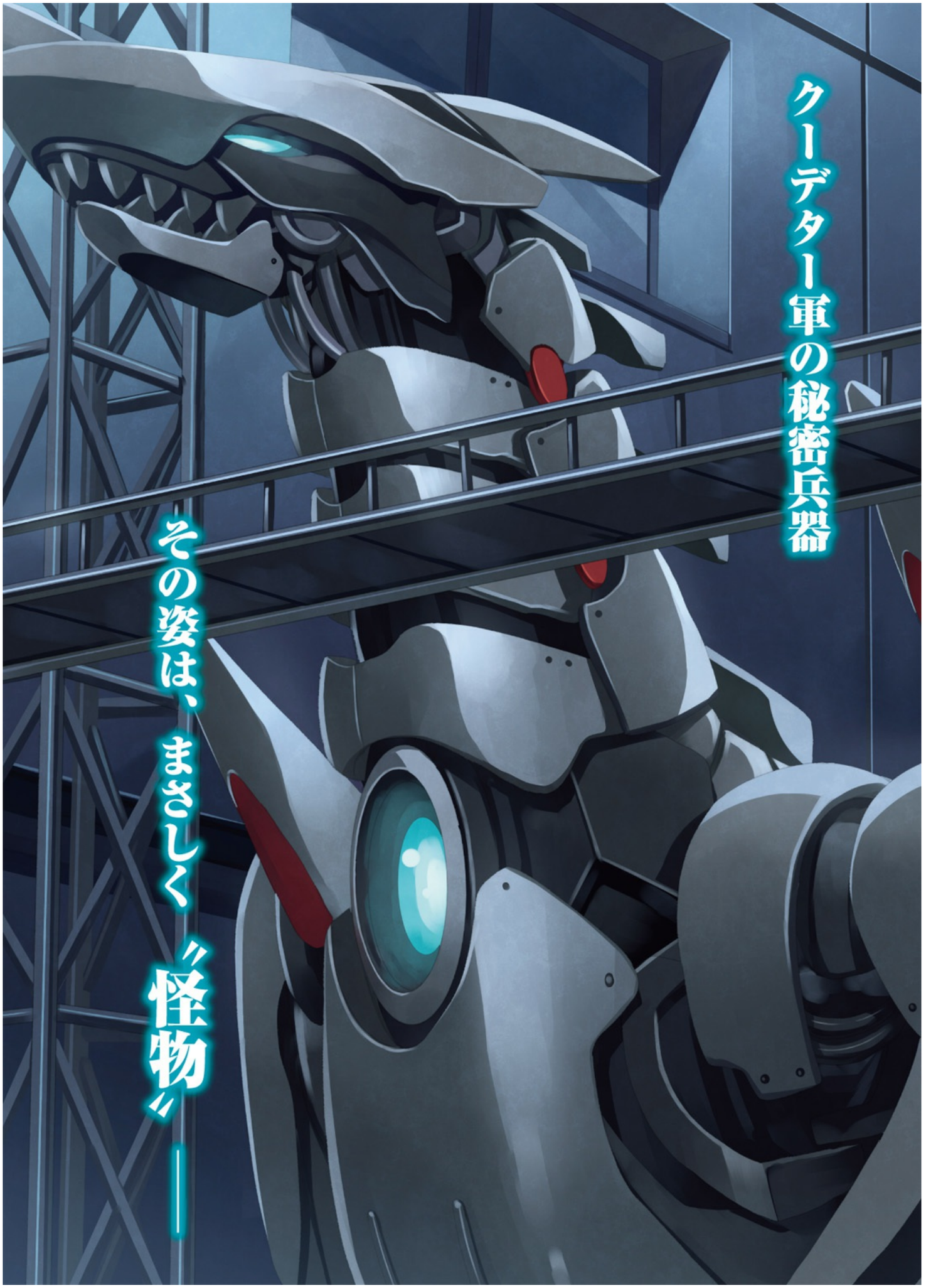

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Takehaya
Illust: Poco
INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?


「殿下がお連れになっている青い鎧の騎士様は、一体どのようなお方なのでしょうか？」
「ふにゅっ!?　そそそ、それはじゃなっ、あー、えーと……ノ、ノーコメントじゃっ！」

六畳間の侵略者!? 24


ついにクーデター軍との
大規模戦闘へ！
勝利の鍵は　頭脳派少女たち!?


クーデター軍の秘密兵器
その姿は、まさしく〝怪物〟――

The Press Conference

Friday, November 26th

The leader of Elfaria's faction was of course none other than Elfaria herself. However, due to complicated circumstances, she never directly addressed the public in person. Lord Pardomshiha took care of speeches for her, while she at best left video messages.

However, with the country divided and on the verge of erupting into civil war, that was a luxury she couldn't afford. If she didn't appeal for her own legitimacy and answer to the doubts of the citizens herself, she would hardly seem fit to lead them into the bloody battle ahead. And in that interest, it was decided that Elfaria would give a speech and partake in a press conference.

"It is perfectly reasonable that you would have doubts about me," she began, addressing her citizens. "After all, the military fabricated enough evidence to drag me from the throne. Even after hearing me denounce their lies, there may yet be some lingering doubt. In fact, I should thank those of you who still put your faith in me."

Elfaria was currently at her faction's base, transmitting her speech throughout all of Forthorthe via the network. Her appearance was dignified and beautiful, reinforcing her usual impression: the very image of benevolence and strength. It was what many of the citizens had been hoping to see.

"However, we cannot just simply allow the wool to be pulled over our eyes. That is the reason why I am not appearing for trial. If I allowed such a trial to take place, I would be found guilty with the false evidence mounted against me. If I am to stand trial, it must be fair and just. We must restore that balance. The false evidence must be exposed, and our courts must be relinquished from the deathly grasp of the military's influence. Then—and only then—will I go before the judge."

The situation was bad, and Elfaria knew it. There was no denying that she had run away from a trial. Even as the reigning empress of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, not even she was exempt from the law. A formal, serious summons to appear in court was absolute. And yet despite that, Elfaria had refused. To make matters worse, she mobilized part of the army in order to resist. All things considered, it wouldn't surprise anyone if the end result was Elfaria's impeachment. But if what she was insisting was true, she had only done what was necessary in order to protect herself and Forthorthe. Because of that, national opinion was divided on the matter. Not just Elfaria's reputation, but the people's trust in her and her entire administration was at stake now.

"All is made clear from the various evidence I have presented. The military decided to use biological weapons, and then attempted to pin the blame on us. The current leaders of your military are unconcerned for you or your safety. They had no qualms involving civilians in such attacks. That is the kind of evil we're dealing with. That is the kind of fight we have ahead of all of us. I am aware of the difficulty of what I'm asking, but it must be done in order to protect Forthorthe. Over two thousand years have passed since Her Majesty Alaia and the citizens of Forthorthe came together to protect this country. We must follow in their footsteps. We shall not allow it to fall into the hands of such despicable men! Not now! Not ever!"

At first, public opinion was critical of Elfaria fleeing trial. Accusations of embezzlement and murder were enough to make the people's trust in her waver. But as of late, that had started to change little by little. That was because word of the battles between Elfaria's supporters and the military had begun spreading.

Elfaria's faction took the utmost care when fighting to keep casualties an absolute minimum. In contrast, the military was unabashed in its use of force. They had even resorted to using biological weapons. The words of Elfaria and her supporters matched their actions but the same could not be said of the military, and it was that obvious, undeniable difference that had started to curb public opinion in Elfaria's favor. There were now fewer and fewer people

criticizing her for refusing to stand trial. Public opinion was roughly split in half, but Elfaria had one more thing going in her favor. It was the existence of a certain someone who was rapidly attracting the attention of the citizens.

Elfaria's speech lasted for half an hour or so, and its conclusion marked the beginning of the press conference in the form of a question and answer session. Journalists standing by remotely would send in questions over the network.

"I'm Galesbarn of *The Forthorthe Periodical.* Your Majesty, you said in your explanation that while it was announced that you were sick, you were actually being held under house arrest. Can you tell us exactly when that was happening?"

"Just a moment. Well, it started during the spring spirit festival, so... more accurately, it was—"

Primarily, the conference consisted of inquiries confirming the details of Elfaria's speech, ultimately trying to resolve the doubts that arose from it. Considering the complex nature of what she had covered, the journalists had a lot of questions. Elfaria answered each and every one of them patiently and politely.

"I'm Laupaur of *Daily Religion.* Your Majesty, your imperial authority has currently been revoked by the Imperial Council. Would your mobilization of the army not be considered privatization of the army, or possibly even a revolt?"

"I am of the standpoint that such a revocation based on false evidence is invalid. I am of course aware that this is a potentially dangerous opinion not shared by everyone. That's why I have requested that the military submit their evidence to be verified, but they have yet to comply. Considering their lack of cooperation, in the scenario that there is not time to verify the evidence in court—"

Of course, there were many criticizing voices too. The news organizations under the military's influence—or rather, under Vandarion's—were quite vocal in their disapproval of Elfaria. Even the neutral news outlets questioned whether or not Elfaria's actions were legal. Yet Elfaria remained calm and polite. Her method was to stay that way until she won out.

Comparing the news organizations in Elfaria's favor to those who weren't, the naysayers outnumbered her supporters by a narrow margin. That meant that there was something of a disconnect between the news and public opinion, likely because of the military's influence over the media. Really, despite how the numbers looked at face value, it was a great sign for public support of Elfaria.

But there was one more thing on the journalists' minds. Since it was something unrelated to the contents of Elfaria's speech, it wasn't something that anyone was willing to ask right away. No one broached the subject until the latter part of the conference, and the man to break the silence was a young journalist who had deliberately delayed his turn for this moment.

"I am Danesford of *The Mastir Economist.* I have a question for Her Highness Theiamillis."

"For me?" Theia's eyes opened wide in surprise.

While she had taken part in the conference, she hadn't expected that she would get any questions. Considering the situation, she was sure that the subject of everything would be her mother, Empress Elfaria. And while the question took Theia by surprise, it was none other than Elfaria sitting next to her that answered in her place.

"I don't mind."

"Mother!"

"Theia, you are a princess of Forthorthe. You have a duty to answer," Elfaria replied with a quick wink.

Theia took it as a sign that Elfaria was enjoying herself, and that she should answer the question as she pleased.

"I understand, Mother..." Theia steeled her nerve and nodded her head. "Let's hear your question. I shall answer to the best of my ability."

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty, Your Highness."

The young journalist bowed deeply before moving on to his question. The news organization he was a part of, *The Mastir Economist,* published a long-running newspaper from Theia and Elfaria's homeland, the Mastir territory. Since they were known supporters of Elfaria, Theia assumed that it would be a simple question to answer. But that was a big mistake.

"Then if I may... Your Highness, just who is that knight in blue armor that you brought with you?"

"Wha—"

Theia was at a loss for words. But she wasn't the only one. The atmosphere in the room where the journalists were gathered went quiet. No one had actually been willing to ask it yet considering the gravity of the situation at hand, but everyone was wondering it themselves. Now they were all focused on Theia with rapt attention.

"Ever since Her Majesty Alaia's reign, knights have customarily avoided wearing blue armor. However, the armor this knight wears is quite plainly blue," the young journalist continued.

"W-Well, that armor is part of the control scheme for my battleship and he just ended up wearing it, so—"

Theia was panicking. She knew even before the conference that the citizenry had an interest in Koutarou, but she never expected to be questioned about it here. If anything, she thought her mother would have to be the one to explain. But now she found herself racking her brain for the words she needed, hurriedly cobbling together an answer. The journalist noticed Theia's panic and pressed the subject even further.

"Moreover, the knight in question has an engraved symbol on his armor that indicates he is an established knight, dubbed by Your Highness."

"Ugh..." Theia was stumped.

"That means he is the first person knighted by the royal family given the honor of wearing blue armor in over two thousand years. That's why we want to know... Just who is he? And what is Your Highness's reason for giving him such an appointment?"

In contrast to Theia, the journalist had considered the question beforehand. The easy way the words flowed out of his mouth now was a testament to that. But it wasn't just how he spoke. His eyes were brimming with confidence... And curiosity. He was eagerly awaiting the answer to his question.

"Like I said, he just happened to end up wearing that armor, and he's been using it ever since."

"So you say there's no special meaning to it?"

"Th-That's right! He just happened to end up wearing it!"

Theia answered the journalist's question as best she could. She couldn't be too honest, but she couldn't deny the truth. It was a precarious situation to be in, meaning that she couldn't really give a full answer.

"Then what is the reason behind giving him a rank and title?"

"It was to repay him for saving my life. As we met on my travels, I had no other reward to bestow upon him. I also never expected him to appear in public in Forthorthe, so I did as my maiden heart desired."

If Theia were to reveal the truth now, there would be many who claimed that Elfaria was using Alaia's legend for her own means. The onus would be on her to prove otherwise, and she would need irrefutable evidence to do so. But doing that would put the only person who could provide that evidence in a difficult situation. There was also a chance that the validity of the royal families of Forthorthe would be called into question. Now just wasn't the right time to tell the entire truth. Only a small fraction of it could be safely revealed.

"So you really mean to say that there is no special meaning behind it?" the journalist asked, continuing to fish for an explanation.

"That is correct," Theia replied.

While Theia hadn't told the entire story, everything she had said was truthful. Koutarou really had ended up wearing the armor by chance. The title of Blue Knight had been given to him because it was something she wanted to do and because she believed at the time that he would never come to Forthorthe. It wasn't like she had known it would lead to this. No one could have.

“Thank you for your answer.” The journalist finally backed down.

Theia was quite relieved at his words. As her body was more dexterous than her mind was when it came to expressing herself, she couldn’t help feeling like she had just narrowly escaped great danger. But that was a mistake.

“Then one final question. About his silvery sword... How did that sword, engraved with Her Majesty Alaia’s crest, end up in this knight’s hands?”

This was really the question he had been waiting to ask. A sword with Alaia’s crest, even one made recently, was not something a mere knight could casually use. It was a very special item, yet there was a knight who appeared to be using such a sword openly. It could only mean the royal families had permitted its use. But why was that? It was a fastball thrown just as Theia had let her guard down.

“H-Huah?!”

What escaped Theia’s lips was more of a sound than it was a word. She was unable to readily answer the posed question. She had thought she’d gotten herself out of this predicament, and it was a bit difficult to come up with a coherent reply when she found herself suddenly thrown back to the wolves. She couldn’t exactly tell them that it was Alaia herself that had given him the sword.

“W-W-W-Well, that’s, uh... Um...”

“It’s... what? Please tell us, Your Highness!”

“...N-No comment! He’s a man in a complex situation, so I am unable to reveal everything.”

After all of her hesitation, Theia chose silence. She felt like it was the only way she could escape the question without having to lie.

But the floodgates had been opened. After the first young journalist, question after question about the knight in blue armor poured in. Theia answered them as sincerely as she could, openly admitting that there were certain things she couldn’t go into detail about. But the fact that the questions continued made it clear how interested the citizens were in the mysterious knight in blue armor.

“Well, that’s true... Then from now on, please call us the Reborn Forthorthian Army. That’s easier to use than ‘the Elfaria faction,’ isn’t it?” Elfaria conceded.

The questions reached a peak when a journalist pointed out that referring to her supporters as ‘Elfaria’s faction’ or ‘the Elfaria faction’ could be confusing and problematic. Many considered it disrespectful to use the empress’s name without including “Her Majesty.” “The Reborn Forthorthian Army” was what Elfaria suggested in its stead. As it was the same name Alaia had used for her army so long ago, it caused quite a stir among the journalists. The citizens who were watching the press conference over the network were equally excited.

“That vixen... She’s as good at inciting the citizens as ever,” said Vandarion disdainfully.

“Her capabilities when it comes to information warfare must be acknowledged,” replied Granado.

In contrast to Elfaria’s supporters, Vandarion and Granado were resentfully watching the press conference unfold. They had accepted that the knight in blue armor was a force to be reckoned with, but they believed that he was in part meant to be used as propaganda. Really, they had assumed that they’d put blue armor on a passable knight and claimed that he was much stronger than he really was. They thought Elfaria was using the legend of the Blue Knight as a means to her own ends. That’s why when Elfaria announced her intention to use the name of the Reborn Forthorthe Army, they figured it was just part of her plan. Of course she would choose that name.

“It looks like it would be wise to make a move before those gullible fools start making a fuss,” said Vandarion.

“The legend of the Silver Princess and the Blue Knight would indeed be the ultimate weapon,” Granado acknowledged.

In Forthorthe’s long history, the story of Alaia was considered to be one of the major events that shaped the nation into what it had become. If they idly stood by and allowed Elfaria to use that to curry favor, she would have public opinion in the palm of her hand. They needed to take action before that could happen. Even though the knight in blue armor might just be a tool, Vandarion and Granado weren’t going to treat the matter lightly.

“But do you have a plan?” Vandarion asked.

“I have already prepared several,” Granado replied.

“As expected of you, Granado”

“This is all in range of what I’ve predicted.”

“And so was me saying that, wasn’t it? Hahaha!” Vandarion let out a satisfied laugh.

His old advisor had already considered the current situation and planned a move based on Vandarion’s wishes. His work exceeded expectation as usual.

“Execute whichever plan predicts the most casualties on both sides,” Vandarion ordered.

“Not the least, but the most?”

But in the end, it was Vandarion that surprised Granado. Taken aback by what he thought he heard, Granado stared at Vandarion. Vandarion replied with a nod overflowing with confidence.

“Of course! In the legend, the people supported Alaia’s army because she kept the casualties to a minimum on both sides since it was a war between citizens of the same country. This is no different.”

“So maximizing casualties will be a weapon to break down Elfaria’s propaganda.” Granado slowly nodded in acceptance.

Being a rational man, he sought an efficient victory. But he was unable to make bold decisions such as taking advantage of losses like Vandarion. That’s why Granado followed him. It was Vandarion’s resolve and decisiveness that made him a true leader. All Granado could do was advise him. Understanding Vandarion’s intentions and how he intended to achieve them, Granado once more understood his place here. This was his destiny.

“We’ll teach that vixen the difference between mere myth and harsh reality.”

“Understood. I shall make the preparations.”

With a course of action decided, they readied themselves for the next battle. They had unfaltering confidence in their victory. If Elfaria was going to shield herself with a wall of propaganda, they would knock it down and crush her along with it. But their self-assurance was far from unfounded. They had spent a long time making deliberate preparations for this and paid large sacrifices to see it through.

The Reborn Forthorthian Army

Sunday, November 28th

The effect of the speech and following conference was greater than expected. Immediately afterward, the Reborn Forthorthe Army saw a large amount of new applicants. Moreover, there were many others pledging their support. This was in part due to Elfaria's easy to understand speech and her sincere attitude at the press conference. Of course, the knight in the blue armor and the choice of a new name were also partially responsible. But joining the cause still meant the people of Forthorthe had to put their lives on the line. That kind of commitment required a strong, earnest leader. In that regard, the press conference had shown that Elfaria and Theia were royal in more than just title.

"To think that this many people would come to our aid..."

Theia's eyes moistened as she looked at the line forming outside the base. It was where the applicants were sent after registering, but people were joining the queue faster than people could enter the base. There were so many people, the line was just getting longer and longer. It was almost as if they were waiting for some big event to start. But this phenomenon wasn't unique to the base where Theia and the others were. According to reports, similar sights could be seen at bases all across the Forthorthian solar system. That thought overwhelmed Theia.

"That's probably only half the reason," Koutarou responded to Theia's mutterings.

While she hadn't been talking to anyone in particular, he'd overheard what she said. They were standing on the rooftop of the base, looking down at the lines of people together.

"Half?" she asked, looking at Koutarou with a confused expression.

As she did, she sensed that something about him seemed different than usual. She wasn't looking at Koutarou so much as she was looking at a knight who had protected this country and its princess in the distant past.

"I'm sure everyone can sense it. That if you and Elle lose, terrible things will happen to Forthorthe. This is what everyone wants... To protect this country, their lives, and their families."

Certain things could only be realized through trust in a leader. In this case, the empress and princess. There was a force trying to take over Forthorthe using unjust means. If they succeeded, it was hard to imagine them having a change of heart and ruling over the nation peacefully. Surely their cruelty would extend to how they controlled their own people, just like they had used a virus weapon to trap Elfaria. That's why the people rose up to fight alongside Elfaria and Theia now. It wasn't just for the sake of the empress and princess. It was simply what they had to do to protect the future for themselves and for their families.

"Just like how you'll protect me and Mother... Theia-chan and Elle-chama?" Theia flashed a small smile and looked up at Koutarou.

She knew that Koutarou wasn't protecting the two of them because they were empress and princess either. It was because they were friends who smiled and laughed together. The fact that they were royalty was incidental. The citizens lining up before them now had similar reasons. They wanted to protect the people closest to them.

"Don't try to make me say it." Koutarou smiled wryly.

It was true. The reason he was fighting was just as Theia had said. But it was hard for him to admit it. In that regard, Koutarou was a normal seventeen-year-old boy.

"Considering these desperate times, I want you to," Theia urged him.

"But..." Koutarou protested.

“Say it,” Theia insisted.



“Okay, okay... You really are stubborn, you know?” Koutarou finally acquiesced with a sigh. “But you’re right. The citizens applying have people important to them like you and Elle are to me. In order to protect them, they want the empress and princess to win.”

“I’m glad you’re honest.”

Satisfied with Koutarou’s answer, Theia nodded her head. She then turned back to look at the lines of applicants. They all gathered here because they had something to protect. Theia knew what Koutarou had said was true.

“You can’t slack off now. These people have high hopes for you,” said Koutarou.

If Theia or Elfaria behaved disgracefully, the citizens might instead choose to accept a military takeover. That’s why they needed to continuously show how proper and fit they were as royalty.

“Heh heh...”

“Why are you laughing? It wasn’t supposed to be funny.”

As Koutarou was being quite serious, seeing Theia giggle like displeased him.

“If they have high hopes, that means they’re expecting a lot of you, too,” she explained.

“...Mind your own business.”

Koutarou couldn’t argue with her there. The best he could do was frown and keep quiet. But all the same, Theia’s expression grew more serious.

“But those people’s expectations are my business, and I’ll need to answer to them.”

“Now that’s going big.”

“Just the same as you and the citizens, I have things I want to protect too.”

Theia’s seriousness only lasted until she finished speaking. After squeezing out those last words, she grabbed Koutarou’s arm and embraced it with a smile. It was a rare glimpse of a princess in a grave situation acting like just a normal girl.

Elfaria wanted to inspect the base together with Theia. Of course, Koutarou and the others tried to stop her by explaining that it was too dangerous, but Elfaria insisted on inspecting anyway. As the applicants had come knowing that they might be labelled as dissidents, she believed it was only proper to show her appreciation. She claimed that they would have no reason to follow her if all she did was hide away somewhere safe. In the end, Koutarou and the others had no choice but to reluctantly accept her demands.

“Layous-sama—”

“Mother, you can’t call him that right now.”

“Whoops! Koutarou-sama, don’t worry so much. Vandarion and the others have no way of knowing what base Theia and I will be inspecting.”

While they had relented, they still weren’t going to let Elfaria move around freely and do as she pleased. The base she and Theia would inspect was carefully selected from a long list of candidates. Then Koutarou and the others deployed extra personnel to protect the empress and her daughter. Normally that would be the job of the base commander or Lord Pardomshiha. But as spiritual energy technology or magic might be used, Koutarou and those who were experts in those fields ended up taking the lead.

Escorting Theia and Elfaria were Koutarou and Harumi. The remaining residents of room 106 were patrolling the perimeter together with soldiers from Pardomshiha and Wenrainka. With Kiriha in command, as well as Sanae, Ruth, and Clan keeping watch, their defenses were solid. With everything in place, it seemed unlikely that anything would even have a chance to happen to Elfaria.

“There are people who have nothing to do with Vandarion that hate the royal families, aren’t there?” Koutarou asked.

“There are indeed. Won’t you protect me, Koutarou-sama?” Elfaria replied coyly.

“I’ve already told you that I will!”

“Then there are no problems,” she giggled.

“That’s not what I’m talking about!”

“Satomi-kun, I think it’s about time to give up. We’re already here,” Harumi interjected.

She had already given up herself. As Elfaria and Theia were both as stubborn as mules, once either of them had decided on something, they were stuck in their ways. That’s why Harumi believed it was more effective to give up on changing their minds now and just focus on protecting them.

“She’s right. Mother and I will inspect. And you will protect us. That’s how it should be,” Theia added.

“Of course!” Elfaria agreed.

“You have no idea what you put us through...” Koutarou sighed.

Regardless of how thorough their defenses were, it didn’t change the fact people special to him were being put in danger. Koutarou wouldn’t be able to relax in a situation like this.

“Oooh!” a soldier gasped in amazement.

Just moments after Koutarou’s complaints, the group entered the base grounds. As soon as they did, the soldiers preparing for battle noticed them.

“It’s Her Majesty!”

“I never dreamed she’d pay us a visit!”

“Even Her Highness has come!”

After spotting Elfaria and the others, the soldiers were all abuzz with joy and surprise. Only a few of them reacted at first, but all of them soon joined in. Before long, excitement had overcome the entire base. As expected in Forthorthe, the very appearance of a royal had a big impact on morale. Chances were high that it was even affecting soldiers in other bases who saw the footage through the network.

“The knight in blue armor is here too...”

“So that’s him?”

“So that’s really the meaning behind the Reborn Forthorthe Army...”

It wasn't just the royal visit that had the soldiers so excited. They could all feel it. Maybe—just maybe—they were looking at the makings of a new legend.

As the soldiers began interacting with Elfaria and Theia, tension filled the headquarters. From the viewpoint of VIP protection, in the event that there were enemy spies or people with unsavory thoughts waiting in the wings, shortly after first contact was the most dangerous time. That was because the guards were not fully in position and no one had a tactical view of the area yet.

"Thank you for siding with us despite the lack of concrete evidence in our favor," Elfaria said, beginning to talk with the soldiers.

"What are you saying, Your Majesty? Even in terms of proof, how could you have evidence that you've done nothing wrong? Regardless, we know of Your Majesty's efforts, which is why we've all come here," a soldier replied.

"Mother, we are blessed to have such good citizens," said Theia.

"You're right. I am very grateful to all of you," Elfaria said, turning her thanks to the men standing before her.

"We are not worthy of such words, Your Highness, Your Majesty!"

Fortunately, Elfaria's and Theia's inspection was proceeding smoothly. They watched over the soldiers' training and preparations, taking the opportunity to talk to them here and there. All of their interactions were pleasant and there seemed to be no danger within the base. Here, it was like they were surrounded by the soldiers' loyalty and devotion.

"Hmm... There doesn't seem to be anyone around Theia and the others who's thinking of anything bad," Sanae observed.

"There doesn't, ho!" one of Kiriha's haniwas confirmed.

"According to the reconnaissance craft's scans, it's not detecting any lethal weapons in the immediate area. All the equipment here is for training and there is nothing that could penetrate the displacement fields around Her Highness and Her Majesty," Ruth added.

"No spiritual energy weapons have been detected either, ho!"

"How does it look on your end, Clan-dono?" Kiriha asked.

“I’m not detecting anything in the surrounding airspace. It doesn’t look like we need to worry about a surprise attack.”

Elfaria and Theia’s safety was being protected by the security team under Kiriha’s command. Sanae was stationed on the roof of the base, confirming that there wasn’t anyone with hostile intentions with her spirit sight. Ruth was controlling a reconnaissance craft from the headquarters, making sure that there wasn’t anyone doing or had anything that might be dangerous. The haniwas were assisting Sanae, scanning for any spiritual energy weapons. And Clan was in her smaller spaceship, the Cradle, watching for any potential enemy ships approaching.

“Patrol team, what’s the status on your end?” Kiriha radioed to the others.

“We’ve secured three suspicious people, but it was all due to needless worry,” Nana answered.

“Yurika was quick to apprehend all three of them,” Maki clarified.

“Yurika-chan, let’s not be so hasty, okay?” Shizuka asked admonishingly.

“But it’s suspicious when they reach into their pockets like that...” Yurika made a pass at defending herself.

Nana, Maki, Shizuka, and Yurika were guarding the surrounding area with a task force of soldiers. The four of them were particularly on the lookout for types of attacks that Sanae couldn’t detect, like explosives.

“I see,” Kiriha replied after getting the sitrep from the girls on patrol. “Koutarou, how about you?”

“Nothing to report here. It’s hard to admit, but it looks like Elle and Theia are the real deal. They’re awfully popular,” he replied.

“As expected from an empress and princess, I guess,” Harumi added.

Koutarou and Harumi stayed with Elfaria and Theia. They were the final defensive line and had been chosen because of their quick reaction times and their flexibility.

“Looks like we were just overthinking things...” Kiriha said, exhaling sharply and leaning back in her chair after collecting the last of her intelligence.

The period where they were the most vulnerable was nearly over, and nobody had reported anything out of the ordinary. Although the chance of being attacked was low to begin with, executive protection like this was all about guarding against that one-in-amillion chance. In the end, Kiriha was satisfied that this seemed like it would be much ado about nothing.

“But still, Master sure is attracting attention too. Heehee...” Ruth giggled to herself as she spotted Koutarou in the hologram relayed by the reconnaissance craft and smiled happily.

At the moment, the only abnormality was the situation that Koutarou was in. The soldiers’ interest was in Elfaria and Theia who had come for an inspection was natural. Their beloved empress and princess had come to visit them. But after looking at the two of them, their gazes drifted to Koutarou and stayed there. The soldiers were equally interested in him.

“...I understand how they feel. He reminds them of the Blue Knight, and has achievements only strengthen that impression...” Lord Pardomshiha whispered in a quiet voice to Ruth. He intentionally spoke softly so that only she could hear him.

“...But in reality, it’s not that he just resembles him...” Ruth responded in kind.

“...If that becomes known, there will be chaos...” Lord Pardomshiha shrugged.

He had already heard everything from Ruth. Of course, he hadn’t believed her at first, yet he had no choice but to accept the truth after seeing all of her proof. What truly impressed him was that most of the evidence came from Clan of the Schweiger family that was on notably bad terms with the Mastir family. Clan would have nothing to gain from lying about something like this. Moreover, in his eyes, the fact that Koutarou and Theia were trying to keep the matter from going public only increased their credibility. But above all else, as a father, Lord Pardomshiha decided to trust his daughter.

“... Sadly, there are no plans to announce it anytime soon...” Ruth clarified.

“...It would be hard to do at a time like this...” her father remarked, still whispering.

“...But I am happy that I was able to introduce Master as his true self to you, Father...”

Lord Pardomshiha regretted not being able to reveal the truth to the public, but Ruth was happy she had at least been able to share it with her father. She believed it was important for him to understand the true identity of the man she loved.

“...Yes, but when you reveal something like that in the future, please go easier on me. I thought I was going to have a heart attack when you told me...”

“Heehee! I’ll be more careful next time.”

As she laughed, Ruth’s voice returned to normal, signaling that their secret talk was now over. Lord Pardomshiha took the cue and spoke plainly now.

“But I do understand why you fell in love with him.”

“Father! Th-That’s not it! I only found out after I fell in love with him!”

Living on Earth, Ruth had fallen in love with the straight yet awkward Koutarou. She learned that he was the Blue Knight after the fact, so it wasn’t the reason for her love, but it only strengthened her feelings. That was an important distinction to her.

“After the fact, it doesn’t matter what came first,” her father insisted.

To Lord Pardomshiha, there wasn’t much difference between a model knight becoming the Blue Knight and the Blue Knight becoming a model knight.

“It matters to a woman!” Ruth argued back.

“More importantly, Ruth...” Lord Pardomshiha’s eyes lit up as he grabbed Ruth’s shoulders.

“*This* is important!” she cried.

“Even if it’s not announced, it would be very meaningful for the Pardomshiha family to receive his genes! I can find no fault in the boy, both as a father and as a knight, so please keep up the hard work!”

Lord Pardomshiha had no intention of getting in the way of his daughter's love. Really, he was cheering for her. It would be convenient for him if that love came to fruition.

"You're only thinking about Pardomshiha, aren't you, father?!" Ruth was outraged.

"No, I just wanted my daughter to be ha—" Lord Pardomshiha tried to defend himself.

"That's definitely the face of a liar! Honestly, father!" But Ruth saw right through him.

If Ruth and the Blue Knight were married, even if the truth wasn't revealed, the Pardomshiha family's status would rise. It would especially serve to improve their relationship with the Mastir family who knew the truth about the Blue Knight. It was a long list of pluses to Lord Pardomshiha, so he had no reason to object.

"Father! Jeez!"

Her father had put Ruth in a bad mood. As his daughter, she at least wanted him to understand. She issued new instructions to the reconnaissance drone as if she was taking it out on the small craft instead of her dad.

"Check for dangerous items. This time, expand the search parameters and exclude the previously checked area."

Although she sounded angry, Ruth operated the computer with smooth movements and the grace of an expert pianist. Even if she was frustrated with her father, it wasn't affecting her work. That wasn't her style.

"Everyone, please look out!" a voice suddenly cried out over the comms system.

It was Yurika, but after three false alarms already today, nobody jumped at her warning.

"Someone on the premises is using magic!" she clarified.

"Red alert, everyone! We're under attack!" Kiriha confirmed.

As soon as Yurika mentioned magic, everyone sprung into action. While they rarely trusted her with anything else, she was the resident expert when it came to magic. All of her allies knew that.

Sanae could feel a source of hostility shortly after Yurika had sensed magic nearby. It was Vandarion's and Granado's plan being set into motion. Since they hadn't known exactly where Elfaria and Theia would be visiting, Vandarion had dispatched spies disguised as applicants to various bases. Once one of the spies reported that they had sighted Elfaria and Theia, they were given the order to assassinate them. The effective result was that the spy hadn't had any hostile intentions until they were told to kill, which was why Sanae's spirit sight hadn't detected anything negative until now.

"Koutarou, they're aiming from the second floor of the warehouse!" Sanae shouted, reporting the details to Koutarou.

"So that's the one!" he shouted back, realizing what was going on.

While Koutarou's abilities were nowhere near the level of Sanae's, he could also sense the hostility. Thanks to that, he was able to find the spy turned assassin with just Sanae's short description. The assassin in question was taking aim at Elfaria and Theia with a rifle from the second-floor balcony of a warehouse some distance away. But by the time Koutarou spotted them, it was too late. The rifle belched flame.

Blam!

It happened in an instant. The bullet blazed through the air and closed in on Elfaria with blinding speed. Of course, Elfaria wasn't completely defenseless. She had her personal barrier generation device equipped, putting a translucent shield between her and the bullet.

Bang!

"Kyaah!"

But that bullet was all it took to destroy Elfaria's barrier. Luckily she was unharmed, but she fell over from the shock. This shouldn't have been possible.

“What is the meaning of this?! There are only supposed to be training weapons here!” Theia demanded answers in both anger and disbelief.

According to their prior examination, there were no weapons on the facility grounds that were capable of destroying a barrier like this, yet it was obliterated with a single shot. Unable to comprehend what had happened, Theia stood in the way to cover Elfaria and contacted Ruth over the comms system.

Ruth’s panicked voice responded, “There’s no doubt about it, Your Highness! That *was* a training round! There’s nothing wrong with the scan results!”

“What?! But Mother’s distortion field was completely destroyed!”

Blam!

“Uwah?!”

This time it was Theia’s barrier. She didn’t fall over, but her personal shield ceased functioning after a single hit just like Elfaria’s had. Despite what Ruth had said, there was no possible way that training rounds had this kind of power.

“A spell has been cast on those bullets!” Yurika shouted.

“They’ve enhanced the power of the training rounds to that of real ones!” Maki explained.

The two magical girls had solved the mystery. While live rounds were strictly regulated, there were no such restrictions on training rounds that barely had any firepower. It wasn’t unusual for someone to be walking around the base with them, which is how they had avoided detection even when magically enhanced. While there was a chance that Yurika or Maki could have noticed them, the bullets themselves were small enough that their mana signatures were easy to cover up. Even Yurika had only sensed it moments before it was used, just as it was pulled out of the assassin’s pocket.

Moreover, since practice rounds would be the only evidence left behind at the scene of the crime, the military could deny any involvement. When it came to assassinations, there was no more frightening weapon than this. A third and fourth round would surely cost Elfaria and Theia their lives.

“I won’t let you!” Koutarou screamed in brave defiance.

After confirming the enemy’s location, Koutarou used his armor to fly up into the air. As GoL’s beam cannons over his shoulders pinned down the assassin, Koutarou drew the silvery sword Signaltin from its sheath.

“Sakuraba-senpai, I’m counting on you!” he shouted to Harumi.

“Signaltin, please!” she called.

As Harumi extended her hands towards Koutarou’s sword, the blade was enveloped in a bright light. It only took a moment for the light to become so strong that it couldn’t be contained by the sword and began flowing out of its tip. It was as if the blade was getting longer.

“Hyaaaaah!”

Koutarou swung the glowing sword with all of his might. He was more than a hundred meters away from the assassin, but the light practically bursting from the sword destroyed the balcony that the assassin was standing on. The assassin fell to the ground alongside the remnants of the balcony and stopped moving.

“It’s o— Wait, not yet! There are three... No, four more!” Koutarou yelled back to the others.

Koutarou had initially thought the threat had passed, but now he sensed the hostility of four more people. They seemed to be surrounding Elfaria and Theia. The sniper had only been there to destroy their barriers and act as a diversion while the other four closed in on the empress and princess to finish the deed.

“Your Majesty, Your Highness! Prepare yourselves!” one of the assassins shouted.

All four of them leveled their guns at Elfaria and Theia. They were loaded with now-deadly practice rounds. It would be overkill for the two girls who now had no way to defend themselves without their barriers. Things were looking pretty grim.

“How deplorable. To rely on assassins... Is that something the proud military of Forthorthe should be doing?”

The one who stepped up to save them was a slim and delicate girl. Unflinching, she stood in the way of their enemies with dignity and grace. Her clear eyes stared at the assassins in judgement as her silver hair fluttered in the wind, but what stood out the most was the crest of a sword now glowing on her forehead. The moment the crowd saw it, many held their breaths. The same was true for the four assassins, all of whom froze at the sight.

“Come, spirits of the air! Gather! Dance! Become a whirlwind to blow away my enemies! Pierce the dark clouds and roar! Sky Dragon’s Roar!”

As the crest on the girl’s forehead glowed, the air began whirling around the three of them as if to protect them. It grew and strengthened, turning into a massive whirlwind that reached up to the sky. The four assassins caught in the vortex were thrown around like leaves in a storm. The whirlwind dissipated in mere moments, but the assassins didn’t get up again after being slammed into the ground. In stark contrast, the three girls who’d been in the center of the whirlwind were unharmed. It was a splendid reversal.

“Please sleep for a while. And once you’re better, think carefully about what you should be doing for the sake of those precious to you.”

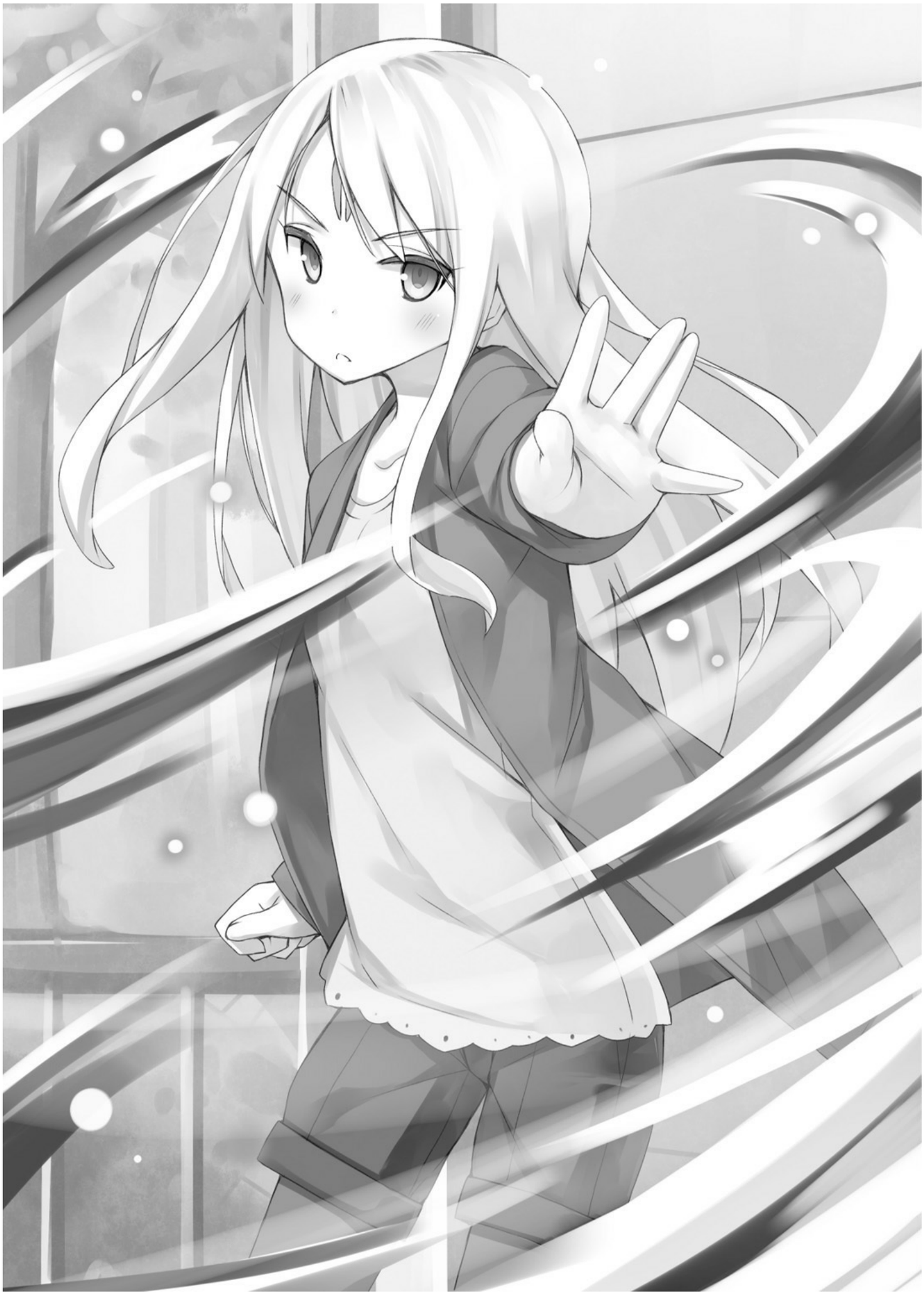
Harumi’s voice indicated wisdom and resolve well beyond her years. Neither the tone of her voice nor the expression on her face were particularly harsh, but there was a weighty seriousness to them. The Forthorthian soldiers crowded around were unable to take their eyes off of Harumi. This silver-haired girl with mysterious powers and a strong, noble will was with the knight in blue armor. There was only one thing on their minds as they stared at the two of them.

“I just hope they weren’t hurt too badly...” Harumi said, looking down at the fallen assassins.

Harumi herself hadn’t realized that people were staring at her. After the fight was over and the strange glow had disappeared, she was too concerned about her attackers’ well-being to take notice of her surroundings. She simply began tending to the unconscious would-be assassins.

The weapons recovered from the assassins were examined in detail by the Corona House crew. The large rifle and the four pistols were all standard issue training weapons commonly used in the base that Elfaria and Theia had come

to inspect. The only thing special about them was their ammunition. Normal training rounds had been enhanced through the use of several spells. The strength of the bullets, their aerodynamic qualities, and more had been enhanced with magic to make them as powerful as live rounds... all while looking like normal training rounds to the untrained eye. Only magic users like Yurika or Maki could spot the difference. And even then, the case the bullets were kept in had a spell cast on it to obscure the mana signature of the bullets inside, which is why Yurika and Maki hadn't detected them until they were pulled out. Overall, it was ideal for an assassin and rather troublesome to find in the hands of one's enemies.



“It looks like Darkness Rainbow is starting to take action,” Koutarou said, staring at the bullet in his hand.

He then set it back down on the conference room table, leaned back in his chair, and sighed. Considering magic didn’t exist in Forthorthe, an enchanted bullet was proof that Darkness Rainbow was involved. It also meant that the military was being supplied with magical tools through Elexis’s company, Dragon Knight Industries. It was clear now that things were getting worrisome.

“Our only saving grace is that magical tools are difficult to mass produce. They shouldn’t have too much impact on a strategic level. Granted, that would mean assuming that we’ll be able to prevent incidents like this from happening again,” Kiriha mused.

She had a point. It wasn’t possible to mass produce magical tools or weapons, making them impractical for war. On the other hand, if given to soldiers tasked with special operations, their chances of success would increase dramatically. That was the kind of attack that they needed to worry about now. Maki and Yurika couldn’t monitor all of Forthorthe on their own.

“We need to nip this threat in the bud, or else things are only going to get worse for us,” said Theia.

The amount of magical tools their enemies were capable of producing would only increase with time. Theia, who was a genius when it came to warfare, could foresee a terrible end if they let DKI run amok at their current rate. There were plenty of situations where a successful strategically planned special mission could turn the tides of battle. Assassinating or kidnapping a person of interest, sabotaging key sites... The list of potential disasters went on.

“Which means we’ll need to settle things with Darkness Rainbow,” Yurika muttered in a concerned tone of voice.

Her face was just as serious as she stared at the problematic bullet. If magic was being used as a tool in the war of a foreign nation, Yurika had to stop it. That was her responsibility as an archwizard of Rainbow Heart.

“We could also win over DKI or cut them off from the military,” suggested Maki.

Originally a member of Darkness Rainbow, Maki was a bit more flexible about the situation than Yurika. Fighting wasn't the only way. If the relationship between DKI and the military took a turn for the worse, the military's access to this kind of technology would be cut off.

"Whether we fight them or disarm them, we'll need a lead on DKI first either way," said Ruth.

"Until then... we at least need to increase the alertness level and prohibit training weapons and unidentified items in important areas," added Clan.

Even something that didn't look like a weapon could be made into one using magic. Without Yurika or Maki present, their only recourse was taking precautionary measures to keep potentially dangerous items out of important places where they weren't necessary. In order to get out of this predicament, they'd need to settle things with DKI as soon as possible.

"...Then that settles what we need to do next," Elfaria concluded.

After carefully considering what Ruth and Clan had just said, Elfaria decided on their next move.

"Mother, what are you going to do?"

"We immediately need to seize control of this planet, Alaia, and go into space. If we're limited to this planet, we'll never get a lead on DKI," she explained.

While DKI had a branch on Alaia, it probably didn't have what Elfaria and the others needed. DKI—more specifically, Elexis—wasn't stupid enough to keep incriminating information or personnel on the Mastir family's own planet. That being the case, they'd need to expand their reach beyond just Alaia, which would mean that they needed to secure a spaceport and seize the planet.

The problem is that the enemy has probably already realized the same thing...

Kiriha was a little worried. She agreed with Elfaria's decision, but the enemy should have predicted that much. Most likely, they already had magic—their trump card—in place for that exact scenario. And if so, they had a fierce fight ahead of them.

Beeeeep!

“Your Majesty, please return to headquarters right away!”

Kiriha’s fears were soon realized. Alongside a noisy beep, the panicked voice of the base commander echoed through the conference room.

“What happened?” Elfaria demanded.

“The enemy forces are on the move! They appear to be after the spaceport!”

“So they’re trying to trap us on this planet... I understand! I’ll be right there! Layous-sama!”

“I know. Let’s go, everyone!”

If the enemy’s goal was the spaceport, they had no time to spare. Koutarou rallied the girls and kicked his chair away from the table as he stood up.

“Ah...”

The girls followed Koutarou’s lead, except for one of them who was unable to do so. After she stood up, she began staggering. Fortunately, she was able to reach out to a nearby wall to keep herself from collapsing.

“Are you okay, Sakuraba-senpai?!” Koutarou exclaimed, quite concerned.

The one on the verge of collapsing was Harumi. She had been sitting right next to him, so Koutarou hurriedly reached out to her. But Harumi pushed against the wall and stood up straight before smiling at him.

“I’m okay. I just got dizzy from standing up so suddenly.”

“I see.”

Koutarou had been worried, but Harumi’s complexion wasn’t bad. Her smile was bright and her legs weren’t trembling. After giving her a quick lookover, Koutarou decided that she was okay and retracted the hand he had extended to her.

“Then let’s hurry, Senpai.”

“Right!”

Harumi was a little sad that Koutarou had pulled back his hand. She so desperately wanted to hold it, but she knew that this wasn’t the time for that. Instead, she stood firm on her own legs and ran out the conference room with

the others.

As Koutarou and the others expanded their range of activity, they would have to move into space regardless of DKI. And they would need the spaceport to do so. That part wouldn't change, even with the existence of instant transfer gates. While men and goods could be sent through the gate, there were still procedures that needed to be followed when entering a country. Moreover, as there was small margin of error with transfer gates, a vast space was required in order to move large quantities of personnel and material. And on top of that, there were plenty of maintenance jobs that were easier to perform by landing the spaceship rather than trying to perform them in space. For those reasons, there still needed to be something that served as a doorway between space and the planet's surface.

While they weren't strictly required, spaceports were essential for the management of spaceships. And when it came to military operations which required moving a great deal of cargo, vessels, and personnel, not having a spaceport really hurt. That was why it was also the Forthorthian military's first move to seize control of the spaceport.

"Koutarou, the attempted assassination probably also served as a diversion to keep us away from the spaceport," said Kiriha.

"So it was a layered plan, huh?" Koutarou remarked.

"If the assassination attempt on Her Majesty Elfaria and Theia-dono had succeeded, that would have been fine with them. But even with it failing, they could deny any involvement because of magic being used. Knowing that we would get caught up on that, it was also part of the distraction," Kiriha continued to explain.

"They're making full use of magic not being detectable by Forthorthe's technology. We have to hurry up and do something about DKI," said Koutarou.

He let out a heavy sigh as he stared at the hologram in their headquarters. The information displayed by the hologram updated every second, showing that a large enemy force was approaching the spaceport. If Kiriha was right,

Vandarion and Granado were fully aware of what they could accomplish with magic and would attack accordingly. It was clear they had a fierce fight on the horizon.

“No, that might not be the case this time,” Kiriha offered.

For some reason, she seemed to be full of confidence. Despite looking at the same data, the two of them had completely opposite reactions. Kiriha was sure that they would be able to defend the spaceport.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“Children like trying out their new toys. Even more so when they’re nice and shiny,” Kiriha explained.

With her excellent grasp on the way the human mind worked, Kiriha knew what kind of plan Vandarion and Granado would use to attack. As men, she knew the pitfall they were likely about to walk into.

Vandarion had sent ground forces to seize the spaceport. Since it was next to an urban area, attacking from space or the sky was impossible. They wanted the spaceport for themselves, so they would avoid damaging it as much possible. That was why they chose a frontal assault, deploying ground forces to occupy the facility.

“I can’t believe it... There really are enemy forces where Kiriha-sama said there would be,” Ruth remarked.

She watched the footage relayed from the reconnaissance craft with bated breath. It was indeed indicating an enemy presence. They had gathered behind a base quite some distance away from the main base. Ruth couldn’t hide her surprise. Kiriha’s insight had practically pinpointed their location.

“What is their precise location and size?” Kiriha asked.

“They’re three kilometers to our north-northwest, or southern B4 on this map. It is a single platoon, forty strong, moving through the forest,” Ruth reported.

She used the hologram to display the pertinent information as she talked. Forty markers indicating the troops were displayed on the topographical map. They were slowly navigating the terrain.

“Hmm, considering their location and size, they must be going with pattern A... No, it’s still to early to say,” Kiriha mused.

“But Kiriha-sama, why are there enemies out there?” Ruth asked.

Kiriha herself wasn’t all that surprised at the situation as she continued to turn it over in her head. But that wasn’t the case with Ruth. She had no idea how Kiriha had so easily deduced the enemy’s location.

“It’s because they have magical weapons,” Kiriha answered.

“Because they have... magical weapons?”

However, Kiriha’s answer only confused Ruth even more. It seemed like a giant logical leap to assume the movements of Vandarion’s forces just because they had magical weapons.

“That’s right. With a powerful trick up their sleeve, it’s natural they’d want to use it. They’re also on the verge of trapping us on Alaia. There’s no way they wouldn’t use them.”

“I see...”

Ruth now saw what Kiriha was getting at. Kiriha smiled at her and nodded.

“However, they can’t gather a large amount of magical weapons. That inevitably means the limited supply they have will be given to a special forces unit for use in a surprise attack. By giving the magical weapons to a special forces unit that has undergone intense training, they’re essentially creating a specialized elite task force. That’s who they’ll send to take over the spaceport,” Kiriha explained further.

“In that case, they would approach on foot to keep us from detecting them. But that means they have to carry their weapons with them. And they’re positioned behind the base because there are a limited number of routes they can take, right?” Ruth asked, making sure she understood.

“Indeed. That’s not all, but that’s the general idea,” Kiriha confirmed.

Kiriha had actually considered much more than just what Ruth had mentioned, including how many forces the enemy could deploy, the range at which her allies could detect space distortions, and the defensive capabilities of the spaceport. After synthesizing all that information and taking it into account, Kiriha had Ruth examine the most likely places the enemy forces might be.

“My...” Ruth remarked in amazement.

Ruth finally had a handle on Kiriha’s way of thinking, but that was a surprise in and of itself. Kiriha had read the mind of the enemy commander and seen through his plan. Although she made it sound like it wasn’t that big of a deal, Ruth knew better. She was left speechless at Kiriha’s brilliance.

“Your Highness, just who is the commander named Kiriha? Where did you have to go to find someone so wise?” Lord Pardomshiha asked. He felt the same way Ruth did. He was an experienced knight, but he had never met anyone like Kiriha.

Just like the inspection, Koutarou and the others were in charge, with Lord Pardomshiha overseeing the operation. That being said, there hadn’t been a single time that he had needed to intervene.

“As far as I know, she is one of a kind. A true genius. She’s from the same planet as Koutarou, and she’s the leader of an organization opposing me,” Theia answered.

“She’s an enemy?!” Lord Pardomshiha exclaimed. His eyes shot wide open. His surprise was so great that he accidentally pulled out a few strands of his beard that he had been fiddling with.

“Hahahaha! I know just how you feel,” Theia replied.

Theia put on a bright smile upon seeing Lord Pardomshiha’s reaction. He was always a calm and collected commander, so it was very rare to see him this shaken up. But at the same time, she understood that it was a perfectly natural reaction.

“In the past, I used to think I could beat her. But looking back to it now, that was foolish of me,” Theia continued.

“Pardon my rudeness... but I’m surprised you made it out okay, Your Highness,” Lord Pardomshiha said quite reservedly.

“Luck and timing were on my side. Because of her circumstances, she went easy on me. If she had been serious, I probably wouldn’t be here now.”

If Theia and Kiriha had fought one on one, Theia would have without a doubt come out victorious. But Kiriha would have avoided a direct conflict. If she had been serious, she would have taken down Theia without even letting her get a shot off.

The reason Kiriha hadn’t done so was because she feared that some of her allies, those who wished to invade the surface, would spiral out of control. That’s why she intentionally created a standoff and used it to her advantage. By using the time it bought her, she attempted to accomplish her goal peacefully. Her actions weren’t out of consideration for Theia and the others. Like Theia said, it was just timing and good luck.

“She’s been an ally for a long time, but... I suspect that I haven’t seen her true ability yet.”

“Really?”

“I’ve seen her command allies in small skirmishes, but those fights weren’t enough to put her full potential to the test.”

“Then do you suppose today might be the day?”

“Indeed. Those under Vandarion’s control will likely rue the day they crossed Kurano Kiriha.”

Theia gazed at Kiriha as she took command with a serious expression. Up until now, Kiriha had never been in a situation were she had to make full use of her genius. But in a confrontation between two armies, especially with her side at a disadvantage, she’d be forced to go all out. Theia was comforted by that thought, but also a little intimidated. Kiriha getting her time to shine would mean a lot of casualties in the enemy forces. In other words, citizens of Forthorthe were going to die. As a princess, it wasn’t exactly something Theia could celebrate.

Ruth sent several reconnaissance crafts to the area Kiriha had specified. As soon as one of them spotted the enemy's ambush, the haniwas headed to the scene. And together with Ruth's reconnaissance craft, they gathered intelligence on the enemy.

"We've detected the presence of a spiritual energy radar, ho! But it's a rudimentary one, ho!"

"If you think you can find us with that, you're mistaken, ho! Beginning emulation of aura pattern, ho!"

The small craft Ruth was using was built for reconnsaissance, but combined with the spiritual information that the haniwas were gathering, not even a covert special forces unit could hide from them. Everything they learned was relayed back to headquarters. But being as scrupulous as she was, Ruth wanted even more detailed information on the enemy.

"Kiriha-sama, can I bring the reconnaissance craft in a little closer?" she asked.

"No, I want you to wait a little longer. Our allies are almost on site," Kiriha responded.

Kiriha understood what Ruth wanted, but she was being careful. The spells the enemy special forces were using were most likely focused on their weapons, but if they happened to have anything in the way of magical surveillance, Kiriha and the others would lose their edge if they were caught now. And in this situation, Kiriha valued stealth over recon.

"We're almost there. About two more minutes I think." As if answering Kiriha, Nana's voice came over the comms system.

"It doesn't seem like they're using a wide area search spell. There should be a low chance of the reconnaissance craft and the haniwas being detected," Maki added.

"But what do we do next, Kiriha-san? Do we get to launch an ambush on the ambush forces?" asked Shizuka.

The girls calling in over the comms system—Nana, Maki, and Shizuka—were the allies Kiriha had mentioned. The three of them were on their way to uncover details about the enemy's magic that neither the reconnaissance craft nor the haniwas could. Moreover, they were each skilled at fighting several people at once, so they could handle themselves if things went south.

"I have a plan. But first, meet up with Karama and Korama," Kiriha ordered.

"Understood," Nana replied.

They kept their conversation brief. While they were using a spiritual energy communications device that would be hard for Vandarion's side to detect, it was unwise to make too much noise so close to the enemy. Their next message over the device was exactly two minutes later, just as Nana had predicted.

"We're in position. Maki is currently using detection magic to investigate mana reactions," said Nana.

After meeting up with the haniwas, Nana and the others hid in the shadows while observing the ambush forces. They were already close enough to be seen with the naked eye, just on the other side of some underbrush.

"I can't sense the presence of any enemies apart from what we can see, but there seem to be a lot of wild animals," Shizuka observed.

Her senses told her that the only hostility nearby was coming from the enemy ambush. While the wild animals were on edge, there was no bloodlust. Because of that, the enemy forces stood out rather clearly in the forest.

"It's being concealed, but I can detect mana in a dormant state. There are no spells actively being cast. It should be okay to get a little closer," Maki said after analyzing the nearby mana signatures.

With Maki's input, it was determined that the enemy wasn't using magic to survey their surroundings. She had only picked up two kinds of spells: small scale spells in a dormant state, and spells to conceal them. There were forty of each type.

"Hmm, so just the simplest use of magic, huh? But that makes it more dangerous..." Kiriha commented as the Shizuka and the magical girls reported to her. She folded her arms and began thinking.

According to Maki's report, it made sense to assume that the weapons had spells cast on them, just like in the attempted assassination where training rounds had been enchanted. This time, the same spell was probably cast on live rounds to make them even more deadly. With the mana focused like that, the effect should be greatly improved. They couldn't let their guard down around enemies like that.

"Then I'd like you to move as I say," Kiriha began.

"Got it. What should we do?" Nana asked.

"First..."

Kiriha already had several plans in her head. She picked the one that best suited the current situation and explained it to Nana and the others.

The Forthorthian Imperial Army was usually controlled by the empress and parliament. However, with things as they were, the empress's imperial authority had been revoked and the parliament was under Vandarion's control. That meant Vandarion could essentially do with the Forthorthian Imperial Army as he pleased. If he had been able to direct all of his forces to the planet of Alaia, the Reborn Forthorthian Army—branded a rebel army by Vandarion—would be destroyed in an instant. The reason he didn't do so was because of the influence of the public opinion.

At first, the public had been suspicious of Elfaria. They couldn't shake the rumors embezzlement and murder. Even if Elfaria claimed that she was innocent, they couldn't just overlook accusations like that. Because of that, the favor of public opinion was divided between Elfaria and the military. But even then, the citizens who remained impartial and believed these matters should be settled by the law indirectly ended up supporting the military. In general, this meant that the public was accepting of the military's claims.

But as Elfaria's faction and military clashed and their conflicts were made public, the people started to change their minds on the matter. Elfaria's faction was fighting in a way that avoided needless bloodshed and sacrifice, be it military or civilian. Meanwhile, the military forged ahead regardless of the costs. It came to a head when the military attempted to frame Elfaria's faction for using a biological weapon. Fortunately, the incident was safely resolved, but

it made it painfully clear to the public that the military was willing to sacrifice even their own soldiers in order to accomplish their goals. It showed their lack or respect for the law and human rights, giving credence to Elfaria's claims that they had fabricated evidence against her. That seemed like child's play after being willing to kill their own men and frame an innocent party for the crime.

Yet that wasn't the only thing that had begun to sway public opinion. There was also Koutarou. To Forthorthe, a knight in blue armor had special meaning. The legendary Blue Knight was as strong as any hero from an action movie, and on top of that he was incredibly smart and very virtuous. With someone resembling him siding with Elfaria, the citizens couldn't help imagining that perhaps the legend had been revived. It started to change the way they thought of Elfaria.

In the end, support for Elfaria had greatly increased. Those who were still undecided began worrying if a court under the military's influence could truly give an impartial decision, and subsequently became more neutral in their standpoint. Their silence meant that the voices in support of Elfaria grew louder.

"It would have been easier if we had attacked the spaceport before public opinion began shifting," said the enemy commander regrettably.

The commander sent by the army to seize control of the spaceport now stood in front of a temporary headquarters made up of a tent pitched beside a large command vehicle. He stared at the spaceport from a distance with a stern expression on his face. He was concerned about what had become the Imperial Army's weak point—public support of Elfaria.

With the people beginning to side with the empress, the military was unable to mobilize most of its forces against her. They feared retaliatory rebellion from the citizens. Currently Elfaria's faction, now known as the Reborn Forthorthian Army, was establishing resistance throughout Forthorthe's solar system. The Imperial Army was also seeing defectors, so their forces were dwindling daily.

While Elfaria's small band of knights was unable to put up much of a fight, the support they were now receiving from the citizens combined with the resistance was reaching the potential boiling point of national rioting. As a riot

of that scale would be major trouble, the military used most of its forces to maintain public order. In truth, the forces they had sent to take the spaceport were insufficient for the job. If the attack had taken place just a week earlier, things would have been different. They could have sent enough men to settle things just by sieging the place and demanding surrender. But they lacked the manpower to do that now. Now they had to rely on picking a fight with the Reborn Forthorthian Army. They would most likely still win, but at the cost of major casualties. It was that prospect that painted the grim expression on their commander's face as he considered their fate.

"Lord Galbauda, there's no need to worry. Our special forces, the Wolf's Fangs, will do something," his adjutant assured him.

"One can only hope," the commander responded gruffly.

Their commander was Wonthor Gius Galbauda. The Galbauda family was only a recently established family of knights, but their exceptional loyalty made them stand out. With his father's early retirement, the commander was relatively young in his late thirties, but he had inherited the title, honors, and merits of his ancestors before him. The young Lord Galbauda was chosen for the position of commander for exactly that reason. The military feared entire forces defecting to the Reborn Forthorthian Army, so it sought leaders like Lord Galbauda. Regardless of the circumstances, the military was still in the right legally, meaning that there was almost no chance that someone as loyal to his cause as Lord Galbauda would betray the Imperial Army.

"But if the Fangs fail, this will become an all-out war. There will be a lot of casualties, win or lose."

"Lord Galbauda..."

Lord Galbauda dreaded the potentially devastating loss of life ahead of them. All of these men were Forthorthians. This was turning out to be war between brothers, and he saw that that fault lay with the military. He wasn't foolish enough not to see that, and even now that they were divided into friend and foe, he still loved the locals. He took no relish in the fact that the fighting today would only give way to more needless loss. But if he was going to break the law and side with the Reborn Forthorthian Army, he would need considerable

grounds for it. However, a military organization moving on emotion was extremely dangerous. He understood that too, meaning his hands were tied. His suffering at the hands of such a situation ran deep.

“The Fangs were strong to begin with, and now they even have those new weapons. I’m sure things will be settled quickly.”

“...Yes, I shall put my faith in that. I can’t let my weakness spread to my subordinates.”

The top brass had instructed Lord Galbauda to use the special forces for a surprise attack. It was an extremely bold plan, using the main forces as a decoy. By deploying them and drawing the enemy in, the special forces armed with new weapons would launch a blitz attack on the spaceport and seize control of the facility. As this would keep the casualties at a minimum, Lord Galbauda had readily agreed to it. What they wanted and what he wanted happened to overlap, so he had no reason to refuse.

I just wish I could say that justice is with us... Regardless of if we win or lose, the road ahead will be long and painful for Forthorthe.

Lord Galbauda looked back at the spaceport. If he succeeded, then Forthorthe would likely be abused by the military. If he failed, then all of Forthorthe would turn into a battlefield. Which was really better for the country? Right now, he honestly wasn’t sure.

“Lord Galbauda!”

That was when the radio operator came running up to Lord Galbauda and his adjutant. Lord Galbauda lightly shook his head as if to chase away his worries and turned to look at the soldier.

“What is it?”

“We’ve gotten a report from the Wolf’s Fangs! They’ve reached the entry point and are awaiting instructions.”

“Good. Tell them to go in five minutes. After that, they’re to follow the plan.”

“Understood!”

There was no time to hesitate. The die had already been cast. Now he needed to pour all of his energy into the success of the plan. If he didn't, the price would be paid in Forthorthian lives. As Lord Galbauda changed gears, he headed to the temporary headquarters to take charge of the battle. He considered himself a knight. And once he had decided to fight, he wouldn't turn back.

Two minutes after receiving contact from the special forces unit, the Imperial Army under Lord Galbauda's command began their march forward. Their forces consisted of two battalions, well over a thousand men strong. They were well equipped, including plenty of assault vehicles and lots of support. They had nothing to fear from the few hundred Reborn Forthorthian Army soldiers holed up in the spaceport. Moreover, their special forces would launch a surprise attack three minutes later. There wasn't even a one in a million chance that they would lose, but Lord Galbauda stayed alert. His opponent was a lady of one of the royal families. And not just any of them. The Mastir family had gone undefeated for over two thousand years. He was well aware that dropping his guard for even a moment could prove fatal.

The majority of the two battalions under Lord Galbauda's command were infantrymen, but there were also several mobile weapons, tanks, and other assault vehicles as well. It was their job to buy time until the special forces unit launched their ambush, but there were two major points to consider.

"I repeat: do not cause any damage to the surrounding urban area! The warheads of guided weapons are to be directed explosives only! And when using live rounds or energy weapons, make sure you double and triple check before firing!" Lord Galbauda ordered his men.

The first point was their proximity to the city. The spaceport was hub for the planet's citizens, serving as a gateway that connected this planet's city to the cities of other planets. As a result, the urban area sprawled out from all sides of the spaceport. In Forthorthe, damaging such inhabited areas was taboo. Bombardments were forbidden, and utmost caution was to be taken to prevent stray fire. If the explosions from missiles were too big, they would reach the urban area as well. Even great care was to be used when using guided or homing weapons.

“And avoid damaging the main building, runway, and parking facilities of the spaceport as much as possible. Especially the main building where the special forces will be entering. Don’t end up killing our men in the heat of battle!”

The second point was to avoid damaging the spaceport itself. This wasn’t like a war with an enemy country. The spaceport was important to both sides. Ideally, it would still be usable after the battle. In order to avoid negatively influencing the economic situation of the region, they were to avoid damage to the runway and the main building, which included the central control room. Weaponry had been carefully selected for the attack and a firm order had been given to focus on the enemy’s defensive positions and their adjoining military base. Moreover, with the special forces unit about to enter the fray, attacks on the main building had to be avoided.

“We may be at the disadvantage of being the attackers, but we have superior numbers. Prepare yourselves for an even fight!” Lord Galbauda rallied his men.

Summarizing what was important, their attacks were to be restricted to designated targets. There were several other minor concerns, but that was all that really mattered now as they were about to enter the fray.

“Once you have the shot, open fire!”

Lord Galbauda gave permission to engage the enemy at a distance. A lot of enemy soldiers were stationed on the spaceport grounds and adjoining military base, but the distance between them wasn’t constant. In order to eliminate enemies as they got in range, it was necessary to give the order now. The spaceport displayed on the hologram in the temporary headquarters gradually grew larger, signaling their approach.

“We’ve received a new IFF signal! We’ve also confirmed the appearance of a combat flag! It’s gold... A flower! It’s Princess Theiamillis!”

However, the moment after Lord Galbauda gave the order to attack, the atmosphere in the temporary headquarters froze over. A huge combat flag had appeared in the blue sky. The crest drawn using lasers was of a golden flower. Everyone born in Forthorthe knew what that meant. It made them all realize that they were pointing their weapons at one of the royal families.

“Your Highness... So you really did choose to show yourself at an important time like this...” Lord Galbauda muttered to himself.

The Imperial forces stared up in awe at the flag raised over the spaceport. They were all in shock, and Lord Galbauda himself was no exception. Granted, he had already prepared himself for this possibility, so his surprise was nothing compared to that of the rest of his men.

“In the end, the road ahead is paved with blood, huh?”

Lord Galbauda was the first to snap out of his stupor. He grabbed the nearby microphone and shouted loudly to his troops. He had to do everything in his power to prevent a loss of morale.

“Don’t falter now, men! Even if our opponent is Princess Theiamillis, our objective is the same! Moreover, Her Highness’s imperial authority has currently been revoked! You may attack without fear!”

“Raaaaaaaaaa!” his men responded in a rallying cry.

Lord Galbauda’s decisive leadership helped them quickly rebound from their shock. At their commander’s words, they tried to shake themselves free from the fear of fighting and the guilt of pointing their weapons at royalty.

The drop in morale is a problem, but this could be our chance!

Lord Galbauda tried to cheer himself up. Depending on how he looked at it, Theia’s presence wasn’t strictly a bad thing. If his troops were able to capture her, the entire war would come to a swift end. That might be the most desirable outcome of all. But his train of thought was quickly interrupted when the unthinkable happened.

“I’m reading signs of the enemy attacking! It’s a laser bombardment!”

“At this distance?! Their lasers should be out of the effective range, shouldn’t they?” Lord Galbauda’s eyes shot wide open upon hearing that report.

In Forthorthe, laser technology was developed enough that it was quite practical in combat, both offensively and defensively. Because of that, missiles and other guided weapons needed to be fired at relatively close range to their target or else they’d just be intercepted by anti-aircraft lasers. While live rounds

didn’t have that problem, they were far less accurate when trying to hit a moving target from a distance. That meant that, typically, the first move in battle was to use energy weapons such as laser and beam cannons, but both of those lost a great deal of their power due to diffusion when fired over long distances. Enough diffusion would mean energy weapons could be blocked by distortion fields, so while a target might be inside the firing range of a laser or beam cannon, that didn’t necessarily mean it was within the effective range. And as Lord Galbauda and his men were currently outside of the effective range of the lasers at the military base adjoining the spaceport, it would be a pointless attack by all conceivable measures.

“There’s no mistaking it! Several bombardments are coming in a few seconds!”

“Is the enemy commander an idiot?! No, that can’t be it! Princess Theiamillis herself has come out! There must be something else going on! Everyone, brace yourselves!” Lord Galbauda ordered.

There was a clear difference between the squads that quickly followed Lord Galbauda’s instructions and those that didn’t. The squads that hadn’t been able to swiftly scatter particles in order to diffuse the energy weapons fired at them suffered the full blow of the incoming laser cannons. Their barriers were destroyed one after another.

“Impossible!” Lord Galbauda gasped.

“The hit distortion field generators have been overloaded and are now unusable! They’re defenseless, sir!”

“What is the meaning of this?! Are you saying that they have a battleship-caliber laser over there?!” Lord Galbauda demanded in exasperated disbelief.

Considering the size of the military base connected to the spaceport, it was unthinkable for it to have a laser cannon capable of going through barriers at this range. This unexpected nightmare caused Lord Galbauda considerable grief.

Lord Galbauda’s way of thinking wasn’t wrong. The spaceport and adjoining military base were indeed without a laser cannon that could be used from such a distance. They only had several normal laser cannons for defense, but the

problem wasn't with the weapons themselves. It was the people using them.

"Bombardment complete. Twenty-two distortion field generators have been destroyed. There were no casualties." Ruth looked up from the operator's control panel and reported the results as if it was nothing.

Aside from mobile weapons and assault vehicles, infantrymen also used squad-sized barriers to protect themselves in groups. That meant that while Lord Galbauda had almost a hundred of them, twenty-two had now been rendered useless. And that wasn't a loss to be sneezed at. In fact, after watching Ruth's performance, Lord Pardomshiha's jaw was currently on the floor.

"Although you're my daughter, I didn't think you were suited for battle... but it looks like I was mistaken..." He was just barely able to squeeze out those words in his astonishment.

Clan, standing nearby, called out to him with a smile. "It only means that Pardom— No. Ruth has a talent for a particular type of fighting, even if it's not what's expected of a traditional knight."

"Honestly, I'm surprised," Ruth's father managed.

"That girl is a genius. Even I'm surprised," Clan added.

She looked over at Ruth, who was still hard at work in the operator's chair. Her talent was indispensable for the next attack as well.

"I thought that word was reserved for likes of Kiriha-dono and you, Princess Clan," Lord Pardomshiha said.

He knew about his daughter's situation, but he was somewhat skeptical of Clan's choice of words. Not only that, but as a father, part of him wanted his little girl to stay dependent in her own way.

"It's true that Ruth is no inventor, but she has the ability to use what's already before her better than anyone else. That is her true talent. She's a genius of coordination and management," Clan explained.

"...Of coordination and management?" Lord Pardomshiha asked.

“She can follow a recipe and finish a dish faster than anyone else, right? I’ve also never seen her make a mistake when it comes to managing schedules or luggage.”

“That has nothing to do with—”

“It does. The only thing that’s different here is that she’s managing laser cannons instead. She coordinated the scheduling of multiple laser cannons in order to have them hit their target at the same time. That’s what this is.”

What Ruth had done was create a mass attack using multiple lasers. It was the same technique Elexis had used, but Ruth had done more than just copy him. She had developed the technique further and used her own style to execute it.

Instead of having all the lasers fire simultaneously, she had them firing alternately, accounting for the cooldown time. It allowed her to keep them firing on a constant rotation, maintaining a higher rate of fire and more power in each round of shots. By doing that, a barrier designed for ground combat didn’t stand a chance. The infantrymen who’d been attacked had no idea, but that was what had caused their barrier generators to overload.

“You make it sound easy...” Lord Pardomshiha said, still in awe at Clan’s explanation.

“It wouldn’t be for me. But with her, it’s a different story,” she continued.

What Ruth had accomplished was no mean feat. It was difficult just getting laser cannons with different specifications to fire at the same time. Moreover, due to their positioning, each cannon was at a slightly different distance from the target. Getting them to hit at the exact same time would require a specially-designed program, not to mention the time it would take to implement it. The terrifying attack was really something that only Ruth could have pulled off.

“While something might be possible theoretically, her talent is in making things a reality. Be proud, Lord Pardomshiha. Your daughter’s prowess in modern warfare is unparalleled,” Clan said.

“I am not worthy...”



Ruth might not have been all that strong as a knight, but in large-scale combat, she had power that far surpassed that of a single knight. Gathering, managing, and effectively using goods, talented personnel, and information was the type of power they needed most in their current situation.

“That said, I can’t just let your daughter hog the spotlight. It’s almost my turn,” Clan said.

“My best regards, Princess Clan,” Lord Pardomshiha wished her well.

“I told you not to call me that right now.”

“P-Pardon me...”

“Heh heh... You just watch what your daughter and I can do.”

While Ruth was already setting the pace, the battle had only just begun. Clan smiled at Lord Pardomshiha as she took her own chair. It was the seat designated for the science officer. After adjusting her glasses, she reached her hands out to the operating panel in front of her.

With over twenty distortion field generators out of use, Lord Galbauda hurriedly reorganized his forces. He moved the squads with functioning generators to the front, and ordered the squads without them to take up positions in the rear. Within each squad, the assault vehicles took the lead with the infantrymen behind them. Mobile weapons made use of their maneuverability to guard against any threats from the surrounding area. It was a proper, efficient response to the attack they had just suffered.

“Squads that still have a distortion field only need to concentrate on defending! Those who don’t only need to concentrate on attacking!”

Lord Galbauda wasn’t the type to blindly stand back up into open fire after being shot down. By reorganizing his forces, he wasn’t just planning on protecting the squads that had lost their defenses. He also intended to maintain their attack power. If he tried to combine squads that still had distortion fields with those that didn’t, it would effectively cut their remaining defensive capabilities in half. By avoiding that, he was also allowing the troops who had

no defenses of their own to focus solely on attacking. In short, Lord Galbauda was keeping their losses to a minimum. And it paid off. Despite the blow, they suffered next to no casualties after the attack.

“Lord Galbauda, we’re almost in firing range for energy weapons!” the operator informed him.

“My orders remain the same! Begin attacking when in range!”

Vrrrrr...

The turrets installed on the assault vehicles and mobile weapons began turning, pointing their barrels towards the spaceport. Their targets were the weapons installed as defenses for the spaceport and military base. If those laser cannons and missile launchers weren’t destroyed, they’d be in for pain. Right now, they were high-priority targets.

While Forthorthian weaponry was similar in look to that of Earth’s, they had AIs for locking on to targets and firing autonomously, meaning that their accuracy was extremely high. Moreover, with the large-caliber guns on the tanks and the missiles on the mobile weapons, battles on Forthorthe tended to end quicker than those on Earth. The defensive weaponry installed by the spaceport and military base should be destroyed in only a few short moments.

“Lord Galbauda, it’s almost time for the Wolf’s Fangs to launch their attack!” Lord Galbauda’s adjutant announced.

“Don’t hold back on bullets or energy! This will be over in a few minutes!” Lord Galbauda rallied.

While there had been some trouble, Lord Galbauda’s main forces launched their attack right before the Wolf’s Fangs’, just as planned. And based on their current formation, his main forces would begin by striking the left flank. As such, Lord Galbauda’s eyes naturally turned to the forces deployed on the left side as shown in the hologram back at his makeshift base.

“The main forces are beginning their attack!” his adjutant kept him informed of their movements.

“I’m counting on you! This is the crucial moment!” Lord Galbauda cried to his troops through the microphone.

In order to keep casualties to a minimum, the most preferable outcome would be that the defensive weaponry was destroyed and that the Wolf's Fangs seized control of the headquarters. That's why Lord Galbauda believed that the next thirty seconds would play a pivotal role in shaping this battle. He looked on at his subordinates beginning their attack. He seemed to be praying. But that was when the unthinkable happened yet again. The next thing Lord Galbauda heard was the screaming voices of the captains from the left flank of his main forces.

"HQ, this is the First Mobile Group! All energy weapons under our control have missed their targets!"

"Second Mobile Group reporting! All of our bombardments passed over the spaceport as well!"

"What?!" Lord Galbauda cried.

Following the inconceivably long-range laser bombardment, all of their weapons had now missed their targets. What's more, it wasn't just the left flank. It was happening all throughout both battalions.

"All forces cease fire! Take defensive positions as you retreat!" he commanded.

If they couldn't hit their attacks, they would just be sitting ducks if they continued to advance. Right now his top priority had changed to falling back to keep his men safe.

"What is the meaning of this? Just what happened?!" his adjutant asked, bewildered.

"Don't just stand there, adjutant! Figure it out!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"Something is intercepting the attacks! Calm down and find the root cause!"

If Lord Galbauda had been your average leader, he and his troops would have fallen into disarray by now. But despite his young age, he was a brilliant knight. His composure and his fighting spirit were still running strong. Having a good

understanding of what the enemy was capable of and knowing that his surprise attack forces were about to spring their offensive helped him keep his peace of mind.

“As expected of the Mastir family that has gone undefeated for two thousand years. They would never let us win that easily...”

With a severe expression on his face, Lord Galbauda glared at the top of the main tower of the spaceport currently displayed in the hologram. There, a massive flag decorated with a golden crest was waving in the wind. It was the combat flag that identified the legitimate successor of the Mastir family, Theiamillis Gre Forthorthe. According to all surviving records, there was not a single account of the Mastir family’s defeat in the last two thousand years. And Lord Galbauda was learning that the hard way.

The aim of all the weapons in Lord Galbauda’s two battalions had deviated, as he suspected, because of the Reborn Forthorthian Army.

“It looks like it’s having just the effect we were hoping for. As expected, Pardomshiha.”

“No, this is all thanks to you undoing their security. Well done, Clan-sama.”

The deviation in the Imperial Army’s aim was the work of Clan and Ruth. Forthorthian weapons had an AI that adjusted the aim based on information gathered from its surroundings. As a result, by manipulating the information it gathered, the aim could be altered accordingly. What Clan and Ruth had done was launch an attack that confused the weapons’ location information.

Regardless of how advanced the technology was, the most important piece of information when firing was the relative position of the shooter to the target. Since the enemy was attacking the base as a group, information was exchanged between them in the form of a map identifying the locations of the stationary targets. All that was left to do was for the individual soldiers to determine their own positions, and then attacks could be launched without ever even seeing the target.

Forthorthe had technology similar to a GPS, meaning it was possible to calculate exact locations based on gravitational waves from multiple space satellites. What Clan and Ruth had targeted were those gravitational waves. By disrupting those signals, all information derived from them would be faulty, and the weapons that relied on that information would subsequently be unusable.

However, accomplishing that was far from easy. It was next to impossible to get each satellite overhead to send fake signals. And as Forthorthe's version of the GPS was under military management, the control center was in Vandarion's hands. What made the difference was Clan, who shouldn't have been there, and the technology she brought with her. Using her cloaked spaceship in Alaia's orbit, she secretly connected to one of the GPS satellites. She used that connection to infiltrate the main control system and hacked into all of the satellites above the spaceport.

Ruth took over from there. She adjusted all of the GPS signals, making it so the actual spaceport was slightly below the position the signals were indicating. The enemy weapon AIs that picked up those signals then adjusted their aim upwards accordingly. Considering the distance to the target, that slight change in altitude greatly affected the trajectory of their attacks, sending their bullets and missiles into the sky. It was a highly advanced strategy only made possible by Clan and Ruth.

"Clan-dono, Ruth, well done. But we can't rejoice just yet. The enemy will catch on soon enough. We'll need to make our next move quickly," Kiriha reminded them.

The strategy, of course, was none other than Kiriha's brainchild. She also knew that the disturbance they had caused wouldn't last for long. The enemy could always attack manually without relying on the AI, and they could also use homing missiles that targeted heat signals or electromagnetic waves. The GPS strategy was only meant to block their first round of attacks and confuse them. But Kiriha wasn't done yet. This was still only the beginning of her grand plan.

Lord Galbauda's forces retreated while investigating the reason for the deviation in their aim. At first, they were clueless. All systems were working normally, and no matter how hard they looked, they couldn't identify any

outside interference. The reason was only determined thanks to a sniper. As his sniper rifle was set to prioritize optical observation, he noticed a discrepancy between the distance his scope was indicating and what the computer he was wearing was reporting. After checking it over multiple times, he reported it to his superior officer who then reported it directly to Lord Galbauda.

“No wonder we couldn’t find any abnormalities. To think they infiltrated the GPS... It looks like they’re more capable than I thought,” Lord Galbauda said in response to the report.

“All units have disconnected from the positioning system. They’re changing settings to prioritize optical observations with laser measurements as a backup,” his adjutant informed him.

“While the suddenness of it all was surprising, now that we know the trick, it’s not impossible to overcome. We can’t afford to let the Wolf’s Fangs be isolated. Continue the attack!”

After solving the puzzle, Lord Galbauda ordered all troops to advance again. The special forces should have already made their way into the spaceport, so if the main forces relented in their assault now, the whole plan would fail.

“Lord Galbauda, we have a report from the Wolf’s Fangs. They have successfully infiltrated the spaceport. They are now approaching the main building!”

“Good timing! Just keep the enemy’s attention on us!”

The Imperial Army that had begun marching forward took aim at the defensive weaponry once more. As they would be firing manually this time, their accuracy would be somewhat lower, but at least there was no need to worry about being tricked again.

“Several hits confirmed! But it seems we were unable to punch through their distortion field, sir!”

“That’s fine! We have firepower on our side. As long as we continue to advance, we will break through eventually!”

This time, many of the attacks had connected. However, due to the distance, they lacked the force to break through the barrier. But Lord Galbauda was still satisfied with the result. This was normal at the start of a battle, and their true intention was merely to act as a diversion anyway.

“Reporting in! The IFF signal and combat flag are on the move! The princess appears to have sortied!”

“So she’s made her move! It seems like Her Highness is as intense as ever!” Lord Galbauda remarked.

The seventh princess, Theiamillis, was widely known to the people of Forthorthe for her combat prowess. Given a gun, she’d never miss. She’d even beaten her mentor in fighter jet simulation battles. Her pride and quick temper lent themselves to her favored position in combat. She was always the vanguard, both in simulations and real combat, and she’d earned quite a name for herself that way. She splendidly embodied the strong royalty that the citizens desired, but when made an enemy, she was a powerful foe. Lord Galbauda knew that, and was quick to make his next move.

“Send all mobile weapons to intercept the princess! Don’t let Her Highness move freely!”

“But Lord Galbauda, our opponent is—”

“I know that! But if we don’t, our men will be the ones to pay the price!”

“I understand, sir. Then should we not send some counter-air defense as well?”

“I’ll leave that to you! But this a battle against time! Make it quick!”

“Yes, sir!”

What Theia brought to the battle was a highly mobile and heavily armed armored suit. It could have been called a wearable fighter jet. Moreover, she wasn’t the only one who had sortied. She had several mobile weapons following her lead. To the Imperial Army that had mostly ground forces, Theia and her mobile weapons attacking from the sky were a very serious threat. If they hesitated to react because their opponent was royalty, the tables would turn irreversibly against them. That’s why Lord Galbauda immediately ordered

that Theia be intercepted. He had prepared himself for what would come afterward.

Standard mobile weapons in Forthorthe were like a mix between a fighter jet and a tank, with a very similar role. Normally, they accompanied infantry squads like tanks, protecting them while attacking enemies with large-caliber guns. And if enemies appeared in the skies, they would fly up and fight like jets. They were weapons with a high degree of flexibility, capable of responding to most situations. That's why they were very problematic in the hands of enemy forces. However, despite many mobile weapons coming her way, Theia remained confident as she led the Reborn Forthorthian Army into battle.

"Did you think you could defeat me with these numbers? How amusing! Just give it a try!"

A fearless smile surfaced on Theia's face as she commanded her firing system to release its safeties and pointed the large-caliber guns above each shoulder of her combat suit at the incoming mobile weapons. All of her opponents were unmanned crafts, and Theia had great faith in her personal motto: "Victory to the attacker." She didn't hesitate to make the first move.

Boom!

As Theia would be using them while flying, the artillery of her suit was designed to be recoilless. But even so, the shock from firing the weapons couldn't be fully mitigated. As the two large-caliber guns fired, Theia's small body was shaken up.

"That's three to start with!"

However, the shock didn't even seem to bother her. In fact, she almost seemed comforted by it as she acquired her next targets. And yet again, she pulled the trigger without a second thought.

"Wahaha! This is what happens when you rely on machines!"

Boom!

"That makes five!"

Her first volley destroyed three, and her second downed another two. The Imperial Army's mobile weapons were getting blown to pieces, yet they weren't returning fire. This was because they couldn't make use of their GPSs.

In aerial combat, one's own movement affected the trajectory of bullets, so position, speed, direction, and acceleration were even more important than ground combat. And because the mobile weapons couldn't make use of that positional information, their range was shorter than usual. They could calculate the relative distance to their target using optical observation and radar, but that alone made hitting from longer distance difficult.

In contrast, Theia's range was unaffected. Clan had written a program that corrected the slight error for her allies. And considering the caliber of Theia's guns, she could destroy barriers and mobile weapons at full range. It made it a rather one-sided fight.

"Use your brains before you attack! Is the enemy commander just for show?!"

Theia voiced her dissatisfaction, taking down mobile weapon after mobile weapon. Right now, she felt like she was taking part in some low-level training exercise.

"Oh?"

As if having heard Theia's complaints, the mobile weapons' movements changed. Instead of approaching separately, they flew in close formation so that even if the lead units were shot down, the following ones could still get to her. They also began laying down suppressing fire to make it difficult for Theia to move. Unlike before, they were now moving with clear intentions.

"That's more like it! You can do it if you try!" Theia happily cheered, now satisfied that the enemy was performing better.

In contrary response to Theia's celebration, two dead serious voices came through the comms system.

"Your Highness, you are too far ahead. It's giving your poor vassals gray hair..." Lord Pardomshiha pleaded.

"Your Highness, I can understand not wanting to let your citizens fight, but you can't win a war on your own," Ruth gently admonished her.

Both of them had sensed danger as Theia fought on her own and couldn't stay quiet on the matter.

"I know, I know. But don't attack me as a father-daughter team!"

Theia had been fighting alone because deep down inside, she didn't want her people involved in this war. Because of that, she had instinctively raced ahead to take down as many enemies as she could. But in reality, even Theia would be defeated if she let herself get surrounded. If that happened, Vandarion's victory would be all but assured. In order to avoid that worst case scenario, she had to rely on the Reborn Forthorthian Army soldiers. Looking at the bigger picture, it was really what was best for the citizens.

"Forgive me. Lend me your strength, everyone."

After taking down the nearby enemies, Theia stopped her charge and regrouped with her allies trying to catch up with her. Her team consisted of manned mobile weapons and small fighters controlled by Ruth, for a total of twenty units. In terms of numbers, the Imperial Army had more, but Theia's side was the only one with working automated aim, so they had the upper hand.

"Men, follow me! We're destroying the enemy mobile weapons!"

"Yeaaah!" the soldiers rallied behind her.

As expected, with their princess leading them, their morale was high. The pilots following Theia cheered for her, moving in synch with her to fight by her side. With this, Theia would surely be safe. Ruth and Lord Pardomshiha were finally able to relax a little.

The battle between the mobile weapons under Lord Galbauda's control and Theia's crew was proceeding in Theia's favor. But Lord Galbauda was fine with that. His goal was to keep Theia and her men stuck in one place and keep them from engaging the ground forces. Even if all of their mobile weapons were shot down, the Wolf's Fangs would have finished their mission by that point.

“Now all that’s left is for the ground forces to push forward and get the troops garrisoned at the spaceport to turn all of their attention to us. If we can do that, we win,” Lord Galbauda said, sighing as he stared at the hologram displaying the progress of the battle. He still couldn’t let his guard down, but his victory was starting to come into sight.

“I wasn’t sure what would happen for a moment there...” his adjutant sighed too.

“Looks like we might make it by the skin of our teeth.”

The ground forces under Lord Galbauda’s command repeatedly fired as they marched forward. They were gradually closing in and their attacks were now able to pierce through the barriers and destroy the defensive weaponry behind them. The enemy predictably counterattacked, but the Imperial Army was harder to hit since they were on the move. The result was that the ground forces sustained relatively few casualties. Lord Galbauda believed that at this rate, the enemy wouldn’t have the reserves left to deal with special forces that were infiltrating them. But unfortunately, the unthinkable would rear its head once more.

“Lord Galbauda, look over there! Th-The spaceport is...!”

“Impossible! The spaceport disappeared?!”

This time, it seemed that the spaceport that the ground forces were trying to attack had completely vanished. Where the facility had been just moments ago was now nothing but deserted land. It was as if it was sand castle that had been blown away in the wind.

“What is the meaning of this? How did this happen?!” Lord Galbauda demanded.

“I don’t know! There were no reactions on any of our sensors! It just suddenly disappeared!” the adjutant claimed.

“What the hell is this?! We didn’t come to watch some magic show!”

An impossibly long-range laser bombardment, an anomaly with the GPS, the appearance of a princess... The unexpected had happened again and again, but nothing had surprised Lord Galbauda this much. Not even he could keep calm

this time.

Kiriha's strategy was simple and clear. She would make the enemy lose sight of the spaceport. In order to do that, she needed to make sure they couldn't use their GPS. By doing that, the enemy would have to rely on their eyes as they advanced. Throwing off the enemy's aim was not the ultimate goal. It was just a means to an end. By disrupting their GPS just before launching their offensive, they would assume that it was intended to interfere with the attack. That was Kiriha's trap. Her true goal was to keep the enemy from knowing where they were, but doing just that would reveal her plan. So by executing her plan when the enemy was about to attack, she was able to hide her true goal.

Once that was done, the rest was easy. The original spaceport was hidden with a combination of magic and Clan's technology, then a new one was created using illusions. And after the enemy abandoned their GPS signals, the illusion was slowly moved to change the route the Imperial Army marched. What was important during that phase was to have unmanned weapons accompany the illusion. That way, it would appear to counterattack as if it was manned, which would conceal that fact that it was a fake. Once the route of the marching enemies had been detoured enough, the unmanned weapons were evacuated and the illusion was dispelled. By doing that, the Imperial Army would come to a standstill facing a direction the spaceport wasn't in. Just like wanderers chasing after a mirage in the desert.

If they gathered footage from the satellites to create a map to compare against, the trick would have been easily discovered. Alternatively, they could compare the scenery in front of them with the geographical data they had. However, the shock of having something disappear before their very eyes overtook Lord Galbauda and his men. They weren't thinking clearly now. They couldn't imagine that they had been led to the wrong place. That mental trap was the true essence of Kiriha's strategy.

Lord Galbauda hurriedly ran out of the makeshift headquarters and looked towards the ground forces. There was indeed no spaceport in front of them. He was at a loss and just stood there, staring into the distance. As a result, he ended up wasting valuable time.

“...Are you the commander for force attacking the spaceport?”

As Lord Galbauda stood rooted in place, someone called out to him. Knowing an ally would never address him in such a fashion, he snapped back to his senses. He instinctively placed his hand on the sword hanging at his waist as he spun around to see who had approached him.

“Who are you?!”

“The leader of the Satomi Knights, Satomi Koutarou.”

“That blue armor... You must be...!”

Standing before him was Koutarou, the rumored knight in blue armor. Just looking at Koutarou, Lord Galbauda realized he had fallen for some kind of ploy that the Reborn Forthorthian Army had put into action.

“I don’t know who exactly you think I am, but there’s no mistaking that I’m part of the Reborn Forthorthian Army.”

“Then... there could only be one reason you’re here. While my men are in a panic, you’ve come to attack the main base. Even though we were planning a surprise attack, we ended up the ones being taken by surprise.”

The strange occurrences, Theia’s appearance, and the disappearance of the spaceport... All of it was meant to keep them distracted, allowing Koutarou to easily move in on the Imperial Army’s base with a troop of soldiers. An enemy knight had infiltrated the base, but there were no soldiers in pursuit or attacking him. This made it clear that the guards of the base had already been defeated. As a result, Koutarou and the others had done to Lord Galbauda exactly what he had planned to do to them.

“I’ve come to recommend that you surrender. There’s no reason to fight anymore. All of our weapons are pointed at your forces who are standing still over there,” Koutarou explained calmly.

“Before I make a decision, there’s something I want to confirm,” said Lord Galbauda.

“Go ahead.”

“What happened to our ambush troops? They were supposed to have infiltrated the spaceport already.”

The situation Lord Galbauda was in was rather grim. However, depending on what had happened to the special forces team, there was yet hope.

“They never infiltrated the spaceport.”

“They didn’t?! That’s not possible! We received a report saying that they did!”

“The captain probably thought they had, but we used mag— I mean, hypnosis to make him believe that.”

After finding the ambush forces, Maki cast a spell on their captain while Shizuka and Nana defeated the remaining troops. As Maki specialized in spells that controlled senses and memories, it wasn’t that difficult to make the captain believe that the mission was proceeding as planned.

“...Which means that we lost the moment that happened, I suppose.”

If his special forces team had reported that they had failed, Lord Galbauda would have undoubtedly defaulted to a different plan. And so the moment that Koutarou and the others made sure that didn’t happen, Lord Galbauda and his forces began marching down the road to defeat. They now had lost sight of the spaceport and found themselves in the crosshairs of their enemies. There was no longer any chance of victory. They had walked right into the Reborn Forthorthian Army’s trap. Lord Galbauda had no choice but to admit defeat.

“However, we a proud knights and soldiers. We will continue to fight until the bitter end,” Lord Galbauda said.

“Stop it. You should already know the outcome. You’ll be wiped out!”

“I know that. And so, as I knight, I ask of you... Take my life and spare the honor and lives of my soldiers!”

As the Galbauda family had only a short history, if they became known for the young Lord Galbauda surrendering to the enemy without a fight, it would tarnish the family name. That said, even if they fought, his forces would be wiped out. It was a bleak future for the Galbauda family either way. The only

way to prevent that was for Lord Galbauda to die in battle. Such a noble deed would protect the family name and hopefully spare his men. It was the best way to keep the casualties at a minimum.

“My name is Wonthor Gius Galbauda! My knighthood might just be a pebble on the side of the road, but I will protect my honor and my people until the end!” Lord Galbauda shouted as he unsheathed his sword and rushed Koutarou.

Of course, he didn’t actually think he could win. He had seen the news and heard of Koutarou’s abilities. Still, he had no choice now. Being cut down and slain by him was the only way he could save his men. It would be his last knightly deed.

“Splendid resolve, Lord Galbauda!”

Koutarou unsheathed Signaltin and faced Lord Galbauda. Lord Galbauda might have been a man of exceptional character, but the same could not be said for his swordsmanship. Koutarou could cut him down with a single swing.

Shink!

However, Koutarou chose not to do so. With a quick swing, he knocked Lord Galbauda’s sword out of his hands, then returned Signaltin to its sheath as if nothing had happened. But Lord Galbauda couldn’t accept that outcome.

Now disarmed, Lord Galbauda fell to his knees and raised his voice. “Why don’t you kill me?! This will be the end of us!”

Lord Galbauda and his men were trapped between a rock and a hard place. Annihilated if they fought and court-martialed if they retreated, ruin appeared to await them no matter which way they turned. And with the only way out denied to him, Lord Galbauda grew emotional.

“I’m confused. Why you don’t understand?” Koutarou asked.

“What?!” Lord Galbauda shouted.

“Just who are you? Is it so impossible to imagine that someone might want to protect you the same way you want to protect your men?”

But those words from Koutarou were enough to silence Lord Galbauda’s burning emotions. He had a hunch about just who that “someone” might be.

“Are you saying... that this is what the empress and the princess wish?”

“That’s right. Our leader does not wish for citizens to kill each other.”

“H-How could this be...?”

Lord Galbauda felt like someone had poured cold water over him. He couldn’t hide his surprise that the empress and princess would worry for the lives of enemy soldiers even now. However, it was true that the Reborn Forthorthian Army had chosen to use diversions and specialized attacks rather than full-on assaults for a reason. It was to prove a point. What Koutarou was saying made sense.

“Neither do they,” Koutarou reiterated.

“They?” Lord Galbauda asked.

“Look over there, Lord Galbauda.”

“Impossible! Why are the soldiers retreating?!”

Surprisingly enough, the forces that had been marching on the spaceport had turned around and were now headed back towards the makeshift headquarters. At first glance it looked like a retreat, but that wasn’t quite the case.

“Protect Lord Galbauda!”

“Don’t let the enemy kill him!”

“Press onward! Don’t stop running even if your legs break!”

Somehow, Koutarou and Lord Galbauda’s had been broadcast to the surrounding areas. The soldiers that had lost sight of the spaceport had come to their senses upon hearing it. They immediately turned on their heels and made for headquarters. It was not a retreat. They were running to protect Lord Galbauda.

The soldiers had completely believed they would be annihilated. They had prepared themselves for the worst when they lost sight of the spaceport. All that was left to decide was how it would happen. Would they fire their

weapons at random in panic, run away, or would they rush to the aid of Lord Galbauda who was in danger? The soldiers chose Lord Galbauda without hesitation.

“The ones you seek to protect also seek to protect you. Rather than fighting the enemy or protecting themselves, they chose to save their commander. You.”

The soldiers all knew that their mad rush back to headquarters was mostly in vain. Their chances of actually saving Lord Galbauda were low. But if the outcome was the same either way, they were determined to try. They ran to save their kind commander—their friend and ally. The soldiers chose to die for a cause.

“So let me ask you, Lord Galbauda, will you choose to die here in spite of that?”

Lord Galbauda couldn’t answer right away. There were too many emotions swirling inside of him for him to form words to express them.

“Please just hang on a little longer, Lord Galbauda!”

“We’re coming to save you!”

However, as the soldiers’ voices kept coming through the comms and their figures slowly closed in, he made up his mind.

“Blue Knight-dono, my men and I surrender to the Reborn Forthorthian Army. Please make preparations to accept us.”

Lord Galbauda decided to surrender. If he had chosen death, he knew his soldiers would fight to the death to avenge him. They had no chance against attacks from an enemy they couldn’t even see. That had to be avoided at all costs.

“Understood... Everyone! We, the Reborn Forthorthian Army, accept the Imperial Army commander Lord Galbauda’s surrender. This battle is to stop immediately. I repeat, we, the Reborn Forthorthian Army...”

Koutarou used the communication system to let both sides know of Lord Galbauda's decision. With that, the soldiers under his command finally surrendered. When they laid down their arms, Lord Galbauda let out a mighty sigh of relief and his expression finally eased up.

"I'm grateful for all of your consideration, Blue Knight-dono."

"I'm not the one you should be thanking."

Koutarou's expression relaxed too as he smiled at Lord Galbauda. The battle had ended and the declaration of the outcome was concluded. The face of a strong knight was no longer required. Replacing it was a smile more appropriate for a boy his age.

"You have excellent vassals, Lord Galbauda."

"They are my pride. No matter what happens from this point on, I will never forget what they have done this day."

And so Lord Galbauda was defeated. However, there was not so much as a hint of regret on his face as he watched his soldiers surrender. Like he had said, he was happy with their final decision. But he was just as happy that they were safe. The battle would likely go down in history as a crushing defeat, but Lord Galbauda knew that he and his vassals hadn't lost anything. That's why he was going to welcome his soldiers back with his head held high.

Everyone's Intentions

Monday, November 29th

As the battle for the spaceport of Alaia was broadcast, the entirety of Forthorthe fell into a great uproar. The vastly outnumbered Reborn Forthorthian Army had seized complete victory with practically no casualties on either side. Not only that, but the one to settle the battle was the knight in blue armor. And this time he didn't use his sword, but rather words to persuade an Imperial Army commander to surrender.

The people of Forthorthe weren't just seeking strength from the man wearing blue armor. They wanted to see a keen intellect and a true spirit of benevolence, and he had proven both in this battle. The knight in blue armor who was with the Reborn Forthorthian Army was strong, clever, and kind. More and more people began to believe that the person they had been wishing for all along had returned to them.

What fostered this belief even more was that a silver-haired girl who could use strange techniques was now known to be accompanying him. According to one theory, the Silver Princess was able to use a strange power after undoing the seal of the sword. It was no coincidence that this young girl's appearance and abilities called the legend to mind. But this boost in the reputation of the knight in blue armor—that is, Koutarou—also served to improve the public standing of Elfaria and Theia as the leaders of the Reborn Forthorthian Army. And since Koutarou had been introduced to Forthorthe as a companion of Theia's, the media was reporting new finds on "the Golden Princess and the Blue Knight" every day.

And with this rise in popularity, the applicants for the Reborn Forthorthian Army continued to increase and the bands of knights that had been watching over the situation came to offer their cooperation one after another. While there were still relatively few bands of knights directly involved (as each band of knights needed to come to an agreement on the matter and work out

countermeasures for spies in order participate in the resistance), Koutarou and the others didn't look at the situation with pessimism. Instead, they thought of it as a good start for their counterattack.

"But man... When you get serious, it's not even a fight, is it, Kiriha-san?" Koutarou said as he headed towards Kiriha's desk carrying a tray loaded with tea and snacks.

Kiriha herself was in the middle of staring into the computer screen in the staff officer's room she had been assigned. After displaying her sharp mind in the defensive battle for the spaceport, all manner of people had sought counsel from her. She ended up so busy that she didn't even have the time to prepare her own tea. Koutarou, on the other hand, was the exact opposite. He found himself with time to spare. When they weren't in battle, he had nothing to do, and if he walked around freely, he'd attract unwanted attention. As a result, he ended up serving as Kiriha's assistant.

"You make it sound like you would have preferred having a real battle."

"That's not it. It's just still surprising how skilled you really are."

"You're mistaken. Lord Galbauda and his men are really the ones who won. I simply put my money on them being reasonable."

The plan Kiriha had devised had many variations. Her exact movements would change depending on how the Imperial Army moved, and not all outcomes predicted low casualties. But after gathering information on Lord Galbauda and taking into account his relationship with the people of his territory, it seemed chances were high that he would pick a strategy to end the battle as quickly as possible. A swift resolution was his only option if he valued human life and the surrounding urban area. His plan would also go over well with the top brass who wanted to use their new magical weapons in a surprise attack.

And sure enough, from the start of the battle, Lord Galbauda acted strategically to safeguard both his men and civilians, keeping losses to a minimum for everyone. The men under his command were loyal and followed his orders to a T. Not only were they disciplined, they shared Lord Galbauda's

morals. The real reason casualties were so low was because they believed in their commander and acted accordingly. Had that not been the case, the outcome of the battle certainly would have been more grim for both sides.

“So this could be called a victory for Theia and Elle—or, really, for the Mastir family,” Koutarou commented as he set the tea and snacks down in front of Kiriha.

Today’s menu was black tea he had gotten from Elfaria and baked confections that Ruth had prepared. Both were Forthorthian specialties, so they were popular with the people from Earth.

“Indeed. In fact, the planet is so well-managed that it was practically expected that Lord Galbauda and his people would be perfectly reasonable. One might even contribute the victory to the Mastir family’s traditions and prestige.”

Kiriha stopped what she was doing at the computer for a moment and picked up the teacup. Having been working non-stop since morning, she decided it was time for a quick breather. After pausing to take a whiff of the black tea, she placed her soft lips to the rim of the cup. Seeing that she had decided to take a break, Koutarou thought it might be a good time to ask her something that had been bothering him.

“About that Lord Galbauda guy... He’s in a precarious situation now, isn’t he?”

Because of the Reborn Forthorthian Army’s landslide victory, Lord Galbauda’s reputation had plummeted. It was to be expected, but since Lord Galbauda had proven to be an honorable man, Koutarou was worried about his future.

“So he is. If we let him go now, he will most likely face a court martial. Considering the outcome of the battle, it probably looks like he simply surrendered without putting up a fight.”



Normally, the Reborn Forthorthian Army didn't take prisoners because that would mean detaining citizens who had been forced to arms. But if they stayed true to their principles and released Lord Galbauda, a harsh future awaited him and his family name. That troubled Koutarou.

"Claiming that the spaceport just vanished wouldn't fly with a could martial, huh?"

"Indeed. While Elexis might be supplying Vandarion with weapons that rely on magic and spiritual energy, he is probably keeping the technology and principles behind them secret. As he will be trying to replace them later, he'd never reveal the whole truth. With that in mind, the trial would proceed to Lord Galbauda's disadvantage."

Lord Galbauda and the two battalions under his command were completely stumped by Kiriha's strategy and had surrendered without much of a fight. They genuinely believed that the spaceport had vanished. And without knowing about magic, they couldn't mount a decent response. But at the same time, the members of the court martial—who didn't know about magic either—would suspect that Lord Galbauda had simply been negligent, cowardly, or worst of all, perhaps secretly working with the Reborn Forthorthian Army. Whatever they decided it was, it was clear that their verdict would be a bad one for Lord Galbauda.

"So I was wondering... isn't there anything we can do?" Koutarou asked.

He put down the tray on a nearby desk and looked to Kiriha for an answer. He believed it would be a mistake to release Lord Galbauda knowing that he would suffer for it, even if Lord Galbauda was fine with that himself. But since the Reborn Forthorthian Army made it a point not to take captives, he couldn't see an immediate solution. That's why he'd come to Kiriha.

"We don't take prisoners, but it's dangerous to let him go. If we handle things like normal, he's going to be in a bad way," Koutarou clarified his concerns.

"Hmm... Lord Galbauda knows some classified information, so we won't release him for a while to keep him from leaking it. How about that?"

"Classified information? Like magic?"

“You.”

“Me?”

“The knowledge that the Blue Knight of legend himself is here is the highest level of classified information that the Reborn Forthorthian Army has. Isn’t it only obvious we would want to keep that information secret?”

“I see... So it doesn’t have to be me, just something to that effect, right?”

Kiriha had given Koutarou a clear solution to his problem. Not returning an enemy officer due to fear of an information leak was realistic and plausible, so just keeping him in custody until the information was outdated was a good middle ground.

“I think information on you is fine though.”

“Kiriha-san, you’re just having fun by toying with me, aren’t you?”

“Of course that’s part of it, but information on you could potentially be leaked rather easily since it’s not officially acknowledged or protected. That means we can share it with Lord Galbauda with little worry.”

“Ugh...”

Using Koutarou’s identity was a good idea. It was the truth, but it was nearly unbelievable. It would sound like mere propaganda if it were disclosed to the public now, so it was hard to officially confirm. Moreover, many citizens were already seeing a connection between Koutarou and the Blue Knight. Leaking the information now wouldn’t change much. But nevertheless, classified information was classified information. Even if they intended to tell the public after the war, it was a good enough reason to detain Lord Galbauda for now.

“You can protect Lord Galbauda just by introducing yourself to him. Surely that won’t be too hard.”

“...This is really amusing to you, isn’t it, Kiriha-san?”

“Yes. I just admitted that was part of it, didn’t I?”

The only real hang-up was how Koutarou felt about the situation. While it might feel right for Kiriha or Theia, that wasn’t the case for him. Since it had just kind of happened, he had a hard time calling himself the Blue Knight.

“Jeez, if there’s really no other way, I’ll do it.”

“That would be nice.”

Kiriha smiled at the troubled Koutarou as she reached out for the snacks. Her grin and her gestures made her look almost childish. It was a relaxed appearance that she rarely showed anyone but Koutarou. It seemed like the tea and conversation with Koutarou were working wonders as a respite from her work.

And now that his problem was solved and Kiriha had managed to get a little break herself, Koutarou decided it was time to get back to it. Being Kiriha’s assistant was actually a good deal of work.

“Kiriha-san, do you need anything other than some tea and snacks?” he asked.

“You.”

“Hey now.”

“I’m not saying that as a joke.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Sadly, I have to calculate how many lives will be lost in order to win. That’s why I need you.”

“I see... So what should I do?”

“You can just continue helping like you are now. I just want you to be at my side. At least until these heartbreaking calculations are over with...”

Kiriha was certainly mature, and her mind was sharper than anyone else’s. But that meant certain things had a more profound effect on her than the other girls, and that included people dying. She had been able to avoid casualties until now, but chances were incredibly high that it wouldn’t stay that way in the near future. Having to take the cost of human life into account when making plans put a great deal of strain on her still young mind. That’s why she needed Koutarou right now.

“I got it. I’ll always be with you. And... you can ask me for any selfish thing until it’s over, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you.”

It was probably also why Kiriha’s smile, which showed both relief and reliance, reminded Koutarou of the much younger Kii.

While Kiriha began formulating plans in her mind, Theia was facing a difficult problem herself. She was currently having another press conference together with Elfaria. It was a question-and-answer session regarding the battle for the spaceport. Like their previous conference, journalists from all over were communicating with them through the network, and Theia and Elfaria went into the session with every intention of being honest with their citizens.

“Is that correct, Your Majesty?” a journalist asked.

“That is the case. While I can’t go into details about personnel and technology for safety reasons, the Satomi Knights contributed in many parts of this battle, including its planning and execution,” Elfaria answered.

“Which means that Sir Satomi’s existence played a big role in all this as well. Your Highness, can you really not reveal who he is?” the journalist asked, turning the question to Theia.

“Um... All I can say right now is that I met him during my travels,” she responded somewhat nervously.

Even during this conference, Theia was stuck on the defensive. As Elfaria wasn’t declaring anything major on behalf of the Reborn Forthorthian Army, most of the conference was focused on their defending of the spaceport. It was unavoidable that the person to carry out the strategy would eventually come up. In fact, the people were especially interested in the matter after learning the battle had come to a largely diplomatic end with very little fighting. And what the people wanted to know, the journalists wanted to know. They bombarded Theia with questions about Koutarou one after the other. But to their disappointment, Theia didn’t have proper answers for them.

“But Your Highness, the citizens can’t accept that! Such keen insight, the ingenuity to lead the Imperial Army by the nose, the nobility to settle things peacefully after everything... and that blue armor he wears! Please tell us, Your Highness! Just who is this man?!”

“I can’t say! I’ve already said that he is a man in a complicated situation!”

The amount of citizens that thought Koutarou had some connection with the Blue Knight was increasing every day, but there was no real reason to believe that they’d fully be able to understand Koutarou’s circumstances—including the part about time travel. And it was impossible to say how trying to explain that would reflect on the army and her mother. That’s why Theia couldn’t answer. In that regard, it would have been a much simpler affair if Koutarou had been the Blue Knight’s descendant. That was really probably what the citizens and the journalists were hoping to hear. She wouldn’t lie to them, but she couldn’t tell them the truth. Theia was caught in a very serious situation.

“Then what about the silver-haired woman?!”

“Huwah?”

“I’m talking about the silver-haired woman who used strange powers to dispatch the attackers during Your Majesty’s and Your Highness’s inspection!”

The journalist asking questions realized that asking about Koutarou wouldn’t give him the breakthrough he was looking for. So instead, he shifted to someone else in Koutarou’s company—the mysterious girl who had protected Theia and Elfaria during the attempted assassination the other day. She had long, beautiful silver hair and was seen with a crest of a sword on her forehead. Only one person in the legend of the Blue Knight fit that description. The journalist pressed the matter further as he displayed a hologram of that girl. Of Harumi.

“Please answer, Your Highness! Who is this person?!”

“Ah, auuugh... Um...” Words failed her. Theia hadn’t expected a question about Harumi to pop up, so she was at a loss for an answer.

“You can at least tell us who this person is, can’t you?!”

“That’s... a member of Koutarou’s... Sir Satomi’s band of knights...”

“Please give us more details!”

“Um...”

Theia had been completely backed into a corner. She'd done her best to get through the questions about Koutarou, so a question about Harumi felt like getting blindsided. It was clear what the journalist wanted, but she couldn't answer. There was no way she could explain who Harumi was without revealing other secrets.

"Calm down, Theia," said Elfaria, stepping in to lend a helping hand.

She couldn't stand to see Theia in trouble. As royalty of Forthorthe, Elfaria was originally planning on leave Theia to her own devices, but things were spiraling out of control for her. Elfaria couldn't help her motherly instincts kicking it.

"M-Mother...?"

"You don't have to say anything you're not at liberty to. However, you mustn't lie. The least we can do for the people who believe in us is be honest with them."

"...Yes, I understand."

Seeing her mother's face and hearing her words, Theia was able to calm down a little. After taking a deep breath, she faced the journalist on the other side of the screen.

"I regret that I am unable to share everything with you at this time. I can understand your interest too, considering the situation. But I want you to calm down and think for a moment," Theia began.

She spoke with the journalist, choosing each word carefully. She followed her mother's advice, leaving out information she couldn't disclose, but making sure that she stayed true to herself and to her people. It was a task that once again reminded Theia of how difficult it was to be royalty. But she wasn't giving up. She was determined to be the best princess she could, in no small part because she believed the man she loved to be the best knight. That's why she was bravely able to face such harship.

"Say, for example, that he is related to the Blue Knight. And let me reiterate that this is hypothetical," Theia continued.

"Yes, let's say."

“Do you think he would be able to publically announce that he was related to the Blue Knight? The Blue Knight left the country to keep it from falling into chaos.”

“Then you’re saying that he would claim no relation, regardless of whether or not it was true?”

“That’s right. I haven’t confirmed it with him myself, but that would most likely be the result.”

After saying that much, Theia let out a sigh. Considering their positions, Theia and Elfaria couldn’t say anything on the matter, and Koutarou most likely wouldn’t admit to it himself. She believed that she had finally been able to get the heart of the matter across. However, the journalist didn’t see it that way.

“Huh...? Wait a moment, Your Highness! Why would you need to confirm it with him? Wasn’t this just an example?!”

“Oh no!”

“Then is he truly related to the Blue Knight?!”

“N-No comment! No comment!”

A fragment of the truth had escaped Theia’s lips. Journalists from all over the galaxy were at the edges of their seats. It was clear that Theia had said something she hadn’t meant to, and as a result, her predicament would continue for a while longer.

Theia was released from the journalists around roughly the same time that Kiriha finished her work. Both girls were now taking a break together. They’d both been extraordinarily busy, so this was the first time they’d gotten together like this in a while.

“You can’t redo press conferences. Phew... This is bad for my heart. I don’t want to do any more of them for a while,” Theia sighed.

She was leaning back on the sofa of the break room, practically sinking into it. Since she was so active, it was a rare sight. It made her small body look even more diminutive than normal, and made it quite clear how exhausted she was.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Theia-dono.”

Kiriha, on the other hand, looked normal at first glance. At least, a stranger might think so. But Koutarou or anyone else who knew her well could tell she was tired. Her mind and spirit were worn down. That was the cost of dealing in the business of warfare and human lives.

“Here, Kiriha. You can have my chocolate.”

“Thank you, Sanae.”

“Open your mouth too, Theia.”

“Ahhh...”

“Here you go... And one for you too!”

Sanae was being nicer than usual. Normally when opening a bag of candy, she took the first bite. But today, she gave that honor to Kiriha and Theia. As she could see their auras, she knew exactly how tired they were. She was especially worried about Kiriha. Theia was more outright exhausted, but Kiriha’s weariness was ran much deeper. Sanae wanted to do something for her.

“Kiriha, let me rub your shoulders.”

“You’re awfully accommodating today, Sanae.”

“A good woman never misses a chance to shine.”

“Heh, is that so? Then by all means, Sanae.”

“Leave it to me!”

While Sanae didn’t fully understand it herself, she felt like Kiriha needed warmth. That’s why she offered to massage her shoulders. And because she figured more warmth was better, Sanae called out for a certain someone to come help.

“Koutarou, you massage her somewhere too!”

“You idiot, keep that between you girls!”

“Anywhere’s fine. Even her boobs.”

“I said keep it between you girls! Especially when it’s not her shoulders!”

Koutarou understood what Sanae was really asking, and he agreed for the most part. But as a man, massaging anything other than Kiriha's shoulders would be strange, even if Kiriha was okay with it. That's why he flat out refused Sanae's request.

"You don't have to be so stubborn when both you and Kiriha would benefit from it."

Sanae thought Koutarou was making a dumb choice. Sanae would get to take it easy, and Koutarou could touch Kiriha all he wanted. That way Kiriha would get a chance to relax and get intimate with Koutarou. To Sanae, Koutarou was passing up something that would benefit everyone.

"Heh, and wouldn't a good woman get the hint, Sanae?" Kiriha snickered.



“Hmm, that’s true. Okay, then I’ll just have to do my best today!”

“I have high hopes.”

After Kiriha got her to relent, Sanae began massaging her shoulders with more motivation than usual. At this rate, there was no doubt that Kiriha would feel better in no time.

“Hey, Theia-chan, I have a simple question for you,” Yurika asked.

She also happened to be in the break room, eating candy she had brought with her from Earth while reading manga she had found in Forthorthe. With the more serious discussion between Kiriha and Theia over, she decided to ask her something.

“What?”

Leaning all the way back over the top of the sofa, Theia looked up at Yurika. Yurika looked back at Theia, whose head was now upside down to her.

“Um... The people of Forthorthe are interested in Satomi-san because his armor is blue, right?”

“Well... yes. In our country, blue armor has special meaning. It naturally attracts attention.”

When she finished her sentence, Theia left her mouth open. Yurika fed her a potato chip and continued her line of questioning.

“Then why not just change the color of Satomi-san’s armor to something else? Like pink. I think people would lose interest then.”

Theia was troubled because Koutarou was attracting so much attention. And that was because he reminded people of the Blue Knight. The color of his armor undoubtedly played a part in that. It made a certain amount of sense to change the color of his armor to get the citizens to forget about it and take the stress off of Theia. The other girls listening felt like there might be some merit to Yurika’s reasoning.

However, Theia didn’t think so.

“Munch, crunch, gulp... No waaaaaaaay!”

She hurriedly ate her potato chip and refused at the top of her lungs. As a result, some of the fragments of the potato chip even hit Yurika.

“I definitely don’t want that!” she reiterated.

“But the press conferences would be easier that way,” said Yurika.

“Koutarou’s armor has to be blue! Blue! It can’t be anything else!”

Still leaning over the sofa, Theia kicked her legs and waved her arms with a big frown on her face. As small as she was, she looked like a child who didn’t get the toy she wanted.

“She’s an idiot...” Koutarou mumbled at the sight.

He was dumfounded by Theia’s unprincesslike behavior. But when Theia heard what he said, she sprung up at full force and kicked off the ground with both legs and arms like a beast, leaping for Koutarou and reaching him the blink of an eye. She then pointed a thin, graceful finger in his face.

“Then are you saying you’re fine with a different color?! Is that what you’re saying?!”

Theia’s wide-open eyes stared right into Koutarou’s. Seeing the fire in them, Koutarou realized that she wasn’t really asking about the color of the armor.

I see, so that’s why you...

She was really asking whether he could face the people he’d met two thousand years ago while pretending to be someone else. Could he stand before Alaia, Charl, and the other girls, not to mention all the soldiers who had fought alongside him or the citizens who had supported him? Could he do that while acting like he wasn’t the Blue Knight? And when he thought of it like that, he had to concede.

“...No, I want it to be blue.”

There was no answer other than that. Holding his head high as the Blue Knight was how he showed respect for the people who had been part of his life long, long ago. It was the way of the knight.

“Heh heh, that’s more like it, my knight.”

Theia nodded with satisfaction at Koutarou’s answer. She then reached out with the hand that had been pointing at him and gently caressed his cheek. Even if only for a moment, the complex emotions behind that touch were

conveyed to Koutarou.

“...Both master and servant are idiots...” Sanae said, shaking her head.

Of course, the understanding between Theia and Koutarou wasn’t conveyed to anyone else. Sanae ridiculed them because she didn’t know any better. To her, it only looked like they were shouldering some incomprehensible burden.

Vandarion had made plans to mobilize part of the army and seize the spaceport, yet they had ended in failure. Even worse, the Reborn Forthorthian Army’s victory had seen a boost in their reputation, as well as Elfaria’s. After his plans backfired, it would seem perfectly in character for Vandarion to be downright livid considering his intense personality. But oddly enough, he remained calm despite his losses.

“Hmm, right on schedule, huh?”

Vandarion watched Elfaria’s press conference while drinking wine made from the fermented juice of a fruit very similar to the grapes used to make red wine on Earth. While his expression betrayed hostility towards Elfaria, it wasn’t out of anger over his defeat. He at least had the presence of mind to enjoy his fruit wine.

“We should consider the first stage complete now. We’ve learned even Elfaria will come out over such an attack,” said Director-General Granado, serving as Vandarion’s staff officer.

Even he seemed happy with the outcome. There wasn’t so much as a hint of panic or regret in his face, despite the fact that they’d failed to achieve what they’d set out to do. But they were both acting this way for a reason. The truth was that the battle for the spaceport was part of a bigger plan.

“A spaceport is necessary for any real resistance. If we took it now, they would be stuck on Alaia. And in order to prevent that, they had to deploy a large amount of soldiers. A well thought-out plan, Granado.”

“With this, they will concentrate and consolidate their forces for either defending or attacking. So if we send our soldiers in now, there will naturally be more casualties than there would have before. That will put a definitive end to

Elfaria's propaganda."

The Reborn Forthorthian Army had been waging small battles throughout Forthorthe. Calling them skirmishes would be more appropriate. And considering the small scale of these fights, casualties were low and the Reborn Forthorthian Army was often winning one-sidedly. With those small victories piling up, they were winning public support and amassing manpower with new recruits. The groundwork for a large-scale offensive was being laid.

That meant that the movement of troops was becoming a problem. Up until now, they had been fighting all over the place, but for a larger battle, they would need to concentrate their forces. And for that, they would need a spaceport. Spaceports were required for transporting people and cargo, making them essential for any large-scale military operation. In other words, the spaceport was the Achilles heel for the Reborn Forthorthian Army. It was a weakness that must be protected at all costs. That hadn't been the case until now, but at this point in time, they had no choice in the matter.

The Reborn Forthorthian Army coming together was exactly what Vandarion and Granado were waiting for. The larger a battle became, the less advantage they had. Larger forces couldn't be hidden as easily, and direct clashes would be unavoidable. That meant that the more people were involved, the bloodier things would get. Elfaria's support from the citizens was largely because she had fought while keeping casualties low, just as the legendary Princess Alaia had. That's why Vandarion and Granado's plan was to increase the scale of the battle to forcibly create more casualties and reduce Elfaria's standing with the people.

"All that's left is to make that battle happen... How are things looking on that front?"

"There aren't any problems in terms of troops. Thanks to the enemy gathering their forces, the chances of rebellions elsewhere have decreased and we can now move our forces as well."

"And do we have any countermeasures for the enemy using diversions like they did in the battle for the spaceport?"

The only unexpected thing in the battle on Alaia was the large-scale trickery that the Reborn Forthorthian Army had pulled off. If they could manage that again, there was a chance that Vandarion and Granado's plans would fail. Countermeasures were necessary to prevent that.

"DKI's scion has promised that he would send out his treasured special forces."

"That Elexis... What is he planning this time?"

But they had things other than the Reborn Forthorthian Army's tricks to worry about. One of them was the CEO of the galactic conglomerate DKI, Elexis. The technology he possessed far surpassed that of the military, although he we was currently sharing it with them. But if the military continued to rely on Elexis, he would have a lot of influence in the political system after Elfaria was defeated. To Vandarion and Granado, that wasn't anything to celebrate.

"No matter. Once we've defeated Elfaria, we won't need that greenhorn's power. We're using *that,* Granado."

"But Vandarion-sama, *that* is still incomplete. It's too early to deploy it!"

"We've brought it over, so we have to use it. The part that's incomplete is its space outfitting, right? There's no problem using it in ground combat. Am I wrong?"

"No, sir... But do we have to go that far to inflict casualties on Elfaria?"

"But of course! In order to put an end to that vixen's propaganda, we need a victory so uncontested that no one can deny it! The most efficient way of doing that is to kill that knight in blue armor at the center of it all! I don't care what we use to do it!"

Despite what trouble Elexis might bring, Elfaria was the greater threat right now. If Elfaria's power was stripped, the problem with Elexis would solve itself. And the most effective way of doing that was to foster as much death in battle as possible, as well as kill the knight in blue armor who was becoming a symbolic figure for the resistance.

"We'll kill him! We'll kill the Blue Knight! This time for certain!"

Vandarion could feel powerful impulses overflowing from deep within him—an intense hatred and murderous intent towards the knight in blue armor. It was those negative emotions, so strong that they burned like hellfire in his veins threatening to consume his very soul, that pushed Vandarion forward. He could no longer distinguish whether he really wanted to kill that knight in order to defeat Elfaria, or if he was fighting Elfaria so he could kill the knight.

In the next battle, Vandarion would go all out. After receiving that report from Maya, Elexis leaned back in his leather chair and crossed his arms.

“I had my suspicions when we received a request for support... but if they’re going to be using *that,* then they must be planning on killing Koutarou-kun,” he said calmly.

“That boy is becoming the cornerstone of the information warfare tactics Elfaria’s side is trying to employ. Vandarion’s side must want to eliminate him as soon as possible,” said Maya.

“So they’re going to kill Koutarou-kun before he holds completely sway over public opinion... Well, I think it’s a reasonable way of thinking,” replied Elexis. He’d realized what Vandarion’s side intended to do.

There was no way around the people of Forthorthe being fascinated with the knight in blue armor. With their eyes constantly on Koutarou, it was clear that he had a certain power over them and their imaginations. And that power had the potential to develop into strong influence. Elexis believed it was perfectly logical to want him out of the picture before that happened.

“Yes. But even then, I was certain that they only brought *that* in to hide the virus weapon,” Maya said with the slightest bit of hesitation in her voice.

“They’re cunning. With the virus weapon thwarted, nobody is paying any attention to *that.* Even the tactician on Koutarou-kun’s side has probably overlooked it,” replied Elexis.

“Even if she hasn’t, it’d just become a head-on confrontation, right? Can *that* really defeat the boy and the others? They were even able to repel Tayuma and Purple who were overcome with chaos and went berserk.”

Compared to Elexis, Maya was skeptical. She understood the strength of Koutarou and the others better than anyone. She had witnessed it several times. That’s why no matter how much faith they put in this trump card, she didn’t think it alone could bring Vandarion and Granado victory. And knowing what she did, she shared the doubts she harbored with Elexis.

“I think it can,” he answered. “Koutarou-kun and the others are certainly strong, but this battle is far bigger than just them now. They can no longer win just by being strong.”

“You’re saying that ten people won’t be able to protect a thousand or more?”

“That’s what I think. Besides, Vandarion has conventional forces on top of *that.* That’s certainly too much for Koutarou-kun and the others to handle.”

“I see what you mean,” said Maya, finally nodding.

While Koutarou and the others were strong, there weren’t all that many of them. It was a decisive weak point. So in a large-scale battle, it was very likely that even if Koutarou and his squad came out on top, the overall battle would end in crushing defeat for them as an army. A handful of strong troops wouldn’t make much of an impact considering the scale of real war. Especially not this time when Vandarion’s aim was to waste lives on both sides. Even counting Nana for eleven of them, it was clear that Koutarou and the others didn’t have the numbers to protect their soldiers.

“Last but not least, *that* has far more power than conventional weapons. If the teamwork between Koutarou and the others can be disrupted, it can force itself through on sheer power,” Elexis continued.

“And so Vandarion’s side has issued a request for support to DKI. If we don’t just nullify Rainbow’s spells, but rather work together with them, then—”

“That’s right, Maya. Depending on how we act, Vandarion and Granado will win against Koutarou-kun and the others this time.”

It didn’t matter if it was supplying Vandarion with technology or sending in Darkness Rainbow to help. As long as they managed to put Koutarou and the others in a vulnerable position, Vandarion and Granado would come out victorious. They might even get the chance to make good on their higher-ranking objective: killing Koutarou. That was how Elexis read the situation, and Maya was starting to think he was right.

“So what are you planning on doing? ...Or rather, what do you want to do?” she asked.

“That’s the problem,” he said pensively, planting his elbows on the desk as he began thinking.

Elexis still hadn’t firmly embedded himself in the military’s power structure, so Vandarion winning now would be a bad thing. From that point of view, his best option was to pretend to work together with Vandarion and Granado, all while leaving a narrow path open for Koutarou and the others to come out victorious. He figured that going as far as keeping Yurika and the others from using magic would be enough to do that. But that wasn’t at all what he suggested.

“All right... Let’s give it our all and support the military,” he finally said after thinking it over.

Hearing that, Maya’s eyes shot open wide and she slammed her hands on the desk as she stared down Elexis.

“Wait a minute, El! Are you serious?!”

Maya wanted to take the opposite approach, secretly getting in the way of the military to buy time for Elexis to muscle his way into gaining more influence with them.

“I’m serious. I want to see for myself.”

“See? See what?”

“If Koutarou-kun and the others can win despite that.”

Elexis was dead serious. There was something that had always been on his mind. And driving Koutarou into a corner was the best way to get the answers he wanted. In order to accomplish that, he would fully cooperate with the military.

“I give up. You’d hamstring the boy, but you still want him to win the race? That’s a pretty twisted form of affection.”

“Strictly speaking, that’s not exactly it. If Koutarou-kun really is the person I think he is, he won’t lose because of something like this. Conversely, if we hold back, he might win even if he’s not who I think he is.”

“So you’re saying you’ll fully cooperate with the military in order to ascertain his true identity?”

“That would be the case, yes.”

“So what if the boy loses? What then?”

After hearing what Elexis was thinking, Maya’s surprise died down some, but she still had a dumbfounded expression on her face. She couldn’t eagerly accept such a high risk just to confirm a theory.

“He won’t lose. Although, that is just my intuition speaking.”

“If your intuition is wrong, you’re gonna get burned, you know.”

“If my intuition is wrong over something like this, I’d never stand a chance again Vandarion either way. Consider it a test of my caliber, too.”

“...Of course. Hmph, this sure is getting interesting though.”

Ending Elfaria’s reign wasn’t Elexis’s only objective. Ultimately, he would also overthrow Vandarion and create a new social structure. To that end, he would need to walk several thin lines. If his intuition led him astray here, he’d never reach his final goal. He needed to know if he could accurately read other people, including both Vandarion and Koutarou.

“However, the problematic part is that while I don’t think Koutarou-kun and the others will lose, I can’t see past that. Will it be a landslide victory? Or will it cost them dearly? What I want to know the most is what kind of losses we’ll be looking at. That will determine how we’ll proceed.”

“Oh, you mean to say that depending on how this goes, you might side with them instead?”

“That’s certainly possible. I’ve thought of several potential developments.”

If reality met the expectations of Elexis’s imagination, Elfaria would be hiding an ace up her sleeve. And if he overlooked that possibility, there was a chance the tables would be turned on him during the final act. The best way to get what he wanted now was to cooperate with the military for the time being

while trying to get a peek at Elfaria's hand. And depending on how strong it was, Elexis would then choose to raise or fold accordingly. It was a sound tactic on his part, even if it carried its own set of risks.

"However, all of these developments have one strategic element in common," Elexis hinted.

"And that is?"

"We'll fully cooperate with the military, but keep our own casualties to a bare minimum. Since we might have to change how we go about things, that much only makes sense. That's why I want to stay out of participating in the actual battle."



However low the chances of it coming to fruition were, they might cut ties with the military and side with the Reborn Forthorthian Army. In preparation for that possibility, however, Elexis wanted to avoid a situation where his special forces, starting with Darkness Rainbow, were reduced. With that in mind, he would supply Vandarion with equipment and use magic as backup.

“If you say that, Crimson will get angry,” Maya chided.

“Isn’t it your job to do something about that?” Elexis asked with a smile.

“No thank you. Please do it yourself.”

“But I know you’ll still do it for me anyway, which is what I love about you.”

Crimson loved fighting, so with a charming smile, Elexis pushed the job of telling her to stand down onto Maya.

“...Why did I choose such a disagreeable man as my partner?”

Maya, on the other hand, let out a sigh and slumped her shoulders. Maya pulled off a splendid melancholy look, despite her body being mostly made of machines.

“I’m grateful to you. For giving me a possibility.”

“Prepare some good sake, and we have a deal.”

“All right. I’ll get my best sake ready.”

Elfaria’s Reborn Forthorthian Army, Vandarion’s military, and Elexis’s DKI. All three factions had different objectives, and there was more than one victory condition. That’s why the future was still undecided, but one thing remained clear. A fierce battle was around the corner.

The Reborn Forthorthian Army had been successful in protecting the largest spaceport on Planet Alaia. But now that it was under their control, they would need to continue to defend it. As they wanted to enter a large-scale offensive against Vandarion, they didn’t have time for skirmishes over the spaceport. However, just concentrating forces around the spaceport was unwise. A practicable solution was required.

“Looks like we’ll need to seize control of Alaia,” Koutarou said, pointing out the problem as he stared at the hologram Ruth had prepared.

He had a similar dilemma in Forthorthe two thousand years in the past. Even after taking control of a city that served as a transportation hub, it couldn’t be fully utilized until the surrounding areas were secure. It was the same scenario with the spaceport now, so the situation was practically the same as it had been back then.

“Yes. We’ll at least need to gain control of the surrounding airspace and the orbit around the planet, or else anything apart from armed fleets won’t be able to land and take off,” Theia said, poking at the hologram of the planet with her slender index finger.

If the safety of the sky above the spaceport and Alaia’s orbit weren’t secured, the spaceport couldn’t be used for mass transport. Armed fleets might have a way of getting through, but their armament made them less efficient, and they didn’t have enough of them to use for serious transportation. So the first order of business now was seizing control of the locations required to move forward.

The hologram of Alaia that Theia had been poking passed by in front of Harumi. After she got a good look at it, Harumi raised her hand.

“Um, how do we do that exactly?” she asked.

Harumi wanted an easy to understand explanation. Specialized terminology had been thrown around during the strategy meeting for a while now, and being as ignorant of military affairs as she was, she wasn’t quite following. Of course, Yurika, Sanae, and Shizuka were in the same position. Yurika and Sanae in particularly looked like they had no idea what the others were even discussing.

“Specifically, we’ll attack various Imperial Army bases around the region. The most important one is the base that allows them to control the military satellites in orbit,” said Kiriha in response to Harumi’s question. As she had already come up with the strategy, she was more knowledgeable than the rest about what it would entail.

By suppressing the military bases around the spaceport, they could guarantee the safety of the airspace. And by suppressing the base in control of the military satellites, they could guarantee the safety of the orbit around the planet. With those two things secured, they could start using the spaceport to its fullest.

Shizuka understood the plan as Kiriha explained it, but a question arose in her mind.

“Can’t you, like, hack the military satellites like before?”

And it was a very legitimate question. Couldn’t the military satellites just be hacked like the GPS was?

“We could have, but not anymore,” answered Clan, the one in charge of said hacking.

“What do you mean?” Shizuka asked.

“Shizuka, if you were suddenly punched, what would you do?”

“Um... I would defend myself and counterattack.”

“Exactly. Just the same, the Imperial Army has taken countermeasures to prevent any further hacking.”

“So they’re not so stupid that they’ll just take a punch lying down...”

“That’s right. It looks like they’ve learned their lesson.”

During the battle for the spaceport, the Imperial Army had suffered from GPS hacking. In response, they beefed up their security after the fact, including physically disconnecting important systems from the network. While their systems would now have a harder time communicating, it went a long way for making hacking into them harder too. That was the kind of defense Clan was talking about.

“As a result, diversions in general will be harder to use. It’s not limited to just hacking,” Ruth said, adding on to Clan’s explanation.

Even if the military didn’t understand what had happened, they still knew that their positions had been misidentified. They wouldn’t fall for the same trick twice. So even if hacking was still possible, its effect would be limited compared to before. They were prepared for that kind of tactic now.

“I suppose the only one who would fall for the same scam twice would be someone like Yurika.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Maki-chan?!”

“Besides, I’m sure Darkness Rainbow will show up when things get desperate, so we should avoid using the same strategy again.”

Looking at it strategically, using the same plan twice was foolish. That only worked for frontal attacks. Not only was using deceptive plans continuously foolish, if they relied on them too heavily, it might bring about the arrival of Darkness Rainbow. Even if they were to pull a stunt like that again, they would have to wait some time in order to regain the element of surprise.

“For better or for worse, our next goal is this, um...” Koutarou said, pausing to look at the map. “Fort Charldrissa. This won’t be a defensive battle, but an offensive one, so of course we can’t use the same plan again.”

But as he spoke his mind to his friends, a certain word caught his attention.

Charldrissa... A base named after Princess Charl, huh?

And with that thought, Koutarou looked down at his chest. As things were peaceful right now, he wasn’t wearing his armor, but he still had a rank insignia pinned to his chest. It was a handmade ornamentation, made from wool and wood. In uneven, wobbly letters, it read: “Insignia of Forthorthe’s Blue Knight, the Super Important Bodyguard of Charl and Alaia.” While it may have appeared to be a child’s toy to anyone else, it was very precious to Koutarou. It was more than just an insignia; it was a treasured keepsake. And for as long as it remained on his chest, Koutarou would continue being the best knight he could.

“What is it, Koutarou? Are you hungry or something?” Theia asked.

Although he was looking down at his chest, it appeared as though he was looking at his stomach. That’s why Theia, who was sitting next to him, assumed it meant he was hungry. She leaned over, putting her face in front of his to get his attention.

Princess... Charl?

Suddenly seeing Theia's face next to the insignia, Koutarou couldn't help thinking she looked very similarly to someone from his past. What she said only enhanced that impression.

"Yeah, something like that. So let's go get something to eat after this meeting is over, Theia."

"You really are helpless..."

"You don't want to?"

"I didn't say that. I'm definitely going to. Got it?! So don't you dare go off alone!"

The spirit of the people who had given Koutarou that insignia long ago still lived on in Theia. Sensing that, Koutarou reaffirmed his resolve to fight.

Please be at ease, Your Highness. I will definitely protect this nation and her citizens.

Koutarou couldn't distinguish if those feelings were for Theia or for the people in his memories, but that didn't trouble him in the least. He was happy the wishes of the royal families hadn't changed at all over the last two thousand years.

When it came to going over the details of their strategy, the discussion led by Kiriha became very technical. That meant that Koutarou, who wasn't well versed in modern combat, along with the girls in the group who weren't well versed in combat whatsoever, moved on to other work. Koutarou was assigned selecting personnel for the squad he would be leading. As the qualities required of a soldier hadn't changed much with the passage of time, he knew what he was looking for. However, since his squad would be attacking Fort Charldrissa, his men would also need to be flexible and dependable in addition to everything else.

"Hey, Koutarou, we should bring those guys and their robots with us. They'll definitely be useful!"

Assisting Koutarou was Sanae's job. Together, they were looking over the material Ruth had gathered for the occasion. Since each soldier had manually signed their application when the came to the Reborn Forthorthian Army, Sanae could evaluate something of their personalities from their lingering auras.

"I bet you just want to see the robots get a chance to shine."

"Yeah!"

"Try and take this a little more seriously. People's lives are at stake here, you know?"

"I am being serious. Robots can break through walls, carry heavy stuff, and protect people. If they get a chance to shine, that means they're helping everyone, right?"

"...So you're actually thinking about this, huh?"

The candidates currently up for discussion were from the giant robot squad that they had fought during the virus weapon incident. After being treated like sacrificial pawns and thinking things through after the fact, all but the soldiers with families on different planets had volunteered to join the Reborn Forthorthian Army. If only someone had told them what the Imperial Army had in store for them beforehand, they would have defected sooner.

"Yes, now apologize to me."

"I'm sorry."

"You forgot the 'Sanae-sama' part."

"I'm sorry, Sanae-sama."

"Very good. So let's bring the robots with us!"

"Well, we want to settle things quickly, so it might be for the best. Let's take them with us after all."

Sanae had sensed that their reason for applying was genuine. Koutarou was well aware why they had changed sides, and he knew that those who hadn't defected still remained loyal to the Imperial Army for the sake of their families. Taking everything into consideration, he felt like Sanae's judgment was correct.

Moreover, they were experienced, and there was nothing lacking about the combat potential of their giant robots. So in the end, Koutarou chose to bring them with him.

“All right!”

“And yet, somehow...”

Koutarou was irked by Sanae’s reaction. Even though everything she had said was correct, he still had a sneaking suspicion she just wanted to see the robots.

“...Hmm?”

But his interest quickly shifted away from Sanae as a particular name on the list of applicants caught his eye. It name was near the top of the list, and he touched it to bring up the data on the person in question.

“It is him... So you applied too, Orion.”

When arranging the list alphabetically by the characters used in the language of Forthorthe, Orion was listed near the top. It was coincidence that Koutarou had happened to spot it there, but he knew that name. Orion was the soldier that had caught them when they were trying to get through a barrier. He did them a favor and let them pass through anyway.

“What is it, Koutarou?”

“Just a guy I know.”

“Hmm... He doesn’t seem like a bad guy.”

“Yeah, I can guarantee that much myself. That’s why I want to make him the adjutant of my squad.”

There was no doubting Orion’s loyalty to the royal families. Koutarou also felt a nostalgic camaraderie with him. There was no doubt this man should be his second-in-command.

“Hey! Your adjutant is supposed to be Sanae-chan, remember?!”

“You didn’t listen one bit at the meeting, did you? You’re the captain of the reconnaissance squad.”

“Huh, really?”

“I’m in charge of the offensive. You’re in charge of reconnaissance. Since we have enough people, we’re splitting up and doing what we’re each best at.”

“So I’m a captain! All right, I’m going to do my best!”

Up until now, Koutarou and the others had pretty much always acted together as a group, but under these circumstances, they couldn’t continue doing that. They would take charge of squads that would allow them to make full use of their individual talents. For example, Kiriha was in charge of strategy at headquarters, and Ruth was in charge of all the operators.

The only exceptions were Harumi and Clan. Harumi’s powers were more effective the closer she was to Koutarou, which naturally meant she would end up in whichever squad he did. And then there was Clan, who specialized in things like technology and behind the scenes espionage. There was also the complication that her identity couldn’t be made public. She wouldn’t be leading a squad either, but rather operating independently from her spaceship, the Cradle.

“Please do. Your efforts will make a difference in the coming battle.”

“We want to finish it with everyone as shipshape as possible, after all!”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

In order to safely use the spaceport, the Reborn Forthorthian Army would capture several Imperial Army bases in the surrounding areas. And the base that Koutarou and the others were in charge of capturing, Fort Charldrissa, was considered the most difficult one to take. On top of having air forces stationed there, it was well manned since the base was responsible for controlling the military satellites in orbit around the planet.

Charldrissa had one regiment of ground forces and one battalion of air forces for a total of three thousand troops. For not being on the main planet of Forthorthe, it was a considerably large base. It was also the largest in this area of Alaia.

Koutarou and the others had roughly the same numbers on their side. But since the defending base would be at an advantage, Koutarou and the others needed to devise a clever way to attack. With that in mind, the responsibility

resting on Sanae's reconnaissance squad was heavy. The information they gathered would determine the plan of attack.

"I'm counting on you," Koutarou said.

"Yeah!" Sanae cheered.

The truth was that he didn't want to have the girls fight. And he wasn't happy with Forthorthian citizens having to sacrifice their lives. That's why he wanted to finish this battle as quickly as possible. That was how the royal families fought, past and present. It was also the way the Blue Knight fought.

Assault

Tuesday, November 30th

The plan Kiriha devised for taking Fort Charldrissa involved a surprise attack and strategic sabotage carried out simultaneously. First, two forces would infiltrate the base from a location where guard was insufficient. From there, the covert force would disable defensive equipment while the strike force drew attention. They would work together to open the front gate and let the main force in.

If everything went well, the battle would be over in less than an hour. That was ideal. As the Reborn Forthorthian Army had to protect the spaceport, they wanted to avoid a prolonged battle.

"According to Sanae's report, the enemy's attention is directed towards the east side," Kiriha explained.

"Not the west where the front gate is, but the east that's harder to attack?" asked Koutarou.

"So it seems. After checking it out, there are records indicating that they were attacked by a rebel force from the east a while ago," she replied.

"So that's why they're focused there. Then what do we do?"

"I've already asked your attendant to cause a diversion on the east side."

“Her, huh? Then we can rest easy. When it comes to diversions, she’s the best around.”

“Using the opening she creates, attack from the north.”

“Not the west?”

“The geographical features to the north will make it easier to hide the giant robots. The west is an option, but we’ll have Theia’s main forces strike there. The terrain there is easier to traverse.”

“I see. Thanks, Kiriha-san. You’re always such a big help.”

“That is my job. Well, good luck. I’ll talk to you later.”

“You got it.”

Sensing that Koutarou and Kiriha’s call was over, his armor’s AI hung up. Even though they were using the hard-to-detect laser communications method, they were still in the middle of a covert operation and communications needed to be kept to a minimum.

When his call was over, a soldier who had been patiently waiting spoke up. “Your Excellence—”

“Orion, could you give it a rest with that ‘Your Excellence’ thing?” Koutarou instinctively interrupted the soldier. He felt self-conscious being addressed like that. It only made it worse that the soldier calling him that was older than he was.

“But then I would have no choice but to call you Lord Satomi.”

“...Okay, fine. Call me what you want.”

But in the end, Koutarou accepted the title. It was better than being called Lord Satomi, and he knew they didn’t have the time to squabble about it.

“Yes, sir. So Your Excellency, what did headquarters say?”

“Supposedly north is our best bet. Apparently they’re on guard to the east because they’ve been attacked there before.”

“Then I’ll let the squad know that we’re marching in that direction.”

“Please do. And let the covert force know too.”

“Understood.”

The young man serving as his adjutant saluted Koutarou before leaving. Making sure his footsteps couldn’t be heard, he disappeared into the darkness of the night forest. Koutarou and the others were currently making their way through it, but Koutarou was at the front of the line. His young adjutant left his side to report to their allies behind them which route they’d be taking. After waiting for the adjutant to disappear, Harumi moved up alongside Koutarou.

“...Satomi-kun, I can feel traces of mana. I think Darkness Rainbow is involved,” Harumi whispered, cautiously looking around.

While their allies were near, nobody was paying attention to her or Koutarou. They were more concerned with the enemy right now.

“...Can you tell what kind of magic it is?” he whispered back.

“...It’s still a ways out, so I can’t tell what spells are specifically being used. But since I can sense it from this distance, I believe they’ve used a great deal of mana in one place.”

The crest on Harumi’s forehead and her long hair briefly flashed silver. It was a sign that she was using magic.

“...So if it’s a detection spell, we’ve already been found out,” Koutarou whispered in an even lower voice.

“...I’m afraid so.”

Harumi sensing mana from the base was more like a sixth sense than an actual spell for detecting mana. A spell would have allowed her to sense it much sooner. It would also be more accurate than more passive forms of detection. But even so, enough mana had been used at the base that it could be sensed from a great distance. If that was the result a detection spell, it would have had a massive search area. It would also mean they could expect that the enemy already knew they were coming.

“...But I can’t imagine they’d use such a serious spell just to keep an eye on their surroundings. Something smaller would have be enough,” Harumi continued to whisper.

“...Which probably means they’ve got some kind of big magical weapon set up or something,” Koutarou responded, still in a whisper too.

“...Or they could be in the middle of creating something. They shouldn’t know that we’re attacking today, after all.”

“...Having magic used against you really is problematic...”

Koutarou took his eyes off Harumi and looked ahead in the direction they were marching with a bitter expression. The dense forest reduced visibility, but ahead lay Fort Charldrissa where there enemy was preparing something magical. Magic was remarkable and versatile took. It could be used in any number of ways in almost any situation. But that also meant that having it used against you was like having a jack-in-the-box in front of you with no way of knowing what surprise lay in store. It was an unpleasant situation, and the tension would only continue to mount as the handle turned.

Koutarou’s combat troops safely reached the vicinity of Fort Charldrissa. No one had pursued or confronted them, so it seemed they’d escaped detection so far. Right now, they were concealing themselves in a nearby valley while waiting for the troops in the back to catch up.

“Sakuraba-senpai, can you sense anything?”

“It’s not just one color of magic... There are several spells being used at once!”

While waiting for the rear to catch up, Koutarou and Harumi moved away from the other troops to observe the base. Koutarou used his spirit sight and Harumi used her magic to gather additional information.

Despite it being night, the base could clearly be seen. Being a military installment, it was well illuminated. Inside the fence surrounding the base was a runway with several fighters lined up next to it. There were also plenty of cannons and machine gun turrets installed around the base, all pointed up towards the sky. Tanks had been placed to protect key points, and there were soldiers actively patrolling the base. It was indeed well defended. They must have realized they would be the next target after the spaceport.

After concentrating, Harumi could eventually sense the mana from before coming from inside the base. Her reading was more detailed this time. It wasn't just one powerful flow of mana, but three. Then a sudden voice from behind gave them even more information.

"This feels like Yellow, Orange, and Green. At least three leaders of Darkness Rainbow are probably here."

"Aika-san! You've already caught up?" Koutarou exclaimed.

"We're light and nimble, unlike your squad, Satomi-kun," Maki replied.

She had walked over to Koutarou and Harumi after arriving with her troops. In her indigo mantle, it almost looked as if she'd walked out of the night itself. But she was smiling brightly at Harumi and Koutarou. She was more like the moon that shone through the darkness.

"I see... So were you serious about three of the leaders being here?"

Maki's arrival had alleviated some of the tension in the air, but it was short-lived. Koutarou knew they needed to be focusing on what Maki had just said.

"Yes," she replied. "Considering the atmosphere around this mana, I don't think there's any doubting that it's those three."

Maki was originally a leader of Darkness Rainbow herself. That's why she was well aware of the distinct traits in the mana that each of the other leaders gave off. Because of that, she could identify them just by sensing fluctuations in the mana. It was like a signature, but only Maki could see it. It wasn't something just anyone that could use magic could do. Maki's mana reserves weren't all that much, but when it came to skill and accuracy, she was second to none.

"And if those three are here, I imagine the other three and Maya-sama are here as well," Maki continued.

"That might be true. They know that they can't afford to lose this base, so it's safer just to have everyone come," said Harumi, agreeing with Maki's suspicion.

Considering the situation, it was hard to imagine that they would place magical girls in all of the surrounding bases. Since there were only a few of them, they would focus their magical power wherever needed to be defended

the most. If they didn’t work as a group, they’d be taken out by Koutarou and the others one by one.

However, there was something that made Maki anxious.

“But this feels too obvious. It’s like they’re asking us to find them...”

Why didn’t they try hiding their mana? If all of the leaders were here, it would have been easy to do. But it seemed like they’d made no attempt at it. Maki couldn’t understand why.

“I think it’s just like you said, Aika-san,” Koutarou said.

He seemed to have figured it out. He could imagine a reason why they wouldn’t bother hiding their mana.



“Oh?”

“It’s on purpose. They’re telling us, ‘Hey, we’re over here. If you don’t hurry, it’ll be too late.’”

“They wouldn’t go out of their way to do that, would they?”

“They would. It’s just like something Elexis and Maya would think of.”

“So it’s a challenge?”

“I’m wondering that myself. It might be a challenge, or it might be a trap. Either way, it’s clear it’s going to mean trouble.”

If the flashy Elexis was in charge of things, it might be a grand challenge. But if Maya was in charge, it could be a trap. Of course, it could also just be Crimson running out of patience. There were several possibilities, but they all had one thing in common. The mana emanating from the base was powerful. Whatever was ahead of them would be a mighty obstacle.

Infiltrating Fort Charldrissa wasn't particularly difficult. Between Clan's optic camouflage and Maki's magic, it was easy to make a hole in the metal fence surrounding the base. Clan also sent a device to flash lights a few kilometers east of the base in order keep the enemy distracted. That allowed Koutarou and the others to break into the base without any problems.

I know it's not realistic to use magic to keep watch over such a large base, but... when there's nothing at all, that's nerve-racking in its own way...

Koutarou and the others had been able to infiltrate the base so easily because they were only up against the standard, mundane precautions. Sanae had already confirmed that there wasn't any spiritual energy at work, and Harumi and Maki determined that there weren't any magical defenses. It all seemed too easy to Koutarou, especially knowing Darkness Rainbow was involved, and that feeling only made things seem more eerie.

It seems like this really is some kind of trap. I need to stay on my toes or I'll walk straight into it.

And it was only natural for Koutarou to think that way, considering he had no idea what Vandarion's true intentions were. If he had known then, things surely would have happened differently.

"Satomi-kun, Sakuraba-san, I'm off," said Maki, snapping Koutarou back to reality.

Maki and her squad were going to split off from Koutarou and the others now that they were inside. They needed to operate in secret as they disabled defensive equipment and opened the front gate.

"Please be careful, Maki-san. Let's all meet again safe and sound," Harumi said, bidding her a heartfelt farewell.

"You guys are the cornerstone of the operation this time, Aika-san. We're counting on you," said Koutarou, concerned in his own way.

In this battle, Maki's squad would be in the most danger. A small squad of just ten people had to disable the defensive equipment and open the front gate of Fort Charldrissa. If they were discovered, escape would be difficult. They'd been tasked with the riskiest job. Kiriha had specifically assigned it to Maki for her

calmness, her rationality, and her versatile magic. Really, this part of the mission was only possible because they had Maki on their side. That's how critical her role was.

"Heh, in that case, is there a reward to be had if I complete the mission unharmed?" she asked, smirking.

Perhaps it was because she was well aware of the danger she was in and the importance of her job, but it was a rare request from Maki. She was asking to be doted on by Koutarou.

"That's—"

"I'm just kidding. Well, then I'm really off this time. See you later."

But in the end, Maki was Maki. She didn't want to hear Koutarou turn her down, so she put an end to the conversation by brushing it off as a joke. While she was unmatched in strength as the indigo magical girl, when it came to interpersonal relationships, she was a coward.

"Aika-san, there will be a reward!"

However, Koutarou knew Maki well. He'd also promised Maki's red-headed friend that he would treasure her. That's why he was able to call out to Maki now without hesitation.

"Ah..."

Hearing those words from Koutarou, Maki stopped in place for a moment.

"Then I'll do my best!" she called as she looked over shoulder, flashing a radiant smile.

Seeing Maki leave like that, Koutarou let out a sigh of relief. Harumi did the same.

"Seeing her like that, I think she'll probably be fine," said Harumi.

"If anything, I'm more worried about us," replied Koutarou.

Maki was an experienced warrior. Her job was dangerous, but there was no need to worry if she could make full use of her abilities. From this point on, Koutarou and Harumi would need to focus on their own safety.

“It’ll be fine,” Harumi assured him.

“Huh?”

“I’ll protect you, Satomi-kun.”

“Hahaha! Okay, I’m counting on you. Really.”

“Of course! Leave it to me!”

Koutarou and Harumi turned towards the main building of Fort Charldrissa at the same time. The main building was their next goal, and they’d be breaking in to make a scene. Since they would be purposefully drawing the enemy’s attention to distract them from Maki, their job was also dangerous. They looked at each other briefly to confirm their resolve before nodding and starting to run with their troops in tow.

Maki’s objective was in the maintenance tunnel under the base. The tunnel housed a communications cable that connected the base headquarters to the other facilities, the defensive equipment within the base, and the antenna that relayed with the satellites in orbit. Maki’s destination was just before where that cable branched off. Her job was to change the connections there in order to disable the base facilities, the defensive equipment, and the antenna.

“Please hurry! We don’t have much time to spare!” she quietly called to her troops.

“Yes, ma’am! Everyone begin work at once!”

Since Fort Charldrissa was originally an allied base, the Reborn Forthorthian Army had an accurate map of it. Thanks to that, things were going well. Maki and her squad were able to reach their destination without getting lost. The patrolling soldiers were a problem, but Maki used her mind manipulation magic to get her squad through safely.

They eventually reached their destination and began working on sabotaging the system. While her subordinates were working, Maki kept guard with a serious look on her face. They’d managed to avoid getting caught in the Imperial Army’s surveillance net, but there was something that made Maki anxious.

Green might still know our location. If she used her Future Forecast ahead of time, it wouldn't matter if there are traces of mana right now!

If Green had used Future Forecast several days ahead of time to determine Maki and Koutarou's positions, there would be no need for the Imperial Army to spread out their guard. They would only have to position themselves strategically and effectively, and down here in the tunnel would be one of those places. With Maki's subordinates working away on the cable, it would be easy to ambush them. Getting attacked here would spell certain failure for their mission.

"What a scary face, Maki."

"Crimson?!"

Maki's fear took form in the worst way possible—Dark Crimson, the leader of Darkness Rainbow with the highest attack power. She was the last person Maki wanted to find them.

This was a grim turn of events. With her squad in the middle of working in the confined space of an underground tunnel, Crimson's explosive magic would be fatal. Maki wouldn't be able to protect everyone on her own. She couldn't avoid the sinking feeling she was about to lose her whole team.

"Jeez, I finally found you. This was the fourth most likely place you'd be according to Green's Future Forecast from three days ago."

"Stop right there, Crimson! If you move a muscle, I will attack!"

Maki readied her staff and pointed the tip towards Crimson. The soldiers who were working also realized the situation they were in and drew their weapons. But their positioning in the tunnel was working against them. Only two of the nine soldiers had a clear shot at Crimson.

"Calm down. I didn't come to fight today either," she announced.

Unlike Maki's crew, Crimson left herself wide open. She simply stood still, not readying her staff or chanting any spells. She just stared at Maki.

"I don't believe that," Maki declared.

"I'm sure you don't, but it was an order from your master."

“Maya-sama?”

“Don’t get me wrong. We didn’t get to go all out last time, so I’d love for you to attack me first. I’m allowed to defend myself after all.”

“There’s really nothing to gain from attacking you.”

Crimson rarely ever lied. She much preferred using fists and firepower to mind games. And the stronger Crimson’s opponent was, the more anxious she was to fight them, and in turn, the more honest she was. Since Maki knew that better than anyone, she turned around and issued a new order to her subordinates.

“Everyone, continue working! We have no time to spare!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

The soldiers were dubious, but they obeyed and got back to work on the cable. They knew time wasn’t on their side.

“That’s more like it.”

“So why did you come, Crimson?”

“I came to see you, of course.”

Sensing that Maki’s cooling hostility, Crimson casually approached her. She was convinced that Maki wouldn’t attack, and her instincts were correct.

“I’m happy, but obviously that’s not the only reason, is it?”

“You’re as smart as ever. There’s something I want you to tell me.”

“You want to know something?”

“About your man.”

“You mean Satomi-kun? Don’t call him my man.”

“Well, he might as well be if our serious little Maki doesn’t flat out deny it. Anyways, who is this Koutarou guy really?”

Crimson had come to obtain information on Koutarou. She knew there was a high chance of making peaceful contact with Maki, especially after Green had revealed her possible positions with Future Forecast. But this was a job she had

accepted from Elexis. Since she wasn't allowed to fight, she had time to spare and accepted the job of coming to see Maki.

"Satomi-kun is Satomi-kun. Nothing more, nothing less," Maki responded calmly.

"There's no way that's it. He was getting attention for the way he looked and fought before even coming here. Not to mention he closely resembles a certain native legend here. If you're trying to incite something, the run-up is taking too long and there was no reason to start it up back on Earth. There have also been too many coincidences with the legend for it to be *just* a coincidence. There has to be something more to it. Or so Elexis said."

Elexis and Darkness Rainbow were closing in on the truth about Koutarou. As they had fought with him several times before, they had a lot of circumstantial evidence. It was more than enough to make them suspicious of Koutarou's identity.

"Crimson, I know what you're getting at. And what you'll do if I don't tell you the truth."

A drop of sweat ran down Maki's spine. Crimson said she had no intention of fighting, but it was unclear if it would stay that way if she didn't get what she wanted. There was no telling if she'd go on a rampage to get Maki to start talking. Everything would be ruined if that happened now. Maki knew Crimson was simpleminded enough that she hadn't put her in this position on purpose, but she still felt her hand being forced.

"Then you can just be honest with me," said Crimson.

"I just hope that what I can tell you will be enough to satisfy you."

If Maki said too much, it would put her friends in a difficult situation. But if she didn't say anything, the mission would be in danger. It was a very fine tightrope to walk She almost felt like praying.

"You're right, Crimson," Maki finally said. "It wasn't a ploy to gain public support, and it wasn't anything intentional. It all pretty much started with a lone girl praying. One thing led to another after that, but he's done the best he

could with what was thrown at him. That's how we've ended up in this complicated situation. If it seems like there's something more to it, it's just because that's the kind of guy he is."

"Hmm..."

"That's all I can say."

With a serious look on her face, Maki stared down Crimson. She'd said what she could. All that was left was whether or not Crimson would accept that, but Maki wasn't optimistic. If Crimson made a move, she was ready to start an incantation right away.

"That's all I needed to hear. That's what Elexis wanted to know."

Betraying Maki's expectations, Crimson nodded with a satisfied expression.

"Huh?"

Thrown totally off her game, it was all Maki could manage to say. She was stupefied.

"Koutarou wasn't intentionally put on a hero's pedestal. As long as Elexis knows that much, he can apparently use the evidence at hand to figure out the rest for himself."

Having known him for a while now, Elexis had plenty of information on Koutarou. All he really needed to piece it all together was the right perspective, and that depended on whether or not the Reborn Forthorthian Army had intentionally made a hero out of him.

"Elexis said he'll be sure of it by the end of this battle."

"...Then there really is something going on here?"

"Let me put it this way for you. Maya's been enjoying herself."

"That's bad... We have to finish our work quickly!"

Maki's surprise only lasted for a short while. She quickly returned to her usual self as she desperately racked her brain over what to do next.

"So there you have it. Let's meet again sometime, Maki."

With Maki's focus wavering, now was the perfect time for Crimson to attack her. And yet she didn't. She simply turned and walked away peacefully as promised. To Crimson, there was nothing more boring than a surprise attack that ended a fight quickly.

"Crimson!"

"What? Are you ready to fight now?"

"I'm glad to see that you're doing well."

"...See you, Maki."

"Yes. Let's meet again some other time."

Crimson wasn't picky about making sure it was a fair fight, but if she was going to fight, she would prefer a proper, straightforward fight so that it would last longer. She was willing to wait for that kind of opportunity.

Around the same time Maki and Crimson crossed paths, Koutarou and his platoon made their way into the main building of Fort Charldrissa. Since Koutarou had brought the robots with him at Sanae's behest, he put them to work and used them to break through the wall of the building to let everyone else in.

"We'll follow after you once we've fully blocked off this place! Please move the forces up ahead!"

"Please do! But don't be reckless! After ten minutes, head out even if you haven't finished the blockade! If we can't reach the headquarters within ten minutes, we're leaving!" Koutarou ordered.

"Understood! Best of luck to you!"

"Thank you! You too!"

Koutarou and his platoon's goal now was to conceal the presence of Maki's squad. In other words, it was their job to stand out. Attacking the center of the enemy base seemed like the quickest way to get their attention. Since this facility managed the control of the military satellites, it was particularly valuable

to the Imperial Army. Surely they would go out of their way to defend it. And Koutarou wasn't disappointed. When they arrived, the Imperial Army forces were gathered in the center of the base.

"Sakuraba-senpai, please!"

"Yes!"

In total, the Imperial Army was about three thousand strong. If they got completely surrounded, Koutarou's platoon of forty wouldn't stand a chance. They weren't really looking for a fight; they just needed to distract the Imperial Army for ten minutes or so. That would give Maki and her squad enough time to infiltrate and let Theia's forces inside through the front gate. But even if everything went according to plan, Koutarou and his men would still be on their own for several minutes. If they let the Imperial Army put them on the defensive, they would be in trouble, so they were planning on going all out from the start.

"Shine, Signaltin!"

Responding to Harumi's call, Koutarou's sword began shining. The light was pure white at first, but it turned red as it grew brighter. Red magic was the type focused on attack spells. Accordingly, as Signaltin's mana was being charged with destructive powers, the blade gleamed with red light.

"Hyaaaaah!"

Booooom!

With a single swing of Signaltin, Koutarou destroyed the shutter that had been lowered to keep out intruders. The soldiers standing at the ready on the other side were too slow to respond and were also hit with the blast. They'd been watching Koutarou and his men through the surveillance camera and hadn't expected him to knock out the shutter with a single swing of a sword.

"The distortion field generator is... that thing!"

Koutarou was quick to seize the opportunity. He swung Saguratin in his left hand and sent out an Aura Blade.

Shwiiing!

The Aura Blade sailed through the air with all the speed and force of Koutarou's swing. It cut through the barrier generator set up behind the soldiers. Not even their powerful defensive machinery was any match for spiritual energy. The generator was easily cleaved in two.

"A-An enemy attack! Drive them back!"

Seeing Koutarou emerge from the explosion of the destroyed generator, the enemy captain hurriedly ordered his men on the offensive.

"If you had opened the shutter and attacked, we'd have been in a tough spot... but sadly, you're too late."

Koutarou quickly dropped down to the floor. Not a moment later, a volley of bullets flew overhead. Koutarou's troops were firing on the Imperial Army soldiers to keep them from firing first.

"All right, looks like that went well."

As Koutarou got up, he saw all of the Imperial Army soldiers collapsed on the floor. However, not a single one was dead. Koutarou's men had fired special rounds intended to incapacitate the enemy, but not harm them.

"Your Excellency!" Koutarou's adjutant, Orion, called out as he ran over to him.

Orion had been in command of the shooting, and based on his expression, he had something to say on the matter.

"I know what you want to say. But there's no time to rest. We're moving on right away," said Koutarou.

"No, that's not it... Shouldn't we be using live rounds instead? This is just too dangerous for you, Your Excellency."

Orion was worried about Koutarou. The bullets that knocked out their opponents had almost no firepower. They were only designed to apply concussive force, which meant that no matter how many bullets they fired, they wouldn't be able to take out barriers. That put the on onus on Koutarou to take the front line and deal with them. Orion knew how dangerous that was.

“This will do as long as I’m still here in one piece,” Koutarou replied. “I’m not going to ask you to kill as long as I have these two swords.”

Koutarou understood Theia and Alaia’s wishes. That was why, unless there was absolutely no other choice, he wasn’t going to let soldiers from the same country kill each other.

“Your Excellency...”

“But when I’m not around, I’ll leave the decision of what bullets to use up to you. I can’t ask you not to defend yourselves.”

“...”

Hearing Koutarou’s answer, Orion straightened his posture and gave him a crisp salute, just like he’d learned at the academy.

“What’s with the salute all of a sudden?”

“I am honored to fight at your side, Your Excellency. We will do everything to protect you, so please be at ease.”

Even as Forthorthe continued to develop and move away from the era of knights, its people were steadfast in living by the ways of chivalry. That was especially true for the soldiers who had volunteered to protect their country. Koutarou incited a special devotion in them, and they were proud to serve under him.

“H-Hey...”

“Then if you’ll excuse me, I’ll hurry the soldiers.”

After one-sidedly saying what he wanted, Orion quickly returned to his subordinates, leaving behind a confused Koutarou.

“Being a hero is hard work, isn’t it, Satomi-kun?” Harumi giggled.

“This is nothing to laugh about, Senpai. I’m not doing anything special...”

Koutarou simply didn’t want to betray the people close to him. He wanted to respect their wishes as much as he could, princess, empress, solider, commoner, or otherwise. Koutarou didn’t feel like he was doing anything particularly worthy of praise.

“Normally it’s not that easy to pull off such a thing.”

“Well, that’s because I have Sakuraba-senpai and others who aren’t normal helping me out.”

“Then you must be very special indeed, Satomi-kun. If not, then all these people wouldn’t be helping you, would they?”

“Please give me a break, Senpai.”

“I’m afraid I can’t. Please do your best, Sir Knight.”

Since she had just used Signaltin’s powers, the sword crest was still faintly present on Harumi’s forehead and her hair was still glowing silver. Because of that, Koutarou felt like it wasn’t just Harumi talking to him, but also a certain precious someone from his past. It sent his heart aflutter. But he knew this wasn’t the time to get sentimental. Koutarou quickly changed gears and asked Harumi something that had been on his mind.

“By the way, Sakuraba-senpai, can you sense any mana around here?”

He was worried about Darkness Rainbow. After parting with Maki, they had encountered Imperial Army forces three times, but there had been no sign of Darkness Rainbow yet. They were supposedly here, but they weren’t attacking. Koutarou couldn’t help wondering why.

“They’re not nearby. It seems they’re more, um... to the south.”

While listening to Harumi, Koutarou brought up a holographic map. They had infiltrated from the north and continued to move in that direction, essentially towards the runway.

“...What are they trying to do? Why aren’t they attacking?”

Koutarou’s expression was serious as he turned the matter over in his head. There was no doubt that magic was being used in the base, but the leaders of Darkness Rainbow hadn’t shown themselves. There was also no sign that there was any magical surveillance being used, and the soldiers were all equipped with standard, non-magical weapons. Something seemed very, very strange.

“Your Excellency!”

“Satomi-kun, everyone’s gathered.”

“I guess nothing will come from worrying over it. Let’s go, Sakuraba-senpai!”

“Yes!”

While Darkness Rainbow bothered him, it was more important that they didn’t stick around in one place. After putting his thoughts aside, Koutarou led his platoon through the passage.

By the time they reached the base headquarters, most of their ten minutes was already up.

“We made it in time!”

Koutarou peeked around the corner of the passage and confirmed their remaining time. They only had a minute and a half to go. They were perfectly on schedule according to Kiriha’s plan. With the time they had left, they should have an opening to charge into the headquarters just ahead of them. But Koutarou wasn’t focused on the headquarters just because it would attract the enemy’s attention. There was another important job to take care of.

“Orion, have you gotten any report from the covert forces?”

“Nothing yet. They might be delayed, or...”

“Nothing will come from worrying. We’re charging in like planned!”

That was a failsafe in the event that Maki and her squad failed. As long as they could take the headquarters, they could disable the defensive weapons, gain control of the military satellites, and, of course, open the front gates. During the planning stage, Kiriha had properly accounted for multiple ways to clear each objective.

But even so, if Koutarou and the others got too hung up on charging in, the entire plan might collapse on itself. That’s why they needed to wait for the right time to make their move. The entire plan didn’t hinge on them. They were just a backup in case of an unexpected delay. But as luck would have it, Maki had fallen behind schedule, which gave them their opening to charge in.

Meanwhile, inside the headquarters were soldiers with their guns trained on the entrance. They also had a powerful distortion field deployed just before the door. Even if Koutarou breached it like he had the others, it wouldn't take out the soldiers just behind it, and Koutarou would be temporarily halted by the barrier. That would give the Imperial Army soldiers an opportunity to attack and call for their reinforcements lurking nearby. They would swiftly defeat Koutarou first, then attack his forces from both sides. That was the strategy the base commander had devised.

"It looks like they're falling straight for our trap..."

A middle-aged woman stared at the door from behind the lines of soldiers. Despite her age, her well-trained body made her look much younger than she was. This was the commander of the base, the knighted Lady Tygashion. Her long hair was adorned with her family crest, a petrel with its wings spread.

"They're very naive. This should be simple," a soldier commented.

"We can only hope. We have nothing more to fall back on," she replied.

Though her subordinate was optimistic, Lord Tygashion still had a stern look on her face. She was confident in her plan, but the Reborn Forthorthian Army couldn't be underestimated. Even taking their naivety into account, she wasn't fully assured of her victory.

"We can't afford any mistakes on our side. All we can do now is pray for protection from the Goddess of Dawn..."

Based on the speed of Koutarou's invasion, Lady Tygashion figured she would only have one shot at an effective counterattack. She knew she wouldn't get the time to reposition her soldiers. That said, she also knew that constantly changing positions or only sending in a few men at a time was foolish. Lady Tygashion needed to concentrate her counterattack in a single location, and she had chosen the headquarters for the showdown.

Since she didn't know that Koutarou and the others had Clan's technology on their side, she had no way of knowing about their interference with the underground comms cable, and she fully expected the base headquarters to be their primary target. Moreover, since Koutarou and the others weren't killing Imperial Army soldiers, she didn't have to worry too much about putting her

men in harm's way. She could use them like pawns to guide Koutarou and his forces into using the same tactics over and over as she prepared for the battle for the headquarters. She believed that was the most effective plan.

Now it was just a matter of seeing it through and figuring out whether or not it would work. Lady Tygashion believed she had done all she could to prepare in the short amount of time she had. All that was left to do was pray. With everything else in place, she believed that was the best she could do with the time she had left.

"He's here! The knight in blue armor!" a soldier cried.

The surveillance camera set up at the door revealed a knight wearing blue armor. Everyone in the room knew what that meant, and the tension spiked.

"The enemy will be stopped by the barrier for only a moment. Keep calm and aim properly!"

Soon after Lady Tygashion issued her order, the door to the headquarters was sent flying at a terrific speed.

Kaboom!

The splinters of the shattered door splattered against the barrier's surface. The soldiers then waited for the knight in blue armor to get caught up in the barrier, but he wasn't the next thing to slam into the barrier.

Thunk! Clank, clank, clank...

"Oh no, it's a flash ba— No, that's...!"

There was an object shaped like a lemon rolling across the floor. Lady Tygashion thought it was flash bang at first. As the Reborn Forthorthian Army didn't kill and wanted the control room in tact so they could take over the satellites, they wouldn't use a real grenade here. Lady Tygashion's line of thinking wasn't totally wrong. A stun grenade was a standard tactic when breaking into a room like this.

Psssshhh...

But the lemon-shaped device wasn't emitting light or loud noise. Instead, it released high-temperature smoke at an alarming rate. It wasn't a stun grenade, but a thermal smoke grenade.

"Preposterous! Who would use something like that in a place like this?! Now none of us can see!"

Strategically, it was an unthinkable move. As the name suggested, it polluted the room with a hot smokescreen. Not only did the smoke obscure vision, the heat prevented the use of thermal sensors, and the metal particles released with the smoke made radar unusable. It was a powerful enough tool that using it in a confined area before entering would indeed mean that neither side would be able to see what was going on. It seemed like a losing game for everyone, and Lady Tygashion couldn't get her head around what her opponent was thinking. She was more taken aback by that than by being blinded with smoke.

"This is what happens when you only rely on just your eyes. There's still sounds, smells, and vibrations. Master martial artists even have a sixths sense for the presence of others. But the bottom line is that you were unprepared."

"Who's there?!"

"Careful. You shouldn't move any more than that. If you take another step forward, you'll cut your own throat and die."

"What?!"

Lord Tygashion almost instinctively moved forward, but the sensation of something cold on her throat stopped her in her tracks. The next moment, the room's ventilation system kicked in and the grenade stopped putting out smoke. The room seemed to clear up almost instantly.

"H-How could this..."

As the smoke dissipated, a surprising sight revealed itself. Apart from Lady Tygashion, all of the Imperial Army soldiers were collapsed on the floor. Standing over them were a knight in blue armor, a girl with silver hair, and Reborn Forthorthian Army soldiers with strange devices on their heads.

At first, Koutarou had been planning on breaching the headquarters using the same method as always. He hadn't had any problems with it so far, so there didn't seem to be a reason to change it. That is, there wouldn't have been if Harumi hadn't spoken up.

"We'll go in the same we have—"

"Please wait, Satomi-kun. I think we should change our tactics for this last time."

"What do you mean?"

"If we were going up against Kiriha-san, I think she would let us attack as we pleased to get us to lower our guard while she prepared a trap at the very end. This would definitely be the place for that trap."

Harumi believed that if there were any traps, they would be at the headquarters. Since there were multiple routes there, trying to lay them along the way would be ineffective. Instead, it would make more sense to set a trap at their ultimate destination. And while they weren't going up against Kiriha, it wasn't unreasonable to assume an experienced enemy commander might think the same way.

"Hmm, I see. You might be right."

"Even if I'm not, I don't think there's anything to lose by switching things up."

"Then let's do it. Thank you, Sakuraba-senpai."

After thinking about it, Koutarou realized she was right and agreed to go along with a new plan. They'd try a different approach and go with a thermal smoke grenade. Koutarou would be able to see with his spirit sight, and the soldiers were equipped with goggles that came with spiritual energy sensors. They could blind their opponents while keeping the upper hand.

And this was the result. All of the soldiers in the headquarters had been defeated, and only Lady Tygashion was left standing. While there had been some danger along the way, Koutarou and the others had successfully accomplished their objective.

Koutarou's last objective in Fort Charldrissa was settling things with the base commander, Lady Tygashion. He lowered his sword and decided to try talking with her.

"Could you just surrender, Lady Tygashion?"

"Threats won't work on me. I know you won't kill anyone. And even if you did, you'd never find out the codes for the military satellites that way."

Lady Tygashion was a tough opponent not just in battle, but in negotiations as well. She knew what Koutarou was really there for, as well as the limitations being part of the Reborn Forthorthian Army placed on him. It didn't look like she would convinced to lay down her arms so easily. But Koutarou had his reasons for asking her to surrender anyway, and it just so happened that one of those reasons made itself apparent in that moment.

Beep!

It was a message from Maki in the underground tunnel.

"Sorry for the delay, Satomi-kun. We just finished the work on our end. We're opening the front gate right now."

"Good timing. Thank you, Aika-san."

While Maki and her squad had been slowed down by the encounter with Crimson, they still managed to complete their objective within the specified timeframe. It was a solid job well done, just as expected from Maki.

"Well, now we don't need the codes anymore," Koutarou said, turning to Lady Tygashion.

"Tch..."

She didn't know how they had pulled it off, but Lady Tygashion knew what it they meant that the front gate was open. The base's systems had been hijacked by the Reborn Forthorthian Army.

"The rest is up to you. With your headquarters lost, your chain of command crippled, your defensive equipment and facilities out of use, and your men unable to fight, are you still going to challenge the undefeated Mastir family to battle?"

“That’s...”

Lady Tygashion’s mask of confidence began crumbling. With the systems in enemy hands, she knew she had already lost strategically. It gave the Reborn Forthorthian too much of an upper hand. She knew that. All that was left for them to decide was what to do with the Imperial Army forces stationed at the base.

“It’ll be impossible, even for us, to avoid casualties in a clash like this. Will you still not back down?”

Koutarou tried his best to embody the ideals of Alaia and Theia, but he knew there were times a more realistic approach would have to be taken. Just the same as what had happened two thousand years ago, there were some sacrifices that couldn’t be avoided. That was the kind of situation they were in now. If Lady Tygashion wouldn’t yield, this would turn into a bloodbath. There would be no avoiding it. That’s why Koutarou was earnestly trying to convince her not to walk that gory road.

“I understand the situation,” she conceded. “But even so, I cannot surrender.”

Despite Koutarou’s attempts to dissuade her, Lady Tygashion wouldn’t stand down. But there was something strange about her declaration. There was no confidence in her words and no hope in her eyes as she stood her ground. Rather, there was an air of despair about her. The look on her face only conveyed sadness and resignation.

“Are you insane?!” Koutarou shouted. “You’ll all be wiped out!”

“Anyone ranked battalion commander or higher has had their family taken hostage. We’ve received strict orders to fight until the last man. For the sake of our families, there is no backing down for us!”

It wasn’t that Lady Tygashion wanted to fight. She simply had no choice in the matter. With her family being used against her, her hands were tied. The same was true for the battalion commanders. They had to fight, even if it cost them their lives, in order to protect their families. If they surrendered here, word would get back to Vandarion and the lives of their families would be forfeit.

“Curse you, Vandarion! How despicable can you be?!”

“You... No, I should call you Blue Knight-dono! Kill us and move on! Don’t let someone like that do as he pleases with this country!”

Lady Tygashion had steeled herself for this. She knew they couldn’t win, but she also knew they couldn’t surrender. The battle wouldn’t be over until all of the battalion commanders were dead. Sacrificing themselves in a head-on clash would be the quickest way to end it.

“Don’t give up like that! Nothing is certain yet!”

But Koutarou didn’t see it that way. He hadn’t given up yet.

“But—”

Lady Tygashion was about to deny it. What he was saying seemed impossible, but when she saw the burning look of determination in Koutarou’s eyes, words failed her.

“What if the battalion commanders were unable to take command?” he asked.

“The company commanders would take charge... I see! The company commanders haven’t had their family members taken hostage, so they could make the decision to retreat!”

“That’s right! Hey, my dear servant, can you hear me?” Koutarou activated his armor’s comms and called for Clan, who was standing by in the Cradle.

“What now all of a sudden?”

“Can you determine where all the soldiers ranked battalion commander and higher are?”

“If I knew what they looked like, sure. But why would you need to know something like that?”

“Just shut up and get on it! I’ll get on my knees and beg or whatever you want later! Just hurry up!”

“Whatever it takes, huh?”

“Once you identify them, let me, Landlord-san, Sanae, and Yurika know! We need to incapacitate them as quickly as possible!”

“I understand. Just wait a minute.”

The base had right around three thousand troops divided into one regiment of ground forces and one battalion of air forces. A regiment comprised four battalions, each led by their own commander. Combined with Lady Tygashion and the air force commander, that meant there was a total of six people in Fort Charldrissa with the rank of battalion commander or higher. Koutarou believed the battle could be brought to a safe end if those six people were incapacitated.

With supporters of Vandarion working as moles in the Imperial Army, if Lady Tygashion or any of the battalion commanders called for a retreat, their families would be killed. But the situation would be different if someone else—someone whose family wasn’t being threatened—took charge. If the chain of command fell apart after the battalion commanders had been lost, a retreat would naturally be called for in order to regroup.

But the conditions in order to achieve that scenario were extremely tricky. They would need to determine the precise location of the remaining five battalion commanders, and then attack them in a way that didn’t make it look like they were aiming for the commanders. Considering the task at hand, Koutarou had called on Clan for help, even though he knew she needed to be involved in this as little as possible in order to keep her presence hidden.

If Veltlion is that desperate, something serious must have happened. I don’t know who it is, but whoever’s behind this is risking getting blown to the other side of spacetime...

At the time, Clan didn’t understand why she was being asked to do such a thing, but realizing the seriousness of the situation, she gladly complied. No one understood Koutarou on the battlefield better than Clan. She trusted in him and responded without hesitation. Thanks to the connection Maki and her squad had opened, Clan was able to use the base’s systems to begin searching for the battalion commanders.

“Blue Knight-dono... I don’t know what to say...”

“You don’t have to say anything. Vandarion’s the one at fault here.”

“Even then... I’m sorry. I cannot blame you for hating me after kowtowing to evil and raising my sword against you, but I just can’t abandon my family.”

Lady Tygashion’s only daughter and her sickly husband had been taken hostage by Vandarion. They both meant more to her than her own life, so calling for a retreat was out of the question, no matter how many soldiers it might cost. Tears overflowed from Lady Tygashion’s eyes as she gritted her teeth in disgust at her own powerlessness. She was at the mercy of that villain’s orders.

“Don’t worry. I won’t let Vandarion have his way. If things go well, we might even be able to stop this before a full-scale battle breaks out here.”

The situation was bad. At this rate, the blood of many would be shed in vain. But if all of the battalion commanders could be captured, they could put an end to the battle before things really went south. Not all hope was lost.

Rrrrrumble...

But Koutarou and the others hadn’t yet met Vandarion’s next scheme. Just before the two armies were about to clash, Vandarion’s trump card caused the very foundation of Fort Charldrissa to shake.

“What’s that shaking?! What’s going on?!”

“I don’t know! But I’m sure it’s coming from the underground hangar on the other side of the runway! That’s the only place out of my jurisdiction! Top brass has been doing something there!”

Following up on what Lady Tygashion had said, the Reborn Forthorthian Army soldier sitting in the operator’s seat began working away at the control panel. A hologram taken from a surveillance camera to the south popped up.

“What is that?!”

Everyone who looked at the hologram instinctively held their breath, but no one was more alarmed than Koutarou. It was a perfectly natural reaction, however. In real time, the hologram revealed what looked like a giant, red dragon crawling out from the underground hangar.

Fire Dragon Emperor vs. Fire Dragon Emperor

Tuesday, November 30th

What Vandarion referred to as “that” was a large mobile weapon. During the virus weapon incident, he had used the transport of a mobile weapon to conceal their actual cargo. They switched the mobile weapon for the virus weapon in transit, and the mobile weapon had been brought here to Alaia where it had been left unused. That is, until now. Vandarion decided to unleash it in this battle. Most everyone had forgotten about it after the virus weapon incident, so in a way, both the virus weapon and mobile weapon had served as decoys for one another.

“I get the idea, but its shape is awfully eccentric,” said Maya, who was watching on with Elexis.

“For me, the shape conjures memories of defeat,” he replied.

“Now that you mention it, you were attacked by the boy’s version of this, weren’t you?”

“Theirs was more graceful, but ours looks just as aggressive.”

“What is it called again?”

“Officially, it’s called the Base Assault Mobile Weapon Elder Dragon Type One, ALUNAYA. The name is certainly lacking in elegance.”

The mobile weapon in question was gigantic at over twenty meters in length. What’s more, it was fashioned in the shape of a massive reptile and made to walk on four legs. On its back were even giant wings equipped with a propulsion system capable of flight. It truly looked like the dragons of legend.

“I suppose since we’ve remodeled it, that would make it the Type One Revised, wouldn’t it? The wretched name just gets worse.”

“You look awfully happy though.”

“Of course I am. This is the first time spiritual energy and magic have been fully incorporated into Forthorthian technology.”

Despite its appearance, the Type One Revised wasn’t some eccentric weapon designed with form in mind. It was also an incredibly functional, state of the art weapon created under the direction of Vandarion’s trusted right-hand man, Granado. Granado was the director general of military affairs as well as the science and technology administration, and the result of combining his stupendous budget with cutting edge technology was the development of the draconic mobile weapon.

In Forthorthe, a mobile weapon’s main purpose was something between that of a fighter craft and a tank. They were generally intended as support for infantry, and for that reason, they were never larger than standard tanks. Making a mobile weapon too big would give away the troops’ position and ultimately be a detriment. Instead, they were made as relatively small machines that specialized in defense and support. That was the whole idea behind the mobile weapons Forthorthe used today.

But Granado had a different idea. He consolidated the technology used in current mobile weapon models and modified it in an attempt to make a mobile weapon capable of taking center stage in battle. Rather than being something of a compromise between a fighter craft and a tank, it would have the full abilities of both. His plan was to make it as large as possible without sacrificing mobility in order to achieve both maximum offensive and defensive potential. And from that idea, the dragon was born.

With the assistance of DKI, both spiritual energy technology and magic were incorporated into the dragon. After acquiring spiritual energy technology from the People of the Earth’s radical faction, DKI had thoroughly analyzed it and it had become a regular part of their technological repertoire. They’d used it to enhance the dragon’s performance. On top of that, transforming various types of energy into mana was one of Darkness Rainbow’s specialties. And by converting vast amounts of energy, it was possible to activate several powerful spells.

While Elexis's Warlord II also used both spiritual energy and magic, it wasn't on this level. The Warlord II was more of an experimental prototype, and the dragon was its fiercer, more refined cousin. Granado had made sure to incorporate all of the experimental data from Elexis into building it. Adding magic and spiritual energy technology to an already impressive weapon gave it a whole new dimension of strength. The Type One Revised, ALUNAYA, was meant to dominate the ecosystems of war. It would be the new apex predator on the battlefield.

"That said... isn't this overdoing it?" Maya asked.

"What do you mean?" Elexis asked in return.

"This is different from when Purple and Tayuma went berserk. No matter how this plays out, the boy has no chance of winning."

At first, Maya didn't think there was any way an enlarged mobile weapon would be the answer to defeating Koutarou. She'd witnessed him and his friends take down Purple and Tayuma, both driven mad with malice. But after seeing the Type One with her own eyes, she began changing her mind. In a full-on battle, the odds would be irreversibly slanted against Koutarou if the Type One Revised was brought in. Vandarion's idea of winning was just to cause as many casualties as possible, and the Type One Revised wasn't designed to protect anything or anyone other than itself.

"Statistically speaking, that might be true. However, according to Crimson, Koutarou-kun didn't become a hero by choice. That means that there's a high chance that the sword at his waist is the real Signaltin. The real one wasn't in Folsaria, after all."

If the Reborn Forthorthian Army wasn't intentionally setting up Koutarou as a hero, Elexis couldn't help wondering about the sword he carried. If it was genuine, that meant Alaia's crest engraved on it was genuine too. And if that were the case, all signs pointed to it being the legendary sword Signaltin.

"So you're saying that no matter the odds, there's still a chance the hero will win?"

"I want him to win. That would be hopeful for us as well!"

After preparing to sortie, the Type One Revised was put on a large lift and sent up to the surface. The ceiling above it opened from right and left, revealing the starry sky overhead. The starlight and the lights in the base shone down on the gigantic figure of the Type One Revised.

“Go, Type One Revised! Let us discover Koutarou-kun’s true identity!”

The lift reached the surface, and the Type One Revised revealed its massive form to everyone watching as its generator came online. When it reached maximum output, it let out a thunderous sound that echoed throughout the base.

ROAAAR!

It was like the roar of a gigantic dragon.

The mechanical dragon appeared on the surface shortly after Theia and her forces charged through the front gates. They were already engaging with the troops attempting to defend the base when the Type One Revised came at them from the rear.

“Ruth! Send all of your unmanned fighters and all of my mobile weapons to intercept that monster! We can’t afford to be attacked right now!”

“As you wish, my princess!”

Being flanked put Theia in a difficult spot. In front of her were the Imperial Army forces who seemed determined to fight until they were annihilated. With the battalion commanders’ families taken hostage, they couldn’t order a retreat. Even with a way to specifically take out the battalion commanders, Theia and the others still didn’t know where they were. There was no way they’d be able to track them down while trying to hold off the Type One Revised, so Theia’s plan was to send unmanned fighters and mobile weapons to stall it.

“Theia-chan, leave that big one to me!”

Just after Theia issued her orders, Shizuka volunteered to face off with the Type One Revised.

“Shizuka?! But we can’t afford your forces pulling out now!”

Theia was hesitant. In total, the Reborn Forthorthian Army had four forces attacking Fort Charldrissa: a battalion each under the command of Theia, Shizuka, Yurika, and Koutarou. Koutarou was currently inside with a fraction of his men, so Theia had taken command of the rest of his battalion. With things as they were, Shizuka pulling her troops out would lead to the collapse of the front line. Theia couldn’t allow that to happen.

“No, not my troops! Just Uncle!”

“Ah, of course! I’d almost forgotten.”

Theia’s expression eased up when she realized what Shizuka meant. Fight fire with fire, and a dragon with a dragon. Shizuka’s plan was to send a real dragon to take care of the mechanical one.

“So that’s a challenge to me! How amusing! Oh Golden Princess, grant me the opportunity!”

“I’d like nothing more! I beseech you to defeat that thing, Fire Dragon Emperor-dono!”

“Understood! Hahahaha! Shizuka, let’s show that mechanical fake who the true king is!”

“You got it. I’ll leave the rest to you, Theia-chan!”

Shizuka left command of her battalion to Theia and flew up into the sky in her half-dragon, half-human form. Reaching an altitude of several dozen meters, she transformed again, this time from half-dragon to complete dragon. Her body grew massive, surpassing twenty meters in length. This was the legendary creature that once ruled over Forthorthe. The king of dragons, the champion of flame, Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya.

“Showing off a toy like that in front of me was a big mistake! I’ll tear you asunder right now!”

Alunaya opened his mouth wide and flew through the sky with his sharp fangs primed for attack. The wings on his back flapped powerfully, and he closed in on the Type One Revised in the blink of an eye.

ROOOAAAAAAARRR!

However, the Type One Revised wasn't about to let him go unopposed. It opened its mouth and powered its generator to maximum. As it did, a light became visible from within its gaping maw.

"Uncle!"

"Right!"

Psheeew!

A torrent of light came out of the Type One Revised's mouth. It had fired power directly from its generator in the form of an energy beam. Fortunately, Alunaya had sensed the danger before it was fired and took evasive maneuvers. Alunaya was unharmed, but the energy beam mowed down the forest behind him in his stead.

"Eeek, that thing's no joke!"

After seeing the destruction that lay in the wake if the Type One Revised's attack, Shizuka felt a chill run down her spine. Not even Alunaya could take a direct hit from that.

"It's nothing if it can't hit. Keep up the good work, Shizuka!"

"I'll do my best! I'm not ready to die yet, you know!"

Upon taking full dragon form, Alunaya's soul took control, but Shizuka was still aware of what was going on. And since she knew more about technology and weapons, her advice in battle was indispensable. She helped diminish Alunaya's handicap of having come from a different age.

"We can't let that thing show us up!"

"Please don't be too flashy, Uncle!"

"I can't promise anything this time around!"

Alunaya wanted revenge. He turned to face the Type One Revised again and opened his mouth wide. Deep inside his throat, there was a brightly burning fire. The temperature of the flames in his gullet increased rapidly until they turned white.

Pfooooosh!

Alunaya unleashed his own torrent of light. The flames that spewed forth were so hot and condensed that were more like plasma than fire. The effect was very similar to the beam the Type One Revised has used.

Rrrumble...

However, the Type One Revised had activated its propulsion system before Alunaya attacked. The giant machine dodged to the side at an unbelievable speed. As a result, Alunaya's plasma breath flew right by the Type One Revised.

"This thing is pretty good! I see it's for more than just show!"

"Uncle, it's coming!"

The Type One Revised quickly changed the direction of its thrusters and deployed its wings. Piercing through the air, it charged straight for Alunaya.

"It's fast! But close combat is just what I like!"

Alunaya flapped his own massive wings and charged to intercept the Type One Revised. His fangs and sharp claws were eager for their prey.

"Uncle, wait! Its moving strangely!"

Shizuka felt Alunaya had chosen the wrong course of action and tried to stop him, but it was too late. The distance between them was closing too quickly, and the two giants were lashing at each other with their powerful limbs before she could even finish her sentence.



Screeeeech!

“Argh!”

The Type One Revised’s claws pierced through Alunaya’s defensive spell and tore off several of his scales. Between the defensive magic he used and the natural armor of his scales, Alunaya was easily as tough as any battleship. The Type One Revised had staggering attack power to do that much damage to him. Its secret was that its claws had built-in beam cannons programmed to fire simultaneously when they made contact with a target. The combined damage from the claws and beams was more than even Alunaya could fully protect against.

“I won’t shy away just from getting hit!”

Crash!

Even wounded, Alunaya was undeterred. He swiftly used his giant tail to correct his flight posture and slammed it down on the Type One Revised at the same time. This was the kind of dexterous attack that only a dragon could pull off.

“It was too shallow?!”

However, the strike wasn’t enough to get through the Type One Revised’s barrier. The energy output from its generator was considerable, and the Type One Revised had increased it even more to brace for the attack. And despite their attacks, the giants flew past each other mid-air to avoid a major collision.

“What is the meaning of this? Those movements are—”

“Uncle! Get your head down!”

“What?!”

Rat tat tat tat tat!

Following Shizuka’s instructions, Alunaya quickly lowered his head, and it wasn’t a moment too soon. He narrowly avoided the spray of bullets fired from the machine gun fashioned on the Type One Revised’s arm. Shockingly, the Type One Revised had changed direction mid-flight after they passed each other to open fire on Alunaya.

“I thought so!”

“What is with this imposter? It’s moving in impossible ways!”

“Uncle, there’s probably no one inside it!”

“What?!”

“It’s all run by a computer! I mean... its thinking is all mechanical! That’s why it can move like that!”

Living creatures used electric impulses and chemical reactions to move their bodies, and there was a natural delay between the brain’s command and the body’s response. It also took time for the brain to process a situation and issue a command in the first place. When a human was evading, there was a certain amount of lag time before they actually made their move. And with a machine as large as a dragon, that should only increase.

However, the Type One Revised’s movements didn’t seem to be inhibited by anything like that. It was reacting to Alunaya too quickly. Even someone with senses as keen as Shizuka’s experienced some delay. To a normal person, it looked like the Type One Revised was reacting instantly. That’s how Shizuka knew it had no pilot.

The speed of the Type One Revised only further confirmed her suspicions. Not its reaction speed, but how quickly it was actually moving. Living creatures required a constant flow of blood in their brains to function. If they moved too fast, that circulation couldn’t keep up and they would pass out. For humans, that was somewhere around 10 g. When the Type One Revised whipped around to attack, it was clearly moving faster than that. Any human inside would be unconscious, or even dead.

“You can think of it like the haniwas, except without a soul.”

“I see... It seems like it’s a more troubling opponent than I thought.”

“Uncle, can’t you do something with magic?”

“I can’t manipulate my mana as freely as a magician can. It wouldn’t be very effective.”

Alunaya and the Type One Revised faced off once more. They were about the same size, but the heavily armed Type One Revised had a stockier profile. Shizuka believed it was enough of a difference to have an effect on what was to come, and she couldn't help but worry.

Even with Alunaya's strength, the Type One Revised couldn't be defeated in a single blow. Having experienced Alunaya's power firsthand, Koutarou was utterly shocked at this development.

"Even Alunaya-san is bound by the limits of living creatures. It's difficult to keep up with something moving in ways impossible for normal beings," explained Clan.

"That just means that it's up to us!" Koutarou shouted.

"That's right. If we increase the intensity of our attacks, it won't be able to dodge, no matter how fast it is!" she cheered in reply.

Alunaya was actually a bad match for the Type One Revised, but if Alunaya didn't keep it busy, the whole situation would only get worse. But Koutarou and the others had to handle their own problems before they could help against the Type One Revised.

"Clan, you still haven't found them yet?!"

"Just hold on! You're asking me to find five people out of three thousand moving targets. It's going to take some time!"

However, Koutarou's problem was not an easy one to solve. They needed to hold back the Imperial Army's attacks while locating the five battalion commanders. Moreover, with the headquarters occupied, each battalion was moving freely without centralized orders. Even for Clan, this was an arduous task.

"Clan-dono, let me help," a voice called in over the comms system.

"Kii?!"

Lending Clan a helping hand was none other than Kiriha. With her brilliant mind, she had come up with a method to simplify things.

“Ruth, fire off a flare. Set it so it flies even higher than normal,” she ordered.

“Understood. Parameters set. The flare is ready,” Ruth responded.

“Fire!”

“Launching!”

Bang!

At Kiriha’s orders, Ruth fired a flare high above Fort Charldrissa that briefly illuminated the base below. The bright light in the night sky naturally attracted attention.

Beep, beep, beep!

“Targets A, C, and D discovered,” announced the Cradle’s AI.

Clan’s eyes opened wide in surprise. Just moments after the flare went off, her ship’s computer had identified three of the battalion commanders.

“Kii, what... I see! How clever of you!”

Clan had roughly pinpointed the locations of the battalions based on variations in the density of electromagnetic waves from the surrounding area, and she then tried to identify the battalion commanders by analyzing the footage recorded by her cameras. The problem with her plan was in analyzing the footage. With Forthorthe’s technology, recording in the dim light of midnight was no problem, but since the surveillance cameras and the Cradle’s camera were all recording from above, it was difficult to see anyone’s face. But thanks to the flare that Ruth had launched, everyone had looked up for a moment, and Clan’s computer had recorded it all. Three battalion commanders were spotted almost immediately.

“Yurika, the first one is right next to you! Use your favorite poison gas and put everyone there to sleep!”

“What do you mean ‘my favorite’?!”

“Maki, the second one is near you, but can you get to the surface?”

“I’m almost there now! Leave it to me!”

“The third is a little farther away... Theiamillis-san, you’re the fastest, so you go!”

“Understood! I’ll take him out with a single strike!”

Clan gave instructions to her allies while updating the search parameters for her surveillance equipment. With three commanders found, that narrowed down the potential places for the remaining two, and the computer now had more resources to look for each one. Things were suddenly several times easier than they had just been. She didn’t think it would take long to find the others.

Beep, beep!

“Targets B and E discovered.”

Sure enough, the Cradle’s AI delivered, and Clan joyfully reported the results to Koutarou.

“I did it! Veltlion, there’s one near you and the other is a little to the south!”

She had an awfully cute smile on her face, but sadly Koutarou didn’t have the time to take notice.

“Good job! Sakuraba-senpai and I will—”

Boom!

“Whoa!”

“Kyah!”

There was suddenly a crater in the ground next to Koutarou and Harumi, courtesy of a shell fired from a large-caliber cannon.

“Master, it’s a bombardment from the outside! The shots are coming from eight kilometers to the south!”

As Ruth reported to Koutarou, several craters formed around Koutarou and Harumi. The bombardment was indiscriminately hitting both friend and foe. After instructing his forces to hide by the buildings, Koutarou called out on his comms.

“Clan, can you do something about this?!”

“Fine, I guess I don’t have a choice. I’ll eliminate the artillery crew myself!”

“Are you sure you should do that?!”

Clan’s help would be most welcome at a time like this, but Koutarou knew it wasn’t an offer he should jump at. With her ship the Cradle, she’d be have no problem taking out the artillery crew, but if she attacked, she’d likely be seen by the Imperial Army. Her technology was advanced, but not enough to maintain stealth while attacking. And her being seen here would have ramifications for the Schweiger family. Clan’s cooperation with the Mastir family, known rivals of her own family, would likely mean she’d be treated as a traitor.

“We can’t be picky right now! Whatever it takes, remember?!”

“...You’re right. Can I count on you?”

“Of course!”

Koutarou silently vowed to himself that if Clan suddenly found herself without a home to return to, he would take care of her. He couldn’t let Clan shoulder all the risk. But without even knowing that, Clan’s eyes shone with determination. As a princess, she had decided to take it upon herself to protect her friends and allies.

“Please wait, Clan-sama! There’s a group of fighters descending from space! There are four in total, and they seem to be on a course to rendezvous with the artillery crew!” Ruth warned her.

“Don’t you dare go alone, Clan!” Koutarou called.

“But—”

“Shut up! I’m not planning on holding a funeral for you!”

The artillery crew alone was one thing, but if they had a group of fighter crafts protecting them, it would be a death sentence for Clan to go in alone.

“Just wait a moment, Clan. I’ll come with you.”

“Theiamillis-san?!”

“If you and I are together, our chances of winning—”

While talking to Clan, Theia stared at the radar showing four red dots. It indicated the exact location of the fighter crafts in question.

Beep, beep, beep!

Then for some reason, the four red dots all turned into blue ones.

“What’s the matter, Theiamillis-san?” Clan asked.

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong at all. Victory is already ours,” Theia answered.

“Excuse me?”

With tears in her big, blue eyes, Theia enlarged the screen showing the four fighters passing overhead. They were just normal, general-purpose fighters that could be used both in or outside of the atmosphere, but Theia recognized the mark on the crafts.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, Your Highness. The 47th platoon is reporting in under Your Highness’s command.”

It was the mark of the platoon of the soldier Theia had saved while descending to Alaia. After that battle, they had decided to leave the Imperial Army, and they now had come all this way in their newly acquired fighters.

“All right, 47th platoon! Eliminate the artillery that’s bombarding this base! Just don’t overdo it!”

“As you wish, my princess! You can count on us! You have our experience working for you now!”

The four fighters descended and approached the artillery crew at a low altitude. Using their laser cannons, they skillfully destroyed just the artillery.

Having escaped the immediate crisis with the help of the fighter platoon, Koutarou and the others were able to capture or incapacitate the five battalion commanders. With all of their senior officers out of commission, command of the Imperial Army forces at Fort Charldrissa officially fell on the shoulders of the company commanders. But there were still plenty of men that continued to fight back and stubbornly resist the invasion. That was because of the Type One Revised. Its combat capabilities were now known to all present at the base, and it gave the Imperial Army forces hope. Hope that it could defeat Alunaya and turn the tides of battle in their favor. What that really meant for Koutarou and the others was that they would have to take down the Type One Revised in order to fully convince them to surrender.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting, Alunaya-dono," Koutarou said as he returned after handling the battalion commanders.

"You can say that again, Blue Knight. Now that I've actually gotten a chance to experience it, fighting against a machine isn't as much fun as I'd hoped."

By the time Koutarou and Harumi grouped back up with him, Alunaya was covered in wounds. Just one look at him made it clear that the battle with the Type One Revised was an intense one.

"Are you okay, Kasagi-san?" Harumi asked.

"You wouldn't believe it, Sakuraba-senpai! It's like that Mecha-Uncle is cheating! It starts moving after us, but it's still faster than us somehow! It's completely unfair!"

The Type One Revised would only move in response to Alunaya, but it moved much faster than he did. It was like deciding what to throw in rock-paper-scissors after watching the way your opponent moved their fingers, yet still being able to throw at the same time. In the Type One Revised's case, it was thanks to a combination of its superior analytical power and overwhelming speed. There were was no trick to it. No mind games. Nothing. It was exactly Alunaya's definition of no fun.

"I'm glad you're still in one piece," said Harumi after Shizuka reported how things had gone so far.

“I noticed Mecha-Uncle looks away every now and then. It seems like it really wants to go after Satomi-kun.”

“Me?” Koutarou asked, somewhat surprised.

“Yeah. I’m guessing it was ordered to attack you specifically.”

The fact that Alunaya was only injured and not worse could be chalked up to the Type One Revised getting distracted by Koutarou from time to time. Alunaya was quick to seize those momentary opportunities and try to regain the upper hand. That was how he’d kept himself in the battle this long. However, analyzing only the strict facts of battle overlooked something very important. In the end, the real reason Alunaya hadn’t been defeated yet was because he was the emperor of the dragons. And it wasn’t for nothing. There was no one tougher than him, and he never missed the chance the counterattack.

“Then there’s only one thing to do.”

“Can you do it, Blue Knight?”

“We can’t have you working hard while I don’t, now can we?”

“Well said! That’s the Blue Knight I know!”

“Let’s go! I’m counting on you, Sakuraba-senpai!”

Koutarou left Harumi with Alunaya and flew up towards the Type One Revised. Their plan was a simple one. If the Type One Revised wanted to go after Koutarou, they would let it. That way it would prioritize targeting and analyzing Koutarou over Alunaya, which should in turn give Alunaya more openings to attack.

“I don’t need a barrier! Put all energy into propulsion!”

“Alert message: This frame will become defenseless,” the AI in Koutarou’s armor warned him.

“I’m out if I get hit anyways, so I just need to move as fast as possible!”

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

“You’ve gotten a lot more obedient recently!”

Putting all of the thrusters on his armor to max, Koutarou approached the Type One Revised on a erratic trajectory. If it was as skilled as Shizuka said it was, he knew moving in a straight line would just make him an easy target. Moving unpredictably seemed to be the safer bet.

“Satomi-kun, leave your defenses to me.”

Koutarou could hear Harumi’s powerful voice through the power of Signaltin. It would be her job to protect Koutarou now.

“I’m counting on you!”

“I’ll cast several spells to protect you! But please be careful! It won’t be enough to defend against a direct hit!”

“Got it!”

The Type One Revised had the attack power of a small battleship. Even the aid of Signaltin and Harumi wouldn’t be enough to fully shield him from a bad blow.Avoiding getting hit at all would be his best defense.

“And here it comes!”

As he closed in, the Type One Revised began its attack on Koutarou. While firing both the cannons on its shoulders and the machine gun on its arm, the Type One Revised put its propulsion to max and began moving towards Koutarou. Its ability to read its opponent and respond accordingly worked better in close proximity, and so the Type One Revised’s AI prioritized getting closer in order to finish things swiftly.

“Whoa!”

Being the smaller of the two, Koutarou was far more flexible in the air. His maneuverability was on full display as he closed in on the Type One Revised while dodging the rain of shells and bullets. While he easily appeared to have the upper hand, he had no way of knowing that the barrage was all part of the Type One Revised’s trap. Koutarou’s movements were more limited while he

was actively being attacked, and that in turn made him easier to read. And as a result, Koutarou inadvertently flew right to where the Type One Revised wanted him to.

Pew!

When Koutarou hit the right spot, the mechanical dragon fired the laser cannon equipped on its head. The laser cannon was actually one of its weaker weapons, but since it followed the cameras as it aimed, it was especially accurate at this distance. With Koutarou where he was now, there was no way of avoiding it.

“Wow, that was dangerous. This must be what they meant about it responding so quickly.”

Fortunately, the Koutarou the laser demolished was just a magical illusion and not the real thing. But even though he wasn’t the real victim, Koutarou felt chills down his spine at the sight. He’d now learned firsthand exactly what Shizuka was talking about earlier.

“That’s right! But that’s only possible when dealing with a single target!” Alunaya cried as he made a move on the Type One Revised.

He swooped in before anyone even realized it and swiped at the giant machine with the massive claws on his right hand. The Type One Revised responded by activating its thrusters in an attempt to dodge.

Screeeeech!

It was enough to throw off Alunaya’s aim. His claws only caught the barrier, letting out a loud, screeching wail as they dragged along its surface. In order to make full use of the generator’s power, the Type One Revised used a distortion field as its barrier. Not even Alunaya could break it with anything short of a direct hit.

“Uncle, to the left!”

“Understood!”

Despite his attack, Alunaya never stopped moving. He took Shizuka's warning and passed by the Type One Revised on the left. The machine retaliated by twisting its arm in a way that would be impossible for a living creature and attacking from that unnatural position. Alunaya, however, pressed on without hesitation. Thanks to a combination of confidence and speed, he was unscathed.

"I thought that was good, but then it wasn't even a direct hit..."

"Don't give up, Uncle! Let's try it again!"

"Of course! I am the emperor of all creations! I will face my enemies head-on!"

"You're so cool, Uncle!"

Even an attack using Koutarou as a decoy hadn't produced any visible results. However, unlike when Alunaya was on his own, his attack had almost hit this time. That was a big step forward.

"Just you wait! We'll be joining in for this round! That mechanical beast won't be so lucky next time!" Theia called.

With the help of Theia and her fighters, they would turn the Type One Revised's trick against it. A constant bombardment of missiles would mean the Type One Revised's movements should be considerably limited. It was enough to give Koutarou and the others hope yet.

"Theia, don't worry about me! Just fire away! If your aim is true, I'll be able to avoid it!"

"I got it! Let's do this, men!"

"Yeah!"

As Theia rallied her troops, Koutarou moved out again. Since the Type One Revised didn't have a soul, Koutarou couldn't use his spirit sight to see where it was aiming. And since their energy outputs were on such drastically different levels, using a barrier to try and block its attacks was unrealistic. All he could do was rely on near random movements to avoid them. If that failed, Harumi's

defensive spells were his last hope. He was still standing on a razor's edge, but he felt more at ease knowing that Theia and the pilots under her command would be providing supporting fire.

"I'm glad Theia doesn't even hesitate when she aims."

It wouldn't work on the Type One Revised, but Theia and the others were different. Koutarou could see their aim as faint lines in the air. Weaving in between them, he approached the Type One Revised again. The Type One Revised was unhappy with the sudden onslaught and quickly moved to evade. It ended up with its back and tail to Koutarou as he drew nearer.

"All right, try this one on for size!"

With a firm grip on Signaltin and Saguratin, Koutarou charged at the Type One Revised. The lower half of its rear is a common blind spot for vehicles and four-legged animals alike. In the Type One Revised's case, its large tail only made it worse. It was the perfect place for Koutarou to attack.

"Oh no, Satomi-kun, get back!"

"Huh?!"

Koutarou heard Harumi's warning through the power of the sword, and although confused, instinctively followed her instructions by activating his emergency boosters to forcibly change his trajectory. He flew over the Type One Revised instead of attacking it from behind. He almost passed out from the sudden acceleration, but he managed to stay conscious, and his efforts were well worth it.

"What are those? Homing bullets?"

Before Koutarou's eyes were several glowing balls. They traced a beautiful curve in the air as they chased after him. The balls of light had been sent to attack Koutarou from his blind spot just as he himself closed in on the Type One Revised's blind spot. He was only able to avoid them because Harumi had warned him in time.

"You're wrong, Satomi-kun! They're attack spells! It seems that mechanical dragon can use magic!"

“What?!”

The Type One Revised had many parts of it enhanced by magic, but it was also outright equipped with magic weapons. Yellow’s specialty reinforcement magic was used to create a crystal that launched attack spells. However, to actually activate those spells, the mana that would form the energy bullets was required from a separate source. And so a device capable of converting the necessary energy had been created using Orange’s alteration magic. That device transmuted the vast energy output from the Type One Revised’s generator into mana. With that setup, all that had to be done to launch spells was send energy through the conversion device.

The launched attack spells then used Green’s precast divination magic for guidance. It was a simple method that targeted everything apart from the Type One Revised that flew faster than a certain speed, but it worked well with the large amounts of energy bullets it launched. And so the powers of Yellow, Orange, and Green were combined into a convenient magic weapon that could be used either to attack outright or shoot down enemy missiles. That was what had been unleashed on the unsuspecting Koutarou.

“Sakuraba-senpai, I’m counting on you!”

“Please, Signaltin!”

But since it was still a magical attack, Koutarou was in luck. Signaltin was overwhelmingly effective against other magic. The white light that enveloped the sword had the power to dispel or negate almost anything. Koutarou used it to cut down the balls of light before they could ever hit him, but if it hadn’t been for Harumi’s warning, he would have been the one cut down.

“Are you okay, Satomi-kun?”

“I’m okay. But seriously, can that thing just do everything?”

As the Type One Revised’s spells were homing, they could be fired regardless of direction or posture. It had even managed to attack Koutarou while it was concentrating on Alunaya. It seemed their strategy of using one of them as a distraction was a failure.

“This is bad, Koutarou! Our opponent is far tougher than it looks! It was made with fighting several opponents in mind from the start!” Theia called.

The Type One Revised didn’t just excel in offense. It also had superb evasive skills and defensive capabilities. The magic homing weapons only served to accentuate those features. Theia was right. The machine had been designed to deal with multiple opponents at the same time. Thanks to that, even Koutarou and the others joining in hadn’t managed to accomplish much as far as turning the tables in their favor. While berserk Tayuma or Purple might have had more power, in comparison, the Type One Revised was much harder to fight.

“Heh heh. It seems you’re having a hard time, gentlemen.”

Just as a dark cloud was beginning to creep over their hopes, an overly optimistic voice filled the area. Strangely enough, however, it came not as a sound, but rather as vibrations in spiritual energy.

“The time has finally come for Sanae-chan to shine!” she cheered.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“I don’t really know. Kiriha said to come, so I did.”

The mysterious voice of course belonged to none other than Sanae. Having guessed that Koutarou and the others were at a disadvantage, Kiriha had sent her to turn things around.

“But I know what to do, so leave it to me! You come with me, Koutarou!”

“I don’t get it, but whatever! I’m counting on you for now, Sanae!”

“Leave it to me!”

Sanae’s innocent voice and her unfounded confidence seemed to brighten everyone’s mood. As he chased after her, Koutarou started to think that Sanae’s true power wasn’t her psychic abilities, but rather her knack for cheering people up.

“Okay, this should be fine.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Explaining it is a pain, so I’ll just show you.”

“Hey now...”

“Special Attack: Local Area Sanae-channel!”

As Sanae mimicked a special attack pose out of an anime, the spiritual energy normally surrounding her began swelling up. It then split into two channels and poured over Koutarou and Alunaya. Their bodies were awash in the strongly glowing light of Sanae’s spiritual energy.

“That should do it. I’ll leave the rest to you!”

“Wait a minute, what did you—”

Unsure of what had just happened, Koutarou was left confused at the sight. Alunaya, however, understood perfectly.

“No, this is fine! Thank you, Sanae!”

“You bet!”

Alunaya made a wide turn and headed towards Koutarou and Sanae. Sanae proudly raised her index and middle finger in a victorious V shape.

“Ride me, Blue Knight!”

“Got it!”

Alunaya had come to pick up Koutarou. In order pull off what he was considering doing, he would need Koutarou’s powers.

“Satomi-kun, your hand!”

Harumi, who had been sitting on Alunaya’s back from the start, reached out to Koutarou. He took her hand and climbed up onto Alunaya.

“Thank you, Sakuraba-senpai!”

“Good luck!” Sanae yelled as she waved.

And with Sanae seeing them off, Alunaya flew off to face the Type One Revised again. He was going to launch another attack on it, this time with Koutarou and Harumi.

“Alunaya-dono, what are you planning on doing?”

“You still haven’t realized? Can’t you feel a change in your body?”

“A change...?”

“That girl made us much faster.”

Koutarou and Alunaya had been struggling against the Type One Revised because it outmatched them in speed and reaction time at every turn. It moved faster than any living creature ever could. Their nervous systems and thinking speeds were just too slow. Koutarou and Alunaya were no exception. They would need supernatural powers to move at the speeds they needed to keep up with the Type One Revised.

Fortunately, that’s exactly what Sanae had done for them. She psychically jumpstarted their brains, which in turn allowed them to use the spiritual energy surrounding them like an alternative nervous system. Their enhanced brains gave swift orders, and their bodies reacted instantly using spiritual energy. They were now several times faster than they had been before.

“With this kind of speed, we can catch up to that fake! But it’s still too much for me alone!”

“And that’s where I come in, huh?”

“That’s right. I’m counting on you, Blue Knight!”

“Let’s end it this time, Alunaya-dono!”

Koutarou stood on Alunaya’s head and held Signaltin firmly with both hands. It was as if Alunaya had grown an extra horn.

“Then let us go!”

Fwoosh!

Alunaya flapped his large wings and propelled his body forward like a bullet. Thanks to Sanae, his wings were not only faster, but also more powerful and more accurate. His performance was on a totally different level now. It was practically like performing aerobatics at the speed of a jet. Koutarou and Harumi certainly would have lost consciousness and been blown away if it wasn’t for Signaltin’s protection.

“Hahahaha! I thank you, Sanae! With this, I can finally fight properly!”

Boom, boom!

The Type One Revised intercepted the incoming Alunaya by firing the two cannons on its shoulders. Its aim was accurate and the shells barreled through the air at blazing speed, but they didn't come close to hitting Alunaya. Rapidly changing his direction at sporadic intervals, he easily dodged both rounds.

"Now that we're moving at the same speed, I can tell that your attacks are sloppy!" Alunaya taunted the soulless dragon.

Rat tat tat tat tat!

Realizing that the cannons were ineffective, the Type One Revised switched to the machine guns on its arms. The spewed a hail of bullets in a line that arced like a whip swinging to cut down Alunaya.

"Master!" Ruth called to Koutarou.

"Alunaya-dono, keep advancing just like you are!" he instructed.

"Hmm? Understood!"

A group of unmanned fighters swarmed to Alunaya. They formed a three-dimensional shield around him and deployed their barriers, blocking the bullets from the machine guns. Of course, each unit could only protect against a few shots at best. But thanks to their formation and sheer number, they were quite an effective defense.

"They might be machines too, but they move creatively! I like them!"

Alunaya flew through the break in the line of bullets that Ruth had created. It was a close fit with his massive body, but with his enhanced physical abilities, he managed it with ease.

Whirrr...

But as Alunaya moved through the bullets, he temporarily had to move in a straight line. Detecting this, the Type One Revised turned its laser cannon on him.

"I'll show you how you read ahead!"

Boom!

There was a sudden explosion before the Type One Revised. It was the result of a special shell Theia fired that created smoke and spread chaff to jam radars. While landing a direct hit on the Type One Revised might be difficult, it was still possible to rob it of its vision when it tried to attack Alunaya. And that was exactly what Theia had done. It was an extraordinary example of her ability to predict three moves ahead in battle. Her shell had caused the Type One Revised's laser to miss after it lost track of Alunaya. Even if it had hit, the laser would be greatly weakened by passing through the smoke and likely wouldn't harm Alunaya.

Alunaya, however, still knew where the Type One Revised was. He dove through the smoke and attacked again. Opening his mouth wide, he tried to bite the machine. In response, the Type One Revised supplied the onboard crystal with a vast amount of mana to unleash a flurry of energy bullets. Their numbers far surpassed the attack it had unleashed on Koutarou earlier, and each one came flying at Alunaya.

"Blue Knight, I'm counting on you!"

"Right! Let's go, Sakuraba-senpai!"

"Shine, Signaltin! Bright enough to wake all the world!"

Harumi pointed her palms at Koutarou, and as she did, the crest on her forehead, her long hair, and Signaltin all began to glow. The glow rapidly grew into a brilliant light. It was so bright that it was impossible to look directly at Signaltin's blade.

I will protect Satomi-kun! I will protect Koutarou-sama! I'll make sure that everyone's Blue Knight, the hope of Forthorthe, is victorious! Even if costs me my life!

The way Harumi was using her powers was dangerous, but she had no other choice. There were just too many energy bullets coming at them at once. Times were desperate, and Harumi didn't hesitate to resort to desperate measures. She would do anything to protect Koutarou. She wanted nothing more than victory for her friends and allies. She was prepared to lay down her life for either cause.

"Hyaaaaaaaah!"

From atop Alunaya's head, Koutarou swung Signaltin with all his might. His sword, wreathed in more intense light than ever before, extended into a giant blade of light. It was well over a hundred meters in length, and it lit up the surrounding area like it was midday. The energy bullets that came into contact with the light melted away within as if their existence has been nothing but a dream.

"It's too late to protect yourself now!" Alunaya shouted confidently.

Following the last word, fire spewed from his draconic mouth. The dense, high temperature flames took over Signaltin's role of lighting up the surroundings as they rained down on the Type One Revised. The mechanical dragon raised its barrier and activated its boosters in an attempt to escape the flames, but Alunaya could keep pace with him now.



Boom! Skreee! Krrrsh!

As the Type One Revised attempted to fly upwards and escape, it was caught in the falling flames. Its barrier was unable to withstand Alunaya's attack and collapsed. While the Type One Revised hadn't taken damage, its barrier and boosters had used up a lot of energy, now leaving it defenseless.

"Do it, Shizuka!"

"Haaaaah!"

Alunaya's right fist went flying at the mechanical dragon. It was a karate thrust that Shizuka had practiced countless times, now being reproduced with Alunaya's massive body. It was a seemingly simple technique, but it had a lot of power behind it. The strike connected with all of Alunaya's strength behind it and easily pierced through the armor plating that was supposedly strengthened with magic, smashing whatever was behind it into pieces.

"Well done, Shizuka. I was right too chose you as my partner."

"You honor me, Uncle!"

"Behold! Victory is ours!"

With a satisfied smile that revealed his fangs, Alunaya twisted his right hand inside the machine and crushed the Type One Revised's heart—its generator.

Turning Point

Tuesday, November 30th

With the Type One Revised destroyed, the battle for Fort Charldrissa tapered to its natural conclusion. The Imperial Army soldiers began faltering. The battle wasn't going their way, and the defeat of the Type One Revised was a big part of that. Alunaya had made quite an impression. The sight of him—complete with a knight in blue armor and a silver-haired girl on his back—destroying the Type One Revised with overwhelming power was too shocking. Alunaya's

victory inspired the Imperial Army soldiers to rethink the situation they were in and reconsider the odds they had against the Reborn Forthorthian Army. As a result, many of them chose to retreat or surrender.

“How?! Why can’t we win?! What is that monster?! Who is that knight?!”

The one having the hardest time accepting the outcome was Vandarion. After learning the results of the battle from his subordinate, he was so infuriated that he smashed his glass of wine on the floor of his private room.

He had deployed a top secret weapon with the intent of forcing everyone’s hand in a bloody battle. But it was all for naught. The Type One Revised had been destroyed, and the casualties were lower than expected. Moreover, with the appearance of a real dragon, the knight in blue armor was a hot topic. His plan to smear Elfaria’s propaganda campaign was backfiring, and once again Vandarion found himself at the hands of defeat and failure.

“However, sir, there’s one thing that’s been made clear with this fight.”

In contrast to the enraged Vandarion, Granado remained calm. He had enough composure to calmly analyze the outcome thoroughly.

“What?!”

“That knight isn’t just a propaganda tactic; he really is strong. Assuming he was a mere puppet was the reason for our defeat. We lost because we were supposed to.”

They had underestimated their enemy, believing him to be a knight in name only. A showpiece of the Reborn Forthorthian Army, more or less, used to curry favor with the public. But that wasn’t the case. Koutarou was strong, and regardless of how little Vandarion wanted to believe it, it was his fault for not recognizing that. No matter the battle, underestimating your enemy was a stepping stone to defeat. Granado could appreciate that much.

“...That may be true,” Vandarion conceded. “I suppose it’s possible I didn’t truly think there was a knight capable of rivaling the legendary Blue Knight.”

Granado’s dispassionate, poignant analysis calmed Vandarion enough to talk, but the fires of anger and hatred that welled deep inside of him still raged strong. Those emotions were originally directed at Elfaria, and although he

couldn’t say exactly when it happened, they were now meant for the knight in blue armor.

“I must admit the same. But it was only reasonable for us to think that way, and it could be argued that such clinging to reason is fault of man.”

“But now we’re certain. That knight’s blue armor isn’t just for show. He really is strong and clever. We’ll need to overhaul our strategy.”

All of their plans until now had been made under the assumption that the knight in blue armor was a fictional hero created through propaganda. But knowing what they did now, continuing to operate under that assumption would surely only end in further defeat. They needed to rethink how they were going to handle the situation and craft plans in light of their most recent intelligence.

“Of course, my lord. We’ve managed to narrow down our enemy this way.”

“Our enemy is neither Elfaria nor Theiamillis, but rather the knight in blue.”

“Considering his strength, it would now seem that the reports we’ve received of his works are indeed true. Without him, I imagine the Reborn Forthorthian Army would lose their momentum. In fact, if he had just been a propaganda tactic after all, that would have been less of a liability for them.”

With things how they were, Vandarion’s rage and hatred for the knight in blue seemed justified. He was reason behind the Reborn Forthorthian Army’s strength. Essentially, he was the real enemy that Vandarion had been fighting against from the start.

“In that case, we should siege the areas where the knight in blue has no presence, then eliminate him using his weak point. What’s the point in attacking the enemy where they’re the strongest?”

“I shall craft a new strategy with that in mind.”

“I’ll leave it to you, Granado.”

The existence of a single person had ruined their strategy before. Up until now, Vandarion had denied the possibility that a single person could have that kind of influence and power. But now that one person stood in his way. He was

without a doubt an enemy more dangerous than Elfaria. Whether or not the knight in blue armor could be defeated would be key in determining the outcome of Vandarion's conquest.

"The legends say that a hero will come when the nation faces true crisis... If someone like that has appeared now, that just proves I'm truly a man capable of conquering Forthorthe! Don't think you can save this country over and over again, Blue Knight! You will crumble before my might!"

Vandarion was intent on defeating the knight in blue armor by any means necessary. He was fueled by the intense loathing and malice inside him, telling him to kill, tear apart, and crush his foe. Not even Vandarion himself understood exactly where those negative feelings had come from. Nor could he foresee the future ahead of him. It laid in darkness. There was only one thing he knew for sure, and that was that he couldn't stand that knight in blue armor. A new world would be built upon the corpse of one of them. It was simply a question of whose.

Elexis, Maya, and the five leaders of Darkness Rainbow learned of the defeat under less stressful circumstances. They had escaped the base shortly after it was attacked and were en route to a neighboring town via a private plane. As they waited for it to take off, they got word the Type One Revised had been destroyed. The first report came from an intelligence agent onsite, but it wasn't long before the media caught on too. While the details of the battle remained unknown, the part about Koutarou and a real dragon taking down the Type One Revised was clear.

"Hahahaha, he won! He actually won! Koutarou-kun actually did it!" Elexis practically shouted.

"My, my... What a surprise," Maya mused.

"I told you he could do it, Maya!"

"You did indeed. You win this one, El. And while it was hard to judge from the footage, it didn't look like there were too many casualties. It seems that Vandarion's strategic aim missed the mark as well."

"That's our boy! I knew you could do it, Koutarou-kun!"

Hearing of Koutarou's victory, Elexis was ecstatic. He looked as if he'd received a letter from a long-lost lover as he frantically gathered all the information he could on Fort Charldrissa from his terminal. He didn't so much as glance at Maya next to him. While she found that irritating, she was also interested in what had gone down. She reluctantly drew closer to Elexis and peered at the information terminal.

"It seems things went as planned for Vandarion at first. Koutarou-kun and his allies were all fighting separately."

"It looks like they were completely cornered. But... There. That was the turning point. The descending platoon of fighters changing sides."

"After that, they took out the commanders and the enemy forces fell into disarray. That gave them some breathing room, and they used that to go after the Type One Revised. And, well, we can see how that worked out."

On the terminal, video footage of Koutarou fighting the Type One Revised was playing. A knight in blue armor and a silver-haired maiden were riding a red dragon over twenty meters long. With support from their allies, they charged in. Koutarou and Harumi's sword of light negated the Type One Revised's magic attack, and the red dragon breathed flames powerful enough to destroy the Type One Revised's barrier. All that it took after that was a right-handed thrust to break through the shell of the mobile weapon and crush the generator inside.

"My oh my, this is bad..."

Now with a rough grasp of the details, Elexis let out a strained laugh as he shrugged. It was in such stark contrast to his elation just moments ago that Maya curiously leaned forward to look at his face from the side.

"What's bad? It's just as you predicted, right?"

"That's true, but... Koutarou-kun overdid it."

"Overdid it?"

"Yes. We're not the only ones onto him now. Now even more citizens will become convinced that their beloved legend has returned."

The matter was already a hot topic on the network that tied the Forthorthian solar system together. And after watching how this battle had played out, there were indeed even more people than ever before who truly believed that Koutarou carried the blood of the Blue Knight, or at the very least, carried on his duty. A gigantic dragon, a silver haired girl, and a knight in blue armor wielding glowing silver sword... It was almost like it had been taken from the very pages of legend. Their profound belief in him now seemed justified.

“So that’s what you mean... Well, like you said, the boy has been too honest about who he really is. But you know, El, this is your fault.”

“I know. And that’s a sore spot. In the end, I overdid it myself. I was too obsessed with revealing Koutarou-kun’s identity.”

The whole purpose of Elexis helping out in this battle was attempting to find out more about Koutarou. He hadn’t thought anything more of it. But as it turned out, he’d been a little too helpful to Vandarion. It was thanks to Elexis’s support that Koutarou was backed into a corner and has to use the ace up his sleeve. Not only did it exceed Elexis’s expectations, it was enough of a showing to greatly sway public opinion. Elexis couldn’t bring himself to celebrate that part.

“Even so, something good has still come out of my overzealousness.”

“You don’t have to make up excuses for my sake.”

“No, no. It’s just as you said. I’m honestly happy.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The battle’s turning point was without a doubt the fighter platoon changing sides. That part had nothing to do with Koutarou-kun. It was Princess Theiamillis’s doing. Confirming that much was important too.”

Elexis knew about Theia saving an enemy pilot in their descent to Alaia, and he believed that was their reason for changing sides. It seemed Theia had the power to move others—the power of a true ruler—and that couldn’t be easily discerned just by looking at her. Being able to confirm it for himself pleased Elexis.

“The power of royalty, huh?”

“It’s hard to quantify, but the Mastir family has the power to upset the outcome of a battle. Ignoring that and just focusing on a legend coming to life would come back to bite us.”

“I wonder about Vandarion and Granado though. Do you think they’ve realized that?”

“Who knows? I can’t intuit that much. At the very least, we just need to make sure we don’t end up getting caught up in the blast.”

“...So are we doing it?”

“Yes. If we just stick with Vandarion, we’ll be deaf to many different threats and opportunities. The time for us to move on our own has finally come.”

Although Koutarou’s origin remained a mystery, it was clear that he had the power of the Blue Knight. The Mastir family was also a force to be reckoned with. After this battle, it seemed that continuing to side with Vandarion would likely not yield the results Elexis had anticipated at first. In fact, the potential outcome of all this was currently drifting further and further away from what he wanted. And so Elexis, Maya, and Darkness Rainbow decided to make their own move in order to change the world for the better and allow the people of Folsaria to return. However, no one yet knew the effect that decision would have on the grand scheme of things.

After returning from yet another press conference, Theia was visibly exhausted. She entered the residential quarters Koutarou and the others were using, headed straight for the sofa, and promptly laid down.

“I can’t take it... I don’t want any more press conferences...” she whined.

“Looks like they really came at you this time,” Koutarou said smugly.

“Don’t act like you had nothing to do with it! This is all your fault!”

“No way, no how.”

“You’re heartless! A traitor! A blasphemer! A spineless coward!”

The press conference has tried Theia's patience and stamina. After the battle for Fort Charldrissa hit the news, the citizens' primary interest was, of course, Koutarou. The entire nation was hungry for more information, which meant the journalists were all hounding Theia for answers about the knight in blue. But there wasn't much she could say to satisfy them. She stuck to her guns on that, but it didn't stop the constant bombardment of questions. That was how the whole press conferences had gone.

"Can't you give your exhausted lord a kind word or even a pat on the head?!"

"Yeah, yeah. Okay. But that's all I have to do, right?"

"I won't accept a half-hearted gesture. Pour all of your loyalty and love into it."

"You're pretty picky for being so needy, you know? Jeez..."

Although Theia was in a poor mood, the other Forthorthians in the room—Theia's mother and her childhood friend—were in rather high spirits.

"Ah, this tea is delicious. You've polished your skills, Ruth," said Elfaria.

"Thank you very much. I'm happy that I didn't end up ruining the tea leaves you gave me, Your Majesty," replied Ruth.

Both girls raised giggled with glee.

"Oh, that's right. The base commander presented me with bountiful gift of edibles, so please deliver some to the Pardomshihas."

"You are most gracious, Your Majesty. Father and Mother will be overjoyed."

"Think nothing of it, Ruth. Teeheehee!"

"Heeheehee!"

In fact, Elfaria and Ruth were in such a good mood that they almost pitied Theia. They continued to chatter about nothing of great importance, occasionally bursting into giggling as if they'd suddenly remembered a joke between them. While it was clear that the two of them were having fun, no one else in the room had any idea what had brought this about.

“Um, Clan-san, why do those two look so happy?” a confused Harumi asked quietly.

Clan, who was sitting next to Harumi as she prepared a tea tray for Theia, set down her own tea and shrugged.

“They’re happy that Veltlion’s identity is being revealed to the citizens.”

“Oh my...”

“They can’t make an official announcement just yet, but the citizens are starting to identify Veltlion as the Blue Knight. To those two, this situation is ideal.”

The citizens of Forthorthe recognizing Koutarou as the Blue Knight on their own was certainly convenient for Elfaria and Ruth. For Elfaria, Koutarou would be unable to cut his relations with the Mastir family as public opinion surged. For Ruth, the Satomi Knights would inevitably be acknowledged as the Blue Knight’s band of knights.

“Teeheehee!”

“Heeheehee!”



Both of them were giddy at the thought of achieving such results without even having to officially acknowledge Koutarou as the Blue Knight.

“I see,” Harumi said quietly and nodded. “I think I can somewhat understand how they feel.”

“It’s over my head.”

“You’re the type that wants to monopolize what’s important to you, aren’t you, Clan-san?”

“Harumi!”

“Heehee... I’m sorry.”

Now that she understood the situation, Harumi smiled happily as she picked up the tray with tea and snacks. She knew how all three of them—Elfaria, Ruth, and Clan—felt, but the difference between their approaches made her giggle too. And happy though she was...

“...Oh my...”

Harumi suddenly felt weak. She quickly lost her balance as the strength left her legs. Though she tried to grab on to something, she didn’t have any strength in her arms either.

The tray in her hands clattered to the floor, but Harumi only heard it. Her vision rapidly grew dark, and she was soon unable to see anything at all. While she was still able to hear, the sounds around her seemed to grow distant with each passing second. There was only a faint thud as she hit the floor, but she barely even felt the impact.

“Harumi! What’s wrong, Harumi?!”

“Sakuraba-senpai!”

“Ruth, get a first-aid kit! Hurry!”

The voices of Clan, Koutarou, and Theia each reached Harumi’s ears, yet she no longer understood what they were saying. They gradually became less and less distinct, and Harumi could no longer tell whose voice was whose as her consciousness sank deep into darkness.

Afterword

It’s Takehaya again. As always, thanks for being here.

Like last time, this volume was published just three months after the previous one. It’s a faster pace than normal, but it was in order to release some relaxing stories and then dive into the Forthorthe arc without losing too much ground. The next volume will be out in the usual four months. In exchange, there won’t be any more interruptions in the Forthorthe arc.

Now then, as for that Forthorthe arc, I believe everyone can feel that we’re starting to reach the climax. In this volume, *that* finally appears. I’m sure that there were many of you anxiously awaiting the debut of *that,* so what do you think of how it appeared? I hope you enjoyed it.

Another noteworthy point in this volume is the position Koutarou finds himself in. In the highly advanced society of Forthorthe, it turns out it’s impossible to keep Koutarou hidden from the public eye, and the media is keeping a close eye on the way he fights. The diminishing difference between “Koutarou’s identity that the citizens are imagining” and “Koutarou’s actual identity” is a bit of an issue. If the truth gets out, it would inevitably lead to confusion. It could possibly even become a hindrance to Elfaria. All that could be done would be to feign ignorance, but because of that, a certain person might end up in quite the predicament. (Ha!)

Speaking of predicaments, Harumi is certainly in one at the end of the volume. In her case, it’s a problem she clearly had from before, and I’m sure the readers will find it natural considering the situation. Of course, the effects of said problem are far from small. Harumi’s crisis is connected to a certain other crisis. And so the story of volume 25 will begin as a result of this problem. I think it’ll be a major volume as far as affecting how the characters behave and act is concerned.

In regards to Harumi, she and Maki are the main characters of the current short story over at “Read It! HJ Bunko.” In terms of timing, the final of four chapters should be released around the time this volume comes out. The story is a carefree game showdown between the two girls, which is almost the complete opposite of what’s going on in the main story right now. Please give it a read if you’re interested.

For this volume, I actually have a little more wiggle room in the afterword, so I’d like explain some points on world building that I didn’t have a chance to go into detail on. Specifically, I’d like to talk about the military unit formations of Forthorthe.

The smallest unit in Forthorthe’s military structure is a squad. A squad has a commander, an adjutant, and eight subordinates for a total of ten men. In this volume, the team Maki was leading was around this size. With fewer numbers, the speed and stealth factors are their selling point.

Four squads gets you a platoon for a total of forty men. This was about the size of the troop Koutarou was leading. With more men, a platoon isn’t as fast or stealthy as a squad, but they have the more firepower and can use larger arms. It’s a good balance, and that’s one of the key features of a platoon.

Next up is a company, which consists of four platoons. With 160 men, hiding from the enemy while on the move is next to impossible. However, if they don’t have to worry about being sneaky, they can use vehicles and weapons that would otherwise give them away. So basically in exchange for stealth, a company has increased attack power and mobility.

A battalion—as I’m sure you can guess by now—consists of four companies. It’s a total of 640 men. At this scale, it becomes impossible for the commander to keep track of all of the men. Companies and platoons are assigned various functions and given general orders. As a result, flexibility is lost, but a battalion’s strength lies in uniting platoons and companies with similar functions to make them even more powerful. A tank battalion is good example of that. In this volume, Theia leads a battalion consisting of companies and platoons capable of flight and anti-aircraft warfare.

Above battalions are regiments. Consisting of four battalions, a regiment has a total of 2,560 men. In the latter part of this book, it's a regiment that invades the base from the front gate. In Forthorthe, it's normal for a standard military base to have a full regiment stationed at it. Fort Charldrissa having slightly more than a regiment of forces despite being on a planet still under development just goes to show how well defended it was.

Above regiments are divisions, and it's standard for them to consist of four regiments. A little math tells us that would be 10,240 men, but practically speaking, a regiment is already a little beyond a combat unit. It would be more apt to think of a division as a form of area control. In other words, within a specific region, four bases are treated as one group. If the region is in danger, the bases in that group respond. As an example, the Imperial Army's attack on the spaceport instigated something like this. In order to take control of the spaceport, Lord Galbauda sortied with two other battalions, but that would have left a base with half of its forces, so the other neighboring bases lend forces to cover for one another.

For the record, bringing four divisions together creates an area army. This is on a provincial level, grouping up several regions together. There's no longer any meaning in counting individual troops, but if you were to do so anyways, you would get 40,960 men. As you might guess from the scale, it's extremely rare for an area army to mobilize. It would take something like a national crisis to warrant that. In terms of our story, that might be necessary soon.

That's all on the military structure of Forthorthe for now. Of course, these specifications are commonly exceeded situationally, so there's no need to think too hard about them. The numbers given are only for infantrymen, so if the arms are different, so will the numbers. For example, the fighter platoon appearing in the story consisted of four fighter crafts and four pilots. Since an infantry platoon consists of forty men, we can see that a fighter platoon is one-tenth the size. However, after you take into account the 36 additional staff needed to keep the fighters operational, the numbers check out. I hope that all makes sense.

Oh, it looks like I still have some space left. What should I do?

That's right. I know I mentioned it in a previous afterword, but I'm actually working on plans for a new work. At this rate, it looks like it's going to be published through HJ Bunko like normal. The goal is to have it released during the first half of next year. Summer at the latest. Of course, since this work will be a collaboration, there's no guarantee that it'll stick to schedule. I'd be happy if you could keep my new project in your thoughts.

It will be a somewhat twisted adventure novel that won't follow the trends too much. However, that being said, the editorial department and my acquaintances who listened to my explanation won't take my word for it. Since *Rokujouma* started in a similar way, they're suspecting that it's going to be another work that's not what it seems to be. Now that I think about it, that might actually be true. Since the work will focus on a child going on a journey, the start has a similar vibe to it.

The project is almost completed, but the most important thing is to keep those who buy it from being disappointed, so I'm planning on refining it even more. I want to finish it get it out there for everyone to read, so when that time comes, if you're interested, I would love for you to accompany me on this new journey too.

By the way, I've made a schedule so that it won't affect *Rokujouma*, so there's no need to worry about that. I have no intention of neglecting *Rokujouma* after it's come this far.

That should just about fill up the space I have, so I would like to end this with my usual farewell. I want to thank everyone at the editorial department for their hard work; Poco-san who always draws my illustrations in time; and the readers who have kept up with this novel all the way to volume 24. Thank you from the very bottom of my heart.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 25.

October, 2016

Takehaya