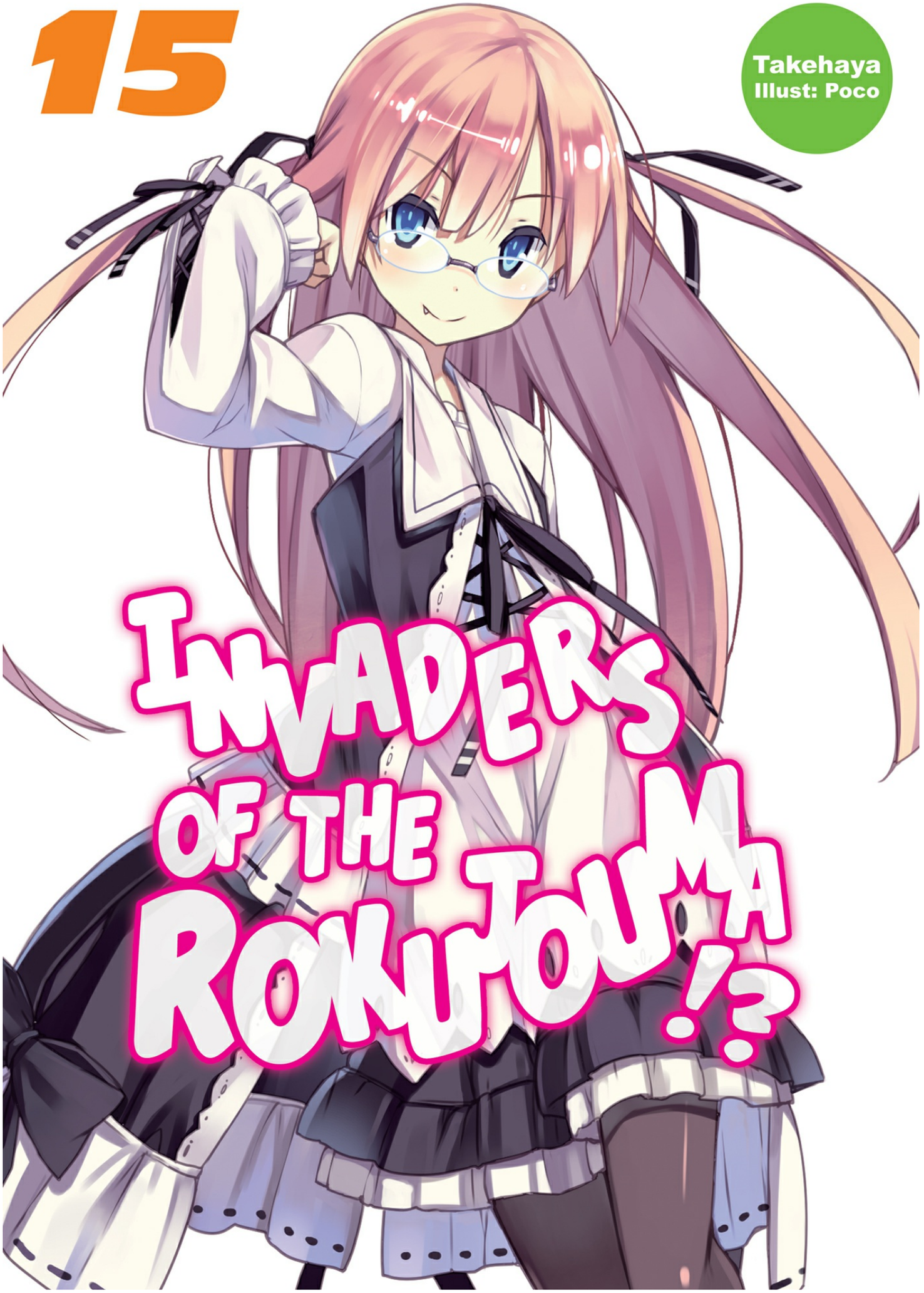
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Takehaya
Illust: Poco



Invaders of the Rokujouma!?



INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?

INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 15


BLUE KNIGHT, RAISE THE FLAG!
THE SATOMI BAND OF KNIGHTS SORTIES!
THE ENEMY THIS TIME IS THE UNDERGROUND DWELLERS' RADICAL FACTION!
KIRIHA AND HER SMILE MUST BE PROTECTED!


THAT'S WHEN KIRIHA REALIZED THAT HE WAS REACHING OUT TO HER AND ACCEPTING HER, WEAKNESS AND ALL.
"THANK YOU, KOUTAROU..."

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STUDENTS OF KISSHOUHARUKAZE HIGH SCHOOL



KASAGI SHIZUKA
Unquestionably strong.
Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI
Koutarou's childhood and best friend.



SAKURABA HARUMI
The president of the knitting society that Koutarou joins.
She's one year his senior, and a little sickly.



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

RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE

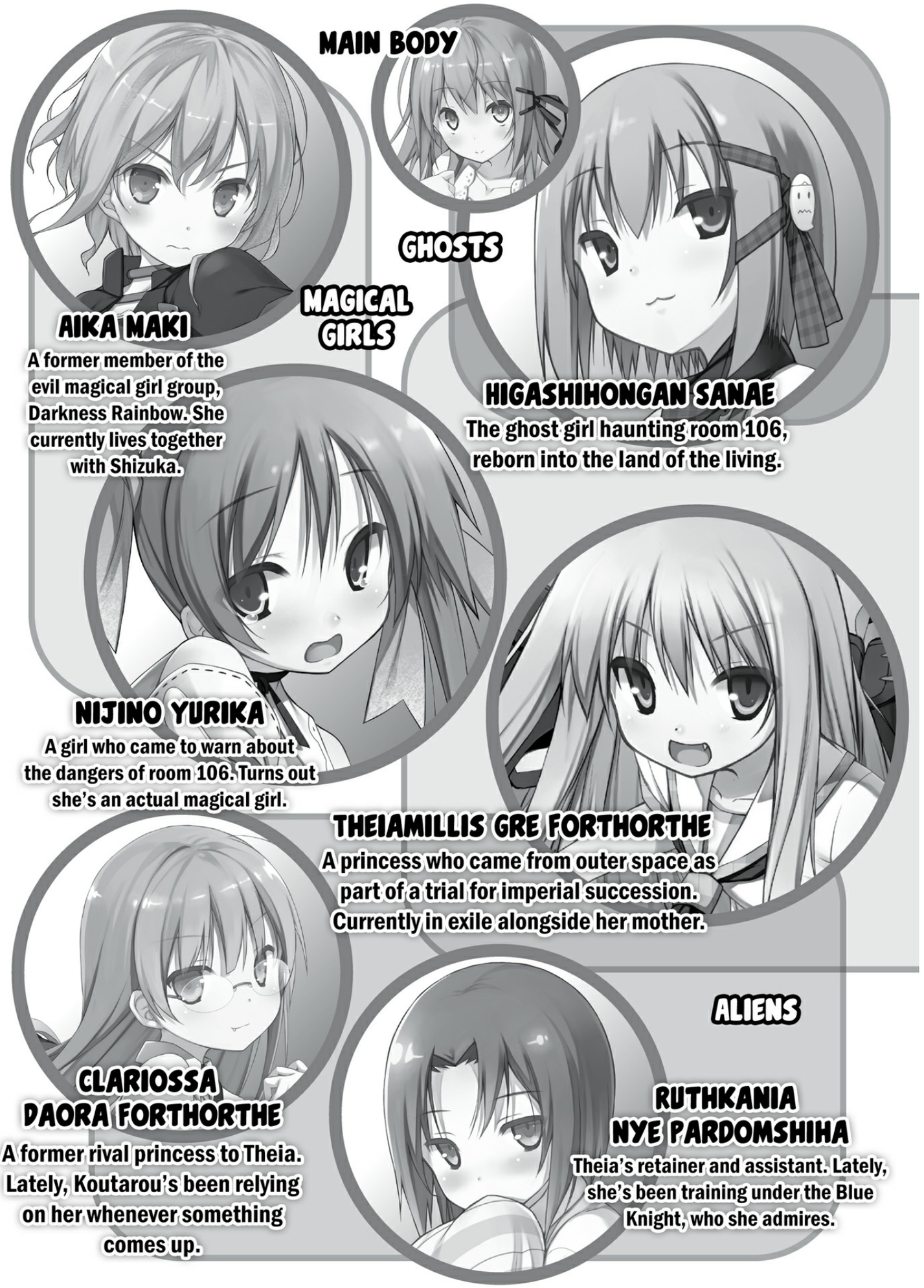
UNDERGROUND DWELLERS



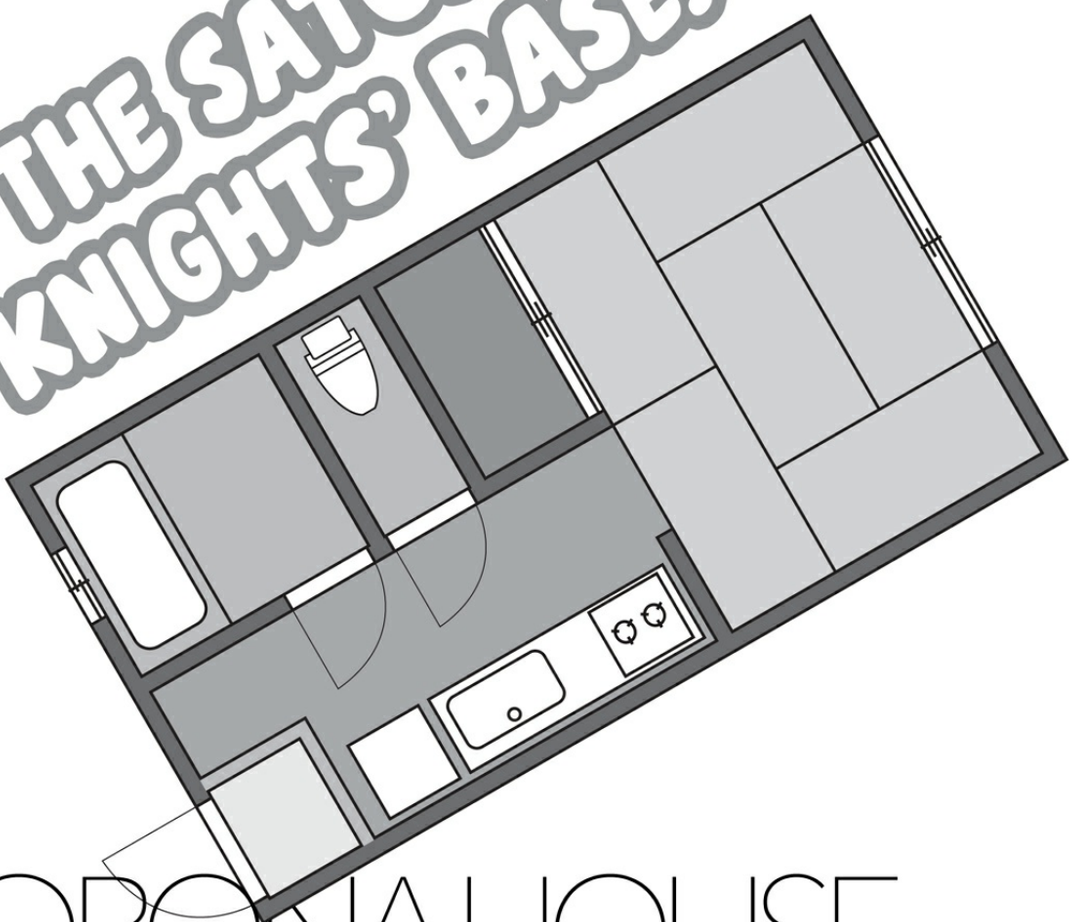
KURANO KIRIHA
A crafty woman who pretended to be plotting to invade the surface while searching for the person she loved.

INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?

FACTIONS MAP


MAIN BODY
GHOSTS
MAGICAL GIRLS
AIKA MAKI
A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. She currently lives together with Shizuka.
HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE
The ghost girl haunting room 106, reborn into the land of the living.
NIJINO YURIKA
A girl who came to warn about the dangers of room 106. Turns out she's an actual magical girl.
THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE
A princess who came from outer space as part of a trial for imperial succession. Currently in exile alongside her mother.
ALIENS
CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE
A former rival princess to Theia. Lately, Koutarou's been relying on her whenever something comes up.
RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA
Theia's retainer and assistant. Lately, she's been training under the Blue Knight, who she admires.

THE SATOMI KNIGHTS' BASE!



CORONA HOUSE

ROOM 106

Kiriha's Now

Friday, July 2nd

The girl known as Kurano Kiriha was very domestic and tolerant by nature. But that wasn't all there was to her. Not even close. For, you see, she was also the commander of the underground people's invasion force.

That being said, Kiriha's planned invasion for the surface was a peaceful one. Apart from creating fake identities and other paperwork for her people, almost all of their so-called invasion was being done through legal means. Moreover, they were taking proactive roles in the community and making friends with the locals. In other words, Kiriha's invasion was designed to cause as few problems as possible for the surface dwellers. If anything, it was more like an immigration than an invasion.

The reason they'd chosen to take such a roundabout way to invade was largely because they didn't like relying on force. They had been unjustly chased out from their homeland in the past, and they had no intention of putting anyone else through that kind of horror. It was a matter of both humanity and honor. In the end, Kiriha's people—the People of the Earth—were a very proud tribe.

But there was also another reason the underground dwellers wanted to avoid an invasion by force. The truth was that their population was in decline, and things were growing serious. In essence, the invasion was do or die for them. That's why they had to pull it off the first time without fail. Kiriha's peaceful invasion was a sure and steady answer to that.

If they tried to invade by force, they would probably be able to take some land. They had enough power for that, certainly. But they would immediately be branded as terrorists. There would be no hope in forming a working relationship with the surface dwellers, making long-term conflict and violent territorial disputes only a matter of course. And since the underground dwellers

didn’t have the numbers to sustain that kind of war, it would eventually spell their demise. Defending their pride by reclaiming their ancient homeland would ultimately do them no good if it only put them on the road to ruin.

However, the People of the Earth were not united on this matter. In addition to the conservative faction that Kiriha belonged to, there was a group of underground dwellers known as the radical faction that advocated for a violent surface invasion.

Why should the noble People of the Earth have to kowtow to the very people who once chased them from their homelands? Especially considering that they were far more advanced as a civilization. Retaking their homes through military force was only just, and being ruled by the superior People of the Earth would be best for the surface dwellers too. Or, at least, that’s how the radical faction saw it. The radical faction largely consisted of militants who had come together over the grudge they held about the past. They very much so lived up to the stereotypical evil persona most people associated with invaders from the underground.

But fortunately, their numbers were few. The conservative faction in power far outnumbered them, meaning they rarely if ever had the political platform to act on their plans. But if the radical faction went rogue and enacted a large military operation on their own, the people on the surface would counterattack, unable to distinguish between the underground dwellers of the conservative and radical factions. If that happened, everything would go just like the radical faction wanted. That was why Kiriha always kept a vigilant eye on their movements.

Kiriha was currently in her base constructed underneath room 106, facing her computer. On the screen was her father, Kurano Daiha, who lived back home in their underground city. She had called him in order to exchange information.

“...And that’s the report I’ve received. Kiriha, it seems like what you predicted before is becoming reality, and there’s not much time. It took us so long to notice... we might be too late.”

“Who could have known that magicians from straight out of a fairy tale really

existed, much less that they're working with the radical faction?"

The information Daiha had all supported what Kiriha already suspected. The radical faction had been operating in the shadows for a while now. They had begun rapidly gathering talent and capital, giving the conservative faction reason to believe they were up to something big. They just couldn't tell what. Every time they tried investigating what the radical faction was planning, information would suddenly become scarce or mysteriously disappear on its way back. As the tribe chieftain, Daiha had quite an extensive network of connections, but not even he could manage to find a concrete lead. As a result, though it was quite obvious that the radicals were preparing for something, the conservatives were still in the dark.

"And considering that not even you could find anything, chief, it is very possible that a magician is intervening."

"Hmm, there is certainly enough circumstantial evidence... But that would also mean that top-secret information is being shared with the magicians. And I find it hard to believe that information is the only thing they'd share..."

The fact that they couldn't find any leads whatsoever when it was so obvious that something big was going on was indeed proof in and of itself that funny business was afoot. Even the best information network in the world wouldn't be able to intercept magical communication. And that raised another point of concern. If the radicals were willing to trust the magicians with critical information, that was further proof of their alliance. There was no longer any doubt that they were working together.

"Then you're worried cutting-edge spiritual technology is being leaked to the magicians?"

"I don't want to believe it, but... it seems like a model of that prototype you brought us is being mass-produced."

That was the only piece of physical evidence they had in the puzzle: the artificial arm that Maya left behind after her last battle with Koutarou and the others. Kiriha had taken it to the underground and left it with scientists from the conservative faction for analysis. They carefully studied its capabilities, and since it was a prototype, estimated the specs for the potential finished product.

They estimated the number of them that could be produced with funding from a third party, and the strength of a military force equipped with them. None of it boded well.

“Then we can assume that this weapon is being shared with the magicians, and that the radical faction is getting equally powerful magical weapons in return. Seeing how we have no protection against magic, this could prove fatal for us, chief.”

“Robotic soldiers powered by spiritual energy attacking us using magical weapons, huh...?”

“We’re attempting to contact magicians here on the surface as well, but there’s no time. We should work under the assumption that we will have to deal with this ourselves.”

“We realized it all too late... I’m afraid there might be no other way, Kiriha. The People of the Earth may be forced to consider a large-scale battle, no... a civil war.”

Daiha looked mortified on the other side of Kiriha’s monitor. He and the others of the conservative faction would be forced to prepare for battle. But such actions were against their morals, making it feel like they’d already been defeated in a way.

“Chief, is there really no way to avoid a war?”

Kiriha had logically reached the same conclusion her father had, but even then, she still didn’t want it to be true. She wanted to avoid a scenario where her own people were forced to shed each other’s blood.

“We will attempt to avoid it at all costs, but we still need to prepare for the possibility. And with the way things are, just preparing for battle might be enough to provoke it.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but the option for dialogue must be kept on the table.”

Kiriha knew why Daiha was readying for war. That he was obligated to prepare for the worst case scenario. But she still didn’t want things to go down that way. She wanted both sides to be able to reach some kind of agreement

through negotiation. Through conversation. It was Kiriha's wish that things would come to a peaceful end—something she'd wanted ever since she first came to the surface herself.

"You're right. I will try to keep it that way."

Hearing Kiriha's powerful words and seeing her resolute expression, Daiha realized just how much his daughter had grown.

My little crybaby Kii... all of a sudden seems just like her mother...

It was both reassuring and lonely. There was a part of every father that never wanted their daughter to grow up. But Daiha also wanted to sit down with this new, strong daughter of his and talk about all kinds of things they never could have before, including how much she'd grown. And that could only happen once this was resolved and things were peaceful again.

"Kiriha, I'll be sending up more manpower for you. You need to strengthen your own defenses."

"That won't be necessary; we have enough here. Please use all available personnel there. In order to prevent this war, I'm sure you will need as much help as you can get on your end."

"I'm not making this decision as your father. You'll need help in trying to prevent this war too, and I need to know that you're safe. I can't afford to lose you."

"Then instead of personnel, please send up the heavy combat module that was being developed for Karama and Korama."

"If it worked as intended, then it would indeed be more than enough for you to protect yourself... but it's not completed. The spiritual energy required to operate it is unrealistic. Even if I send it up, it won't be of any use to you."

"I have an idea as to how to supply the necessary energy. I should be able to get it activated."

"Understood. We won't be able to finish it in time to make use of it here, so I'll send it up to you."

"Thank you very much, chief."

There, their discussion stopped. The information exchange was over. That was when Daiha's expression loosened up and returned to that of a father's as he smiled at Kiriha.

"One last thing, Kiriha..."

"Yes."

"Do not—under any circumstances—die."

Daiha felt a stinging pain in his chest when he recalled his wife's funeral even now. He didn't want to have to go through the same thing for his daughter. He would have preferred to keep her at his side, but he had no commander more capable than she was. She was the only one that could lead the surface operation, which left him feeling anxious.

"I am not alone anymore. So I'll be fine, father."

Kiriha was keen and insightful. She knew exactly how her father felt. So before she hung up, she gave him a reassuring smile that only a daughter could.

Kiriha normally returned to room 106 with a confident smile, but it was somewhat forced today. She wasn't her usual self after hearing that things with the radical faction were on the verge of exploding. She couldn't help imagining the worst, and it showed on her face. Though she was incredibly mature, she was still only a teenager. She couldn't keep everything inside.

"...What are you doing, Satomi Koutarou?"

Koutarou was currently playing with that Kiriha's cheeks.

"Nothing in particular. I just suddenly wanted to see you make a silly face."

He would pull on them or push them together, creating one weird expression after another on Kiriha's rather adult face.

"Yeah, the more beautiful the face, the funnier this looks."

"Koutarou..."

"Kiriha-san, I know you can do everything on your own, but don't try to carry all of the burden yourself. If you need to, you can rely on us. Worrying like that

is a shame with this pretty face of yours.”

Koutarou was playing around with Kiriha’s face because he was concerned about her. She always wore a smile and kept things from showing, so for him to be able to tell that something was wrong now, he knew it must be bad. And that didn’t please him one bit. He always wanted her to be smiling, whether Kiriha’s teasing smirk or Kii’s pure and earnest grin. Both versions of her deserved to be happy.

“Treating me like that... I might just break down and cry right here and now.”

Koutarou’s feelings were conveyed to Kiriha, and her expression eased up a little. She was happy that there was someone that understood her. Even more so since it was the boy she loved.

“That’s fine. As long as you return to the normal you afterwards.”

“Those are big words, Koutarou.”

Kiriha’s smile turned into a mischievous one. She looked like she might have actually started crying depending on Koutarou’s reply.



“How do I put this...? I can’t just sit still when you and the others aren’t... you know... yourselves.”

Koutarou spoke honestly, though he couldn’t help feeling embarrassed it since it wasn’t something that he would ordinarily say. Ever since talking to Kenji, Koutarou had a much better understanding of what the girls of room 106 meant to him. Their happiness was the bare minimum Koutarou required to be happy too. Even if he was embarrassed to admit it.

“I love you, Kiriha!”

That was when Sanae abruptly ran over and hugged Kiriha from behind. She wrapped her arms around her neck like she normally did with Koutarou. Of course, she was smiling the same way she did with Koutarou, too.

“What are you up to all of a sudden, Sanae?”

Since Sanae was behind her, Kiriha gently stroked Sanae’s arms instead of turning to look at her as she asked Sanae that question.

“Nothing. I just thought I should tell you loud and clear.”

That alone was enough for Kiriha to understand her. Kiriha’s warmth gently wrapped around Sanae, and in return, she hugged Kiriha even tighter.

“Thank you, Sanae. I love you too.”

“Heeheehee. Love is all, after all!”

“That’s true. You’re very right.”

“If you’re ever in trouble, you can rely on yours truly: Sanae-chan, the angel of love!”

“Heh, I’ll do just that.”

Sanae’s simple, straightforward love and concern helped Kiriha return to her usual self.

Looks like I don’t have to be the one that steps up to the plate anymore.

Koutarou flashed a small smile and decided to leave the rest to Sanae. He was troubled when Kiriha wasn’t herself, but so was everyone else. Koutarou wasn’t the only one that wanted to cheer her up, and he could count on the other girls

to help with that.

“Here you go, Satomi-kun.”

“Thank you very much, Sakuraba-senpai.”

A cup of tea was set on the table in front of Koutarou. Seeing Koutarou’s exchange with the other girls, Harumi figured they all might be in need of some tea soon.

“Still, I’m impressed you noticed that Kiriha-san was feeling down.”

Harumi sipped on her own tea as she smiled at Koutarou, feeling admiration for him. He’d picked up on Kiriha’s emotions before she had herself.

“Kiriha-san is normally so calm and composed that seeing her make a face like that told me just how out of sorts she really was.”

“I see... That might be one side to it.”

Satisfied, Harumi nodded and her smile grew brighter. She loved people who could be kind to anyone, so that was something she greatly respected.

“You’re wrong, Sakuraba-senpai.”

However, Yurika—who was sitting next to Koutarou—objected. She pouted and stared at him with a grudge in her eyes.

“Satomi-san just dotes on Kiriha-san.”

“That’s not my intention.”

“You’re lying. You’re never nice to *me* like that.”

“That’s not true.”

Hearing Yurika’s accusation, Koutarou sprung into action right away.

“Wah!”

Koutarou grabbed Yurika, forcibly pulled her over to him, and began playing with her cheeks just like he had with Kiriha. Her indignantly puffed-up cheeks quickly deflated in his hands as he worked them like clay.

“See? I’m happy to do this for you too. There. Take that.”

“Y-You’re just playing with me! Do it when I’m feeling down, please!”

“But you only get upset over trivial stuff. Like forgetting to buy some manga or breaking a plate. I can’t comfort you every time.”

“Those aren’t trivial! They’re big deals to me!”

“I don’t care.”

Yurika made her displeasure clear, but Koutarou only continued playing with her cheeks.

The truth is that this is your fault too, Yurika. You always try to solve your real problems by yourself...

Despite what Koutarou was saying, he treasured Yurika. Playing with her cheeks was proof of that.

“Jeez! You’re always bullying me, Satomi-san! You only do the mean stuff to me!”

Yurika continued to frown with dissatisfaction.

Can’t you just be a little nicer?!

The truth was that Yurika knew that Koutarou treasured her. But her outlook on men and women was a bit old-fashioned, so she had complaints about how Koutarou showed his affection.

“Oh? What’s that? I never do anything nice for you, huh?”

“You’re not going to fool me anymore!”

“I see. What a shame... I even got you some new instant noodles.”

“Instant noodles?!”

However, her anger didn’t last for long. All traces of it vanished from her face as her greediness took over.

“I-I won’t be fooled by a single cup!”

She at least tried to resist, but the way she snuck glances at Koutarou told him she’d already been swayed.

“It’s not just one. Since you’ve been working so hard on your studies lately, I bought all three new flavors.”

“Satomi-san, you bully... Why didn’t you just say so from the start? Jeez!”

Yurika began pouting once more. As a reward for her recent efforts in her studies, Koutarou had bought three different flavors of her favorite food. Though the question remained as to whether or not instant noodles were fit to be given as a gift, if he’d just told her that he’d gotten them for her at the start, things would have played out just as Yurika had hoped. But he hadn’t for the explicit purpose of teasing her, which was what upset her now.

Why doesn’t Satomi-san just act like a proper boyfriend— Wait, a b-b-boyfriend?!

“Huwah?! Auuuuugh!”

Yurika was at a loss for words when she realized what she wanted of Koutarou.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

She turned red and started to fidget violently.

Then a k-ki... Aaaaahh!

She was desperate to escape the unimaginable thought that had popped into her head.

Yurika didn’t calm down until well after Koutarou had given her the bag with the instant noodles in it. She was now sitting facing the wall, closely hugging the bag of noodles and mumbling about something.

“What’s up with her...?”

“Just leave her be for a while, Satomi-kun.”

Koutarou was perplexed by Yurika’s actions. But Shizuka, who had been cheerfully watching the two of them, stopped him from trying to talk to her about it. She knew how Yurika felt and would have loved to hear how their conversation played out, but thought better of it. She didn’t want to see Yurika driven further into a corner, which is why she stopped Koutarou from making things worse.

“You should learn a thing or two about women, you know.”

“I’m painfully aware of that.”

Koutarou obediently returned to the tea table. He’d heard the same thing from his best friend, Kenji, more than once before, so he decided to take a hint. He’d probably done something wrong.

“Oh?”

When he returned to the table, Koutarou picked up his cup to sip on some tea. Realizing it was empty, however, he called out to Ruth for a second helping.

“Ruth-san, can I please have some more tea?”

Since Ruth was getting more tea for Theia anyway, he thought it wouldn’t be too much of an imposition to ask her for some too.

“...”

However, Ruth didn’t respond. The room was small and she was standing nearly right in front of him. There was practically no way she hadn’t heard him, yet she remained silent. She just continued to pour tea without turning to look at Koutarou. She was quite clearly ignoring him. Shizuka, who realized what was going on, snickered and nudged Koutarou with her elbow.

“Satomi-kun, is she doing that thing again?”

“Huh? That thing? Oh...”

Koutarou realized it too once Shizuka pointed it out, and reluctantly tried again.

“Lady Ruthkania Nye Pardomshiha, vice captain of the Satomi band of knights, pour me another cup of tea.”

“As you wish, Master! Right away!”

Ruth, who had been ignoring him just a moment ago, now cheerfully complied with his request. Her eyes were sparkling as she happily poured him tea. She even brought some snacks without being asked.

“Things sure have gotten confusing...”

Feeling a headache coming on, Koutarou pressed a hand against his forehead.

Ever since Koutarou had formed his band of knights, Ruth wanted him to call

her by her official title from time to time. She also wanted him to give her orders. In other words, she was excited to indulge in her role as vice captain.

“By the way, Koutarou, I’d like a minute with you.”

That was when Theia approached Koutarou. After sitting down next to him, she presented him with a small paper bag.

“Here. Today’s salary. Consider it a gracious gift from your lord.”

Inside the bag was money, and a tidy sum at that... which was equally as headache-inducing as Ruth’s behavior for Koutarou.

“Theia, I told you that I don’t need a salary.”

Just like Ruth wanted Koutarou to give her orders as his vice captain, Theia wanted to give him a salary as his princess. But Koutarou was Theia’s knight, and he had chosen to be so without there being money involved. He certainly didn’t want it getting in the way of their relationship now, which was why he was reluctant to accept the bag filled with his pay.

“I don’t take orders from you! It’s a princess’s job to pay her knights! So just let me act like a princess every once in a while, would you?!”

Theia had built a relationship with Koutarou as a normal girl. But from time to time, she wanted to feel like a princess. Paying him a salary was part of that.

“Hey now...”

“Besides, what inconvenience is there if you hold on to my money?”

Theia thought of herself, Koutarou, and Ruth as a family. She didn’t see any issue with money flowing between them. To her, paying Koutarou was about the gesture.

“Okay, well... why not do it at the end of each month instead? It must be a pain doing this daily for you too.”

Theia just wanted to play knight and princess. The money didn’t actually matter. Once he understood that, he gave up on objecting. It was true that he was her retainer, after all. But even if he was willing to acquiesce to her paying him, doing it every day was a little much.

“No! I don’t want to!”

However, Theia adamantly rejected the idea. Her beautiful golden hair flipped about as she shook her head fervently.

“I want to pay you every day! I want to feel like a princess every day!”

She was like a child demanding a toy. Seeing that, Koutarou lost all motivation.

“...You’re an idiot, aren’t you?”

“You mean: ‘You’re an idiot, my beloved Princess Theiamillis.’”

“So you’re admitting being an idiot?”

“If that’s what it takes. This is my hobby.”

“Okay, okay... You really are a pain. But I humbly accept, my princess.”

Koutarou gave in and took the paper bag. When he did, Theia covered her mouth and laughed elegantly. It seemed like she was satisfied.

“Ohohoho! Very good! Very good indeed, my knight!”

“Well, it’s not like I don’t understand how you feel...”

Koutarou smiled wryly before the high-spirited Theia. He too had a hobby that confounded others—beetle hunting—so if that was how she felt about it, he wouldn’t hold it against her. He also believed she had a secondary goal in mind.

“Then...”

Koutarou looked over the small, adorable paper bag...

“Here you are, Aika-san. I’m counting on you.”

And promptly handed it to Maki.

After the band of knights was formed, Maki was put in charge of their finances, which included handling Koutarou’s salary from Theia. Koutarou believed that Theia paying him was also partially so that she could give Maki something to do.

“...”

However, Maki didn’t take the bag from him for some reason. She was

holding an account book and was quietly watching him with sparkling eyes like she was waiting for something.

Koutarou sighed. He could tell what she wanted right away, and reluctantly complied.

“Lady Aika Maki, Indigo Knight of Satomi’s band of knights, balance today’s ledger.”

“Understood, Master!”

Maki seemed quite content as she accepted the bag from Koutarou and cracked opened her account book with a bright smile. Seeing her like that made Koutarou happy too, but he was also confused.

“It looks like you have your hands full, Satomi-kun,” said Shizuka.

“...I don’t understand women at all...”

Beetles and Sun Rangers

Saturday, July 3rd

When Koutarou invited Yurika to join them for some beetle hunting, she immediately declined. She didn't like exercising and hated the heat. Yet for some reason, when the day rolled around, Yurika was tromping up the mountain right along with everyone else. She was in such poor shape that she was out of breath almost as soon as they started up the mountain path, and had taken up a position as the slow-moving, whining caboose of the group.

"Wh-Why did I... have to come too?"

"You're already a couch potato as it is. And ever since you started studying, you never go outside. If you don't move your body every now and then, you'll really regret it. Use it or lose it, you know."

"I'd rather... be reading my manga... than be exercising."

"Quit complaining and follow me."

"O-Okay!"

Yurika's profound discontent seemed to vanish in the blink of an eye when Koutarou said that.

He wants me to go with him. I'd follow you anywhere, Satomi-san... Heeheehee!

He hadn't meant it quite how Yurika had taken it, but it was enough to improve her mood.

"Oh Satomi-san, despite what you say, you just can't bear being without me. Jeez, you..."

Yurika put her hands on her cheeks and began squirming. Koutarou, however, simply kept walking and left her behind. She wasn't the only one he was worried about.

“You too, Clan. You’re about as out of shape as Yurika since you keep yourself locked up in your lab all the time. You’re not allowed to fly today.”

Koutarou was as worried about her health as he was Yurika’s. Much like Yurika, Clan also lived as she pleased. Though she’d been showing consideration for others as of late, she was lacking in consideration for herself. That’s why Koutarou took it upon himself to keep an eye on her.

“I-I know. I understand how these things go.”

The same as Yurika, Clan was out of breath. She was wearing easy-to-move-in summer clothes and carrying her bug net. She actually looked rather nice, but even dressed for the occasion, she was still a sheltered princess. She’d run out of stamina long before they reached their intended destination.

“In return, once you can’t walk anymore, I’ll carry you like I did before. So go ahead and go all out.”

“You *continue* to tease me!”

Clan furrowed her brows, thinking that she was being made fun of. However, Koutarou was serious.

“I’m not teasing you. I was the one who invited you, so I’ll take responsibility.”

“Y-You better mean that...”

Clan imagined Koutarou carrying her like he had in the past and blushed. But because she was already red in the face from exhaustion, Koutarou didn’t notice.

“When you put it like that, I feel a bit embarrassed...”

That was when Harumi, who was walking in front of Koutarou and the others, slowed down to walk next to them and join the conversation.

“It’s okay for you, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“But I’m the only one who has it so easy... I feel badly.”

Harumi had an apologetic look on her face. She was actually wearing a special device, and was using its power to climb the mountain. Its effects were amazing, as she effortlessly climbed up the mountain without using any

stamina. That was why she felt bad for Clan when she herself had it so easy.

“Having a weak constitution is different from being out of shape. You’re allowed to use things to make your life easier. It’s not cheating when you do it.”

“H-He’s right... You should conserve your strength and save it for something you really want to do.”

Both Koutarou and Clan thought this was the way things should be. After all, without the device, Harumi wouldn’t have even been able to come on the beetle hunt with them.

“You’re both so very kind... Thank you. I’ll do just that.”

Moved by their words, tears formed in Harumi’s eyes as she bowed deeply to them. Clan, who still wasn’t used to being complimented or thanked, quickly changed the subject to hide her embarrassment.

“S-So how does the PAF feel?”

The PAF, or Power Assistance Field, was the name of the device Harumi was using. It was something Clan had invented just for her. The technology was based on the personal barriers that Clan and Theia used for self-defense. It covered Harumi’s body with a weak barrier, and as she moved, it altered its shape in real time to assist her. As a result, Harumi was several times stronger than normal and was able to move so lightly it was almost like she had sprouted wings. Thanks to the barrier’s support, she was still full of energy and going strong.

Functionally, it worked like the power assist in Koutarou’s armor, but recreated the effect with a barrier. Being just a barrier, however, its capabilities were far inferior to Koutarou’s armor. The output was weaker and the real time transformation of the barrier was slow due to the complicated program required to operate it. However, the PAF had one clear advantage over Koutarou’s armor.

The main unit of the PAF, a modified barrier generation device, was so small that it could easily be attached to Harumi’s belt. Thanks to that, it was discreet and she could carry it with her at all times. It could also be easily be turned on or off with the flick of a switch. On top of that, with its weak output, it could be

used for an entire day without any fear of running out of power. But the most outstanding feature of all was that there was no sign Harumi was using it. In order for the barrier not to stand out, it had been altered to be completely transparent. Thanks to that, Harumi didn't have to worry about being seen using it.

The PAF had been created using ordinary technology, but its applications were anything but. It was powerful, yet blended in seamlessly with everyday life. It was a brilliant invention that spoke to Clan's true genius.

"It's wonderful. My body is so light, and I don't feel tired at all. Even my strength... Look!"

"Whoa!"

Harumi casually hugged Koutarou and easily lifted him up off the ground.

"I can barely feel Satomi-kun's weight. This thing is amazing."

"...This is embarrassing."

"Pardon?"

"Um... This is..."

Harumi was only innocently trying to demonstrate her strength, but Koutarou's words made her realize what she was really doing. Her eyes shot wide open in surprise and her face gradually turned red. She was hugging Koutarou.

"I-I-I'm sorry! I was so happy, it just kind of happened!"

"No... I don't really mind..."

Harumi hurriedly let go of Koutarou and looked down on the ground abashedly. Harumi had feelings for Koutarou, certainly, but she didn't do well when it came to expressing them.

"I'm glad... that there aren't any problems. If there's something that bothers you... let me know right away. There's always... room for improvement."

Clan flashed a slight smile and lent Harumi a hand by changing the topic again. She may have been out of breath, but she still had her wits about her.

“Okay. Thank you again, Clan-san.”

Harumi recovered a bit and smiled. Seeing that, Koutarou was relieved. He was always worried he’d done something wrong when she got so bashful. To give her a moment to herself, Koutarou turned to Clan.

“By the way, Clan...”

“What?”

“What is that thing Sakuraba-senpai is using called again?”

“The PAF.”

“Ah, right, that’s it. Well, about the PAF, I think you should put some proper research into it and sell it in Forthorthe.”

“Sell it?”

Clan’s eyes opened wide. The idea of selling one of her inventions had never crossed her mind before. She would research what she wanted and use her inventions as she pleased. That was how she’d always done things, and why Koutarou’s words stumped her.

“Yeah. That way you can help not only people with weak bodies like Sakuraba-senpai, but the elderly and handicapped as well.”

“I can... help others...?”

Since Clan had always been alone, she had a hard time imagining what it was like to help others. It was just another side effect of the sheltered way she’d lived her life.

“That’s right. You could make a big contribution to society. Just like your grandmother did.”

“Veltlion...”

But by the time Koutarou mentioned her grandmother, Clan had made up her mind. Years ago when Clan’s grandmother died, she’d arranged for her entire fortune to be given to charity. And when Clan realized she might be able to contribute to the greater good in a similar way, she grew eager to research applications for the PAF.

“That’s a wonderful idea! I will help as a test subject, Clan-san!”

As Clan made up her mind, Harumi, who had now recovered from her embarrassment, offered her assistance. Since she was born with a weak constitution, Harumi could imagine just how many people Clan’s PAF might be able to help if it were widely available. She thought it would be better for Clan’s invention to be shared with the world than keeping it to herself.

“Harumi... thank you. I’ll be counting on you...”

Harumi’s offer put a smile on Clan’s face. She likely wouldn’t really be able to contribute much considering Clan’s resources, but even then, it made Clan happy. She felt reassured just knowing she’d have the support of a friend.

“But you don’t have much common sense when it comes to money, so don’t make it too expensive.”

“I already know that!”

“Then I’m sure you’ll make a ton of people happy. With their support, you’ll be one step closer to being empress.”

“Huh...?”

Clan’s eyes opened even wider than before. She couldn’t believe what Koutarou had just said.

“Veltlion, you wouldn’t mind if I become empress instead of Theiamillis-san?!” she asked in a fluster.

Koutarou was Theia’s vassal. Because of that, he should be rooting for Theia to become empress by default. But that’s wasn’t what it sounded like.

“The people should come first, right? That’s why the most suitable person should become empress. Compared to that, who I serve doesn’t matter.”

Koutarou thought that much was a given. While it was true that he had become Theia’s vassal, he knew that wasn’t necessarily related to her potential as an empress. If Theia became empress but wasn’t cut out for the job, it would be the people that suffered for it. And Koutarou thought their happiness mattered more than who became empress.

“The future will decide whether you or Theia is the most suited for the

throne.”

“...As expected of the Blue Knight, you’re strict,” Clan said with a sigh and a wry smile.

Koutarou was quick to correct mistakes, even if it was his lord who had erred. That was his way of showing his loyalty. Always pushing for the path of righteousness would make him the ideal ally of the royal families. The embodiment of Alaia’s ideals, he was a vassal far tougher than almost any foe.

“Being the Blue Knight’s got nothing to do with it.”

“I wonder how many knights there are in this age that could declare that...”

Clan was as amazed as she was pleased by Koutarou’s stout, knightly behavior, though she kept that second part secret.

Veltlion wishes for me to be a worthy princess...

Koutarou thought that the most worthy princess between Theia and Clan should become empress. To Clan, that meant he wanted her to become a princess worthy of the honor.

Most of the group thought it was a good thing Harumi had the PAF to assist her, but a certain someone looked none too pleased.

“...Unfair. Harumi always gets the fun stuff. Hey, hey, Glasses! Make me something like that too!”

It was Sanae. She didn’t have any complaints about Harumi using the PAF, but it looked like fun and she wanted to try it too. She sidled right up to Clan, her eyes sparkling.

“S-Sanae, you don’t need it...”

Despite being pressured by Sanae, Clan managed to shake her head.

“What does it matter? Don’t be so stingy. Just make one for me too.”

“But you can do it yourself, can’t you?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You could just do the same thing with your psychic powers. You cover your

body with spiritual energy and use your powers to move it.”

“Ah, I see! You’re so smart, Glasses! I’ll give it a try!”

Once she understood how the PAF worked, Sanae smiled and slapped her hands together.

“Transformation! Kabutonga!”

She then struck a heroic transformation pose. To her, the PAF was more or less just a tool to transform into a superhero.

“Amazing! Sanae-chan is glowing!”

“Behold the power of a maiden!”

Sanae proudly puffed out her chest. A faint glow similar to a firefly’s was radiating off of her body. It was the light of the spiritual energy she’d gathered.

“Sanae, hold back a little more so you don’t glow. You stand out like a sore thumb.”

“Ah, right. Like this?”

“Yeah, that looks good.”

As Sanae restricted her spiritual energy, the glow faded away. But even though it was no longer visible, there was still a barrier of spiritual energy enveloping her body.

“Take this!”

“Eeeeek!”

Sanae wrapped her arms around the nearby Yurika. While she was waifish, she weighed close to 50 kilograms with everything she was wearing and carrying. But Sanae easily lifted her up, something ordinarily unthinkable considering Sanae’s physique.

“Satomi-kun, did you... just see that?”

“Y-Yeah... Sanae, you...”

Shizuka and Koutarou were both at a loss for words. But rather than over Sanae being able to pick up Yurika, they were stunned by the amount of

spiritual energy she'd emitted just before.

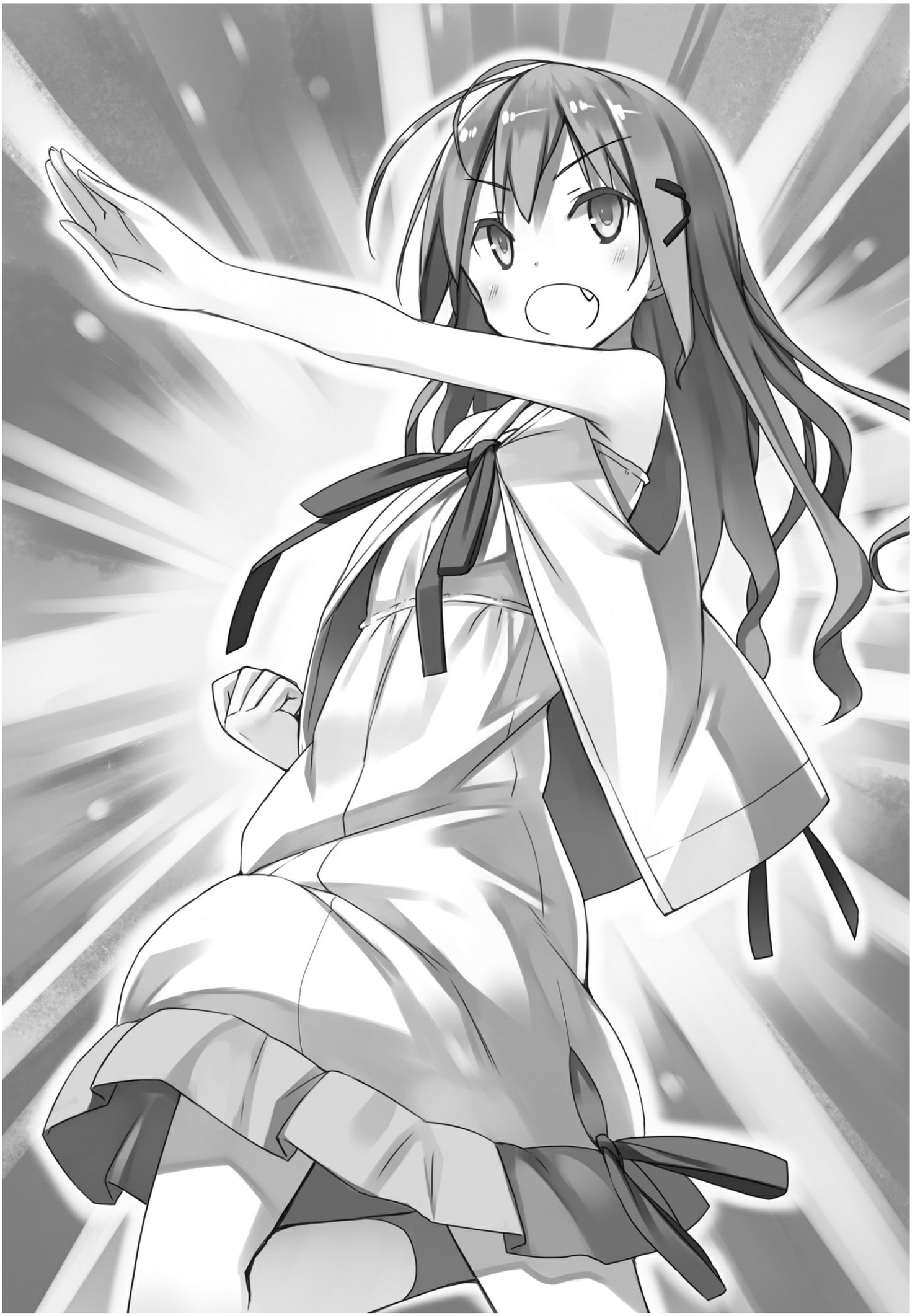
Normally, people couldn't see spiritual energy the same as they couldn't see ghosts. Only those with talent, like Koutarou or Shizuka, could see such things. So if normal people like Yurika and Clan had been able to see it, that meant she'd gathered so much spiritual energy that it had been converted into light. In other words, it defied the laws of physics.

Since Koutarou and Shizuka could see spiritual energy, they could always see the spiritual energy that Sanae was controlling with their own eyes. That was why they were especially surprised to see the light she'd given off.

"Ow!"

"Oh, sorry, Yurika. I didn't think there would be branches overhead."

"Please look before you lift me up!"



“Does it hurt?”

“Of course it hurts!”

Sanae had just done something astounding, yet she was completely unaware of it. She was just casually chatting away with Yurika.

“So this is what an abuse of power looks like...”

“Nuh-uh!”

“Kabutonga Sanae has turned on her friends!”

“You were just being careless!”

As he was watching Sanae and Yurika, half in surprise and half in amazement, Koutarou caught a glimpse of something flashing out of the corner of his eye.

“That’s...”

When he turned to look, he saw Kiriha standing there. She was staring at a trading card in her hand. It had a reflective surface, and Koutarou had seen it glinting in the sun.

Seeing that Kiriha was looking at her card, Koutarou walked over to her.

“You’re still carrying that thing around?”

“It is my... No, it’s Kii’s treasure, after all.”

With everyone else focused on Sanae and Yurika, nobody was paying attention to Koutarou and Kiriha. That’s why she was willing to bring up the past from ten, almost eleven years ago now.

“Then keep it tucked away somewhere safe.”

“Are you embarrassed?”

“...Yeah.”

Koutarou nodded, his cheeks slightly pink. Kiriha cheerfully smiled in response.

“When I’m looking at this card, it’s like I’m confessing my love to Onii-chan, after all.”

That was exactly why Koutarou was embarrassed. When they first met, she told Koutarou that the trading card was a precious memento from the past. She even told him that she'd gotten it from her first love. But it wasn't until earlier this year that he learned that it was actually he himself who'd given it to her during his travels through the past. As a result, he knew all too well what kind of emotions Kiriha was feeling when she was looking at that card.

"If you get it, then put it away."

"Okay. I'm a good woman, so I won't do anything that would trouble you, Onii-chan."

While Kiriha happily looked at Koutarou's nervous expression, she slid the Kabutonga card back into her pocket. She then turned the fond gaze she'd been staring at the card with on Koutarou.

"H-Hey..."

"Heehee..."

Kiriha no longer needed to pour her emotions into that card. Since the person her feelings were meant for was now standing right in front of her, she didn't hesitate to redirect them right at him. But that gaze—her eyes full of love and trust—made Koutarou even more nervous than before.

I give up... Well, I guess I should call the end results good...

Koutarou had brought Kiriha with him on the beetle hunt because she hadn't been able to get any rest lately with her problems back home taking up all of her time. He wanted her to forget about all of that for a day and just take it easy.

"Now that I think about it, we walked all over the mountain just the two of us ten years ago as well."

"That's true. But we're looking for beetles today, not stars."

"I'm sure we'll find lots of them. We even found the star, after all."

"I hope so..."

Kiriha smiled and took Koutarou's hand, both the same way she had ten years ago. Koutarou was embarrassed, but if this was the price for that smile of hers,

he was happy to pay it. He quietly held her hand in return.

Koutarou knew a good spot for hunting beetles from his experience as a kid. It was a secret location that had been passed down to the local children from the older kids. And it seemed it was still teeming with life after all this time. Within just a few minutes of arriving, he'd already caught their first beetle.

"Looks like there are still plenty around here."

Koutarou was holding his freshly caught beetle and happily looking around the area. The woods were lit up by the bright summer sun and looked so very alive and green. The wind passed through the trees, rustling their branches and carrying with it the distinct smell of the forest. The mountain woods that Koutarou had grown so accustomed to in his youth welcomed him back this year like he'd never been gone.

"All right, on to the next one!"

Koutarou sprung into action looking for his next catch. But after taking two, three steps he realized he should probably put away the beetle he just captured.

"Here, Satomi-kun."

And as if waiting for that moment to come, the insect cage that Koutarou called Henrietta appeared before him.

"Oh?"

"You need this, right?"

Maki was the one who had presented the cage to him. She opened it with a smile like she was waiting for Koutarou to put the beetle inside.

"Thank you, Aika-san."

"You're welcome."

After Koutarou put the beetle in the cage, Maki swiftly closed the lid. Then after hanging the cage over one of her shoulders by its strap, she reached into her pocket.

“Aika-san, the insect—”

“Here.”

As Koutarou was about to enter the thick of the forest, he wanted the insect repellent. But before he could even finish asking for it, Maki had already put it in his hand. It was as if she’d known what he was going to ask for without him having to say anything at all.

“...Aika-san, you still really get me, don’t you?”

Koutarou felt admiration for Maki as he accepted the spray from her. In the past, she was always able to anticipate what he was going to do and stay a step ahead of him. But now the contract between them had been annulled and they no longer shared a magical bond. That should have been the end of their near-psychic mental connection. And it seemed like it was for a time, but Maki was able to read him like a book now.

“I’ve started to understand again recently. I wonder why...”

Maki didn’t really know how she knew, but she felt like she always knew what Koutarou wanted. It was almost like the contract had been recreated.

But I’m kind of happy about this...

There were two reasons Maki was able to anticipate Koutarou’s actions again.

The first was because they were very compatible with one another to begin with. Maki had loved Koutarou all along even without the influence of the contract, so her bond with him had endured the annulment. It had just been temporarily thrown out of whack because of the unease she felt. Who she was, whether or not she really belonged—doubts like that blinded Maki and isolated her. If that had never been cleared up, she likely never would have regained her connection with Koutarou.

So essentially, getting her confidence back was the second reason. What was responsible for that was the recent establishment of the Satomi band of knights. That provided Maki with a clear sense of who she was and where she belonged. Thanks to that, she had returned to her normal self and once again had a connection with Koutarou that allowed her to anticipate his needs.

This is probably what it's like to have a soul mate...

Maki didn't know the details of how their connection had been reestablished, but it made her happy.

"It's probably because I'm so simple."

"Please don't ruin my dreams. I'd prefer to think there's a more romantic reason."

"Sorry, I don't understand romance," Koutarou said with a shrug and an awkward smile.

"You really don't?" she said with a giggle.

Seeing Maki look up at him the way she did, Koutarou's hand moved by reflex.

"I really don't. Not in the slightest."

He put his hand on top of Maki and gently patted her head.

"So you really *do* get it, jeez..."

Koutarou claimed that he didn't understand, yet he had done exactly what Maki wished for. It felt like their hearts were properly reaching one another now. She couldn't have been happier. She felt like she might just melt from the warmth she was feeling from Koutarou's hand.

In total there were eight people out on the beetle hunt: Koutarou, Sanae, Kiriha, Yurika, Harumi, Clan, Maki, and Shizuka. The two that weren't present, Theia and Ruth, were out by the station. They supposedly had some important business to attend to.

Three hours had elapsed since they first set out, from morning to noon, and they'd gotten quite a haul so far. In total, they'd collected twenty-four beetles, an average of three per hunter. Of course, it didn't actually work out that way. The most a single person had caught was seven, and the least was zero. The group was currently in the middle of showing off their catches.

"I-I couldn't even get a single one..."

"Ohoho, there's no need to feel so down, Yurika. I will give you my Kabutonga

No. 2.”

“That’s not what I meant, that’s not... Augh...”

Yurika hadn’t caught a single beetle. She could have caught as many as she wanted with magic, but the results from attempting to capture beetles using just her own strength was a big fat zero.

Sanae, who was consoling Yurika, had caught five. She’d gotten the most out of the girls. Since she was able to detect the unique auras of beetles, she had no trouble finding them. If she’d caught every single one she found, she would have been first on the leaderboard by a large margin.

“Harumi, how did the controls feel when catching the bugs?”

“It was a little difficult. Because of the barrier, it felt like my fingers were bigger than normal.”

“Hmm... In order to perform any delicate work or precise tasks, the barrier might need to vary in thickness.”

“Ah, what a wonderful idea. I think that would help a lot. It would be very useful when doing things like housework.”

Harumi and Clan had caught one and two beetles respectively. But they were more interested in testing out the PAF, so they’d spent most of their time performing adjustments and discussing ideas. But they still had three beetles between the two of them, which wasn’t a bad result at all. Combined with all the data they’d collected, it had been quite a productive morning for them.

“Kasagi-san, I’m amazed you can pluck flying beetles out of the air.”

“I can as long as they’re not female.”

“Why not female?”

“Without the horn, don’t you think they look like cockroaches? Especially when they’re flying...”

“Ahaha, I can see that.”

Using her physical strength, Shizuka could catch beetles where the other girls couldn’t. She’d collected a total of four, with her most impressive catch being

jumping up to snatch an airborne one midflight—a feat applauded by everyone.

Maki had caught two. She'd spent all of her time helping Koutarou, so it was more accurate to say she'd had two beetles put in her cage. Considering she hadn't actively been trying to catch any, however, it wasn't a poor result.

"My, seven beetles... As expected from my Onii-chan."

"Kii, how many did you get?"

"Three. I really can't catch them like you can."

"Catching three with your method is really impressive."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, you did great."

"Heehee..."

Koutarou had caught seven, the most out of everyone in the group. Even combining his and Maki's, their average beetle count worked out to four and a half—less than Sanae's five. On top of that, Sanae had been the one telling people where all the beetles were, so Koutarou felt like she was the true victor.

Last but not least, Kiriha had caught three beetles, the group average. Using her sharp observation skills, she captured all the beetles that had managed to escape from the others.

"All right, this one looks good."

"What are you going to do with that beetle?"

"This one is the largest, so I figured I'll give it to Clan."

"You're giving it to Onee-chan? Why?"

"She wants to show Earth's beetles to the kids on the spaceship. So I figure the bigger the better."

"How wonderful. Then I'll contribute this female beetle. She's the biggest of the bunch too."

"That sounds good. I'm sure Clan and the kids will love it."

"I'm sure they will."

Smiling and nodding at each other, Koutarou and Kiriha walked over to Clan.

In the end, Koutarou and the others released most of the beetles. They only needed a couple for Clan to show the children and a couple for Koutarou to keep. In total they kept four: two pairs of male and female. After taking a picture of the rest, the remaining twenty were set free for the local children to capture whenever they visited next.

“If we sold them, we’d at least get some money...”

Yurika shed bitter tears as she watched beetles flying away. To her, the beetles looked like 500 yen coins flying into the forest.

“Nijino Yurika, are you really that poor?”

“There’s so much manga I want... ahh... Look at that money just flying right out of our hands...”

“How pitiable. To think this is one of Rainbow Heart’s archwizards...”

Maki, standing next to Yurika, held her head in pain. Her rival’s patheticness hurt her sense of pride as a magical girl. Yurika’s predecessor, Nana, was a noble enemy that Maki could really respect... unlike Yurika.

“Yurika-chan, in that case, why don’t you join Satomi-kun’s band of knights?” suggested Shizuka.

Shizuka thought of Koutarou as Yurika’s legal guardian. Considering Yurika’s personality, he was basically the only one who could handle her. She also thought it was good for Koutarou to have to take care of someone like a troublesome little sister. She felt like it was a win-win situation for both of them.

“That’s right. You’ll get a salary, so you can use that to buy manga,” added Sanae.

Yurika’s salary as a magical girl was docked to pay for repairs on a building she had destroyed in the past, which Sanae had no sympathy for. But Sanae didn’t want to see her friend skimping on food to buy manga, only to eventually starve to death. Since she believed Koutarou would be willing to help her out, she pushed for Yurika to join his band of knights. She had no concern whatsoever

for the dignity or the image of the group.

“But, but... if I rely any more on Satomi-san, he’ll never see me as a woman...”

“It’s okay. Koutarou never saw you as a woman to begin with.”

“That’s not okay at all!”

Yurika and the others continued to talk about anything and everything completely unrelated to beetles. Koutarou was idly watching them chatting away from a distance, but was suddenly reminded that there was something that had been on his mind.

“Clan, do you have a moment?”

“What is it?”

Clan was currently looking into the cage containing the large beetles, smiling as she imagined what kind of reactions the children on the spaceship would have when they saw them. But when Koutarou spoke her name, she looked up right away.

“Is it something important?”

“Yeah.”

As they locked eyes with each other, both of their expressions turned serious. It made the gravity of what they had to discuss quite clear. As a result, nearby Kiriha and Harumi both looked at each other, wondering what was about to happen.

“I want you to tell me about Theia’s father.”

“Theiamillis-san’s...”

In that moment, Clan’s expression turned stiff. Koutarou had brought up something far more serious than she’d expected.

“Elle said that he died in an accident, but was it really just an accident?”

A while back, Elfaria had told Koutarou that Theia’s father had died before she was born. Koutarou had just assumed it was an accident of some kind, but after spending some time thinking about it, he began wondering if there was more to the story.

Elfaria had taken a stance on disarmament, and her fiancé had died before their wedding. Considering her political situation twenty years ago and the timing of the “accident,” Koutarou couldn’t shake the bad feeling he had about it.

If he asked Elfaria directly, she would probably laugh it off and say that he was overthinking it. That’s why he wanted to ask Clan, someone impartial from a different political faction.

Fortunately, neither Theia nor Ruth were there. The only ones present were the tight-lipped Kiriha and Harumi, both of whom he trusted and would go to for advice. It was the perfect opportunity to ask Clan about the details.

“...No way...”

Harumi’s eyes opened wide in horror. She was so big-hearted that just hearing that Theia had lost her father was enough to pain her. Seeing her like that, Kiriha silently put her hand on her shoulder.

“Kurano-san...”

Feeling Kiriha’s hand, Harumi collected herself. If Koutarou brought this up with the two of them present, it probably meant it was something he wanted them to hear. She knew she couldn’t get emotional. She had to stay alert and listen with an open mind.

“In regards to that, I don’t have all the details. My answer contains some speculation on my part. Do you still want to hear it?”

Clan spoke with a rather grave look on her face. It was an expression she rarely showed recently—that of a princess facing something serious.

“Yeah, please tell me. It’s important.”

Koutarou was the same way. Rather than a high school student, he looked like the Blue Knight right now. That was just how serious the matter at hand was.

“According to the information that the Schweiger family has, the military was particularly active before and after the accident.”

In the past, Theia and Elfaria were Clan’s political rivals. That’s why she had a lot of information about them, and that included information about Elfaria’s

past.

“Back then, Elfaria-san’s platform was starting to gain some traction just as she ascended the throne. Public opinion was on her side, and she was about to take her policy on disarmament to the next step. She was going marry a finance bigshot that kept away from the military on purpose in order to make her position clear. It would also give her a stronger backing in the financial world.”

“So two anti-military proponents were going to marry and amplify each other’s influence...”

“At the very least, that’s what we believe. Creating an alliance like that was necessary in order to stop the military from taking over. Elfaria-san never had the time to find her own happiness...”

“Just like Empress Alaia...”

“So it seems...”

Clan looked down sadly. As a woman, she understood how Elfaria felt about marriage. And since she knew exactly who it was Elfaria really had feelings for, she was painfully aware of how hard things must have been for her.

“But that would have been very inconvenient for the military.”

It was there that Kiriha entered the conversation. At the mention of Alaia’s name, Koutarou and Clan had fallen silent, so Kiriha urged them on. Since this was something they didn’t want Yurika and the others to overhear, they needed to be quick about it. Accordingly, Clan picked up the slack right away.

“Indeed. That’s why they tried intervening using all kinds of methods. They bribed her fiancé’s subordinates and dug up dirt on anyone involved... whether it was true or not. The media ate up one scandalous story after another.”

“Ridiculous... Is that what has become of Forthorthe’s Imperial Army?”

Koutarou ground his teeth. He was actually angry for once. He had a hard time accepting that the noble Imperial Army he’d fought alongside two thousand years ago had fallen so low.

“That must be exactly why Empress Elfaria was advocating disarmament. To return the military to the way it was as you knew it, Satomi-kun...”

Harumi was in tears. She had inherited Alaia's memories, so this felt very near and dear to her. She couldn't stop crying when she thought of how Elfaria and Alaia must have felt.

"And that was around the time the traffic accident in question happened."

"Clan, that means... That accident was..."

"...Yes. The Schweiger family believes it was a plot by the military."

Clan was from the Schweiger family, a royal family distinct from the Mastir family that Theia and Elfaria hailed from. As such, she had access to different connections and information networks. With what they were able to learn, the Schweiger family reached the conclusion that the death of Elfaria's fiancé was actually an assassination orchestrated by the military and disguised as a traffic accident.

At the time, Elfaria's disarmament was seeing some success, and the people thought highly of their new empress. If the military let Elfaria get any further in her plans, it would hamstring their power and cut them off from the weapons, funding, and powerful connections they needed. To the military—which had already absorbed part of the industrial sector and was developing on its own—that was unacceptable. So they did everything they could to get in Elfaria's way. Yet even then, she didn't relent or back down. Regardless of how much they threw at her, Elfaria stuck to her guns and continued to advocate for disarmament.

Unable to stop the empress any other way, the military finally resorted to desperate, forceful measures. That meant the assassination of Elfaria's fiancé. If they couldn't stop her directly, they would take out her weaker partner. He was a civilian and had a naive outlook on his physical and political safety. On top of that, with his death, the military could stop two powerful factions from uniting against them. He was an easy and effective target.

"While it's impossible to say for certain, the Schweiger family has operated on the assumption that that's what happened ever since."

Kiriha continued where Clan left off, "And considering that there hasn't been anything to disprove it since, that assumption is most likely the truth or very close to it."

“That’s right, Kii,” said Clan, nodding in response. “There’s no real, physical evidence. But the circumstantial evidence that has built up over the years all points towards an assassination.”

“An assassination...”

Harumi struggled to find words. She’d experience something similar, both through the plays and through Alaia’s memories. She was sympathetically aggrieved, and a silent anger over why something so unjust was allowed to happen began brewing inside her.

“That’s all I needed to hear about the accident. But that leads me to my next question. Why did Elle give birth to Theia through artificial insemination?”

Koutarou was angry too. A fierce rage burned in his eyes. He felt a certain duty to keep the military from running amok. The Blue Knight slumbering within Koutarou was about to awaken.

“This is just a guess, but... I believe it was meant as a countermeasure against further assassinations. In fact, there haven’t been any more attempts since Theia was born. It also allowed her to maintain her connection with the disarmament faction within the financial world.”

The Schweiger family figured there were two primary reasons why Elfaria had a child with her late fiancé.

The first reason was an expression of will, to show that assassinations were useless. With fertilized eggs preserved, even repeated assassinations wouldn’t stop her. It was pointless to target her relatives and loved ones. If they were going to go after someone, it would have to be Elfaria herself. And even if they did target Elfaria, it wouldn’t be the end of the Mastir lineage. The Schweiger family believed Elfaria had Theia to demonstrate that to the military. Whether it had an effect or not remained unclear, but they believed there had been no assassination attempts attributable to the military since then.

The second reason was to strengthen her connection with the disarmament faction in the financial world. That was originally meant to happen through marriage, but with her fiancé dead, her only way to still have a familial connection with them was through a child. Thankfully that was possible through artificial insemination, and she was still able to have the relationship with the

disarmament faction the way she wanted. With Theia's birth, both sides worked harder than ever to achieve their goals.

That also had a secondary, rather unexpected, effect. Since Elfaria stayed unmarried after losing her fiancé and even bore his child, the citizenry saw her as loyal and unwavering. She captured their hearts, and her already high approval rate skyrocketed.

So in the long run, the military's plot to stop Elfaria backfired. When all was said and done, she had more support and momentum than ever before. With that kind of power, even the military had a hard time raising a word against her. Even the tabloids fell silent. They would have to lie low for quite some time before making their next move.

"So Elle did all of that to hold back the military..."

Elfaria had to use marriage as a political tool, and she hadn't given birth to Theia out of love. She had to have known that what she was doing wasn't right; the girl that Koutarou met back then was no fool. But Forthorthe's military had grown so powerful that she was left with no other choice in order to try and stop them.

"Now, after almost two decades, they're finally stirring again. They've likely been waiting all this time to pull their most recent stunt in Forthorthe."

"So she only managed to buy a few years..."

"Elfaria-san has likely walked a very precarious and dangerous path to get to where she is now. So much so that her marriage wouldn't have made a difference."

Clan looked down once more. A year ago, she felt nothing over Elfaria's fate, yet it weighed on her heavily now. The current Clan knew how painful her journey had been, and how much Elfaria had been forced to sacrifice to get here.

"So this is what she had to do to keep the country from turning rotten, huh?"

"In the end, she's no different from Alaia-san. She had no choice but to continue fighting without any concern for her own happiness."

“And that’s what she’s been doing for the last two decades...”

The problems surrounding Theia and Elfaria were deeply rooted and many years in the making. And now they’d been chased away from their own country and were living on the outskirts of space. It was only a matter of time before the military came up with some crime to frame them for.

I have to protect them... Theia, Elle, and Forthorthe.

But just like Elfaria, Koutarou had no intention of shying away or backing down. Despite what hardship may lie ahead, he would power his way through all of it. He wanted to see each of the girls live their lives happily. That was why he was standing here now. It was the reason he’d left Alaia behind and returned to the present age.

Koutarou and the others left the mountain shortly after they released their extra beetles. While summer had really only just gotten started, it still got dreadfully hot in the afternoon. Calling it a day before it became too much to bear was an iron rule when it came to fun beetle hunting.

“Sanae, it’s too hot.”

“It is not.”

“You’re too heavy.”

“I am not.”

“Get off. This isn’t something you do after a beetle hunt in the summer.”

“Consider it a test of your love. If you really don’t like me, then put me down.”

“Good grief, fine...”

Koutarou was making his way down the mountain with one of the girls on his back. The original plan was for him to carry Clan, but for some reason, Sanae had gotten on his back instead like it was her prerogative to do so. She didn’t seem to mind the summer heat and firmly clung to his back like she always did. Koutarou didn’t have any intention of forcibly shaking her off, so he just let her do as she pleased.

“I wish I could be that forthcoming...”

Harumi was mumbling to herself as she watched Koutarou and Sanae from behind. She wasn't good at expressing her feelings, which was why she felt a little envious of the straightforward Sanae.

"Sanae has been like that ever since they met. It's sort of a perk of hers. It's not something the rest of us can really emulate," said Kiriha in response to Harumi's mumbling.

"You mean... ever since she was a ghost?"

"Indeed. But Sanae isn't the only one who has perks, now is she?"

Kiriha smiled as she said that. Kiriha's perk was the trading card she carried. Or rather, what it embodied: her past and her bond with Koutarou.

"Perks...?"

"Your perk would be the knitting society, right, Sakuraba-senpai?" chimed in Yurika.

With a cheerful smile, she leaned in and gently nudged Harumi with her elbow. She was officially a member of the knitting society too, but she was careful not to get in the way. She knew that the knitting society was a special excuse for Harumi to be alone with Koutarou.



“N-Nijino-san!” Harumi shrieked.

“There’s no need to be embarrassed. Everyone already knows,” Yurika replied.

“Heh, in terms of perks, Yurika-chan is the real winner,” interjected Shizuka.

“Huh? I am?”

Yurika blinked repeatedly in confusion. After giggling a little, Shizuka explained herself.

“Whenever Satomi-kun is about to start something, he always invites you first, Yurika-chan.”

“And I always suffer for it! That’s not a perk at all!”

“It’s a luxury, Nijino Yurika.”

“You too, Maki-chan?! You’re wrong! You’re all wrong! A perk is supposed to be something nice! Something warm and fuzzy! Being picked on all the time is *not* a perk!”

Koutarou and the others continued to descend the mountain laughing and chatting. It was just another fun summer day, but they knew exactly how valuable that was. They all secretly prayed for days like this to continue forever.

Little did they know there were those intent on making sure that didn’t happen. The first ones to notice that were the two haniwas that served Kiriha.

“Ho, ho no! This is bad, ho!”

“Sorry for intruding on your fun, Ane-san! Ho!”

Karama and Korama had been using camouflage to keep themselves hidden up until now. But when they sensed something approaching—something unusual—they revealed themselves to Koutarou and the others.

“We’re picking up a reaction on the spiritual energy sensor, ho! The reaction is weak, but it’s most likely another sensor, ho!”

“Two hundred meters out and approaching! Coming from straight ahead! It seems they’re climbing up the mountain path, ho!”

Whoever was approaching was also using spiritual energy technology. In other words, either an underground dweller or someone with connections to them.

“Karama, Korama, Class II Stealth Mode. If necessary, go into sleep mode.”

“Got it, ho!”

“Understood, ho!”

Kiriha swiftly gave Karama and Korama the order to conceal themselves. At this point, Kiriha suspected whoever was approaching was most likely hostile. She had personally forbidden her subordinates from using spiritual energy technology on the surface. Either this was someone defying her direct orders or someone from the radical faction.

“Nee-san, this is strange, ho! Their aura is too unstable! Even if it’s a sensor, it wouldn’t be a very good one, ho!”

“I remember this spiritual pattern, ho! There’s a 90 percent probability it’s that fun group of five we met before, ho!”

“Oh...”

Fortunately, Kiriha’s worries were unfounded. The approaching group were no enemy. They were more of a third party.

Karama and Korama’s warning put Koutarou and the others on edge, but that tension immediately dissolved when they realized who was approaching. Even if they weren’t all that close, it was a relief to see familiar faces.

“It’s just them...”

“Who are they, Satomi-kun?”

“Do you know them, Veltlion?”

The only ones who didn’t recognize the group were Maki and Clan. They looked at the incoming strangers in puzzlement, and turned to Koutarou for answers.

“We met them when we were helping out at a hero show a while back.”

“Ah, I’ve heard Kii mention that before.”

“Then they’re actors?”

“Something like that.”

As Koutarou was explaining how they’d met, the group of five finally noticed Koutarou and the others.

“Hey, Kenichi-niichan, aren’t those people...”

“They are! What an unusual place to meet again...”

“No way! Isn’t that Baron-sama and the others?! Damn, if I’d known they’d be here, I would have put some makeup on!”

“There it is... Megumi’s sickness is acting up again.”

“Megu-chan, you’re beautiful the way you are.”

The group of five eagerly approached Koutarou and the others to greet them. It was almost like they’d run into a group of old friends. Koutarou and the girls responded in kind.

“Long time no see, everyone!”

The bright young man in the front was Kenichi, their leader.

“Thanks for all your advice last year!”

Following right behind him was the shortest of the five, a young boy by the name of Kotaro. He was like Kenichi’s little brother, and the smartest of the group. His hobby was gaming.

“Baaaron-saaamaaa! You look as divine and manly as ever!”

Behind them was the only girl of the group, Megumi, who was simply beaming. She had something of a bad habit of falling in love too easily.

“Megu-chan, you’re drooling! That’s not very ladylike in front of Baron-san!”

The giant chasing after Megumi with a handkerchief was Daisaku. He was a nice guy with a big heart and a big appetite, and sort of watched over the group like a babysitter. Essentially, while Kenichi was the official leader, Daisaku did most of the work.

“Don’t get too carried away, you guys. They’ll take you for country bumpkins.”

The man staring coldly at the rest of the group was Hayato. He liked to act cool, but his penchant for showing off usually ended up backfiring. Being from a village in the mountains, he was actually the biggest country bumpkin of them all.

This group of five was always together. They were coworkers. A team. They were the Sun Rangers of the Sun Squad, rookie superheroes who’d gotten their start two years ago.

“They’re still the same... Hmm?”

Koutarou felt a little nostalgic to see the Sun Rangers acting the same as always, but something seemed different as he watched them run up to him and girls.

What’s this?

Koutarou gave them all a closer look. He quickly put his finger on what had caught his eye. They seemed a lot more sure of themselves than last year.

“Impressive.”

“It looks like they’ve trained quite a bit since we saw them last. It’s almost like they’re completely different people.”

Shizuka had noticed the same thing. It really was like the Sun Rangers had undergone some kind of transformation. They were running with swift, confident steps with great posture, all while in a tight formation. It even looked like they were all in better shape.

And it’s not just the way they look... They’re all watching each other’s backs. Their teamwork has improved considerably. Did they do a lot of training for actual combat?

Koutarou’s intuition told him that they had put up with a lot of unprecedented training for action actors. They seemingly improved their capabilities as soldiers, even though that wasn’t something actors needed. As a result, just the sight of them running was enough to persuade others that they

were heroes. Koutarou was surprised by their ambition.

“It’s been a while, you guys. It looks like all your training’s been paying off.”

“You can tell?!”

Koutarou gave his honest impression, which made Kenichi’s eyes sparkle.

“Yeah, you look totally different. You’ve gotten so much stronger.”

“It’s an honor! We tried our hardest to follow in your footsteps.”

“But Kenichi-niichan, Baron-san really is leagues ahead of us. I can tell just standing here looking at him.”

“But of course! Don’t lump Baron-sama in with other men! We’d never be a match for him after just a little training. Ahh... I hope he’ll use those manly fists on me!”

“Daisaku, it seems like Megumi’s sickness is worse than usual today... What’s going on?”

“Ever since the day we went to Baron-san’s play, her symptoms have gotten worse.”

The Sun Rangers were unable to hide their excitement upon unexpectedly running into Koutarou. But Koutarou wasn’t sure what was going on.

“So, Sun Rangers, what are you doing out here? Is it work? Or are you training?”

When Koutarou asked their leader, Kenichi the Red Shine, what they were doing on the mountain, the Sun Rangers’ excitement died down a little. They waited for Kenichi to answer for the group.

“Well, I can’t go into details, but we’re looking for something in the area.”

The Sun Rangers were a secret organization created by the government to combat invading forces. They had come here today on a mission to find a base belonging to a certain group of invaders. But it wasn’t like they could tell normal civilians that.

“I see. You sure have it hard.”

But Koutarou didn’t think much of it. He figured they were only scouting for a

place to record for their hero show. It was perfectly normal for actors to have to keep things like film locations hush-hush. Kiriha was the only one whose expression stiffened when she heard what Kenichi said.

They're searching the area with a spiritual energy sensor... Could the radical faction be planning something on the surface? Or... though I don't want to believe it, could it be that they already have a base here?

Kiriha alone had realized who the Sun Rangers really were, but unless something major happened, she had no intention of making official contact with them. If possible, she wanted to keep her own identity a secret.

"Karama, maintain stealth mode and follow them. I want to know their objective."

"Understood, ho!"

Seeing no other choice, Kiriha ordered one of her haniwas to follow the Sun Rangers. The chances were high that what they were up to had something to do with the People of the Earth, and that meant it involved her one way or another. Unaware of Kiriha's complex emotions, Koutarou and the Sun Rangers were carefreely chatting away.

"B-By the way, why are you here, Baron-sama?!"

"Megu-chan, calm down a little."

"But, but...! We finally got to see each other again!"

"We're came here for these."

"Beetles?"

"Yeah. We want to show Japan's beetles to the children from Clan's—she's the girl in the glasses over there—country."

"That's wonderful. Looks like you caught some big ones, too."

"Yeah. They're amazing, aren't they?"

"They sure are."

Hearing that Koutarou was out capturing beetles for children from a foreign land, Kenichi's expression brightened up. In a way, all of the Sun Rangers'

battles were against foreign invaders, so if Koutarou was making friends and improving relationships between Japan and the rest of the world, that was better for everyone. Maybe there would even be less fighting in the future. In other words, they shared the same goal. But Koutarou was one step ahead and stopping the fighting before it even started. That's what Kenichi thought was so wonderful.

We should strive to be like that too... And to that end, we have to give it our all now!

In order for them to become like Koutarou, they had to complete the mission in front of them. Determination burned like a fierce fire in Kenichi's eyes.

"Niichan, it's about time we..."

"You're right. Back to the mission, everyone!"

"Whaaat?! I was finally reunited with Baron-sama, and it's going to end without him getting to beat me to a pulp?!"

"You'll have to endure, Megu-chan. Baron-san wouldn't be happy if you abandoned your mission."

"We don't have any time. We can't just sit around here celebrating our reunion."

It wasn't just Kenichi who had renewed his determination. The other four... the other three, rather... shared that same feeling.

"Could I ask you one last thing, Baron-san?"

"What is it, Red Shine?"

"Did you see anything strange while you were out here capturing beetles? Anything at all, even something that may have seemed minor?"

"I... don't really remember anything that stood out. How about you guys?"

Koutarou couldn't recall anything in particular. He turned to the girls, but all seven shook their heads too.

"No one else has either, huh? Sorry we can't be of any help, Red Shine."

"Think nothing of it."

Kenichi didn’t get the information he was hoping for, but he wasn’t discouraged. It seemed the Sun Rangers had trained their minds in addition to their bodies.

“I appreciate your cooperation. I’m also glad we got to see each other again.”

“Me too.”

“Well then, we must be going!”

Kenichi and his four allies saluted in an orderly fashion and left.

“Hey, Koutarou...” Sanae climbed up Koutarou’s back and whispered. “Those guys are strange as ever, but... I think they’ve been through a lot too.”

“Yeah, probably.”

Just like Koutarou and the others had grown, so too had the Sun Rangers. Visibly so. Their figures as they continued to run up the mountain path stood tall and gave off an aura of power and confidence. It was almost as if they were real heroes.

The Surface and the Underground

Saturday, July 3rd

Once the Sun Rangers could no longer be seen, Koutarou and the others began climbing down the mountain again. While they were tired from beetle hunting, the unexpected reunion had left them in high spirits.

“How are you holding up, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“Thank you for worrying about me, Nijino-san, but I’m still going strong thanks to Clan-san’s invention. Thanks to you too, of course, Clan-san.”

“W-We can’t be too overconfident. It’s still just at the prototype stage.”

“Don’t get so embarrassed, Glasses. It’s times like these that you should brag about what you’ve done!”

“By the way, are you fine with leaving the Satomi knights’ uniform to Theia-chan and Ruth-san, Aika-san?”

“Yes. I don’t know anything about Forthorthian fashion, so I think it’s best to leave it to them”

“We’re talking about Theia and Ruth-san here. I have no idea what they’re up to, but it can’t be anything good.”

Kiriha was the only one among them whose expression remained dark. To her, the meeting with the Sun Rangers wasn’t just a reunion. It was an omen. The fact that the Sun Rangers, a surface defense force, were on the move was proof that the radical faction was stirring. That doubt overshadowed all the joy she felt over getting to see them again.

“Nee-san, I got a message from Karama, ho! The Sun Rangers have moved past where we were hunting beetles and are headed deeper into the forest, ho!”

“Have Karama continue following them.”

“Roger!”

While one of the haniwas was keeping an eye on the Sun Rangers, Kiriha planned for the future.

Since they were using a close range spiritual energy sensor, they must be on someone’s trail. They most likely pursued someone after a battle, or they came out here with some kind of a lead...

Kiriha predicted that the Sun Rangers had caught wind that their enemy—the radical faction—was hiding in this area. Her reason for thinking so was their sensor, which was far inferior to the ones the haniwas were equipped with. With its diminished range and accuracy, trying to find something with the sensor alone would be like searching for a needle in a haystack. That had to mean that something led them to the mountain. There was no way they were here by chance.

That was why she’d sent one of her haniwas after them. Karama, who had a superior sensor, might be able to find something before the Sun Rangers could. With the radicals on the move underground, she couldn’t rule out the possibility that they’d made it to the surface as well.

“If we can find them first and make the first move...”

Kiriha normally didn’t like fighting, but it was something she might be forced to do in order to stop the radical faction. The situation had potentially deteriorated to that point. If the radical faction had already built a base on the surface, or if they were in the middle of a large-scale operation, they would likely be past the point of talking things out.

“Nee-san, this is bad, ho!”

“What is it?!”

That threat became all the more real with the bad news from Korama.

“An emergency message from Chief Daiha, ho! Shijima Tayuma has escaped, ho!”

“What?!”

Shijima Tayuma was a leader of the radical faction. As part of the People of

the Earth, he was especially elitist and harbored a lot of hate for the surface dwellers. Last year, Tayuma had tried to enact a military operation on the surface, but was stopped by Kiriha and the others. The ordeal ended with him being sent to prison underground, but he had now apparently escaped. Kiriha knew just what that meant.

As of this very moment, her battle had begun.

The ones responsible for breaking Tayuma out of prison were a young man and woman rarely seen underground. The man was tall and blonde, wore a suit, and had a foreign air about him. The woman had keen eyes and wore a revealing, dark indigo outfit. Since the underground dwellers typically preferred simplicity in their fashion, Tayuma looked very plain standing next to the two of them.

All three of them were on the run after breaking Tayuma out of jail. They were still underground, so the operation wasn't a complete success yet. Currently, they were on standby, hiding in the basement of a certain building while they waited for an escape vehicle to arrive. Though the basement was dim and dirty, it was a welcome respite since it was the first real chance they'd had to rest since fleeing the prison.

"...It's been a while since we last met face to face, indigo warrior."

"Well, getting in touch has been difficult lately."

Tayuma began by addressing the woman. Her name was Maya, and the two of them had been working together for over ten years now. Tayuma ordinarily hated surface dwellers, but Maya was an exception. She was from the lost seventh tribe mentioned in the legends of the People of Earth. In other words, she was technically one of them. That's why Tayuma was willing to cooperate with her.

"So, Maya, who is this man?"

However, Tayuma didn't know the man she was with. Tayuma was adamantly convinced of the superiority of the People of the Earth, and it rankled him to think that he'd been reduced to being saved by a pitiful surface dweller.

“This is Elexis. We became partners a while ago. I can’t go into details, but I can guarantee that he isn’t Japanese.”

“My name is Elexis. It’s a pleasure meeting you, Your Excellency Shijima Tayuma.”

Elexis bowed elegantly. As an experienced businessman, he was quite used to being met with hostility. He wasn’t shaken in the slightest.

“Hrmm...”

“I understand it may be hard for you to accept, but I implore you to consider the bigger picture. It is because of Elexis that we’re able to mass produce weapons. Isn’t it obvious he’s no ordinary man?”

“That’s true... but...”

Maya, Tayuma, and the radical faction backing them were only able to enter the final stages of their plan with Elexis’s support. The machinery he’d brought in was far superior to both what the surface and underground dwellers could get their hands on. Thanks to that, they were able to overcome the technological hurdle in their way and considerably shorten the timeframe it would take to enact their plan.

“And like I said, he’s my partner. Insulting him is the same as insulting me.”

“...I understand. I am sorry, Elexis. I do apologize. I’m quite grateful for your support and cooperation.”

“I’m honored.”

In the end, Tayuma broke. He considered Maya part of the People of the Earth, not to mention she held great power and supported his cause. She was a wonderful ally, and Tayuma had no intention of doing anything to jeopardize that. Besides, Elexis was an outsider with superior technology. He was clearly quite different from the surface-dwelling Japanese that had chased the People of the Earth underground. They were Tayuma’s real enemy, so he saw no point in persecuting Elexis when Maya was willing to vouch for him.

“By the way, how is the factory progressing?”

With the matter of Elexis settled, Tayuma got back down to business. In the

end, the war against the surface was what really mattered to him.

“Everything is going smoothly. About 95 percent of the scheduled production has already been completed, which is why we came to pick you up.”

“That’s much faster than what we expected.”

“We’ll go over the details when we arrive at our destination. It would be better if you see for yourself.”

“Which means that our destination is the factory on the surface?”

“That’s correct. The invincible army awaits you, their commander, there.”

“Wonderful... Now I’ll be able to pull one over on the Kurano family...”

Hearing Maya’s report, Tayuma flashed a twisted grin, a cruel and ugly expression of his envy and hatred.

After escaping the underground, the three of them headed towards the mountains just outside of Kisshouharukaze City. It was where Elexis had erected a base when he first came to Earth, and the simple repair and production facility that he’d brought with him was still there. The radical faction had made it into a full size factory for their own purposes. Tayuma’s first impression upon seeing it was satisfaction.

“Seeing it in person, I must say it’s quite a masterpiece! So this is my army!”

In the factory warehouse were mechanical soldiers that utilized the same technology Maya’s body did, though these constructions weren’t anywhere near as human-looking. Less than half of the total force was in the building, but they still numbered over a thousand units.

“We have already relocated our portion, so the ones remaining here are without a doubt yours,” explained Maya.

“So these will be equipped with your clan’s techniques—I think you called it magic, didn’t you? I can hardly contain myself just imagining the sight of them advancing. So these are the fruits of the true power of the People of the Earth! Muahahaha!” reveled Tayuma.

“Regarding that, the trailers that are transporting the soldiers to our base will

return with that equipment.”

Once the production of the weapons, including the mechanical soldiers, reached 95 percent completion, Darkness Rainbow’s take of the deal was accounted for. After sending that portion to her own base, Maya had gone to rescue Tayuma. She was being cautious and minding the order of operations in this exchange to make sure she wouldn’t suffer any losses even in the event of something unforeseen. The same was true with the magical weapons that Darkness Rainbow was sharing with Tayuma and the radicals. Under the pretext that finding transportation was difficult, Maya had made sure the spiritual weapons she was getting from the underground dwellers were taken to her base first, where they would exchange them for the magical weapons. So while Maya appeared to be cooperating with Tayuma on the surface of things, she was still safeguarding her own interests and profits above all else.

“Once the trailers return with the weapons, all preparations will be complete. Maguz-sama will be pleased.”

There, Tayuma mentioned a strange name. Maguz was the leader of the radical faction, but largely controlled things from the shadows and didn’t make public appearances very often. As a result, even though the conservatives had caught radical soldiers before, they were never able to get much information on their leader. All they knew was the codename Maguz.

“By the way, Tayuma, that’s who requested your rescue.”

“So it really was Maguz-sama... I must send my thanks later.”

“While you’re at it, let them know they got a good deal.”

“Very well. Then I will go report and send my thanks to Maguz-sama right away.”

Tayuma had safely arrived at his base and confirmed the progress at the factory. Everything was in order, so it was now time to get to work. A large-scale attack on the surface was right around the corner.

“Me and Elexis are gonna go perform the final adjustments on *that*.”

“It’s already complete?!”

“I’d say it’s also about 95 percent finished. That’s why we’re making final adjustments.”

“I see, then I’ll leave—”

Tayuma was interrupted by jarring alarm sounding throughout the factory.

“Intruder alert! I repeat: intruder alert! Intruders are believed to have broken past the eastern fence and entered the site! Guards are to find and dispose of these intruders right away!”

“So they’ve made it here, have they? It seems the wretched surface dwellers aren’t all just idiots!”

Tayuma, Maya, and Elexis left the rest of their reports for later and headed straight for the operation room. There was no longer any time for chitchat. They needed to find the intruders as quickly as possible and prevent any information from being leaked.

The Sun Rangers had stumbled across the factory by chance, though it was their hard work and dedication that allowed them to be in the right place at the right time. In essence, it was both a stroke of good luck and the result of all their training.

“We did it! There really was a base! It’s just like you said, Kotaro!”

“I thought something was strange. They’re underground people, but lately they’ve been flying in the sky.”

The Sun Rangers had fought against the underground dwellers on several occasions, though never publically. They were thwarting small-scale attacks like the sabotaging of communication facilities. And after a minor skirmish, the underground dwellers would always retreat.

However, as of late, something had changed. Whereas they used to always escape underground, they’d recently also started escaping into the air. And whenever they did, they would always fly off in the same direction. The Sun Rangers took the hint and followed after them, searching high and low for where they might be going.

With their unreliable sensor, they'd come out several times without any luck, but today was different. They persevered in their search, and finally came across a dot on the screen of their sensor. It was moving swiftly, and they hurriedly gave chase so as not to lose it.

They had no way of knowing, but the reaction they'd picked up was the vehicle that Tayuma and the others had used to escape. Solely concerned about their underground pursuers, they'd sped up once they reached the surface. Since the engine to the vehicle used spiritual energy and increasing its speed meant increasing its output, that put them on the Sun Rangers' radar.

Tayuma and the others had made three mistakes. They underestimated the accuracy of sensors the surface dwellers had access to, they didn't consider the possibility that surface dwellers might be investigating nearby, and they were in too much of a rush.

The quality of a sensor didn't matter if what it was detecting was close enough. And something like a speeding spiritual energy vehicle was easy enough to detect in the first place. In short, carelessness, coincidence, and haste had all conspired against them and led the Sun Rangers right to Tayuma's factory.

"But what do we do now, Kenichi? This is definitely no normal base. They're making something on a large scale here."

Hayato was wearing his blue battle suit and looking at the facility through the scope of his rifle. It definitely had the feel of a military base, but it also looked like a factory. It was taking in a lot of water from the river and had several smokestacks protruding from the roof. It even looked like it had its own power plant. It was easy enough to tell that something was being made inside.

"It's too big for just the five of us to attack."

"I think so too. If we move in now, we're only going to end up regretting it."

Megumi and Daisaku, dressed in their pink and yellow suits respectively, both wanted to play it safe. The base was too massive for them to try and take on alone. They believed calling for reinforcements would be best.

"So we're just going to leave without doing anything? They're definitely up to

no good.”

“I agree with Hayato. We can’t return emptyhanded. Remember what Professor Roppongi said the other day? A large-scale battle might be close.”

Hayato in blue and Kenichi in red wanted to take a more active approach. Now that they’d found the enemy base, they wanted to at least throw a wrench in the gears. With a large-scale battle potentially ahead of them, they might end up at a disadvantage in the near future if they didn’t take their chance here. That being said, it wasn’t like they wanted to charge in without a plan.

“Then it’s two against two... Kotaro, what do you think?”

“Hmm...”

Kotaro, wearing his green suit, scratched his head as Kenichi asked for his opinion. After thinking on it for a minute, he slapped his hands together.

“That’s right! Kenichi-niichan, what if we compromise and take the middle ground?”

“Middle ground? What do you mean?”

“We’ll take a look inside the factory. We’ll figure out what they’re up to and then get out. That way, we won’t have to attack and we won’t have to walk away with nothing to show for ourselves. We’ll at least get information.”

“Kotaro, you’ve been on a roll lately.”

“Hehehehe.”

Being praised by Kenichi, Kotaro proudly puffed out his chest. He was the shortest of the group, but he was standing a little taller now.

“I’m thinking of going with Kotaro’s idea. Does anyone have any objections?”

Kenichi looked to the rest of the group to get their consent. Everyone nodded their heads in unison without any disagreement. Kotaro’s third option suited everyone.

“With that decided, let’s go, everyone!” declared Red Shine.

“Yeah!” the other four Shines shouted.

With Kenichi out in front, the Sun Rangers carefully approached the factory.

Since they didn't want to be discovered before they could scout the place out, they needed to be stealthy and choose their moves wisely.

"It's just that this isn't very hero-like... Baron-san might get angry if he saw us now."

"Kotaro, Baron-san would understand. This is for the sake of the children."

"Yeah, you're right."

Like Kotaro said, sneaking around wasn't very heroic. If anything, it was more villainous. But their intentions and their hearts were unquestionably on the side of good.

Around the factory was an electrified fence. Carelessly touching it would make for a shocking experience, but if they cut it, the enemy would realize they were there and find them in no time.

"All right. Come on over, guys."

This was where the giant Daisaku showed off his talent. Using a cable to reroute the electricity, they could safely break through part of the fence. He might have looked to be the clumsiest of the bunch at first glance, but in reality, Daisaku was the most dexterous of them all.

"Thanks, Daisaku-kun. You're always such a lifesaver."

Megumi smiled as she helped Daisaku put away his tools.

"It's not as difficult as it looks, Megu-chan."

Megumi held quite a bit of respect for Daisaku's expertise since she was unfamiliar with machinery. Partially thanks to that, Daisaku was the man she favored the most, not including cases of her sickness. She was unaware of that, however, and it would probably take quite a while yet before her feelings blossomed into love.

"I'll go first. Wait for my signal before you follow."

"Be careful, Kenichi."

"Roger that!"

Kenichi lightly waved at Hayato before passing through the hole opened up in the fence. It was the job of the leader to jump into danger first. Their second in command, Hayato, would bring up the rear. That way, either the leader or the second in command would be able to handle any threat, whether it approached from the front or the back. This was the formation that had naturally developed between them over the past few months.

“All right, it’s safe!”

Having passed through the fence, Kenichi hid in the shadow of a nearby container and waved his allies over. The Sun Rangers passed through the fence one at a time, and they all made it stealthily over to Kenichi inside of thirty seconds.

“This is where it gets difficult.”

After accounting for everyone, Kenichi poked his face out from behind the container to take a look at what was ahead. There was nowhere else to hide, so they would need to rush all the way up to the building. Since he could see armed underground dwellers actively patrolling, they would need to time their move just right.

But they didn’t get that far. All of a sudden, a loud siren sounded throughout the entire factory grounds, putting the patrolling guards in a scramble.

“Intruder alert! I repeat: intruder alert! Intruders are believed to have broken past the eastern fence and entered the site! Guards are to find and dispose of these intruders right away!”

“They found us?!”

“Get it together, Kenichi! Judging from the alert, they’ve only just now found out about the fence!”

Kenichi turned pale, but Hayato calmed him down. Neither the contents of the alert nor the movements of the guards indicated anyone had actually spotted them.

“Niichan, they might have cameras checking the fence regularly. It’s much cheaper than higher-tech security devices.”

“What do we do, Kenichi-kun? It’s going to be hard to scout out the factory now.”

“Daisaku-kun is right! We can’t scout while they’re all on high alert like this!”

The number of guards was steadily increasing. The Sun Rangers had grown strong over the last year, but not strong enough to deal with several dozen enemies at once. Just scouting the factory like they’d planned now would be dangerous.

“All right, here’s what we do. Me, Hayato, and Kotaro will get their attention. While we’re doing that, Megumi and Daisaku will go take pictures of the inside of the factory. I don’t care if it’s through a window. Once that’s over, we all get out of here ASAP! We’ll make a diversion and book it!”

Since the underground people didn’t know how many Sun Rangers there were, they should be able to fool them with just three of them. That would make it easier to escape down the line, too.

“Okay. Be careful, Kenichi-kun.”

“You too, Daisaku! Now let’s go, Hayato, Kotaro!”

With their strategy meeting concluded, Kenichi and the other two jumped out from the shadow of the container. Giving them a few seconds lead time, Daisaku and Megumi took off in the opposite direction. On their way, they saw a lot of guards running towards Kenichi and the others.

“I hope they’ll be okay...”

“You don’t have to worry about them, Megu-chan. Let’s just focus on our own job.”

Megumi was worried, but Daisaku gave her the reassurance she needed.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Daisaku-kun. Let’s do our best, the two of us.”

“Yeah.”

They didn’t have the time to worry about Kenichi and the others. They had their own dangers to overcome.

While they had acted cool about it, Kenichi and the others were pursued relentlessly the moment they came out of their cover.

“They’re shooting! They’re not even asking questions!”

“Kenichi-niichan, there’s more coming from the left!”

“Kenichi, Kotaro! Don’t go to the right either; a different squad is flanking us!”

They still had some distance between them, but there were underground dwellers everywhere. The guards were armed with rifles, and were mercilessly firing at the three rangers. Slowly but surely, they were being cornered.

“Hayato, where should we go?!”

“Just focus on running forward!”

The three rangers pressed onward as bullets whizzed passed them. All they could do right now was keep going. They had to keep running to buy time for Megumi and Daisaku to fulfill their mission.

“Niichan, something’s weird!”

In the middle of their chase, Kotaro realized something was indeed odd.

“What?”

“It’s their guns. They’re—”

“Whoa!”

“Are you okay, Kotaro?!”

“I-I’m fine! It only hit my helmet! But you get it now, right?! The guns they’re using aren’t firing that mysterious beam they usually do!”

“Yeah, now that you mention it... I wonder why they’re using normal guns today.”

The strange thing Kotaro had noticed was that the underground dwellers weren’t using their regular weapons. There was no mistaking that these were underground dwellers, however. They were wearing the same trademark Shinto-style priestly robes and body armor that the Sun Rangers were used to seeing.

But the underground dwellers they'd fought up until now had used spiritual energy rifles. They were powerful weapons that gathered and focused spiritual energy before releasing it in beam form. Every now and then one or two in a troop would use something different, but the spiritual energy rifle was their weapon of choice by far.

But for some reason, all of the guards here were using regular guns. Without knowing why they'd switched to more common weaponry, the Sun Rangers couldn't help but find it strange.

"No, those aren't normal guns!"

"What do you mean, Hayato?!"

"The bullets they're firing are arcing to chase after us! They're like magic homing bullets!"

Hayato used a rifle himself. And being the resident expert on guns, he was the first to realize what was truly strange about the weapons the underground dwellers were using. He saw a rifle fire in one direction, but the bullet hit in another. At first he figured that he was mistaken or seeing things, but when it happened time and time again, he came to realize that wasn't the case.

It was beyond bizarre, but the bullets were actually changing trajectory after they were fired. It wasn't a significant change, but it made accurate fire possible even on the run. Hayato thought back to the trajectory of the bullet fired in the assassination of a certain president. While it was just slight, it was far from realistic that a bullet could change direction.

"Seems like this is their new weapon!"

"So they traded firepower for accuracy, huh?"

"If they get any closer, we'll be done for in no time! Hayato, Kotaro, don't stop running no matter what!"

Since the enemy had the overwhelming advantage in numbers, Kenichi and the others had no intention of confronting them in a real fight. But even just running around the factory site was getting harder and harder.

Who knows how long we'll last...

As a powerful anxiety started taking root in Kenichi's mind, Megumi's voice came through the speaker of the communications device built into his helmet.

"Kenichi, we're done on our end! We're withdrawing!"

"Understood! We'll pull out as well! I'll contact you about the rendezvous point later!"

"Okay! Be careful!"

After reporting just the critical information, Megumi ended the call. She didn't have the luxury of going into details right now either. But the good news raised everyone's morale. It was time to make their escape.

"Niichan, let's hurry up and get out of here!"

"Hayato, use one of your grenades to blow a hole in the fence up ahead!"

"Leave it to me!"

Hayato raised his rifle, and the underslung grenade launcher let fly a grenade with a bit of kickback and flame. The grenade hit the fence right where Hayato had aimed, and blew open a large hole. The three rangers sprinted straight for it. That was their way out.

"Hayato, you go first! Kotaro, you next!"

"Understood!"

"What about you, Niichan?!"

"I'll go last! Just in— Hah!"

Kenichi hung back so he could watch everyone's flank as they retreated, and it paid off. He was just barely able to fend off a surprise attack from an assailant who'd snuck up on them without making a sound.

"I won't go down that easily!"

Kenichi swung the sword in his right hand and repeatedly fired the handgun in his left at his attacker. But the assailant elegantly jumped backwards and dodged the bullets.

"Wh-What's with this guy?!"

The assailant had an overall humanoid shape, but a mechanical appearance. It was about as tall as your average man, but giving it a closer look revealed that its limbs were far too thin, as if they were just bones. On top of that, its hands and feet were equipped with large claws, making it look quite monstrous. The sheen on the surface of the whole thing made it clear it was metallic, but it had a very different look than the typical humanoid robots Japanese corporations produced these days.

“The underground dweller’s killer robot, huh? Damn it...”

Kenichi frowned and held his side with his left hand. He had a large wound carved into him there. The assailant, the underground people’s mechanical soldier, had cut him up as it jumped away. Despite its bony appearance, it was strong and quick. Kenichi thought he’d been able to defend himself, but it seemed that the mechanical soldier was one step ahead. If it wasn’t for his combat suit, the wound would have been fatal. But even with his suit’s protection, the wound was deep and pumping out an alarming amount of blood.

Not good... I can’t escape like this... I’ll have to...!

Kenichi jumped back and stood with his back against the hole in the fence.

“Kenichi, what are you doing?! Hurry up!”

“Hayato, Kotaro, you two go! I’ll buy you some time!”

Kenichi figured that they would all be wiped out at this rate. Even if the three of them fought together, it would take time to defeat the mechanical soldier. Time that they didn’t have. More guards were arriving by the minute. And even if they all fled, they’d be hunted down. He didn’t want to lead the underground dwellers to Megumi and Daisaku too. In order to prevent that, somebody needed to stay behind and stall the mechanical soldier. Since he was already injured, Kenichi thought that job should fall on his shoulders.

“You can’t, Kenichi-niichan!”

“If I don’t, none of us are going to make it out of here! Now quit your yapping and go! Return to base with as much information as possible!”

As Kenichi gave his order, the mechanical soldier attacked again. While he did

his best to defend with his sword and handgun, he was clearly at a disadvantage. He took blow after blow from the mechanical soldier's claws.

"Kotaro, let's go!"

"Yeah!"

Hayato and Kotaro took flight, but they were running towards Kenichi rather than away from him. They dove back through the hole in the fence and entered the factory site once more.

"You idiots, what are you doing?!"

"I won't let you hog the spotlight, Kenichi! Being cool is *my* job!"

"Daisaku-niichan and Megumi-neechan will take the information back."

Hayato's rifle belched flame, and the bomb that Kotaro threw exploded with a grand boom. With the three of them working together, the battle began to progress in their favor. Kenichi prevented the mechanical soldier from getting any closer, Hayato kept it from retreating with covering fire, and Kotaro dealt damage to it. It was a combination they'd cultivated over the past few months.

"Do you understand what you're doing?!"

"Of course we do! We just couldn't leave you behind!"

"Niichan, we all came this far together. Let's stay together until the end."

"You guys..."

But regardless of how much of an advantage they gained over the mechanical soldier, it was but a small victory. Before they could defeat the mechanical soldier, they would be surrounded by the guards that had caught up to them.

"...I guess I can't stop you. In that case, let's give it our all. If we work together, we might even make it out of here alive."

"That's better! That's more like a Red Shine!"

"I wish Baron-san could have heard what you just said, Niichan. He would definitely be proud."

The three of them already knew that there was no turning back. In the face of desperation, they steeled themselves. They were prepared to take as many

enemies as possible with them. That was their job. They were soldiers who protected the peace and the safety of the people. And much unlike a year or so ago, they took pride in their work.

“You’re absolutely right! Well said, Red Shine!”

Someone called out to Kenichi, but it wasn’t Hayato or Kotaro. It wasn’t Daisaku or Megumi either. And mere moments after they heard it, the mechanical soldier in front of Kenichi was cut in half.

“Huh?!”

Just on the other side of the fallen robot was a boy in beautiful blue armor wielding a large sword.

“It looks like you’ve become real heroes in just a few months.”

“Baron-san!”

The boy who’d cut down the mechanical soldier was none other than Koutarou. Kenichi was completely stunned, and just stood there completely speechless and motionless. He was both surprised at Koutarou’s sudden appearance and the fact that he’d just cleaved the mechanical soldier in two with ease. But while he was dumbfounded, Kenichi made an easy target. The guards let loose a hail of fire. That was when the black-haired girl standing next to Koutarou—Kiriha—quickly gave an order.

“Karama, Korama, spiritual energy field to maximum output!”

“Roger!”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

In the blink of an eye, two haniwas floated up in front of Kenichi. They generated a shield of yellow light between them to protect him.

“This is bad, Koutarou! These attacks aren’t based on spiritual energy!”

The shield of light was already starting to collapse. It was partially because of the sheer amount of fire it was taking, but also because it was designed to be used primarily against spiritual energy attacks. Under such heavy fire from regular weapons, it wouldn’t last long.

“It’s okay! Leave it to me!”

Next, a girl with silver hair—Harumi—stepped forward. She closed her eyes, held her hands in front of her chest, and spoke in a mysterious tongue almost as if she were singing. It was Ancient Forthorthian, a language of rituals and magic.

“Gather, spirits of water! Dance, spirits of wind! Combine these two powers and appear, spirits of lightning!”

As she recited those words, a white light enveloped Harumi and grew stronger. As if responding to it, Koutarou’s sword began emitting the same light.

“Like a coiled snake, like a rising tornado, show yourself! Whirl! Thunder Spiral!”

Upon finishing her incantation, Harumi opened her eyes wide and thrust her hands forward. As she did, a giant coil of red light several meters in diameter appeared from her outstretched hands. It generated a powerful electromagnetic current, which twisted the trajectory of the incoming bullets via induction. As a result, they never made it anywhere near the haniwas’ barrier.



“What is this?!”

Kenichi was confounded at the odd events happening around him one after another.

“Now’s not the time to be surprised! We’re running away!”

“Y-Yes!”

But when Koutarou roared at him, Kenichi collected himself immediately. The enemy was right in front of them and there was no time to waste. Asking Koutarou questions—including just who he really was—could wait for later. He quickly passed along the order to his allies.

“Hayato, Kotaro, you heard him! We’re getting out of here!”

“G-Got it!”

“I don’t really understand, but thank you, Baron-san!”

Hayato and Kotaro seemed equally as confused as Kenichi was, but they obediently followed his orders. They hurriedly darted back through the hole in the fence and exited the factory site.

“Red Shine, I’ll lend you a hand.”

“Thanks.”

The wounded Kenichi borrowed Shizuka’s shoulder and chased after his allies.

“You’ve taken quite a beating. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

Sanae accompanied the two of them, and used her spiritual powers to perform some emergency treatment on Kenichi as they went.

“Clan, give us a smokescreen!”

“Smoke discharger fired!”

“Yurika, stop the enemy from moving!”

“Okay! Ice Burn! Modifier: Effective Area, Large!”

“Aika-san—”

“Wall of Flame!”

And after obstructing the enemy as best as they could, Koutarou and the others followed after the Sun Rangers.

It wasn’t by coincidence that Koutarou and company appeared just as Kenichi and the other rangers were in danger. Not long after Kiriha received a report that Tayuma had escaped from prison, Karama, who had been following the Sun Rangers, picked up something on his spiritual energy sensor. Kiriha suspected that there was a high chance that it was Tayuma, considering the timing. At that point, Kiriha set off in pursuit of the Sun Rangers herself.

The Sun Rangers didn’t know that there was a conservative faction of underground dwellers, nor did they know that the radical faction had made connections with magic users. They didn’t even know that magic existed in the first place. They had absolutely no way of knowing what they were going up against. On top of that, the timing was bad. The radical faction had been gearing up for an attack on the surface lately, and they were more than prepared to defend themselves at all costs. If help hadn’t come, the Sun Rangers would have been wiped out by unknown weapons that could only be described as magical.

Seeing that the Sun Rangers were willing to sacrifice themselves and that the enemy was preventing them from escaping, it was quite clear that this was no average skirmish. There was a dangerous chance it might serve as the trigger for the war between the surface and the underground. If that happened, it would be the worst case scenario that Kiriha dreaded. That’s why she decided to save the Sun Rangers, well aware that her identity might be exposed in the process.

In the conference room of the Sun Rangers’ secret base were Koutarou and the seven girls that were with him, plus all five Sun Rangers and their commander, Professor Roppongi, for a total of fourteen people in all. It was quite a crowd, but unlike room 106, the conference room was quite large. It didn’t feel cramped even with all of them in it.

“...I see. So the underground people are currently split into the conservative

faction and the radical faction. I never put much thought into that, but in the end, we're all human. The same as the Earth isn't united, neither are the People of the Earth."

Despite Kiriha explaining the circumstances, Professor Roppongi didn't seem very surprised. He stroked his beard while nodding contently. Considering Earth's history, he saw no reason to doubt what Kiriha had told them. While the question remained whether or not Kiriha really belonged to the conservative faction herself, the existence of a conservative faction made perfect sense to him.

"There are two problems. The first is that the radical faction does not represent the intentions of the People of the Earth. The other is that the radical faction is rushing to get results."

"So the minority that is the radical faction is trying to force a war with the surface that the majority does not desire?"

"And if they succeed, we will be brought to ruin. Yet despite knowing the risks, they insist on fighting."

"So they'd die for their pride... As expected of radicals."

The radical faction's way of thinking made them look like any other terrorist organization. In the end, humanity's worst enemy was itself. Whether you were from the surface or underground didn't matter.

"We of the conservative faction have chosen to move to the surface unbeknownst to the surface dwellers with the intent of eventually assimilating. The radical faction can't accept that."

"So they would rather die in battle than have their way of life extinguished..."

The conservatives had decided to migrate to the surface, and intended to live there peacefully without causing any difficulties for the locals. As a result, once those that had migrated to the surface obtained a secure means to live on their own, the People of the Earth's government would be dissolved. While they would likely keep some sort of organization for the welfare of their people, they would otherwise become Japanese citizens. In other words, while the People of the Earth would live on, their nation would die out. That was what the radicals

could not abide.

What the conservative faction was trying to protect was their people—their lineage. But the radical faction wanted to protect their nation—their pride and traditions. And since what each side valued was at odds, no amount of discussion could reconcile their differences.

“I understand the circumstances. It seems like it would be for the best if we can work together. Sadly, it would have to be unofficial...”

“I understand your circumstances as well. I appreciate your offer for cooperation.”

“I see. Then I will speak with the higher-ups.”

The Japanese government probably wouldn’t accept the conservative faction’s methods. After all, the kind of mass undocumented move they were orchestrating was essentially illegal immigration. The government had a very clear stance on that, and likely wouldn’t make concessions for an unknown nation they had no diplomatic relationship with.

But realistically speaking, they would want to cooperate with the conservative faction in order to combat the radicals. That meant they would only be able to offer small-scale support under the table. In exchange, the People of the Earth would be “forgotten” once the radical faction was taken care of. The Japanese government wouldn’t want to risk angering the conservatives for fear of ending up with another radical faction on their hands. But looking at it from another viewpoint, the People of the Earth had been living in Japan all this time. They could technically be considered natives, which would leave the government responsible for them. All in all, it would be easiest for everyone to just pretend like they’d never made contact in the first place.

And so it was decided that the two sides would work together, but that left certain members of the meeting rather shaken. Namely the Sun Rangers.

“Things sure have taken a strange turn...”

“Are you not satisfied, Hayato?”

“That’s not it... but I am confused.”

“I know what you mean, Hayato-niichan. We were fighting against the underground dwellers until just earlier today, and now we’re working with them. It feels pretty strange.”

Hayato and Kotaro were fairly stumped by this series of developments. Until just earlier that day, they’d believed that all underground dwellers were evil and a threat. But in just a few hours, that had been completely turned on its head. The underground dwellers were split into two factions, and they would be working with the good guys to fight against the bad. It would take some time to get used to things.

“Kenichi, are you okay with this?”

“I’m... relieved, actually.”

The Sun Rangers’ leader, Kenichi, saw things differently from his companions. He was a bit perplexed himself, but overall, he was quite pleased.

“Why?”

“Say we’d defeated the evil underground dwellers and reached their empire... What would we have done then? Kill their children? Their women? Their elderly?”

“That’s...”

“By working together with the conservative faction of the underground dwellers, I’m finally able to see a clear end goal. We only have to fight against the invaders; we don’t have to do anything else.”

Up until now, Kenichi hadn’t been able to conceive an end to this fight. Essentially, the Sun Rangers had only been dealing with the invaders and not the cause of the invasion. It was like trying to treat symptoms and not the disease itself. They’d only been able to fight individual people or groups of people, which made no difference in the bigger picture. They hadn’t found the underground dweller’s stronghold and had no means of stopping the invasion at its core. Realizing that they were more or less stuck, Kenichi had worried a great deal about the future.

What would happen if they *did* find the enemy’s stronghold? Would they kill everyone there? There would likely be unarmed civilians and children. Would

they have to kill them too? Or would they capture everyone and keep them locked away in some kind of concentration camp? Pondering what might lie at the end of their battle with the underground dwellers made Kenichi dread its approach.

If things had continued the way they were going, the future would be grim indeed for either the surface or the underground dwellers. But now that they were working together with the conservative faction, there was another option on the table—a hopeful one. That's why Kenichi welcomed their alliance with the conservative faction. He wanted to work towards a future where as many people as possible were alive and happy.

"Kenichi-niichan, did you eat something strange?"

"You don't have to put it like that! I can be serious at times too, you know!"

"That's not what I meant. It's just that everything you're saying is right. It's... just kind of surprising, right, Hayato-niichan?"

"Yeah. You're right on the money, Kenichi. We just never even thought about it like that."

Hearing what Kenichi had to say helped clear up both Hayato and Kotaro's confusion. They'd never considered the future like he had. And when they thought about it now, they realized he was right. If the battle came to an early end, it would be good for both them and the underground dwellers. It would be the ideal conclusion.

"Kenichi, you really are the Sun Rangers' leader."

"So you finally admit it, Hayato-niichan?"

"I just realized that a leader shouldn't be chosen purely based on ability or the coolness factor."

"You're a sore loser. But I think so too."

"Hayato... Kotaro..."

Kenichi teared up a little. His teammates felt the same way he did, which renewed his determination to see this through with them.

"Silly Hayato and Kotaro! It was obvious that we should be friendly with the

underground people the moment my Baron-sama showed up with one of them as his ally! You're all overthinking this!"

"I'm sure the underground dwellers have delicious food, too. So I'll be glad if we don't have to fight them."

"You get it, Daisaku-kun! Ohohoho, I wonder what kind of wonderful underground people there are... Hahh... I can't wait to see them!"

The remaining two rangers, Daisaku and Megumi, weren't bothered over the matter whatsoever. They were all in favor of working together with the People of the Earth before Professor Roppongi even suggested it.

"You're the same as always, Megumi, Daisaku..."

"I'm envious of that simplicity."

"Shhh! Nee-chan will hear you, Hayato-niichan."

The Sun Rangers were slightly shaken up after the decision to cooperate with the conservative faction of the underground dwellers, but in the end, their resolve was only strengthened.

The Sun Squad was a secret task force created by the government, meaning they had a special role to fulfill. A mission. The truth was that the underground dwellers had once had a third faction apart from the conservatives and radicals. It was a faction that strived after harmony with the surface even more than the conservative faction. They were a party of people that advocated dissolution of the People of the Earth.

Their platform was simple. Once the twentieth century rolled around, progress and development really started to take off on the surface. The dissolution faction was enamored with surface lifestyle and culture, and began petitioning for the dissolution of the People of the Earth so that they could go live on the surface.

However, both the conservative and the radical faction objected. The radicals denounced them since dissolution went against their pride as People of the Earth, and the conservative faction thought that dissolution was rushing into things too quickly. As a result, both factions distanced themselves from the

dissolution faction.

Isolated, the dissolution faction decided that they would migrate to surface alone. Coincidentally, this was right around the time World War II broke out. A few brave members of the dissolution faction took advantage of the chaos on the surface and made the move. Once they had successfully migrated, they cast aside their identities as People of the Earth and began living as surface dwellers.

It could be said that this early migration changed the fate of the People of the Earth. Those living on the surface would sometimes bring cultural items or entertainment from the surface back down to the city, and they would share what their experiences had been like above ground. As a result, more and more people grew to admire the surface, and more and more people gradually began to make the move. As emigration increased, the conservative faction was forced to accept that People of the Earth were in decline. When Kurano Daiha came to power, he took the opportunity to change the faction's policy on migration.

However, this change was far from welcome to the radical faction, and they began considering the dissolution faction as enemies. As traitors. Of course, the dissolution faction sensed that and realized that the radical faction might eventually come attack the surface. If that happened, the dissolution faction in particular would be in trouble. They loved the surface and couldn't stand to see the surface destroyed, and they certainly didn't want to be caught between the surface and the underground in any sort of conflict. That's why the remaining members of the dissolution faction decided to go ahead and emigrate, making their stance clear to the rest of the underground dwellers and taking out an insurance policy of sorts.

That insurance policy was secretly contacting the government on the surface and giving them spiritual energy devices that they had taken from underground. That would indirectly let them know that there was someone out there with advanced technology, and hopefully it would help them prepare in case one day they did come into conflict with the underground.

Consequently, the Japanese government began researching this new and mysterious technology. The Sun Squad was formed based on those findings. In other words, all of the equipment the Sun Rangers used was a product of the

government's research on underground technology, their combat suits and sensors included. That's why their gear was so inferior to Kiriha's. The technology that the dissolution faction brought to the surface was over half a century out of date by now.

Only within the last few years had the radical faction begun preparing for their attack on the surface. As such, the dormant Sun Squad was brought back online to handle the situation.

"And that's roughly how we've come to be where we are now," concluded Professor Roppongi.

"So what we have is replicas of old technology? No wonder we can't win..."

"But we've been training so hard so that we *can* win, Megu-chan."

"Professor, does that mean that we've been allies with the peaceful underground people from the very beginning?"

"If you call the enemy of your enemy your ally, then that would be the case, yes. But we have no official alliance. It's more of a give-and-take kind of relationship."

"You should have just said so from the start."

"Hayato, would you have believed it a year ago?" asked Kenichi.

"That's..."

"It's just as Kenichi-kun says. The underground invaders' existence has only became apparent as of late. Even with their technology as evidence, nobody would have believed it."

Reflecting on the professor's words, Kenichi and the others thought back on themselves a year ago. When they did, they realized that Roppongi was quite right.

"But now we all have a much better view of the bigger picture. Kiriha-san and her people have taken the middle ground in all this."

When Kenichi and the others fell silent, it was Koutarou that spoke up. After listening in on everything everyone had to say, Koutarou had gotten a grasp on the problems surrounding the underground world.

“Yes. We conservatives are, as our name suggests, conservative. We have a peaceable and reasonable approach to things. We were hesitant about dissolution at first, but we’ve changed our minds because the situation has changed.”

Kiriha wore a satisfied expression. She had been curious about the inferior spiritual energy technology that the Sun Rangers were using, and Roppongi’s explanation had supplied her with the information she was missing.

“Then all that’s left is how we suppress the radical faction...”

Harumi wrapped up the discussion so far. Considering the safety of both the surface and underground dwellers, it was clear that the radical faction was the problem. The surface wanted to avoid a full-scale war with the advanced People of the Earth. Even if they won, there would be considerable losses. And the People of the Earth had such a scarce population that they too wanted to avoid a war with the surface. Even if they could achieve what they wanted to in the short term, it was unsustainable in the long run. Yet while neither side desired war, the radical faction was trying to start one. They had to be stopped no matter what.

“Um, Satomi-san, can I say something?”

That was when Yurika, who had stayed quiet all this time, raised her hand and asked for permission to speak.

Yurika?

In that instant, a bad feeling came over Koutarou. Looking at Yurika, she was wearing the resolute expression she did when she stood up for justice as a magical girl. It didn’t bode well considering the situation.

“...Go ahead.”

Koutarou held back his apprehension and urged her to continue.

“Okay. Um, uh, about this gun...”

When Koutarou told her to speak up, Yurika held up the rifle in her hands. It weighed several kilos, and the heavy sound it made as she placed it on the table struck anxiety into the hearts of everyone waiting to hear what she had to say.

“The truth is... there’s a magical reaction coming from this gun.”

“What?!”

They all had a good reason to be concerned.

When Koutarou and the others were saving the Sun Rangers, Yurika felt the presence of mana scattered across the battlefield. The majority of it was from the weapons the underground dwellers were using. Thinking it was strange, she picked up one of the rifles from a defeated guard and brought it back with her. That was the rifle she put on the desk.

“The gun itself doesn’t have magic cast on it, but the bullets inside of it do. It looks like they adjust their trajectory based on what the user targets.”

Yurika had been examining the rifle while everyone else was talking. She only cut into the conversation when she realized things were worse than she initially suspected.

“I don’t understand magic, but this lady is correct. The bullets fired from their guns definitely changed course midair.”

Hayato backed up Yurika’s claims. He knew his way around guns, and had picked up on the unusual feature of the rifles being used back at the factory.

“Just where is the radical faction getting magic enchanted bullets from?”

“Probably through Maya-sama. Maya-sama’s body was made from spiritual energy technology, so they’re likely sharing technology with each other.”

Maya, the previous Dark Navy, was Maki’s former master. In a previous battle, Maya had suffered grievous injuries and was no longer capable of fighting. But she’d reappeared on the battlefield with a mechanical body that utilized spiritual energy technology. If the radical faction had supplied her with it, she’d likely given them something in exchange. The rifle Yurika picked up seemed to be proof of that.

“Magical weapons are being used to invade the surface. This is clearly a misuse of magic... This is a job for me.”

Even if it wasn’t Darkness Rainbow per se, Yurika couldn’t abide the abuse of

magic. As Magical Girl Rainbow Yurika, she had to do something about it. Her expression was more serious than ever. This time it wasn't just about saving her friends or upholding her duty; it was both.

"If we're making a move, we should do so soon. Looking at this gun, the radical faction has already made careful preparations."

Clan too wore a serious expression. Both she and Yurika had investigated the gun, and her scientific analysis of it revealed details that were almost as alarming as what Yurika had discovered.

"What do you mean?"

"This gun has extremely high processing precision. I could only analyze it with the instruments I had on hand, but it was made using technology that far exceeds what's available on the surface."

"Well, of course. It was made by underground dwellers."

The underground dwellers had advanced spiritual energy technology. On top of that, they now had magic that could probably make their machinery even more precise. It wasn't strange to think they'd immediately put that to use in their weapons.

"That's not the problem. While the parts that affect the rifle's shooting ability were made using the utmost precision, the wear parts of the gun—the ones that will eventually need to be replaced after enough use—weren't."

"What do you mean?"

Koutarou tilted his head in confusion. Hayato, the resident firearms expert, explained the rest.

"In other words, the rifle is designed so that the consumable parts can be reproduced on the surface... which is bad. Really bad. It means they've even taken what happens after they've invaded the surface into consideration when making their weapons."

"I believe it's the same reason why the guns themselves don't use magic. They're probably working under the assumption that replacement parts wouldn't be able to reach the front lines in time."

When making weapons, the build and design changed considerably whether the firearm was intended for long-term or short-term use. Weapons designed for the short term could use high quality parts, like what an elite team might need on a special mission.

However, in a drawn-out war, that would lead to problems. If soldiers used high quality weapons that they couldn't maintain themselves, they would quickly become unusable. The same was true for magical weapons and parts. If the supply chain couldn't keep up as the battlefield expanded, magical weapons would be unserviceable. In other words, useless.

So for extended battles and longer wars, weapons needed to be designed for ease of maintenance. Instead of specialized parts, they needed parts that were easy to reproduce. So the guns they'd created could fire regular bullets in addition to enchanted ones—the regular bullets being the standard load while the enchanted ones were held in reserve for when they were necessary.

In short, all weapons were designed with a purpose in mind. And these guns were made for the explicit purpose of invading the surface. That was what Clan meant when she said that the radical faction had made careful preparations.

"This gun is both superior from an industrial and strategic point of view. It's hard to believe this is how far they've come since their first attack. Without a doubt, they're aiming to play the long game."

"Which means that once they begin moving, it'll be hard to stop them, huh? Kiriha-san..."

"I know. Let's take action as soon as we can."

The radical faction couldn't be underestimated. It was clear now that they were more dangerous than anyone had imagined. Knowing that, no one could sit by and let them get away with what they were planning. Koutarou and the others no longer had time to spare.

After discussing possible countermeasures, it was decided that the factory should be infiltrated. The primary reasons for that were to investigate what was being produced inside and to get a grasp of the radical faction's plans. They knew that weapons were on the factory line thanks to Daisaku and Megumi's

photos, but they wanted more details. And if possible, they wanted to sabotage the manufacturing.

Once they had a plan, they met up with Theia and Ruth who had been at the station. The group was currently in the middle of briefing them.

“I see, those Sun Rangers are... What a strange turn of events.”

“So what will you do, Master?”

“I’m going to guard Kiriha-san and infiltrate the factory.”

There would be two groups on the factory mission. The larger group would serve as a diversion while a select few would sneak in a different way. The smaller group would be Koutarou, Kiriha, Clan, and Harumi. Kiriha was an expert on the People of the Earth, Clan was an expert in science, and Harumi was a burgeoning expert in magic. Koutarou would be their bodyguard.

“What should we do?”

“Please join Yurika and the others and attract the enemy to the main entrance. The diversion team will have a fierce fight on their hands. We’ll need as many people as we can to keep the radicals busy and in check.”

“That’s my specialty, so leave it to me. I will perform my role splendidly.”

“Master...”

Theia agreed to the plan right away, but Ruth clasped her hands in front of her chest and looked up at Koutarou. The moment he looked into her eyes, he understood what she wanted.

“Lady Ruthkania Nye Pardomshiha, vice captain of the Satomi band of knights, accompany Princess Theiamillis and divert the enemy’s attention.”

“I will do so with my life!”

Receiving her orders from Koutarou, Ruth’s eyes shone like diamonds as she replied with a Forthorthian-style salute.

Theia and Ruth had been by the station to do a little shopping and to pick something up. That something was the uniform they’d designed.

“Maki-sama, how does it fit?”

“It’s perfect.”

“It doesn’t feel restricting anywhere, does it?”

“Don’t worry. It’s quite easy to move in. But Ruth-san... could you stop calling me ‘Maki-sama’?”

“Why?”

“You’re the vice captain, and I’m your subordinate, so...”

“Then... Maki-san.”

“That’s better.”

“Heehee, you’re surprisingly strict.”

“How can you say that when you’re the one who wanted uniforms?”

“Ahaha, that’s true.”

Ruth and Maki were now dressed in matching uniforms. They were somewhat resemblant of Koutarou’s armor, but the overall design was much closer to that of a school uniform. It was a girlish and cute outfit. It was made of blue and white fabric in honor of the Blue Knight and Alaia, and each member’s uniform had extra touches of their own personal color decorating it. Ruth’s was yellow, and Maki’s was indigo. They were wonderful uniforms inspired by Theia and Ruth’s maiden dreams.

“...Why is it just Ruth and Maki?”

Sanae watched the two of them, wholly dissatisfied. Since she hadn’t officially joined the band of knights, she didn’t get a cute uniform for herself. This displeased her greatly, and the frown on her face grew more and more pronounced.

“Higashihongan-san, you can wear one once this fight is over,” said Harumi, calling out to her.

“Really?!”

“Of course. Once the problem with the underground dwellers is resolved, there won’t be any reason to maintain the standoff.”

At the moment, Sanae had to maintain her position as an invader of room 106 to keep tensions from exploding with the People of the Earth. But once the radical faction was taken care of, that would no longer be an issue, leaving Sanae free to join the Satomi knights and get her own uniform.

“Koutarou, Koutarou! Once this is over, will you let me join the band of knights?! I can be in charge of the chores!”

“Yeah, yeah, just calm down a little.”

“All right! I’m going to give it my all!”

“Just keep it in moderation.”

“Yeah!”

Sanae clung to Koutarou’s back, her mood having done a complete one-eighty. She looked like a child, but her spiritual energy was as strong as ever. It filled her body to the brim and then some. The portion that overflowed formed a faint halo. She was the very definition of high-spirited.

“...”

In stark contrast to Sanae, Yurika was completely downcast. She was holding her staff, Angel Halo, while quietly thinking to herself about something.

“Hey.”

A dull thud rang out.

“Ow!”

Seeing Yurika sulking the way she was, Koutarou casually bonked her on her forehead.

“Wh-What are you doing, Satomi-san?!”

Yurika held her forehead and complained to Koutarou. Her serious expression had vanished in an instant.

“You weren’t looking like yourself. It was just reflex.”

“Why can’t you be more gentle?! Jeez!”

“But if I’m gentle now, you’d cry, right?”

However, Yurika's complaining didn't last long. Koutarou's words had drained all of her will, and she embarrassedly looked away.

"Th... That... might be true, but..."

"Don't get so worked up just because this is related to magic. You're not fighting on your own anymore. We're all with you."

"Satomi-san... hahh..." Yurika took a deep breath and loosened up her expression. "I feel a little better. Thank you, Satomi-san."

"All I did was hit you."

"...I'll leave it at that."

With some of the tension leaving her body, Yurika flashed a smile. But then she had to wipe away the tears forming in the corners of her eyes. In the end, she did cry a little.

"Satomi-kun really gets Yurika-chan."

Shizuka laughed as she watched their exchange. Koutarou responded with a dry smile.

"For better or for worse, she's a handful. But if you spent over a year living with her, you'd start to understand her too, like it or not," he said with a shrug.

But both Koutarou and the girls around him knew that he was just hiding his embarrassment.

"Jeez, Satomi-san! If you love me then you should just say so. You're so shy."

Another dull thud rang out.

"...S-Sorry. I got too full of myself..."

"By the way, Satomi-kun, don't you have anything for me?"

"You want me to hit you too?"

Koutarou waved the fist he'd just used to bop Yurika at Shizuka.

"No. I mean don't you have any words of encouragement or good luck charms for your unfortunate landlord who's been dragged into the fight? There's always something like that in the movies."

“Then... how about this?”

Koutarou placed the hand that was waving around on top of Shizuka’s head and gently patted her. When he did, she smiled with a satisfied expression.

“Hmm... Well, it’ll do.”

“I’m honored that I could be of service.”

Normally Koutarou would have complained a little in such a situation, but not now. He paid it no mind and just smiled *Anyone would be anxious right now...*



While all of the girls present held strong powers, they were still girls in their teens. There was no way they would be able to stay calm when faced with a battle that would decide the future of the surface and the underground. The results of this battle would also affect room 106's future. Koutarou may have known nothing about the hearts of women, but he understood the hearts of his friends well enough to know how they were feeling.

"Then could you do it for one more?"

"One more?"

"Over here, Koutarou."

"Owowow..."

Koutarou was confused by what Shizuka meant, but Sanae forcibly turned his head towards Kiriha, who was studying a map with a serious expression.

That's...

Koutarou could see the card Kiriha was secretly clenching in her hand, and he knew what that meant. It was just as Shizuka had suggested—there was one more person he needed to take care of.

"She's been emitting a strange aura for a while now. I tried doing some stuff... but nothing really worked. So you do something, Koutarou."

"Okay, Sanae, I'll give it a shot."

"Pretty please."

After hugging Koutarou once, Sanae climbed off his back.

"But what on earth am I supposed to say to her...?"

Koutarou thought on it for a while. Kiriha was a commander of the People of the Earth. She was situated right at the heart of all this chaos. If he said the wrong thing to her in an attempt to comfort her, it might even backfire. Seeing his consternation, Harumi decided to give him a friendly word of advice.

"Satomi-kun, you only have to act like you do normally. Like you do with us. Pretty words with little meaning aren't what you want to convey to her, right? Speak from the heart. Your heart."

Harumi's words were filled with conviction, and her eyes were as gentle as could be.

Empress Alaia...

Her appearance reminded him of the girl he'd gotten to know so well in the past. He knew that they were different people, but he'd started seeing more and more of Alaia in Harumi lately. She'd started emitting the same aura of dignity and grace the Silver Princess had. And this was for real, not acting.

"Right now, Kurano-san is your princess. So please go to her side at once, Sir Knight."

"Right."

Harumi called Kiriha a princess, but to Koutarou, the calmly smiling Harumi was the one who really looked like a princess.

As Koutarou walked over to Kiriha, the remaining girls naturally followed him with their eyes. They watched and waited, full of curiosity and wondering how he would treat her.

"He's talking to her."

"Well, that's the natural way to start."

Once he was in front of Kiriha, he began talking with her. Since Kiriha would glance down at her hand from time to time, they were probably talking about her card.

"Now that I think about it, I wonder what the card is."

"R-Ruth-san, I think it's a trading card with a character from an old anime on it. But it seems to mean a lot to her, so it would be prying to ask about it, right? That's why we don't know much either."

"I see. So, Shizuka-sama, what charac—"

"Pardomshiha, have a look at Veltlion!"

"Huh?"

As Ruth was about to encroach on a dangerous topic, Koutarou made his next

move. He and Kiriha were still talking, but Koutarou had placed his hand on her head and gently began patting her.

“I love that.”

Seeing Koutarou patting Kiriha’s head, Maki blushed a little and her eyes moistened. When she thought back to when he’d done the same thing for her, she understood what Kiriha must be feeling right now.

“Kiriha-san is crying!”

“Unlike you, Kiriha can’t just jump on the boy she likes whenever she needs him.”

“She’d be fine if she would just take a more demanding attitude like Her Highness.”

“Ruth, are you trying to pick a fight with me?”

“Of course not, Your Highness.”

As Koutarou pat her head, tears streamed down Kiriha’s cheeks, each one proof that she was just a normal girl on the inside. These were her true colors, something she ordinarily only showed Koutarou. He reached out for her cheek and wiped her tears away.



“Koutarou’s hands are really warm, you know. That’s why I’m always rubbing my face against them.”

“I remember the first time he patted me on the head too... It was the first time anyone had since my dad died, so I cried.”

“There’s a part of Satomi-kun that craves the warmth of others... So when he’s doing that, he might feel the same way we do.”

“Sakuraba-senpai, you make it sound like you’re Satomi-san’s girlfriend.”

“That wasn’t my intention... I-I just mean in general!”

All of the girls watching over Koutarou and Kiriha recalled themselves in the same situation with him at some point or another. It helped them understand what Kiriha was feeling right now, and helped them see their own feelings objectively. It reaffirmed for each of them that they needed Koutarou, and that the same was true for the other girls too. No one was surprised when Kiriha leaned in and hugged Koutarou.

“Of course she’d hug him... I think about doing it every day.”

“From time to time... I think that maybe Koutarou was sent by the Goddess of Dawn to save us.”

“Your Highness, if you’re going to say that, it doesn’t apply to just Master.”

“You’re right. We’re all saving each other in one way or another.”

Eventually, Koutarou hugged Kiriha back. As he did, Kiriha clung to him and began crying even harder.

“It’s because he hugged me like that that I was able to leave Darkness Rainbow. I knew if it was him, we could support each other...”

“In my case, I annulled my engagement, but... I don’t regret it.”

“But your fiancé was a bad guy.”

“When Satomi-kun protects you, you get this feeling of wanting to protect him too. But I think that’s what happiness really is. One-sided relationships are lonely, aren’t they?”

Most of the girls had experienced the embrace of Koutarou’s powerful arms.

They'd felt the exact sensation that Kiriha was feeling now. That's why they began tearing up when they saw it. They each had their own personal investment in it.

"I can't accept this..."

But there was one girl among the bunch who looked rather unhappy. It was Clan, who was frowning quite discontentedly. If that wasn't enough, the stormy eyes behind her glasses said it all.

"He's never done that for me. Not even once."

"Me neither, Clan-san. Though I guess he did during the play..."

"In your case, it was practically real, right? That counts, Harumi!"

Clan was the only one who hadn't been hugged by Koutarou. Strictly speaking, he hadn't hugged Harumi either. The most she'd been able to do was get close to him during their knitting society activities. But since Harumi had Alaia's memories intertwining with her memories of the play, she knew what it was like to experience it.

"But, but, but... Clan-san, Satomi-san is always saying how much he loves you."

"He only says that when he's working me to death!"

"But he's never said that to me when he's working me to death..."

Clan's flash of anger didn't last for long. Just like Yurika said, though Koutarou had never hugged her, she had her own special moments that she shared with him. It was too rash to judge their relationship solely based on physical contact.

"Ah, Kiriha is smiling now."

"How wonderful. It looks like she'll be fine."

After hugging Koutarou for a while, Kiriha eventually let go of him and smiled. She'd probably been able to straighten out her feelings by talking to him, and the other girls rejoiced to see her come out triumphant on the other side of her moment of doubt.

That was when Harumi sighed and mumbled a bit under her breath.

“What can we do... to keep Satomi-kun this way...?”

Koutarou needed Harumi and the others. That’s why he had returned from the past. And if possible, Harumi wanted things to stay like that forever. She didn’t want him going somewhere far out of her reach ever again. And it wasn’t just her. All the girls wanted the same thing.

Infiltration Operation

Saturday, July 3rd

While the Sun Rangers had been able to sneak into the radical faction's factory once before, they were now obviously a lot more alert. The soldiers would patrol more frequently, and they were very clearly armed. They didn't want to allow any more intruders.

"I'm really glad we hurried."

Kiriha observed the factory on the other end of the forest through her digital binoculars and let out a small sigh of relief. Confused by Kiriha's reaction, Koutarou standing next to her asked her what she was thinking.

"Why? Isn't it more problematic that there are more guards around?"

"While that part is problematic, it means that there's still something left to be guarded."

"I see. So it would actually be worse for us if it wasn't as guarded."

"Precisely."

The fact that the guard had increased around the factory meant that the radical faction still needed it. Since Koutarou and the others wanted to find out what they were doing, the increase in security meant that the evidence they were after was still inside the factory. A decreased guard would have meant the opposite, and it would be too late even if Koutarou and the others infiltrated it. So while more enemies on site was something of a setback, it wasn't all bad news.

"There's also one more reason I'm glad we hurried."

"What's that?"

"The fact that the guard is so well armed seems to suggest it won't be long until the factory won't be needed anymore."

“You mean they’re no longer worried about being seen?”

The radical underground dwellers patrolling the site now were much more seriously armed than your standard security guards. And they made no attempt to hide it. They walked around with their weapons in plain sight as they boldly patrolled the yard. In Japan, there was hardly anywhere that was protected by actual armed guards. Anyone who spotted them now would easily be able to tell something was afoot. It would only be a matter of time before they were reported for engaging in terrorism.

But what did it matter if they wouldn’t be around for long?

Before the police or mass media could ever reach the factory, it would have outlived its purpose. They might have even initiated their attack on the surface by then. So right now, they didn’t care about being discovered. They were far more concerned about the enemy trying to infiltrate again.

“Satomi-san, don’t go too far ahead, please. You’ll step out of the area of the camouflage spell.”

“Ah, sorry, Yurika.”

Koutarou and the others were approaching the factory under cover of Yurika and Maki’s magic. They were still some distance out, but a clever spell kept them all perfectly concealed. Thanks to that, the radical faction still hadn’t noticed them. But since the radical faction now had access to magic too, Koutarou and the others still had to be careful.

“Baron-san, it’s about time we split up.”

“You’re right. Red Shine, take good care of my friends.”

“Of course.”

From here, they would split into the diversion team and the infiltration team as planned. Kiriha was the leader of the infiltration team: herself, Koutarou, Clan, and Harumi. The diversion team consisted of everyone else, led by Kenichi. The diversion team would distract the enemy, allowing for the infiltration team to sneak into the factory and gather intelligence. If time and circumstances allowed, they would also sabotage the factory.

“Then we’re off.”

“See you later, everyone.”

“Don’t screw this up, Theiamillis-san.”

“You’re probably the ones who’ll be in more danger. Be careful.”

After saying their farewells, the infiltration team disappeared into the woods. The remaining diversion team stayed put until they could no longer see the others.

“...By the way, everyone, can I ask you something?”

Once Koutarou and the others were long gone, Kenichi decided to try asking the remaining girls of room 106 something that had been on his mind for a while.

“I don’t mind. What is it?” Theia answered for the group.

“I’ve been wondering, but what relationship do you all have?” he asked hesitantly. “Your group is so diverse that I can’t even get my head around it.”

Kiriha was from the underground and everyone else was helping her. He knew that much, but he couldn’t get his head around how things had come to be like that.

Kiriha was a commander of the People of the Earth. Theia, Ruth, and Clan all had extremely advanced technology. Yurika, Maki, and Harumi could all use magic. Sanae had spiritual powers, and Shizuka had overwhelming strength with martial arts. And then there was Koutarou, who united them.

No. Kenichi hadn’t the faintest idea what had brought such a strange and powerful group together.

“We...”

Theia was about to instinctively reply that they were invaders, but something stopped her before she could say it. She had doubts about whether that word was apt to describe them now. That’s why, after thinking for a moment, she gave a different answer.

“We’re sort of like a family. We’re all so diverse, just like you said, which put

us at odds at first. But it was that conflict that brought us together. Now we all stand hand in hand, accepting each other—both the good sides and the bad.”

“That’s quite a deep relationship...”

Theia’s answer was slightly different from what Kenichi wanted to hear, but it gave him the gist of things. They had gathered either by fate or chance, and after fighting with each other initially, they’d come to join hands. That was how he understood Theia’s story.

“That’s how I know you’ll be fine too. I’m sure you’ll be able to coexist with the underground dwellers.”

“I hope so.”

If Theia and the others could do it, then surely they could too. Holding on to that hope, Kenichi headed valiantly into the battle before him.

After breaking off from the group, Koutarou and the rest of the infiltration team were hurrying through the forest. Since the diversion team would be attacking the front gate, they would be sneaking into the facility through a back way. They’d chosen an infiltration point that was as close as possible to the actual factory building, hopefully lowering the risk of being spotted by the enemy en route. Once they were in position, the diversion team would begin their attack, so they wanted to get to their destination as quickly as possible.

“Clan, you’re falling behind. Hurry it up.”

“E-Easier said... than done... Running isn’t exactly... my specialty...”

Of the group, Clan was the only one trailing behind. Koutarou was wearing his armor, and Harumi was using the PAF. Kiriha had no assistance, but she didn’t need it; she was quite fit and well trained on her own. Clan, however, had far below average stamina and was already out of breath.

“Guess I don’t have a choice then.”

“Kyah!”

Koutarou circled back for Clan and scooped her up in his arms as he continued to run. With his powered armor, running while carrying Clan was no problem

for him.

“Veltlion, I can—”

“Fly on my own” is what she was about to say. But then she remembered what the girls had all been talking about, and ended up swallowing her words instead.

“What is it?”

“I-I just stopped being stubborn. I’ll be counting on you for a while.”

Clan could fly through the air with her inventions, but she had chosen not to. Instead, she threw her arms around Koutarou’s neck and embraced him.

It’s a bit different from being hugged... but this is nice in its own way...

It wasn’t a situation where a girl of age should be glad, but she instinctively poured strength into her arms. That appearance of hers was awfully cute and Harumi smiled by reflex.

“Heehee, not being stubborn is best sometimes, Clan-san.”

“I-It’s just that I’d rather take a blow to my pride than slow everyone down right now.”

“It’d be dangerous if you fell off, so just hold on tight for now, Clan.”

“I think... I’ll do just that...”

Clan blushed as she drew her cheek closer to Koutarou’s. From this distance, she could feel his warmth and his breath. The sensation made her mind go blank. But she was so close to him that Koutarou couldn’t see her or tell what she was doing. Moreover, now that she was in his arms, he was far more worried about Harumi right now.

“Sakuraba-senpai, don’t push yourself too hard either.”

“I’m fine, Satomi-kun. That’s why I’m on this side, remember?”

Since the infiltration team would be going in while the enemy was distracted, they would hypothetically be a lot safer than the diversion team, who would actively be fighting the enemy. Koutarou had only come along as a bodyguard just in case.

“And besides, Clan-san’s invention is more than making up for my weakness.”

“If you say so...”

Koutarou reluctantly nodded. What Harumi was saying made sense, but he was still apprehensive about bringing her into a potential combat zone. Even with the PAF and the strong power she inherited from Alaia, Harumi was still just Harumi to Koutarou. The same as with Yurika, he didn’t like the idea of her being involved in anything violent like this.

“But even then, I don’t want to have you fighting, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“If you’re going to say that, then I don’t want you fighting either, Satomi-kun. A gentle soul like you doesn’t belong on the battlefield.”

Harumi understood how Koutarou felt because she felt the same way about him. Koutarou, who had lost part of his family and was still so desperately seeking warmth in others, shouldn’t be forced to raise a weapon against anyone. There was only one reason why he did.

“Yet you still fight. For everyone, and for their future. So I will too. I want to stay by your side and do what you do.”

“Sakuraba-senpai...”

“Of course, I know I’m not suited to fight. That’s why I want to help as best as I can without getting in the way.”

Harumi’s feelings hadn’t changed since the day she learned of Koutarou and the others’ secrets. She wanted to walk down the same path they did. That was it. And she was sure that the other girl inside of her felt the same way.

“Give it up, Satomi Koutarou. Harumi is right.”

“Okay, okay. In that case, let’s just get this over with quickly. That’d be best.”

Koutarou relented when Kiriha suggested that it was a losing fight. If he was going to insist that Harumi didn’t have a reason to fight, the same could be said about him. There was no real reason that Koutarou should be allowed to fight while Harumi couldn’t. And that being the case, the easiest way to make everyone happy was to complete their mission as quickly as possible in order to avoid any fighting.

And it's not just Senpai or Yurika, either... It's the same for Kiriha-san, Clan, and everyone else. They're all strong, but they still shouldn't have to fight.

Harumi wasn't the only one that he wanted to keep out of the fighting. Koutarou wanted the girls of room 106 to live happily. That's why he was determined to do his best for all of them.

Confirmation that the infiltration team had reached their checkpoint came about ten minutes after the groups split up. By then, the girls of room 106 and the Sun Rangers had reached the front gate of the factory.

"A laser message from Master. They have made it to their assigned position."

"Send him a message telling him not to let his guard down... Well then, let's go, men!"

Theia stood at the front of the group, her arms crossed and her feet firmly planted on the ground shoulder-length apart. The night breeze kicked up her golden hair, and it waved like a flag in the air. Her apparent confidence and the unwavering will in her eyes was so majestic and beautiful that it hardly seemed like someone of her diminutive stature could contain it all.

"Maki-san, this will be the first battle for our band of knights. See to it that you perform honorably so as not to sully the Satomi family name."

"As you wish, vice captain! I will protect Her Highness in place of our captain!"

Ruth and Maki were wearing their knight uniforms and standing on either side of Theia to protect her. On top of their matching uniforms, each girl was wearing their own gear. Ruth had her armor and was carrying two beam swords, while Maki was cloaked in an indigo robe and holding her magical staff. Though they were born in different worlds, the determination on their faces and the fire burning in their eyes made them look like they could be sisters.

Behind the three of them were Sanae and Shizuka.

"All right, I'm gonna give it my all today!"

"You sure are fired up, Sanae-chan."

"Yeah! I'm gonna steal the spotlight and make Koutarou wanna invite me into

his band of knights!”

“Maybe I’ll do the same.”

“That’s more like it, Shizuka! Make dragon uncle work too!”

“No thank you!”

“That’s cold, Shizuka.”

“But if I bring out Uncle Alu, I’ll get heavier! I’ll definitely finish this without having to bring him out today!”

“...It’s not like your actual weight really increases...”

“I don’t really get it, but I’m rooting for you, Shizuka!”

Neither Sanae nor Shizuka had any armor or weapons. Instead, they were both enveloped in spiritual energy—Sanae with her own and Shizuka with some borrowed from the dragon inside of her. Thanks to that, they were both stronger than armed soldiers. For these two girls, weapons or armor would only get in their way.

“Nana-san... I’ll fulfill my duties the best I can today...”

Behind them was Yurika, who had a different atmosphere about her than usual. The real difference was in the enemy she was facing. They were an organized group that was misusing magic on purpose, a clear enemy of Rainbow Heart. Moreover, she would need to defeat them to save Kiriha’s future. So walking into this fight was both a matter of duty and something she needed to do to help a dear friend. That’s why she looked far more serious than normal.

“I’m still nowhere near as good as you were, Nana-san, but I will definitely pull through!”

Yurika tightly gripped her staff, Angel Halo. The resolute expression of a magical girl that peeked out on her face from time to time was now clearly showing. She was like a completely different person compared to when she first came to room 106. Indeed, Yurika was not herself right now, but Rainbow Yurika—a real magical girl.

“Baron-san’s friends are all amazing people... We still have a long way to go...”

“We’ve made progress too just to be able to tell that by looking at them.”

“Kotaro is right, Kenichi. There’s no need to beat yourself up over it.”

“Yeah. Being able to tell how amazing Baron-sama is for ourselves is a huge step forward!”

“...Sadly, that part of Megu-chan hasn’t made any progress...”

All the way in the back of their formation were the five Sun Rangers. They were wearing their usual combat uniforms, which had acquired all kinds of battle scars over the past months. That was proof of their growth, proof that they were now first-rate soldiers. They were no longer the disorderly mob they were when they’d first met Koutarou. Much like Yurika, they were completely different people now.

There were six girls from room 106 and the five Sun Rangers on the diversion team. All eleven of them boldly approached the front gate of the factory. As they did, the spotlights around the facility focused on them. When they had approached to within ten meters of the gate, a speaker mounted over the gate gave them a stern warning.

“This is private property! If you approach any further, you will be removed by force!”

It was the standard threat, but it was clear this was no mere formality. The soldiers beyond the gate already had their weapons at the ready and were just waiting for the order to fire. They knew good and well that the people in front of them were the same group that had been there earlier that day.

“I dare you to try it! I’ll show you just who you’re barking at!”

Theia fearlessly stood at the front as the enemy tried to intimidate them. The unyielding strength she had been born with revealed itself in her eyes.

“Blue Knight, raise the flag!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

On Theia’s orders, a large flag several meters wide spread out behind the group. It wasn’t a physical flag, but one drawn using lasers. In the center of the flag was a golden flower. It was the combat flag raised when Princess

Theiamillis took the front lines.

The laser flag stood out even from afar. Koutarou and the others could see it on the opposite end of the factory.

“So it’s started.”

With the flag raised and its golden light filling the area, it naturally caught the attention of the factory guards. As a result, they began flocking towards it. Just as planned, the guard around the rear of the factory thinned out.

“Clan, we’re counting on you.”

While Theia’s flag was meant to draw the enemy’s attention, it was also the signal for Koutarou’s group to get to work. So as the diversion team took to their battle at the front gate, Koutarou and the others took to infiltrating the back of the factory.

“Preparations are already complete. The surveillance cameras along our route are already being fed dummy footage and I’ve confirmed the sensors’ positions. I can guide us into the factory undetected.”

The first step of their breakin would largely depend on Clan. As her ship specialized in stealth functions, she had excellent techniques for concealment. While the People of the Earth had more advanced detection devices than those found on the surface, they were but rudimentary toys to Clan.

“Kii, you’ll have to do something about the spiritual energy sensors.”

“Karama, Korama, activate your spiritual energy sensors and detect them.”

“Got it, Nee-san!”

“Clan-chan, watch how gallant we are, ho!”

“Don’t fall for us, ho!”

“I wouldn’t!”

The only thing Clan couldn’t do anything about were the spiritual energy devices. Since they were a totally foreign technology to her, she had no way of detecting them. She would have to leave that part to Kiriha and her haniwas.

“Senpai, could you keep an eye out for spells just in case?”

“Of course. I’ll keep watch.”

Harumi would be on the lookout for mana. Since magicians needed to cast spells manually, one at a time, the chances that they were being used to do work at a factory was fairly low. But that didn’t eliminate the possibility a few had been assigned to guard key areas. It would be important to have Harumi stay alert for things like that just in case.

For their operation, the division of duties was simple and clear. Clan was in charge of technology, Kiriha of spiritual energy, Harumi of magic, and Koutarou of security. In terms of an infiltration team, they were the most effective and succinct combination possible.

“All right, let’s go everyone.”

“Yeah!” the three girls responded to Koutarou in harmony.

The four of them made it past the outer fence and into the factory yard. Neither their demeanors nor their teamwork showed any hint of disorder.

Koutarou and the others would have liked to advance straight towards the factory, but there were too many sensors in the way. They carefully followed Clan’s directions, slowly but surely closing in on the building.

“Next, stay low and get up to that corner. Veltlion, you need to be extra careful because you’re so tall.”

“Gotcha. I’ll be careful.”

They would sneak from shadow to shadow, staying low and even crawling where necessary. They wanted to be as quick about it as possible, but the enemy would find them if they rushed. They had to be patient for now if they wanted to get as much information as possible.

It took several long minutes for them to all creep up to the building, but fortunately, their efforts paid off. They reached their destination without being detected.

“Jeez, we finally reached it.”

“Well done, Clan. You really are good at these kind of cowardly things.”

“Are you praising me or taking a stab at me?”

“I’m praising you, really.”

“I can’t believe it. Jeez...”

“It’s okay, Clan-san. Satomi-kun is always singing your praises when you’re not around.”

“Hey now, Sakuraba-senpai!”

“Heehee, sorry.”

“I-Is that true?!”

Koutarou and the girls took a quick breather in the shadow of the large factory building. Smiles of relief could be seen on their faces as they felt themselves freed from the tension that had been building up as they made their way here. There was even a lighthearted joke or two. But things wouldn’t remain that way for long.

A group of soldiers passed right by the place where there were hiding. They looked like reinforcements headed for the battle at the front gate. Waiting until the soldiers got a good distance away, Kiriha spoke up.

“We can’t take things too lightly. Koutarou, let’s proceed inside the building right away.”

“You’re right. I bet the other group doesn’t have it easy.”

They could hear the sounds of gunfire and explosions even from this side of the building. There was no doubting the diversion team was in the middle of a fierce battle right now. And with their lives on the line, Koutarou and the others didn’t have the time to take it easy.

“Nee-san, we shouldn’t try that service entrance over there, ho!”

“An active spiritual energy sensor has been set up in that area, ho! We’ll be detected even using Class II Stealth Mode, ho!”

The problem was that security around the factory was tight. They wouldn’t be able to use the entrance that the soldiers had.

“I’d like to hurry, but breaking in with brute strength would be a bad idea when we’re outnumbered like this.”

“We should look for another entrance then. Clan, can you find one we can use?”

“Please wait a moment... um...”

Clan operated her bracelet and sent orders to her small reconnaissance drone. The drone had been gathering information for a while and already had a rough blueprint of the outside of the factory. She brought it up and analyzed it again to find a different route.

“Let’s see... Not too far from here is an exhaust vent where the heat from the factory is being funneled outside. I tried following the heat signature, and it seems to go quite a ways into the factory.”

Clan suggested that they infiltrate the factory via the exhaust ventilation system, but Kiriha quickly shook her head.

“Since this is heat exhaust from weapons manufacturing, it’s likely an extreme temperature. Koutarou aside, I can’t imagine that the rest of us would make it through.”

With metal being processed inside the factory, the heat vented outside would indeed be intense. It would be like a constant, scorching hot wind. That was no problem for Koutarou, whose armor was designed for space use, but the other three girls wouldn’t have it so easy. Which was why Kiriha couldn’t imagine it would be a realistic path. While Kiriha liked Clan and wanted to respect her plans, she had to object this time.

“I’ve already thought of that, Kii.”

But since her objection was something Clan had expected, she smiled. She had already thought of a countermeasure.

“With the data I’ve collected, I believe we should be able to pass without any problems using Harumi’s magic.”

Clan had accumulated data on magic from both Alaia and Harumi. And based on that data, she thought that if Harumi used defensive and cooling spells, they

should be able to endure the vent without issue.

“I see... That might work.”

“Of course, it won’t last for long... But there are also other merits to it, too. There shouldn’t be any sensors in the exhaust vent.”

Even with tight security around the facility, the radical faction had no reason to set up surveillance at an entrance that would ordinarily require a spacesuit to pass through. Surely it would be less guarded as well.

“Then we’re counting on you, Harumi.”

“Please leave it to me. This is exactly what I’m here for.”

Harumi didn’t flinch at the sudden job thrown onto her, but rather nodded confidently as her long, beautiful hair started shining silver.

The infiltration via the heat vent was progressing smoothly. Harumi was controlling the mana from Signaltin to shield herself and the others from the searing heat. Thanks to that, they could casually walk through the blowing 100 degrees Celsius air. After walking through the vent for a while, they came across a maintenance hatch. Once they pried it open, they finally had their way into the factory proper. As expected, the heat ventilation system was poorly guarded, and nobody had noticed them.

“Koutarou, your hand.”

When it was Koutarou’s turn to come through the maintenance hatch at the rear of the group, he moved over to the ladder they were using. But looking down, Kiriha was holding her hand up to him to help him down.

“Thanks, but no thanks, Kiriha-san. The armor is still pretty hot.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I do,” he said, giving her a wry smile.

The maintenance hatch was hot from the superheated air in the vent, so Koutarou, who was wearing his armor, was put in charge of opening and shutting it. And since he’d been handling the vent, his gauntlets had absorbed some of its heat. While the armor had a cooling function, it wasn’t instant. If

Koutarou grabbed Kiriha's hand now, it probably wouldn't burn her seriously, but her delicate skin would turn red from the heat. So Koutarou refused her help and climbed down the ladder on his own.

"Onii-chan doesn't understand the feelings of a girl who wants to be of help to the person she loves," Kiriha whispered so that only Koutarou could hear.

She was pouting. Kiriha—or rather, Kii—wanted to be useful. A little heat was nothing if it meant she could help Koutarou.

"What can I say? You're too important to me, Kii."

"Ahaha, then I guess it is what it is."

Kiriha was only able to remain so childlike for a few seconds. They were in the middle of a battle, and tension soon returned to her expression. The same went for Koutarou. The next he spoke, he'd resumed his knightly aura.

"By the way, Kiriha-san, what kind of place is this?"

"This is the part of the factory floor with blast furnaces and other machinery that puts off a great deal of heat. There should be another area where the weapons are actually assembled. I want to take a look there first."

Koutarou couldn't even imagine what some of the machines around him were, but they were for industrial metallurgy. The metal was melted in the blast furnaces and molded into rough shapes. Those shapes were then processed, refined, and cut down into parts. Kiriha had no doubt these were the parts for the new weapons the radical faction was using.

But since the mechanical soldiers were so large, it was hard to get a grasp of their overall shape and function just by looking at individual parts. They would be better off heading to the assembly line to see the product being made. And if possible, she wanted to head to the control room where the whole process was overseen.

"Clan-san, which way should we go?"

The factory looked even stranger to Harumi than it did to Koutarou. As a normal teenage girl, she didn't know the first thing about industrial technology, and it was all a little scary. She turned to Clan for help.

“Well, if the factory is laid out logically, then we should head in the direction of the front gate.”

Clan answered without hesitation. Since she wasn’t an ordinary girl by any stretch of the imagination, and had experience with all kinds of odd things. And that included some industrial knowhow.

“Why?”

“Because it makes supply chain management easier. Placing the start and finish of the production line there is the most logical thing to do.”

“I see. That would be most efficient, wouldn’t it?”

With the beginning and the end of the line in the same place, logistics were simpler. A transport could drop off raw materials and leave after being loaded up with finished product. Though there were some exceptions, most production lines worked in that sort of circular way.

“Which means that’s where we want to go.”

“Let’s hurry. Everyone’s still fighting for us.”

To get the information they needed, Koutarou and the others headed in the direction Clan had suggested.

Everyone, stay safe...

But even though they were inside the factory, they could still hear the sounds of the battle outside. Koutarou prayed for the other girls’ safety while resolving himself to complete his mission as quickly as possible.

The diversion team couldn’t simply focus on defeating the radical faction. If they got too much of an edge, then the enemy might begin retreating. And if that happened, there would be no point in a diversion. They needed to draw things out while leading the enemy to believe they had a sure chance at victory. Because of that, Theia and the others couldn’t make use of any large or particularly devastating attacks, such as bombarding the area using Blue Knight. They limited themselves to fighting against the soldiers directly.

“Blue Knight! Anti-personnel smart gun!”

“Please select your choice of bullet.”

“Use paralysis bullets! Fire at will!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Theia summoned an anti-personnel weapon from Blue Knight and rained down fire on the soldiers guarding the factory. What she was wielding was like a large machine gun, the kind that was more likely to be found mounted to a vehicle. It spat nearly a thousand per second, and the sound of it firing was like an earthquake.

“Kyah! Kyah! Kyah!”

The bullets weren’t just whizzing past the enemy, but also Yurika, who happened to be nearby. Since Blue Knight was aiming automatically, she was in very little danger of being hit, but she was still none too pleased about being fired at by her own ally. She was crying near hysterically.

“Theia-chan, please just shoot the enemy!”

“The trajectory of each bullet is carefully calculated! You’ll be fine!”

The bullets Theia was firing were rounds meant to paralyze. There wasn’t a great deal of firepower behind them, and they didn’t have the power to break through Yurika’s defensive spell. Moreover, Blue Knight’s automated aim was extremely precise. Even with thousands of rounds being fired, only a handful went astray. While she would have been in trouble if Theia had fired at her directly, there was almost no chance a few stray bullets would do her any harm. Theia had determined that using a high-output, low-firepower weapon would allow her to concentrate on her enemies without having to worry too much about her allies. Though she didn’t say it out loud, Theia had faith in Yurika’s magic.

And the results were just as Theia anticipated. The guards fell one after another. But though she might be safe, Yurika still wasn’t happy about being shot at.

“Don’t shoot me just because you think it’s safe!”

“Yurika-chan, if you don’t like it, then you just have to make sure you don’t

get hit.”

Shizuka, who was with Yurika, flashed a confident smile. She could sense Theia’s intention to attack and would move out of the line of fire. As a result, not a single bullet had hit her so far.

“Please don’t lump me together with a superhuman like yourself, Shizuka-san!”

“You can do it too if you put your heart in it. Or can you not muster enough motivation without Satomi-kun here?”

Shizuka made small talk as she wailed on a soldier. She went from a light left jab into a right straight that she used to rotate her body before pouring all her momentum into a roundhouse kick. The soldier took each hit of the brilliant combo, fell instantly to the ground, and stopped moving. Such was the power of Shizuka’s attacks. But since she was avoiding vital points, the soldier on the ground had only lost consciousness and not his life. The girls had good reasons for not wanting to kill their enemies.

Though they might be bad guys, the members of the radical faction were still Kiriha’s people. Thinking about relations in the future, they wanted this conflict to end with as few casualties as possible. That was why Theia and Shizuka were only using nonlethal force. Of course, the fact that they detested killing also played a big role in it.

“Th-That’s not it, but...”

“Yurika, quit spacing out and get to work! They’re coming out in droves!”

Sanae shot at an enemy using a bow and arrow created from her own spiritual energy. An arrow that would split into sixteen smaller ones midair was a difficult thing to dodge, and the soldier fell to the ground as he was hit by several of the smaller ones. The soldier in question had actually been after Yurika. Since she was so incredibly adaptable on the battlefield, she was seen as one of the biggest threats.

“S-Sorry, Sanae-chan! Fog Cloud! Modifier: Effective Time, Twice!”

Yurika cast a spell to block the field of view of the approaching enemies. The enemies would keep attacking even if she protested, so she didn’t have the

time to whine.

“Yurika-sama, get behind us!”

“Nijino Yurika, you support us from the rear! The Satomi knights will take the front!”

There were other enemies approaching Yurika, but they were stopped by Ruth and Maki. Ruth was wearing a mechanical-looking set of armor and was armed with beam swords, while Maki had created a large blade stretching out from the top of her staff. The two girls put themselves between the enemy and their friends.

“Maki-san, be careful not to get too far out! Please keep our allies’ positions in mind at all times!”

Ruth made full use of her armor’s defensive capabilities, breaking up the enemy waves. With her barrier’s high output, she could effectively block attacks for her allies by expanding it over a wider area. At the same time, she attacked enemies designated as high priority by her armor’s AI one after another with her beam swords set to paralysis mode.

“Understood, vice captain!”

Maki’s role was more offensive than Ruth’s. Using her large blade, she targeted the soldiers who left themselves open. In essence, Ruth was preventing the enemy from advancing while Maki thinned their numbers. It was an effective combination, and together they were able to stem the enemy tide.

That said, their band of knights had only just recently been formed, and their coordination was still somewhat lacking. Maki in particular had very little experience when it came to fighting on a team. While working for Darkness Rainbow, she had almost always been alone. Because of that, she had a tendency not to consider her allies. Koutarou was one thing, but she had a hard time paying attention to everyone around her.

“Aika-san, wipe those guys out! I’ve got your back!”

“Kasagi-san? Thank you! I’m counting on you!”

But even though Maki struggled to mind her allies, they were still all working

together. Since this way of fighting was completely different from what she was used to, there was a lot of hesitation in her moves. But she firmly believed that this was where she belonged, and that belief made her stronger. So did the friends who had her back.

And so, with the unique teamwork between the girls of room 106 that made use of each of their peculiarities, the diversion team's battle was progressing in their favor. But when it came to teamwork, the Sun Rangers weren't losing out either.

"Let's go, Daisaku!"

"Yeah! I'll charge in, so please back me up, Hayato-kun!"

They'd been little better than a disorganized mob in the past, but now the five of them each had a clear role in the group.

Up in front was the large man skilled in martial arts, Yellow Shine Daisaku. He dealt with the enemy's vanguard. Pink Shine Megumi used an automatic gun to restrain the rear of the enemy formation. Actually taking out the enemy was the job of their sharpshooter, Blue Shine Hayato, who used a rifle to pick off the enemies one by one. Green Shine Kotaro's job was to throw the enemy into disarray. His weapon of choice was explosives. And finally, with a sword in his right hand and a gun in his left was Red Shine Kenichi. He adapted to the situation and provided backup wherever needed.

"Calm down, Daisaku, Hayato! Our job isn't to defeat the enemy!"

"Kenichi is right! We need to buy time for my Baron-sama and the others!"

Their teamwork was splendid. There wasn't a single sign of the disorganized, chaotic mess they were in the past. The Sun Rangers hadn't just twiddled their thumbs and done nothing these past few months. They'd trained to become strong, and had gotten even tougher through their experience in battle. Combined with the teamwork they'd developed, they were finally fit to be called a combat squad.

Under the command of Kenichi, the five of them fought magnificently. The equipment they had was nowhere near the level of what Theia and the others had, but it was clear to anyone that they were far more skilled than your

average soldiers.

“Kenichi-niichan, something’s strange.”

“What do you mean?”

“Take a good look. The weapons that Daisaku-niichan and Megumi-neechan photographed aren’t coming to attack at all. And that robot that attacked when we were escaping isn’t here either.”

“Now that you mention it...”

Their battle instincts kicked in and told them something was fishy. They were supposedly at a weapons production facility, yet none of those weapons were anywhere to be seen. The Sun Rangers knew they should be there—they’d photographed them just earlier that day—but not even the mechanical soldier they’d fought was around now. The only enemies on the battlefield were members of the radical faction. The Sun Rangers had prepared themselves for a fierce fight, so this was almost a disappointment.

“If you’d like, I can tell you the reason for that.”

That was when a cold, sharp voice cut through the noise of the heated battle. The moment it did, both friend and foe alike stopped fighting.

“Maya-sama?!”

“It’s been a while, Maki.”

The voice belonged to the previous Dark Navy, Maya. She approached in a grand manner, and stopped to face Maki a few meters away.

Maya-sama... she means business...

A cold shiver ran down Maki’s spine when she saw her old master. Maya crossed her arms as if to accentuate her large bosom. She appeared defenseless despite her provoking behavior, but Maki couldn’t seem to find a single opening. To Maki, Maya looked like a ferocious beast ready to rip off her opponent’s head in the blink of an eye.

Maki kept a keen eye on Maya as she readied her blade. Her stance was tighter than it had been before. She knew better than anyone else that she wouldn’t catch Maya with any large attacks.

“Oh, how scary. Maki, you don’t need to be so frightened. I only came because I wanted to see your face. It’s been too long. I’ll leave after playing with you for a bit.”

Maya didn’t seem shaken in the slightest despite her protégé pointing a deadly weapon at her. She knew that the current Maki couldn’t win against her. Maya simply oozed confidence. It was written all over her face. Her white teeth could be seen peeking out from lips as they curled up in a bewitching, foxy grin. She was truly beautiful, but the gesture was more akin to a beast baring its fangs.

“Heh heh heh, but if you look at me with those scary eyes, Maki, you’ll give away your little act of being captured by the enemy.”

“M-Maya-sama?!”

Maki was shaken by Maya’s words. Since Maya had appeared so suddenly, she had completely forgotten about the delicate situation she was in herself. She should have had a more reserved reaction. But Maya’s next words shook Maki up even more.

“Don’t worry, Maki. I don’t really care what side you are on. I never had, and I never will.”

“What...”

Maya had already had an inkling of Maki’s betrayal, yet left her alone until today.

“I have to say though, Maki, I don’t hate the current you right now.”

Maya flashed a truly happy smile as her master, or perhaps as one of her few comrades. It was a pure smile devoid of any malice, though it only lasted for a few seconds.

“Realize your desires with your own power. You’re finally living the life. Though it’s a bit ironic that you didn’t really seem to understand what Darkness Rainbow was all about until you split.”

When Maki was a part of Darkness Rainbow, she desired nothing more than sincerity from people. She clung to truth and honesty because of the betrayals

she'd experienced in the past. But no one is perfect. There are many forms of dishonesty, and everyone lies in one way or another. That was an endless source of irritation for her. Maki was always unhappy with her surroundings and with other people.

Maya didn't like that about Maki. She thought that instead of just being unhappy about it, she should do something about it. Even if that meant forcing other people to be sincere with magic. Using magic to realize your desires was Darkness Rainbow's creed, after all.

However, after parting ways with Darkness Rainbow, Maki found herself freed from that bitter unhappiness. She'd come to realize that what she really wanted wasn't sincerity, but what lay beyond. Love. And forcing love with magic was wrong and sad. It would only be a hollow shell of the real thing. A lie. And Maki despised lies. So in short, the power of magic couldn't bring Maki what she really wanted. She needed a real relationship, not a slave. Someone who would be brutally honest with her, rather than shower her with adoration.

So now, instead of trying to use her magic to get something, Maki was using her powers to protect what she already had. And seeing Maki be so honest with herself about her feelings, even if those feelings were love, made Maya happy. She thought things were better this way, though it was amusing that Maki hadn't truly started to act like a member of Darkness Rainbow until she left them.

But as a member of Darkness Rainbow herself, Maya knew that their bonds with each other were shallow. It wasn't exactly out of character for an evil magical girl to double-cross her allies. That's why Maya wasn't all that surprised and didn't care all that much that Maki had betrayed them. If anything, she was happy to see her take that kind of initiative. That's why she hadn't mentioned it to anyone else.

Good and evil didn't matter to Maya. She only cared about her own desires and using magic to get what she wanted. Maya herself was also a pure embodiment of Darkness Rainbow's ideals.

"Then you should understand, Maya-sama. Even if it means having to fight you, I won't lose."

Maki pointed the tip of her blade at Maya. Her hands were trembling slightly from the tension, and beads of sweat were sliding down her forehead. If she let her guard down for even a little, she would be taken out in an instant. Since Maya knew the scope of Maki's abilities, she was just about the scariest enemy imaginable.

"Good. That's how you should be. However..." As Maya spoke, blades popped out of her artificial arms. "I feel the same way! I will cut down anyone who opposes me, even if it's you, Maki!"

Maya made her move just as those last few words left her mouth. She was so blindingly fast that most of the crowd watching had trouble even following her with their eyes.

"Nightwalker! Recall Precast Spells! Category: Alpha!"

But Maki had no trouble keeping up with her. In response, she released ten or so spells that she prepared beforehand to drastically increase her combat abilities.

"Maya-sama!"

Maki's large sword met the blade that had popped out from Maya's right arm. With the magical enhancements from her spells, Maki was just barely able to keep up with Maya.

"Well done stopping me! That's my number one apprentice!"

Though her attack had been blocked, Maya grinned in delight. Seeing how much her protégé had grown pleased her.

"But you're too naive!"

Maya didn't relent. Her protégé or not, an enemy was an enemy. Even though she was happy to see Maki's growth, she wouldn't hesitate to cut her down without mercy.

Maya had the upper hand in terms of both weight and power, and she forcibly pushed Maki back, following up with a kick at Maki's head. Since most of Maya's body was supported by an alloy armature, a blow like that would do serious damage.

“Energy Release!”

Maki’s enhanced senses told her that she wouldn’t be able to dodge the kick normally. So instead, she released the mana gathered in her staff. The magical blade formed on top of Maki’s staff required a large quantity of mana to maintain, and releasing it was enough to cause a small explosion.

“You’re as reckless as always, Maki!”

The shockwave from the explosion threw Maya’s kick off course, but because of its proximity, it also damaged Maki. Compared to Maya and her mechanical body, Maki’s flesh and blood body took more damage in the blast. She figured it would be better than getting hit by Maya’s kick, but just like Maya had said, it was still reckless.

“...My master isn’t someone you can beat through normal means...”

Still staggering from the explosion, Maki readied her staff once more. Her eyes were unwavering. She was desperate to beat Maya.

“You know just what to say to make me happy,”

However, for some reason, Maya retracted the blades extended from her arms.



“Maya-sama?”

Since Maya had the advantage, her actions confused Maki. As her apprentice, Maki knew better than anyone that Maya couldn’t be underestimated.

“I told you. I only came to see your face today.”

Maya knew why Maki was confused. While fighting her was fun, it was also fun to see her like this. Maya smiled like her bloodlust just moments ago had all been a farce.

“If I were seriously going to fight you, I’d prepare a much better stage. Not somewhere like this with all these people to get in the way.”

Maya had several reasons for stopping, but the biggest reason was that she hated interruptions. While Maya would have had an advantage for a time after her surprise appearance, Theia and the others wouldn’t just sit idly by. In fact, Shizuka was already rushing over to Maki’s aid. If she stayed around much longer, Maya may very well have been in trouble. The current Maki wasn’t alone anymore.

“Besides, I just received word that our boy has fallen into the trap.”

“Boy...? You mean Satomi-kun?!”

Maya and the others’ real target was Koutarou. Everything else was just a bonus, including getting to see her protégé. Maya had come out because they didn’t know where Koutarou was. While they had quickly figured out that Maki and the others were a diversion, they didn’t know if Koutarou was taking part in the infiltration or the diversion. Since their strategy would change depending on where he was, Maya had come out to find out for herself.

She didn’t see him among the members of the diversion team, but had shortly after received a message letting her know he’d been found inside. With that information, Maya no longer had any reason to stick around outside.

“That’s right... Koutarou, my dear beloved boy... That’s the reason why our main forces aren’t out here, you know. I’m sure that boy and his little friends are struggling right now.”

That explained why the main weapons at the factory hadn’t been brought out

against the diversion team. Maya and the others had placed their main force inside, lying in wait. And just as expected, Koutarou eventually appeared. In other words, the radical faction had pulled the same tactic on them. The group at the main gate was just a diversion to distract attention from their main objective.

“Well then, goodbye for now, Maki. Let’s meet again soon.”

With those parting words like she was only casually bidding farewell to a friend, Maya turned away from Maki.

“Maya-sama! W-Wait, Maya-sama!”

Maki wanted to chase after Maya, but the radical soldiers closed in to obstruct her way. They wasted no time in attacking, and all Maki could do was watch Maya walk off as she defended herself.

“Now... it’s been a while since I got to play with the boy... Heh, I can’t wait.”

Maya’s steps were light. She looked like a woman about to reunite with her lover.

Secret Weapon

Saturday, July 3rd

Not long before Maya appeared before Maki, Koutarou and the others managed to reach the loading dock of the factory. They had to evade soldiers patrolling the area on the way there, but fortunately, thanks to the powerful trinity of technology, magic, and spiritual energy on their side, they made it there without issue.

On the way, they'd gotten a chance to take a look at the production line, which gave them a better idea of what was actually being made in the factory. All that was left was to find out how they planned on using what they were making. That was what had led them to the loading dock.

"It looks like they're carrying them out on those trailers."

Koutarou peeked out from behind a small crane in the corner of the loading dock. The dock itself was large, and housed several oversized trailers. They were currently being loaded with containers filled with finished weapons one after another. There were crates of guns, boxes of ammunition, small combat vehicles, large ordnance, and even mechanical soldiers. They were all merciless weapons designed for the explicit purpose of taking human life. Seeing it all, Koutarou instinctively grabbed Kiriha's hand.

Kiriha-san gave it her all to avoid this... This is completely different from her invasion...

Any invasion that involved these tools of war wouldn't be an invasion so much as it would a slaughter. It couldn't be further from the peaceful immigration Kiriha had envisioned. The radical faction liked to talk about pride, but even Koutarou—an outsider—could tell that the conservative faction had truly chosen the honorable way when he saw all of this. Kiriha was paving the way for her people with hard work. With brooms and garbage bags, not bullets and guns. With love, not blood.

This radical invasion had to be stopped no matter what. Kiriha's peaceful invasion had to be protected. Those feelings gripped Koutarou, unconsciously making him squeeze Kiriha's hand even harder.

"...So it seems."

Kiriha only responded to what Koutarou had said, but his feelings were conveyed to her too. That's why she squeezed his hand back just as hard. Their fingers intertwined, their hands completely linked. It was just an outward expression of the way their hearts were right now.

"Then how about we destroy those trailers, Veltlion?"

Clan proposed a strategic attack. If they destroyed the trailers, the weapons would never leave the facility. It might be a good chance to reduce the radical faction's arsenal.

"No, it would be better to let them go. I want to find out where the weapons are being taken."

Koutarou agreed with the sentiment behind Clan's idea, but he believed it would better serve them to locate the enemy's base.

"But Satomi-kun, are you really okay with letting that many weapons fall into the hands of these people?"

Harumi furrowed her brow. She was worried. There was enough weaponry in these containers to outfit a small army. Once they left the factory, innocent people would be in danger. So shouldn't they keep that from happening? That was Harumi's concern, and it was Kiriha who answered her doubts.

"Sadly, Harumi, considering the scale of this factory, this is just a fraction of their total arsenal. Even if we destroy all the weapons here, it may not make much of a difference overall. And if that's the risk we run, then it would be better to let them go so we can determine their destination. If we can get to their base and prevent a battle from breaking out in the first place, that will have a much greater effect than just destroying some of their supply here. So we have to hold out."

"I see..."

Kiriha explained the details of Koutarou's approach. It was difficult to accept, but Harumi understood the complexities of the circumstances. It was hard for Kiriha herself to let these weapons go, but if she didn't, it could lead to an even bigger tragedy. Right now, she had to hold back for the greater good.

"Clan, do you have a transmitter of some sort?"

"I do. Please wait a moment."

Clan shoved her hand into her bag and rustled through its contents. Harumi smiled cheerfully upon seeing Clan's actions.

"Teehee. You have everything, don't you, Clan-san?"

"If it's shady, you can count on Clan."

"Mark my words, Veltlion. Once we get back, you're really going to get it... Ah, here it is."

Clan pulled out a small capsule-like device from her bag and placed it in Koutarou's palm. It was the Schweiger family's preferred type of transmitter.

"Once you attach this to a surface, it will automatically activate and begin broadcasting a signal."

"But won't they notice if it goes online right now?"

"Nothing to worry about. We can just set it to standby so there's a lag time before it begins transmitting. It's also possible to set it to activate when it's no longer in range of a specific signal."

Clan tapped away at her bracelet and adjusted the settings on the tiny device. She programmed several of them so that they would stay on standby for an hour. During that time, one of Clan's drones would follow the trailers and monitor them by optical feed. When the hour elapsed or the drone could no longer track the trailers—whichever came first—the transmitters would begin emitting their signals. That should lower the risk of the enemy discovering them.

"All done. Now we just need to attach these to the trailers."

"Thank you, Clan. You're a lifesaver."

Koutarou took the transmitters in his right hand and patted Clan two or three times on the shoulder with his left. While it may have been a bit too rough of a gesture to thank a princess, it couldn't have been more expressive of Koutarou's gratitude. So even though Clan was frowning, she was secretly quite happy.

"Jeez, you're such a barbarian..."

"Well then, I'll be right back. Wait here for me."

"Satomi-kun, please wait. I'll cast a spell that will make it harder to see you."

"Thanks, Sakuraba-senpai."

After Harumi cast the camouflage spell on him, Koutarou carefully approached the trailers to attach the transmitters.

The loading dock was large, with lots of places to hide. On top of that, the soldiers were busy loading up the trailers, so they weren't paying much attention to their surroundings. There were just a few patrolling guards, but with Harumi's spell concealing him, Koutarou was able to quietly make it past them. Within a few minutes, he'd attached all five transmitters.

"It seems he's just gotten the last one on."

Clan was watching Koutarou through her binoculars. After planting a transmitter on the undercarriage of the fifth trailer, Koutarou waved to Clan. It looked like everything had gone well.

"Did you hear that, Kurano-san? Satomi-kun is on his way back."

"I see. Thank you, Harumi."

After Harumi reported what Clan had said to Kiriha, she looked up from her hands and let out a sigh of relief. She'd had her head bowed in prayer this whole time, asking for nothing more than Koutarou's safety. Instead of her own, her attention now shifted to Kiriha's hands.

"You look at that card from time to time... Is it something important?"

Kiriha was holding a well-worn foil trading card. On it was a beetle-themed hero striking a pose. It seemed like an odd thing for such a feminine and mature

girl like Kiriha to be holding on to, which is why Harumi suspected it was something dear to her.

“This... was given to me by my first love. It was ten years ago... No, I guess it’s already eleven years now.”

Kiriha flashed a nostalgic smile and turned to look at Koutarou who was on his way back to the group. There was a deep love visible in her eyes. She was staring at Koutarou with the same fond look she often did the card. Harumi immediately put two and two together.

Satomi-kun said he met Kiriha-san when she was young on his way back from the past... so this must be from then. Kiriha-san has felt this way for him ever since then. She really loves him...

Harumi had first met Koutarou a year and a few odd months ago. Though since she had Alaia’s memories, it felt more like she had known him much longer than that. That’s why she understood how Kiriha must feel. Wanting to stay by his side, wanting to be needed by him... Those gentle, sincere emotions overflowed her heart. The other girls of room 106 probably all felt the same way.

“Those must be very precious memories.”

“That’s right. They’ve given me the strength to do my best all this time.”

“Veltlion is only ever kind to Kii... He’ll take her out to play and give her presents. He just sees me as convenient to have around.”

“...I do what now?”

That was when Koutarou returned. Unaware of what the girls were discussing, he was confused as to why Harumi and Kiriha were smiling but Clan was sulking.

“It’s nothing!”

“We were talking about how you’re always relying on Clan-san.”

“Well, Clan is good at what I’m bad at. She’s a big help.”

“H-Hmph!”

“And the reverse is true, too. For example, she’s terrible at housework... Speaking of which, I’ll be coming to clean up your lab again soon. You’ve probably made a mess of it since last time.”

“Cleaning? Heeheehee! Why, Clan-san, you’re being treated kindly after all.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, actually—”

“N-No, no! Stop! Don’t say any more, Harumi!”

Clan shook her head vigorously and interrupted Harumi. And while she was at it, she attempted to change the topic.

“Veltlion, it’s about time we move on!”

“Hmm? Yeah, you’re right.”

While he was still curious about what Harumi was going to say, they couldn’t afford to leisurely stand around and chitchat. Koutarou readily agreed to Clan’s suggestion and turned to her for further direction.

“So, what do we do next?”

“Um, th-that’s...”

Koutarou urged Clan on, but she was stumbling for words. Since she was really just trying to change the subject, she hadn’t actually put any thought into their next destination. Fortunately for her, however, Kiriha stepped in to save her.

“Koutarou, I think we should head for the factory’s control room.”

“The control room? Why?”

“If we examine the computers there, we might be able to find out how many weapons have been made and where they’ve been sent. I want to get a complete picture of what we’re up against.”

Kiriha hadn’t spoken up just to help Clan. She’d been interested in visiting the control room from the start. And now that they knew what was being made here at the factory, all that was left was to determine production runs and shipping locations.

“Got it. So, Clan, where is that control room?”

“Logically speaking, it should be placed where it can easily access all of the production line. Probably in the center of the factory.”

By now, Clan had regained her usual composure. She was pointing towards the wall they were currently standing in front of. Though none of them could see through it, her intuition told her that was where their target would be.

As Clan suspected, the control room was at the very center of the factory. That made it easy to find, and the group easily made their way there.

“It’s just like you said, Clan. Well done.”

“You’re amazing Clan-san.”

“You won’t get anything from praising me...”

Clan blushed a little at Koutarou and Harumi’s compliments. Kiriha was the only one who hadn’t said anything. She had quite a serious expression on her face, so Koutarou decided to ask her about it.

“What’s wrong, Kiriha-san? You look like something’s on your mind.”

“It’s... I just felt like something is odd.”

“Odd? Like what?”

“The design of this factory is logical. As a result, we’ve been able to navigate it without getting lost once. Really, it’s *too* logical. Not even their factories underground are this well laid out.”

Kiriha was bothered by the fact that the factory didn’t look or feel like the ones she was used to underground. While the People of the Earth had more advanced technology than the surface dwellers, production wasn’t really a specialty of theirs considering their relatively small population. That’s why, when it came things like industrialism and logistics, the surface dwellers clearly had the advantage. The narrow underground world wasn’t conducive to building efficient factories and the like.

Yet this facility was near immaculate. The more time she spent in it, the more Kiriha came to appreciate it didn’t seem like anything that had come out of the

mind of an underground dweller. It was indeed odd.

“There are magicians working with the radical faction, so maybe they brought in someone to help out with it.”

Clan figured they must have brought in an expert. With the evil magicians on their side, something like that wouldn’t have been hard.

“I hope that’s all...”

But Clan’s theory didn’t sit quite right with Kiriha. It was hard for her to imagine that the proud radical faction would be willing to ask a surface dweller for help, even if they desperately needed it. It would be a completely different matter than working together with the magicians from another world. And on top of all that, the weapons that the enemy soldiers were using was another cause for concern prodding at the back of Kiriha’s mind.

“Kiriha-san, nothing will come from worrying about that here and now. Let’s investigate the control room and figure out what’s up.”

“...You’re right. Let’s try going in.”

Temporarily shelving their doubts, Koutarou and the others decided to enter the control room. The door to it, however, was sealed with an electronic lock. Once again, it was Clan’s time to shine.

“Please wait a moment.”

Clan opened up the cover to the electronic lock and connected it to her bracelet with a cable. Once hooked up to it, she ran a program to analyze the lock. The code needed to open the door was sixteen characters long, and the bracelet revealed the code one character at a time as it solved it.

“Okay, I’m done.”

With the full code needed to open the lock, Clan punched it in on the panel. When she did, the door slid open sideways with almost no sound. It seemed even they had been made with extreme precision.

“Sakuraba-senpai!”

“Yes!”

Once the door opened, Koutarou and Harumi charged into the control room. If there were enemies inside, they'd needed to be incapacitated right away. That meant that it was now Harumi's turn to show her stuff. Her powerful magic could take out several guards at once. Koutarou would go in with her to protect her.

"Huh?"

"There's... no one here."

However, quite contrary to their expectations, the control room was unmanned. There were large monitors displaying the factory and various computers here and there, but not a soul around to operate them.

"That's strange. It's hard to believe that they'd even send control room operators to deal with the diversion out front."

Kiriha entered next, but stopped and tilted her head in confusion. She had a bad feeling that she couldn't shake.

"Regardless of the reason, we still need to investigate this room."

Clan urged Kiriha forward as she came into the room too, brining up the rear. Kiriha didn't resist and let Clan guide her to the very center of the room. She was right. Even if something was strange, they still had a job to do.

"Clan, you take care of that administrator's computer over there. I'll examine the main computer right here."

"Got it, Kii. Let's get this over with quickly."

The two members of their team skilled with computers, Kiriha and Clan, immediately got to work. While copying data from the computers, they also took a look around for anything that stuck out. Harumi and Koutarou, both of whom were terrible with technology, stood by as observers.

"Satomi-kun, I'm glad it wasn't just the two of us that came here."

"Who knows what would have happened if we didn't have Kiriha-san and Clan?"

Koutarou and Harumi both felt a little helpless, but Kiriha and Clan's investigation was progressing smoothly. After a few minutes on the computers,

they stumbled across what they were looking for.

“Koutarou, this is bad!”

The first one to say something was Kiriha, who was investigating the main computer.

“What is it?!”

Koutarou hurriedly rushed over when he heard her panicked voice and saw her tense expression.

“Take a look at this! It appears to be a blueprint for a massive weapon!”

“What the heck is this?!”

On the monitor of the terminal Kiriha was sitting at was an image of a huge machine over ten meters tall. Like she said, it seemed to be some kind of weapon, but it was so big that it looked more like a building.

“I can’t give you any details without studying it more, but it seems its designed to cause earthquakes over a large area!”

“You’re saying that they’re planning on using this to attack the surface?!”

The weapon was so massive that even the file for the digital blueprints was huge. Kiriha had taken an interest in the large file and opened it out of curiosity, but its contents came as quite a surprise.

The weapon was designed to stimulate and disrupt the spiritual energy running through the planet, known as ley lines. Such disruptions under the surface of the earth would result in massive earthquakes. If this machine were actually used, Japan would be hit with natural disasters the likes of which it had never seen before. Whole cities would be left in ruin, and the entire coastline would be drowned by tsunamis.

“Kiriha-san, if they use this thing, the surface might never recover!”

“It won’t just be the surface! An earthquake on this kind of scale wouldn’t leave our city unscathed either! No, it can’t be... That might be their plan!”

Living underground, the People of the Earth were especially susceptible to earthquakes. There was no way the radical faction didn’t know that. If they had

generated a weapon meant to cause earthquakes, they were well aware of the consequences it would bring.

The radical faction's goals were now clear. They had two main objectives.

First, they would attack using a method the surface dwellers wouldn't recognize as an attack. The surface dwellers didn't know that earthquakes could be caused artificially. They would simply assume that it was a natural disaster. And after wreaking havoc on the surface, the radical faction would move in with their army and occupy the cities. Since the people would be devastated after the earthquakes and national resources would be stretched thin with relief efforts, there would be little resistance.

And in doing all of this, they would achieve their secondary goal: wiping out the city of the People of the Earth. By robbing them of their homes, they would be forced to the surface. The surface dwellers wouldn't be able to tell the difference between the conservatives and radicals, and would declare all the People of the Earth their enemy. That would force even the conservatives to defend themselves against the surface dwellers, inadvertently uniting the People of the Earth against the surface.

"How could the radical faction do something like this?! They would even destroy their own home?!"

Harumi, who had listened in on the conversation, was nearly screaming. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. She couldn't even imagine wanting to annihilate the city she was from. Surely no one in their right mind would do something like that.

"While most of us think of the underground as our home, the radical faction only sees it as a humiliating prison! They wouldn't hesitate to destroy a prison to reclaim their true homeland!"

The conservative faction had long accepted the underground as their home. They'd lived there for so many years that it was filled with all kinds of memories and wonderful things for them. It had taken a great deal of resolve to accept that they would have to abandon it after all this time.

But the radical faction didn't feel that way. They'd never thought of the underground as their home. It was simply where they'd been driven after being

chased out of their ancestral homeland. Unable to forget that unfortunate history, they spent their days seething with hatred. They couldn't wait to be rid of it. It was a blemish on their glorious history. An embarrassment. A wrong that they were itching to right.

"But that's going too far!"

"Calm down, Sakuraba-senpai! We're here to stop it from happening!"

"R-Right."

Harumi had fallen into a panic for a moment, but Koutarou's powerful words snapped her out of it.

Satomi-kun really is strong, regardless of how many years pass... He'll protect everyone just like he did in the past... I should stop crying and start thinking about what I can do too...

Harumi wiped away the tears forming in her eyes and changed gears. She channeled all of her energy into trying to think of a way to help.

"Kiriha-san, is that weapon here?!"

Koutarou's line of thinking was clear. If something that dangerous existed, it should be destroyed immediately. If it was in the factory, they could take care of it right here and now.

"It seems like they only made the core of the weapon here. It seems like the rest of it is being produced somewhere else."

"They're not making all of it here?! Then where?!"

"There's a record of it on this computer here!"

As for where the earthquake weapon in question actually was, Clan had found something on the computer she was investigating. Since she was on the administrator's terminal, she had access to records about what had been produced and where it was shipped.

"It's top secret, so it looks like the actual name of the place and coordinates are omitted, but it seems to be on one of the islands off the coast of Kisshouharukaze City. The word 'island' is being used frequently."

“So that’s why they only made the core here!”

“What do you mean, Kiriha-san?”

“If they’re using an earthquake-inducing weapon, then it would be much more efficient to use it on the border of a tectonic plate rather than inland. If they want to avoid being seen by the public, an uninhabited island off the coast would be the best choice. But the problem with an unhabituated island is securing water. Large quantities of water are usually required for things like cooling when manufacturing advanced products. On an uninhabited island, you’d either need to use seawater and thoroughly filter out the saline and impurities, or dig for water underground. Since either would take a significant amount of time, they just manufactured the core here in this factory.”

Since the core of the weapon was the part primarily responsible for its destructive power, it required extremely advanced and precise technology to produce. One common problem in extremely delicate manufacturing was particulate debris, either in the water or the air, that could gummy up the works. That’s why factories that produced refined electronics were often built on sites with clean rivers and little air pollution.

“Clan, can you tell what island it is?”

“I’ve only been able to give this a cursory look, but it seems all the detailed information on the location is missing or redacted...”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to check all of them. Get to work on that, Clan.”

Several islands lay off the coast of Kisshouharukaze City, and Koutarou was determined to check every last one of them if that’s what it took. But that meant they had to get started as soon as possible. There was no telling how long the search could take.

“Wait, Satomi-kun!”

Koutarou was ready to leave and get started, but Harumi stopped him.

“What’s the matter, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“Won’t one of those trailers from before be headed to the island?”

“Oh...”

There was a good chance that one of the five trailers would be taking a shipment to the island. The radical faction would need weapons to protect the earthquake weapon, after all.

“Great idea, Sakuraba-senpai! Clan!”

“I’m checking the shipping records now! She’s right! It looks like one of the trailers is headed to the island in question!”

“Don’t lose sight of that one! I’ll punish you if you do!”

“What a stupid thing to say! Just who do you think I am?!”

“I’m counting on you, princess. Our future is in your hands.”

“Please, Clan-oneechan.”

“...Leave it to me. If Veltlion is going to call me princess and you’re going to call me Oneechan, then I can’t possibly fail!”

Clan’s eyes behind her glasses shone brightly as she nodded and began busily operating her bracelet, sending orders to the Cradle that was on standby far overhead. The fate of the People of the Earth, the fate of Koutarou and the others, and the fate of Japan now rested on her surveillance drone. They had to know where that trailer was going.

After collecting all the information they needed, their work in the control room was done. Knowing what they did now, their to-do list had grown significantly.

“Kii, I’ve sent a message through the Cradle to Theiamillis-san and the others telling them to withdraw.”

“Thank you. We should head straight for the island after grouping up with Theia-dono and the rest. There’s no time to lose.”



“Sakuraba-senpai, how are you holding up?”

“I’m feeling just fine.”

“All right, then let’s go.”

Waiting for all four of them to gather at the door, Koutarou opened it. Just like when they entered, it slid to the side almost silently. But what they saw on the other side floored them.

Beyond the door was a large passageway over ten meters wide. It looked like it could handle multiple lanes of traffic. And standing in the middle of it was a man that both Koutarou and Kiriha recognized.

“It’s been a while, brats.”

“Tayuma! Of course you’re here!”

Kiriha glared at the man, Shijima Tayuma. Tayuma, however, brushed her hostility off with a belittling and twisted smile.

“That’s my line. But here you are... right in my trap, daughter of Kurano.”

“What?!”

Upon hearing the word trap, Koutarou’s expression changed, and Tayuma gave Koutarou a condescending smile.

“You’re as slow as ever, surface brat. You think we’d leave the control room unmanned for no reason?”

“You used it to corner us...”

Koutarou began understanding the situation. The moment the diversion team appeared, Tayuma and the others must have guessed that there would be another team infiltrating the factory. The control room was like the mother load of secrets for the whole factory, so they would eventually make their way there. And when they did, he would sweep in and trap them all at once. The control room had only one entrance, so once they were inside of it, there would be no escape.

“Then the factory’s security on the inside was lax for the same reason...”

“Heh, at least Kurano’s daughter is quick on the draw. That’s correct. Why

would we waste the manpower if we didn't know where you'd enter? All we really had to do was plan one strategic ambush—here, outside the control room."

Radical forces began emerging from the dark shadows of the passageway. There were twelve of the robots they'd seen that afternoon. Past them were four large machine guns on wheels that would automatically track their targets. Both were weapons that had been produced in this factory.

"So your target was Kiriha-san from the very beginning."

"That's right. In stimulating her sense of danger, we knew she would appear eventually to investigate. Just like Maguz-sama planned."

"Maguz...? Of course, the mastermind..."

Koutarou clenched his jaw. He wasn't particularly surprised since he knew that Tayuma wasn't all there was to the radical faction. But he'd never thought they'd be caught by someone who had the foresight to plan so far ahead. He began worrying about the battle that lay ahead of them.

"Mastermind? Don't be silly. Maguz-sama is our supreme leader that will bring glory to the People of the Earth."

Tayuma smiled proudly. He was intensely loyal to Maguz.

"But you failed last year."

"The outcome of that didn't matter. In truth, with all the attention gathered on me, preparations for real war could be completed in secret."

Maguz had actually been pulling the strings behind Tayuma's attack last year as well. The goal back then was to have Kiriha or even Tayuma killed by surface dwellers, which would stimulate anti-surface dweller sentiments among the People of the Earth. But that plan had failed, giving the radical faction reason to lie low for a time.

Or at least, that's what it seemed like. They simply just kept things quiet while they labored away on their war preparations. It would have been suspicious for them to go dark suddenly, but Tayuma being in jail gave them a convenient excuse to tone things down publicly while they applied their efforts elsewhere.

Really, he bought them several valuable months of prep time.

If Tayuma had succeeded in his mission back then, public opinion would have swayed towards war. But even if he failed, it would give the radical faction time to prepare for war. It was a win-win situation for them. And it was because Maguz understood that that he let Tayuma go on a little rampage on the surface last year.

“Maguz-sama is a great, broad-minded person who even takes what someone as insignificant as me says into consideration. He is not someone the likes of you could ever defeat!”

Tayuma had a broad grin on his lips—a display of confidence. Koutarou and the others were already in his trap. Victory was at hand.

“I won’t let things go as you plan, Tayuma! I will capture you here, and Maguz right after!” Kiriha declared, still sharply glaring at him.

I don’t like it when she makes that face...

Koutarou preferred seeing Kiriha’s normally gentle expression. Just like how he didn’t want to see Yurika being forced into being a magical girl, he didn’t want to see Kiriha forced into being a commander. He just wanted her to act like her normal, kind self, and maybe even the innocent Kii from time to time.

But when she wore that expression on her face, it was for a reason. There was someone standing in her way. And Koutarou would be there to help her take them out as swiftly as possible. He clenched his fist and steeled himself.

“Bwahaha, that’s what you think! Actually, I’ll be taking my leave for today.”

“Tayuma?!”

Despite what they were expecting, Tayuma turned his back on Koutarou and the others. He had no intention of fighting them himself. The crowd of automated weapons parted for him.

“Wait, Tayuma!”

“If you wish to fight me, daughter of Kurano, you’ll first needed to defeat these. Not that Maguz-sama or I really care if you die or survive this.”

Tayuma ignored Kiriha and calmly proceeded down the passageway. Koutarou

and the others wanted to chase him, but the sixteen automated weapons closed ranks and blocked their way. They couldn't do anything else until they were out of the way.

"I'm sorry, Koutarou. My apologies to you too, Clan, Harumi. The enemy is more troublesome than I thought."

Tayuma disappeared around the corner further down the hall. Watching him go, Kiriha gritted her teeth in frustration. She realized how naive she'd been.

"Don't sweat it."

Koutarou smiled at Kiriha. When she looked into his eyes, she saw something different from normal. They were filled with a resolute determination.

"Once this is all over, I'll be satisfied as long as you give me a kiss with a smile."

"Koutarou..."

Those words alone sapped the tension from Kiriha's shoulders.

That's right... This is the kind of person that Onii-chan has always been...

Slowly, confidence began to replace the bitter anxiety she felt over her blunders. Kiriha placed her hand over the card in her pocked and smiled as she thought of all the feelings she'd poured into it.

"Heehee, now you've said it. Let's hurry up and end this so I can shower you with kisses."

"I'm looking forward to it. Blue Knight, give me my sword."

"As you wish, my lord."

No matter how strong he was, Kiriha couldn't help feeling that a sword just didn't suit Koutarou. That was really why she wanted to bring all of this to a swift conclusion.

The enemies attacked as Koutarou readied Signaltin. Thanks to that, they had the initiative. The shrill sound of whirring motors rang out, and all four machine guns opened fire at the same time. They each took a different target, and a hail

of bullets rained down upon all members of the infiltration team.

“Deploy the distortion field over a wide area!”

“Karama, Korama, spiritual energy field to maximum output!”

However, before the bullets could hit, two barriers were erected in their way: Clan’s personal barrier and the spiritual energy barrier created by the two haniwas. Both were sturdy, but due to the sheer amount of bullets coming at them, they couldn’t stop them all.

“Come, spirits of wind! Dance around and become a whirl! Reveal your great powers capable of traversing the world! Blow it all away! Shielding Wind!”

Fortunately, a slightly delayed third barrier completely stopped the remaining bullets that had been slowed down by the first two. It was a defensive wind barrier created with Harumi’s ancient magic.

“Everyone, focus on the machine guns first! We can’t have them tearing us up!”

Koutarou gave orders to the three girls behind him and swung his sword at the mechanical soldiers. It was his job to keep them at bay.

I wouldn’t lose to these one on one, but...

But going up against twelve was troublesome. The mechanical soldiers were made with the same technology Maya’s new body used, and while they couldn’t move as fast as she did, they were still quick. On top of that, they were fully automated and extremely accurate with their attacks. While their cooperation wasn’t as good as the Motor Knights that Elexis had used, their speed still made it a cause for concern. And worst of all, there were a lot of them. While Koutarou could read their movements because they were powered by spiritual energy, it was still difficult dealing with twelve of them at once. As a result, four of them slipped past him and came after the girls.

“Kii, use this!”

“Thanks!”

The ones to deal with the incoming mechanical soldiers were Clan and Kiriha, both wielding weapons that Clan had summoned for them.

“Haah!”

Kiriha was using a naginata with a blade that generated intense heat. Well-versed in military arts, she knew exactly what she was doing with the polearm. She dexterously swung it around and blocked the mechanical soldier’s large claws.

“Keep it up, Kii!”

Clan was holding a beam cannon in both hands and repeatedly firing at the mechanical soldier fighting Kiriha. Since Clan was bad at melee combat, she left Kiriha to handle that while she backed her up at range.

While Clan and Kiriha formed their second line of defense, Harumi was still aiming for the machine guns with her magic. Though their barriers could block the machine gun fire, they weren’t doing anything about the mechanical soldiers. The machine guns needed to be taken out as quickly as possible so the barriers could be redistributed.

“Gather, spirits of water! Dance, spirits of wind! Combine these two powers and appear, spirits of lightning! Oh draconic dark cloud, open your jaws and destroy!”

Harumi’s hair shone a brilliant silver as she chanted her spell like a song. With each word, a powerful electric charge gathered around her as it sparkled and crackled.

“Roar of Thunder!”

Upon finishing her incantation, Harumi opened her closed eyes and stared at the machine guns in front of her. When she did, the electric charge swirling around her split into four bolts and flew forward.

With a loud roar, lighting struck them so hard that it was like a giant hammer had slammed into them. The booming sound of it echoed loudly down the hallway. Since attack spells required the use of multiple elements at the same time, they were considered top-tier magic. They had tremendous power, and taking a blow from one could easily be fatal.

“It didn’t work?! Why?!”

However, the machine guns were still functional. They weren't unscathed, but they were still firing at full speed. Harumi had used the same spell against Elexis's Motor Knights, so she had no idea why it wasn't working now.

"Harumi-chan, it's the barriers, ho!"

"They have spiritual energy fields, ho! Elemental attacks won't work, ho!"

Karama and Korama, who also functioned on spiritual energy, understood exactly what had happened. The moment before the electricity hit them, the machine guns had activated their barriers to shield themselves. Because they were easy targets, they'd been equipped with particularly study defenses.

"What should I do, Karama-chan, Korama-chan?!"

"Earth, water, fire, wind, and the higher-ranking spirits won't work, ho! Those are the things spiritual energy fields specialize in repelling, ho!"

"All spiritual power, ho! You'll need to attack with pure power or mana itself, ho!"

"Thank you, I'll give that a try!"

The spirits that the ancient magic of Forthorthe called upon were spirits of the natural world. And converting mana into a form of spiritual energy made it easy for spiritual energy barriers to block.

"To think they could withstand Sakuraba-senpai's magic..."

Koutarou began panicking a little when he realized what was going on. He knew very well just how powerful her spells were. Even if their barriers were strong against it, the fact that they'd been able to withstand a spell like that was impressive. Scary, really. They were dangerous opponents that shouldn't be taken lightly.

"Nothing will come from complaining! I'm sure Harumi can do it!"

"You're right! Let's all believe in Sakuraba-senpai!"

Koutarou pushed his doubts aside when he heard Kiriha call out to him, and went back to concentrating on the battle at hand. While he'd done some damage to them, the eight mechanical soldiers in front of him were all still raring to go. If he lost his focus when dealing with these swift opponents, he'd

pay dearly for it.

“Kii, we need to hold down the fort too!”

“Not a problem! As long as it’s just blocking, I should be able to handle this!”

Clan and Kiriha were doing their part to hold back the enemy too. Their primary focus was keeping any of the mechanical soldiers from getting to Harumi, who was in charge of their counteroffensive.

“This time... it has to work...”

Harumi clasped her hands in front of her chest. Her friends were still fighting hard, and what she did here would sway the outcome of the battle. She was rightfully nervous.

I can’t attack using the spirits’ powers, so... in that case...!

Harumi mustered her courage and began chanting once more.

“Oh great power that guards all things! Oh light of hope that illuminated the beginning of all things! Gather before me as a blade to cut down my foes!”

Harumi’s hair turned completely silver and her entire body was wrapped in a white light. Before long, that light began gathering in her extended right hand. The gathered light grew brighter, and then began extending forward from her hand. The extended light grew longer, thicker, and brighter. It was a like large sword of light born from Harumi’s mana.

“Strike swiftly! Royal Silver Sword!”

Finishing her incantation, Harumi swung her right arm. The light that had gathered in her hand followed her movements. As the tip of the sword had pierced through the ceiling as it grew, it cleaved through it when it was brought down.

“What?!”

Koutarou was captivated by the pure white light that passed by his side. It was such a striking light that he forgot about the danger he was in for an instant. Without a sound, the sword cut the machine gun on the right in half. Harumi then lightly flicked her wrist to the side and the sword of light cut down the other three in one fell swoop. The light began disappearing there, but it

took out two of the mechanical soldiers before completely vanishing.

“Phew... It worked...”

When the light disappeared, Harumi looked down at her right hand and let out a small sigh. She hadn’t had any real confidence her attack would go as planned.

The spell Harumi had used summoned Signaltin’s power and discharged it directly. Since it was an unpolished move that was essentially just a blast of pure mana, Harumi didn’t know if she’d properly be able to control it or not. But fortunately, it had all gone just as she’d hoped. Since it was Signaltin’s mana, using it as a sword suited it well. Alaia’s feelings surely helped her out too. That’s what Harumi, overcome with relief, thought to herself.



“Sakuraba-senpai is starting to look more and more like Her Majesty Alaia...”

Koutarou couldn’t hide his surprise. Harumi had played Alaia on stage, but lately she’d been doing more than that. She was really living up to her role. Her memories, her beautiful silver hair, her control of Signaltin and its excess mana through the use of ancient magic... It was like the Silver Princess had been revived in the modern era through a normal girl.

This might have been Her Majesty Alaia’s wish...

That was when Koutarou realized that Harumi was Alaia’s ideal self. Alaia had lived as a royal of Forthorthe to her last breath. But it came at the cost of her own personal freedom and happiness. In contrast, Harumi was just a normal girl who’d inherited Alaia’s appearance, powers, and memories. In other words, Harumi as she was now was exactly who Alaia would have wanted to be if she had been reborn as a normal girl. But he knew it wasn’t really her. Harumi’s personality hadn’t changed at all since Alaia’s powers had awoken within her.

Her Majesty wouldn’t take over someone else’s life. Especially not Harumi...

The mechanical soldiers attacked mercilessly in the moment Koutarou was distracted by Harumi. They were trying to tear him apart with their large claws.

“Oh crap!”

Since he was distracted, his reaction was ever so slightly delayed. It left him open, and such an opening was exactly what the mechanical soldiers were designed to prey on.

“Look out!”

However, the mechanical soldiers’ claws were stopped by Kiriha’s naginata the moment before they dug into Koutarou.

“This battle isn’t over yet, so don’t let your guard down, Koutarou!”

From there, Kiriha used the naginata’s blade and handle to unleash a flurry of attacks.

“Thanks! You saved me, Kiriha-san!”

Koutarou readied his sword again and attacked the closest soldier. With the

machine guns out of commission, the tides of battle had turned in their favor. With the barriers that had been used to block the machine gun fire freed up, they could make more bold attacks on the mechanical soldiers. Even outnumbered, they began driving the machines back.

“At this rate, I won’t get my time to shine.”

“That’s not true. We’re only here because of you, Clan-san.”

“You flatter me, Harumi...”

“It’s not flattery; it’s the truth.”

After that, Clan and Harumi began offering ranged support, disrupting the mechanical soldiers’ teamwork and creating openings for Koutarou and Kiriha to take them out one by one. It only took a matter of minutes for all of the mechanical soldiers to be destroyed. Looking at the course of the fight, victory was theirs the moment Harumi took out the machine guns.

Kiriha's Determination

Saturday, July 3rd

While they had gathered the information they needed and all made it safely back to room106, Kiriha's expression remained gloomy and serious. Koutarou understood how she felt. They were now faced with a mountain of uncertainty.

"Why didn't Tayuma try killing us?"

That was Koutarou's biggest question. He'd had them trapped. If he'd just sent more of the factory's weapons after them, he could have eventually overwhelmed them and cut them down. But he'd done nothing of the sort, and Koutarou didn't understand why.

It was Kiriha who answered his doubts. Being as sharp as she was, she had already figured it out.

"He probably planned on killing the intruders at first. That was why he placed his trap outside the control room."

The information the intruders wanted was inevitably in the control room, and he'd placed a trap at the only exit. Kiriha suspected his original plan was indeed to cut them down on the spot.

"But on the way, he realized the identity of the intruders and changed his mind."

"Why would he do that?"

"I can think of two reasons. The first is that Tayuma and the others want to learn about us and our abilities."

If the intruders had been the Sun Rangers, they would have been wiped out. But it was Kiriha and her allies. That's why Tayuma shifted to plan B.

To Tayuma, Koutarou and the others were unknown enemies that had given him a hard time in the past. There was a high chance that they would appear

during the battle with the surface dwellers. With only a portion of them in the control room, he thought it would be better to test them and learn about them than get rid of them.

To that end, he only threw unmanned units at them. He would study the encounter and the data gathered from it, and use that against them when the time came. That's why Tayuma had walked off so casually. He felt no urgency in trying to defeat them. That would come eventually.

"It was probably also his intention for us to leak information about the earthquake weapon to the People of the Earth."

That was his secondary reason for letting them live. If the conservative faction did nothing about the earthquake weapon, they would lose their home and be forced up to the surface where they would be dragged into battle. But even if the radical faction threatened them with such a weapon, there was no guarantee they'd believe it. They may very well just think it was tasteless bluff. But if word of it came from a reliable source like Kiriha, they would be forced to believe it. In essence, Tayuma was using Kiriha to force the conservative faction to make a choice ahead of the destruction.

It was a diabolical but highly effective plan. In fact, having seen the information on the earthquake weapon with her own eyes, Kiriha was already moving to take measures against it. It would only be a matter of time before a similar panic spread through the rest of the conservative faction.

"Damn it, so we're just doing exactly what Tayuma wants us to... No, what this Maguz guy wants us to..."

Koutarou gritted his teeth. He was mortified. Their opponent was always one step ahead of them, and it didn't seem like that would change anytime soon.

"So, Kiriha, what will you do?"

Theia directed a harsh glance, rarely seen in room 106 these days, at Kiriha. When she considered what lay ahead of them, she couldn't help the demeanor that came over her. This was Theia as a princess prepared for battle.

"I don't know. How do I settle things without anyone getting hurt?"

But Kiriha still hadn't reached a conclusion. She could see several paths in

front of her, but regardless of which one she chose, there would be casualties. So she chose not to make a decision at all. There had to be a better way. A better path to walk. She just hadn't come up with it yet.

"There might be a way to get through this without anyone getting hurt. But there's no time to find it, Kiriha. We need to act immediately."

"I know that... but..."

Kiriha bit her lip in frustration. The truth was that she knew that Theia was right. In fact, she'd spoken with her father, Daiha, about the coming battle just the other day. But even then, she found it all very difficult to accept.

Kiriha always acted out of benevolence. She used her intellect to try and stay one step ahead of problems. Whether it was in her political or private life, she always strove to find the solution that kept everyone safe and sound.

"I believe that when your choices are limited and casualties can't be avoided, then the choice that brings about the fewest casualties is preferable."

"But I can't abide seeing the surface dwellers hurt... or potentially letting the People of the Earth become their enemies."

It was Kiriha's benevolence that brought her to a dead halt at crossroads like this. None of her options were good. And she was unlike Theia, who could simply just act. Even though Kiriha knew she had no other option, she couldn't bring herself to move forward. She was at a complete loss. Her face distorted into a pained grimace and she tightly clenched her fist.

"Kiriha-san."

That was where Koutarou reached his hand out to hers. He undid her clenched fist and held it firmly.

"Koutarou...?"

Unable to decipher his intentions, Kiriha stared at Koutarou. She had the expression of a child looking to her parents for answers. It reminded Koutarou of how she'd looked eleven years ago. That's why he smiled with all his might and spoke to her in a gentle tone.

"If Kiriha-san and Kii-chan say they need me, then I'll help in any way I can."

Kiriha had been too big-hearted ever since she was just a young girl. If Koutarou told her what to do, she would undoubtedly listen. But he didn't think that was good enough. That big-hearted little girl was still inside of her, and if she didn't follow what her big heart told her was right, it would wound her deeply... even if she pretended like everything was fine.

"And if we fail even then, then I'll be there to suffer through it with you."

Kiriha and Kii didn't need someone to tell them what to do. Her heart was already telling her. She only needed one thing. A push.

"So tell me, Kiriha-san, what is that you need right now? What should I do?"

He would accept anything she said, and he tightly held her hand to let her know that.

"Koutarou... Onii-chan..."

Kiriha was taken aback by his words. He was saying that he would disregard good and evil, right and wrong, and side with Kiriha regardless of what she chose. She was suddenly reminded of eleven years ago. Of the Koutarou who cried at his own helplessness. And of herself, desperately trying to save him. That's when she realized this was the same; their roles were just reversed. He was reaching out to her and accepting her, weakness and all.

"Thank you, Koutarou..."

That's why Kiriha squeezed his hand back, which made him squeeze hers even harder in turn. Kiriha used her free hand to wipe away the tears that had started to fall. She was happy over Koutarou's feelings, but she had no time to indulge in tears. Right now was the time to act.

"Please listen, Koutarou. Everyone else, too."

After wiping away her tears, Kiriha raised her head. Not even the faintest trace of weakness remained on her face. She once again wore the expression of a calm and composed commander.

"From here on, we, the People of the Earth, will use armed force to stop the out of control radical faction."

As a member of the conservative faction, Kiriha herself was a pacifist. The fact

that she had steeled herself for battle meant a lot. That was how far the situation had soured. And that was conveyed to the girls of room 106 as well. Their connection ran deep.

“While it is deeply regrettable that the People of the Earth must fight against each other, we cannot let the radical faction have their way. We will capture their leaders, stop the use of the earthquake weapon, and protect both the surface and the underground. To that end, we need your power!”

While they might be extremists, the members of the radical faction were still People of the Earth. Kiriha didn’t want to hurt them if she could help it. She’d desperately struggled up until now in order to avoid that. But she’d finally made up her mind. If she didn’t take a stance here, she wouldn’t be able to protect anything. She couldn’t sit and twiddle her thumbs while her hometown was brought to ruin.

“Please, lend us your strength! The enemy is far too great for us alone to handle!”

The radical faction was strong. They had amassed war funds in the shadows, had the help of magicians, and were now mass-producing weapons. They were also moving swiftly. Things were on the brink of war already. While the conservative faction had the numerical advantage, it would be hard for them to turn the tables. That’s why Kiriha needed the help of Koutarou and the other girls of room 106. She didn’t like the idea of involving them in her fight, but she had no other choice.

“Ohoho! I’ve been waiting for you to say that, Kiriha! You are my rival! I’ll kick those radicals to the curb so we can return to our original fight!”

“Theia’s right, Kiriha! Let’s beat them up with a smash and a bang, and then go play somewhere fun! It’s almost time for summer vacation!”

“I’ll help too! Magic is being misused, so it’s my job to set things right!”

“I’ll go too. Since Maya-sama is involved, I can’t let this be.”

“Don’t you worry, Kii. Your Onee-chan is here for you.”

“Master, what will the Satomi knights do?”

“The Satomi knights will all sortie. We’re going to support the People of the Earth’s conservative faction.”

“As you wish, my lord. I will stake my life on it.”

“What will you do, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“I will help too, of course. Kurano-san is my friend after all. What about you, Kasagi-san?”

“Same. A landlord and tenant share a special bond. Right, uncle?”

“That’s right. I shall help as well. I’m also interested in this underground country.”

The girls offered their support one after another. Not a single one was against it. Not a single one of them had a relationship with Kiriha so shallow that they could abandon her in her time of need.

“Everyone... thank you...”

Kiriha’s chest grew hot as tears welled in her eyes. As she looked around at the girls of room 106, she was truly happy that she had come to the surface. She wanted the other People of the Earth to experience this kind of bond with the surface dwellers too. That’s why she had to stop the radical faction no matter what.

What Koutarou and the others were calling the earthquake weapon had been dubbed the Great Earth Dragon. In the People of the Earth’s culture, the ley lines running underground were likened to dragons, and its name was derived from that. It would be the dragon in the earth that stirred up earthquakes for them.

Elexis, who was in the control room for said weapon, quite liked the name. The enterprise he managed himself also had a name involving dragons.

Elexis was currently facing a brand-new computer, performing the final adjustments on the Great Earth Dragon. It was a very advanced weapon, and also very delicate. Not only did it have to harmonize with spiritual energy technology, but it had magical components that needed monitoring as well. It

would take quite some time to get everything right and for it to reach full power. As a result, Elexis had been nailed down in the control room for days with scant progress.

“I’m back.”

“Ah, welcome back, Maya.”

Maya was the flash of excitement in his life. Whenever she was around, unexpected things happened one after another. After thoroughly losing to Koutarou, Elexis had remained on Earth because he enjoyed Maya’s company.

“How did it look?”

“They’re a silly bunch, same as always. But I think they’ve gotten even stronger than before.”

“What about Koutarou-kun?”

“Especially him... Here, you should take a look for yourself sometime.”

“Thank you, Maya. I’m looking forward to it.”

Maya handed Elexis a memory card. On it was the combat data collected on Koutarou and the others by the automated weapons, and various other data taken from the sensors placed around the factory. With it, the combat capabilities of Koutarou and the girls could properly be measured. That was the information Elexis and Maya had really wanted.

“Elexis, that’s quite an attitude to take when you have a beauty like me in front of you.”

“Hmm? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You look like you just got a letter from your lover.”

“I guess it is an affair of sorts. But it’s the same for you, isn’t it?”

“Heh... We’re pretty twisted, aren’t we?”

Maya and Elexis smirked at each other. That was happening more and more lately. Overall, the two thought in very similar ways. But it wasn’t as if they had nothing to offer each other. In fact, they both enjoyed that the other frequently had ideas they would never think of themselves.

“There’s that. But it’s also just a bright point in an otherwise very dreary assignment.”

“Are you stuck in your work?”

It was rare for Maya to show interest in someone else’s feelings. She typically did whatever she pleased without consideration for others.

“No, it’s not like that. While it’s taking time, everything is proceeding smoothly.”

“Then what is it?”

“Honestly speaking, I can’t say I like this. I understand their goals, but their means are weapons of mass destruction and kidnapping.”

The same was true for Elexis. He rarely complained about others. It was a natural part of his demeanor as a businessman; he simply kept his opinions to himself. But ever since meeting Maya, that part of him was gradually changing.

“Heh, then I guess we both have a guilty conscience about it.”

“I’m not rejecting the methods outright. They’re things I might use myself. They just need to be used in a limited and controlled way. But these people are letting their emotions rule them.”



While Maya and Elexis were working together with him, they didn't hold any positive feelings for Tayuma. They were all working towards common goals, but Tayuma was too extreme in his ways. Maya and Elexis weren't huge fans of that. He struck both of them as too prideful without truly having anything to be proud of.

"Evil has it own way of blooming."

"Indeed it does. And in that regard, you are truly beautiful, Maya."

"I can't say I'm too pleased about being called an evil woman."

"An evil woman, huh? Ahahaha! That certainly does sound like what I meant, doesn't it?"

"Jeez... so shameless..."

The two of them were in the process of building their relationship as partners. But since neither had ever been in a relationship with someone they considered an equal before, they would be slow to realize it. If they ever realized it at all.

"...All joking aside, what is that Tayuma doing now?"

"That would be the kidnapping part. He's gone with Maguz to go capture Kurano Daiha."

"So it's finally starting."

"Yes. The People of the Earth's civil war is just about to begin."

"Honestly, I would like to see Koutarou-kun and his friends shine. That way would be more elegant."

"It's not like I don't understand how you feel... Do your best, Maki..."

Their real objective was still far off. Cooperating with the radical faction was just the first step. In other words, while Maya and Elexis were working together with Tayuma, they didn't share the same goals. That's why it was still unclear how they would influence the People of the Earth's future.



Article 10 Addendum #2
Exception clause: In the event that dating or dates between the signatories of the Corona Convention is acknowledged to be exceptionally pure, Article 10 need not apply.

Corona Convention

New! July 10th, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see everyone, it's the author Takehaya.

This fifteenth volume goes on sale in March, which will mark just about five years since the first volume was released. And on this fifth anniversary, I have a major announcement to make. You may have seen or heard about this already but...

Invaders of the Rokujouma?! is getting an anime!

This is all thanks to you readers who have supported me through these—including the side books—seventeen volumes. I would like to start by thanking you from the bottom of my heart.

Now then, the anime is set to be broadcast in the summer season, and preparations for it are rapidly proceeding. I myself regularly participate in the scenario conferences. As for the content itself, I think that it will be faithfully adapted. Of course, the restrictions are more severe than that of a novel, so it's not easy work. You can't make an anime just by splitting a story up into half an hour chunks, after all.

But counter to the difficulties, the anime format definitely has its strengths. We'll get to see things like the characters' gestures and cuteness, or Yurika's uselessness, in a whole new way. It will be fun to see it all come together visually. A lot has been left up to the readers' imaginations so far, so there's that to look forward to.

So weighing all the pros and cons of an anime, I'm praying that it turns out to be a success in everyone's book. While everyone will perceive it differently, I can only hope that as many readers as possible enjoy it.

Now that I think about it, an anime version first came up in the fifth volume. Three years have passed since then, and I'm personally really grateful it's happening now. While preparing for the anime, there are lots of things to take into consideration. For example, you might be wondering about who appears in

the ruins in the first volume. If that character had to be strictly defined three years ago, the development from there on would have been restrained. If I'd had to suddenly stop the series due to adult reasons, that could have been troublesome. But now we're up to the fifteenth volume, and the progress of the story from here on out has already been determined. There aren't anymore lingering questions like that. That's why I believe the anime will be able to accurately portray the person in the ruins. Since novels and animes always have differences like those, I hope you'll enjoy it in a different way if you pay attention to details like that.

This is about all the space I have for the afterword this time around. It was all about the anime, but I couldn't help myself. That's just how big the news is.

Lastly, I would like to thank the editorial department who is helping with both the novel AND the anime; the respective companies involved; Poco-san for always drawing cute characters; and finally, all the readers who bought this volume.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 16.

January, 2014

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 15

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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