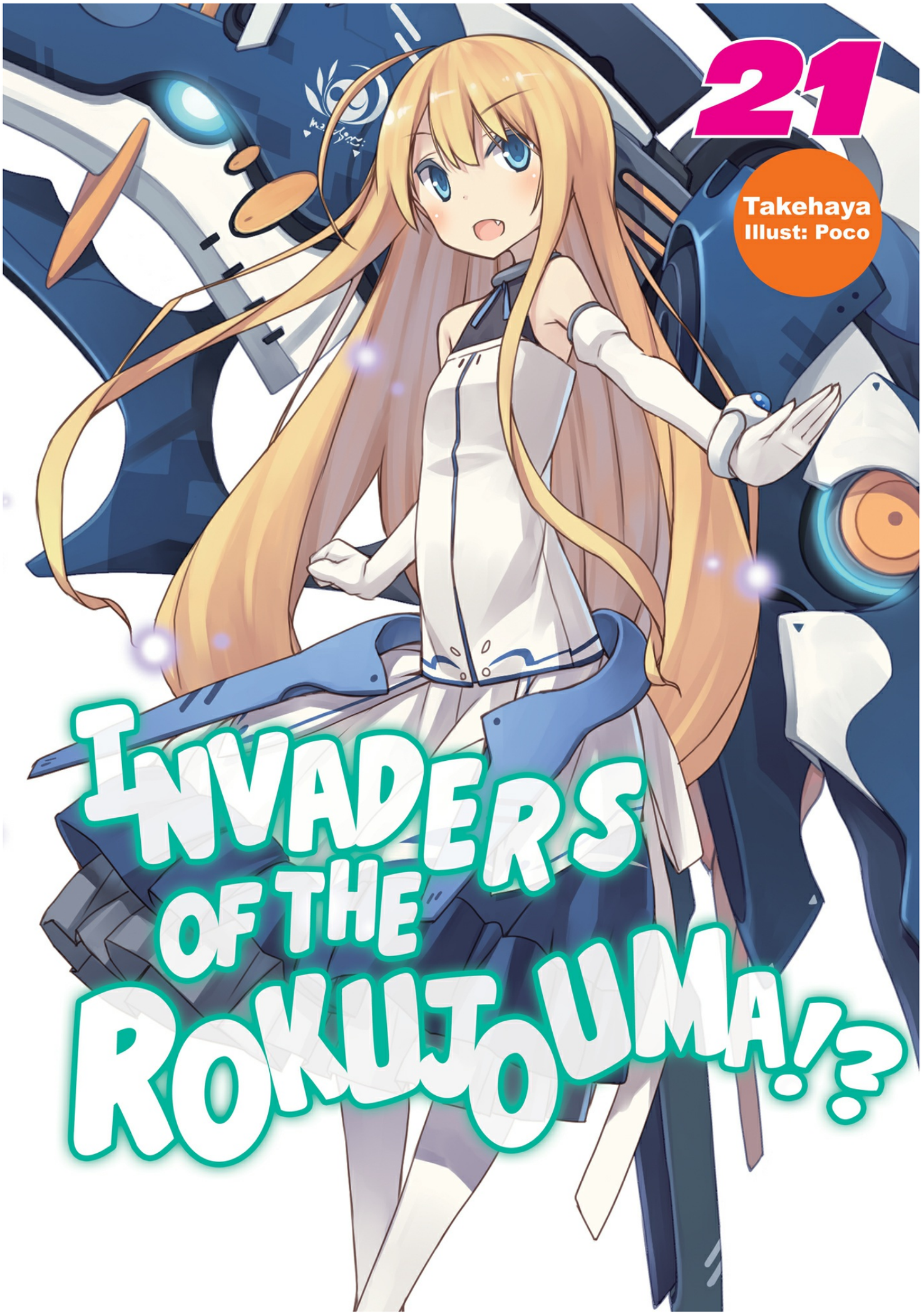

21
Takehaya
Illust: Poco
INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?


INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 21
THE GOLDEN PRINCESS AND THE BLUE KNIGHT


THE SOLDIERS ALL LOOKED FORWARD THROUGH AN OPENING IN THE TREES... BOLDLY STANDING THERE WAS A PETITE GIRL WITH LONG, BLONDE HAIR.
SHE WAS THEIAMILLIS GRE MASTIR SAGURADA VON FORTHORTHE, FORTHORTHE'S GOLDEN PRINCESS.


"CLAN, BE MY SERVANT LIKE BEFORE...
I NEED YOU."
"HEH, YOU'RE THE SERVANT HERE.
WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO GET THAT,
YOU NEANDERTHAL? HEEHEE..."

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From the World of Stars

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

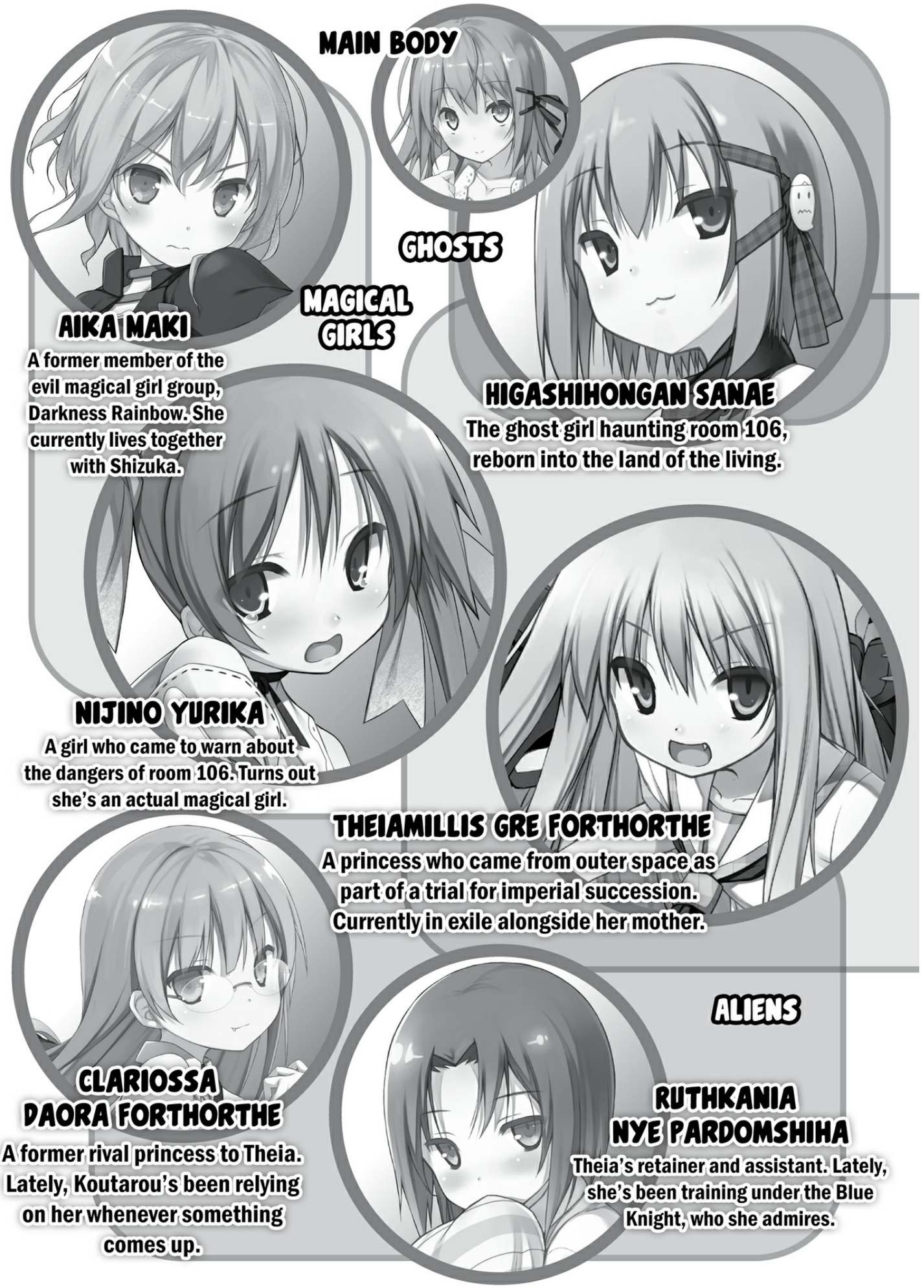
UNDERGROUND DWELLERS



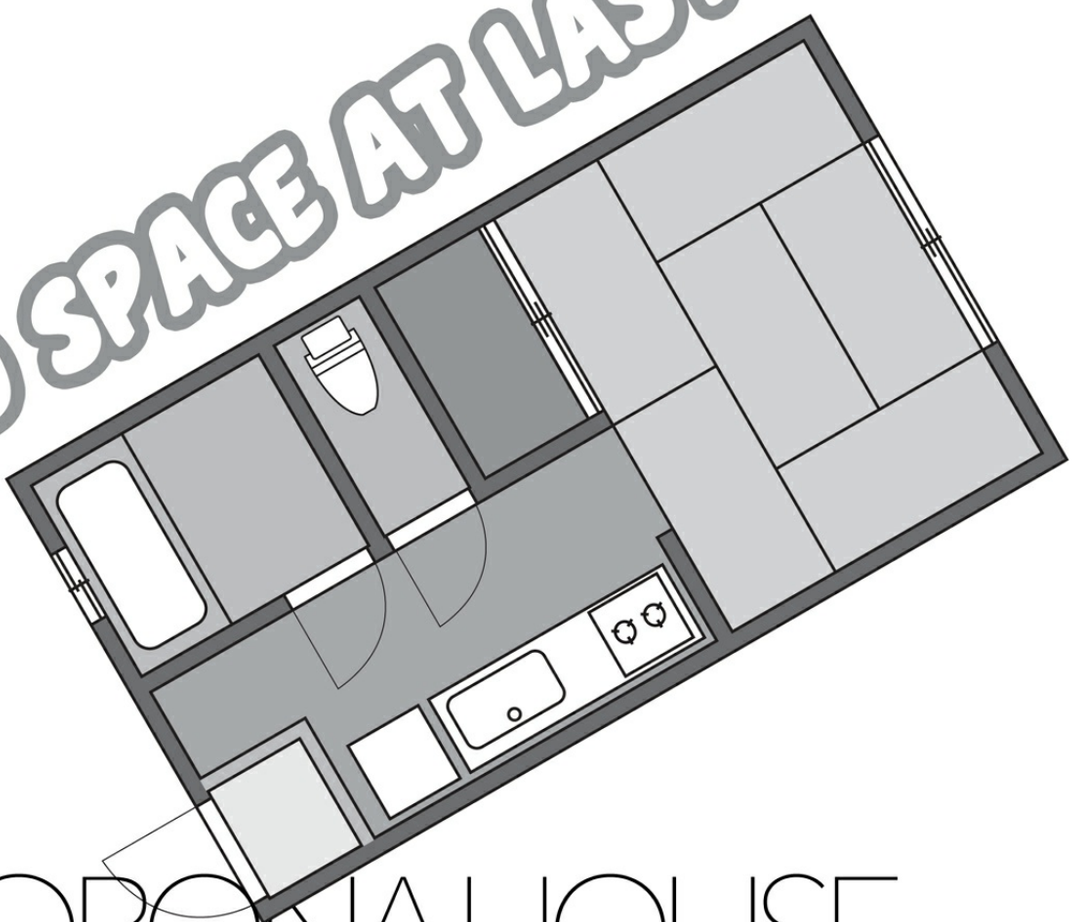
KURANO KIRIHA
A crafty woman who pretended to be plotting to invade the surface while searching for the person she loved.

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.

TO SPACE AT LAST!!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Quickening

Tuesday, October 26th

Forthorthe had what could be considered the space-age version of television, but programs didn't air on set schedules like they did on Earth. Moreover, they didn't actually use TVs. The equivalent device was more like a version of the bracelets that Theia and Clan wore, enlarged to make the projected images easier to see. Said devices were connected to a galactic network and were always kept up to date with the latest information and shows. Both personal and household versions existed, the only real difference being the size.

Forthorthian TV—to call it that for convenience's sake—aired a number of programs and features on the royal families. The most predominant figure of interest, of course, was none other than Empress Elfaria. She'd been sick over the past few months and was convalescing, which heightened the attention on her all the more.

Little did the citizens of Forthorthe know, however, that all the information they were being fed on the empress was fake. She wasn't really sick at all. She'd been placed under house arrest by the military. Her daughter Theia had come to rescue her and taken her to safety on Earth. But the news didn't report a peep on that. No, the story was that Elfaria was simply refusing interviews and public appearances while she was convalescing. The military had already seized the ear of parliament and the media, and was continuously pumping them false information that was then disseminated among the people.

But suddenly, the tune of the story changed one day. The media all at once began reporting that Elfaria wasn't actually sick. It had all been a cover. The *real* scoop was that she'd been accused of several crimes and had thus fled to a planet Forthorthe had no diplomatic relations with—or so they said.

The media wrote off the months of coverage they'd aired about her supposed illness as a polite stopgap. They knew the truth would come out eventually, but

they couldn't just up and report that the empress—the highest and most preeminent authority of the nation—was a criminal without unmistakable, bulletproof evidence. All of the media outlets had agreed on that point.

"The current empress, Her Majesty Elfaria Dana Forthorthe, is now suspected of having embezzled considerable sums of public funds. She is also a suspect in the murder of journalist Curial Maduldin, who attempted to expose her. According to the prosecution, they've gathered extensive evidence against the empress. Based on that, parliament finally decided to make the accusations against her public. A royal family conference will be held shortly to rescind Her Majesty's crown and authority before she's formally arrested. The real problem now is that Empress Elfaria is believed to have fled to a remote planet on the edge of known space, and Princess Theiamillis is suspected of—"

These reports came as a huge blow to Elfaria's supporters. It was clear that they would be painted as rebels next, all for remaining loyal to their empress. Nevertheless, they were proud Forthorthians who remembered the long struggles of their nation. They were no strangers to adversity, and they wouldn't hesitate to stand tall beside their beloved empress and princess until the bitter end. The spirit of the legendary story of Alaia and the Blue Knight lived on through them.

Elfaria's supporters' first move was to inform Elfaria and Theia of the situation. Nothing could happen before that. In order for them to take swift action, they'd need their leaders fully informed.

"The problem is how we get this information to the planet where Her Majesty is..."

Lord Pardomshiha, an older gentleman with a well-groomed beard, stood rubbing his chin as he stared at the monitors reporting various information. In a situation like this where the empress was absent, Lord Pardomshiha served as the de facto leader of Elfaria's supporters. In spite of the grim situation, he would do his best in her stead until she returned.

Elfaria's loyal faction largely consisted of the Mastir family, allied members of parliament, a diehard group of citizens, and two select bands of knights—

Pardomshiha and Wenranka. Both were storied organizations that had served the Mastir family for over two thousand years. They always rushed to the aid of the Mastirs without hesitation, even at dark times like this. They were the epitome of devoted.

“Normally we would just send them a message using hyperspace communications, but the Imperial Army... No, the coup d’etat army would likely detect that.”

Standing next to Lord Pardomshiha was the captain of the other band of knights, Lord Wenranka. The family of Wenranka held the same peerage as the Pardomshihas, the only difference being that they were granted the title of Triumphant Knights rather than the Pardomshihas’ Guardian Knights. They were equal in rank and glory, but as Lord Wenranka had yet to reach the age of forty, he readily deferred to the older Lord Pardomshiha as the commander out of respect. Bravery wasn’t the only thing the Wenrankas were known for; justice and reason were also on that list.

“Then that means our best chance of getting information to them is stuffing it into a pod and shooting it towards Earth from the edge of the solar system.”

“The forces in charge of sending that pod will be risking their lives to do so. Please allow my knights to handle this, Lord Pardomshiha.”

“Are you certain, Lord Wenranka?”

“If Pardomshiha is the shield of the royal family, then Wenranka is its spear. Please allow us the honor of demonstrating that.”

“I would gladly.”

They were desperate to get information to Earth to inform Elfaria of the current situation, but the circumstances barred them from using any of the normal methods to do so. If they used hyperspace communications to send a message over 10 million lightyears away, the source of the broadcast would easily be detectable. That would mean giving away the location of the base, and they couldn’t risk that. They had to come up with something else.

The best alternative was packing up a communications pod and sending it to Earth. Though the Forthorthians referred to such a thing as a pod, it was truly a

spaceship in its own right. Due to its small size, however, it couldn't carry any crew and it moved much faster than a normal ship. It moved so fast, in fact, that accuracy in destination was an issue, but that potential hitch could be overcome by launching multiple pods to ensure at least one reached the target. Though they'd need to be sent from the edge of the solar system, it would still be much safer and more secure than using hyperspace communications.

I just hope this information reaches Ruth...

As Lord Pardomshiha collated the information to be put in the pod, his thoughts turned to his faraway daughter. Elfaria and Theia weren't the only ones on Earth. Ruth, Lord Pardomshiha's daughter, was with them as well. And the information he was sending them would affect all three of their fates. Elfaria and Theia were the top priority as royalty, but it was only natural for a father to be worried about his child.

"I'm counting on you, Lord Wenranka."

With those words, Lord Pardomshiha's voice reflexively grew stiff. Complex feelings he couldn't give voice to were hanging just behind them in the air.

"Leave it to me, Lord Pardomshiha. We will triumph without fail."

But Lord Wenranka was also a father. He knew exactly what it was that Lord Pardomshiha was so unable to say, and he didn't hesitate to accept this important mission with a steely resolve and a bright smile.

Fate's Guidance

Friday, November 5th

Clan's personal spaceship, the Hazy Moon, wasn't officially on Earth. That made it the best possible place to hide the defectors that Theia had brought back to Earth with her mother. In the worst case scenario, they would simply be taken to the Schweiger family. It was common knowledge that the Mastirs and Schweigers were rivals, however.

"Princess Clariossa, there are no words to express our gratefulness for the consideration you've shown us."

That's why the Elfaria faction people couldn't help but feel somewhat confused about Clan's generosity and benevolence. They extended their gratitude any opportunity they got, though that troubled Clan a little.

"There's no need to be so concerned with such things... You are all citizens of Forthorthe, and that's more than reason enough for me to aid you."

Clan had spent most of her life holed up in her lab, and as a consequence, she wasn't particularly skilled when it came to dealing with people. She always felt awkward when people came to her like this, especially if they were thanking her or praising her. Moreover, she felt silly and immature for not realizing sooner that this would be a part of her daily life if she became empress.

"But... don't you have your position as a member of the Schweiger family to consider, Princess Clariossa?"

"Of course I do. And I ultimately intend to prove that I am superior to Theiamillis-san and lay rightful claim to the throne."

Yet in spite of her nervousness, it had already been almost year since Clan and Koutarou had come and gone from past Forthorthe. She spent more time than ever with other people these days. With friends. And that was doing something for her. As of late, she'd even started to get better at handling situations like

this. She wasn't planning on staying immature forever.

"Then—"

"However, I will not do so unscrupulously. I will challenge Theiamillis-san and win, but I will only do so in an honorable manner befitting a royal. Concocting a plot to trap the empress would only bring shame to my family name. Surely you're not suggesting I do something so sinister and underhanded."

"N-No, I wouldn't dare."

"Then it's fine. I only seek to protect Forthorthe and uphold its people, the same as Her Majesty Alaia did. This is what she would have wanted."

"Your Highness..."

The most driving factor in Clan's maturing over the past year was personally meeting Alaia. It was only when she stood next to the legendary Silver Princess that she understood how lacking she was as a princess herself. And so, in pursuing Alaia and her ideals all this time, Clan had slowly been changing. She wanted to eventually reach Alaia's level and, if possible, even surpass her. It was that wish that had made Clan who she was today, and would continue to shape her in the future.

"Princess Clan!"

"Let us see the Blue Knight again!"

After Clan silenced the adults with a smile full of strength and kindness, the children came running over to her. They were after the footage she'd recorded of Koutarou. They loved watching the knight in blue armor and his outstanding performance, and they would pester Clan whenever they could to see it.

"Okay, okay. Just wait a moment... Farewell for now."

"Y-Yes. Farewell, Your Highness."

"Hurry up, Princess Clan!"

"C-Could you not push me? The Blue Knight videos aren't going anywhere..."

"No, we have to hurry!"

"Kyah!"

Clan said goodbye to the adults as the children half pushed, half dragged her out of the room. All told, Clan's exchange with the kids couldn't have lasted more than a few moments, but those few moments gave away a great deal about her and her relationship with the children. All of this came as quite a surprise to Elfaria's supporters.

"It seems Princess Clan is just as splendid a princess as Princess Theia."

"Indeed. It seems our judgment was clouded."

"She's nothing like they say she is... Who was it that called her a sly she-devil?"

"It just goes to show that you can't rely on rumors."

"You've got that right... With Princess Clan and Princess Theia, I think Forthorthe will be all right."

They were indeed surprised, but not in a bad way. If anything, they welcomed the idea of her blossoming into a superb princess. Seeing her now was like a beacon of hope to them in these dark days. It gave them a little faith in a homeland that otherwise felt very far away right now.

Most of all, the children loved seeing Koutarou fight big things. The bigger, the better. Their favorite was undoubtedly his fight against Alunaya. They'd grown up hearing stories of the legendary battle between the Blue Knight and the Fire Dragon Emperor, so seeing Koutarou fight Alunaya was like watching a fairy tale play out on screen. They never got tired of it.

These children probably don't really think Koutarou is the actual Blue Knight... though they may vaguely be able to sense it on some level...

Giving in to the children's wishes, Clan showed them footage of Koutarou that wasn't top secret or would otherwise cause problems if they saw it. But when she watched it with them, she couldn't help noticing that the children made no distinction between "Koutarou" and "the Blue Knight." Their eyes sparkled like diamonds as they watched him fight all the same.

"Princess Clan, Princess Clan! This guy is the Blue Knight, right?"

“W-Who knows? I don’t really know the details myself.”

“Stupid! Princess Clan can’t just admit he’s the Blue Knight! That’s a state secret!”

“Whoa, a state secret? That’s so cool!”

Whenever Koutarou did something, the children would always come running to Clan with questions—first and foremost, whether he was the Blue Knight or not. Clan knew the answer, of course, but she couldn’t tell anyone because of the position she was in. The best she could do was smile wryly and dodge the question.

“He’s flying in the air!”

“Cool! The state secret is flying!”

“He’s glowing, too!”

“The state secret is glowing!”

“Somehow... I feel like I’ve made a terrible mistake...”

Since Elfaria’s supporters on Earth had witnessed the battle against DKI, Clan had no qualms showing them footage of comparable clearance. But in hindsight, she was starting to think that might have been a bad idea. And her intuition was usually right. Though she hadn’t fully realized it yet, the perception that Koutarou was *the* Blue Knight and not just a knight in blue was growing more and more amongst the Forthorthian refugees.

“Clan, are you busy?”

As Clan was racking her brain over what to do about this, Theia unexpectedly appeared in the conference room she was using as a temporary theater. Behind her was Kiriha, and they both looked like they meant business.

“I-I’m not! Welcome, Theiamillis-san.”

“Hey, it’s Princess Theia!”

“You’re right!”

“Princess Clan is so cool! She’s friends with Princess Theia!”

“Yes, well, we *are* both princesses.”

At first Clan was embarrassed that Theia had found her playing around with the children, but their peanut gallery commentary was all it took for her to completely forget about it.

Theia and Kiriha had come to visit the Hazy Moon in order to ask the group's resident scientist some questions privately. In order to facilitate that, the three of them left the conference room where the children were playing around and moved next door.

"So, what do you want to know?" Clan asked casually as she took a seat across from Theia and Kiriha.

"U-Um... Well..."

In stark contrast to the calm and collected Clan, Theia looked troubled and anxious. She couldn't even generate a full sentence, it seemed.

"Theia-dono, would you like me to take over?"

Seeing the state Theia was in, Kiriha offered a helping hand. She'd planned on leaving explaining the situation to Theia while she went to make some tea. The tea was from Earth, after all, so Kiriha thought it would taste better if it were hand-brewed rather than left to the automated machines Clan had. But since Theia was clearly having trouble even getting started, Kiriha offered to intervene.

"No. This concerns me, so I should be the one to say it."

"Very well."

Hearing Theia's answer, Kiriha returned to making the tea. She poured hot water into the teapot and quietly waited while the leaves steeped.

"Is it something serious?"

Reading the room, Clan started getting a little worried. She'd been expecting some lighthearted banter, so the apparent seriousness of the situation took her a little by surprise.

"No, not exactly. Really, I came hoping you could help alleviate my worries about something. Just think of it as small talk."

“All right then...”

“I just didn’t know who else to go to. Heh, how pathetic...”

Theia’s slender shoulders drooped as a wry, complicated smile crept across her face. Seeing that, Clan could tell that, whatever this was about, it was a matter of great importance to Theia. As such, she sat up straight and looked at Theia, quietly waiting for her to explain. They sat there in silence like that for some time. It wasn’t until after Kiriha brought them tea that Theia spoke up again.

“Tell me, Clan... Is it possible to conceive children between Forthorthians and Earthlings?”

That was the question that had been plaguing Theia in the back of her mind for almost a year now. There was no longer any doubt that she loved Koutarou, but if she wished for him to love her in return... It was possible that something as insurmountable as biology might stand in the way. Theia and Koutarou were from different planets; despite the fact that they both looked human, the bottom line was that they were both alien species to one another. The odds that they would be able to breed were incredibly low, and that had always bothered Theia. It meant that even if she got everything she wanted—if she wed Koutarou and he returned to Forthorthe with her—she would never be able to give him a family. Theia and Ruth had promised they’d do everything they could to shield him from loneliness, yet Theia still couldn’t help but worry. That was just how much she loved Koutarou.

But recently, they’d come to discover that the people of the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria and the People of the Earth had descended from Ancient Forthorthe. That had given Theia new hope—hope that the people of Forthorthe and the people of Earth may be able to interbreed after all. After all, there were documented cases of both Folsarians and People of the Earth marrying and having families with Japanese spouses.

And that was ultimately why Theia had come to Clan—to ask if she could do the same. If she were to marry Koutarou, could they have children? To Theia, that question was more important than whether or not the sun would rise tomorrow.

“So that’s what this is about... No wonder you look so serious.”

Finally hearing Theia’s question settled some of Clan’s own doubts. If that was really what she’d come to ask, then it was perfectly understandable why she was so nervous. If their positions were reversed, Clan surely would have felt the same unease.

“Please tell me, Clan! I’m begging you!”

“Er, um... Theiamillis-san, please raise your head! You don’t have to go that far for me to tell you!”

“Thank you, Clan! I owe you one!”

Theia quickly raised her head and lunged forward to grab Clan’s hands in a thankful gesture. The tears welling in her eyes made it perfectly clear just how important this was to her.

“Don’t even think about it. I don’t want you to be indebted to me over something so important. That wouldn’t be fair.”

Clan was satisfied just having seen her tears. They were a rare sight indeed coming from the strong and intrepid Theia. Moreover, Clan also had her pride as a princess to consider. She’d hate to be put in the situation Theia was in right now where her romantic feelings could potentially be used against her. Clan wanted to be a proud, splendid princess in her own right. One that could stand as Theia’s equal. And that was why she had no intention of demanding anything more from her when she was already in tears.

“Then allow me to start from my conclusion.”

To honor Theia’s feelings, Clan would answer her as best she could. And as she began to speak, Theia instinctively held her breath.

“It is indeed possible for Forthorthians and Earthlings to have children together.”

“Are you sure?!”

In shock and surprise, Theia slammed her hands into the table and stood straight up out of her chair. It seemed Kiriha was taken aback as well. She was carrying a tray to the table, and stopped cold in her tracks when she heard

those words from Clan's mouth.

"That can't be... That would mean Earth and Forthorthe are..."

"That's right, Kii. I've already confirmed that their genetic codes are close enough to facilitate reproduction."

From there, Clan began explaining in detail how she'd come to this conclusion.

The first inkling Clan had that something was strange had arisen after Koutarou was hurt during their travels in past Forthorthe. It was a minor wound, but she'd used her first aid kit without any hesitation. It worked perfectly, and Koutarou's wound was healed by the next day. All seemed fine and well, but when Clan stopped to think about it, it struck her as strange. First aid kits from Forthorthe were designed specifically for the people of Forthorthe. The diagnostic devices and medicines they used weren't created with Earthlings in mind. Yet in spite of that, there were no complications when she used them on Koutarou. She had assumed it was because his body structure was similar to that of a Forthorthian and because the wound she'd treated wasn't anything serious; it all could have been a coincidence. As long as it was only for superficial wounds, a Forthorthian first aid kit might even work on animals or other aliens.

But that theory began to lose credibility when yet another coincidence happened. Dextro had unleashed his deadly virus in past Forthorthe by poisoning the local water supply. Yet though Clan and Koutarou both drank the tainted water, they barely showed any symptoms of infection. That was what had given Clan the idea that she could analyze their genetics to find a treatment. Her quick thinking kept the casualties to a minimum, but it also led her to a certain discovery—that she and Koutarou shared similar genetic code.

It was a blessing in the moment. The fact that Koutarou's genetics were compatible with the Forthorthians' meant that he could be used as the basis for the gene therapy Clan concocted to combat the virus and help the villagers. It never would have worked otherwise.

But it was still strange. Really, it should have been impossible. Life on Earth

and life on Forthorthe had developed millions of light years away from each other under completely different environmental circumstances. That should have been obvious in their DNA—the way it was structured, the way it replicated, everything. For example, if the phosphates used to create DNA were insufficient on either planet, perhaps arsenates might have been used instead. Yet no such difference existed between the two, making the gene therapy possible. It was like two computers developed by two different companies miraculously had compatible operating systems.

This puzzled Clan, and she continued to do more research after the fact. But even after a more detailed analysis of Koutarou's genetic code, she couldn't find any difference between his and hers—in other words, between Earthlings and Forthorthians. And if they were that genetically close, it meant they were practically the same species after all. To use the computer analogy from before, it was like finding out that instead of just having the compatible operating systems, the two computers also had identical hardware. It was startling enough that Clan had redone her analysis over and over, thinking it couldn't possibly be right. But after 22 tries and identical results, she was forced to face the facts.

Of course, Clan knew that if she shared this discovery with anyone that they would immediately assume she was crazy. It was just that mind-blowing. The probability of these similarities developing on their own—naturally and coincidentally—was so astronomically low that it was simply hard to believe. But as a scientist, Clan had to accept the truth, no matter how farfetched it seemed.

"...So unless I'm the kind of fool who could yield faulty results 22 consecutive times, I can say definitively that Forthorthians and Earthlings are the exact same species of human."

Clan wrapped up her explanation with a very serious expression on her face. Theia had come to her for answers, and Clan had given her exactly that. But she knew the words that had just come out of her own mouth were so incredible that Theia's response might simply be to laugh in her face.

"If that is the case, then that gives rise to one major question."

Yet at the very least, Kiriha wasn't laughing. This was a serious conversation and it was important to Theia and Clan. She wouldn't dare laugh over something like that. Moreover, as far as she was concerned, there was something even bigger at stake here.

"If Earthlings and Forthorthians are the same species, then the same species must have purposefully been placed on two different planets."

"I also believe that to be the case. The chances of the same species independently appearing on two distant planets at the same time are so low that it would realistically never happen even if you repeated the history of the universe several times over."

The odds that two intelligent life forms had even encountered each other in all the vastness of space was nearly unbelievable to begin with. It was one thing that they existed, and another altogether that they'd managed to develop and prosper simultaneously. If just one factor in the equation had been shifted forward or back a couple of thousand years, none of it would have been possible. It was far more likely that Forthorthians would discover the ruins of ancient alien civilizations than any actual aliens.

But not only had they met aliens on a distant planet, said aliens turned out to be the exact same species of human that the Forthorthians were. That had to mean they'd evolved on similar trajectories, they shared identical genetic structures, and they could interbreed. The real question in Clan and Kiriha's minds was then this: could such a coincidence really be just a coincidence? Both of them firmly believed the answer was no. They couldn't deny that there was a nonzero chance that it was indeed all random, but it made far more sense to believe that there was something else at play. Indeed, faced with the facts, it seemed obvious to them that life had intentionally been placed on both planets, which would mean they had stumbled upon what was potentially the greatest mystery of the universe. But Theia interrupted all talk of this by slamming her hands on the table.

"You can save thinking out the science stuff for later!"

The conversation had gotten away from what she wanted to know, which was the only thing she cared about in the moment

“I need to hear you say it again, Clan! Could Ruth and I bear Koutarou’s children?! Could we give him a family?!”

Would they be able to share that kind of bond? Compared to the importance of that question, Theia didn’t care about the mysteries of the universe. The only thought that filled her mind was whether or not she and Koutarou would really, truly be able to become a family like any ordinary man and woman would.

“Yes, it’s a very realistic possibility,” Clan said with an affirmative nod.

Because it would be ethically questionable, Clan hadn’t actually experimented on whether or not fertilization was possible. However, according to her computer simulations, the success rate should be comparable to two Forthorthians trying to conceive. There would be no way of knowing if that was really true or not without empirical proof, but all signs were good.

“Of course, it’s not like you’re of a marriageable age yet.”

“But, but that means it is possible... Ruth and I can have Koutarou’s children... We can give him a family...”

After hearing Clan’s full response, Theia slumped down on the floor as all of the tension drained from her body. She put her hands on the floor and repeated what Clan had said over and over in a mumble. This question had been weighing on her for months, and to have that burden finally lifted from her shoulders came as a great shock.

“Then as long as that’s what he wants, we...”

As the seconds passed, the shock faded and gave way to relief.

“Hngh... Hic...”

Tears welled in Theia’s eyes, spilling down her cheeks in large droplets before tumbling to the floor. Drip, drop... One after the other, they fell like rain.

“I’m, hngh... I’m so glad...”

“Even if there are some complications, your genes are similar enough that I should be able to help you there. So rest easy.”

“Isn’t that wonderful, Theia-dono? Now you’ve lost your handicap.”

Clan and Kiriha warmly watched over the crying Theia. Tears were starting to form in their eyes as well. They both understood the pain and fear of imagining a future where you couldn’t be with the one loved.

“Hic, hnnngh... Waaaaah!”

Eventually, Theia’s tears burst into full-on sobbing. Clan and Kiriha did nothing to interfere, however. They simply let her cry, for they knew that these new tears were tears of happiness. Happiness that the pain and fear Theia had dreaded for so long were now gone.

Room 106's Portrait

Saturday, November 6th

Considering the current situation, marriage was out of the question. Politics aside, Theia also had Koutarou's feelings to take into consideration. Forcing herself on him wasn't what she wanted. Moreover, even if they were to marry, children would be much further down the line. Theia was well aware of that, but now that she knew everything she'd dreamed of was possible, she couldn't help thinking about it constantly. That was true even now, as Theia stood in front of the bookstore, gazing over the magazines that were just released today.

"A special feature on raising children, huh...?"

These magazines were something she normally had no interest in, but a certain something had snagged her attention and just wouldn't let go. One magazine had a couple pushing a stroller on the front, and it instantly sent Theia's mind spinning over possibilities for the future. She couldn't help imagining her and Koutarou on the magazine cover instead.

"But... for me to buy something like this..."

Despite her growing desires, Theia knew that buying a magazine like this would be entirely out of character. She was an active, bold, aggressive girl. What business did she have reading a parenting magazine? Her common sense and pride prevented her from picking it up, yet she couldn't just walk away. As a result, she ended up just standing there and staring at the magazine for some time.

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?"

Before long, Ruth emerged from the bookstore. She'd come to buy a recipe book, so the trip here was actually her idea. Theia had simply tagged along.

"I-It's nothing. Nothing at all."

Theia blushed a little and quickly looked away. She didn't want Ruth to know what she was doing.

"Oh? If you say so..."

Theia's reaction, however, struck Ruth as odd. She glanced over at what Theia had just been looking at and spotted the magazine almost immediately.

So this was what caught Her Highness's eye...

Ruth knew it when she saw it, because she too had heard the news that Forthorthians and Earthlings could have children. It was incredibly easy for her to understand what was going through Theia's head because she was thinking and feeling the exact same things. Moreover, as Theia's childhood friend, she knew just what to do for her at a time like this.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness. I forgot to buy something. Would you mind waiting here for me just a moment longer?"

"S-Sure."

Ruth flashed a small smile, went back inside, picked up a couple of the magazines at the storefront, and headed back to the register. The magazine Theia had been eyeballing, of course, was among her haul. Ruth wanted to get it for her, but she knew it would be awkward and hard for Theia to accept if that were the only magazine she bought. If she bought several, however, she could pick it out of the pile at her leisure and simply claim that she was reading it because she was bored or some such. Ruth knew Theia well, and there was no more considerate or steadfast friend to have.

Upon returning to room 106, Ruth set the bag of books and magazines from the bookstore on the tea table and then got to doing the housework. Things like cleaning the bath, preparing dinner, and doing the laundry could all be done automatically by Forthorthian machines, but Ruth enjoyed doing it all by hand. She considered housekeeping a hobby of sorts, and treasured it because she believed it would mean something extra special in the future.

"Hmm..."

Sitting in the inner room, Theia intently watched Ruth from a distance. There was something she wanted to do, but she didn't want Ruth to see her do it. She

waited patiently, and when she saw a humming Ruth enter the bathroom with gloves and a sponge, she took it as a clear sign she was cleaning the bath. That should keep her occupied for a while.

“All right.”

After waiting for Ruth to close the bathroom door behind her, Theia quickly crawled up to the tea table and pulled out the contents of the bag sitting on top of it.

“Here it is...”

Theia plucked the parenting magazine out of the stack—the very same one she’d been staring at in front of the bookstore.

“I-In these pages, our f-future together is...”

Theia tried to keep her pounding heart from leaping right out of her chest as she flipped through the pages. She was so nervous that her hands were trembling. One of the first things her eyes fell upon was a picture of a young wife smiling at her baby fast asleep in a crib.

“Ah...”

The moment she saw the photo, Theia was completely enthralled. She carefully turned page after page, staring closely at each picture. It was like she was seeing her future become more and more clear. In the end, she didn’t read a single word of the actual feature; she was content just looking at the pictures of happy families as she imagined herself with her future husband.

A-A wedding ceremony... Yes, there has to be a proper wedding before children... After swearing our love before the goddess, we will... he and I will live together with Ruth and mother. We’ll have fun together every day and raise our children with love... and then... and then...

Indeed, Theia saw herself with her future husband in each and every photo of the magazine. Rather than strangers, she saw herself with the man she loved, surrounded by family and friends. Her children, her best friend, her mother, the other girls of room 106... It was like she was seeing her ideal future unfold before her very eyes.

“Then... Then there’s the housework... If he does it, j-just how much should I let him do? Ruth will probably want to do the housework anyway, so... Augh, what should I do?!”

Theia’s excited mind raced with possibilities as she continued to flip through the magazine. Right now, she wasn’t the iron-willed princess the people of Forthorthe knew her as. No, she was just a normal girl yearning for a normal future. And Ruth watched over her with a smile all the while.

“Oh, Your Highness... Heehee.”

Theia was so absorbed in the photos that she was oblivious to how much time had passed. Ruth had finished cleaning the bathroom some time ago, but she didn’t mind. This was exactly why she’d bought Theia the magazine, after all, so she decided to let her be for as long as she liked.

“I’m home.”

Currently, Theia just so happened to have the magazine open to a picture of a couple standing at their front door. So when she heard Koutarou call out, she reflexively replied...

“Welcome back, darli—”

Realizing what she was about to say, Theia interrupted herself by clapping a hand over her mouth. And it wasn’t a second too soon.

“BWUH?!”

Upon snapping back to her senses, Theia blushed furiously at the word that had almost left her mouth. Worse yet, Koutarou would see what she was doing. She quickly shut the magazine and stuffed it in the pile with the others on the table. Not a moment later, Koutarou walked in.



“Huh? Is it just you here, Theia?”

“...”

Upon entering the room, Koutarou saw Theia sitting stiff as a board all alone except for the stack of books and magazines on the table next to her. Looking closer, he saw that her face was red.

“What’s wrong, Theia? Did something happen?”

Confused by the present situation, Koutarou sat down next to Theia and got a good look at her. When he did, she began fidgeting.

“N-No, nothing! Really! Nothing at all!”

“You don’t say...”

Koutarou glanced over at the tea table. There was a stack of magazines all sitting atop one another, but the cover of the magazine Theia had been reading was peeking out. It caught his attention, but when he went to reach for it, Theia nearly yelped.

“Right! I was, um, well, uh...”

She was speaking loudly, but she was at a complete loss for words. Her mind was utterly blank. She needed an escape, but there was none in sight.

“What’s up? You can tell me.”

Theia was clearly acting strange—strange enough that Koutarou was starting to worry. He looked at her with a concerned expression. Now that he knew and accepted how important the girls were to him, he wasn’t about to let something like this slide.

“I-I-I... uh... ah... augh...”

However, Theia and her overheating brain were unable to offer a satisfactory answer. She was getting worked up over not being able to say what she wanted, which only sent her running in bigger and bigger circles. It seemed making noises was the best response she could give him right now.

“Actually, Koutarou...”

Fortunately, that was about when a lifeline entered the room—Kiriha. She’d

gotten home not long after Koutarou, and now took her usual place at the tea table as she turned to Koutarou.

“Theia-dono’s bra size has increased. Try to be more considerate.”

There, Kiriha pointed to a fashion magazine sitting in the stack.

“Ah...”

With that red herring, Koutarou assumed that Theia was embarrassed because she’d been looking at new bras and offered her a wry apology.

“S-Sorry, Theia.”

“What? O-Oh, d-don’t even mention it...”

Thanks to Kiriha quick wits, Theia managed to avoid further interrogation. Ruth silently bowed to her from behind Koutarou so that he couldn’t see her. Really, she was the one who’d asked Kiriha to intervene. Since she’d been with Theia when Clan delivered the news, she knew perfectly well what Theia was going through and didn’t hesitate to help.

Even though she’d just dodged a bullet, Theia continued acting strange afterward. She simply couldn’t help it. Whenever she was with Koutarou, her mind wandered back to that magazine. Ruth and Kiriha were helping to cover for her, but at this rate, it was only a matter of time before Koutarou picked up on what was really going on. Fortunately, the reason that hadn’t happened yet was because there was a distraction in the apartment. Indeed, room 106 was currently blessed with an unsual visitor.

“Play with me, Layous-sama. I’m bored.”

That visitor was Theia’s mother and the current ruler of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Empress Elfaria... who was currently sitting listlessly next to Koutarou and leaning on him. She didn’t look much like a mother, much less an empress.

“Come on, Elle. You’re in front of your daughter. Can’t you be at least carry yourself properly? Sit up straight already!”

“There you go, acting like a caretaker again...”

“If you don’t shape up, I’ll call you ‘Your Majesty.’”

Elfaria was proving to be a big enough disturbance that Koutarou failed to notice something was still up with Theia. Theia might have been embarrassed otherwise, but for now, she was grateful for her mother.

“Then what will you call me if I *do* act proper?”

“...I’m going to hit you.”

“Just call me Elle-chama—”

Thud!

“Augh... You’re as violent as ever! I can’t believe you’d hit the empress...”

Koutarou’s annoyance planted a goose egg smack in the middle of Elfaria’s forehead, which she clutched with tears in her eyes. It was a very Yurika-esque thing to do, but there was a decided difference between her and Elfaria.

“...So, what did you actually come here for?”

“Honestly, I think the citizens I brought along with me are starting to get cabin fever again, so I was wondering if you guys might help me out like you did last time.”

As soon as the subject turned serious, so did Elfaria. She sat up straight, looked Koutarou in the eye, and spoke clearly as she asked for his help. Rather than a careless fool, she now looked like a dignified empress. The girls who were observing this exchange were aghast at the sudden change.

“Come on... Why didn’t you just say so from the start?”

Koutarou, however, was unfazed. If anything, he’d expected this. He knew Elfaria’s true nature, after all.

“Heehee, well... If I start off silly and then get serious, I knew you’d end up saying, ‘Oh, so you *did* have a proper reason for coming here after all. I guess I’ll help.’”

“You didn’t have to do that for me to—”

“To help the citizens that Alaia-sama protected?”

“...Yeah.”

“But I want you to say that you’ll do it for the sake of Elle-chama and Theia-chan’s beloved citizens.”

Koutarou sometimes caught a glimpse of Alaia in the Forthorthian royals. Unlike Theia and Clan, the older Elfaria had noticed that—and she found it somewhat irritating. That’s why she tried to get Koutarou to see her for who she really was with her eccentric conduct, which also helped keep his attention off Theia for now.

“Take that.”

Thud!

“Ow! What are you doing?! I was going somewhere nice with that!”

“But you tried to sneak that ‘Elle-chama’ crap in there again.”

“Of course I did! I *am* Elle-chama!”

“You good for nothing empress... What am I going to do with you?”

Aside from her daughter, Koutarou was really the only person Elfaria felt like she could be herself around. The time they’d spent together twenty years ago was still fresh in her mind. It felt like it was just yesterday to her. Koutarou was, after all, her hero and her first love. He was the one true ally the royal families had. And in truth, the citizens weren’t the only ones worn down from being away from their home country—Elfaria was too. She treated herself by coming to see Koutarou, but her adult obstinacy and seriousness prevented anyone else from realizing that.

Fortunately for Elfaria, Koutarou and the others accepted her request without hesitation and agreed to take her and her citizens out on the next holiday. Human hearts are fragile, no matter what planet they hail from. In fact, the farther you are from home, the more obvious that is.

“Layous-sama, I want to try this beautifying bath!”

“The hot springs huh? That looks good.”

The citizens would be split between tour buses to go sightseeing where they pleased. For security reasons, however, Elfaria couldn’t join them. Instead, she

would be escorted by Koutarou and the others on a personal sightseeing trip. Currently, they were discussing their destination.

“I have to stay beautiful for the sake of my citizens and my daughter, you know!”

Elfaria had discovered a tourism magazine in the stack on the tea table. She’d spotted a picture of an interesting hot spring while flipping through it, and had claimed to be “in a hot springs mood” ever since.

“Wouldn’t you be happier that way too, Layous-sama?!”

“Theia, Elle is saying stupid stuff again. Help me put her in her place, please.”

“...”

“Hey, Theia?”

“H-H-Huh?! S-Sorry, I wasn’t listening...”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You’ve been acting strange today.”

While Elfaria had thrown him off Theia’s trail thus far, even Koutarou could tell that something wasn’t right when Theia didn’t answer him. Concerned she was lacking her usual vigor, he looked right at her.

“I-I’m fine! Everything’s fine!”

“But you...”

Theia’s face was red and she was spacing out a lot. To Koutarou, she was acting like she might have a cold. So to get to the bottom of this, he reached a hand out and pressed it against her forehead.

“...Well, you don’t seem to have a fever.”

“Huwah?!”

It took Theia by surprise. Really, it was a common gesture between the residents of room 106. It was the easiest, simplest way to see if someone had a fever, after all. Koutarou had even done it to Theia personally several times before, but today... His hand felt strangely hot on her forehead. She just couldn’t help being extremely conscious of him touching her.

Theia loved Koutarou, but because he was an alien, some part of her had long

given up on the idea of ever having a real relationship with him. Reality had pumped the breaks on her feelings, but the news Clan gave her the other day turned her world upside down. Looking at the magazine had only made it worse, and now her heart was surging forward full steam ahead. It was like the breaks had been cut; she certainly wouldn't be slowing down any time soon.

"It's nothing! N-N-Nothing! Nothing at all, you jerk!"

"Wh-Wha—?! Hey, what's gotten into you?!"

Theia was spinning her wheels so hard that smoke was practically coming out of her ears. She had no idea how to react, and so defaulted to her usual response—attacking Koutarou. She grabbed hold of the hand on her forehead and put him flawlessly in a joint lock. It perhaps wasn't the best way to handle the situation, but it would at least shut Koutarou up for the time being.

"Owowow, I just wanted to know— OW! That really hurts!"

"I don't know! I don't care! I don't know!"

"Mercy! Mercy!"

"Ugh! Just drop dead!"

Yet despite having the physical upper hand in this situation, Theia was the one losing here. After putting Koutarou in a joint lock, the two of them were even closer than they'd been before. It set her heart racing all the more. She felt like it was right about to burst.

"Heehee, Satomi-kun and Theia-san sure are full of energy today."

"Ruth-san, what's up with Theia-chan?"

To Harumi, it only looked like the two were having fun. But Shizuka saw it differently. She was watching Theia with wide eyes. Seeing this, Ruth smiled and walked over to her.

"Shizuka-sama."

"Yes?"

There, Ruth leaned in and whispered into Shizuka's ear...

"Actually, we recently found out that Earthlings and Forthorthians can have

children together. So after finding out that she could have a normal relationship and marriage, Her Highness doesn't know what to do..."

"Really?! Isn't that great, though?! You're happy too, right, Ruth-san?!"

Hearing the circumstances, Shizuka's expression immediately brightened up. Ruth flashed a big smile too and nodded.

"I am! Her Highness had nearly lost heart... but I think it must have nearly leaped out of her chest when she heard the news."

Of course, the news didn't apply to just Theia. Ruth was a Forthorthian too, after all. And while she didn't know what would actually happen in the future, just knowing that it would be possible to have children with the man she loved inspired a brand new optimism within her.

"I guess I always just assumed that, so I'm surprised to hear that it was even a question..."

Harumi smiled at her two friends, having already heard the news. Not being particularly versed in science, it had never dawned on her previously that there might be any kind of complication with Earthlings and Forthorthians having children. They both looked human to her, after all. But though she didn't understand the scientific implications of the news, she knew its meaning was well worth celebrating. Kiriha and Maki, meanwhile, had much more complex reactions.

"As for me, I'm somewhat perplexed to learn that I'm a descendant of aliens."

"Yes, me too."

Kiriha knew that Maxfern and his alchemists brought their culture and technology to the ancestors of the People of the Earth, but as they were aliens, she'd never expected that she was descended from them directly. With Clan's testimony, however, it seemed that was indeed the truth.

Maki's case was somewhat simpler. She had only just learned that Folsarians were the descendants of Forthorthe, so learning that their genetics were comparable with Earthlings didn't shake her but so much. Nevertheless, it was still a surprise.

“What about me, then?” asked Yurika, who wasn’t wholly unrelated to the business involving Folsarians.

“You don’t need any more funny business going on.”

“Sanae-chan, what’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Since Yurika was born with mana, it’s possible that she might be a descendant of a Forthorthian too...”

In Clan’s eyes, that was a distinct possibility. Yurika had been born to an ordinary Japanese family, but she had a remarkable capacity for magic compared to other Earthlings. Rather than assuming that it was a coincidence, Clan thought it was more likely that she carried the blood of Grevanas’s magicians.

“So that means me, Koutarou, Harumi, and Shizuka are the only real Earthlings?”

Kiriha, Maki, Yurika, Clan, Theia, Ruth, and Elfaria were either pure Forthorthian or likely had Forthorthian blood running through their veins to one extent or another.

“Heh, in other words... That means the direction of your cosplay’s been wrong all this time. You should’ve been dressing as an alien. Maybe everyone would’ve believed you then.”

“I’m not sure what I think about you putting it like that!”

“...Hold on, Sanae. That might not necessarily be the case.”

There, Kiriha joined in on the discussion. Something about what Sanae had said that caught her attention.

“What?! Are you saying cosplaying as a magical girl was the right thing to do?!”

“It’d be correct either way!”

“That’s not it—”

“Are you saying I shouldn’t have been a magical girl after all, Kiriha-san?!”

“I meant it’s possible that almost everyone in this region has Forthorthian

blood.”

Sanae had said that there were four “real” Earthlings in the room, but Kiriha wasn’t so sure. Maxfern and his people had come to the area that was now known as Kisshouharukaze thousands of years ago. They may have been few in number, but so too was the native population at the time. After enough time and intermingling passed, it was quite possible that almost everyone in the area had some Forthorthian blood in them. It was possible that’s what had triggered Yurika awakening to her magical abilities. And it was even possible the same applied to Harumi, Shizuka, Sanae, and Koutarou.

“That might be true. When I was in Darkness Rainbow, we were mostly active around this area.”

Darkness Rainbow operated worldwide, but their activities had always been centered on Kisshouharukaze City. There were far more children born with abundant mana here than anywhere else. That made it convenient for recruiting members, gathering sacrifices, and many other things.

“So in other words... Layous-sama was already of a lineage fitting enough to become a knight of Forthorthe.”

Upon reaching that conclusion, Elfaria’s eyes began sparkling. Maxfern and Grevanas were without doubt criminals, but Forthorthe wasn’t the kind of country that held people responsible for the sins of their ancestors. In fact, Maxfern’s niece Lidith and Grevanas’s subordinate Caris weren’t even punished in Alaia’s time. Instead, she promoted them to important positions as her loyal retainers. There was no way the royal families would hold Maxfern and Grevanas’s descendants accountable for what they’d done thousands of years in the past. No, it was far more important that they were of Forthorthian blood. Moreover, it was potentially the Forthorthian blood in the area that had eventually given birth to the Blue Knight that went back in time to save Alaia.

“Aaaaand that means we have to transfer the territory confiscated from the Maxfern family over to Layous-sama! How terrible... Heeheehee.”

The moment Alaia had decreed it so, the Blue Knight was untouchable by the law. And if he had the slightest trace of Maxfern’s blood in him, that would make him eligible to inherit all of Maxfern’s territory with absolute impunity.

“Heeheehee... To think he’s not just a knight, but actually the distant relative of a noble, too... We’ll have to get this all sorted out somehow, teehee. Too bad the paperwork is going to be a pain. My, oh my...”

“She doesn’t really sound convincing.”

“Rather, it sounds like she’s trying to come up with more and more ways to ensnare Satomi-kun, doesn’t it?”

Though Elfaria continued to ramble about how much trouble resolving all of this was going to be, she didn’t look troubled in the slightest. If anything, Sanae and Harumi who were observing her seemed to be the troubled ones. The other girls felt more or less the same way too.



“Why are you always that mean to me?! Why can’t you just be more honest?!”

“What are you talking about?! What did I even do?!”

“I don’t care!”

“Ow! Argh, I-I have no idea what you’re talking about, Theia!”

“Kyah! Wh-What are you—?!”

While everyone else was talking, Koutarou was still caught in Theia’s joint lock. It would be easy enough to get out of with spiritual energy or mana, but he didn’t want to do that. He was having fun, after all, and he didn’t want to hurt Theia. She meant too much to him.

“Veltlion, if you leave Elfaria-san be, you’re going to get rooked into something terrible.”

“I doubt it... Satomi Koutarou is too kind.”

“Who cares where it is, even if it’s in Forthorthe? It’s important to have a home...”

“What, Yurika? Are you planning on living with him still?”

“I wonder if room 106 will be vacant once he moves out...”

“Your Majesty Elfaria... I believe it might be better not to be so stubborn. There are Master’s feelings to consider, after all...”

“Ah, yes... How very, very troublesome. Heehee.”

Considering his relationship with Theia and the other invaders, the prospects of Koutarou escaping Elfaria’s clutches weren’t good.

Elfaria would be joining room 106 for dinner tonight, and she was warmly welcomed. Ruth was in charge of the cooking as per the usual, but Theia offered to join in and help too. Kiriha let Theia take over for her, and was instead enjoying some tea before supper.

“To think the day would come I get to eat my own daughter’s homemade cooking...”

“Theia-chan’s cooking is a little rough around the edges, but she’s pretty good. She even got a pretty good evaluation during the cook-off.”

“Shizuka-san, you are the one who taught Theia how to cook, aren’t you? Thank you very much for that.”

“Kiriha-san and Sakuraba-senpai did too. It wasn’t like it was just me.”

“Then I’m grateful to all of you. Really, thank you all.”

Just moments before, she had been acting like a silly young girl. But when it came to Theia, Elfaria was a mother before all else—and it showed. Everyone could tell just how close the two of them were.

“Jeez... You should just act like this all the time, Elle. Why are you always like that?”

“If I’m not, there’s a certain someone who tries to keep a certain distance from me.”

“I don’t understand the way your brain works...”

“I’m sure you don’t. If you did, I wouldn’t have to be like that.”

“Good grief. You really are...”

Koutarou had no complaints about how Elfaria was currently behaving. If possible, he thought she should always act this way... but he couldn’t deny that it would be a little sad not to see her ever be herself again. Getting him to realize that was most likely Elfaria’s real plan from the outset. And Koutarou fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

“It’s for my daughter’s sake.”

“I wonder about that...”

“I’m not lying. I’d do anything to hear you call me mother, Layous-sama.”

“As if I’d ever do that!”

“What? Do you hate Theia?”

“That’s not what I meant! Even if I married her, I’d still never call you mother!”

“Oh my goodness! Could this be your rebellious stage?!”

“No! Just no!”

However, in the end, Elfaria didn’t keep up her serious side for long. By the time Theia and Ruth were finished preparing dinner and had returned to the inner room, she was back to her usual silly self.

“If you don’t cut it out, I’ll punch you in that beautiful face of yours even if you are the empress!”

“What?! You think I’m beautiful?!”

“You good for nothing empress! I say one thing, and you take it and run in the complete opposite direction...”

“I think it’s better to just give up, Veltlion. You can’t win with words in a battle against a hardened politician.”

“Tch... One day, Elle. One day.”

“You’ll marry Theia one day?!”

“See? She’s a genius at conversational manipulation.”

Koutarou was completely worn down by Elfaria. The more he spoke, the more ground he felt like he lost. And since she wasn’t showing any hint of malice or aggression, it wasn’t like he could get his way by settling this with force. It left him at a complete loss.

“Ruth, I think it’s been a while since I’ve seen my mother smile like that with anyone...”

“It’s probably because she trusts Master just like she trusts you, Your Highness.”

“Yes... You’re probably right.”

Much like Theia, politics kept Elfaria from having many close friends or confidants she could show her true colors to. The legendary hero she’d met when she was young was one of a select handful. Realizing that, Theia felt more than ever it was the right thing to do to spend her life by Koutarou’s side.

Once dinner began, Elfaria turned her attention to Theia and let Koutarou catch his breath. With that, things quieted down some and the atmosphere in room 106 returned to normal.

“Here, Koutarou-san.”

“Thank you, Sanae-san.”

Sanae-san passed a small plate of food over to Koutarou, who was sitting next to her. She’d taken to handing him dishes like this as of late, largely because Sanae-chan was always clinging to Koutarou’s back during meals.

“All right, Koutarou, eat up! I’m ready!”

“Rather than going to all this trouble to hand me food and have me eat it, why don’t you just eat it yourself?”

“I like it when you eat it first. That way I know if there are any green peppers in it.”

“Ah, ahaha... I’m sorry about this, Koutarou-san.”

With Sanae-chan on Koutarou’s back, she left Sanae-san sitting at the table alone. Sanae-san felt badly about the trouble she was causing for him, which was why she’d started helping him out at dinner.

“There are green peppers in this?!”

Yurika, meanwhile, had taken something completely different from their conversation. She was sitting across from Sanae-san, on the other side of Koutarou. That put her practically right next to Sanae-chan, and her ears perked up instantly as soon as she heard even hushed mention of the dreaded vegetable.

“No, there’s not.”

“You’re lying! Your face says you’re lying!”

“I said there aren’t any green peppers in it, so just eat it.”

“Satomi-san, you’re trying to trick me into eating them again, aren’t you?! You’re not going to fool me today!”

“Say, Yurika... would you rather shut up and eat or be forced to drink a whole

bottle of pepper juice?”

“Thank you for the fooooood! Hom nom nom...”

“That’s better.”

If Koutarou took his eyes off of her for even a moment, Yurika would pick vegetables out of her dinner or something else absurd at the table. That was why he usually sat next to her—to keep an eye on her—especially on nights where ingredients she didn’t like were part of the meal.

Elfaria, who was currently sitting across from Koutarou, watched this exchange with an interested expression.

“Theia, what is this pepper juice Layous-sama is talking about?” she asked.

Theia stopped eating for a moment and politely wiped her mouth before answering her mother.

“It’s a drink made from raw green peppers that Koutarou made up.”

“My, how frightening...”

Elfaria winced at the thought. Seeing that, Ruth threw out an extra tidbit.

“Your Majesty, it also uses celery and parsley as the secret ingredients. If you don’t wish to try it, I suggest you make sure you have a balanced meal.”

“A-As expected of Layous-sama! There are no openings in his strategies!”

Elfaria almost always kept her cool, but right now she was pale and shaking. The truth was that her diet was as unbalanced as Yurika’s. That fact had been bothering Ruth for some time, but since Elfaria was empress, there was absolutely nothing Ruth could force her to do. It seemed the mere threat of pepper juice had an effect, however, as she began eating vegetables on her plate that she would ordinarily never touch. Seeing that, Ruth flashed a satisfied smile and returned to eating her own dinner.

“My, my... It seems Elfaria-san has a surprising weak spot,” remarked Clan.

“By the way, what do you think of Earth’s food, Clan-san?” asked Harumi.

Elfaria may have had an unbalanced died, but it was for a very different reason than Yurika. It stemmed from a bit of culture shock between the food of

Earth and Forthorthe, and the other Forthorthian citizens who had come with her to Earth were experiencing the same thing. Curious about whether that held true for Clan too, Harumi turned to her.

“It’s fine,” Clan replied from the wall, where she was sitting and eating with the help of one of her gravity-defying inventions. “I’m not really picky when it comes to food.”

She seemed unfazed by the question, but Kiriha flashed an impish smile.

“Heh, Clan-dono left all of the cooking to Koutarou, so she never had the chance to be picky.”

“Kii!”

With her secret now exposed, Clan’s entire face turned red. That gave Harumi a pretty good idea of what the situation really was, and she smiled alongside Kiriha.

“I see. Clan-san did travel with Satomi-kun for quite some time, after all. Heehee... He must’ve worked his magic on her back then.”

“I’m sure. If she were picky, he wouldn’t have served her anything at all.”

“So it was a question of life or death, was it? Teehee...”

“This is no laughing matter! Just... Just how many nights do you think I went hungry? That man is the devil!”

While it was a funny story to Harumi and Kiriha who weren’t picky eaters to begin with, it was no such thing to Clan who had experienced the terror firsthand.

“You don’t get any food if you’re picky...?”

Maki stopped eating and pensively repeated what she’d just heard Kiriha say.

“You don’t have any strong likes or dislikes, Aika-san. You don’t have to worry about not getting fed.”

Shizuka heard her muttering and smiled at her. Maki had lovely table manners, so Shizuka found it amusing that she was worried.

“No, that’s not what I meant... I was thinking maybe I should try it. Being

picky, I mean.”

“What, why? You want to be punished? Could it be that you’re into that, Aika-san?!”

“No, that’s not it! Um...”

Maki glanced over at Yurika, blushed, and looked down. Seeing that, Shizuka got the hint.

“Ah, I see... You want Satomi-kun to look after you like he does Yurika-chan.”

“Something like that... I have no experience with that kind of thing...”

She wanted to be scolded by those close to her. She wanted to be worried about and cared for. She’d lived a harsh, desolate childhood devoid of even the common joys and spats that filled almost any household. If possible, she simply wanted to experience what a normal family life was like. Realizing that, Shizuka set straight to helping her out.

“Satomi-kun, do you have a moment?”

“Wait, Kasagi-san!”

“It’s fine, just leave this to me.”

“What is it, Landlord-san?”

“As of today, Aika-san has decided she’s going to stop eating her vegetables. I leave resolving this in your hands.”

“What, why? I don’t follow...”

“Why isn’t important, Satomi-kun. But I’m counting on you.”

“...?”

Koutarou was puzzled by Shizuka’s sudden and odd request. But she earnestly folded her hands together and asked him sincerely. Knowing that she was always taking care of others and had their best interests in mind, Koutarou decided to comply.

“I understand. Leave it to me.”

“Thank you, Satomi-kun!”

“Aika-san, for starters, you’re getting pepper juice after dinner.”

“Oh, um... Okay. I’ll do my best to be picky.”

Koutarou still had no idea what was going on, but he decided not to waste any more brainpower on it. Maki wasn’t the type to be selfish for no reason, so she likely had a reason for whatever she was doing. Whatever it was would probably be easiest to resolve by treating her unbalanced eating just like he would anyone else’s.

“So, Maki, what vegetable are you picking out tonight?”

“Um... For the time being, I’m thinking about this crown daisy.”

“Ooh, I don’t like those either!”

“Hmph... Veltlion is always giving Shizuka and Maki special treatment.”

“I think Satomi-kun gives you plenty of special treatment too, Clan-san.”

“That’s not special treatment! He just bullies me!”

“I wouldn’t mind trading places with you, you know. I don’t particularly like being treated as his senpai.”

“Harumi, the truth is that Clan-dono isn’t really unhappy with the way she gets treated.”

“She’s just not being honest. Clan has always been like that.”

“Heehee... If you’re going to start that, Your Highness, I’d say the same is true for you.”

“Layous-sama, I strictly protest any special treatment based on age!”

“What are you going on about all of a sudden?!”

Dinnertime with eleven people was lively from start to finish. Wherever someone pulled back, someone else was ready to jump right in. It was almost like the fun would never end. But alas, suddenly...

Beep!

“Detecting a small-scale space-time distortion. There is a 90 percent certainty of it being an exit warp.”

Everything came to a grinding halt when Ruth's bracelet chimed in with a warning message. It was a rude reminder that while Koutarou and the others had overcome many problems, there was still one major one lurking over them.

"Calculating mass based on the distortion... There is an 85 percent certainty that the incoming craft is an information pod. It is believed to be emergency contact from Forthorthe. A swift response is requested, my princess."

That looming problem was the ongoing coup d'etat in the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire. A great many complex, intertwining circumstances made it an especially difficult issue to tackle, but it seemed the time had finally come... whether it was easy or not.

Wriggler

Saturday, November 6th

As it turned out, there were two incoming information pods from the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire. They were marked “37” and “82” respectively. Out of a hundred pods that had been sent, all stuffed with the same information, these were the only two that had reached Theia and the others.

The reason for that was because of the distance between Earth and Forthorthe. The two planets were over 10 million lightyears apart. One lightyear is roughly 10 trillion kilometers, so multiplying that by 10 million made for an unthinkable distance. In comparison, Earth’s seemingly distant moon is only roughly 400,000 kilometers away.

Pods could be sent within the Forthorthian solar system with a margin of error of less than one in one trillion. But that accuracy was difficult to achieve on significantly longer warps in a single try. That was why, when it came to such vast distances, the standard procedure was to break up the warp. Taking multiple, shorter warps increased the accuracy and safety of the trip by decreasing the overall margin of error.

But such precautions weren’t strictly necessary without any humans on board. And especially not when time was of the essence. Forthorthe only really needed one pod to reach its target destination, so they launched a hundred with half of the standard warps for the trip and rolled the dice. It would still take longer than hyperspace communications, but it would be far faster than sending a spaceship.

Familiar with Forthorthe’s transportation means and the logic and circumstances behind them, Theia knew exactly what the numbers engraved on the sides of the two pods meant. Whatever was inside them had to be urgent. And upon that realization, her face paled... As did Ruth’s, Elfaria’s, and Clan’s.

“We can’t wait out the entire quarantine period. Ruth, open the pods as soon as possible!”

“Yes, Your Highness! I’ll send a robot right now!”

There was no telling what the pod had picked up along the way while travelling through space. You had to be careful, even when receiving pods from known allies. That’s why a thorough washing, sterilization, and quarantine period on retrieved objects were standard, but Theia was far too impatient to get into these pods. Ruth sent a remote-controlled robot to retrieve them. It would technically need to be washed, sterilized, and quarantined too, but nobody was harping on technicalities right now.

“All right... I’m opening the pod.”

The two retrieved pods were brought to the arrival and departure deck intended for quarantine. Ruth operated the remote-controlled labor robot and used it to approach one of the pods. She had it extend its mechanical arm and operate the control panel on the side of the pod. It reacted right away and a small hatch next to the panel was opened, revealing something on a metallic tray inside.

“It seems to be paper file wrapped in plastic and a data chip.”

“Hurry up and read the data chip, Ruth.”

Theia’s intuition told her that the data chip and the paper file contained the same information. If this information was as critical as she suspected it was, the sender would have wanted it readable no matter the situation of who received it. And it turned out Theia was right. The truth revealed itself as soon as the robot plugged in the data chip and began relaying its contents.

“The current empress, Her Majesty Elfaria Dana Forthorthe, is now suspected of having embezzled considerable sums of public funds. She is also a suspect in the murder of a journalist...”

“These are broadcasts from back home in Forthorthe. And the sender is... my father?! M-My apologies, I mean the sender is the Pardomshiha and Wenranka alliance.”

“So they’ve finally made their move...”

Theia's expression turned stony as she passed her eyes over the relayed information. It was a harsh look that hadn't crossed her face since she first came to room 106.

"Theia, it looks like the time has come to steel yourself."

"I already have, mother."

Elfaria put her hand on Theia's shoulder. It relaxed her expression a bit, but the fire in her eyes didn't fade in the slightest. Theia knew that this would be the beginning of the greatest trial ever placed on her and her mother.

The conflict between Elfaria and the military first began more than twenty years ago. The military had a lot of power even back then, and also had a tendency of throwing its weight around in government affairs. Elfaria took note of that and built her political platform on the idea of disarmament. If she were to become empress, she promised the citizens she would keep the military from running amok. Even the mighty military of Forthorthe would have no choice but to back down if both the empress and public called for it. Regardless of what they did in secret, the Imperial Army had sworn allegiance to the royal families.

Sensing that they would be forever hamstringed if they left Elfaria came to power, the military did everything they could, both publically and privately, to keep Elfaria from ascending the throne. Yet for all their meddling, they couldn't stop Elfaria's momentum. She became empress and disarmament became a reality. With that, the military's great and unchecked power was finally toppled. Though Elfaria had paid a great price for it, she ultimately came out victorious.

For some years after that, the military lay low, but they never lost their pride. As the Blue Knight himself had been the one to rally, assemble, and lead the army that defended Forthorthe, they strongly believed themselves to be the true successors of the Blue Knight. That was why they couldn't bear the thought of being toyed around with by or kowtowing to some thoughtless monarch.

It was also why the top brass of the military began making moves behind the scenes to build up an army that was so strong that they would be beholden to no higher power. They held the legendary Empress Alaia up on a lofty pedestal. It paraded as a form of patriotism, but their divinization of Alaia really served as an excuse to deem all the rulers that came after her incompetent. It was only a

means to an end, and it could be said that their coup d'etat really got its start there. It had been a long, slow buildup to its current state, but there were a few reasons for that.

The first was of course the large setback of the disarmament. With the watchful eyes of the government on them while that was ongoing, they'd never be able to pull off the kind of rebellion they were hoping for.

The second reason was because they'd learned that turning the public against them would be fatal. Elfaria had ridden an enormous wave of public support to the throne, which she'd used to sponsor the disarmament. And as long as she had the people under her thumb, they would never even dream of overthrowing her. If the military swooped in and did it by force, the public would turn against them instead. So in order for a coup to succeed, they would need to begin with assassinating Elfaria's character and boosting their own reputation. They'd known that ages ago, and they were in for the long game.

The first thing they'd done to that end was dig their claws deep into the media. They won over people in important positions through bribes or, failing that, blackmail, framing, and assassination. Slowly, outlet by outlet, they gained control of stations and publications alike, and they began putting slants on the news to paint things in their favor.

As the military worked to seize control of the media, they also wormed their way into other sectors. They waited until they had about a third of Forthorthe's media under control so they could add that to their list of bargaining chips when it came to getting important government and finance figures. Regardless of the truth, the news outlets they now controlled could go a long way to influencing stock prices and tarnishing politicians just by saying the right thing on air or in print. And so, slowly but surely, the military increased their nefarious sphere of influence.

Once they had their claws in finance too, they had capital freely flowing into their cause. This allowed them to illegally produce weapons and increase their forces, all under the table and out of the public eye. Yet even then, the timing wasn't right. They'd have to wait years more yet before the top brass had everything in order and was willing to make their big move.

Of course, Elfaria wasn't just sitting by idly as all of this transpired. She took all kinds of countermeasures, but using only above-board tactics against people who were willing to play dirty put her at a distinct disadvantage. If she created laws to inhibit the military, the media under the military's control would brand her as an evil dictator and the military would simply defy her scenes. With everything falling into place in the military's favor, they began boxing Elfaria in thusly.

When she felt that she herself was in danger, she sent her daughter Theia to Koutarou's side using her trial as an excuse. And once Theia was safely away, she resolved to finally confront the military. That, however, would be much harder than it sounded. The media, the government, and the financial circles under the military's control had her so badly cornered that there was little she could do at that point.

They all moved against her at once. The military captured Elfaria and placed her under house arrest while the media falsely reported she was ill. It was only thanks to Theia that she'd been able to escape and flee to Earth.

Koutarou and the others had seen the fallout of that on Earth, including Elexis and his goons showing up, but they didn't know the extent of what was going on back in Forthorthe. At least, not until the information pods arrived. They contained a full report of the situation.

As of late, the media had completely turned on Elfaria. It was no longer reporting that she was sick, but that she was a criminal. The charges were embezzlement and murder to cover up the embezzlement. Of course, the accusations were all falsities concocted by the military. They'd generated just enough evidence to strip her of her imperial rights and send her to trial.

So as things were, the military's plans were playing out nicely. Elfaria's character was thrown into question, and the public was almost perfectly divided on the issue of how to proceed from here. At this rate, all the military would have to do was add a little more fuel to the media fire and they'd have the majority of public opinion on their side. With that, they'd be able to send a fleet to capture Elfaria. The politicians under military control had already approved of this plan without deliberation.

The pretext for dispatching the fleet would be to bring Elfaria home and put her on trial, but the top brass of the military was secretly hoping that she would put up some resistance. If she did, it would give them cause enough to attack and kill her. Of course, even if she didn't resist, they could always kill her and say she did. No one would be watching on some faraway backwater planet.

The information contained in the pod was explained in detail by Elfaria herself. As expected of an empress, she spoke with dignity and grace, but in a way that was easy for everyone to understand. She painted a very clear picture of the danger at hand, which was why the moment she concluded her explanation, Koutarou let out a sigh.

"Hahh... Sounds like this is worse than I thought, Elle."

Koutarou's gut told him that Elfaria was, using chess terms, in check. She'd be finished by the end of the military's next move.

"Yet you don't seem that worried, Layous-sama."

"Knowing you, you already have something planned, don't you?"

"I don't see why I should have to play by their rules."

Elfaria flashed a small smile, indirectly affirming Koutarou's suspicions before shifting her glance over to Kiriha, who had also been listening in.

"In fact, I think Kiriha-san may have already figured it out."

"Is that true, Kiriha-san?" asked Koutarou, turning to Kiriha standing next to him.

"I have my guesses... But I would say that if there's this tight of a leash on information, it would be best to pretend like you've fallen for the enemy's trap."

"I think so too, Kiriha-san."

Elfaria revealed a broad, satisfied grin. Really, she'd used this opportunity to put Kiriha to the test—and she'd passed with flying colors.

"Wait a minute!" shouted Koutarou. "Elle, are you saying you let yourself get captured on purpose?!"

“Indeed I did. That set the stage for everything that’s happening now.”

By the time Elfaria realized what the military was doing behind the scenes, they’d already amassed considerable forces and influence. Moreover, they had a tight grip on the media and other important mouthpieces. Anyone who knew too much was either bribed or threatened to keep quiet.

Elfaria tried various methods of turning the tables, but didn’t feel like she was getting anywhere. As she began to run out of other options, she decided to take a huge gamble. By using herself as a decoy, she was hoping to rip a giant hole in the net the military was keeping on information.

The military had a lot of cards in play and was always trying to think one step ahead, but against a clever opponent like Elfaria who was always thinking two or three steps ahead, it was hard to keep up. She knew that if she dangled the bait they wanted most in front of them—she herself—that she could force their hand. There was no way they wouldn’t go for it.

And so Elfaria allowed herself to be captured by the military. If she drew things out too long and they chose to use rougher methods, she knew good and well they might just outright kill her. But the military had never expected to capture the empress so soon, so at this juncture, they hardly knew what to do with her. Mostly, they just threatened her while she was in their custody, trying to pressure her into doing what they wanted.

But the military was composed of several different factions, each of which had different ideas about what should be done with Elfaria and each of which wanted to take credit for her capture. The internal friction that caused ultimately stymied any actual progress being made. The infighting even allowed some things that wouldn’t ordinarily to slip through the cracks, like information that Elfaria’s people quickly picked up on and put to good use. It was thanks to such information that Theia had been able to come liberate Elfaria.

But the story didn’t end there. While Theia was returning to Earth with her mother and a handful of loyal Forthorthian citizens in tow, the military was busy fabricating evidence against Elfaria. Meanwhile, the people who supported Elfaria but had chosen to stay on Forthorthe were hard at work using the information they’d drummed up during Elfaria’s captivity to try and bust the

whole military conspiracy wide open.

“I knew you weren’t the type to take a loss sitting down, but to think you’d go that far...”

“I was only able to do it for two reasons. Firstly because the military’s been so predictable, and secondly because Theia and Ruth have matured into more wonderful and powerful allies than I ever could have expected to have.”

Theia and Ruth had put up an admirable fight with Blue Knight when they rescued Elfaria. While she had a plan to escape on her own, Theia and Ruth’s assistance had expedited the whole process. Things went safely and smoothly thanks to them.

“Mother...”

“I’m not worthy of your praise, Your Majesty.”

Theia and Ruth stood shoulder to shoulder, both wiping away their tears as they smiled proudly. Koutarou, however, didn’t look happy at all.

“Elle, don’t even think about doing something like that ever again.”

“I know. I’m sure they won’t let me escape so easily next time.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m saying this because you’re... You’re Theia-chan’s mother, Elle-chama.”

“Layous-sama...”

Elfaria went wide-eyed when she heard those unexpected words come from Koutarou’s mouth. But her stark surprise only lasted a moment, for she soon let out a small sigh and smiled wryly.

“Heehee, if you’re going to use that card against me, I have no choice but to comply, Layous-sama.”

Elfaria had made Theia and Ruth worry, and Koutarou wasn’t about to let her do it again. He was indirectly telling her to be a proper mother.

“As long as you understand. Now... what will you do next?”

“The military will inevitably dispatch a fleet to recapture me. We will be leaving Earth before they arrive and returning to Forthorthe.”

“Are you sure this is the best time to go back?”

“As long as we can meet up with our allies there, we should be safe. It seems risking my life was worth it; they’ve already identified who the real enemy is.”

Of all the information Elfaria’s people had gathered while she was using herself as a decoy, the most critical thing they’d learned was who was actually leading the quiet coup d’etat. If they went public with that kind of intelligence now, the military-controlled media would just deny it and cover it up. But now that Elfaria’s people knew the names and faces of their enemies, they could gather even more evidence on them and what they were up to. Once they could collate that and get it into Elfaria’s hands, she would be able to hold a press conference and spell out the current conspiracies so that they were plain for all to see. But in order for that to happen, Elfaria needed to be in Forthorthe. So, according to plan, it was finally time for Elfaria to return home.

“Much to my chagrin, I actually have to hand it to you for pulling this all off, Elle...”

“Thank you kindly. But fret not. I shouldn’t have to do anything like it again.”

“Good. But anyway, back down to business... Who are we dealing with here?”

“The two central figures are these men.”

Elfaria pulled up a hologram of two older men from the data chip.

“Wha—”

Upon seeing them, Koutarou reflexively gasped. Though these should have been faces he was seeing for the first time, they looked all too familiar.

“Satomi-kun, is that...”

“It can’t be!”

Harumi and Clan reacted the same way Koutarou did. The two men in the hologram looked familiar to them too because they looked strikingly like two terrible men they’d met two thousand years in the past. They were faces Koutarou and the others would never forget.

“So you’d stand in the way of the royal family once more, Maxfern and Grevanas...”

Prime Minister Maxfern and Head Court Magician Grevanas—that was who Koutarou saw in the hologram. Their hair was colored and styled differently, but it otherwise looked exactly like them.

“Is this that synchronicity thing Clan was talking about at work...?”

Seeing the familiar faces of old enemies, Koutarou’s expression turned stern and sharp. His eyes narrowed intensely. It was like he was reliving everything that had happened two thousand years ago in an instant. He was regaining his senses as the Blue Knight.

“Or maybe it was just destiny we’d fight again. We didn’t finish things back then, after all...”

Even the girls of room 106 and Elexis looked similar to people Koutarou had known in the past, and now the bad guys had made their entrance too. Since their last fight had ended with Koutarou sending Maxfern and Grevanas away rather than defeating them, this felt like the natural conclusion to him. He believed it was what fate had had in store all along, even though he was well aware they were just two men that happened to look the same as his old enemies.

“This is the leader of the Vandarion band of knights, Lord Marswell Dayora Vandarion. Next to him is a high-ranking military official who is the director general of military affairs and the science and technology agency, Granado Valkyris. These are the two men that are overstepping their bounds and controlling the military.”

Lord Vandarion bore an uncanny resemblance to Maxfern, and Director General Granado to Grevanas. And in a strange twist of fate, the two had come to power in the military during the disarmament Elfaria had advocated. Their predecessors had stood against Elfaria and were removed for their positions for it, opening up opportunities for a new generation of military leaders—which included Vandarion and Granado.

On the surface, they’d been cooperating with Elfaria all this time. But underneath it all, they’d been spearheading the movement against her. Thanks to the support they gained because of that, they rapidly rose through the ranks while becoming the leaders of the anti-Elfaria faction. They were so clever and

stealthy about it that Elfaria and her people hadn't realized their true ambitions until they had already gained considerable power.

"Two thousand years have passed and you even become a knight like you wanted... yet you still don't understand a thing, Maxfern."

In the past, Maxfern had been unable to wield Signaltin, the sword of kingship he'd sought for so many years, and it had driven him mad. He believed the reason the sword denied him was because he wasn't a knight. And now, two thousand years later, a man—no, a knight—that looked just like Maxfern had appeared. But little did Vandarion know he wouldn't be able to make Signaltin glow either. While he had the title of a knight, he lacked the heart of one. It saddened Koutarou immensely.

"Koutarou, we will be returning to Forthorthe to punish these insolent fools."

The masterminds had been revealed. All that was left was to discretely gather evidence against them and expose their plot. They had their claws deep in the media, but they didn't control it completely. As long as Elfaria's faction could gather and present the right evidence, they should be able to re-earn the trust of the people and get public opinion on the empress's side. With that, she would be able to break free of the military's clutches and punish Vandarion and his men for what they'd done. That was the goal, and now was the time to act. As Theia would say, it was time for a counterattack.

"If their goal was to create a government that would be good for the people, that would be one thing. But it's clear now that's not their intention. We have to protect Forthorthe," declared Theia.

"Okay. Then I'm going with you," replied Koutarou.

"Are you sure? You might have some Forthorthian blood in your veins, but this doesn't have much to do with you," she asked in a trembling voice as she looked up at him timidly.

Of course, Theia wanted Koutarou to come. But at the same time, she wanted him to stay wherever he would be safest. She trusted and relied on him and trusted him the most, yet he was also who she'd hate to see hurt the most. It was a terrible conundrum. She would feel badly no matter how he answered her.

“It’s got everything to do with me. I’m your knight, you know.”

“Koutarou...”

Tears welled up in Theia’s doe eyes. She did feel badly, but that was quickly overwhelmed by the happiness she felt at hearing Koutarou declare himself her knight.

“Besides, this is all my unfinished business as far as I’m concerned. I have to go and settle it.”

Elexis had returned to Forthorthe with the People of the Earth’s spiritual energy technology and Folsaria’s magic. His goals were uncertain, but it was hard to believe he’d just be sitting back with that kind of power at his hands. And Koutarou felt like his actions had led to this. He was essentially the one who’d created the People of the Earth and Folsaria in the first place, so he believed stopping Elexis was his duty.

“So, Theia, just take me with you like it’s the most natural thing in the world. You have that right.”

“Yes, you’re right... You’re absolutely right.”

Theia tried wiping away her tears, but they just wouldn’t stop flowing. In the end, she gave up trying and proudly stuck out her chest in spite of the tears.

“Then, Satomi Koutarou, please lend me your strength. We alone won’t be enough to protect Forthorthe from these fools.”

“All you have to do is give me the order.”

“There’s no need for that, right?”

“...As you wish, my princess.”

In the past, Theia had given Koutarou a single, simple order—to live as he pleased. As long as Koutarou stayed true to himself, there would be something driving him. Something he wanted to protect. It was the same something that had brought him back from the past. And now, after everything he’d been through, his desire to honor that past and help the people of Forthorthe only added fuel to his fire. Koutarou would defend her and Forthorthe no matter what. All Theia had to do was believe in that.

“If Koutarou’s going, I’m going too!”

“I will as well. I am in your debt, and you’ll need an expert on spiritual energy technology.”

“There’s a chance that Darkness Rainbow will be involved, so I will go too.”

“Me too. I have to stop Maya-sama, and I can’t let Satomi-kun go alone...”

“In that case, why don’t we all go and settle this together? I’m sure Uncle would be happy to lend Forthorthe his strength once again.”

“Of course. It’s Alaia-dono’s homeland, after all.”

Just like Koutarou, the other girls didn’t hesitate to offer up their help. They wanted to protect Theia too. They each lived their own lives and were propelled by their own passions and reasons, but they all shared the desire to keep their friends—keep each other—safe. Though they’d all gathered in room 106 for different reasons, they were all of the same mind on this matter.

“Thank you, everyone. However, this will become a far fiercer fight than anything we’ve faced before. There’s no telling how ugly things might get, and there’s no guarantee any of us will return alive. Would you still go even then? Even knowing that?”

If they headed to Forthorthe alongside Theia, they would without a doubt be walking into battle. It would be a conflict far larger than their fight against the radical faction, and one far more intense than their fight against Darkness Rainbow. They’d be walking into all-out war. After all, the enemy this time was the military of a vast galactic empire. Theia couldn’t guarantee their victory, much less their safety. Kiriha and Yurika had already promised her their help when she needed it, but now that the hour was upon them, the situation was so dire and dark that Theia dreaded to ask them for aid.

“Why are both of you leaving me out of this, Theiamillis-san, Veltlion? I also had a hand in saving the world two thousand years ago, you know.”

“I’d like to come as well, Theiamillis-san. Your Blue Knight may be strong, but Satomi-kun is just a normal boy on his own.”

However, in the end, the entire Corona House crew saw this as their problem.

It involved all of them. Moreover, the legendary hero that Theia relied on wasn't all that strong on his own. The chances of everyone coming out on the other side of this fight unscathed were dramatically higher if they all worked together. If there was a problem if one of them was missing, they'd just all have to go.

"Looks like they got us there, Theia."

Koutarou smiled wryly and shrugged. Clan and Harumi had irrefutable points. Without the girls' strength, Koutarou never would've been able to save past Forthorthe. On his own, he was just a normal boy who knew his way around a sword. And knowing this would be a drawn-out fight, Koutarou couldn't tell the girls not to come. He would need them.

"Indeed. How troublesome."

Despite Theia's choice of words, she didn't look troubled in the slightest. Far from it. She was overwhelmingly happy that her friends were willing to help her, even if it meant willingly walking into danger.

"Your Highness, let us rely on everyone's strength."

"Ruth is right, Theia. Right now you need as many allies as you can get."

"Yes... Then please lend me your strength, men. It doesn't even have to be for the sake of Forthorthe. This is all so we can reclaim our peaceful everyday lives."

In the end, Theia decided on bringing everyone with her. While it wasn't easy, she was also joyously happy. She had so many people she could rely on now, and that gave her courage. With their help, she would fight to the bitter end.

Our story now goes back about a week to when an imperial fleet was about to be dispatched from Forthorthe's capital of Fornorn with the mission of capturing Elfaria and Theia.

The fleet was only a small portion of the Imperial Army's forces, totaling six ships. It consisted of one carrier that served as its flagship, one defensive ship to protect the flagship, one battleship and two destroyers that were offensively equipped, and lastly a large supply ship that wouldn't take part in combat.

Though the fleet was small—less than a hundredth of the Imperial Army's total forces—it was a very orthodox composition and made for a strong team. Moreover, it was well loaded in terms of firepower. If they unloaded what they had, they would easily be able to take down a royal-class battleship. And because of that, the two men watching the fleet depart were convinced that they would complete their mission without trouble and return successful.

"The time has finally come... It's finally here, Granado."

"It's been a long time coming. It's been almost forty years since we first met."

Lord Vandarion and Director General Granado had quite a history together. They'd met decades ago when they were both still students, a knight and a commoner. At first they kept their distance from one another because of the difference in their station, but they eventually came to realize that they had similar concerns and ambitions, and friendship quickly blossomed between them. They were both irritated that the world's estimation of them was lower than what their achievements and abilities actually warranted.

"Has it already been that long since we swore to stand at the top of Forthorthe together?"

"Haha, the white streaks in our hair say it all."

Lord Vandarion's family was relatively new and unproven compared to the Melcemhein family they'd splintered from. Because of that, they lacked prestige and influence among the knights. So without much of a family name, a young Vandarion was left to earn a name for himself through his own knightly deeds and accomplishment. But the times weren't conducive to that. Forthorthe was peaceful and stable, so it wasn't like battles would conveniently spring up in and around the Vandarion family territory. He was stymied, and at the rate things were going for him, he would never be able to surpass the status he was born into. It made him bitter and resentful, but years later, he unexpectedly found himself in a position to do something about it—all thanks to Elfaria's disarmament. He finally had his chance, and his ambition would make the most of it.

"Ironically enough, we were only able to accomplish things in this timeframe thanks to that little brat."

“Indeed... Under ordinary circumstances, it would have taken far longer to climb to the top.”

Director General Granado’s story was similar to Vandarion’s. He was a brilliant scientist that failed to receive the credit and recognition he deserved. The reason for that was largely because his research was in weapons development, though he fully believed the real reason was his status as a commoner. The royals from the Schweiger family and other nobles with ample funds had no trouble making names for themselves in science, after all. And just like Vandarion, Granado found himself in a good position after Elfaria’s disarmament. It was perhaps only inevitable that he and Vandarion would sympathize with each other so.

They were both men of fiery ambition, yet they also had the prudence and restraint to keep that fire from consuming them. They simply let it smolder and build until it was the right time to unleash it. And in that respect, they were similar to Maxfern and Grevanas in more than just appearance.

“In that case, we might have needed canes by the time we were standing here.”

“What a terrible thought. Our natural lifespans might have turned out to be our greatest enemy.”

“Indeed. So we should be grateful for that little brat.”

The two men were standing on the balcony of the palace, looking up at the six ships flying away. With the empress gone, they now served as the masters of the imperial palace. On the surface they were just a holy knight serving as a general and the head of the military’s science department, but their grasp secretly stretched across all of Forthorthe. And if the fleet succeeded and returned with Elfaria, they would make their move to seize power for good. Their slow, decades-long coup d’etat was finally reaching its climax.

“In our nation’s long history, there have been many who dared to challenge the royal families of Forthorthe... but not a single one ever succeeded. We will be the very first, Granado.”

“I can’t wait for the day I see you sitting upon the throne, Vandarion-sama. It won’t be long now... And now that the time is almost upon us, I can feel the

passion I had in my youth reviving."

"It's still too early for either of us to grow old, Granado. If it would please you, you may take the throne for yourself."

"You jest."

"Hardly. Our fates are intertwined and we share the same destiny. It doesn't matter which of us is the one sitting upon the throne. It is *our* victory we seek."

"To hear you say that is more than enough for me... It's you I wish to see on the throne, Vandarion-sama."

"Then I'll make sure you have the best seat in the house to watch me take over the universe!"

"As you wish, my lord."

His heart swelling with pride, Granado respectfully bowed before the lord he'd chose for himself. Vandarion hadn't changed at all over the years. He was proud and strong, and Granado believed he'd made the right choice to follow and serve him.

The fleet's ships soared through the sky, their boosters roaring and jetting out flame. The bond between the two men staring admiringly up at them was just as radiant—and it was certainly far deeper and stronger than the bond between Maxfern and Grevanas had ever been. It would prove to be a powerful weapon for them, and it just might make the difference in their bold coup. If this era had a new Blue Knight to offer up to try and stop them, he would certainly have his work cut out for him.

Meanwhile, Maya and Elexis were also watching the departing fleet from the capital of Fornorn. Their view, however, was from the top floor of DKI's headquarters.

"The military sure is stupid. There's no way they could win with a force that small."

"They don't know any better. They don't know about Koutarou-kun and the others, much less Hazy Moon. If they think they're just going up against Princess

Theiamillis, that fleet would certainly be more than enough. It's not like they're incompetent... Their opponent is just that ridiculous."

"Fair. They're certainly attacking with a lot more than your dumbass did."

"Hahaha... How harsh, Maya. You're not wrong, but I'm not incompetent either. So if you compare the two of us, then you could say the military is proceeding even more cautiously than I did."

"Who said you weren't incompetent?"

"You slay me."

Elexis laughed as he took the full brunt of his partner's pointed words. At the end of the day, Maya was right and Elexis knew it. He'd underestimated Koutarou and the others, and that had been his downfall. There was definitely an argument to be had that was incompetence at work.

"Nevertheless, a sharp woman like you chose me as her partner. I have some confidence in myself."

"I'm just praying I didn't make the wrong choice."

"You really do slay me, you know?"

"That's my job. If you're looking for praise, you can just call someone else. I'm sure there's a long line of people just waiting to fawn over you."

"That's why I like you."

"You sure are a strange one..."

Elexis knew that Maya's words were a sign of trust. She only showered flattery on people she sought to use. But when she was with Elexis, she was harsh and critical with him. He knew that meant she had a deeper bond with him, and as the manager of a large enterprise, he appreciated the stark honesty. It was one of the reasons he didn't want to let Maya go.

Maya felt similarly about Elexis, too. To her, it was normal to discard people when she was done with them. But for some reason, she found herself unable to do so with Elexis. While it was partially because she had no replacement for him yet, she also enjoyed that Elexis trusted her. It felt good. And Maya wasn't stupid; deep down she knew that they were helping each other make up for

what they lacked.

“Well, as things stand, that fleet will likely be destroyed by Blue Knight and the Hazy Moon.”

The military was unaware of Blue Knight’s true specs when Koutarou was piloting it, and they had no idea that Clan’s Hazy Moon was orbiting Earth. The moment the fleet showed themselves and moved in to attack, they would be ambushed by the Hazy Moon while Blue Knight would sweep in to clean them up.

“Way to ruin the moment, idiot. Jeez, this is why men are...”

“Hmm? What’s the matter?”

“Forget it. So, what are you going to do?”

“I was thinking of putting the military in my debt. I’m going to teach them a more effective means of attack.”

In the conflict between the royal family and the military, Elexis was a third party. Since he planned to seize power in the end no matter the outcome, he didn’t really care who came out on top of their little spat. But as far as securing a foothold for the future was concerned, getting the military on his side would be easier.

“So you’ll win some favors by selling them information you don’t need, huh?”

“I’m a businessman by nature, after all.”

First things first, Elexis would pick out some choice information on Koutarou and the others that was no longer of particular value to him and Darkness Rainbow. Then he’d sell it to the military cheaply, knowing he could reap the favor threefold in the future.

“I guess I better be careful and make sure you don’t try and pawn off any third-rate trash on me too.”

“Funny. I’m pretty sure I’m the one buying off you at the moment.”

“I wonder...”

Though she spoke rather acerbically of it, Maya was actually quite partial to

Elexis's idea. In a way, that was emblematic of their entire relationship. Maya felt strangely about it, but ultimately believed it was fine. It would be some time yet before she realized that was simply her way of accepting him.

"Now then..."

"What is it?"

With the discussion reaching a lull, Elexis stood up from his seat and approached the antique cabinet by the wall. He opened the ornate glass door and peeked inside before pulling out a bottle and two glasses, which were as sparkling and richly decorated as they were elegant and refined.

"Oh, it's nothing, I was just thinking that I'd treat you to a good, old fashioned Forthorthian drink."

"I bet you'll send me the bill after I take a sip, right?"

"No... I was just thinking we could enjoy the mood a little longer."

"Stupid!"

"You don't want any?"

"Just shut up and hand it over!"

"All right, all right."

Elexis approached Maya with the bottle and glasses in hand. They'd become partners in a bizarre twist of fate, but the most bizarre twist yet was that Elexis actually like Maya. He'd never met a woman like her before, and she exposed parts of him that he felt like he'd never known he had. That was what was happening even now as Elexis came to the realization he wanted to spend more personal time with Maya, so he decided to do just that.

Second Coming of the Legend

Sunday, November 7th

Regardless of how technologically advanced Blue Knight and the Hazy Moon were, they still needed very mundane care like regular maintenance and supply refreshers. When it had just been Theia and Ruth, their needs weren't all that great. But once Elfaria and the Forthorthian citizens were on board, their demands increased accordingly. Fortunately they were able to get most everything they needed via the People of the Earth and the transfer gate, which eliminated the need for the Forthorthians to descend to the surface personally. The greatest problems were manpower and timing—it would take a lot of hands on deck to resupply in a hurry. They didn't have any fully automated devices to facilitate the process like they did in the grand Forthorthian docks back home, which slowed the resupply process down considerably. So in order to help speed things along, Koutarou and the girls were all lending a hand so that they could depart as soon as possible.

"Ruth-san, where should I carry this?"

"The twelfth storeroom in the right leg calf."

"Okay, twelfth warehouse in the right leg calf. Got it."

Koutarou wrote the destination down on a plate fixed to the cart. Because they were taking in a considerable deal in the way of cargo, it would generate a lot of hassle down the line if things ended up getting stored in the wrong facilities. As she was overseeing the operation to ensure nothing like that happened, Ruth looked over the cart and plate one final time to make sure everything was in order.

"Wait up!" shouted a hardhat-wearing Sanae as she ran over to Koutarou, pushing a cart of her own.

"Whoa there. That's dangerous. Slow down a bit, will ya?"

“Okay, okay.”

For safety reasons, people were put in groups of two to work on bringing in all the cargo. Today Sanae happened to be Koutarou’s partner, so the two of them would be heading to the same destination with their loaded-down carts.

“So, where are we going now?”

“This time it’ll be the opposite leg, the right one. The twelfth storeroom.”

“Okay, twelfth storeroom in the right leg... Koutarou, does that mean our right?”

“No, it’s right from Blue Knight’s perspective.”

The Hazy Moon’s resupply was already complete, but stocking Blue Knight automatically took longer because of the shape of its hull. Normally, a ship’s main storeroom was on the lower decks in order to make sure it was accessible from multiple points. Storing the heaviest loads downward also helped balance the ship and maintain its center of gravity. Blue Knight, however, was humanoid in shape and structure. If all of the supplies were loaded into the lower half of the ship, they would be incredibly difficult to access from the upper half. To combat this, multiple warehouses were constructed in both the arms and the legs. It made things more readily accessible in flight, but it also meant that there was more to keep track of in the way of logistics, which slowed down the resupply process.

“Transporting supplies is hard because of the ship’s weird shape.”

“You should have just made it round instead of being so picky.”

“Less talking, more working!”

“Okay, okay...”

“Fine, jeez...”



After being yelled at by an angry Theia—who was acting as the supervisor of the whole operation—Koutarou and Sanae scuttled off with their carts. They approached a set of gates connected to various points like the People of the Earth's supply point and Blue Knight's storerooms. Koutarou and Sanae were headed for the gate that led to Blue Knight's right leg.

"Auuugh! Shizuka-san, where are you?!"

Just as they were about to enter the gate, Yurika came running out of it in tears. She was pushing a cart like Koutarou and Sanae, but for some reason she was alone.

"Yurika, what happened?!"

"Satomi-san, Satomi-san! Please help me! Shizuka-san just disappeared all of a sudden!"

Yurika and Shizuka were assigned as partners for the day, but they'd apparently gotten separated, which was why Yurika was back here—alone and in tears.

"Really? That's not like Landlord-san... Where were you taking supplies?"

"Koutarou, her cart says storeroom 22 in the torso."

"Which means... Okay, calm down and listen to me, Yurika."

"Where did Shizuka-san go?!"

"Like I said, calm down."

"O-Okay..."

Koutarou lightly flicked Yurika's forehead, which promptly got her to settle down. This was nearly a daily interaction between the two of them, so her response was practically conditioned.

"Yurika, *you're* the one who disappeared."

"Huhwuh?"

"This is the gate connected to the right leg. The gate for the torso is the one in the middle."

“It’s not this one?!”

“Nope. You were supposed to be over there.”

“Shizuka-saaan!”

Finally realizing her mistake, Yurika ran speeding off towards the correct gate without so much as a thank you. Blue Knight’s strange shape turned out to be the biggest challenge for Yurika. She’d gotten lost five times today alone.

“Say, Koutarou...”

“I know what you’re gonna say, but there’s no time for that.”

“No, not that... I mean, was the destination on her cart even correct?”

“Please, Sanae. Don’t say such scary things so casually.”

Koutarou and Sanae suppressed their unease as they passed through the gate. The resupply was taking long enough as it was, so they couldn’t afford to delay their own work to worry about Yurika.

The royal class space battleship named Blue Knight was a humanoid structure over a kilometer long—or tall, as it were. The sections of leg below the knee stood 250 meters tall on their own. Koutarou and Sanae were currently headed for the twelfth storeroom in Blue Knight’s right calf, but because the gate was located right under the knee, they still had a good hundred meters or so to get to their destination. On the way there, they crossed paths with several other people, including some of the Forthorthian citizens that had come with Elfaria and some of the People of the Earth that were helping out with the resupply. Everyone was working hard together to get things done. But even then, they all stopped to bow politely to Koutarou as he passed.

“Teehee, everyone’s greeting you, Koutarou.”

Sanae grinned from ear to ear when she noticed. She was beaming like she was the one being praised. She was pleased that Koutarou was getting the recognition he deserved, which in turn helped put into perspective for her how much he’d really done to help other people.

“It’s not like they have to, though.”

“That’s not true! You’ve helped all these people out.”

“Yeah, but so did you guys. It’s not like I’m all that big of a deal.”

“I’d rather you get all the credit, though. It’d feel weird if people started thanking me for stuff.”

“Yeah, well, it feels weird for me too.”

Sanae was pleased as punch, but Koutarou was rather conflicted on the matter. There hadn’t been a single incident that Koutarou had resolved on his own, so all of the gratitude being directed at him felt strange.

“You’re the leader, so just accept it already. Red always gets the credit as team leader.”

“I’m Blue though.”

“Blue is the Blue Knight’s color. If you admit to being the Blue Knight, it’s only obvious that people would thank you, Layous-sama! Ohoho!”

Sanae teased Koutarou by mimicking Elfaria in a very uncanny fashion. His expression instantly twisted into a bitter smile.

“Don’t do that. I won’t forgive you if you grow up to be like Elle.”

“Okaaay.”

Though she could be impish from time to time, Sanae wanted Koutarou to see her as a good girl. She had no intention of ever being like Elfaria, but didn’t mind pretending every now and then for a little fun.

“The truth is, though, that I want you to be a hero... but just *our* hero.”

“I would honestly prefer that too.”

“Aha, so you’d be okay with us thanking you?”

“I’m grateful to all of you too, after all.”

“Yeah, that’s fair.”

“It balances out, right?”

“Yeah... Hey, am I working out as your Kabutonga?”

“Yeah. You can take pride in it.”

“Heehee!”

Right about the time their conversation petered out, they made it to storeroom 12. Sanae ran up to the door with a bounce in her step and placed her hand on the panel next to it with a flourish.

“Open sesame!”

Following her overly dramatic display, the door slid open without a sound. It was operated by the panel next to it, and activated by a combination of voice recognition and a scan that mapped the capillaries in one’s hand. Sanae loved using it and repeated the same performance every time she came.

“You love doing that, don’t you?”

“Yours truly, Sanae-chan, believes in boldly opening the way to your own future!”

“Talk about exaggerating. It’s just a door.”

“Eeheehee.”

Storeroom 12 was several meters both wide and across. It was big enough for both Koutarou and Sanae to enter with their carts without it feeling too cramped. Once inside, they parked their carts and worked together to unload the containers stacked on top of them.

“What’s in these boxes, Koutarou?”

“Well, mostly food. This one right here says ‘potatoes’ on the side.”

“Isn’t it a bad idea to keep food in a faraway place like this?”

“If we get into a fight, there’s no way of knowing which parts of the ship will be damaged, so it’s best to split things up and keep a little of it everywhere.”

“Huh... I guess a lot of thought went into this.”

Each of their carts was carrying two containers the size of large cardboard moving boxes, which were specifically designed to help prevent the spoilage of their contents. They were heavy considering everything they were loaded with, but gravity aboard Blue Knight was specifically being controlled to make the job of unloading the carts easier.

“Welp, that should do it.”

“All right, let’s go back!”

It only took a few minutes for Koutarou and Sanae to get the containers to their designated places in the storeroom, where they fit snugly to a T. Once that was done, they wheeled their carts back out into the hallway—where they were greeted by the unexpected blaring of a siren.

“Kyaaah!”

“What?!”

A revolving red light was flashing up and down the corridor, adding to the suspense. Both Koutarou and Sanae froze in place, surprised by the suddenness of it all. It only took a moment, however, for them to regain their composure. They turned to each other with resolution and determination in their eyes.

“Let’s go, Sanae!”

“Yeah!”

Leaving their carts behind, Koutarou and Sanae took off running. They couldn’t tell what had happened from just the alarm, but they knew that—whatever it was—it was serious. Their first priority right now was to get to Theia and Elfaria to protect them.

Shortly after the fleet departed on their mission to capture Empress Elfaria, Lord Vandarion received a message from the Melcemhein band of knights. It contained information on Blue Knight’s battle capabilities—which were reportedly higher than they were on paper. The origin of this information was undisclosed, but as it came through the Melcemhein band of knights, Vandarion knew they weren’t just pulling his leg. But even so, he wasn’t worried. Blue Knight was only one ship. An entire fleet would never lose against a single ship no matter how powerful it was, though Vandarion did warn them to put some countermeasures in place to keep the potential damage to the minimum.

Moreover, that wasn’t all the information the message contained. It claimed that there was an underground organization on Earth that was helping to resupply Blue Knight. The message described them, their combat capabilities,

and their whereabouts—it even included a map and blueprints of their base. It was practically a missive on how to attack and destroy them.

“With information this detailed, I suppose it’s only natural that the source would want to keep their identity hidden.”

“Certainly. If we sent a spy into the ranks of Elfaria’s faction, even they would be in danger if they revealed information like this.”

At first, Lord Vandarion and Director General Granado didn’t trust the information they’d received. Because it came from the Melcemhein knights, however, they couldn’t just ignore it. It was also so specific and detailed—particularly in regards to the underground organization on Earth—that it seemed legitimate. It was hard to believe anyone would go to such lengths to falsify intelligence, so it seemed much more likely that the Melcemhein family or someone close to them had a spy among Elfaria’s supporters. And so Vandarion and Granado came to trust and believe the information they’d been sent.

“However... if we attack Her Majesty Elfaria using this information, it would be like telling the sender we’re willing to cooperate with them.”

“Considering the detailed nature of the intelligence and the timing of its delivery... I can think of one other potential sender—that DKI boy.”

Vandarion’s chief suspect was the young CEO of DKI, Elexis. Although he wasn’t a spy per se, it wasn’t hard to believe he had access to privileged information and then some. He’d also have a discernable motive for sending it to Vandarion.

“Now that you mention it, he hasn’t made any public appearances lately... Is it possible that he’s been on Earth ever since he went after Princess Theia?”

“If that’s true, then this would all make sense. He remained on Earth for some reason, and has only just returned to Forthorthe now that things are going down here. As a result, he has more accurate information than we do in regards to what’s going on on Earth. Perhaps that’s how he knows we’ll lose if go straight for Blue Knight—he’s experienced it firsthand.”

“That can’t be... How could a whole fleet be taken out by a single ship, even if

it’s a royal class battleship?”

Director General Granado could hardly believe it. Elexis had attacked Theia’s Blue Knight and lost, but Vandarion and Granado had sent a much larger fleet to handle the job. If even they lost, just how powerful was Blue Knight really? As the director general of military affairs and the head of Forthorthe’s science and technology agency, Granado understood all too well how frightening that prospect really was.

“Perhaps it’s because of that underground organization the message mentioned.”

Lord Vandarion didn’t fear Blue Knight the way Granado did. He suspected that its alleged power wasn’t its own—and in that sense, he was very close to the truth. Blue Knight, even in high-spec mode with Koutarou at the helm, would also have the secreted away Hazy Moon to back it up.

“Whatever the reason, that boy will use this to suggest that we’re better off teaming up with him. In other words, it’s a sales pitch.”

“Yet at the same time, he’s sizing us up.”

“That’s right. If we use this information to secure victory, it would prove we at least have a modicum of intellect and capability in his eyes.”

“While if we ignore him and lose because of it, it would prove we were unworthy of an alliance in the first place.”

“Honestly, what a shrewd boy.”

“What should we do?”

“For starters, we’ll confirm the validity of his information. Are the maps of the base accurate? Are there any space-time distortions in that area? So on and so forth. Those answers will be the deciding factor.”

“I’ll look into it right away.”

Vandarion and Granado still didn’t know for certain whether or not Elexis was the one who sent them the information. Vandarion was fairly convinced, but they still needed to confirm it. As far as he was concerned, the veracity of the intelligence would indirectly give them their answer. Yet the moment they

confirmed the information and put it to use, they'd be accepting Elexis's implied offer. That was what Vandarion meant when he said Elexis was a shrewd boy.

"Heh... Still, we have gotten old."

"I beg your pardon?"

"While we were contemplating what to do, the younger generation was making its move. Just like we did in the past."

"But in the end, Vandarion-sama, you will be the one to stand at the top of it all."

"That's my intention. I won't be letting that boy do as he pleases just yet."

Vandarion wasn't surprised that a rival player like Elexis would emerge from the woodwork at a crucial moment like this—it was exactly what he and Granado had done in the past. Nevertheless, he was confident that he would ultimately be the one to seize control of the nation when all was said and done. And so he decided to engage Elfaria and her followers in a surface battle—just like Elexis's information hinted they should. Doing that would prove two things: how accurate the information was, and what Elexis was really worth. Vandarion would be using this opportunity to size him up too.

The circumstances being what they were, the coup d'etat army decided on a rather orthodox approach to their surface attack. Because the accuracy of their intelligence was still in question, they couldn't make any bold moves. The fleet commander wanted to limit the gambles they were taking; the surface attack was a big enough risk as it was.

As for the plan of attack, it was relatively simple. The coup forces knew that Blue Knight was currently in the middle of receiving supplies from the base in question. Because of that, the ship would be completely immobile, making it the perfect time to strike. But because the coup forces had no relations with Earth, it wasn't like they could enter its atmosphere legally. To get around that, the fleet dispatched a special forces team to infiltrate the underground organization's base. From there, they would use the organization's gate to board Blue Knight and capture Elfaria.

At first glance, it looked like a difficult mission—but looks can be deceiving. Being heavily automated, Blue Knight had very little in the way of crew. As long as the coup forces could deceive the IFF, they wouldn't have to worry about being attacked by Blue Knight's defense mechanisms. And seeing as how Blue Knight was a former allied ship, that part wouldn't be hard. The key to the mission—what the success of the operation would really depend on—would be whether they could successfully reach the gate. Getting there, however, wouldn't be as simple as they thought.

"Two of the spiritual energy sensors on the base's outer perimeter have detected suspicious individuals approaching, ho! The fourth sensor on the southeast side and the third sensor on the north side have also gone off, ho!"

"We can't see anything on the optical cameras there, ho! But when the footage is enhanced, we can see some men wearing clothing that changes colors like a chameleon, ho! And they're getting closer, ho!"

It was the People of the Earth's technology that first detected the approaching enemy. As Forthorthians in general were completely ignorant of spiritual energy technology, they walked right into various sensors and traps without knowing better. That was what had tripped the siren Koutarou and Sanae heard in the lower decks of Blue Knight.

"That's the active camouflage Forthorthian special forces use," explained Clan. "They stand out so badly because the quality is so poor."

Ruth had used a drone to stealthily survey the areas Karama and Korama had identified, while Clan processed and enhanced the incoming footage to give Koutarou and the others a clear image of the intruders in question. Little did they know they'd already been detected.

Clan had decried the quality of their camouflage, but that was largely because she was comparing it to what she might use herself. What the enemy was using was actually rather high quality for being mass produced. Had they been on any other mission, they wouldn't have been spotted until they were much closer to their target. Their early detection wasn't their fault or the fault of their gear so much as it was bad luck that they were up against Clan and the People of the Earth.

“So there’s 45 of them in total, huh? They’re not joking around.”

Koutarou could see two groups of men in matching fatigues in the hologram projected from his bracelet. He and Sanae were making a run for the gate leading to Earth while Clan and the others filled them in.

“Hey, Koutarou. Why are their numbers different?”

Sanae, who was looking at the same hologram, cocked her head to the side in puzzlement. There were two groups approaching, but the group coming from the south had thirty men while the group coming from the north only had fifteen. They would be completely unbalanced if they were moving for a pincer attack.

“The group with fewer men to the north is probably going to run distraction,” answered Kiriha. “Get a more detailed analysis of the footage. The north side should have longer range weapons.”

“Kiriha-sama is correct! Only the men on the north side are outfitted for long range combat!”

“That must be their plan, then. The smaller group will engage us from a distance, and while our attention is turned to the north, the larger group will rush in from the south. Based on their positions, it’s almost certain their end goal is the gates in the warehouse. They’re after Elfaria-dono aboard Blue Knight!”

Kiriha’s keen eye and insight quickly deciphered the intentions of intruders. The warehouse on base sat on the southeastern side of the facility. It was a simple, perfectly sensible plan to send their main force to the real objective via the shortest possible route.

“Ruth and I will take care of the north side! They’re a hundred years too early to go up against us in a long range battle!” declared Theia.

“Please leave this to us, Master!” shouted Ruth.

“Koutarou, you take Shizuka with you and head southeast!” Theia ordered.

“Okay! Landlord-san, let’s meet by the gate!” Koutarou shouted.

“Roger that! I’m almost there!” Shizuka shouted back.

As long as she knew her opponent's plan, Theia could handle things. As commander, she effectively put her soldiers to their best use, swiftly moving to counteract the enemy's strategy.

"Maki, you come with us just in case! We might need your backup!" Theia called.

"Okay, I'll head over to you," Maki replied.

"That means you're with us, Yurika," called Koutarou.

"I-I would! But I don't know how to get back!" Yurika called back.

"Wait a minute, Yurika! Where are you right now?!"

"I'm with Elfaria-san! I got some tea and snacks from her!"

"So you never found Shizuka..."

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! It wasn't for lack of trying!"

As it turned out, Yurika was unexpectedly off course. Her original destination was storeroom 22 in Blue Knight's torso, but she'd never made it there. Instead she'd accidentally made her way to the living quarters and met up with Elfaria, who tried to help her find her way.

"No! Good job, Yurika! You just stay there!"

"Yeah! Protect Elle no matter what, okay?"

"O-Okay! I'll do my best!"

Though unexpected, the Yurika situation ended up working out perfectly. Since she could use all kinds of magic as a magical girl, she was incredibly versatile in situations like this and made an ideal candidate for protecting Elfaria.

"Harumi, you go with Koutarou! Make sure he has what he needs with Signaltin!"

"Yes, of course!"

"Kiriha, move as you see fit based on the situation!"

"Got it. Karama, start off assisting Theia-dono. Karama, you come with me—

we're going to Koutarou."

"Gotcha! I'm off, ho!"

"I'll protect you, Ane-san, ho!"

"Clan, you stay here as backup! Unless something serious happens, don't come out!"

Theia was putting her forces to excellent use, but the trickiest player to put into action was Clan. The Schweiger family had close ties with the military, and things would get complicated if there were suddenly open hostilities between them. Moreover, Clan's Hazy Moon was officially back in Forthorthe, so she couldn't risk letting anyone spot it here.

"You don't need to worry; I know the position I'm in quite well! But Yurika, if things get really bad, don't hesitate to bring Elfaria over here!"

"Thank you very much!"

Theia, Ruth, Maki, and Karama were in charge of intercepting the troops to the north which would be leading the diversion. Meanwhile, Koutarou, Sanae, Harumi, Shizuka, Kiriha, and Korama would take care of the enemy's main force coming from the southeast. Yurika would stay with Elfaria to protect her if it came to that. Clan was on standby overhead in the Cradle, doing what she could to support Koutarou and the girls behind the scenes. For teams that were decided so hastily, they were well balanced in terms of offense and defense, and should be well equipped to deal with the intruders. Theia's natural instincts when it came to battle were second to none.

By the time Maki and Karama grouped up with them, Theia and Ruth were already preparing to attack. As impatient as she was, Theia was determined to attack first. And since she wouldn't dare let her lord fight on her own, Ruth followed suit.

"Ridiculous! You think fifteen fools could defeat me?!" Theia shouted as her missile launcher opened all of its ports at once.

Theia's Combat Dress was currently outfitted with golden decorations. She had the Guardian Yellow accessories equipped, which sacrificed mobility for

superior defense and massive firepower. Guardian Yellow could fire missiles and large cannons all while being protected by a sturdy barrier and anti-air guns, making it perfect for the current situation.

"Ruth-chan, I'm sending over the spiritual energy sensor data, ho!"

"I've got it. Your Highness, all fifteen of the enemy units have been targeted."

Karama, who had come with Theia, had an accurate read of the area—including the location of all fifteen of the special forces units. Ruth processed the data from Karama and forwarded it to the firing control system for Theia's Combat Dress. In other words, both Karama and Ruth would be responsible for guiding Theia's missiles.

"Maki, can you enhance my senses?!"

"You can count on me! That's my specialty! Here! Keen Sense! Lightning Reflexes!"

Next, Maki—who had only just gotten to the scene—cast two spells in rapid succession. The first was to sharpen Theia's senses and the second was to improve reflexes and motor functions. Both were perfect for a situation like this where swift and accurate attacks would make all the difference, and since they were indigo magic, they were right in Maki's wheelhouse. With her help, Theia was now as keen as a wild animal and as dexterous as a fine artist.

"Heh, I'll show these sorry dogs what it means to challenge me to a fight!"

Theia laughed fearlessly as she readied a massive cannon in both hands. It was almost twice as long as she was tall. From a distance, it looked like she was holding a giant spear.

"Blue Knight, release firearms control on the anti-ship hybrid cannon! I want manual bombardment!"

"As you wish, my princess."

Theia disengaged the AI's control of her cannon because she was intent on attacking herself. She could see her targets just fine now that her eyesight was sharper than a hawk's. And with her deft movements, her aim didn't waver in the slightest. Enhanced by magic, she was now far more accurate than the

computer would be.

“Anchor!”

Two loud cracking sounds could be heard as stakes emerged from both of her feet and impaled themselves in the ground, effectively fixing her in place. The cannon she was holding was far beyond what a normal human could hope to steady and support. After a shell was fired via a gunpowder blast, it was then further accelerated by the cannon’s electromagnetic barrel. The shells shot out with such speed and force that it was impossible to see with the naked eye. As a result, it was impossible to completely kill the recoil even with Guardian Yellow’s weight and technology on Theia’s side. That was why she needed the additional help of a primitive technique like staking herself to the ground.

“Blue Knight, raise the flag!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Theia was now fully prepared to fire. But before that, a flag with a golden flower on it unfurled overhead. It wasn’t a physical flag, but one drawn with lasers. The sight of it was incredible, and the flower emblazoned on it was both exquisite and beautiful.

“Can you hear me, men?! We will now begin our attack!”

The flag flying over Theia’s head was meant to let everyone—friend and foe alike—know that the princess herself had taken to the battlefield. Forthorthe’s proud royals were above the likes of sneak attacks. They fought and defeated their enemies fair and square, and Theia was no different. The large, several-meter flag fluttering over her head was a bold declaration that she was here to fight and win.

The highly trained special forces approaching from the north couldn’t help but notice the large, brilliant flag. And when they saw it, they fell into a panic.

“Receiving an IFF signal! Confirming the combat flag... It’s a golden flower! It’s Princess Theiamillis!”

“The princess herself has taken the front line?!”

“Never mind that! That flag means that we’ve already been detect—”

Before any one of them could get to the bottom of what was happening, they were all assaulted with a booming sound so loud that it shook the entire forest.

“Wah!”

The next thing they knew, the barrier protecting the group of them collapsed. The shell Theia had fired straight at them pierced right through it and smashed the generation device to pieces. But it didn’t stop there. It still had enough force behind it that it kept going and smashed through several mobile weapons following behind the special forces. The boom they’d heard was merely a ghostly aftersound of the destruction—a shockwave from the shell that moved far too fast to be seen.

“Captain, an incoming message from headquarters! A high energy reaction detected from Blue Kn—”

“Get dooown! They’re bombarding us!”

Next, they were assaulted by several pillars of light. It was a surface bombardment from Blue Knight in orbit, which only targeted the mobile weapons protecting the special forces.

“Emergency alert! Thirty anti-personnel missiles are approaching! Take evasive action immediately!”

For the grand finale of Theia’s attack, she showered the special forces with missiles. Their strategy support AI warned them to get out of the way, but they had just thrown themselves on the ground to avoid the orbital bombardment. It was physically impossible to get out of the way in time.

“Impossible! Anti-personnel missiles with no lock-on?!”

The missiles were accurately being guided towards the group—and their captain could hardly believe what he was seeing. There had been no signs of a radar lock-on, and the missiles were far too spread out to be using any kind of heat or optic tracking. It was conceivable that they were being guided by Blue Knight in orbit, but that would impose a lag in communications that wasn’t conducive to use with anti-personnel missiles. Yet despite all odds, these missiles were flying straight for the special forces troops. They scored direct hits on two soldiers that were still prone after diving for cover.

“Waaaaah! W-Wait... What is this?!”

“It looks like... paint?”

“They’re mock missiles! The kind used for training!”

This was the most confounding development yet—the missiles weren’t carrying the usual payload, but rather special paint used for practice. The soldiers who’d been hit were unharmed, just covered in red and yellow dye.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but we’re safe!”

“Luck’s on our side!”

The soldiers were simply happy that they were all right, but their captain and vice captain weren’t sharing in the celebration.

“So this is what Princess Theiamillis is like...”

“Captain, did Princess Theiamillis really mix up her missiles?”

“Bullets would be one thing, but there’s no way she’d mix up missiles.”

“Then what’s going on?”

“Can’t you tell? That was a warning.”

“A warning?”

“Her Highness could have just killed us three times.”

What if she’d fired something more dangerous than a simple armor-piercing round from her cannon? What if Blue Knight’s surface bombardment had targeted more than just the mobile weapons? What if the missiles hadn’t been practice rounds?

In any one of those scenarios, the soldiers would all be dead by now. To assume that their lives had been spared three times by sheer coincidence and good fortune would be foolish. This was a message Princess Theiamillis.

“She could’ve eliminated us if she’d wanted, and she won’t show any mercy next time. She’s telling us that if we want to live, we either need to leave or surrender—the choice is ours.”

All of the soldiers turned to their captain in awe. His words sent a ripple of

shock through their ranks, and the vice captain turned to him with questions on everyone's behalf.

"Now I'm really confused... Why would Her Highness do that? Wouldn't it be safer just to kill us?"

"Her reasons are probably the same as Empress Alaia's were. She's a princess of the house of Mastir and we're Forthorthian citizens, after all."

"Captain... did Her Majesty Elfaria really commit those crimes the news says she did?"

The vice captain and several of the other soldiers couldn't fight the doubt springing up in their hearts. Empress Elfaria had allegedly embezzled public funds and killed to cover it all up. By all accounts, she was a terrible person. Yet here, Princess Theiamillis, was righteously showing kindness and mercy in combat on her mother's behalf. It didn't add up. No one felt that more keenly than the soldiers whose lives had just been spared.

"I don't know either... No, I can't tell anymore. But there is one thing I know for certain."

"And that is?"

"That girl... She's a true princess of Forthorthe."

The soldiers all looked forward through an opening in the trees. They could see the smoking barrel of the cannon that had just fired at them. Standing boldly behind it was a petite girl with long, blonde hair. With the barrel of the cannon aimed skyward, it looked like she was holding up the radiant flag flapping overhead.

She was Theiamillis Gre Mastir Sagurada von Forthorthe, Forthorthe's golden princess.

The explosive sounds of Theia's incredible bombardment could be heard all the way at the southeast of the base. As if they'd been waiting for it as their signal, the special forces approaching from the south took action the moment they heard it. They darted out from their cover in the forest and made a break for the warehouse. Their goal was to reach the gate inside, and Elfaria who

should be on the other side of it.

“Hurry it up! We need to apprehend the empress before they shut down the gate!”

The captain in charge of the southern forces hurried his men along. Time was of the essence in this operation. While it took several hours to set up a transfer gate that was safe for humans to pass through, it only took as little as a few seconds to shut one down. The special forces were lucky that they were dealing with a larger gate meant to transport cargo—that would at least take a few minutes to close. If they could just make it through in that time, they could infiltrate the system and forcibly keep the gate open long enough to take over Blue Knight. But that meant they were working against the clock, which had started ticking the moment the battle to the north erupted.

“They’re coming! Hurry up, Koutarou!”

Thanks to her spirit sight, Sanae had a good handle on the enemy’s position. There were thirty units in total, and they were all rapidly closing in with increasing hostility. If Koutarou and the others delayed in the slightest, the enemy would reach the warehouse first. To avoid that, Sanae hurried them along. Kiriha quickly realized the urgency of the situation and ordered Koutarou and Shizuka to go on ahead.

“Koutarou, you and Shizuka take the lead!”

“You can count on us! GoL, your targets are everyone in front of us.”

“IFF set—targets are the thirty human units and the mobile weapons at twelve o’clock. Enemy forces show signs of engaging in military action. GoL will now begin its attack.”

“I see you’re as quick to respond as ever...”

“I am honored by your praise, my lord.”

“Uncle, could you prioritize using your mana for defense?”

“You don’t want any offensive power?”

“I’ll only need your help with that if the enemy is tough. If I go all out, I’ll end up killing these guys.”

“That’s true.”

Following Kiriha’s instructions, Koutarou and Shizuka charged the enemy. It was far too casual and reckless of an approach, but they didn’t have anything to worry about with GoL protecting Koutarou and Alunaya protecting Shizuka.

“Sanae, you suppress the enemy from behind Koutarou and Shizuka!”

“I’ll do my best to be as annoying as possible!”

Sanae was also protected by her spirit sight—she could easily read her enemies’ auras and see where they were attacking. The biggest threat to her was getting caught in stray fire, so Kiriha decided to play it safe and keep her behind the front line fighters.

“Harumi, you stay back here with me!”

“Right! Satomi-kun, shall we do it like we always do?”

“Please!”

“Korama, you protect Harumi!”

“Got it, ho! Will you be fine on your own, Ane-san?”

“That’s why I’m staying back, just in case.”

“Ane-san sure is responsible, ho!”

The rear line of their formation consisted of Harumi, Korama, and Kiriha. Harumi would be using her magic to support the others from a safe distance. Korama would be protecting her while she cast spells. And lastly, Kiriha would be using a spiritual energy beam rifle to offer supporting fire while commanding the others from further back where she could get a better view of the battlefield. The rear line was all about strategy and defense.

“To think they’d come at us with just five people...”

“They’re either really brave or really stupid.”

“I imagine they’re just desperate. They can’t fall back because they have to protect Her Majesty Elfaria.”

“So they’re loyal subjects, huh?”

“Indeed, so stay on your toes. Diehards make troublesome opponents in any situation.”

Kiriha’s tactics were solid, but the Imperial Army special forces were battle-hardened soldiers. They weren’t about to make the amateur mistake of underestimating their opponents. Courageous, reckless, loyal... Those were all dangerous attributes. Mercenaries fighting for money were a lot more conservative and predictable.

Little did the special forces know that the opponents charging them now were more ridiculous than they could possibly imagine. Courageous, reckless, and loyal was only the tip of the iceberg. And the one who embodied all of that best was the knight in blue armor leading the charge.

“Hey, some guy in antique armor is coming this way.”

“That armor is the master controller for Blue Knight, though it also seems to function as a space suit in extreme environments.”

“So it looks classic, but it’s state of the art on the inside, huh? No matter. Send the mobile weapons forward!”

Thanks to the data the special forces had on Blue Knight, they identified the armor Koutarou was wearing right away. They’d been well informed of its performance. It was a royal piece of cutting-edge technology, though it was somewhat weaker than it rightfully should have been because of the emphasis placed on its design and aesthetics. All and all, it was comparable to the power suits the military used—which meant that Koutarou was hardly a threat in the special forces’ eyes. They should easily be able to take him out with their mobile weapons.

“I thought I taught your predecessors not to judge a book by their cover...”

Koutarou unsheathed Signaltin and Saguratin hanging at his waist, holding one sword in each hand.

“Warning. Enemy mobile weapons approaching. Multiple lock-ons detected. Estimating the scale of the attack from the energy reaction... Chance of defeat is 64 percent. Activating active barrier.”

“I’ll leave defending and the soldiers to you. I’ll deal with the big guys.”

“Strategy algorithms recommend an immediate withdrawal.”

“We’ve been partners for a while now. I think you know me a little better than that.”

“The mainframe will pray for your fortune and glory in place of the nation of Forthorthe.”

“Well said! That’s more like it!”

On Koutarou’s orders, GoL adjusted the aim of its laser cannon on Koutarou’s right shoulder. It had been rattling off suppressing fire to keep the enemy from advancing, but that ceased as the AI closely monitored the mobile weapons. Koutarou was close enough to them now that suppressive fire was no longer necessary. From here on out, GoL’s job was simply to protect Koutarou.

“That said... using mobile weapons against an enemy of unknown strength was the right call. Though I can’t say I like taking the brute force approach.”

With a sword still in each hand, Koutarou charged forward towards the approaching mobile weapons. There were three of them in total. Each was just over three meters tall and looked like something between a tank and a plane. Normally they hovered above the surface and functioned as infantry support, but they could also fly through the air like planes in short bursts when necessary. Since they were automated and didn’t carry pilots, they were lightning quick and extremely mobile—in other words, they were a nightmare for infantry.

“This guy must be an idiot... Just one of our mobile weapons could wipe out an entire platoon of infantrymen, and he thinks he can take three? Does he have a death wish?”

“He must not know any better. My, what a terrible adversary ignorance makes.”

There was no way for a citizen of this backwater planet to know how powerful and deadly Forthorthian weapons they’d never seen before were. So instead of trying to stop Koutarou, the special forces units simply watched as he charged in without hesitation. This fight would be over soon... or so they thought.

“All right, let’s do this... I’m counting on you two!”

“Go, go, go! Let’s blow them away with my Love Love Sanae-chan sword!”

“Satomi-kun, I’ll maximize Signaltin’s power when you strike!”

Saguratin began shining gold as Sanae infused it with her spiritual energy, and Signaltin began glowing silver as it responded to Harumi’s will. The light from both swords was equally bright. Since Koutarou and the girls were going up against machines here, they weren’t concerned about holding back. They’d go all out from the start.

“Veltlion, the upper part protruding from the frame is where the distortion field generator is located on this type of unit.”

“That thing, huh?!”

Clan, who was observing from above, fed Koutarou key information on the mobile weapons’ weak spot. Koutarou quickly located it and raised his arms upwards in a cross-like motion.

“Take a good look! We’re the opponents you’ll have to get through, and this is our strength!”

Despite the large amount of energy gathering in the swords, the three mobile weapons continued their forward advance. They were operating under the assumption that they were merely fighting an opponent with primitive, close-range weapons. A few of the special forces got a bad feeling when they saw the swords glow, but by the time they put it together, it was already too late.

First was Saguratin. Koutarou swung it valiantly, and the arc it cut through the air became a blade of spiritual energy that flew forward and spread wide. It assaulted all three mobile weapons, whose barriers weren’t designed to protect against spiritual energy. The spiritual blade thusly passed right through the barriers and destroyed the generation devices behind them.

Next was Signaltin. Koutarou darted between the middle and right mobile weapons, swinging his silvery sword to both sides. Without their barriers, the mobile weapons were defenseless against the magical surge of power Harumi released from Signaltin. It cut through the metal machines like a hot knife through butter.

Lastly, the grand finale was the gauntlet built into the left arm of Koutarou’s

power armor. He focused Sanae's spiritual energy from Saguratin into the gauntlet to generate a powerful electric charge before unleashing it at the last remaining mobile weapon. The bolt flew into the large hole where its barrier generation device had once been and unleashed its energy, bursting the mobile weapon from the inside.

All three attacks happened in the blink of an eye. They were so fast that not a single member of the special forces had any idea what had happened. To them, it simply looked like Koutarou had destroyed three mobile weapons with a single swing of his sword.

"I guess that's about what I should have expected from anything other than Elexis's machines..."

After confirming that the mobile weapons were destroyed, Koutarou turned once again to the approaching special forces. He didn't have a single scratch on him, and his highly polished armor shone radiantly in the light of the fires from the destroyed mobile weapons.

Of course, the other mobile weapons weren't simply waiting for Koutarou to attack them too. Once they entered range, they opened fire with their heavy machine guns—their anti-infantry weapon of choice. Koutarou instantly took off when he heard the sound and, unable to keep up with him, only a small number of bullets actually reached him. They were no match for his barrier, however, and were easily deflected.

In order to take down Koutarou, they'd need to resort to heavy anti-mobile weapon armaments. But before they could even begin to process that, the next three mobile weapons were already destroyed.

"Who the hell is that guy?!"

"What's going on?!"

"What even happened to the mobile weapons?!"

The special forces were astonished and aghast. Koutarou had taken out three mobile weapons—the equivalent of three infantry platoons—in an instant. And the special forces weren't stupid. They knew they only had thirty men with them, or three-quarters of a single platoon. Despite the headcount, they were

clearly outnumbered in terms of strength.

“C-Calm down, men!” the captain called. “No matter how strong he is, he’s only human! All it will take is a single bullet!”

“The captain is right! Calm down and remember your training!”

“It’s not like we’ve only trained to fight against weaker opponents!”

The captain did what he could to stifle his own panic and rally his troops. With the help and additional encouragement of the vice captain and squad leader, the alarm in the ranks steadily began to die down. Their misfortune, however, had only just begun.

“Well, you might be right about the single bullet thing if it were just Satomi-kun on his own.”

“What?!”

The captain was caught off guard by an unexpected voice, and the unexpected fist that followed. It came flying at him from the side with no warning. It appeared to be a girl’s fist, but in contrast to its seemingly delicate appearance, it smashed into the captain’s face with a frightening amount of momentum. Then, just for the moment it made contact, the weight of the fist increased dramatically, making the captain feel like he’d been hit with a sledgehammer rather than punched.

“Gah!”

“C-Captain?!”

Taken by surprise, the captain never stood a chance. He instantaneously lost consciousness and was sent flying, crashing to the ground some meters away. The impressive blow astounded everyone who saw it, including the girl who’d thrown the attack.



“Uncle, that was too hard! Did you just kill that guy?!”

“Don’t worry. I held back, so he’s still alive. Just... probably with a few broken bones.”

Of course, the girl who’d punched the captain was none other than Shizuka. While Koutarou was occupying the special forces’ attention, she’d snuck up on them and launched a surprise attack. Under normal circumstances, a girl ambushing a special forces unit with nothing but her bare fists would be suicide. But for better or worse, these circumstances were anything but normal. Thanks to the power of the Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya inside of her, Shizuka had combat capabilities that were on par with or even exceeded that of a mobile weapon. Ordinary weapons couldn’t hurt her, and ordinary soldiers couldn’t block her attacks. The captain really hadn’t stood a chance.

“The captain is down! Counterattack!”

“Open fire!”

“Damn little girl!”

Shizuka’s surprise attack didn’t shake the troops the way Koutarou’s display had. Many Forthorthian weapons were small or even undetectable by the naked eye, leaving the special forces to assume that Shizuka had something like that at her disposal. They’d trained for situations like this, and fell back on that training as they readied their weapons and counterattacked just like they’d practiced many times. A loud series of bangs rang out.

“Whoa, Uncle! I’m really counting on you for defense, okay?”

“Worry not. I swear I will protect you.”

Shizuka was being fired at by a dozen or so troops, and the roar of all the gunfire made it sound like she was inside a thundercloud. Though she was protected by Alunaya, she still didn’t like being shot at. Draconic power or not, she was just an ordinary girl in the end. Fortunately, she had friends nearby she could depend on for help.

“Ane-san! I’m in position, ho!”

“Covering fire is incoming, Shizuka. We’re here for you, so fight as you

please.”

“Thank you, Kiriha-san!”

After the short message of support from over the comms, beams came raining down from above. Most of them hit soldiers behind Shizuka, taking them out and reducing the fire she was taking. It was a combo attack courtesy of Kiriha and Korama.

Kiriha actually fired the beams, and Korama got in place to cleverly deflect them towards the group of soldiers with his spiritual energy field. Using this tactic, Kiriha could fire from a safe position while Korama, who had his spiritual energy field up the entire time, wouldn’t have to worry about counterattacks. But that wasn’t all. Raining fire down from overhead meant that they could ignore the difficulties of firing across terrain, and they could aim strategically to avoid friendly fire by bypassing any allies that were on the field between them and their intended targets. It also had a surprise effect. From the perspective of the special forces, it was like they were being attacked by an unseen enemy.

“We have to do something cool too, Harumi!”

“Yes, let’s do our best!”

Sanae and Harumi then entered the fray as well. Now that the mobile weapons had been eliminated, they could move with relative safety and freedom on the battlefield. And between Sanae’s random attacks and Harumi’s powerful magic, the remaining special forces troops began dropping like flies.

The last soldier standing was the vice captain. With trembling hands, he pointed the barrel of his weapon at Koutarou.

“S-Such power... Just who are you kids?”

He couldn’t help but ask. One boy and four girls had easily dispatched thirty special forces agents and the six mobile weapons protecting them. The vice captain couldn’t believe it, despite the fact that he’d seen it with his own two eyes. It was like watching a magic trick—he was struck dumb with disbelief.

“We’re...”

Koutarou hesitated to reply for a moment. There were plenty of answers he

could give... but one in particular struck a chord with him in the moment.

“We’re a motley alliance formed to serve and protect Princess Theiamillis, the Satomi band of knights.”

“The Satomi... band of knights?”

“Yes, although I don’t know if you could say we’re really official yet.”

That was the last thing the vice captain heard before Koutarou knocked him out. Later, he and the rest of his squad would return to their fleet and report on the details of what happened. That would include the appearance of a mysterious band, the Satomi band of knights, and would mark the first time their name was recorded in the annals of Forthorthe’s history.

And as of this moment, their record was flawless. They’d come out victorious in a battle where the odds had seemed to be overwhelmingly against them—all with zero casualties on either side. It was a definitive, impressive start to what would become the legend of Theiamillis’s knights.

In total, 45 men had attacked the People of the Earth’s base. A squad of fifteen was in charge of running a diversion in the north while the real infiltration team made their move in the southeast. By the time all was said and done, Koutarou and company had captured all 45 of them.

After a small skirmish, the entire diversion squad accepted their defeat and surrendered. The team to the southeast had resisted down to the last man, but they were all ultimately incapacitated. Presently, all 45 captives were being held aboard Blue Knight, but it would only be a temporary arrangement. As they weren’t technically criminals, Koutarou and the others would eventually free them.

“I’m glad everything turned out okay.”

While the fighting had been taking place, Yurika was guarding Elfaria on the bridge. Once she heard from Koutarou and the others that things were resolved without issue, a relieved smile crossed her face. She was always prepared to fight when she had to, but it wasn’t something she enjoyed doing—and she certainly didn’t enjoy seeing her friends forced into it. She was happy to hear

that both friend and foe alike were safe.

“Easy for you to say when all you had to do was watch.”

“But, but, but, Sanae-chan... If I’d gotten my chance to shine, that would’ve meant you and the others failed.”

“Hey, then it’s a great thing that you didn’t do anything, right, Yurika?”

“That’s right. Nothing happening is always best.”

In the end, all Yurika had done was have tea with Elfaria, but no one was unhappy about that. Quite the opposite, really; they all felt the same way deep down.

“So, Theia, what do we do now?”

“If we laze around here any longer, the enemy will just attack again. Let’s abandon the resupply and depart as soon as possible.”

But alas, there was no time to relax and indulge in relief. While they had safely repelled the Forthorthian special forces, the fleet they hailed from was still nearby. If Theia and the others dawdled any longer with the resupply, they would simply be sitting ducks for another attack. In order to avoid that, Theia decided to cut the resupply short and get a move on.

“Abandon the resupply? Do we have enough on board as it is?”

Theia’s reasoning was sound, but departing without adequate supplies would also be dangerous. That prospect concerned Koutarou.

“Whether we do or not, if we continue the resupply, the enemy will reappear—that much is certain. As such, we cannot continue the operation.”

“Pardomshiha, what percentage of the supplies have been loaded so far?”

“Just under 80 percent of the intended goal.”

“Then if we include the Hazy Moon’s supplies in the total, we’ll be more than fine.”

Fortunately, Blue Knight was already over three-quarters of the way through the resupply. With that much done, plus Clan’s generosity in agreeing to share supplies from the Hazy Moon, they would be set. With that knowledge,

Koutarou was no longer worried.

“All right, then let’s get out of here as soon as we can.”

And so the group steadily worked towards departing. Theia’s plan had her mother and Koutarou’s support, but there was something in particular she needed to do before they left. Or rather, there was one more passenger she needed to pick up.

“Yurika, could you bring Nana here?”

“Sure. I’ll be right back.”

Accepting Theia’s request, Yurika leaped through the gate on Blue Knight’s bridge. She was going to get Nana, who would be accompanying them on their trip to Forthorthe. Nana was currently undergoing maintenance on her artificial limbs in the People of the Earth’s base. As she’d just been through a serious battle and was about to undertake a long journey, they wanted to be as thorough as possible with the maintenance. But now that their departure had been bumped up, Nana would have to cut her service short and the rest of it would have to be performed aboard Blue Knight on the way.

The plan to depart as soon as possible had other consequences as well, one of which Harumi quickly picked up on.

“Even if we leave right now... isn’t the enemy fleet somewhere nearby? Will we really be able to slip past them?”

Harumi was worried that they wouldn’t be able to avoid another fight. The fleet that had come for them was only a small fraction of the Imperial Army’s total forces. But if they engaged here, they could be fighting all the way back to Forthorthe. It would be a considerable drain on their supplies, not to mention dangerous. The ideal scenario would be avoiding any combat at all, but that would be a challenge thanks to a fundamental problem with warp navigation.

The journey from Forthorthe from Earth would require repeated warps. Warp technology used the power of gravity to literally warp space in order to bring a target’s current location and its destination closer together, then punching through the warped space to create a shortcut between the two. As such, other gravitational fields could influence the warp, and the warp itself had a

considerable effect on its surroundings. At short distances said effects were negligible, but that wasn't the case on longer warps. So in short, if they wanted to warp away without attracting much attention, they would need to move away from Earth before engaging the warp. But it was hard to imagine the fleet would just let them do that—it was far more likely they'd use the opportunity to close in and attack.

"Their fleet only consists of six ships. If Layous-sama is the one controlling Blue Knight, we can still win against them," assured Elfaria.

With the intelligence they'd gathered from their captives, Koutarou and the others now knew the size of the enemy force they were facing. With the combined powers of Blue Knight and the Hazy Moon, there was no doubt that they would come out victorious even if they were outnumbered. Royal-class battleships were meant to serve as flagships for much larger fleets, and as such were outfitted with the latest technology and equipped with impressive firepower. They had an overwhelming advantage against normal ships, and Koutarou and the other had not one, but two of them on their side.

"Wait, Elle. That would be bad for Clan. If things go south, she won't even be able to go home."

Clan wasn't "officially" on Earth right now, and the Schweiger family had a notorious rivalry the Mastir family. Moreover, they were deeply connected to the military. So if Clan openly took a stance and sided with Theia and Elfaria, not only would it make her a traitor, it could jeopardize her entire family's safety. Koutarou didn't want to put Clan in a dangerous position like that, and while the Schweigers might be known rivals of the Mastirs, they were still a royal family. Koutarou personally wanted to avoid dragging them into any undue trouble.

"Now isn't the time for that. From here on out, we'll be fighting against the Imperial Army... no, against the coup d'etat forces. So you have bigger things to worry about than me."

In spite of Koutarou's concerns, Clan firmly shook her head. Her eyes and expression were far sterner than usual. As a Forthorthian royal, this wasn't a matter she could simply shy away from. Granted, her pride played a small part

in that stubbornness as well.

“But even if we win the war, I’ll feel horrible if you end up all alone.”

“I’m not alone anymore. I have you, plus Theiamillis-san and the others, no?”

“That’s true, but...”

“Or did you already forget that promise?”

“That promise? Yeah... we did make one, didn’t we? Hmm...”

Koutarou paused for a moment and reflected on the promise he’d once made Clan in the past. He’d told her that if she ever found herself without a place to call home, she could come live in room 106. And the situation was no different now—they were still trying to protect the citizens of Forthorthe from a coup. That’s why Clan had no hesitation whatsoever going into this. And faced with her clear, resolute eyes, Koutarou couldn’t find any words to argue. That’s where Kiriha came in, and she quickly threw the speechless Koutarou a bone.

“Clan-dono, try not to bully Koutarou so much,” she said with a special smile she only used around the two of them. “Koutarou doesn’t want you to be separated from your family. Not unless it absolutely comes to that.”

“Kii...”

At that, Clan relented a little out of deference. She knew Kiriha and Koutarou’s family situations all too well.

“Besides, who said we actually have to fight? That hasn’t been decided yet.”

“Really, Kiriha?! Is there something we can do?!”

“We’ll make full use of Clan not officially being here.”

There, Kiriha returned to her usual sly grin and began explaining her great escape plan.

Upon hearing of their unexpected and overwhelming defeat on Earth’s surface, the higher-ups of the fleet fell into a panic. Not only had their diversion and ambush been completely seen through... They were defeated by what appeared to be a team of fewer than ten children, and they hadn’t even taken

out a single one of them in the process. It was nearly inconceivable, leaving the higher-ups rightly bewildered at the news.

“Calm down!”

“But admiral...”

“It doesn’t matter how strong their soldiers are—it won’t make Blue Knight any stronger! All we have to do is make sure they don’t escape!”

At the fleet admiral’s scolding, the crew’s bewilderment began to die down. He had a point, after all. It wouldn’t matter how strong their individual enemies were once they were aboard their ship. According to intelligence the fleet had gotten back home, Theia’s Blue Knight was purportedly more powerful than its recorded specs, but in the end, it was still just a machine. It could only be but so powerful.

“I apologize for losing my cool... Now, admiral, what shall we do?”

“For starters, we will continue observing Blue Knight.”

The admiral’s commanding voice reverberated through the bridge of the carrier. His determined tone made his iron will perfectly clear to all his subordinates. It gave them some hope and helped bolster morale after the crushing surface defeat.

“So we’re not doing anything? Won’t that just give Blue Knight a chance to launch the first strike?”

The carrier’s captain, however, was worried that Blue Knight might attack while they casually continued to observe the situation. The carrier was the slowest ship in the fleet, making it a prime target. The captain had accordingly succumbed to a type of occupational paranoia that kept him hypervigilant of any prospect of enemy attacks at all times.

“We don’t really want to fight in Earth’s orbit... and I’m sure they don’t either.”

Neither side wanted to engage in the midst of a planet they had no diplomatic relations with. A military fleet simply entering orbit without permission could already be interpreted as an act of war. But taking it one step further and

actually engaging in combat while in orbit would unquestionably make them the aggressors here, thusly calling into question the legitimacy of their mission in the eyes of the public. That wasn't a risk they could take, but Elfaria's side was in the same pickle.

The only way things could safely go down between them would be a short, decisive battle on the far side of the moon where it was unlikely anyone on Earth could observe them—but pulling that off would require an unspoken agreement between both parties. In short, the carrier captain had nothing to be worried about.

"We have the advantage of time on our side."

"Indeed. We can stay here indefinitely, but they'll have to make a move sooner or later."

"They'll likely try to avoid combat and escape via warp. That being the case, they'll need to leave Earth's orbit, or perhaps just head for the far side of the moon. All we need to do is make sure they can't."

In order to warp away, Blue Knight would need to get away from Earth. Their closest, most discrete option was simply to maneuver Blue Knight behind the moon. In order to prevent it from getting there, the fleet admiral was holding his six ships in an orbit slightly further out from Earth than Blue Knight. This way, as soon as Blue Knight made a move, they could close in and obstruct its path.

"Admiral, Blue Knight is on the move!"

"After them! This was sooner than I expected, however... So they're planning on departing before we can get into a more advantageous position, are they? Smart and swift. It seems like they have a competent commander or strategist on their side."

"Blue Knight has deployed a stealth field."

"That won't be enough. They know they're being chased... which means they'll duck behind Earth temporarily! All right, full power to engines! Don't lose them!"

Like most ships, Blue Knight had some stealth functions for emergencies. They

weren't nearly as advanced as the Hazy Moon's, however, and could be traced with the proper analysis. The coup d'etat army already had advanced data on Blue Knight, making that a relatively easy feat.

The biggest threat was that if they lost Blue Knight's trail even momentarily, it would be incredibly difficult to pick back up again in the vastness of space. Knowing that, the admiral assumed that Blue Knight's plan would be to try and use Earth as cover to throw them off—and his instincts seemed to be spot on. The trail the ship left behind it led right around to the other side of the planet.

"Send the destroyers forward! They don't have to attack; just don't lose them!"

Just like with cars, the bigger a ship was, the slower it was to accelerate. As a royal-class battleship, however, Blue Knight was designed to be transporting Forthorthian royalty. That made it an obvious target on the battlefield, and it was therefore built with cutting-edge technology to perform as highly as possible. Still, its sheer size worked against it, and a standard destroyer could easily outperform it in terms of acceleration.

"Blue Knight is now entering the shadow of the Earth."

"And the destroyers?"

"They made it in time. They're continuing observation as ordered."

As Blue Knight entered Earth's shadow, the carrier that the admiral was aboard lost visual. The two destroyers he'd sent ahead, however, had no problem keeping up.

"Good. Now send the destroyers to overtake Blue Knight. Get in front of them and don't let them leave the planet. And I repeat: do *not* let them attack

"Understood. I'll have—"

Very suddenly, the operator working with the fleet admiral went pale.

"A-A-Admiral! We've detected a space-time distortion on the far side of the moon! The pattern indicates it's Blue Knight!"

The operator was practically screaming. He could scarcely believe the words coming out of his own mouth.

“Impossible! Then who have we been following?!”

The hologram of the Blue Knight they’d been following was still displayed on their monitors. It wasn’t like it had suddenly disappeared. So by all accounts, there were now two Blue Knights.

“Incoming message from the destroyers: After close examination, what we believed to be Blue Knight was actually an information pod!”

“We’ve been had! Blue Knight’s stealth capabilities exceed what we were told!”

At last, it dawned on the admiral that they’d been tricked. The fleet had misidentified the information pod as Blue Knight, and consequently turned their back on their actual target. They were now helpless to stop the real Blue Knight as it casually warped away, leaving behind its 45 captives in a lifeboat.

Kiriha’s escape plan ultimately hinged on the fact that the coup d’etat army didn’t know they had access to Clan’s Hazy Moon—and they readily used that to their advantage. First, they used Clan’s observation equipment to gather data on Blue Knight while in stealth mode. Then they created a decoy that would leave behind an identical trail. Making the information pod physically look like Blue Knight would be difficult, but simply imitating a stealthed trail was easy.

Then, while the real Blue Knight was completely concealed in the Hazy Moon’s advanced stealth field, it launched the decoy. The coup d’etat army fell for it and sailed right by Blue Knight and the Hazy Moon in its pursuit, completely oblivious to their existence.

Things were quite simple after that. Once the fleet was far enough away, Blue Knight engaged its warp drive and headed for Forthorthe. Clan, meanwhile, stayed put for now. Even with the Hazy Moon’s advanced stealth functions, not even she could disguise a long-distance warp reaction. As such, she would strategically hang back until the fleet left Earth and she could warp freely without detection.

“I have to admit... I’m really glad Kii is on our side...”

Clan, who was left behind in orbit around Earth, muttered to herself as she

stared at the monitor on the Hazy Moon's bridge. It was currently showing the coup d'etat fleet ships warping out one after another.

"To think she had an entire trained fleet dancing in the palm of her hand..."

Kiriha, after all, had been the one to engineer their great escape. She'd cleverly made use of the resources they had available to them in order to avoid a fight and allow Blue Knight to flee Earth safely. And she'd done it all while allowing Clan to remain hidden. It was a strategy so brilliant it was practically art.

"No wonder I couldn't win against Theiamillis-san... Jeez..."

Clan recalled challenging Theia in the past and smiled wryly. She'd had no idea who Kiriha was back then, or what it would mean to go up against her and her allies. Thinking back on it, she had no idea what had driven her to do something so outrageous.

Gold and Silvery White

Monday, November 15th

Travelling from Earth to Forthorthe on a normal spaceship would take approximately a month. It was accuracy, however, rather than distance that made the trip a tricky one.

Earth and Forthorthe were about 10 million lightyears apart. Even using a specially designed computer to navigate such an extreme distance, a margin of error of but a single percent could put them off target by 100,000 lightyears, or roughly the diameter of the Milky Way. In other words, they could end up anywhere in the galaxy. In the worst case scenario, they might warp directly into a black hole or a star. The true error of margin was actually only a fraction of a percent, but even then, it was still necessary to have certain safeguards in place.

So in navigating the grand vastness of space, its very vastness became an asset. Anywhere there was open, empty space was useful in warping. They made much safer warp destinations because of the significantly reduced chance of accidental collision. When travelling between galaxies, the empty bands between them could be used. Within a galaxy, the space between stars could be used. And once a ship got close enough, it could target specific solar systems. Essentially, they acted as stepping stones on longer voyages. Travelling in incremental fashion also greatly reduced the margin of error. The first warp would traverse 90 percent of the total trip distance, the second would traverse 90 percent of the remaining distance, the third 90 percent of the new remaining distance, and so on. As the remaining distance tapered off, so too did the margin of error.

A normal spaceship would repeat that warp process until it finally reached Forthorthe, which took about a month all said and done. Of course, Blue Knight and the Hazy Moon were no normal ships. Their navigational computers were top of the line and their warp drives extremely accurate. As a result, Koutarou

and the others would reach Forthorthe in just ten days.

Over the course of the warp voyage, things were quite peaceful for Koutarou and company. Even with an enemy fleet chasing after them, thanks to the margin of error over such long distances, the odds were astronomical that they would ever cross paths along the way. That also made it harder to find allies, however, and as such, they weren't able to regroup with Clan until the eighth day of their trip.

"You better not have made a mess of the ship again while I wasn't around..."

"As we discussed previously, I was in cold sleep, so I couldn't have even if I'd wanted to."

Despite it being day eight of their journey, Koutarou and the others felt like only half a day had passed since they left Earth. That was because they'd slowed time aboard the ship, just like what Clan and Koutarou had done when they returned from the past. It was an important part of the warp process, and was frequently used over extended voyages across long distances.

"Satomi-kun, why don't you be honest with her and say that you were worried?"

"A-Aika-san?!"

"Is that true, Maki?!"

"Yes, Clan-san. Your, um... Hazy Moon, was it? Satomi-kun was restlessly pacing the bridge until he saw it reappear."

"I see... Um, I'm sorry for making you worry, Veltlion... As you can see, I'm safe."

"I-I wasn't worried about you. I was just worried about you making a mess of the ship."

"Heh... Of course."

"Satomi-kun certainly is stubborn..."

"Aika-san, you'll pay for this later."

“I’ll gladly accept whatever punishment you have in store for me. My forehead is ready and waiting.”



As things stood, they had another two days of their voyage to go. It would only take a few more warps from here. But as they closed in on Forthorthe, the open spaces they could safely warp to reduced in number, consequently increasing the chances they would run into the coup d'etat army. To discuss how to proceed, the Corona House crew gathered on Blue Knight's bridge for a strategy meeting.

"Now that we're all here... we first need to decide what to do about Clan."

"Me?"

Indeed, the first topic Theia put on the table was Clan. Not expecting her name to come up in such a fashion, Clan went wide-eyed.

"Yes. The Schweiger family and the Mastir family have been rivals for generations. If you stick with us, there will eventually be trouble."

Theia wasn't worried about Clan specifically. She practically considered her family, and there was no doubt in her mind that Clan shared that sentiment. The other Schweigers, however, were a different story. There was no way they would side with the Mastir family, especially not now that they'd been publicly accused of being criminals. That put Clan in the same precarious situation she'd been in when they left Earth eight days ago.

"Like I said before, I have already made up my mind. Even if it costs me a home to return to, I will protect Forthorthe."

Clan's answer, however, hadn't changed since then. She was prepared to fight until the bitter end alongside Koutarou and Theia. She too was a proud princess of Forthorthe, and she refused to allow some pretender to take over the nation by force.

"But Clan, your place might not be here."

"Veltlion?"

"It might be more advantageous to have you as a mole in the Schweiger family rather than openly fighting alongside us."

As their escape from Earth had proven, the enemy not knowing they had Clan on their side was a huge asset. As such, her continuing to support them secretly

from within the Schweiger family might be even more useful than her direct assistance in combat.

“You’re not just saying that to try and send me home, are you?!”

“I can’t say that’s not part of it. But having you as a mole would genuinely be helpful. And if you go home and maintain your relationship with your family, then even in the worst case scenario where we lose, you could still become empress.”

The military’s first objective would be to install a puppet regime. From there, they would move to end imperial rule altogether and install Vandarion as a dictator—though not obviously. So if Clan were around when that happened, she could pretend to go along with the scheme while secretly stalling Vandarion’s plans. Really, returning Clan to her family would give them all kinds of opportunities and options.

“You’re asking me to go home and just sit and watch while you and Theiamillis-san take on all the danger?! I don’t want that!” Clan protested, rising from her chair with a clatter.

“We need you to secretly support us while preparing for the worst.”

“That’s not what a princess should be doing!”

Clan was vehemently against Koutarou’s idea. When faced with a ticking time bomb, she would rather try and disarm it than be on standby with body bags. Rather than preparing for the worst, she would rather spend her time and efforts making sure it didn’t come to that in the first place. *That* was what Clan believed her royal duty to her people was.

“Besides, you don’t understand anything! Just how lonely do you think it is to sit and wait?! Just how hard do you think it is to watch a fight from afar?!”

Clan couldn’t accept it. Not just because of her status as a princess, but because of her personal feelings. Because of her talents, she was often relegated to playing a supporting role rather than participating in fights directly. All too often, she found herself powerless to do anything other than pray for Koutarou and the others to return safely. She now understood how Alaia must have felt when she saw Koutarou off to battle. And having to do it from close up

was bad enough. Imagining what it would feel like to do it from afar while silently, secretly waiting for good news at the Schweiger estate... It was too much. She couldn't stand the mere thought of it.

"If you don't need me, then just say so! Leave me out! But... if you do need me, then please let me stay by your side!"

With tears in her eyes, Clan loudly declared her feelings for all to Koutarou for all to hear. It was so passionate and intense that it might be mistaken for a declaration of love... No, in the grand scheme of things, it was indeed a declaration of love—for all her friends gathered here and for all the people of Forthorthe.

"See, Layous-sama? It's just like I said," said Elfaria with a proud smirk.

"Sheesh... I guess we don't have a choice," Koutarou relented with a sigh.

These reactions confused Clan

“Veltlion? What are you talking about?”

Clan blinked a few times in confusion as the tears spilled from her eyes. There, Theia stepped forward to explain in Koutarou’s place.

“Actually, while we were waiting to rendezvous with you, we spent some time discussing amongst ourselves how to treat you from now on. My mother said that you would ultimately choose the right thing for yourself, both as a princess and as our friend.”

“Elfaria-san...”

Surprised, Clan looked to Elfaria. Her smirk waned into a gentle smile, and she gave Clan an encouraging nod.

“Now, Clan, the reason you feel this way is because of the long journey you took with Koutarou, isn’t it?”

“Yes... it is. If it weren’t for that, I would still be my old, immature self.”

“We all know that, but Koutarou was still somewhat reluctant. So we threatened him a little. We told him that if he didn’t take the responsibility for making you the splendid princess you are today... Well, we told him that the rest of us would be forced to do something drastic.”

“So...”

Clan then turned to Koutarou. He’d been talking to Elfaria and had his back to Clan, but she could tell why he wouldn’t turn around and meet her gaze. After what they’d been through together, she knew him at least that well.

“Then from the start... Veltlion was...?”

“That’s right. Knowing what your answer would be, he chose to ask anyways. He felt like he had to confirm your determination.”

“I see...”

Clan wiped away her tears and stared at Koutarou’s back. She wanted to run right up to him and hug him, all while complaining about how cold he was... but in the end, she chose not to. It was partly because of her stubbornness, and

partly because she knew she didn't have to for Koutarou to know how she felt.

"Master, all else aside, I believe there is something you need to say to Clan-sama."

And Clan was quite right—Koutarou knew good and well how she felt. So, at Ruth's urging, he too made up his mind.

"Clan..." he said, his back still turned.

"Yes?"

"Be my servant like before... I need you."

"Heh, you're the servant here. When are you going to get that, you neanderthal? Heehee..."

Clan jokingly responded how she would have during their travels in past Forthorthe. It was her way of saying that she was happy to be his partner even now. The only thing that had changed over two thousand years was that now when she said those words, they were filled with a warm, tender kindness.

As the discussion continued, the group ultimately decided that Clan would stay with them disguised as Koutarou's servant from Earth. As an Earthling, no one would question why she didn't have any Forthorthian identification and no one would be able to look into her background. Moreover, no one would dare to think that a princess was serving as a knight's servant. Luck allowing, no one would ever figure out her identity this way.

Once it was decided that Clan would be playing the role of Koutarou's attendant, she took the seat to his right. Koutarou's servant, partner, advisor, science expert... There were a lot of titles Clan could go by, but whichever she chose, she believed that the seat right next to Koutarou rightfully belonged to her. And Koutarou was fine with this. He was still embarrassed, so he wouldn't have to look directly at her this way. Meanwhile, the rest of the girls of room 106 observed this awkward master/servant relationship with fascination.

"Well, now that we've decided the matter with Clan-dono, let's move on."

In the end, everyone knew that there was still plenty that had yet to be

discussed. So when Kiriha suggested advancing the conversation, the girls put Koutarou and Clan out of their minds for now. It would certainly come up again during dinner, but there were presently more important matters at hand.

“With Clan-dono accompanying us, we can think a little bigger. We’ll be able to rely on the Hazy Moon for a great deal.”

“Leave that all to me. You won’t regret it.”

Whether or not Clan was on board would affect the way plans proceeded from this point. Her inventions would be useful in all kinds of situations, and having access to a second royal-class battleship could mean all the difference in the battles to come.

“Theia-dono, what do you plan to do now?” Kiriha asked.

Really, she already knew the answer. But for the sake of discussion, she wanted everyone else to hear it.

“At first, my plan was to meet up with our allies outside of the solar system. It would be too easy for the coup d’etat army to find us once we’re inside it. But with the Hazy Moon’s help, we can be a bit more bold. If you will, Ruth.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

There, Ruth used her bracelet to bring up a planetary display in the middle of the table everyone was seated around. It was different from the models Koutarou, Shizuka, Harumi, and Yurika had grown up seeing in school. There was still a sun in the center, but there were only eight planets orbiting around it. In the past, people had only inhabited a single one of those planets. But with Forthorthe’s development and expansion, there were now people living on all eight. Together, this sun and its eight planets comprised the Forthorthian solar system. It was the center of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, where Theia, Elfaria, Ruth, and Clan called home.

“Our first destination is here—Planet Alaia.”

When Ruth said that, the sixth planet from the sun in the display enlarged. It was a beautiful blue planet with a ring around it just like Saturn.

“Alaia?”

Harumi’s ears perked up upon hearing that, and she turned to Ruth in question. With good reason, of course. The name Alaia held special meaning to her.

“Yes. Originally, only our main planet—the third planet from the sun, Planet Forthorthe—could sustain life. But the remaining planets have since been terraformed to do the same, each of them named after a different historical figure in commemoration.”

At first, Planet Alaia had been completely barren. But with its vast resources, it was relatively easy to work with and became the first of the planets to be terraformed. Once it was habitable, it was renamed after the legendary Empress Alaia. That was arguably the start of Forthorthe’s golden space age.

“My, what an extraordinary tale...”

What would eventually happen in Earth’s future had already happened long ago in Forthorthe. Harumi couldn’t help the wonder that overcame her hearing about it, and Alaia most likely would have felt the same way.

“Planet Alaia is under the direct control of the Mastir family, so Her Majesty Elfaria still has a lot of support there. That’s why it’s where her faction has set up its base.”

Forthorthe had seven royal families, each of which had been given control of a terraformed planet within the Forthorthian solar system. As such, the residents of the planets each had a strong allegiance to the royal families that governed them. Even amidst the flying accusations, Elfaria’s approval rating on Alaia had barely taken a hit. Public support was still strong for her there, making it a sanctuary for her faction. Accordingly, it was where they’d secretly set up their headquarters.

“Therefore we’ll head to their base and meet up with our allies.”

Theia and Elfaria were planning on using the reconnaissance their allies had done to expose Vandarion’s conspiracy. Rendezvousing at a base would be the easiest way to do that, but Elfaria’s faction had very few safe places they could meet right now. Of all the secret bases they’d set up, the one on Alaia was the largest and served as a headquarters for the whole operation. It was also conveniently distanced from any stars, making it relatively easy to get to via

warping.

“However, there’s one big problem,” cautioned Theia. “And that’s how we’re going to get down to the surface without being spotted by the coup d’etat forces.”

“Getting into Alaia’s airspace won’t be an issue,” said Clan. “The Hazy Moon can get as close as we want without being detected. The real problem is how to proceed from there. While it’s not as densely populated as the main planet, plenty of people still live there. Its air defenses aren’t negligible, so entering the atmosphere will be next to impossible without being detected.”

Not even the stealthy Hazy Moon could completely conceal the heat and light given off during reentry. Using a gate or warp presented a similar dilemma—they were detectable. So while the better part of their journey had already been completed, it seemed this last leg would be the most challenging yet. Actually getting down to the surface without being detected in this day and age was next to impossible.

Interestingly enough, however, Sanae—who was actually listening for a change—was the first to offer a plan.

“In anime and stuff, this is where we would stow away on ships or blend in as passengers on a train to cross the border.”

While her plan showcased her general lack of knowledge on the matter, the idea of stowing away somehow wasn’t a bad one. That was how Theia and Ruth had slipped into Forthorthe when they came to rescue Elfaria, after all.

“That might have been possible before, but now they’re on their guard. We’re felons on paper, and we have a space battleship with us. No matter how we decide to get in, it’s going to take something extraordinary.”

However, the situation was different now. Officially, Theia and her allies were being treated as terrorists riding around a rogue battleship. Accordingly, counterterrorism measures had been taken and security had been increased around each of the planets. That would make playing the stowaway card harder and riskier, but if the girls couldn’t come up with anything better, it would have to be their last resort.

“Yurika-chan, if you really gave it your all, how far could you teleport?” Nana asked, turning to Yurika.

Hearing Elfaria say they’d need extraordinary measures, Nana’s mind immediately turned to magic. As a former magical girl, she was familiar with all kinds of spells and knew that teleportation might be able to do the job.

“Let’s see... Using a ritual while we’re moving will be impossible, so... if I stretch the incantation out as long as possible and use as much mana as I can... Um, I think I could manage ten kilometers?”

“Ten kilometers won’t be enough. We’d need a hundred at the very least.”

But alas, it seemed magic wouldn’t be a realistic option in the end either. If Yurika could teleport them ten kilometers, that meant they’d only get thirty or forty at best even if Harumi, Maki, and Nana all helped out. Moreover, the physics were an issue. If Yurika teleported everyone in at the velocity the ship was moving during reentry, they very well may all end up nothing more than a red stain on the surface of Planet Alaia. There was also the additional complication that teleportation magic might actually be detectable by Forthorthian technology if it was bending space-time.

“Honestly, Theiamillis-san, I thought you’d be a little more impressed that a human can warp ten kilometers without the aid of science...”

“Well, if Yurika-chan’s magic won’t do, it’s Uncle’s time to shine.”

“Indeed, I can descend normally. I’ve done it several times before.”

Another trump card the group had was Alunaya. He could take on his full dragon form and enter the atmosphere without the use of teleportation magic, so there wouldn’t be any fear of detection from bending space-time.

“But prepare for your weight to increase quite a bit, Shizuka.”

“If there’s nothing else we can do, then I’ll accept it this time. So go for it, Uncle.”

“You’re right. A human that can teleport and a dragon that can enter the atmosphere from space... Hearing it again does make me appreciate how incredible it all is.”

“But Your Highness, even if all of us were to ride on Alunaya-sama’s back, there’s still a chance we might be spotted visually or by radar.”

Ruth had valid concerns. Alunaya was over twenty meters in size, and would still give off a substantial amount of heat and light during reentry. Moreover, a simple radar would be all it took to detect him.

“Indeed, that is a problem...”

“In that regard, we should be able to use this,” said Kiriha as she pointed to the planetary diagram.

Currently, it was displaying the ring around the lovely blue planet of Alaia.

Planet Alaia had a ring much like Saturn’s that consisted mostly of ice and dust with some rock mixed in. Occasionally, pieces of it would fall down to Alaia. Kiriha’s plan was to blend in with the falling debris and enter the atmosphere that way. There was one major problem, however. Alaia had a system set up in order to prevent damage from any such debris.

Most of the ice burned up in the atmosphere as it fell, but in the case of particularly large chunks, they could cause serious damage if they managed to survive the trip and reach the surface. To prevent that, there were satellites around the planet set up to detect falling chunks above a certain size and neutralize them with a laser. As such, there was a high chance the group would be attacked too if they tried to blend in with falling debris. In order to avoid that, some clever maneuvering was required.

The plan Clan and Kiriha came up with to break through the defense system was to give a small spaceship a coating of radar-absorbing paint. It wasn’t a stealth-oriented ship to begin with, so it would still be detectable by radar, but the idea was to make it appear smaller. Since the goal was to blend in with falling debris, there was no need to conceal it completely. As long as they made it appear small enough on radar that it wouldn’t trigger the lasers, all they’d have to do was cut the power and let gravity pull them down towards Alaia. Once they were inside the atmosphere, Alunaya would use his mana to protect the spaceship from the building heat and cushion them for a safe landing. While it would be a comparatively slow trip since they’d be relying solely on the

power of gravity for the descent, all and all, this was the plan with the highest chance of success.

The small ship they would use for the trip was the Kiriha's Ohime. Since Ohime was essentially designed as an accessory for the haniwas, it could operate in all the same environments they could. It was, of course, no match for specialized ships that were meant for the water or outer space, but its adaptability was a huge asset.

Since they'd be playing a big part in the descent operation, Karama and Korama took the lead in helping out with the Ohime remodel. Calling it a remodel was perhaps a bit grandiose, however. All they were really doing was adding a cover to make it look like a lump of ice and painting it with RAM.

"Hey! The paint on the starboard side is thin, ho! What are you doing, ho?"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I'll repaint it right away!"

"As expected of Harumi-chan, ho! The finish is very nicely done on the port side!"

"You flatter me."

"I'd like Harumi-chan to do the starboard side too, ho!"

"I'm painting it again right now! And I'm doing it properly this time! See?!"

Theia was idly watching as the work proceeded smoothly. Though she was staring at the Ohime, however, her mind was elsewhere. She was thinking of what lay ahead of them.

In the end, all I can do is fight, huh? I haven't really matured at all...

When Theia first came to Earth, she'd been intent on using force to put the owner of room 106 into submission. After maturing, she'd eventually come to see the error of her ways. But now that she was returning home, here she was preparing to fight again. While she knew deep down that was how it had to be, it also sowed a seed of doubt in her heart.



And this time, it's not just Ruth. I've gotten a lot of people who are important to me involved... Maybe I'm just not cut out to be a ruler...

Ruth was a Forthorthian-born knight that served the Mastir family, so she had her own reasons for fighting. That wasn't the case, however, with their other friends. They had all come at Theia's request. Each of them possessed special powers and abilities that would make them invaluable in the fights to come, but that didn't change the fact that Theia was dragging them into a fight they had nothing to do with. Of course, they would all say it had something to do with them personally since Theia was involved... but that didn't make her feel much better about it.

"You're open."

Suddenly, an acute pain struck Theia's forehead

"O-Ow! What are you doing?!"

Indignant and in pain, Theia turned to face her attacker with tears in her eyes. It was Koutarou, who was standing there looking like he was about to swing his fist again.

"What? All I did was punch you."

"Yes, thank you! I got that part, you jerk! I wanted to know *why* you punched me!"

"No real reason."

"Don't hit people for no reason!"

"Fine. I hit you because you're you, Theia."

Everyone understood how Theia was feeling right now. They had all, more or less, felt the same way during their own ordeals. No one here enjoyed putting their friends in danger. But when they tried to tell each other not to worry, it was hard to get the point across. That's why the girls had sent Koutarou as their emissary. He was the only one who knew how to communicate with Theia with something other than words.

"I don't need any other reason to hit you."

“Then that means I can hit you right back!”

Without missing a beat, Theia swung her fist at Koutarou’s stomach. While she looked delicate, her punches were anything but—and she knocked the wind right out of Koutarou.

“Urgh...”

“You belong to me and Ruth, after all!”

“S-So you *do* get it, Theia!”

“How naive! Did you think I was some kind of idiot that would just let you punch me over and over?!”

Following that, things broke out into an all-out fistfight between Theia and Koutarou. In order to disable their opponent, however, they quickly both moved to using joint locks on each other.

“Y-You little...! Using brute force like this...!”

“If your citizens... could see you right now... what would they think, princess?!”

Theia swiftly slipped behind Koutarou and wrapped her thin arms around his neck. Unwilling to let her get away with that, he used his strength to try and tear her off of him. Theia had the advantage in terms of technique, but Koutarou had the upper hand in terms of strength. It could be anyone’s game.

But... why did Koutarou do something like this?

With Koutarou currently in a chokehold, Theia had some breathing room. As she mercilessly squeezed tighter, she couldn’t help wondering why Koutarou had come after her in the first place. Surely he’d done it comfort her in his own way. He never hesitated to use violence if it meant pulling someone up from the depths of their own dark thoughts. Yet somehow, Theia suspected that there was more to it than that this time.

Koutarou said something about “getting it”... In other words, he wanted me to see something.

Indeed, actions spoke louder than words, and Koutarou’s actions told Theia that something deeper was at play here.

Because I'm me, because he's him... He punched me to remind me of that, which means...

A few minutes into their fight, Theia finally realized what Koutarou was trying to tell her. No, what he was trying to show her.

"...Hmm? What is it, Theia?"

The strength in Theia's arms suddenly weakened. He'd been frantically trying to tear her off until now, so he immediately noticed that her hold on him had weakened. He eased up too and turned to look at her.

"It's... nothing..."

Theia was in tears. She'd given up her chokehold, and was now simply crying with her arms wrapped around Koutarou's neck.

"I see..."

Koutarou put his hand on Theia's head and lightly patted it two, three times. There was no longer a need for words. Theia already knew everything he'd been trying to tell her.

"I just remembered... That's all..."

There, Theia put strength into her arms again. But it was different this time. Gentle. It was a hug.

"I realized... that me putting you in pain like this... means nothing to you..."

As long as Theia was Theia, Koutarou didn't mind if she punched or squeezed him. The opposite was also true. As long as Koutarou was Koutarou, Theia didn't mind getting punched or squeezed. They could only interact like this because they were open with each other and relied on each other equally. Theia was keenly aware of that.

"..."

Still silent, Koutarou lightly patted Theia's head again. There was still no need for words.

"But if you come with me... you really will get hurt. And I know you'll say you don't mind... but I do. I don't want that..."

“...”

“I don’t want you to get hurt because of me relying on your goodwill...”

“...”

Koutarou patted Theia’s head once more, then began gently rubbing it as he moved his hand left to right.

“But here I am... relying on you... because you don’t mind getting hurt because of me...”

“...”

Koutarou continued silently stroking Theia’s head, which seemed to convey his feelings well enough. Theia only held on to him tighter. Once he’d confirmed that she’d reached her answer, Koutarou finally spoke up.

“You’ve always thought that way too, though, right? You never cared if you got hurt while you were helping someone else.”

“...”

This time, Theia was the one to fall silent. Or more accurately, she simply couldn’t form words through her sobbing. So to convey her feelings instead, she squeezed Koutarou tighter still.

“For me... I have things I want to protect, even if that gets me hurt. And I think the others all feel the same way... just like you do, Theia.”

Still unable to speak, Theia simply pressed her forehead against Koutarou’s and cried quietly. Her face now hidden, no one apart from Koutarou could see that she was sobbing.

“Still, you really are a nice girl. Even though we feel that way and you know it, it still worries you.”

“Mm...”

“So whenever that worry gets to be too much, come to me and I’ll punch it right out of you again. I’ll make you remember like I did just now that you fight the same way.”

Theia had found her answer, yet she still felt conflicted deep down. That part

probably wouldn’t change.

“Can I hit you too...?”

“Stupid. Of course you can.”

“Mm...”

There, both of them fell silent. Koutarou simply continued to stroke Theia’s head as he waited for her to stop crying, which wouldn’t be for some time yet.

“Say, Theia...”

It was only when he sensed she’d finally quieted down that Koutarou spoke up again. There was something he wanted to ask her.

“What is it, Koutarou?”

Theia answered him in a calm, gentle, and incredibly sweet voice—one she rarely used. It was something she saved, only to be used with people she absolutely trusted at special moments like this.

“Can we pick up where we left off with the chokehold? I’d be too embarrassed to go back to the others like this.”

The other girls knew that Koutarou and Theia were together. They’d been tossing the occasional worried look their way for a full hour or so now. Of course, they didn’t know what the two of them were talking about. That’s why Koutarou wanted it to look like their conversation had been derailed and a fight had broken out again. He had a certain degree of pride to protect as a teenage boy, after all.

“You really are hopeless... But yeah, I agree.”

“Right?”

“I want to keep our relationship an extreme one...”

Theia paused there. There were two words she meant to end her sentence with, but chose not to—“For now.” As a girl of age, she had her pride too. Instead of saying what she meant, she leaned in and pressed her lips against Koutarou’s cheek so gently that he hardly even noticed as she wrapped her arms around his neck again. It would be the seal on a vow she made to herself.

“All right, are you ready?”

“Wait... How did it go again?”

“You had my right hand.”

“Right, right. Now I remember.”

And so the two began fighting once more. It was as intense as always, though only on the surface. The girls watching them noticed, of course, but had no intention of calling them out on it. There was no need. They’d realized that everything had already worked itself out.

With the haniwas’ help, Ohime’s preparations were complete by the time Blue Knight reached the ring around Alaia. Moreover, the group had safely been able to get in contact with Elfaria’s faction, meaning they now had information about what was going on on Planet Alaia and back home on Planet Forthorthe.

“...And that’s the situation. We think it’s the correct decision to refrain from making yourself known at this juncture, Your Highness. Security is a lot stricter than before; we’re still looking for an opening in it.”

“Meaning stowing away would be too high-risk. There are too many opportunities for it to fail.”

“That’s why we agree with your plan to descend from the ring.”

“Very well. Send a team to come pick us up.”

“Understood.”

According to their contact, Forthorthe was leaning dangerously in favor of the coup d’etat army. The media under their control continued to slander Elfaria. Even with other media outlets trying to weigh the pros and cons, the overall tone of the coverage concerning Elfaria was negative. It was slowly eroding public opinion. The only reason the conversation was still ongoing was because public support for Elfaria had been so high at the start. Had that not been the case, the people would have turned on her instantly with the amount of bad press she was getting right now, however false it might be. And at this rate, it would only be a matter of time before her supporters back home started giving

out.

Fortunately, however, even with things as bad as they were, the citizens on Alaia were still loyal to Elfaria. The people's opinion of the Mastir family was high based on their historical reputation alone, but they'd proven themselves in modern times as well. After overcoming the hardships of the age of terraforming on Alaia, its citizens were exceptionally supportive of the Mastir family—so much so that it was unlikely to change no matter what the coup-controlled media said about Elfaria. To that end, Planet Alaia and its people were an incredible ally to Elfaria's faction. And the coup d'etat army knew it.

That was why they would try and keep Theia and the others from making it there at all costs. They knew the citizens would just eat up the story of the exiled empress and her only daughter returning to their planet named after the Mastir family's legendary Silver Princess, which was why security around the planet had been beefed up and any and all entries were being carefully monitored. And because of that, Elfaria's faction agreed that descending to the planet alongside falling debris from the ring would be much safer than trying to sneak in any other way.

"Then, Your Majesty, Your Highness... We'll be wishing you a safe journey."

"Thank you."

"Farewell."

After concluding his business with the empress and princess, the contact for Elfaria's faction swiftly left Blue Knight's bridge. His role wasn't just to deliver information to them, but also to report back to their other allies. And there was no time to spare right now.

"The princess thanked me... Heehee..."

"Ah, there he is! Hey, mister!"

"I've gathered everyone's letters!"

"And here are the pictures of the princess we promised!"

"Leave it to me. I'll make sure to deliver these. In exchange—"

"Yeah, we'll take a lot more pictures, so please deliver more letters!"

“It’s a deal.”

The contact had one other important job as well. He was responsible for delivering letters and messages from the children aboard Blue Knight to their friends and family. Compared to his primary mission, mail carrying might be seen as trifling work, but to children, he was their only connection to the homes they’d come from. Seeing to it that their letters be delivered was also of the utmost importance to him.

Around the same time on Planet Forthorthe, Vandarion was in the middle of receiving a report from the fleet admiral. He’d already heard word of what had happened via their hyperspace communications, but since the contents of the report were hard to accept, he summoned the fleet admiral to report directly to him once they returned.

“The Satomi band of knights? I’ve never heard of them.”

“If we are to believe the words of their commander, they are a new band of knights sponsored by Princess Theiamillis.”

“Let’s forget about their name for now... There’s no mistaking their strength, is there?”

“That’s correct, my lord. Forty trained special forces soldiers didn’t stand a chance against just nine of them.”

Vandarion’s primary questions concerned the enemy’s strength and numbers. He was rightly confused, as anyone would be, to hear that forty grown men had been vanquished by a group of teenagers. The fact that they’d done it with basic, outdated gear like swords only added insult to injury. And perhaps the most perplexing and alarming detail of all was that a girl in an apron had taken out a dozen or so men with her bare hands.

“And so they easily took out an elite special forces team... How pathetic.”

“Vandarion-sama, it would be unfair to blame the soldiers. With no casualties on either side, I believe this new band of knights was simply out of their league.”

“Granado? Hmm... You might be right. There just might be something special

about Earth.”

However, between the fleet admiral’s report and the documented footage, there was no doubt about what had happened. Their enemy was just that powerful. This had confounded Vandarion at first, but he slowly began to accept reality. Denying an enemy’s full strength out of pride was foolish. It would be better to accept the truth and respond with appropriate force, and Vandarion could do that much. He had the manpower to back it up, and he knew it. He was more than ready to crush these new opponents when the opportunity presented itself.

“Now, why did you allow Blue Knight to escape orbit?”

That was now the hardest pill for Vandarion to swallow. The strength of this new enemy shouldn’t have mattered once the fight had reached space. Individual power meant nothing aboard a ship.

“Since we had data on Blue Knight’s stealth signature, we used that to pursue them.”

Blue Knight’s stealth functioned allowed it to fly invisible to radar, but it wasn’t completely untraceable. It still leaked a specific electronic and gravitational wave pattern when in stealth mode. Knowing that pattern, the fleet had quickly identified it and given chase.

“However... I don’t know how or when they pulled a fast one on us, but before we knew it, we were simply chasing a decoy. As we were, the real Blue Knight fled in the opposite direction and entered warp.”

The fleet had pursued their target in line with their objective. All seemed normal up until that point. But by the time they caught up with what they thought was Blue Knight, the real Blue Knight was already entering warp. They were confused, and rightfully so.

But that was because they had no way of knowing that the real Blue Knight had been disguised by the Hazy Moon’s stealth field. And no one would have guessed it considering the circumstances, so it would be unfair to blame them for it. But that wasn’t the way the army worked. When it came down to brass tacks, the fleet admiral was at fault.

“How troublesome...”

Hearing the details of the situation, Vandarion’s expression turned harsh. Seeing that, the admiral was struck with the sinking feeling that he was in for punishment and demotion. That was just how severe the look on Vandarion’s face was.

“It seems Empress Elfaria is a far tougher opponent than I expected...”

Director General Granado wore a similar visage. Based on the admiral’s story, he had a relatively sound idea of the technology their enemy had at their disposal. And he wasn’t thrilled. It was enough to make him wonder if he should begin pulling some of his projects out of R&D.

“Indeed she is, but I was referring to someone else.”

“Who, Vandarion-sama?”

“The DKI brat.”

“Elexis, my lord.”

“I misread the situation. He knew that this would happen when he gave us that information. He was setting himself up to get a good deal from us.”

“You mean to suggest that DKI already has countermeasures?”

“That’s right. He wanted us to see that we would lose both on the surface and in space for a reason. I don’t like it one bit, but we’ll have to work with him for now.”

Without Elexis’s interference, the coup d’etat forces would have only dealt with Blue Knight in space. His tips had led them to believe that a surface fight would be more favorable, but he’d led them into that scenario knowing they still wouldn’t win. It seemed he knew good and well just how strong these people were already, making his real message loud and clear now.

“‘You get it now, right? If you want to beat them, we’ll have to work together.’ That’s what that brat was trying to say.”

If all they had to do was crush Elfaria, it wouldn’t be all that hard. It would simply take a short, brutal display of uncompromising power. But what would the citizens think after witnessing such a thing? It would only incite them

against Vandarion, making it difficult for him to seize rule after the fact. Instead, the ideal solution was to find Elfaria with a small, specialized force and resolve the situation as swiftly as possible with as little evidence as possible. And in order to do that, they'd need whatever tricks and secrets Elexis had up his sleeve. What else did he know that they didn't?

"That said... we likely wouldn't have believed him if he'd simply come to us and said it."

"I know, Granado! That's the most irritating part!"

Bang!

Vandarion pounded his fist into his desk out of frustration. The loud impact alongside his fierce voice echoed through the command room. Everyone present immediately froze in place, their eyes glued on Vandarion.

"I concede for now, brat! We may need your power right now, but it won't be that way forever! I am Marswell Dayora Vandarion, the man that will rule all of Forthorthe!"

And so Vandarion settled on forming a reluctant alliance with Elexis. He was a prideful man, so it killed him a little inside to admit he needed anyone's help, but he was willing to pay any price to fulfill his dreams—to be the man who stood atop the world. That was the kind of man Marswell Dayora Vandarion was.

Koutarou and the others took off towards Planet Alaia some time after their contact from Elfaria's faction departed. That was partly because they wanted to give him some lead time, but also because they were waylaid a bit trying to find a suitable cluster of ice. In order to successfully hide Ohime, they'd need to find large pieces of ice, but not ones so large that they'd trigger the planet's laser defenses. They didn't exactly want to get incinerated on the way down.

Once they found an appropriate ice formation, they headed towards Alaia with it in tow. Timewise, it had been about half a day since their contact had departed, and it would be another two days yet before they reached the surface even with the Hazy Moon taking them as close as possible before they began their descent. And over the course of those two days, there wouldn't be

much they could do, as they'd need to keep power use to a minimum in order to avoid detection. Basically, they'd just be quietly waiting inside Ohime as they fell.

"Man, a tatami mat really helps calm you down."

"Heh, you should thank Sanae-chan's brains for that one."

"You did good."

"Heehee."

Shizuka patted Sanae on the head as she kicked back on the tatami mat. They and the rest of the Corona House crew were currently in the living quarters in the back of Ohime. As it was only a small gunboat, Ohime wasn't originally outfitted with living quarters. Its back room, however, was a flexible space that could be rearranged to suit the pilot's needs. The armaments were easily removed and the room was refashioned into living quarters. That said, since it was done in great haste, the room was rather dull. To help, though she'd done it without permission, Sanae had laid out the tatami mats to try and make it a little more bearable.

"If only there were a wardrobe, it'd be just like we were back in room 106."

"Just settle for that locker over there."

"It's really hard to sleep standing up, you know?"

The small room was comparable to Koutarou's apartment, consisting only of a main room, bathroom, and small kitchen. With the majority of passengers being girls, those were the facilities they'd requested.

"Everyone, tea is ready."

"We've got snacks too."

The situation being what it was, for better or worse, Koutarou and the girls were mostly spending their time as they usually did. Ruth and Kiriha had just prepared refreshments, and everyone gathered around the small, low table in the middle of the room.

"Maki, could you hand me my cup?"

“Here you go.”

“Thank you.”

Though the room was cramped for the number of people in it, they all worked together to pass out the tea and snacks in an experienced and familiar fashion. They knew they were in the middle of a dangerous journey, but doing this gave them some sense of normalcy and helped calm their nerves. Their origins and powers aside, they were all just normal girls in the end. This was the kind of quality time they craved with each other, even in the face of grave danger.

“Oh? Where’s Sakuraba-senpai?”

Koutarou sat down to have tea and snacks with the girls, but that was when he noticed that Harumi was missing.

“We passed by her in the hall a little while ago, ho!”

“She was headed for the cockpit, ho! Not the bathroom!”

“Thanks. I’ll go get her.”

At the rate things were going, her tea would be cold and all the snacks would be gone by the time she got back, so Koutarou left Ruth and Kiriha to safeguard his as he made his way toward the front of the ship.

The stars as seen from the cockpit were especially vivid. With no atmosphere in the way, they weren’t twinkling. Looking at them felt more like looking a painting, which felt like a bit of a shame to Harumi. She felt she knew what they were truly meant to look like—dancing little points of light—yet she couldn’t help laughing a little over such a selfish thought.

“What are you giggling about over here all alone, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“Satomi-kun... Heehee, actually I was thinking that it’s a shame that the stars aren’t twinkling.”

“You’re right. You can see them so clearly here that there’s no magic to it.”

Koutarou walked over to Harumi and, standing side by side, they stared out into space together. Like Harumi had said, the stars weren’t twinkling in the slightest. Koutarou couldn’t help thinking it was a shame too.

“Sometimes, seeing something from further away makes it look all the more beautiful.”

“You’ve got another twenty years or so before you start worrying about wrinkles, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Oh you, Satomi-kun...”

“When that happens, I’ll make sure not to look too closely.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll just rejuvenate myself with magic.”

“Then all the other girls will ask you to do it for them too.”

“Then I will, heehee.”

“Haha, I bet.”

Right now, they were inside a tiny spaceship over 10 million lightyears away from home, yet they were joking around and giggling like they were in the knitting society’s club room. Since it had been just the two of them there for so long, the mood naturally drifted in that direction whenever they were alone together.

“You’re a romantic, aren’t you, Sakuraba-senpai?”

“I won’t deny it, but aren’t all girls romantics compared to boys?”

“Was... that directed at me?”

“Only a little, heehee.”

There were times when Harumi found Koutarou’s emphasis on the rational side of things irritating. She thought it would do him some good to be a little open and give in to the romance of the moment every now and then. But at the same time, his inability to do exactly that was part of Koutarou’s charm. Though she knew that and couldn’t be but so mad at him, there was still a part of Harumi that was dissatisfied.

“Honestly, in terms of romanticism, I don’t think I hold a candle to Theiamillis-san.”

“She really eats that stuff up, huh?”

“Think about it. In the pursuit of romance, she even managed to turn you into

the real Blue Knight, you know.”

“It really is a puzzling story.”

“Yet in the end, being just a normal Earthling girl puts a bit of a damper on the romance of it for me.”

“Hahaha! That’s just like you, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Koutarou couldn’t help laughing. Harumi was romantic, certainly, but her serious and down-to-earth side prevented from keeping her head in the clouds. That was simply her personality.

“Heehee, maybe. But... right now... everything strangely feels like a dream. So perhaps I have it in me after all.”

Harumi gently smiled at Koutarou and looked back outside. She was happily chatting away with an underclassman and clubmate. Moreover, he was the boy she loved. That set her heart aflutter with joy, but as she looked out into space, a tingling of another emotion blossomed within her.

“Like a dream? What do you mean?”

“Even though this is the first time I’m seeing this sky, it feels nostalgic.”

There was no way Harumi had ever seen the stars shining outside the cockpit right now, yet they felt familiar somehow. It was like she was seeing the sky at home for the first time in a long time... And she couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d done something like this with Koutarou before.

“I know how silly that must sound, heehee...”

“That’s probably...”

“Yes, I know. This is the first time I’m seeing these stars with my own eyes, after all.”

Inside of Harumi were the memories of a certain girl. They were something Harumi had inherited when she took over her mission. And while this wasn’t the sky over Forthorthe, the stars were the same. Indeed, they were stars that girl had stared at many times over the course of her life.

“I understand that these aren’t my memories. That this isn’t something I felt

personally. But... these feelings are so similar to my own. I guess that's why... I can't help feeling wistful..."

As they looked out at the stars together, Harumi could recall a time they'd done this together on Forthorthe.

"I even remember what was said back then... and what wasn't."

The painful feeling of loving someone, but not being able to tell them. The painful feeling of wanting to keep someone near, but not being able to stop them from leaving. Those emotions welled within Harumi as tears welled in her eyes, making the stationary stars seem to twinkle brilliantly like they did back home.

"Back then, you said..."

Giving herself over to the memories, words came to Harumi's lips. She didn't resist them, but simply let them flow from her mouth.

"'I came from the other side of that sky... from the world of stars...'"

Koutarou had had a place to return to, a promise to keep. It was impossible to stop a knight that only listened to reason. And hearing those words, she'd had no choice but to give up. So painful though they may be, they were special to her. They were words she'd never forget.

"I could only wait for the day you would return to Forthorthe... so that we could look up at this sky together once more..."

Before Koutarou's eyes, Harumi's hair began glowing silver and her dewy eyes turned blue. Unable to stop them any longer, the tears she was holding back trickled down her porcelain cheeks.

"It can't be..."

Koutarou was at a loss for words. He was bewildered and taken aback. The girl in front of him right now was without a doubt Harumi. He knew that... but she looked like someone else.

"Welcome back, Koutarou-sama... I have forever waited so long for this day."

That beautiful silvery hair, those clear blue eyes, that soft, calm voice, and graceful demeanor... Apart from her outfit, she appeared exactly as the girl in

Koutarou’s memories.



“Sakuraba-senpai...? Or... am I speaking with Her Majesty?”

Koutarou couldn’t tell anymore. Was this girl Harumi, or someone else? There were too many similarities in the way they behaved and carried themselves. The only clear distinction Koutarou could make was the color of her hair and eyes.

“Who knows? I can’t really tell myself... Am I Harumi? Or am I Alaia? I might even be both. We share something which can’t be distinguished, because there is no need for that...”

Harumi possessed all of Alaia’s memories. They’d long overwritten all the mental images and scenes Harumi had conjured to play the part of a Forthorthian princess in the school plays. Perhaps that was why Alaia’s memories had never scared Harumi. There was a place for them. Harumi’s memories were Harumi’s, and Alaia’s memories were Alaia’s. There was a clear boundary between them... with one exception.

While they were born under different circumstances and had lived completely different lives, they shared something in common—their feelings for a certain man. So when those feelings were fanned, it was difficult to tell whose feelings she was feeling exactly. And in that sense, Harumi and Alaia were one right now. When she was with Koutarou alone, the distinction wasn’t important.

“Heehee... I’m just happy you’re back, Koutarou-sama. I’m sure Charl would be thrilled as well.”

“Y-Your Majesty, I... I...!”

Both she and he had a great many things they wanted to say. They’d both spend long days and nights thinking of what they would say should the day come they ever had a chance to meet again. There were an infinite many things, but now that the moment was here... not a single word came to mind. It was all too sudden. The only thing they could do was look at each other.

“Hey, Koutarou! Harumi! If you don’t hurry, we’re gonna eat all the snacks without you!”

“Ah...”

In the end, the moment passed just as suddenly as it had come. The instant Sanae's voice came calling from the living quarters, the spell was broken. Harumi's thoughts were clear and the glow in her hair was gone. She was herself again.

"...Sakuraba-senpai, right?"

"Yes..."

Harumi nodded solemnly and bowed deeply to Koutarou. She felt badly.

"I'm sorry, Satomi-kun. I wish I could have stayed as Alaia-sama a little longer... but my feelings were disturbed..."

Harumi and Alaia were only one in rare circumstances where all the proper conditions aligned. It wasn't something Harumi could control or do on purpose. Koutarou didn't fully understand how it worked, but he knew there was no reason for Harumi to apologize.

"It's fine. You're you, Sakuraba-senpai. You don't have to force yourself to be anybody else. Not even Her Majesty. I don't think that's what Alaia would want, either."

Alaia's intentions were clear. While she had allowed Harumi to succeed her duties, she wanted Harumi to live her own life. Just because she had the ability to didn't mean she wanted Harumi to become her.

"Yes, I think so too..."

Harumi finally raised her head and smiled again. She knew Koutarou was right. The Alaia within her didn't want Harumi to change how she lived her life. The two of them aligning as they did was just as much of a surprise for her as it was for Harumi. But even so, a wish that could not be erased budded within Harumi when she saw the tears forming in Koutarou's eyes. If nothing else, Harumi knew that she and Alaia were united on that matter.

"But you know, Satomi-kun... Sometimes I wish that I was actually Alaia-sama's reincarnation instead. If only I could become her..."

"Sakuraba-senpai, that's..."

"Then it wouldn't matter if I was Harumi or Alaia-sama. We would be the

same.”

For the first time, Harumi wished from the bottom of her heart that she really was Alaia. She wanted Koutarou to be able to see her again, but she also wanted Alaia to be able to be with Koutarou. As kind as she was, it broke Harumi’s heart that their farewell had been so lonely. That’s why she wanted, if she could, to make Alaia’s dreams come true.

But in the end, Harumi’s sensibilities brought her back down to Earth. She knew that could never really happen. That much was obvious, but it only made her feel impatient.

From the World of Stars

Friday, November 19th

Two days after setting out for Planet Alaia, Ohime was finally approaching the defense system set up around its atmosphere. If they could get past that, all they'd have left would be reentry. There were two obstacles in their way, however: the laser cannons set up to handle large chunks of ice, and the surveillance put into place by the army.

The laser cannons were practically no problem whatsoever. As they identified targets approaching Alaia with radar, objects below a certain size wouldn't be targeted. They'd known that in advance and made sure Ohime wouldn't trip the system.

The army's surveillance network, however, might not be such a simple matter. Koutarou and company had fashioned Ohime to look like ice and cut power to its engines and systems so as not to give it away, so if all went well, there shouldn't be any issues. The surveillance network was set up over such a wide area that it would be difficult to detect a single small, camouflaged ship in the first place—if that was even possible. It was highly unlikely the network had that kind of advanced detection ability. Its primary purpose was as something of an early warning system for larger vessels like battleships.

But even then, Koutarou and the girls couldn't completely relax. Obviously, there were patrol ships out and about too. In the worst case scenario, they might end up accidentally bumping right into someone that was looking for them. However unlikely that might be, the prospect still made everyone nervous.

"We're less than three thousand kilometers away now."

Peeking at her bracelet, Clan gave an updated report to Koutarou and the others who were currently drinking tea. Hearing it, Koutarou casually rested his hand on the table and looked up at her.

“Yeah, that doesn’t really mean anything to me.”

“Ugh, fine... Um, in another ten minutes, we’ll be entering the atmosphere.”

“That’s awfully fast.”

“It’s because we’ve been accelerating with the gravitational pull of Alaia ever since we disembarked from the Hazy Moon. And things are only going to get faster from here.”

“I guess I kind understand why no one ever mentions distance in sci-fi movies now.”

“Indeed. When travelling in space, time is easier to understand than distance.”

Fortunately, their anxious wait was almost over. Hearing that, Koutarou flashed a smile. Clan felt similarly, though her smile was somewhat stiff. Puzzled by that, Koutarou asked her about it.

“What’s wrong?”

“I was just thinking about what’s going to happen next...”

There, Clan forced a wry smile. Her inner scientist simply hadn’t come to terms with the plan.

“What about it?”

“Well, this isn’t the typical method of reentry.”

“How is it different?”

“Normally, we’d burn up on this kind of course.”

“What?!”

After entering orbit, a normal spaceship would slowly descend to the surface as if surfing on the atmosphere. By doing that, its speed and altitude would slowly decrease, protecting the hull from the high temperatures generated upon reentry.

However, Ohime—currently pretending to be a falling lump of ice—wasn’t taking any such precautions. Though it was still descending through the atmosphere, its angle was too steep and its speed too fast. If they continued

along their current trajectory without any intervention, they would burn up as they flew across the skies of Alaia as a shooting star.

“Glasses, you mean this is like the part in anime when somebody says, ‘Don’t be reckless! Don’t you know the friction of the atmosphere will destroy you?!’”

Sanae, who was clinging to Koutarou’s back and listening to him talk to Clan, suddenly leaned forward and inserted herself into the conversation.

“Yeah, it’s just like that.”

In reality, the heat created from the air being compressed was far greater than the heat born from friction, but Clan didn’t see any reason to split hairs right now.

“This is bad! Let’s get out of here, Koutarou! At this rate, you’ll disintegrate into nothing while calling out the name of your beloved—me, of course!”

Sanae grabbed Koutarou’s shoulder and shook him violently. Thanks to anime, she’d seen plenty of failed reentry attempts before.

“S-Sanae! C-Calm down!”

“How am I supposed to calm down?! I don’t wanna be stardust! Nooooo!”

“It’s okay, Sanae-chan. Uncle will be doing his best to keep that from happening.”

“Huh? R-Really?”

“Indeed. I will slow us down and block out the heat. I’d never live it down if the Fire Dragon Emperor himself burned up, you know.”

It would fall on Alunaya to protect them all from the dangers of reentry. He would erect a sturdy barrier to shield them from the heat, and shape it in a way that would help decelerate the ship. If that wasn’t enough, he’d then use magic to directly slow their descent. It would be an incredible feat only capable with the Fire Dragon Emperor’s vast reserves of mana.

“This is going to wreck my weight... but I’d rather be heavy than dead,” grumbled Shizuka.

“Dragon Uncle, how much will Shizuka weigh after this?” asked Sanae

“Well, it’s not like I’m transforming, so I doubt she’ll go over 200 kilos.”

“And Shizuka’s prepared for that?”

“Indeed. Besides, I don’t think she’s worried about the impressions she’s going to be making here.”

“So we’re relying on magic to get through this, huh?” mused Koutarou. “I see. So that’s why you’re sulking, Clan.”

“It’s just hard for me to accept something so outrageous.”

To understate the magnificence of what they were about to attempt, they were basically using magic to jury-rig a breaking system to try and survive reentry. As a scientist and a rationalist, that was a hard pill to swallow for Clan.

“Let’s just say that we’re saving all your technological wonders for later, Clan-dono.”

“Yeah. Besides, Clan-san, if it weren’t for you, I’m not sure we even would have made it this far.”

“Hahh... You two are the only ones who would say that, Kii, Harumi.”

“You’re just a stubborn, eccentric scientist.”

“Veltlion!”

The conversation deteriorated there, which actually helped to relieve some of the tension that had been building as they neared their goal. Soon enough, their long cruise would be over.

“Emergency alert, ho! Detecting active radar, ho!”

“The enemy is approaching, ho! It’s four space fighters, ho!”

However, the coup d’etat army wasn’t going to let it happen so easily. Whether it was chance or inevitability, enemy ships were now headed right for Ohime.

“What?!”

Hearing the haniwas’ alert, Theia stood up and raced for the cockpit. Koutarou and the others followed suit. An enemy encounter just as they were about to attempt reentry was bad news.

Koutarou and company were just as surprised to see the four fighters as the four fighters were to see them.

“Captain, how did this new radar detect the enemy’s position?”

“I don’t know. It’s some new model of DKI’s, but... I can’t believe this performance.”

“Resolution-wise, this is several digits more powerful than the ones we used to have.”

“Just when did they develop something like this? DKI hasn’t been in the weapons business for that long...”

The imperial fighters they were flying came factory equipped with a multisensor that used gravitational waves and electromagnetic radiation. It was meant to have noncombat applications, so it had more functions than just tracking nearby enemies, but it was still essentially just a device that examined the fighter’s surroundings. The new model of multisensor they’d had installed just today, however, had located their enemy—even with power to their ship cut—from several dozen kilometers away. That would ordinarily be unthinkable, but it seemed these new sensors had been designed to defy expectations.

“Moreover, how did we even know an unidentified ship was passing through this region?”

“Maybe it’s some other new technology too? Or maybe there are spies or something...”

That was their real surprise—that they’d managed to track down the enemy at all. The full specs of the new multisensors were top secret, so the pilots didn’t know what they were truly capable of, but their displays rendered to about a hundred kilometers out. That might seem like an extraordinarily large area—and it would be on a planet—but in space, a hundred kilometers was nothing. For comparison, the distance between Earth and its moon is roughly 380,000 kilometers, which was incidentally also the approximate distance between Alaia and its ring. Detecting an enemy craft in that area even with the

new multisensor was the equivalent of trying to find a needle in a cosmic haystack. It should have been impossible without knowing their route beforehand, and unlikely even then.

“Whatever the case, I bet the military’s going nuts over this new tech.”

“Now that you mention it, I heard the fleet that went to capture Her Majesty Elfaria returned emptyhanded.”

“That’s probably what lit a fire under them.”

The real reason they’d been able to detect Koutarou and the others was because DKI—or more accurately, Elexis—had gotten his hands on spiritual energy technology and magic. The multisensor he’d created as a result was capable of detecting both spiritual energy and magical auras. And while operating in space with no other living creatures around, the spiritual energy radar in particular worked especially well.

On top of that, Darkness Rainbow used magic to divine the route Koutarou and company would be taking. As there were several potential options, a squadron of fighters—all equipped with the new multisensor—had been dispatched to monitor each one. Koutarou and the others had ended caught up in one of those webs.

“But I can’t imagine they’d offer all of this free of charge. This is some top-secret stuff, or maybe even beyond that if you can imagine.”

“I mean, DKI stands to earn more the longer this fight with Elfaria’s faction drags out. There’s a decent chance this’ll leak. Normally, you’d try and sell someone the cheapest model you can get away with making.”

“Then, captain, does mean they’ve got some other deal going on?”

“Yeah... I don’t think there’s any doubt there’s something going on at the top.”

All of the lingering question marks for the pilots were beginning to raise red flags. The military on Alaia was under Lord Vandarion and Director General Granado’s control, but the majority of the people stationed there were locals. So while they faithfully followed orders from their superiors, they couldn’t help wondering what was really going on. Those thoughts watered and nourished

the already germinating seeds of doubt in their hearts.

Really, the fighter pilots were unfortunate in that they had no idea they were going up against Princess Theiamillis and Empress Elfaria personally. They'd only been given the order to attack the unidentified ship trying to enter the atmosphere, and they followed that order to a T. While the seeds of doubt were growing, they hadn't yet blossomed into conviction. As such, they had no real reason to stop their attack.

"Your Highness, the coup d'etat fighters are jamming communications! We don't have access to any outgoing comms other than laser communication!"

The first thing the fighters did was jam communications, which made calling for backup difficult and stymied the use of guided weapons. As Forthorthe's guided weaponry was notoriously swift and accurate, comms jamming was often an integral part of combat.

"Curse you, Vandarion!"

Theia was standing at Ohime's airlock when she got Ruth's report. A dark, angry expression rose up on her face.

"What is it?"

"He's planning on using these poor pilots as sacrifices to make us look bad! That's why they went straight into jamming!"

While jamming was an important tactic, it wasn't usually resorted to until missiles had actually been launched or there were signs an enemy was actually calling for reinforcements. Otherwise, if jamming was enacted too early, it would make it impossible to send and receive messages of surrender. But since these fighter pilots had gone for it right away, Theia could only assume they'd been ordered to attack on sight. And Vandarion had to have known what he was doing when he gave that order.

With their communications jammed while they were dangerously close to reentry, Theia and the others would have no choice other than to counterattack —which brought its own set of problems. The fighters were in the same position they were, so if their pilots were knocked unconscious or their engines

were stopped, they would be pulled into the atmosphere and burn up in the process. Worse yet, since they were stationed here on Alaia, these pilots were most likely locals.

So in essence, Vandarion's plan was win-win for him. Either the fighters would unknowingly take out Elfaria and Theia right here and now, or they would defend themselves and end up killing four local pilots. If that happened, Vandarion would undoubtedly make a grand show of their funeral and paint Elfaria as a heartless monster for slaughtering her own people.

"So what do we do?"

"We'll destroy their sensors. Without them, they'll have no way of fighting."

With jamming in place, electromagnetic radiation and gravitational waves were unusable. They'd have to fall back on optical cameras and thermal sensors —means that were more difficult to interfere with—in order to lock on to targets. The multisensor, which bundled all of these functions together, was mounted on the upper part of the airframe. If Theia could just manage to destroy those, the fighters would only have their emergency sensors left, making any further fighting all but impossible.

"So we blind them, huh?"

"Yes. But brace yourself. If we damage the airframe itself too much, then there will be nothing we can do."

"Let's do it."

"...I'm sorry, Koutarou."

Theia instinctively apologized. Aiming for just the sensors in a high-speed space battle was asking a lot. It would only increase the danger of the situation, which she felt bad about.

"Don't worry. I've always been good at this kind of thing."

However, Koutarou offered her a nonchalant smile in reply. Seeing it, Theia remembered who she was dealing with here. It was just the pick-me-up she needed in a situation like this.

"That's right. You're the Blue Knight... So please, my knight."

“As you wish, my princess.”

Even in this day and age, the Blue Knight was still upheld as a model knight. That was in part because he’d earned a reputation for never having killed a man intentionally. In other words, this kind of danger was a daily occurrence to him.

As Ohime began reentry, Shizuka and Alunaya had to take over protecting the ship. So instead of using the ship to attack, their plan was to send out anyone who could move freely in space to defend it from the fighters. That team consisted of Koutarou and Theia who had space-ready gear, Sanae-chan in her astral form, and Yurika who was forced to wear an improved PAF model.

“Nooooo! I don’t want to go into space without a spacesuuuit!”

“Give it up already. You’re already outside.”

“You are wearing a spacesuit, you just can’t see it. Just believe in Glasses.”

“That’s easy for you to say when you’re not really out here, Sanae-chan!”

“Ruth, how much longer do we have?!”

“Roughly three minutes, but please factor in the time it will take to return to Ohime!”

As they were quickly hitting the atmosphere, things were already starting to heat up. Alaia’s gravity was also pulling them downward, so if they got too far away from Ohime, they wouldn’t be able to return regardless of how much time was left. These were dire circumstances to fight under—everyone understood why Yurika was crying—but the group had no other choice.

“Yurika, can you do this or not? We brought you with us because magic might be involved, but we can get Aika-san instead.”

“H-Hnngh...”

Based on the situation and what the haniwas had detected, it was almost certain that the enemy was using spiritual energy technology. That meant that Elexis was involved somehow, which in turn meant that they might even be up against magical equipment. That was the reason Koutarou had forced Yurika to come with them. He wasn’t trying to be mean.

“I-I’ll do it! That’s my job!”

A few words of encouragement was all it took for Yurika to stop wailing over the comms. He couldn’t see her face, but he knew good and well what face she was making right now.

“I’m counting on you, Yurika.”

“Right!”

“All right, men... Begin the operation!”

Once Yurika had calmed down, Theia issued the order and her three troops sprang into action. The fighters were practically upon them now.

“Sanae!”

“I got this! Special attack: Galactic Sanae-channel!”

Sanae made the opening move and used her psychic powers to connect everyone’s minds. This would allow them to communicate without the need for technology. Space was vast, and with jamming in place, they only comms they had available were short-range. As such, establishing a reliable method to communicate was their number one priority.

“And the enemies are over here!”

But Sanae also had a second important job, which was to use her psychic powers to track the enemy and report their locations to Koutarou and the others. That would allow them to fight without radars and sensors. Yet even then, there was still one more problem that needed to be resolved.

“Double Cast: Lightning Reflexes, Sharpen Senses! Modifier: Multi-Target!”

Battles in space took place at long range and at breakneck speeds. Excellent kinetic vision, sharp reflexes, and swift dexterity were all a must—doubly so since they’d be aiming for very specific, delicate targets on moving foes. But that was where Yurika’s magic came in. She should be able to get them the edge they needed.

“Then we’re all set. Theia, I’m counting on you to cover me.”

“With me here, you can fight to your heart’s content! Let’s go!”

With all of Sanae and Yurika's cards in place, Koutarou and Theia flew off. As there was no atmospheric resistance in space, they moved quicker than normal at a speed comparable to the fighters.

"Captain, enemy units approaching! Radar is showing four, but only two... or is it three? Either way, optics isn't picking up all of them, and they're very small targets!"

The fighters detected Koutarou and the others approaching with their spiritual energy radar, which worked even when standard jamming was active. And when they finally got a visual, they could hardly believe what they were seeing.

"I'm getting the same reading over here! Wait... Are they mobile infantry?!"

In modern Forthorthe, power suits were considered outdated. They were still used for exploration missions when automated machines weren't an option and for emergency retreats from battle, but those were last resorts. In almost every single practical instance, an actual robot was more useful and efficient than power suits—and it was unthinkable that someone was using them to come after trained fighters.

"Are these guys insane?!"

The fighter pilots' first reaction was to question their enemies' sanity. It was dark, so they couldn't get a good look at the faces of the approaching targets... but they would've loved to see them.

"Captain, they might actually know what they're doing! They're as mobile as we are. Most of their weaponry is unknown, but one of them has a large-caliber gun for armored targets!"

"I see. So they're riding on a flying cannon, are they?"

As the pilots gathered information on Koutarou and the others, their surprise began changing direction. Though their targets were small, they had the mobility and attack power of fighters. It appeared they'd sacrificed defense to achieve that, but they were small enough targets that they would be difficult to hit in the first place. Moreover, since Elfaria faction's had been separated from the army, they were likely weaponizing everything they could get their hands

on. Perhaps this wasn't as crazy of a tactic as it had first seemed.

"Now's not the time to be impressed! Assume that they're fighters and respond accordingly!"

"Roger that!"

Even going up against odd opponents outfitted with outdated tech, the fighter pilots weren't going to let their guard down. They initiated standard attack protocol, which opened with firing missiles at maximum range.

"All units, spread out after firing! Wait to see who wasn't taken out by the missile barrage, then go after them individually! I'm going to attack the enemy ship!"

The captain's plan of attack was a methodical one. First they would all attack the mobile infantrymen—Koutarou and Theia—with missiles. If that didn't take them out, three of the fighters would challenge whoever survived to a dogfight. And while that was going down, the captain would attack the enemy's small spaceship, Ohime. It shouldn't be hard to destroy such a small crafter beginning reentry, so he had no concerns about leaving his men to deal with Koutarou and Theia.

It's not just the multisensor, though... These guided missiles are strange too. How can they still work with jamming up? And why were they given to us?

All four fighters fired twice for a total of eight missiles sailing through space, each one guided by aura. While the captain didn't know that exactly, he could tell they weren't normal. The seeds of doubt only began to sprout more and more.

"Koutarou, focus the active barrier at twelve o'clock and push through the missiles! And don't worry! I'll deal with any rogue shots!"

"All right! I'll leave that to you!"

Seeing the approaching missiles, Koutarou and Theia decided to push through. They knew they were small enough targets that it was unlikely even high-speed missiles would score a direct hit, but even if they exploded nearby, they could cause serious damage. So while Koutarou defended himself and Theia with his barrier, Theia would target any missiles that threatened to reach

the danger zone. Their straightforward approach mirrored their straightforward personalities, but more than that, it was a sound strategy.

“Yurika, Sanae! One of the fighters is headed your way!”

“I’ll do my best!”

“Koutarou, it looks like the missiles are chasing after auras! I’ll try getting in their way!”

Fortunately, with Sanae around, they also had another option for dealing with the missiles. Since they were being guided by spiritual energy, she could use her spiritual powers to interfere with them.

“The number one galactic popstar, Higashihongan Sanae, is going to sing a special song for you today!”

Sanae’s chosen method of interference was to start singing in the middle of space. The song was from an anime she loved, and she—quite seriously—poured her heart and soul into it.

“So much happens every day! But smile, keep your chin up! There will be cloudy days too!”

It was the theme song from her favorite show, *Magical Girl Love Love Heart*. Her singing was far from stellar, but her love-filled voice reached out towards the stars nonetheless.

“But when that happens, just call for meee! And I’ll come running with my Love Love magic for yooou!”

Despite her apparent lack of singing talent, the spiritual power she poured into her voice gave it a strange power. As if they’d been charmed, the missiles started turning away from Koutarou and Theia. The fighters’ radar also temporarily seized from the high amount of spiritual energy Sanae was outputting.



“Good job, Sanae!”

Theia squeezed the trigger on her beam cannon while listening to Sanae’s singing voice in the background. Currently, she had her Combat Dress accessorized with Star Purple. It came equipped with gear meant for use in space, including several energy-based weapons and a large engine.

“Keep it up, you two!”

Theia repeatedly fired her beam cannon and shot down three missiles in quick succession. Koutarou’s barrier pushed aside the debris they scattered as he pressed ever forward. Koutarou could still tell where the enemy was thanks to Sanae, even as she continued to sing. Their enemies, however, could no longer use their radar thanks to the power of Sanae’s voice. It was like a free-for-all right now with no chance of retaliation or counterattack, so Koutarou went in swinging for the fighter right in front of him.

“Sakuraba-senpai, I’m counting on you!”

“Right! Shine, Signaltin!”

“Haaaaah!”

Koutarou swung Signaltin as he passed by the fighter. With all the momentum of his weight and increased speed behind it, the blow had more impact than usual. Cloaked in powerful mana, Signaltin’s blade shone silver as it easily shattered the enemy’s barrier.

“Theia!”

“Leave it to me!”

That was when Theia, coming in slightly behind him, fired her beam cannon with extraordinary precision and destroyed the multisensor installed on the upper part of the fighter’s frame. Now essentially blinded and deafened, the fighter turned around and swiftly departed the battlefield. Instead of giving chase, Koutarou and Theia shifted their focus to the next fighter.

“Unit 02 was damaged during radar whiteout and is exiting the combat zone.”

“Damn it! Is this the enemy’s doing?! But at this range...!”

When the captain's ship AI updated him on the battle, he fired his remaining two missiles at Ohime. The radar wasn't back online yet, but he was now close enough to guide the missile using optics. Ohime was practically immobile as it began the reentry process, so it was essentially a sitting duck.

"What?!"

However, the surprises weren't over just yet for the captain. Right before the missiles hit, Ohime disappeared into thin air. The missiles then exploded in empty space, shattering only one of the nearby ice chunks.

"Phew, he fell for the decoy," sighed Yurika.

"That was some smart thinking for you," ribbed Koutarou.

"It was a trick I learned from Kiriha-san."

"So the real credit goes to her, huh? Go figure."

This unexpected turn of events was thanks to Yurika's magic. She'd conjured an illusion of Ohime that had the same size, shape, and heat signature of the real deal, while disguising the actual ship as a lump of ice. Not knowing any better, the captain had fired on the illusory decoy.

"Damn it, I was tricked! But it's not over yet!"

As his radar rebooted, the captain got a lock on Ohime's real position. He was out of missiles, but he still had his beam cannon. Not ready to give up, he charged at Ohime again, intent on destroying it.

"G-Guys, he's coming back!"

"Stop panicking and protect the ship!"

"R-Right!"

With the captain locking on to Ohime via optics and his missiles spent, Sanae gave up on singing for now. She and Yurika were going to work together to protect Ohime. She used her psychic powers to gather ice chunks to use as a shield while Yurika cast a magical force field.

"It's just one thing after another!"

The captain rapidly fired his beam cannon as he flew by Ohime, but each shot

was blocked either by the ice shield or force field. It wasn't like the attack was useless, however. The ice shield was quickly being chipped away and the force field blinked a few times before disappearing altogether. Feeling good, the captain turned his fighter around to go back in for another run.

"Theia, I can handle things here! You go help them!"

"I'm on it!"

By now, Koutarou and Theia had destroyed the weapons and sensors on the second fighter. With only one left to go, either Koutarou or Theia should be able to take it out on their own. Since Theia had greater mobility and a longer range, however, she was a better candidate to go back up Sanae and Yurika.

"Wise choice, but I'm faster!"

But before Theia could reach them, the captain had already circled back around and was launching his next attack. Theia had her beam cannon at the ready, but it wouldn't work well enough at this distance to stop the rapidly firing fighter.

"Kyaaah! Here he comes again!"

"But I'm not just gonna sit here and take it!"

Yurika quickly threw up her defensive spell again and Sanae gathered more ice, but this time she used it differently. Rather than making a shield, she read the captain's intent to attack and threw chunks directly in his line of fire.

"They can do that?!"

Surprised by the sudden resistance that shouldn't have even been possible in the midst of space, the captain decided to focus on taking out the ice chunks. If he simply dodged them and circled around to attack again, Theia would be there by then. So instead, he would press forward with his attack. He would plow through the ice and then take out Ohime. That was his plan, but unfortunately for him, it backfired.

"Oh no!"

While the beam cannon shattered the lumps of ice, it didn't send their debris flying like the exploding missiles had. Instead, the beams just broke the large

chunks of ice up into smaller pieces, which were still right in the captain's way. He flew right into them at full speed.

The captain of the fighter squadron was only unconscious for a few seconds. The loud, blaring alarm and the violent shaking from the fighter crashing into ice quickly woke him up.

"J-Just what..."

Having just come to, his mind was still muddled. The alarm was noisy, the airframe was shaking, and a red light in the cockpit was flashing. In his daze, he could hardly understand what was going on, but the training that had been beaten into him told him that it wasn't good.

"What a sorry state..."

The captain shook his head and tried to clear his mind as he ran through a flight check on muscle memory alone. The space distortion field was defective, half of the posture control thrusters were no longer functioning, the temperature of the airframe was rising, the angle and posture of the ship were all wrong. There was a long list of abnormalities were being reported, and those were just the major ones. Pretty much everything that could have gone wrong had. It was a pilot's worst nightmare.

"That's right. I was on a mission... There was a suspicious ship..."

As he was going through the usual procedures, he began to process the situation he was in. Things slowly started coming back to him.

He and his team were attacking an unidentified ship suspected to belong to Elfaria's faction. He'd misjudged the situation and run his fighter into a cluster of ice, which was how he'd ended up in this condition. He'd lost control of his ship and was headed straight into the atmosphere. That was what all the shaking and all the alarms were about.

"Looks like this is it..."

He was on a multipurpose vessel that was used for all kinds of missions. It was capable of reentry, but only at the proper speed and angle. Speed wasn't an issue right now, but the fighter's angle and posturing were all wrong. It was

upside down and entering the atmosphere at an acute angle. The captain tried to correct his course, but with roughly only half of the posture control thrusters functioning, there was barely anything he could do. There was a chance he could use his distortion field to protect himself against the heat, but it too was nonfunctioning. It had encountered an error while rebooting and was now stuck in an endless reboot loop. So while the fighter was still in one piece, it was essentially dead in the water.

The captain knew he was about to die. No matter how hard he tried, there was no way to pull himself out of this. He was going to burn up in the atmosphere right along with his ship.

“Faluna, Eswiz, I’m sorry... I won’t be coming back home.”

Accepting his fate, the captain said farewell to his wife and child. The truth was that he was unbearably scared. He wanted to scream and cry out, but he knew the cockpit’s flight recorder would document his final moments for his wife and child to see. And when he remembered that, he choked back his fear and focused on saying goodbye to his family. If he gave in to the terror, he would never get those words out. He didn’t want his loved ones to see him go like that, so the captain fought back his emotions from exploding and recorded his last message.

“As you know, I’ve sworn my loyalty to the royal family. All I can hope now is that, in giving my life, this benefits the empress somehow... I don’t know who’s aboard that ship, but based on how they fight, it must be someone important.”

In order to make peace with what was happening, the captain told himself that all was as it should be. This mission had been suspicious from the start. The multisensor and missiles, the surprise appearance of the enemy and their incredible strength, right down to their equipment and their means of attack... All of it was strange. Putting the pieces together, it was easy to imagine that someone important from Elfaria’s faction was on that ship. And if they survived this encounter, maybe that would help Empress Elfaria out somehow. The captain was an Alaian local, so while he’d faithfully followed his orders, that didn’t mean he agreed with them. And in that sense, perhaps this was ultimately a happy resolution. He would be remembered as a loyal soldier, but he would pass without actually bringing any harm to Elfaria or the Mastir family.

When he thought of it like that, he was able to come to terms with his end.

“You’re wrong!”

That was when, out of the blue, a voice came over the captain’s comms. It surprised him terribly—communication should have been impossible in his current situation. Yet that voice was coming through loud and clear. At first, he thought it was an auditory hallucination.

“Royals or not, my mother and I don’t want Forthorthe’s people to suffer!”

“A direct contact communication?! That voice couldn’t be—”

“So I’m not going to let you die! You’re going to survive, you’re going home to see your family, and you’re all going to live your lives to the fullest!”

“Princess...?! Is that Princess Theiamillis?!”

As the captain realized who the angelic voice coming over the comms belonged to, his fighter began changing inclination. As it did, he caught a glimpse of someone through the canopy of his cockpit. It was the person speaking to him, who was manually holding on to his fighter in an attempt to correct its posture.

“Yes! You can rest easy now, so just hang in there a little while longer!”

“Stop it, Your Highness! If you do that, you’ll perish!”

Seeing her, the captain’s worries turned to the life of his princess—to Theia. Deep down, he was still as loyal as could be to the Mastir family.

As capable and powerful as Theia’s Combat Dress was, it wasn’t equipped for reentry. The captain could tell that much just by looking at it. And at this rate, even if she managed to correct the fighter’s posture and save him, she would die in the process. The captain couldn’t accept that.

“I won’t die! I’m a proud descendant of the Mastir family! I’m not weak enough to lose my life over something like this!”

“But—”

“Silence! Even if what you say is true, I won’t abandon you! I won’t abandon anyone! If that were the kind of princess I was, then I never would’ve returned

home!”

“Your Highness... you really are...”

Theia ignored the captain’s protests and used Star Purple’s large thrusters to forcibly adjust the fighter’s posture. Just like the fighter, Theia’s Combat Dress was giving out various warnings. There was little propellant left, the barrier against high temperatures was on the brink of collapsing, and she was now falling too fast to be able to return to Ohime. Yet even then, Theia pressed on, driven by her desire to protect her citizens no matter what.

“You don’t have to worry about me! Just live! As a subject of the Mastir family, I command you to be happy!”



“Your Highness! Your Highness!”

At last Theia’s efforts paid off. Several of the alarms in the fighter’s cockpit finally quieted down. The captain was now on an acceptable course for reentry and, seeing that, hurriedly called out to Theia.

“Your Highness, the posture and angle have normalized! Please hurry up and withdraw—”

But before he could even finish his sentence, Theia was snatched up by the pressure of the atmosphere and blown away from the ship. Seeing it happen before his very eyes, all the captain could do was scream.

“Princess, nooooo!”

No matter how loudly he yelled, there was no response from Theia. But the look on her face as she drifted away shook the captain to his core.

“YOUR HIGHNESS!”

Theia was smiling. She looked happy. Even as she was overtaken by the intense heat and pressure of atmospheric reentry, there wasn’t the slightest hint of regret on her royal visage. All she had to offer was a calm, gentle, accepting smile, and it was a sight the captain would never forget for the rest of his days.

There was no doubt in his mind that Princess Theiamillis was going to die just as she’d lived—as a true royal of Forthorthe.

Theia had told the captain not to worry about her, but that was all she could have said in the situation. The truth was that she had no plans to survive.

“How troubling... At this rate, I really will die...”

Theia knew she’d done something stupid, but she regretted nothing. As Forthorthian royal, there was no way she could’ve just sat back and watched as one of her citizens died in front of her.

“I’ve got another twenty or thirty seconds, I guess...”

Theia had used up almost all of her propellant to change the fighter’s posture.

Accordingly, she released Star Purple—which was now nothing more than a heap of metal—and used it as a shield to protect her from the heat of reentry. Sadly, however, it didn't last long. Under the extreme heat and pressure, Star Purple began breaking down, starting from its weakest points. There wasn't much time left now. If Star Purple gave out, all that was left to protect Theia was her barrier that was already on the verge of collapse. Within seconds, she'd be incinerated.

"So I'll go out like a shooting star, huh? What an unexpectedly romantic end..."

There were millions of ways to die, and in Theia's mind, going out like a shooting star wasn't the worst. Her inner romantic thought it would be a beautiful end. Moreover, the view was good from here. Alaia growing bigger beneath her was bathed in a beautiful blue glow. And with little else to do as she awaited the end, Theia took in the extraordinary vista.

Thud!

"Ow!"

Suddenly, a heavy impact struck Theia on the back of the head. At first she thought her barrier had collapsed already, but that wasn't the case.

"What are you doing over here trying to act all cool and play the hero by yourself?"

"Koutarou?!"

Before she knew it, Koutarou was beside her. She thought she was dreaming at first, but quickly realized this was very, very real. The back of her head was still throbbing, after all.

"What are you doing?! Are you trying to get yourself killed?!"

"That's my line. Seriously, what are you doing?"

"Protecting the people is a royal's duty!"

"Then you don't mind if I step in, do you?"

"What?"

“Protecting the royals is a knight’s duty.”

With those words, Koutarou embraced Theia. Not a moment later, Star Purple gave way. The heat it had been blocking instantly assaulted Theia and Koutarou at full force, but it didn’t burn either one of them. Thanks to GoL, Koutarou’s armor could put up two types of barriers—a standard spherical one that would protect him in all directions, and a second, sturdier one that could be deployed in a direction of choice for extra protection. Between both of them, they were just barely managing to keep the heat off Theia and Koutarou.

“I do mind.”

Theia embraced Koutarou in return and frowned a little. She was rather displeased with his choice of words.

“What?”

“Why won’t you say it’s because I’m important to you?!”

“Of course a knight’s princess is important to him.”

“Ugh! You’re saying that even though you know good and well what I mean, aren’t you?!”

Theia pushed away from Koutarou a little and glared at him with her cheeks indignantly puffed out. She looked nothing like the grand, proud princess she’d been a moment ago. In fact, right now she looked more like a sulking child. Koutarou couldn’t help laughing.

“I’m just getting a little bit of revenge.”

“Stupid! How could you be so mean at an important moment like this?! This is our final goodbye!”

GoL’s barriers were keeping them safe for now, but there was no way they would outlast the atmosphere. They were already starting to give off warnings. It wouldn’t be long before they collapsed now, which was why Theia believed the two of them would die like this.

“Because it’s not really the end.”

“What?”

Theia went wide-eyed and lost all her steam upon hearing his words.

“You see, I brought someone special—Yurika.”

Koutarou let go of Theia with one arm and pointed upward. Still overcome with blank surprise, Theia slowly looked up and saw something strange flying overhead.

“Kyaaaaaaaah! Noooooooo! I’m burning, I’m burning uuuup!”

That strange something was Yurika straddling her staff. She was screaming about the heat assailing her defensive spell as she flew towards her friends. Theia couldn’t actually hear her voice, but she could tell what she was saying just by looking at her face.

“Let Yurika in the barrier.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

The armor’s AI opened a hole in the upper part of the barrier just long enough for Yurika to enter. Once she was in, she immediately laid into Koutarou.

“Wh-Wh-What is with this hellish place, Satomi-san?!”

“We covered this in physics class the other day. It’s the upper layer of the atmosphere.”

“You’re lying! This is the first time I’ve heard of anything so terrible! I’m gonna die! You’re gonna die! We’re all gonna die!”

“No, we’re all going to work together to keep that from happening.”

“I see... So this is what you meant.”

Theia now understood Koutarou’s intentions. His armor alone wouldn’t be enough to safely get them through the atmosphere, but Yurika’s magic might. If they held out long enough, Theia’s barrier would recover and she could help protect the three of them as well. It would have been ideal to have Sanae’s psychic powers in the mix too, but the others had needed her to help move Ohime. They’d have to make do with the three of them somehow.

“However, Koutarou, there’s still one big problem, you know?”

“Is there? What are you talking about? Is there something wrong with your

Combat Dress?”

“No. I’m still sulking.”

Theia puffed out her cheeks again. Seeing that expression, Koutarou gave in, sighing as she shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. He was no match against Theia when she was like this. Besides, there was no guarantee that they would survive this even with the three of them working together.

“Theia, you’re important to me. That’s why I came to save you.”

“Then I suppose I have no reason to object. I’ll let you save me.”

“Stupid.”

“Heh heh.”

Theia happily smiled and embraced Koutarou, who had bashfully turned away. Now everything had been resolved and the only thing left for the three of them was to hold on to each other for dear life.

“NOOOOOOOOOOO!”

They streaked through the skies of Alaia together, leaving behind a long tail like a meteor and the high-pitched sound of Yurika’s panicked screaming.



On the night that strange blue shooting star shot through the sky, a young boy living on Alaia received a letter. It was from a friend of his he hadn't seen in some time.

"Let's see... 'I'm riding on a spaceship and everyone is okay.'"

The boy lay on his bed as he began reading the letter from his friend, who was also a young boy and consequently not the best letter-writer. The contents of the letter were flat and to the point, and partly because of the faltering voice reading it out, it sounded horribly tedious. Nevertheless, the boy was quite happy to have received a letter from a dear friend he missed very much.

"'We met the Blue Knight and a state secret was flying.' Wait, the Blue Knight?"

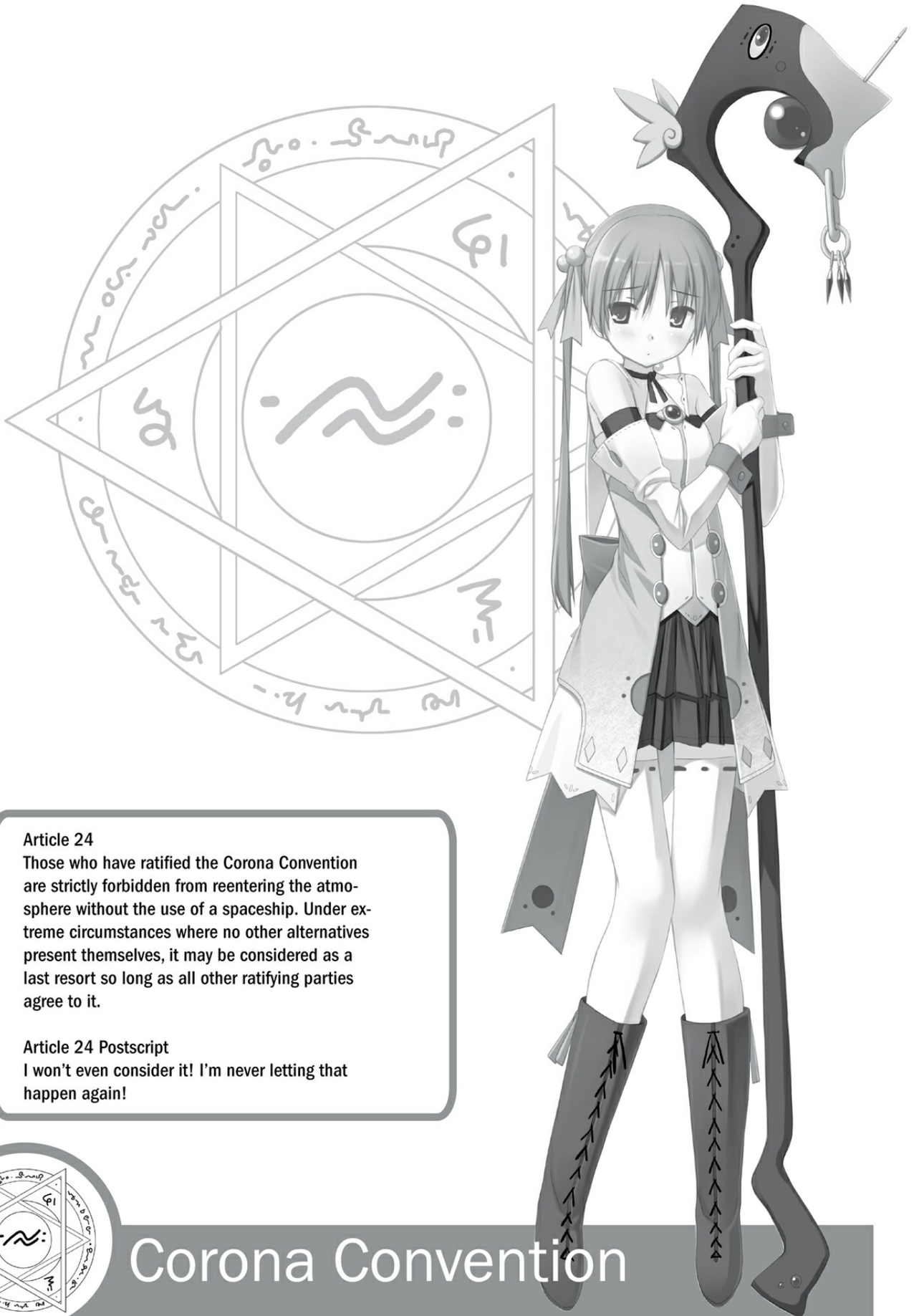
As the boy read the mostly dry letter, a certain something jumped out at him. It was a name that no Forthorthian boy or girl could ignore—it was the name of their national hero whose story the subject of many a movie and fairy tale.

"'There's a video of the Blue Knight attached. Please watch it. Sincerely, Bobban Giun.' Hmm... Is this the video?"

The boy shook the envelope upside down and a small plastic chip came falling out. It was a common media storage device, and on it was a file labeled "Blue Knight found."

"'Show it to everyone else and they will be happy.' Hmm... I still don't get it, but let's take a look."

After watching it, the boy decided to upload it to the pangalactic network—Forthorthe's internet. He had no idea what kind of consequences that would bring. All the boy who'd recorded the footage and the boy who'd uploaded it were thinking was that it would make the people who saw it happy.



Article 24
Those who have ratified the Corona Convention are strictly forbidden from reentering the atmosphere without the use of a spaceship. Under extreme circumstances where no other alternatives present themselves, it may be considered as a last resort so long as all other ratifying parties agree to it.

Article 24 Postscript
I won't even consider it! I'm never letting that happen again!

Corona Convention

New! November 20, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see. It's the author, Takehaya. This time we're back for volume 21. As "The Golden Princess and the Blue Knight" subtitle suggests, the story this time is centered on Theia. But while she's the center of the story, there's lots more going on around her. As fate begins to converge, I think everyone should get their time to shine. As such, the scale of this arc is probably going to be the biggest yet. I'll do my best to live up to all your expectations.

As for the contents of this volume, the Corona House crew is leaving Earth and heading for the Forthorthian solar system. Since the stage is set in space, it's going to be a bit of a different story than usual. As Forthorthe is over ten million lightyears away from Earth, just getting there is going to be an adventure.

But the real star of this volume, as I mentioned, is Theia. I really wanted to give her her time to shine before everything gets too chaotic, so this time around, we have Theia playing lots of roles—from comedy to combat to politics. This volume also marks the debut of two new accessories: Guardian Yellow and Star Purple. In short, I hope it's a satisfying entry to the series for all you Theia fans out there.

Another important development for Theia this volume is learning that she could have a family with an Earthling after all. The genetic makeup of Earthlings and Forthorthians is close enough to facilitate that. As Clan and Kiriha point out, that should really be impossible. But just like that strange sense of disbelief you might have felt in the first volume when a ghost, a magical girl, an underground dweller, and two aliens all showed up in the same place—something like that doesn't happen without a reason. I know this is something a lot of readers actually didn't spend too much time dwelling on, however. It's "normal" in light novels for a lot of unique characters to come together like that, so it didn't necessarily warrant any deeper thought. This was a help to me, actually, considering the story wasn't guaranteed to get far enough to explain everything. If you all had asked too many questions at the start, I might have

been in trouble!

Another highlight of this volume is the appearance of Lord Vandarion and Director General Granado, who look just like Maxfern and Grevanas respectively. Because Elexis resembles Dextro, I think some of you may have expected this development. It's almost like these men have reappeared after two thousand years to make another play for Forthorthe... Will Koutarou really be able to settle the score from back then this time around? I hope you enjoy reading to find out.

Now, moving on, as the story this time involves travelling to Forthorthe, I need to clear up how hyperspace travel over extremely long distances works. I mean the so-called warp navigation being used, where space is bent to create a shortcut via a space-time distortion. It poses something of a technical problem.

Earth is approximately ten million lightyears away from Forthorthe—that's a 1 followed by seven 0s. And one lightyear is about ten trillion kilometers—that's a 1 followed by thirteen 0s. So if you're following, in kilometers, ten million lightyears would be a 1 followed by twenty 0s. In other words, it would look like this...

10 million lightyears = 100,000,000,000,000,000,000 kilometers

Looking at that number should make it clear that even a slight miscalculation in the warp would land a ship wildly off course. Hashing it out based on the accuracy of Forthorthian navigational equipment and the warp drive, we'd get a margin of error of about 0.01 percent—which is about a thousand lightyears. So even when aiming for Forthorthe, they could end up in a totally different solar system.

As a result, it's unreasonable to assume that they'd be able to reach their destination with a single warp. It makes much more sense if warps are used repeatedly. For example, if we pick up from our first hypothetical warp, a second warp would only have a margin of error of 0.1 lightyears, or about a trillion kilometers. And if we try and warp again from there, the margin of error is only ten thousand kilometers, which is perfectly navigable by normal means

in a spaceship. In other words, with a margin of error of 0.01 percent, at least three warps are required.

However, that number doesn't take into account any safety measures. And since you never know exactly where you'll be exiting with a warp, you definitely want those in place. You wouldn't want to end up inside of a star or sucked into a black hole or stuck in a storm of comets, after all. So in order to prevent that, you would need to intentionally target a nice, big, empty area that factored in the margin of error. Fortunately, space is so vast that there are countless such areas. That would mean taking indirect detours, however, which would only add to the number of warps needed to get to the intended destination.

On top of that, you need to consider the downtime between warps. I imagine warp drives are delicate pieces of machinery that require cooling, maintenance, recharging, and more—all of which would take time. A car is ready to go again after being refueled, but I think a spaceship would be able to warp once or twice a day at most. Maybe more in an emergency, but it wouldn't be as safe or reliable.

With that in mind, I decided that it would take about ten days for Theia's Blue Knight to reach Forthorthe from Earth. With that as my basis, I decided that a normal space battleship would take about fifteen days and a civilian ship about thirty.

Once I had those specs, I started realizing that Forthorthian space travel is measured more so in time than it is distance. Or, at the very least, in number of warps. In short, Blue Knight's trip home takes ten days, or ten warps. Thinking about all this, I'm reminded that traveling through space is a lot of work.

I've been given some more space for the afterward this time, so let's keep the ball rolling. Apparently, due to technical issues, the total number of pages in the book has increased by sixteen because of the length of the manuscript and where it ended. That means we have to fill the extra space with this afterword and advertisements (ha!).

Anyway, let's talk about the next volume a little. The crew has arrived in the Forthorthian solar system, but Koutarou, Theia, and Yurika have fallen to the surface of the sixth planet from the sun, Alaia. And where they land isn't great

—it's a region where the coup d'etat army has a lot of influence. So, to meet back up with their friends, the three of them head for the Pardomshiha territory in hopes of finding allies.

That's right, this should sound somewhat familiar but also a little new. The plot will continue developing like this, which is why the past Forthorthe arc had to end where it did. Really, you're getting the real ending to that story here. So for now, just kick back and look forward to the next volume—the adventures of the Blue Knight, the Golden Princess, and the horse's rear.

Oh, I almost forgot to report on something important! A drama CD was included as a bundled bonus with physical copies of this book, but not digital ones. BOOKWALKER has come to the rescue, however, and extracted the sound data from the CD to add as a downloadable bonus with the digital version. So, for a limited time, this volume comes with the first half of volume 7.5's drama CD. Since it's only for a limited time, however, those of you who are interested should hurry.

The offer is limited because this a very experimental trial. This is apparently the first time BOOKWALKER is offering a drama CD for download with book purchases like this. In fact, it might be the first time anyone's done it *ever*. Since they're unsure of the demand and a hundred other complicated things, they've decided that permanently hosting the download would be difficult. As a compromise, they're offering it for a month to try and test the waters.

How things go will determine how things work for future drama CDs. As I'm writing this afterword at the end of November, I personally have no idea what's going to happen yet. Based on the situation, the limited distribution might not even last the full month. By the time this book is published, more detailed information should be available on HJ Bunko's and BOOKWALKER's websites.

But still, BOOKWALKER really has done us a huge service. And not just with the drama CD, either. They tried selling Empress Alaia goods for the first time through the digital version last time. Something like it might come up again, so if you're interested, keep an eye out.

All right, surely I've covered enough pages by now (ha!), so I'd like to sign off with the usual acknowledgements.

As always, I would like to extend my thanks to the editorial department for their help; to my illustrator Poco-san for always coming up with such wonderful illustrations without a whole lot of pointers; and finally, to the readers for always supporting me.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 22.

November 2015

Takehaya

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 21

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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