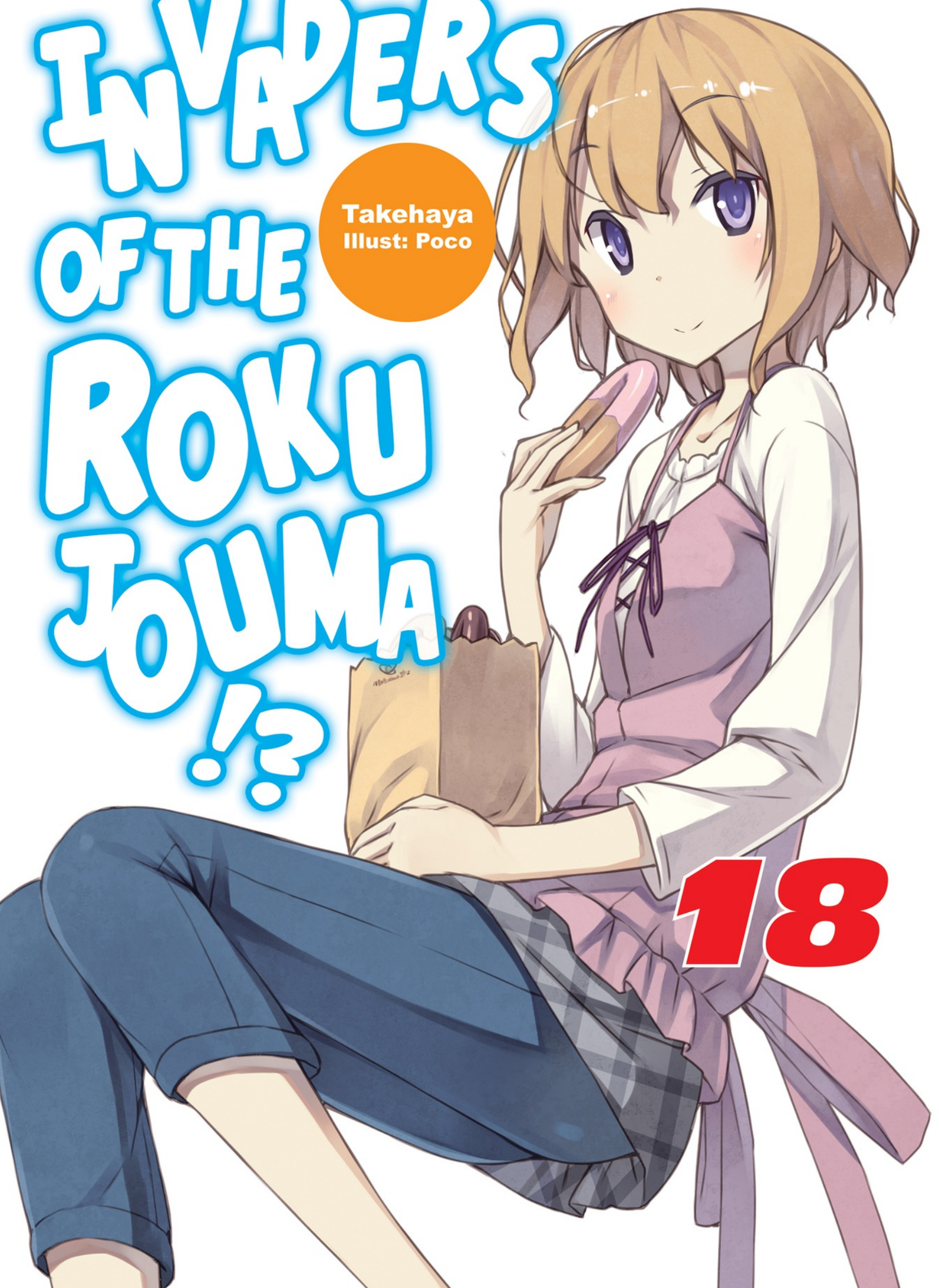
Invaders of the Rokujouma!?

Takehaya
Illust: Poco



18


Darkness
INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 18


SCIENCE TEAM
SPIRITUAL ENERGY TEAM
COSTUME TEAM
"...I'D GRATEFULLY ACCEPT YOUR HELP. THANK YOU, EVERYONE."
THE PLAN TO BRING BACK MAGICAL GIRL (?) RAINBOW NANA BEGINS!


"HAAAAAH!!"
"MAKIII!"
CLASH!
NAVY VS. CRIMSON

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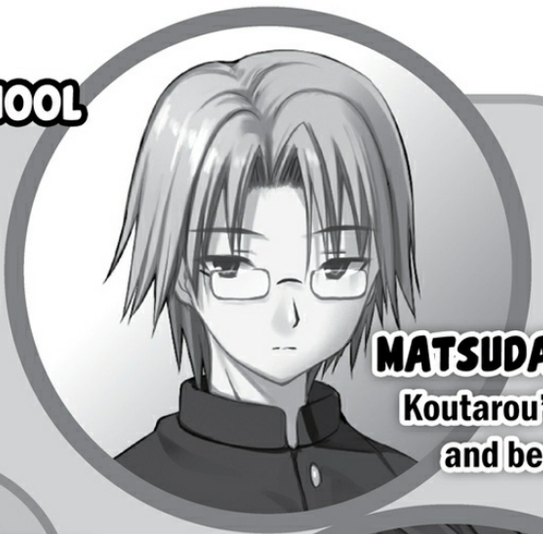
Everyone's Wishes

Afterword

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.

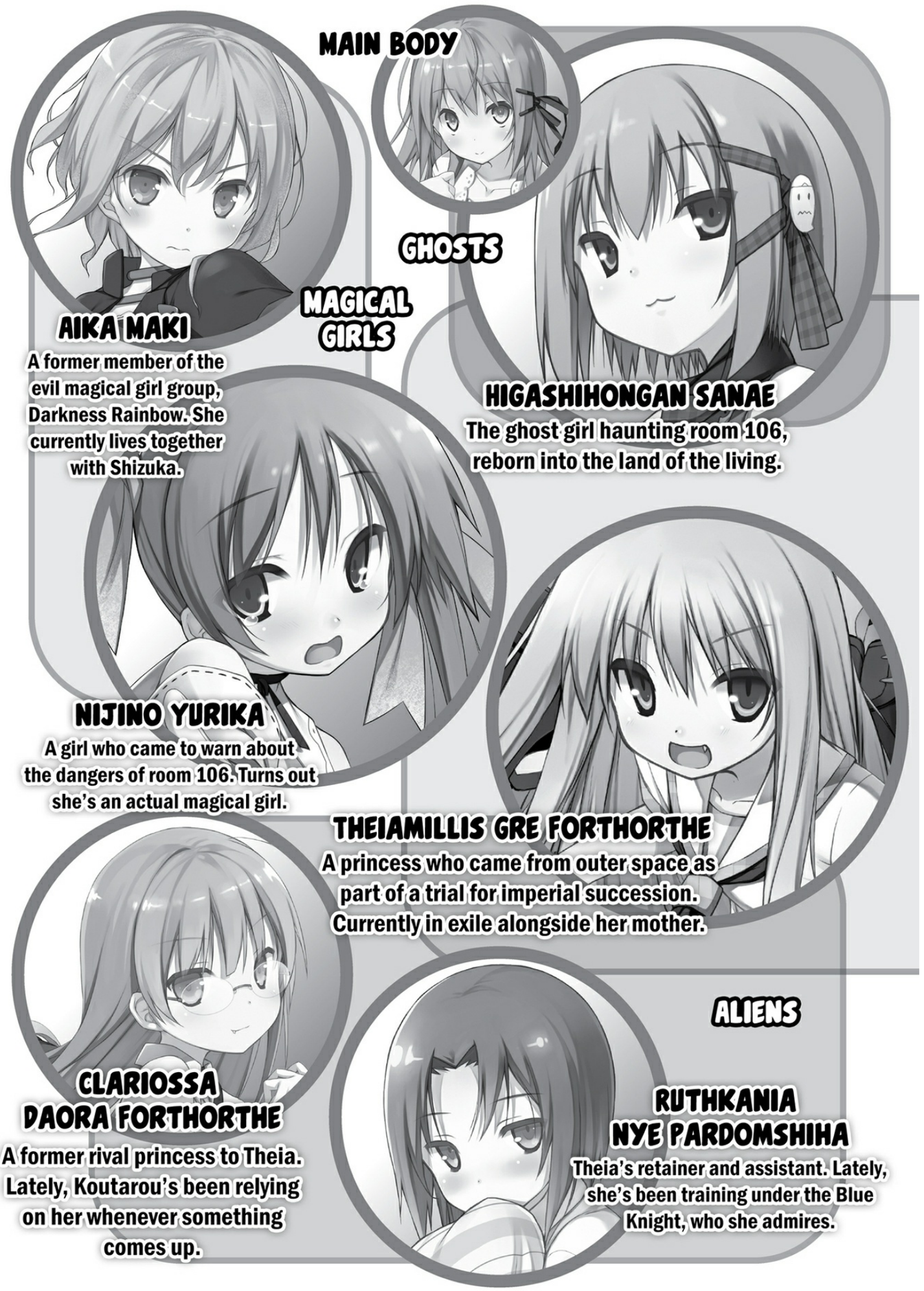
RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE

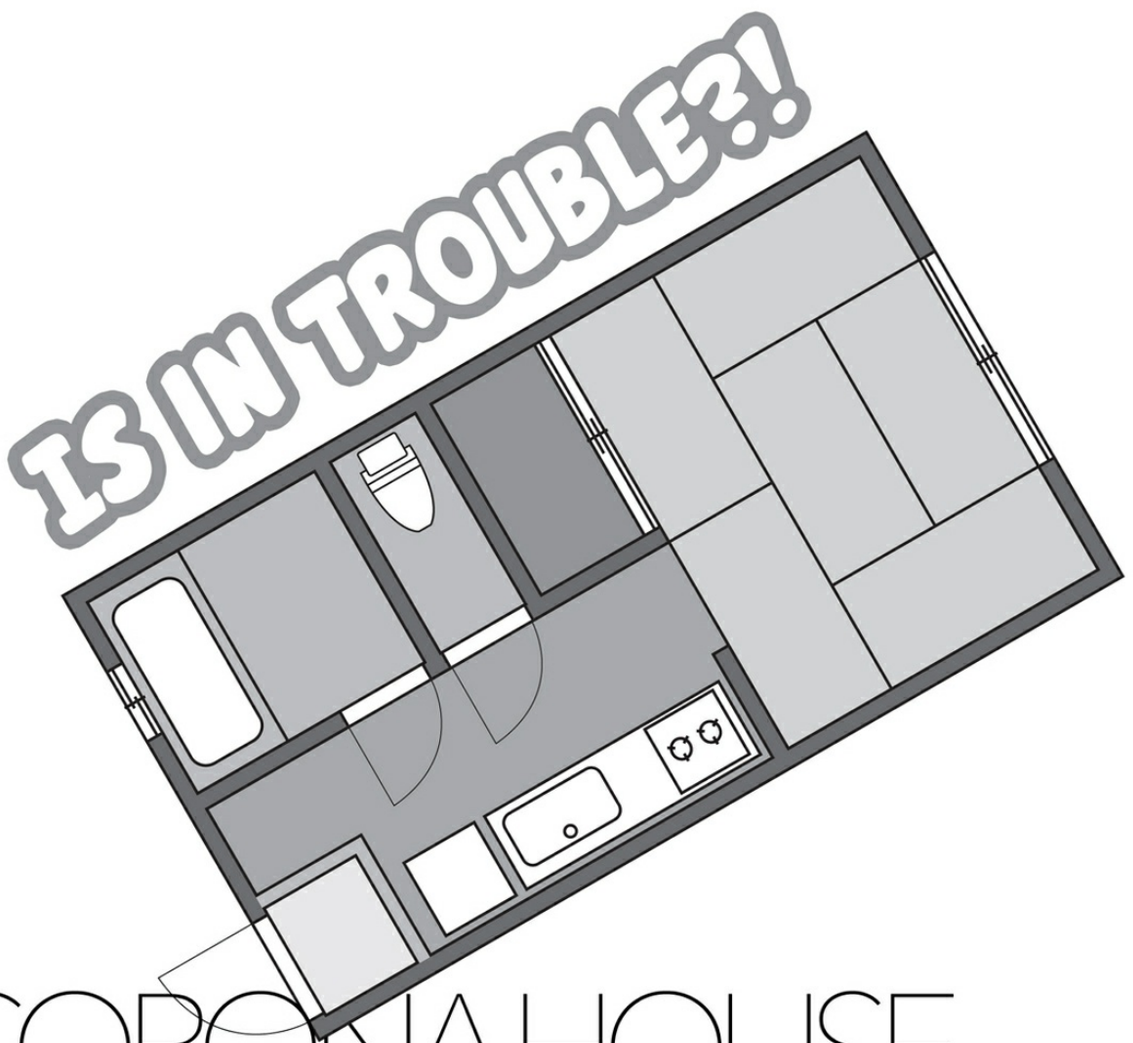


UNDERGROUND DWELLERS

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.



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

The Girls' Evening

Wednesday, September 8th

When the new semester began after summer vacation, the clubs of Harukaze High immediately set to preparing for the cultural festival. This, of course, included the knitting society. All three of its members—Koutarou, Harumi, and Yurika—were currently gathered in the club room discussing what to use for their club exhibit. They could have just as easily held the meeting in room 106, but since it was club-related, it seemed more appropriate to have it at school.

"I'm going to put this muffler out as-is."

"Well, you just started out, so that sounds about right."

For the knitting society's exhibit at the festival, they'd be displaying choice pieces of their work. Still new to the club, Yurika was only just learning how to knit. She was currently at the level Koutarou was about a year ago, which was mastering the basics. Yurika made some modifications to her first creation, called it a muffler, and decided to use that.

"Which piece will you use, Sakuraba-senpai?"

"Hmm... Which one should I pick?"

This would be Harumi's third year in the club. She'd completely mastered standard knitting fare such as sweaters and gloves, and moved on to more complex creations like stuffed animals and handbags. Picking just one piece to showcase her skill wouldn't be easy.

"Why not just display all of them?"

Koutarou saw an easy alternative. He believed that because she'd made so many pieces, she should show them all off.

"But... then it would just be an exhibit of my work..."

Harumi furrowed her brow. She was concerned about taking over the display. Yurika only had her "muffler," and Koutarou only had a couple of pieces to show for himself. She was worried that if she put all her work out, it would go

from being the knitting society's exhibit to Harumi's exhibit. And as conscientious and modest as she was, Harumi didn't want that.

"I think it's fine. This'll be your last year in the knitting club, so why not take the opportunity to show off some?"

"Satomi-san is right. The display would be boring with only a few pieces in it, so we should fill it up with your amazing work or else we won't get any display space for next year's cultural festival."

Koutarou and Yurika were both in support of Harumi putting out all her work, even if it was for different reasons. After thinking on it for a moment, Harumi gave a reserved nod.

"Okay, then I'll display a few things..."

Harumi was attached to several of her pieces. Through her experience in the school plays, she'd also learned the joys of having others recognize her work. Being a showoff wasn't good, but it wasn't good to hide things, either.

"All right, then this year, the knitting society display is all about Sakuraba-senpai!"

"Satomi-san and I can just stick our pieces in the corner!"

Koutarou and Yurika decided that the focus of the exhibit should be Harumi's work. It would help advertise the club better, and would hopefully help lure in new members come next year.

"W-Wait a minute, you two!"

Harumi had come out of her shell some over the last year, but she couldn't help feeling shy when her friends were pushing her like this.

Now with a plan in mind, the three members of the knitting society headed back to room 106. From there, Harumi would use the gate to return home via the transporter aboard Clan's Hazy Moon. Teleportation was faster than taking the bus, and this way, she got to spend more time with her friends as she walked back to Koutarou's apartment with them. It was win-win.

"As for the next step, I'll handle the stands and panels, so can I leave decorations to you two?"

Koutarou sketched out a rough plan for their exhibit on a piece of scrap paper and proposed that Yurika and Harumi take care of making it look nice. He believed the girls' delicate sensibilities would make them much more qualified for the job, while he would stick to the physical labor.

"Certainly."

"I'll try... Slurrrp..."

Harumi sounded perfectly confident and dependable, but Yurika seemed less so as she slurped down her instant noodles. It would have been a little disconcerting if Koutarou didn't know that she would actually try her best when it came down to it.

"I'm sorry for making you do all the hard work, Satomi-kun..."

The exhibition stands and panels were heavy, and Harumi felt bad for leaving all the labor to Koutarou. Koutarou, however, didn't seem to mind at all. He smiled and shook his head.

"It's fine. The right person for the right job, you know?"

Koutarou was aware that he had no sense of aesthetics. He was, however, perfectly confident in his strength.

"Yeah, Sakuraba-senpai. If we didn't divide things up this way, Satomi-san and I wouldn't have a leg to stand on... Slurrrp..."

"Eat or talk, pick one."

"Slurrrrrrrrp..."

"Then I guess the right job for you is eating ramen, huh?"

"Heehee."

The members of the knitting society continued to sit around the tea table and discuss the details of their upcoming exhibit. Once they had everything hammered out, the others girls of room 106—who had been keeping quiet in order not to disturb them—began talking too.

"So, Theia-chan, what will the drama club be doing?"

The first to open her mouth was, of course, the chatterbox of the group,

Shizuka. Koutarou, Harumi, and Yurika had been talking about what the knitting society was going to do for the cultural festival, which got her wondering about what everyone else was up to. Theia paused her game and turned to Shizuka to answer.

“Since it was received so well last year, they’re supposedly going to be doing ‘The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight’ again.”

“So you’re going to have your hands full, aren’t you?”

Maki, who was sitting next to Shizuka, joined in on the conversation too. She suspected that, though Theia was sitting around carefreely play video games right now, once the preparations for the play began, she probably wouldn’t have time for such leisurely luxuries.

“No, I won’t be getting involved this time.”

However, Theia shook her head, her beautiful golden hair swishing left and right.

“Really?”

Maki went wide-eyed at Theia’s unexpected answer. Everyone else in the room looked similarly surprised.

“Indeed. The other day, the president passed the torch on to the next generation, and while they were at it, they decided to replace all of the staff and cast and start from scratch. And so I won’t be intervening. At most, I’ll be a consultant for any questions they have.”

“Ah, I heard about that,” Koutarou interjected. “Supposedly Mackenzie will be playing the Blue Knight now. Feels kinda strange...”

Koutarou flashed a wry smile. Last year, he’d ended up stealing the role from Kenji, but now that the play was being recast, Kenji was returning to play the leading man. Since Kenji was better-looking than Koutarou, he thought Kenji would probably do the part more justice.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Theia-dono.”

Kiriha smiled sympathetically as she poured herself some more tea. She knew that Theia was quite invested in anything and everything involving the Blue

Knight, and figured that Theia would probably be disappointed over this development.

“It’s not that I don’t feel that way... However, techniques must be succeeded. Letting each generation do things their own way is forward-thinking and brave. It’s the correct decision that will lead the club to greater success.”

As it turned out, Theia wasn’t as broken up over it as Kiriha had expected. She thought that it would be good for there to be multiple interpretations of the legend. She hadn’t always felt that way, but a lot had happened over the past year—including Koutarou challenging her own interpretation of the Blue Knight. But that wasn’t the only reason Theia’s way of thinking had changed.

“Besides,” she said with a bittersweet smile, “since Koutarou is now playing out his own legend, there’s no need for a theatrical rendition. And there’s no need for me to meddle.”

Koutarou didn’t have to play the Blue Knight anymore—he was the Blue Knight. At least, that was how Theia thought of it, even if Koutarou didn’t see it that way himself. As such, having him play the part of the Blue Knight in the play would make it less like a play and more like a documentary. And since Theia knew the truth, she felt like her assistance in producing the play would subtract from its artistic vision. It was different last year when they were all still thinking and dreaming without knowing any better, but they couldn’t unlearn what they now knew. Theia appreciated that, and so she didn’t mind letting a new generation of the drama club reinterpret the play for themselves.

“That may be what Her Highness says, but the truth is that she doesn’t want to reveal Master’s true self to the public.”

“H-Hey! Ruth!”

But when Ruth exposed Theia’s real motivations in stepping down, she turned bright red—which only seemed to confirm that Ruth was telling the truth.

“I’m only doing this for the sake of the play! I definitely wasn’t thinking of keeping Koutarou to ourselves!”

“Theia-dono, Ruth never said anything about that.”

“Ugh...”

When Kiriha pointed that out, Theia fumbled for a reply. Kiriha then smiled, but not because she was teasing her. It was because she felt for her.

“That being said, I agree we should keep him to ourselves. If we let him take part in the play again, we’d simply be putting what’s most precious to us on display.”

“W-Well, that is true...”

Theia was still shaken, but felt a little better after Kiriha showed some empathy. While she was embarrassed, she didn’t mind her friends knowing her real intentions. There was a high chance they felt the same way too, after all.

“That’s right, knights! I forgot!”

That was when Sanae, who had been clinging to Koutarou, shouted out. She quickly climbed off and moved around to face him.

“What now all of a sudden?”

“Employ me, you bastard!”

Sanae leaned forward and demanded something from Koutarou, but since she’d omitted most of the details, he wasn’t sure what.

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“You promised me! That once the mess with Kiriha was all cleaned up, you would let me into your band of knights!”

“Ah, that’s right.”

With a bit more context, Koutarou remembered. Sanae wanted to join the Satomi band of knights, but her initiation had been put off until the ordeal underground was settled. If the radical faction had caught wind that the powers of room 106 were starting to unify, it could have meant even more trouble.

However, with the radical faction now officially dissolved, there was no longer a need to worry about that. And now that summer vacation was over and things were returning to normal in room 106, Sanae had finally remembered her deal with Koutarou.

“So there you have it! Now hurry up and employ me, you bastard! I’ll be the

housekeeper!”

“Is that the kind of attitude you use when asking someone for something?!”

“Employ me too, you bastard! I’ll be the secretary!”

“Y-You too, Senpai?!”

Harumi, who was sitting next to Sanae, jumped on the bandwagon. She mimicked Sanae’s tone and demanded to join as well. Thinking back on it, Koutarou recalled that he’d made a similar promise with her too.

Well, things sure have taken a strange turn... But there shouldn’t be any problems now.

After turning it over in his head for a moment, Koutarou began thinking he should grant their request. After all, he had made a promise to them, and now that the problems with the underground dwellers had been resolved, there really shouldn’t be anything stopping them from joining.

“W-Wait! Sanae, Harumi! I must ask that you hold off on joining!”

However, it seemed someone had an objection. It was none other than the very person the band of knights was supposed to protect, Princess Theiamillis.

“Your Highness, why are you in such a fluster? Is there a problem?”

Ruth, who was sitting next to Theia, looked at her with a confused expression. She couldn’t imagine there being any issues with Sanae and Harumi joining.

“There’s a major problem! At this rate, my band of knights will be taken over by noncombatants! I can’t have that!”

Theia’s concern lay with the official division of duties within the band of knights. Currently, the Satomi band of knights consisted of three members: Koutarou the captain, Ruth the vice captain, and Maki the treasurer. With two knights and one noncombatant, they could still maintain the appearance of being a combat-ready force. But if Sanae and Harumi joined to help with housework and paperwork, the ratio of noncombatants to knights would jump from 1:2 to 3:2, which didn’t bode well for their war potential.

“Surprisingly, you care an awful lot about the details, don’t you?”

“You just don’t care enough, Koutarou!”

To Theia who had all kinds of ideals about knights (whether or not they were just for show), a band of knights was and should be a combat unit. She didn’t want history to remember hers as anything less. Especially not with Koutarou in charge of it.

“I understand, but... What are you going to do, Your Highness?”

Ruth smiled when she figured out what was going on in Theia’s head and pushed the stagnating discussion forward. Normally, the captain—in other words, Koutarou—was in charge of personnel. Theia couldn’t actually insist on refusing Sanae and Harumi for personal reasons. They’d need to find some sort of compromise.

“First, we’ll increase our combatants by two! That way, the majority will still be knights!”



By adding two additional knights and having Sanae and Harumi join after that, knights would remain the majority in the troupe. That way, they could honor Theia's ideals for the Satomi knights.

"That's surprisingly underhanded for you, Theiamillis-san."

Clan smiled wryly. She was reading a book while lying down on the ceiling via the power of her anti-gravity device. The manipulative move Theia suggested sounded like something Clan herself might have done in the past. She didn't think it suited the straightforward Theia.

"Say whatever you like! This is an issue of integrity!"

"Well, it's not like I don't understand how you feel..."

Clan shrugged and laughed a little. Truth be told, since Koutarou wasn't the fighting type in the first place, the Satomi band of knights would inevitably be a peaceful bunch anyway. That said, the Blue Knight's personal troupe being a powerful combat squad was important for the sake of appearances. Clan understood that well as a fellow princess of Forthorthe.

"So, please, Shizuka! Kiriha! Could you join my band of knights as a martial artist and strategist?!"

"What? Me?"

Shizuka, who was eagerly listening in on this dramatic discussion, was surprised to hear her own name come up. She'd joked about joining before, but she had never anticipated that she would get dragged into things like this.

"You have no affiliation, so asking you is the least problematic! And I don't mind if you join in name only!"

Theia humbly pleaded with both girls. She could have just as easily recruited real Forthorthian warriors to pad their numbers, but she didn't want the band to lose the warmth it had. So, to that end, Theia thought the best solution would be recruiting fellow residents of Corona House instead.

"Heh... I understand your dilemma. I also owe you for your help against the radical faction. I will gladly join."

Kiriha understood the position Theia was in and readily accepted her request.

She used the pretext of repaying Theia for her hard work in the battle against the radical faction, but Kiriha's real motivation for joining was that it sounded like fun.

"Then I'll join too."

Since Kiriha hadn't hesitated to join, Shizuka decided to go along with it as well without giving it much of a second thought. She figured if the wise Kiriha was on board, then there shouldn't be any issues. It wasn't exactly the most sound of reasons.

"Thank you both!"

Theia shook Kiriha and Shizuka's hands with tears in her eyes.

"Theia-dono, there's no need to cry, is there?"

Seeing her in this state, Kiriha couldn't help the smirk that crept across her lips.

"Say what you will, but this is a matter of utmost importance to a maiden of Forthorthe!"

Theia wanted to safeguard her ideals, no matter what it took. She was in love with the romantic idea of a band of knights, even if they were meant to be a lethal killing force.

"...Do I get a say in all this?"

Koutarou was flummoxed by this discussion continuing without him, the captain.

"Don't worry about it," said Shizuka. "Oh, and Satomi-kun, I don't mind if my salary is just your rent."

"Thanks, Landlord-san."

As puzzled as he was, Shizuka's bright smile eased his worries.

It's not like we'll be playing the part of a real band of knights anyways...

The important part was whether or not everyone was having fun. In that sense, their little band of knights was more like a school club.

"So, Theia, what about me and Harumi joining?"

Sanae hadn’t quite been able to keep up with the rapidly unfolding events, and eagerly leaned forward over the tea table to ask Theia if she’d made up her mind yet.

“Don’t worry. Everything has been resolved, so you may now join in triumph.”

“All right!”

“Isn’t that great, Higashihongan-san?”

“Yeah!”

Having finally gotten permission, Sanae flashed a large, bright grin. The kind Harumi seemed happy as well, and the two of them smiled warmly at each other.

“Harumi, Harumi!”

“Right!”

Without another word, the two girls stood before Koutarou and called out to him in perfect sync like they’d practiced it ahead of time.

“Employ us, you bastard!”

“Yeah, yeah...”

Since the two of them seemed so happy, Koutarou couldn’t bring himself to object.

And so the Satomi band of knights grew by four members, the most eager of which were Sanae and Harumi. They were both thrilled that they’d finally gotten their chance.

“Koutarou, Koutarou! Let’s talk about my salary!”

“Okay, okay.”

“I’ll give all of it back when I get it, so make it a million yen! I want to be a well-paid woman!”

“As a housekeeper?”

“Yeah!”

Sanae had no intention of actually taking any money from Koutarou, but she

still wanted the prestige of a high salary. Her solution for this odd conundrum was returning her pay to Koutarou immediately after she received it.

“No way.”

“Why not?! I said I’d give it back!”

“You’ll need to keep at least enough to have some pocket money.”

Ever since her time as a ghost, Sanae had been receiving an allowance from Koutarou, which usually went toward anime merchandise and candy. Koutarou would feel bad if she gave him all the money she made back and didn’t have enough to spend on those things anymore. In truth, he wanted to keep giving her an allowance.

“Pocket money is different!”

“Is that so?”

“An allowance is a token of love! It’s different from hard-earned wages!”

“I don’t really get it, but if you’re fine with that...”

“All right, then it’s decided!”

With her working arrangements determined, Sanae grinned from ear to ear. Nothing was really changing with Sanae joining the band of knights. Her everyday life would continue on just like it always had. But it would feel different. She cheerfully clung to Koutarou’s back as if to claim it was where she belonged.

“So what’s my mission, Satomi-kun?!”

Harumi looked just as animated as Sanae. Unlike Sanae, she was mature and demure by nature, but she was purposefully going along with Sanae’s antics for the fun of it. As of late, she was learning how to express herself in ways like this.

“It’ll be something like gathering information, right?!”

Harumi made theatrical gestures as she waved her hands around enthusiastically. A cheerfulness that rivalled Sanae’s sparkled in her eyes.

“Of course not. I don’t need any information.”

Koutarou could see through her and knew that she was playing along on

purpose. It only took one look into her eyes filled with childlike excitement. Growing a little embarrassed, he responded to her somewhat snappily... but he couldn't deny that she was extraordinarily cute right now.

"So... something like going to buy melon bread and milk, then?"

"What kind of a mission is that?!"

"Oooh, I'll take some!"

"So for Satomi-kun, Higashihongan-san, and myself makes three. Would anyone else like some?"

"...Theia, do you hear this? What about the image of your precious band of knights?"

Even though she was a noncombatant member, Harumi's first mission being going to buy melon bread and milk would surely not sit well with Theia—which was why Koutarou turned to her for help.

"Urgh... Harumi!"

And, just as he'd hoped, Theia looked like she was about to lose it.

"What is it, Your Highness?"

"I desire a red bean sweet bun!"

"As you wish, my princess."

"Very good!"

"...I never should have counted on you..."

It was actually a common mission for bands of knights to provide support or supplies for civilians. And while Theia was picky when it came to her ideals about how the band of knights should work, she wasn't the kind of lord to refuse missions her members voluntarily chose.

"Master, isn't it a good thing that there are only peaceful missions to be had?"

"That's right, Koutarou. Do you know how wonderful a thing it is for a squad of knights to have the leisure of goofing around?"

With Ruth and Kiriha on Theia's side, Koutarou started to come around. He couldn't deny that they were right. The fact that the shy Harumi was teasing him was proof enough that things were peaceful. Just like Theia, Koutarou didn't actually want his band of knights to become militaristic, so he decided to count his blessings and just be happy that Harumi was acting the way she was.

He sighed before muttering, "This is all thanks to the problems underground being resolved now..."

Because the state of affairs in room 106 had the potential to agitate tensions underground, the Satomi band of knights had never taken on missions or new members before. But now that they no longer had the radical faction to worry about, things were different. They could play around as a band of knights as much as they wanted without there being any trouble. And that was indeed a wonderful thing.

"The problems underground are resolved..." Yurika muttered too, echoing Koutarou's words.

Yeah... I might be able to ask now...

There was something Yurika had been wanting to ask the girls of room 106 for some time now, but in order not to incite anything—especially from the radical faction—she hadn't been able to bring it up. When she heard what Koutarou said, however, she too realized that things were different now. That gave her hope.

"What's the matter, Yurika-san?"

Clan, who had been lying on the ceiling, slowly descended next to Yurika when she noticed that she seemed unusually lost in thought.

"Um... There's actually something I would like to consult everyone on."

"Consult? That's unusually serious for you."

Slightly surprised by this rare display from Yurika, Clan adjusted her glasses as she looked at her. Surprised or not, she would at least hear her out.

"What is it, Yurika?"

Koutarou also turned to her attentively. The other girls felt the change in

atmosphere and followed suit.

“You don’t have to hold back. Just spit it out.”

“All right... What I want to consult with you all about is Nana-san.”

Yurika brought up her friend and mentor that had taught her magic, Magical Girl Rainbow Nana.

“Nana?”

Maki’s expression stiffened and turned sad upon hearing that name. In the past, Nana had fought against Maki—or more precisely, Darkness Rainbow—and sustained serious injuries that forced her into retirement. Maki, as she was now, regretted what had happened. Yurika didn’t blame her for it, but the mere mention of Nana tugged at Maki’s conscience.

“Um, Satomi-san, when you fought Maya-san from Darkness Rainbow, she had a body made of machines from the underground, right?”

“Yeah. It was definitely spiritual energy technology, probably also enhanced by Forthorthian science.”

Koutarou nodded and confirmed what Yurika was suggesting. After a firsthand encounter with Maya, he was sure of it. And after Elexis’s involvement with the radical faction was revealed, he thought the chances were high that advanced technology from Forthorthe was also used to help create her mechanical body.

“So, I was thinking... After seeing Maya-san move around so well after what happened to her, I was wondering if the same could be done for Nana-san.”

Maya had suffered debilitating injuries in an all-out fight with Nana. Some time after that, Maki and the rest of Darkness Rainbow got their vengeance and put Nana out of commission. Like Maya, she was wounded badly enough that her protégé was forced to take over for her. But if Maya had recovered through the help of spiritual energy technology and advanced Forthorthian science, then it seemed like Nana should be able to do the same. That was what Yurika was hoping for.

“Nana was... your savior and mentor, right, Yurika?”

“Yes.”

When she was younger, Yurika was attacked by a demon that had sensed her aptitude for magic. Nana had saved her, which was the start of a long and lasting bond between them. One thing led to another, and Nana ended up teaching Yurika magic. She became something of her apprentice, and took over her role as a member of Rainbow Heart when she was forced to retire. It went without saying that Nana meant a great deal to her.

“Kiriha-san, Theia, Clan... What do you think?”

Koutarou made up his mind right away. In his eyes, Nana being Yurika’s friend was reason enough to help her. But considering the fact that she’d saved Yurika’s life and more, there was no reason for him to even hesitate.

“Of course. A friend of Yurika’s is a friend of mine. I will gladly help.”

Theia was the first to respond. She thought of Yurika as a precious friend and had no reason to refuse her request. She’d also heard about Nana saving Yurika in the past, so she too wanted to help save her in return.

“I don’t mind either. I’ve always been interested in technology from the underground. And besides, I can’t refuse a request directly from Veltlion.”

Clan agreed as well. She genuinely wanted to help Yurika, but with her aloof personality, she couldn’t admit that outright.

“What about you, Kiriha-san?”

“I agree, of course. I’m sure it will be beneficial for everyone.”

Last but not least was Kiriha, who also agreed. The girls of room 106 considered each other invaluable friends. If one of them was suffering, they all were. So if Yurika had a problem, they all wanted to help her with it.

“But I’ll have to ask that you be patient. Since this will mean offering spiritual energy technology to an outsider, it’s not a decision that I can make on my own. I’ll have to consult with the chief first.”

While Kiriha was the commander of the surface invasion forces, she wasn’t in control of the People of the Earth. She didn’t have the same kind of authority Theia or Clan did. As such, it would take some time for her to get the powers

that be to agree to supply their proprietary technology to a complete outsider. That wasn't a call she could make on her own.

"Of course. I'm very grateful."

Yurika bowed deeply to Kiriha. Considering her normal carefree attitude, that gesture alone conveyed just how important Nana was to her.

"Don't worry. I don't think anyone will object. It will just take time."

While Kiriha couldn't agree to help Yurika without consulting her people, she remained optimistic. Yurika had played a major role in quelling the radical faction, so the People of the Earth had no reason to refuse her. Moreover, assisting Nana would also help them understand exactly what spiritual energy technology had been given to Maya.

"Isn't that great, Yurika?"

"It is. Thank you very much, everyone."

And so Koutarou and the others decided to help Nana.

The country of magicians, the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria, was impossible to reach by foot, car, plane, or boat. Folsaria, you see, existed in a different plane. It took magic to travel there, similar to how Theia used a gate to travel between room 106 and Blue Knight. It was a nearly instantaneous process.

A complex geometrical pattern drawn on the concrete floor began glowing. The light in the center of the pattern was especially strong, and from it stepped a lone girl. It looked almost like she was emerging from water.

"Good to have you with us, Blue," said a powerful voice.

It was Dark Crimson, the red magic specialist of Darkness Rainbow, a secret society of evil magical girls plotting to overthrow the country of Folsaria.

When the girl fully appeared from the light, she stepped out of the geometrical pattern on the floor—a magic circle. She had short, bobbed hair and wore a dark blue robe.

"I just succeeded the previous generation, so I wanted to get a feel for things here."

The girl's voice was calm, her tone polite, and her expression indifferent. Compared to the dynamic Crimson, she came across as significantly less animated. She was Dark Blue, one of the leaders of Darkness Rainbow alongside Crimson. She specialized in blue magic, the magic of summoning and recovery.

Getting from Folsaria to Kisshouharukaze City required travel through a magical passage. Since creating one took a great deal of mana, people typically chose to travel through permanently established passages, though those were few in numbers. This girl, however, had chosen a different way. Dark Blue had used her own magic to create a temporary passage. It was just the kind of thing summoning magic was useful for. While she was somewhat lacking when it came to direct combat abilities, she more than made up for that with her remarkably utilitarian support skills.

"We're counting on you. You're the cornerstone of the operation this time."

Following Dark Blue, another girl appeared from the light. She also had a calm voice, but rather than sounding indifferent, she gave off a more intellectual impression. Her glasses only highlighted that. This was Dark Green, the magical girl who had attacked room 106 alongside Crimson.

She, of course, specialized in green magic, the magic of illusions and divination. She was more or less the brains of Darkness Rainbow, and she would be leading the team in their upcoming operation—one of her own design.

"I'll do my best."

Blue nodded indifferently in acknowledgement of Green's words. She hadn't been brought along just for transportation; she would be playing a major role in the plan that Green had devised. Blue's reaction, however, made her seem wholesomely unenthusiastic about the job. While she had said that she would give it her all, it was difficult to tell if she actually meant it or not, leaving Green a little uneasy.

"Don't worry. If anything happens, I'll handle it."

Sensing Green's worries, Crimson flashed a fearless smile. Even if Blue failed, things would still be fine as long as she was there to clean up afterward. Unlike Blue, Crimson was filled to the brim with confidence. Seeing that, Green sighed for some reason.

“Hahh... Even with the powerful magic you’ve obtained, you’re underestimating the enemy too much.”

Where Blue didn’t have enough motivation, Crimson had too much. Green’s ideal was somewhere in the middle, but her companions were too far astray on either side.

“I’ve waited so long precisely because I’m *not* underestimating them. I took the time to develop and master my new magic, and I think I’ve been patient enough. That’s how I know there’s no way I’ll lose.”

Using the combined knowledge Crimson had acquired through Maya and Elexis, she’d strategically gone through her repertoire of spells and fine-tuned them all to be more scientific. As a result, Crimson was pioneering a third generation of magic following ancient magic and modern magic. She called it scientific magic, and what she’d done was groundbreaking.

The inner workings of scientific magic weren’t all that different from modern magic, but they incorporated scientific principles to make them more powerful, more effective, and more efficient. A good example of this was with Crimson’s Ray of Sunshine spell.

As the name suggested, the spell imitated light from the sun to blind and burn an opponent. However, with her newfound scientific knowledge, Crimson now understood that there were many different wavelengths of light that overlapped to create white light. That overlap was unnecessary for her purposes, so Crimson had reduced the wavelengths the spell utilized to a single one. And with just that adjustment, Crimson greatly improved the power of the spell and reduced the mana needed to cast it, which could then in turn be used to make the spell even stronger.

That was why Crimson was so confident. There was no way she would lose to Koutarou or Yurika with the power she’d obtained. Her attitude bordered on cocky, but she had every right to be.

“The problem is that woman... Kurano Kiriha.”

Green, on the other hand, was very wary of one opponent in particular—Kiriha, whose mind was her greatest weapon. Her wits and intelligence were something to be feared. The reason Crimson and the others had to seek out

scientific magic in the first place was because of their miserable defeat at the hands of Kiriha, who had no magic to speak of.

Magic was but one facet of power. True strength was a matter of how it was utilized. That was the hard lesson Kiriha had taught them, and Green was keenly aware that even with scientific magic, there was still a possibility that Kiriha could outwit them somehow. Who knew what kind of terrifying fate awaited them if Kiriha made good use of Yurika?

“That’s why we came up with this plan, right, Green?”

“That’s true, but...”

As Green’s future forecast had been overcome by Kiriha in the past, the trick to making sure that didn’t happen again would be to take out Kiriha first. If they could incapacitate her, they had plenty of other means at their disposal to take care of Yurika and the rest of her allies. But even so, Green couldn’t shake the anxiety growing within her as they prepared to initiate their plan. The humiliation of defeat in the past still haunted her, even with the ability to read the future.

“Don’t worry. We’ve gotten stronger and we now know just how dangerous that woman is. Besides, Blue is with us, and you yourself planned this all out, Green. There’s no way things’ll go like they did last time.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I guess I was being a little too pessimistic.”

Green smiled faintly as she began to cheer up. Crimson’s positivity was always a blessing when she was feeling insecure.

Maybe it’s because the enemy is too strong, but... things have taken a strange turn...

Watching Crimson and Green, Blue felt puzzled. The members of the organization known as Darkness Rainbow were allies in theory, but they never beheld each other as friends. They were working together towards a common goal, but they each had their own agenda. The other members were simply pawns to be used to that end. In fact, the decisive battle against Rainbow Nana had even been an excuse for some of them to eliminate potential rivals.

“Like Maki, you overthink things from time to time.”

“I’ll try not to think at all, then. Just like you.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Yes.”

“Jeez...”

But the way Crimson and Green were interacting now flew in the face of all that. Perhaps because their enemy was exceptionally powerful, they were genuinely cooperating and working together to support each other. If they turned selfish and put their own agendas before that of the group’s, the entire operation would fall apart.

But yeah, there’s no reason to use Crimson or Green for the time being. We can make deals later, but we can only fight now...

Things like teamwork and cooperation were the strong suits of Darkness Rainbow’s rival organization, Rainbow Heart. While Blue found it mysterious that Darkness Rainbow had to resort to the ways of their enemy, she also understood that it was necessary under the circumstances. As such, she also realized that she would have to join them if she wanted a chance of coming out on the winning side.

The crux of Green’s plan was to perform a large-scale ritual to unleash a powerful spell. That spell would serve as a preemptive strike to incapacitate Koutarou and the others. After that, the dark magical girls would take them out one at a time. If they were all incapacitated, Green’s calculations told her that they should be able to defeat all of them with scientific magic easily.

“Green, what are the chances of success?” Blue asked Green while working on drawing the magic circle.

They were currently in an abandoned building on the edge of town. It was plenty wide, the ceilings were high, and the foundation was sturdy. It was somewhat old and decrepit, but it was more than stable enough for the ritual. Blue’s voice as she asked Green about their prospects echoed through the empty, wide open room.

“To simplify things, the chances of our success exceed 80 percent.”

Green conveyed the future she had foreseen to Blue. Her powers of divination allowed her to see all possible outcomes, including scenarios where they never fought at all or there was no conclusion to the fight. Adding up all the potential futures, their chances of outright winning the fight were only about 25 percent, but that number wasn't what Blue wanted to know. Their chances of losing the fight were about 5 percent. So discounting that and a few other anomalous scenarios, the odds of them coming out on top overall were greater than 80 percent.

"If the odds are that high, then we've pretty much won already. As long as we don't cut any corners, that is," Crimson said as she stood up with her staff in hand.

She had been helping out with preparing the magic circle, but she now had a different job to do.

"And on that note, I'm off. I'll leave the rest of this to you."

"Are you fine going alone, Crimson?"

"Green, you stay here and help Blue. You're the only one that can use those weird machines we got from the underground people."

"All right, then you can count on us. Right, Blue-san?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then I'll see you later."

Crimson waved and then headed out on her own. She had a job to do while the other two girls finished creating the magic circle. And that was perfectly fine with her. As lively as she was, Crimson much preferred seeing some action over drawing a magic circle. When she got outside the building, her steps naturally became much lighter.

Magician and Apprentice

Wednesday, September 8th

The woman who once called herself Magical Girl Rainbow Nana was rather petite. She'd always been slight of stature, but the artificial limbs she'd been given were imperfect, so her posture tended to be somewhat hunched over. It made her already small frame look even smaller, and combined with her slow movements, she gave off the impression of an elderly woman.

Her imperfect artificial limbs had come from the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria, which wasn't known for its scientific advancements. Due to the existence of magic, science had fallen somewhat out of favor there. And since Folsaria had a limited amount of human capital, the advent of magic had inevitably stymied scientific development.

Magic could accomplish a great deal, certainly. But when it came to manufacturing prosthetic limbs, there was no substitute for medical and scientific knowledge. In order to make them effectively, one needed to understand how joints worked and muscles moved. Without that knowledge, the best a magician could do was make a limb that looked like a human appendage. Making it move naturally was all but impossible. As such, Nana moved slowly and awkwardly, almost like a puppet. But even then, considering what she was working with, it was something of a miracle that she could manage even that, and that was attributable to Nana's extraordinary efforts in her rehabilitation.

"It's nice to meet all of you. My name is Nana."

Her voice was unmistakably that of an adult woman, but was endearingly cute. Nana was only in her early twenties, but hearing such a voice from someone who gave off the impression of an elderly woman with a cane was somewhat jarring.

"Thank you for always taking care of Yurika-chan."

"Nana-san is my savior and mentor. Please be kind to her."

Yurika offered the feeble Nana an arm. She looked like a young girl supporting her grandmother.

No wonder Yurika is so desperate. To think she's just in her twenties... I feel so sorry for her.

Upon seeing Nana, Koutarou finally understood why Yurika, who was oh-so timid by nature, chose to fight as a magical girl. It wasn't just because Nana had saved her. It was because Yurika—even as the cowardly girl she'd been back then—had seen what kind of effect Nana's injuries had on her. It was more than just physical. Nana had had her duty as a magical girl torn from her, as well as all the satisfaction and happiness that came with it.

We definitely have to do something about this... both for Nana-san and for Yurika's sake...

Realizing this only strengthened Koutarou's resolve to help Nana. He didn't know what he could do, but he would do anything in his power. When Koutarou shifted his gaze from Yurika back to Nana, he found she was staring straight at him.

"So it really was you..."

"Huh?"

Unsure what Nana was talking about, Koutarou was quite puzzled. She lifted her right hand to bunch together some of her hair. Several of her fingers were artificial, so they moved awkwardly to complete the gesture, but she finally managed to form a faux twintail on one side of her head.

"Maybe you can't tell because it's been more than ten years, but..."

"Wait..."

Imagining Nana with twintails, Koutarou recalled the mysterious girl he'd met eleven years ago. She'd matured and her face had changed quite a bit, but she still resembled her younger self.

"You're... the girl I met in the mountains that night?"

"So you do remember. Nice to see you again, good necromancer."

Pleased that Koutarou remembered her, Nana smiled. To her, their meeting

that night had been special. She'd never forgotten it once, even after all these years. She had no idea if Koutarou felt the same way or not, but she was still happy that he remembered her.

"So you're Nana-san..."

Koutarou had encountered Nana on the mountain the night he met Kii—Kiriha—and she had gone on to help them out when Kii was kidnapped. Koutarou remembered her quite clearly for all she'd done, and considering he'd been travelling through time when he met her, it had really only been a few months for him since he saw her last.

"Huh? Satomi-san, do you know Nana-san?"

"Not well, but... she helped me out eleven years ago when I was on my way back home. When Kii-chan... I mean, when Kiriha-san was kidnapped."

Upon hearing that, Kiriha looked stunned. She rushed over to Koutarou and Nana in a fluster.

"When I was kidnapped... Do you mean she's the one who saved you in that back alley, Onii-chan?!"

This was no small deal to her, and it was a rare sight to see the ever-calm Kiriha so shaken up. She'd even called Koutarou "Onii-chan," which she never did in front of anyone but Clan.

"Yeah. She bailed me out and took care of the people controlled by Maya so I could go after you. Really, she's our savior too."

"Oh, I see... Er, no, excuse me. I had no idea. Please allow me to extend my thanks to you as well."

"Could you be the little girl from back then?"

Listening in on Koutarou's explanation, Nana realized who Kiriha was, and smiled even more broadly.

"Yes. Thank you very much for saving me."

Kiriha smiled in return and bowed deeply. She hadn't personally met Nana before, but she'd heard all about what she'd done through Koutarou. She was grateful.

“Think nothing of it. It was my mission, after all.”

Someone she’d saved was now living happily. To Nana, there was no greater reward. Even though she’d lost her power, she was still a magical girl at heart.

“Oh, that’s right, Sanae-chan. Nana-san is Kanae-san’s friend.”

“She’s my mama’s friend?! Now that I think about it, you seemed to know her too, Yurika... What gives?”

“Well, Kanae-san fought with Nana-san against bad people.”

“So, like what we do?”

“Uhuh.”

Hearing this important piece of information from Yurika, Sanae rushed over to Nana. And, unusually enough, she very politely bowed.

“I’m Higashihongan Sanae. Thank you for helping out my mother.”

“My... Sanae-san, you’ve grown quite energetic.”

Upon realizing who Sanae was, Nana was overjoyed to see her. To Nana, Kanae was sort of like a best friend and older sister rolled into one. So to see Kanae’s beloved daughter had made a full recovery was wonderful news—especially since Nana felt personally responsible about not being able to save her on her own.

“Yeah, Yurika and everyone else helped me out a lot.”

“Is that so?”

Sanae quickly shifted back to her usual casual self after politely introducing herself. But seeing the happy energy in her eyes, Nana preferred things that way.

“You’re my mom and Yurika’s friend, right?”

“Yes, they’re both very precious friends of mine.”

“Then let’s be friends too! Whenever you’re in trouble, just call for yours truly, Miracle Sanae! I’ll come save you.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll be counting on you.”

“Yeah! Leave it to me!”

Sanae’s earnestness was easy for Nana to accept. As far as she was concerned, since Sanae was Kanae’s daughter, they were already friends anyway. Once they shook hands and agreed to their newfound friendship, Sanae ran over to Koutarou.

“Koutarou! Koutarou!”

“What now, huh?”

“Hurry up and help Nana!”

“Weren’t you going to do that yourself?”

“I’m using my authority to recruit you for the mission.”

“That’s one way to go about it... But nevertheless, I want to help her too.”

Higashihongan Sanae was the resident housekeeper of the Satomi band of knights. With her authority and influence, she would be taking charge of Nana’s treatment.

“Honestly, Koutarou...” spoke up Theia, who’d been silent thus far.

“Hmm?”

“Taking everything into consideration, there is absolutely no reason for us not to help Nana either.”

Nana had saved Yurika, and helped out Koutarou, Kiriha, and Sanae. While Theia and Ruth had no direct connection to Nana, her apprentice—Yurika—had helped them out countless times. Maki, Shizuka, and Harumi felt the same way. Even if they didn’t owe Nana anything personally, they were all indebted to Yurika. So if she wanted to save Nana, they would all do whatever they could to help her. Theia wouldn’t deny her over something as petty as wanting to keep her futuristic technology to herself.

“Yeah, you’re exactly right, Theia.”

“I wouldn’t stand for anyone thinking we’re ungrateful.”

“So, Nana-san...”

“Yes?”

“Hearing all this, would you let us help you?”

The residents of room 106 were all in agreement. They would create the best possible prosthetics for Nana to help her get her life back. Even if she could never be a magical girl again, they at least wanted her to be able to live like a normal girl in her twenties. If they couldn’t give her the same sense of normalcy they all had in their daily lives, none of them would be happy either. So, in the end, this wasn’t just for Nana’s sake—it was for everyone’s.

“I’m touched... and I will gratefully accept your help. Thank you, everyone.”

After thinking for a moment, Nana nodded and quietly agreed. Deep down, she’d probably realized what this meant to them.

Roughly half of Nana’s body had been reconstructed with magic. In her fated fight with Darkness Rainbow, she’d overloaded her mana core to critical mass and allowed it to explode. It was the ultimate desperate attack, and she’d resolved herself to die in the process. Through some strange twist of fate, however, she escaped the grim reaper’s scythe and lived to tell the tale, but not unscathed. She lost the lower half of her body, including her mana core, and could no longer work as a magical girl. As such, she left Rainbow Heart and was now living a quiet life.

Nana was currently aboard Blue Knight undergoing a preliminary medical examination before any work on her new body began. She had changed into a hospital gown and was lying down on a large bed surrounded by all kinds of machines and devices.

“Her spine seems to be misaligned. Maybe it’s because of her mismatched artificial limbs. We’ll need to take this into account when we make the new ones.”

“Pardomshiha, let’s take complete three-dimensional data while we’re at it. We can compensate for the irregularities in her frame by comparing her specs to that of an average woman her age.”

“Certainly, Clan-sama.”

Clan and Ruth were in charge of the scientific side of things. They would be using advanced prosthetics from Forthorthe as a base to build new ones for

Nana, which would hopefully give her a great deal more freedom and stability than her magically made ones.

“Kiriha, Nana’s spiritual energy flow is a mess.”

“That’s not good. That would be a hindrance even without artificial limbs, and she won’t be able to properly feel the effects of the surrounding hallowed grounds.”

The spiritual energy experts, Kiriha and Sanae, were in charge of the mystical side of things. Normally the two of them would be joking or playing around, but they were both earnestly at work right now. That’s just how much they wanted to help Nana.

“Karama, Korama, can you correct the flow using spiritual circuitry?”

“We should be able to, ho!”

“We can, Ane-san, but it will be expensive, ho!”

“Money is no obstacle. Take as much as you need from my personal assets.”

“How generous, ho!”

“That’s our Ane-san, ho!”

“Sanae, can you map out the distortions in her spiritual energy? At least the parts that Karama and Korama can’t pick up with their sensors?”

“Sure, let me give it a shot.”

It wouldn’t be all that hard to create proper prosthetic limbs using Forthorthe’s advanced science. But no matter how natural and real they looked, they would still only be mechanical. In order for Nana to feel a gentle breeze or the warmth of sunshine, they would need the People of the Earth’s spiritual energy technology. Moreover, they would probably also need some magical assistance. Eliminating the sounds of the internal machinery or changing the appearance of parts would be simple work with magic.

In short, the girls were trying to create a perfect substitute for Nana’s real body parts by combining Forthorthian and underground technologies with Folsarian magic. They didn’t want Nana to become a cyborg, but rather return to being a normal person. That was the common wish of all the girls gathered

around to help her.

“While we’re at it... I’d like to work on some of the external elements as well. Maki, is it possible to keep skin cells healthy through magic?”

“It is. Healing magic can be cast on the whole body, but if it’s just the skin, it won’t take that much mana. I believe the mana provided by the spiritual energy converter would be enough.”

“Then let’s spread skin cells over the surface. It would be a bore if the artificial parts were peeping through. Help me out, Maki.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Theia and Maki were planning out how to make the artificial limbs look more human. The best solution would be if the artificial parts couldn’t be seen at all. It was purely an aesthetic change, but one that would make a profound difference to Nana. As girls, they wanted to help make sure that she felt beautiful again. And considering the delicate nuances of everything that was going on, both magica and science had equal opportunity to shine in this operation. That was why Theia and Maki had teamed up to take the initiative.

The remaining three girls—Yurika, Harumi, and Shizuka—were handling a similar problem.

“My outfit originally belonged to Nana-san, but I had to alter it, so Nana-san can’t wear it anymore.”

“Then let’s prepare a new one. We’ll base it on your outfit, but make it more grown-up.”

“Nana-san is in her twenties now, so she doesn’t have that magical girl feel anymore, after all.”

They were working together on a new outfit for Nana. With her current handicap, she could only wear clothes that were easy to move in. But since that would soon be rectified, the girls wanted to make something for her that made her feel special and fashionable. As members of the cosclub, knitting society, and home ec society, Yurika, Harumi, and Shizuka thought they could put their skills together to come up with something nice.

While the girls were all working away on things for Nana, the lone man on the ship was off doing something else. He'd donned an apron and was in the kitchen area preparing dinner for everyone.

"Blue Knight, why are you not joining the others in their work?"

Alunaya, who found the situation somewhat odd, spoke to Koutarou through the crest on the back of his right hand. Koutarou looked up from his cooking and glanced at the crest like one would at a wristwatch.

"Alunaya-dono, even if it's mechanical, we're still talking about a woman's body. Don't you think it would be rude for me to be involved?"

"I see... This is what you call tact, is it not? My niece always scolds me for my lack of it."

Koutarou could sense Alunaya's warm laughter through the crest too. When conversing this way, words weren't necessary. All Koutarou had to do to communicate with Alunaya was think, but he still spoke out loud when they talked because it was only natural to him. He might never adjust to the idea of having a completely mental conversation.

"Yeah, that's right. We mean to create a real body for Nana-san, after all."

"Tact and obstinacy, huh? So that's why you're on dinner duty."

"Hey, this is important work and someone has to do it."

"That apron suits you well, surprisingly."

"Ahaha, thanks, Alunaya-dono."

Taking part in Nana's medical checkup and creating her new artificial limbs would be incredibly intimate. It would be like seeing her naked. Knowing she probably wouldn't want a man around for that reason, Koutarou had volunteered to do other chores instead. But that wasn't all. Unlike the girls of Corona House, he was just an average high school boy. He didn't think there was anything he could do for Nana even if he wanted to help.

"Okay, I'm getting back to it."

"Yes, I'm sorry for interrupting."

With their discussion over, Koutarou adjusted his apron and got back to work. Alunaya was watching over him through Shizuka's eyes, and muttered to himself...

"He's as overly serious as ever, I see..."

Koutarou didn't hear him, but Shizuka—who he was currently residing inside of—did. She giggled, partly surprised and partly amused.

"You think so too, Uncle?"

"Indeed."

"I don't think girls mind so much when boys as considerate as him see them, you know?"

"Because he has tact, huh?"

"Yeah. But Satomi-kun stubbornly refuses to accept that. He'd go on forever about conventions or morality or whatever. Jeez, he's so thickheaded..."

Shizuka smiled wryly and shrugged. Since Koutarou was well-intentioned and wouldn't be doing it for any other reason than helping Nana, Shizuka thought him seeing her wouldn't be any different than a doctor seeing her. Yet nevertheless, Koutarou had simply removed himself from the situation. He meant well, but Shizuka thought there were reasonable limits even to being considerate—nice guys finish last, after all. She couldn't help being a little irritated at the helplessly awkward Koutarou.

"I don't think it's because of some preconceived notion about morals."

"Oh?"

"He can't accept the very reality that the girl you call Nana will never truly live a normal life. That's why he doesn't want to be involved. He would rather believe that you're actually creating a real body for her—not just something that looks and acts like one."

The link that Alunaya and Koutarou shared through the crest communicated even emotions. Thanks to that, Alunaya knew quite well how Koutarou really felt. It was true that he was being considerate of Nana's situation, but mostly, he simply couldn't accept Nana's misfortune. In his heart of hearts, he

desperately wanted to believe that they were giving Nana a new body, so he wanted to treat it like one and give Nana her privacy. He wanted to believe that what they were doing would help her live a happy and fulfilling life.



“Why are boys like that, I wonder...?”

Shizuka found herself unwittingly letting out a sigh over Koutarou’s earnest awkwardness.

“Despite that, you seem happy, Shizuka.”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

Shizuka’s sigh quickly gave way to a smile. As awkward as Koutarou was, Shizuka loved him for it. She was happy to have fallen for such a considerate man.

“If I were to guess... is it because you wish to breed?”

“I have no intentions of that yet!”

However, because of Alunaya’s all too tactless comment, Shizuka’s happiness blew up into embarrassment.

While Koutarou’s cooking couldn’t compare to Kiriha or Ruth’s, everyone was grateful to be able to eat after finishing up their work. Because everything Koutarou had learned how to cook in past Forthorthe was meant to be eaten while travelling, it was all easy to eat—especially while on breaks.

After dinner, Koutarou was put in charge of the other chores so that the girls could go back to focusing on their work. Since he was notably lacking in useful skills or womanly sensibilities, he thought this arrangement was for the best and didn’t complain about his role. Moreover, since the housework was normally something Ruth and the others handled, he didn’t mind helping out once in a while. However, there was one matter the girls wanted to consult him on.

“Come here, Koutarou.”

“What?”

When Theia called to Koutarou, he put down his broom and quickly walked over to the girls.

“Are you hungry again? Or do you need some coffee?”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

Koutarou was sure he was being summoned for another chore, but Theia shook her head. Instead, she pointed to the hologram floating in the air.

“We want your opinion on the combat system.”

Theia and the others had called Koutarou over because they wanted his opinion on the finer details of its system design. Whenever there was a battle, the girls all fought using their own power. But Koutarou was different. He fought using science, spiritual energy, and magic all at once. As a result, Nana would likely move similarly to how he did once her body was complete. That’s why his take on things would be valuable.

“I gotta say... a combat system seems unnecessary.”

While what Theia was saying made perfect sense, Koutarou shook his head. Nana had fought enough, so building her body with the expectation that she would continue to fight just seemed cruel. He thought it would be better not to include a combat system at all.

“I understand, but I doubt Darkness Rainbow sees it that way.”

Theia looked down with a despondent expression. She felt the same way Koutarou did, that Nana should get to live a peaceful life from here on out. However, if Darkness Rainbow ever caught wind that Nana had recovered, there was a high chance they might attack her. They would automatically assume that she still had the power to fight, and the odds would be unfairly slanted against her if she couldn’t.

“So they won’t leave her be...”

“Satomi-kun, this might sound strange coming from me, but defeating Darkness Rainbow is the best way to keep Nana safe... No, the best way to keep Nana-san from fighting. But until then, I believe she needs the means to protect herself.”

Maki, the former Dark Navy, agreed with Theia’s assessment of the situation. Having been a leader of Darkness Rainbow herself, she had a great deal of insight on the matter. And if she said so, Koutarou had no choice but to reluctantly accept it.

“Okay, so what do you want to know?”

“First of all, since her body will be strengthened by spiritual energy, in the event that she moves faster than your armor can...”

There, Koutarou joined in on the discussion. He wanted to politely avoid any talk about the details of Nana’s body, but since this was purely technical and combat-oriented, he didn’t feel too badly about it.

When Koutarou joined in, Yurika and Nana took their leave. With Nana’s medical checkup finally finished, Yurika wanted her to get some rest. Koutarou and the others were still discussing important things in the main room, so she decided to take Nana somewhere else for some peace and quiet.

“Here we go, Nana-san!”

“Yurika-chan, it’s dangerous to go so fast.”

“It’ll be fine!”

Yurika ran down the hallways of Blue Knight, pushing the movable bed that Nana was lying on in front of her. Yurika was scrawny and out of shape, but the bed was floating in the air thanks to advanced Forthorthian science, so she could still run at full speed despite pushing Nana along.

“The last time I tried this with luggage, it stopped on its own before hitting a wall.”

“So you’ve crashed before, have you? Heh.”

“I didn’t crash. Like I said, it stopped on its own.”

“Heh, of course.”

It probably would have scared any other bedridden patient to be wheeled around so recklessly, but Nana—a former magical girl of Rainbow Heart—was happily smiling.

“Here we go! High speed cornering!”

“Kyah!”

The two of them made quite a racket giggling and screaming as Yurika raced them through the halls, but they eventually—safely—reached their destination, the cabin. Yurika managed to lead them there successfully without getting lost

not because she knew the layout of Blue Knight, but rather because there were lights on the floor guiding the way.

“This’ll be your room, Nana-san.”

“It’s awfully big.”

Yurika had brought Nana to one of the guest cabins reserved for special visitors. It was a rather spacious room decorated with exquisite furniture.

“Theia-chan is rich after all.”

“I think this is a step beyond that...”

Nana could tell at first glance that she was being put in an exceptionally luxurious room, and it took her a bit by surprise. Yurika, on the other hand, showed no sign of wonder at the sight of the lavish Forthorthe-style furniture, and boldly wheeled Nana into the room without hesitation. Nana thought her heart might stop every time Yurika nearly rammed her into something that looked expensive.

Does Yurika-chan have any idea...?

Nana had to wonder if Yurika was being so casual because she was so close with Theia, or if it was because the cultural gap was wide enough that she just didn’t appreciate the value of the things in the room. She feared it was the latter.

“Okay, let’s move you over to this bed, Nana-san.”

“Okay...”

Yurika wheeled Nana all the way to the bed in the back of the room and beckoned her to switch with a smile. Nana had to wonder just how much that bed was worth as she slowly shifted herself over. The movable bed automatically adjusted its height to match the bed in the room, making the transition easier for her.

“Good work, Nana-san.”

Yurika smiled as Nana laid down in the new bed, where she then tucked her in.

I didn't realize Nana-san was this small...

It had been quite some time since they'd last seen each other, and Yurika couldn't help thinking to herself how slight Nana seemed. She'd always been a petite girl, but in her weak and feeble condition, that impression was only exacerbated. Seeing her like this, Yurika's smiled turned somewhat sad.

"You can take it easy for the rest of the day, Nana-san. It looks like there will be more tests and measuring, but not until tomorrow at the soonest."

As pained as she was, Yurika didn't want Nana to notice and tried to cheer herself up. Her efforts paid off, and her smile quickly returned to normal.

"Yurika-chan, there's no need for you to be sad."

Nevertheless, Nana had known Yurika for a long time. She didn't fail to notice the glimpse of a bitter smile on Yurika's lips.

"Nana-san..."

Yurika's eyes shot wide open in surprise. It was a timely reminder that she'd never been good at keeping secrets from Nana. She was her master and her best friend. If Nana had been there, she would have been the first person Yurika went to during the scavenger hunt when she was tasked with finding a friend.

"But Nana-san... It's because of me that you're..."

Yurika bit her lip.

It had happened over a year ago. Yurika was taken hostage by Darkness Rainbow. With Yurika being used against her, Nana refused to put up any resistance and willingly walked into grave danger. That was what had pushed her to the extreme point of overloading her mana core and basically self-destructing. Darkness Rainbow hadn't expected her to go so far for Yurika's sake and took the brunt of the attack.

Fortunately, Nana and Yurika had both escaped alive, but at a heavy price. Nana lost several of her digits and limbs, and even with those parts replaced with magical prosthetics, her mobility and health were still severely compromised. On top of that, without her mana core, she could no longer use magic. In order to save Yurika's life, Nana had given up a big part of herself.

“That wasn’t because of you. It was Darkness Rainbow’s fault for taking a hostage. It’s nothing you should be concerned about, Yurika-chan.”

Even though she’d sacrificed her body and her ability to use magic, Nana was still a magical girl at heart. There was nothing more important to her than the life of her dear friend. That’s why Nana didn’t regret anything about what happened and didn’t hold any of it against Yurika.

“Nana-san is right, Yurika,” a third party said upon entering the room. “If anything, Nana-san should hold it against me.”

“Maki-chan...”

It was the former Dark Navy. She wanted to speak with Nana, but because it would be difficult in front of Koutarou and the others, she’d waited for her chance to do so privately.

“Yurika, we of Darkness Rainbow were the ones that captured you. We were the ones that used you to corner Nana-san. That’s why I should be the one apologizing.”

When Nana blew herself up, Maki was still a member of Darkness Rainbow. She’d been lucky enough to be some distance away from Nana, so the magical explosion didn’t gravely injure her, but she hadn’t gotten off lightly either. It was all she could do to escape with her injured companions.

“Nana-san...”

Maki stood next to Yurika and looked down at Nana in the bed. Deep sadness and regret filled her eyes. It was as if Yurika’s sorrow from moments ago had been transferred to her.

“I’m sorry for doing such terrible things. Darkness Rainbow was... No, the me back then didn’t know what I wanted. That’s why I eliminated everything I didn’t like in a sad attempt to find what I did.”

What Maki truly wanted was love, but oblivious to that, she’d used the power of her magic to manipulate people’s minds in a forcible attempt to shield herself from getting hurt. She’d thought that if she could eliminate everything she found unpleasant, then all that remained would be something desirable. Blind to her true desires, Maki let her feelings run amok and devoted herself to

her short-sighted, misguided stopgap solution.

“I got you two involved because of my own selfishness.”

That was the real reason why Maki had used her magic the way she did, and it could be said that the other leaders of Darkness Rainbow were letting their emotions run amok in similar ways. That selfishness was what made them hostile against Rainbow Heart, which Nana ultimately paid the price for.

“I know that it may not make a difference and I’m not asking for forgiveness, but I at least wanted to tell you myself... I am so very sorry, Nana-san.”

After meeting Koutarou and the others, Maki realized that what she truly sought was love. That was why she was always using her magic to shield herself from lies and betrayal—she was really just searching for people who would protect her and be honest with her. The current Maki knew better, and knew that she had to treasure the love that was right in front of her. She was a different person now. She recognized her past mistakes, and wanted to make them right where she could. Nana’s current condition was a sorry reminder of the terrible things she’d done to other people, which was why she’d come to her directly to apologize.

“Navy... No, Maki-san. I forgive you.”

Nana forgave Maki without an ounce of bitterness in her voice. If anything, she sounded happy. She was even smiling.

“Nana-san...”

Maki was dumbfounded by Nana’s smile. She’d been completely debilitated by Darkness Rainbow. Maki was sure that she must bear at least some lingering ill feelings over what had happened, but no... Nana was smiling at her, and Maki couldn’t understand why.

“I was a magical girl of love and courage. While I might despise wrongdoing, I don’t hate people. Love forgives all... In that sense, I’m still Rainbow Nana.”

Nana took pride in having once been an archwizard of Rainbow Heart and what she’d accomplished during her time. And even though she was retired now, her feelings hadn’t changed whatsoever. Nana didn’t regret the sacrifice she’d made. In her eyes, it was what she’d had to do as Rainbow Nana.

“That’s right, Maki-chan. You being here is proof that Nana-san did the right thing.”

“Yurika...”

The end result of what had happened that day was that Yurika met Koutarou and Maki was saved from Darkness Rainbow—arguably from loneliness. Nana believed that the ends justified the means in this case, just like Yurika said. She may no longer have been working as a magical girl, but she still thought like one.

“Nana-san...”

“Yes?”

“I feel like I finally understand why I could never beat you or Yurika.”

“Now that you do, I’m sure you could win against us both.”

“...That might be true...”

Maki wiped her eyes and finally cracked a smile. Yurika and Nana watching over her both smiled too. They all knew that Nana was right. Anger and hate didn’t play a part in this equation. Especially not now that everyone was working to help Nana recover.

“Nana-san, Yurika... Thank you for forgiving me...”

Maki had spent a long time walking the wrong path in life, but she’d come to an important crossroads. She’d be heading a different way from now on.

As things quieted down in the room, another visitor arrived.

“Nana-chan!”

It was Sanae’s mother, Kanae. She jumped into the room and ran right over to the bed. Since Nana was an old friend of Kanae’s, her eyes immediately filled with tears to see her lying helpless in bed.

“Kanae-san?! What are you doing here?!”

Nana, who had been smiling up until now, looked blatantly shocked. She’d never dreamed she’d run into Kanae here.

“I heard that you were here from my daughter and came running!”

Kanae ignored the other two girls in the room as she rushed to Nana's side and took hold of her small hand. Kanae hadn't spent all that much time together with Nana, but Nana was very, very special to her. She thought of her both as a little sister and a daughter, and this was the first time she'd seen her in a very long while. That was why the typically strict-about-manners Kanae had pushed past Yurika and Maki to get to her.

"What's with you? If you were hurt and had to retire, you should have said so! You made me worry like that for nothing!"

Kanae's biggest worry was that she hadn't heard from Nana even once after she vanished. She'd long fretted that she'd died in battle.

"Th-That's because if I carelessly contacted you, Darkness Rainbow would..."

Nana was borderline rambling. Her previously composed attitude had flown right out the window when she saw Kanae enter the room. Just as Kanae treasured Nana, Nana so treasured Kanae. Their bond was so strong that just being in Kanae's presence was enough to render Nana a normal girl for a time.

"Quiet, you! What are you so scared of Darkness Rainbow for?"

"Because they're dangerous—"

"You really are stupid! I'm way more concerned about whether or not you're okay!"

Kanae tugged on Nana's hand and pulled her closer to embrace her. That was just how dear Nana was to her. Even though it had been more than ten years, that hadn't changed.

"Kanae-san..."

"You have something to say, don't you?"

"I-I'm sorry."

"Try again."

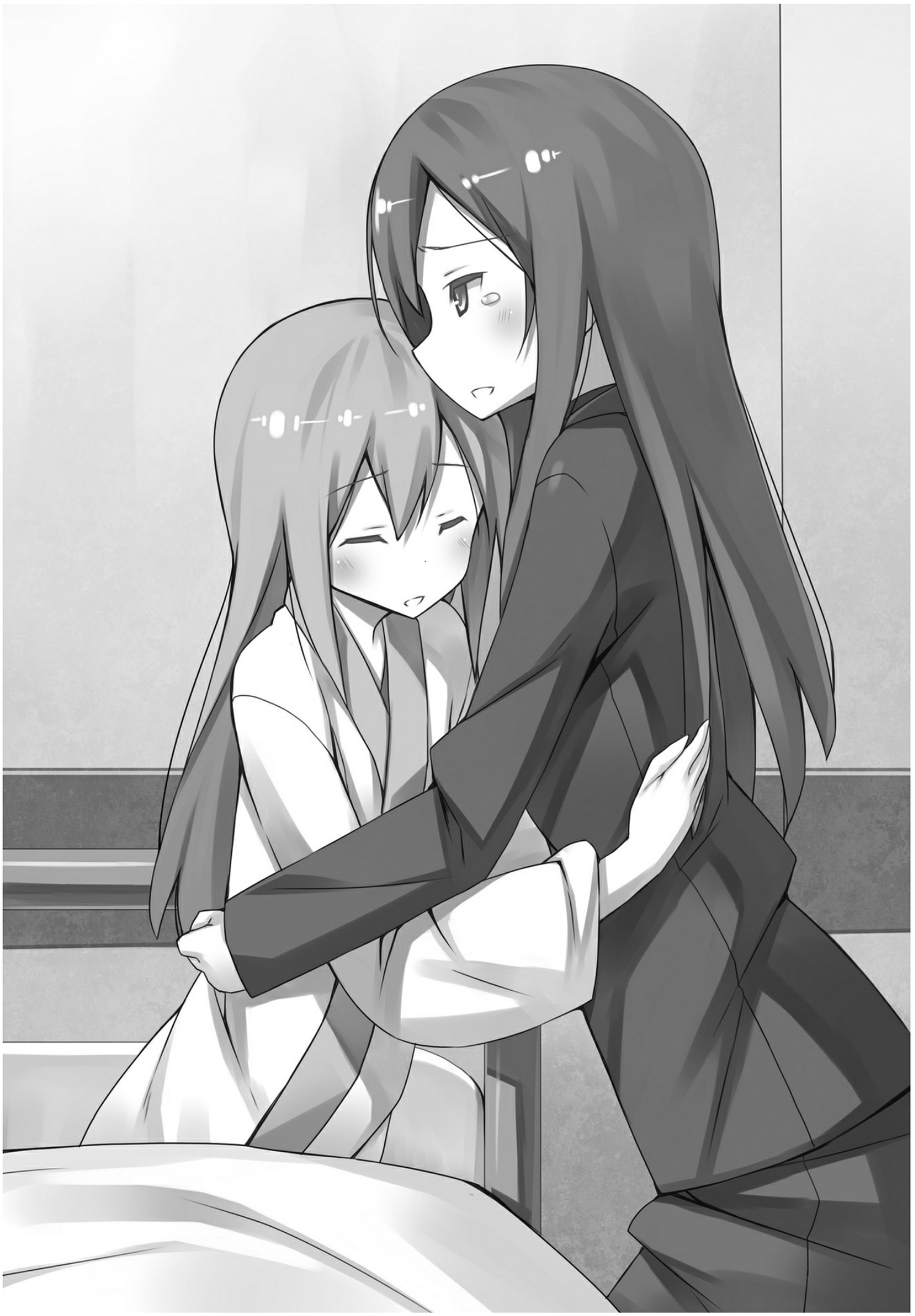
"I, um... I-It's good to see you again..."

Nana only reservedly whispered her answer after thinking on it for a long moment. She then tightly hugged Kanae with her right arm—her last remaining

real limb. Responding to that, Kanae strengthened her embrace.

“It’s good to see you again too, Nana-chan. I’m so glad you’re okay...”

While they hadn’t been together long all those years ago, Nana was irreplaceable to Kanae. They’d shared great joy and great sorrow together. And now that they were finally reunited, Kanae was unable to hold back her tears.



“Yurika-chan, you didn’t tell Kanae-san that I was okay?”

“I did. I told her that you had been seriously injured and that I took over for you.”

“If you put it like that, it makes it sound like I’m either dead or dying!”

Nana, Yurika, and Kanae continued on chatting together. Maki watched over them for a while before realizing that it might be better for her not to be present. While Nana had forgiven her, she had still been their enemy once. There were probably plenty of things they wouldn’t want to talk about in front of her, so she slowly and quietly distanced herself from the group.

“Kanae-san, you worry too much.”

“At least tell me what’s going on!”

“Now, now, Kanae-san, calm down...”

Fortunately for Maki, none of them seemed to notice when she slipped out the cabin door. They simply continued chatting away. Maki took one last look at their happy smiles before silently making her exit. Upon entering the hallway, Maki leaned against the wall and lost herself in thought.

Old friends, huh...?

Darkness Rainbow was a group of magicians that had only allied because they shared a common enemy. There was no sense of camaraderie between them, and they had no scruples about using each other. But despite all that, there was still one member that Maki had thought of fondly.

I wonder if Crimson is worried about me...

Maki was thinking of Dark Crimson, who was easily the most straightforward member of Darkness Rainbow. Her only goal as a magical girl was to get stronger. Her simplistic way of thinking and straightforward desires had agreed well with Maki, who had no tolerance for lies and deception. The two of them got along well and respected each other. Maki didn’t really know if they could call each other friends... but she hoped so. That being the case, she felt badly thinking that she might be making Crimson worry.

No, how silly of me...

Crimson was a member of Darkness Rainbow. There was no way she had any real feelings for Maki. It was stupid to think that she felt the same way about her underneath the surface.

I don't have any friends who would worry about me—

And just as Maki was about to mutter something sad to herself...

"Ha!"

She was suddenly attacked by someone.

"Huwah?!"

Someone grabbed her arm and twisted it upwards in a simple joint lock. Maki was a trained soldier, so she was ordinarily vigilant and alert. She should have noticed someone approaching. As an indigo magician, she was an expert at reading people, after all. However, the person that had put her in a joint lock had done it with so little hostility that they'd easily slipped past Maki's defenses.

"How about it?! Do you give up?!"

"K-Kasagi-san?!"

Upon hearing the voice of her assailant, Maki immediately realized it was Shizuka. She also realized that she hadn't noticed Shizuka's approach, not just because she had no hostility within her, but also because she was an expert martial artist. Concealing her presence and sneaking up on an opponent for a surprise attack was child's play to her.

"What's with that gloomy look on your face, huh?! Take this and this and this!"

"Ow, ow, ow!"

Shizuka seemed strangely enthusiastic about tackling the gloomy Maki. But since she had no intention of actually hurting her, she restrained herself so that Maki only felt a small amount of pain.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

"What? A girl can't try out some moves on her best friend for no reason?"

“N-Not under normal circumstances, no!”

“Guess it’s a good thing we’re not normal then!”

“Ah...”

Hearing those words—“not normal”—Maki understood what Shizuka was doing. She’d gotten worried about Maki and come to look for her, only to find her brooding in the hallway. She meant well and was trying to lift her spirits, which was how she’d been able to sneak up on Maki without her noticing.

“Cheer up, Aika-san! Whatever’s got you down, we’re here for you!”

“Kasagi-san... No, I’m fine now.”

“...Really?”

“Really. How should I put it...? I was just a little embarrassed about my short-sightedness.”

She had just been thinking to herself that she didn’t have any real friends. But even if it had been true in the past, things were different now. Maki was surrounded by friends who cared about her, and Shizuka was proof of that. She’d come as an emissary for everyone. Maki no longer had a reason to be jealous of Yurika.

“Glad to hear it. Now... Take this!”

“Ow, ow, ow! Wh-Why, Kasagi-san?! A-Aren’t you done yet?!”

“Well, I was, but now you’ve got my inner martial artist curious. How are you going to escape this one, Aika-san?!”

“Allow me to demonstrate!”

A smile returned to Maki’s face as she defended herself against Shizuka. She had military training, and knew more than one way to get out of a basic joint lock. Freeing herself from Shizuka’s grasp...

Crimson and I probably could have had fun like this...

Her thoughts turned to her former ally. If things had played out differently, she might be smiling and goofing around with her like she was with Shizuka right now. When that thought crossed her mind, Maki’s smile turned somewhat

lonely.

The Beginning

Monday, September 13th

Making a new body for Nana was a monumental task and couldn't be completed in a mere day or two. The girls went about their daily lives as they continued to work on it piecemeal. With the discussions about the combat systems over and done with, Koutarou had gone back to doing chores, and he was currently out buying ingredients for tonight's dinner. Normally that was a job for Kiriha, Ruth, Harumi, Shizuka, or any combination thereof, but with everyone so busy, only Kiriha had been able to break away for the dinner shopping trip today. She was currently out with Koutarou, walking arm in arm with him as they moved through the shopping street.

"Hello, Kiriha-san."

"Hello, Obaa-san."

"Kiriha-san, we just stocked up on some new tea leaves. You're more than welcome to take a few samples home with you if you tell me what you think of them next time."

"Thank you very much."

"Well hello there, Kiriha-chan. Out on a date with your boyfriend today?"

Kiriha had a good rapport with most of the shop owners in the area. Just walking down the street, almost everyone would stop and greet her, ask for advice, or make small talk. Seeing it for himself, Koutarou realized just how far along her invasion was.

Everything seems to be going smoothly. I'm glad.

Kiriha's invasion was a peaceful one. She wanted to move her people to the surface, but in a way that they could live happily and respectfully alongside the surface dwellers. Koutarou still wasn't really sure that could be called an invasion, but he was happy nonetheless that things were going well. He couldn't help smiling to see Kiriha getting along so nicely with all the people in town.

"Yes, we're on a date!"

“Wh-What?!”

However, Kiriha’s bold remark rattled Koutarou right out of his peaceful happiness. After talking with Kenji and his father about the girls of room 106, Koutarou had started to grow more self-aware of his relationships with them. And hearing Kiriha declare that they were on a date together came as quite a surprise.

“That’s an awfully normal-looking boy you picked for yourself, Kiriha-chan.”

“Normalcy is important. Besides, we share a special bond.”

“Well said... Aaah, must be nice to be young! Damn! Good for you, kid!”

“Th-Thank you?”

“What are you saying, dear?!”

“Oh, no, honey! I didn’t mean it that way!”

The grocer’s wife overheard his conversation with Koutarou and Kiriha, and gave him an earful. Koutarou and Kiriha took their leave, and went back to walking down the street together.

“Heehee, as I thought, being together like this does make it look like we’re on a date.”

Kiriha glanced back towards the grocer’s shop and smiled as she hugged Koutarou’s arm tightly. When she leaned in closer, the smell of flowers tickled Koutarou’s nose. It was probably either the scent of the shampoo or perfume that Kiriha used, but Koutarou couldn’t tell which. It was a faint aroma that wasn’t overwhelming, which only enhanced Kiriha’s mature and calming aura.

“We’re only out to buy stuff for dinner.”

“It’s still a splendid date. When a man and woman are in a relationship, or when they’re on their way to being in one, spending time together like this is called a date.”

Kiriha smiled as she spoke confidently and squeezed Koutarou’s arm. To her, any time she got to spend with Koutarou was like a date. But her confidence and smile quickly seemed to fade...

“Of course, it would be a different story if you didn’t have any romantic feelings for me.”

That was Kiriha’s one true fear.

“So much has happened between us. I’ve gotten to know you in and out, your good sides and your bad. We’ve been through thick and thin, supporting each other every time... After all that, there’s no way I wouldn’t feel anything for you.”

Kiriha looked so unsure of herself that Koutarou didn’t hesitate to tell her how he honestly felt. They’d been through one incredible thing after another with each other over the last year and a half, any number of which could have meant the start of a relationship between them. It would be a lie for him to pretend like he hadn’t thought about it or that he felt nothing for Kiriha.

“Then it’s accurate to call this a date.”

A smile returned to Kiriha’s lips as she looked up at Koutarou and leaned against him. She was so close that if she got up on her tiptoes, their lips would touch.

“Regardless of the mood... can you really call shopping for dinner a date?”

Koutarou was happy to see Kiriha smiling again, but he was too embarrassed to admit that they were on a date. His only defense was to make a wry comment.

“Then let’s just say I’m being mischievousness.”

Kiriha got in front of Koutarou and stopped to embrace him. In the end, she was always one step ahead of him. Even if he couldn’t accept being on a date, he would still accept having a little fun. Kiriha was somewhat puckish by nature, after all.

“I’m sorry for always troubling you.”

Kiriha looked up at Koutarou from point blank range. Koutarou could see his wavering reflection in her dewy eyes. Despite what she’d said, it was quite clear to him that she wasn’t just being mischievous right now.

“Jeez... This is why they call people like you temptresses.”

“Why?”

“Because you know you could get away with anything right now.”

Just a few months ago, Koutarou probably would have been troubled by Kiriha’s actions. But after becoming more aware of his own feelings after talking to his father and Kenji, he’d come to appreciate how precious the girls all were to him. And that realization helped him better understand how Kiriha herself felt.

“The truth is... I’m actually hoping you’ll counterattack.”

If Koutarou did anything right now, he could always say it was Kiriha’s fault for tempting him. She’d intentionally put him a position where he could blame her for whatever happened. So in other words, this wasn’t her usual mischievousness, but a free pass disguised as mischievousness.

“Behaving like that is only going to get you hurt.”

Even knowing that, Koutarou couldn’t do anything irresponsible. He placed his hands on Kiriha’s shoulders and gently pushed her away from him. He felt it was what he had to do precisely because she was precious to him. If he let himself get carried away in the heat of the moment, he would lose sight of what really mattered.

“Heehee... You haven’t realized, have you, Koutarou?”

Despite being rejected, Kiriha smiled happily like she’d gotten her way.

“Realized what?”

“That you treasure us more than a normal boyfriend would treasure his girlfriend.”

Although Koutarou hadn’t done what she’d hoped he would, he’d surpassed all her expectations. His actions told her that he wouldn’t make a move until he *was* ready to take responsibility. Moreover, Kiriha felt like him holding back and choosing not to do anything thoughtless with her despite the intimacy of the moment was the same as him saying he truly loved her.

“The only things you haven’t done are formally declare yourself to be our lover and take the initiative in expressing your love. Aside from that, you do

everything. Even beyond what a normal lover would.”

“What...”

Each of the nine girls were important to Koutarou. That’s why he wanted all of them to be happy and he would do anything in his power to make that happen. He had reason enough to put his life on the line for them and he wouldn’t hesitate to do so. And the girls felt largely the same way about him. In other words, their love and trust was mutual. If any one of them was in danger, the others would come running without a second thought. The relationship between them had long surpassed that of average friends. If anything, they were closer to family now.

Becoming lovers with someone or marrying them was essentially a way to bring someone into your life as family, but Koutarou was already past that point with the girls. While he stuck to saying they weren’t lovers, they might actually be something closer than that. That’s what Kiriha believed.

“Your hands told me everything. Just why did you push me away? Was it because you hate me?”

“That’s...”

Koutarou couldn’t argue with what she was saying. If they had just been friends, he could have easily gone along with things. She’d intentionally given him an opportunity to do just that, after all. But it was precisely because she was so special to him that he couldn’t. He couldn’t let her do that to herself.

“That’s how I know I won’t get hurt, even if I behave this way. You’re too considerate as it is,” Kiriha declared with a smile.

A deep sense of love and trust gleamed in her eyes. She was convinced that she would find happiness as long as she was with Koutarou, no matter what.

“Jeez... I admit defeat, Kiriha-san...”

Koutarou raised the white flag. Listening to her words, he started feeling like he wanted to live up to her expectations and trust.

“Then do you accept that this is a date?”

“Yes, but not by choice.”

“Not by choice, huh? Teeheehee...”

Kiriha knew that Koutarou’s pride as a man forced him to say that, and didn’t press any further. She believed a good woman allowed her man to save face.

After that, Koutarou and Kiriha continued their trip around the shopping street to get what they needed to cook dinner. Kiriha had called it a date, and the two of them were certainly intimate enough to make everyone who saw them think just that.

“Say, Koutarou...”

“Hmm?”

“Do you prefer a more traditional apron, or the gown-like kappōgi?”

“Why would you ask that all of a sudden?”

“I wanted to know which one you think I should wear.”

“Wouldn’t that depend on what you’re making? Surely an apron for making Western food and a kappōgi for Japanese food.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. When you come home at the end of the day, which one would you like to see me welcome you in?”

“Hey...”

“Just tell me.”

“A... A regular apron, I guess...”

“Why?”

“It’s not so soft and feminine.”

“You mean you think of me as some kind of tomboy?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

The People of the Earth’s civil conflict had been resolved and their peaceful invasion of the surface was now well underway. As a result, the workload on Kiriha as a commander was decreasing by the day, giving her more free time and allowing her to live more like a normal girl. It was almost as if her inner self —Kii—had been set free. As a result, while Kiriha still remained calm and

dignified most of the time, she would sometimes unleash surprise attacks of her cute and playful side.

“Heehee, you mean you’re thinking of Kii.”

“Th-That’s not really...”

“No?”

“I mean, you’re not wrong, but...”

“Heehee... I love you, Onii-chan.”

“H-Hey, there are people watching...”

“Who cares?”

Koutarou found himself attracted to this new Kiriha, or more accurately, the original Kiriha. He was glad to see her being herself. Just like how he hadn’t wanted to see Yurika as a magical girl, he didn’t want to see Kiriha as a commander.

“Now that I think about it, Kii-chan had strong likes and dislikes, but... have you outgrown that, Kiriha-san? Do you still hate green peppers?”

“Actually, I still don’t like them, but I endure and eat them anyway.”



“Always the mature adult... You don’t have to eat them when it’s just the two of us, you know?”

“Heh, how reassuring.”

The final stop on their shopping trip would be for produce. Since carrying vegetables enough for ten people was rather heavy, they always saved getting them for last. As they entered the greengrocer’s, the shopkeep greeted them energetically.

“Welcome! Thanks as always for your patronage, Kiriha-chan!”

“And thank you for always being so generous.”

Like most of the other shops along the shopping street, the owners of this particular store knew Kiriha. She much preferred picking up fruits and vegetables here than at the supermarket. She thought their produce was far superior in terms of both freshness and taste.

“So, what did you come in for today?”

“Green peppers, eggplants, and onions. I was thinking of making a stuffing for some meat, so I’ll also need some veggies to throw into a salad. Let me know if you have any recommendations.”

Kiriha explained to the shopkeep what she needed, and discreetly held Koutarou’s hand so he couldn’t see. Since Koutarou knew that she was continuing the topic that they had been on a moment ago, he smiled and squeezed her hand back.

“I got some good radish sprouts and lettuce in today.”

“Then I’ll take those.”

“Good, good. Green peppers, eggplants, onions, radish sprouts, and lettuce, coming right up!”

The shopkeep started to fill a plastic bag with the vegetables Kiriha requested, but came to a stop about halfway through.

“By the way, Kiriha-chan...”

“Yes?”

“If you see my daughter on your way back, would you let her know it’s time to come home?”

The owner of the produce market had a daughter Kiriha had gotten to know through her volunteer work and the hero show. Whenever she spotted Kiriha, she would run right over to her with a giant smile on her face. It was just that kind of energy that could be problematic in a girl her age, however, and she was still out playing even though the sun had already started to set.

“Of course. I’ll let her know if I happen to see her.”

“Thank you, Kiriha-chan.”

“I’m happy to help after all you’ve done for me.”

The shopkeep gave his thanks to Kiriha as he handed over the plastic bag. It was full of everything she’d asked for in addition to several other vegetables thrown in as a bonus. Kiriha gratefully accepted the bag and politely thanked the shopkeep in return before she and Koutarou departed.

Kiriha wasn’t the only one who disliked green peppers in room 106. Sanae and Yurika were on the same team.

“Koutarou, if you love me, then eat my green peppers for me!”

“Fine.”

Chomp!

“Aaah, no, not like that! Spit it out! The taste is transferring over! Nooooo!”

“Here, Satomi-san. Have mine too.”

“Y-Yurika, y-you...! Bleeech! I-In that case, you’re going down with me!”

“Huh?”

“Eat up, Koutarou!”

“Mm!”

“Kyaaah! All I can taste is green pepper! It’s taking over my mooouth!”

The moment they realized that today’s dinner was meat stuffed with green pepper, Sanae and Yurika had decided to pick them out and leave them to

Koutarou. However, their plan backfired almost immediately when Koutarou agreed, but caught Sanae and made her taste them too by sharing spiritual energy. Unwilling to suffer alone, Sanae then grabbed Yurika and shared senses with her too.

“What are those two doing...?”

Baffled as to why Sanae and Yurika were writhing in agony, Theia happily ate her meat stuffed with green peppers. The Mastir territory that Theia hailed from was rich in agriculture and produced several pungent vegetables she disliked. Having gotten used to even those, green pepper was nothing to her.

“By the looks of it, Your Highness, if we pick out the green peppers, Master will catch us and force us to eat them.”

Ruth gleefully watched the scene unfolding across the tea table. Koutarou, Yurika, and Sanae’s tussling looked fun to her. She was actually a little envious.

“Veltlion will force-feed us if we pick out the green peppers, huh?”

Clan gazed down at the stuffed meat on her plate and began pondering if she should give it a try. Realizing what Clan was thinking, Harumi called out to her.

“Clan-san, why don’t we try picking out our green peppers as well?”

“I-I can’t do something as shameless as that! It would be a breach of table etiquette!”

Embarrassed over being completely seen through, Clan hurriedly stuffed large bites of the dish into her mouth. Harumi suspected that was also a breach of table etiquette, but Clan was behaving too cutely for her to point that out.

“Aika-san, say, ‘aah!’”

“What is this?”

Maki was surprised when Shizuka suddenly thrust a forkful of stuffed meat in front of her. She had no idea what Shizuka was doing.

“I was getting a little jealous of Satomi-kun and the others, so I wanted to try out something similar.”

“Ah, so that’s what this is...”

With that, Maki finally understood what Shizuka was up to. She really just wanted to join in on the ridiculous fun.

“Yup. So come on! Say, ‘aah!’”

“Aah!”

Maki opened her mouth at Shizuka’s request, and Shizuka lovingly fed her a bite of dinner. Even though it was the same food she was eating before, Maki felt like it tasted better this way. It was her first lesson in how love enhanced the flavor of food.

“No fair, everyone, ho!”

“We have no likes or dislikes, ho!”

“I think they’d be more surprised that the two of you eat at all.”

“Nothing is impossible for haniwas, ho!”

“Heh, you’re right— Oh?”

Kiriha was chatting with the haniwas as she ate, but was interrupted by the buzz of her cellphone ringing. Kiriha pulled out her vibrating phone and saw the name of the shopkeep from the produce market displayed on the screen.

What could he want at this hour?

If she had forgotten something or left her change at the store, he would have either called right away or waited until the next day to give it to her. Discussing volunteer work shouldn’t be urgent enough for him to call during dinner, either. Wondering what this might be about, Kiriha got up from her seat and walked towards the kitchen to answer the call.

“Hello?”

“Is that you, Kiriha-chan?!”

The shopkeep’s familiar voice came ringing through the speaker. He sounded like he was in a fluster, and Kiriha immediately got a bad feeling.

“Yes. Is something the matter?”

“My daughter still hasn’t come back! You haven’t seen her, have you?!”

“What?!”

It was now past 8PM, yet the greengrocer’s daughter who wasn’t even in grade school yet hadn’t come home. Kiriha’s heart sank as she feared the worst. It seemed her bad feeling wasn’t just a feeling.

The greengrocer’s daughter’s name was Youko. She was six years old and would be finishing kindergarten this year. As she was growing and learning things, she’d started going out to play on her own more and more often, especially with how busy her parents were running the shop.

Of course, her parents gave her the standard set of warnings appropriate for a child her age—be careful around cars, don’t talk to strangers, and come home before sunset. And before today, Youko had never once broken any of those promises. She was a clever girl and knew nothing good would come from misbehaving.

And that only made it all the more worrisome that she hadn’t come home today. That was why her father had called Kiriha in a panic. He and his wife felt guilty about leaving Youko to her own devices so often because they were busy with the store, and they were especially worried that something bad had happened to her because of it.

“...That’s what he said. I’m worried as well, so I’m going out to look for her.”

Once she got off the phone, Kiriha explained the situation to Koutarou and the others. Knowing that a little girl was out wandering the streets at night by herself, Kiriha intended to go look for her herself. She knew just how lonely that was.

“Me too.”

Hearing Kiriha’s plan, Koutarou hurriedly stood up and volunteered to go with her. He remembered Youko from the hero show, so he knew what she looked like and could help Kiriha search. Moreover, no matter how strong Kiriha was, he didn’t like the idea of her walking around the city alone at night.

“Count me in.”

Following Koutarou, Sanae stood up too. She was also worried, but mostly wanted to stick with Koutarou.

“Sanae, do you know what You-chan looks like?”

“I don’t, but I only need to find someone with an aura similar to the greengrocer’s, right?”

“How clever... We’ll be counting on you.”

“Leave it to me!”

With Sanae’s psychic powers, she was especially useful when it came to searching for people. Even if she didn’t know what Youko looked like, if she could track her down by aura, she stood a better chance of finding her than even Koutarou. As such, she was beaming with confidence and ready to go. Following suit, the other girls stood up one after another.

“Kiriha, Koutarou, I’ll come too!”

“I will also help.”

“Pardomshiha, we’re sending out unmanned scouts.”

“Yes, Clan-sama. Right away.”

Hearing that a little girl was missing, not a single one of them could just sit back and relax. They were all anxious to do what they could to find her.

“Thank you, everyone.”

Kiriha bowed politely to her friends. Unlike with Koutarou and Kiriha, Youko was a total stranger to the other girls. Nothing said that they had to help, making their offers of support especially welcome.

“Don’t mention it, Kiriha-san.”

“Yeah, Sakuraba-senpai is right! Isn’t she, Aika-san?”

“Yes. If we all search for her, we should be able to find her sooner.”

In the end, everyone in room 106 decided to help look for Youko. However, as they all headed towards the door, Koutarou remembered something important.

“Yurika.”

“Yhes, What ihs iht?”

When Koutarou called her name, she poked her head over the group. Her

cheeks were still stuffed full of food.

“You stay behind.”

“Whaaat?!”

Hearing what Koutarou said, she quickly swallowed her last bite of dinner and began protesting.

“Why are you bullying me even at a time like thiiis?!”

She was on the verge of tears. She was just about to go to work in the name of love and courage, but Koutarou was cruelly shutting her down.

“No, it’s not like that.”

Realizing that she was about to start with the waterworks, Koutarou hurriedly shook his head.

“Then what *is* it like?”

Koutarou seemed to be saying he wasn’t telling her to stay behind to be mean, but Yurika wasn’t fully inclined to believe that. She beheld him suspiciously.

“Perhaps he’s not bullying you so much as he is politely saying you’ll be useless?” Theia held a finger up and suggested.

“Is that what it is?!”

“Theia, don’t make things worse!”

“Oh, that wasn’t it?”

“While she might be useless, there’s more to it this time.”

“So you really do think I’m useless!”

“Could you guys shut up and listen?!”

Koutarou loudly scolded them for getting carried away and explained himself.

“Yurika, you should stay with Nana. She hasn’t had dinner yet, and there’s other stuff you need to do, right?”

“Ah!”

Koutarou had told Yurika to stay behind because someone should stay aboard Blue Knight and take care of Nana. While her limbs were being worked on, she was currently bedridden and couldn't do much on her own. She needed help with almost everything from changing her clothes to bathing. Yurika, as her best friend, simply seemed the best candidate for the job. That was all there was to it; it wasn't like Koutarou had singled her out to be mean.

"Th-That's right! I completely forgot about Nana-san!"

"How could you forget about your savior?"

"Heh... Eh heh heh..."

Yurika laughed awkwardly with an embarrassed smile plastered on her face. She had tunnel vision, and had completely put Nana out of her mind when she heard about the missing little girl. That could be considered cold, but compared to her savior who was on the path to recovery, the missing child was undoubtedly the much bigger and more immediate problem.

In the end, Koutarou and the eight girls—everyone minus Yurika—headed out to look for Youko. It was an issue that most of them didn't know what she looked like, so Kiriha got the haniwas to display an image of her from their memories. Once that problem was solved, everyone split up. Since Yurika was staying behind to take care of Nana, she would also be playing the part of nerve center. If anyone found anything, they would report to Yurika who would then notify everyone else.

Koutarou had ended up in a group with Sanae and Harumi—neither of which could be out on their own, albeit for different reasons. They'd both chosen to go with Koutarou because he was the most reliable.

"Satomi-kun, I've drawn up how everyone's spread out."

While Harumi couldn't go out on her own because of her weak constitution, she served as the brains of the group. She was calm and thoughtful, and made an excellent complement for the brash Koutarou and reckless Sanae.

"If the shopping street is the epicenter, Theia-san and Ruth-san are heading north, Kasagi-san and Aika-san are heading south, and Kiriha-san and Clan-san are heading west."

Harumi had sketched a map in her notebook of the various locations and paths of the other groups. Names and portraits were penciled in the relevant places, giving Koutarou and Sanae an easy to understand plot of everyone's positions.

"So we should go east?"

Koutarou smiled for a moment as he looked at Harumi's adorable handwriting and sketches, but quickly pulled himself together to focus on the task at hand. He had a missing kindergartner to find, and no time to waste.

"I think having everyone that can use magic grouped to the east and south might be unwise, so perhaps we should start going eastbound, but circle up north."

"Yeah, that's a good idea."

They were in enough of a hurry that they hadn't put much thought into the formation of the groups, and it seemed there had been something of a bias in abilities. That was made quite clear by Harumi's map, and Koutarou thought she had the right idea about how to proceed based on that.

"Ahaha, there's no need to worry!"

Unlike Harumi, Sanae couldn't be left on her own because of her personality. Since nobody knew what she'd do if left to her own devices, she was placed in Koutarou's care for safety's sake. Sanae just wanted to be with Koutarou, so she'd had no objection to this arrangement.

"I'll find You-chan right away!"

"You sure sound confident."

"Now's the time for psychic beauty Sanae-chan to really shine!"

Since Sanae could track auras, locating people was one of her specialties. In fact, she was already scanning the area with her spirit sight. Despite the fact that she looked like she was just messing around, she was taking her job seriously.

"We're counting on you."

"You won't be disappointed! As thanks, give me lots of head pats later!"

“Sure, sure.”

“Satomi-san, would you do the same for me?”

“You too, Sakuraba-senpai?!”

“Don’t be a stingy jerk. Give Harumi some pats too.”

“Fine, sheesh...”

“Heehee... I’m looking forward to it.”

While it was alarming that Youko still hadn’t returned home, no one had any way of knowing how serious the situation really was. Chances were that she was just lost somewhere, so Koutarou and the girls would find her eventually if they kept searching. That was what they all believed. It was a sign of the confidence they’d built up through their many battles.

“Heya, I found something right off the bat!”

Not betraying their hope, Sanae found traces of what she suspected was Youko’s aura almost immediately. While she hadn’t met Youko before, she knew her parents from the produce market, so she used that as a basis to search for similar auras.

“Well done! Where is she?!”

“It looks like she was going for the park. There are traces of happiness headed that way.”

“Let’s go, you two!”

Having found a lead, Koutarou and his team went straight for the park with quickened steps. They wanted to find Youko as soon as possible and reunite her with her parents.

The park in question was more of a playground located in the middle of a residential area. It was small, less than ten meters across, but full of swings and slides. Sanae could detect traces of Yoko’s aura here.

“Hmm, it’s kind of going around in circles.”

“In circles?”

“Yeah, like this.”

Sanae began running around the park as she followed Youko's aura. Seeing her reenactment, Koutarou quickly realized what Youko had been doing.

"It looks like she was playing tag or something."

With her oh-so youthful appearance, Sanae herself looked like a child playing as she traced Youko's steps. She looked just like she was trying to avoid getting tagged.

"But it looks like she stopped from time to time. Like here... or here."

After running for a while, Sanae paused under the slide and the bushes by the edge of the park. It looked like she was hiding rather than running from someone.

"Satomi-kun, they might have been playing hide-and-seek."

"Yeah, that might be it."

If Youko had been playing hide-and-seek, the traces of her aura would make sense. She even seemed to move from spot to spot regularly, as if changing places at the start of every game.

"So maybe she found a good place to hide and just fell asleep there?"

"Well, after all that running around, it's entirely possible."

"Higashihongan-san, can you tell where Youko-chan was last?"

"Gimme a sec. Hrm..."

Sanae looked over the park. There had been several children all running around together, so the traces of their auras were intermingled for the most part. It wouldn't be hard for her to pick out the most recent trace of Youko, it would just take her some time to find it.

"This one, I think."

After looking around for a while, Sanae found what she thought was the freshest residual energy from Youko's aura. It seemed she'd left the park and headed down the adjacent road alone.

"Did You-chan leave the park?"

"It doesn't seem like they were playing hide-and-seek anymore..."

It was highly unlikely that Youko had left the park while playing, and Koutarou and Harumi were concerned about why she might have wandered off if she wasn't going home.

"Whatever, let's try following it."

"Right."

However, nothing would come from trying to puzzle it out. They took action instead, and followed Sanae who was already hot on the little girl's trail.

"Huh?"

Not far out of the park, Sanae suddenly came to a stop. She then cocked her head to the side and looked around.

"What is it?" Koutarou asked.

"Hmm, well, the aura stops here."

Sanae had stopped cold because the traces of Youko's trail did too. It was like someone had drawn a line and erased every trace of her past this point.

"How's that possible? What could do that?"

"Well, you could hide your spiritual energy within an even bigger source. It happens when setting foot on holy ground like at a shrine, too."

Sanae was following Youko's aura with her spiritual senses—different from smell, touch, and sight—and there were two primary ways someone could keep her from "seeing" traces of their spiritual energy. The first was to hide under cover of an even greater source of spiritual energy, and the second was to enter an area where it was impossible to leave traces at all.

"But there's no sign of a bigger source of spiritual energy here..."

"Then is this some kind of sacred ground?"

"It shouldn't be. So if that's the case, it would have to be because there's something temporary here like a portable shrine or hearse... That's all I can think of."

There weren't many types of moving sacred objects that Sanae knew of. Portable shrines and hearses were first on the list, both being important tools

used in sacred ceremonies. Since there hadn't been any festivals recently, a hearse seemed like the most likely culprit in this scenario.

"I don't see any hearses around... Did she get on some other kind of ceremonial object?"

"Maybe, but..."

The traces of Youko's aura stopped cold like she'd climbed aboard something, but it was hard to imagine what kind of sacred object would have come to pick up a little girl. Sanae wasn't convinced that was the right answer, and kept looking around for more clues. That was when Harumi spoke up.

"Satomi-kun, there's something I would like to try..."

"What is it?"

Koutarou turned to look at Harumi, and she timidly explained herself.

"I was wondering if it might be possible for magic to conceal spiritual energy..."

"Is there magic like that?"

"I don't know. That's why I was thinking of trying it to find out."

Harumi was wondering if it was possible to essentially jam traces of spiritual energy with some kind of magical barrier. Since she could use ancient magic through Signaltin, she wanted to give it a try herself.

"Sure, go for it."

"All right... Oh spirits who live among us and rule the material and the ethereal! Gather before me, hold hands, and become a shield to protect against evil! Appear, Great Shield of Spirits!"

As Harumi recited her incantation in Ancient Forthorthian, her hair began glowing silver. It grew stronger and stronger as mana gathered, gradually setting her whole body aglow. It then stretched out from her and covered Sanae and Koutarou in a thinly glowing veil too. It was a magical shield that disguised one's soul.

"Now it should be impossible to see our spirits."

Harumi wanted to find out if concealing the spirit was the same thing as concealing spiritual energy.

“Well, Sanae?”

“Huh? Well, I can still see your spiritual energy.”

“That’s because you’re inside the barrier too.”

“Oh yeah.”

Sanae then left the effective area of the spell and looked back at Harumi and Koutarou.

“Hey, wow! I can’t see your spiritual energy anymore!”

“Really?!”

“Yeah! I can see you two just fine, but I can’t see your auras!”

Harumi’s spell had concealed their auras, which meant that Sanae couldn’t see their spiritual energy from outside the barrier. Her intuition had been spot on.

“Now that I think about it, something like this happened when Aika-san showed up.”

“Did it?”

“Yeah.”

When Maki first fought Yurika, Sanae had lost sight of Yurika’s spiritual energy when trying to track her down. Maki had blanked out their memories of what went down that day after the fact, but she’d lifted the spell not long after joining up with them.

“Okay, then this means a magician is involved.”

“Wouldn’t it have to be Darkness Rainbow, Satomi-kun?”

“What?! Them again?!”

“Calm down. We still don’t know for certain.”

Rainbow Heart forbade the personal use of magic. If there wasn’t a fight going on, none of its members would use something like a stealth spell in the middle

of town, and it wasn't like there were any traces of a fight nearby. That being the case, all signs seemed to point to Darkness Rainbow. But they couldn't just jump to conclusions. It was only a theory for now.

"Oh?"

It was about then that Koutarou's phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and looked at the screen to see that he had had a message from Yurika.

Koutarou and the others had split up into four teams to look for Youko, but Yurika's message had specifically been sent to Koutarou, Shizuka, and Theia's teams. That meant the information had originated from Kiriha's team, and Yurika was just passing it along to the rest of them.

The message read as follows, "I got a call from Kiriha-san. Apparently, greengrocer went to the police and found out that there have been several reports of missing children recently. The police took his report too, and are now supposedly considering launching a criminal investigation."

It turned out that Youko wasn't the only child who'd gone missing. A smattering of other children has disappeared over the past few days. The incidents were scattered across the city, so the police didn't believe they were related at first. But with the reports piling up, it didn't seem there was any way it could all be a coincidence. By the time Youko's parents went to report her missing, the police were able to inform them of that much.

The kidnapped children were all huddled in the corner of a dark, abandoned building. They were all young, some not even in kindergarten yet, and rightfully terrified at what had happened to them. Being snatched away was any child's nightmare.

"I'm glad you're all keeping quiet. Babysitting isn't my style."

As Harumi had suspected, Darkness Rainbow was responsible for the missing children. While Green and Blue were finishing preparations for their ritual, Crimson had gone out to find the kids. Magic made it easy to kidnap them, and equally easy to cover her tracks.

"So you say, but the first thing you did was put the noisy children to sleep with magic."

Green, who had recently started working together with Crimson more often, paused what she was doing and sighed. When Crimson returned with the children, many of them were screaming and crying. Crimson cast a spell on them to put them to sleep, which only terrified the other children more. They didn't know they were sleeping; all they knew was that they'd suddenly stopped moving. After that, the other children didn't dare do anything to anger the evil magical girls. They simply huddled together, trembling in terror as they awaited their fates.

"Really, you have that girl to thank, not your 'babysitting' or your spells," said Blue as she pointed to the small magic circle the children were confined within.

Essentially, it was a cage made out of magic. Inside of it were ten children: four asleep and six awake. The oldest girl of the bunch was doing her best to keep the others encouraged.

"Cheer up, everyone! Someone's going to come save us!"

"But it's been so long..."

"Yeah, nobody's coming for us!"

The young girl trying to keep morale up was none other than Youko. She was the oldest of the children, and having grown up in a busy home, she could keep things together better than most kids her age. She too was scared, but she still did her best to try and keep the others from despairing.

"Harukazeman will come! I know it!"

"Harukazeman will?"

"Then why hasn't he come yet?!"

"He'll come right after beating up Baron Demon! So we all have to be smiling when he gets here, or else he'll be sad!"

"Y-Yeah, you're right."

"Okay..."

Youko was a smart girl. She knew that Harukazeman was just a fictional character from the local hero show. But in this situation, she needed his strength. A hero of justice would come save them eventually... That was the

kind of hope the children needed.

“I’m glad she’s just a child... A girl like her would make a troublesome enemy.”

Calmly observing the children, Blue thought Youko—though she didn’t know her name—was a remarkable specimen. Despite being in danger, she was still courageous, calm, and thoughtful. Blue kept an eye on her, worried she might even be clever enough to come up with an escape plan.

“She’s just a kid. She can’t do anything.”

Crimson shrugged as she glanced at the children. She believed power was everything, so the children looked especially helpless in her eyes.



“Crimson, what were you like ten years ago? Were you the kind of child that would just sit and wait quietly in a situation like this?”

“That’s...”

However, Crimson shut her mouth when Blue called her out. As a child, Crimson had only ever thought about how she could pull one over the adults. She’d craved power as long as she could remember, and she’d successfully outwitted adults who let their guard down more than a few times even as a kid. She had to make sure the tables didn’t get turned on her now.

“Let’s put up some more safeguards in addition to the barrier to make sure they can’t escape. That way it won’t matter how clever she is.”

Green loaned the humbled Crimson a helping hand. Even if there were several smart children in that group, there was no way they’d be able to break through multiple spells. According to Green’s divinations, the odds of it happening were next to none. And with that secured, they’d only have to worry about their ritual being interrupted.

“Knock yourself out. I have to go out now anyways.”

Crimson gratefully accepted Green’s assistance. And with that, she tried to take her leave and force an end to the discussion.

“Where? We should have enough sacrifices now.”

However, Blue stopped her. Crimson had been kidnapping children to use as sacrifices for their ritual, but ten of them should be perfectly sufficient. As such, Blue didn’t see any reason for Crimson to go back out.

“I’m going to save Maki. The only uncertain element of this plan is what’s going on with her right now, isn’t it?”

While Crimson wanted to escape any further conversation, she was also very serious about saving Maki. Whether or not Maki was their enemy had the potential to greatly affect the outcome of the upcoming fight.

“Crimson, I’ve already factored into the plan that Navy-san is being mind-controlled and will be fighting against us.”

Green, who had carefully designed this operation, had already chalked Maki

up as an enemy. Machines, drugs, magic... There were all kinds of methods to control a human mind. It was foolish to assume that Maki was just being held prisoner. Or so she thought. Green had no idea that those were all things that Koutarou and the others would never actually do, but since Darkness Rainbow regularly employed such tactics, it was something she naturally felt she had to consider.

“That means that if Maki’s actually on our side, our chances of success increase even more, right?”

“Well, of course.”

Green shrugged. There was no need to even divine what Crimson was asking; it was obvious. If Maki turned out to be on their side, then things would be even easier than they’d anticipated.

“I don’t have anything better to do now that all the sacrifices have been gathered, so I might as well.”

“Well, it would be better than doing nothing.”

After hearing Crimson out, Blue relented.

According to their plan, Crimson was in charge of gathering the sacrifices, while Blue and Green were in charge of preparing the magic circle for the ritual. Crimson had just finished her job first. She could stay and help work on the magic circle, but Blue and Green had it under control as it was. It would only cost them time to stop what they were doing and explain it to her. Crimson wasn’t even particularly good at minding the children, so sending her after Maki seemed like the best use of her time. If she was successful and managed to bring Maki back, it would benefit everyone.

“Crimson, you just want Navy-san back, don’t you?”

“Ahaha! So you get me after all, Green! I’m gonna go get her, see to it that she gets stronger, and then fight her with all of my power!”

Crimson didn’t just want to save Maki for the sake of the mission. She wanted to help Maki because she saw her as her rival. By Crimson’s logic, Maki should keep getting stronger so they could fight one day. And if she brought her back to Darkness Rainbow now, she could learn scientific magic. With that, their fight

in the future would be even grander.

Between Friend and Foe

Monday, September 13th

After receiving Yurika's message, Koutarou and the others realized that the situation had escalated to a genuine emergency. In order to cover a wider search area, anyone who was willing and capable of doing so moved out on their own. Their three new independent search parties were Maki, who was used to going alone in the first place; the overwhelmingly strong Shizuka; and Theia, who had the power and support of Blue Knight. Everyone else stayed in groups. Considering they were now potentially dealing with a serial kidnapper, there was no harm in staying cautions.

"I don't want to believe it, but..."

When she heard about the string of kidnappings, Maki suspected that Darkness Rainbow was behind it. And the reason was simple—despite ten children being missing, there wasn't a single clue or witness. The culprit hadn't demanded ransom, either. That's why the police were still debating about whether or not to actually handle the cases as kidnappings. But Maki knew better. Magic would have made it easy to snatch the children without a trace. It could have even been used to lure the kids to deserted areas and keep them from yelling for help.

"And if they're kidnapping children, they must need energy for a ritual..."

The other reason Maki suspected Darkness Rainbow's involvement was because the victims were all young children. Kids at that age were still innocent, making it easy to extract pure energy from them. Children who had an aptitude for magic produced especially high-quality energy, but they were few and far between. That would explain why Darkness Rainbow had had to take children from all over the city. The seemingly random kidnappings inadvertently ended up giving away their one commonality.

"If Darkness Rainbow really is involved, then..."

As a former member of Darkness Rainbow, Maki knew in her heart of hearts that Darkness Rainbow was responsible. She too had once tried to plunge

Kisshouharukaze City into darkness, but now it was time to confront her past and make up for what she'd done.

"I have to protect it... this world of light..."

After getting information on the locations of the disappearances from the Sun Rangers, Maki headed for the closest one. In order to find out for sure if Darkness Rainbow was really involved or not, she was going to go examine the site for herself.

"This is the place."

Maki had made her way to the river. It was well past sundown now, so the place was desolate. She stood alone on the bank in her knight's uniform. It was a combination of the Blue Knight's signature blue and touches of her own shade of indigo, though it was hard to tell the difference between the two at night.

"Now then... If I were going to kidnap children, how would I do it?"

Maki jumped down from the embankment to the riverside and looked around the area. According to the Sun Ranger's intelligence, a little boy had gone missing here. He was out playing soccer with his friends and never returned home.

"The city is rather crowded, so it would make sense to do it here."

Having once been a member of Darkness Rainbow herself, Maki knew firsthand how they thought and acted. It wasn't something that pleased her, but it was experience that could be invaluable in finding the children. Now wasn't the time to shy away from her dark past.

"But in an area this open, there would be eyewitnesses. In that case..."

Maki had cast a spell to enhance her vision in the darkness. She could see clear from one side of the river to the other despite the hour. It helped her get a sense of the area, and she quickly narrowed down the potential abduction sites.

"So probably around here... or over there."

There were two places that really stuck out to her. The first was under the bridge over the river, and the second was a grassy open area.

The reason Maki suspected under the bridge was simple. The children loved to play over there, so it would have been easy to lure the boy there and no one would have thought anything of it. His parents had said he had a soccer ball with him, so it would have been easy to imagine he was going there to kick it against the concrete wall. And once he was there, he would be out of sight and easy to snatch.

As for the second spot, Maki suspected the grassy open area because of her experience in Darkness Rainbow. After kidnapping the boy, the best way to divert suspicion would be to create an illusion of him and have him walk around the riverside for a while. That would mislead the police about the precise time and location of the kidnapping. They'd have no idea he was long gone before they ever suspected anything, and they wouldn't arrive on the scene until the whole thing exploded into a huge investigation. Moreover, it would have been simple for one of the evil magical girls to hide even out in the open with an invisibility or camouflage spell.

"Analyze Magic."

Maki cast a spell to analyze mana in both areas. Nothing turned up under the bridge, but she discovered a red flag in the grassy area.

"It's subtle, but the mana around here is thin... After using a spell to kidnap the boy, they must have used a different spell to cover up their tracks before leaving."

If someone had cast a spell here, there should be residual mana lingering based on the strength of the spell. Because of that, it was standard practice to cast a follow-up spell to conceal such traces when discretion was necessary.

It was a clever trick, but it had one notable flaw. When a spell was cast to conceal mana in the area, it also concealed the natural mana there. And the red flag Maki had picked up on was that the natural mana in the grassy area was diminished. It was sort of like finding the magical equivalent of wet paint. It would eventually dry and return to normal, but that took time.

That said, the natural mana here was nearly at normal levels. Maki had only been able to detect the subtle difference because she knew exactly what she was looking for and had narrowed down her search area considerably.

Someone like Harumi, who was a magician but lacked any real training, probably would have missed it altogether.

“A large-scale spell was cast at the scene of a kidnapping and its traces were covered up...” Maki said to herself, her expression turning grim. “This is most definitely Darkness Rainbow’s doing.”

It was possible that someone affiliated with Rainbow Heart had passed by for an unrelated reason and used magic before covering it up, but the odds of a coincidence like that seemed unrealistically low to Maki. It seemed far more probable that someone had used magic to take the child, and Darkness Rainbow were the likely suspects.

Maki could only think of one reason Darkness Rainbow would kidnap ten children. They must need energy for a large-scale ritual. And if they were back in Kisshouharukaze City, it was likely to attack Koutarou and the others. Then they would claim the power in room 106 for themselves and challenge Rainbow Heart to a decisive battle.

“So it’s finally begun... But I’ll put an end to it!”

Maki’s eyes were gleaming with resolve. She now knew what love was. There were all kinds, each and every one of which was worth protecting. That was why she was determined to return the kidnapped children to their parents. Maki had broken out of her own darkness and was now aglow with purpose and love.

After messaging Yurika to let her know she believed Darkness Rainbow was behind the kidnappings, Maki continued searching for clues.

The magicians of Darkness Rainbows all carried powerful magical tools with them. They of course had their staffs and outfits enchanted with protective magic, but also a wide variety of magical drugs and charms. When they were trying to be stealthy, they also needed to conceal the mana traces of the tools they used. And if they were using something on the move, it would mean that they had to keep up the concealment as they went, which would essentially leave a wake of suppressed natural mana.

Following that trail, Maki left the river and headed for the suburbs of Kisshouharukaze City. She was walking through a district that had been

developed as a resort area in the 80s and 90s, but was abandoned when the economic bubble burst and the companies that had invested in it went under one after another. And no one had touched it since. It was like a modern ghost town, haunted by the remnants of someone's grand dream.

"If the caster had been a little better at green magic, I wouldn't have been able to follow their trail like this..."

A magician had to use a strong enough concealment spell to mask their mana or else traces of it would remain. But if they used a concealment spell that was too strong, it would conceal even the natural mana in the area. The only way to conceal oneself perfectly was to use just the right amount of concealment. But hitting that sweet spot wasn't easy. The only person in Darkness Rainbow who could do it was their green magic specialist, Dark Green. But fortunately for Maki, whoever she was following wasn't as good at green magic as she was, making it easy to follow their trail.

"It couldn't have been Dark Green. And it probably wasn't Purple or Blue either. Their trails would have been too faint for me to follow this far. That leaves Yellow, Orange, and Crimson, and the worst among them with this kind of magic is..."

By process of elimination, Maki managed to figure out who the kidnapper was.

"So she's here..."

Maki paused for a moment and smiled sadly. The culprit she'd identified was the only person in Darkness Rainbow that she considered a friend. While she was selfish, she was nothing if not honest.

"That's right, Maki. Long time no see."

"Crimson..."

Dark Crimson wore a deep red outfit and gave off a rather fiery impression, though she was currently wearing the same sad smile as Maki. This was a reunion, but the air between them as they faced each other in the empty alleyway was as melancholic as the ghost town around them.

After receiving Maki's message about Darkness Rainbow, Yurika forwarded

the information to Koutarou and the others before deciding to join in on the search.

“Kanae-san, please take care of Nana-san.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice, Yurika-chan. I’m your senior when it comes to taking care of Nana-chan.”

“That’s right. Then I’ll leave it to you, Senpai.”

“That sounds much better.”

“Hahaha.”

Yurika left Nana in Kanae’s care. She didn’t like the idea of leaving her at all after dragging her out of Folsaria, but Yurika had a job to do now and Kanae was a longtime friend of Nana’s, so having her around made Yurika feel much better about it.

“I’m going now, Nana-san.”

“Yurika-chan...”

Nana fought back the urge to stop Yurika, who was heading out with a smile. Just like Koutarou, Nana didn’t want Yurika to fight. That said, not many people had her talent for magic. There were things that only Rainbow Yurika could do, so Nana knew that she had to let her go. It made her feel helpless—the same kind of helplessness that had weighed on her a year and a half ago.

“Please don’t look so sad, Nana-san.”

Yurika realized the complex emotions that must be swirling within Nana, which was new for her. Talented or not, in the past, she’d been too caught up in worrying about herself to be able to see into anyone else’s heart. She was more like a magical mess than a proper magical girl.

“But...”

“I’m not who I was a year ago. I have lots of things I want to protect now.”

Yurika had greatly matured since she and Nana were last together over a year ago. She had gained courage, come to love, and found her reason for fighting. Yurika wanted to protect Koutarou, Nana, the girls of room 106, everyone living

in the city... and their normal daily lives. In short, she'd grown into a true magical girl.

"Of course. I'm sorry. Then let me give you some advice as your mentor."

"I'd like that."

"Yurika-chan, there isn't much a single person can do. Rely on your allies when you have to."

"You can count on me. I'm good at relying on people."

Yurika gave a joking reply, but Nana could see right through her. She smiled wryly and chose to press her point.

"I'm talking about when things get truly serious, Yurika-chan. You never rely on others when it really matters."

"...Okay, I'll be careful."

Nana had thoroughly called her out, and Yurika had no choice but to acknowledge it. She obediently nodded her head and promised Nana she'd take her advice to heart.

"And one more thing... Eleven years ago when Maya kidnapped Sanae-chan and Kiriha-san, she used a pretty large magical circle for her ritual."

"How big, exactly?"

"It took up most of one floor of an underground parking deck."

"That's pretty big."

"Yes, and Maya only needed one child to power it. So if Darkness Rainbow needs ten children for whatever they're planning, the magic circle is likely proportionately larger. They should be in the basement of a very large building."

"Good to know! Thank you, Nana-san!"

Though Nana was physically handicapped, her mind was as sharp as ever. Yurika smiled, thinking she should have expected as much from Nana.

"I'll be off now!"

“See you later.”

“Be careful!”

“Okaaay!”

After saying goodbye to Nana and Kanae, Yurika rushed off to get to work. Once she was gone, Nana and Kanae were left alone in the cabin and stared at the door their young friend had just exited through for a while.

“Say, Nana-chan...”

“Yes?”

“Yurika-chan is a good apprentice, isn’t she?”

“Yes. She’s my prided star pupil.”

“My, that’s a bold statement. But I know how you feel. My daughter is my pride and joy.”

“Then let’s believe in them and their friends.”

“You’re right. Between them, I’m sure everything will work out.”

Eventually the two women smiled at each other. They were worried that Yurika and the others might get hurt, but at the same time, they didn’t think there was any way they could lose. When a magical girl with the title of Rainbow went to battle for something she believed in, she always returned victorious. That’s what Nana and Kanae had told themselves over and over when they fought together in the past. And they proved it true by coming out on top every time. That’s why they could smile now; they had faith that Yurika would do the same.

After disembarking from Blue Knight in orbit, Yurika returned to Earth’s surface and met up with Koutarou, who just so happened to be the closest to where she was. They then began looking for the missing children together.

“Yurika, you could have just stayed with Nana-san, you know?”

But as expected, Koutarou still thought Yurika should be by her mentor’s side. It had been ages since they’d gotten to see each other, and on top of that, Koutarou still didn’t like the idea of Yurika fighting. It seemed like a win-win

situation for her to stay behind this time.

“This is my duty. If Darkness Rainbow is committing evil deeds, I have to stand up to them.”

If Darkness Rainbow was abusing magic, it was Yurika’s job as a member of Rainbow Heart to stop them. There was still a small chance there was someone else pulling the strings, but Yurika couldn’t sit back and count on that while they were potentially running amok.

More than anything, Yurika knew that in order for her to lead a happy life, everyone around her needed to be happy too. If they weren’t, she’d never be able to do things like eat her instant noodles in peace. So to Yurika, regardless of everything else, this was something she had to do.

“I just can’t accept it. I don’t like seeing you look like a magical girl because I know what it means. It’s unfortunate.”

The reason Yurika had become a magical girl was because she’d been born with a talent for magic, but Koutarou would have much preferred it if she’d simply been allowed to live out her life as a normal girl.

“If you feel that way... then it’s not unfortunate at all, Satomi-san.”

Yurika didn’t see it the way he did. Koutarou felt like Yurika was being denied something as a magical girl, but Yurika felt like it was being a magical girl that had brought her to the wonderful life she had now. There had been a point in time that she was all alone and had no one who understood her, but her duties had led her to Koutarou, the kind of wonderful friend who wanted the best for her. That was why, no matter how fierce the battle she faced, Yurika would never think of being a magical girl as unfortunate.

“You dunce.”

“You mean... you really think I’m unfortunate?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I think you should comfort me, Satomi-san.”

“Come on now...”

“Actions speak louder than words. If I’m really that unfortunate, I might need

a kiss or something.”

Yurika leaned in, got up on her tiptoes, and puckered her lips in a blatant display.

“Stop being stupid. Let’s go put an end to the cause of this misfortune.”

Koutarou shut her down, put a decisive end to the discussion, and walked forward full steam ahead, leaving Yurika in the dust. Watching him go, she sighed a little.

“You’re going to lose out on a lot in life, Satomi-san...”

Yurika would let Koutarou get away with just about anything. She wouldn’t have even minded if he’d actually kissed her. But because she was that way, Koutarou wanted to treasure her all the more. Perhaps Yurika was right. If Koutarou were just a bit more selfish, he could have a lot more fun in life.

“Life isn’t about loss and profit. And if you keep thinking of things that way, you’re going to overlook what’s really important.”

“What’s really important? Like the fact that I love you?”

“...”

Smack!

“What are you doing?! You don’t have to be so embarrassed!”

“I’m not talking about small stuff like that.”

Yurika didn’t immediately realize the meaning of his words, and watched Koutarou in puzzlement as he continued on ahead of her

“Ah...”

But it all clicked after a few seconds, and she went chasing after him with a smile on her face. He was really just embarrassed.

“This is the kind of thing I love about you.”

Yurika caught up to Koutarou and continued to smile as she walked along beside him. Koutarou caught a glimpse of her grinning before turning his face away.

“...Shut up and look for the kids already. This is an emergency.”

“Okaaay!”

Seeing Koutarou like this, Yurika looked down and laughed for a moment before turning her attention to the surrounding area in search of the children.

Koutarou and Yurika continued their search as they followed after Maki. If Darkness Rainbow was indeed involved, she would eventually come into contact with them. When that happened, the more allies she had with her, the better. Little did they know that Maki had already crossed paths with Dark Crimson.

“You look better than I thought you would, Maki.”

“They’re treating me well, after all.”

The two magical girls now stood facing each other in a vacant lot some distance off the main road. Even though they just looked like two teenage girls talking, they didn’t want to attract any attention considering what might be about to go down.

“But me aside... has nobody said anything about your outfit since I’ve been gone? It’s a wrinkled mess.”

“No one’s as nagging as you, no. Orange says I’ve got a wild and cool look, and my subordinates are too scared to say anything.”

“Jeez, what’s become of Darkness Rainbow?”

“We’re just not that kind of group.”

“Too true.”

Their discussion was friendly and lighthearted. They sounded like two old classmates catching up—a rarity between members of Darkness Rainbow.

“So, what are you doing now, Crimson?”

“I’ve come to save you, Maki.”

Maki was hoping she’d reveal something about the kidnappings, but Crimson’s answer was far from what she’d expected her to say.

“Me?”

Maki went wide-eyed in surprise. To Darkness Rainbow, captured allies were considered a liability because of the information they could leak. The idea of saving one of them had never been discussed before. They were always left to die or eliminated outright. Maki found it hard to believe that Darkness Rainbow had changed since she left, so she was stunned to hear Crimson say she'd come to save her.

"That's right. Our battle with Rainbow Heart is at hand, so I came to take you back. There's not enough time to find and train a new Dark Navy."

"I see..."

In their decisive battle against Rainbow Heart, Darkness Rainbow would need all hands on deck. Rather than fighting without one of the seven leaders, rescuing Maki made more sense. They weren't saving her because they wanted her back, but because they needed her as a pawn. That was just like Darkness Rainbow. That was how they thought, and Maki knew it all too well.

"I can't go with you," Maki said as she shook her head.

Maki wore a mechanical collar around her neck to fool Darkness Rainbow into thinking she was being held against her will.

"I wonder if that collar can really kill you..."

"The truth is... I don't really know what it is. It's not like I made it. That said, I'm not interested in testing my luck."

Maki shrugged. She'd expected a certain amount of skepticism, so she wasn't shaken in the slightest to hear Crimson asking questions. She simply replied as naturally and as honestly as she could. Even if she wasn't on Darkness Rainbow's side anymore, she still despised lies.

"Sure, but... You're really staying on that side because you want to, right?"

However, Crimson's next question shook Maki to the core. She felt like her heart was going to leap out of her chest. She couldn't believe that Crimson, who never thought too deeply about anything, had been able to see through her. Maki suppressed her unrest and chose her next words carefully.

"Why do you think that?"

“You look like you’ve gotten stronger.”

Crimson smiled, her long hair flipping about in the night breeze like a flickering fire. It only made her look more intimidating

“Before running into you tonight, I thought you were being forced to stay against your will because of that collar. But I don’t see how you could have gotten stronger if that were the case. Wouldn’t that be odd?”

If nothing else, Crimson had a natural sense for strong opponents. She’d caught on to the fact that Maki was acting of her own free will because she could sense the changes in her.

If Maki was being threatened with the collar around her neck and forced to work, she should be getting weaker. If she was acting out of fear solely because she didn’t want to die, there should be no spark in her eyes.

Yet Crimson could plainly see that Maki had purpose and resolve like never before. In magic battles, willpower played a significant role in the outcome. So if Maki had newfound drive, then she had power to match.

“That’s why when I saw you, I thought, ‘Ah, look, she’s doing all right for herself.’”

“Crimson...”

Crimson’s intuition wasn’t wrong, and Maki realized that trying to hide the truth from her would be pointless. That said, she still wasn’t sure what Crimson’s intentions were, so she decided to play the rest of the conversation by ear.

“If that’s what you think... then what are you planning to do, Crimson? Purge me here and now? Report back and tell the others that I’m a traitor?”

Being a loose end and a liability was more than reason enough for Darkness Rainbow to dispose of someone, and being a traitor was a step above even that. Chances were Maki would be killed on the spot, or all the remaining members of Darkness Rainbow would come for her when Crimson reported back to them.

“Why would I do something so wasteful? I want to fight strong opponents, Maki. I’ll always welcome you getting stronger.”

Crimson prioritized her own desires over that of the organization. And to her, there was nothing more important than the quest for strength.

“I hardly would’ve gotten anything out of fighting you before... but you’re different now. You’ve become someone worth fighting!”

Crimson smiled happily. Maki had been strong as part of Darkness Rainbow, but not strong enough for Crimson to consider a target. She specialized in offensive red magic, which gave her an advantage over Maki in combat. That’s why Crimson had always been waiting for Maki to get stronger, almost like a crop before harvest.

And at long last, it seemed she’d finally done it. Crimson didn’t know how, but Maki had found power after leaving Darkness Rainbow. She’d become someone worthy of fighting in Crimson’s eyes. But if Crimson reported Maki’s betrayal to her allies, she would lose her chance to fight her. That’s why she chose to refrain, and instead intended on dragging her back after besting her.

“There’s no way I’m going to waste this opportunity! Fight me, Maki.”

“You really are the poster child for Darkness Rainbow, Crimson...”

Darkness Rainbow’s creed was to use magic to fulfill all their personal goals, so in essence, Crimson putting her own desires before that of the organization embodied their ideals perfectly. She was no different from Maya in that sense. That’s how Maki knew she wouldn’t be able to convince her.

“Say, Crimson...”

“What?”

“I think I wanted to be your friend.”

Before meeting Koutarou, Maki had lived a sad life of solitude and betrayal. That’s why she’d always liked Crimson—she was honest and true to her feelings, no matter what. To Maki, she’d been a small candle of comfort in an otherwise dark world.

“You don’t say... But I wanted to fight you.”

But Crimson didn’t understand that. In fact, it was because she was so earnest that she was only singlemindedly focused on her desire to fight Maki. But Maki

had always seemed to have a psychological wall up, preventing her from exhibiting her true strength. That's why Crimson had taken an interest in her.

"So we were after different things from the beginning... What a shame."

Steeling herself, Maki readied her staff. Though they were each engaged by the other, they were fundamentally seeking different things. And because Maki liked Crimson for her honesty and straightforwardness, she couldn't ask her to change her ways for her sake. Even now, Crimson still wanted to fight her. And that earnestness was exactly why Maki couldn't help but like her.

"Maki, I feel like we've finally gotten the chance to open up to each other."

"How ironic. It took all this for us to truly become friends."

The two girls exchanged sad smiles, just like the ones they wore when they first ran into each other. Perhaps they'd expected all along that this was how things would go down.

"Even if we're friends, I won't hold back, Maki."

"Don't worry, Karen. I know."

Karen was Crimson's real name. When Maki had shared her real name with Crimson, she'd done the same in return.

"I told you not to call me that."

But Crimson didn't like her name. All she wanted was strength, so having such a cute, feminine name annoyed her. It didn't suit the image she wanted at all, so she'd always asked Maki to call her Crimson instead.

"I remember. I just wanted to say it once."

"Then you'll fight for real once too?"

"Yes. You're my friend, after all."

"Heh, I'm looking forward to it."

The two girls exchanged smiles once more before raising their staffs overhead and incanting a spell to create a barrier. Despite the serious fight about to erupt between them, there wasn't a trace of hostility on either of their faces.

All that mattered to Crimson was getting stronger. She'd never missed a

single day of combat training. Her reflexes were perfectly honed, and so she started and finished her incantation first. Moreover, since she focused her training on her offensive energy-based spells, they packed quite a punch.

Maki, on the other hand, wasn't so combat oriented. She specialized in mind manipulation spells, so her real strengths were at play before a battle even began. It wasn't like she had no skill for combat, but she had to admit that Crimson had the advantage in a head-to-head fight.

"Nightwalker! Recall Precast Spells! Category: Alpha!"

Because of that, Maki knew the beginning of the fight was a critical opportunity. She activated more than ten spells she had precast into her staff that enhanced her physical and mental prowess. Crimson would of course do the same thing, but this kind of magic was in Maki's wheelhouse. With it, she might be able to get a leg up on her already powerful opponent.

There was just one problem. Crimson was faster and got off her spell first.

"Wait, what's the meaning of this?!"

However, in defiance of Maki's expectations, Crimson hadn't cast a spell to enhance her body. It was strange. The Crimson that Maki knew would always do that before aggressively attacking in close combat.

"When I came here, I fought against some strange people... That got me thinking, and I realized something."

Crimson stood practically stock-still as she squared off against Maki, who was glowing from all of the spells she'd activated. Most of them had been concentrated on herself, but she'd also used one to transform her staff into a magical greatsword. And by the look of things, the boosted Maki would close in on Crimson and cleave her in half before she could ever do anything. But Crimson wasn't panicking in the slightest. She was just standing there with a confident smirk on her face. Seeing it, Maki felt a cold chill run down her spine.

"Realized what?!"

"Just like how there's a proper way for a swordsman to use a sword, there's a proper way for a magician to use magic. Ray of Sunshine! Modifier: Single Wavelength! Targeting Option: Gaze Tracking!"

Just as Maki was closing in on her, Crimson incanted her next spell.

Preposterous! What can she do with a sunray?!

Crimson's spell would create a powerful light, but it wouldn't be enough to stop Maki. If she stared straight into it, it might burn her eyes, but she was confident she could still cut Crimson down even blinded. Moreover, it was nearly impossible to aim for the eyes of someone moving as fast as she was. At worst, she was probably only looking at being blinded in one eye.

No, the battle-hardened Crimson would never make such a foolish play! There's got to be more to it!

The next moment, Maki forcibly changed directions and tried to move away from Crimson. She didn't know what Crimson was up to, but she knew just how serious she was about fighting. There had to be a good reason she'd chosen a spell like that. In short, you could say that Maki believed in Crimson's strength.

"Kyaaah!"

And Maki's intuition was right. The second Crimson finished her incantation, two of the three defensive spells Maki had cast on herself were blown away. The third just barely managed to hold up, and was now unstable after taking heavy damage. Fortunately, Maki herself was unscathed—just confused about what had happened. Her compromised defenses and the apparent power of Crimson's spell were both alarming.

What did she do?! I didn't sense any mana in whatever took out my defensive spells just now! Did she send something flying?!

Maki was panicking. She had no idea what Crimson had attacked her with. And if she did it again, Maki would be in serious trouble.

"Quick Cast Force Field!"

Maki jumped backward and distanced herself as she cast another spell. If she didn't have at least two layers of protection, she wouldn't be able to defend herself against another attack from Crimson.

"If you don't think fast, Maki, you're gonna eat it!"

Crimson then launched her second strike, which obliterated Maki's remaining

third defensive spell and her newly cast force field. Crimson's attacks were not only powerful, but frighteningly accurate. She wasn't having any trouble hitting Maki while she was on the move.

What power and speed... If she's sending something flying, it's incredible... But the incantation she used was just for that light spell... Wait, light?!

All of a sudden, the image of Theia summoning a particular weapon from Blue Knight popped up in Maki's mind. That was it. That was the secret behind Crimson's attacks.

"I see, so that's what it is..."

"Oh, you've already figured it out?"

"Yes. That spell... It's a laser, isn't it?"

Since Maki had seen Theia's laser cannon in action, it didn't take her long to identify what Crimson was really using. Lasers hit virtually instantaneously the moment they fired, making them exceptionally accurate, and they were devastating at short ranges—just like Crimson's attacks.

"Bingo! Brilliant! That's Maki for you!"

Despite her secret being revealed, Crimson seemed happy. She longed to fight powerful enemies so she could go all out in combat. She wanted someone who could keep up with her, so it wouldn't have been any fun if she'd taken Maki out right at the start.

"To think you'd be using science to enhance magic..."

"I had a hard time reworking my spells from the ground up, you know?"

Crimson let out an exaggerated sigh as she tapped her staff against her shoulder. Such a casual gesture left her wide open—they were in the middle of a fight, after all—but she knew that Maki wouldn't take the opportunity to launch a surprise attack while they were talking.

"That's definitely not like you."

"Yeah, well, this is what losing to a no-magic smartypants will do to a girl."

Crimson was referring to none other than Kiriha. Using only her brain as a

weapon, she'd handily defeated Crimson and Green. As a magician capable of altering reality, getting outwitted by a normal human was utter humiliation. Really, Crimson was impressed with Kiriha, but she'd taught her a painful lesson about how costly ignorance could be. And she'd taken that lesson to heart. After their fight, Crimson took the opportunity to learn more and change herself for the better. Even if it was out of character, it was what she thought she had to do to beat Kiriha the next time they crossed paths.

"I know how saying this is gonna sound, but... We Folsarians have put too much value on magic. We're behind scientifically."

Folsarians understood so little about science that their magic suffered for it. Fire magic was a simple example. Because Folsarians generally didn't understand the principles of combustion, the fire created by their magic was always a standard red flame.

Little did they know that red flames were imperfect, inhibited by impurities and insufficient oxygen. Hotter, better fed flames were blue in color. That should be what they aimed for, yet every magician in Folsaria produced red flames with their magic. Their preconceptions and ignorance got in the way, making their magic inefficient.

But Crimson knew better now thanks to the power of science, and had improved her spells severalfold by removing such waste. They were more efficient, powerful, and faster than ever before.

"That explains the laser..."

"Maki, I knew the first thing you'd do was enhance your own body. That's why I chose magic that moves at the speed of light. It's only rational, don't you think?"

"To think I'd live to hear the day you talked about rationality... What a strange feeling."

"Are you picking a fight?"

"I suppose so. We are fighting, aren't we? Really, I'm buying time to think of a countermeasure."

"Then hurry up and think of something! I won't wait forever!"

There, both girls began incantations at the same time.

“Ray of Sunshine! Modifier: Single Wavelength! Targeting Option: Gaze Tracking!”

Crimson conjured her laser spell again. It used a single powerful wavelength of light to strike wherever she was looking. Unlike weaponized lasers, it didn’t even have a visible form. It was a nightmarish attack that would strike invisibly and instantaneously.

“Fog Cloud!”

Meanwhile, Maki cast a simple spell that created a billowing fog. As simple as it was, it was the best way to protect herself from Crimson’s laser.

Not only would it obstruct her view and make it difficult to aim, the laser would diffuse as it passed through the cloud, rapidly weakening its power. It wouldn’t be enough to negate the attack altogether, but it should make it easier to defend against.

“Good thinking, Maki! Thermovision!”

However, since Crimson had known Maki for so long, she’d expected that Maki might come up with a way to obstruct her sight. In response, Crimson quickly cast a spell that allowed her to see heat. She could spot Maki through the fog that way, and handily leveled her staff at her.

“Explosion!”

This time, Crimson unleashed a different attack on Maki. It was essentially a cannon fired using magic. When Crimson held her staff parallel to the ground, there was an underslung metallic cylinder running along it. Inside it was a cannonball that was propelled by a magical explosion—Crimson’s spell.

“It’s over, Maki!”

With a dull roar, the cannonball shot from the cylindrical barrel. Since Crimson had concentrated her explosion to propel the cannonball, it was much more powerful than using the explosive spell on Maki directly. Accordingly, the cannonball it fired was wickedly fast. It was an ideal way of attacking Maki, who couldn’t see it coming through the fog. Of course, the recoil was considerable.

Even though Crimson was ready and braced for it, she was still pushed back a little.

The cannonball hurdled through the air and flew straight at Maki at a blinding speed of two kilometers per second. At this range, she'd never stand a chance of dodging it. And with the momentum it had behind it, it would easily smash through two or three defensive barriers. Crimson was convinced victory was hers.

"I don't think so!"

"Maki?!"

However, the cannonball never hit Maki. It seemed she wasn't where Crimson had aimed, because she promptly dashed out from elsewhere in the fog and charged Crimson with her greatsword. It wasn't until she was in plain sight that Crimson realized she wasn't emitting any body heat.

Ah, so that's what the fog was for!

By obstructing Crimson's view, Maki had forced her to focus on thermal vision to see anything. She'd then simultaneously created a double of herself to mimic her heat signature while cloaking her own, and snuck around through the fog to get closer to Crimson.

"Haaah!"

"Makiii!"

Maki swung her greatsword at Crimson. Its powerful magical blade was attached directly to her staff, which was even more powerful. Seeing it come right for her, Crimson knew exactly what kind of trouble she was in. In this deadly situation, she made the gamble of a lifetime.

"You can have an arm or two!"

Crimson knew she didn't have time to cast a defensive spell, and she was still off-balance from the recoil of her cannon shot, making it difficult to block with her staff. With little other choice, Crimson swung her left fist directly at Maki's greatsword in an act of desperation.

And she felt every bit of the blow. As soon as her fist made contact with the

sword, a heavy impact rocked her whole arm. Since it was a magical blade, just touching it was enough to cause serious harm. That was the tradeoff—Crimson had sacrificed an arm to avoid taking a direct hit to her body.

But that wasn't all. Maki had a precast memory loss spell on her greatsword. So the second Crimson made contact with it, the past few seconds of the battle were wiped from her mind.

"You did well blocking that, Crimson! But I still win!"

Crimson was dazed for a moment, having lost her place in the battle. Maki hefted her greatsword up and went in for another attack, this time to put a decisive end to the fight. Victory would be hers. Anyone watching would have thought so.

"Explosion!"

"Wha—?!"

However, that was when something unexpected happened. Crimson had functionally been sent several seconds back in time, but the explosion spell activated differently this time—right in front of her instead of within the barrel of her staff. That was Crimson's real gamble. She knew she'd try and cast her explosion spell again if Maki wiped her memory. But rather than fall to Maki's greatsword, she would blow them both up in a contest of sheer luck and fortitude. The timing was a little sketchy depending on just how much of her memory was wiped, but Crimson's gamble had paid off.

And so the two girls were caught up in the magical explosion. When the dust settled, neither one of them was still standing.

Since Maki was interrupted in the middle of an attack, she hadn't even had time to brace herself for the impact and was thrown quite a ways. She was hurt badly enough that she could hardly move, much less stand. The pain was unbelievable, but all she could do as she lay on the ground was stare up into the clear night sky. With the season quickly changing from summer to fall, the stars seemed to be twinkling especially brightly.

"Maki."

The star-studded sky behind her, Crimson peered down at Maki. Both girls

had taken the same attack, but luck was on Crimson's side. She could still move.

"...You win, Crimson."

Maki honestly admitted her defeat and smiled up at Crimson. The battle was over and she knew it. She'd lost—not to a foe, but a friend.

"Heh, sure doesn't feel like it."

Though Crimson had won, she was in a wretched state. She'd been hurt almost as badly as Maki, and she hadn't yet regained control over her left arm. The only reason she was still standing was because she'd been braced for the explosion when it went off. It was just a difference in stance. In other words, she felt like she hadn't overcome Maki with strength, but luck. In her eyes, they were on equal terms.

"They say luck is a skill. Be proud of your victory, Crimson. It's rude to the defeated not to be."

Maki, who hated lies and deception, admitted her defeat readily. Battle was straightforward. A loss was a loss. That was something she honestly accepted, though the opponent she was facing had something to do with it as well. She didn't see Crimson as an enemy, and therefore didn't regret losing to her.

"Heh, I don't hate that side of you, Maki," Crimson said with a satisfied grin.

Though the match had come down to luck, both girls had fought with all of their might. It was exactly the kind of battle Crimson craved, which was why she was so content now. She likely would have felt the same way regardless of who won.

"But still, I'm stunned. To think you'd use a cannon... The laser was a surprise, but the cannon was an even bigger one."

Maki laughed as she looked at the staff in Crimson's right hand. The long, metal cylinder attached to it was indeed the barrel of a cannon. No one would expect that kind of attack coming from a magical girl.

"But why didn't you use Inferno Fire? You would have been able to create an even more amazing cannon with that."

Crimson's strongest offensive spell was Inferno Fire, which outclassed even

Explosion, the spell she'd used to fire the cannon. Maki was wondering why Crimson hadn't used it instead.

"The barrel would never survive. For it to stand up to Inferno Fire, it'd have to be much bigger, but then the recoil would be too much. Explosion is enough to overcome defensive spells and I can fire it repeatedly. Power isn't always everything."

Before their battle, Crimson had actually gone through several tests. That was how she'd come to the conclusion that Explosion was the optimal spell for the cannon. She'd tried using Inferno Fire once, and paid dearly for it. She didn't want to go through that in combat.

"So that's why we didn't both go down..."

"That's right."

If her last attack had been Inferno Fire, it likely would have reduced both Crimson and Maki to ashes at that range. While they were both hurt even with Explosion, they were still able to walk away from it because Crimson had had the sense to choose an appropriate spell. While it might have been a clever way to make a cannon, using such large explosions at such close range would always be a dangerous game. It required a certain amount of caution.

"So it was the new powers you designed for exactly this that brought you to victory... Are you happy, Crimson?"

"Yes. Thanks for fighting me seriously, Maki."

That was ultimately the biggest reason Crimson was so satisfied with their fight—Maki had agreed to fight her sincerely. Since Maki was an indigo magic specialist, her mind manipulation spells weren't a great match for fighting against the purely offensive Crimson. It would have been much more in her wheelhouse to thwart the situation entirely and retreat. But Maki had given it her all nevertheless, and Crimson was grateful for that.

"I told you I would. Since we're friends, it was worth having a real fight at least once."

"Yeah, you did. My bad."

In the end, Maki was true to herself from start to finish. There wasn't an ounce of deception in the way she presented herself, and she kept her word until the very end. Crimson smiled wryly at her friend who had gotten stronger, but was still somehow the same. However, shortly thereafter, her smile vanished. Someone had invaded the barrier they'd raised before the battle.

"It looks like we've got company."

"This feeling... I'm sure it's Satomi-kun."

Maki recognized the presence of the person who'd passed through her barrier. It felt like Koutarou.

"Him, huh? Guess I can't stay, then."

Crimson frowned to hear the intruder was one of Maki's allies. And not just anyone. If Maki was right, it was the formidable adversary Satomi Koutarou. Crimson knew Maki wasn't bluffing either, and she didn't like the idea of fighting Koutarou while she was already seriously injured. In order to avoid that, Crimson decided to leave right away.

"See ya, Maki."

Crimson shouldered her staff and turned to go.

"Wait, Crimson... Are you sure you don't need to kill me?"

Surprised by Crimson's apparent retreat, Maki instinctively stopped her. Crimson halted, looked over her shoulder, and smiled at Maki.

"You humored me and fought... So consider this returning the favor."

"Crimson..."

Crimson had no intention of killing Maki. She knew that Maki had only fought to make her happy. So, as a friend, Crimson was giving her a chance to be happy too.

"But the next time we meet, things'll be different. Next time, I will treat you as an enemy and kill you."

"I don't think I'll show any mercy either."

That was as far as they could be friends. From here on out, they would be

enemies again. For the next time they fought, it wouldn’t be a one-on-one battle. It would be an all-out war between their allies. The paths they were walking forked here.

“Later, Maki. Today was fun.”

With those words and a smile, Crimson departed.

“Karen!”

Maki called out to her one last time using her real name. Hearing it, Crimson hesitated for a moment, but didn’t stop. She then vanished into the dark of night.

“Goodbye, Karen...”

To Maki, Crimson had been a candle in the darkness of her otherwise bleak life. But that small candle flame had never ignited anything greater. Maki regretted that, but couldn’t stop the candle from burning how it pleased. That’s why she didn’t try to stop Crimson from leaving.



Gathering

Monday, September 13th

After finding the severely wounded Maki, Koutarou and Yurika rushed her back to room 106. They needed to treat her as quickly as possible, but they also needed to have an emergency meeting about how to proceed from here.

With what Maki had been able to uncover, it was now apparent that Darkness Rainbow was back in Kisshouharukaze City. There was no longer any doubt that they were behind the kidnappings. Continuing a vague search knowing they were around would be extremely dangerous, so they needed to gather their resources and proceed strategically.

“The first order of business will be trying to figure out what Darkness Rainbow’s actual objective is,” said Kiriha, who was leading the discussion.

The meeting began once everyone else returned to room 106, and they were all now gathered around the tea table. Darkness Rainbow had to have some reason for being in town, and it was clear the kidnapped children were a means to that end. But without knowing what their actual goal was, Koutarou and the others were only going in blind. They could set something off at any time, and all by accident. In order to get anywhere, they’d have to pin down what Darkness Rainbow was even doing.

“So, Yurika, what’s this Darkness Whatever after, anyways?”

Sanae turned to Yurika for answers. She wanted to hear a professional’s opinion on the matter.

“Darkness Rainbow is after the mana gathered here in room 106.”

It was Koutarou’s apartment, but Yurika considered this her problem, and she answered Sanae with an uncharacteristically serious look on her face. This was what Koutarou hadn’t wanted things to come to. He hated seeing Yurika like this.

“That’s the part I don’t get, Yurika-chan. What are they going to do with the mana?” Shizuka asked as she worked on bandaging up Maki.

The first thing they'd done upon returning to room 106 was see to treating Maki. After some first aid and magical healing, her complexion had drastically improved. It seemed she'd be fully recovered before long.

"Well, Darkness Rainbow advocates the free use of magic. That's why they don't get along with the kingdom's government, who says that magic shouldn't be misused."

In a kingdom where magic was very, very real, Folsaria had restricted its use to prevent abuses of power. Darkness Rainbow, on the other hand, insisted that magic belonged to the individual and the government therefore had no right to restrict it. That was the reason they'd splintered from normal society.

"So what? They want to overthrow the government or something?"

"In the most extreme case, yes. Darkness Rainbow doesn't want to take over, really, but they do want to take out anyone and anything that imposes limits on magic. The government of Folsaria just happens to be the biggest obstacle in their way. It's why they butt heads like this," explained Yurika.

"Honestly, I think it's fair to say the battle to overthrow the nation has already begun. When I was a part of Darkness Rainbow, they were already making preparations for it," added Maki.

As a former leader of Darkness Rainbow, Maki knew better than anyone just what they were up to.

"The reason I came for room 106 was to gather mana in advance of our fight with Rainbow Heart, the defenders of Folsaria."

To tackle the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria, Darkness Rainbow had taken it upon themselves to gather as many magical tools as they could to assist them. They knew that Rainbow Heart had them severely outnumbered. If they went into a straightforward fight, Darkness Rainbow wouldn't stand a chance. That's why they'd be relying on artifacts to make up for the difference in manpower, much the same way that terrorists or guerilla soldiers would use unconventional weapons to forcefully gain an advantage.

"Folsaria knows what they're up against, however, which is why magicians like me are on the job."

Knowing a fight would eventually break out if Darkness Rainbow went unchecked, Folsaria couldn't just sit by and let that happen. So in order to combat the threat, the top magic masters of Rainbow Heart were given the title of Rainbow. There were currently seven Rainbow magical girls, and Yurika was one of them. They were specifically tasked with missions to thwart or otherwise stop Darkness Rainbow from getting their way. That was why Yurika had been defending the mana pool in room 106 for over a year.

"So their desire for freedom drove them to turn against their own government? No wonder they got along so well with the radical faction," mused Kiriha.

While Darkness Rainbow and the People of the Earth's radical faction had different agendas, they related with one another because they were both trying to overthrow what they perceived to be unjust systems. History was full of examples of organizations banding together to fight a common enemy, which was more or less what they'd done. Kiriha wasn't wrong about that, but Maki didn't think she had the whole picture, either.

"Strictly speaking, the first spark was an internal conflict within Rainbow Heart about whether or not Folsarians should try to return to their ancestral home. Darkness Rainbow was founded by those who disagreed with what the kingdom decreed. They were actually a part of Rainbow Heart originally."

"Really? Wow... I had no idea it was that complicated."

Koutarou was surprised by this revelation. He'd only thought that Darkness Rainbow was a coalition of evil magical girls. But taking the time to think about it rationally, it made sense. This wasn't some anime or manga; good and bad wasn't such a black and white affair. Of course Darkness Rainbow had a reason for being the way they were.

"The Magical Kingdom of Folsaria was founded by a group of people who were exiled from their home after committing a terrible crime hundreds of years ago. They've chosen to continue to honor that and stay where they are."

Folsaria was a proper kingdom led by a sovereign king. Their grave crime in the past had been rebelling against a former king in the name of wealth and power. In the end, they were punished for their greed and treachery and

sentenced to banishment. As proof of their penance, the Folsarians created a new kingdom with a king they promised to honor. As further penance still, they agreed to continue to live in exile long after the tenure of their crime.

“But the people who would go on to form Darkness Rainbow couldn’t accept that. They couldn’t stand to be confined within the small borders of Folsaria for a sin they hadn’t committed.”

After many generations had passed in Folsaria, the memory of the sin they’d committed long ago began to fade in public memory, which gave rise to an important discussion.

The Magical Kingdom of Folsaria was fraught with problems. The country itself was quite small, which caused a great number of complications as the population increased. Food, living space, and other resources all came at a premium because of the high competition for them, creating a wide gap between the rich and poor. Slums, pollution, and strife all exploded as that gap only continued to increase.

When it all reached critical mass, a group of Folsarians stepped forward and advocated that the kingdom should pool its magic to return to their true home in order to overcome the crises they were facing. They felt that whatever debt for the crime the Ancient Folsarians had committed was paid, and there was no need for them to be held responsible for it even longer. They believed it was time to return home and ask for help.

Their cause quickly gained support, especially among the poorest citizens of Folsaria, and before long, the discussion split the country in two.

“But in the end, they couldn’t convince the country to act, and so they used their own magic to attempt to return home alone.”

The kingdom of Folsaria ultimately believed that if they pushed outward seeking wealth, they would in essence be setting themselves up to repeat the mistakes of their past. And so they decided to remain where they were and try to solve their problems rather than running from them. Otherwise, they’d never truly be able to redeem themselves of their past sin.

That was the just answer, and the people accepted it. The debate quickly quieted down, and the people refocused their efforts on working together

towards a brighter future. The entire ordeal seemed to instill a new sense of patriotism in them. At least most of them.

But there was still a handful of citizens who weren't happy with this decision. They banded together under the name Darkness Rainbow and left Folsaria with one goal—to use their magic as they pleased to return to their true home.

"So that's why Folsaria forbade the private use of magic..."

"Yes. At first it was just to keep people from trying to leave and causing trouble, but when Darkness Rainbow started doing more extreme things to that end, the private use of magic was banned completely."

"But that didn't stop Darkness Rainbow."

"No, they refuse to give up."

At first, Darkness Rainbow had acted purely out of a desire to return to their true home. But when Folsaria tried to stop them, they decided to continue by force if need be. The conflict between the two sides eventually escalated to where it was today.

"However, the more they fought, the more they seemed to lose their sense of purpose. Then other members joined for reasons that had nothing to do with their original mission, like me..."

In order to make up for their lack of combat potential, Darkness Rainbow began recruiting new members under the auspices of the free use of magic. It worked, but it also diluted their ambitions, promoting freedom of magic over their desire to return home.

"Darkness Rainbow now is just a shadow of their past ideals and dreams. They've lost their purpose and taken the wrong path, making them a mere shell of what they used to be. So our enemy is the seven... No, the six magical girls who represent that organization."

The current Darkness Rainbow had lost its way, yet continued to openly pursue the free use of magic. And it was to that end that they now sought to overthrow the Folsarian government.

"You guys sure have a lot going on."

“Sanae-chan... I was pulled into the organization without knowing better, but yes. The situation certainly is complex, isn’t it?”

“Just stick with me and you’ll be fine!”

“Thank you. I’ll do my best.”

And so, with an understanding of Darkness Rainbow and their goals, Koutarou and the others now had a clue about what they might be doing in Kisshouharukaze City.

“Knowing what we do, their target is no doubt the mana in this room. They’ll need its power to go after Folsaria, after all.”

That was the conclusion Koutarou had personally reached. In preparation for their decisive battle, Darkness Rainbow was trying to take the mana pooled in room 106. They’d probably kidnapped the children to use as hostages.

“Koutarou, I’m afraid you may be underestimating the situation.”

“What do you mean?”

“If they’re doing something as blatant as serial kidnapping, I suspect their big move is at hand. They may challenge Rainbow Heart immediately after this mission is complete.”

Kiriha feared the worst. Up until now, the magicians on both sides had been keeping low profiles in order not to draw attention to themselves. They always made sure to cover their tracks, including erasing the memories of anyone who happened to witness them, and casting wards to keep bystanders away. Their stance was essentially to keep the common person from believing magic was real.

But Darkness Rainbow wasn’t playing by the rules this time. They’d kidnapped innocent children, something that was bound to raise immediate alarm in the city. It would inevitably turn into a major incident, including police involvement or worse. And after causing such a fuss, it would be much harder for Darkness Rainbow to do anything in Kisshouharukaze City in the future.

So it seemed the only reason to pull such a daring move was if they never intended to return. And the explanation for that was obvious. After getting

what they needed to out of the city, they would go straight for Rainbow Heart.

“From a strategic point of view, the even more troublesome part is that our enemy doesn’t seem to be taking into consideration the outcome here.”

Theia folded her arms with an austere expression. As someone who naturally saw things from the perspective of the battlefield, there was another major problem in her eyes.

“They’re not taking the outcome here into consideration? What do you mean? That they don’t need to win against us?”

“That’s right. Since there’s no strategy that can guarantee victory 100 percent, a commander usually comes up with failsafes in addition to a plan—what they’ll do if things go wrong. That being the case, these kidnappings raise a red flag.”

“Ah, I see! There is no do-over if they screw this up!”

With the whole city on high alert, Darkness Rainbow wouldn’t have enough magic power to brainwash the entire population even if they pooled their resources together. They wouldn’t get a second chance at this mission.

“That’s right. And that’s a problem because it means they don’t care what happens here. If they’re not concerned about the fallout, they must not be planning on sticking around.”

What Kiriha and Theia had surmised would be invaluable in determining how to proceed. However, there was still one big lingering question. Having picked up in it, Harumi raised her hand like she was asking for permission to speak.

“But, Theiamillis-san, wasn’t Darkness Rainbow targeting room 106 so they could fight against Rainbow Heart?”

“Yes, I’m sure they’re still hoping to get their hands on it.”

“You mean to say they don’t actually have to have it?”

“No, there’s no need to be so stuck on this room now. Not now that they have a replacement.”

“A replacement?”

Harumi didn't follow and titled her head quizzically to the side. Clan adjusted her glasses and spoke up to explain it to her.

"Harumi, the underground's radical faction has shared their technology with them."

"Ah..."

Harumi's eyes opened wide. She now finally understood what Darkness Rainbow was thinking.

"The magicians should have now have access to spiritual energy technology and the weapons made with it. I'm sure they'll use that to make up for their lack of manpower," Clan said, shaking her head at the desperate situation.

"Say, Theia-chan, I don't really get it, but..."

Shizuka was the next to raise her hand. She understood what Darkness Rainbow was thinking, but that confused her even more.

"If they think it's fine to lose, why even bother attacking? Can't they just leave us be?"

Shizuka couldn't get her head around why Darkness Rainbow would attack even though they'd already gotten what they needed from the radical faction. Coming after room 106 anyway just seemed extraneous.

"Looking at the bigger picture, it could be a diversion. Perhaps they're trying to buy time for something. Kiriha, what do you think?"

"Maybe while Darkness Rainbow attacks room 106, Maya and Elexis are scheming in the background?"

"Kiriha-sama may be right, Your Highness. Maya and Elexis both vanished before the battle underground was settled."

"How ominous. Who knows what those two are up to?"

Maya and Elexis were pretty much guaranteed trouble for Koutarou and the others. While it looked like they were working with the underground radical faction and Darkness Rainbow at first glance, it was impossible to say what their real goal was. Elexis was an especially dangerous wildcard. As a result, in addition to everything else, Koutarou and the others had to worry about what

they might be cooking up elsewhere. Just what were they up to? Everyone fell silent as they pondered the unknowable answer to that ominous question.

“Nothing will come from dwelling on those two scheming thorns in our side. Let’s limit ourselves to the problem at hand—Darkness Rainbow.”

The discussion about Maya and Elexis had quickly hit a wall, so Clan tried to get the meeting back on a productive track.

“That’s awfully convincing coming from the former princess of scheming.”

Koutarou had a good laugh at Clan’s expense, which infuriated her to no end.

“Veltlion! Why are you always only mean to me?! Why can’t you be nicer like you are with everyone else?!”

Clan was shouting loud enough and looked mad enough that she might just attack Koutarou. Koutarou, however, didn’t flinch. He just kept laughing.

“That wasn’t being mean. I said *former* princess of scheming.”

“Ugh... A-Ahem, anyway! Back to Darkness Rainbow!”

“Yeah, that’s what we were talking about before someone blew their top.”

“I hate you...”

“You love me.”

“See? You are most certainly being mean to me!”

“Yeah, that one was on purpose.”

Koutarou and Clan’s banter lightened the atmosphere in the room and lifted everyone’s spirits just a little bit. Kiriha seemed the most amused by them, but after laughing for a moment, a serious expression returned to her face.

“Now then, to summarize what we know... Darkness Rainbow is planning on attacking room 106, but that is not their end goal here. They’re hoping to claim the mana pool if they can, but that side mission is most likely a feint or a ploy to buy time. Therefore, the chances of them running away when the time comes are high. They can’t afford to lose anyone or waste resources here with their decisive battle on the horizon.”

Darkness Rainbow wanted the mana pool if they could get it, but it wasn’t

absolutely critical. That meant they'd be playing defensively, and they wouldn't hesitate to retreat if need be.

"Running away, huh? If this were an anime or something, they would have a secret passage or a helicopter ready to escape from their secret mountain base."

Sanae had been listening to what Kiriha was saying, but her only frame of reference was what she'd seen in anime. Normally someone would get angry at her and tell her to take things seriously after a comment like that, but they were going up against a group of magicians. What Sanae was suggesting wasn't totally out of the question.

"Now that I think about it... Nana-san mentioned something to me. She said a ritual that requires ten children would have to take place in a building large enough to accommodate it. Something really big."

Yurika threw out another point for consideration. When it came to ritual magic, the scale of the spell, the size of the magic circle, and the energy required to activate it were all proportional. In other words, the more children they kidnapped to use as energy, the more serious the spell and the bigger an area they'd need to prepare it.

"So that means that they might be in the mountains like Sanae-sama suggested. There's nowhere that big in the city, after all," Ruth informed everyone after checking a hologram map projected by her bracelet.

The magic circle Maya had used eleven years ago had been the size of a small parking lot, and that was for only one child. Even when accounting for improvements in techniques over the years, if Darkness Rainbow had ten children in their clutches now, they'd need somewhere as big as a baseball stadium to perform the ritual. Occupying somewhere like that in town without being noticed would be difficult, so it seemed likely they'd chosen a secluded area.

"Abandoned commercial facilities and unused tunnels in the mountains would be good candidates."

"I ran into Crimson at the edge of town, so it could be there."

Maki had encountered Crimson while she was looking for clues about the missing children, and she didn't think it was by coincidence. She figured whatever facility they were using was likely nearby.

"All right, Ruth. Generate a list of potential locations."

"As you wish, my princess."

Ruth used both her map data and drones from Blue Knight to search out and narrow down possible ritual sites. While everyone was waiting for that, Shizuka asked something that had been on her mind this entire time.

"By the way, what kind of ritual are we talking about? What are they going to do?"

She was curious about the ritual itself. Everyone had been talking about how Darkness Rainbow was going to use a ritual, but she didn't know why or what for. She was a complete amateur when it came to magic and couldn't even imagine what the answer might be.

"I believe they either intend to attack us outright, create weapons, or summon demons."

Maki could think of three possible uses for their ritual. Eleven years ago, Maya had used one such ritual to accumulate mana, but it seemed all too likely that Darkness Rainbow had a more specific goal in mind.

"How sure are you?" Koutarou asked.

"Very," Maki answered with a serious nod.

There was a heavy moment of silence in the room. Maki's expression made Koutarou feel both sad and restless.

"...That's what I would have done."

Maki had once been part of Darkness Rainbow. That's why she knew better than anyone what they might be up to. While she'd never used another human being as an energy source, she had used ritual magic before. It was something she regretted now.

Koutarou and the others' speculation was on point. Darkness Rainbow was preparing their ritual in the spacious basement of an abandoned building on the

outskirts of town. They'd used magic to manipulate several people in the area, and the owner of this particular building was one of them.

"How's it going, Blue-san?"

"It's activating properly. Look. It's rapidly absorbing the life force from these flowers."

After seeing off Crimson, who had gone to rescue Maki, Dark Green and Dark Blue continued their work on the magic circle. They'd only just finished it, and were now testing out their handiwork. They placed a bouquet in the center of the circle and activated it to see what would happen. And sure enough, the flowers quickly wilted as their life force and spiritual energy were drained.

"The spiritual energy condenser is functioning normally. Same with the converter. There are no issues to report."

"That's good. We can move ahead as planned, then."

It had only taken a few seconds for the bouquet to wither into dried flowers. That was the fate that awaited the ten children who would be used as a battery for the actual ritual.

"It's still too early to relax. This is where you come in."

"That's right. I'll do my best."

As for why Crimson and Green had brought Blue along in the first place, her title as a magical girl revealed the answer. They needed her blue magic. Using mana to bend space-time, she could summon objects and creatures from afar or send them away. And the large-scale ritual they'd worked to prepare today was actually a giant summoning spell.

Koutarou and his allies were strong. However, they had one obvious weakness—there were only nine of them. Even if they forced the captive Maki to fight, they only numbered ten strong. That meant if Darkness Rainbow attacked more than ten places at once, Koutarou and the others would never be able to defend it all. So to accomplish that, they were going to summon ten powerful demons. That's why they needed ten children. Koutarou and his allies would have to split up to handle the demons individually, leaving Darkness Rainbow free to go seize an undefended room 106.

“I’ll bring the children over. Blue-san, please begin the initial preparations.”

“Understood. I’ll leave the children to you.”

Such a serious ritual would take about three hours and appropriate preparations ahead of time. Not only did they need to make sure all their tools were in place, but they would have to eat and drink plenty since they wouldn’t be able to during the ritual. It was a physically demanding task, and they needed to make sure they were up for it.

“Oh?”

Green was heading towards the corner where the children were caged, but she stopped halfway. Something at the entrance to the basement had caught her eye.

“What is it?”

“It looks like Crimson is back.”

As a specialist in divination, Green wasn’t just good at predicting the future. Gathering information and various forms of intelligence were also easy for her. She had a magical surveillance network cast around the entire building, allowing her to detect anyone approaching. And it seemed Crimson was near.

“But something’s strange. She’s walking so slowly...”

Eventually Crimson got close enough that Green could see her. And when she did, her face went pale.

“Oh no, Crimson is badly hurt! Blue-san, come help me!”

“Right!”

The two of them were supposed to be working on preparing the ritual, but put that aside in order to go assist their wounded ally.

Because Crimson had been caught up in her own explosion spell, she looked far more hurt than she actually was. Most of her wounds were superficial burns. Blue used the mana she’d gained from draining the bouquet of flowers to heal Crimson enough that she could move normally.

“Thanks, Blue. I never would’ve been able to show my face again if I’d had to

retire from a mission because I got nailed with one of my own spells."

"Your own spell?! You mean you used Explosion on yourself?!"

"Just what happened, Crimson? What about Navy-san?"

Crimson had left to save Navy—Maki—but had returned injured and alone. Moreover, she claimed that her injuries were her own doing. Blue and Green had no idea what had happened.

"I fought Maki."

"You fought?! Why?!"

"She's been completely brainwashed by those guys. So when I went to save her, she attacked me. It was a trap."

"Brainwashed...? Navy-san...?"

"I've known Maki for a long time, so I want to save her, but... I don't see how it'd be possible right now."

"Then why did you use Explosion on yourself?"

"Maki used her stupid Memory Flash spell on me and it went south for both of us. The fight basically ended in a draw."

Crimson told Green and Blue what had happened, but left out certain details. She didn't tell them that rather than a captive, Maki was a traitor. She knew what consequences that would have for Maki, and she didn't want that.

Turns out I'm surprisingly sentimental, Maki...

Crimson surprised even herself in not telling her allies the truth. But between what Maki had said about being friends and Crimson's desire to fight her again, she felt something. Even if she couldn't see it for herself, she wanted to be friends with Maki too.

"At any rate, we can consider Maki to be an enemy for now. If it comes to that, I'll kill her myself."

"I'll leave that to you, Crimson."

"Green, any modifications to the plan?"

“None. I anticipated the worst case scenario—Navy-san being brainwashed—so that’s been factored into the plan already.”

“All right. I’ll get back to it, then.”

“Please do.”

On one hand, Crimson was relieved that Green and Blue bought her story, but on the other, she was a little disappointed that neither one of them seemed to care at all about Maki. In her heart of hearts, she slowly started to realize that was why Maki had left them in the first place.

Though Crimson’s wounds had been healed, she was still exhausted and charred. So after taking a shower and changing her clothes, she took a break to have dinner in one of the smaller rooms in the building. As she sat down to eat, her thoughts turned to Maki once again. She was happy that she had been able to fight a stronger Maki, but now that it was over, she felt somewhat sad. She was desperately pondering why. It wasn’t going well, but it at least got her mind off of Kiriha and Koutarou, the enemies she’d been fixating on.

While Crimson was in the middle of eating, a voice suddenly came from behind her.

“What is this? For someone wounded in battle, you seem awfully fine.”

When she turned around, Crimson saw a girl wearing an umber outfit had entered the room. It was Dark Orange, the most energetic and fashion-forward member of Darkness Rainbow. She also had strong opinions, especially about things she disliked. Maki had said that Orange was just like a kid, and Crimson agreed with her.

“Orange... Purple and Yellow too...”

“I’m glad you weren’t injured that badly.”

“You think you’ll still be able to participate?”

Behind Orange were two other girls dressed in violet and ocher—Dark Purple and Dark Yellow respectively. Purple was the most mature member of Darkness Rainbow, and often acted as a mediator. In contrast to her cute appearance, Yellow was the most obstinate of the group. Once she set her mind to

something, there was no talking her out of it.

“If you’re all here, does that mean it’s already time?”

According to the plan, the three of them weren’t scheduled to show up until the ritual was nearly ready. And if they were already here, it meant Crimson had spent a lot longer than she’d realized lost in thought. However, Purple shook her head.

“There’s still time yet. We came early just in case after hearing you’d been injured.”

It would be another two and a half hours before the ritual was ready. Purple had decided to show up early as a precaution. If Maki was on the move for the enemy, they might be discovered sooner than expected.

“Since we don’t want the enemy interfering with the ritual, we’re going to set up some countermeasures.”

“You just rest, Crim-chan. If the enemy really does show up, you’ll get your time to shine.”

Purple had brought Yellow and Orange along with her to guard the building. Knowing that Maki would likely report her encounter with Crimson to Rainbow Heart, Purple thought they should hurry to finish the ritual as quickly as possible.

“Purple, what did Green say?”

“She said the odds are about 20 percent.”

She was referring to the odds of Rainbow Heart arriving earlier than expected now. Green had been able to divine that much with her magic.

“That high, huh? Guess I better take this seriously.”

That 20 percent probability meant that there was a one in five chance that Rainbow Heart would show up across all possible futures. Factoring in the other potential problems they might face, this significantly increased their odds of running into trouble. That was why Purple had rushed over when she heard the news.

“Regardless, just leave things to us while you rest up. That’s your new

mission, Crimson.”

“Okay. I’m counting on you, Purple.”

“Good. As sudden as it may be, then, we’ll be off.”

“See you.”

“Until next time.”

Leaving Crimson behind, the three other girls exited the small room.

“Heh, so the fighting’s gonna start soon, huh?”

While Crimson had been lost in thought before the three appeared, her mind was now racing with thoughts of her next battle. She couldn’t deny the sentimental feelings still lingering in her heart, but fighting was everything to her. That’s why she couldn’t take Maki’s hand. Maki liked Crimson because she was so straightforward and earnest. It was just a shame her first love was battle.

Koutarou and the others decided on a plan and began searching for the kidnapped children once more. They had two leads this time: they knew that Darkness Rainbow had to be somewhere big enough to accommodate their ritual, and that it was likely near where Maki had run into Crimson.

There were plenty of large buildings around Kisshouharukaze City that went up during the economic boom, but when the bubble burst, most of them ended up abandoned. Two such buildings happened to be on the outskirts of town in the vicinity of Maki’s encounter with Crimson.

The first was a closed down mall. Construction had started on it in hopes of creating a massive shopping center that would make use of a new expressway that was also being built. The bubble then burst and the expressway plans were nixed, but because construction had already begun on the mall, the investors went through with it and saw the project to completion. The mall opened on schedule, but without the expressway to bring in traffic, once the initial hype died down, it went under in just a few years. No one was willing to take the space after that because it was in an inconvenient location with bad traffic, and as a result, all that was left there was a massive husk of an unused building.

The second potential location was a resort hotel that was over fifty years old. It had been the largest of its kind in the area when it first opened, but by today's standards, it was merely average. The aging property saw a steady drop-off in its clientele over the decades, and the owners eventually gave up the ghost a few years ago.

Both the abandoned mall and hotel had plenty of space and would be perfect for holding the ritual. With time of the essence, Koutarou and the others didn't feel like they could risk searching each in turn, so they split into two teams of five led by Yurika and Maki respectively. That was the logical call, considering they were the two resident experts in magic. Yurika's team consisted of Harumi, Kiriha, Shizuka, and Clan, while Maki had Koutarou, Sanae, Theia, and Ruth with her. The teams had been designed to evenly split firepower and resources.

If there was any flaw in their plan, it was that they were leaving room 106. But with children's lives on the line, stopping the ritual was their top priority. It worked in their favor that Darkness Rainbow likely wouldn't launch their attack until the ritual was complete. They wouldn't be able to take over the mana in room 106 instantly, either. It would take some work to capture the ancient power in any meaningful way that they could use.

As such, leaving a few of Kiriha's subordinates and unmanned fighters from Blue Knight felt adequate for now. They could defend room 106 to the best of their ability and function like an alarm system. They would let Koutarou and the others know if anyone attacked, and they should be able to make it back in time to help defend the apartment. So with that covered, the children came first. Saving their lives was more than worth taking a few risks.

Tensions were high before everyone even left the apartment. The most nervous of all was, unsurprisingly, Yurika. She'd been a leader in battle before, but this would be her first time genuinely taking command of a group. It was a completely different feeling.

"Sanae-chan, do you think I'll be good enough as a commander?"

Anxious, Yurika asked her good friend Sanae for her opinion. Really, she was hoping Sanae would object so she would have a reason to back down and trade places with someone.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

However, betraying her hopes, Sanae encouraged her.

“I’m not...”

“It’ll all work out.”

Not the best with words, Sanae didn’t bother explaining why she thought so, but she did have a proper reason for believing in Yurika. She had only been able to return to her body because Yurika had put herself on the line to protect her. Really, Sanae knew that Yurika would save her life because she’d already done it once. As such, she had implicit, unshakable faith in Yurika. She was useless on a day-to-day basis, but she always came through when it mattered. Sanae knew that better than anyone.

“That makes me worry...”

“Don’t do that. You’ll have Harumi and Kiriha with you. If you have any trouble, just go to them like you would me.”

“Okay, I’ll try my best!”

“Attagirl!”

In the end, Yurika decided to put her heart into being a leader. She felt an especially strong sense of duty to put a stop to Darkness Rainbow after being reunited with Nana. And thanks to that, she had an easier time steeling her nerves than normal.

“It looks like they’ll be all right after all.”

Koutarou had been the one to push for Yurika as a team leader. He was a little wary about it, but knew deep down that Yurika was most reliable in situations like this. If she had people with her to keep her together in the meantime, everything would be fine.

“Satomi-kun, I’m no Yurika, but... are you sure you’re okay with us leading the teams?”

Unlike Koutarou who was rather satisfied with the current arrangements, Maki was somewhat hesitant. She didn’t think she made a suitable leader, but for altogether different reasons than Yurika.

“Why do you ask?”

“I am part of your band of knights. My life is in your hands. That’s why you should be the one in command, Satomi-kun.”

Maki gently placed her hand on her chest. She had absolute faith in Koutarou. If he so ordered her, she would tear her own heart out and give it to him.

“If you say your life is mine, I should be allowed to do as I please with it, right? So be a leader for me, okay? You’ll do fine. Now let’s go. We need to hurry.”

If Koutarou were the leader, he would constantly need to be checking with Maki, which would just slow things down. Putting Maki and Yurika in charge would be the wisest use of their resources.

“But I used to be your enemy, Satomi-kun! I have no right to lead you now!”

Everyone knew that Maki used to be part of Darkness Rainbow. It was true that defectors were hardly ever given command of troops. It was bad for morale, and there was always a question of loyalty. However, Theia smiled wryly when she overheard Maki’s concern.

“Maki, if that’s true, then nobody here is worthy of taking command except for Harumi and Shizuka. Would you rather they lead?”

Of the nine girls present, seven of them had butted heads with Koutarou at some point in the past. Apart from Harumi and Shizuka, most of them had even tried to fight him before. By Maki’s logic, that meant they were the only ones fit to take command. And that obviously wasn’t going to happen considering dispositions and skills.

“That’s...”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Theia, Aika-san.”

Koutarou shook his head with a bittersweet smile.

“Huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“None of you should have to do this. If it wasn’t an emergency, I wouldn’t even ask for any of you to be here. That’s a last resort as far as I’m concerned.”

In Koutarou's eyes, the girls were all equal. In his eyes, none of them should be forced to fight. But as things stood, every second counted and he needed help. That was how it always went, but he still didn't like the idea of dragging the girls into conflict.

"Besides, I believe in you, Aika-san. How could I not trust someone who's always praying for my future?"

On the day Maki annulled her magical contract with Koutarou, that's what she'd told him. That she was always praying for him, and that she would cast aside her lonely walk in life to stay by his side. And Koutarou believed her. He believed in her, her words, and her smile that day. He believed that she would always be on his side.

"That's right... I am always praying that you and the people that surround you will have a bright future..."

Maki knew that in order for Koutarou to be happy, the people around him needed to be happy too. Everyone from Kenji and his classmates to the people of the shopping street and, of course, their children. The happiness of people is naturally dependent on the people around them. When someone is happy, it's infectious. And so Maki prayed, not just for Koutarou, but everyone in his life.

"So... what's the actual problem?"

Seeing Maki's reaction, Theia blinked repeatedly. She couldn't understand the reason why Maki was so worried.

"Don't be like that, Theia. Aika-san hasn't spent a year and a half fooling around with us like you have."

"Then it's only a matter of time."

"That's right."

Thanks to Koutarou and Theia, Maki finally realized that the people around her were all praying just like she was. They were praying for her too.

"Satomi-kun, Theia-san... Thank you for believing in me."

She was so happy that tears were welling in her eyes, but she couldn't give in to her emotions now. It was time to fight for that happiness, and so Maki fought

back her tears and tightly grasped her staff.

By the Remains of a Dream

Tuesday, September 14th

Koutarou and the girls departed room 106 shortly after midnight. The apartment was normally well guarded through various means, but knowing that they were up against Darkness Rainbow, extra measures were put in place just to be safe. They'd had to wait for Kiriha's subordinates to arrive and the drones to be put in place, but now that all of that was done, they were finally on the move. They split up into their preplanned groups and headed to their respective destinations.

Koutarou was on team Maki along with Sanae, Theia, and Ruth, and their assigned destination was the abandoned shopping mall. There was a paved road that led right up to it, but if Darkness Rainbow was actually using the mall for their ritual, the entrance road would undoubtedly be monitored. As such, the group decided to take an alternate route and was currently making their way through the wooded area that ran parallel to the road.

"How does it look, Ruth?"

"There are no reactions on the thermal sensor. There don't seem to be any living creatures within range."

The closer they got to the mall, the more vigilant they became. They hadn't run into any problems so far, but they couldn't be too careful. There hadn't been any signs of surveillance yet, but perhaps that was to be expected since they were still over three hundred kilometers out from the building. It wasn't like Darkness Rainbow could keep the whole area under constant watch. It was quite likely just the road was being monitored, but they still had to be cautious.

"I'm picking up some reactions on the sonic sensor."

"Is it the enemy?"

"It could just be some wild animals. A more detailed analysis isn't revealing any major movement."

Their vanguard was an unmanned craft scouting from the sky. Fortunately, it

hadn't picked up anything, so it was all green lights so far. Next up was magic. Since they were dealing with magicians, it was only reasonable to assume that their surveillance network might be entirely magical. It was a good thing they had a magician of their own with them.

"Well, how does it look, Maki?"

"There are no magic reactions on the outside."

Maki scanned for every kind of spell that she could detect, but wasn't picking up anything. All she could sense was the latent natural mana of the area.

"Maybe they're not here," guessed Sanae, tilting her head to the side.

She couldn't see anything with her spirit sight either, so she began suspecting that Darkness Rainbow wasn't present at all. That meant that they were either at the resort hotel, or both leads had been bad.

"It wouldn't be easy to monitor a place this big even with magic."

"You're right. It's still too early to jump to conclusions. If they have limited resources, they would only put up surveillance where it makes the most sense. Like the entrance, for example. They don't have the time or manpower to be watching every centimeter of this place."

"You think we can get into the mall with relatively little trouble, then?" asked Koutarou.

The four girls nodded in serious agreement. While they couldn't see anything for now, that didn't mean the enemy wasn't here. So, using technology and magic to conceal themselves, they continued towards the abandoned mall.

At about the same time, Yurika and the others arrived at their destination—the closed hotel. While the building itself was smaller than the shopping mall, it was far taller. It was also difficult to tell how many basement floors it had. Moreover, since it was situated in an open area with a good view, it would be difficult to approach without being detected.

"So what do we do now, Yurika-chan?" asked Shizuka, turning to their commander for guidance.

Team Yurika consisted of Yurika, Harumi, Kiriha, Shizuka, and Clan. Just like

team Maki, they were stealthily observing the area before proceeding.

“We’re going in. I can kinda feel some mana, so I’d like to find out what it is.”

“I think I feel it too.”

But unlike Maki’s team, Yurika’s team was already picking up on something. Both she and Harumi were just barely able to sense some mana in the area, but it was still too vague to determine anything. They were up against Darkness Rainbow, after all. They’d been combatting Rainbow Heart for several hundred years. Feints, diversions, and other trickery were daily fare for them. Tossing a dummy charged with mana into an empty building that somewhat resembled their hideout was a favorite tactic of theirs.

“First thing’s first, let’s let the others know we might have something.”

Clan used her bracelet to send Ruth a short message. The two of them were responsible for relaying communications between the two groups.

“The problem is how we get in. There aren’t very many points of entry,” said Kiriha with a severe expression.

Because it was a hotel, the building had been constructed on a bit of hill with a good view. The second floor and up offered sweeping vistas of the entire area. That alone would make it difficult to get in stealthily.

“What do we do?”

Yurika gave up on trying to come up with something herself and turned to everyone else for their opinions. She knew her own ideas didn’t have a history of working out well in situations like this.

“If we assume that hotel is being surveyed from one of the upper floors, we should aim to infiltrate from the northern side by the service road.”

The majority of the windows in the building faced southward. The scenery to the north wasn’t as pleasing to the eye, so both the northern side of the building and the windows there were smaller. As a bonus, if Darkness Rainbow was observing things from a top floor, the steep angle would make the ground immediately below something of a blind spot.

“But Kurano-san, won’t they be expecting that?”

Harumi was worried that taking the better route would be the obvious choice. Surely Darkness Rainbow knew it would be weak to infiltration, and surely they'd put appropriate countermeasures in place.

"So we can choose between A: the front door which is going to be harder but less guarded, or B: the back door which is going to be easier but more guarded."

Shizuka summarized the dilemma succinctly. Both options had risks associated with them.

"Personally, I'd pick A."

Shizuka preferred the simple and straightforward solution of just going in the front door.

"I would prefer plan B..."

Meanwhile, wary Clan thought sneaking along the service road would be a better idea. Hearing her mutter to herself, however, Kiriha flashed an innocent grin.

"Because the north side is dark and gloomy?"

"Kii?! I'll smack you, you know?! I said I'd prefer it because it's closer... But either way, we'll need to find some way to conceal ourselves, right?"

"What should we do, Yurika-san?"

"Um..."

When Kiriha turned to Yurika for a decision, she looked troubled and began racking her brain for an answer. There would be risks either way, so it was a matter of figuring out which risks would be easier to reckon with.

What I need to prioritize the most is... That's right, the children! When we leave with the children, the safer the better!

After thinking for a while, Yurika made up her mind.

"Let's go with the service road."

"Because it's dark and gloomy?"

"Kii!"

“Ahaha... No, it’s just that after we rescue the children, I think we’ll probably escape the same way we came in. In that case, I think it’s better to take the safer route.”

Yurika put the children’s safety above all else. Considering what could happen after they infiltrated the hotel, there was a high chance that they would be fleeing the scene with the children in tow. The easiest way to handle the entire situation would be to escape with the children before Darkness Rainbow even noticed. If they could do that, the children would be safe and the ritual would be ruined—two birds with one stone.

And after rescuing the children, they would need to get out of the building in order for either the Cradle or the Hazy Moon to pick them up. They could use the service road out back to get away quickly and under relative cover. In terms of safety, Yurika believed that plan posed the least risk for the children.

“Wow, so you did put some thought into it after all, Yurika-chan.”

Shizuka flashed a cheerful smile and gave Yurika a congratulatory slap on the back. She also thought putting the children first was the right thing to do. After losing her parents at a hotel not unlike this one, it would do her heart good to be able to reunite these kids with their families.

“Harumi, Kii. What do you two think?”

“I think Yurika-san is right. I’d also like to make sure the children are safe.”



Harumi agreed with Yurika's plan. She was quite fond of children after all the time she'd spent with the kids at the hospital, and couldn't stand the thought of anything terrible befalling the kidnapped children. She would put their wellbeing before even her own.

"My answer has already been decided. I'll save these children just like I was saved eleven years ago."

Kiriha smiled at Clan. In the past, she and Koutarou had come to her rescue under similar circumstances. She would never forget that day. Koutarou had been given the impossible question of whether he would save his own mother or an innocent little girl, and in the end, he'd chosen Kiriha. There was no way she could choose differently—she would save those children.

"How about you, Clan-dono?"

Kiriha's smile took on a tinge of mischievousness as she asked Clan for her answer. It was the same smile a much younger Kii had turned on her eleven years in the past.

"I-I have no objections. Helping the weak and vanquishing the wicked is what's expected of a princess of Forthorthe."

With blatant gratitude and goodwill directed at her, Clan blushed furiously and turned away in an attempt to hide her red cheeks.

"It looks like everyone is in agreement then, Captain Yurika," Shizuka reported.

The other three team members nodded in unison to confirm.

"Okay. Let's start to make our way to the service road in the back."

Yurika returned the group's nod. She was resolved; she would save the children and not let her friends down. While Koutarou might not like it, everyone would admit Yurika was doing a splendid job as a magical girl right now.

"The princess of love and courage, ho!"

"You're being surprisingly captainly, ho!"

In that moment—for at least that moment—Yurika was a true leader.

The inside of the shopping mall was silent. Ruth had detected some audio with her sensors, but whatever it was had yet to reach their ears. That didn't surprise any of them, however. The mall was just that big.

"You can sense that, right, Aika-san?"

"Yes, I can feel weak mana over a wide area."

But ever since they entered the mall, Koutarou and Maki had been sensing mana. It was faint, perhaps because the source was still some distance away, but there was no doubt that magic had been used here.

"Ruth, how about those sounds?"

"They're still registering. The source appears to be moving now as well."

Now that they were actually inside the building, Ruth could get better, more detailed information about what her sensors were picking up.

"It's also emanating throughout the area. Possibly even the entire mall."

"Guys, stop! Hang on! This might be bad..."

In the midst of their discussion, Sanae suddenly stopped the group with a rarely seen serious expression on her face. She looked to her right and left. There were concrete walls in either direction, but she was looking far beyond them with her spirit sight.

"What is it?"

"There are evil spirits all over the place. Like, not just one or two, but a lot of them."

Sanae could sense a great deal of spiritual energy in vague, dark forms. They were clearly distinct from people and normal spirits. They were also meandering about, seemingly without purpose. That's why Sanae believed they were evil spirits.

"Maybe the sound and mana are from them?"

"I think that might be it, Satomi-kun."

"I believe there's a reasonably high chance as well."

“One of them will be coming around that corner any second now.”

“All right, everyone, let’s hide in that shop. I want to get a good look at this evil spirit.”

“An evil spirit, huh? Can’t say that I have any pleasant memories of those...”

Koutarou and the others ducked into a nearby shop and hid behind the display shelves and tables that had been left installed. They wanted to learn more about these evil spirits Sanae was sensing. It was possible they were demons summoned by the ritual.

“The sound is getting closer. It looks like the evil spirits are indeed the source for the sound.”

“T minus five... three, two, one...”

“Is that it?”

“It just looks like a human... Is that really an evil spirit?”

A single figure shuffled by the storefront. They were hunched over and walking slowly, but it definitely looked like a person.

“Your Highness, Master... This is strange.”

“What is?”

“There’s no reaction on the thermal sensor.”

“What does that mean?”

“It must mean their body temperature is the same as the ambient temperature of the surroundings.”

“What?!”

Ruth was constantly scanning their surroundings with multiple sensors, and could see quite plainly that the person passing by the storefront didn’t register on the thermal scan. Unless the sensor was malfunctioning, that meant that this person’s body temperature was exactly room temperature.

“I see... Satomi-kun, it must be a zombie.”

“A zombie?! You mean, like, the living dead?! Those monsters from horror

movies?!”

“I’m afraid so. One of Darkness Rainbow’s own is particularly skilled at conjuring them. This must be Purple’s doing...” Maki explained, biting her lip.

“Is she that dangerous? This Purple girl?”

“Yes. I definitely don’t want to fight her.”

In terms of sheer combat ability, Crimson was the powerhouse of Darkness Rainbow. But if anyone could actually beat her, it would be Purple. Her specialty was purple magic—the art of spiritualism and necromancy—and she was constantly surrounded by an army of the dead. Purple couldn’t beat Crimson on her own, but that was the point. She was never alone. She always had her horde to protect and fight for her. She was the necromancer of nightmares, Dark Purple.

“Maki-san, how many of those zombies could she control at the same time?”

“There’s a limit to Purple’s abilities, of course, but the weaker something is, the more of it she can control. Reasonably speaking, however, there couldn’t be more than a hundred.”

Purple only had but so much mana, and the number and strength of the dead she controlled depended on how she chose to divide her power. She could choose to control one incredibly powerful soul, or dozens and dozens of weaker ones. And since she could freely go between them, the composition of her horde could vary from encounter to encounter. The reason she was so feared was because she was extremely adept at optimizing her army. The right servants for the right encounter.

“Master, this is bad,” Ruth reported with a grim expression. “Because of the zombies, I can’t determine the location of the ritual. I won’t be able to learn anything more from the scans until we clear them out.”

With the zombies shuffling around the empty mall, there were sounds echoing from almost every direction. That’s why she hadn’t been able to pinpoint the source before, and it would undoubtedly mask any other noise in the building. In order to get any other meaningful data, they’d have to take out every last one of the zombies.

“I see... Aika-san, what about your magic?”

“Ritual magic emits powerful mana, but there are spells to conceal that. If one of those has been cast, I’m not sure I’d be able to sense it over the mana the zombies are emitting. Really, since this is Purple’s handiwork, she probably intentionally has them enchanted with just the right amount of mana to disguise it.”

They’d struck out with magic the same way they’d struck out with the sensors. Maki’s intuition told her that Purple had unleashed the zombies for precisely that reason. They posed more than one obstacle in locating the ritual site, and letting them freely roam the mall would allow her to personally protect the magic circle.

“Now I’m worried Yurika’s team is going to end up finding the ritual site over there at the hotel.”

“Because we can’t leave until we defeat all the zombies here now?”

The worst possible scenario would be if all of this was just a clever diversion. Maki’s entire team might successfully be waylaid by Purple alone.

“I’m counting on you for this one, Theia.”

“Good! I’m raring to go!”

“Everyone, we’re defeating those zombies! There’s no need to hold back! Speed is everything when time is of the essence!”

“Yes, Maki-sama!”

“Understood!”

“Right!”

“Lemme at ’em!”

Koutarou and the others responded in harmony to Maki’s orders. Morale was high, and fortunately, they had Theia with them to lead the charge. They would make quick work of Purple’s precious horde.

Before Maki’s team began their assault on Purple’s minions, they contacted Yurika’s group to inform them of the situation. Once they attacked the zombies,

the enemy would inevitably realize the mall had been infiltrated. And if Darkness Rainbow was actually stationed over at the hotel, they would tighten their defenses there as well. That was why they contacted Clan to give Yurika's team a heads up. Ideally, they would synchronize and make their moves at the same time. The ultimate ideal was waiting until Yurika's team cleared the hotel to make a move, but considering the urgency of the situation, they didn't have that kind of time. The best they'd be able to do under the circumstances was coordinate.

"I've received a message from Veltlion and the others. They've spotted enemies, and are waiting for our signal to launch an attack. How should I respond, Yurika?"

"I'm sure Satomi-san and the others want to hurry, but they'll have to wait until we've gotten inside from the service road. It shouldn't take more than five minutes."

"Understood. I'll let them know."

Yurika and the others had made it to the road that led to the back of the hotel. It was already potentially heavily guarded, so if Koutarou and the rest of Maki's team prematurely sounded the enemy's alarm, they might never be able to get in this way. Since Yurika and Harumi could already sense mana coming from inside the hotel, they wanted the others to hold off on their attack until they successfully made it inside.

Kiriha was feeling overly cautious since she couldn't get a good read on the enemy, but time wasn't on their side. She wouldn't have the opportunity to pause and think of a good alternate plan, so she chased all doubt from her head and focused on the situation at hand.

"They've confirmed, Yurika."

"Okay, then let's go, everyone."

Waiting until Clan had relayed their intentions to the other team, Yurika and the others emerged from hiding and carefully approached the service road. They had a plan in mind from here.

Darkness Rainbow was a group of skilled magicians, so using magic to try and

hide was risky. Instead, they would conceal themselves using Clan and Kiriha's technology. Clan's multipurpose cloaking would make it impossible to detect them with thermal, visual, or electromagnetic radiation sensors. So as long as Kiriha's haniwas could conceal their spiritual energy, the chances of them being detected at all were quite low. The biggest flaw in their plan was that, without using magic, they had no way to disguise any sound they were making. They were also going up against elite magicians, so they needed to be especially careful even with expert cloaking. Anything could happen from here

"Ugh, I'm so nervous..."

When the group reached the service road, Shizuka instinctively groaned. She didn't like this sneaking and hiding business. She could hold her own in a fight, but she felt totally useless in stealth operations. Knowing one wrong move could send the whole thing up in smoke put her a little on edge.

"Just hang in there. We only need to make it inside."

Originally they'd wanted to stay hidden the entire time. But with zombies protecting the mall, the situation had changed. Once Maki's team attacked, their cover would more or less be blown anyway. That being the case, they needed to use this opportunity to the best of their ability and make it into the hotel before Darkness Rainbow realized they were there.

"Sakuraba-senpai, you're awfully calm about this."

"Heehee, I don't think I'm particularly excitable."

The girls encouraged each other and tried to keep morale high as they made their way down the road. The enemy shouldn't be able to see them, and they weren't emitting any mana that would give them away. But even so, the girls were still anxious. There was still a chance the enemy might hear them somehow. In the end, it was just like Koutarou said. Just because they were good at fighting didn't mean they were well suited for operations like this.

The next few seconds would be a trial for the girls. Dark doubt swirled in their hearts as all kinds of terrible visions flashed through their minds. It was a harrowing experience. However, they endured, and eventually they safely made it to the hotel doors. The trial was over.

“Pheeew... I thought I was going to die of a heart attack...”

Shizuka leaned against the hotel wall and gave the others a weak smile. She was stronger than anyone else in a fight, but when it came to nerves, she was just like any normal girl. She was weak to that kind of tension.

“Shizuka-san, it’s still too early to take it easy. We need to make it through this door now...”

Yurika was already standing in front of it thinking about how they might actually get inside. Seeing her in this uncharacteristically serious state, Shizuka finally realized what it meant for Yurika to be a magical girl. She understood exactly why Koutarou didn’t like it.

“We’ll open it, ho!”

“We’re good at this kind of thing, ho!”

The two haniwas floated over Yurika armed with grasping tools for precision tasks. It seemed they were going to pick the lock.

“No, I’ll melt the lock with acid and break through.”

However, Yurika shook her head and readied her staff.

“That’s pretty bold for Yurika-chan, ho!”

“Are you sure you should do something so forceful, ho?”

“Satomi-san and the others are going to make their move once we get through anyway. That’s why I think we shouldn’t waste any time. Clan-san, please contact Ruth-san and let them know we’re in position.”

“Understood.”

Yurika waited for Clan to transmit the message, then began her incantation.

“Acid Splash!”

It was a spell to conjure a spray of strong acid. She hated that it wasn’t very magical girl-like, but she was getting more and more adept at using it. The acid shot out from the tip of the staff right onto the door. Both it and the knob quickly corroded and melted away. Despite being metal, they looked just like running candlewax.

“Let’s go!”

Yurika quietly pushed what was left of the door open. Without a knob and lock, it only took a light push. Yurika peeked through a small gap to confirm that nothing was on the other side before ducking inside. She was demonstrating a level of skillfulness and resourcefulness that no one would have expected coming from her.

“Seeing Yurika-chan acting so cool is kind of a bummer.”

Seeing Yurika take the lead in moving into the hotel, Shizuka realized just how terrible the situation really was. She was the only one to say it out loud, but the other three girls felt the same way.

“What are you all doing? Hurry up!”

That was when Yurika popped her head back outside. She’d gotten impatient when the rest of the group hadn’t followed her.

“Sorry! We’re coming!”

They didn’t have time to get sentimental. The girls looked at each other and nodded before darting after Yurika.

The first one to sense something was wrong was, of course, Green. In preparation for enemy interference, she’d cast a smattering of precautionary spells, including her specialty divination magic. And when that registered an anomaly, she swiftly reported it to her allies.

“Crimson, Blue-san. The enemy is coming.”

“Are you sure?”

Crimson and Blue were both in the room with Green, but only Crimson reacted. Blue currently had her hands full with the ritual and couldn’t spare the attention.

“Most of the possible futures where the enemy doesn’t show up just vanished. They must be on the premises.”

Green’s future forecast allowed her to see all potential futures, giving her a rough estimation of what would actually happen. For example, if she saw ten futures and the enemy appeared in six of them, the odds of the enemy actually

showing up were 60 percent. But because there was no such thing as a certain future, that was as accurate as her divinations got—probability.

The further out a future was, the more potential it had. And as the hour of said future drew near, the possibilities would eventually whittle themselves down to one. For several possible futures to drop out of the equation all at once, Green knew there must have been an event to trigger that kind of decisive change in the future. For the odds of the enemy showing up to skyrocket like that, it likely meant they were en route. They might even already be in the building.

“What terrible timing. We’re the only ones who can do anything right now.”

Crimson clicked her tongue. Blue was in the middle of the ritual. Purple, Orange, and Yellow had left to create diversions for the enemy. They were set to stick to the plan and not come back until the ritual was ready. That meant the only ones there to defend Blue were Green and Crimson.

“Can you tell how many there are?”

“The highest odds point to five, but there are some fluctuations.”

“What about Maki?”

“I doubt it. It would be an anomaly for her to show up.”

“I see...”

After confirming what she wanted to know, Crimson picked up her staff that she’d left leaning against a nearby wall. Green turned to her with an anxious look.

“So you’re going?”

“Yes. If we fight down here, it’ll ruin things.”

The summoning ritual was currently one third complete, but if Blue were interrupted, they’d never see it finish. If there had to be a fight, it would be best to keep it as far away as possible.

“Will you be all right on your own?”

“I’m all healed up.”

“But...”

“Don’t be such a worrywart. Besides, you learned your lesson last time, didn’t you? Your forecast is way less accurate if you’re involved.”

According to the plan, Crimson would fight on her own at first. Green would hang back to gather information from afar and support Crimson with her future forecast. The reason they chose to fight that way was because they wanted to avoid the feedback loops that had been their downfall last time.

If Green tried to forecast her own future, the very fact that she did would distort it. It was like the divination equivalent of using a microphone in range of the speakers that were broadcasting it. It would eventually skew the margin of error to the point that the forecasts were useless. Kiriha had managed to see through that and use it against her in their last battle. And because she didn’t want to make the same mistake again, she had decided to leave the fighting to Crimson.

“Even so, I’m reluctant to send you out on your own, Crimson.”

“Oh? That’s not a very Darkness Rainbow-y thing to say.”

“Don’t make fun of me! I just want to make sure this plan is a success!”

Hearing Green shout her protests, Crimson felt a strange sense of disappointment. And that disappointment made her realize something.

I was expecting Green to replace Maki...

Having realized that, Crimson wanted to confirm something. That’s why she stopped in place and turned towards Green.

“Say, Green...”

“Yes?”

“If I wanted to—”

If I wanted to fight you, would you be my opponent?

That’s what Crimson wanted to ask Green, but she stopped herself midsentence. She realized she wouldn’t be asking it as a member of Darkness Rainbow, she’d be asking it as herself.

Thinking through things rationally, anyone who wanted to fight powerful opponents or grow stronger would fight Crimson just like Maki had. But there were very few people, even among those who lived by battle, who thought strength was everything like Crimson did. In truth, she was the only one in Darkness Rainbow who felt that way. And, too impatient to wait for strong rivals to appear naturally, she'd asked nicely for Maki to fight her.

That in and of itself wasn't very Darkness Rainbow-like. It was something she'd only been able to do because Maki wasn't a part of Darkness Rainbow anymore. So she felt stupid to think she could ask another member of Darkness Rainbow—one who'd already turned their back on a former comrade, no less—for the same thing.

"Never mind. Actually, Green, why did you join Darkness Rainbow?"

Instead, Crimson asked Green what had brought her to the organization in the first place, unaware that that was also a very un-Darkness Rainbow-like question.

"Me?"

But Green realized it, and her eyes shot open wide accordingly.

"Yeah. If you don't mind, could you tell me?"

Though she was taken aback, Green didn't say no. Urged by Crimson, she told her story.

"A long time ago... I had the rug pulled out from under me and I lost something very precious. That's why I seek to know the future beforehand now. If I know what's coming, I won't have to lose anything again."

"That's not bad. I've revised my opinion of you, Green. Let's at least seize our freedom to see the future from Rainbow Heart."

"Crimson... Yes, let's do that."

There were things that both girls had yet to understand about each other. Crimson in particular had failed to realize that she was holding Green to Maki's standard. That is, she was looking to her for the same level of openness and sincerity that she expected from Maki. But unlike Maki, Green would lie and

hide her feelings. And Green didn't realize that was why Crimson didn't understand her.

Green wasn't only worried about Crimson for the sake of the mission. She was also hurt that Maki had become an enemy. But because she didn't want Crimson to know those things, she hid them. It was compulsive, almost. It was what her own personal darkness compelled her to do. If she could be more like Maki—honest with others and herself—she might be walking a different path in life.

Maki's team waited for the signal from Yurika's team before launching their attack on the zombies in the shopping mall. Fortunately, they weren't particularly strong. They were also slow, which gave Koutarou and the others the advantage out of the gate.

"Even I can't say I enjoy this..."

"Your Highness, if possible, let's finish them with a single attack."

"Yes, let's do that."

Zombies were combat-oriented demons made from the corpses of humans. That made it especially difficult for Koutarou and the others—even knowing they were dead—to attack them. That's why they either tried to defeat them without hurting them too much or, conversely, obliterate them without leaving a trace behind. If possible, they wanted to put them out of their misery as quickly and as gently as possible.

"You're thinking too hard about it, everyone. These people are thanking us. It's painful for them to be like this."

But fortunately, Sanae was with them. Thanks to her spiritual powers, she could tell exactly what was going on with the zombies. Most of them were grateful to have their souls freed from their abused corpses. There were some who were bitter and angry, but those negative emotions were directed at the person who'd made them zombies, not Koutarou and the others who were freeing them. And, knowing that, they felt much better about what they were doing.

"Koutarou, let's beat Purple for the sake of all these people."

“Yeah, you’re right. We have to stop her from doing terrible things like this.”

Koutarou and the others grew angrier and angrier with each corpse they defeated. The zombies were walking abominations to both the living and the dead, and there was no way of knowing what else Purple had under her control. They wanted to capture her and make her free her entire horde. That was the only way any of them would rest easy.

“But Satomi-kun, something’s strange...” Maki said cautiously.

“I think so too,” Koutarou agreed.

“What? What is?” Sanae asked, blinking in confusion.

“That Purple, the one who made these zombies, hasn’t shown up yet. Neither has anyone else from Darkness Rainbow. Why aren’t they using this chance to attack?”

As the fight continued, Koutarou started to feel more and more like something wasn’t right. They were quickly plowing through the zombies dotted around the mall. They’d easily taken out more than fifty now, which, according to Maki, should have been more than half of Purple’s army.

While the zombies weren’t very strong, they were difficult opponents purely because of their sheer number. Using them as shields and attacking from a distance seemed to be the most effective tactic, but as they burned through more and more of them... It started to seem even weirder that Darkness Rainbow hadn’t shown their faces yet.

“Master, maybe this really was a diversion.”

“I was afraid of that...”

“That said, there’s no way to know for sure until we defeat all of them. This Purple girl’s quite clever.”

“She is probably the scariest member of Darkness Rainbow right now.”

In Maki’s experience, Purple was the most terrifying enemy. In terms of pure fighting prowess, Crimson and Maya were leagues ahead of the others. But there was something different about Purple. She didn’t have the same kind of bravery or humor that Crimson and Maya did. She was always calm, even in

battle. She attacked without mercy, and that made her all the more frightening. Koutarou and the others might already be in her trap. It probably wasn't a coincidence that she'd chosen zombies to go up against teenagers, either. As Koutarou and the others were starting to realize that, they had no choice but to continue fighting.

After successfully making it into the resort hotel, Yurika's team barely lasted a minute before encountering the enemy. It seemed the hotel was well fortified.

"Ane-san, there's a spiritual energy reaction, ho! We'll analyze the pattern, ho!"

"Analysis complete! There's an 80 percent chance that it's those mechanical soldiers from before, ho!"

"Not good! There's a gravitational wave reaction too! There must be Forthorthian weaponry here!"

After coming in the back door, Yurika and the others had ducked into a storage room to try and scope out the situation rather than rushing into battle. The children were their top priority and, if possible, they wanted to find out where they were being kept first thing. If they couldn't manage that, they at least wanted to get a better idea of what they were up against.

The first thing they detected was several reactions they believed indicated enemy forces. If they'd carelessly charged in, they would have been in for trouble.

"So the shopping mall is being protected by zombies while this place is being protected by spiritual energy and Forthorthian weaponry..."

"What is it, Kiriha-san?"

Hearing the haniwas' and Clan's reports, Kiriha put her hand to her chin and began thinking. When Shizuka asked her what was wrong, Kiriha turned to Yurika with a grim expression.

"Yurika, can you sense any mana?"

"Yes. It feels like the entire building is filled with it."

"That must be it, then..."

“What is?”

When Shizuka questioned Kiriha a second time, she finally answered her.

“This is where the enemy is performing their ritual. This should be where the children are.”

“Really?!” Yurika exclaimed in surprise.

She then darted right over to Kiriha. It seemed she’d momentarily snapped out of serious magical girl mode.

“If the enemy is logical, there’s no doubt. The zombies were placed in the shopping mall to make it look like there was mana there. But here... They’re defending the place with spiritual energy technology and Forthorthian weaponry, not magic. So what does that mean if you’re still detecting mana?”

Kiriha didn’t state the answer outright, but Yurika managed to put it together with her help.

“I get it! There’s something else going on here!”

“Yes. Chances are high it’s the ritual they’re preparing.”

Darkness Rainbow had cleverly divided their resources to make both locations appear as though they potentially held the ritual magic circle. If they had it here *and* were protecting it with magic, there would have been enough mana in the building for it to be detectable outside. Conversely, if the mall was a distraction and it was only guarded by spiritual energy technology and Forthorthian weapons, it would’ve had no mana signature whatsoever—meaning Koutarou and the others wouldn’t even have a reason to inspect it. It would have been a failure as a decoy.

So to prevent either of those situations, they’d made good use of their assets. They were defending the ritual with nonmagical tech and the decoy with magical weapons so that they gave off similar amounts of mana and would smell equally enticing. That would leave Koutarou and his allies with no choice but to investigate both. However, it was precisely because of that strategy that Kiriha was immediately able to determine the hotel was the real location once they got inside. If it was being protected by nonmagical tech yet there was still mana coming from somewhere in the building, that could only mean one thing.

“Kiriha-san, please give me a moment! I’ll pinpoint the source of the mana!”

Yurika acted immediately and without hesitation. Her only concern was saving the children, which meant they had to stop the ritual before it was too late. There wasn’t a second to waste.

Thanks to Yurika searching the area for mana, they were able to determine it was coming from the basement. It was slowly increasing in intensity, but there wasn’t all that much of it—certainly not ten children’s worth. That came as a huge relief.

“It looks like the children haven’t been fully drained yet, but based on Sanae-chan’s experience, just being drained of a third of their energy is enough to have lasting consequences. We need to break through and get them out of here, even if it’s by force.”

“Please wait, Yurika-san! If we don’t think this through, the enemy will surround us and we’ll waste even more time!”

Yurika was ready to bust into the basement. The longer they waited, the more danger the children were in. Harumi knew that, but she still thought there was a better way. If they made a careless mistake now, it would only end up costing them more time in the end. They needed to plan accordingly.

“Ugh... You’re right. Does anyone have any ideas?”

Yurika respected Harumi, and readily listened to her. She then took a few deep breaths and tried to compose herself. The children were important to her, and that was exactly why she couldn’t afford to rush things now.

“Why don’t we go just go in the way with the fewest enemies?”

Shizuka’s idea was simple. They had access to a map of the hotel, and they had a good idea of where the enemy was. So in her mind, all they needed to do was figure out the safest route based on those two pieces of information.

“Someone acting as a decoy wouldn’t be bad, either.”

Clan’s idea was to use a strategic decoy. They could have one person distract the enemies while the other four snuck into the basement.

“I think Shizuka would be the best decoy,” offered Yurika.

“Why me?!”

Shizuka was left reeling at suddenly being volunteered for the job.

“That’s because you’re the least likely to be hurt.”

“Uhhh, that’s true, but...”

Since Shizuka had the powers of the Fire Dragon Emperor within her, there was no way that any normal enemy would put a scratch on her. But using those powers came at a terrible price—at least in her eyes. They dramatically increased her weight, and Shizuka feared that more than getting hurt.

“All right, let’s get started right away.”

“Wait a minute, Uncle! Don’t be in such a hurry! Kiriha-san! Please, Kiriha-san, I’m begging you! Don’t you have some kind of plan?!”

Shizuka interrupted Alunaya, who was already getting fired up, and turned to Kiriha with a pleading look. She never wanted to weigh over 200 kilograms again.

“Well, I can’t say I don’t,” Kiriha said with a nod.

She didn’t much care about Shizuka’s weight, but she still didn’t like the idea of using her as a decoy. She was in the middle of trying to think of an alternative.

“I don’t know if it’s possible or not yet, however.”

“Please, whatever it is, just tell me! I’ll do anything!”

Kiriha still wasn’t convinced of its success, but with Shizuka in tears, she had no choice but to share it anyway.

“We destroy the floor and head straight down.”

“Whaaaaat?!”

“Hooooo?!”

When Kiriha said that, the surprised voices of the four girls and the two haniwas came together in beautiful harmony.

“The biggest risk is that the children might get caught in it. We don’t know

their exact location.”

They wanted to avoid enemies, and they didn’t want to resort to using a decoy. Kiriha had come up with a plan that would meet both of those conditions, crazy though it might be. Her chief concern was that in blowing out the floor, there would be a dangerous amount of debris falling into the basement. It might easily crush the children, and if that happened, everything would be for naught. That’s why Kiriha was hesitant about going through with it.

“Kiriha-san, this spot will be okay.”

However, Yurika had a solution.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Since the children are being used as sacrifices, they have to be on the magic circle. But I can sense we’re not standing directly over top of the magic circle right now, so there should be no risk to the children if we break through here.”

The children had to be in the center of the magic circle much the same way batteries had to be seated in a remote control properly—they were powering it. That was common knowledge to a magician.

“Then let’s do it! Right now! Hurry before someone changes their mind!”

“Do you really hate it that much?”

“You’re naturally skinny, Sakuraba-senpai! You’d never understand how I feel!”

“It’s not something you should be crying about...”

Thus, Yurika’s team made the bold decision of breaking through the floor.

Even though the procedure should be safe, there was still the off chance of something going awry. They were pressed for time, but with the safety of children on the line, they decided to take all possible precautions. They first put a small hole in the floor and sent a camera down to confirm the situation in the basement. As Yurika had said, there was nothing directly below them. As for the rest of the basement, it appeared to be a large, open room that stretched both

long and wide.

After confirming the coast was clear, the girls could destroy the floor without worry. The actual destroying part was done by one of Clan's work lasers, which opened up a neat one-meter hole. The circular piece of concrete that had just been a part of the floor fell straight down into the basement with a loud crash.

The noise echoed through the empty hall. It would undoubtedly alert the girls' enemies to their presence, but when they were this close anyway, there was very little meaning in trying to be stealthy. The girls jumped down one by one, unconcerned about the noise they were making.

"I was wondering what you'd do, but that was pretty ballsy."

An unfamiliar voice welcomed Yurika and the others as entered the basement. It was a girl wearing a carmine outfit—Dark Crimson, one of the leaders of Darkness Rainbow.

"You used to be so timid, too... I'm impressed, Rainbow Yurika."

"Crimson-san..."

Yurika firmly held her staff in both hands as she looked at Crimson. The others didn't know her, but based on the way Yurika was behaving, they all knew how to react to her.

"Why didn't you try and stop us?"

"Because it was more convenient this way."

As soon as Crimson said that, the hole Clan had just cut in the floor was covered up. It was the automated and mechanical weapons crowing around it overhead. Upon realizing that Yurika and her friends were breaking through the floor, Crimson had purposely left them be to lure them in. And now with their exit blocked off, they had no means of escape. That was why Crimson had called it convenient, for she intended to wipe them all out.

"You sound awfully confident, Crimson or whoever you are."

"Kurano Kiriha... You may have gotten the better of me last time, but don't think for a minute it'll happen again."

"We'll see about that, won't we?"

Kiriha flashed a confident smile, but it was only a bluff. Darkness Rainbow had the defensive advantage this time, and they'd come fully prepared. Kiriha knew she'd be in trouble if she simply relied on the same strategy from before. She had to think fast—but she had no reason to tell her enemy that. And so she racked her brain, her confident smirk never wavering.

Did Crimson come alone? There are six members of Darkness Rainbow... Even if they split up to guard the two buildings, there should be two more magicians here... What are they doing? One of them is probably performing the ritual. Is the other one helping her? Or something else? And then there's the matter of the laser and cannon that Maki told us this girl has... How is she going to use those? What can we do to counter them?

All kinds of ideas popped into Kiriha's head. That was her greatest weapon. She could contribute relatively little to a battle in the way of firepower, but her brainpower would lead them all to victory. Crimson was most cautious of this unique, unpredictable power of Kiriha's. She'd seen it in action before and been burned by it.

"Green, how will they move?"

Crimson spoke to Green, who was standing by elsewhere, through a mental link. They were connected via a spell that let them talk telepathically, making communications devices like radios superfluous.

"It looks like they have countermeasures for the laser and cannon. There are also several futures where they're able to block even normal attacks."

"And if we play this according to plan?"

"There is an 80 percent chance of success."

"Sounds good to me!"

Crimson grinned maniacally as she readied her staff and pulled the lever on the side of her barrel. She was clearly outnumbered, but she had every intention of winning. That confidence showed on her face

"Crimson-san, there isn't any way you'll stand down... is there?"

"What a silly question, Yurika! I joined Darkness Rainbow for fights like this!"

“Then you leave me no choice! As Rainbow Nana’s successor, I will defeat you!”

“Just try it!”

Crimson made the first move. She swung her loaded staff around and began an incantation.

“Ray of Sunshine!”

“The laser is coming! Yurika, Clan-dono!”

“Mage Shield!”

“Focus the deployment of the distortion field forward!”

At Kiriha’s warning, both Yurika and Clan took defensive measures. Yurika used magic and Clan science to create a large barrier to protect the group. Maki had warned them that Crimson’s laser was powerful, so they focused their defenses forward to create a sturdier shield. Between the two of them, they should be able to block the attack.

“Modifier: Single Wavelength! Targeting Option: Spread!”

But that was when something unexpected happened. For some reason, Crimson pointed her staff in a completely different direction. Yurika and the others were puzzled by her actions, but they’d soon be made painfully aware of her intentions.

“Go!”

The laser travelled out from the tip of Crimson’s staff, but when it reached the wall, it bounced off and headed back towards the group. And just before it hit them, it splintered into multiple beams and assaulted the girls from several directions. Since they’d only deployed their defenses in front of them, there was nothing they could do to block it.

“Kyaaaaah!”

“Ugh!”

Yurika and Kiriha both cried out in pain. Harumi, Clan, and Shizuka had all been fortunate. The lasers had only grazed them, but Yurika and Kiriha had

taken serious hits.

“Reflectors?! This room has been set up so she can freely use her lasers! No wonder she was so confident!”

Clan quickly realized what had happened. Crimson had bounced the laser of a reflector built into the wall for exactly this purpose.

“That’s right. You guys really jumped into a hornet’s nest down here.”

Immediately after deciding to use this hotel for their ritual, Crimson and the others began making preparations for possible enemy attacks. With bait like a ritual and child sacrifices, they knew the good guys would come biting eventually. As long as they approached from above ground, there were a limited number of ways they could get to the ritual site. Darkness Rainbow had taken that into account beforehand put defensive measures in place each step of the way. That included down here in the basement, where the walls, ceiling, and floor had reflectors installed. With them, Crimson could use her lasers creatively and attack from unexpected directions. Even though she was severely outnumbered, it was starting to seem like she actually had the advantage.

“Are you okay, Yurika-san, Kiriha-san?!”

“I’m fine.”

“The haniwas protected us.”

Fortunately, the laser had lost some of its power by reflecting off the wall and even more when splintering. As a result, though the hit was quite a shock, the laser hadn’t been enough to incapacitate them.

“But this is bad... Because of the reflectors, we can’t tell how the laser will move. And if we focus on that and deploy our defenses radially, we won’t be able to defend against the cannon. This was meticulously planned.”

If they were only going to be attacked by reflected and even split lasers, they actually weren’t in all that much danger. Deploying their combined magical and scientific defenses in a bubble shape would keep them fully protected. But if they spread the shield out like that, it wouldn’t be strong enough to hold up against a serious attack like Crimson’s cannon.

“In that case, it’s my turn.”

There, Shizuka stepped forward. As she did, Alunaya called out to her from within.

“Are you sure?”

“This isn’t the time to worry about my weight.”

“Very well! Then let’s go, Shizuka!”

At this rate, they’d be worn down by the laser before they could do anything else. In order to settle things quickly, they needed a strong offense in addition to defense. That’s where Shizuka came in. She unleashed some of Alunaya’s power and faced Crimson in her half-dragon form.

“Your appearance and mana are completely different from before. Is this your true power?”

Crimson grinned eagerly as she looked at Shizuka. She could sense the strength radiating from her, but her confidence seemed unshaken. She still wholeheartedly believed she could win. If anything, she was even more pumped about the fight seeing she’d get to have a go at Shizuka, who she felt a strong rivalry with after how their last fight had gone.

“Something like that. Looks like you’ve been training your magic too, huh?”

Shizuka hadn’t forgotten their last encounter either. She’d ultimately won against Crimson because she wasn’t a committed magician or martial artist—she straddled a line in between. But despite her previous loss, Crimson was still brimming with confidence. Even wielding the power of a dragon, Shizuka wasn’t going to let her guard down.

“A little.”

Crimson pointed her staff at Shizuka. As she did, the spiritual energy and Forthorthian weapons began appearing behind her, one after another. Yurika and the others could tell they’d been summoned to prevent anyone from getting in the way of Crimson and Shizuka’s battle.

“Here I come, Shizuka!”

“Try me!”

Once the weapons were in place, Crimson began her attack and trained the barrel of her staff on Shizuka.

“Explosion!”

The sound of the cannon being fired shook the entire hall, and the cannonball it launched sailed at Shizuka with frightening speed.

“Too easy!”

However, it would take more than that to defeat Shizuka. She spewed flames to intercept the cannonball midflight. While she wasn’t as powerful as Alunaya in half-dragon form, the fire she spat was more than hot enough to incinerate half of the flying cannonball. The remaining half lost its moment and fell to the ground inert.

“In the short while since we last met, you’ve sure learned some ridiculous things.”

Crimson was amazed by Shizuka and stopped to comment on it as she readied her next spell.

“Not so fast!”

Shizuka stepped forward to stop her, but the army of weapons closed in to shield Crimson.

“Shizuka-san, keep going! Just like that!”

Before the weapons could attack Shizuka, her allies acted to support her. Yurika repeatedly fired magical arrows to restrain the weapons and Harumi cast a protective barrier on everyone while Kiriha’s haniwas and Clan’s beam cannon began methodically destroying the weapons.

“It’s over, Crimson!”

Shizuka slipped past the weapons with the help of her friends and closed in on Crimson.

“I don’t know about that!”

However, that too was part of Darkness Rainbow’s plan. Crimson suddenly vanished right before Shizuka’s eyes.

“What?!”

As a result, the claws she’d just swung slashed through nothing but air. Surprised, she looked around the area but didn’t see Crimson anywhere. Instead, she beheld a surprising spectacle.

“The enemies are—?!”

The weapons that Crimson had called forward suddenly changed their appearances to look like Shizuka and the other girls. There were twenty of them remaining, for a total of four clones of each of the five girls. Shizuka and the others were stunned by this development, and the clones took that opportunity to intermingle with girls, making it impossible to distinguish who was really where.

This was all Dark Green’s doing. Green magic covered both divination and illusions, so spells like this were her strong suit. She’d precast both this illusion spell and the one to make Crimson vanish ahead of time, and activated them from a distance.

“If I do this, it doesn’t matter how strong you are, does it? Or are you going to defeat everyone including your own allies?”

Crimson’s disembodied voice echoed through the basement. She sounded as confident as ever. Regardless of how strong Shizuka was, if the situation deteriorated into a confused melee, most of her power would end up being used against her friends. And that was especially dangerous for someone like Shizuka who could eliminate her opponents with a single attack.

“Uncle, can’t you tell them apart?!”

“It’s difficult. The caster of this illusion is very skilled.”

Dragons were blessed with extraordinary amounts of mana, but they used it very roughly, focusing mostly on flight and combat. As a result, they weren’t good at more delicate magic like illusions. Seeing through ones cast by a green magic expert wouldn’t be easy.

“Yurika, however, might be able to do something.”

“Yurika-chan, please!”

“R-Right!”

Yurika and all of her clones nodded. She and the other girls were at a disadvantage not knowing where their allies were. Especially not since the weapons could communicate with one another and attack freely. They couldn’t use any sort of projectile that would give them away, but with how things were going, it would only be a matter of time before the girls were wiped out. Yurika knew she had to do something.

“You think I’d give you the time for that?! Ray of Sunshine!”



However, Crimson wasn't that naive. Even though she was invisible, she was still attacking. She wasn't able to do much damage with her lasers, but she was able to scramble the girls' positions, making them lose track of where their allies had been. Now they were completely mixed together with the clones with no hope of reconciling. All they could do now was dodge the incoming lasers while fighting against their own clones. And that would be as hard as it sounded. The individual weapons did their best to avoid tangling with the girl they had cloned, leaving Yurika, Shizuka, Clan, Harumi, and Kiriha on the defensive since none of them were willing to attack their friends. Yurika didn't have the time to cast a spell to try and see through the illusions.

"Karama, Korama, can you tell us apart based on our auras?!"

"It looks like this illusion is taking spiritual energy into consideration too, ho!"

"We can't tell you apart at all, ho!"

"Image analysis and thermal vision aren't working either! These illusions must have been specifically created to avoid detection!"

"Bingo! Did you think we'd stay ignorant forever?!"

Crimson couldn't stop boasting. Though no one could see her face, they could all tell from her voice what she was feeling. Like with Crimson and her laser, Green had put scientific knowledge to use in improving her spells. These advanced illusions were Green's take on scientific magic.

"Now, take this! And there's more where that came from!"

"Kyaaah!"

Caving underneath a rain of lasers, Harumi fell to the floor.

"Sakuraba-senpai!"

The nearby Yurika instinctively reached out for her, but Harumi slapped her hand away.

"Eep! Senpai, what are you doing?!"

Yurika's hand was just fine thanks to the protection her magical girl outfit offered, but she was utterly shaken to have Harumi attack her.

“Are you okay, Yurika-san?!”

Worried, Harumi called out to the panicking Yurika. In the middle of all the confusion, Kiriha tried to explain what was going on.

“Calm down, Yurika! That’s a fake!”

“R-Really? They can even mimic stuff like that?!”

They didn’t just move and sound the same as the girls they’d cloned. They could even pretend to get hit by lasers and yell for help. Green’s illusions were extremely elaborate and articulate, having been given some semblance of intelligence.

How can we turn the tables here?!

Kiriha protected herself from several clones and lasers while desperately racking her brain. Everyone was wounded at this point. She could tell because the clones were even mirroring the injuries the girls were getting. And those injuries were starting to add up. They’d all be annihilated at this rate. They needed something radical to be able to turn things around.

“Ugh, I don’t care about my weight if it means I can destroy these things!”

Even the superhuman Shizuka was helpless in this situation. Since she couldn’t tell friend from foe, her draconic powers did her no good.

Weight?

But nevertheless, her desperate complaint seemed to have given Kiriha an idea.

“Clan-dono, the mass! Even if they can change how they look, they can’t change how much they weigh!”

“You’re right! If I calculate space distortions, then...!”

Not even an illusion could change the mass of what it was disguising. Even if it could manipulate sound and electromagnetic radiation, it couldn’t affect the distortions the mass of the weapons themselves caused in space. Something like that would have taken a much more serious and powerful spell.

“All the fakes have been locked on! But there’s still that chance...”

None of the girls weighed more than 50 kilograms, so by limiting her targets to anything that weighed more than that, Clan was immediately able to identify the weapons underneath the illusions. But she couldn't shake the fear that a fake Kiriha had given her this idea, which was why she hesitated to attack.

"There's no need to aim directly at them! Just aim right next to them!"

It seemed Kiriha could sense Clan's doubts, and she gave a new strange instruction

"What...? No, there's no time to hesitate! Initiating the attack!"

Clan was puzzled, but she didn't have the time to think about it. She ordered the firing control system to attack. Following the targeting data after filtering by mass, Clan's beam cannon began its bombardment. Beams flew this way and that, aimed for directly next to most of the girls—hopefully the clones. Clan still didn't understand, but she had to believe in Kiriha.

A white flash of a beam grazed one of the Yurikas. There was a crumpling metallic sound as it made contact with seemingly nothing in the air next to her. The beam had scored a direct hit on *something*, opening up a large hole that exposed all kinds of hardware and wires. The next moment, the illusion collapsed and the weapon underneath was revealed. It seemed the beam had struck something vital as well, for the weapon was no longer moving. It was exactly the outcome Kiriha had hoped for.

"Impossible! What just happened?!"

Crimson's shaken voice echoed through the room. She was still invisible, but it was obvious enough how surprised she was.

"It's nothing, really. Even though the weapons are disguised by elaborate illusions, there are two things that cannot be manipulated that way: mass and size."

Clan had narrowed down her targets by mass, but was still worried something might be amiss. That was why Kiriha had had her attack adjacent to her targets. The mechanical weapons were pretending to be people with the help of illusions, but they only looked like the girls. They hadn't actually shrunk down to human size. Kiriha and the other girls were even smaller than the standard

human sized and shaped spiritual weapons too, meaning that aiming for around them would still hit whatever oversized weapon was pretending to be them.

“It wasn’t a bad idea, however. If you’d only cast illusions on real people, you would’ve had us.”

“Tch, to think there was such a blind spot!”

The strategy was sound; there was simply a flaw in its execution. Kiriha had zeroed in on that and used it to derail the whole thing.

“Kii, your brain truly is a terrifying weapon...”

“This means we just can’t aim for them directly!”

“Time for our counterattack!”

“I won’t forgive you for attacking Yurika-san with my appearance!”

Grazing attacks would be their secret to success here. They wouldn’t hurt their allies even if they managed to get caught in the crossfire, but they would destroy the machines pretending to be them. Now that they knew what to do, the girls rallied and began taking out the illusions one after another.

“Again?! Curse you, Kurano Kiriha!”

“Calm down, Crimson.”

“But Green—”

“Listen. You’re stalling five people, including Rainbow Yurika. That’s more than enough to consider this a victory.”

“Yeah, you’re right... Sorry for whining like a kid.”

Crimson was enraged, but Green was able to calm her down. Getting emotional was the first step to defeat. That was another lesson Kiriha had taught them.

“It’s okay. However, Crimson, your odds of victory have dropped below 50 percent.”

“Okay. Let’s continue as planned, then.”

“Yes.”

Now that she'd regained her composure, Crimson was able to think clearly. Still hidden, she snuck out of the basement. The plan she and Green had agreed upon beforehand was that she'd retreat if the odds fell out of her favor.

Even though Crimson had gained the powers of scientific magic and prepared several additional measures in advance, there had always been a distinct possibility that it wouldn't be enough to win against five opponents. Green was actively monitoring Crimson's chances of victory as she fought, and once they dipped below 50 percent—their predetermined benchmark—she would signal the retreat.

"Crimson, you did good."

"You're the only one that would say that to me right now."

Yurika and her allies were still fighting against the weapons Crimson had left behind, but she didn't even look back as she walked away. Twenty mechanical weapons was no big loss to Darkness Rainbow. And besides, their loss had already been factored into the plan. They bought time for Crimson to escape and regroup with Green.

Everyone's Wishes

Tuesday, September 14th

Green looked relieved to see Crimson when she returned from the first floor of the basement.

"Welcome back, Crimson."

Seeing her like that, Crimson smiled.

"Oh? Were you worried?"

"Well, of course. There are still things I need you to do."

Green had actually been deeply worried for Crimson, but she hid behind her job as a leader of Darkness Rainbow.

"Sure, sure. So, how's it going over here?"

"About the time your chances of victory started dropping, the summoning entered its final phase."

"How many do you think we can summon?"

"With the mana we have now, two."

"Hmm, guess there's nothing we can do about that."

The ritual they were trying to perform was based on Blue's summoning magic. Using the children as sacrifices, they would call powerful demons to this world.

However, to fully use all ten children and complete the spell like they'd originally intended, the ritual would require several hours. With their enemies already on the scene, they knew their time was limited. They decided to cut their losses and proceed with what they could manage rather than losing everything.

They'd been draining energy from the children for just under an hour now, meaning they had less than a third of the energy they'd intended to collect. That would at least, however, let them summon two out of the ten demons.

"Rainbow Yurika and her friends will be here soon. Let's begin right away."

“Of course. Blue!”

Green raised her hand, and Blue, who was working on the ritual at the magic circle, nodded. She was preparing to activate the spell. This would be the start of the real fight.

Koutarou realized something was wrong just as they defeated the last zombie.

As the number of zombies decreased, the chances of the ritual site being somewhere in the shopping mall seemed less and less likely. And when their numbers dwindled to just a few, Maki and Sanae reached the conclusion that the mall had been a diversion after all. So while Koutarou and Theia cleaned up the leftovers, Ruth opened a communications line to Clan. But before she could even say anything, Clan’s desperate voice came blaring over the comms.

“Pardomshiha! This is an emergency!”

“What has happened, Clan-sama?!”

Ruth knew something was amiss just from the tone of Clan’s voice, and she immediately connected Koutarou and Theia’s terminals to the call as well. They were in the middle of fighting, but only against the straggling zombies. They certainly had the leisure to listen in. Maki and Sanae, who didn’t have bracelets, ran immediately over to Ruth.

“Darkness Rainbow has activated the ritual!”

“That can’t be!”

“There’s no doubt about it! Urgh... ack... By the time we found the magic circle, they were already in the final stages! Hack...”

The projected hologram of Clan appeared to be coughing. It looked like she was talking to them through a cloud. But hearing what she’d said, Koutarou cut in on the call.

“Clan, you couldn’t stop it?!”

“We didn’t even have the chance! They forcibly activated the spell with insufficient mana! Yurika says it was only 20 percent of what they intended!”

After listening to Clan’s report, Maki leaned in to speak with her through Ruth’s bracelet.

“Clan-san, what did Darkness Rainbow use the ritual spell for?!”

“Ack... They summoned two large demons! The whole hotel collapsed because of them!”

It seemed Clan’s coughing fit was because she’d called them in the immediate aftermath. The air around her was thick with concrete dust and other debris.

“W-Wait, Glasses! What about the children?! They’re not buried in the rubble, are they?!” Sanae asked anxiously.

Their lives were in danger as it was in Darkness Rainbow’s clutches. She hated the idea that they might now be stranded or worse. If they’d perished in the building collapse, the entire search would be for nothing.

“They’re fine. We rescued them, but in exchange, Darkness Rainbow managed to get away...”

“So the children are safe? Thank god...”

Sanae let out a sigh of relief. She had no memories of it, but she had once faced a similar danger. She felt an instinctual bond with these children much the same way Kiriha did. But they all had more than the children to be concerned about now. Clan relayed footage from an unmanned scout through the call.

“Look! These are the monsters that appeared from the magic circle!”

First the footage showed the hotel from overhead. The image only lasted for a few seconds before there were terrible creaking and snapping sounds. Then two strange figures—a giant and a behemoth—came bursting out of the building, leaving nothing but destruction in their wake. Each demon was about twenty meters tall. They weren’t on the scale of the black hound Tayuma had transformed into, but they were still mind-blowingly large. They roared loud enough to shake the very air, and perhaps because of that, the remnants of the hotel collapsed behind them some seconds later.

“I’m having the unmanned scout following them, but they’re headed straight into the city!”

Clan then cut to a live feed from her drone, which showed the giant and the

behemoth descending the mountain. Because the behemoth was lighter, it was moving faster and was out about a hundred meters in front of the giant. Lights from the city were so close that they were already in view. It wouldn't take the demons more than half an hour to reach town.

"This is terrible! Who knows what will happen if they make it to civilization!"

"Darkness Rainbow has gotten serious enough that they're abandoning all discretion! There's no keeping this one a secret!"

After cleaning up the last of the zombies, Theia and Koutarou returned to Ruth and the others. They all had grave expressions on their faces. They all knew what was at stake if these monstrosities made it into the city.

"Veltlion, please mobilize and go after them too!"

"Yeah, we'll be right—"

Koutarou would have chased down the demons even if Clan hadn't asked him. And he was about to let her know that was his intention when Maki suddenly interrupted him.

"Wait, Satomi-kun!"

"Aika-san?!"

Maki then called out to Clan's hologram in a panic, "Clan-san, was Purple over there at the hotel?!"

"Purple? No, we only saw girls in red, green, and blue."

"Satomi-kun, this is a trap!"

"A trap?!"

"Purple had to have been the one that summoned the horde of zombies, but she's nowhere around! Crimson, Green, and Blue were in charge of the summoning, so what are Purple, Orange, and Yellow doing right now?!"

Darkness Rainbow had seven members, and Maki's departure made six. Half of their ranks—Crimson, Green, and Blue—had been at the hotel casting the summoning spell. It was possible that the other three weren't even in town, but Maki knew that with zombies at the mall, at least Purple had been here. And if

that was the case, what was she doing right now? Maki hadn't really needed to ask. The answer was obvious to everyone.

"They're after room 106! Ruth, raise the alert level of the unmanned fighters! I've given my subordinates the permission to attack! Darkness Rainbow is coming!"

The demons that Crimson, Green, and Blue had summoned were meant to split up Koutarou and his allies. Since there were ten of them, they'd originally wanted ten demons to divide them completely. But even two would do them a huge favor by splitting their forces in half. And while Koutarou and his friends were busy dealing with the demons, Purple, Orange, and Yellow were moving in on room 106. An already dangerous situation was only getting worse.

Koutarou and the others' most pressing problems were handling the summoned demons and defending room 106. Taking care of the demons would require serious firepower, which automatically bumped Theia, Ruth, Clan, and Shizuka to the top of the roster. The three Forthorthians had cutting-edge technology on their side, and Shizuka held the ancient power of a dragon.

"Hahh... Just after I lost all that weight, too..."

"Don't cry over your weight, Shizuka."

"That's easy for you to say when you're so light, Theia-chan. Just imagine the boy you love not being able to sweep you off your feet—literally!"

"Yes, that's terrible and all, but the city will be destroyed if we don't all help."

"I know. That's why I'm coming with you instead of running away."

"So you'll at least face your fate when it comes to it..."

All four of them had means of flight, so they were able to easily meet up midway between the hotel and mall. Once they did, they immediately set off after the demons.

"Say, Pardomshiha..."

"Yes?"

"Do gentlemen concern themselves with a lady's weight?"

“You mean Master?”

“I-I mean in general!”

“He does seem to mind a little, but he also worries about being too thin.”

“Now that you mention it, he has told me a princess shouldn’t be unhealthy...”

“Master has?”

“Like I said, in general!”

The four of them flew through the air at incredible speed and had the demons within their sights in a matter of minutes. Since they were twenty meters tall, they stood out even from afar.

“Enough with the useless banter over there. Right now, we need to focus on doing something about these nasty things.”

“They are certainly big and nasty...”

“Neither one is over twenty meters tall, but since they’ve been summoned by magic, we can’t let our guard down. Who knows what they’re capable of?”

Since they were outside, Theia and Clan could use their flagships in this fight. If need be, Shizuka could also transform into full-on dragon mode. The overwhelming advantage seemed to be on their side, but they were still proceeding with caution since they were up against magical creatures—something none of them had much experience with.

“Let’s go all out and clean this mess up immediately! That would be the fastest and most peaceful resolution for the city!”

“You mean the most peaceful resolution for you.”

“I’m part of the city too!”

Shizuka was quick to action and summoned even more of her strength. She was still in her half-dragon, half-human form, but her entire body was aglow with crimson flames. It was a manifestation of her overflowing mana—and her desire to settle this quickly.

“Honestly, I agree that we should strike swiftly.”

With that, Theia designated the demons as enemies for her Combat Dress's firing control system. The two large cannons on her shoulders then took aim at the giant, the closer of the two targets. Ruth and Clan followed suit and prepared themselves for combat. Ruth switched the unmanned fighters into combat mode, while Clan readied her beam cannon. They were also worried about the innocent people of the city getting dragged into this, and for their sakes, were equally intent on putting a quick end to this ordeal.

"Victory to the swift!"

Before even confirming that everyone was ready, Theia hastily began her bombardment. All she was concerned about right now was speed.



While Theia and company were opening fire on the demons, Koutarou and the others had just returned to Corona House. Using Blue Knight's teleportation gate, they arrived directly in room 106. Fortunately, it was still quiet. Darkness Rainbow was nowhere to be seen.

"We made it here before them!"

"You're wrong, Satomi-san! Darkness Rainbow is already here! There's a ward up to keep people out!"

Koutarou was hopeful, but Yurika knew better. She recognized signs of the enemy as soon as she sensed them. Room 106 was oddly quiet. They couldn't even hear the faint sounds of passing traffic. Even though it was the dead of night, it was unnaturally silent. That was thanks to the ward that had been put up around Corona House, which told Yurika the battle had already begun.

All of a sudden, the sound of gunfire from spiritual energy rifles exploded outside. It had to have been Kiriha's subordinates stationed here to protect Corona House.

"Koutarou, it looks like they cast the ward a while ago and held off attacking until anyone unrelated left the area! This is it! They're making their move now!"

The magical ward magicians used didn't just keep unwanted third parties out; it also compelled them to vacate the area being warded. So when Darkness Rainbow cast a ward around Corona House, they waited until just Kiriha's subordinates were left before striking.

Kiriha had contacted them on the way back to room 106. Hearing that they were still alive and well was good news, and brightened her expression a little.

"All right, let's head out there too!"

Koutarou and the others had made it back before tragedy struck, but if Kiriha's subordinates were left alone, they could be in serious trouble against Darkness Rainbow. So despite the danger that awaited him, he threw open the front door and ran outside.

"Good, you're all okay!"

All ten of Kiriha's subordinates were just outside, using assembled furniture as

a makeshift barricade. Between their quick thinking and Koutarou's swift return, they were all safe. One of them had been injured, but it wasn't life-threatening.

"You came, Satomi Koutarou!" Crimson called from nearby.

Darkness Rainbow easily spotted Koutarou as soon as he stepped onto the scene. Even though it was the middle of the night, his brilliant blue armor stood out like a beacon. Crimson recognized it on sight, and she was especially wary of it.

"You sure pulled off something elaborate here."

Koutarou stepped forward and stood his ground against the dark magical girls. In response, the six of them stopped attacking to respond to him.

"It would be a pain to have you guys interfere during out showdown with Rainbow Heart. That's why we've come to deal with you first," Crimson said with a smile.

Their ultimate goal in Kisshouharukaze City today had been to take out Koutarou and his allies.

After getting spiritual energy technology from the radical faction and Forthorthian technology from Elexis, Darkness Rainbow didn't necessarily need room 106's mana any longer. But room 106's owner was still a problem. He would undoubtedly try and get in the way during their fight with their longtime enemies, Rainbow Heart. He and his allies were all powerful, so eliminating them early would be the best option.

"So the summoning ritual was to split us up... Specifically, you wanted to draw our firepower away."

"Bingo! As expected from the man who captured Navy-chan. That's exactly right. If we hadn't separated you from those ridiculous allies of yours, we'd never get our chance!"

Dark Orange praised Koutarou with a bright expression that seemed inappropriate for the situation. It was somewhat unnerving. Koutarou could understand why Maki felt so awkward around her.

“It’s six against six now. And now that we’re even, we’re happy to go up against you with our new powers.”

Purple flashed a mature smile full of confidence. Green had come up with most of the plan, but Purple had advised her on some of the finer points. And with things going according to their plan so far, Purple was convinced of their victory.

The biggest problems for Darkness Rainbow in fighting Koutarou and his allies were the Forthorthians and Shizuka. The magicians were ill-equipped to handle their hypermodern and ancient powers respectively. That’s why they’d had to summon huge demons to deal with them. If they couldn’t split up Koutarou’s group entirely, they at least wanted to distract the members with the highest damage potential. In other words, the ritual had never needed to be seen through to completion. They would proceed no matter how many demons they could get. Even one would be enough to divide Koutarou and his allies, and Darkness Rainbow would take that opportunity to attack. That had been the gist of Green’s plan all along.

Yurika, who had been hanging back, then stepped forward and took her place next to Koutarou.

“Purple-san, I don’t care what you’re planning! I’m an archwizard of Rainbow Heart, and I will stop you in the name of all that’s good!” Yurika boldly declared as she readied her staff, Angel Halo.

When Yurika had first taken over for Nana, all she’d inherited was her equipment. But things were different now. She now carried Nana’s love and courage inside her as well. She stood proud as Nana’s successor, Rainbow Yurika.

“That’s a funny thing to hear coming from you. You’re nowhere near Nana’s level.”

“Of course not. But while I’m fighting in Nana-san’s place, you won’t be rid of me the same way.”

Four girls lined up behind Yurika: Harumi, Sanae, Maki, and Kiriha. They were all planning on supporting her, and Yurika was counting on them. She knew her powers alone weren’t all that special. But together, she believed they could

accomplish anything.

“I’m my own person! I’ll fight my own way—and win!”

Against Darkness Rainbow, Yurika was taking the front line for once. But nothing else had changed. Her goals and her methods would still be the same. She and her friends would work together to protect each other, and then they would all return to their normal, happy, fun everyday lives.

The Garb of the Lord, or GoL for short, had a large roaring generator that supplied Koutarou’s armor with a large quantity of energy. Normally, GoL’s role was to eliminate weaker enemies and pave the way for the emperor, but just the improvements it offered to Koutarou’s offense and defense would be a huge help in the current situation.

“Hmm, so that’s the new armor I’ve heard about... How scary.”

Crimson eyed Koutarou’s armor with great interest. This would be the first time Darkness Rainbow had seen GoL, but they’d heard about the way he fought underground from Maya. They didn’t seem fazed at all, however. Even though Crimson called it scary, she still seemed perfectly confident.

“Crimson, that sword dispels mana, so attacking him with just magic is pointless,” Green warned.

“I know. Why do you think I bothered studying science?” Crimson responded as she loaded her cannon.

Her newfound powers should prove effective against Koutarou. They’d learned from Maki some time ago that Signaltin had the power to dispel magic. So instead of using outright magic, they would transform their attacks into physical force. That way, there would be nothing left in it for him to dispel. A cannonball was a lump of steel, and a laser was a beam light. That said, Crimson was a little miffed that she wouldn’t be able to use her favorite spell, Inferno Fire.

“I think a magician firing off lasers and cannonballs is even scarier, honestly.”

“Don’t you think everything changes with time?”

Crimson took the opportunity to level her cannon at Koutarou, and the other

members of Darkness Rainbow raised their own staffs—with one exception. Blue instead held up a large rifle. Since she'd used up almost all of her mana in the ritual, she would be fighting with an enchanted firearm.

"I do. Knights have certainly gotten a lot more modern!"

Sensing that the battle was about to start, Koutarou moved forward with Signaltin in hand. He wasn't naive enough to let a group of magicians get the drop on him. He clenched his sword, and when he did, it began emitting a strong glow.

"Satomi-kun, please go all out! I'll help you as best as I can!"

"Thanks, Sakuraba-senpai!"

Harumi was responsible for the glow of the sword. She was enveloped in the same pure white light that was coming off the blade, and her now silver hair was fluttering. Supporting Koutarou with the powers she'd inherited from Alaia was Harumi's signature role.

"Traaansform, Kabutonga!"

Standing next to Harumi, Sanae struck a heroic pose right out of an anime. When she did, she also began glowing. She was using her spiritual powers to enhance her body. Strength, speed, resilience... All of her physical abilities now exceeded human limits. Sanae chased after Koutarou, leaving a trailing streak of light behind her. Her role would be to back him up.

"Karama, Korama, activate the spiritual energy field! Use the generator's excess output to attack!"

"Understood, ho! Go for it, Ane-san! Ho!"

"Now it's our time to shine, ho!"

Kiriha brandished her naginata that converted spiritual energy into power and stepped out in front of Harumi. Between the naginata and the haniwas, she could help pick off enemies at range, but her primary job was to guard the defenseless Harumi.

"Here we go, Maki-chan!"

"Yes!"

Lastly, Yurika and Maki took up positions on the rear line to support everyone with their magic. Between offensive spells, defensive ones, and diversions, their exact jobs would change depending on the situation. And faced with six other magicians, they would be prioritizing defense today.

In response to Koutarou and the others after they took up their formation, Darkness Rainbow sent Crimson out. She was quick and skilled in close combat, and therefore in charge of the front line for the group.

“Explosion!”

She stepped forward as she fired the cannon attached to her staff. Her first goal was to immobilize Koutarou. The recoil from her cannon shots was considerable, but she didn’t hesitate to fire. She also had five spiritual energy automatons and five unmanned fighter crafts from Forthorthe by her side. Since Signaltin’s dispelling powers wouldn’t work on them, they would be going after Koutarou.

“So what if you have a cannon?!”

Koutarou moved swiftly to the side to evade the cannonball. He avoided a direct hit, but the speeding metal ball clipped his armor’s barrier and drained a surprising amount of energy. It was proof of just how strong her cannon attack was.

“You’re pretty good, Crimson.”

“I’m even stronger than I used to be!”

As Crimson shouted back at Koutarou, the weapons around her began their assault. The cannonball had drained just enough of Koutarou’s barrier that some of the bullets made it through and slammed into his armor. Though they didn’t cause any real damage, it was an admirable combo attack.

“Good job, Green!”

“I do my best!”

Green was controlling the weapons based on predictions she was getting from her future forecast. That was how she’d known exactly where to aim at Koutarou’s barrier—she was targeting its weak points.

“Tch!”

In an attempt to break up the teamwork between Crimson and the weapons, Koutarou took aim at the weapons. He figured it would be easier to go after them than Crimson.

“Not so fast!”

However, none of his attacks connected. Consulting her forecast, Green moved the weapons to positions she knew Koutarou wouldn’t hit. For Green who specialized in magic that supplied her with intelligence of all kinds, automated weapons she could control at will made the perfect familiars.

“One more time, Crimson!”

“Yeah!”

Crimson pulled the lever on her cannon and loaded another ball while Green moved the weapons back into position around her. They were harder to disrupt than Koutarou imagined.

“They’re tough!”

“It’s okay, Koutarou! Leave this to Guardian Angel Sanae!”

However, before Crimson could attack again, Sanae arrived with covering fire. She pulled back a bow made from spiritual energy and let fly a similarly spiritual arrow.

“Hiiiiit theeeeem!”

The spiritual energy arrow split up into several dozen midflight and rained down on the weapons that Green was controlling. Because it had split so unpredictably, not even Green could dodge all of the incoming arrows. The best she could do was order the machines to group together and defend.

“Mass Protection from Soul Energy.”

Just before Sanae’s rain of arrows hit, however, a purple light wrapped around both the group of weapons and Darkness Rainbow. It was Purple’s doing. Since she specialized in spiritual energy and necromancy, she was the best suited to protect against Sanae’s attacks.

“Hmph, you’re pretty good, Purple.”

Because Sanae’s arrow had divided, each one only carried a fraction of the original attack’s power—meaning the worst they could do was crash into Purple’s barrier. Sanae was surprised by this outcome and offered fair praise for her opponent.

“I’m surprised. To think there really was someone with deific levels of spiritual energy here...”

Purple was equally impressed. While she had successfully blocked Sanae’s attack, it had completely wiped out her barrier. Normally it held up for much longer than that, but it could only take one of Sanae’s attacks.

“Karama, Korama!”

“Roger! Let’s go, Brother!”

“Let’s show them the power of the siblings of fire and lightning, ho!”

Karama and Korama generated flames and electricity and took aim at Purple.

“Vacuum Wall!”

But a vacuum in the shape of a wall rose up before them. When the high-energy flames touched it, they were immediately smothered for lack of oxygen. And since there was nothing conductive in the negative space, the high-voltage lightning simply bounced off of it. This spell was courtesy of Orange, who specialized in magic that altered the state of things.

“It didn’t work, ho!”

“These enemies aren’t normal either, ho!”

“Blue-chan, Blue-chan! Aren’t those haniwas totally cute?! Let’s take them home with us!”

“Take this seriously, will you?! Navy was always getting angry at you for exactly this, right?!”

Blue attacked with her rifle as she scolded Orange. She was aiming for Yurika and Maki on the rear line, and her marksmanship was praiseworthy. When she attacked with summoning magic, she would often conjure things from a

distance and use them to attack—like pouring lava over her enemies, for example—so accuracy was important to her. She would also summon weapons sometimes, so she knew her way around guns.

“Maki-chan!”

“Right!”

“Force Field!”

“Force Field!”

Yurika and Maki incanted the same spell in harmony. Since they were using it together, it created a twofold barrier to intercept the rapid-fire bullets headed their way. They crashed into the barrier and shattered the first layer in the blink of an eye, but the second layer held fast. A single barrier would have ordinarily been enough to block bullets, but Blue wasn’t using any ordinary rifle.

“Blue is right. You’ve got to be more serious, Orange.”

“Yellow-chan, you bully! You’re always scolding me!”

The bullets fired from Blue’s rifle had also been strengthened by Yellow, whose specialties were enhancement and defense. They flew faster and farther with her aid, making them all the more deadly.

“We’re just about even, huh?” Koutarou muttered as he readied his sword.

Since both sides had mostly succeeded in nullifying each other’s attacks so far, nobody had actually been hurt yet. That told Koutarou that they were well matched in terms of abilities.

“This is getting fun. Don’t you think, Satomi Koutarou?”

“Don’t just assume I’m like you. There’s no fun in fighting for me.”

“Hmm... Well, I still expect you to be a gentleman and entertain me.”

Crimson leveled her staff at Koutarou again and tossed a sidelong glance Maki’s way.

So this is why you picked him, Maki... I kind of get that...

As if sensing her glance, Maki looked over at Crimson too. She flashed a small smile that was gone by the time she turned back to her target and took aim.

This wasn’t the time to get sentimental. The battle had only just begun.

The two huge demons were more than a match for Theia and the other three girls. While they weren’t as deadly as Tayuma had been, they were still colossal threats.

“Your Highness, I’ve analyzed the strength of their barrier.”

“Hmm, it’s not as powerful as I thought...”

Theia and Ruth were dealing with the behemoth. If it came down to it, they could call in a bombardment from Blue Knight. A massive beast that walked on all fours would certainly be a big enough target to hit.

“I believe one bombardment from Blue Knight would be enough to defeat it.”

“Please keep in mind we’re near an urban center, Your Highness. We’ll have to limit the number of orbital strikes, so I suggest we immobilize the beast first.”

The beast was rather fast for its size. Considering the delay between issuing the command and the actual attack when it was coming from space, they’d need to find some way to at least to slow the target down before using Blue Knight. To that end, Theia readied the rifle in her right hand and charged the behemoth. She was going to attack all of its legs with the fast-moving projectiles of her beam rifle.

“GROAAAR!”

After being attacked by Theia relentlessly already, the behemoth let out a loud roar when it saw her approach. Icy shards flew from its mouth the same way a dragon would breathe fire.

“It’s nothing personal, but...”

Theia made use of her naturally sharp kinetic vision and dexterously manipulated her boosters and her posture control thrusters to seemingly flutter freely across the sky. The behemoth tried its best to shoot her down with its ice breath, but it couldn’t keep up with her movements. In less than ten seconds, she’d closed the distance between them and was right on top of it.

“Sorry, I can’t let you stay here.”

After rapidly unloading her beam rifle at nearly point blank, Theia zipped away from the behemoth the same way she'd closed in on it. And because she'd fired at such a close range, she'd actually reduced the speed of her projectiles in order to increase their density. The denser beams easily pierced the beast's hide and severely damaged its front right leg.

"GRAAAH! GRAAAAAH!"

Driven by pain and anger, the behemoth turned around and tried to shoot Theia again, but with one leg out of commission, it couldn't chase after her.

"Now, Ruth!"

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Waiting for the behemoth to turn towards Theia, who was circling around its right side, Ruth approached the behemoth from the rear left side with the four small unmanned fighters she was controlling. They opened fire on the behemoth's hind left leg. The beast was so focused on Theia that it left itself wide open.

"GROOOAAAAAR!"

The small fighters didn't have as much firepower as Theia did, but they made up for that with their numbers. Lasers from four of them at once succinctly and accurately burned off the beast's tendon that rested on the outside of its shell. The behemoth was assaulted by a fierce pain and fell to the ground with a loud thud. With its front right leg and left hind leg now compromised, it could no longer stand.

"If we were to fight against you alone, the outcome might have been different..."

The behemoth was up against Theia and Ruth as a team. Strictly speaking, they also had four unmanned fighters on their side. When Theia was attacking, it couldn't keep its focus on just her. But if she'd been alone, the beast would have been free to chase her down without worry. The outcome of the fight might not have been so one-sided.

"Blue Knight, bombard the target."

“As you wish, my princess.”

“You’re better off returning home. Try not to get caught up in another summoning.”

Theia looked at the behemoth with pity in her eyes. It had been summoned and forced to fight, so it felt unfair that it had to pay the price for someone else’s cruelty.

“Beginning bombardment.”

“Show it some mercy and finish it off in a single hit.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Theia had learned from Maki that when demons were summoned to Earth, their bodies were created by condensing and hardening mana. Unless the whole body was destroyed, it would never be able to fully return to where it had come from. Theia felt at least some small comfort knowing the beast wouldn’t suffer long as she watched the large caliber laser come pouring down from the sky.

The second demon, the giant, was assigned to Shizuka and Clan. Victory was undoubtedly on their side. It was just a matter of when and how to seize it. Shizuka alone could easily overpower the giant with her draconic powers. The only problem with that would be the aftermath for Shizuka.

“If I transform and defeat it right away, my weight won’t increase that much, right?”

“Yes. That way would be better for the giant, too. And of course, the people of the city.”

“I’m trusting you, okay, Uncle?!”

“V-Very well. I’ll do my best to live up to your expectations.”

The Fire Dragon Emperor was overwhelmed by his new niece, but he unleashed his powers in a grand display to hide that.

With her size body, I think weighing 200 kilograms is perfectly reasonable...

His dragon sensibilities made it impossible for him to understand why Shizuka

grieved her weight so. But nevertheless, he hated to see her sad, so Alunaya resolved to defeat the demon as quickly as possible.

“Shizuka, you should aim for one of these places.”

Clan displayed a hologram of the vital points of the human body. Even though the giant’s body was made of mana, its anatomy still mirrored that of an ordinary living creature.

“Uncle, remember that.”

“Okay.”

As Shizuka unleashed all of her power, she would be handing control of her body over to Alunaya. That’s why she wanted him to remember where to aim. As Shizuka studied the hologram, Alunaya’s mana surged forth, growing bigger and bigger along with him until he assumed his full dragon form nearly twenty meters long. At this point, he bore no resemblance to Shizuka. Her body had safely melded into his and served as a core and focal point for his mana.

“Now, let us go!”

“Good luck, Uncle!”

“Goodbye, young one.”

Upon transforming, Alunaya flew off and left Clan behind. Clan watched him go, and while imprudent, her thoughts turned to something completely unrelated to the battle at hand.

I’m glad I was light when Veltlion was carrying me...

Thanks to Shizuka, Clan had realized one of the major concerns of womanhood that had flown completely under the radar for her until now.

“Shizuka, how shall we attack? We can use my plasma breath, magical attacks, or martial arts.”

Alunaya could breathe plasmic flame and use a variety of offensive spells with his massive mana reserves. He was also pretty confident in his martial arts skills. He was quite sure either would be enough to take out their target, but there was a slight problem. That’s why he decided to ask Shizuka for her opinion.

“Martial arts! Of course we’ll go with martial arts!”

Shizuka’s answer was determined before Alunaya even asked.

“Why?”

“You’re not allowed to waste mana!”

Both his breath and magic attacks consumed a good deal of mana, which was precisely what she wanted to avoid.

“Understood...”

Now with an attack plan, Alunaya flapped his wings and charged the giant. There was always a chance of Shizuka getting hurt too when he fought at close range, which was something that he wanted to prevent at all costs. But since there was something she was even more scared of than getting hurt, he had no choice but to do things his way. Alunaya bared his claws and fangs as he swooped in to attack the giant.

“This is hardly a challenge... Why did I even come?”

Clan was watching over the battle and let out a stiff sigh. Her dragon companion was going all out from the start. First he chomped his opponent’s right hand to prevent any counterattacks before turning around and slamming his mighty tail into the giant. And to finish it off, he sunk his massive teeth into the giant’s neck. Once the giant was dead, its body began crumbling. Its soul would return home and its mana-made body would disperse naturally.

And just like that, Alunaya finished off his opponent without so much as a shout. It was a complete and utter victory worthy of the Fire Dragon Emperor.

“Th-That was terrible...”

Back in fully human form, Shizuka hunched down and held her knees. Seeing this, Clan ran to her side. She was worried Shizuka was injured.

“Are you okay, Shizuka?!”

“No, I’m not...” she said, her face pale.



“Biting the giant was terrible... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget that sensation or taste...”

“What?”

Clan was astonished by Shizuka’s words. She wasn’t hurt at all. At least, not physically. She was just shocked at what she’d experienced through Alunaya’s senses. It wasn’t a real body, and the giant hadn’t actually died, but that wasn’t much consolation to her right now.

“Ah, forgive me. Next time, I’ll temporarily sever the sensory connection.”

“P-Please do...”

Just like how the Fire Dragon Emperor couldn’t understand Shizuka’s worries, Shizuka couldn’t understand the Fire Dragon Emperor’s eating habits. It seemed they would just never see eye to eye on some things. Clan, who was unsure why she’d even come, took the odd niece and uncle duo back home.

The six on six battle between Koutarou’s side and Darkness Rainbow had continued to progress evenly. While Darkness Rainbow had gotten one up on Yurika’s team at the hotel, they hadn’t laid any clever preparations to give them an edge at Corona House. They were well matched against Koutarou and his allies. The balance of power tipped ever so slightly in Darkness Rainbow’s favor, but the support from Kiriha’s subordinates balanced things out. That delicate equilibrium, however, only lasted a few minutes into their battle. Green, thanks to her divinations, was the first to know something was up.

“This is bad, everyone. All the futures where the summoned demons reach the city have suddenly been eliminated. They’re being replaced with futures where Rainbow Yurika’s other allies show up.”

“At this rate, we’ll lose once their reinforcements arrive. How long do we have?”

“The soonest they’ll arrive is one minute. It looks like they have access to some kind of teleportation magic.”

“One minute? Sounds like we’re going to have to settle this fast.”

Hearing Green’s report, Crimson felt rushed to settle the battle. If they didn’t

seize victory quickly, they would end up losing this fight. She was willing to try and make a decisive move in the next minute.

“Crimson, I’m against that. We can’t afford to lose here. This isn’t the battle we should be focusing on.”

Purple, on the other hand, objected. If they went all out now, it could do as much harm as good. Even if they won the immediate fight, if they were too exhausted to escape afterward, it wouldn’t help anyone.

“Attention, everyone. Both summoned demons were just killed.”

Blue knew the second it happened. As the summoner who’d brought them into this world, she magically knew when their bonds were severed. It seemed their fights had gone just as Green had predicted.

“We need to make our decision now. Let’s vote on whether we should keep fighting or retreat.”

Purple was swift to bring the group to a consensus. Discussing the issue further would only be a waste of time. A majority vote would have to do.

“I vote for continuing the fight.”

“I vote for retreating, like I said before.”

Crimson and Purple cast their votes to no one’s surprise. They’d made their intentions clear already.

“I don’t want to run home in defeat. I want to beat them first!”

Orange cast her vote on Crimson’s side. In contrast to her frivolous behavior, she was quite prideful. That part of her was Darkness Rainbow-like.

“I agree on retreating.”

“I think we should retreat as well.”

Reserved Blue and conservative Yellow both sided with Purple.

“What about you, Green?”

“I...”

Green wanted to do what Crimson wanted, but she saw that the chances of

Crimson dying would increase exponentially if they stayed and continued to fight. She couldn't bring herself to agree to it knowing that was the risk.

"...I also think we should retreat. I've made preparations for this."

"That makes it four against two. We're retreating!"

And so Darkness Rainbow decided to retreat. Since it was a majority decision, Crimson and Orange would follow. That is... if they had the chance.

Koutarou wondered why Darkness Rainbow collectively seemed to slow down for a few seconds. It was subtle, but it suddenly felt like they weren't' concentrating on the battle. The reason why would soon reveal itself as Theia contacted him.

"Koutarou!"

"Theia!"

Koutarou continued fighting Crimson as he answered. Crimson responded by suddenly bombarding him to make him move, and by the time he recovered, she was ready to attack for real. Lasers rained down on him, but they were fortunately all blocked by GoL's active barrier.

"Good news! The demons have been defeated!"

Theia sounded proud. Koutarou figured it must have been a complete and utter victory.

"Aha, that's it!"

He also figured that must be why Darkness Rainbow had been temporarily distracted. They were probably weighing their options and their next move, thinking that the odds would be against them once Theia and the others showed up. So Koutarou decided to make his move and close in on them.

In this situation, Darkness Rainbow had two options. They could either keep fighting and try to end things quickly, or force their way through and retreat. Either way they would end up going on the offensive, so it only made sense for Koutarou to try and attack before that.

"Hmm? What was that?"

“Nothing! We’re still fighting over here! Come back as fast as you can!”

“Roger that! Just you wait!”

“Senpai!”

“Yes!”

Harumi controlled Signaltin’s mana as Koutarou advanced, using its power to increase his speed.

“Tch, so you’ve figured it out!”

“Don’t be so sure! I don’t know which option you’re choosing yet!”

Koutarou swung his sword down. Harumi followed up on that by flooding the blade and the area around it with electrical current. A direct hit would probably cause an opponent to faint, but even a glancing blow would stun them. And that was all Koutarou was trying to do. Rather than killing his opponent, he just wanted to slow her down to keep her from going on the offensive.

“Crimson!”

However, that was when Green did something bold. She used the remaining weapons she was controlling to shield Crimson. There were currently seven of them, but the electrified blow from Signaltin took out three.

“That forecast magic again!”

By the time Koutarou was ready to swing again, Crimson was already well out of his range and the remaining four weapons were blocking his path.

“You’re a lifesaver, Green!”

“It’s not over yet!”

Green had more in store. She ordered three of the remaining weapons to self-destruct, and they obeyed without hesitation, blowing themselves to bits.

“Satomi-kun!”

“Uwah!”

At such close range, Koutarou was inevitably caught in the blast. But thanks to Harumi’s quick reaction, his defenses were momentarily enhanced enough to

protect him.

Man, I really let my guard down! To think she'd blow them up like that!

With Green sacrificing valuable combat equipment, it was clear now that Darkness Rainbow had no intention of trying to finish the fight. They would be retreating. That was why they were willing to blow up their own equipment—to make a distraction to get their allies out. Koutarou admired Green's resolve and quick thinking as he kicked himself for his carelessness.

He had expected Darkness Rainbow to go on the offensive even if they were retreating in order to collect Crimson. If they had all attacked together, they should have been able to overwhelm Koutarou and the others long enough for Crimson to get away.

But there was a second option. They could create an opening with an indiscriminate explosion and nab their comrade in the chaos. That was probably why Green had only blown up three of the remaining four weapons. The last one was likely carrying the injured Crimson away right now.

Koutarou hadn't expected them to attack in a way that would injure their own ally. He could barely even conceive of doing something like that because he could never imagine hurting the girls of room 106. But that was normal. He was fundamentally different from the members of Darkness Rainbow, who figured they could just forcibly heal Crimson later.

That said, he couldn't just let them escape. Koutarou hurriedly scanned the area, looking for Crimson. Sadly, the smoke from the explosion was blocking his view, so he tried looking with his spirit sight instead. He was only able to catch a glimpse of things that way, however, because the next moment...

"Negative Energy Burst!"

Purple cast a spell that unleashed an explosion of spiritual energy. It did no real damage, but the dark energy she flooded the area with functionally blinded his spirit sight. Sanae couldn't see anything either, and it even blocked out the haniwas' spiritual energy radar. Moments later, their heat and electromagnetic radiation signatures cut out, and the haniwas lost track of them completely. Orange had cast a follow-up spell to shield them from other forms of detection.

“Harumi, Yurika, Maki! I’m counting on you!”

In this situation, Kiriha placed her bets on their three magicians. With Koutarou, Sanae, and the haniwas disabled, Harumi, Yurika, and Maki were their last hope. Fortunately, because they could sense mana, they might still be able to stop Darkness Rainbow.

“Greater Acid Cloud!”

Yurika cast a spell that created a cloud of strong acid. The plan was to spread the cloud over where Darkness Rainbow was retreating to cut off their path. Since there were six of them, they would likely be able to overcome it easily, but they would at least have to slow down to cast more spells.

“Oh spirits of life that dwell forever within the earth! Gather and beat as a single pulse! And with that powerful pulse, release the restrictions imposed on mortals! Carve! Divine Speed!”

Next, Harumi cast a spell that would greatly increase her target’s speed. As for her target, she set her sights on Maki.

“If we can at least capture one of them...!”

Maki was already running before Harumi’s spell activated. She was holding her staff, transformed into greatsword, firmly in both hands. She ran like the wind and dove into the billowing smoke. All she could see was white, but she was hot on Darkness Rainbow’s heels. They hadn’t bothered to conceal the spells they’d cast, so Maki had no trouble following their mana trail. She also knew Corona House well enough that she didn’t think she’d have any problems navigating it even with compromised vision.

“They’re just up ahead!”

After running through the white smoke for a few seconds, Maki caught up to someone thanks to her knowledge of the area. At that point, the smoke was starting to dissipate, and it quickly became clear who she’d found.

“So you’re here, Maki!”

“Crimson!”

Surprisingly, it was the injured Crimson. She had stayed behind to stop Maki

and buy time for the others to escape.

“Now, let’s finish this!”

A staggered Crimson readied her staff.

“Just stop it, Crimson. What’s the point in fighting anymore?”

It didn’t look like Crimson was in any condition to keep fighting. No matter how strong she was, she wouldn’t stand a chance against Maki in this state. Maki couldn’t even get her head around what Crimson thought she was doing.

“Point? Oh, there’s a point.”

“Like what?!”

“I love fighting. That’s why I do this. That’s enough for me.”

Crimson tried to pull the lever and reload her cannon, but it felt surprisingly heavy. It was an easy feat for her in top form, but she was really struggling with it now.

“And what will you do if you die?!”

“Then that’s that... Don’t you feel the same, Maki?”

“Don’t compare me to you! We’re different!”

They both so badly wanted the other to see eye to eye with them, but they were fundamentally very different people who treasured very different things. That’s why, although Maki and Crimson acknowledged one another, they had to turn their backs on each other.

“But I’m not wrong, am I? You wouldn’t mind dying for what you love either, right?”

“Crimson...”

“Let’s fight, Maki. This is all I have. There is no other way of living for me.”

Crimson leveled her staff at Maki, both arms trembling. She was at her absolute limit, but still wanted to fight. She loved fighting. She couldn’t lie to herself about that, and that was why she chose to keep going even when it would exhaust her completely.

“So you press on with your way of life too. No matter who you’re up against.”

“Fine. I understand. I won’t argue anymore.”

“I’m glad you’re so obedient.”

“But, Crimson...”

“Hmm?”

“I’m not living as Dark Navy, but as Aika Maki. I wouldn’t mind dying for that sake.”

“I see... Good for you, Maki.”

“Thank you, Crimson.”

Maki and Karen had already had to say goodbye, and now Navy and Crimson did as well. They were tearing away from each other and walking different paths in life. It was somewhat sad, but both of them were satisfied with the way things had turned out. They may be walking different paths, but they shared the same resolute determination to walk their own way. And in that sense, they still understood each other.

“Let’s fight, Maki.”

“I’ll defeat you, Crimson.”

And so the final fight between Maki and Crimson began. Of course, the conclusion would be reached just moments later. One strike from Maki easily knocked the enfeebled Crimson unconscious. Maki had won their fight, but the bigger victory was arguably Crimson’s. She’d stalled Maki just long enough for the rest of Darkness Rainbow to escape.

But Maki didn’t regret that. Just like Crimson had chosen to fight knowing she would lose, Maki had chosen to fight knowing that would be the cost. That was just who she was—Aika Maki, a lonely and ordinary girl who cared very much for her friends. And that was how she would live her life from now on.

After the battle between Darkness Rainbow and the Corona House crew was over, Elexis ordered his computer to finalize its data collection and leaned back in his chair to stretch his arms and back. Seeing that, Maya walked over.

“Is it done?”

“Yes. I won’t be able to really tell until I analyze it, but I think we’ve probably gotten the data we need.”

Elexis stretched once more and massaged his own shoulders. He’d been sitting and staring into the computer screen the entire day, and he was feeling it.

“But still... How wicked of you to use Darkness Rainbow as a decoy to gather information.”

“Saying ‘decoy’ makes it sound terrible, but if you look at the bigger picture, this is for their sakes as well.”

“That kind of shallow excuse is just proof you really are a villain.”

Elexis had been gathering information in preparation for the decisive battle between Darkness Rainbow and Rainbow Heart. Knowing things like the frequency of the gravitational waves Theia used to communicate with Blue Knight would help give Darkness Rainbow the edge they needed. For example, by analyzing the information, they could obstruct signals, broadcast fake information, or any number of other things.

“I’m not sure you’re one to talk.”

“Oh? Are you going to call me an evil woman again?”

“I wouldn’t dare. You’re my angel.”

“You really are a villain. I hate you, El.”

“My, my...”

Maya had been doing similar work. She’d been gathering magical readings from a charm she’d given to Purple, so she hadn’t had to spend the day in front of a computer like Elexis. Instead, she’d been lounging on a couch in his room watching things unfold.

“Say, El...”

“Yes, dear?”

“Do you think we can win?”

Maya was almost always wearing a smug, confident grin, but right now, there was unease in her eyes. Even she was feeling nervous about what was to come, considering the scale of it all.

“When you say things like that, you start to sound like a normal girl.”

Elexis in the past might have been disappointed by that, but Elexis as he was now was simply confused by it.

“Everyone has their moments.”

“Well... I can’t even imagine how things are going to play out, but I’ve done all that I can. If this doesn’t work, then there’s nothing I can do and I can give up.”

“You’re right. I think I’ll adopt that attitude too.”

Maya was in much the same boat Elexis was. Showing weakness to others was something she would have laughed at herself for, but for some reason, she had no qualms about revealing herself to him.

“By the way, Maya...”

“What?”

“It’s about if we lose this next fight.”

“I don’t even want to think about that.”

Maya frowned. She had no real confidence that they’d win, but she still didn’t want to imagine losing.

“Well, could you at least hear me out? If we lose... what do you say about going on a voyage across the stars with me?”

“That’s an awfully romantic invitation.”

“No, no, that’s not quite it. I’m inviting you on a rampage across the galaxy with me.”

“As pirates?”

“Something like that.”

Elexis sighed. Upon hearing his proposal, Maya started to return to her normal self. Elexis didn’t dislike Maya’s weak side, but he liked it more when

she stood tall like she was ready to take a bite out of the world. That's why he was satisfied with this result.

"That doesn't sound too bad. I'll think about it."

"All right, then it's decided."

"Hey, I only said I'd think about it. Don't go deciding things on your own."

"If you don't want something, I know you'd say so right away."

"You really are a villain..."

"That's why you're my partner."

"I've been wondering about this for a while, but you're really just making a fool of me, aren't you?"

"Of course not. You're my angel."

"I really do hate you! I won't play pirates with you, either!"

"My, my..."

Maya and Elexis's silly conversation continued for some time. They certainly didn't look or sound like the masterminds behind the party trying to overthrow the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria. That was perhaps the answer to everything, but the two of them were so focused on their goals that they didn't notice.

After repelling Darkness Rainbow, Koutarou and the others quietly returned the children to their homes after using magic to erase their memories of being kidnapped. That kind of thing was especially traumatic for kids their age, and there was also the matter of what they'd seen while kidnapped... So in the end, wiping the children's memories was something they felt they had to do. But since Darkness Rainbow's ritual hadn't drained the children of a life-threatening amount of spiritual energy, the kidnapping incident ultimately came to a peaceful conclusion.

"Jeez, we're finally done..."

Upon returning to room 106, Koutarou plopped down at the tea table, collapsed over it, and let out a sigh. It was nearly dawn now. They'd spent all night resolving the incident, and were rightfully exhausted now that it was over.

“Everyone, go home and rest. There’s lots that we need to talk about, but that can wait until after we get some sleep. Good work tonight.”

Even Theia, who was normally more energetic than anyone, was beat. For her to be in such a condition could only mean the other girls were even worse for wear. Everyone was feeling sleepy from a mix of relief and fatigue. They all wanted to go immediately to bed. All of them, except...

“Please wait. Can I have a minute of everyone’s time?”

Yurika was standing in the middle of the room with a very tense and serious expression on her face. She looked like she still felt like they were in battle.

“What is it, Yurika?” Koutarou asked, slowly lifting his face up from the table.

Seeing Yurika’s grave expression immediately cleared his mind and some of his exhaustion. He was instinctively focused and ready to listen.

“There’s something I would like to ask of everyone.”

Hearing that Yurika was indeed serious, the other girls gathered around the tea table. Yurika waited for everyone before continuing.

“Darkness Rainbow will be challenging Rainbow Heart to a decisive battle very soon.”

That was a conclusion she’d reached after thinking about Darkness Rainbow’s kidnapping stunt and its consequences. Everything had ended well this time because Koutarou and the others had managed to get on top of things and stop them in time, but without them, there was no way to tell how wrong things might have gone. Darkness Rainbow would have a difficult time showing their faces in Kisshouharukaze City now, but that hadn’t stopped them from going forward with their plan. That could only mean that they were in a situation where they didn’t care about that. That was Yurika’s basis for thinking they’d be moving on to bigger prey from here.

“If that happens, I’ll cooperate. That’s what you wanted to ask, right?”

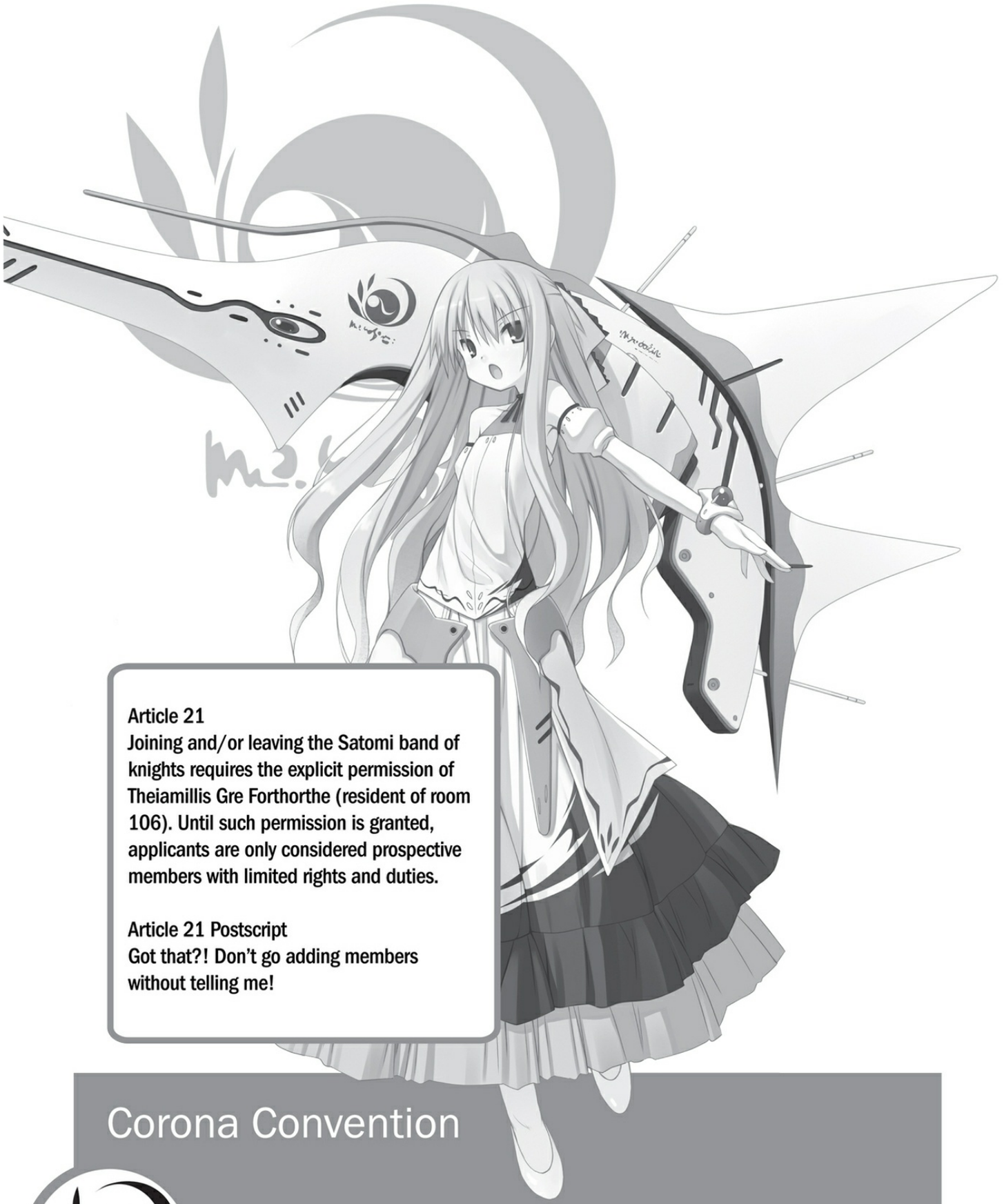
“No, it’s not. Lots of people will lose their lives in this battle regardless of which side wins. That’s why, before it begins...”

Yurika looked at each of her friends in turn as she spoke. After taking a good

look at everyone, a change seemed to come over her. There was a resolve in her eyes and a dignity in her voice there wasn't normally.

"I want to attack Darkness Rainbow's HQ and make sure the decisive battle never happens in the first place! And for that, I need all of your help!"

After growing as a magical girl and following in Rainbow Heart's footsteps, Yurika forsook conflict. That's why it was especially momentous that she'd decided to make a move and attack first. That was just how dire the situation was.



Article 21
Joining and/or leaving the Satomi band of knights requires the explicit permission of Theiamillis Gre Forthorthe (resident of room 106). Until such permission is granted, applicants are only considered prospective members with limited rights and duties.

Article 21 Postscript
Got that?! Don't go adding members without telling me!

Corona Convention

New! September 30th, 2010

Afterword

Happy new year, everyone. It's the author, Takehaya. This time I've safely delivered volume 18, and I hope you enjoyed it. That's right, volume 18 is actually the twentieth installment in the series (thanks to the two side volumes). When I imagine all twenty volumes lined up side by side on people's bookshelves, I get a little excited. There aren't many works that make it this far, much less get an anime. I'm extremely grateful for being blessed with many fans. We're entering the sixth year of the series' run, and I am very appreciative of your continued support. Thank you all very much, and I hope you will continue to support me in the future as well.

Now then, the magical girl arc begins unfolding in this volume and will continue into the next. Since it'll be in two parts, I wanted to get a closer look at some different characters, which is why I focused more on Maki this volume.

With Maki's background in Darkness Rainbow, she has a dark past and various connections. This time around, we got a closer look at her relationship with Dark Crimson. While Maki and Crimson accept each other, they can't quite see eye to eye. They finally clash in this volume, and I honestly think it's one of the best parts. I hope those of you who have finished reading the volume find the conclusion satisfactory.

And since we got a nice portrait of Maki in the first half of the magical girl arc, we'll be getting one of Yurika in the second half. Having become a true magical girl after all this time, she finally resolves herself to fight Darkness Rainbow. The setting will shift to the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria as that happens, but Rainbow Heart and Darkness Rainbow have been fighting for centuries. Whatever resolution there is to be had between them, it won't come easily. Just how will Yurika deal with that? That's what the next volume is all about, so I hope you enjoy it.

I'm actually writing this afterword the night of Christmas Eve. With the new year in sight, I'm finally done with this year's work and am spending my days quite lazily. While taking it easy, however, everything that's happened this year seems to pop into my head. It's been quite a busy year, so there's a lot to look

back on.

Around this time last year, writing started on the scenario for the anime and I was going to several meetings a month. This was also around the time I first met with the voice actors. All the new voice actors looked so nervous they might drop dead, all huddled up in a corner and everything. I remember thinking they were as cute as scared little forest animals. I think I might actually be a little disappointed to hear they've matured enough to grow out of that terrified adorability (ha!). But I do hope they're all doing well.

Not long after that, an initial event was announced. That was about the time I really started to feel like my work was becoming an anime. After that, as the recording sessions began, I started getting really busy with meetings. There was probably a point where I had to stop and wonder if I'd have enough time to work on the novels, but in the end, it all worked out somehow. I think I was busiest during the summer, and before I knew it, the anime was already on air. By August, my work on the anime was gradually dwindling, and the number of meetings started decreasing. Then by fall, the anime was over and I was back to being a regular author.

Once my workload returned to normal, I decided to get a motorcycle license. Seeing the beginner voice actors try so hard, I wanted to try something new as well. That's why I was practicing riding and writing every day during the fall. Doing something you've never tried before is both stimulating and refreshing. The test for the license is something most people don't ever even get to try, so I felt like I was really showing some guts in going for it. However, perhaps because of my age, I failed the exam when trying to cross the narrow plank bridge (ha!). According to the instructor, your sense of balance changes drastically with age. However, he also said that your driving posture is extremely important on the narrow plank bridge. And so, after improving my posture, I passed the exam the next time I took it! In picking out my first bike, I chose something basic and classic rather than anything flashy or adventurous. Recently, I've been taking it for rides to a ramen shop that's pretty far away every once in a while.

As I was getting used to driving my bike, there was an *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* event in the beginning of December. It was fun meeting everyone

involved again after such a long time, and I finally got a sense that the anime was complete. I was also moved that we could pack a 700-person hall with fans. I would personally like to thank everyone who came. And with the final event over, I officially returned to my pre-anime life. It's been half a year since then, and looking back on it all is incredible.

What I've learned this year is that people should challenge themselves to try new things. Between the anime and my motorcycle since, I've begun thinking that ever since I became an adult, I've been passing up on things that weren't guaranteed to be fun or I knew I would succeed at. Maybe I'm relying too much on what other people say. When I was a kid, I never thought about that and dove headlong into all kinds of experiences.

Since most of my readers are high school students, this might not yet make sense to you. However, before too long when you start to become an adult, you might feel your life getting more trivial. If that happens, I encourage you to try something new without overthinking it.

What should I do next year? Since I can feel my stamina going down with each passing year, maybe sports would be a good idea. Maybe I should learn some martial arts. Or maybe play some ball. I still haven't decided, but I'm planning on trying to challenge something new.

That's right, I have some news to share! I don't know if it will have started by the time this volume is released or not, but HJ Bunko will be starting up a new site called "Read it! HJ Bunko." Some short stories from room 106 will be posted there with some regularity, so for those of you who are interested, please check out HJ Bunko's website. I'm sure you can reach it from there.

That's about all the space I have for the afterword, so I believe it's time to wrap it up. Finally, I would like to give my regular acknowledgements. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to everyone at the editorial department, to the illustrator Poco-san, and to all of the readers who bought this volume.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 19.

December, 2014

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 18

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis

Edited by Morgan Dreher

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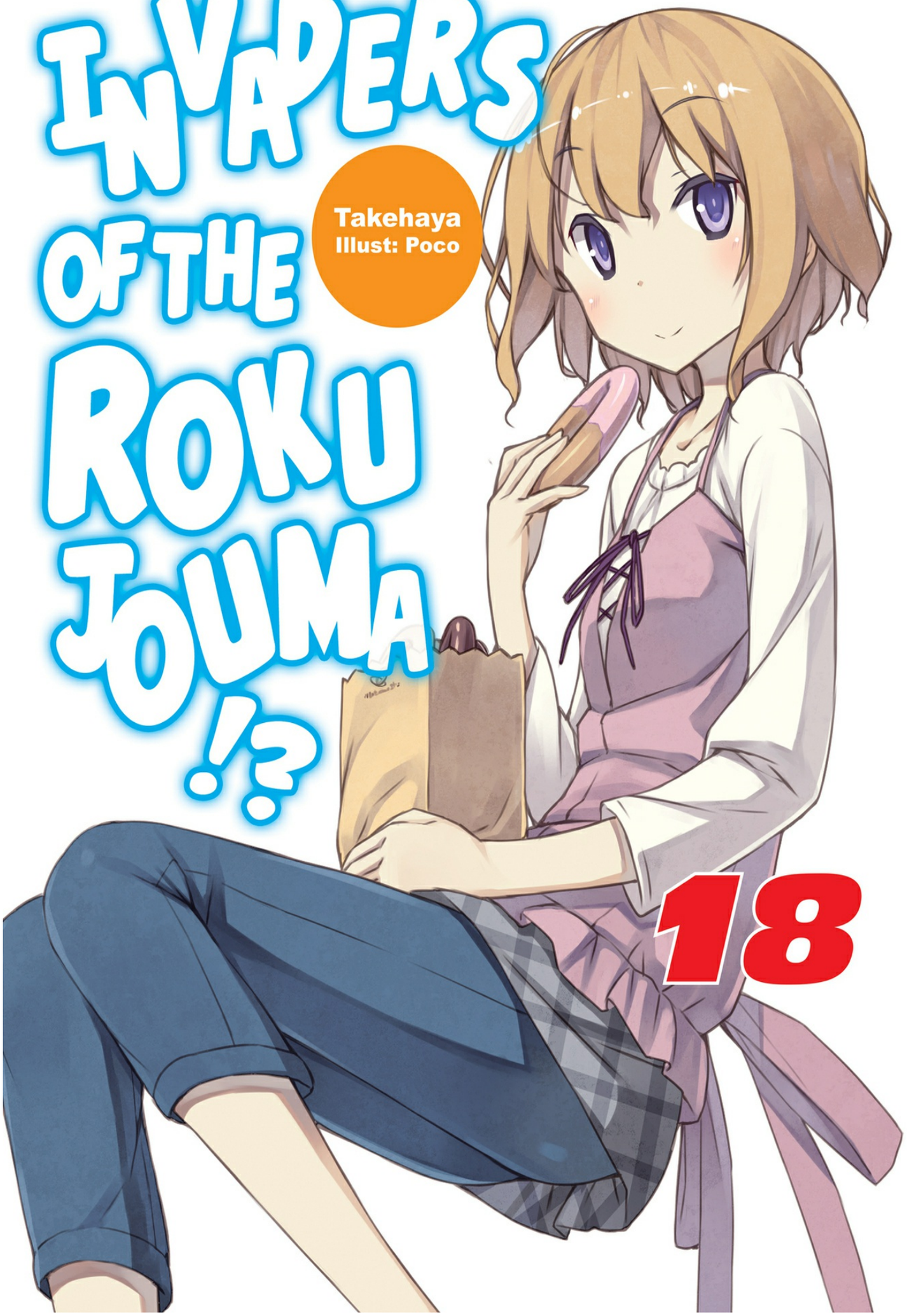
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