Caris's warning startled him quite badly. Since Alunaya didn't want Koutarou getting behind him, he was willing to take some collateral damage to hit him.

"Leave it to me!"

As Alunaya opened his mouth to spew flames, Clan fired several shots from her rifle. The moderately spread out lasers hit all over Alunaya's face. Before now, that was enough stop Alunaya in his tracks for a while, but not this time. He had expected the attack and endured it while continuing to breathe fire.

The glowing white pillar of flame came straight for Koutarou. He would be able to easily dodge it with more distance between them, but evading was impossible at this range. And just as it looked like Koutarou was about to be swallowed in the torrent of flames...

"Then I'll just do this!"

Koutarou had a sudden flash of an idea and altered the electromagnetic field generated around his sword to envelop himself as well. He poured as much of his spiritual energy into his left arm as he could. As he did, Koutarou shot forward like a bullet, instantly putting him out of the range of the fire.

“V-Veltlion, you idiot! Just... Just how reckless can you get?!”

Since Clan was monitoring the condition of Koutarou’s armor on her bracelet, she knew what he had done. He’d used the powerful electromagnetic field from his gauntlet to forcibly accelerate the armor. Not even his advanced space armor, however, could completely block out magnetism of that magnitude. Though the armor itself didn’t break, the AI spat out all kinds of errors as the onboard systems shut down.

“Not so fast, Clan!”

However, Koutarou didn’t stop moving. The armor’s functionality had been compromised, but the gauntlet on Koutarou’s left arm was still working. Koutarou used that power to push himself forward.

“I’ll show you...”

Propelled forward by the power of Kiriha’s gauntlet, Koutarou charged right at Alunaya. His sword was aimed at the back of his neck where Caris had sensed gathering mana. The armor’s systems had shut down and it was unclear whether or not they’d come back online, so Koutarou knew this was his last chance to attack.

“...exactly how reckless I can be!”

Saguratin clashed with Alunaya’s barrier. In that moment, Koutarou could see a large crystal attached to the back of Alunaya’s neck. It was the only thing glowing blue on Alunaya’s gigantic red body. Koutarou used all of his remaining strength to unleash a pulse of electricity there.

There was a white flash. The largest lightning bolt Koutarou had unleashed yet passed through Alunaya’s barrier and zapped the glowing blue crystal.

“ROOOAAAAAAARRR!”

Since Koutarou was exhausted, however, the last of his energy wasn’t enough

to create sufficient electricity to shatter the crystal. Yet though the crystal remained intact, Alunaya seemed to be in great pain. He nearly doubled over in the air, his massive body wriggling like a fish out of water. The howling roars he let out echoed all the way into the town, leaving the villagers shaking in their boots. Alunaya then lost his ability to keep himself in the air and fell towards the ground.

“D-Did that do it...?”

The exhausted Koutarou also entered free fall as he watched Alunaya plummet. The armor still hadn’t rebooted, and he no longer had the strength to use his gauntlet. At this rate, Koutarou would smash into the ground at terminal velocity.

“Heh, heheh... We win... Your Highness...”

However, before Koutarou reached the ground, he lost consciousness. He was so battered and weakened from the fight that, once he relaxed after being assured of his victory, he blacked out completely.

The Holy Sword

Koutarou had avoided death by sudden encounter with the ground thanks to Clan and Caris. Caris had used her magic to slow Koutarou down, and Clan had just barely managed to catch him.

“Jeez... What a handful for a knight...”

The laser rifle that Clan had tossed aside to catch him was what ended up dashed upon the earth in Koutarou’s place. But that didn’t seem to bother her as she held on to Koutarou. She was simply relieved that he was safe.

Koutarou was immediately taken to the infirmary in the fort and was seen to by Lidith the alchemist and Fauna the priestess. However, even after he was treated, he remained unconscious. Worried, Alaia asked Lidith about Koutarou’s condition as she gazed at his sleeping face.

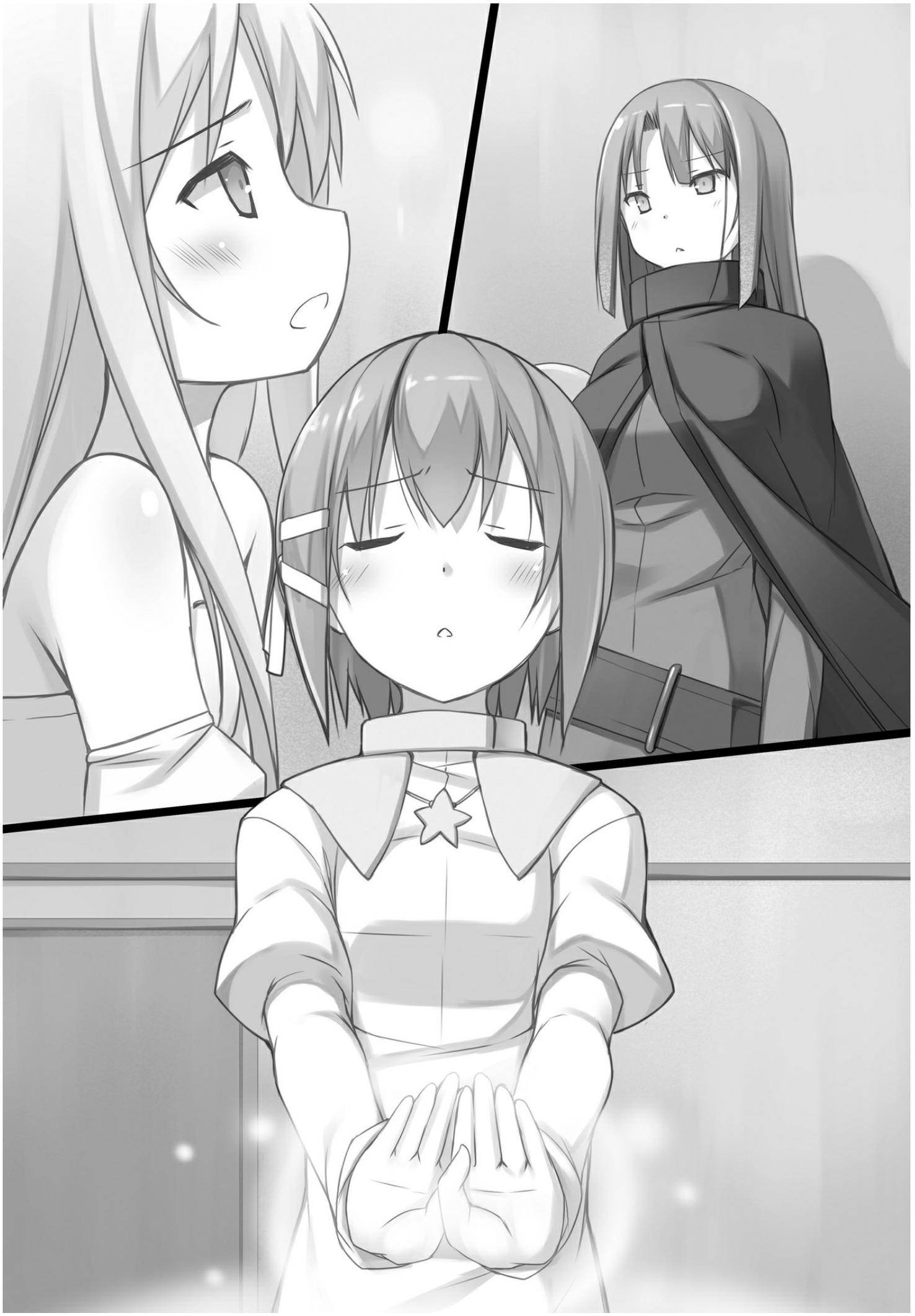
“Lidith, how is Layous-sama?”

“He’s injured all over, but not one of his wounds is critical. It seems like Caris’s magic was of great help.”

As an alchemist, Lidith knew some of the most advanced medical arts of the age. Alchemists were scholars who studied everything from science and pharmacology to herbalism and magic. She’d also learned a great deal as Clan’s assistant. As a result, she was able to give Koutarou much more specialized treatment than just first aid or folk medicine.

“So then when will the Blue Knight wake up, Lidith?”

Charl climbed up beside the bed and watched over Koutarou with Alaia. She had no doubt that he would wake up. He had promised to let her ride a horse after all, and he always kept his promises. But for all her bravado, she was still worried. Her lips were pressed into a frown as she looked on at the sleeping Koutarou.



“I can’t say for sure... It all depends on Lord Veltlion.”

“Princess Charl, I’ll do my best to make sure Layous-sama wakes up as fast as possible!”

“Yeah! Please do, Fauna!”

As a priestess of the Goddess of Dawn, Fauna could manipulate spiritual energy. She had been using her powers to stimulate Koutarou’s natural healing and speed up his recovery for a while now. It was something like a stronger version of Sanae’s massages. And since Fauna was an experienced practitioner of the healing arts as a priestess, her help would ensure Koutarou recovered at least twice as fast as normal.

The truth was that Clan could have used the medical kit she had on board the Cradle to heal Koutarou even faster. But Clan knew that there was a finite limit to how much the med kit could be used, and it would be impossible to find supplementary supplies for it in this day and age. So as long as Koutarou’s injuries could be healed using the techniques of this age, she held off on resorting to the med kit.

“Thank goodness... Layous-sama is all right...”

With her friends, Alaia was finally able to relax some. Based on their words and attitudes, she knew that Koutarou would be fine. Alaia revealed a small smile as she wiped away a tear that had begun to form in her eye.

When Koutarou had been dragged in unconscious, Alaia felt like her heart would stop. It was like watching her world crumble in front of her. If nothing else, it was a confirmation of just how strongly she felt about him. And it was the strength of that emotion that left her feeling unsure even when other people said that he was okay. Those were just words. It wasn’t until after Koutarou was treated that she was able to get a real feel for the situation. Between seeing him for herself and the reassurance of her close companions, she was finally put at ease.

“What a lucky man. It’s hard to believe that he’d make it out okay after a fight with a monster like that.”

“He’s always been a lucky man. After all—”

He's the man I tried to kill but couldn't.

Those were the words that almost left Clan's mouth, but she chose to hold them in. Even though it was the truth, saying it out loud wouldn't do her any favors now. Moreover, admitting Koutarou was her enemy right now would leave a bad taste in her mouth. So Clan kept her thoughts to herself and smiled softly before continuing.

"After all, there are always people praying for his safety."

"You can say that again. I need the Blue Knight alive. He still hasn't made good on his promise to feed me well."

Unaware of Clan's true feelings, Caris nodded repeatedly in agreement. Watching Caris with a certain degree of amusement, Clan repeated her words to herself.

There are always people praying for his safety, huh? Now that I think about it, that was true even before...

Clan recalled Koutarou's life on Earth. He lived with five girls in a small apartment. Clan's rival, Theia, was one of those girls, and she too had started out as Koutarou's enemy. But as time passed, hostilities ceased and they began respecting each other. The same was mostly true for the other girls too. All five were probably worried sick about Koutarou even now. That was why Koutarou was trying to return home.

Heh, I guess that makes me the sixth...

Clan wasn't much different. She had tried to kill Koutarou, but now she was worried for him. Moreover, Koutarou had offered to let her live with him if she ended up with no home to return to herself.

Koutarou was stupid, awkward, and barely capable of taking care of himself. As the invaders attacked one after another, he'd ended up getting involved in each of their troubles. In fact, that's exactly how he'd gotten cast through space and time. And now even if he wanted to return home, he couldn't. If he'd been a little more selfish or discerning, this probably wouldn't have ever happened. But that simply wasn't awkward, kind-hearted Koutarou's lot. In a sense, he was a true underdog.

Yet even so, he was remarkably fortunate. There really was always someone worried about him, and that became his drive to survive. Knowing that, Clan too was certain that Koutarou would awaken. It just wasn't in his nature to stay down. Everyone loved that silly, stubborn side of his.

"...He really is a lucky man..."

He very well may be the only man to ever have four princesses fawn over him so.

Clan smiled at the sleeping Koutarou. She felt it was odd, but right now she could honestly admit that even she was worried about him.

"This is bad, Princess Alaia! You'll never believe who Flair-sama has come back with!"

But the peaceful moment was interrupted when Mary entered the infirmary with a pale face.

Flair had made this most unusual discovery when she went out to investigate what happened to Alunaya. Thanks to Koutarou's attack, Alunaya had crashed into a forest south of the fort. Flair led a small troop into the woods to try and discern what had become of him. But no matter how hard they looked, he was nowhere to be found. They found splintered and knocked over trees that seemed like evidence he'd landed in the area, but nothing of the dragon himself. Considering his size, it was hard to believe he was hiding anywhere, so Flair assumed that he must have flown off and ended up calling off the search.

On their way home, however, Flair crossed paths with a familiar face. It was such an unexpected encounter that Flair wasn't sure what to make of it, much less what to do with the man. At first she thought about killing him, but in the end, she decided that Alaia should be the one to make the call, so she brought him back to the Raustor fort.

"You're quite brave to show your face here."

Flair brought the man to a meeting room near the entrance to the fort. Upon seeing him, Alaia's normally gentle expression turned icy. Behind Alaia stood Clan, Charl, and the other girls, but they said nothing and simply watched as

things unfolded. They were planning on leaving this to Alaia and Flair.

“You can say that again, ‘Princess’ Alaia.”

The man, however, showed no sign of being shaken by Alaia’s cold stare. Remarkably, the corners of his lips turned up into sly grin. It was as if he had no idea he was in the heart of enemy territory.

“Such a brazen attitude... What business do you have, Copper Knight Dextro?”

Copper Knight Dextro. It was a name Alaia and the others would never forget. Dextro was a copper-rank knight of the Melcemhein family, who was loyal to Maxfern and made up a portion of the coup d’etat army.

In the past, Dextro had personally taken on the mission of pursuing Alaia. In an attempt to corner her, he’d poisoned a small town’s water supply. It was a cruel, indiscriminant scheme that sickened many innocent villagers. Alaia and the others had fortunately managed to get through the crisis, but they would never forgive Dextro for what he’d done.

“Before we talk, take these off me. They’re just so uncomfortable.”

Dextro indicated the shackles binding his hands and feet. Since he was considered an extremely dangerous man, Flair had taken every precaution—including restraints—before taking him to Alaia.

“Don’t be stupid. We’re not foolish enough to set you free.”

Flair was quick to reject Dextro’s request. She wasn’t willing to take any chances when Alaia’s safety was involved.

“Jeez, you must be dense. I wouldn’t do anything that would risk my life.”

Dextro jangled the shackles around his wrists and slumped his shoulders in an exaggerated fashion, but it seemed Flair’s response was about what he expected. He simply sighed and moved on as he began to explain things.

“I came here to make a deal with you lot.”

“...A deal?”

Alaia narrowed her eyes. She was skeptical.

“Yeah, that’s right. I have some information you’ll be interested in. Moreover,

it’s incredibly urgent. I want you to accept my demands in exchange for telling you.”

“There is no way we would make a deal with you!”

Flair quickly rejected Dextro once more. She would never dream of conceding to a deal with such a despicable man, both for Alaia’s sake and her own pride as a knight.

“What are your demands, Dextro?”

However, Alaia’s reaction was the opposite of Flair’s.

“Your Highness! You can’t fall for this man’s trickery!”

“Flair, if that’s really why this man has come here, we won’t lose anything by hearing what he has to say.”

Alaia knew just how calculating Dextro was, and she knew that he’d taken a great risk to come here and talk to them. Alaia most likely wouldn’t kill him because she valued the lives of her citizens, but there was nothing stopping Flair, for example. In fact, she’d almost cut him down on sight. Yet despite knowing the danger it would put him in, Dextro had come to make a deal. That meant that whatever he had to bargain with was worth a risk like that.

“As expected from Princess Alaia. You’re a cut above that hard-headed woman.”

“Dextro, you bastard!”

“Calm down, Flair.”

Alaia held Flair back and stepped up to Dextro. She was planning on hearing his terms.

“Tell me your demands, Dextro.”

“I only have one demand. I want you to protect my position, even if you win this war.”

“Your position?”

“Yeah,” Dextro said with a nod and a grin. “I was sure it would only be a matter of time before your silly little Reborn Forthorthian Army would be

quashed, but now you've even gone and taken over Raustor. Your numbers are still no match for Maxfern, but it looks like that might be changing soon. If rumor spreads that the Blue Knight defeated a dragon, I bet you'll have recruits flooding in left and right."

"And what of it?"

Flair glared daggers at Dextro, and Dextro responded with a sneer.

"Well, if you'd let me finish, the short of it is that there's a chance you lot might win this war. I'd wager your chances are fifty-fifty."

"So that's it..."

Alaia now saw why Dextro had dared to appear before them. Her expression turned even more serious as she gave him a stern glare.

"Honestly, I don't really care who wins, but there's no denying I'll be in hot water if you do. I'm sure you'd love to put me on trial for war crimes and all that. I might even get executed."

"Of course! That's what you deserve after what you've done!"

If Maxfern's coup d'etat army were to lose, Dextro wouldn't just lose his position. He'd have to face the law for what he'd done during the coup, including the atrocity of poisoning an entire village. It would depend on the trial, but he likely wouldn't be able to avoid the death penalty. If he was lucky, he'd just spend the rest of his life behind bars. Either way, his future looked bleak if Maxfern's coup didn't succeed.

"So you're selling us information to buy amnesty in advance, are you?"

Alaia saw exactly where this was going.

"Precisely, Princess Alaia. I couldn't give a damn if you or Maxfern ends up on the throne, but I have a certain investment in saving my own hide. So don't you think it'd be in my interest to make sure I'm sitting pretty, no matter who wins?"

Dextro wanted to secure his future regardless of who won, and he intended to buy that with Alaia by giving her critical information. That was why he'd appeared, even knowing the risks. It was all to save himself.

“You’re saying the information you have is worth that much?”

“Indeed I am. Both for this army, and for you personally. But you better decide quickly, because this information will be worthless soon.”

The information Dextro was peddling was urgent. Alaia would find out what it was soon enough, but by then it would already be too late. Would she let it happen or work with Dextro to prevent it beforehand?

“I suppose I have no choice then. I will accept your deal.”

After thinking on it for a moment, Alaia decided to accept the deal. If Dextro really believed this information was worth enough to save his life, she couldn’t just ignore it. In other words, she was willing to buy in to his carefully calculated bet.

“You can’t, Your Highness!”

Of course, Flair objected. Promising amnesty to a war criminal like Dextro was unthinkable.

“I’m sorry, Flair, but I believe this is what’s best for the people.”

However, Alaia shook her head at Flair.

“Your Highness...”

“Just endure it, Flair.”

Alaia felt the same way Flair did, but she had made her choice with the citizens in mind rather than her own emotions. She couldn’t put the people at risk just to uphold an ideal. It was the same way she’d felt that night at the harvest festival.

“Don’t worry. We both get something out of this. That’s what makes it a deal.”

Dextro nodded in satisfaction. Like he said, Dextro wasn’t scamming Alaia and the others. He actually had something worth their while—worth protecting a man like Dextro.

“The dragon that the Blue Knight fought this morning... supposedly he’s called Alunaya... Anyways, he’s actually Grevanas’s puppet.”

“Impossible! Are you saying that Grevanas has the power to control an elder dragon?!”

Flair’s eyes shot wide open in surprise. Dextro was talking about the head of the court magicians. Grevanas was one of the masterminds behind the coup d’etat and essentially Maxfern’s right-hand man. However, even if Grevanas was the strongest archwizard, Flair found it hard to believe that he could control Alunaya.

“Calm down. That’s not the problem right now. The problem is what comes next.” Dextro started to speak faster, clearly feeling like he was pressed for time. “Maxfern and Grevanas’s plan has three stages. First was to use that dragon to bring out the Blue Knight. Not even he could tangle with a dragon and walk away unharmed.”

Dextro looked around the room. It was true. Koutarou was nowhere to be found.

If I had stuck to my part of the plan, it might have actually worked... But oh well. Guess that ship’s sailed...

Judging by Koutarou’s absence for an important discussion like this, Dextro realized that Maxfern’s plan had succeeded thus far.

“The second phase was supposed to be me leading an assault on the fort while the Blue Knight was indisposed. But the operative phrase there is ‘supposed to.’ I gave all kinds of reasons to delay the march, so it’s not happening now.”

“Why would you do that?”

“There was no way of telling if the Blue Knight was actually incapacitated or not, and there’s no way I’m facing him in a fight again. No way, no how. I’m not interested in getting trounced again.”

The assault force Dextro had was a small one intended to infiltrate and sabotage the fort at night. Based on his experience, however, Dextro knew exactly what would happen if they ran into Koutarou. Dextro was only planning on going through with the attack if he could confirm that Koutarou was out of the picture, but he wasn’t able to get sufficient intelligence on the matter. And

so Dextro decided to play it safe, stalled his mission, and met up with Flair.

“Because of that, the plan goes straight into phase three.”

“And what’s that?”

Alaia urged Dextro ahead. She too was starting to sound like she was in a hurry. She’d felt something ominous was afoot as soon as the words “Blue Knight” left Dextro’s mouth.

“With his guard lowered after fighting the dragon, the Blue Knight will be assassinated.”

Before Dextro even finished his sentence, Alaia was already on the move.

Alaia was running towards the infirmary where Koutarou was resting. After leaving the minimum amount of soldiers behind to guard Dextro, the other girls all chased after her.

“Koutarou-sama!”

Alaia threw open the door and flew into the infirmary in a rushed fashion that contrasted her graceful appearance. She’d feared the worst, but she was shocked at what she saw.

The infirmary was in a wretched state. There were two people on the floor—the army surgeon who worked in the infirmary and a guard who helped out with odd jobs. They were still alive, but critically injured. Their blood stained the floor.

Koutarou lay sleeping on the bed the furthest away from the entrance. Three men surrounded him. They were wearing Reborn Forthorthian Army uniforms, but the bloody swords they carried betrayed their real allegiance. There was no doubt they were the ones that had attacked the surgeon and the guard, and their next target was Koutarou.

“I won’t let you!”

Realizing immediately what was going on, Alaia rushed towards Koutarou at full speed. She was selflessly desperate to save his life. Right now, her position and the importance of her life to Forthorthe were the last things on her mind.

To her, Koutarou was starting to become more important than Forthorthe.

“Your Highness! Damn! I could use a hand, Clan!”

Seeing Alaia rushing towards the assassins, Flair quickly drew a knife from her waist and threw it at the closest assassin as she called for Clan’s assistance.

“Jeez, there’s never a dull moment around here!”

Clan had predicted something like this and already had her rifle ready. She took aim and squeezed the trigger without hesitation. A bullet burst out of the barrel and flew towards a different assassin than the one Flair had attacked.

“Guwah!”

“Gyaaah!”

So between Flair and Clan, two assassins were already down. Seeing that, the lone remaining assassin swung his sword down in a frantic attempt to fulfill his objective.

“Noooooooooo!”

The commotion in the room and Alaia’s sorrowful cry woke Koutarou.

“Mm... Wh-What?!”

Koutarou opened his eyes to quite an incredible scene. A silvery blade was closing in on him and Alaia was rushing to throw herself in front of it. The room reeked of blood and there were four injured men lying on the floor.

“Princess Alaia?!”

Without any context, Koutarou had no idea what was going on. The only thing he knew for sure was that at this rate, Alaia would be cut down by the sword.

“As if I’d let you!”

Fully intending to protect Alaia, Koutarou slammed his fist straight into the oncoming blade. There was a dull sound and sharp pain. He’d punched the broad side of the assassin’s sword so he wasn’t cut, but the bones of his left fist were practically shattered after slamming into something metal like that. But thanks to what he’d done, Alaia was unharmed. Koutarou had knocked the blade away enough that all it had done was cut his foot.

“Koutarou-sama!”

The next moment, Alaia jumped on top of Koutarou and wrapped herself around him. She was desperate to shield him from harm and paid no mind to her own safety. She was probably as desperate as she’d be if she were trying to protect Charl.

The assassin’s first attack had failed, but he quickly recovered and took aim for part of Koutarou that was undefended. Alaia was so petite that she wasn’t able to cover all of his body with her own. His arms, head, and most of his legs were exposed. The assassin only had to strike there to kill Koutarou, despite Alaia’s best efforts to protect him.

“I won’t let you do that either!”

Clan’s rifle belched flame. An instant later, the sword was blown out of the assassin’s right hand. Her bullet shattered the blade and thwarted the assassin’s plan, but the assassin still wouldn’t give up. Since his right hand had gone numb from the impact and wouldn’t move, he pulled a knife out with his left.

“Nice save, Clan.”

But that was all the assassin was able to do. With the tip of Flair’s sword pointed at his throat, he stopped dead and dropped the knife. Anything else and Flair would surely cut his head clean off.

“You’re...”

Flair was aghast when she saw the assassin’s face. She recalled seeing him before. He was a coup d’etat soldier that had defected to the Reborn Forthorthian Army just yesterday. Since Flair was in charge of the combat troops, she’d met him when he applied. She now struck him with the butt of her sword to knock him out, but she was still visibly surprised.

“Ha! That’s what happens when you don’t kill your enemies. The Blue Knight’s ways are just too naive,” Dextro jeered.

Since he was still in shackles, Dextro had arrived after everything was over. But since he knew of the assassination plan, he was well aware of what had surprised Flair.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“Huh?”

“Look at me. I once tried to kill Veltlion.”

Clan leaned her rifle on her shoulder and glared at Dextro. Koutarou surely would have called it a sly look if he had it.

“But it was thanks to me that giant of yours bit the dust. So tell me. Who is the naive one here, Veltlion or you?”

“Tch...”

Dextro clicked his tongue irritatedly. The steel giant Dextro had sent after Koutarou had its head blown off by Clan’s beam cannon. That was only possible because Koutarou hadn’t killed Clan, even though they were once enemies. Moreover, the assassination plot being foiled was thanks to Koutarou not killing Dextro. In the end, it stood to reason that Dextro was really the naive one.

“You’re fine the way you are, Veltlion...” Clan mumbled in a low voice as she looked over towards Koutarou still lying on the infirmary bed.

Even though the danger had now passed, Alaia was still firmly holding on to him. Her body wouldn’t stop trembling. Despite being injured himself, Koutarou quietly and gently patted her back. Charl worriedly watched over the two of them. The whole sight, however, reaffirmed for Clan what she’d suspected this whole time.

“This is the Blue Knight’s path... Your path.”

Koutarou was indeed the real Blue Knight.

After all was said and done, Koutarou fell asleep again and didn’t wake until three days later. It was a result of some particularly unpalatable medicine Lidith had given him, his injuries, and sheer exhaustion.

“Where am I...?”

When he finally woke up, Koutarou looked around. Rather than the infirmary, he appeared to be in his quarters at the fort. He was relocated after his treatment in the infirmary was complete.

“Hmm?”

Though he recognized his own room, he was surprised to see who was sitting by his side.

“Princess Alaia?!”

Alaia was sitting in a chair next to Koutarou’s bed, slumped over and fast asleep. On the small table next to her was a bottle with something in it, bandages, a pitcher full of drinking water, and assorted other supplies. Seeing that, Koutarou realized that she’d been tending to him.

“Princess Alaia...”

Alaia was grasping Koutarou’s right hand with both of hers. Even fast asleep, she was firmly holding on to him like she never intended to let go.

“Seems like I’ve made her worry quite a bit...” Koutarou mumbled in a quiet voice and squeezed her hands back.

Alaia should have been busy with her work as a princess, so she shouldn’t have had the time to attend Koutarou like this. But even so, she made time for him. To take care of him. She’d been so worried about him that she didn’t see any other option.

“Mm, mmm...”

Responding to Koutarou moving his hand, Alaia began to stir. She slowly opened her sleepy eyes before sitting bolt upright in her chair.

“Koutarou-sama?!”

“Good morning, Your Highness.”

When she saw Koutarou smiling, her lower lip quivered as tears welled in her eyes.

“Thank goodness... You woke up...”

The light of the lamp was reflected in Alaia’s tears, making them seemingly sparkle. They fell from her eyes, trickled down her cheeks, and dripped from her chin, glittering like royal jewels.

“I’m sorry for making you worry. And I am truly honored that you would treat

me personally, Your Highness.”

“It’s nothing! These are all injuries you sustained for our sake! I should be the one apologizing and thanking you!”



Alaia hurriedly wiped her tears away because she didn't want to trouble Koutarou, but it was no use. No matter how much she wiped, the tears just kept coming. She might have been able to force a smile, but she couldn't hide her tears of relief.

"Your Highness..."

Seeing Alaia like that, Koutarou felt truly grateful. Not everyone had a princess that worried for them like this. Koutarou was honored, but still felt a pang of guilt knowing these feelings of Alaia's were meant for the real Blue Knight.

"I'm sorry for crying like a little child, Koutarou-sama."

It took Alaia quite some time to stop crying, but once she was able to cry her heart out, her usual, calm smile reappeared.

"I'll treasure the memory of it the rest of my life. Not everyone gets to see a princess cry."

"My... Koutarou-sama, you have quite a mean streak to you."

"I get that a lot."

Seeing Alaia slightly pouting, Koutarou was reminded of Harumi back on Earth.

"Satomi-kun, you meanie."

While they cheerfully chatted away, Harumi would often criticize Koutarou like that from time to time. The pouting expression Alaia was making right now was just like Harumi's too.

Princess Alaia and Sakuraba-senpai really are a lot alike...

And it was because of that that Koutarou hadn't felt lonely these past few months. It wasn't just Alaia, either. Charl, Flair, and the others girls all reminded him of his companions on Earth in one way or another. So even though he was far from home, they'd kept him from getting too homesick. He felt that of all the places in space and time, he was lucky to have ended up here.

"By the way, Koutarou-sama..." Alaia said, finally giving up pouting. "How are

you feeling?”

Alaia worriedly looked over Koutarou. As she did, Koutarou nodded and smiled.

“I’m all better. I ache a bit here and there when I move, but the biggest problem right now is my empty stomach.”

While Koutarou had been asleep, people were constantly taking care of him. Thanks to Lidith’s medical treatments, Caris’s magic, and Fauna’s spiritual energy techniques, he’d made great strides in recovering. Now that he was awake, nothing was screaming out in pain. As long as he ate well and let things run their course now, he would make a full recovery.

“Oh my, Koutarou-sama... Jeez...”

Alaia smiled to hear Koutarou joking around. After having been so worried about him, she couldn’t help but find his silly tone of voice funny.

“I-I’ll have Mary prepare dinner right away... Heeheehee...”

Hearing herself laugh with Koutarou, Alaia confirmed her own feelings.

I’m really glad... Koutarou-sama is safe...

Through the warmth of Koutarou’s hand, she knew exactly how she felt.

I... I definitely don’t want Koutarou-sama to die...

During the past couple of days, Alaia had come to realize just how much Koutarou meant to her. The despair she’d felt when he was carried back to the fort in critical condition. The panic she’d felt when she learned of the assassins. The desperation she’d felt as she threw her body over Koutarou to protect him. The frustration she’d felt when all she could do was watch him sleep as he recovered. And the deep relief she’d felt when she finally got to see his smile again.

All those feelings told Alaia something. She was willing to pay any price to make sure that Koutarou was safe. Alaia knew that one day Koutarou would leave her. To a princess, marriage was just a political tool to begin with. No matter how much she loved him, she would never be able to marry him. But if she knew that Koutarou would live on safe and sound even after they parted

ways, she could stay strong.

That's why... To that end...

Alaia made up her mind. Her determination was unwavering. It even surpassed her desire to protect her country.

"Koutarou-sama, once you recover, there is someplace I want to take you. Would that be all right?"

As long as Koutarou was safe, she was willing to protect the world on her own if she had to. She was more sure now than she'd ever been.

Alaia took Koutarou to an empty temple in the mountains, some distance away from the fort.

Raustor, meaning "the goddess's resting place," had earned its name from a legend that claimed the Goddess of Dawn stopped to rest there while she was traveling through infinite space and time. The legend made the area one of religious significance and several temples to the Goddess of Dawn were built there. Alaia had brought Koutarou to one such temple, specifically the oldest one that was managed by the Mastir family.

The temple itself was on old, sturdy stone building that looked much the same way it did when it was first built over a thousand years ago now. The only significant change in its appearance was the moss growing on the outside walls.

The one who'd guided Koutarou and Alaia to the temple was Fauna. Fauna served as a priestess of the Goddess of Dawn, and on top of that, she'd been Alaia's friend since their seminary days. Alaia trusted her a great deal, which was why she'd personally placed her in charge of this temple.

"Alaia-sama, Layous-sama, this way."

"Thank you, Fauna."

With Fauna in the lead, they entered the temple. Since both Alaia and Fauna had been here several times before, they didn't really think much of it.

"This is..."

But Koutarou was different. As he entered the temple, he was taken aback by

a strange sensation. Even if he hadn't been told in advance that it was a temple built to honor the Goddess of Dawn, it was easy to tell that this place was sacred. But that wasn't the feeling that overwhelmed him now. It was more like a sense of deja vu.

Have I been here before...? Or is it something about this atmosphere...?

His sense of deja vu grew stronger the further in he went. He felt like he either knew the place or that he'd been somewhere with a similar feel to it.

"I'm sorry for keeping you waiting. This is the place I wanted to take you."

"This statue..."

Although it only started as a feeling, Koutarou was dead sure of it once they reached the large room made out of stone in the center of the temple. Red stained glass windows dotted the ceiling, lighting up the room with the colors of dawn. In the center of it all was a stone statue aglow in the red light. It sat atop of a large stand, so Koutarou had to look up at it to see it.

It was a statue of the Goddess of Dawn, the deity Forthorthians revered as the goddess of creation. It depicted a girl with her hands clasped in front of her in prayer. According to the legends, the tears she shed out of loneliness turned into the thread that she would use to begin knitting the fabric of the universe. To symbolize that, tears had been carved down the statue's face in lines.

Surrounding the statue were several pillars. Transparent globes had been installed on the top of each one, and they all shone red in the light pouring down from above.

I... I know this statue... But from where? Why can't I remember?

Koutarou was puzzled. This scene—the statue of this girl in this room—was familiar to him, but no matter how far back he scanned in his memories, he couldn't remember where or when he'd seen it. It was like it was part of a memory that had been blacked out. He could tell something was supposed to be there, he just couldn't tell what. It was a strange, frustrating feeling.

"Please come over here."

Koutarou was lost in thought staring at the statue, but Alaia's voice snapped

him back to reality. She was standing in front of the statue, and she was calling him over.

“Go to her, Layous-sama.”

Fauna urged Koutarou on as well. She was still standing by the entrance to the room, watching from afar. She was going to leave Alaia and Koutarou be while she waited outside. Fauna knew what Alaia bringing Koutarou here meant. Not only was she in charge of the temple, she was also Alaia’s good friend.

“If you’ll excuse me then...”

“Of course.”

Fauna politely saw Koutarou off, then retreated outside the inner chamber of the temple. Once she was gone, Koutarou and Alaia were left alone in front of the statue.

“Thank you very much, Koutarou-sama.”

And now that they were alone, Alaia used Koutarou’s real name. Ever since Koutarou had told her the truth, she’d used it behind closed doors and in private.

“Think nothing of it. But... what is this place, Your Highness? And why did we come here?”

Koutarou was full of questions. Since his own memories were so vague, he wanted to know more about this place.

“This is a special place to the royal family of Forthorthe. Our national treasure is held here.”

“Your national treasure?”

Hearing Koutarou repeat her words, Alaia smiled and turned towards the statue’s stand. She then placed her hand on the silver plate installed on it. It read, “Should the nation ever be faced with great crisis, recite thy true name here.” Koutarou couldn’t read it, but his armor quickly translated it for him. It was the ancient Forthorthian language used by priests and magicians.

“My name is Alaia. I am the silvery white snow of Mastir and the crown princess of Forthorthe, Alaia Kua Mastir Signaria Tio Forthorthe.”

The moment Alaia recited her full name, white light began shooting out from the plate. It grew and grew until the whole statue of the goddess was glowing. The plate then slid down and revealed what was behind it.

“Is that... a sword...?”

Inside the stand was an old sword. It was stuck in the stand itself and it, along with the stand, began sliding out towards Koutarou and Alaia. When the sword had first been placed in the stand long ago, it had a beautiful polish and sparkle to it, but now the blade and handle were both rusty. It had lost its original splendor, and now only looked like a piece of junk.

“Yes. It has been passed down in the royal family for generations. It’s said that it was given to the royal family by the Goddess of Dawn herself. The very existence of this sword is proof of the legitimacy of the rulers of Forthorthe. Its power has long protected the country from its enemies.”

Alaia proudly proclaimed that much, but then her expression turned dark.

“However... this sword has also been a great source of conflict, so it was sealed away in this place two hundred years ago.”

The sword was considered proof of kingship, meaning that whoever held it had the right to rule Forthorthe. Men fought over it, spilling blood to try and obtain it for themselves. A wise emperor several generations ago had enough of it and took it upon himself to hide the sword away. The court magicians were then tasked with creating a powerful seal to keep the sword from falling into the wrong hands. Only those of royal blood could undo the seal, and even then they were only permitted to do so in times of national crisis.

“So that’s what you meant by your national treasure... But if you’ll forgive me for saying so, Your Highness, it doesn’t look like it holds much power now...”

Koutarou believed Alaia’s story, but what she showed him now was just a rusted stick of metal. It didn’t look like very special at all.

“Heehee, I’m sure it doesn’t in this state.”

Alaia giggled and turned towards the sword again. Just like the statue in front of her, she clasped her hands, closed her eyes, and began praying.

“Past, present, and future, oh mother of all things, Goddess of Dawn.”

Alaia began speaking the ancient language in a sonorous voice. As she did, a shrill noise like metal hitting metal filled the room and something on Alaia’s forehead began glowing.

“Your Highness... what is...”

Before Koutarou knew it, a sword-shaped crest had appeared on Alaia’s forehead. The crest itself was shining, almost as if light was shooting out from the blade of the sword.

“I, a daughter of Forthorthe and thy faithful servant, beseech thee. Now is the time to break the seal and give us power to overcome the crisis that threatens us.”

Alaia was reciting an incantation to break the seal placed on the sword. Those words and her royal blood were the keys to removing the seal.

“Wind of the heavens. Green of the earth. Water of the sea. Fire of the mountains. Using my life as provision, reveal the power to rule all things!”

The light shining on Alaia slowly shifted to the sword. As it washed over the blade, everything the light hit was restored to its original splendor. The rust vanished like it had been blown away by the wind, and the warped blade regained its true shape. The dirt and scratches disappeared from the blade that now shone a brilliant silver. The sword had such a beautiful sheen to it that it looked like it had just been forged.

“I am Alaia, the silvery white snow of Mastir! Oh holy sword of the temple, carve my name into your blade and revive!”

As Alaia loudly declared her name once more, the sword practically exploded with pure white light. But the light was just a portion of the power flowing out of the sword. There was also a rumbling that shook the temple.

It continued for several dozen seconds, but after that, the sword’s light slowly weakened before receding as if it had been absorbed by the sword itself. And though the light was gone, the sword still retained its glorious appearance. It still had the same beautiful sheen it did the day it was enshrined here, long before Koutarou and Alaia’s time.

“Koutarou-sama.”

Alaia grabbed the handle of the sword as if nothing had happened. In its current state, it no longer looked like it was in danger of falling apart. Alaia held the reborn blade in both hands and turned back to Koutarou.

“It is tradition that this sword takes the name of the one who releases the seal.”

The sword crest on Alaia’s forehead was still there, and like the sword in her hands, it shone silver. It was proof she was the one that had undone the seal. It was a bond that tied her to the sword.

“Because of that, this sword is given my name.”

Alaia then presented the sword to Koutarou as she proudly declared its name.

“This is Signaltin. It means ‘sword of silvery white.’”

Koutarou knew it as the name of the most famous sword in all of Forthorthe. The Blue Knight’s sword.

“This is... Signaltin?”

Koutarou was surprised. He knew that Signaltin existed, but he didn’t think it would appear in front of him right now or in this manner. Theia’s manuscript had mostly glossed over anything magical, so obtaining the sword in the play wasn’t this much of a spectacle.

“Please take it, Koutarou-sama.”

Alaia was planning on giving the sword to Koutarou. As long as he had it, he would never lose. And as long as Koutarou was alive, Alaia could stay strong. She believed that was the best option for both herself and for Forthorthe.

“N-No, I couldn’t possibly take something so important...”

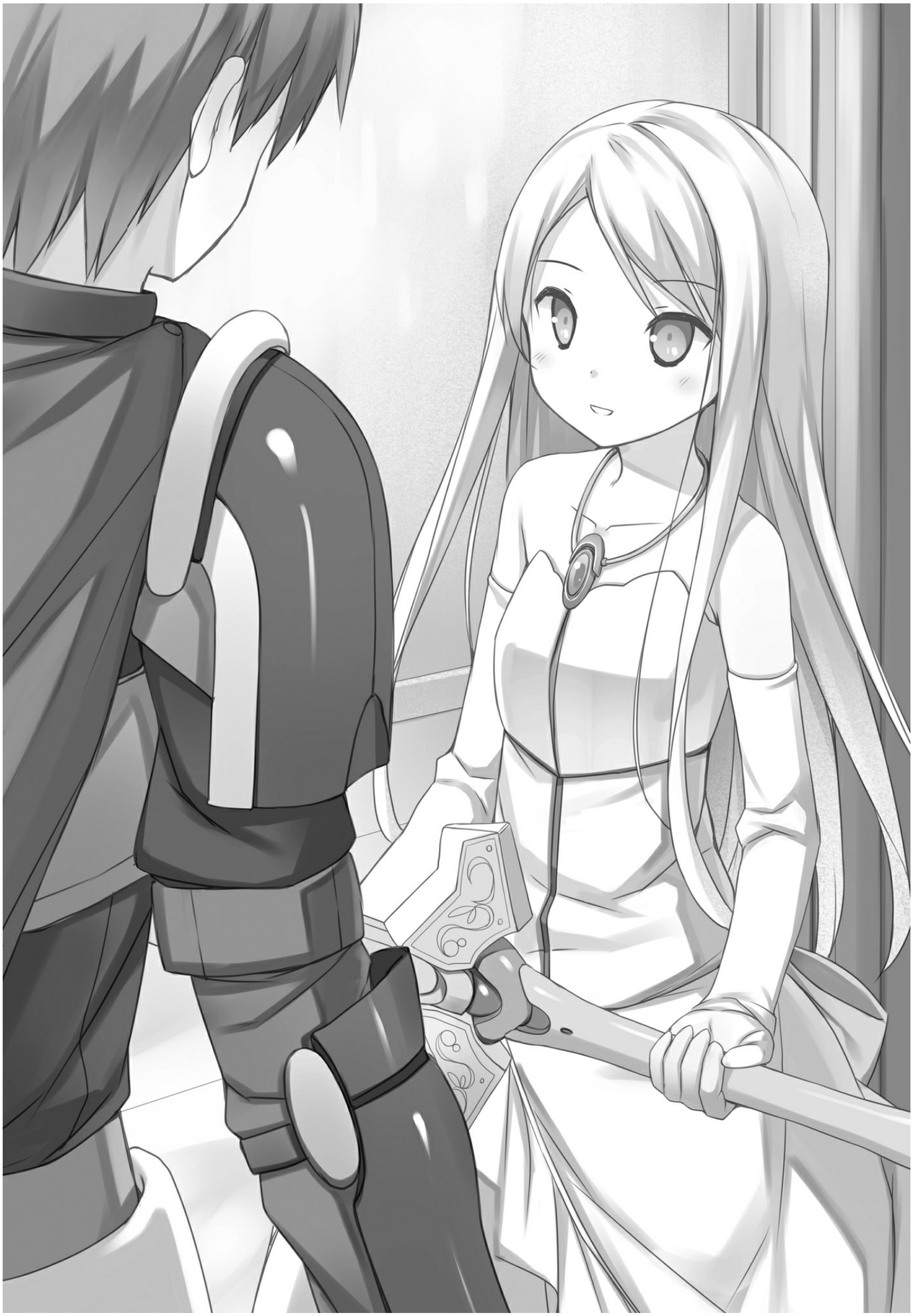
But Koutarou couldn’t accept a gift like that. He could tell that the sword held immense power after just seeing the ritual to dispel the seal. Moreover, it was a sacred treasure of the royal family.

“It’s okay.”

Koutarou’s reaction, however, was just what Alaia expected. She smiled and

gently shook her head.

As I thought, I should leave this sword to Koutarou-sama.



Convinced that she had made the right decision, Alaia revealed her intentions to him.

“In return, promise me one thing.”

“Huh?”

“Please promise me that when you return to your own world, you’ll take this sword with you, Koutarou-sama.”

“I-I can’t do that, Your Highness!”

Alaia’s request was so unexpected that Koutarou’s eyes shot wide open in surprise. He was even more surprised now than when he saw Signaltin transform.

“It is best for you to keep it. This sword will become a source of conflict here. We have already learned at great cost exactly what kind of fate awaits a country that relies on something so powerful. That’s why this sword was sealed here in the first place.”

In contrast to Koutarou, Alaia was calm. She watched over Koutarou with a gentle expression and continued explaining herself.

“And the safest thing to do for the country is to take it far, far away. Then no one will ever be able to fight over it or its power ever again.”

While Alaia was trying to protect Koutarou, she was also trying to protect Forthorthe. The sword’s very existence had caused strife and civil war. Because of its overwhelming power, all sorts of men sought it out. It wasn’t much different from the way terrorists in the modern world scrambled for more and more powerful weapons.

Though the conflict may have stopped once the sword was sealed in the temple, there was no guarantee that it would stay that way now that it had reemerged into the world. The idea was to place the sword somewhere no one could get their hands on it until the time called for it, but that kind of opportunity hadn’t shown itself until now—in the form of Koutarou, the boy who had come through time from the world of the stars to wield it.

“If you were to take it, Koutarou-sama, the people of this world would no

longer have anything to fight over. You would be saving us.”

That was the reason Alaia was giving the sword to Koutarou. While the sword itself could protect her land and her loved ones from all kinds of danger, letting it go would protect her country in the long run. To Alaia, there was no action more meaningful than that.

“I see... so that’s why...”

That was the true reason why the Silver Princess had given the Blue Knight the sword and why he had vanished with it after the war. It wasn’t just to avoid any political difficulties his existence might cause. The sword itself represented a certain danger, especially while Forthorthe was rebuilding itself. That’s why the Blue Knight had taken it away. To remove both himself and such a powerful liability from Forthorthe.

“I understand, Your Highness. I will humbly accept that duty.”

Now that he fully understood the situation, Koutarou decided to accept the sword. It was a job he had to do as the Blue Knight’s replacement, and he felt he could do a better a job than the Blue Knight in that regard since he could take it back to Earth.

“Thank you very much, Koutarou-sama!”

Alaia felt an immense joy when Koutarou accepted the sword from her. Now everything would fall into place in their favor. That was Alaia’s hope, and that hope drove her forward now.

“Koutarou-sama, from now on this sword will protect you. From any enemy and any trial.”

“Then I will use my life and this sword to protect you, Princess Alaia...”

And so Koutarou obtained Signaltin as the gears of fate continued turning.

On the night after Koutarou and Alaia returned to Raustor with Signaltin, an intense vertigo befell Alaia as she was working in her office.

“Hnngh...”

Having almost lost her balance, Alaia leaned against the wall to keep herself

from collapsing completely.

“Your Highness!”

Fauna, who was in the room with her, noticed right away and ran over to support her. She’d been staying close to Alaia ever since they visited the temple, worried she’d suffer adverse effects from breaking the seal.

“Th-Thank you, Fauna... You’re a big help...”

“Please stay still, Your Highness. I’ll heal you right away.”

Fauna sat Alaia down on the sofa and attempted to treat her using her spiritual energy. Alaia’s body had grown horribly weak. She now had the constitution of someone who’d been chronically ill their whole life, and though it manifested like an illness, the healing energy that Fauna was pouring into her didn’t seem to have much of an effect.

“I feel much better now. Thank you, Fauna.”

After a while, color returned to Alaia’s cheeks. With her symptoms alleviated, Alaia smiled and thanked Fauna. She felt truly lucky to have Fauna as a friend at a time like this.

“Your Highness... don’t you think that you gave Signaltin too much of your life force?”

Alaia had grown weak because she’d used half of her life force as payment to undo Signaltin’s seal. In the ritual to break the seal, the reborn sword could hold an amount of power proportionate to the life sacrificed to awaken it. Knowing that, Alaia had poured as much of her life into it as she could. The sword crest on her forehead was a sign of the exchange, and even now, half of her life force resided in Signaltin.

“It’s fine.”

Alaia’s health had deteriorated as a result of the life force she’d sacrificed, but not once had she shown any sign of regretting it. If anything, it was quite the opposite. She felt satisfied to have accomplished something so important. She was happy with what she’d done.

“This way I can always stay by Koutarou-sama’s side.”

Alaia was fated to never be with Koutarou, but now as long as he carried Signaltin with him, she would be with him in a different way. As a princess, her position prevented her from expressing her love any other way. This was the only thing she could do.

“Princess Alaia...”

Faced with Alaia’s resolute love, Fauna couldn’t argue.

“Even if... he’s to return to the other side of that endless time and immeasurable distance...”

No matter the time or distance separating Alaia from Koutarou, she would forever be with him. That was enough to satisfy Alaia.

The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight

Once Koutarou obtained Signaltin, the Reborn Forthorthian Army's advance was unstoppable.

Word of Koutarou repelling Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya spread throughout Forthorthe like wildfire, and the army quickly gained the support of more and more people in the form of manpower and supplies. At their current pace, the Reborn Forthorthian Army would doubtless become strong enough to win the war. That was how everyone in Forthorthe felt. As a result, the bands of knights that were still on the fence were slowly won over, and they joined the Reborn Forthorthian Army one after another. With that, the army's numbers swelled even further, and they now had a strong enough force to take on the coup d'etat army.

Meanwhile, the coup d'etat's forces were constantly diminishing. Once word spread that the Reborn Forthorthian Army could take down even dragons and that they were only getting stronger, morale took a turn for the worse in the coup d'etat ranks and soldiers started defecting left and right. If Alunaya, who was currently missing, reappeared, the negative feedback loop that the coup d'etat army was experiencing could probably be reversed, but there was no sign of that happening. Things were looking more and more grim for them by the day.

Even though there was almost no difference in their numbers now, the difference in morale put the coup d'etat forces at a significant disadvantage. While the Reborn Forthorthian Army was becoming more and more skilled with daily training, the coup d'etat army was practically running amok all over the country. And that just made the situation even worse for them.

As a result, the Reborn Forthorthian Army was able to advance almost effortlessly without Koutarou even needing to use Signaltin. Because of that, by the time the first snow fell, the Reborn Forthorthian Army was already marching on the capital city of Fornorn.

Koutarou and Clan were staring at the hologram projected by Clan's bracelet. In it, they could see a brick cityscape. To their modern sensibilities, it looked old-fashioned, but in this age, it was beautiful and without peer. As expected of the capital of an imperial country, the villages and towns they had seen so far were nothing compared to this. They both felt like farmhands leaving the country and seeing the city for the first time.

"So this is the capital, huh? It's pretty big."

"It's the largest city on this continent. It's equipped with aqueducts and sewers, and I've even heard there are streetlights."

The population of Fornorn was over a hundred thousand. Compared to analogous historical cities on Earth, it was quite large. Before the invention of the steam engine, there was an effective limit to how large a city could grow. All things considered, a population of over a hundred thousand in this age was more than enough to qualify Fornorn as a metropolis.

And because it was such a large city, the military presence there was equally large. Since it was the capital, they could easily expect ten thousand soldiers to be waiting for them. If the coup d'etat army mobilized all its forces, it could even be several times that. But since the coup d'etat army was also busy suppressing riots and maintaining the borders, Alaia and the others weren't expecting that kind of turnout. Even then, however, ten thousand men was quite a sizeable force.

"Still... this is strange."

"That's true. Why haven't they deployed?"

"Who knows? Let's just hope they don't go for a scorched earth strategy..."

The Reborn Forthorthian Army had moved to surround the city limits of Fornorn. They were eight thousand strong, but with reinforcements on the way, they would soon number closer to ten thousand. But despite their approach, the coup d'etat army showed no sign of intercepting them. In fact, they hardly seemed to care. The capital was being marched on and they hadn't even taken up defensive positions.

“Princess Alaia doesn’t want that kind of battle.”

“How rude. I don’t either, you know.”

“Sorry, Clan.”

“Just how long is it going to take for you to acknowledge me as a princess?”

“I said I was sorry.”

What Koutarou and Clan feared the most was that the coup d’etat army had actually deployed their troops inside the city. If the city turned into a battlefield, there would be serious collateral damage and likely civilian casualties. They couldn’t risk reducing the capital to ashes, even if it was to catch the masterminds behind the coup d’etat. That would be doing more harm than good.

“More importantly, if that’s their goal, we need to find a way to launch an assault directly on the palace.”

“More importantly... Jeez... Repairs on the Cradle will be finished soon. If we use that, it might be possible.”

“All right. Gather some more intel for us, Clan. Concentrate on the area around the barracks.”

“I understand. I’ll have something more in-depth for you before the reconnaissance team returns.”

Koutarou and the others were taking the utmost care in making their move on Fornorn. Considering what would happen after the war, it wasn’t enough just to suppress the coup d’etat. That was one of the tricky parts of a civil war. If they fought in a way or did anything that might upset the citizenry and lead to further riots or uprisings, the civil war would never really be over. Both Forthorthe and Earth were full of examples of civil wars that had come to such poor, drawn-out endings.

“Your Excellency! You must hear this!”

The young man who served as Koutarou’s adjutant suddenly jumped into Koutarou and Clan’s tent. Normally he would never do something like that. He was a polite man and always announced his presence, so his entrance alone

told Koutarou that something serious had happened.

“Calm down, man. What is it?”

Koutarou switched to his Blue Knight persona and immediately asked the adjutant what had happened. He could tell that it was something important, but he knew he wouldn’t get anything useful out of his adjutant while he was panicking. In order to settle him down, Koutarou spoke to him in a calm voice.

“W-Well, the coup d’etat army has surrendered!”

“What?!”

“Wh-What did you say?!”

However, upon hearing his report, Koutarou and Clan lost their cool too.

The reason the coup d’etat army had surrendered was because the masterminds, Maxfern and Grevanas, had gone missing in action. Allegedly they vanished a few days ago and hadn’t been seen since. The alchemists and court magicians had disappeared as well, taking only their proteges with them. Not only were they gone, but they had left the coup d’etat army without any specific orders. Like a child who had grown tired of a toy, Maxfern seemed to have simply tossed them aside.

“...And since we don’t want to go to battle either, we are now surrendering.”

“I understand, but it’s rather hard to believe...”

Though the coup d’etat army messenger had spelled everything out for Koutarou, he was absolutely baffled. He understood what the messenger was saying, but it was hard for him to take at face value.

“I can understand why you feel that way, but it is the truth.”

The coup d’etat army messenger seemed to be equally perplexed by it all. The situation had thrown them for a loop too, and he did his best to explain that to Koutarou.

“Your Excellency, I sent a scouting party to confirm. What this man says is all true. Maxfern and Grevanas were nowhere to be found in the palace, and the alchemists’ atelier and the wizards’ tower were completely empty as well.”

The adjutant corroborated the messenger's story.

"Hmm... I see. I suppose that leaves both sides at a loss."

"I am glad you understand."

Even though it was nearly unthinkable, it was the truth. Maxfern and Grevanas had abandoned the coup d'etat army and vanished from Fornorn.

"Clan."

Now that he had a grasp of the situation, Koutarou beckoned Clan over. Once she was close enough, he leaned in so he could whisper to her.

"What's going on? There was nothing like this in the play."

"I don't know either. According to history, the Blue Knight should have fought against Maxfern and Grevanas..."

In both Theia's manuscript and Forthorthe's records, the Blue Knight did battle with Maxfern and Grevanas. Though the exact details of their fight varied from historical account to historical account, there was no question that they did indeed fight.

Despite that, Maxfern and Grevanas were nowhere to be found even though the Blue Knight had made it to the capital to face them. Theia's manuscript was largely historically accurate, and according to it, the decisive battle took place in Fornorn. That's why Koutarou and Clan had believed that they would be walking into a fight. It only seemed natural with how the war had been proceeding. All in all, this was about the last thing anyone had expected.

"If history is different from the script, what do we do now?"

"This doesn't feel right, but Alaia has to ascend the throne. That's the endgame, so let's just work towards that."

"All right, let's start with that."

After his private talk with Clan, Koutarou turned back to the messenger.

"We will accept your surrender. Prepare to receive us right away."

"Th-Thank you very much, Your Excellency!"

Hearing Koutarou's answer, the messenger's expression brightened up. He

was also stumped by the current situation. It was so strange that he'd known coming in to this that there was a chance that Koutarou wouldn't believe him. If he suspected it was a trap, he very well may have been killed on the spot, so he was truly relieved that Koutarou had come around. With this, the war would be over and he could safely return to his family. It was an emotional moment for him, and that intense emotion expressed itself in the tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Jeez..."

Koutarou let out a small sigh and lowered his shoulders. Seeing that, Clan furrowed her brow.

"It's still too early to relax, Veltlion."

"Well, I know, but... it's better if the war comes to an end."

"That's true. It's not like I don't understand how you feel."

Koutarou was relieved. No matter how many battles he went through, he had no love for war. If the fighting was truly over now, he was glad of it. Though it bothered him that history had changed, he was still ultimately relieved. The same was true for Clan. Though she'd scolded Koutarou for relaxing, she too felt a weight lifted off her shoulders.

However, all their relief was premature.

"Veltlion, it's terrible!"

With the end of the war in sight, the atmosphere in the tent was light, if not relaxed. That changed immediately when Flair jumped in, the blood visibly drained from her face.

"Princess Alaia and Princess Charl have been kidnapped by Maxfern!"

Those words would raise the curtain on the final battle.

While Koutarou and the others were distracted at the capital, Maxfern had ambushed Alaia's forces that were positioned in the rear. With the entirety of the coup d'etat army left in Fornorn, nobody had expected a surprise attack from the rear like this.

Maxfern had used a flock of strange, winged monsters to attack. They were creatures summoned by Grevanas and his court magicians, and they descended on Alaia's camp on command. The unexpected aerial ambush sent the soldiers into a panic and the Reborn Forthorthian Army was scattered. Alaia and Charl were kidnapped, and Mary and Fauna were taken with them since they were all in the same tent together.

After that, Maxfern left the Reborn Forthorthian Army an odd message. It stated that Koutarou should come to Sariachal Castle without his army.

"So, what kind of place is this Sariachal Castle?"

While riding on horseback, Koutarou called out to Lidith. The name "Sariachal" hadn't appeared in Theia's manuscript, so Koutarou was unfamiliar with it.

"Sariachal is northwest of Fornorn. It's an old castle that the Maxfern family used to manage. It fell out of use around the time Fornorn was being built, so it should be abandoned now."

Lidith answered Koutarou's question while skillfully handling her horse. She seemed to have natural skill at many things, and she was certainly a far better rider than Koutarou was. She had no trouble keeping up a conversation at a full gallop as she rode beside him.

"This is without a doubt a trap, Veltlion."

Clan, however, was riding together with Flair since she could only make a horse walk at best. She was in such bad shape that it took almost everything she had just to hold on to Flair and not fall off, but even in that condition, she was primarily worried for Koutarou.

"They're going to kill Alaia-san and the others either way. They probably just want to get rid of you before that."

To Maxfern and Grevanas who had started the coup d'etat, Alaia and Charl were just a nuisance. To them, getting rid of the princesses would be the most efficient way for their coup to succeed. So Alaia and Charl would be killed eventually, regardless of if Koutarou showed up or not.

But Koutarou was in more immediate danger than Alaia and Charl were. If

Alaia and Charl were to die, Koutarou, as the army commander, could lead his troops in a battle to avenge their fallen princesses, which could be devastating for the coup d'etat. It was even possible that the Reborn Forthorthian Army would gain momentum that way rather than lose it.

And Maxfern wanted to avoid that. The ideal scenario for him right now seemed to be capturing Koutarou, Alaia, and Charl and keeping whatever happened to them quiet. He could kill them if he wanted, but as long as he made the citizens believe they were still alive, he wouldn't have to deal with any sort of backlash.

"I won't let them do that! No matter what happens, I will save the princesses! Even if it costs me my life!"

Flair's expression filled with rage and she spurred her horse. Her fury ran deep. She was always intense, and that was now directed at Maxfern, the evil man who had taken her highly esteemed princess hostage.

"Please calm down, Lady Pardomshiha. If I let you die, Princess Alaia will scold me."

"But Veltlion, there's no point in being careful if Princess Alaia and Princess Charl perish!"

Flair couldn't get there fast enough. The unthinkable had happened. The situation was so extreme that there wasn't an ounce of composure left in this normally dignified girl.

"Please slow your horse a little, Lady Pardomshiha. At this rate, your horse will collapse before we get there."

"Ugh, s-sorry..."

Flair blushed a little as she heeded Koutarou's advice and slowed down some. If she taxed her horse too much, she would never make it to her destination. Similarly, if she pushed herself too hard, she wouldn't be able to accomplish what she wanted. Realizing she'd gotten too worked up, Flair admonished herself.

"Still, what are we going to do, Blue Knight?"

Caris, who was flying along with them on her staff, pulled up next to Koutarou. In her case, she was better at using her magic than she was at riding a horse. She even flew backwards so she could face Koutarou as they talked.

“If we keep going like this, we’ll walk right into their trap. And there’s just five of us, so there’s a limit to what we can do.”

In total, their team was only five strong: Koutarou, Lidith, Flair, Clan, and Caris. It hardly seemed like enough for a royal rescue operation. And knowing that they were heading into a trap, it wasn’t just Caris that was worried.

“Well, I guess we can’t get too hung up on pretense... Clan.”

“What’s with that face?”

Clan’s stomach sank when she saw the serious look on Koutarou’s face. At a time like this, it could only be a prelude to something reckless.

“You didn’t come up some stupid plan again, did you?”

“I might have. Clan, we can’t be picky in this situation. We’ll need to use all our resources to save Princess Alaia and the others.”

“...Are you sure?”

Clan indicated the other girls with a quick glance. “All their resources” included the Cradle and the equipment it carried, but resorting to that would be the same as admitting to Flair and the others who they really were. It was on a completely different level from being seen flying or using some advanced weaponry. There was a high chance they’d be changing the future of Forthorthe if they exposed the people of this age to that level of technology.

“Yeah. The end is nigh, and it’s just like Caris said. There’s a limit to what we can do with just the five of us.”

“...I understand.”

Clan nodded her head. Though there was a risk, Clan believed that Koutarou was right. They could trust Flair and the others, and it was true that they didn’t have enough people. It was better to risk exposing their identities than losing Alaia and Charl.

“And prepare that thing too. We might need it.”

“Th-That too?! I’m still in the process of adjusting it and—”

“Like I said, we can’t get too hung up on pretense.”

Koutarou smiled as he spoke. It was a wicked grin he normally only flashed when telling Clan a dark joke, but something felt different about it this time. Seeing it, something suddenly hit Clan.

“Veltlion, is there any chance you’re unbelievably angry?”

It looked like Koutarou was behaving calmly to Clan, but there was a palpable rage behind that smile. Maxfern and Grevanas had touched something that they shouldn’t have.

“No, I’m perfectly calm,” Koutarou replied as he touched the insignia on his chest.

“Right, calm... Okay, jeez... This might not end well...”

Based on Koutarou’s gesture, Clan was certain that he was angry. He was only acting calm so that he wouldn’t alarm the people around him. But the fact that she was starting to see cracks in his acting—which had been perfect all the while they’d been here—Clan considered proof that he was livid like she’d never seen him before.

I guess I never really had a chance of winning against such a nonsensical man...

Thinking about it, she realized Koutarou must have been the same way when she had fought him. And now understanding exactly why she’d lost, Clan could sense that the battle they were riding towards was going to be fierce.

After being taken to the old castle of Sariachal, Alaia and the others were confined in its dungeon for a time. After a few hours, they were then taken to the castle garden. It was a rather desolate place. Positioned between the gate and the castle, there was once an abundance of plants and statues there to welcome visitors. The castle was long abandoned, however, and there was no longer anyone to maintain the garden. The plants were withered, the sculptures worn and cracked. The fountain, no longer working, was full of dirt. The huge, dilapidated garden, over a hundred meters across, was a dismal place indeed.

Alaia and the others were brought out to the garden and bound to wooden stakes driven into the ground. They were tied up tightly enough that they could barely move, much less try to escape. As things were, it was growing harder and harder to stay positive. The situation was especially taxing on the young Charl.

“What’s going to happen now...?”

Charl let out a fraught sigh and furrowed her brow. Seeing that, Fauna and Mary smiled and tried to cheer her up.

“We’ll be fine! There’s no way we’d lose to villains like them!”

“That’s right! Layous-sama will definitely come save us!”

Talking to each other and trying to cheer each other up was really all the girls could do now that they were unable to move.

“I know! I know that! But...”

“Charl... You’re scared that Layous-sama will come, aren’t you?”

Alaia was painfully aware of how Charl felt. She too knew that Koutarou would come to rescue them, and that was exactly the problem.

“Sister, Blue Knight is an idiot, so he’ll definitely come! He’ll be killed trying to save us!”

“Charl...”

Koutarou would have his hands tied with Alaia and the others as hostages. He’d be in danger because of them, and most likely killed. There didn’t seem to be any way around it, and the thought terrified the two princesses.

“It will be fine, Charl. Layous-sama will definitely win. Our Blue Knight won’t die that easily.”

Alaia continued to try to comfort Charl. As much as she wanted to believe her own words, she too was sure that Koutarou would come and that he’d then let himself be killed without putting up a fight. Alaia knew just what kind of person Koutarou was. That’s why she loved him. But she just couldn’t bring herself to tell her trembling little sister the truth.

Please don’t come, Koutarou-sama... Whatever the reason...

All Alaia could do was pray. She fought back the desire to cry and did her best to smile for Charl.

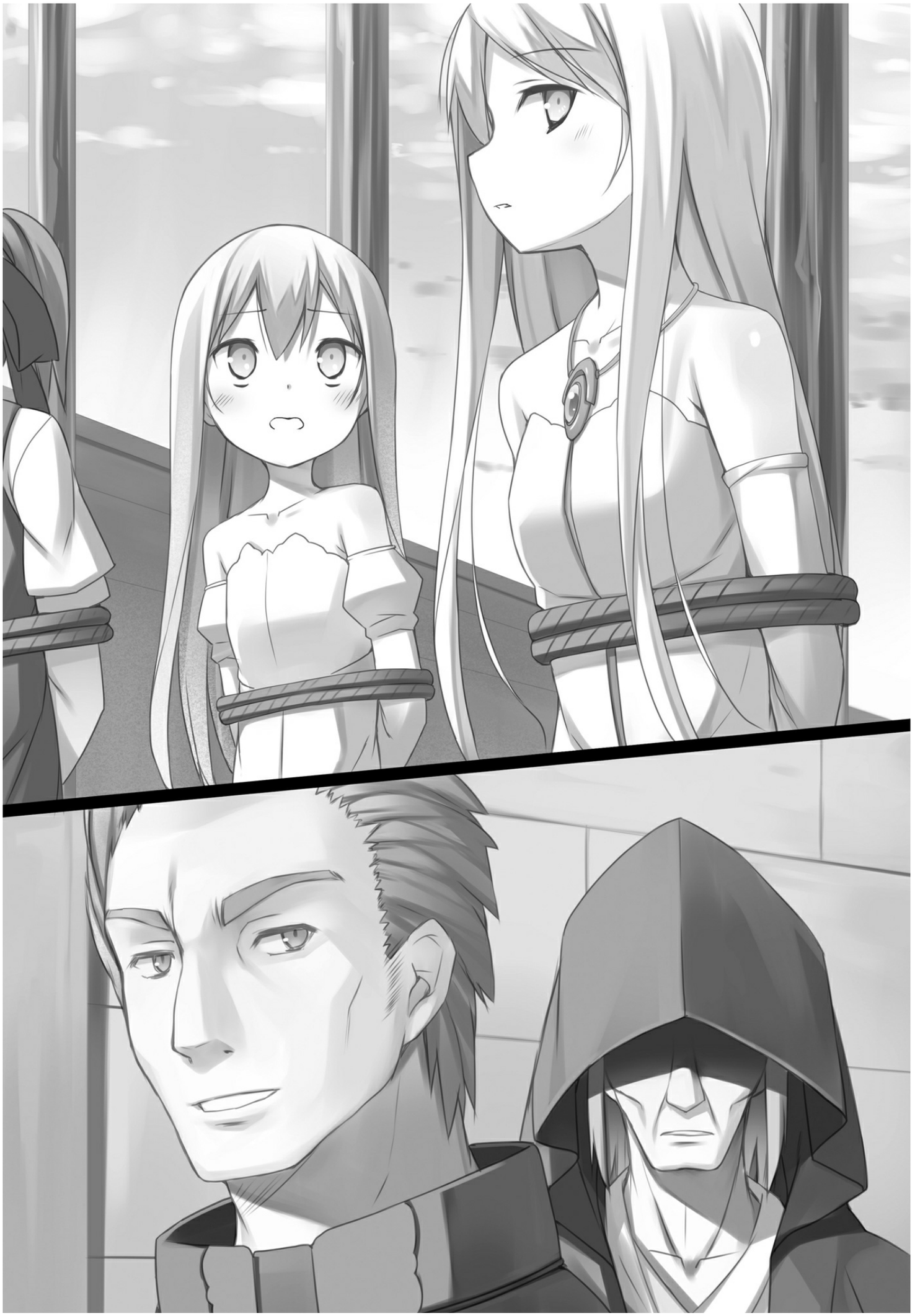
“There’s no need to worry, Princess Alaia, Princess Charl. As long as the Blue Knight listens to us, there won’t be a need to kill him.”

“Maxfern!”

Before they knew it, Maxfern had appeared before them. Violbarum Maxfern had been a minister of Forthorthe for a long time, but he was the man responsible for murdering Alaia’s parents and bringing war to the country. Not even Alaia could conceal her scorn for a man like him. Her smile vanished and she glared at him with contempt.

“You’re full of lies...”

“That’s not true.”



Maxfern brushed off Alaia's glare and revealed a, at first glance, tender smile. It quickly became clear that it was just for show.

"As long as the Blue Knight agrees to our demands, he will be no threat to us. A lion has no reason to crush a single ant."

Maxfern was overflowing with confidence. He was convinced of his own victory. From the sound of it, he wasn't interested in Koutarou's life after all. He seemed just that confident.

Where is this confidence coming from...?

Alaia felt something eerie about his behavior, and the weighty unease left her at a loss for words.

"Maxfern-sama, it seems the knight in question has arrived."

Grevanas, who stood next to Maxfern, pointed towards the gate on the other side of the garden.

"So you've come, Blue Knight... Hahaha, he sure is an exemplary knight. How excellent..."

Looking in the direction Grevanas had pointed, Maxfern laughed with satisfaction. The moment he'd been waiting for had come.

"Blue Knight!"

"No... Koutarou-sama, why...?"

Standing in the large, wide-open gate was a knight in blue armor. Even from afar, it was obvious it was Koutarou. He also appeared to be alone. After getting off his horse, Koutarou looked around the garden. As he did, his gaze met Alaia's briefly. In that moment, Koutarou smiled gently before quickly returning to a stony expression. He knew now wasn't the time to get emotional.

"You can't, Layous-sama! This is a trap!"

Koutarou walked straight down the middle of the garden. His steps were slow but firm. Alaia could tell just what kind of resolution Koutarou carried with him as he proceeded.

"Don't bother with us! Maxfern will kill us anyway!"

Despite knowing that, Alaia still called out to him. She was desperate to stop him.

“Please don’t worry. I’ll save all of you soon.”

No matter what Alaia said, Koutarou wouldn’t stop. He took step after step without breaking rhythm and had already reached the center of the garden.

“I see he’s brought *that* with him.”

Once Koutarou got closer, Maxfern stared at him for a moment before smiling and stroking his beard.

“It looks like it. I can detect mana.”

Grevanas was looking at Koutarou too, but not with just his eyes. He could see dense mana filling Koutarou’s body. Everything seemed to be going just as Maxfern and Grevanas had planned.

“Confirm if it’s the real deal or not right away.”

“As you wish.”

Grevanas raised his hand. As he did, an absurd looking creature appeared. It had the body of a carnivorous animal standing upright, but a reptilian head. On its back were large wings reminiscent of a bird of prey’s. Really, it looked like several different creatures put together, but it was a beast that Grevanas and his court magicians had summoned from a different world they called Hell.

“Go!”

As Grevanas swung his hand down, the monster flapped its large wings and took to the air. They apparently weren’t just for show.

“Wh-What is that?!”

Koutarou really only noticed the monster when it flew up in the air, and he had no idea what to think of it when he saw it. By now, however, Koutarou had seen all kinds of strange creatures in Forthorthe. The horses had horns and the lizards had wings. Not long ago, he’d even seen a giant dragon up close. As a result, he wasn’t caught too off guard by this beast.

“I see. So that’s one of the demons that kidnapped Her Highness and the

others.”

Koutarou had heard tales of the bizarre monsters that had attacked from the surviving soldiers. They’d said a flock of beasts that walked upright and flew across the sky had kidnapped Alaia and the others. Their description matched what Koutarou was seeing perfectly.

“But so be it. It’s not something I can’t defeat, after all!”

Koutarou drew his sword without flinching.

Compared to that dragon, this demon is nothing! Besides, I have this sword!

The sword Koutarou had drawn was Signaltin, the powerful weapon given to him by Alaia.

“Skreeeee!”

The demon screeched loudly, flapped his large wings, and dove for Koutarou.

“Bring it!”

Koutarou shouted right back and pointed his sword at the demon. As he did, the silver sword sensed Koutarou’s will to fight and began emitting a pure white light.

A pulse? I see, this is Her Highness’s...

Koutarou could feel a gentle warmth from the light, and he recognized it as a sensation he’d felt before. It was the same warmth he’d felt during their dance, when he’d been injured, and when he’d held hands with Alaia.

“You’re quite unlucky...”

Koutarou was confident that he would never lose as long as Signaltin was still glowing. There was just no way he could with part of Alaia there to protect him.

“I’m in an extremely bad mood today!”

Koutarou swung his sword with all his might in a counterattack against the incoming demon as soon as it got in range. His target was the demon’s face.

“Skreeeee! Wrrraaaaak!”

But the demon’s movements were swift. It skillfully flapped its wings and

changed course to dodge Koutarou's attack. As a result, he barely managed to even scratch the demon's tail.

"I missed?!"

"Wrahahahak!"

The demon escaped into the sky. It looked down on Koutarou and seemed to ridicule him. It was as if he was taunting him, saying that his attacks would never connect.

"Not bad..."

Koutarou looked up at the demon and was honestly impressed. But it wasn't the demon he was impressed with.

"Wraah?! Wraaaaah!"

That was when the demon realized what Koutarou was looking at, and that was its tail. Without explanation, several dozen centimeters of it appeared to be missing.

"Wrrraaaaak! Wrrraaaaak!"

As it watched in horror, more and more of its tail was disappearing. A shining white light spread over his tail, and wherever it spread melted away. It eventually ate up the demon's tail and began to spread to the rest of its body.

"Skree, skreeeee! Wrrraaaaa—"

The demon's shrieking suddenly stopped. The light had devoured the demon's body and it had now reached the head. The demon tried to cry out again, but without a throat, it simply couldn't. The fear was visible in its eyes, but even they too soon disappeared. All that was left behind was a handful of ash that fell towards the ground and scattered in the wind.

Maxfern, who was watching that spectacle excitedly, turned to Grevanas.

"Grevanas, did that demon die?"

"No," Grevanas answered calmly. "When a demon is summoned into this world, it creates a body by solidifying mana. That sword erased that mana and forcibly sent the demon back to Hell."

“Forcibly sent back to Hell from just a scratch... How interesting.”

“Of course, he might have died as a result of that...”

“Either way, what splendid power! It’s beyond expectation.”

“Yes. It seems to be the genuine sword.”

Despite their subordinate demon being defeated, neither Maxfern nor Grevanas seemed perturbed. If anything, they almost seemed happy.

“Just what are you doing sending something like that at me? I came just as you told me to.”

Koutarou stopped and called out to Maxfern. Since he couldn’t tell what Maxfern was after, he proceeded carefully.

“Sorry about that, Blue Knight. I couldn’t tell if you were the real deal or not. I’d like to apologize for the rough welcome.”

“...So you’re Maxfern?”

Koutarou didn’t know what Maxfern looked like. Lidith had told Koutarou he was a muscular, middle-aged man with a long beard, but this was his first time seeing him.

“Indeed. I am Violbarum Maxfern, the man who will become king of this world.”

Maxfern introduced himself in a dignified manner. His regal behavior certainly made him seem like a king. If it weren’t for his despicable nature, that is.

“King of the world? That’s quite bold. Do you really think you can become king?”

“Of course. That’s why I had you come.”

“Me...?”

Koutarou was perplexed.

Does he think he’ll become the king of the world by killing me? That’s just...

Maxfern had called for Koutarou so he could kill him, using Alaia as a hostage. That’s what Koutarou believed. But if one could become king by killing an

ordinary high schooler, the world would be overflowing with kings. Koutarou couldn't follow Maxfern's train of thought.

"It couldn't be..."

But with those words, Alaia's expression changed. Koutarou didn't understand, but Alaia realized what Maxfern was after.

"Maxfern, you plotted all of this just for that?!"

"But of course! As expected from the wise Silver Princess! It seems Princess Alaia understands everything! Muahahahaha!"

Alaia was at a complete loss for words, while Maxfern was laughing out loud. He then reached his right hand out towards Koutarou.

"Well then, Blue Knight, let's finish up our business! Once that's done, I'll give you back Her Highness!" he declared condescendingly. "Now, hand over that sword! That holy sword that is said to have been given to the king of the world by the Goddess of Dawn herself!"

It was as if he was trying to grasp the world with his outstretched right hand.

Maxfern's goal wasn't to take over the nation of Forthorthe. His plans were bigger. What he wanted was the holy sword now known as Signaltin. The sword capable of cutting open the future. The sword that led its owner to the throne and served as a sign of kingship. The royal family's heirloom treasure. Maxfern was plotting to become the king of the world by obtaining that very sword.

However, the seal used to confine the sword was strong and not even the combined powers of all the court magicians could break it. At first, Maxfern threatened to kill Alaia and Charl to coerce the emperor into breaking the seal, but he refused. Even with his daughters' lives in danger, he wouldn't assist Maxfern in using the holy sword to take over the world.

So then Maxfern changed his plans. The holy sword's seal would only be broken if the country faced true crisis. That's why he assassinated the emperor and empress and started a coup. It was to create such a crisis. The coup d'etat wasn't the real goal; it was just a means to an end.

Next, Maxfern let Alaia, who had no idea what was really happening, escape. Knowing Alaia and her friends wouldn't be able to on their own, Maxfern had created an escape route for them. So when Maxfern's niece, Lidith, guided Alaia down that road, he felt like hugging and praising her. She'd unintentionally done exactly what he hoped for.

After that, Maxfern kept watch of Alaia while keeping the pressure on her to make sure she always felt some sense of impending disaster. He would send pursuers after her, and he even ordered the poisoning of the village she was hiding in. His goal was to make Alaia believe that things were developing into a genuine crisis.

That's why Caris's mission had only been to monitor Alaia, and why Dextro had been forbidden from killing Alaia directly. Everything was to drive Alaia to unseal the sword, and he needed her alive to do that. But there was something that Maxfern hadn't taken into account. And that was the existence of the Blue Knight. Of Koutarou.

Ever since Koutarou had appeared, Maxfern's plans had started to go awry. The pursuers were defeated, the poison was treated, and the steel giant had been taken out. Attack after attack on their base was driven back, and the Reborn Forthorthian Army became unstoppable. Moreover, Koutarou gave Alaia hope, and she began believing that the country could be saved as long as Koutarou was around. That was a problem for Maxfern because he needed Alaia to believe that she'd have to go after the sword to save her beloved country.

So Maxfern changed his plans once more. He decided that the best way to impress a sense of crisis on Alaia was to threaten Koutarou's life. Maxfern received reports from the spies he planted in the Reborn Forthorthian Army that Koutarou and Alaia were either lovers or something close to it. Maxfern suspected that if Koutarou was in danger, that would be enough to convince Alaia to break the seal. Sending Alunaya and the assassins after Koutarou was all to that end.

But now the seal was broken and the holy sword was within Maxfern's reach. Though he'd hated Koutarou at first, he now almost felt like thanking him.

The moment Maxfern demanded Signaltin from Koutarou, Alaia let out a sorrowful wail similar to a scream.

“You killed my mother and father for that?! You started a coup d’etat, killed countless people, and cornered me all so I’d undo the seal on that sword?!”

The very idea threw her into despair. Everything had been part of Maxfern’s scheme. The Reborn Forthorthian Army, everyone who’d died in battle, and even Alaia’s heart. Maxfern had manipulated them all just to get Alaia to undo the seal.

“That’s right! If I hadn’t, I never would have been able to get my hands on that sword, meaning I would never become king of the world! I served the royal family for decades just so I could get this chance! It was all for this, Princess Alaia!”

This was the high point of Maxfern’s entire life. He’d waited for this chance for several decades. If he could just get his hands on Signaltin, it would all be worth it. He could enjoy eternal life granted by the sword’s powers, or he could turn his attention to world conquest. As long as he got the sword, the possibilities were endless. Maxfern no longer had anything to fear. The future was spreading out infinitely in front of him.

“...To think you were just after this sword...”

This all came as a surprise to Koutarou. In Theia’s script, Maxfern’s goal had only been to take over the country, but the reality of it turned out to be quite different.

“Now give that sword to me, Blue Knight. If you do, I’ll safely return Princess Alaia and the others to you. It’s not a bad deal for you.”

Maxfern crossed the garden as he casually approached Koutarou. He was sure Koutarou would accept his deal.

“If you’d like, I can even leave Forthorthe alone for a couple hundred years. As long as I have that sword, I have all the time in the world.”

“Damn...”

Koutarou began hesitating. Should he hand over the sword to save Alaia and

the others? Or should he defeat Maxfern here and now to save Forthorthe and the world? Koutarou could only chose one of the two.

“You can’t, Koutarou-sama! Even if it’s for us, you mustn’t give that sword to Maxfern!”

Alaia wished for the latter, just like the former emperor had. But then Alaia and the others would be killed. If Koutarou chose to hand over the sword, peace might return to Forthorthe for a time. However, if the sword had the powers Maxfern said it did, Alaia and Charl’s descendants would eventually be the ones to suffer at his hands. The end result would be the same. The only difference was how long it would take.

“But Your Highness—”

“If you’re my knight, then please fulfill my wish! Please slay Maxfern and at least save yourself!”

“Sister’s right, Blue Knight! You must live! Live and protect Forthorthe!”

“Shut those women up, Grevanas!”

“Understood.”

Grevanas signaled several of his subordinates nearby. As he did, they formed a circle around a big crystal and started incanting something. The next moment, it appeared.

“ROAAAAAAAR!”

Something huge came crashing down from the sky at an incredible speed. Just before it smashed into the earth, it flapped its large wings, reduced its speed, and landed properly. Even then, the sound its giant body made made when it hit the ground was terrific. It was Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya.

“That’s the dragon from before!”

“SSister!”

Although Alaia and Charl had remained courageous up until now, there was no fighting the fear that overcame them in the presence of an elder dragon. With the dragon—who seemed to be brutality given form—right in front of them, all the bound girls could do was stare.

“So you’ve come, monster...”

Koutarou instinctively tightened his grip on Signaltin’s handle. Seeing that, Maxfern stopped him.

“Careful there, Blue Knight. You’d better not be thinking of doing something stupid. One wrong move and Alunaya would surely bite the princesses in half.”

“Grrrrrr...”

As if backing up what Maxfern said, Alunaya growled and opened his large mouth next to the bound girls. If he snapped it shut, Alaia and the others would be torn apart instantly. Since Koutarou knew the dragon’s speed and strength personally, he knew what a threat that really was.

“Damn...”

Koutarou stopped and lowered his sword.

“Good, that’s more like it. As long as you obey, the princesses don’t have to die.”

Maxfern began walking again, this time all the way up to Koutarou.

“Koutarou-sama...”

Alaia bit her lip. As she’d feared, Koutarou refused to abandon them. Lowering his sword was a sign of his intentions. In reality, he had the ability to cut down Maxfern where he stood, but Koutarou couldn’t do it knowing what it would mean for Alaia and the others. He was probably going to hand the sword over to Maxfern, and there was no longer any way to prevent it.

Maxfern stopped in front of Koutarou and casually presented his right hand. He had a triumphant grin on his face.

“Now, Blue Knight. The sword.”

“...You win, Maxfern.”

Koutarou nodded in bitter resignation before extending his right hand and presenting Signaltin to Maxfern.

“Ah, the holy sword is finally in my hands!”

Maxfern raised the sword above his head with both hands. He looked like a

child that had just gotten a new toy.

“We’re in position! Go ahead, Veltlion!” Clan’s voice sounded out from Koutarou’s comms.

“You’re late, Clan!”

The moment he heard Clan’s voice, Koutarou made a fist and swung at Maxfern. He was planning on taking Signaltin back. The moment Koutarou had been waiting for—the time to fight back—was finally here.

“I can’t help it! We had to change position because Alunaya appeared!”

“I don’t want to hear excuses!”

“Wh-What?!”

Maxfern was so focused on the sword that he was unable to dodge Koutarou’s punch. Taking the blow square to the cheek, Maxfern turned violently to the side and collapsed. Koutarou quickly rushed over to him and tried to grab the sword.

“I will not allow such interference.”

However, before Koutarou reached the sword, Grevanas cast a spell. His magical staff had a special magic built into it. It required neither incantation nor motion to activate. He wielded an artifact that let the user cast a spell just by thinking it. The magical arrows created by the artifact staff rained down between Koutarou and Maxfern, keeping Koutarou from getting the sword and allowing Maxfern a chance to get up and away from trouble.

“Damn it! Kill Alaia right now!”

Maxfern was furious after Koutarou’s unexpected attack, and he ordered the murder of Alaia and the others as revenge. The life of a princess was a price far too high to pay for a single punch, but Maxfern couldn’t forgive Koutarou for such a disgrace now that he had become king of the world.

“Do it!”

Grevanas barked the order to his subordinates to kill Alaia. The crystal they were stranding around was how they gave orders to Alunaya.

“ROAAAAAAAR!”

Receiving the order, Alunaya let out a fierce roar. His thunderous voice shook the very air in the garden. He then opened his mouth wide to attack Alaia and the others who were still bound. However, just before the dragon’s fangs reached them, there was a large explosion by Alunaya’s feet. The unexpected blast caused Alunaya to lose his balance and fall to the side. Alunaya crushed the stone pavement underneath him, and the impact rivaled the explosion beforehand.

“Uwah!”

While the explosion saved Alaia and the others from Alunaya’s fangs, it wasn’t all positive. Fragments of the stone pavement that Alunaya crushed were sent flying towards Koutarou.

“Damn it, that’s overdoing it, Clan.”

After getting hit by a ten centimeter rock, Koutarou fell backwards and landed on his butt. Fortunately, thanks to the armor’s barrier, that was all that happened. Without the barrier, he would have been seriously injured.

“What was I supposed to do?! I don’t have time for fine-tuning when there are dragons just randomly showing up!”

The explosion had come from a bomb Clan had set. Using a device that she had invented herself, Clan could become invisible to the naked eye. So while Koutarou was distracting Maxfern and the others, she’d snuck onto the scene and planted the bomb. Using the opportunity afforded by the explosion, Flair, Caris, and Lidith used the same device to save Alaia and the others. That was the rescue plan Koutarou and Clan had come up with.

“Veltlion, we’ve saved Princess Alaia and the others!”

The plan was a success so far, and Alaia and the other kidnapped girls were now free once more. Koutarou could see everyone meet up out of the corner of his eye.

“All right!”

All that was left was to reclaim Signaltin and defeat Maxfern. Pumping himself

up, Koutarou moved to pick himself up off the ground.

“Koutarou-sama, look out!”

Alaia’s cry echoed through the old castle garden. The next moment, Maxfern appeared in front of Koutarou with Signaltin raised above his head.

“Things won’t go the way you want, Blue Knight!”

Unlike Koutarou, Maxfern hadn’t been pelted with stones. He was still on his feet. Seeing Koutarou fall over, he didn’t miss the chance to attack.

“Maxfern!”

Koutarou was still getting up, leaving him defenseless.

If that hits, I’ll be killed!

Realizing the danger he was in, Koutarou quickly gave his armor instructions.

“Raise the barrier! Full power!”

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

The armor obeyed Koutarou’s order and deployed the barrier. Interconnected, semi-visible hexagonal tiles appeared in between Koutarou and Maxfern, getting in the way of the incoming attack. While they blocked the blow, Koutarou fell over once more from the impact. As he hit the ground, his armor’s AI let him know it was unhappy.

“Alert: Distortion field function has been stopped. The damage has exceeded tolerance levels.”

“From one hit?!”

The hexagonal tiles disappeared all at once. With just a single strike from Signaltin, Maxfern had knocked out the armor’s barrier. Even though the armor had stood up against all kinds of attacks before, it was powerless before Signaltin.

“Looks like you’ve met your match, Blue Knight.”

Maxfern raised the sword above his head once more. Koutarou was now prone and his barrier was gone. With one swing of Signaltin, Maxfern could

easily cut Koutarou in half.

“Not so fast!”

Koutarou focused on his left hand. He used his spiritual energy to create a large fireball and threw it right at Maxfern.

“Did you think a petty trick like that would work against this sword?!”

Maxfern swung Signaltin down without even flinching. The sword easily cut through the fireball and continued towards Koutarou.

“Not even that worked?!”

Koutarou had used all the spiritual energy he could muster to create that fireball, yet Signaltin had destroyed it with ease. Neither Koutarou’s defensive or offensive powers worked against Maxfern. He didn’t have anything left up his sleeve.

I’m sorry, Your Highness... Even though I swore that I would protect you, it seems this is as far as I go...

Unescapable death came flying at him in the form a sword blade. Koutarou acknowledged it and prepared himself for the end.

“But...!”

But even then, Koutarou leaped at Maxfern. Even if he was killed, he wanted to injure Maxfern as much as possible so he could buy even a little time for Alaia and Charl to escape. Even faced with death, he wanted to uphold his oath to his very last breath. That was most likely the moment Koutarou truly became the Blue Knight.

“Noooooooooooo!”

Alaia screamed at the top of her lungs. To her, the sight in front of her almost looked like it was unfolding in slow motion. Koutarou had realized he was going to die, yet he still charged at Maxfern. She saw all that, but visions of her memories of meeting Koutarou and the time they’d spent together flashed over it.

“Please! Nooooo!”

Koutarou would die. And by Signaltin, the very sword she had unsealed to protect him. It felt like Alaia was killing Koutarou herself. Her heart couldn't take it. She just couldn't accept it.

Alaia's life had become part of Signaltin. It would always protect Koutarou. It would always be beside him. That was her own oath, and her only real wish as a girl who lived her life bound by duty.

"Koutarou-samaaaaaaaa!"

Alaia screamed and screamed, but the time had come. Signaltin swung downward, brushing Koutarou's hair before it reached his face. Seeing that, Alaia was overcome with despair.

"Wahahahahaha! Die! Drop dead, Blue Knight! Accept your punishment for defying the king of the world!"

Maxfern brought the blade down with all of his might. All who watched on were sure Koutarou would be cut in half.

However...

Signaltin was what was split in two.

The moment Signaltin touched Koutarou's body, it broke in half with a shrill noise, leaving Koutarou completely uninjured. It split like a cheap toy sword made from nothing more than paper and glue. No one who saw it could believe their eyes, but the most surprised of all was Maxfern.

"How could something like this happen?! It had so much power just moments ago!"

Maxfern was in complete shock and stared at the broken Signaltin in disbelief. It had lost its shine and turned to mere rusty iron scrap. It looked the complete opposite of how the beautiful silver blade had just moments before.

"Wasn't I supposed to become king of the world?! Wasn't it supposed to have the power of the Goddess of Dawn in it?! It was even supposed to be able to destroy the evil rooted in people! What is going on, Grevanas?! This is just some

scrap!”

Trembling with rage, Maxfern threw the remains of Signaltin to the ground. When it landed, the rusted blade fully shattered. The handle was the only part of the sword that remained recognizable, but even then it was cracked and looked like it might fall apart at any moment.

“I-I don’t understand either! Why did it suddenly lose its power...?”

“Now this was all for nothing, Grevanas!”

Maxfern yelled at Grevanas, his face dyed red with rage. Even the calm Grevanas seemed to have lost his composure after this most unexpected turn of events.

“Signal... tin...”

While everyone was stunned, only Koutarou remained calm. He picked up the handle that had been thrown to the ground and looked at Alaia.

“...”

Unlike everyone else, Alaia had her eyes closed and her head turned down. She was trying to block out the world. She didn’t want to see the moment Koutarou was cut down. She didn’t want to hear his last screams. And because she was so numb to her surroundings, she had no idea that Koutarou was safe.

“Of course... This is Signaltin... That’s what it is...”

The sword crest on Alaia’s forehead was shining brightly. It was almost as if that crest was the real Signaltin.

“Princess Alaia.”

Having understood everything, Koutarou called out to Alaia. While both enemy and ally were at a loss and the situation had been brought to a standstill, it didn’t change the fact that they were still in the middle of enemy territory. In order to escape from this, her help was essential.

“Huh...?”

Upon hearing Koutarou’s voice, Alaia opened her eyes. At first she thought she might be hearing things, but when she looked up, she saw Koutarou

standing there.

“Koutarou-sama?”

“I’m sorry for making you worry, Your Highness.”

“Koutarou-sama, w-weren’t you... killed just now...?”

Defying all expectation, Koutarou was still alive and well. That mysterious, wonderful sight made Alaia doubt her eyes. She was happy, but she was so confused that she could hardly make sense of what happened. She had no idea how to react.

“It seems like Signaltin took the hit for me.”

“The sword... Ah...”

Alaia looked down at Koutarou’s hand, clutching Signaltin’s handle. The moment she saw the ruined sword, she was reminded of what it had looked like when they first retrieved it from the temple.

I see. If I am part of that sword, that sword is also part of me. Then my oath is—

Alaia’s eyes lit up as she realized what it all meant.

“Let’s go, Your Highness. I told you I would use my life and this sword to protect you.”

“I believe in you, Koutarou-sama. And in turn, I will protect your life.”

They nodded at each other before entering their respective stances. Koutarou pointed the tip of the non-existent blade towards Maxfern, and Alaia reached her arms forwards with her palms towards Koutarou. Seeing all this, Maxfern sneered.

“What are you going do with that piece of scrap? Did your precious holy sword breaking drive you a little mad?”

If Maxfern had ordered Grevanas and his court magicians to attack right away, things might have turned out differently. But in his own stupor and hubris, Maxfern disregarded what Koutarou and Alaia were doing. He was convinced they were powerless.

“You seeing this sword as broken is exactly why you couldn’t cut me down.”

“What?!”

Koutarou’s lips curved up into a grin when he saw the look of shock on Maxfern’s face. He then broke into a run and charged at him. The way he carried the handle really did make it seem like he was holding a powerful sword. As he closed in on Maxfern, Alaia began reciting an incantation.

“Past, present, and future, oh mother of all things, Goddess of Dawn.”

They were the same words she’d used in the temple, and with each one she spoke now, the sword crest on her forehead glowed brighter and brighter. The light became so strong that it covered her entire body and began flowing out of her.

“I, a daughter of Forthorthe and thy faithful servant, beseech thee. Now is the time to break the seal and give us power to overcome the crisis that threatens us.”

The light from Alaia gathered around the shattered fragments of the blade lying on the ground. Once it surrounded them all, it lifted them up into the air and carried them towards the handle Koutarou was holding.

“Wind of the heavens. Green of the earth. Water of the sea. Fire of the mountains. Using my life as provision, reveal the power to rule all things!”

The fragments connected to the handle one by one and began reconstructing the blade from the hilt up. By the time Koutarou had reached Maxfern, the sword had regained its former shape.

“I am Alaia, the silvery white snow of Mastir! Oh holy sword of the temple, carve my name into your blade and revive!”

Koutarou raised the newly formed sword above his head. As he did, the sword regained its silvery sheen and began emitting its pure white mana. The sword that had been mere rusted pieces of metal just a few seconds ago was reborn again in all its splendid glory.

This was the holy sword Signaltin. Now that Koutarou and Alaia’s feeling were as one, it was filled with more power than ever before.

“That’s impossible! A broken blade regenerating like that is just impossible! There’s no way it could regain its powers like that!”

“Since you’re not a knight, you would never understand something as simple as why this sword shines!”

What was important wasn’t the sword itself. Its condition didn’t really matter. What mattered was what the sword represented. Koutarou could feel the warmth emitting from the sword in his hands. It was going to protect not just him, but the whole world.

“Just because I wasn’t born a knight? Preposterous! I won’t accept that!”

But Maxfern understood nothing. He thought that Koutarou meant his lineage, and missed the point much the same way that he was too obsessed with the condition of the sword and not what it meant. He didn’t realize what was truly important. If he had, the sword might have actually answered to him.

“With this, it’s over, Maxfern!”

“Damn it! God damn it!”

“Maxfern-sama!”

Koutarou brandished the sword boldly and was about to come down on Maxfern when he suddenly sensed someone’s intent to attack the area right where he was standing. He instinctively abandoned his attack and jumped back. Not a moment later, giant claws cut through the air right where he’d just been.

“Alunaya!”

It was a strike from Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya. Clan’s explosion had knocked him over, but he had now recovered and was attacking Koutarou.

“Kill them, Grevanas! Don’t let any one of them escape alive!”

Boiling with rage and his eyes bloodshot, Maxfern ordered the deaths of Koutarou and everyone else.

“Please stop it already, uncle! What more will come from fighting?!”

“Shut up, shut up! I’ll kill you too!”

“Uncle...”

Not even Maxfern's niece, Lidith, could reach him now. That was just how intense the rage that consumed him had become.

Maxfern couldn't forgive the holy sword for not accepting him, the man who was supposed to become the king of the world. Nor could he forgive Koutarou, who was using the sword instead. It was like they were taunting him. Mocking him. Telling him how insignificant his existence really was. That all of his efforts up until now had been in vain. And allowing this to continue—allowing Koutarou to live—would be like admitting all that was true. The prideful Maxfern wouldn't stand for that.

"Get them, men!"

In contrast to the enraged Maxfern, Grevanas was clam and swiftly gave the order for his subordinates to attack. Heeding his call, a flock of demons easily numbering in the hundreds sprang up from cover all throughout the garden. Their strange appearances were varied, yet their eyes all flashed the same bloodlust. But that wasn't all. Several of the same kind of steel giant Koutarou had fought before dotted the ranks of the demons.

These were Maxfern's current troops, or rather, his horde of monsters. In his pursuit of power, Maxfern had reached out to non-human creatures for aid. It was almost like a reflection of the man he was inside. Maxfern was a monster with the appearance of a man.

The horde of monsters attacked Alaia and the other seven girls. They were like ants swarming their prey.

"Your Highness! Everyone!"

Koutarou quickly moved to rescue the girls.

"Oh no you don't! Your opponent is right here!"

"ROAAAAAAAR!"

Alunaya moved in front of Koutarou. After roaring loudly, he bared his fangs to intimidate Koutarou. And with a dragon in his way now, he was no longer able to head to the girls' rescue.

"Damn!"

“Hahaha! Blue Knight, even if you’re invincible, those girls are normal humans! Can they last long enough for you to make it to them? Wahahahahah!”

Maxfern laughed at Koutarou. With Signaltin, Koutarou was strong. He might even be able to beat a giant dragon. But even if he could, it would take time. And Maxfern was planning on using that time to kill the girls.

“You’re too naive, Maxfern.”

But Koutarou was still smiling. Despite Maxfern laughing at him, he showed no sign of anxiety.

“What?!”

“Sorry, but things won’t go as you planned.”

Koutarou knew the girls wouldn’t go down without a fight.

As the swarm of demons attacked, the girls followed Flair’s lead and calmly entered formation. Clan and Flair took to the front. Skilled in fighting, they would act as a wall the other girls could stand behind. Clan was using her rifle like always, but Flair was wielding something different.

“You understand how to use those swords, right?”

“I’m fine! The balance is slightly different, but they’re not much different from the thin blade I usually use!”

Flair was holding two swords made out of light. Shining blades reminiscent of neon tubes extended from the metal handles. They were the latest model of beam saber that created a scorching hot blade by containing heavy metal particles within an electromagnetic field. The beam simply imitated the shape of the sword. Flair had gotten them from Clan, and held one in each hand. She used them skillfully to fend off the oncoming demons.

“Something like this?”

Flair blocked one demon’s attack with one sword and attacked a different one with the other. The high temperature of the beams easily cut through the demons and scorched their bodies. Her swift, sharp skills with a blade made it

look like a tiny, glowing tornado was cutting down the demons.

“Yes, that’s perfect! Keep doing exactly that!”

Clan was shooting at the demons that Flair couldn’t reach with her sword, giving her some more freedom in combat. And if Flair was about to get attacked, Clan would move in to cover her. Her barrier was easily strong enough to protect the both of them from the demon’s claws.

While they maintained the front line, Lidith the alchemist and Caris the magician were positioned behind them.

“Caris, it’s time for the next attack!”

“All right, I’m ready!”

Lidith and Caris were working together on ranged attacks. Their jobs were to wipe out was many demons as possible and destroy the steel giants.

Lidith used the strategical computer and observation device she had borrowed from Clan to selectively target the demons. Since Caris and Lidith’s minds had been linked through Caris’s magic, she could see exactly what Lidith was targeting. Going off of that, Caris repeatedly sniped enemies she had no actual visual on. And with Lidith prioritizing targets that were entering Caris’s range, they were shot down before they could even get to the girls.

It was a strategy only made possible thanks to Lidith. Normally there wouldn’t be anyone capable of using the strategical computer in this age, but she’d picked up on how to operate it while working as Clan’s assistant. Thanks to that, they were able to pull off a combination attack using science and magic.

“Caris, the giant!”

“I know! I’m currently planting it! All right, detonate it!”

“Detonating!”

One of the steel giants collapsed with the low, booming sound of an explosion. The giant itself didn’t appear to be particularly wounded, however. The damage was limited to a small dent and scorch marks on its chest, which certainly wasn’t enough to take down a steel giant. That too was a combo attack from Lidith and Caris.

After their first fight with a steel giant, Clan had prepared a certain type of explosive in case they had to fight one again. It was a unique bomb that was applied directly to the target before use and didn't cause that big of a blast. Its explosive power was mostly channeled into a shockwave aimed to destroy the target or something inside of it. And once she understood how the golems were made, Clan decided on this kind of bomb to specifically target the crystals powering them. Though the giant's armor was made from thick steel, their core was just a crystal. Destroying that was easy with the concussive force of such a bomb.

Caris would use her magic to attach the explosive to a giant from a distance, and Lidith then gave the computer the order to detonate it. The mighty giants were powerless to stop them. It was a simple but brilliant idea. Even though their first battle with one had given them a hard time, they were now turning the steel giants into useless lumps of metal left and right.

Behind Caris and Lidith were Alaia and Fauna the priestess. Fauna was in charge of using spiritual energy to heal any injuries and increase everyone's physical strength. With her support, the four up front could fight without reservation. Alaia was in command of their squad, but she was also using what magic she could to help out.

"I think I'm gradually starting to get the hang of it, Fauna."

"You're doing great. That's very impressive for someone using magic for the first time, Alaia-sama!"

Alaia didn't have any real training in magic, but she was currently receiving mana from Signaltin via the crest on her forehead. She could then control it using the ancient ritual language she'd learned in her seminary studies. As a beginner, she couldn't help with attacking, but she could strengthen and defend, and she used her newfound power to support everyone.

All the way in the rear were Charl and Mary the maid.

"Please sit still, Princess Charl."

"I know, I know."

The young Charl didn't have much of a job. If anything, it was to stay put. If

she wandered around, she would risk getting in the way of the others and worrying them. Being wise for her age, however, Charl understood that she should stay back and keep low.

“Um, Your Highness... I feel like I’m not being of much use.”

“Don’t worry, Mary. I’m really the one in the way.”

Mary’s role was to guard Charl. Though she had learned martial arts for self defense, she wasn’t skilled enough to take part in actual combat. That’s why she’d been put in the back to guard Charl. But it wasn’t busy work. Charl’s safety had an impact on everyone’s morale, so the very job Mary was complaining about was in fact the most important of all.

Just as Koutarou had expected, the eight girls weren’t going down without a fight. In fact, they had taken up a counteroffensive and were steadily reducing the enemy’s numbers. They had gotten weapons and equipment from Clan, and they were firmly holding their ground.

“Grevanas, just what is going on?! It’s just a few girls!”

“But Maxfern-sama, their weapons are—”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear any excuses!”

Maxfern was irritated by the current situation. Nothing was going how he wanted. He’d gotten his hands on the sword only to lose it. He tried to kill his enemies, but not one of them was dead. His plan had been proceeding smoothly up until reaching Sariachal Castle, but it now seemed like his luck had run out the moment he set foot on the castle grounds. It was a nightmarish reversal for Maxfern.

“It looks like your plan is falling apart, Maxfern. I guess you’re just a third-rate villain.”

Koutarou readied his sword and kept Alunaya in check while provoking Maxfern. His aim was to get Maxfern to focus on him to reduce the pressure on everyone else. In reality, Koutarou was most terrified of Alunaya turning his flaming breath on the girls.

“Shut up! I’ll still at least kill you! Do it, Grevanas! Kill the Blue Knight!”

Koutarou’s plan worked. Maxfern was coming after him. He might not even have needed to taunt him in the first place. Maxfern absolutely hated Koutarou for being able to use the sword that he couldn’t.

“As you wish.”

Grevanas ordered his subordinates to send a portion of their ranks attacking the girls to go after Koutarou instead. Grevanas himself let go of his staff to personally take over control of Alunaya to help crush Koutarou.

“Well, so far so good, but now I have to do something or else I’m going to eat it big time... I should change the battlefield.”

Realizing that he was now at a disadvantage, Koutarou dodged Alunaya’s flaming breath attack and then activated his boosters to soar up into the sky. He thought it was a better bet than staying on the ground with a mass of magicians and demons targeting him.

“ROAAAAAAAR!”

Alunaya chased after him with a loud roar. Flapping his wings, Alunaya’s giant body rocketed through the air. His large, magically enhanced wings gave him an immense amount of lift and power, letting him fly like a bird despite his size.

Ten or so demons followed after Alunaya. Grevanas was controlling Alunaya, while his subordinates controlled the demons. In other words, the court magicians were using their full force to crush Koutarou. Koutarou had wanted them to come solely after him, but it put him in a tight situation. This was easily the greatest danger he’d been in yet.

“If I’m forced onto the defensive, I’ll end up losing! So instead...!”

His armor’s barrier still hadn’t recovered from the blow from Signaltin, meaning taking repeated attacks in his current state would spell disaster. So Koutarou quickly made up his mind and dove forward with Signaltin at the ready. His target was Alunaya. He had to beat down the dragon and secure an escape path.

“Everyone! Please lend me your power!”

Those words unwittingly slipped from Koutarou's mouth. All of his power was borrowed. It was a fact he'd grieved in the past, but now he was grateful. He'd realized that obsessing over your own power was what made men like Maxfern.

To Koutarou, it didn't matter if he didn't have any power of his own. He could always work with someone to achieve his goals, and he realized that working together was really what gave him the most power of all. He'd only gotten this far because of the allies and friends who supported him.

"I would prefer it if you came to me first."

"Princess Alaia?!"

Alaia's voice reached Koutarou just as things were about to get heated. But it hadn't reached his ears. Rather, it was projected directly into his mind through the glow of Signaltin.

Koutarou instinctively looked down to the garden, and there he saw Alaia looking up at him with her hands in front of her chest. At the start of the fight, it would have been incredibly dangerous to stand defenselessly like that. But now that the number of enemies had been reduced, the chances of her being attacked had dropped.

"Koutarou-sama, I will fight by your side."

"What do you—"

Before Koutarou could question Alaia further, a demon appeared in front of him. Koutarou abandoned his conversation and made a wide swing with Signaltin. As he did, a powerful glow poured forth from the blade. It was almost as if it had sensed Koutarou's intention to attack. The demon was cut in half by the light of the sword before the blade even reached it. Signaltin passed through the demon with no resistance at all. It was like he was cutting through an illusion. The dust that scattered on the wind once the demon was consumed by the light, however, was proof that it had indeed been real.

"Koutarou-sama, fight any way you want. I'll handle the timing from here."

"I see, so that's what you meant! I'm counting on you, Your Highness!"

"Yes!"

It turned out that the sword hadn't sensed Koutarou's will to attack; it was Alaia. Using the crest on her forehead, she controlled Signaltin's output from a distance. Normally, Signaltin emitted a constant flow of mana. But by controlling Signaltin, Alaia could choose to release the energy only during the moment of attack. And by regulating when Signaltin used its mana, she could reserve it for short, powerful bursts rather. It wasn't so much of a power-up as it was an efficient use of resources.

"Here I go, Your Highness!"

"I'll protect your back! Please just focus on what's in front of you, Koutarou-sama!"

"Understood!"

Koutarou charged at another demon. Alaia used her powers to help accelerate him, so he closed in on the demon in the blink of an eye. To the demon, it must have looked like Koutarou teleported. Even if it wanted to dodge, there was no time. Signaltin shone brightly once more and the demon was cleaved in two before it could even move.

"Tchk, tchk, tchk!"

"Wrrraaak!"

Two demons came at Koutarou at once. One had an insect's head and the other had a goose's head. They were both aiming for Koutarou's back with their sharp claws, planning on tearing him apart.

However, before their claws ever got close to Koutarou, they were hit by a small shockwave. It didn't have the power to harm them, but it was enough to affect their wings and stop them from moving momentarily. But a moment was all it took.

Signaltin cut both demons in half without so much as a sound. Their bodies decomposed into mana and then to dust. It was a splendid combination attack by Koutarou and Alaia.

"We can do this! With this, we can do it!"

Thanks to Alaia's precise control of its energy, Signaltin was a completely

different beast now. Its offensive power had risen dramatically, and the leftover mana was used for defense and other support. With Alaia's help, Koutarou was overpowering the demons with no trouble. In a matter of seconds, he'd decimated the ten or so demons that came after him. Only a few remained.

"ROAAAAAAAR!"

With the majority of demons gone, Alunaya charged at Koutarou. As he did, the remaining demons retreated. Maxfern had determined that the demons didn't stand a chance against Koutarou now.

"Time for the main show."

Koutarou knew things were about to get serious, so he did too. He now took Signaltin in both hands and brandished it boldly.

"Koutarou-sama, I'll keep watch of your surroundings. You deal with Alunaya."

"Please do, Your Highness."

While Koutarou was fighting with Alunaya, there was a chance that the demons might launch a surprise attack. With Alaia watching his back, however, Koutarou could focus on Alunaya.

"We're almost there! Do your best, Koutarou-sama!"

"As you wish, my princess!"

As he shouted, Koutarou readied his sword and flew forward at full speed. Koutarou could see Alunaya's intent to attack with his spirit sight, and right now the area of the attack was increasing. It would either be a tail swipe or a burst of his flame breath. Koutarou would be a sitting duck where he was, so he continued forward towards Alunaya to try and make it harder to use such a massive attack.

Alunaya swung his giant tail around in a wide arc. It was like a massive whip cutting through the air.

"I can't take that!"

Koutarou dove into evasive maneuvers to dodge the tail. Without his barrier, a single hit from something like that would be fatal. And without Caris's illusions as diversions, he had to prioritize safety over all else.

“Please leave it to me.”

Alaia increased Koutarou’s speed to make up for the lost ground while dodging, and Koutarou charged forward again at top speed.

“Goooooooo!”

Alunaya had a powerful barrier protecting him. While Signaltin had the ability to dispel magic, it was uncertain if it would be enough to break through it. The only way to find out was to try.

“ROAAAAAAAR!”

Alunaya let out a pained wail. Signaltin had pierced his barrier like it was nothing and sheared off a few scales.

“It worked! But it was too shallow!”

Since Alunaya wasn’t a creature summoned through magic, his body wasn’t composed of mana like the demons’ were. A single blow wouldn’t reduce him to ashes. In fact, all a single blow had done to Alunaya was take off some scales.

“So I can hurt it if I want, but the sword won’t do that much damage, huh?”

Koutarou dodged Alunaya’s claw swipes while racking his brain. Alunaya was over twenty meters long. The sword simply wasn’t big enough to do but so much damage to such a massive beast. The armor’s built-in weapons wouldn’t fare much better. It was like challenging a tank with a rifle.

“Do I have to rely on this just like last time?”

Koutarou was referring to Kiriha’s gauntlet. With Signaltin’s ability to break through the barrier, the gauntlet should prove more effective this time around. And by combining that with the armor’s weapons, he might be able to do a little more damage.

“If only he had a weak point...”

“A weak point? Oh, that’s right.”

Alaia inadvertently reminded Koutarou of the crystal on the back of Alunaya’s neck. During their last fight, he’d been able to make Alunaya retreat after attacking that.

“There is something like that. A magical crystal embedded in the back of Alunaya’s neck.”

“I see... Then that would be the perfect target for this sword. By dispelling the crystal’s mana, we might be able to turn the tables of this battle.”

“I’ll give it a shot!”

Koutarou readied Signaltin and activated his boosters once more. His propellant was quickly running out, so just like his last fight with Alunaya, it would be best to settle this as quickly as possible.

Koutarou tried to use his mobility to his advantage and get behind Alunaya, but it wasn’t that easy. Unlike the last fight, he was the only one in the air with Alunaya now. Alunaya could keep his eyes on Koutarou, and he wasn’t about to just let him circle around behind him. And without support from Caris, Koutarou was just wasting time trying.

“What should I... I don’t have the time to wait for Clan...”

Clan and the others were currently dealing with the rest of the demons on the ground. Although there were significantly fewer now, they still had to protect Alaia so she could support Koutarou. It looked like they had their hands full with that, and Koutarou didn’t have the time to wait for them to finish up.

“Look out, Koutarou-sama!”

“Whoops!”

Immediately after Alaia’s warning, Alunaya’s flame breath passed by right next to Koutarou. It was so close that it singed his hair.

“Please be careful, Koutarou-sama! It’s all over if that hits you!”

“Sorry, I was a little lost in thought... Wait a minute...”

Seeing Alunaya’s flame breath fly off into the distance, Koutarou was struck with a wild idea. He quickly ran it by Alaia.

“Your Highness, can the sword cut through those flames?”

Alaia nearly gasped at what Koutarou was suggesting.

“It might be possible... But if it fails, there’s no going back.”

Alunaya's flame breath was really just magical fire. In other words, Signaltin might be able to dispel it.

Alunaya had to stop moving in order to spew flames, and the flames themselves partially obscured his vision. So even if it was only momentarily, he left himself open when he attacked that way. If Koutarou purposely took the flame breath head-on, Alunaya would lose sight of him. He could then use Signaltin to protect himself.

But if things went wrong—if he screwed up the timing or came in at a bad angle—Koutarou would be swallowed by the flames. Considering that risk, Alaia couldn't agree to such a plan. Hearing her answer, however, Koutarou smiled and called her name.

"Princess Alaia."

"What is it?"

"Which do you believe in more? The fire breath? Or me?"

"...Kou..."

Alaia was at a loss for words.

"K-K-Koutarou-sama! That's not the point! That's unfair!"

Alaia raised her voice and scolded Koutarou. To her, that question only had one answer.

"Stupid Koutarou-sama!"

So instead of answering him, she continued to criticize him like a child.

"That's poor manners, Your Highness... Clan, do you have any advice?"

Koutarou smiled and asked Clan for her input over his comms. He wanted to hear the scientist's opinion.

"...I don't, stupid. But if there's anything you should know, it's that the flame breath is practically plasma. So by using an electromagnetic field, you might be able to protect yourself a little, stupid..."

Clan's actual advice would have been to abandon this plan altogether. However, knowing Koutarou's personality, she knew that he'd already made up

his mind by the time he asked her. So she gave up on trying to stop him and instead gave him information she thought might be helpful.

Normally when plasma came into contact with an electromagnetic field, a complex reaction would occur. In this case, the plasma breath should diffuse and the barrier field would serve as a sort of umbrella, much the same way Earth's magnetic field protected against solar winds. However, if the momentum was too great, there wouldn't be much of an effect at all. That was a very real possibility against Alunaya's breath.

"All right, I'll give it a try."

Koutarou grinned and pointed Signaltin towards Alunaya's face.

"Koutarou-sama, please reconsider."

"Your Highness, I still haven't heard your answer."

"I..."

Alaia was hesitant to answer. After several seconds of silence, she quietly mumbled something.

"...Make sure you come back, Forthorthe's Blue Knight..."

"As you wish, my princess."

In the end, she still never answered the actual question.

Alunaya liked to use his flames to keep Koutarou at a distance because he knew that Koutarou was stronger at close range. Because of that, it wasn't that hard to bait a breath attack.

Alunaya opened his large mouth and began inhaling. Seeing that, Koutarou positioned himself not too close, but not too far away either. The balance of that was actually quite tricky. If he was too close, Alunaya would swipe at him instead, and if he was too far, he wouldn't be able to use the flame breath as cover for his approach. Koutarou had to find the perfect spot for this to work.

"Now, Koutarou-sama!"

After confirming that Alunaya was gathering mana in his gullet—a sure sign he was about to spew flames—Koutarou set his boosters to maximum thrust

and charged straight forward. As long as he could close the distance in time, the rest should be easy, so he was willing to use the last of his propellant on this if he had to.

The next moment, Alunaya exhaled a white-hot pillar of fire. Flames hotter than even the surface of the sun were coming straight for Koutarou.

“How about thiiiiiiiisss?!”

While using his boosters to adjust his angle of approach, Koutarou thrust Signaltin out in front of him. He also generated an electromagnetic field around it to shield himself from the plasma that Signaltin couldn’t dispel.

In a flash, all Koutarou could see was white. Signaltin’s mana covered Koutarou’s entire body as everything else around him was engulfed in plasma. And while the sword might have been capable of dispelling the plasma, it couldn’t do anything about the superheated air that swirled around it. The surrounding temperature spiked immediately and Koutarou felt like he had been thrown into an oven.

“Tch...”

Fortunately, his armor was designed to be used in space and could withstand extreme temperatures. The AI reported several warnings, but there was no major damage. The outside shell of the armor was scorched and discolored, which, all in all, was an excellent result for having just survived a blast of straight plasma hotter than the sun.

Koutarou dove out from under the flames and circled around to Alunaya’s back. Since Alunaya couldn’t see Koutarou because of his breath, he had no idea that he was being flanked.



“Taaaaakeeeee thiiiiiiiis!”

Without letting up on his boosters, Koutarou charged straight at Alunaya. His target was the blue crystal attached to the dragon’s neck. Signaltin pierced through Alunaya’s barrier and struck its target. As the mana inside the crystal was dispelled, it shattered and scattered all over.

“ROAAAAAAAR!”

Alunaya immediately screamed out in pain. His wailing voice was so loud it felt like it was shaking the entire world.

“Did that do it?!”

“Koutarou-sama!”

As Koutarou looked on, Alunaya plummeted towards the ground. The moment the crystal shattered, he lost control of his body. He repeatedly tried flapping his wings to regain control, but in the end, the dragon slammed into the earth below.

Maxfern blankly stared as Alunaya crashed into the garden, but then fell into a fit of quiet laughter. It was a dark, frightening sound. It sounded like the laugh of a demon coming up from the depths of hell, and it was enough to make all who heard it shudder.

“Heh... Heh heh heh... Splendid... Truly splendid... Even with the holy sword, to think you’d be able to defeat Alunaya...”

As Maxfern’s laughter creepily echoed through the garden, the demons surrounding Alaia and the others moved to form a defensive formation around Maxfern. His loyal alchemists as well as Grevanas and his court magicians were already by his side. They would follow Maxfern until the end.

“Just give up already, Maxfern.”

After landing, Koutarou approached to within a few dozen meters of Maxfern, but the small army surrounding Maxfern showed no sign of attacking. Perhaps it was because they feared Koutarou, or perhaps it was simply because hadn’t been ordered to yet. Either way, they didn’t get in the way of Koutarou and

Maxfern's conversation. The eight girls well behind Koutarou watched as the situation unfolded as well.

"You've lost."

"...That's true. I'll admit to that. It's your victory, Blue Knight."

Surprisingly, Maxfern seemed to accept his defeat. He'd failed to obtain the sword he was after, and his ace in the hole, Alunaya, had been defeated. His plans had all gone awry, and now the only thing he had left to show for himself was a few dozen subordinates and a horde of monsters willing to protect him. Even his chance to take the country of Forthorthe had slipped through his fingers. There was no coming back from this, but he was reasonable enough to acknowledge that.

"But I still have no intention of letting you take this country, Blue Knight! This world is mine! I won't hand it over to anyone!"

Before anyone knew it, the demons were all holding bottles filled with black liquid. But they weren't planning on attacking Koutarou and the others with them. No, they poised to take off into the sky.

"Do it, Grevanas!"

"Maxfern-sama, do we really have to go this far?"

"Shut it! Are you willing to accept such a miserable defeat?! That everything we've done has been for naught?!"

"I-I didn't say that, but..."

Grevanas, who had so far calmly obeyed Maxfern's orders, was now showing hesitation. It gave Koutarou a sinking feeling.

"Then just do as you're told!"

"I understand..."

"What are you planning, Maxfern?!"

Koutarou demanded answers. The sinking feeling in his gut was rapidly getting heavier and heavier. He couldn't tell what, but he felt like something bad was about to happen. He couldn't just sit still.

“Like I told you, Blue Knight! I have no intention of just handing this country over to you!”

“So that’s how it is, Maxfern?!”

In that moment, Alaia suddenly raised her head. She wore an expression of astonishment and fear. She’d realized exactly what Maxfern was plotting. Exactly what he was going to have the demons do.

“That black liquid! It’s that poison from before, isn’t it?!”

“That’s right! Well spotted, wise Princess Alaia!”

The bottles the demons were carrying contained the same fatal virus that Dextro had used on the village during the harvest festival. The alchemists had gathered, studied, and reproduced it in mass quantities. Maxfern was planning on using the demons to distribute it throughout Forthorthe and sicken the entire country.

“Are you planning on destroying Forthorthe?!”

A chill ran down Koutarou’s spine when he realized Maxfern’s goal. The virus might wipe out more than just Forthorthe. Viruses didn’t respect borders, and there would be nothing stopping it from spreading across the entire continent or even the entire world.

“Hahaha! Isn’t this how you’re supposed to seize a country?!”

Maxfern laughed tauntingly at Koutarou. He looked like a raging madman, and that rage was directed at one person in particular: Koutarou. When his smile faded, the crazy look on his face betrayed just how insane he really was. There was a dangerous gleam in his bloodshot eyes.

“This country— No, this world is mine! That sword might be yours, but I will never hand over this world! I’d rather turn it over to darkness!”

Maxfern was filled with hatred and envy. Not only had the holy sword rejected him, it had accepted Koutarou instead. If the holy sword chose Koutarou to be king of the world, then Maxfern would ravage the world to make Koutarou’s title meaningless. All out of spite and bitterness.

“Ahahaha! Muahahahaha! Nobody can stop it now! This world will end! And

you, Blue Knight! You will reign over nothing but a dead land of corpses!”

“Maxfern, you bastard!”

As Maxfern’s mad laughter filled the garden, the demons took to the sky carrying the black bottles. In total there were over fifty of them, and Koutarou had no way of defeating all of them while making sure the bottles didn’t break in the process.

“Clan, can’t you do something?!”

“I can’t come up with anything on the spot! If just one of those bottles shatters, something terrible will happen. There’s no way to keep them all whole...”

The odds were fixed against them. If just one of the bottles were to shatter, the virus would pollute the entire area. From here, it would probably spread to Fornorn, the heart of the country. And once the capital was infected, there was no way of keeping it from spreading to the rest of Forthorthe.

“Uncle! Please stop it!”

“Shut it, Lidith! You don’t deserve to address me as family after you chose the Blue Knight over me!”

“Maxfern! There’s no meaning in this!”

“That’s exactly right, Princess Alaia! The goal is to make it meaningless, after all!”

Their only hope seemed to be to make Maxfern call the demons back. But there was no way such an insane man would ever listen to reason. He was dead set on his revenge against the goddess who’d erred in her judgement.

“It’s no use, Veltlion! Forthorthe will be ruined!”

Clan could create a cure for the virus, but the country would be ravaged before she could administer it to everyone. There just wasn’t enough time. This would be on a completely different scale than saving a single village.

“Blue Knight! Please do something! You must have something you can do, right?! Please say there is!”

“Princess Charl...”

Koutarou gritted his teeth.

Damn it, is watching this all happen all I can do?!

Koutarou would have loved to tell Charl that he had an ace up his sleeve. Something that would save them from this crisis. But he didn’t. He was just as lost as everyone else.

“Caris-chan, can’t you use your magic to do something?”

“It’s impossible. They’re too spread out.”

“Flair-sama, what should we do?”

“I’m sorry, Mary. I don’t know.”

The demons flew off one after another as Koutarou and the others watched on in horror. They were literally watching the world end.

This is my first time ever seeing something so truly frightening... No, wait, is it really?

Something was tugging at the back of Koutarou’s brain. Something about this sight was familiar to him.

When was it? Where have I seen this? What am I remembering?

Koutarou desperately scanned through his memory banks. Something in there might be the key to solving this problem, and right now, he was willing to try anything.

“Ah...”

Before long, Koutarou stumbled across what he was after. In his fight against Clan during the play, just as she was about to unleash her final attack, Koutarou had heard a mysterious voice. He also had a vision of strange, monstrous creatures taking to the skies with black bottles in their clutches. And—

“Clan!”

Koutarou’s eyes lit up and he rushed to Clan, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her back and forth. Having found a solution, he lost sight of himself in the excitement.

“Wh-What is it?!”

Being so shaken, Clan’s eyes rolled in their sockets in bewilderment.

“We’ll use that! You know, that thing!”

“Please slow down! What are you talking about?!”

“Obviously, I mean that bomb that brought us here in the first place! Use the second one to blow away these demons and those bottles!”

That bomb, the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell, was Clan’s ultimate weapon. She’d developed it herself. When activated, it shunted everything caught in the blast outside of the very universe. Koutarou wanted Clan to use it to cast the demons out of this world.

“R-Right, that! But it’s still being adjusted. We don’t know where—”

“You idiot! Now’s not the time for worrying about things like that! Just hurry up and do it before it’s too late!”

“I get it! Cradle! Prepare to launch the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Right beside the now desperately shouting Clan, a black hole much larger than what she normally used to call out weapons appeared. A rounded cone emerged from it. It was the missile’s warhead. Clan had created two such missiles, the first of which had been destroyed by Koutarou. That made this the second and final one. She’d intended to use it to return to her own world, but she didn’t have much of a choice now.

“Fire it as soon as it’s ready, Clan!”

“At least let me do a final check!”

“No!”

“Fine, fine! I got it! Jeez!”

The repulsion shell was already fully charged. Since Koutarou had said beforehand that he was willing to use any means necessary, Clan had made sure it was charged just in case.

“No matter what you’re planning, it’s too late now! Just sit back and watch!”

Maxfern boasted triumphantly. He had no way of knowing what Koutarou was planning or what Clan was about to fire. Convinced that whatever they were up to wouldn't make a difference, he decided to let them struggle in vain.

"What are you trying to do, Koutarou-sama? How can we help?"

Unlike Maxfern, Alaia sensed something serious in Koutarou and Clan's behavior. She asked him for instructions.

"Get down! There's going to be a big explosion!"

"I've finished inputting the target coordinates and parameters! Target is locked! Here we go, Veltlion!"

"Fire!"

"Everyone, get down!"

"Firing!"

The girls listened to Alaia and threw themselves to the ground. The next moment, a missile as tall as Clan came flying out of the black hole. The missile's rocket engine sputtered a trail of flame behind it as it headed straight for the flock of demons above Maxfern.

That's right. This is what it looked like...

The sight unfolding before Koutarou was exactly what he'd seen in his vision. Maxfern and his subordinates were stunned.

"What?! Grevanas, what is that?!"

Seeing something unknown flying towards them, Maxfern demanded an explanation of Grevanas. He believed it was some kind of magical tool.

"I don't know! It might be some variety of weapon, but something like that couldn't possibly defeat all the—"

Grevanas quickly started his explanation, but he wasn't able to finish. The missile travelled far faster than his mouth could move. In a matter of seconds, the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell activated at its target location.

A bright flash filled the area with light, and the horde of demons was surrounded by a gigantic cube. The cube grew in size, extending downward and

outward so that it also covered Maxfern, his subordinates, and the castle. But it only lasted for a few moments. Then it vanished and it took everything inside of it with it. The demons, the bottles they were carrying, Maxfern, his men, and even the castle behind them. All that was left was a giant, square hole in the ground and an earthquake-shockwave combo that felt like it shook the entire world. The intense vibrations of space being erased created the earthquake, and the air flooding in to fill the vacuum turned into a shockwave that assaulted everyone in the area.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Koutarou and the girls screamed. Clan’s barrier could block the shockwave, but not the intense earthquake. They all clung to each other as the ground beneath them shook violently.

“...D-Did it stop?”

Since it wasn’t a natural earthquake, however, the shaking soon subsided. Koutarou hurried to his feet. He stared at the gaping square hole carved into the ground, a sign of just how powerful the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell really was.

“Did we do it...?”

“We did it, Veltlion! They’ve all been completely erased!”

The demons were gone and so were the bottles they were carrying. All of it had been cast out of the universe. Forthorthe was saved.

“No, not yet, Veltlion! Look over there!”

Pale-faced, Flair frantically called out to Koutarou and pointed towards the sky.

“Oh no! It looks like one of them made it!”

A lone demon remained overhead. It was still flying after being hit by the shockwave, albeit very shakily. Fortunately, the demon seemed to have absorbed most of the shockwave and the bottle in its hands was undamaged.

“We can’t let it get away! Hurry and—”

Just as Koutarou was about to take to the skies and chase after it...

“Koutarou-sama, it’s falling!”

“What?!”

The shakily flying demon suddenly began plummeting towards the earth. The shockwave had been too overwhelming, and the demon finally lost control.

“Oh no, the bottle is going to break!”

Of course, the bottle fell right along with the demon. If it broke, the virus would be unleashed, giving birth to yet another nightmare.

No good! I won’t make it!

Despite knowing what was at stake if that bottle hit the ground, nobody could reach it in time to catch it. The demon was too far away. Koutarou wouldn’t be able to make it even if he set off now at full speed. There was no longer anything they could do.

“There is no need to worry.”

Suddenly something large blocked out the sun overhead, casting a towering shadow on Koutarou and the others. Looking up, Koutarou nearly staggered backward when he saw what it was.

“Alunaya?! Y-You’re still alive?!”

“Yes, and you will be grateful for it yet.”

A white line of fire shot through the sky. It was Alunaya’s breath attack. The high-temperature flames incinerated the demon and the bottle in one fell swoop.

The Golden Sea and Silvery White Snow

Alaia was crowned empress and her coronation ceremony was held on a winter morning a few days after the New Year.

With Maxfern and Grevanas thrown out of the universe, the coup d'etat had naturally come to an end. As the coup was the direct result of Maxfern and Grevanas's intrigue, once they were gone, there was no longer anyone that would stand against the royal family. The coup d'etat army had already surrendered too. And so Alaia and the others were finally able to return to the imperial palace.

The month after that was incredibly busy. The collapsed political system had to be restored and the standing army quickly had to rebound in order to keep the neighboring countries from getting any funny ideas. With the coup over, there was no shortage of business that needed to be tended to. The country had a lot to recover from and a lot to rebuild. But with the help of many people, Alaia cleared task after task.

About a month after the end of the war, things were finally starting to shape up for Forthorthe. By then, most of the chaos had stabilized and the industries ravaged by the war were beginning to recover. Seeing her chance and hoping to give the citizens a reason to celebrate, Alaia announced a grand coronation ceremony to be held concurrently with a ceremony to officially commemorate the end of the war. It would be the biggest celebration in Forthorthe since the foundation of the country.

"The wounds of war run deep. They still haven't healed, but after a month, the country is finally starting to get back on its feet. And that is no mean feat. I was only able to return here thanks to the help of the people. I have seen what you all can do, and I know in my heart what we can do together. This country will recover yet."

Alaia was giving a speech. A large crowd had gathered in the imperial palace's courtyard to witness her coronation. On her head was a beautiful crown made

out of platinum and decorated with jewels. It was the crown of the empress of Forthorthe.

Today was the day Alaia ascended from Her Highness to Her Majesty. On this day, history was made for the Holy Forthorthe Empire and the gears of fate were set in motion. They would continue to turn as a thousand years passed and Forthorthe entered its space age and became a galactic empire. And they would continue to turn for another thousand years after that as a lone girl departed Forthorthe for the outskirts of space in a blue battleship. This day would be the first step towards those events. It would be the grand beginning to many things, but it also marked the swiftly approaching end of something else.

Once she finished her speech and stepped off the platform, Alaia let out a small sigh.

“Phew...”

She then took several deep breaths. With Alaia’s weak constitution, an unusually busy day like today was rough on her.

“Good work, Your Highness.”

Fauna the priestess approached Alaia. When she put her hand on Alaia’s chest, her pained expression gradually eased up.

“Fauna, I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Please take care of yourself. Your Highness... I mean, Your Majesty, your body is no longer just your own.”

“Thank you, Fauna. I hope you will continue to help me in the future.”

As payment for awakening Signaltin, Alaia’s health had deteriorated. Because of that, Fauna would use spiritual energy to heal her from time to time. It was a secret between just the two of them. Not even Charl, her own sister, had been told of it.

“Sister!”

It was Charl that was now running towards Alaia, with Mary in tow right behind her.

“You can’t, Your Highness! Slow down! You’ll mess up your dress!”

“It’s fine! You’re such a worrywart, Mary.”

Like Alaia, Charl was also wearing a ceremonial dress for the occasion. But she didn’t seem to think anything of it as she ran along like she always did. Meanwhile, Mary was mortified that she might tear or ruin it.

“Sister!”

Charl threw herself at Alaia. Since hitting a growth spurt, Charl had grown quite considerably over the last month. As a result, Alaia staggered as she caught her. But thanks to Flair’s casual support, Alaia managed to avoid falling over.

“Thank you, Flair.”

“Not at all, Your Majesty. This is my job, after all.”

Flair flashed a calm and gentle smile for Alaia and Charl. As of late, Flair had become a lot more feminine, but that was largely thanks to the war ending. She’d been kept on edge and on high alert since the minute the coup started, but now that it was all over, things were different. In a more natural, relaxed state, her real personality was starting to show.

“So, why were you in such a rush, Charl?”

“Blue Knight isn’t here! Sister, have you seen him?”

Charl was in such a hurry because she was looking for Koutarou. Having gotten bored after the ceremony, she’d decided she wanted to play with Koutarou. However, he was nowhere to be found, and so she’d come to ask Alaia if she knew where he might be.

“Lidith, what job is Layous-sama doing?”

“Lord Veltlion wasn’t assigned any duties today.”

Lidith shook her head in response to Alaia’s question. She was wearing a long robe indicating her status as a government official. Specifically, she was serving as Alaia’s court lady. In modern terms, she’d be something like a secretary. She was also looking to become a minister, just like her uncle had once been. He’d taken a wrong turn and done a great deal to damage their family name, but

Lidith sought to correct that.

“That’s strange. He was here just a little while ago...”

Alaia could remember seeing Koutarou while the priest was crowning her during the ceremony. She secretly wanted Koutarou to see her with the crown on, so she’d made sure he was there.

“Hmm... Do you know anything, Caris?”

Charl then turned to Caris. Caris was a bit of a strange girl, but she got along with Charl almost as well as Koutarou did, so Charl considered her someone easy to talk to.

“I didn’t see him in the dining room.”

Caris shook her head as she munched on some of the bread she had. She was now one of few remaining magicians in Forthorthe. Most of the court magicians had vanished alongside Grevanas. As a result, only the magicians who’d been out on missions at the time were left behind. Caris was put in charge of them, making her the new head of the court magicians.

Alaia also made a policy to prevent any new magicians from being recruited. She had decided to reduce the number of magicians at court after Grevanas’s tyranny. She was aiming to create a country that didn’t rely on special powers or special people. She wanted to phase out court magicians altogether. But Caris was fine with that. To her, magic not being needed was a sign things were peaceful. She was currently living comfortably and got to eat something delicious every day. In order for that to continue, a long-term peace was needed.

“Hmm... Where would the Blue Knight run off to without me? Is he really that determined to keep me from riding a horse again? That disloyal knight...”

“Where...”

When Alaia heard Charl say that word, she suddenly remembered something.

“From an endless time and an immeasurable distance.”

Without a word of explanation, Alaia broke into a run.

“Sister?!”

Charl immediately chased after Alaia. She knew that Koutarou would be wherever Alaia was going.

“Koutarou-sama!”

It wasn’t logic so much as it was a hunch. Even so, she had to go. If she didn’t, she felt like she would never see him again. And so she ran as fast as she could, trusting that the strong emotions welling up inside her would sustain her. The coronation ceremony was the last thing on her mind right now.

Meanwhile, Koutarou was on a small hill in the suburbs of Fornorn. He was there with Clan and a crimson dragon over twenty meters long.

“I see. So you two are heading home too.”

“Yes. We’ve already seen all the sights in this country.”

As it turned out, Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya was welcomed into Forthorthe as a state guest. He was then tricked, put under Grevanas’s spell, and forced to fight against his will. The magicians used the crystal in his neck to manipulate him, so he was set free from their control when Koutarou destroyed it. That’s why he’d saved everyone with his flame breath. Alunaya wasn’t a hostile dragon, but a peaceful one.

Having learned the truth, Alaia was deeply grateful and invited Alunaya in as a proper guest of the state. He was treated to fresh food and alcohol daily, and she even summoned bands and theater troupes to come perform for him. It was both Alaia’s way of thanking him and apologizing for what Maxfern and Grevanas had done to him. Alunaya accepted Alaia’s apology and became a friend of Forthorthe.

However, after the coronation ceremony, Alunaya had decided to leave. Humans and dragons had rather different lifestyles, so he couldn’t remain in Forthorthe forever.

“Where will you go now, Alunaya-san?”

“To a new home. This world has grown colder, and it has become much harder for us to live here. That’s why we’ve decided to travel to another world. The others are awaiting my return.”

“A different world? I see...”

That was the reason dragons had gradually vanished from Forthorthe. They hadn’t died out. They were simply migrating to a more comfortable world. The only dragons that remained behind were those with intellects too small to comprehend what was going on and those who were against moving. There were also, from time to time, dragons that came to visit the latter.

It was a shocking discovery, but Koutarou and Clan both knew how powerful Alunaya was. They’d also come from a different world themselves, so they had no trouble accepting what Alunaya shared with them.



“Where will you two go?”

“We will return to the future.”

“The future?! Fuahaha, no wonder you have such a strange smell! I see, I see... So this is the smell of the future.”

The trust was mutual. Alunaya had no trouble believing that Koutarou and Clan had come from the future. They were all outsiders here, so they shared something of a special bond.

“But still, if you aren’t from this age... I’ll have to thank you as well.”

Alunaya considered his destroying the last bottle of the virus to be his thanks to the people of Forthorthe, but that didn’t much apply to Koutarou who was from another world. Since Alunaya had a strong sense of obligation, he felt that he needed to thank him in some way for saving him too.

“What you’ve done already is thanks enough. If Forthorthe hadn’t been saved, we wouldn’t be able to return to our own world.”

“Heh heh... Then think of it as a token of friendship.”

Alunaya laughed in a low voice and his eyes began shining green. As they did, a crest of a dragon’s head was carved into the back of Koutarou’s hand. But he felt no pain in the process. It was a special crest that Alunaya had carved using magic. It wasn’t dissimilar to the crest on Alaia’s forehead.

“This is...”

“This crest connects you to me. If you ever require my assistance, then speak your wish to this crest. I will certainly appear, no matter how far apart we may be or how much time may have passed.”

“I hope that I never have to.”

“Fair enough. But even then, please call me out to play at least once before you die.”

“Would calling you out for such a reason be okay...?”

“Like I told you, it’s a token of our friendship. Heh heh... Now then!”

Alunaya spread his giant wings as he laughed and lightly flapped them a

couple of times. That alone created a wind powerful enough to tousle Koutarou and Clan's hair.

"I believe it's time for me to leave. It's been fun, Blue Knight."

"Likewise. Take care, Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya."

"Attendant, you stay healthy too."

"You've got it the wrong way around. Veltlion is the attendant."

"Heh, you've been a funny lot till the very end."

And with those words, Alunaya took off. He flapped his giant wings and flew up into the sky in an instant. The setting sun cast its light over the dragon's crimson body, making it look like he was on fire. Alunaya continued flying until he disappeared over the horizon without looking back even once. It was a powerful, dignified image truly befitting his name.

"I guess it's time for us to go too, Clan."

"Yes. We've stayed for quite long enough."

Once they could no longer see Alunaya, Koutarou and Clan headed towards Clan's spaceship, the Cradle, which had been summoned to the hill.

"Still, in the end, the real Blue Knight never appeared..."

"However, history has been more or less corrected. We should still be able to return to our own time and place."

"I hope so..."

Koutarou and Clan walked shoulder to shoulder with no hurry in their steps. At first they had just wanted to escape from this age as fast as possible, but now they felt an attachment to it. And it was that attachment that slowed them down now. They both just wanted to take in the scenery for a moment longer, to feel the wind blowing for another second.

"By the way, how are we going to get home? I heard you had a plan."

"Right now, the Cradle still isn't capable of spaceflight. So I figured that we could use the ship as a literal cradle and sleep until the parts necessary to repair the ship have been produced."

“Even if we’re asleep, we’ll die before that happens. Those parts won’t be available for another two thousand years, right?”

“It’s fine. By freezing time inside the Cradle, time will be stopped for us, but continue to flow normally around us. Of course, I’ll need to make some fine adjustments first.”

“I don’t really get it, but I’ll leave it to you.”

“Yes, yes. I’m always the one who has to do all the work...”

When they had first arrived in this age, they had been trying to kill each other. But now it was as if they’d been friends for years. Their relationship had changed completely in the time they’d spent here. That’s just how long it had been. Or, at least, how long it felt.

And that didn’t just go for the two of them. They had developed bonds with the people of this age as well. The sadness of having to leave them slowed their footsteps towards the Cradle even more. They really loved the friends, companions, and allies they’d made here.

“By the way... Are you sure you don’t need to say your farewells to Alaia-san and the others?”

“Yeah. If I did that, my determination would waver.”

“I understand how you feel. I’d probably keep putting off our departure a few days at a time and never actually end up leaving...”

“So you do have a cute side to you.”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?! Hahh... Jeez...”

The time to leave had finally come. It was the moment they’d been waiting for since they first arrived, but they were still somewhat reluctant to go. Saying goodbye is never easy.

For Koutarou and Clan to be able to sleep for two thousand years, they’d need to find a place that wouldn’t be disturbed for that long. There weren’t many such places, but fortunately Clan had an idea.

Alaia had first gathered troops in the vicinity of a small fort in the

Pardomshiha territory. Clan knew that two thousand years later, that place would be known as “Veltlion’s special territory.” It would also be very heavily guarded in the meanwhile. After the war, Alaia would grant it to the Blue Knight as his domain, and not even the royal family would be allowed to touch it.

There, Koutarou and Clan would be able to sleep undisturbed for two thousand years. Since the territory was off-limits, they wouldn’t have to worry about construction, excavation, or anything of the sort. Though there had been talks about examining parts of the territory on the bimillenial anniversary of Alaia’s coronation, nothing ever came of it.

And so Koutarou and Clan prepared to make their way to Veltlion’s future special territory in the Cradle. Though it currently wasn’t capable of spaceflight, Clan had repaired it so that it could fly in an atmosphere. As such, they were on course to reach the special territory before the sun fully set.

“Veltlion, come up to the cockpit after you’ve taken your armor off.”

“Okay. I’ll be there as soon as I’m done.”

After boarding the Cradle, Clan and Koutarou split up. She went for the cockpit and Koutarou made his way towards the hangar. His role as the replacement Blue Knight was over and he no longer had a need to wear the armor. He was planning on removing it for their trip just for comfort.

After entering the hangar, Koutarou walked over to the work area used for spacesuit maintenance. The devices there were automated, so after determining what kind of armor Koutarou was wearing, they reached out with their mechanical arms and affixed the armor to a maintenance stand. After that, the armor opened up and Koutarou stepped out of it.

“How convenient.”

After getting out of his armor, Koutarou turned back towards the maintenance stand. The blue armor had taken quite a beating. Dents, scratches, burn marks, and more covered it now. Every one of those battle scars reminded him of the fierce fights he’d been in.

“You did well... Thank you for your hard work,” Koutarou mumbled quietly and lightly tapped the breastplate in appreciation.

Having spent most of the last half a year in this suit of armor, Koutarou had gotten attached to it.

“I am honored, my lord.”

“Really, you’re very well made.”

Koutarou smiled as the armor replied. He then removed the wooden insignia on its chest and the two swords hanging from its waist. Those three items were things he didn’t want to leave behind in the hangar.

“All right.”

Koutarou equipped the insignia and the two swords himself and headed towards the hangar exit. As he did, he could hear a low rumble and feel the floor shaking beneath him.

“I guess we’re off...”

The commotion was indeed the Cradle lifting off. After a while, the shaking stopped and the noise died down in the hangar. Once it had sufficient altitude, the spaceship didn’t shake in the slightest. Now all that was left was the quiet flight all the way to Veltlion’s special territory.

However, just as Koutarou was about to exit the hangar, there was another loud sound. It was the alert beep of an incoming call on the panel right next to the exit. The next moment, Clan’s face appeared there.

“Veltlion, the farewell party has arrived.”

As Clan said that, a hatch on the stern side of the hangar slowly opened.

“...Farewell party?”

The first thing Koutarou saw through the opening hatch was the snow that had started to fall. Next he saw a meadow with the wind blowing through it, lit up by the setting sun. And when the hatch fully opened, he saw both a silvery and a golden glow.

“Koutarou-sama!”

“Blue Knight!”

It was Alaia and Charl, still dressed in their royal gowns from the coronation

ceremony. The wind blowing through the meadow whipped their hair about, and it appeared to flicker in the light of the evening sun. The Cradle had already reached quite a high altitude, but Koutarou would never mistake the two of them. They were special people that he would never forget.

“Empress Alaia! Princess Charl!”

Koutarou grabbed the handrail by the hatch and shouted out to the two girls below. He could see their expressions brighten as they waved their hands.

I see... So they came to see me off...

Koutarou was overwhelmed. Simply speechless. All he could do was watch them wave to him from afar. But as he looked at them, his vision started to blur. He wiped his tears away so he could properly see, but his vision quickly blurred again. Koutarou gave up on wiping away his tears and instead raised his voice to call to them once more.

“Goodbye, Empress Alaia! Princess Charl!”

Why couldn’t he come up with anything better to say? Koutarou was frustrated at his own stupidity. All he could say were simple farewells, but there was so much that he wanted to convey to them. Gratitude. Affection. Loneliness.

“Don’t cry, Blue Knight! You’re a man, aren’t you?!”

But fortunately, they knew exactly how Koutarou felt. They wiped away their own tears as they watched him moving further and further away.

“Blue Knight! Play with me if we meet again! Stay well!”

Charl had burst into tears when she realized that Koutarou was going home, but now she was smiling brightly to see him off. She was still crying, but she didn’t let it stop her from smiling. She continued waving her small arms at Koutarou. With each swing of her arm, tears scattered off her cheeks, glittering like beautiful jewels as they fell.

“Koutarou-samaaaa!”

Next was Alaia’s turn. She spread her arms out and reached up towards Koutarou. It was as if she was trying to embrace him as he gradually moved

further away. She had one last thing to say to Koutarou, but as she opened her mouth to call to him, the Cradle's boosters activated and the engine let out a loud roar.

"....."

Alaia's voice never reached Koutarou, but he knew that she was giving him her final farewell.

"....."

Alaia continued shouting to him with large tears flowing out of her eyes. Even if he couldn't hear her, he could see her earnestly reaching her arms out to him as she attempted to convey her feelings. Just how grateful she was for him. Just how sad she was that the day of their parting had finally come. He understood it all.

"Empress Alaia... Princess Charl..."

That's why Koutarou desperately waved his arms back at the two girls who were getting smaller with each passing moment. It was the only way for his feelings to reach them now.

The rocket engine of the Cradle generated a strong wind that swept through the meadow. With the setting evening sun shining down on it, it was as if it had turned into a golden sea. And with the silvery white snow falling down on it in flurries, the contrast of gold and silver created a breathtaking spectacle.

Alaia and Charl stood there, still waving their arms as their hair fluttered in the wind. Neither words nor expressions would reach Koutarou now. Waving their hands was the last thing they could do.

Koutarou was waving back as he looked down from the open hatch. Even after he could no longer distinguish them from the rest of the scenery, he continued waving to them.

The bonds they had formed over the past months would not so easily be severed over distance. He knew their feelings were connected, and he knew that they were still standing there waving too, so he continued to wave back long after he couldn't see them.

All he could see now was the golden sea and silvery white snow.

And so, bathed in the embrace of a warm, gentle light, the curtain fell on the legend of the Blue Knight.

The Last Scene to You

“The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight, Part 2.”

The play being held in the Kisshouharukaze High School gym was nearing its end and the finale was just about to begin. The backstage crew who’d been working hard all this time now kicked it into high gear to make everything perfect for the final scene.

“Where’s Harumi-chan?!”

“She’s in position! She’s ready to go whenever!”

“Has the lighting been changed to the evening color?! Don’t screw this up now!”

“We’re good!”

“Where’s Satomi-kun?”

“He’s already gone up!”

They all wanted their perfect play to have a perfect ending.

The curtain was about to rise on the finale. Harumi, playing the part of the Silver Princess, was standing by on the side of the stage.

“That’s strange... What’s happening to me...?”

With the last scene almost upon her, she was unable to hide her nervousness. She put her hand on her chest and took several deep breaths, but that wasn’t enough to calm her nerves. Powerful emotions were welling up inside of her and she was struggling to keep them under control.

“All I have to do is act like I always do...”

This hadn’t happened before. She had no problems pulling off the scene during practice, and she hadn’t panicked during the last play like this. Being together with Koutarou always put her at ease.

“Why am I suddenly so anxious about seeing Satomi-kun? It wasn’t like this a moment ago...”

But now, all of a sudden, Harumi was starting to feel nervous about meeting Koutarou on stage. When she thought about standing before him, her feelings ran wild. It wasn’t like they’d had a fight, and it wasn’t like she’d had a change of heart. Nothing was seemingly out of the normal, but for some reason, she just couldn’t act normal.

“What should I do...? I-It’s starting...”

Despite Koutarou’s existence making her feel at ease just a moment ago, she now felt the opposite. It was like her emotions had been turned inside out, and she was now feeling very insecure.

“Sorry I’m a bit late!”

Theia, playing the part of the Golden Princess, finally arrived. In the last scene, the Silver Princess and the Golden Princess would be seeing the Blue Knight off. Harumi, Theia, and Koutarou would be the only ones on stage.

Theiamillis-san... She’s already gotten into her role...

Tears were streaming down Theia’s cheeks. She was already in character before even getting up on stage. Harumi was impressed.

If I use my feelings too, I can...

Inspired by Theia, Harumi decided to give herself over to her emotions as well, and let those guide her acting. In the script, the Silver Princess bid the Blue Knight farewell knowing that she would likely never see him again. So Harumi believed she could use these nervous feelings inside her to portray that unease well.

“Okay...”

Setting her mind to that, Harumi began feeling a little better. She was still anxious, but not about her acting.

“Harumi-chan, Theia-chan, you’re on! We’re raising the curtain!”

That was when the drama club president gave everyone involved the go-ahead for the scene. The curtain rose and a red light shone down on the

meadow set. On the opposite end of the stage was a large stand with Koutarou at the very top of it. In this scene, the Blue Knight was supposed to be looking down at the two princesses from the top of a hill.

“Ah...”

The moment Harumi looked up at Koutarou, all of the anxiousness in her chest vanished. Just like it had with Alaia on that day.

When Harumi and Theia appeared on the stage, Koutarou was reminded of the real Alaia and Charl. Harumi didn’t have silver hair and Theia wasn’t as small as Charl. There was also a big difference in the clothes they were wearing. But the atmosphere was the same. It felt right. And looking down at them now, memories of that day filled Koutarou’s heart. It was such a profound feeling that he almost believed if he just closed his eyes now, he would be right back there with them.

“Layous-sama!”

“Blue Knight!”

And that feeling grew even stronger when he heard their voices.

“Koutarou-sama!”

“Blue Knight!”

Harumi and Theia began overlapping with Alaia and Charl in his eyes. Especially when he heard Harumi’s voice call out for Layous-sama.

Just what... am I seeing...?

Was it a fantasy of his memories? Or had Signaltin, which was hanging from his waist, responded to his feelings? There was no way of knowing.

“Empress Alaia! Princess Charl!”

The only thing Koutarou knew for sure was that the words he spoke now were not from the script, but from his heart.

I... I really, really loved them...

And as Koutarou reconfirmed his own feelings, the sight in front of him

greatly changed. Before he knew it, the stage had changed into a real meadow. The swaying grasses reflected the red evening sun with a golden sheen and a strong wind blew overhead. It wasn't just his sight that was affected. He could feel the wind and smell the grass. It was all the same as it was that day.

Pure white snow was falling from above. Catching the light of the evening sun, it gave off a silvery sheen in beautiful contrast with the golden meadow.

"Goodbye, Empress Alaia! Princess Charl!"

Koutarou was no longer sure where he was. Was he on the stage? In a dream? Or had he really returned? Whichever it was, he didn't mind. He was getting to see two people he thought he'd never meet again.

"Don't cry, Blue Knight! You're a man, aren't you?!"

Tears naturally began overflowing from Koutarou's eyes. Charl scolded him for it, but Koutarou couldn't help it.

"Blue Knight! Play with me if we meet again! Stay well!"

Charl cried too and waved her hand just like she had that day. This was exactly how he'd bid Charl farewell.

"Koutarou-samaaaaa!"

Alaia too called out to Koutarou with a nostalgic voice and a nostalgic smile. She spread her arms out and reached up towards Koutarou. It was as if she was trying to embrace him as he gradually moved further away.

"Even if we are separated by endless time and immeasurable distance..."

She spoke the words that never reached Koutarou's ears that day over the engine noise of the Cradle. But he was hearing them now. He was incredibly surprised, and he reflexively leaned in so as not to miss a single word that fell from Alaia's lips. He would engrave every word into his heart.

"These feelings will always be with you!"

That was the message from the past that had travelled through endless time and immeasurable distance to reach him.

The curtain fell on the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess with a thunderous applause from the audience.

It may have taken two thousand years, but Koutarou was finally able to hear Alaia’s heartfelt farewell.



Afterword

Long time no see everyone. It's the author, Takehaya.

This time I have managed to safely deliver *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* volume 8.5, "The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight, Part Two." I am grateful to everyone for picking it up.

The contents of this volume are the direct continuation of volume 7.5. It's the equivalent of the manuscript that Theia wrote in volume 7, and the second half of the legend of the Blue Knight. Perhaps it could be called the Koutarou arc.

There are several highlights in this volume, but one of the biggest might be the appearance of the dragon. The dragon is sort of a cliche in fantasy stories, but in a novel with some sci-fi elements, there couldn't just randomly be a dragon for no reason. It had to make sense in context to some degree. As to how to write that in, that left me scratching my head for a while.

In terms of biology, a creature like a dragon has a rather peculiar anatomy. There are two classic elements of a dragon that are really hard to rationalize. One is that they can fly despite their size and weight, and the second is that they can breathe fire.

There have been examples of large flying creatures on Earth as well, such as the pterosaur. Specimens as large as ten meters have been found. So it might be easy to think that dragons of that size would be able to fly as well, but that's not how it really works. The pterosaur was incredibly light, weighing only between twenty to thirty kilograms. Despite its large size, it was only about as heavy as a large dog. That's what let them fly. But when thinking about a dragon, it's hard to imagine them weighing anything less than a hundred kilograms. With such a powerful, gigantic figure, they would likely weigh in in the tons. And when looking at your standard dragon bosses in games, those would probably be more in the double-digit tonnage. So with that in mind, there's really just no way that they'd be able to create enough lift with their wings to get off the ground.

As far as breathing fire is concerned, however, that's where things really get into the realm of fantasy. There are creatures on Earth that can spew out chemicals at high temperatures, but that still caps out at around the 100 degrees Celsius mark. Since the creature has to withstand the heat themselves when spewing the chemicals, it makes sense that 100 degrees or so would be the limit. Something in the creature's body would also have to be capable of producing such heat, and the rest of the body would have to be heat resistant. Then there's the question if whether or not something like that could naturally evolve. If you can't imagine it, believe me when I say the odds on that are really, really low. To complicate things more, there are also dragons that can spew all kinds of things from blizzards to poison gas to electricity. In fantasy works, an even larger variety of dragons appear. So assuming that each of those dragons naturally evolved from different paths and then that they all just coincidentally exist in the same time period seems a little too forced.

So that's what was troubling me. In the end, I decided to make the entire species magical. Their bodies aren't much different from a dinosaur's, but they're born with strong magical power. Using that power, they would be able to fly even if it was impossible otherwise and shoot magical attacks from their mouths. With that, I didn't have to worry too much about the science of it, and it wasn't an issue since magic already exists in this world. And from there, I reached the conclusion that intelligent specimens would be able to use magic just like anyone else.

In a normal fantasy, I think it's perfectly fine for dragons to have flame sacs or electricity sacs. It makes sense if that's how the gods of the world designed them. Once *Rokujouma* has concluded, maybe I'll try my hand at a normal fantasy. I'm starting to feel like it would be a lot of fun to write. Of course, that will be much later. Probably.

I've just about run out of space now, so I think I'll wrap this afterword up here. I would like to extend my warmest thanks to everyone at the editorial department; to Poco-san for always drawing such cute illustrations; to my friends for always going out with me for a drink when I get stuck on something; and to everyone who bought this book.

Then let us meet again in the afterword of volume 9.

October, 2011

Takehaya

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

The Reborn Forthorthian Army

An Oath and an Insignia

Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya

The Holy Sword

The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight

The Golden Sea and Silvery White Snow

The Last Scene to You

Afterword

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 8.5

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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