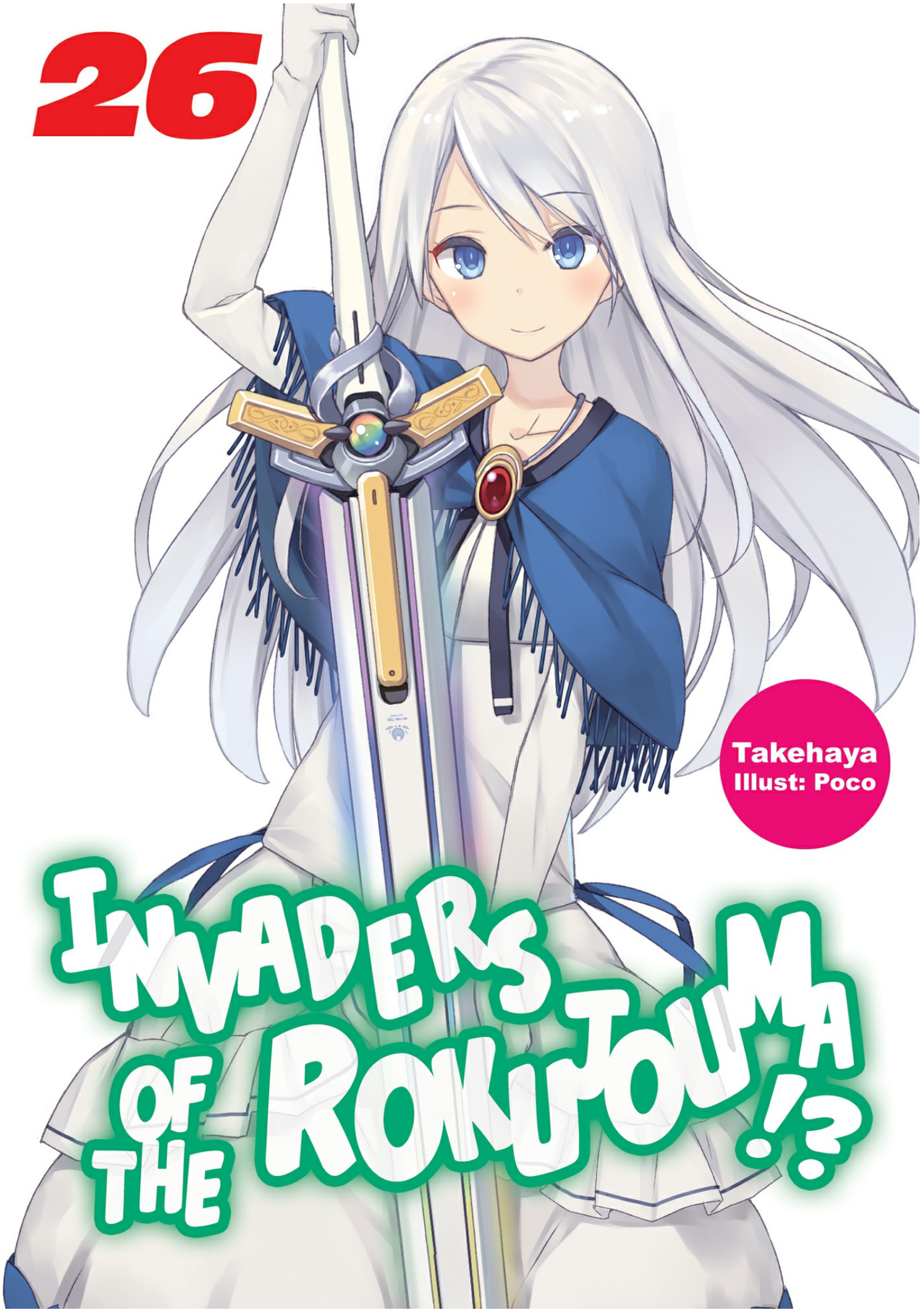
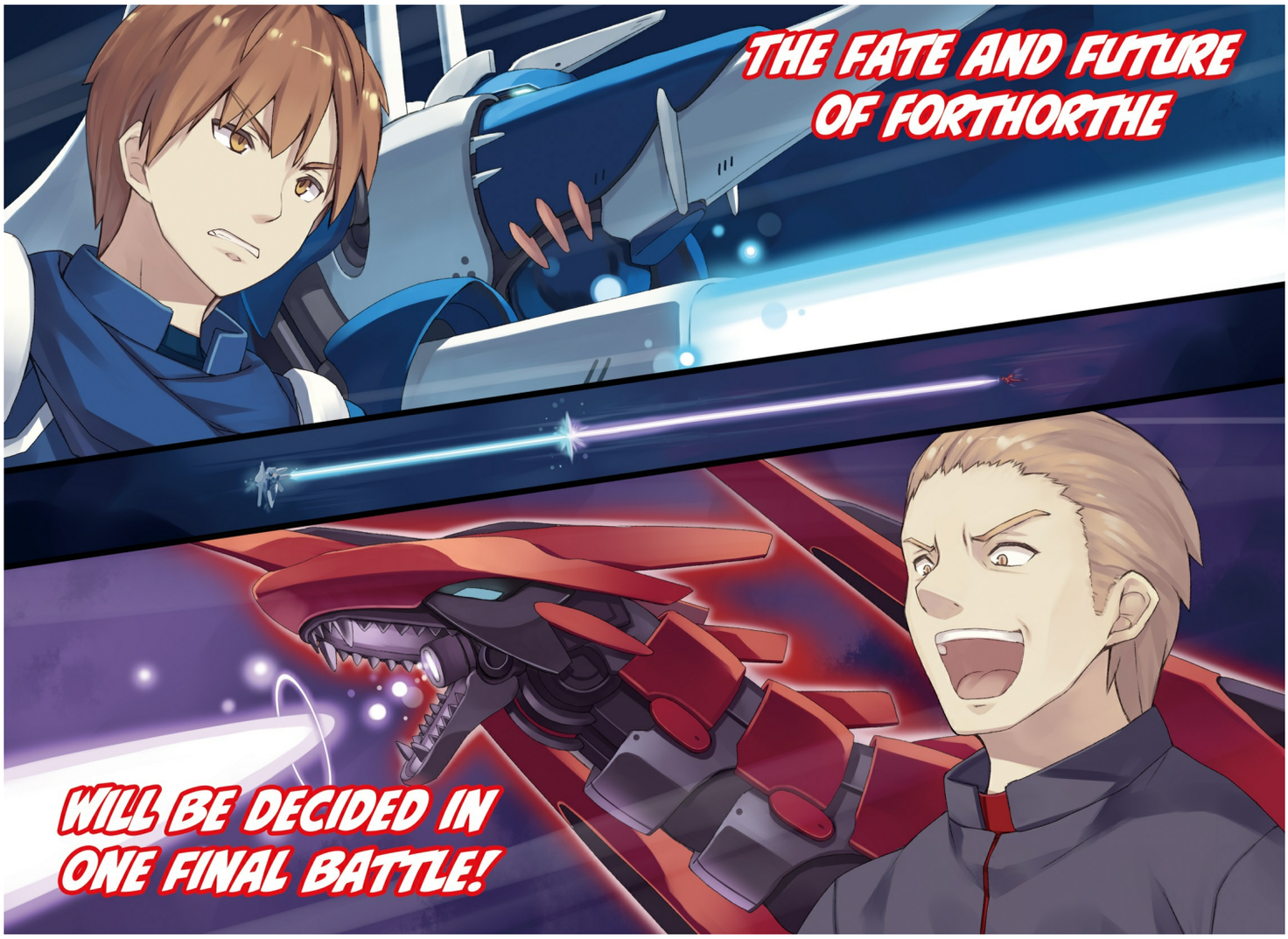
26



Takehaya
Illust: Poco

Invaders of the Rokujouma!?


INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 26
THE GOLDEN PRINCESS AND THE BLUE KNIGHT


THE FATE AND FUTURE OF FORTHORTHE
WILL BE DECIDED IN ONE FINAL BATTLE!


"YOUR MAJESTY... IT REALLY IS YOU, ISN'T IT?"
"IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I MET YOU AS JUST MYSELF, HASN'T IT?"

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INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!?
FACTIONS MAP

STUDENTS OF KISSHOUHARUKAZE HIGH SCHOOL



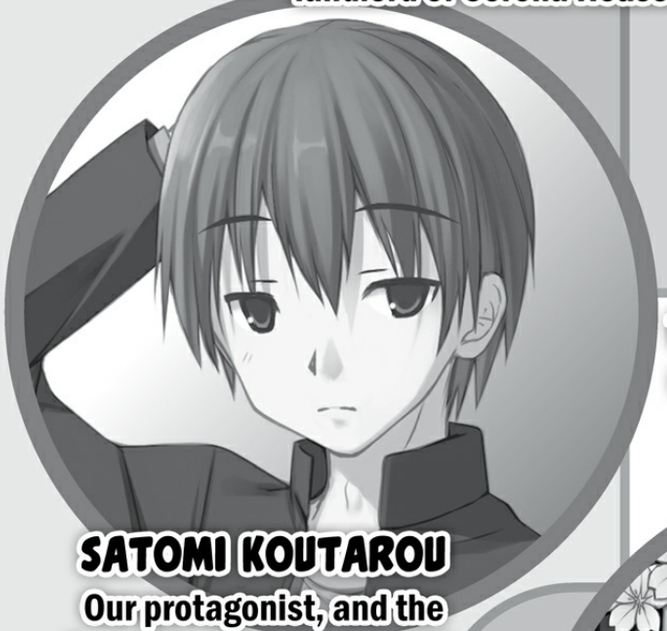
KASAGI SHIZUKA
Unquestionably strong.
Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI
Koutarou's childhood and best friend.



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



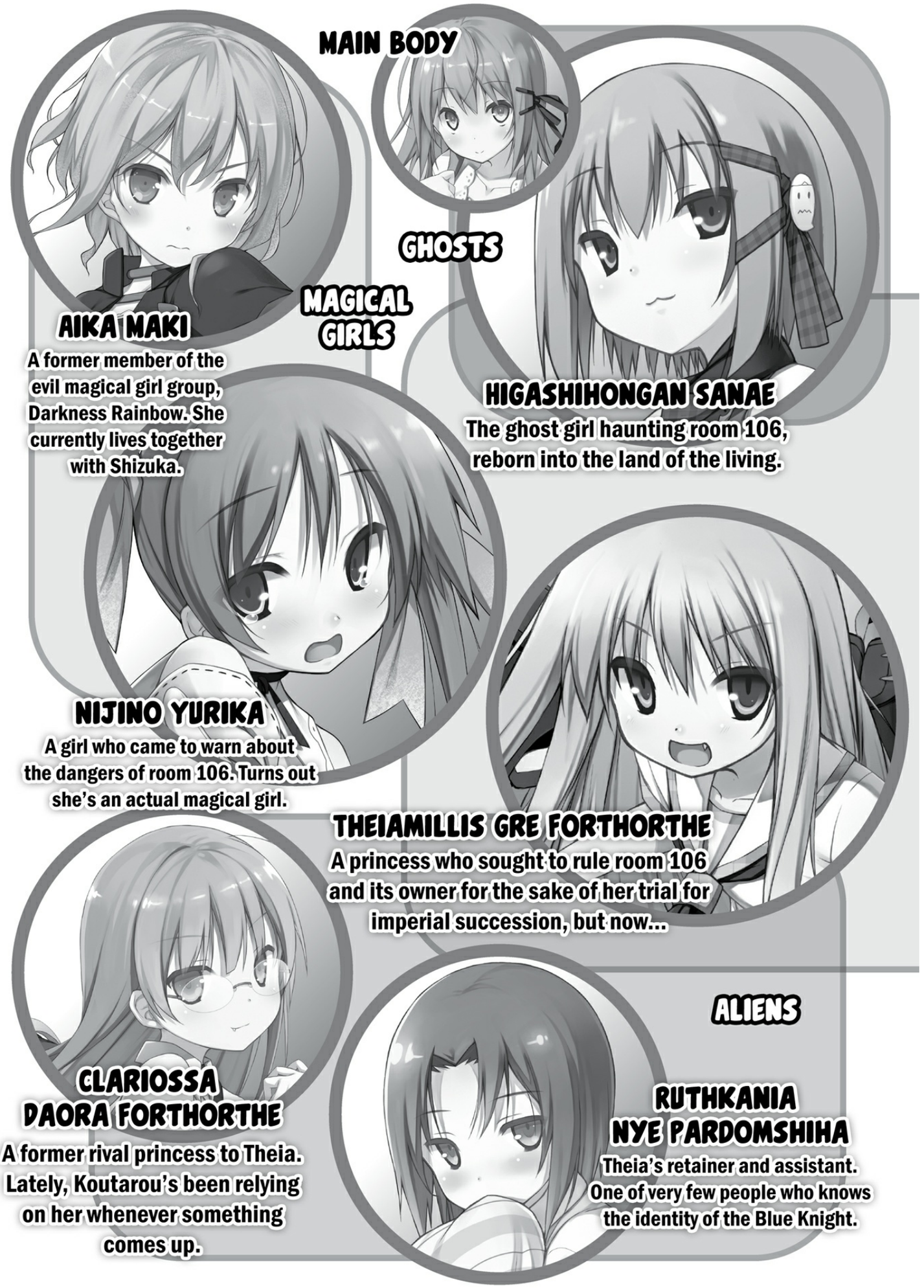
SATOMI KOUTAROU
Our protagonist, and the formal tenant of room 106.
Also the Blue Knight.

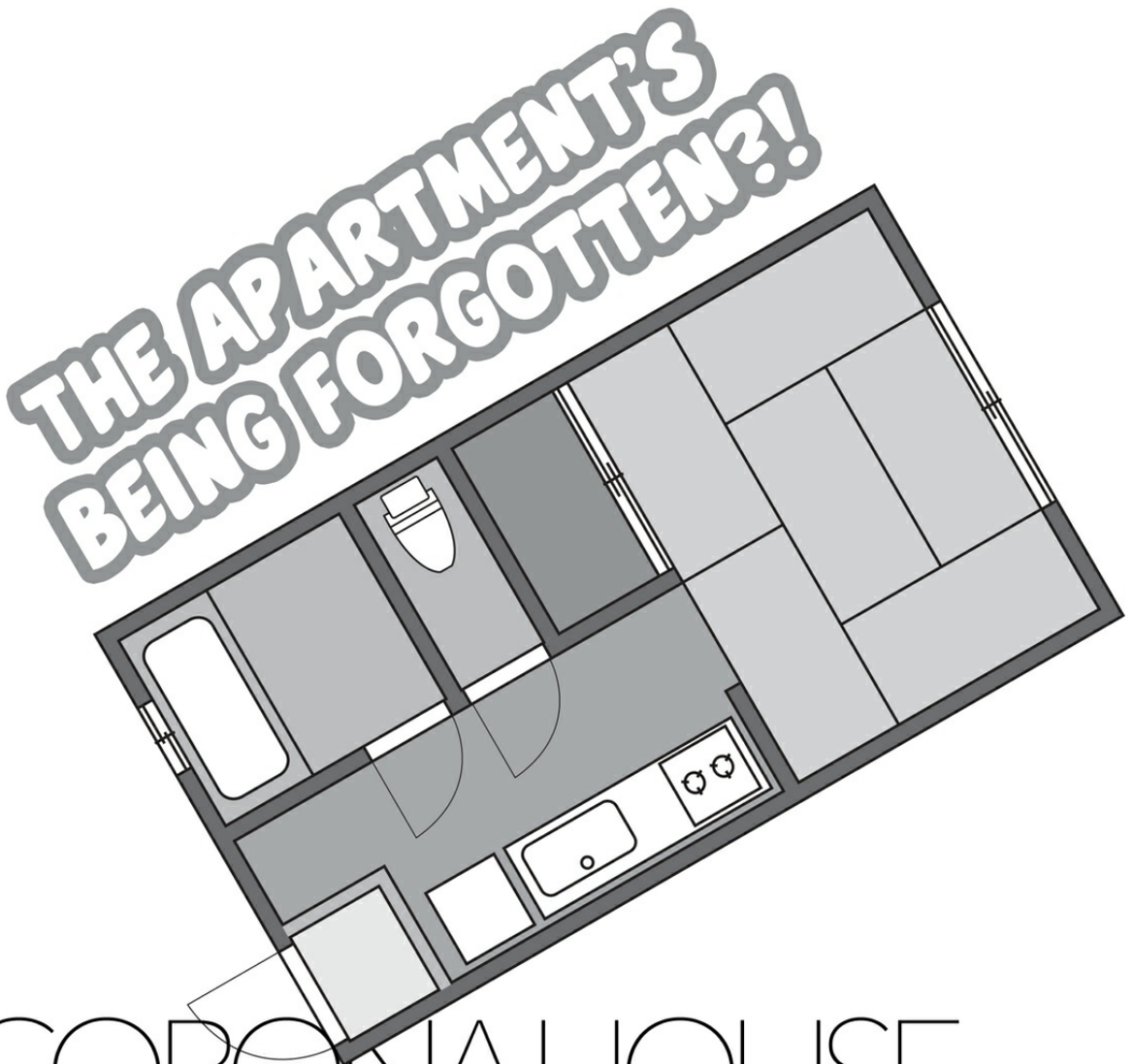
RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



UNDERGROUND DWELLERS

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


MAIN BODY
GHOSTS
MAGICAL GIRLS
AIKA MAKI
A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. She currently lives together with Shizuka.
HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE
The ghost girl haunting room 106, reborn into the land of the living.
NIJINO YURIKA
A girl who came to warn about the dangers of room 106. Turns out she's an actual magical girl.
THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE
A princess who sought to rule room 106 and its owner for the sake of her trial for imperial succession, but now...
ALIENS
CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE
A former rival princess to Theia. Lately, Koutarou's been relying on her whenever something comes up.
RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA
Theia's retainer and assistant. One of very few people who knows the identity of the Blue Knight.



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Attack

Monday, December 20th

"...But the truth is that I'm going to be dismissed any moment now, so we should move on after we take a little break to collect ourselves."

"You sound so happy even though you're saying something so pathetic."

"Ahaha, well there's nothing I can do about it now."

Elexis's cheerful laughter echoed through the troop transport vehicle. Like Maya had said, he didn't look like a man that had just lost everything.

Once the clock struck 9 AM, Koutarou would use his vast wealth to buy up shares in DKI, and there was no doubt that the first thing he would do once he became the largest shareholder was dismiss Elexis as CEO. But since it was still before business hours, there weren't any issues yet. He likely wouldn't be barred from the building until that afternoon at the earliest. Naturally, the same was true for Maya and Darkness Rainbow.

"But where do we go, young master? The company's being taken from you, right?"

Orange's question was completely understandable. Elexis losing his position would mean that he didn't have a place even at any of DKI's branch offices.

"Even if I'm cut off from the company, he can't touch my private property. So don't worry. It's not like I'm being dismissed for failing to properly manage the company or anything."

Publically, DKI was currently doing quite well. Despite that, Elexis would be dismissed at the request of a specific shareholder. It would be an internal affair, and Elexis couldn't be held personally liable for anything since the company was in good order and doing well for itself. If the reason for his dismissal was over DKI's intervention in national affairs, Elexis might have been held accountable, but as Koutarou and the others were in a hurry, they wouldn't be able to go

that far. He would simply be dismissed on the whim of a shareholder with no charges brought against him. Elexis knew that would leave all of his personal assets and private property in tact.

“For example, I’m thinking of lying low in one of my villas.”

“One of? So you’re still stinking rich without your company...”

Crimson was shocked at Elexis’s words. So much so that she momentarily forgot the pain of her wounds.

“It’s not all mine, you see. It’s the wealth of my family, amassed over two thousand years or so.”

“So you’re our young master in more ways than one, huh?”

“Crimson, I don’t want even you calling me that.”

While Elexis was from a family of commoners, its lineage could be traced back to the Melcemheins, a band of knights from two thousand years ago. Elexis was a direct ancestor of a squire from that band, and some generations after their knighthood was abolished, his family started a successful business and amassed a great deal of wealth over the next millennia or so. It was practically nothing compared to Koutarou’s fortune, but that was hardly fair. Compared to most anyone else, Elexis was still extraordinarily wealthy.

“I’d like to see the ocean. Folsaria didn’t have one after all.”

“Oh, that’s a good one, Bluie! Young master, do you have a seaside villa?”

“Of course. What season would you like it to be?”

“You’re *that* rich?!”

In contrast to its austere exterior, the interior of the transport vehicle was filled with a certain contentedness. That was largely in part due to Elexis’s and Orange’s naturally easygoing and cheerful dispositions, but it was also because everyone aboard knew that even though they’d lost, they’d given it everything they had. Everyone, that is, except for one person.

“Jeez, they’re all so carefree...”

Only Green kept out of the conversation as she stared out of the small

window of the transport vehicle. It wasn't like she didn't understand how the others felt. There was just something specific she'd wanted to accomplish in their fight, meaning the taste of defeat was especially bitter for her. She couldn't look back on it with the same satisfaction they did. Instead, she rued their encounter with Koutarou and the others as she idly stared out the window.

Green's real goal had been to kill Maki. She didn't honestly have too much of an opinion on Maki as a person one way or the other. In fact, she'd found it somewhat regrettable when she first learned that Maki had become an enemy. But despite her indifference for Maki, Green cared a great deal for Crimson. Too much, perhaps. And she considered it a problem that Crimson was so interested in Maki, even after becoming their enemy. She couldn't stand it. That's why she was plotting to eliminate Maki and keep Crimson's attention all to herself.

"Yellow, don't you have someplace you'd like to go?" Crimson asked as the conversation continued.

"Well... sort of. There's somewhere I'd like to go, but I have to make it first," Yellow replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I want to build my own home, however small it may be, somewhere with nice scenery."

"Oh, what a fun dream. When you build it, make sure you invite me over!"

"Of course."

"Try not to destroy it while you're there, Crimson," Purple half-jokingly chimed in.

"I would never! Who do you think I am, Purple?"

Though she was still looking out the window, Green's ears were focused on Crimson's voice. Green wasn't good at expressing her feelings, so this kind of thing happened often. And that's why she admired Crimson, who always spoke her mind without hesitation. In reality, Green and Maki were a lot alike, though Green would never be able to admit that.

“...Huh?”

As Green continued to stare out the window, something flashed past it. She’d only seen it for an instant, so she wasn’t really sure what it was. She pressed her face against the window to try and get a better look outside, but it was already gone.

“I wonder what that was...”

She figured that must have just been a bird passing by, but the battle-hardened Green decided to use her magic to make sure just in case.

“...Precognition.”

Green used her specialty divination magic to peer into the future around Crimson. Since she was the most important person to her, she cared the most about what might happen to her.

“Oh no! Everyone, look out! We’re going to be attacked!”

When she looked into the future, Green saw something that looked like a big hole opening up in the transport vehicle. The outline of the hole was blurry, but she was sure about the rest of the vision. In other words, she was quite sure something was about to happen in the transport vehicle.

“When, by who, and from where?!”

“Greater Protect All!”

Ignoring Crimson’s questions, Green immediately cast a defensive spell. Her mana formed into a plate-like shape over where she’d seen the hole appear in her vision, which happened to be right behind Crimson.

Boom!

Not a moment later, a hole opened in the body of the transport vehicle.

Offense and Defense at the Asteroid Belt

Monday, December 27th

"Ten days have passed since I gave the military the order to stand down and submit their evidence. Despite all this time, however, they have done neither. As such, I can only interpret their actions one way: This is a coup d'etat."

Ceilēshu had made up her mind, and she formally let the public know of her decision. She declared that everything the military had done up until this point was treason. Though there had been rumors, this was ground shaking for the whole country.

"With no evidence of the alleged crimes that Her Majesty Elfaria has committed, I have no choice but to believe that the military made false accusations in order to entrap Her Majesty. This means that Her Majesty has been unjustly pursued and detained for some time now, which is an insult to both this country and its people. It is unforgivable."

Vandarion had had Elfaria on the defensive all this time, but now it was her turn. It was a complete reversal.

"That alone is a serious problem, but the military has yet to stand down. Worse still, they are now poised to put up a violent resistance. In their refusal to cooperate with us, they have made it clear what their true intentions are. This is nothing more than an armed uprising. In other words, they have forced Her Majesty from her rightful position as empress with lies and deceit, and now they are trying to use the military to claim Forthorthe for themselves. This is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, a coup d'etat."

The military had been operating this whole time under the pretense of exposing Elfaria's crimes. They even had the backing of parliament, adding to the illusion of their justness and validity. But now both those pillars of support were gone, leaving behind only a crumbling mountain of lies. Vandarion had fallen from a crusader of the truth to the mastermind behind a coup d'etat.

“The royal families have met, and they also recognize that the actions of the military constitute an unjust coup d’etat. As such, the royal family meeting has decided that all royal authority will be returned to Her Majesty as of today. Her Majesty Elfaria will be restored to the throne.”

With no evidence against Elfaria and with the military’s actions denounced as a coup d’etat, Elfaria’s royal authority would legally be returned to her. She would then rightfully be able to take her place as empress once more.

“And with that, my duties as regent empress are over. I, Princess Ceilēshu, am grateful to the Goddess of Dawn for safely being able to honor my position, and I would like to sincerely thank all of the citizens for your cooperation during this time.”

With Elfaria returning to the throne, Ceilēshu would be stepping down as regent empress. Truthfully speaking, Ceilēshu was relieved. After everything she’d experienced, she’d realized that she wasn’t cut out for the job. She was satisfied just that she would be able to put Elfaria back into power.

“And as my final act as regent empress, I would like to present to you the Empress of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Her Majesty Elfaria Dana Forthorthe.”

With a smile on her face, Ceilēshu finished her speech and left the podium. Taking her place was none other than Elfaria. Elfaria, however, was not dressed as she ordinarily was when she presented herself to the people. She was wearing a ceremonial outfit reserved for the rare occasion that the empress intended to take the front line.

When Elfaria appeared on the stage, the hall of the imperial palace being used for the conference fell into silence. However, the moment she stepped up to the podium, the hall erupted into a roar of cheers. The empress that had been chased from the palace by the treacherous military had returned with the help of the Blue Knight. The citizens were unable to contain their excitement after such a symbolic series of events. They were all thinking the same thing. They were witnessing a new legend in the making. And because of their excitement, Elfaria had to wait over a minute before the hall calmed down

enough for her to speak.

“I am the empress of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Elfaria Dana Forthorthe. I am happy to be able to stand before you all again as empress.”

Shouts of joy erupted through the hall once more. But this time, the excitement died down with a single wave of Elfaria’s hand. The crowd was excited, but they were also quite eager to hear what she had to say.

“At the same time, I must apologize for not being able to serve as your empress for over half a year. I will do my best to ensure that nothing like this will ever happen again.”

Elfaria wasn’t the one behind the coup d’etat, but she took responsibility for not being able to quell it right away. Protecting the peace was part of the empress’s duties, and that was exactly why Elfaria knew what she had to do next.

“But for the time being, there is a rather pressing matter at hand. What I must do now is stop the rogue military.”

The Imperial Army under Vandarion’s control had now become a coup d’etat force. They were quickly losing public support and isolating themselves. That said, however, they still had ample resources. Leaving them to their own devices would spell disaster.

“From here, the Imperial Army of Forthorthe should subjugate the coup d’etat army under Vandarion’s control.”

Of course, Elfaria had no intention of letting that happen. She’d even chosen to wear her war dress for the conference today to prove her determination.

“However, as the core of the army is behind the coup d’etat, the current Imperial Army is incapable of organizing itself to respond to the threat quickly enough.”

But even with Elfaria’s determination, there were problems. Though only a portion of the army had revolted under Vandarion, most of them were central figures to the organization. It had left the current Imperial Army in disarray. It would take a great deal of investigating and restructuring to make sure the army was in working order before they could even broach the issue of handling

Vandarion, and that would take time.

“That is why the Reborn Forthorthian Army will be leading the operation.”

In order to avoid squandering time and giving Vandarion the upper hand, Elfaria decided to proceed by using the Reborn Forthorthian Army as the backbone of the operation. They were independent of the Imperial Army, meaning nothing had been compromised by Vandarion defecting. They were still ready to take action, and Elfaria would have the available army soldiers follow their lead.

“That being the case... the commander in chief will of course be the Blue Knight, Lord Layous Fatra Veltlion.”

The moment that Elfaria said his name, the hall was abuzz with cheering yet again. In reality, the Blue Knight had never historically been part of the Forthorthian Imperial Army. Two thousand years ago, he’d disappeared after the coup d’etat forces were defeated, so he’d only ever held a place in the Reborn Forthorthian Army. But now he would formally be leading the Imperial Forthorthian Army proper, and his mission would once again be to save the country from the hands of those who would take it with unjust violence and force. The citizens were thrilled that the Blue Knight had come to do for them exactly what he’d done two thousand years ago.

After what Elfaria said, breaking news bulletins interrupted standard broadcasts all across the nation. “For the first time in history, the Blue Knight will belong to the Imperial Army, and he’s been tasked with subjugating the coup d’etat army.” Though there were various differences in the reports, all news stations and media outlets were covering the story. The people couldn’t get enough of it. But unlike the overjoyed Forthorthian citizens, there was one person watching the footage of Elfaria’s conference while rolling his eyes. It was the Blue Knight himself.

“Elle is being ridiculous, talking like this doesn’t concern her...”

Koutarou sighed as he watched Elfaria onscreen. She boldly spoke to the crowd in her glittering outfit. Her expression and behavior were demure, certainly befitting an empress, but Koutarou could see right through her. Elfaria

was enjoying this situation more than anyone else.

“If only Koutarou could appreciate the significance of him understanding that...” Theia sighed.

“Elfaria-san sure has it rough too. Heh...” Clan giggled a little.

As the second and seventh princesses respectively, Clan and Theia would both take part in the subjugation of the coup d’etat army in their personal battleships. They would take the front in Elfaria’s stead and serve as generals. Unlike Koutarou, however, neither one of them was unhappy with that. They watched both Koutarou and the footage of the conference with smiles on their faces.

“By the way, will Ceilēshu-san be joining us in battle as well?” Clan asked.

“No. According to mother, Ceilēshu will stay at her side.”

“Why is that?”

“Because she won’t be able to complete the succession in time, she’ll remain as an advisor.”

All of the princesses apart from Ceilēshu would be joining the battle, meaning six royal class battleships would come together for a single purpose. While none of them other than Theia and Clan would take the front lines, it was an extremely meaningful show of force that the royalty was united against the coup d’etat. Having six royal class battleships in the Blue Knight’s fleet would also boost both troop morale and public support. While they couldn’t actually send out the empress herself, it was tradition in Forthorthe for the royal families to take risks.

“Looks like everyone is reveling... Jeez...” Koutarou murmured, shaking his head.

“The people of Forthorthe would be excited even just to catch a glimpse of you, Master. Knowing you’ll be fighting for them is like a dream come true.”

Strangely enough, even though he himself was the cause for all the fuss, Koutarou couldn’t even imagine how the Forthorthians felt. Sensing his puzzlement, Ruth smiled at him. She was part of the Pardomshiha family that

also appeared in the legends of Alaia and the Blue Knight, so she could understand how both Koutarou and the citizens felt. And her conclusion was that all Koutarou could do was give in to it.

“Yeah, but if Elle hadn’t poured oil on the fire like that, it would have at least been a little calmer.”

“But Her Majesty meant well. She has to give the citizens the impression that this battle will end the war.”

For Elfaria, winning the battle was of course important, but she also intended to ease the hearts of the people. The Blue Knight and six princesses would stand shoulder to shoulder and fight the coup d’etat army. There was no doubt they would be victorious. That kind of conviction would give the citizens hope and even boost the economy. And while it was too subtle for most citizens to notice, it was an excellent demonstration of the quality of Elfaria’s leadership.

“No way! That expression tells me that this definitely isn’t the only thing she’s up to!”

Koutarou could understand what Ruth was saying, but after seeing Elfaria’s face on the broadcast, he was quite sure there was more to it. He had every confidence that she was enjoying toying with him.

“Looks like you do understand, Satomi Koutarou. That is Her Majesty Elfaria’s revenge for leaving her behind twenty years ago. Can you really blame her for it?”

“Ugh...”

Just as Kiriha had pointed out, Koutarou and Elfaria had gotten along well twenty years in the past, yet he had left her behind. Knowing that, he had no choice but to grin and bear the unease welling up inside him.

Koutarou and the others would depart the next day on Theia’s ship. Since Koutarou would be aboard, Blue Knight would serve as the flagship of the Imperial Army fleet. Knowing that the rest of the force would be following her ship made Theia a little nervous.

“To think the time for something like this has really come...”

Blue Knight, moored to the space station by a metallic arm, looked enormous from the spaceship dock. While its actual size was about a kilometer tall, it looked much bigger from below. The fact that Theia was unable to see the head—or more accurately, the bridge—only served to strengthen that impression.

“I wish I could go back to when things were simpler and I could just go wild...”

Theia was determined to fight for her mother’s sake, but she never imagined that the fight would be on such a grand scale. While Theia enjoyed combat, it was mostly in a competitive sense. She had no love for war and scorned the thought of people dying, especially on her watch. But she also knew that no matter what she did in the upcoming battle, there would be casualties. Her choices and actions would simply determine the scale of that loss. That pressure naturally made her apprehensive.

“Harumi, what did you do two thousand years ago when this happened?”

Unable to overcome the worry in her heart, Theia turned to Harumi, who was looking up at Blue Knight with her. Neither one of them had been able to sleep, so they’d come out to look at the stars together.

“I was the same as you are now, Theiamillis-san. Unable to put aside my nervousness and hesitation.”

With a faint smile, Harumi answered as Alaia would. Perhaps because of the stimulation of the decisive battle drawing ever nearer, her hair was glowing silver.

“So even the legendary Princess Alaia felt this way...”

“I’m still a normal person, you know.”

“Fair enough.”

“So... having Koutarou-sama dote on you may be a good idea.”

Scale aside, when it came to war, Alaia had more experience than Theia. She had a much better idea of what it would take to overcome her nerves in this kind of situation.

“Is that what you did?”

“You should already know that, Theiamillis-san.”

“Something like that did happen in the manuscript... I see, so that actually happened.”

“Heehee... Indeed it did.”

In the script Theia had written, Alaia had revealed her weakness to Koutarou before a major battle. It wasn’t anything that had been recorded in the annals of history, but Theia had accurately been able to guess what a princess might feel under such circumstances.

“But you sound so composed now... Did you already get him to dote on you?”

“No. There’s nothing I can do in this battle after all.”

Space battles were far out of Alaia’s area of expertise. In such a large battle, it was even unrealistic to try and use support magic, not that Koutarou would have allowed Harumi to use magic in the first place considering her condition. Moreover, Harumi wouldn’t be leading anyone in this battle. Her decisions had practically no effect on the outcome, and in a way, that took all of the stress off of her. It was a notable difference between what Alaia had gone through in the past and what Harumi was going through now.

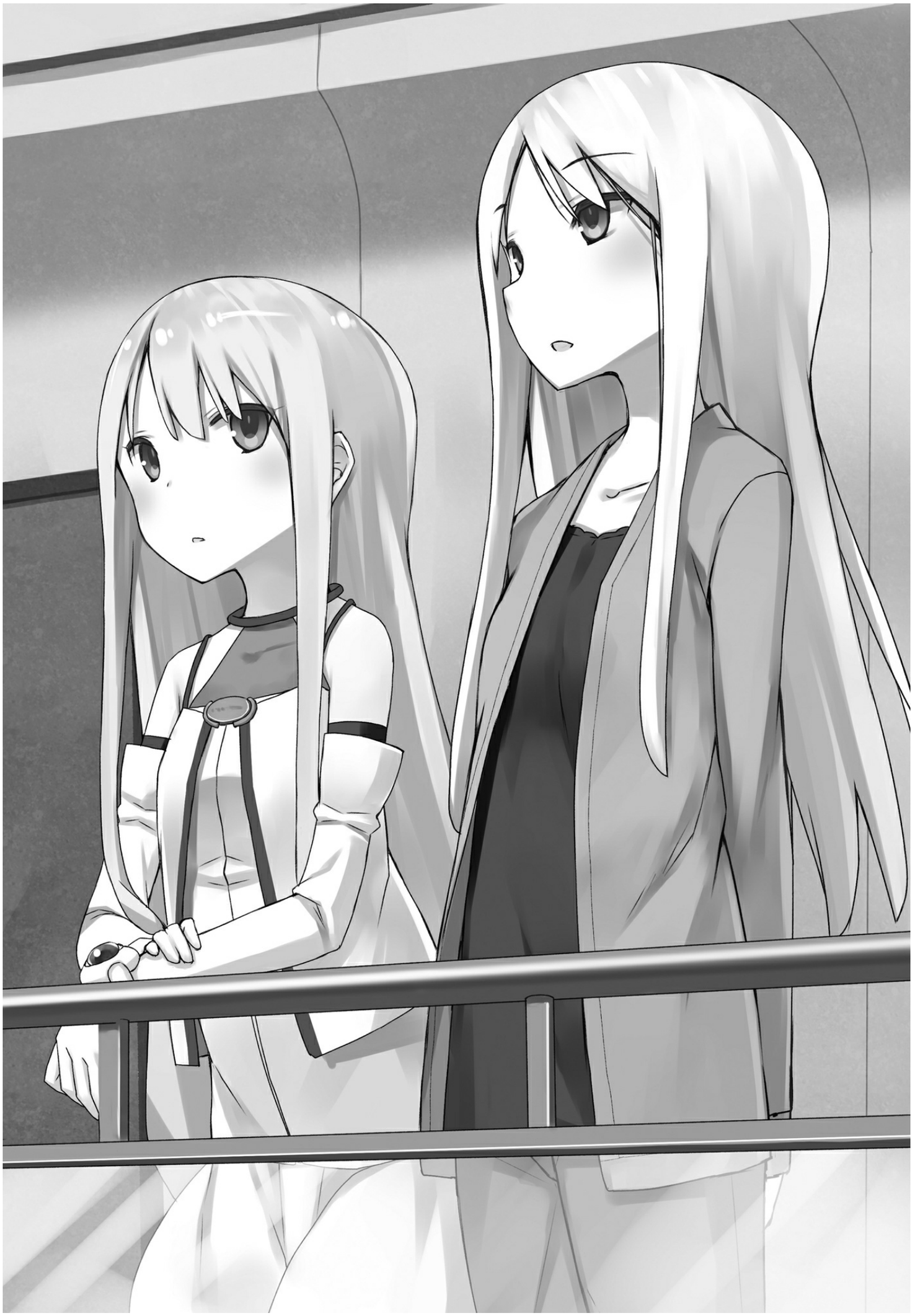
“This time it’s my turn. You just sit back and relax.”

“Before that, you’d better have Koutarou-sama dote on you some.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of that later.”

“Teehee, then there’s nothing to worry about.”

Princesses of the past and present, Theia and Harumi would have never met under ordinary circumstances. But even so, they now stood side by side smiling at each other. It was a miracle born from complexly intertwining fates. That’s why Theia believed that fate was on her side, and she was sure victory would be too. There was no way to know if that was really true or not, but she chose to believe, and that gave her hope and confidence—exactly what the people under her command would be waiting to see in their general.



Quite frankly, Koutarou was bad at speeches. But he knew he had to do his best when he was at the ceremony meant for sending off the troops to subjugate the coup d'etat army and end the war. Knights and soldiers from all around the country watched via hologram as Koutarou climbed up to the podium to address them.

"I am the commander in chief who has been appointed to put an end to the coup d'etat, Satomi Koutarou, though you may know me better as Layous Fatra Veltlion."

"Ooooooooooohh!"

The moment Koutarou gave his name, cheers loud enough to drown out his voice amplified by speakers filled the spaceship dock where the ceremony was taking place. The knights and soldiers in attendance were well aware of Koutarou's exploits, both past and present. Word had even spread about the events of Rushstock Cemetery, though they were only unconfirmed rumors. Everyone who gathered before him now was deeply moved by the thought that they might be part of his legend.

"Well, in this case, my name doesn't matter. What's important is what we do from here on out."

After waiting for the venue to quiet down, Koutarou continued with his speech. A life and death battle would soon be upon them. He wasn't just here to ask the knights and soldiers to fight. There was something more he had to tell them.

"Our enemy is the rogue military that started this coup d'etat, and Vandarion who orchestrated it all. However, it must be said that those serving under him may not have had a choice in the matter. There are inevitably those who are just following orders, against their will or otherwise."

As Koutarou spoke, the rest of the venue was dead quiet. Like exemplary soldiers, the men and women present all strained their ears so as to not miss anything their commander in chief was saying.

"One of the goals in this battle is to help those people. Just defeating the enemy is not enough."

There were plenty of people in Vandarion's faction that questioned its actions, but only a small portion of them had been able to escape their predicaments. Most of them were still forcibly under Vandarion's command with no way out. As such, the Imperial Army's opponent now was a mixed group of enemies and allies. It would be a far more delicate battle than one where the objective was simply to wipe out the enemy.

"But Vandarion surely knows we feel that way, and he will do his utmost to try and exploit it."

According to Kiriha's prediction, there was a high chance that Vandarion would use squads of sympathizers as human shields for himself and his loyal troops. He would fill ships he could control remotely with anyone he believed might turn against him, and put those ships in the most dangerous positions during battle. His goal would be to exploit the kind hearts of the Imperial Army and make it more difficult for them to attack.

"Unfortunately, we have no means of discerning friend from foe. And of course I can't ask you to throw your lives away in order to save everyone he'll use as cannon fodder. That's why our best option is to take down the enemy headquarters with one swift strike. By doing that, we will be able to keep casualties on both sides to a minimum and still eliminate the enemy."

Of course, it was impossible to discern whether or not a ship was moving on automatic control just by looking at it. There could be ruthless enemies pretending to defect or surrender only to get close enough to attack. And if the Imperial Army was too hesitant to attack because they were concerned for the welfare of their friends and would-be allies, they themselves would suffer undue loss. They would never win against Vandarion like that. Instead, by steeling themselves and attacking without holding back, they would be able to keep casualties at a minimum. That was the cruel reality of war against your own country.

"And since a swift, decisive victory is what we need, the role each of you play in this will be great. Always keep in mind that only the utmost efforts of each individual will bring about the best possible result for us all. I expect a good fight from each one of you."

The Imperial Army had the upper hand in terms of head count. Even with the sacrifices of battle, their superior numbers would eventually lead them to victory. But they couldn't afford to wait for that, nor did they want to. If they didn't keep casualties to a minimum, they would be no different from Vandarion. That belief had been passed down from Alaia's reign.

After his introduction, Koutarou went through the basics of his plan with the knights and soldiers, then ended his speech. He stepped down from the podium, followed by fervent applause and cheers. He hadn't even been on stage for ten minutes, but Koutarou looked exhausted. Like Theia, he wasn't good in front of a crowd.

"...Are you sure that was really okay?" Koutarou asked as soon as he stepped off the stage. He was talking to Kiriha, the one who'd decided on the contents of his speech.

"Yes. There were no problems with that. It must have strengthened Vandarion's impression that we'll be launching a swift attack."

Overall, Koutarou had been honest in his speech. He also genuinely did his best to make sure the Imperial Army's knights and soldiers were prepared to fight people who were effectively hostages. However, the part about settling things immediately with a swift attack wasn't exactly true. Koutarou hadn't shared Kiriha's actual plan with them as a countermeasure against the coup d'etat spies that had inevitably infiltrated their ranks. Vandarion likely already assumed that the Imperial Army would want to settle things as fast as possible to keep casualties low, and Kiriha had arranged Koutarou's speech in order to give him evidence to keep believing that.

"But if we make him think we're hurrying, won't that be bad?" Yurika asked.

And she seemed to have a good point. Once the coup d'etat army understood that the Imperial Army would aim to end things quickly, they would probably deploy all of their forces in an attempt to overpower them. If that happened, it would be a bloody battle on both sides. Really, it was an unusually astute observation from Yurika.

"It's not like they fully trust what Koutarou says. They can't take it at face value, and that hesitation will be just enough to give us an opening to exploit

since they'll still feel forced to deploy their troops."

Kiriha's plan had already taken what Yurika was worried about into consideration. In fact, that was the true essence of her plan.

"Yurika, if you realize something's not right, that means Kiriha's already caught it too," Sanae added.

"Well, that's true. Now I feel like I was worried for nothing."

Sanae and Yurika didn't put too much more thought into what Kiriha was really planning. Trying to figure it out was a headache, so they were both content as long as things were being handled.

"The rest is all up to how hard we work," Theia said.

"I'm not very fond of working hard..." Clan groaned.

"What are you talking about? You worked like a maniac when you first came to kill Theia."

"I've realized how reckless that was now!"

"But right now, we need the Clan from back then."

"...You really are a monstrously unfair man."

Making preparations for the plan was Kiriha and Ruth's job, but putting it into action would be up to Koutarou, Theia, and Clan. The decisive battle was close. Tension was mounting both among the soldiers, and aboard Blue Knight.

The coup d'etat army was focusing their forces in the asteroid belt between the fourth and fifth planets of the Forthorthian solar system. Optical observation and radar had natural limitations, so it was impossible to differentiate between asteroids and spaceships from afar. It made the asteroid belt the perfect place to hide a fleet. While the asteroid belt in the Forthorthian solar system was smaller than the one between Mars and Jupiter, it was still plenty large enough to conceal ships and space stations.

"D-Director General Granado, several of the advanced warning satellites on the rim of the asteroid belt have detected a space distortion. There's a 98 percent probability that it's the Imperial Army fleet."

Vandarion’s forces had made their base in the asteroid belt by modifying one of the asteroids. There was a mining facility there originally meant to extract minerals from the asteroid in the early stages of the space age, but it had fallen out of use as development in the vicinity advanced, and had later fallen into the hands of the military. One of its strong points was that it had communication capabilities that stretched across the entire asteroid belt, meaning they could constantly monitor information incoming from various observation devices. It played to their advantage even now as they were promptly alerted to the details of the Imperial Army’s arrival. And since they had tabs on their enemy but not vice versa, it was a highly advantageous position for them. Even so, the operator that first reported this information to Granado was hesitant. He knew that making enemies of the Imperial Army and the royal families was not a matter to be taken lightly.

“That was faster than expected... but I suppose it’s still within our estimations. What is the exact size and location of their fleet?”

In charge of the base was Granado Valkyris. As both director-general of military affairs and the science and technology agency, he was Vandarion’s right-hand man. He was an experienced and intelligent man. He’d expected something like this would happen, so he remained composed even upon hearing that the Imperial Army fleet had appeared. His calm demeanor even helped reassure the hesitant operator reporting to him.

“They are almost directly to our east, and their elevation is almost zero degrees.”

In space, things like cardinal directions were virtually meaningless, but they were still used in practice because they were easier for people to understand. By using the stars and nebulas that remained in the same place regardless of one’s position in the Forthorthian solar system, orientation and direction could be determined. The operator reported the Imperial Army’s location according to those standards.

“Because of their numbers, we can’t identify individual ships, but it’s a grand fleet of over a hundred vessels.”

“So they’re planning on using their full force to try and break through our

weakest point, huh? It seems the Blue Knight's goal is a swift attack just as our intelligence indicated."

The total amount of military grade spaceships in the Forthorthian solar system hovered at around a thousand. The Imperial Army had arrived with a hundred ships or so, meaning they were attacking with 10 percent of their entire force. In order to do that, they'd likely mobilized every available vessel. They'd also appeared on the opposite side of the asteroid belt when looking at the sun. They were strategically approaching vertically from the outside of the asteroid belt where it thinned out. Putting those two things together, it appeared that they were indeed moving in for a swift attack. Following his plans, Granado issued orders to his troops.

"All ships, prepare for battle. Take action following plan 12E."

Without knowing where the Imperial Army would attack from, Granado had spread his forces out over a wide area. But now that he knew they were inbound from the east, he put his men into action accordingly.

Use of gravitational waves was the standard means of long range communication, especially out in space. Even so, however, gravitational wave communication was not without its flaws. If a space distortion navigation, or warp, took place nearby, it could cause a major disturbance in communications. That was because warping space had an impact on gravity. Clan's plan had been to make use of exactly that.

"I've managed to infiltrate them. I'm currently analyzing their communications log."

"...When she does things like this, it's almost like a work of art. She's on your level, Kiriha-san."

"Honestly, in this area, I hardly measure up to Clan-dono. These creative ideas and technologies are unique to her."

"The only problem is that she tends to lose her nerve when complimented..."

The coup d'etat army's communication network spanned the entire asteroid belt, and it all relied on gravitational wave communications. It was far too large

for cable to be a realistic option, and electromagnetic waves would be too difficult to use since the asteroids would block the signals. That meant they depended on gravitational wave communications, which could be infiltrated from the outside. However, that was easily detectable because gravitational waves different from the usual patterns would be present. Something like that would easily be caught and dealt with.

So what Clan set her eyes on was a disturbance in the network caused by space distortion navigation. If a grand fleet aiming to end the war with a swift attack all warped into the area at once, the interference in communications would be considerable. When the communications systems began detecting errors from it, they would restart as a safeguard. And in the middle of their boot-up cycle, they were easy to hack into, and from there it was a simple matter to cover up any evidence they'd been hijacked. A small unmanned craft Clan had sent out ahead of time was responsible for automatically breaking into the system following a program she'd written. That way, they could hack into the coup d'etat army and they'd never even know it.

Of course, it wasn't something that Clan could have done on her own. A lot of support was required before the plan could be put into action, such as getting information on their security from moles within the coup d'etat army, and having unmanned crafts from nearby bases spread out within the asteroid belt to help disguise Clan's. Koutarou's speech pressing for a swift attack had been to make sure their actions looked natural. What they'd accomplished this way was only possible through the powerful combination of Clan's talent and the Imperial Army's resources.

"Analysis of the log is complete, and all traces of the infiltration have been erased. I applied a security patch so there's no worry about us being detected anymore."

"Sorry for making you do things you don't want to do."

"You can say that again. Please just leave it at this."

"Yeah. Let's proceed with the plan."

"Understood."

The projected hologram of Clan disappeared. She had a great deal of work she

needed to do, so she had more on her plate than just Koutarou.

“Satomi-kun, heehee...”

“What’s with that face, Landlord-san?”

“You’re starting to get better at handling girls, aren’t you?”

“I’m not dumb enough to anger her during an emergency.”

“Maybe your homework should be learning how to do that outside of an emergency situation then.”

“Please give me a break, Landlord-san...”

Of course, Koutarou and the others were equally busy. The warped fleet was approaching the asteroid belt even as they spoke. The looming battle was finally upon them. After exchanging knowing glances with each other, Koutarou and the others got into their respective positions.

As things stood now, the coup d’etat army forces were comparable to the Imperial Army’s. The problem for them was that the current situation was unlikely to remain that way. Because the coup d’etat army had split from the Imperial Army, what was left of the Imperial Army had been left in disarray. As time passed and the organization restructured, however, they would slowly pull themselves back together. That would free up troops and increase the manpower available. On the other hand, the coup d’etat army had no such hope. It was extremely unlikely they’d be able to recruit any more troops, and their chances of resupplying in the future weren’t much better. As such, they needed to seize victory as quickly as possible while keeping their loss to a minimum. They were anxious to bring things to a swift end for their own benefit.

“We have confirmed flags and IFF signals. It seems that six royals—the second through seventh princesses—are attacking.”

“Ooohh...”

Whispers immediately ran through the bridge of the Veldargors, the coup

d’etat flagship named after a mountain range in the Melcemhein territory. The stir was over the Imperial Army fleet, which was just confirmed to contain six royal ships. The one that stood out the most was the humanoid-shaped spaceship with a magnificent golden flag raised over it that identified it as the Imperial Army’s flagship, Blue Knight—the personal battleship of the seventh princess, Theiamillis.

“The Blue Knight and the princesses... They’re coming...” someone on the bridge mumbled after everyone else had fallen silent.

Though it was quiet otherwise, those words expressed what everyone was feeling. Only Vandarion’s most loyal men were aboard the Veldargors, but even they were a little shaken by the sight of the Blue Knight and Forthorthe’s princess teaming up to come after them. They were still Forthorthian citizens, after all.

Bang!

A single gunshot echoed through the bridge. The reeling crew then focused their attention on its source. The man holding the gun was the fleet commander on board, Granado.

“Have you come to your senses, men?”

The muzzle of the gun was still exhaling smoke, but it wasn’t because a bullet had been fired. Granado had simply used a blank to snap the shaken crew back to reality.

“We have no choice but to fight, regardless of who our enemy is. You all followed Vandarion-sama knowing that, didn’t you? Calm down and do your jobs like normal.”

The combination of the loud gunshot and Granado’s calm voice was rather effective. The rattled crew seemed to pull themselves together and swiftly returned to going about their work like usual. Their standard battle procedures had been beaten into them through practice, and going through the familiar motions helped them regain their composure.

“Forgive me, Commander Granado.”

Watching his subordinates springing back into action, the captain apologized

to Granado. He was initially quite shaken himself, and if Granado hadn't done something, they would have ended up wasting precious time.

"There's no need to worry. It's not easy to conquer that kind of gut reaction. In fact, your men were quick to recover. However, the very same thing is happening throughout the fleet right now. That needs to be dealt with immediately."

"I understand! I'll have all forces pull back right away!"

While this was their first encounter in person, Granado had fought against Koutarou and the others several times already. That's why he wasn't shaken himself, but also how he could understand his subordinates' disquiet. Thanks to that, he knew exactly how to handle it. However, it wasn't like the problem had actually been resolved. Granado was only one man, and the same panic was likely spreading like wildfire on all the other ships in the coup d'etat fleet. Moreover, this was only the beginning. The fighting hadn't even started yet.

"In addition, shift all ships with a trust rank of C or lower to automatic operation."

Granado had already personally verified the trustworthiness of the men under him even before Vandarion had started the coup. Those with a trust rank of A were loyal and obeyed all orders. They'd likely do Vandarion's dirty work without objection. Ships with a trust rank of B were also considered loyal. They may object to certain orders on moral grounds, but they functioned normally otherwise. And then there were vessels with a trust rank of C or worse—those considered disloyal and likely to revolt. Under current circumstances, there was also a high risk of them defecting to the Imperial Army. With that in mind, Granado decided to forcibly put those ships under AI operation or remote control.

"...What about their crews?"

The captain knew a question like that might earn Granado's ire, but he couldn't help asking. It was a serious issue and lives were at stake.

"There's no time to let them evacuate. We'll prepare for battle as they are."

"I-I understand."

Granado had given the order to commence the battle without unloading the crews of the automated ships. Normally if a ship was to be sent into battle under automatic control, the crew would disembark. Or if it was decided ahead of time that the ship would be remotely operated, it wouldn't be outfitted with a crew in the first place. In other words, Granado had planned for things to turn out this way. The crews of trust rank C vessels would essentially be used as hostages—human shields for the loyal ships. By having them aggressively attack on the front lines, he was aiming to demoralize the Imperial Army.

If I show even the slightest resistance, we'll be used as sacrificial pawns next...

The captain shivered when he realized Granado's true intentions. Fighting against Forthorthian royalty was already hard enough to swallow. But if he refused to fight, he and his crew would be the next in line to be sacrificed. And so the captain chose to conceal how truly shaken he was and pass Granado's orders along to his subordinates.

As the orders moved down the line, the entire fleet would realize the same thing. It would no longer be a matter of whether they wanted to or not. They would have no choice but to fight. If nothing else, fear would motivate them to take up arms against royalty and their fellow countrymen. That too was just as Granado had planned.

The most heinous part of Granado's plan—or more accurately, Vandarion's—was that while the untrusted vessels would be operated against their will, their communications would be left open. That way, the Imperial Army would quickly realize they were fighting against crews that were helpless.

"This is the destroyer Roshabinow, formerly part of the 22nd shock fleet of the Imperial Space Fleet. This ship is not operating manually, but under remote control of the fleet's AI. As such, we wish to surrender to the Imperial Army, but are unable to do so."

A message came in from a destroyer in the middle of a laser bombardment indicating their desire to surrender. It would have been an insane proposal on Earth, but it wasn't so unusual in the extremely advanced country of Forthorthe.

“Roshabinow, this is Theiamillis on board the Imperial Army flagship, Blue Knight!”

“Her Highness herself?! We are not worthy of—”

“Leave the formalities for later! Roshabinow, can’t you regain control of your ship?”

“The science officer is trying over and over, but his work is being overwritten by the system before he can finish every time. We are unable to intervene from the bridge. It seems like it might be possible if we had more time, but we don’t have that luxury right now. Please, pay us no mind and attack!”

The coup d’etat army was keeping their main force hidden within the shadow of the asteroid belt while attacking with their sacrificial pawns, the automatically controlled ships. The Imperial Army’s response was sporadic attacks. It was understandable that the Imperial Army hesitated to attack the ships that showed signs of surrender, and their crews were grateful for it, but if things continued as they were, they were potentially putting their countrymen and even their highly esteemed princesses in danger. The crews on board the automatically controlled ships wanted to avoid that no matter what. While they were unwillingly fighting for the enemy side, their loyalty remained with the Imperial Army.

“We simply ask that you tell our families we had no desire to be a part of the coup d’etat. Please, Your Highness!”

“Calm down, Roshabinow! We’ll save you right now!”

“But at this rate—”

“Don’t worry! We didn’t come without a plan! Have you forgotten that the Blue Knight leads this fleet?!”

The Imperial Army had predicted that the coup d’etat army would make a move like this. It wasn’t the first time such a situation had arisen in Forthorthe since the development of automated weaponry. That’s how the Imperial Army had the foresight to take precautions against it, and the person holding the key to the solution now was a reclusive, bespectacled princess.

“Hey, how much longer is it going to take, Clan? We’re out of time!”

“Veltlion, can’t you at least address me properly when you’re using an open communications line?!”

“I’ll prostrate myself before you or whatever you want later, but the lives of our allies are on the line right now!”

Clan was sitting quietly in her chair, not doing anything. But despite what it might have looked like, she was still pulling her weight. She had already finished what she needed to do. She was now simply waiting for the Hazy Moon’s main computer to finish the necessary calculations.

Beep!

The computer alerted her just as those calculations were complete. Clan adjusted her glasses as if to say that she’d been looking forward to exactly this moment, and then began tapping away on her console.

“You’d better not forget you said that!”

Clan could issue the computer commands faster manually than she could orally. She typed out prompt after prompt with swift, dexterous movements like she was playing the piano. Only the key to execute the command was entered in a different fashion.

“I’ll hold you to your word when this is over, Veltlion!”

Clack!

She slammed down on the last key like she was playing a percussion instrument. And with that, the battle truly began.

The hologram displaying the battle in real time indicated everything was proceeding as Granado had expected. The Imperial Army sent in the largest force they could muster, but they were unable to break through the coup d’etat forces using the asteroid belt and automated ships as shields. Their superior defensive position was gradually giving them an edge.

“Looks like victory will be ours... It seems that I overestimated them.”

Granado had made several predictions beforehand on how the battle would go, and most of them involved the Imperial Army trying to pull something at

this stage. But counter to his expectations, nothing was happening as he watched things play out through the hologram. The fight was turning out to be rather straightforward.

“Is the Blue Knight squandering the power of the six princesses? Or...”

Although things were proceeding in the coup d’etat army’s favor, Granado found the lack of development a bit strange. With the Blue Knight leading the Imperial Army, he’d been quite sure there would at least be a surprise attack from a special detachment. Granado stared at the hologram with his arms crossed. Until everything was said and done, he wasn’t going to let his guard down.

“...What is the meaning of this?”

The words of an operator mumbling to himself reached Granado’s vigilant ears. Not even a comment like that slipped past him.

“What is it?”

“Commander Granado... Well, something’s strange.”

“Go on.”

“I don’t know how to describe it... It’s like what we’re seeing and what’s being displayed are different.”

“An inconsistency then? I need details.”

Granado raised an eyebrow at what the operator said. He understood what he was saying, but he lacked the information necessary to understand the full situation.

“Um, please look at the front screen.”

“I can’t see anything.”

“Exactly. There’s nothing being displayed, no matter how much I zoom in. But there are supposedly explosions happening in that direction according to the hologram.”

“...What?”

Granado started to get a sense of what was going on. The front screen he and

the operator were watching functioned something like a windshield. It displayed the feed from the cameras on the front of the ship. Looking at that screen now, all they could see was black space and the stars beyond. That was it. But they knew better. The hologram told them there was a fierce battle taking place outside. They should be seeing explosions and enemy ships on the monitor, but there was nothing of the sort. That's what had tipped off the operator.

I see, so we're already in the Blue Knight's trap... As expected of a legendary commander. At least this is more in line with what I anticipated...

Granado reached out for his control panel. He compared the camera feed to the hologram to confirm what the operator had said. Indeed, there was an undeniable discrepancy between them, and that meant Vandarion's forces were in a dangerous situation.

"Captain, I'll leave things to you for now. Continue according to plan."

Granado stood up from his seat and headed for the exit of the bridge.

"Commander Granado, where are you going?"

"I'm going to use the equipment in my laboratory to figure out why the camera feed and the hologram's CG model are inconsistent with each other. An error is the last thing I want right now."

"That's an excellent idea, commander."

Granado was well versed in science and technology, and the bridge crew knew that. No one questioned Granado going to investigate the problem himself. In fact, many were grateful for it.

I'll need you to hold off the Blue Knight for a little longer. Sorry, but this is farewell.

But Granado's real objective wasn't the laboratory. He was instead making his way to Veldargors's flight deck, where he would use a spaceship he secretly had stored there to escape. Granado didn't so much as hint at his true intentions as he quickly left the bridge behind. He wasn't going to take anyone with him. He needed the Veldargors to continue fighting.

“That’s Commander Granado for you. He’s talented and quick to action.”

“I’m sure he’ll get results in no time.”

“I’d like all of you to follow the commander’s example.”

The crew on the bridge had no way of knowing that they’d been abandoned, and it would be a while yet before they realized their fate. Right now they were laughing together and taking it easy as they watched the battle play out seemingly in their favor. The only one who had sensed their imminent defeat was Granado.

It wasn’t just on board the Veldargors that the camera footage and the hologram models were different. It was happening across the entire coup d’etat fleet, and Clan was the one responsible for all of it. It was a direct result of her handiwork after infiltrating their gravitational wave network.

“Since we can’t tell friend from foe, I’m having all ships under automatic control leave the combat zone.”

“That’s fine with me. That still takes care of half of their force. Good job.”

Standing on the bridge of Blue Knight, Koutarou had linked his armor to the ship and was controlling it directly. Though he usually used it like a normal set of armor, the blue armor he wore was originally an operating device for Blue Knight. As such, when they were linked, the ship copied his movements. And as he dexterously maneuvered the kilometer long ship, Koutarou slipped through the coup d’etat army’s supposed impenetrable formation. It certainly helped that they couldn’t see him at the moment. Clan had functionally blinded them after hacking into the gravitational wave network.

“Be careful. I can’t do anything about the cameras on the enemy ships.”

“Don’t worry! By the time they notice, it will already be too late!”

As the gunner, Theia was sitting in her own seat behind Koutarou. It was her job to secure safe passage for Blue Knight by taking care of enemies and asteroids in the way. Her marksmanship, as usual, was dead on. Blue Knight hadn’t taken a single attack as it advanced.

“Veltlion, anyone with a good intuition is going to catch on any minute now!”

“I know! Ruth-san, order all forces to charge in now!”

“Yes!”

A communications network was extremely important in space battles. They happened on such a large scale that it was almost impossible for any single ship to collect enough information on an enemy force. Communications allowed allied ships to share information with each other, essentially creating an information network between them. That, combined with data from observation devices and reconnaissance crafts, was the only real way to pinpoint enemies in an area as vast as space. And that was exactly why Clan specifically targeted the coup d’etat army’s communications.

Upon infiltrating their network, Clan started off by throwing in false information. She strategically included data that would simulate a real battle, leading the coup d’etat forces to start fighting against a phantom army that wasn’t really there. The asteroid belt played to their advantage in that regard. In a place dense with debris and obstructions, visual data wasn’t always reliable. In other words, the fleet was counting on the information from the communications network to make actual combat decisions. So when the data indicated that the enemy was upon them, they launched their attack. And if the data said the enemy was destroyed, their attacks ceased. That was common sense, and no one questioned it. But it was exactly their reliance on that common sense that had them playing the fool now. They had the wool pulled over their eyes by false information, and they were none the wiser as they fired on nonexistent enemies. If anything, believing they had the automatically controlled ships to use as a shield helped lure them further into a false sense of security.

Their only hint that anything was wrong was the footage coming in from the cameras installed on the outside of the ship. Since the network of cameras and monitors functioned as a safer replacement for windows on spaceships, they ran completely independently of the ship’s other systems. That way, the crew would still be able to see outside even if all of the other systems shut down in an emergency. But because it was an independent system, that also meant that Clan couldn’t hack into it through the communications network. The cameras

would still faithfully record what they saw on the outside of the ship, even as the holograms falsely indicated enemy ships were about. That was what the operator on the Veldargors had picked up on, even if he didn't understand the reason why it was happening. All things considered, it was praiseworthy. But since the footage was mostly of the immediate area outside the ship, someone would have to be watching at just the right time—for example, when there should be an explosion in the distance—to realize the discrepancy between the feed and the hologram. Really, he'd just gotten lucky.

While the coup d'etat ships were distracted with their phantom battle, Clan overrode the remote control on the ships that wanted to surrender and moved them out of the combat zone. Sanae wanted to free them and let them join the battle on the Imperial Army side, but taking into account the possibility that not everyone on board said ships was in agreement about their loyalty, it was the safest decision for now simply to send them away. But even then, it had a significant effect. Losing those vessels nearly halved the coup d'etat forces.

"Master, there's a high energy reaction dead ahead! We've been found!"

"Theia, you know what to do, right?!"

"Who do you think you're talking to?! Just leave this to me!"

At a distance, the chances of Blue Knight being spotted by the coup d'etat army were incredibly slim. That being said, the coup d'etat army still had plenty of ships, and at this point in the battle, more and more of the crews on those ships would be checking the monitors. As such, as Blue Knight closed in, the chances of being detected increased dramatically. And once their cover was blown, they would lose the upper hand.

Both the coup d'etat army and the Imperial Army were confident in the security of their communications networks. Neither side would have readily believed their network had been compromised shortly after the battle had begun. There were safeguards in place to prevent exactly that. In fact, Clan had only barely managed to pull it off, and it had taken a mind-boggling amount of prep work. It was a nearly inconceivable feat, and that's exactly why the coup d'etat army fell into a panic when the Blue Knight suddenly appeared next to

them.

“What is the meaning of this?! How is the Blue Knight right underneath us?!”

The captain’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head as he pushed back against his chair in disbelief. The camera underneath the Veldargors was showing Blue Knight approaching. The holographic model indicated Blue Knight was currently engaged in combat some ten kilometers ahead, but there was no arguing with the image of the blue ship speeding towards them from below. The captain’s surprise was only natural.

“Is something wrong with the cameras?!” he cried.

“No, that’s not possible!” the operator reported back, equally surprised.

“Then you’re saying they infiltrated the network?! And so soon?!”

“That’s the only thing it could be!”

“Damn it! We’ll have to proceed assuming that the shared information is a complete mess!”

No matter how hard it was to believe, reality was closing in on them. And quickly. Not responding in time would be a death sentence on the battlefield. Fortunately, thanks to his daily training and combat experience, the captain was well prepared for even an unthinkable situation like this. In spite of his astonishment, he didn’t freeze up.

“Send a warning to the entire fleet and request that all nearby allies join in to intercept the Blue Knight! Taking on a royal class battleship alone would be suicide!”

“What should I tell them to do, captain?”

“We don’t have time to coordinate detailed plans now! Have each ship respond to the enemy as they see fit and fall back! If we’re split up, we’ll be defeated in an instant!”

The captain made the right call. Since their information network was no longer trustworthy, it meant that each coup d’etat ship had to fend for itself. They could only trust what they could see with the ship’s radar or their own eyes. Conversely, the Imperial Army knew the exact location of every coup

d’etat ship because they had access to real time information from the network. The coup d’etat forces’ only defense now would be to band together and counterattack as a group. If they could turn this into a match of strength, they still had a chance at winning.

The only question was where the ships would gather. As things were, it needed to be somewhere the entire fleet could find without trouble. The base within the asteroid belt would be perfect since all the coup d’etat navigators should be able to find their way there by calculating their relative position based on the stars. Moreover, with limited to no information about what was happening elsewhere in the region, a retreat to defend their main base was also in their best interest.

“Captain, Blue Knight has changed direction!”

But because the captain’s call had been so textbook, the Imperial Army was one step ahead of him. In fact, holding their ground and fighting things out was precisely what the Imperial army wanted to avoid.

“What?! Where is it headed now?!” the captain demanded.

“I-It looks like it’s on a course for Conora Base...” the operator replied, the hopelessness audible in his voice.

Conora Base was the coup d’etat headquarters hidden within the asteroid belt. It was exactly where they intended to regroup.

“So that’s what they’re after! All forces, return to Conora! The Imperial Army — No, the Blue Knight was after Conora Base from the start!”

The quickest way for the Imperial Army to bring an end to this battle would be to capture Conora Base. Because Vandarion’s faction had been branded as enemies of the state, there were very few places where they could resupply. So few, in fact, that the only one in the vicinity of the asteroid belt was Conora Base. Losing it would mean the fleet had no choice but to surrender.

However, finding Conora Base was no simple task. Since it had been built into an asteroid, it was actually mobile and could be moved like a spaceship. The coup d’etat forces strategically hid it within the asteroid belt, and they moved it on a daily basis for maximum security. Only men with the rank of captain or

higher were privy to its exact location. So even though the Imperial Army had pinpointed the coup d'etat fleet, they still didn't know where their base was. That is, not until the captain of the Veldargors gave his orders.

The entire coup d'etat fleet then began moving towards a single location in order to regroup in an attempt to defend themselves after their network was compromised. The Imperial Army believed they'd pick a strategic location for that—likely their base—and waited to see where they were going. Once they had a location, Blue Knight changed its course accordingly. Really, infiltrating the network was a ruse to uncover the location of Conora Base. And in his panic, the Veldargors's captain had told them exactly what they wanted to know.

The main purpose of hacking into the enemy network was to hijack control of the ships that were being operated remotely and allow them to escape. But it also had another goal, and that was locating Conora Base if possible in order to bring the battle to a swift close and keep casualties to a minimum on both sides. Taking over the remote control of the ships was a simple affair, but that secondary objective was why Clan had gone to the trouble of sending false information through the holograms.

"While there's a slight margin of error in order to account for the asteroids, where the flight paths of all the ships intersect should be their rally point. They would have chosen somewhere they would be able to rush to Conora's defense if need be, so it should be in the vicinity. I want you to find it," Kiriha explained.

"Initiating reconnaissance! Preparing the space distortion catapult!"

Following Kiriha's briefing, Ruth gave orders to Blue Knight's main computer. She was going to scout a wide area by warping several reconnaissance crafts ahead of them. The goal was to locate Conora Base before Blue Knight arrived at the rally point.

"Target destination is the region around the rally point!"

As a battleship, Blue Knight had a catapult to launch smaller spacecrafts it had on board. It could even do so through warp. While it only worked for short distances and wasn't safe to use on passenger vessels, it was convenient for

dispatching communications pods or unmanned drones. That was the technique Ruth used to launch reconnaissance craft after reconnaissance craft. Including backup units, she deployed several dozen. Once assembled in a three-dimensional grid, they could effectively sweep an area while Ruth monitored any openings.

“Reconnaissance craft 20 is detecting something! Your Highness, I’ve located Conora Base!”

And it didn’t take long for the search to bear fruit. Ruth’s unmanned crafts had first found the coup d’etat army’s small scouting ships, but that served as proof that the base was somewhere nearby. Ruth took the hint and investigated the area thoroughly. In her diligence, she discovered Conora Base.

“Where is it?!” Theia cried excitedly at the news.

“I’ll bring up the footage right now!”

“Koutarou, that’s it! Head over there!”

“Got it!”

Ruth quickly indicated the base’s coordinates with markers on the bridge monitor for everyone to see. Koutarou adjusted the ship’s course so the markers were right ahead of him and put Blue Knight’s thrusters to max force. The ship flew through space like a comet with a blue tail of light streaming behind it.

“So that’s it!”

While they were still far enough away that it couldn’t be seen with the naked eye, Koutarou spotted Conora Base in the enhanced computer image of what was in front of him. It had a strange but distinct shape. In that sense, it was exactly what it looked like: an asteroid that had been outfitted with a flight deck and thrusters. The main facility was inside the hollowed-out asteroid, which had been reinforced to ensure its structural integrity. While it wasn’t anything pretty to look at, it was practical and cost effective. It wasn’t an unusual design to see in remote regions of space.

“Master, Conora Base’s vital point is in this location!”

“Theia, you’re up!”

“I know! This is a fight against time!”

“Yeah, and if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not get surrounded! Ruth-san, the anti-ship energy sword!”

“As you wish, my lord! Drawing anti-ship energy sword Signaltin!”

Koutarou called for Blue Knight to draw its sword, although at several hundred meters in length, it was really far too large to be called a sword. It was the size of a spaceship all on its own. And once in Blue Knight’s hand, it began emitting white light. As the name suggested, Signaltin was modeled after the legendary sword. It boasted enormous energy output in addition to its massive size, and it used both of those to enhance its attacks.

“Leave the weaklings to me! You just forge ahead!”

“Don’t slip up!”

“Right back at you!”

Of course, Conora Base wasn’t going to give in without resistance. It had forces to guard it, and the base itself was armed. Despite its appearance, Conora Base was comparable to a royal class battleship. While it was inferior in terms of mobility due to its structure, there was no other substantive difference between it and Blue Knight. Moreover, it was only a matter of time before the coup d’etat fleet arrived. While everything was proceeding according to Kiriha’s plans so far, Koutarou and the other girls knew they couldn’t celebrate too soon. They all psyched themselves up as they approached the base looming in the distance.

In Forthorthe, space battles typically started with laser attacks. With the advent of the laser, most missile assaults were easily intercepted. Beam cannons couldn’t remain convergent over long distances either. And so lasers reigned supreme in space warfare. They were powerful enough as it was on the surface of a planet, but they were even more powerful in the vacuum of space without even air to hamper them. This was all common knowledge in

Forthorthe, and commanders were usually quick to put it into practice. This battle was no exception. The fight between Blue Knight and Conora Base kicked off with a laser shootout.

“Commence bombardment!” the base commander ordered.

“Roger! Commencing laser bombardment!” the lead operator responded.

Conora Base hadn’t once been attacked in the past several decades, but it was outfitted with a battle-hardened staff that had experience from other regions of the nation. They trained for this moment daily, and when it finally came, they commenced their attack on Blue Knight all according to procedure without missing a beat.

“What kind of damage did they take?” the commander inquired.

As lasers moved at the speed of light, it was implicit that any target that could be seen through the crosshairs could be hit since the shot would connect almost instantly. That’s why the base commander didn’t even both asking about the accuracy of the attack and went straight to asking what kind of damage Blue Knight had sustained. He wanted to put as much strain as possible on their barrier, so he was eager to know how successful their opening strike had been.

“W-Well, commander, it looks like all attacks missed the target...”

“What?!”

The base commander couldn’t believe what the operator was telling him. Laser bombardments always scored direct hits, bar one or two cannons that would misfire due to timing issues. That was a given. And yet, for some reason, all their attacks had missed. Their target was a battleship, and a royal one at that. The largest of spaceships. It should have been an easy target. Something was clearly wrong.

“What happened?!” the commander demanded.

“It seems that we were fooled by a massive hologram...” the operator replied meekly.

“So they’re taking advantage of us not being able to use the network!”

Because the coup d’etat army had been hacked and was unable to use their

gravitational wave network, automatic bombardment using radar lost a lot of its precision, so the task was carried out using cameras and the naked eye. However, because of Yurika and Maki's illusion, it was almost impossible to determine Blue Knight's actual position that way. Most of the enemy lasers had flown wildly through empty space. A couple of them were lucky shots and still reached Blue Knight, but they weren't enough to get past the barrier or do any real damage. Conora Base functionally hadn't landed a single hit.

"Change of plans! Don't go for direct hits! Just put up a barrage of fire and don't let Blue Knight get close!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"Release the reconnaissance crafts and launch the fighters! No matter how convincing of a hologram it is, we should be able to see through it at close range!"

The man in charge of Conora Base hadn't been appointed commander without good reason. He was an experienced leader with plenty of skill that served him well. He'd more than earned his title, and it was times like this that it showed. Even in the face of a setback like this, he reacted quickly and came up with countermeasures. Unleash a defensive barrage, and deploy unmanned crafts and fighter units. If the base couldn't land long-range attacks, they would keep Blue Knight at bay and send in mobile units to fight. At close range, they might be able to see through the hologram—or more accurately, the illusion—and detect the real thing with their onboard sensors. While it was mostly a stopgap strategy, it wasn't a bad idea.

"Our fighters have engaged the Imperial Army fighters! Their commander is confirmed to be Princess Theiamillis!"

"Oooooohh..."

The command room was immediately abuzz at the mention of Theia's name in such a capacity. They were locked in combat with the seventh princess of Forthorthe, but there was no backing down now. The base personnel understood that, so in spite of their shock, they didn't panic. Watching the fight unfold, however, was truly a sight to behold. It was quite obvious that Theia's skill was not to be taken lightly. She was an ace pilot, and the coup d'etat army

would have to do something about it or suffer the consequences.

“Let the fighters know not to engage Princess Theiamillis on their own! Surround her with at least three fighters! Any less than that is just asking to be destroyed!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

The battle between the fighters was progressing in the Imperial Army’s favor under Theia’s lead. Theia had intentionally taken the front line in order to raise the Imperial Army’s moral while intimidating the coup d’etat forces. But it wasn’t just for show either. Theia was strong. She was quite a force to be reckoned with, and the coup d’etat fighters—still somewhat discomposed by her arrival—were learning that the hard way.

“Have the reconnaissance crafts circle around the combat area! Keep them out of the danger zone for now!”

“I’ll let them know right away, commander!”

However, the outcome of this battle wouldn’t be determined by a fighter skirmish. What was truly important was to keep Blue Knight away with a barrage and have the reconnaissance crafts move in. As long as they could succeed on that front, the battle would be theirs even if they lost the fighter skirmish. The base commander wasn’t being overly pessimistic about the situation.

“The battle has only just begun! Even if the legends are true, the Blue Knight’s reign was over two thousand years ago! This is our time, Blue Knight! The day will be ours!”

The base commander rallied, but he felt a chill run down his spine as he watched his fighters get defeated one after the other. The reconnaissance crafts were taking a detour around the combat zone and closing in on Blue Knight. Since there was no one in them, they moved at high speed. And despite the detour, they reached Blue Knight in mere minutes.

“Enemy ship located!” an operator called out as the information came in.

“Good job! Forward the details to the laser! And give them a taste of our maximum output beam cannons!” the commander ordered.

As the reconnaissance crafts approached Yurika and Maki's illusion, they detected a large object. Based on its mass and the energy emitted, it was determined to be the enemy battleship.

"Target set to the enemy ship!"

"Fire!"

If they could destroy the flagship carrying the Blue Knight, it would devastate the Imperial Army. Even if they couldn't destroy it, as long as they did enough damage to hold it off, the allied fleet would arrive soon enough to finish it off. The commander was confident that breaking Blue Knight would be an excellent show of force, strong enough to rally the entire coup d'etat army.

"All shots have scored direct hits! The enemy ship's distortion field has collapsed! They'll be def— Wh-What is this?!" the operator gasped.

However, upon seeing that the spaceship they had attacked was another illusion, the whole base was stunned.

"What?! The Hazy Moon?! Wasn't that supposed to be Blue Knight?!" the commander shouted.

The ship behind the illusion was indeed a royal class battleship, and its barrier had been destroyed just as planned. But it clearly wasn't blue, and it wasn't humanoid-shaped either. The crest on the combat flag flying over it wasn't a golden flag, but a moon. It was no doubt the Hazy Moon.

"If that's the Hazy Moon, then where is the Blue—"

Booooom!

Just as the commander started to realize they might be in trouble, Blue Knight's sword pierced Conora Base. The impact from it was so incredible that anyone in the base who didn't grab on to something to brace themselves in time hit the floor.

"...I-Impossible. How did this happen? Did the Blue Knight bring a demon with him or something?!"

A single, full-powered strike from Blue Knight's massive sword was enough to devastate and silence the entire base.

The person the base commander unknowingly referred to as a demon, Kiriha, ultimately had a simple plan: to approach with two ships while making it look like there was only one. While it was equipped with various stealth technologies, making Blue Knight completely disappear would be difficult. Since they knew their opponents would have access to spiritual energy and magic too, it was an even more daunting task than usual.

But what if they prepared a different ship to pretend to be Blue Knight—one that was also a royal class battleship? If they could keep everyone's eyes on what they thought was Blue Knight the whole time, it might be possible to trick them that way. Then they could send in the real Blue Knight for a surprise attack. And that's exactly what they'd done. They snuck up on Conora Base before unleashing a close range bombardment to collapse its barrier and then pushed forward in a ramming attack with Blue Knight's sword to destroy the base's outer shell and power reactor. Conora Base had lost without ever even having a chance to defend itself.

"Jeez... I'm glad the Hazy Moon is okay."

Clan, now aboard Blue Knight, let out a sigh of both joy and relief. Using a royal class battleship as a decoy was unheard of, and it certainly wasn't safe for Clan and her crew to stay on board when they knew it was going to be in danger. Clan herself had stayed behind until just before the attack, when she moved over to Blue Knight.

"You're the star of the show this time, Clan-san."

"You're the only one who would say that, Harumi."

"I'm sure everyone will praise you later... Satomi-kun included."

"A clueless knight who's out of his element like he is would never have the sense to do something like that!"

"My, my... Teehee..."

Fortunately, all of Clan's hard work had paid off. Even though she was complaining, she knew what she'd done was a necessary part of the plan. And better yet, it had gotten them results. Since it was Kiriha's plan by design, Clan

had actually trusted all along that things would work out. Her only real worry was whether or not Koutarou would acknowledge the role she'd had in their success.

"This is the commander-in-chief of the Imperial Army Fleet, Layous Fatra Veltlion. In the name of Princess Theiamillis, I request that all ships and bases belonging to the coup d'etat army in this region surrender."

Koutarou, however, was busy playing the role of a legendary hero. It would be quite some time yet before he could simply be himself and appreciate the finer details of the situation so far. Clan would have to wait.

"This is the commander of Conora Base, Landanz Galiora Basker. Your request has been received, and we will comply. Conora Base and all associated ships surrender unconditionally. I would like to initiate the procedures."

Conora Base's commander was a reasonable man. He knew that the Blue Knight could have destroyed the base in a single strike, and that he still could if he so wished. He also understood that, with the loss of their main base, the coup d'etat no longer had a leg to stand on. That had decided the battle. No matter how much they struggled now, there was no realistic chance of recovering from that. They'd only be risking more if they continued to fight under these conditions, so the base commander decided to cut their losses and accept defeat. Of course, his opponents being a legendary hero and an imperial princess had something to do with it. They were just too strong. The commander was forced to recognize that now, and the feeling was shared across most of the fleet.

"Understood. We'll send a negotiator to you, Conora Base. Prepare to receive them."

"We'll open the seventh dock. Let the negotiator—"

However, things wouldn't come to such a neat conclusion. This battle was far from over. A third party cut in over the communications line.

"Let me start by congratulating you, Blue Knight."

"Vandarion?!"

It was Marswell Dayora Vandarion. He had eyes as sharp as a hawk's, a smirk

that oozed confidence, and an attitude that was nothing short of provoking. Seeing him reminded Koutarou of meeting Maxfern two thousand years ago. It was a face he couldn't forget even if he wanted to.

Now that I think about... Vandarion and Granado haven't revealed themselves even once all this time. Just what have they been up to?

Koutarou got a bad feeling the moment he saw Vandarion's hologram. Even though they had never bet before, his resemblance to Maxfern only brought back bad memories.

"To think you'd take Conora Base this quickly... No wonder Granado was in such a rush."

"What do you want? Are you here to surrender too?"

"Hahahahaha! How clueless can you be?! You're the one who will be surrendering, Blue Knight! Take a look!"

Vandarion stepped out of the way of the camera, revealing what was behind him.

"M-Mother?!"

"Elle! Princess Ceilēshu!"

Neither Theia nor Koutarou could believe their eyes. Through the hologram, they could see Elfaria and Ceilēshu bound to pillars. It wasn't clear where they were, but it seemed to be inside of a spaceship, or perhaps another base judging by the structure.

"How did this happen?!" Theia demanded.

"It's simple," Vandarion replied. "While you were preoccupied over here, we walked right into the imperial palace."

"Impossible! We left behind more than enough men to defend it!" Theia shouted in disbelief.

But it was true. Vandarion's faction had infiltrated the imperial palace and kidnapped Elfaria and Ceilēshu. And even though the proof was right in front of them in hologram form, it was hard to believe. In addition to the royal guard, Koutarou and the others had left an entire fleet and Ceilēshu's personal

battleship to protect the palace. In fact, they hadn't left until they were sure such defenses were in place.

"Hahahaha! What kind of fool would show all his cards at once? Did you really think this was all I had?"

ROOOAAAAAR!

A loud roar erupted from somewhere nearby as Vandarion sneered. Looking for its source, Koutarou noticed something massive emerging from behind Elfaria and Ceilēshu.

"That's... what attacked Fort Charldrissa!" Koutarou gasped.

Past Elfaria and Ceilēshu was the looming figure of a massive mechanical dragon. It bore a striking resemblance to the one that had attacked Koutarou and the others at Fort Charldrissa, but this one was considerably larger and more heavily armed. Painted mostly red, it even looked more aggressive.

"Don't make me laugh! That was just a prototype. This is the real weapon, the Elder Dragon Type Two, ALUNAYA! Behold my power, Blue Knight!"

Vandarion had used the power of the dragon to capture Elfaria and Ceilēshu, but that was only the start. His goals remained unchanged after all this time. He was hell-bent on murdering the Blue Knight and destroying the grieving, distraught Elfaria as he seized control of Forthorthe.

"Now then, esteemed Blue Knight, I invite you here too! Surely you won't refuse! Wahahahaha!"

A villain had once again appeared in Forthorthe determined to rule all through fear and power. Marswell Dayora Vandarion was confident he was born to be the supreme ruler.



United Front Again

Thursday, December 30th

By the time that Ceilēshu called for a ceasefire and demanded he produce the evidence he had against Elfaria, Vandarion's chances at victory had practically been snatched away from him. The false evidence he'd fabricated would never hold up in court. Surrendering it would essentially be exposing himself as a fraud. He'd only expected to get away with it in the first place because he had so many judges and court officials under his thumb. They were loyal to him, and he'd had no reason to think they wouldn't look the other way. However, after Ceilēshu called for the appointment of a special tribunal to handle Elfaria's case, that was all meaningless. Turning the evidence over to Ceilēshu's court simply wasn't an option. But the price for that would was being branded a coup d'etat army. Vandarion had largely gained the support and aid of the citizens by claiming his real goal was to convict the corrupt Elfaria. But once he was unmasked as an enemy of the state, he and his cause had lost their validity. It was the beginning of a downward spiral, and it wasn't hard to imagine what was going to happen next.

After being backed into a corner, however, Vandarion decided on a desperate plan to escape his desperate situation. He would lure Koutarou and the others out to the asteroid belt while he took forces to the imperial palace to capture the empress. However, it wasn't as easy as it sounded. Even without Koutarou and company there, the palace was still considerably well guarded. On top of that, Imperial Army surface troops and Ceilēshu's personal fleet had been stationed there. Yet somehow, Vandarion and his men had managed to kidnap Elfaria and Ceilēshu. There had to be something behind it.

"According to the royal guard, it sounds like they were completely outwitted. All of the security systems were bypassed. But even then, they would have needed extreme precision and speed to be able to pull this off. It would be the tactical equivalent of getting a tank through the eye of a needle at lightning

speed," explained Ruth.

She had talked with the imperial palace for quite some time and was in the middle of reporting what she'd learned to Koutarou and the others on the bridge of Blue Knight. Apparently Vandarion had sent a special force to launch a surprise attack on the imperial palace, and in the middle of the chaos, used the dragon to swoop in and capture Elfaria and Ceilēshu. The attack was methodical and meticulous. Everything was planned so that they moved in at the right time and in the right places, bypassing both the security systems and the guards. The accurate and swift execution of the plan was almost mechanical, and according to the captain of the royal guard, the enemy was one step ahead of them at every turn. They were practically powerless as Vandarion's men charged in and took the empress away.

"Maybe they sent in a super spy? Y'know, the kind that gets orders that self-destruct after you read them, like that double-oh-something-or-another guy," Sanae suggested.

Rationally speaking, a spy was a very real possibility. Someone could have gathered all kinds of information on the palace, analyzed the psychology of the guards, and bribed key personnel if needed in order to pull off this kind of raid. However, there was one major problem with that theory.

"There hasn't been enough time for that. Since Her Majesty Elfaria returned to the imperial palace, the guards and defensive measures have been reorganized. I can't imagine anyone could gather the necessary intelligence to perfectly bypass all of that in just a couple of days," said Kiriha.

Kiriha felt that no matter how skilled a spy might be, the groundwork for a plan like this was just too massive of an undertaking for a single person over such a short span of time.

"In that case... our prime suspect is probably Darkness Rainbow. They were the ones behind that mechanical dragon last time too," offered Shizuka.

After her encounter with it previously, Shizuka was primarily focused on the mechanical dragon. While it was equipped with various weapons and spiritual energy technology, it had also been enhanced with Darkness Rainbow's magic. If they were involved this time too, it might help explain how Vandarion had

been able to pull off such an attack on the imperial palace.

“Well, with Dark Green’s divination magic, they would have been able to execute the plan without any preparation, but...” mused Kiriha.

“I don’t think it’s them. They’re definitely villains, but this isn’t like them. Besides, if they were going to try something like this, they would have done so in our previous fight, right?” added Koutarou.

Shizuka made a good point, but Kiriha and Koutarou were skeptical. While it seemed like a possibility that Darkness Rainbow might be involved in the attack on the palace, they’d actually already had more than one opportunity to do something like this. However, in their previous fight, Darkness Rainbow had specifically refrained from attacking the palace and using more firepower than was necessary in order to prevent civilian casualties. Vandarion’s raid took the complete opposite approach, and Koutarou and Kiriha were reluctant to believe Darkness Rainbow had suddenly done a one-eighty like that.

“There’s so much we don’t know... but we can’t save my mother and Ceilēshu until we get to the bottom of this.”

In the end, the problem was summarized by Theia. If they tried to go save Elfaria and Ceilēshu without a better idea of what kind of tricks Vandarion had up his sleeve, they could all be in trouble. It was simply dangerous to try anything like that without knowing what they were up against.

“Looks like I’ll have to play along,” Koutarou conceded.

Elfaria and Ceilēshu were currently being held captive in a space fortress hidden behind Planet Forthorthe’s moon. Vandarion had asked that Koutarou come alone, and he was willing to, considering the situation.

“Koutarou!”

“You can’t, Koutarou-sama!”

Theia and Harumi protested, but it was clear the other girls were against it as well. They could tell what Vandarion was really after.

“Even if you give in to his demands, Vandarion isn’t going to let mother and Ceilēshu go! He’s asking for you to come alone so he can kill you! You know

that, don't you?!" Theia shouted.

Vandarion had kidnapped Elfaria and Ceilēshu in order to lure in Koutarou and kill him. After that, he would keep them hostage and use them to negotiate with Forthorthe. With the current empress and a princess captured, the Imperial Army's hands would be tied—especially so with the Blue Knight out of the picture. Vandarion's plan was perfectly transparent. He wanted to finish off Koutarou and use his death to strip the people of their hope.

"Even so, I can't abandon those two," Koutarou said, shaking his head.

"Koutarou..." Theia said, the concern audible in her voice.

With two royal hostages, Vandarion would kill one of them and claim that the Blue Knight had abandoned the royal families if Koutarou didn't do what he wanted. He would use that to provoke the citizenry and foster dissent. But that wasn't what really mattered to Koutarou. His primary concern was rescuing Elfaria and Ceilēshu. They'd both fought so desperately to protect the country and its people, and Koutarou couldn't allow himself to sit back and watch as they met a terrible fate after everything they'd done. He wanted to go save them, even if meant stepping into the lion's den.

"But I'm not going to die. If I rush into action, we might be able to figure out how they raided the imperial palace. I want you to save Her Majesty and Her Highness."

If Koutarou made a move on the space fortress in an attempt to save Elfaria and Ceilēshu, Vandarion might try and fight him with the same tactics he'd used to storm the palace. If Kiriha could come up with a plan based on that, they might actually stand a chance of saving Elfaria and Ceilēshu. Koutarou was willing to make a wager on that possibility, however slight.

"Right now, that's our best shot. Don't you think?" Koutarou asked, turning to the girls.

With those words, silence fell over the bridge of Blue Knight. The nine girls around Koutarou all knew that what he was saying was correct, but even so, they were reluctant to admit it. It was hard to let Koutarou go off to handle this on his own. If they did as he said, he was taking a risk that made them all nervous. Still, they knew it needed to be done. Everyone knew the answer, yet

no one was willing to say anything. The silence continued for several long minutes.

“Sorry for interrupting during your meeting, commander. We’ve received notice that the former CEO of DKI has an urgent message for its largest shareholder.”

In the end, what broke the silence was a curious incoming message from the Imperial Army headquarters.

The current largest shareholder of Dragon Knight Industries was Koutarou. He’d used his ample funds to secure 51 percent of the company’s shares, which technically made him the largest shareholder, but also gave him a great deal of influence over the management of the company. Koutarou didn’t have any intention of changing the direction the company was headed, but he had closed several departments and dismissed the previous CEO in order to keep the company from exerting any of its influence over the current political situation. And now that dismissed CEO was calling Koutarou. Considering the timing, it was impossible to ignore.

“What do you want, Elexis? Did you call to complain?”

“I know when to give up, Koutarou-kun. Complaining now wouldn’t be very becoming, would it?”

Elexis shrugged in a typically dramatic fashion. Even through the hologram, Koutarou could see he was covered in bruises and bandages. He certainly didn’t look like much of a villain in his current condition. Koutarou thought “unbecoming” would be putting it lightly.

“That’s true. So why did you contact me?”

“Actually, we’ve run into some trouble on our end, and it’s a bit too much for us to get out of on our own. You’ve cut me off from DKI, after all.”

Elexis was still rich, but he’d lost the power of his company, which is why he was coming to Koutarou to ask for help.

“So you *are* complaining.”

“But it’s the truth, isn’t it? But that’s beside the point... I’d like to set my pride aside and ask you and your friends for help. This should benefit you all as well. And if you cooperate with us, I wouldn’t be against some kind of compensation.”

However, Elexis wasn’t asking for charity. There was something in it for Koutarou too. In other words, Elexis was calling to strike a deal.

“So it’s that important and urgent, huh? All right, I’ll at least hear you out. We can decide where to go from there.”

Fortunately for Elexis, Koutarou was also in a position where he could use some help right now. Knowing there was a possibility he might be able to get it from Elexis, Koutarou was at least willing to humor whatever he had to say.

“Thank you, Koutarou-kun. I’m grateful... The truth is that Green was kidnapped.”

“What?!”

“After we lost to you, Vandarion’s men attacked us. Fortunately we were able to escape thanks to Green, but she was captured in the process.”

As neither side had any time to waste, Elexis got straight to the point and summarized what had happened for Koutarou. After the decisive battle against Koutarou, they were attacked by Vandarion’s forces. Knowing that they were exhausted and spent from their fight with Koutarou, Vandarion was looking to wipe them out since they were no longer useful to him. But thanks to Green’s magic, Elexis, Maya, and the other members of Darkness Rainbow were able to escape. The price was that Green had been captured, and that was ultimately why Elexis was calling.

“We’ve come to you for help because we want to save Green no matter what.”

“I see... So that’s how Vandarion was able to attack the palace.”

After what Elexis said, Koutarou started to get a sense of the bigger picture. Green was somehow being used by Vandarion’s faction, and that had been the key to their raid on the palace. With her power to read the future, they wouldn’t have needed any other preparations. And without specific

countermeasures against that kind of magic, the palace would have been helpless against it.

“What do you think, Aika-san?” Koutarou asked.

“I think it logically makes sense. But...”

Maki, who was standing at Koutarou’s side, mostly agreed with him. However, there was an unanswered question that gave her great pause, and that concerned Darkness Rainbow.

“Crimson, you should know what it is that concerns me.”

That’s why Maki called out to the member of Darkness Rainbow that she knew the best: her former friend Dark Crimson. Crimson walked up beside Elexis and answered Maki with a wry smile.

“I sure do. And I know what you want to say. I think it’s strange too. Who would have ever thought the day would come that we try and save one of our allies without anything in it for ourselves?”

That was precisely what Maki had doubts about. Darkness Rainbow was a very individualistic organization. Its leaders had come together to combine their strength because they had mutual interests. They were more like associates than allies, and the thought of risking themselves to save one another was utterly foreign to the way they operated. Yet according to Elexis, they were trying to do just that. That was why Maki had her doubts. She suspected that there were some ulterior motives at work.

“I think the reason this happened is because we kept losing to you guys,” said Crimson.

“To us?” asked Maki.

“We couldn’t beat you as individuals who were ready to abandon our allies if need be. In order to stand up to you guys, we had to combine our strength over and over again. I guess we just grew to depend on each other, and that turned into a need to protect each other.”

It had all started in a very calculating way. It was clear that it was impossible to win a fight against Koutarou and the others alone. There was constantly a

need to combine their powers, and it was more efficient to protect their allies than to wait for successors to be trained to replace who they lost.

“Naturally we began talking more, and we gradually understood each other better. Eventually, we even came to respect each other. As people, not just as leaders of Darkness Rainbow. I think having a common major goal changed us.”

After working together time and time again, the girls of Darkness Rainbow had started to change. As they got to know each other, they slowly became friends. Even if they didn’t agree with each other’s goals, they learned to respect them and cooperate to achieve them regardless. And after all that, when faced with powerful enemies like Koutarou and the others, they’d finally begun truly working together.

“For instance, we even learned that Purple doesn’t like kurka fruit. Apparently she doesn’t like its unique aftertaste. Isn’t that strange? Just a while ago, we all had no idea...”

“What did Green wish for?”

“In the past, she lost something important because her predictions were wrong. She’s fought all this time wondering how things might have been different if she was able to use her forecast magic freely.”

After Maki, Green was the first person Crimson had truly gotten to know by learning what her goal was as a member of Darkness Rainbow. It happened in the middle of a fight before the decisive battle of Folsaria, where she then learned of Purple’s suffering. As the stage of the battle shifted to Forthorthe, Darkness Rainbow continued to learn more about each other and their motivations. All of that led up to this moment and them wanting to save Green.

“So please cooperate, Maki. You too, Koutarou.”

“If I’d known sooner, I...”

“Yeah, I regret it too. That’s why I want to get Green back.”

“...All right. I’ll believe in you, Crimson.”

“Thank you, Maki.”

Maki decided to trust in Crimson. She’d once been her friend, and Maki knew

that Crimson didn't like petty tricks or underhanded tactics in the first place. Maki didn't think she'd lie to her now. And seeing Maki's trust in Crimson, Koutarou made his own decision.

"Now that I think about it, they started calling you young master over there, didn't they, Elexis?"

Thinking back on it calmly, Koutarou had seen the signs. The best example was Elexis himself. Darkness Rainbow had accepted a normal human like him, and they were helping each other. And even though Elexis had lost a great deal of his power, they were still working together.

"Yes. Sadly, having lost my company, that's what I've been reduced to."

Orange calling him young master and Crimson reluctantly being willing to follow his orders probably weren't the result of cunning and guile. Just like Koutarou's relationship with the nine girls he knew had changed over time, so had Elexis's with Darkness Rainbow.

"So you want to save Green as the young master?"

And that was precisely who Koutarou wanted to ask about. Not the former CEO of DKI, but this man Orange called young master. What were his true intentions? With politics and investments aside, did Elexis personally want to save Green or not? Koutarou couldn't team up with him before knowing that.

"Well, it's true that girl is in trouble. And she did help me during the attack after all. And it wasn't a lie when I said I wanted to partner up with the people of Folsaria and allow them to return. So what can I say? Yes, I suppose I want to uphold my principles as the young master."

Partnering with the people of Folsaria meant treating them as equals. That of course included Green. Elexis didn't think it was right for her to die, and he certainly didn't feel like he could just abandon her. A sacrifice in the middle of battle would be one thing, but this was different. She'd saved his life and he had a debt to repay. That too was because he considered the members of Darkness Rainbow to be his equals.

"Why couldn't you guys have just said all that from the start?"

Elexis's answer was exactly what Koutarou was hoping to hear. However, he

also realized something of a contradiction had budded within Elexis and Darkness Rainbow. The same thing had happened with Koutarou and the girls. And upon realizing it, Koutarou smiled. He smiled at everyone, including himself.

“What am I supposed to do, Koutarou-kun? I can hardly believe it myself. We’re supposed to be the bad guys, after all.”

“...Even then, I’m choosing to put my faith in you. You guys are still human, after all.”

Koutarou and the girls had squared off against Elexis and Darkness Rainbow several times in the past. They had been through ceasefires, partnerships, and rivalries together. Yet in spite of their complicated relationship, these two camps would be allying one final time. But this time, it wasn’t a bargain or a calculated deal. They both had people they wanted to save, and they were all putting their differences aside to come together in the end. This would make the first time they would be allies in the truest sense of the word.

The Blue Knight's Crisis

December 31st

Elfaria and Ceilēshu were being held captive in a space fortress that Vandarion had constructed in secret. They'd been locked in a room that was kept under strict watch. All they were allowed to do was talk to each other and watch the news on the Forthorthian equivalent of a TV.

"I just hope Layous-sama doesn't come..." Ceilēshu sighed.

With the immediate news coverage of Elfaria and Ceilēshu's capture, the public was quick to condemn Vandarion for what he'd done, but they were divided on how he should be handled. There were those who were adamant that he should be suppressed through military force, those who called for diplomacy to negotiate Elfaria and Ceilēshu's release, and those who were willing to cow to Vandarion for fear of what he might do to the captured empress and princess. Those were the three major voices being heard from the public, and there was a fierce debate between them all across Forthorthe. The situation had ultimately turned the spotlight on Koutarou. Experts believed that the Blue Knight's actions at this crossroads would influence public opinion one way or another.

"Layous-sama will definitely come. That's the kind of person he is," Elfaria reassured Ceilēshu.

Elfaria didn't doubt that Koutarou would come for them, because the Blue Knight she knew wasn't the type to do nothing in a situation like this. It was just like two thousand years ago.

"But then he'll be right where Vandarion wants him! The hope of all Forthorthe will be extinguished!"

Ceilēshu, however, dreaded the thought of Koutarou coming. With her and Elfaria as hostages, Vandarion would surely use them against Koutarou. He wouldn't even be allowed to defend himself. The danger was clear as day. The

Blue Knight would be killed, Signaltin would fall into Vandarion's hands, and the people of Forthorthe would be devastated. And even for all of that, Elfaria and Ceilēshu still wouldn't be released. Things would only get worse from there.

"Layous-sama should go straight to attacking the fortress, even if that means the two of us lose our lives, Your Majesty!"

Ceilēshu wanted Koutarou to subjugate Vandarion, and she wasn't concerned about where her safety fell in that equation. If her life could buy peace for the future of Forthorthe and its people, it was a price she was willing to pay. She believed that was part of her duty as a royal, and she had been prepared for it ever since her personal fleet was unable to stop Vandarion's raid on the palace.

"Ceilēshu-san, you resolve is splendid. As empress, I am proud of you."

Elfaria nodded with a smile, but that wasn't all she had to say. She then leaned in a little and spoke to Ceilēshu in a hushed voice. She didn't want the soldiers on watch to hear her.

"However, Layous-sama will without a doubt choose a different path. He will try and placate Vandarion before making his move. And if we aren't ready when the time comes, we'll just be putting Layous-sama in danger."

"Your Majesty..."

Ceilēshu opened her eyes wide in surprise. Though Elfaria was speaking softly, her words were full of confidence. There was a strong light in her eyes too. Even though she didn't have anything to go off of, she knew exactly what the Blue Knight—what Koutarou—would do. That was proof of her absolute faith in him, and proof of their strong bond.

"Make sure you pay close attention from here on out. If you lower your head in defeat too soon, you may miss your chance. Okay, Ceilēshu-san?"

"Okay."

Ceilēshu nodded with a serious expression, but it didn't last long. Her somber look quickly broke down into a smile.

"You really know Layous-sama well, Your Majesty. It's almost as if—"

You're long-time lovers, or even husband and wife... was what Ceilēshu was

about to say, but she was interrupted by an abrupt alarm blaring from the TV.

“Breaking news! Blue Knight, the ship that has been serving as the Imperial Army Fleet’s flagship, appears to be headed towards the moon unaccompanied! We’re switching over to live footage now!”

The alarm signaled an urgent news segment. Blue Knight had apparently departed for Planet Forthorthe’s moon, where its destination was inevitably the space fortress on the far side. And since Vandarion had made his demands public, the citizens all understood what that meant. The news set the entire country abuzz. What was the Blue Knight going to do when he got there? Whatever it was, it would decide the future of Forthorthe, and the citizens were understandably on edge.

“Layous-sama... He’s finally...”

“Ceilēshu-san, we don’t have much time left. Let’s put our minds to work as best we can for the sake of our Blue Knight!”

“Yes!”

Just like Elfaria and Ceilēshu, most of the nation was watching the footage of Blue Knight leaving the space station the Imperial Army had been using as a base. Quite some time had passed since it had first begun, but Vandarion’s coup d’etat was now moving into its final stage. It would either be Koutarou or Vandarion; there was no future where both could remain. Each tick of the clock was one closer to the moment when one of their names would be wiped from the annals of history.

Like Earth’s moon, the far side of the moon orbiting Forthorthe couldn’t be seen from the planet. That said, with Forthorthe’s advanced space-age technology, getting a glimpse of it was easy. However, the Imperial Army under Vandarion’s rule had blacked it out when he took over in order to keep the citizens’ prying eyes off of it. Today, however, Vandarion had called for that blackout to be lifted. Moreover, Vandarion was in a position to jam all communication in the region, or even destroy broadcast satellites and ships. But instead, he was allowing them to record and relay freely. Vandarion wanted the footage of what was going on to spread throughout Forthorthe and to reach

all of the planets under Forthorthe's influence.

"That Vandarion... He really is planning on messing up Forthorthe, isn't he?"

Koutarou's expression stiffened as he stood all alone on Blue Knight's bridge and watched the news reports. Vandarion's goal was obvious. He wanted all of Forthorthe to see what was about to happen. He'd likely even broadcast footage himself from inside the fortress. If Koutarou obeyed his commands without resistance, he could boast triumphantly. If Koutarou instead resisted, he could just kill him and show his corpse off to the citizens. He was sowing fear in order to reap the chaos it would grow into.

Any disorder among the people put Vandarion at an advantage. With the public fearful and divided, with overwhelming power like a mechanical dragon and a personal space fortress, and with the empress as a hostage, that advantage was only growing. It was likely only a matter of time before the opportunity presented itself for Vandarion to seize control of things in a dramatic reversal. But as Vandarion's power was growing, so too was his obsession with killing Koutarou.

"In the end, the legendary hero is being used against the people to make things unstable..."

Koutarou turned off the news, adjusted Blue Knight's course, and entered the space fortress's port. It was so enormous that there was more than enough room for Blue Knight to dock several times over.

"Looking at this, who knows what kind of forces he still has..."

Blue Knight was using one of several ports at Vandarion's space fortress. It was enough to house an entire fleet, and there was a chance that's exactly what Vandarion had at his disposal. It was also possible that a portion of the Imperial Army fleet would split off and join Vandarion at some point if the situation got too grim. That was why Elfaria and Ceilēshu had to be saved before it was too late. As he used the operator's console to dock Blue Knight's hull with the port, the significance of what was to come truly set in on Koutarou.

Vandarion's space fortress was silent. When Koutarou disembarked Blue

Knight, there was no one around waiting for him. All he had to go on was a set of lights in the floor indicating the way. The only thing he could hear was his own footsteps. The sound of his armored boots clacking across the metallic floor coated with reinforced plastic echoed through the vast hall.

“Maybe his allies haven’t arrived yet, maybe he’s just that confident, or maybe he just doesn’t trust anyone...”

Following the guiding lights on the floor, Koutarou continued deeper into the space fortress. He’d expected to come across someone eventually, but there wasn’t a soul to be seen anywhere. Koutarou felt like the desolate fortress must be not unlike Vandarion’s heart. He could brag all he wanted about how advanced and superior it was, but in the end, it was all empty. Just walking through the place felt lonely to Koutarou.

“...So this is it, huh?”

After continuing into the heart of the fortress, switching between elevators and trams for several minutes, Koutarou ended up in front of a very large door. The door and its surroundings looked like they belonged in a temple rather than a fortress. But that might be just right for Vandarion.

Creeeeeaaak...

The ground shook as the majestic door opened from the middle, revealing an even larger, grander room behind it. Koutarou’s first impression of it being a temple wasn’t wrong. This door was simply the entrance to the temple. Beyond it were beautiful sculptures and pillars, and the floor was paved with marble. And in the center of it all—where there was usually a shrine or an altar—was a chair with a man proudly seated on top of it. Marswell Dayora Vandarion. The man who wanted to become Forthorthe’s god.

“Welcome, Blue Knight! We finally meet!”

Vandarion’s throne was built on a slightly elevated platform. Still seated, he welcomed Koutarou, but there wasn’t even a hint of friendliness in it. If anything, his tone and exaggerated gestures were aggressive. He practically radiated malice.

“Long time no see. I guess it’s been two thousand years.”

Vandarion's current appearance reminded Koutarou of a certain person: Violbarum Maxfern. Two thousand years ago, he was the one trying to become Forthorthe's god—just as Vandarion was now.

"What are you talking about?"

"You just remind me of a certain villain from the past."

"Hmph, don't compare me to some fool from the past! You won't get your way like you did back then!"

Vandarion's tone grew even more aggressive. As a Forthorthian himself, he too knew the legend of the Blue Knight quite well, and he couldn't stand being compared to Maxfern. That only made them seem more similar to Koutarou, but Vandarion couldn't appreciate that.

"Do you think you can win, Vandarion?"

"Think? I *know* I will! There's nothing you can do against me! Granado, bring out the women!"

ROOOAAAAAR!

With a loud roar, a massive silhouette appeared behind Vandarion. It was a giant mechanical dragon over thirty meters tall: the Elder Dragon Type Two. Granado had built it to be Vandarion's ultimate weapon. The giant dragon walked around Vandarion and stepped forward. At the same time, the floor between Koutarou and Vandarion opened up and two pillars emerged. There was someone tied to each one.

"Layous-sama!"

"Are you okay?!"

"Elle! Princess Ceilēshu!"

Tied to the pillars were Elfaria and Ceilēshu. They both called out to Koutarou when they laid eyes on him. Seeing the two like that, Koutarou instinctively tried to run over to them.

"That's as far as you go, Blue Knight-kun. If you get any closer... you know what happens, don't you?" Granado cautioned him.

“Tch...”

The moment Koutarou had begun running, the dragon’s claws thrust towards Elfaria and Ceilēshu. Seeing the ominous gleam of the sharp claws, Koutarou stopped dead in his tracks. Vandarion had brought out Elfaria and Ceilēshu in order to control Koutarou.

“Hahahahaha! What happened to that assertiveness of yours, Blue Knight?”

“Vandarion...”

Koutarou gritted his teeth in frustration, but he had no choice but to obey. He couldn’t put Elfaria and Ceilēshu’s lives at risk, even if it was a bluff.

“We’ll start by having you throw down that annoying sword of yours. We can talk after that.”

Without a word, Koutarou pulled the sword from his waist. Of his two swords, Koutarou had only brought Signaltin with him. Saguratin was broken and hadn’t been repaired yet. Of course, he had no intention of actually using Signaltin. If Vandarion hadn’t specifically told him to bring it, he wouldn’t have brought it either.

Clank!

As instructed, Koutarou tossed the unsheathed blade onto the floor. The next moment, the Type Two’s eyes began to glow red.

Wham!

“Uwah!”

One of the Type Two’s front legs slammed down in front of Koutarou. The mechanical dragon was so large that the force behind the stomp was terrifying. If it had hit Koutarou, he surely would have been killed. However, the Type Two hadn’t aimed for Koutarou.

“No!”

“Signaltin!”

There was anguish in Elfaria and Ceilēshu’s cries. When the dragon lifted its leg, all that was left underfoot were metal fragments—the shattered remains of

Signaltin.

“How could you do this?! Vandarion, do you know what you’ve just done?!” Elfaria demanded.

She was greatly shaken. The horror was written on her face, and she openly condemned Vandarion for his actions. But she wasn’t the only one so affected. The same was true for Ceilēshu and the citizens watching live through the broadcast. They were torn at what saw. Signaltin was shattered. To the people of Forthorthe, it was like watching the country burn or the empress being assassinated. It was a devastating sight.

“Oh, I know exactly what I’ve done, Your Majesty! This is what claiming a country is all about! Stomping out the current authority and building a new authority on top of it! Who cares about the country itself?! Who gives a damn about the legends?! I am Marswell Dayora Vandarion, the man who will create a new world!” Vandarion loudly declared.

Vandarion had shattered Signaltin as a symbolic demonstration of his power. By doing that, he was showing the people of Forthorthe that he was greater than the legendary Blue Knight and the royal families of Forthorthe.

Of course, there would be backlash for how he’d chosen to do that. But even if he’d done something different, there was no denying that the people already bore a resentment for Vandarion. And since he was already disliked, he had no problem driving the point home. In fact, by making his true nature very clear, there would be those that chose to follow him out of fear.

“Even after two thousand years, you’re still after the same thing. In the end, nothing’s changed and you still rely on Signaltin.”



Only one person dared to stare Vandarion down in spite of what he'd done. It was the owner of the crushed Signaltin, Koutarou.

Two thousand years ago, the traitor Maxfern had tried to take over the country by claiming Signaltin for himself. And now the traitor Vandarion was trying to take over the country using Signaltin's influence. There was a difference in their methods—capturing it versus destroying it—but the intention was the same. Signaltin was a tool, and both Maxfern and Vandarion believed they could use it to control the people. Koutarou was dumbfounded that hadn't changed.

"In the end, there's not much difference between you and Maxfern. Your head is stuck two thousand years in the past."

"What did you say, you bastard?!"

Vandarion erupted at Koutarou's remark. He held intense emotions towards Koutarou. Far too intense to be written off as just jealousy for the cheers that Koutarou was getting from the citizens, or the anger of having his plans repeatedly ruined. It was a furious hatred that welled up from deep in his soul. And now that he was face to face with Koutarou himself, those emotions overflowed from within. He wouldn't stand for being made a fool of.

"If I hear any more contempt from you, I'll teach you where you stand! I don't need two hostages, you know!"

Grrrrr!

As if responding to Vandarion's words, the dragon's claws closed in on Ceilēshu. She was an important hostage, but she didn't have the definitive influence Elfaria had as empress. That's why Vandarion didn't hesitate using her life as leverage to shut up Koutarou. That was just how strong his anger and hatred for Koutarou was.

"What are you getting so excited over, Vandarion? It's just a little talk. I'm not even resisting."

"I'm not giving you any freedom! Don't say anything you don't have to!"

"...I understand."

Koutarou's intention had been to get Vandarion to focus all of his attention on him and not Elfaria and Ceilēshu, but he hadn't expected Vandarion to be this irritable. Now he had no choice but to obey Vandarion for fear of him exploding and taking it out on the girls.

"So let's move on. Why did you call me here?"

"The first reason has already been taken care of. The second reason is to have you surrender."

"Me?"

"That's right! You are the Blue Knight, the knight of all knights! The commander-in-chief of the Forthorthe's Imperial Army! You surrendering to me is the same as Forthorthe losing!"

As Forthorthe and the royal families had recognized Koutarou as the Blue Knight, he had the authority to command the entirety of the Imperial Army. While Koutarou was technically under the empress's command, not even the empress had the power to revoke his authority. In that sense, he had authority equal to Elfaria's in regards to command of the army. If Koutarou were to surrender, the entire Imperial Army under his control also would. Similar to how Koutarou and the girls had moved against Elexis and Darkness Rainbow with the power of the Blue Knight's status, in a sick twist of fate, Vandarion was trying to hamstring Forthorthe by using the Blue Knight's status against them.

"So that's what you're up to, Vandarion..."

Even if he were to threaten the empress, she probably wouldn't surrender. Even if a princess had to be sacrificed. As empress, it was only natural she'd make that choice. But the Blue Knight was different. But by kidnapping the empress and threatening the Blue Knight, surrender might still be possible. Vandarion was broadcasting a live feed from his fortress to make sure everyone saw it when it happened.

In order for Koutarou and Forthorthe to beat Vandarion in this situation, he would have to abandon the empress and princess. But if he did that, there would be citizens who refused to support the Blue Knight any longer. If that happened, the people would be divided once more, inevitably sending the country into turmoil. That said, if Koutarou surrendered, he would be delivering

Forthorthe into Vandarion's hands. Forthorthe would suffer regardless of what he chose. Vandarion was trying to create an advantageous position for himself by imposing such an ultimatum.

"You may surrender, or you may stay here with me and watch the empress and princess be executed. Chose whichever you like! I don't mind either way, Blue Knight!"

Vandarion was driven by his anger, hatred, and envy for the Blue Knight. If Koutarou surrendered, his pride would be satisfied and Forthorthe would be his. If not, he would execute Elfaria and Ceilēshu before the eyes of Koutarou and the citizens for his own satisfaction. Either way, Forthorthe would suffer and Vandarion would get what he wanted. He waited in a near frenzy of joy for Koutarou's answer.

"I..."

But there was no such suspense for Koutarou. He'd come to the fortress knowing what his answer would be. He opened his mouth to declare it, but...

"You can't, Layous-sama!"

"That's right! You can't surrender for our sake!"

Elfaria and Ceilēshu interrupted him. They also knew what he was going to say. Koutarou looked up at them when he heard their voices. There was a strong will in both their eyes.

"How moving this is, Blue Knight. It's truly a tragic picture of devotion and betrayal."

Vandarion ridiculed Koutarou and the girls. The joy of being able to trample the Blue Knight and the royal families, something he had waited years for, made Vandarion's very soul quiver. Because of that, his words almost sounded gentle. Of course, it was all facetious.

"Shut up, Vandarion!"

"Layous-sama, this is an order as empress! Pay no heed to me or Ceilēshu and strike down Vandarion!"

"But Your Majesty Elfaria, you are part of the Mastir family that I am so

indebted to. Princess Ceilēshu is connected to the Mastir family as well. I can not forsake either one of you!”

“If it’s to protect citizens and country, justice is secondary! Have you forgotten our ideals, Layous Fatra Veltlion?!”

“That’s right! We don’t want to live if it brings suffering to the people!”

“But Your Majesty! Your Highness! When all else is said and done, I am still the Blue Knight!”

“Wahahahahaha!”

Vandarion’s wicked laughter echoed in the vast room. He was enjoying Koutarou, Elfaria, and Ceilēshu’s conversation. Their desperate but futile struggle to find a way out of this dark, helpless situation amused him greatly.

“Vandarion-sama!”

“What?”

But hearing Granado’s voice spoiled his fun. His face twisted with dark gloom, but Granado didn’t flinch at the sight. Having known him for such a long time, Granado wasn’t so easily affected by Vandarion’s moods. There wasn’t time for that anyway. He had something urgent to report.

“There’s a strong reaction on the Future Forecast System! A surprise attack is coming! The back and forth between the Blue Knight and the others is just a ploy to buy time!”

“How impudent!”

Vandarion finally realized what Koutarou was doing. He was intentionally acting like a decoy to distract Vandarion while the army launched an attack. Having guessed that something was happening, Elfaria joined hands with Ceilēshu to buy time. Vandarion and Granado had been completely fooled as the attack closed in.

“Stop them! Teach them that petty tricks won’t work on their new supreme ruler!”

“As you wish, my lord!”

However, Vandarion and Granado weren't going to go down that easily. Now that they had caught on to the surprise attack, they moved to intercept it. Controlling the dragon, Granado fired the laser cannon equipped to its left arm. Like with the Type One Revised, the Type Two had been created to fight multiple enemies at the same time. The laser it fired was a short-range, wide area attack that was weak overall, but could hit multiple targets at the same time. Granado had seemingly fired it at a part of the room where no one was.

"Quick Cast Greater Force Field!"

"Karama, Korama, spiritual energy field to maximum output!"

"Ruth!"

"Commencing emergency deployment of the distortion field!"

The laser appeared to be flying towards empty space, but nine girls suddenly appeared in its path. When the laser hit, the invisibility spell that had kept them hidden lost its effect. But the girls hadn't taken any more damage than that. The wide area laser had inherently low firepower for a laser attack, so the girls were able to protect themselves from it with their various abilities.

"So there you are, princess and rabble! Don't think the same tricks will work over and over again!"

"Please stand back, Vandarion-sama!"

Fwoooosh!

The Type Two turned its body around and made a sweep with its massive tail. The truth was that Theia and the others weren't the only attackers. There were automated weapons on the opposite side of the room, also hidden by an invisibility spell. The Type Two's tail, however, swept them away. The automated weapons they'd brought with them were smaller models to make it easier to infiltrate with them, so the majority of them were turned into scrap by the attack. Once that was done, Granado ordered the dragon to pick up Vandarion. The safest place was next to the Type Two.

"It doesn't matter what you do! I can see right through it all! There's no one that can beat this Type Two! I stand astride the entire world with this power!"

Vandarion boasted triumphantly from the palm of the Type Two. Vandarion was convinced that the dragon's power had stopped the surprise attack and wiped out Koutarou's and the others' hope, leaving them with no chance of victory.

"I didn't want to believe it, but can that dragon of yours see the future?"

But even then, Theia's bullish attitude remained unfazed. She wouldn't be the one to tarnish the reputation of the undefeated Mastir family. Her duty was to fight with confidence, regardless of the situation.

"That's right! DKI doesn't have a monopoly on seeing into the future! We've taken the magic for ourselves and made better use of it!"

ROOOOOAAAAAR!

The Type Two responded to Vandarion's voice with a roar. The Type Two's main strength was its ability to see the future, which is what had allowed Vandarion to raid the imperial palace. By peering into the future, it was possible to outwit any enemy. It could prevent surprise attacks and stop betrayals, making things rather one-sided for whoever possessed such power. And that was exactly the power given to the Type Two, the ultimate weapon for a supreme ruler.

There's a mana reaction at the back of the neck. It's... green mana! I should have known! Green is in there!

Using several spells, Maki confirmed that Vandarion was telling the truth about what the Type Two could do. The reality of the situation was grim. Vandarion had kidnapped Green and deprived her of her freedom and consciousness. In that state, he'd put her inside the Type Two as if she was just a machine part. Even without directly using magic, there were several ways to use magicians as tools. It was Green's power that allowed the Type Two to see the future. That's why Vandarion's faction had gone to the trouble of plotting an attack to kidnap her. She was their target all along, which is why Elexis and the others had been able to escape after the ambush.

"Now then, what will you do, Blue Knight? Signaltin is broken and your surprise attack has failed! Now it's time to choose! Will it be Forthorthe?! Or the empress?!"

Vandarion boasted triumphantly once again. The empress and princess were in his grasp, he had taken Signaltin from the Blue Knight, and now he'd cut off his attempt to gain control of the situation. All that was left was to show the people of Forthorthe the miserable sight of the Blue Knight's demise. Vandarion would capture him and execute him when the time was right. Unlike the way things had gone with Maxfern two thousand years ago, victory looked like it wasn't on the Blue Knight's side this time.

"Hey, Vandarion."

But despite the way things looked, Koutarou was calm. Despair hadn't gotten the better of him, and that irritated Vandarion somewhat.

"Have you settled on your answer?"

Vandarion hurried Koutarou on. He was anxious to broadcast Koutarou's defeat and humiliation to all of Forthorthe, but Koutarou had a mysterious look on his face.

"It seems you only just started with future forecasts, but... did you properly test it?"

"What? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Divination magic has several weak points. If you had properly understood that, you might have come out victorious, Vandarion."

"What—"

Clack! Dwaaang!

The Type Two suddenly kneeled down where it stood. Standing in its palm, Vandarion had to grab on to a finger in order not to fall off. As he did, he shouted out to Granado.

"Granado! What are you doing?!"

"Vanda... the subcontroll... is under atta..."

Granado's reply was hard to make out through all the static, but Vandarion understood the gist of it. The dragon had two cockpits: the main controller in the head, and the subcontroller stretching from the back of the neck to the spine. Granado was in the subcontroller, which was also where the newly

developed Future Forecast System had been installed. Based on what Vandarion could understand of Granado's message, the subcontroller was under attack.

"Impossible! There's nothing happening!"

From the palm of the Type Two, Vandarion couldn't directly see the back of the neck. Instead, he had pointed the fortress's cameras there, but nothing in particular stood out. The scale-shaped hatch that was painted a deeper red than the rest of the body was still shut and intact.

"H... Hologram... it's all virtual... a trick to make everything look normal... being fooled..."

"What?!"

Boom!

The next moment, a blast from somewhere inside the subcontroller blew through the hatch door. It should have blown it clear off its hinges, but once the blast subsided, the hatch still appeared to be in place. That could only mean one thing: the hatch was a fake. Someone had attacked and infiltrated, but they'd covered up their tracks with a virtual image to make it look like nothing was wrong.

"Are you okay, mother?!"

"You did great, Theia!"

"I'm glad to see that you're safe as well, Ceilēshu-san!"

"Thank you very much, Clariossa-san!"

With Vandarion distracted, Theia and the others made their moved. They rushed up to the captured royals, cutting their restraints to rescue them

"Everything worked out great, Kiriha-sama!"

"Indeed. As expected, they are ignorant when it comes to the magic involved."

In contrast to the rejoicing Ruth, Kiriha remained calm. They weren't in a position to celebrate yet. They had to keep their guard up.

“I-Impossible! Aren’t we supposed to be able to see the future?! What did you bastards do?!”

“You made the novice mistake of assuming the future was absolute. You were too careless, Vandarion.”

Kiriha concealed her mouth behind a fan and laughed elegantly. Everything had gone according to her plan. Vandarion and Granado had been made to dance in the palm of her hand.

Largely speaking, the weakness of the Future Forecast spell was Green’s subjectivity. It potentially distorted the way she perceived the future, which confused those looking to make use of her forecasts. Not much time had passed since Vandarion and Granado had gotten their hands on future forecasting, and they had been quick to put it into use. The result was that they were now depending on it without an understanding of its flaws and limitations. Kiriha had suspected as much, and she preyed on that.

Future forecasting was essentially the simple act of taking a peek at the future. That’s why it couldn’t distinguish between reality and illusion. It couldn’t see through holograms or illusion spells. It would actually have to witness the device or magic creating them in order to do that.

As such, Kiriha had given Darkness Rainbow a very specific set of instructions and asked that they stay hidden with illusion magic. Since that was a specialty of theirs, even though the plan was elaborate, she thought they could pull it off. They had faithfully followed Kiriha’s directions and approached the Type Two while hidden. They then created an illusionary hatch and destroyed the real one to get inside. After breaking in, they made the subcontroller look perfectly normal. That’s why there had been no change in Green’s forecasts so far—the future still *looked* the same.

Of course, there were other things throwing chaos into the forecasts. One was Theia and the others entering the fray. With them attacking, the Type Two would naturally counterattack, and the uncertainty of battle would start to distort Green’s forecasting. Even if enemy attacks could be predicted, variables

like reaction time lowered the accuracy of the forecast. Each human element involved made the calculation that much trickier.

Furthering the chaos even more was the presence of Maki. While Green didn't feel much for Maki personally, she didn't like that she meant so much to Crimson. In other words, Green indirectly hated Maki. Because of that, she naturally paid more attention to Maki when she was around, spitefully peering into her future and trying to get in her way. Since that distracted Green's attention from everything else that was going on, it made it easier for Darkness Rainbow to move unnoticed.

"So this is how you guys always saw us? I see..." Nana mused.

"Apparently this was the plan we were going to go with the next time we fought," Crimson explained.

"I suppose we're lucky things came to this first in a way."

Nana and Crimson were the ones leading the group breaking into the subcontroller. Since Nana was so dependable and Crimson had exceptionally high attack power, they were the perfect pair for the job.

"...What?" Granado asked no one in particular as he looked around.

The six girls of Darkness Rainbow plus Nana had cast a spell on the subcontroller of the Type Two. It was an illusion to make it seem like everything was normal. That's why all Granado, who was in the subcontroller, felt was a slight change in pressure as the hatch opened. If anything, he was worthy of praise for noticing something so subtle.

"Was it just my imagination...?"

Yet despite Nana and Crimson standing right in front of him, he didn't see anything. The Future Forecast System wasn't issuing any warnings either. The illusion cast on the subcontroller was one thing, but the invisibility spell they had cast on themselves before entering the space fortress was about to expire. It would only last another thirty seconds or so. But until then, the system would continue to falsely report to Granado that everything was fine and that the future was secure. And though they only had a matter of seconds left, they weren't worried. Even if the spell ran out now, they'd already successfully

infiltrated the subcontroller.

“Go, Crimson!” Nana called.

Bang, bang, bang!

Nana repeatedly fired her gun, Over the Rainbow. She was targeting the control panel for the Type Two. Her goal was to destroy it or make it unusable before Granado noticed.

“Got it!” Crimson shouted.



The subcontroller was essentially a cockpit several meters in diameter. It was much larger than the inside of a tank, but it still didn't take long to get from one side of the room to the other. Crimson closed in on Granado as fast as she could and swung down her staff, now transformed into an axe.

Bleep, bleep, bleep!

"An enemy?! How did they—"

When the alarm rang out, Granado realized the danger he was in. The Future Forecast System had detected the attack just as the invisibility spells began to wear off.

"Just where are they coming from? I-Impossible! From inside of the subcontroller?!" Granado shouted in his surprise.

"That's right! I'll be taking Green back now!" Crimson roared.

Wham!

The Future Forecast System was now showing footage from within the subcontroller. As Granado turned around, he was suddenly knocked back. He crashed into the already half-destroyed control panel. Crimson and Nana appeared from thin air as Granado collapsed at their feet. That was the future the system predicted, and that's almost exactly how things unfolded a moment later. The only real difference was that, knowing the future, Granado tried to reach for his gun this time. But even then, the outcome remained unchanged. Granado lay collapsed by Nana and Crimson's feet.

"Crimson, you didn't kill him, did you?"

"I made sure to hold back. He's one of Vandarion's few friends, so we're using him as a hostage, right?"

"So you didn't forget. That's good."

So far, all was going as Kiriha had planned. They were able to infiltrate the subcontroller and seize it while neutralizing Granado. If needed, the rest of Darkness Rainbow was there to support them, but fortunately, that hadn't been necessary.

"Crim-chan, come on over here! I found GreGre!"

“You did?!”

Crimson had defeated Granado in an instant, but when Orange called to her right after, she immediately lost all interest in him. She hurriedly turned around and ran towards Orange’s voice.

“Yellow, is Green okay?!” she asked excitedly.

“Purple and Blue are looking at her now. Just calm down,” Yellow replied.

“I can’t calm down when she looks like that!”

Green was embedded into one of the walls of the subcontroller. It was a terrible sight. She was wearing something like a helmet with electrodes and IV drips attached to her everywhere. She was being compelled to use her Future Forecast through the use of drugs and hypnotic suggestions, and a computer connected to her interpreted that data for Granado and Vandarion. She was being forced to help them against her will.

“You sure care about your friends an awful lot, Crim-chan.”

“Don’t make fun of me!”

“I’m not making fun of you. I can kind of understand how you feel now.”

The girls quickly worked together to remove Green from the wall and deattach her from the electrodes and IVs. At the moment, she was surrounded by her five allies all looking down at her with worried, caring expressions. The very same allies that had once only considered each others tools.

Two years ago, all we did was fight... I don’t know what happened... but I can’t hate them anymore...

Watching over them, Nana realized the change that had come over Darkness Rainbow. She knew them well, including that they only cared about themselves in the past. But here they were, working as a team and treating each other like friends. While she might not be able to be their friend after everything they’d been through, Nana didn’t think she could hate the current Darkness Rainbow.

Thunk.

“Wh-What?!”

With the controls destroyed, the Type Two started tilting. It was so sudden that Nana had to grab the backrest of pilot's seat to support herself. Darkness Rainbow followed suit, grabbing on to whatever they could while trying to protect Green.

"Looks like it's settled down," Nana said when the moving stopped.

Fortunately, the Type Two hadn't fallen over. The AI had kicked in before that and activated its balance control, bracing itself with its limbs. However, the abrupt shock caused something unexpected to happen. The unconscious Granado had woken up.

Now's my chance!

Once awake, Granado quickly took stock of the situation and readied a weapon he had hidden on him.

Thunk! Clank, clank, clank...

After tossing it, Granado hurried to the nearby door to take cover. The subcontroller had a main entrance, and a secondary one that led to a different part of the Type Two.

"A grenade?! Everyone, run!" Nana shouted.

She reacted as soon as she heard the unmistakable sound of a grenade rolling across the floor. She ran right up to it and kicked it away. It traced a beautiful arc in the air and landed near the door that Granado had escaped through.

Boom!

It exploded when it hit the floor, engulfing the entire subcontroller.

Why am I protecting Darkness Rainbow, I wonder...?

Despite telling Darkness Rainbow to run, Nana herself had stayed behind. Moreover, she'd approached the danger. Since she wasn't able to escape, she'd put herself in harm's way and used her own body as a shield to protect Darkness Rainbow. Even then, it might all be meaningless. Her body was small, and the defense spell she cast using the staff built into her wouldn't be enough to protect against an explosion like this at point blank range. But in the end, Nana was a magical girl of love and courage at heart. She couldn't abandon

those who had just started to learn the ways of love.

I guess this is the end of the road for me... Oh well. Really, I should have died two years ago protecting Yurika-chan...

That was what Nana thought as the blast in the subcontroller hit her. Yurika was Nana's disciple and also her best friend. As she closed her eyes, Yurika's face was what she saw. That being her final thought put Nana's heart at peace.

"...Huh?"

But that was when something strange happened. Even after the blast had passed, Nana was still alive. Confused, she slowly opened her eyes and saw several transparent, glowing somethings floating in the air.

"Yellie, why are we protecting Rainbow Nana again?"

"I don't know... but just letting her die her would be kind of disgusting, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, that's true."

The yellow things floating over Nana were impenetrable shields created by magic. It turned out that Nana wasn't the only one willing to protect her new, unexpected allies.

Vandarion’s Insanity

Friday, December 31st

The grenade’s explosion had started a fire in the subcontroller. That fire caused a chain of explosions that drove Nana and Darkness Rainbow out of the Type Two. Yet as they fled, someone else was moving into the Type Two. It was the Type Two’s owner: Vandarion. He was intent on using the power of the metal dragon and his space fortress to finish off Koutarou and the others.

“Granado?!”

Welcoming Vandarion in the main controller, however, was a critically wounded Granado. Unable to accept the sight at first, Vandarion instinctively froze up.

“Vandarion-sa... ma... I-I’ve... failed...”

Because Nana had kicked away the grenade, the blast had entered the passage where Granado had taken cover. The result was grievous. Granado couldn’t afford to let himself be captured, nor could he let them just take Green away. Moreover, he was bad at fighting, so in order for him to eliminate the assault unit that had infiltrated the Type Two, a grenade was the perfect plan. He’d had the right idea. Nana had simply reacted in an unexpected way. Granado, gravely injured, had crawled his way to the main controller after the fact.

“Get it together, Granado! A wound like this will heal right away! I’ll prepare the best doctors for you!”

Once he came to his senses, Vandarion kneeled beside Granado and held him up without concern for the blood he was getting on himself. He couldn’t leave his long-time comrade lying on the floor.

“D-Don’t be unreasonable, V-Vandarion-sama... Agh...”

“Granado!”

“Hnngh... This is my... b-body. I know... what condition... it’s in... I won’t... last long... I’m glad I could... see you one last... time...”

However, Granado had sensed his death was near. It was because of that that he’d made his way to the controller without bothering to try and do anything for his wounds. It was all so he could see his lord one final time.

“Don’t you die, Granado! Are you planning on leaving me alone?!”

Vandarion could also tell that Granado’s body was rapidly losing its strength. That he would die before long. He knew it; he was just unable to accept it. Granado was the only person who understood him. The only one who had strived for greatness with him. His only friend.

“T-To rule... is a lonely thing... A true... king among kings... must be able... to endure that...”

“Don’t you lecture me, Granado! You will live! Alongside me! You’re the one who said that you would see me through to the end! All the way to standing at the top of this nation!”

Decades had passed since the two men had first met. Vandarion had always been seeking greatness, but he hadn’t done it all on his own. He had always had Granado and his advice by his side. He thought it would always be that way. And together, the two of them would see Vandarion the supreme ruler of all things. That was the promise they had made each other.

“...Even though this body may perish, I will always be at your side... I will without doubt watch... as you seize the whole universe, Vandarion-sama...”

And with those words, Granado expelled all the air in his lungs. It was almost as if he let out a heavy sigh. What he’d exhaled was actually the last of his life, but just like a sigh, it faded into nothingness.

“Hey, Granado...”

Vandarion shook Granado. Though Vandarion still held his body in his arms, Granado’s spirit was gone. Vandarion shook him again and again, but there was no response.

“Stop messing around! Open your eyes this instant! That’s an order!”

Vandarion knew what had happened. Logically speaking, he knew. But his heart wouldn't believe it. The reality before him was a roadblock to his ambition. Achieving victory together with Granado was the future Vandarion sought.

"Are you listening, Granado?! Why don't you say something with that sharp expression of yours like you always do?! Do what I tell you!"

Decades had passed since the two men had met, and ever since that day, they had worked together to set this grand plan in motion and attain their goals. Only Granado truly understood Vandarion and shared his dream. But Granado —and their future together—was no more. Tears, the likes of which Vandarion had never shed even in front of Granado, now streamed down his face.

"Granado! Hey! Answer me, Granado! Please!"

No matter how much Vandarion called to him, Granado never answered. Vandarion's ambition, for all it was worth, could not return to him the life of his lost best friend.

"...Granado..."

Snap.

A fallen friend, a ruined ideal, and a murdered dream. Under the weight of it all, something snapped inside Vandarion. It was like a seal had broken, releasing something that had long been stagnant on the other side of Vandarion's heart. It poured out now, consuming Vandarion. Drowning him.

"Heh... Hahaha... Ahahaha!"

What the floodgates had unleashed was insanity. Granado was the only thing in Vandarion's life that kept him in check. He was what kept Vandarion in touch with reality and his humanity. But without him, that safety had been removed. There was no longer anyone or anything that could reign in Vandarion. There was nothing left to stop the insanity from consuming him.

"Then you may watch from there, Granado... I will line your grave with the heads of the Blue Knight and the royal families!"

The insanity began distorting Vandarion's goal. He was supposed to use the

Blue Knight and the royals, including their deaths, as tools in order to take over the country. But now he only craved their deaths for vengeance's sake. With Granado gone, Vandarion was so overcome with uncontrollable emotion that he mistook the means for the end. All he wanted was to destroy the people that had everything he'd lost. Everything he should've had.

"Hahahaha! That's it! That's *it!* I'll mow down everyone who gets in my way, not just the Blue Knight and the royals! Their bloody corpses will be the foundation of my country! You won't have a grave, Granado, but a monument! And I will fill it up with the heads of our enemies!"

Finally, Vandarion's hostility slowly began to turn on the country of Forthorthe itself. His desire to destroy it was slowly overtaking his desire to rule it. His hatred and his frustrated grief were that intense. While Vandarion still wasn't aware of it, that was the path his heart had started to lead him down.

The Type Two stopping was a stroke of luck for Koutarou and the others, as they needed to safely extract Elfaria, Ceilēshu, and the still unconscious Green. But even though the Type Two wasn't moving, the space fortress' defense system was still kicking. While Koutarou and the others had no way of knowing, Granado had reached the main controller and activated the fortress' defense system before he died. Because of that, there were plenty of enemies obstructing their way out. It was like the complete opposite of Koutarou's long, desolate walk to the center of the fortress when he arrived.

I guess that means that he really doesn't trust anyone other than Granado in the end...

Koutarou couldn't help thinking that as he swung the beam sword in his hand. All of the enemies before him were automated weapons. All that was sent flying as Koutarou swung his sword was a mix of oil, metal, and plastic. Nothing he fought was flesh and blood. Koutarou felt it was a representation of Vandarion's empty, untrusting, mechanical heart. He also felt it was similar to how he himself had been before meeting Kenji.

"How annoying! They're all over the place!"

Theia repeatedly shot off her beam rifle while voicing her irritation. For each

enemy she destroyed, another appeared to take its place. A space fortress of this size was manned by what seemed like an infinite number of robots and automated weapons. As a result, Koutarou and the girls were still fighting their way through them and hadn't reached the port where Blue Knight was docked.

"Annoying, huh? Yeah, I guess so."

Koutarou reflexively flashed a dry smile. Theia had called the situation annoying. That must have been how he was too. He couldn't keep himself from smiling at the thought.

"Did you say something, Koutarou?!"

"No. But we'll need a bold move to deal with this!"

However, he couldn't just keep smiling. He had to safely get Elfaria, Ceilēshu, and the other girls out of this place. He couldn't afford to be delayed here.

"Agreed! Kiriha, can't we do something?!"

"The enemy is focusing their attacks on Koutarou and the royalty, so we'll use magic to create sufficient decoys."

Kiriha had noticed that the automated weapons were prioritizing Koutarou, Elfaria, and the princesses as targets. Accordingly, her plan was to disguise Koutarou and the royals while making the unmanned fighters under Ruth's control look like them to take their place. The idea was to have Koutarou and the others make it all the way to Blue Knight while the automated weapons were busy going after the decoys.

"All right! Yurika, Aika-san, I'm counting on you!"

Koutarou quickly agreed to Kiriha's strategy. As Darkness Rainbow had already used up a lot of mana infiltrating the Type Two, he left the task at hand to Yurika and Maki.

"Got it! I'll change the appearance of Satomi-san and the others!" Yurika called.

"Okay, then I'll create the fakes!" Maki agreed.

The two magical girls would divide the spells between them. Creating the decoys was the more difficult task, but Maki's specialty in indigo magic—mind-

affecting magic—gave her an advantage in making illusions.

“Instant Disguise! Modifier: Multiple Targets!”

“Perfect Illusion! Modifier: Multiple Targets!”

Their spells activated with the desired effect. Koutarou, Elfaria, and the princesses now looked like regular Imperial Army soldiers, while the unmanned fighters took on their appearances in their stead. It was a masterful use of magic.

“All right, now go!” Ruth shouted.

Ruth put the final touches on the diversion by using her bracelet to order the unmanned fighters away from the group. The majority of the enemies began chasing after them. Thanks to that, most of the fire was drawn away from Koutarou and the others, which eased the pressure on them considerably.

“Please hurry, Master. The fakes won’t last for long.”

“Got it! Let’s break right through!”

The only problem was that the unmanned fighters weren’t as strong as Koutarou and the others. Moreover, as they were in the middle of escaping, Ruth couldn’t control the fighters directly herself. She had to leave them on autopilot and trust the AI to do the work for her. But without Ruth’s guidance, she knew the odds were against them. They were so outnumbered that there was no way that they’d hold up for long. That’s why Koutarou and the girls had to hurry and escape before that happened.

“Huh...? What is...”

Everyone was making a mad dash for the port, but someone in the group stopped.

“Sanae! We gotta go!”

“I know, but...”

The one lagging behind was Sanae. Koutarou quickly called for her to pick up the pace, but she remained motionless. She was staring behind them, clearly bothered by what she was sensing.

“I thought so... There’s no doubt!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Koutarou, this is bad! Something I don’t get is chasing after us!”

Sanae pointed behind them and tried to warn Koutarou of the danger. The unusually grave expression on her face told Koutarou that this was serious.

“Explain it so I can understand!” Koutarou shouted to her.

“It feels like Purple or Tayuma!” Sanae shouted back.

“What?!” Purple exclaimed.

All of Darkness Rainbow reacted, but Purple in particular stopped running. She turned and squinted her eyes in the direction Sanae was pointing. As she did, her eyes opened wide and her jaw dropped.

“What is the meaning of this?! The gates of hell are opening?!”

While she couldn’t directly see it since it was on the other side of a wall, her eyes detected abnormal mana. She saw negative emotions forming a vortex, continuously giving birth to powerful gray energy. As Purple was an expert in necromancy, she was sensitive to this kind of phenomenon—especially so after the time she herself had been swallowed by something like it. But it was that sensitivity that led to her astonishment now. She couldn’t believe the gates of hell had appeared in a place like this.

“Purple...”

However, Dark Blue—who had actually worked to open up the gates of hell before—could imagine how this had happened.

“Green was the one who originally had the information on the gates of hell. So if Green’s Future Forecast was being used—”

“Then they’re using the gates of hell too?!”

“I think so!”

Green had been captured by Vandarion for her power. Assuming Future Forecast was all he was after was a mistake. There was no way something as incredibly powerful as the gates of hell wouldn’t have attracted his interest.

“Be careful, everyone! It’s coming!” Sanae warned.

The abnormality that Sanae had sensed—the gates of hell—was rapidly approaching. Less than a minute after Sanae first noticed it, it was already upon them.

Crash!

The gates of hell, wearing the body of a massive, metal dragon, appeared before Koutarou and the others. There had been a thick wall between them, but it had easily torn through it like it was paper.

“Ahahahaha! I’ve found you! I’ve got you now, Blue Knight! Using this power I was given by Granado, I’ll make sure to kill you this time! Unlike two thousand years ago, I don’t need Signaltin! I’ll obtain everything with this power!”

Using Vandarion’s insanity as fuel, the gates of hell produced energy without end. It was absorbed by the mechanical dragon, giving it power far beyond what it was designed to have. It seemed Vandarion’s threat was very real. If this power continued to grow as it had with Tayuma or Purple, the Type Two very well may be capable of bringing ruin to all of Forthorthe.

The Type Two’s eyes gleamed and fired lasers. It was the same as the attack it had used against Theia and the others once before, so if they worked together, they should be able to block it again.

Smash!

However, despite their barrier being as strong as possible with Sanae in charge of spiritual energy, Clan in charge of the science, and Yellow in charge of the magic, the Type Two’s lasers easily broke through it.

“This is nothing— Whoooaaaa!”

“Uncle, please!”

The Type Two’s attack power had significantly increased. The laser that broke through the barrier assaulted Koutarou and Shizuka. Sparks flew from Koutarou’s armor and Shizuka was covered in small burns. If the laser had hit

anyone else, it likely would have been enough to take them out altogether.

“We can’t win like this! Keep him occupied as we retreat! We won’t be able block the attacks soon!” Theia quickly ordered.

Retreat seemed like their only option now. With Sanae’s spirit sight and enhancements alongside the support of the magical girls, they could dodge most of the Type Two’s attacks. The only real problem was wide area attacks like the laser. And since that laser now had enough power to break through their barriers, Koutarou and the girls wouldn’t be able to last long. At this rate, they’d be looking at more than sparks and small burns soon.

“Landlord-san, can you buy us fifteen seconds?!”

Koutarou only had one idea for a retreat, and since he didn’t have time to think of anything else, he decided to put it into action right away.

“I’ll do it!” Shizuka shouted.

“I’m counting on you!” Koutarou shouted back.

He needed to buy a little bit of time for his plan to work. It would come in two stages. The first required Shizuka to go all out with the Type Two while he put his armor to work on a certain task. And though Koutarou had a plan, the other girls couldn’t tell what he was thinking just by looking at him. Clan was the first to question his actions.

“Wait, Veltlion, just what are you going to do?!”

“I can’t be picky about the means in this situation!”

“Kyaaaaah! E-Everyone, prepare to protect yourselves! Things are about to get really messy!”

Clan’s face paled. She knew how the Blue Knight was on the battlefield better than anyone else. That’s why she could tell that Koutarou was up to something based on his expression and the tone of his voice. She then used her bracelet to check his armor’s logs to try and figure out exactly what he was doing. Clan had a bad feeling about it all. An extremely bad one at that. That was why she told the others to protect themselves.

“Let’s change, Uncle!”

“Looks like it’s finally my turn!”

Shizuka transformed from her half-dragon form to a full-on, massive dragon. She became the Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya, the ruler of all dragonkind that the Type Two was modeled after. As Shizuka’s body couldn’t withstand such a transformation forever, there was a limit to how long he could fight like that. But thanks to that vast energy Alunaya had, he was the only one cut out to fight against the Type Two.

“Uncle, if we’re going to do it, let’s make it flashy!”

“Then I’ll go straight in at full power! We’ll carve a new legend in these fifteen seconds!”

The Fire Dragon Emperor was covered in crimson scales, and when he used his power, he was wreathed in flame just as crimson. But right now, those normally red flames were burning so brightly that they’d turned white. It was a sign that the Fire Dragon Emperor had summoned his full strength.

“Oho, so this is the Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya! How interesting! Why don’t we compare which dragon is the superior beast?!”

The Type Two revealed its fangs as it readied to intercept the Fire Dragon Emperor. Being mechanical, the Type Two shouldn’t have had any emotion, but looking at it now, its bared fangs made it seem like it was smiling. It was as if Vandarion’s own emotions had possessed it.

“The first thing that comes to mind when I think of dragons is breathing fire! Why don’t we start with that?!”

Fwoooooosh!

The Type Two opened its metallic jaw wide and fired the beam cannon in its mouth. The beam cannon accelerated heavy metal particles through a long barrel with the help of electromagnetism, and as they reached their peak, they were released at a frightening speed. The white torrent that shot out from the Type Two’s mouth assaulted the Fire Dragon Emperor far faster than the speed of sound.

“You think to challenge me with flame? You fool!”

Pfwaaaaah!

In response, Alunaya lived up to his name by spewing flames from his mouth at full force. They were even hotter and brighter than the fire surrounding him. They were so dense with energy that the flames themselves condensed into plasma. A direct hit would incinerate any foe before they even had a chance to feel the pain.

Bwooosh!

The Type Two's beam cannon and the Fire Dragon Emperor's plasma breath met each other in mid-air. The Fire Dragon Emperor's breath was stronger in terms of temperature and power, but the Type Two's beam was thicker and covered a wider area. As a result, Alunaya's fire breath pierced through the center of the beam and assaulted the Type Two. It lost most of its strength as it pushed through the beam, but it also scattered the beam wide enough that it became quite weak. In the end, neither attack did much damage at all.

"Are you okay, Uncle?!"

"Don't worry! This is nothing!"

"Ahahaha, as expected of the Fire Dragon Emperor! That's what I was hoping for! Now try this on for size!"

Still shooting flames and beams from their mouths, the two dragons closed in on each other. Once they got in range, they broke out into close-quarters combat.

"Shizuka, it's your turn!"

"Okay!"

While in full dragon form, Alunaya was usually the one controlling the body as he was more knowledgeable when it came to fighting as a dragon. But there were still situations where giving control to Shizuka was more efficient, and close range combat was one of them because of her talent in martial arts. As of late, the two of them had begun fighting by taking each other's merits into account. Now Alunaya was wielding his powers as a dragon while Shizuka was making use of the techniques she'd been training her whole life. In terms of hand-to-hand fighting ability, it was no exaggeration to say they were the

strongest.

“How foolish! It seems you don’t understand that fighting at close range is what this machine does best!”

But while Alunaya had reached the height of strength for a living creature, the Type Two had a mechanical advantage. The Type Two worked together with a powerful computer system, making use of precise and fast motors to move. Its ability to collect and analyze vast amounts of data and make predictions based on that data coupled together with the motors that gave it a reaction time far faster than any human allowed the Type Two to move and act at supernatural speeds. It also wasn’t constricted by a skeleton or joints that limited its movement range. It could move and bend in unnatural ways. Between that and its overwhelming speed and power, the Type Two was unfettered by the same restrictions placed on living beings.

“Fear not, Shizuka! Keep pushing forward!”

“Hyaaaaah!”

“Fools! Allow me to teach you that you flesh and bone creatures don’t stand a chance against my machine!”

Alunaya had conventional power, born from his own strong body and Shizuka’s long training. In comparison, the Type Two had innovative power, born from cutting edge, state-of-the-art technology. Both sides pushed their powers to the limit as they clashed.

Slam!

A scaled fist and a metal fist collided. Both parties had struck with all their strength, so the blows largely cancelled out each other’s momentum. However, the fight didn’t end there. After that, they started fighting by making full use of their individual abilities and powers.

“And then we do this!”

Shizuka had assumed that the first strike would fail, and accordingly had prepared a second one. Using the momentum from their fists being knocked back to spin around, she aimed for Type Two’s head. Normally a move like that would have been a roundhouse kick, but making use of a dragon’s body, she

attacked with its massive tail instead.

“Do you think you can defeat my Type Two with an attack like that?!”

The Type Two’s pilot was Vandarion, but he was just a normal human. He couldn’t match the skills of a martial artist like Shizuka. He also wasn’t used to the controls for the Type Two. As such, most of them were left to automatic operation. Vandarion gave general directions and the AI took appropriate action based on the situation at hand. That was true even now—the Type Two followed Vandarion’s instructions and decided intercepting Shizuka was the best course of action.

“It’s that fast?!”

Bam!

Shizuka’s tail attack was blocked by the Type Two’s arm. The armor plating on it was thick and the barrier it used was sturdy, so the blow didn’t do any real damage. Even so, Shizuka saw an opportunity.

“But it’s not moving too fast for me to hit it!”

Unlike the Type One Revised, the Type Two had a human operator, so it was somewhat slower. It couldn’t move so quickly that it would put Vandarion at risk. Shizuka’s instincts were telling her that she’d be able to land a hit on it.

“Is that all?! It’s my turn now!”

“Ugh!”

However, Shizuka quickly realized that her thinking had been too naive. The Type Two quickly moved to corner Shizuka and Alunaya with slashes from its fangs and claws. It was certainly moving slower than the Type One Revised had, but it was making more reasonable decisions based on the circumstances. It had sacrificed reckless speed for improved prediction capabilities. Strategically, it was on a completely different level, in no small part because the system had been updated using the data gathered from the Type One Revised.

“Come on! What’s the matter?! You talked such a big game, I expected you to live up to it!”

“In that case...!”

Shizuka focused Alunaya's mana into her right fist. Doing that would lower their magical protection, but it would significantly increase the power behind their attacks. Hitting the Type Two, which could move in ways that normal creatures couldn't, multiple times was hard. With that knowledge, Shizuka decided to go for something more desperate.

"Hahahaha, you fool! Doing that is the same as killing yourself!" Vandarion sneered.

It was clear what Shizuka was trying to do. The way Vandarion saw it, any drop in Alunaya's defense was basically an increase in the Type Two's attack power. To him, it seemed like Shizuka had chosen to put herself at an even bigger disadvantage. And that, as far as he was concerned, was a foolish misstep.

"The new legends will hail me and Granado! Now die, you old dragon!"

The Type Two faithfully abided Vandarion's will and attacked Alunaya's body with its scorching hot claws. Alunaya, who was trying to unleash an all-out attack with his right fist, had his left side completely open.

"Urghhh! Gwaaaaah!"

"Hahaha! Ahahahaha!"

Alunaya's cries of pain and Vandarion's mocking laughter echoed throughout the room. The Type Two's claws had sunk deep into Alunaya's scaly hide.

"Fools! Mere fools! What made you think a two thousand year old fossil would even stand a chance against state-of-the-art weaponry?! The age changes with each passing hour, you know!"

"...Too bad for you, Vandarion. If there's a new legend being written here, we shall be its heroes."

"You're a sore loser!"

"Why would a two thousand year old fossil win? Well, that reason is simple. After all..."

Alunaya revealed his fangs in a grin as he grabbed hold of the Type Two's arm. If the opponent is too fast, then let them attack to lure them in and capture

them. That was Shizuka's desperate plan.

"Now, Satomi-kun! I don't know what you're going to do, but do it!"

Booooom!

In that instant, a massive, glowing white light pierced through the thick walls of the space fortress and headed straight for the Type Two.

"Impossible, that's—"

"We're using state-of-the-art weaponry as well."

With its claws in Alunaya and Alunaya holding it in place, the Type Two was unable to move. It was a sitting duck. The white light struck and sent it flying into the wall of the fortress.

Rrrrumble...

The entire facility shook from the impact. The white light, as it turned out, was Blue Knight's anti-ship energy sword. While Shizuka distracted Vandarion, Koutarou had prepared Blue Knight to attack from outside.

While it was called a sword, it only really looked like one from the point of view of Blue Knight. To anything smaller, a direct hit from the anti-ship energy sword was more like a being rammed by a spaceship. The power of such a blow had not only sent the Type Two helplessly flying, it had pinned it to the wall. Having to penetrate the walls of the fortress before reaching the Type Two had actually significantly reduced the momentum of the blow, but the massive sword still had all of Blue Knight's weight behind it. The much smaller Type Two didn't stand a chance.

"Kyaaaaaaaah! Nooooooooo!"

With the wall of the fortress now punctured, air was being sucked out of the building at an alarming rate. Most everyone had grabbed on to something nearby or made use of magic or science to stabilize themselves, but one person in particular was too slow on the draw. It was Yurika, known for her poor reflexes. She looked like she was about to be sucked out of the fortress along with the air.

“Yurika-san!”

But fortunately, Yurika had a very competent friend. Harumi grabbed her hand before she went flying.

“S-Sakuraba-senpai!”

“Please hold on!”

“Thank yooooouuu!”

While Harumi had a weak constitution, she herself wasn’t all that weak. After grabbing Yurika, she was able to pull her to the handrail she was holding on to herself. And so thanks to a helping hand, Yurika was able to escape immediate danger.

“Jeez, who knows what that man will do when he gets angry...”

Clan was controlling the gravity around her to counteract the sucking power. Because of that, it looked like she alone was standing in a patch of a calm, normal world. It afforded her enough comfort to complain about Koutarou’s exceedingly dangerous move.

“But it was worth doing,” Theia interjected. “Even Alunaya-dono was having trouble dealing with that monster. Koutarou made the right decision.”

Theia made skillful use of her combat dress’ boosters to resist the sucking power and remain fixed in place. Because of her perspective, she had the best grasp of the situation. The overwhelming mass and sheer size of the anti-ship energy sword had defeated their enemy in a single hit. And as the Type Two wasn’t an opponent that could be taken down by any normal means, they would have ended up with a tragedy on their hands if they’d kept twiddling their thumbs for too long. Theia felt that smashing open the space fortress was an acceptable way to avoid that.

“I like it! Not bad!”

“That sure does seem like your kind of strategy, Crim-chan. I guess I don’t hate it either, really.”

Darkness Rainbow witnessed Koutarou’s handiwork as well. They were watching him while using magic to protect themselves. Air had already drained

from the area around them, leaving them standing in a practical vacuum. Yet even so, nothing looked as if it was amiss. To magic experts like them, something as expected as the lack of pressure in a vacuum wasn't a big deal.

"Are you okay, Landlord-san?"

"I'm not okay at all. I must weigh at least three tons now..."

"That manifestation isn't my real body, so the only actual damage is the mana it used up."

"Looks like you're okay then."

"I'm not okay! Did you hear me?!"

Alunaya had taken some serious damage from the Type Two's claws, but his dragon manifestation being made of mana meant that neither he nor Shizuka were actually hurt. The only real damage was to Shizuka's maiden heart. Ever since Koutarou had asked Shizuka and Alunaya to buy him time, he'd been seriously worried for them. It was quite a relief to see that they were unharmed now that it was all said and done.

"I know how you feel, but let's get out of here," Kiriha urged them. "Not all the enemies are defeated yet."

"Kiriha-sama is right. The weapons that attacked us were all sucked out of here, but the space weapons on the outside are closing in," Ruth added.

While everyone was safe for the moment, the danger had yet to pass. The Type Two had been defeated, but most of their original enemies remained. Escaping as quickly as possible was the wisest move.

"...Wait! Something's still strange!" Sanae suddenly shouted.

"The gates of hell haven't closed! Vandarion is still alive and well!" Purple shouted right after.

Just as everyone was getting ready to escape, those words stopped them all dead in their tracks. How could that be? They knew they still had enemies ahead of them, but it really didn't look like Vandarion would be any threat to them considering the condition the Type Two was in.

"Really?!" Koutarou asked.

“Yeah!” Sanae called. “That messy gray thing is still swirling!”

“The gates of hell breathe in the will of the user and give power in return! Since it’s still present, that means someone’s still using it! It can only be Vandarion!” Purple explained frantically.

Rumble...

That was when Blue Knight’s anti-ship energy sword began shaking. However, Koutarou wasn’t doing anything to it. Something else was trying to move it.

“Hahahaha! This is fantastic, Granado! The weapon you made really is the strongest! There is surely nothing else like it in the entire universe!”

Sanae and Purple were dead on. The Type Two—which should have been totally crushed—was still moving at the tip of the sword. It was using both of its arms to try and pull free from the sword.

That’s impossible! To think it could push the sword away with that difference in size!

The Type Two was around thirty meters long. In contrast, the anti-ship energy sword was several hundred meters in length. It was several dozen times its size, and more than several thousand times its mass. The disparity was so large that there was no way the Type Two should even be able to budge the sword. It would be like a human trying to push a building. But nevertheless, an unbelievable scene was unfolding right in front of everyone’s eyes. Seeing it for himself, Koutarou made a swift decision.

“Hey, Blue Knight, let me in the bridge!”

Following Koutarou’s instructions, one of the hatches along the side of the bridge opened up. Koutarou activated his emergency boosters and flew up towards it.

“Koutarou, what are you going to do?!” Theia called after him.

“I’ll keep him busy with Blue Knight! You guys hurry up and get out of there!”

Koutarou was going to stall the Type Two using Blue Knight. Seeing that it was strong enough to push something several times its size and mass, he couldn’t think of any other way to fight it. But since he would be using Blue Knight to

stall the Type Two, the girls wouldn't be able to use it to escape. Instead, Clan's Cradle, which had carried Darkness Rainbow here, would be their way out.

"But I can't leave you behind!" Theia yelled.

"Hurry up and go! There's no time to spare!" Koutarou yelled back.

Since Koutarou had already entered Blue Knight, his voice reached Theia over the comms system. Before the transmission was even over, Blue Knight began moving, thrusting the sword further in as the Type Two tried to push it away.

What's going on? Something's clearly different from when Landlord-san fought it! It's like it's getting stronger and stronger!

As Koutarou tried to thrust the sword, the Type Two pushed back with equal force. It was nearly impossible to believe, but the Type Two was now on par with the Blue Knight and it was only getting stronger. Slowly but surely, it was pushing the sword back.

"Don't waste any time! I don't know how long Blue Knight will be able to stop him!" Koutarou shouted to Theia again.

"I refuse! I don't ever want to leave you alone again!" she shouted back.

"You idiot! Are you trying to take Elle and Princess Ceilēshu down with you?!"

"That's unfair, Koutarou!"

"Hurry up and go!"

As Koutarou urged Theia to flee with the others, the anti-ship energy sword began glowing white. He was going to make up for what he lacked in pure strength with an energy-based attack. Koutarou being forced to resort to that despite the proximity of Theia and the others made her see the grim reality of the situation for what it was. And with that, Theia grumblingly made up her mind.

"Hmph... Men, let's leave this to Koutarou and escape!"

"Are you sure about that?!" Clan questioned.

"We have to get mother and the others to safety first or else we can't even fight!"

Theia wasn't going to leave Koutarou behind. She was just temporarily retreating to save others. After making sure Elfaria and Ceilēshu had escaped, she'd be back, armed and ready to fight. Theia personally was resistant to the idea, but it's what she knew she had to do as a princess.

"It's a tactical retreat. Karama, Korama, calculate a relatively safe escape route!"

"Calculations are already done! Ho!"

"This way! Ho!"

"Clan-dono—"

"I'm bringing the Cradle in using remote controls now!"

Vandarion's space fortress had been considerably damaged by Blue Knight's ramming attack. Thanks to that, the shortest path to the Cradle was now buried in rubble. Theia and the others quickly decided on a new route and made their exit. Seeing that, Koutarou set Blue Knight's generator output to maximum power.

As the anti-ship energy sword began glowing, it began destroying objects and debris in a certain radius around its blade. The sword worked by using energy to distort space and harness that destructive power. As Koutarou watched it begin to work, he was able to identify what was going on with the Type Two.

"It's draining energy from the fortress?!"

Several cables were attached to the body of the Type Two. It looked less like they were properly connected and more like they were forcibly thrust into it, but through those cables, energy from the fortress was flowing into the Type Two. That was the real reason why Blue Knight was losing to it in terms of power. It was far bigger than the Type Two, but not bigger than the fortress itself.

"Muahahahaha! This power given to me by Granado is invincible! Even a royal class battleship is but a toy before this power! And with it, I will crush you!"

Vandarion seemed to believe that the Type Two's external power was coming

from Granado or something he'd done. But it sure didn't look invincible to Koutarou, who was looking on from the outside. To him, the Type Two wriggling around in the center of a mass of cables looked like some kind of leashed monster.

"How about it, Blue Knight?! Signaltin is already gone, and now your allies have run away! No royal, soldier, or citizen will come to save you now! You will die all alone in that giant iron coffin!"

ROOOAAAAAR!

The Type Two roared loudly as it worked to push back the sword, seemingly unaffected by the destructive energy it was emitting. The Type Two was still pinned to the fortress wall by the tip of the sword, but it was slowly pushing it farther and farther away from itself. It looked like it would be able to break free before long.

"I'm not going down that easily!"

Fwoooosh!

After checking the hologram displayed in the bridge to confirm that Theia and the others had gotten out of the fortress, Koutarou activated the Blue Knight's thrusters. Using thrusters inside was rather insane, but Koutarou didn't have the luxury of playing it safe. He was determined to keep the Type Two in place regardless of the cost to him or Blue Knight.

"Hahahahaha! You want to have a test of strength against me, huh?! Very well! I'll show you the power of the supreme ruler that stands above all!"

The Type Two's strength rapidly increased. Despite the power of Blue Knight's thrusters, it was gradually being pushed back. The Type Two had already pushed the sword far enough away that it could escape from under it, but Vandarion had chosen not to move. Running wasn't what a supreme ruler did, after all. He wanted to push the Blue Knight back and win a head-on fight.

"Tch, in that case..."

For Koutarou, on the other had, his pride was the last thing on his mind. Chaos would befall all of Forthorthe if Theia and the others didn't escape, so he was prepared to stall Vandarion in place even if he was called a coward for his

means.

“Hey, Blue Knight! If you see any openings at all, then attack that metal monster! I’ll leave the choice of weapon to you!”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Immediately after Koutarou’s order, Blue Knight fired six missiles. While they were slower than normal ones, they were capable of avoiding obstacles as they made their way to their target. They were sort of like small ships that would ram into an enemy and explode on impact.

“Ha, petty tricks! Do you really think toys like that will be enough to defeat me, the supreme ruler?!”

The six missiles went around the anti-ship energy sword and closed in on the Type Two. Despite the incoming missiles, however, Vandarion showed no sign of doing anything about them. They all struck the Type Two directly.

Boom! Ba-boom! Ba-ba-boom!

The six missiles exploded one after another. Yet once the flames and smoke dissipated, the Type Two still stood in place as if nothing had happened. Several cables had been blown off, but backup cables were already in place.

“How foolish! If that sword can’t defeat me, of course those missiles wouldn’t do anything! But homing weapons are certainly a good idea!”

The Type Two exposed its fangs, seemingly smiling. The next moment, the Type Two fired countless missiles from multiple launchers.

“Blue Knight! Emergency deployment of the distortion field!”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Koutarou immediately gave the order to defend, but each and every one of the fired missiles flew right past him and exited the space fortress through the hole Blue Knight had made when it entered. The missiles then grouped up with the unmanned weapons outside.

“Haha, you fool! You’re not my only enemy!”

As the Type Two fired its missiles, the Cradle had already departed the space

fortress and was moving away at full speed. Their current goal was to get to the Hazy Moon, which was hanging back a safe distance away from the fortress.

“Your Highness, several missiles and unmanned fighters are inbound! We’re in danger as things stand!”

Immediately after Koutarou radioed in his warning, Ruth detected the missiles and weapons approaching. There was some distance between them still, but it was only a matter of time before they caught up to the Cradle. Since the missiles and unmanned crafts were all automated or pilotless, they could accelerate at inhuman speeds. By Ruth’s calculations, they’d reach the Cradle within three minutes.

“Theiamillis-san, we’re counting on you!”

After glancing at the data that Ruth sent, Clan immediately called for Theia’s help. The enemy had them vastly outnumbered. It was far more than Clan could handle on her own and, even as the captain of the ship, she didn’t have the time to be stubborn about it.

“Ha! Of course they wouldn’t let us escape that easily!”

Theia understood the situation. She hurriedly jumped into the gunner’s seat and took over the weapon controls in Clan’s stead. She targeted the missiles first since they posed the most immediate danger.

“Take them down!”

Theia squeezed the trigger after taking rough aim. She was using the anti-air laser cannon, which, while rather weak, could be repeatedly fired. The idea was to use a sweeping barrage to shoot down the incoming missiles and fighters. As lasers moved at the speed of light, they were easy to use in such a way even at a distance. The fired lasers cut through space, intercepting the missiles flying at the front of the incoming formation.

“Seventeen missiles have been shot down, but there are more behind them!” Ruth reported.

“Curses, there’s no end to them!”

Theia’s shooting was splendid, and she shot down missile after missile. There

was no sound in the vacuum of space, but if there had been, they would have heard a series of booming explosions. Yet even with her marksmanship, Theia hadn't managed to take out all of the missiles. There were just too many of them, and past them was still the swarm of unmanned fighters. It wasn't a hopeful situation.

"Kiriha-san, can't we do something?" Harumi asked.

Harumi personally was growing increasingly anxious about not being able to do anything. Koutarou had stopped her from using magic, and now Signaltin had been shattered. Even if she'd had full access to her powers, however, the distance between the Cradle and the enemies would make her powers harder to use. In the vastness of space, magic wasn't very effective. All Harumi could do now was ask Kiriha about possible countermeasures.

The Type Two and Vandarion's power exceeding my expectations is quite a problem...

Kiriha herself was regretting how naive her predictions had been. She never dreamed the enemy would be so powerful that they would need to use Blue Knight just to stall him. It put them at a disadvantage in more ways than one. If Koutarou wasn't using Blue Knight to fight Vandarion, they would have used its accurate warp to escape already. But now they were stuck on the Cradle, braving what dangers may come to try and make it all the way back to the Hazy Moon. And though she was disappointed, Kiriha knew dwelling on it wouldn't solve anything now. She quickly pulled herself together.

"Clan-dono, can't you issue a remote order for the Hazy Moon to warp?"

Kiriha's idea was to bring the Hazy Moon to them. Like Blue Knight, the Hazy Moon was a royal class battleship. It had warp capabilities far more accurate than standard ships. Kiriha wanted to make use of that and arrange a pickup of sorts.

"It's possible, but then we wouldn't be able to escape."

Clan had her reservations about Kiriha's plan. It was easy enough to bring the Hazy Moon in with a warp, but it would cost them their easy way out. Once the warp drive was used, it would have to be charged and serviced before they could use it again. And if they were unable to escape with a warp, the situation

wouldn’t change all that much even with the Hazy Moon.

“That doesn’t matter, so please do it now!”

“I’m going to trust you on this one, Kii!”

In the end, however, Clan put her reservations aside and put her faith in Kiriha. Theia was still putting up a fight, but if they didn’t do something, things were only going to get worse. That’s why Clan believed Kiriha was in the right. It was better to do something—to try anything at all—than it was just to sit there and do nothing. Clan swiftly punched the necessary commands into her bracelet and gave her orders to the Hazy Moon.

Thanks to observation satellites, Theia and the others could be tracked from the space fortress. The sight of missiles and advanced weapons swarming after a single small spaceship was almost comical. Watching through one of the screens in the Type Two, even Vandarion was amused.

“Take a good look, Blue Knight! The empress and princesses are in danger because you’re taking your time!”

Vandarion no longer had any real interest in the fate of Elfaria and the princesses. With the Type Two that could now overwhelm Blue Knight despite their differences in size, Vandarion saw no value in things like hostages and negotiations. It certainly seemed like he didn’t need them. Ecstatic at the tremendous power he now held in his hands, Vandarion only considered the lives of Elfaria and the others tools to make Koutarou suffer. And as Vandarion’s power increased, so too did his hostility towards Koutarou.

“Hahaha, are you sure you don’t need to go save them?! You’re the guardian of the royal families, aren’t you?! The savior of this nation, right?! Both the royalty and the citizens are waiting for you to make an appearance!”

“Ugh... Please hold on, everyone!”

All Koutarou could do was pray, but he had to stay so focused on Vandarion that it was hard to do even that.

“Just you wait, Blue Knight! My dragon will devour all! Any moment now, you’ll get to experience the power Granado has given me for yourself!”

The Type Two put force into its arms and pushed the energy sword further back. Despite clearly having the upper hand now, all Vandarion was doing was pushing Koutarou back. He was determined to overwhelm him. He wanted him to taste the helplessness of utter, uncontested, humiliated defeat.

“I’m even using the boosters and I’m still being pushed back! Just how strong is that thing really?!”

As the Type Two pushed, Blue Knight was losing ground faster and faster. It was being shoved backward despite its legs bracing against the floor and its boosters resisting the force at max thrust. The power it was exerting to do that alone was extraordinary. The floor Blue Knight was standing on cracked and crumbled. The boosters had already blown out both the inner and outer walls of the fortress, revealing the stars outside. But even then, even with all that power, Blue Knight was still being pushed back. Blue Knight’s power was incredible, but the power the Type Two was draining from the fortress was truly unbelievable.

“I will rule everything! The universe will be my dominion! Do you think I’d challenge you with the same feeble power as two thousand years ago?! What a foolish thought!”

“I’ve changed too! I’m not the same as I was two thousand years ago!”

With things as they were, Koutarou made a bold decision. Several of Blue Knight’s weapons began pointing at the center of the space fortress. If Vandarion was getting his power from the fortress itself, Koutarou needed to destroy the reactor. He believed he stood a better chance of managing that than taking down Vandarion directly.

“How about this?!”

Pew, pew, pew!

Blue Knight unleashed a bombardment from the side of the ship. It excluded the main armament, but the firepower was still substantial. Blue Knight’s secondary weapons were comparable to a standard battleship’s main weapons. The attack was enough that Blue Knight tilted to the side from the recoil, even though it had mostly fired beams that had far less recoil than physical rounds.

“You fool! I anticipated you’d attack like that!”

Ping, ping, ping!

Blue Knight’s rain of beams never reached their target. They were all deflected by the Type Two’s barrier, which Koutarou discovered was protecting the space fortress’s generator as well.

“Even that’s no good, huh?!”

“I have the power to push back Blue Knight at full force, and you really thought a petty bombardment would do anything?!”

Wham!

“Whoa!”

Not missing the window of opportunity it had while Blue Knight was knocked off balance from attacking, the Type Two thrust forward and pushed the ship all the way back through the hole in the fortress and out into space. Of course, the Type Two’s attack didn’t end there.

Pew, pew, pew, pew, pew!

Drawing immense power from the fortress, the Type Two unleashed its own flurry of beams. They flew through the gaping hole in the fortress, straight for Blue Knight.

“Blue Knight, emergency—”

“Emergency deployment of the distortion field.”

Ping, ping! Crrrrrackle! Zzzt!

With so many powerful beams, even a royal class battleship like Blue Knight would be critically damaged if they all hit directly. Thankfully Blue Knight was able to get its barrier up in the nick of time, but it didn’t last long. The barrier quickly collapsed under the intense fire. Though worse for wear, the ship itself was able to survive the barrage.

“Wahahahaha, you’re just a shadow of your former glory! Looks like the legends are all myth and no substance! Pathetic!”

The Type Two exited the space fortress after the beams, but it was still

connected to the facility by countless cables. Once the Type Two fully emerged, the fortress moved behind it to follow after it. They were moving together and functioning as one unit. In all of Forthorthe's history, there had never been a weapon like this. It truly was the most terrifying thing anyone had ever seen.

What do I do?! How can I defeat a monster like that?!

Despite that, Koutarou still had to defeat the Type Two. He didn't even want to imagine what Vandarion would do with it if he was left to his own devices. And in order to keep him from getting his way, Koutarou would be as reckless as he had to be to win.

"Blue Knight, change from battle mode to final attack mode."

With those words, a change came over Koutarou. There was a stern look on his face and a strong resoluteness in his eyes. He looked like a man determined to use his last resort, no matter how much he'd wanted to avoid it.

"Authentication is required for activation of final attack mode."

"My name is Layous Fatra Veltlion!"

"Authentication complete. Identity of the Blue Knight himself confirmed. Order accepted. As you wish, my lord."

There were several warfare taboos in modern Forthorthe. One of them was the use of weapons that were overly destructive or inhumane, which covered things like the bioweapon Vandarion had once used. In order to use such a weapon, a person of adequate authority had to be the one to give the command. These weren't the kind of weapons that could be used lightly in battle. Someone had to take responsibility when they were deployed.

"Irradiate a wide area with the Genesis Buster."

"Due to the galactic treaty, a secondary confirmation is required for use of the Genesis Buster."

"I repeat: ready the Genesis Buster."

"Command accepted. Gunport opened. Genesis Buster is preparing to fire."

Thunk!

Following Koutarou's order, a gunport for a large-caliber weapon in Blue Knight's left arm opened. The heavy sound it made was so loud that it reverberated through the entire ship. Energy began gathering deep inside the barrel and light started leaking out. However, the Genesis Buster wouldn't attack with that energy. Instead, it would use something extremely dangerous created by that energy.

"Reduce Vandarion's prized dragon and that fortress to photons!"

"Attention. Notice to the entire army: The flagship, Blue Knight, will now irradiate a wide area with its Genesis Buster. Retreat from the battlefield at once."

The Genesis Buster wasn't a ray weapon, but the term "irradiate" was used because of the light it would produce. Rather than light, however, what the Genesis Buster really fired was antimatter. When that came into contact with normal matter, both would be annihilated in an unimaginable flash of heat and light. The ultimate weapon that created primordial light—that was the Genesis Buster. It brought dawn to the eternal night of space.

"To think I'd end up using this..."

The Genesis Buster was the fated weapon that Theia had tried to unleash when she first met Koutarou. He felt like it was a weird twist of fate that he'd end up being the one to pull the trigger on it.

"Oh... Antimatter, is it? It's the strongest known weapon in all of Forthorthe, which means if I can withstand it, there will no longer be anything capable of stopping me!"

Vandarion halted the Type Two and had it spread its arms out to either side. It was like he was inviting Koutarou to shoot.

Just watch, Granado! This dragon and space fortress you created will surpass the Blue Knight and the royal families!

Vandarion had absolute faith that he would accomplish his goal of ruling the universe. That fate had chosen him. That not even a legendary hero or the royal families could stop him. And, above all else, that the dragon and fortress that Granado left him would be the start of a new legend. Antimatter wouldn't be

enough to defeat him. Vandarion was just as sure of that as he was that the sun rose in the east.

“Shoot, Blue Knight! Then you’ll see that neither you nor Forthorthe can defeat me!”

“Your Excellency, the Genesis Buster is ready to fire.”

“Then fire!”

“Initiating Genesis Buster wide area irradiation. All personnel, prepare for shock and flash.”

Pwoooosh!

The initial firing itself was no different from any other beam, but just moments later, the torrent of antimatter emitted a dazzling light. The miniscule amount of matter that dotted the otherwise perfect vacuum of space was enough to cause a reaction with the antimatter, but that was merely a harbinger. Its true light wouldn’t be born until the antimatter collided with its target.



Clan's Hazy Moon had inferior firepower and generator output compared to Blue Knight. That was because some of its function as a battleship had been compromised by the various modifications Clan had made to it over time. But even so, it was only inferior to Blue Knight. The Hazy Moon still far outstripped any normal battleship. And through the use of remote control, Clan put that firepower to full use as soon as the Hazy Moon warped in.

"So what do we do now, Kii?!"

Clan hurriedly gave orders to the Hazy Moon as she asked Kiriha for further instructions. The arrival of the Hazy Moon and the cover fire it offered had certainly helped. With fewer missiles and automated weapons on their tail, the danger to the Cradle had greatly decreased already. But it clearly wasn't enough. There was still an uncomfortable number of enemy crafts closing in on them. Surely there was another step to this plan.

"You have other ships like the Cradle docked to the Hazy Moon, don't you? I want you to send all of those out."

"I see! So that was your plan..."

"Ruth, blind the enemy as the other ships are sent out. Maki and Yurika, I want you two to hide the Cradle while the enemies can't see."

What Kiriha had wanted wasn't strictly the Hazy Moon, but rather the spaceships docked to it. The Cradle was a smaller craft intended for exploration, and it was one of many such vessels housed by the Hazy Moon. They were what Kiriha intended to use to deceive the enemy.

If the Cradle were to disappear on its own, the enemy's automated weapons would comb the area for it. They'd find it right away. Kiriha would thwart that by releasing several ships and covertly hiding only the Cradle. That way the enemy crafts wouldn't realize the Cradle had disappeared, and they would waste their time chasing down the other ships. It was similar to the way they'd used decoys of themselves to escape the space fortress.

Originally the plan had been to safely escape by warping out of the area, but with things as they were, simply hiding from the enemy would be a victory in itself. Hiding in the vastness of space would afford them a certain degree of

safety. Kiriha was going to protect Elfaria and Ceilēshu without even having to use the warp.

“The missiles and automated weapons have begun chasing after the other ships. There are currently none following us. It looks like we managed to get away,” Ruth reported.

Fortunately, Kiriha’s plan proved effective. The enemy crafts and missiles followed the other ships, which led them away from the Cradle. Ruth was pleased at the report, but the other girls all felt a similar relief.

“Man... That was scary...” Yurika whimpered.

“This was a victory made possible by friendship!” Sanae cheered.

“It looks like we made it out in one piece. Ruth, let mother and Ceilēshu know,” Theia ordered.

“Thank god my weight didn’t have to increase any more...” Shizuka sighed.

However, their brief reprieve didn’t last long. Moments later, a siren began blaring in the Cradle’s bridge. Lights flashed on and off, alternating red and yellow.

Woo, woo, woo!

“What alarm is that?!”

“Attention. Notice to the entire army: The flagship, Blue Knight, will now irradiate a wide area with its Genesis Buster. Retreat from the battlefield at once.”

“The Genesis Buster?! Ruth, what is happening over on Blue Knight right now?!”

Theia, of course, was the first to react. Having initiated the sequence herself once before, she knew exactly what that message meant. Ruth was feeling the same tension and sense of urgency Theia was, and she reported the situation to her princess in a near scream.

“The Blue Knight and the Type Two are both alive and well! It seems that the Type Two is being supplied with energy from the space fortress, and neither the anti-ship energy sword nor bombardments are working on it!”

“What kind of technology would it have to be using to be that strong?!”

“No, it’s not technology at all!”

It was Sanae that answered Theia. She was the one with the best grasp of the situation right now because he could tell where the Type Two’s terrifying power was really coming from.

“What do you mean?!” Theia demanded.

“The power is coming from the guy in the dragon’s head! He’s getting more and more evil power from that whirl! The power from that big machine thing is just for show!”

Fighting Koutarou had only produced more anger and hatred in Vandarion’s heart. He was unhappy that the royal families had showered their support on Koutarou alone. Koutarou had even been given Signaltin while Vandarion had gotten nothing. And on top of all of that, his best friend who had supported him in everything he did, Granado, was now gone. It was unthinkable. It was unforgivable.

Vandarion was going to steal all that Koutarou loved, destroy it, and then dominate Forthorthe, or else he would never feel satisfied. It was that overly intense desire and malice that fed the gates of hell inside the Type Two. But the gates of hell didn’t stop at turning emotions into energy. They broke through the walls between dimensions to summon the power of chaos from an even higher plane of existence. That was the truth behind the Type Two’s abnormal strength.

However, Vandarion was just a normal human and there was a limit to his comprehension of these matters. It was only reasonable that he assumed the power at his fingertips was coming from the space fortress rather than magic or a higher plane. Even if he had an inkling of the supernatural power at play, he attributed it to Granado. It was the creations he’d left behind that were overpowering the Blue Knight, after all. And so, inadvertently, Vandarion made it look like the power of chaos was being supplied by the cables from the fortress. The only one who knew better was Sanae, who could see the flow of chaos directly.

“Impossible! You’re saying the Type Two is just a puppet to Vandarion?!”

“Your Highness, Blue Knight is firing the Genesis Buster now! I’m bringing it up on screen!”

The moment that Theia realized what Sanae was trying to say, there was a flash of brilliant, pure white light. It was a primordial light born to correct the twisted, discolored impurities of the universe. The Type Two, the space fortress, and everything around them were caught up in the light that shone like the sun.

The energy born from the collision and subsequent annihilation of antimatter and regular matter far exceeded any nuclear reaction that could be created by the same amount of fuel. It released a mind-boggling amount of energy in a flash of light. Nothing could survive such an overwhelmingly destructive blast of force. Even Forthorthe’s strongest royal class battleships would be finished by a mere glancing blow. The same should have been true for the Type Two and the space fortress.

“Ha... Hahaha! Hahahahaha! Granado! Hey, Granado! Are you watching?! Can you see the Type Two?! It even repelled antimatter! This is true power! With this, the universe will be mine!”

Defying all logic, Vandarion and the Elder Dragon Type Two ALUNAYA withstood the Genesis Buster. It was a feat that exceeded anything that could be expected of even the most advanced Forthorthian technology, and the sight of it made Vandarion’s threats of dominating the universe seem all the more real. There was no longer anything that could stop him.

“Vandarion... What are you...”

Koutarou was so shocked that he could barely form a proper sentence, but his surprise was less about the Type Two or the Genesis Buster and more about Vandarion himself.

“Almost all of the Type Two’s head was blown away... yet you’re still there...”

The Type Two and the space fortress hadn’t gone unharmed by the attack. The Type Two had damage all over its body, and the space fortress was partially destroyed. There were explosions happening all over the place. Even with how strong they were, there was no blocking an antimatter cannon. But that just highlighted the uncanny strangeness of the situation. From what Koutarou

could see, the Type Two's head had taken the brunt of the damage.

The Type Two had two controllers. There was the subcontroller stretching from the back of the neck to the spine, and the main controller in the head. The subcontroller had been destroyed by Nana before the battle even really began, which meant that Vandarion could only have been in the main controller. The Type Two's head, however, had been obliterated by the antimatter cannon. All that remained of it was the scorched lower jaw and stump of a neck. Everything above that was gone. Yet even so, Koutarou was still hearing Vandarion's voice over his comms system. Focusing on his eyes, Koutarou could see a concentration of will where the Type Two's head should have been. Overturning all reason, even though his body was no more, Vandarion remained in place and he was still intent on killing Koutarou and ruling the universe.

"Hahahaha! Now it's proven that nobody can stop me anymore! I am the supreme being of Forthorthe!"

Vandarion himself hadn't realized what had happened. With what could be heard of his shouting through his destroyed comms system, it was obvious the power of chaos was twisting his view of the world, allowing Vandarion to see only the reality he wanted to. It was a world where he got everything he wanted. Even as a spirit, Vandarion was the avatar of avarice.

"Even if that's the case, I can't let you roam free in the world of man."

Koutarou had begun to understand what was happening with Vandarion. That absurd power behind him was a lot like what had happened with Tayuma and Purple, but Vandarion twisting the rules of reality was clearly something different. With Tayuma and Purple, the changes had been inherent to themselves. Vandarion, however, was bending the very logic of the universe. If he escaped in this unnatural form, his rampage would know no bounds. It would be setting a literally unstoppable monster loose on Forthorthe.

"Vandarion, it's my responsibility to defeat you, and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

Clank!

Koutarou readied Blue Knight's sword. There was a certain intimidation factor

to a hulking humanoid battleship lifting an energy sword several hundred meters long, but the Type Two was an even more fearsome sight.

“The hell you are! I’ve waited a long time to kill you! A thousand, two thousand... No, even longer! I’ve waited so, so long for this moment, burning out my very soul for the power and the chance to destroy you! I’ll be the one who wins! I’m going to kill you! And this time, I will take everything for myself!”

Vandarion had already lost his human form, and his trusted dragon was falling apart. But his intense will—his burning desire to kill Koutarou and ruin the royal families—kept his existence in this world. It was an awe-inspiring, forbidding sight. It was almost as if he really was the supreme ruler.

“Playtime is over! It’s time to disappear, Blue Knight! There’s no room for you in the world I rule!”

Obeying Vandarion’s will, the Type Two and the space fortress advanced towards Blue Knight. At first glance, they didn’t appear to be moving very quickly, but it was merely a trick of the eye due to their massive sizes. In reality, they were moving faster than any battleship could. As Koutarou was advancing in Blue Knight as well, the distance between them closed quickly.

“Vandariooon!”

“Dieeee!”

Both sides attacked at practically the same time. Koutarou was repeatedly firing beams out of the anti-ship energy sword in shooting mode to try and inhibit Vandarion. Vandarion countered with his own beams, but then something strange happened. With no warning, beams fired from the Type Two’s head, or where it should have been. The actually head had been destroyed by the Genesis Buster, but it was like it was still there and functional.

“That’s useless! Absolutely useless! Even a mosquito bite hurts more!”

As Vandarion continued charging forward without a care, the beams Koutarou fired scored hit after hit on the Type Two and the fortress, causing major damage. But it had no effect on Vandarion whatsoever. For each hole opened by the beams, a dim, grey energy flooded the openings and recreated the destroyed parts. The recreated parts looked less mechanical and more organic

than the original, but they functioned the same nevertheless. To Koutarou, it felt like the Type Two was only getting stronger.

Reality around him is bending to his will! That's a frightening amount of control!

Blue Knight, however, had no such power. Koutarou had to dodge or block what Vandarion threw at him, and he dexterously moved the machine to avoid Vandarion's beams. He didn't have Theia or Ruth to support him, but the safety had been released, and he could tell where the beams would go with his spirit sight. He could dodge a normal barrage.

"Quit moving around!"

"Take this!"

Once he made it through the rain of beams, Koutarou pushed forward. Blue Knight approached the Type Two, sword swinging.

"Bring it, Blue Knight!"

The Type Two prepared to intercept Blue Knight with its ghostly claws and fangs. Their lethal strikes clashed in the middle of space.

Clank!

The momentum of the blows largely cancelled each other out, but Blue Knight was sent backward by the impact. It was simply lacking the mass the combined Type Two and space fortress had. Charging into them was like a compact car crashing into an eighteen-wheeler.

"Urgh!"

"I'll crush you like this! Just like you tried to do!"

Blue Knight and the Type Two were face to face again. Based on the small movements of what remained of its lower jaw, Koutarou imagined that the Type Two was grinning. But he had no time to contemplate the dragon's expression. At the rate things were going, he was going to be smashed into an asteroid or satellite. Vandarion could easily use their difference in mass to throw Blue Knight around.

"Oh, I'm not going to let you get away, Blue Knight! I'll smash you to pieces

for all of Forthorthe to see! You'll die right along with your stupid legend!"

"N-No..."

Something that looked like grey arms stretched out from the space fortress and firmly grabbed hold of Blue Knight's wrists, keeping Koutarou from going anywhere. Vandarion, however, continued pushing forwards, activating the space fortress's thrusters in a beeline for a nearby asteroid.

"Come on, what's the matter? Aren't you going to run?"

"Not good! I'll be crushed at this rate!"

The asteroid in question was an imported lump of ice that was used to produce water. The facilities on it, however, had been hijacked by Vandarion and were being used to broadcast footage of the battle throughout Forthorthe. Smashing Blue Knight into that would give the people a particularly shocking shot of their hero being destroyed. It would be everything Vandarion could hope for out of Koutarou's death, and with that thought, he picked up more and more speed.

"Look, Granado! Watch as I put an end to the Blue Knight! Our wish will finally be granted!"

"Blue Knight, full thrust!"

"You fool! There's no way that this space fortress would lose in a battle of strength against a mere battleship! You will die here! So just accept your fate and become the first step of my road to supreme rule!"

"Come on!"

Koutarou fired all his weapons, maxed out his boosters, and tried everything else he could think of to escape this predicament, but nothing yielded results. At the rate things were going, Blue Knight would be helplessly dashed against the icy asteroid. Since they were comparable in size, both asteroid and Blue Knight would likely be smashed into pieces.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting, Koutarou-kun!"

Pew, pew, pew, pew, pew!

As a familiar voice came over Blue Knight's comms, several energy shells came

raining down from above. They pierced through the grey arms stretching out from the space fortress, freeing Blue Knight and allowing Koutarou to get out of the way of the asteroid.

“If you’re going to attack, how about you actually aim for the enemy?”

“Say what you will, but I was in bit of a hurry.”

The energy shells had been fired from a spaceship that was smaller than a standard destroyer. It was a highly mobile combat vessel equipped with a large generator and versatile armaments.

“Then don’t hold back. You’re a good shot, aren’t you?”

“Sure. But you should know my tardiness is partially your fault too, Koutarou-kun. Because you bought up DKI, this was just left neglected.”

“Well, anyways... Thanks, Elexis.”

“How bizarre... You know, hearing you say that doesn’t sound so bad.”

The one operating the combat vessel overhead was Elexis. He’d fixed up the ship, which had been left in one of DKI’s warehouses, and chased after Koutarou and the others in it. He figured that, depending on how things went, they might need the extra firepower.

“Curse you, DKI whelp! Peskily showing up just when I was about to settle things once and for all!”

Vandarion seethed when he realized the extent of Elexis’s interference. He was of course surprised at his arrival, but he was even more surprised that Elexis’s attack had been effective against the Type Two and the space fortress. It irritated him to no end, stoking his sense of rivalry.

“Your turn’s already come and gone, DKI brat!”

“I’m just a young master now. Koutarou-kun bought up DKI, after all. That being said, this machine is without a doubt a piece of DKI craftsmanship. That attack was surprisingly effective, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, what kind of magic did you use?”

Koutarou was just as interested as Vandarion was in the attack that had done

real damage to the Type Two where the Genesis Buster had failed.

“Go on, Maya,” Elexis urged her. “You explain it.”

“Fine... It’s simple. No matter how powerful they may be, the gates of hell are maintained with magic. You only need something to negate that.”

Elexis had fired special energy shells to get Vandarion to back off of Koutarou. From there they grouped up. They were going to work together and fight.

“I’m amazed you had something so convenient,” Koutarou commented.

“We developed them so that we could safely use the gates of hell. We learned after our experience with Purple,” Maya explained.

Their original plan to use the gates of hell to defeat Koutarou wasn’t a bad idea. But having realized the danger of it all after Purple ran amok, they created a weapon that nullified magic. Using that weapon to save Koutarou was nothing short of ironic, although the primary reason Elexis and Maya had brought it with them was so that they could nullify Green’s Future Forecast. While it hadn’t ended up being necessary to save Green after all, it was certainly proving its worth now.

“Wouldn’t you have won if you’d used this during our last fight?” Koutarou asked.

“Just winning there like that would have no meaning whatsoever. We can’t become like Vandarion has, can we?” Elexis countered.

“No, absolutely not.”

And so Koutarou and Elexis stood side by side again. They weren’t after the same future, but they both needed Forthorthe to remain intact to pursue their dreams. If it meant facing an enemy who threatened that, they were both willing to put their individual goals aside and work together for a greater good. For common ground. They could always settle their differences once the world had been saved.

“Crawling up like insects, one after another! How pestering!”

“Unlike you, we’re weak, so we need to team up to survive.”

As Koutarou said that, he recalled Sanae once saying that it was the privilege

of heroes of justice to team up together. Koutarou and Elexis weren't exactly heroes of justice, but as they were now, working together to fight evil, Sanae's assessment was close enough. Koutarou found it so amusing that he unintentionally laughed.

"What's so funny?!" Vandarion fumed.

"It's just as you say. We insects have to come out in droves."

"Oh? Koutarou-kun, do you have an idea?"

Elexis changed channels and radioed in to only Koutarou so that Vandarion couldn't hear. Even with anti-magic energy shells, they wouldn't stand a chance without a plan. In terms of raw power, Vandarion still had an overwhelming advantage.

"Even an insect can take out a giant with a poison sting, I suppose."

"I'm planning on doing it like the Blue Knight."

"Like the Blue Knight, you say?"

"Yeah. A method you're very familiar with."

Koutarou didn't give a clear answer to Elexis's question. He knew there was still a chance Vandarion was eavesdropping on them even on a private, encrypted channel.

"Hmm, I see..."

Elexis has known Koutarou for a long time, and he had a good grasp of his personality. He could imagine what Koutarou meant by handling this like the Blue Knight.

"But... are you really okay with that?" Elexis asked.

"There's no other way. I don't have the luxury to choose my means."

"My, that really is unfair, Koutarou-kun."

"What now, all of a sudden?"

"It's because you keep doing that that the royal families and citizens keep giving their all. Two thousand years or more..."

“Yeah, well, I’m counting on you for the rest, Elexis. It’s a strange turn of events, but you’re all I have.”

“I can’t really promise anything. There’s no guarantee that I’ll make it out safely myself.”

“Then I guess we’ll both just have to trust in our comrades.”

“Indeed. Let’s leave the rest to them while we do something about this.”

“Yeah!”

Clank!

Koutarou had Blue Knight ready the energy sword once again. Just like before, he repeatedly fired beams while charging forward. Vandarion reacted the same way too. The Type Two and the space fortress charged forward again to meet Koutarou and Elexis.

“It seems like you were plotting something, but I’ll just crush you together now!”

But unlike last time, Elexis’s combat vessel was behind Koutarou. With his assistance, things would unfold differently.

Elexis’s combat vessel charged after Koutarou. Inside the bridge, which was almost the size of a cockpit, were Elexis and Maya. The vessel had been designed so that it could be comfortably operated with a crew of two.

“We’re supporting Koutarou-kun’s charge!”

“Are you sure you don’t need to be stopping him?”

“I’d love to, but he’s the Blue Knight!”

“All right, all right.”

Elexis’s combat vessel was named Gelaurudis after a famous female Forthorthian pirate. He thought it was appropriate.

“Maya, go all out!”

“Are you really okay with me doing that?”

“It’s the only way if we want to survive.”

“Good answer. Then let’s go, El!”

Maya’s body was largely a machine, so by modifying a few connections, it was possible for her to freely operate the ship. She was currently sitting in the pilot’s seat, but she wasn’t touching the controls. Since she was directly hooked to the ship, there was no need for that. In other words, the ship flew however she wanted. And since Maya had plenty of combat experience, its movements were very logical and sharp. Indeed, Elexis thought the ship was quite aptly named.

“Now go forth like the Blue Knight, Koutarou-kun!”

“Leave it to me! You just do what you need to as the young master!”



“Ha! Allow me to live up to your expectations!”

Elexis’s primary role was attacking, but he was also in charge of the use of various equipment and the comms. In short, he was in charge of everything that Maya couldn’t do as she steered the ship. Elexis had a tendency to take his time while aiming, but in return, his shooting was quite accurate. With Maya’s expert steering and Elexis’s precise marksmanship, despite being a comparatively small vessel, Gelaurudis’s combat capabilities surpassed that of a standard destroyer.

“El, it can’t be seen yet, but there’s a flow of mana coming from two o’clock! Something is coming from over there, so blow it away!”

“Understood!”

Pew, pew, pew, pew, pew!

The most outstanding trait of the ship, however, was its ability to deal with enemies protected by magic. The ability to convert between physical energy, spiritual energy, and mana was a specialty of DKI and Darkness Rainbow, and Gelaurudis put that to use. The main armament of the vessel converted the vast energy born from the generator into mana, and then reversed the magic polarity of that mana to create and fire anti-magic shells. Against regular targets, it didn’t do anything a normal energy shell wouldn’t, but against targets protected by magic, it had the powerful effect of cutting through that magic. It worked similarly to Signaltin, but it was controlled more scientifically.

“Curse you and your pesky tricks, you little brat!”

“Vandarion, you stole that power of yours from us. Of course we know its weakness!”

The anti-magic shells fired by Elexis broke the mana that Vandarion was concentrating on into pieces and stopped it dead in its tracks. Vandarion had been trying to create a massive whip of mana to sweep away Koutarou, Elexis, and Maya at the same time. But with his plan nipped in the bud, he grew even more resentful of Elexis. Elexis had leisurely waltzed onto the stage Vandarion had carefully created to destroy the Blue Knight and the royal families. His meddling was unforgivable. Vandarion’s aim shifted from Blue Knight to Elexis and Maya’s combat vessel. Part of the reason was to put an end to their

annoying ability to nullify his magic, but most of it was because Vandarion didn't like Elexis.

"Die! Die, die, dieee!"

The space fortress fired a hail of missiles. It was debatable if they were actually missiles or not, but since Vandarion thought of them as such, they traced an elegant arc in the air like Vandarion was used to seeing and assaulted the combat vessel.

"Elexis!"

"Don't worry about us, Koutarou-kun! Just keep on charging!"

"He's right, boy! Believe in us a little, will you?!"

Maya skillfully avoided the flurry of incoming missiles. Rather than having eyes in the back of her head, it was more like she had eyes in all directions. Subtly accelerating, decelerating, and rotating, Maya dodged the missiles by a hair's breadth.

"El, work harder!"

"I am! And you know I am!"

"That's not enough to be my man!"

Of course, Elexis's cooperation was a necessity. There were missiles that Maya couldn't avoid even with her expert steering, and the combat vessel was still in one piece because Elexis was able to shoot those down.

"You're a terrible woman, you know... Although I suppose that's one of your good points, really..."

"Did you say something?!"

"I said I love you."

"You filthy liar!"

Not only were Elexis and Maya safe, but they had likely distracted Vandarion long enough that Koutarou would be fine as well. Blue Knight continued forward in a charge. Vandarion tried to attack here and there, but it was only to try and restrain his movements. After surviving the Genesis Buster, Vandarion

didn’t really consider Blue Knight that much of a threat. Moreover, since Vandarion considered Koutarou a bitter rival, he wanted to save the main dish for last. He’d have to take care of Elexis and Maya before then.

“Argh, moving around like a pesky little dragonfly!”

Growing increasingly irritated at being unable to shoot down Elexis and Maya, Vandarion decided to go for a more drastic attack. Instead of using multiple, extremely mobile missiles like he had been, he opted for a slower-moving one.

“Maya, that’s a colony buster!”

“What’s that?!”

“It’s what it sounds like—a massive missile used to destroy space colonies or strategic sites in a single hit! It’s sluggish, but it’s equipped with a powerful warhead that’s enough to blow us to pieces even if it doesn’t hit us directly!”

“Now of all times?! Do something about it, El!”

Vandarion’s plan was simple. If the fast missiles couldn’t catch them, he’d finish them off with a missile that had a massive blast radius. Even if their Gelaurudis was swift, its small frame made it especially vulnerable to large explosions. If they even got close to one, they would be done for.

“I’d be happy to, but you’ll have to hold your horses!”

Since they’d be through if the missile got close, Elexis would need to snipe it from afar, which wouldn’t be an easy feat with a swarm of missiles chasing them down. While the size of the large missile made it an easier target than most, it still wasn’t something that could be done right away just because someone said so.

“All right!”

A few seconds after the missile launched and Elexis took aim, there was a bright flash. The missile in question had been hit. While the explosion was considerably larger because it was in a vacuum, there was no sound for the same reason. The flash of light was the only proof the missile had been destroyed.

“Jeez, that’s bad for my heart.”

“I’ll gladly make you as many hearts as you need.”

Fortunately, the explosion was far enough away that the Gelaurudis was unharmed, but it could have been a dangerous situation if they’d taken just a few seconds longer. Knowing that, both of them were extremely relieved.

“Jeez, you idiot! Now’s not the time to be saying things like that!”

Though she had relaxed for a moment, Maya quickly pulled herself together. The radar she was connected to detected more large missiles.

“Three more of the same were launched! They’re all headed this way!”

“I shouldn’t have said as many as you need!”

“You really are an idiot!”

A single missile was enough to send shivers down their spines, and now there were three. The situation was bad in triplicate. They now had to process three times the targets moving to surround them before they got too close.

“Elexis, leave one to me!”

Fortunately, Koutarou relieved some of that burden. One of the missiles would pass near Blue Knight, so he volunteered to intercept it for them. Blue Knight had much more serious hull integrity and better barrier output than Elexis’s small combat vessel. It wouldn’t be a problem unless it went off right next to it.

“I’d be happy to, Koutarou-kun! That leaves only two!”

“Hurry up and shoot them down, El!”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to do!”

Despite the bewildering movements Maya was making as she dodged incoming fire, Elexis started shooting down the other missiles as they approached. The highest priority was of course the larger ones, but they were still done for if one of the smaller missiles made a direct hit. Suppressing his emotions and remaining calm, Elexis slowly but surely disposed of the missiles one by one.

“There’s the first!”

The umpteenth destroyed missiles unleashed a flash of light much brighter than the rest. It was one of the large missiles. Koutarou destroyed the large missile near him at almost the same time, leaving only one left.

“The last one is—”

“El!”

Bang!

An intense impact shook Elexis and Maya. Gelaurudis had been hit.

“What happened?!”

“It was a laser! He shot us using the flash as cover!”

The moment the bright flash from the colony buster lit up the area, the large laser cannon installed on the Type Two’s body sniped combat vessel. From the angle it was fired, the laser moved in a straight line and scored a direct hit. Elexis and Maya shifting some of their attention away from the Type Two and the space fortress had come back to bite them. But not even the most competent soldier was perfect. Vandarion simply had more battle experience, and he’d taken an opportunistic move.

“How’s the damage look?!”

“The second and fourth anti-magic cannons are offline! The third is critical! Eighteen percent of the posture control thrusters are malfunctioning, and mobility has decreased by 8 percent!”

The damage to the combat vessel was severe. Almost half of the cannons capable of firing the anti-magic shells had been rendered unusable. Moreover, the thrusters for posture control had also been damaged, drastically reducing the ship’s mobility. It was clear that either was a fatal problem in a situation like this.

“Muahahahaha! What’s the matter, brat?! Done already?!”

Vandarion boasted triumphantly. He could tell what kind of damage Elexis’s ship had taken, and the end of him would mean the end of Koutarou. The end of Forthorthe. With one shot, he’d put the country in checkmate.

“Elexis!”

“We’re okay, Koutarou-kun! Let’s charge in!”

Elexis swiftly decided on a plan and accelerated the combat vessel. Having a large generator and thrusters for its size, the combat vessel shot forward. It was still being targeted with missiles and lasers, but it went so fast that it seemed to be ignoring most of them. Koutarou hurriedly set his boosters to max thrust and chased after Elexis and Maya.

“What are you going to do?!” Koutarou called in over the comms.

“Now that it’s come to this, we can’t bother with appearances! We don’t have much time!” Elexis responded.

With only half of his attack power and his mobility dropping, Elexis knew that they’d be at a bigger disadvantage the longer they waited. That meant they had to end things quickly—before Vandarion could act—no matter how big of a risk it meant taking. Elexis believed that this would be their last chance.

“How unlike you, Elexis...”

“I’ve gradually been swayed by your way of doing things, Koutarou-kun.”

The combat vessel continued to speed forward in what was practically a straight line. That made it easier for the laser to take aim at them, but Elexis didn’t seem to mind. No matter how many lasers grazed the ship, it only continued to accelerate.

Of course, the missiles also had an easy time chasing a target moving in a straight line. Following after the combat vessel, the missiles began forming a swarm. Elexis continuously bombarded them, but he wasn’t seeing much return on his efforts. The smaller missiles were serving as shields for the larger ones and lasers, preventing Elexis from hitting his real targets.

“Well then, Elexis, would you like to join my band of knights?”

“That sounds good. Could you look after those girls too?”

“That’ll depend on how hard you work.”

“Perfect! I was just about to show that off!”

Elexis accelerated even more, charging straight at the Type Two and the space fortress like he intended to ram them. Not even Blue Knight could keep up with

that kind of acceleration. Only the missiles stalking them trailed behind Gelaurudis. Their remaining anti-magic cannons all turned towards the bow and opened fire.

“What, you want to die an honorable death now that you’ve been cornered?! Even though you have a weapon that might harm this machine, do you really think that it can be destroyed by a desperate act like that?!”

Vandarion bombarded Elexis’s vessel with lasers. As it closed in, several of the shots hit and the vessel took major damage. But even so, it didn’t relent in its fearless charge. Even Koutarou began suspecting that Elexis was going to sacrifice himself to ram the Type Two.

“The bet ends here. We win, Vandarion.”

“What?!”

“I’m dropping the crystal, El! Hang on tight!”

The lower hatch of Gelaurudis opened, and something large poked through. It was a massive crystal emitting white light, which promptly exited the hatch. As it did, the Gelaurudis took a sharp turn and just barely missed colliding with the Type Two and the space fortress. Elexis’s real goal had been to slam the glowing white large crystal into them.

“You think you could defeat me with something like this?!”

Vandarion’s intuition told him that the crystal wasn’t a threat. He couldn’t detect any high energy readings or explosives from it. Since he didn’t understand magic, he had no way of knowing that the crystal was the source of their anti-magic shells.

“Go! Create a path for Koutarou-kun! Carve open the future for Maya, Darkness Rainbow, and all Folsaria!”

Since he’d already lost to Koutarou, Elexis considered his most pressing concern to be the promise he made to Maya and the others, and that was to arrange for the return of Folsaria on equal footing with Forthorthe. Elexis hadn’t worked together with Koutarou just to save Green. It was a necessary step in the future of Folsaria.

Kabooooom!

There was an intense shockwave that shook space itself. As magic and anti-magic collided, it sent out a surge of mana that flooded the surrounding area. It crashed into Gelaurudis's magic barrier in a roaring explosion, but the main explosion happened after that.

The second explosion, a nonmagical one, made no sound at all. In terms of scale, however, it was on a completely different level from the first. It was the swarm of missiles that had been chasing after the combat vessel all exploding at once. The annihilation of magic and anti-magic had left a big hole in the ship's barrier, and the missiles poured in through that hole.

Gelaurudis took massive damage from the explosions. While it had escaped collision with the Type Two and the space fortress, it hadn't been able to withstand two explosions one after another. Having already taken serious damage, the alarm in the bridge screamed as red and yellow warning lights flashed. Finding them annoying, Elexis cut them off.

"That's better," he muttered.

"Jeez, it's finally quiet," Maya sighed.

Once the alarm was cut off, silence filled the bridge. Most of the ship's instruments had already stopped functioning, and the damaged systems had cut off. There was nothing left to make noise in the ship, and since they were in the vacuum of space, there was no sound coming from the outside either. The only thing still working was the monitor displaying what was happening outside. The screen showed twinkling stars on a pure black background.

"Hey, El."

"What?"

Maya and Elexis sat side by side on the double-seater, staring at the monitor together as they began talking. The steering system had been compromised, so the ship couldn't change direction. The comms system wasn't working either. And without a way to steer or call for help, they were left helplessly drifting through space. Talking to each other was all they could do.

“Do you think the boy will win?”

“Of course. He’s the Blue Knight, you know.”

“Is that your pride as a Forthorthian talking?”

“He’ll definitely win. It’s Koutarou-kun, after all.”

“Yeah... Then I guess there’s no need to worry. Those girls will survive, and Folsaria will too...”

“Don’t worry. Like I said, it’s Koutarou-kun we’re talking about.”

“That’s true. Heh...”

Maya leaned on Elexis’s shoulder and lightly laughed. Elexis’s eyes opened wide in surprise for a moment, but in the end, he simply smiled and said nothing about it.

“Hey, Maya, do you remember when I asked if you wanted to voyage to the sea of stars if we lost?”

“I remember refusing that.”

“How harsh. But I’ll ask once more... Why don’t you go on a voyage with me?”

“Hahh... You could just be honest and say that there’s no way of getting back.”

They had done all they could. They were both convinced of that, so neither of them had any regrets. And here, alone together and sharing that feeling, the mood between them was quite different from usual. Whether or not either of them really noticed it would forever be a mystery, but it was clear that they were both enjoying themselves.

“I can’t help it. I’m a romantic after all.”

“I know that. It’s one of your good points.”

“You’re being awfully nice today. What brought that on?”

“It’s because the stars are beautiful.”

“It’s the perfect weather for a voyage, isn’t it?”

“Heh, let’s leave it at that...”

The small ship carrying the two of them quietly ventured into the vastness of space. Having lived their lives under constant pressure to fight and defend themselves, neither one of them had ever had such a quiet moment. This was the first either one of them had attained true peace of mind. Nobody knew how long their voyage would last, but both of them knew better than anyone that no matter how long it might be, not a second of it would be wasted.

Dawn's Rainbow

Friday, December 31st

Elexis and Maya's desperate attack opened a large hole in the Type Two's barrier. And because they pulled away at the last second, the swarms of missiles that were following them went right through the hole they opened up and slammed into the Type Two, causing extensive damage to both it and the space fortress. The Type Two no longer looked anything like it had originally, and there was now a gaping hole in the fortress exposing its core. And that—the core of the space fortress—was Koutarou's target.

"Hrrraaaaah!"

Koutarou had Blue Knight ready the anti-ship energy sword ready and charge towards the fortress. He was concerned about what had happened to Elexis and Maya, but they'd done what they had to give him this chance. As Vandarion had already lost his physical form, Koutarou didn't think the Type Two collapsing would be enough to stop it. If he didn't finish things before Vandarion could recover, he'd waste the opportunity that Elexis and Maya had risked everything to give him. Attacking was his only option.

"C-Curse youuu! Th-This is nothing!"

"Vandarioooooon!"

There was no resistance from the half-destroyed fortress. Vandarion still hadn't recovered from the shock of Elexis and Maya's attack. Because of that, Koutarou easily made his way into the fortress and continued charging forwards. His targets were the generator and the warp drive in the very center of the fortress.

As long as I can destroy those!

Koutarou's goal was to attack the warp drive, releasing the energy it was storing for a warp. While that was out of control, he might be able to banish

Vandarion somewhere by letting Blue Knight's stored energy run wild as well. It was a total gamble, but Koutarou thought banishing Vandarion would be better than nothing if he couldn't defeat him outright. Even if that didn't work, he could at least keep Vandarion from going anywhere by destroying the generator. Of course, the explosion would take Blue Knight with it. In other words...

"What?! Are you insane, Blue Knight?!"

"Maybe, but you'll be coming with me! You can be the ruler of an uninhabited world known to none!"

Koutarou was going to keep Vandarion away from Forthorthe with his own life. It was as if the fight from two thousand years ago was repeating itself.

"You're going to banish me and Granado again?! No way, Blue Knight!"

Realizing the similarity himself only angered Vandarion more. Unable to accept it, Vandarion's molten hatred pumped through his veins like magma. The gates of hell turned that hostility into raw power, which Vandarion in turn used to attacked Blue Knight and Koutarou.

"Unforgivable! Absolutely unforgivable! I won't allow it!"

Fwooosh!

It happened without warning. The Type Two appeared to open its gaping maw and spew out a whirl of flame, despite most of the Type Two—including its entire upper body—having being blown away by Elexis's attack. Moreover, the flames themselves were abnormal. They were without a doubt flames, but they were dark and stagnant rather than bright and flickering, making it difficult to tell what color they actually were. It was a fire fueled by pure hatred and chaos.

"What is that?!"

The flames in question assaulted Blue Knight just as it was about to pierce the core of the space fortress. The moment they touched Blue Knight, everything they came into contact with simply disappeared.

"Alert: 13 percent of the lower part of the ship is missing."

“In an instant?! What kind of attack is that?!”

“Details are unknown. Main thrusters are unusable and 28 percent of posture control thrusters are—”

“You don’t need to report! Just hurry up and get us moving again! Close off all partitions and abandon everything unnecessary!”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Rather than saying it had disappeared, it was more accurate to say its existence had been negated. Parts of the blue ship were swallowed whole by the dark flames, making them indistinct and unrecognizable. What they consumed was no longer real, so to Vandarion and Koutarou, it simply looked like the flames annihilated anything they touched.

“You’re too late now, Blue Knight!”

“Vandarion!”

“You will die here! That is your lot! Struggle all you want, but this will be your grave!”

Clash!

Thriving on his overflowing hatred, envy, and lust for vengeance, Vandarion continued to bend reality around him as he closed in on Koutarou. The Type Two reshaped itself according to Vandarion’s will, and the missing parts reappeared even bigger than before. It reached out one of its large hands and grabbed Blue Knight’s neck. Where the Type Two’s fingers closed around Blue Knight, more of it began disappearing. Just like the flames, the Type Two was now wielding the power to negate existences.

“Aaaaahhh!”

And it didn’t just affect the ship. Koutarou’s existence was the object of Vandarion’s contempt. He was the real target, and as Vandarion’s power came for him, Koutarou’s existence began to disappear, little by little, from the edge of his body.

“Urgh...! Aaah!”

“It won’t be a quick death, Blue Knight! I’ll make sure you suffer! You’ll end

your miserable life in despair once you've lost all hope! You'll pay! For Granado, you'll pay!"

The pain Koutarou was experiencing was unlike anything he'd ever felt. It was as if his nerves were being directly burned and stabbed simultaneously. That kind of unreal pain was exactly what Vandarion wished for him.

"Your Excellency!"

"Are you okay, Layous-sama?!"

"Everyone, protect His Excellency!"

But suddenly, the pain assailing Koutarou eased up. When he came to, Koutarou could see white lights surrounding him. They were somewhat dim, but it was almost as if their light repelled the darkness trying to consume him. Thanks to them, Koutarou's existence stabilized, keeping him out of danger of being negated.

"Bah! What are those blasted lights?!"

The white lights, although far from bright, seemed to dazzle Vandarion. In his distraction, the Type Two released Blue Knight.

"Accursed little things! How long are you planning on clinging on to an old relic like the Blue Knight?!"

"Whoa!"

"You guys!"

However, against the power of the gates of hell, the white lights could only buy a little time at best. With a single swing of the Type Two's arm, the white lights were extinguished like flames in a strong wind.

"Vandarion...!"

"Ha! Wahahaha! Losing something important to you is terrible, isn't it?! Doesn't it just make your blood boil?! Well, how do you like it, Blue Knight?! This is what Granado and I have been dying for so, so long to give you a taste of!"

With overwhelming power on his side, Vandarion was convinced of his victory

and boasted triumphantly. Koutarou was starting to see the grim situation for what it was. Blue Knight had now lost most of its lower body and left side, leaving it floating in space. It couldn't move properly anymore, meaning even his plan to sacrifice himself and destroy the generator was a bust. Koutarou too had lost most of his stamina from Vandarion's last attack. He was only barely even able to stand. This would be end of the road for him. He would lose, and it would cost him his life. That was clear to everyone.

The girls watching on from the Cradle could see exactly how desperate things were getting, but with Elfaria and Ceilēshu in tow, they couldn't risk going to save him. Things would just end up as they were before they escaped. It was a long, anxious ride to deliver Elfaria and Ceilēshu safely to the rear lines, and by the time they had, Blue Knight was badly damaged and floating helplessly in space.

"We're going to save Koutarou right now! At this rate, he'll be killed by that monster!" Theia shouted.

"Wait a minute, Theia-chan! Even if we go like this, we'll just be killed too! Uncle is still in a weakened state too! We have to think of a good plan first!" Shizuka warned her.

"There's no time to think!" Clan interjected. "Veltlion will be killed any moment now!"

"Yurika, do something with your magic! I'll allow it!" Sanae cried.

"I'd love to, but there's no amazing spell like that!" Yurika whimpered.

Koutarou wouldn't hold out much longer. Vandarion was going to kill him soon. Everyone agreed on that point, but they couldn't agree on a way to go about saving him. But it was to be expected. It would take more than a plan to tackle the crisis facing them. It would take a miracle.

"Kiriha-san, can't we do something?" Maki asked.

"Maki... I wish I could, but in this situation..." Kiriha responded.

Even Kiriha, who had made miracles happen for them before, shook her head. As their chief strategist, she had already done the math. She knew that no

matter what they did, there was no way of saving Koutarou now. And with no plan to save the day, she felt like she had failed personally.

“I wanted to spend the last moments together with Master... Why did he leave me behind...?”

Ruth looked at the image of Blue Knight displayed on the monitor, grinding her teeth in frustration. She also knew that there was nothing that could be done and it pained her greatly. Ruth regretted not being there to meet Koutarou’s fate with him, and though she was the only one that said it, the other girls felt the same way.

At this rate, Satomi-kun will... Koutarou-sama will die. Then Forthorthe and the rest of us will be next. In the worst case scenario, even Earth and the neighboring planets might be at risk. In that case...!

As grim as things were, only one of them hadn’t given up hope yet. It was Harumi, the girl with long, silver hair and a glowing crest of a sword on her forehead. With a resolute look on her face, she stepped up to a desk in the corner of the room. On it were two swords, both badly damaged to the point of being unusable. One was Theia’s Saguratin and the other was Harumi’s Signaltin.

“If I use up the rest of my life to revive this sword, then it might just...”

Harumi was thinking of reviving Signaltin. Koutarou had strictly forbidden her from doing so, but that almost seemed inconsequential now. Vandarion’s power far exceeded all expectation. If Koutarou fell, Forthorthe and everyone in it would be next. Once that happened, it would be too late. That’s why she had to act now. Reviving Signaltin might cost her her life, but it might give Koutarou a fighting chance. While there was no guarantee, it was a better option than simply waiting for the end to come.

“I’m sorry, Satomi-kun, for breaking our promise...”

Harumi made up her mind after seeing the girls of Darkness Rainbow rushing off in a ship on their own. They didn’t know if Elexis and Maya were safe or even really where exactly they were, but they didn’t hesitate to go rescue them. Harumi thought she should do the same for Koutarou.

“You can’t, Harumi!”

However, the instant Harumi reached out for Signaltin and was about to begin the incantation, Theia grabbed her arm. She had been the first to notice what Harumi was about to do and rushed over to stop her.

“Theiamillis-san...”

“I won’t accept you making a sacrifice of yourself!”

“But if I don’t do this, Koutarou-sama will die! We and all of Forthorthe will be next! We don’t have a choice!”

“This is something we need to solve together! We can’t let you carry a burden like that all on your own again!”

The two girls broke out into a heated dispute. Since neither one of them was actually wrong, there was no compromise in sight. Their debate continued without either one of them backing down. The other girls watched on, sympathetic to how they both felt. Each one of them was willing to sacrifice themselves for Koutarou’s sake, but they couldn’t let that burden fall on just one of them. It only made them feel all the more helpless.

“...”

“Hmm?”

A mysterious whisper reached Sanae’s ear. Perplexed, she looked around the room to see who it was, but all the other girls were equally engrossed in Harumi and Theia’s debate. There was also no one standing next to her, and there weren’t any spirits nearby either. It didn’t seem the whisper had come from anywhere at all.

“Maybe my ears are playing tricks on me...”

Naturally, that was what Sanae thought. While she might have psychic powers, she was human. Mishearing things was a daily occurrence. However, she soon realized that she hadn’t misheard anything at all.

“.....”

“There it is again... Who’s there?!”

The second time Sanae heard the whisper, she was quite certain it was someone's voice. Someone was calling out to her from somewhere very far away.

".....”

"In order to oppose the power of the whirlpool of chaos, the principle of causality dictates that altering reality requires white... I have no idea what you're talking about!"

The voice seemed somewhat familiar to Sanae. She also felt like she'd had a conversation something like this before, but she couldn't remember when or where.

".....”

"Huh...? If we do that, Koutarou will be saved? Really?!"

".....”

"Just a chance is good enough! Thank you, I'll give it a shot!"

"..."

"Yeah, love is all. I don't know who you are, but you know your stuff!"

"Sanae-chan, what are you talking about?"

Realizing Sanae was mumbling to herself, Yurika cocked her head to the side. Whatever Sanae was up to, it was a welcome distraction from the building tension in the room between Harumi and Theia.

"Um... Huh? What now?"

Sanae looked back at Yurika with her head cocked to the side as well. She suddenly couldn't remember the last half a minute or so. It was like her mind had gone totally blank when Yurika said something to her. The last thing she could remember was what Theia had said...

"This is something we need to solve together!"

And those words gave Sanae an idea.

"Are you okay?" Yurika asked.

“That’s it! That’s it, Theia! That’s all we need to do! Sorry, Yurika, I’m going for a while!”

“Sanae-chan?!”

There was a method that could satisfy everyone after all. Once Sanae realized that, she took off running, leaving Yurika behind.

We’re idiots! All nine of us!

Thinking about it calmly, the answer seemed awfully simple. So simple, in fact, that arguing about it was stupid. Sanae hurried over to Harumi and Theia. She had to tell them... No, she had to tell everyone. There was still a way to save Koutarou.

Having taken so much damage, Blue Knight was no longer capable of fighting. It could slowly turn and move its right arm, but that was hardly enough to defend itself, much less attack. The Type Two slowly circled around the crippled ship. Vandarion wanted to taunt him. He wanted Koutarou to feel his doom approaching.

“Are you ready, Blue Knight?”

Vandarion’s Type Two had a strange appearance, as did the space fortress behind it. They had taken at least as much damage as Blue Knight, likely considerably more. Yet despite that, they moved as if nothing had happened. From time to time, they even had bursts of power that far exceeded what they should have been capable of. And strangest of all, they were being piloted by a man who had no body left in this world. Nothing about it made sense.

“That’s not a good look for you, Vandarion...”

“Impudent little... Even at the bitter end, you manage to be so very annoying!”

Wham!

Blinded by his own rage and hatred, Vandarion was still oblivious to what had happened to him. He still thought he was in the cockpit of the Type Two. He hadn’t even noticed that the Type Two had grown in size. Though reality around

him bent to his will, he only saw what was convenient for him.

Frustrated by Koutarou's insult, Vandarion used the Type Two to kick at Blue Knight. Everything was Koutarou's fault. That was Vandarion's horribly self-centered view of things.

"Ugh!"

"Who do you think you are?! Did you think *you* were the ruler of this world?! What insolence! That is my title and mine alone, you whelp!"

Wham, wham, wham!

"Guah!"

Vandarion continuously kicked Blue Knight. His desire for Koutarou to suffer manifested in the chaotic energy around him, which psychically caused Koutarou pain.

Why is he the only one they respect?! Why do they only follow him?! He doesn't even have Signaltin anymore! He's the man who took my only vassal from me!

Vandarion couldn't forgive Koutarou, the Blue Knight. His very existence provoked his ire, but what he hated most was how everyone flocked to him. The royal families fawned over him and the citizens worshipped him. Even the spirits of the dead came to his aid. But no one was there for Vandarion. Not one single person was there to support him. Not one single person was there to defend him. The reason why was plain as day, but Vandarion had literally been sucked into his own reality where he only saw what he wanted to. He'd always been like that, but losing Granado had sent him off the deep end. The only solution he could see was killing Koutarou. Everything was Koutarou's fault, after all. Unable to see the error of his way, that was the course Vandarion was set on.

"Guah, ack...!"

After the umpteenth kick, Koutarou was no longer able to stand. He wasn't being kicked directly, but the power of the chaotic energy that came with the blows assailed him each time. So even though he wasn't physically being kicked by Vandarion, it felt like it. His body ached all over. He lost his balance and fell

backward. His vision grew dim and he could no longer tell which way was up. But it didn't much matter. He could hardly move. He tried to stand several times, but to no avail. The best he could do was move the tips of his fingers.

I can't go to sleep... If I let Vandarion go free...

The only reason Koutarou was still conscious was because of his strong sense of duty. The thought that, should he die, Vandarion's next target would be the royal families and the citizens of Forthorthe kept him awake, albeit just barely. Even though his body was failing him, his desire to stop Vandarion was unfaltering.

At this rate, Vandarion will go after them... I have to stop that... no matter what...

But what sustained him the most was the thought of the girls who were still in the area. Driven by spite, Vandarion would do everything in his power to make Koutarou suffer as much as possible. He would go after them whether or not Koutarou was alive to see it. For their sake, he tried again to stand, but his body simply refused. His desperation turned into panic. Vandarion was certainly getting what he wanted out of Koutarou. This was torture.

"Looks like you can't move anymore. But don't worry. Rabble like you were born to grovel before the supreme ruler! You've only fallen into your rightful place!"

Vandarion was thrilled. Blue Knight was heavily damaged and Koutarou had collapsed. He was ruing his own powerlessness, and Vandarion relished every moment. This was what he had been waiting for for so long.

"Time to die, Blue Knight! Your death will usher in a new era! It will be the dawn of the age that belongs to me, for now and evermore!"

Koutarou appeared to be down for the count, so Vandarion decided to move on to the next step. There was no point in attacking Koutarou anymore. From here on, filling the world with chaos would be a much more effective means of torturing him.

Vandarion... I have to... I have to do something...

Thoughts of what would happen next ran through Koutarou's mind.

Vandarion was sure to go after the girls. He didn't know if they would be killed or captured, but Vandarion would put them through hell first. The thought of that alone made Koutarou feel like his soul was being shredded, but his body was still unresponsive. The pain was one thing, but the powerlessness he felt was nearly enough to drive him mad.

"Looky here... So you were worried about us too, huh, Koutarou?"

Koutarou suddenly heard a familiar voice in his head.

"Sanae?"

There was no mistaking it. It sounded like she was right by his ear like she usually was.

"Yeah. Everyone else is here too."

"Master, are you okay?!"

"Keep it together, Satomi-san! Maki-chan, you say something too!"

"Satomi-kun... Thank god you're still alive!"

"What's this?! You're a mess! Doctors! Repairmen! Anyone! Just bring a bunch of them! My vassal's in trouble!"

"You've taken quite a beating, Satomi Koutarou... I guess there was no helping it this time."

"Satomi-kun, say something. Clan-san is about to cry."

"I'm not crying! Shizuka, stop spreading baseless rumors!"

"K-Koutarou-sama... Y-You're hurt again..."

When he first heard Sanae's voice, Koutarou thought he might be hallucinating. But as he heard the voices of the other girls, he realized that wasn't the case. Through either psychic powers or magic, he really was hearing all of their voices.

"Everyone, why..."

"That's obvious. We all want to save you, Koutarou-sama."

In contrast to puzzled Koutarou, Harumi's was quite calm and her voice

reflected that. She almost sounded like she was admonishing him for doubting them.

“I’m honestly happy, but there’s no way. You guys need to get away! Vandarion is too powerful!”

“Yeah, we think it’s impossible with normal methods too.”

Sanae sounded calmer than usual too. Her voice didn’t have its usual energetic quirk to it. Even though she was normally quite carefree, even she seemed to understand the gravity of the situation.

“Then hurry up and run! Once Vandarion kills me, he’ll be coming after all of you!”

“That’s why we’re thinking of being a little reckless... like someone we know. Actually, it might be more than just a little.”

Theia was revealing a certain cuteness underneath her normally stubborn side. She almost sounded like a mischievous child.

“Reckless?”

“Yes, quite reckless indeed. There’s no guarantee it’ll work, so we at least wanted to hear your voice one last time.”

The only one that was the same as ever was Kiriha. She talked to Koutarou the same way she always did, although perhaps with less teasing than normal. She was still keeping part of her emotions locked up deep inside.

“There’s something we wanted to ask you too, Satomi-san.”

“Wait, what are you guys planning on doing?!”

Koutarou had a bad feeling about what was about to happen. If even Yurika was taking this seriously, then it could only mean that the girls really were about to do something dangerous. Koutarou’s anxiety increased tenfold.

“Master, do you love us?”

“And not just because we all live at home... I mean at Corona House.”

“Even discounting any sympathy for me being a former member of Darkness Rainbow or Sanae-san for being a former ghost...”

“Do you love us as... you know... women?”

Ruth, Shizuka, Maki, and Clan all chimed in too. Because they all knew Koutarou’s circumstances and they were being considerate of each other, they had always avoided asking that question directly. But no longer. They couldn’t take the last step until they had his answer.

“Of course I do! That’s why I want you all to hurry up and get out of here! I couldn’t bear to lose any one of you! I’d grieve a loss like that for eternity, no matter how many times I’m reincarnated! I don’t know what you’re planning on doing, but stop it right now!”

Koutarou spoke from the heart and without hesitation. He didn’t want to lose even one of them. He wanted to see them all live their lives out happily. He wanted to be with all of them. Those were his true feelings. Feelings he’d kept hidden deep within him. Feelings he could only confess after being so cornered.

“...”

The moment Koutarou revealed how he felt, the girls responded not with words, but with intense emotion. It was an explosion of emotional power from all nine girls. All kinds of positive emotions flooded into Koutarou at incredible speed. It filled him and his heart like it was reinforcing their existence. It was a sign of all of their feelings come together. A blip of love in what seemed like a very dark world right now.

“Satomi-kun, ah... Koutarou-sama... We want to give it a try exactly because of what you just said. We just have to do it! Because we all love you from the bottom of our hearts too!”

“Hey, stop it, you idiots! Can’t you understand I’m telling you to run?!”

“You’re the idiot! These feelings mean the world to us! That’s why we’re willing to risk our lives for them! What else are we supposed to do?! The man we love is in trouble!”

Harumi and Theia tried to make it as clear as they could be to Koutarou. Having confirmed Koutarou’s feelings, the girls no longer felt any hesitation. They were going to bet it all on the warm feeling each of them felt in their chest. Their lives. The future. Everything. Even knowing they might lose it all,

not one of them had any regret in their heart. The man they loved so much had said that he loved them too. In they end, they were all girls in love. Nothing a man, not even Koutarou, could say would change their resolve.

The nine girls stood together in a circle. In between them were two swords. Both of them were shattered with pieces missing. Neither could be used in this condition. Facing the swords, the girls clasped their hands together as if to pray. They would be performing a ritual in order to revive the two swords. By pouring in as much of their life force as they could muster, they would revive a sword that surpassed even the original Signaltin.

Of course, there were no guarantees that the ritual would succeed or that the sword it created would be able to defeat Vandarion. And since they'd be pouring their own life energy into the ritual, there was no telling if they would make it through safely either. But this was their last resort to protect their beloved and defeat the evil that threatened them. Even if it cost them everything, it was a worthy cause.

Standing around the swords, the girls looked at each other one last time. Each of them nodded in turn as if to confirm they were prepared for what was to come. Not a single one of them showed any reservation. And so they began the ritual. There was no longer any time to spare. Everything would come down to this moment.

"I am the infinite power that precedes all things."

Harumi began the ritual. With her hands clasped together, she recited an incantation in Higher Ancient Forthorthian, the ritual language of Forthorthe two thousand years ago. As she did, a white, sword-shaped crest appeared on her forehead. A matching white light began pouring out from her body, stretching overhead. It was as she was being lit up by a spotlight from above.

"The eternal wanderer, watching over the end of the world..."

Next to speak was Sanae. As she continued the incantation, a purple sword-shaped crest appeared on her forehead and a matching purple light poured out from her body.

"Answer the plea of the nine. Now is the time to release the final seal!"

Third was Yurika. Her color was blue. The same sword-shaped crest appeared on her forehead and light poured out from her body too. Once she recited her line, the two swords in the center of the circle began giving off a faint glow. The energy from the three different colors of light seemed to give them power.

“Guider of creation, messenger of balance!”

Fourth was Kiriha. A green light wrapped around her. Under its calming glow, the two swords started floating in the air despite no one touching them.

“With the light of the nine, take form!”

Next was Theia. She was radiating a red light. Its powerful glow shone on everything around her, and when it hit the swords, they began to change shape. It was like watching them being broken in reverse.

“Draw close to that one life and protect all things!”

After Theia was Ruth. The color surrounding her was yellow. As the modest light—seemingly representative of her personality—hit the swords, it filled in the gaps where pieces had been missing.

“My name is Invader!”

The orange light flowing out of Clan was surprisingly clear and beautiful. As it filled the room, the once shattered swords fully reformed, becoming whole again in the image of their original, graceful appearances.

“We make but a modest prayer in this small world!”

The eighth light to appear was indigo. Its source was Maki. In the past, the indigo light she wielded was dark, but the light she shed now was vivid and bright. And as if reflecting that change, the swords began emitting a bright glow of their own. Signaltin shone silver and Saguratin shone gold. And with that, they had regained their former glory.

“Treasured swords of fate, engrave my name within you and release the seal!”

Last was Shizuka. Her color was black, normally the color of destruction. But here, with the white and colorful lights of the other girls, Shizuka’s black light represented balance.

As the girls all reached out in front of them towards the two swords, the nine lights they projected shot upward, joined, and then spiraled down into the swords. It was a fantastic spectacle, just like a swirling rainbow.



Two swords suddenly appeared in front of Koutarou, a gold one and a silver one. Both emitted a powerful light as they floated right in front of his eyes. But oddly enough, the light they shone was different from the color of the swords themselves. Rather than shining silver and gold, they scintillated the colors of the rainbow with black and white mixed in. All perceivable colors could be seen in the glow at any given moment.

“Signaltin and Saguratin...? But what’s going on...? They’re much stronger than before...”

They showered their multi-faceted light on Koutarou, and he felt the pain leave his body. He could move again. Signaltin had a similar power before it was destroyed, but it wasn’t this strong. Yet seeing it and its power now, Koutarou realized that what the girls were trying to do had succeeded.

“Is that what the princess and the others were doing?! They reformed Signaltin in an act of desperation?! No, that’s not it! This is something completely different!”

The two swords had appeared within the bridge of Blue Knight, so Vandarion couldn’t see them directly, but he could clearly feel the power concentrated there. As if reacting to their appearance, the gates of hell began spewing out a frightening amount of energy. The gates of hell, the whirlpool of chaos itself, knew what those swords were. It could tell that it would need much, much more power in order to defeat them. The whirlpool of chaos was scared of the two swords.

“Those idiots... They went ahead and did it anyway...”

Unlike the astonished Vandarion, Koutarou stared at the two swords with a calm expression. He could feel familiar presences from both swords. It was similar to what he felt when he’d return home to Corona House room 106 after a long day. That’s why, no matter how much power the swords had, he was unintimidated. There was no danger in room 106. Just family, comfort, and love. And that’s what Koutarou felt now. A small smile crept over his lips and he casually reached out for the two swords. As he did, he could hear the voices of the nine girls from beyond the rainbow of light. It was the final part of the incantation where they named the sword they had forged together.

“Come from between the light and darkness! Come from beyond an endless time and immeasurable distance! Nalfalaren!”

The nine girls speaking as one gave the sword the fitting name of Nalfalaren. In Ancient Forthorthian, it was the word for the rainbow that formed before dawn. Looking at the sword shimmering the full spectrum of color, it was easy to see why they’d chosen it.

“What?! The swords are...!”

As the sword was given a name, something shocking happened. The gold and silver swords before Koutarou began to merge into one. The new, merged sword had inherited features of both Signaltin and Saguratin. Gold inlay ran down the beautiful silver blade, and the golden hilt was decorated with silver embellishments. The crest engraved on the blade was neither Theia’s golden flower nor Alaia’s snowflake. It was a mysterious flower with petals like crystals of snow that Koutarou had never seen before.

“I see... So this is Nalfalaren...”

Koutarou grasped the sword and held it firmly. It fit perfectly in his hand. Even though this was the first time he’d ever held it, it felt like he’d always been using it.

“Blue Knight, what is that sword?!” Vandarion demanded.

“It’s Signaltin and Saguratin reborn as one.”

“Don’t lie to me! That sword is far more powerful than either of those ever were!”

Koutarou didn’t really know the specifics. All he knew was that the nine girls had revived the two swords and turned them into one—Nalfalaren.

There’s no way that it was just revived like that! And the Type Two’s power has been increasing ever since it appeared! It knows it needs even more power to beat that thing!

Vandarion, who was in the process of merging with the gates of hell, knew that Koutarou’s new sword was incredibly dangerous. The Type Two and the space fortress were automatically preparing for a fight. The generator’s output

had increased and all unnecessary systems were cut off to concentrate as much power as possible. The Blue Knight had only gotten a new sword, but the gates of hell were panicking. There was no way that it was any normal sword.

“Regardless, I am the man who will stand above all else! I won’t fall back just because these machines are scared! That’s not what a supreme ruler does!”

Even the machines that Granado had crafted could recognize the danger, but Vandarion wouldn’t stand for feeling even a tingle of fear. Vandarion was a natural-born supreme ruler. A king among kings who ruled all with an iron fist. He was going to kill Koutarou to prove that this fear was unfounded and reaffirm his dominance as a supreme ruler.

“I’ll kill you! This time I will definitely kill you, Blue Knight!”

Vandarion closed in on Blue Knight as he fed vast amounts of hatred into the gates of hell, which in turn pumped power into the Type Two. The Type Two had already been mostly destroyed, so there was barely anything left of its original body. However, given shape by the energy from the gates of hell, the Type Two looked like it was still intact. Its combat capability in this strange, semi-real form far outstripped its original physical form. The energy it had accumulated now was easily threefold what it had had before.

“Theia, I’m counting on you.”

“Perfect! Leave it to me!”

Koutarou’s sword started to glow red. The next moment, the anti-ship energy sword in Blue Knight’s hand began to automatically fire beam after beam. Its aim was incredibly accurate, and the beams scored hit after hit on the approaching Type Two.

“Aaaghhh, impossible! I’m the most powerful! The world is mine! How could this be?!”

After its transformation, the Type Two was now as large as Blue Knight. The strength of its body and of its barrier had increased accordingly. Yet in spite of all that, Theia’s beams easily pierced through both.

“I won’t accept this! This won’t do! Give me more! Give me more power! Enough to kill the Blue Knight!”

Rrrumble...

After Theia's bombardment, the Type Two drained even more power from the space fortress—or more accurately, the gates of hell—in order to repair itself. But the damage was considerable, and repairing it wouldn't be a simple task. To accomplish it, the Type Two didn't just absorb energy—it began absorbing the space fortress itself.

"Kiriha-san, what's going on with that?"

When Koutarou called out to Kiriha, the glow of the sword changed from red to green.

"It looks like they're trying to fuse together completely. Because Vandarion has been exposed to the chaos for too long, he's starting to lose his sense of self."

It was a strange sight to watch. The Type Two pulled the fortress closer and sucked it in like it was made of clay. The Type Two first repaired its damaged parts, and then used the excess energy and material to reinforce its body and grow bigger. By the time the entire space fortress had been absorbed, the Type Two had turned into a gigantic dragon over ten kilometers long.

"But Koutarou, that body is a bluff. In the end, the source of the power is the same. It's that gross whirly thing."

"Master, the whirly thing that Sanae-sama is talking about is located here."

"This is our chance, Satomi-kun! That area is still compromised from Maya-sama's attack earlier! We can still attack it directly!"

The sword shone purple, yellow, and indigo in turn, conveying the girls' voices to Koutarou. It was as if they were all right there with him.

"So that's it, huh?"

"Do you think you still have a chance despite our difference in size, Blue Knight?!"

"You know what, Vandarion? If this had just been between the two of us, it probably would be impossible."

Koutarou held the sword in both hands and readied it. Mimicking him, Blue

Knight did the same with the anti-ship energy sword. When it did, the color of the energy surrounding the massive sword changed. It now gleamed like a rainbow, just like Nalfalaren did. And the glow grew brighter and brighter. As the light grew stronger, it shot out from the tip of the sword like a beam.

“But because you broadcasted this fight to all of Forthorthe, everyone is praying for you to be defeated and for peace to be returned to this world.”

“It can’t be... That light is...”

The light extending from the energy sword reached over ten kilometers in length. It was the manifestation of the collective desires that had been poured into Nalfalaren. Not just from the nine girls and Koutarou, but all of Forthorthe.

“That’s right, Vandarion! I’m not alone! I have more than ten billion people behind me!”

“I don’t care! I won’t let you get away with this!”

Swinging the Type Two’s over three kilometer long arm, Vandarion made a desperate move to destroy Blue Knight. He had to settle things before Koutarou could use that sword.

“Theia! Clan!”

“I got it!”

“Gosh, you’re still treating me like a slave...”

The color of Koutarou’s sword rapidly changed between red and orange, and Blue Knight’s beams and lasers focused their fire on the hulking Type Two. However, their target wasn’t the approaching arm. It was the Type Two’s head past the arm. Blue Knight scored hit after hit in the Type Two’s face, temporarily robbing it of its vision.

“Landlord-san! Yurika!”

“Uncle, give all of our remaining mana to Yurika-chan!”

“Recall Precast Teleport!”

The Type Two was far too big. A bit of bombardment wouldn’t be enough to stop the swing of its massive arm, and Blue Knight was still too damaged to

move properly. Instead, Yurika would use her magic to get Blue Knight out of the way. Normally she didn't have enough mana to teleport a whole ship, but right now Yurika had the support of Nalfalaren and Shizuka, who was also supplying her with the mana of the Fire Dragon Emperor. Thanks to that, Yurika was able to move Blue Knight back, even if only just a little. Between that and the Type Two no longer being able to aim properly after being blinded, the swing only shaved off a couple of Blue Knight's mounted cannons.

"Impossible! How could this happen?! I even have the Blue Knight cornered!"

"You would never understand! Not when you're so intent on conquering everything for yourself and by yourself!"

The moment Koutarou had been waiting for finally arrived. He knew it when the sword began to emit a pure white light. It was Harumi.

"Koutarou-sama, now's the time!"

Harumi had been waiting all this time for an opening as she channeled the will of the people with Nalfalaren.

A vast amount of energy was required to even move the Type Two, especially at its increased size. It required even more to attack, and that was just normally. A desperate, panicked attack like what Vandarion had just pulled used exponentially more still. Because of that, the Type Two had almost no power left for defense. Even though it would only last for a few seconds, he was wide open now.

"Unlike you, I'm not on my own! And we will be victorious—together!"

Koutarou didn't miss the opportunity. He swung his sword with all his might, and not missing a beat, Blue Knight copied the movement with the anti-ship energy sword. The blade of the sword, over ten kilometers long, moved at speeds too fast to see. Its target was the left section of the Type Two's chest that was still weakened from Elexis and Maya's attack. The gates of hell should be whirling just inside. Blue Knight's glowing blade entered through the Type Two's right shoulder, passed through its chest, and exited through the left side of its chest. It all happened so fast, however, that Vandarion didn't even know he'd been cut down until the Type Two began exploding.

BOOOOOM!

With a single strike of the energy sword, the gates of hell had been cut in half. When they collapsed, the supply of energy to the Type Two was cut off. And since it had already lost its physical form, that meant the end of the monstrosity that the Type Two had become.

“What is this?! Why can’t I win?! Why do I always lose?! Why is it that the world only recognizes the Blue Knight and not me?!”

While the Type Two lacked physical form, it had sucked in the space fortress and manipulated its shape through magical energy. But now that that energy was dissipating, it too was breaking down like a sandcastle being washed away in the waves.



“That’s because you don’t see the world for what it is, Vandarion. If only you had only shown the world a fraction of the recognition you gave Granado, this wouldn’t have happened.”

The world would never smile at someone who scorned it so. Having learned that as a child, Koutarou knew it better than anyone. It was only when he smiled despite his wounded heart that the world smiled back at him. All nine girls had done the same thing.

“Ridiculous! I’m the supreme ruler! Why would I need to show consideration for anyone else?! They should be bowing to me!”

The collapse of the Type Two reached the cockpit where Vandarion was. As he too had already lost his physical form, it was only a matter of time before he met the same fate as the Type Two.

“What?! My body is collapsing?! Why?! Why do such unjust things happen to me?! What is the meaning of this?!”

“...So you really didn’t notice that you’d been stripped down to your soul?”

“No! I don’t want to disappear! I’m the supreme ruler! The man who stands atop this world! I can’t disappear in a place like this! I still haven’t done anything! I have to kill the Blue Knight, destroy the royal families, and conquer Forthorthe! The world will suffer a massive loss if I disappear! I don’t care who, just save your king! Give me your life! Where are you, Gra—”

Even in the bitter end, Vandarion understood nothing. Just like Maxfern two thousand years in the past. And it was because he didn’t understand that that there was no one there to reach out a hand to save him. Not even Granado, who had faithfully kept his promise and watched over Vandarion as he became just a soul.

Beyond the Light

Saturday, January 8th

With Vandarion defeated, the coup d'etat army surrendered. It was in part because it would be difficult to continue their rebellion as things were, but the final nail in the coffin was what everyone had seen of Vandarion in his battle with the Blue Knight. By the end of it, the merged Type Two and space fortress looked like a monster even to Vandarion's own men. Moreover, nothing Vandarion had said sounded anything like the leader they wanted. It was a rude awakening for those who still supported the coup d'etat, and they peacefully surrendered afterward. With that, the drawn out coup d'etat came to an end.

After the official surrender, Elfaria immediately began major reforms. The first order of business was to replace any government officials who'd had close ties to Vandarion. After that, there were discussions on how to prevent possible future coups and how to go about the disarmament of the Imperial Army. They were all things Elfaria had proposed in the past, but had been shut down by parliament. With Vandarion gone, however, that would no longer be an issue.

Elfaria's reforms also addressed part of what Elexis had wanted for the country. His primary concern had been that political parties and the military might run amok under Elfaria's rule, but Elfaria pushing legislation through made it clear she was in control and that things had normalized. Koutarou didn't think Elexis would be unhappy with how things turned out.

As for Elexis, his and Maya's whereabouts remained unknown. According to Darkness Rainbow, they couldn't find them no matter how much they looked. There was always a chance that they were lying, but Koutarou chose not to pursue the matter. With Elfaria's reforms, Elexis was probably satisfied, and really, Koutarou felt like he owed him one for saving him in their last battle. Even in the worst case scenario, considering how much of a stickler Elexis could be for formalities, he would probably give his regards before he started any trouble. But most of all, Koutarou couldn't imagine that he and Maya would do

anything that would put Darkness Rainbow in a bad position.

While pushing for reform, Elfaria announced the existence of Folsaria to the citizens of Forthorthe. She spoke of how the descendants of the people under Grevanas had survived and developed on their own. She explained that contact with them had been established during the coup d'etat, and that she had decided to form a friendly relationship with them.

The people of Folsaria were rather divided on the matter of returning to Forthorthe, so Forthorthe believed it was their responsibility as a friendly nation to respect both sides. In other words, they would honor Folsaria's independence while opening the door for those who sought to immigrate. It was also decided that immigrants from Folsaria would be welcomed in Veltlion's special territory for the time being.

The more or less diplomats that were serving as a point of contact with Folsaria were the girls of Darkness Rainbow. Since they were already in Forthorthe and had a good understanding of Forthorthe's situation, they were perfect for the job. Serving as the point of contact on Folsaria's side would be Rainbow Heart. As Rainbow Heart was the current government of Folsaria, it seemed like an obvious choice.

"So in the end, we managed to achieve our goal as Darkness Rainbow," said Purple.

"I don't like losing to Navy though," sighed Green.

"Maki saved you, you know. You could be a little gracious," laughed Crimson.

"I know! That's why I've accepted even though I don't like it!"

"Hey, Bluie, Yellie! Forthorthe has all kinds of cute fashion!" Orange practically cheered.

"You think so?" Blue asked. "Then maybe you should pick out a new outfit for me."

"I'd love to! When do we go?!"

"I wonder if there's someplace with nice scenery somewhere in Veltlion's

special territory...” Yellow wondered out loud.

Rainbow Heart and Darkness Rainbow would work together to fulfill their diplomatic duties. While it was an unexpected outcome considering the long, fraught history between them, everything was just as it should be. Overall, both sides had gotten what they wished for.

And so the girls of Darkness Rainbow would fulfill their new duties while waiting. Waiting for Elexis and Maya to return from their so very long voyage. Koutarou felt things were fine that way, and Theia and the other girls agreed. They knew that the current Darkness Rainbow was nothing like Vandarion.

Meanwhile, Koutarou’s reputation as the Blue Knight—the man who appeared to almost single-handedly put an end to the coup d’etat—was skyrocketing. The people praised him for everything he’d done, and they loved him more than ever. He’d become the legendary hero they were hoping for, and he’d saved the day just like he had two thousand years ago. Almost everywhere he went, just his presence caused a huge commotion.

“You’re awfully popular, Blue Knight.”

“This isn’t something to laugh about, Alunaya-dono.”

Koutarou was visiting Rushstock Cemetery to honor the heroes of both past and present that rested there. He felt indebted to all of them, so he wanted to properly pay his respects. Things had been so chaotic after the war, however, that he hadn’t had a chance to come until now. Today, one week after the surrender of the coup d’etat army, he’d finally managed to get some free time.

“Yeah, if we were anywhere else, there would have been a huge scene. Looks like this was a good place to visit,” commented Shizuka with a giggle. She’d come along as Koutarou’s bodyguard.

Koutarou normally caused a commotion wherever he went, but today that hadn’t happened. People were certainly noticing, but they only observed him from a distance out of respect. They were in a cemetery after all.

“If you didn’t want to attract attention, you didn’t have to dress like that.”

“Of course I did. I could never come here without wearing this.”

For military affairs and formal occasions, Koutarou was expected to wear his signature blue armor. It especially stood out when he went out in public. As today was private business, however, there was nothing that said he had to wear it. He simply just couldn't bring himself to visit his comrades-in-arms without looking the part as the Blue Knight. He felt it was the least amount of courtesy he could show them as the man who'd been their commander.

"Then you'll just have to bear it."

Unlike the troubled Koutarou, Shizuka was in high spirits. She was happy that the man she loved was so well liked by all. Shizuka celebrated his rise in fame as if it was her own.

"You don't get to act like it doesn't have anything to do with you."

"But it doesn't! Y'know why? Because even after all this time you still haven't made me your giiirlfriiiend!"

"Come on now..."

"Hmm... The way I see it, Blue Knight, is that you simply look too heroic."

Everyone had an ideal image of a hero, and Koutarou matched that all too well. People simply couldn't help having such a strong reaction to him. That was the way Alunaya saw it.

"Things just happened to work out that way. It was like that in the past too. Really, I just got lucky. I'd have been a total disgrace otherwise."

Koutarou didn't see himself as anyone that impressive. He'd always had something to fall back on. Even two thousand years in the past, he was going off of Theia's play scripts. And then when things seemed to happen all over again with the coup d'etat, he simply went off of his experience from the past. Koutarou could only play the part of the Blue Knight thanks to that.

"If your experience from before was a rehearsal, then you could call this fate. Besides, they say history repeats itself, don't they?"

Alunaya laughed heartily. Koutarou wanted to express his dissatisfaction with Alunaya, but what he said distracted him from doing so.

Fate...? Rehearsal...? If this was all just practice for something, then...

There was no proof of what Alunaya was suggesting, but something about it struck a chord with Koutarou. If the play had been a rehearsal for the events of two thousand years ago, and the events of two thousand years ago had been a rehearsal for the present-day coup, then what had all this been a rehearsal for?

“What’s the matter, Blue Knight?”

But as a stuffed doll of Alunaya peered into his face with his big, round eyes, Koutarou put the thought out of his mind. At least for right now, it was much less important than what he’d come here for.

“If you want to know what it’s like, I don’t mind exposing that you’re here too, Alunaya-dono.”

“No, Blue Knight! Be more mature! Don’t get me involved!”

“Hmm...”

Koutarou and Alunaya broke out into a silly spat, but it was truly a refreshing sight. They only had the freedom and time to do something like this because Forthorthe was at peace once more. Realizing that much, Shizuka let the two of them be.

“I think you should suffer a little too, Alunaya-dono.”

“I’m sorry! I admit my fault!”

“Ah, how nice...”

At least for the moment. Shizuka’s intuition was telling her it wouldn’t last long. The people watching Koutarou from a distance were having a hard time containing themselves. It wouldn’t be long before they came running.

In Rushstock Cemetery, there was a special tomb dedicated to honoring late royalty. It was a monument of sorts, and citizens were allowed to visit freely. More privately, however, there were royal burial grounds where royalty was actually laid to rest. Each territory had one for their respective royal family. For example, the Mastir family burial grounds were here in the Mastir territory. And as these graveyards were near sacred territory, they weren’t open to the public. People weren’t permitted entry without a special reason, but the Blue Knight

himself coming to visit certainly qualified as a special reason.

“Empress Alaia, Princess Charl...”

Koutarou’s quiet whisper wandered its way through the otherwise empty graveyard. He had come alone. The Mastir family burial grounds were rather large. They along with the wide sky stretching overhead were dyed orange by the sun setting behind Koutarou. Before him stood a large tombstone carved from natural rock. Bathed in the glow of the evening sun, the crests engraved on the tombstone almost lit up. The tombstone bore the royal family crest as well as the personal crests of the individuals buried there. Koutarou was particularly interested in two of them.

“Everything has finally settled down. Forthorthe will be safe now.”

Koutarou had come to give Alaia and Charl a report. Alaia as Koutarou knew her now was with Harumi, so he knew that she wouldn’t be here. But even so, even if just for sentimental reasons, he wanted to come tell her personally that everything was all right. Of course, he had come to tell Charl the same thing.

“I can finally feel a weight lifted off my shoulders. It was my actions that brought all this on, after all...”

Koutarou continued talking to the tombstone as if he was speaking directly with Alaia and Charl. As he did, all kinds of things flashed through his mind. What had happened in Forthorthe in the past and everything that had come of it. While it might have been hard to believe, Koutarou was the cause for all of it. But that was now coming to a close. The underground empire, Folsaria, and Forthorthe... All of the troubles that had originated two thousand years ago had finally been resolved. All that was left was for Koutarou and the others to return home to Earth and everything would be back to normal.

“As I thought, I’m really not suited to being a hero. I think I’m much more cut out to be just your average high schooler.”

Koutarou let out an embarrassed laugh. The one thing he’d felt constantly all this time was that he was much more suited to living an average life in a normal world. But as he laughed, he heard someone laughing with him.

“I think there would be a flood of objections to that. Who other than you

could truly call themselves a hero, Koutarou-sama?”

“Your Majesty?!”

Surprisingly enough, Alaia had appeared before Koutarou’s eyes. And it wasn’t Harumi. It was strange. Koutarou knew that Alaia should be with Harumi now, but Harumi was nowhere to be seen. This was definitely Alaia... Alaia as Koutarou had known her all those years ago.

“It’s been a while since I met you as just myself, hasn’t it?”

“Your Majesty... It really is you, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I’m relieved to see you well, Koutarou-sama.”

Alaia narrowed her eyes and smiled gently. Seeing her like that, Koutarou couldn’t help remarking how much she really did look like Harumi. It was almost hard to tell the difference between them, but something was definitely different here. There was something Koutarou couldn’t quite put his finger on. Harumi was Alaia reborn, but her soul was the same.

“But... why are you here today? And all alone at that...”

Koutarou began to grow concerned that Alaia was here without Harumi. Since that expended mana, it wasn’t something that could be done lightly. And considering that, she must have had a good reason for doing it. That was the part that bothered Koutarou.

“I guess I can’t hide anything from you, can I, Koutarou-sama? Heehee...”

“Your Majesty? Really, is something the matter?”

Koutarou had a bad feeling about what was to come. The tone in Alaia’s voice only made him more anxious. He gave Alaia a worried look.

“Actually... I’ve come to say farewell, Koutarou-sama.”

“Farewell?! Why would you do that?! It can’t be—”

What she said was most unexpected. Alaia still existed within Harumi even now, so if she’d come to say goodbye, that made it sound like Harumi was in danger.

“No, that’s not it. The life poured into that sword, into Nalfalaren, was only

very slight. Really, it didn't fit as much as I'd expected. There should be no adverse effects for any of the nine girls."

"Good... Thank god..."

Koutarou's shoulders slumped as the tension left his body. He had been worried all this time about what the girls had done to revive the swords, even though they all seemed to be fine so far. However, now that the person who understood magical swords better than anyone had said that they would be fine, Koutarou was put at ease. He'd been worried for nothing.

"But then, why...?"

And yet while he was relieved, that only confused him more. If Harumi was dying, he could understand why Alaia would come to say farewell. But if she was okay, then he wasn't sure why Alaia had come to see him like this. Her eyebrows drew close together in a somewhat lonely expression as she began to explain things to him.

"The me here right now is part of me from two thousand years ago. This spirit represents the life and soul I used up undoing Signaltin's seal."

Two thousand years ago, Alaia's soul had been split in two. One half went on to live life in Forthorthe and would be reincarnated into Harumi after her passing. The other half was inside of Signaltin. Or at least it was.

"But the other day, Signaltin's contract was lifted."

"Ah..."

"That's why I was released from Signaltin. And because of that, I'm starting to lose my shape as Alaia."

Koutarou now began to understand what was going on. Until the battle the other day, Signaltin had been a container for Alaia's soul, but now the original sword was no more. Alaia had been freed and was gradually integrating with Harumi. In other words, the contract with Signaltin was what had kept the two different parts of her distinct. But there was no need for that now.

"Oh no! Isn't there anything we can do?!"

"There's most likely a way to allow me to stay. But... I have no intention of

doing that.”

“But why?!”

“I have to return my life to Harumi. I have to avoid my existence causing Harumi harm.”

“Ugh...”

If Alaia remained as she was, Harumi would forever have a weak constitution. If she didn’t return this part of her soul to Harumi, she would always be in danger. If she asked Harumi, she would likely say she was fine with that. That’s why Alaia chose to vanish silently. That’s why she’d come to tell Koutarou farewell.

“Besides, I’m not disappearing. I am simply returning to Harumi, where I belong. This is not a true farewell.”

“But your memories...”

“It’s more unusual to keep your memories after dying and being reincarnated, really. Won’t you feel sorry for Charl if I’m the only one who gets special treatment?”

“But...!”

“Besides... my dream has finally come true. I’ll get to be a normal girl, have a first love, build a family... You too should know how wonderful of a thing that is, Koutarou-sama.”

“Your Majesty...”

Koutarou couldn’t say anything. He knew what Alaia’s dream was. But as long as Alaia remained as she was, that dream would never be fulfilled. That’s why she had to be freed from the small cage that was her current form. Koutarou knew he shouldn’t stop her. He knew what he needed to do for her was greet Harumi, who would finally become one with Alaia, with a smile.

“Please don’t be sad, Koutarou-sama. Just... please find the me that will forever live on within Harumi...”

“...I will...”

This was the start of Alaia's dream. It really wasn't a farewell. It was the start of something wonderful. It should be celebrated. But neither of them made an effort to hide their tears. Their was no filling the gap between what they felt and what they should be feeling. Humans are strange, awkward creatures that way, but part of their beauty lies in that awkwardness. That's why Koutarou would never forget the sight of Alaia and her tears. She was so beautiful right now that he burned the image into his mind.

Some time passed as they cried together, but it was unclear to either of them whether it was minutes or hours. They only realized it as the sun started to dip below the horizon. In that liminal hour between day and night, voices called out to them.

"Sister! Blue Knight!"

"Your Excellency, are you making Her Majesty cry again?!"

They heard the distinct voices of two girls that were very important to both Koutarou and Alaia. But it wasn't just those two voices. There were countless people calling out for Alaia, and that only meant one thing.

"...Koutarou-sama, it seems that the time has come."

Alaia wiped away her tears and smiled. As sad as she was, it wasn't a smile from the heart. If she relaxed for just a moment, her smile would melt away like snow. But even then, Alaia wanted to smile in the end.

"Your Majesty... It was an honor to see you again."

Koutarou understood exactly how Alaia felt, and so he pretended not to see right through her real feelings. He smiled in return for her. He didn't want to trouble her.

"Layous-sama... Do you mind if I ask you one last question? Something a normal girl would ask?"

Alaia was wrapped in a golden light much like the glow of the sun. It was the presence of the people gathering around her. They had come to get her. And as their light surrounded Alaia, her figure began to fade.

"Ask me anything you wish."

“Was I...”

Alaia trailed off and then began to blush. Even here and now, what she was about to ask required a lot of courage.

“Um... Was I a woman that could help heal your wounded heart?”

“That’s—”

It was a very difficult question. In reality, Koutarou already had a clear answer, but the woman he was speaking to was a princess he held in high regard. An empress, even. It wasn’t something he could say so lightly just because he had the chance. But after thinking about it for a moment, he decided to answer her honestly. He didn’t want either of them to have regrets.

“I— Mmph!”

“Heehee...”

But as Koutarou was about to give her his answer, Alaia reached out and put a single finger over his lips. Koutarou was quite taken aback.

“Please give Harumi that answer someday. When you think the time is right.”

“Your Majesty...”

At the very end, Koutarou finally got to see a very girlish side to Alaia. If they had been a normal boy and girl in a normal time, he believed they would have talked like this often. And that was the kind of future Alaia hoped Koutarou and Harumi would have together.

“Koutarou-sama, I’m so glad that I met you. Forthorthe still exists after two thousand years, and its people are living with smiles on their faces. And now I get to live like a normal girl. It’s all thanks to you...”

It was time for Alaia to go. Her image grew fainter and fainter as she started to vanish into the light. But Alaia wouldn’t truly disappear. She was only going to join the people in the light. The rest of her would join with Harumi. Once he returned to the Imperial Palace, he would be able to see her again. That’s why Koutarou had only one thing to say.

“Then let us meet again. At dinner.”

“Koutarou-sama... Yes, at dinner...”

It was the most either of them could muster now. Even if they were never to see each other like this again, they still wanted to meet again. Within Harumi. Within their everyday lives. And so neither of them actually said goodbye. Instead, they exchanged a promise to meet again. And...

“I will always love you... May these feelings always be with you...”

A pure declaration of love.



The seventh princess of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Theiamillis Gre Forthorthe, was trembling with rage. She had been betrayed by one of her vassals. The traitor in question had trampled all over her trust and the trust of the people. It was an act so wretched and despicable that Theia called a press conference to voice her dissatisfaction to the citizens and gain their support in the matter.

“As I am sure you have all heard, the commemoration ceremony for the end of the war and the following celebration scheduled for tomorrow have been canceled. I am very sorry to all of you who were looking forward to it.”

Theia spoke politely, but there was no hiding the intense fury behind her words. That much was conveyed to the citizens, even through the hologram.

“I was looking forward to it too. It was meant to be a day where all of Forthorthe could rejoice, after all. It was also supposed to be a chance for us to show our gratitude for our hero.”

Theia’s small fist on top of the podium was trembling. She had soared high on the wings of joy only to be cast into the depths of indignation.

“But would you look at that! Before we even had a chance to thank him, he ran home to his homeland!”

The journalists’ cameras all went off in a sea of flashes. This was the real reason the press conference had been called—to reveal why the commemoration ceremony and following celebration had been canceled.

“All this while throwing his land and property in our faces! If this is not a betrayal, then what is?!”

That was the part that had angered Theia so much. Their hero, Koutarou, had run away from his own party. Theia had so been looking forward to the moment she could walk out before the crowd, all dressed up and arm-in-arm with Koutarou.

“The only message he left was, ‘Make the best of it!’ What a joke!”

The part that provoked her ire the most, however, was that Koutarou had left for Earth without even consulting her. She had been left behind by Koutarou

several times now, and each time she had endured it since there was no helping it. But this was different. He certainly could have at least talked with her first, yet he'd left without a single word. The short of it was that Theia was livid that the man she loved had left her behind.

"I'm not asking that he stay and run the country! And I can understand why he couldn't leave Signaltin in Forthorthe after seeing all it can do! But he could at least stay for you all to greet and thank him properly for what he's done!"

Yet despite her personal feelings, Theia was calmly and logically presenting her case to the citizens. This affected them too, after all. At least, that's the pretense she was using.

"What kind of a legendary hero does that? If he keeps saving us, we'll always be in his debt! He could at least put himself in our shoes!"

Surprisingly, Theia's speech received high acclaim from the citizens. As they all loved the Blue Knight, they all more or less felt the same way she did.

"Show some humanity! Stay and listen to us praise you! Or stay because the company is just so good! Not to mention the food! A respectable hero would do all of that, but he's simply taken off again, leaving us nothing but a legend!"

That's why, despite all of the speech being criticism for the Blue Knight, Theia received little criticism herself. Almost all who saw her speech thought to themselves, "Well, said Princess Theiamillis."

"So I believe that the only acceptable recourse is for Clan and myself to head to his homeland and convince him to return to Forthorthe with us. This is something only Clan and I can do. I don't know how many years it will take, but fortunately my mother and Ceilēshu are here to continue to take care of all of you and the country!"

Because the citizens had been sympathizing with her, Theia's idea gained a lot of support. In a public opinion poll recorded later, a whopping 79 percent of participants claimed that they supported her either directly or indirectly. There was no denying that the people wanted Theia and Clan to bring the Blue Knight back.

Public opinion was swayed even further in that direction thanks to Elfaria's

fake tears. After Theia's speech, she showed the footage of Koutarou choosing to become emperor the first time he activated GoL, and then she cried for the camera.

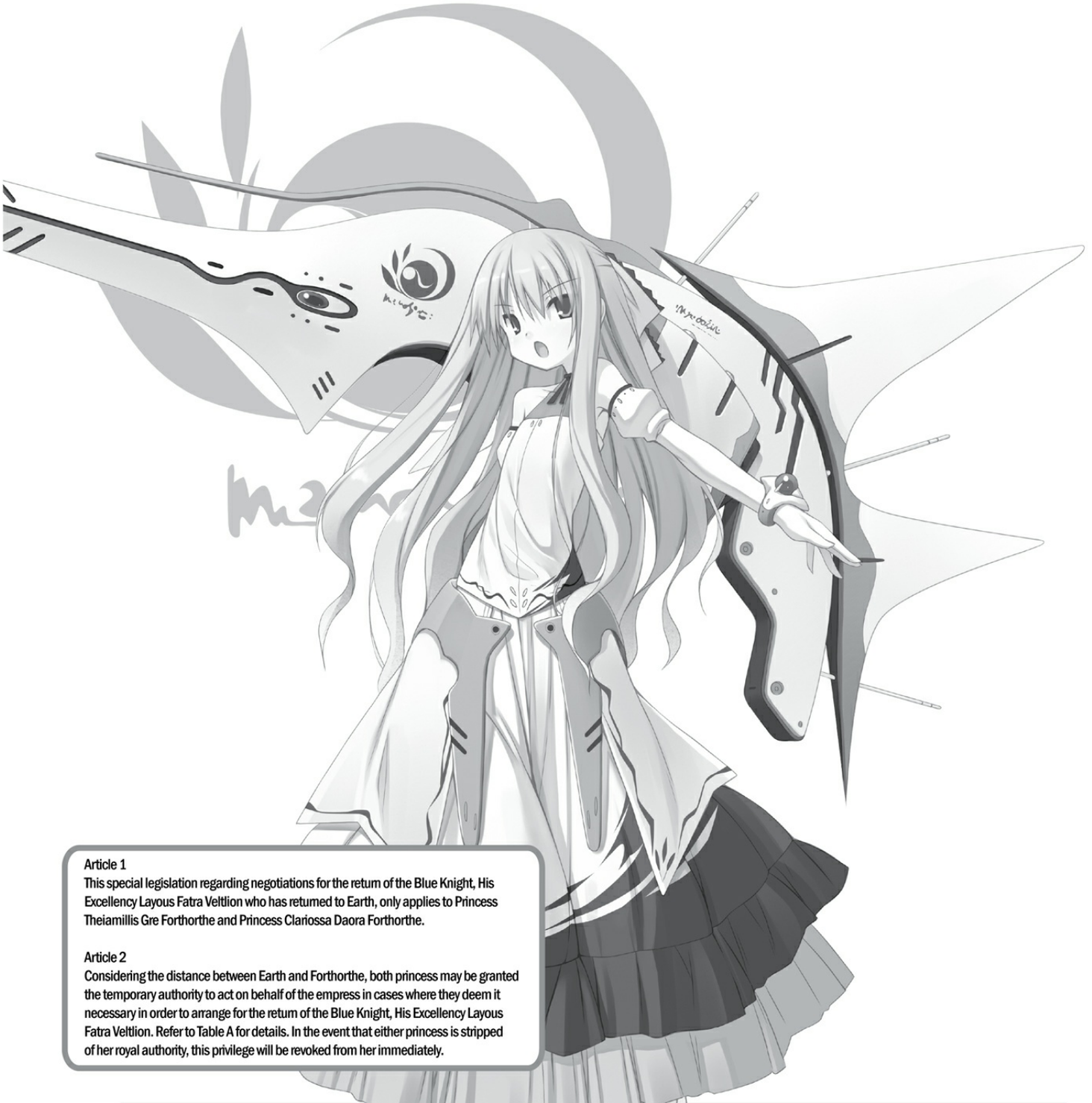
"As you can see, Layous-sama secretly desires to become the emperor. It's only a natural desire as a man. Everyone dreams of becoming a lord at least once in their life. However, Layous-sama silently left this country because he cares too deeply for it. And he didn't so much as hesitate to give up his extremely vast property. How very noble..."

So between Theia's rousing speech and Elfaria's sympathetic plea, almost the entire country was cheering for Theia and Clan to go get the Blue Knight.

"Just you wait, stupid Blue Knight! Clan and I will make you our groom no matter what kind of dirty tricks we have to use! I won't let you just waltz back home to Earth like you have nothing to do with us!"

"Ah, um... I'll do my best too! Certainly! Well, probably..."

And so with the overwhelming support of the people, Theia and Clan's mission to Earth was officially approved by parliament. Forthorthe was ready to establish diplomatic relationships and give technological support in order to conciliate with the Japanese government. They had only one goal: to bring back Forthorthe's greatest treasure, the Blue Knight. They were even ready to be branded as invaders in order to accomplish that. But the Blue Knight himself remained unaware that the situation was about to hit critical mass. The invasion of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire was only just beginning.



Article 1
This special legislation regarding negotiations for the return of the Blue Knight, His Excellency Layous Fatra Veltlion who has returned to Earth, only applies to Princess Theiamillis Gre Forthorthe and Princess Clariossa Daora Forthorthe.

Article 2
Considering the distance between Earth and Forthorthe, both princess may be granted the temporary authority to act on behalf of the empress in cases where they deem it necessary in order to arrange for the return of the Blue Knight, His Excellency Layous Fatra Veltlion. Refer to Table A for details. In the event that either princess is stripped of her royal authority, this privilege will be revoked from her immediately.

The Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire's Special Legislation Regarding Negotiations for the Blue Knight's Return

New! January 31st, 2011

Afterword

Nice to see you again. Author Takehaya here. This time I managed to deliver volume 26.

Being the climax of the Forthorthe arc, this volume had more pages than usual. In exchange, the afterword is shorter than normal, so I'll have to move quickly.

This volume is about the coup d'etat that sprung up in Forthorthe. Koutarou and Vandarion finally square off. Up until this point, they've had a lot of indirect skirmishes, but this time they really get to duke it out. It starts as a battle between fleets, but it takes an unexpected turn from there. Since this battle ultimately decides the fate of Forthorthe, it's going to be a knock-down-drag-out fight. Will Koutarou or Vandarion come out on top? Or perhaps...

How's that for a cliffhanger? Since the future of Forthorthe is riding on this, I thought I should stop there.

Of course a lot of the highlights in this volume are towards the end, but I personally enjoyed you-know-what firing off. It's been 27 volumes since it last appeared, and I'm sure there are many of you that have forgotten about it. I know I almost had (ha!).

I think that the following volume, volume 27, will be a half volume with three stories from *Hercules*. Koutarou and the others will be returning from Forthorthe, and I think half of a volume will be good to cover that. Everyone's taken two months off from school, so a lot of problems have arisen in the meantime. While Koutarou and the others were gone, I'm sure that Rainbow Heart probably prepared replacements for them. That's an organization of justice for you. The short of it is that I don't think they'll just be able to slip back into their normal lives without a few hiccups. I think Yurika and Sanae in particular will be in some trouble. And then there's Theia and Clan getting serious about their invasion, and more.

As for the questionnaire I asked for everyone's help about in the last

volume... After deliberations with my editor-in-charge, S-kun, and after making it through the already plotted out storyline, *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* will continue. Apparently, a startling amount of questionnaires were sent in, so we concluded that we'd feel bad for just ending the story dry. But if it's going to continue, then I will almost certainly be doing a "Koutarou has begun going out with X!" series, so we might be looking at another nine volumes there alone. It'd be even more if we included Elfaria, Alaia, Charl, *etc.* My current prediction is that there would be over forty volumes, but will Hobby Japan be okay with that? I'll ask S-kun about it next time (ha!).

If I carry on normally, the storyline I've plotted out will reach its end in a few volumes. Then it'll be like I'm starting on a series without a plan. Since that'd be bad, I'm going to get to work on thinking up new stories. Fortunately, Forthorthe is heading in the direction of making contact with Earth, so I'm sure there will be all kinds of hijinks in that department. I'll make sure to plan things out so that those of you who prefer these dramatic episodes over the more carefree ones still have something to enjoy as well.

Thank you all very much for answering the questionnaire, but I'd like to ask for your continued cooperation. As I thought, it was a great way of collecting everyone's opinions. Please feel free to continue to send them in. It's nice to have them in hand because it's a lot easier than trying to sift through the internet to figure out what you guys think.

So please continue to send them in, now and in the future. Your responses support the continuance of Hobby Japan and the continuance of *Rokujouma*. We don't win alone, remember? That's true in real life too. So for the future of Hobby Japan, it'd be nice if you could write in too.

I think that's about it this time since I don't have a whole lot of room. Finally, I have my usual thanks. To everyone at the editorial department for their hard work and cooperation; Poco-san for skillfully drawing illustrations to suit my ultra-specific specifications once again; and to all of my readers who bought this book, I would like to thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 27.

June, 2017

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 26

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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