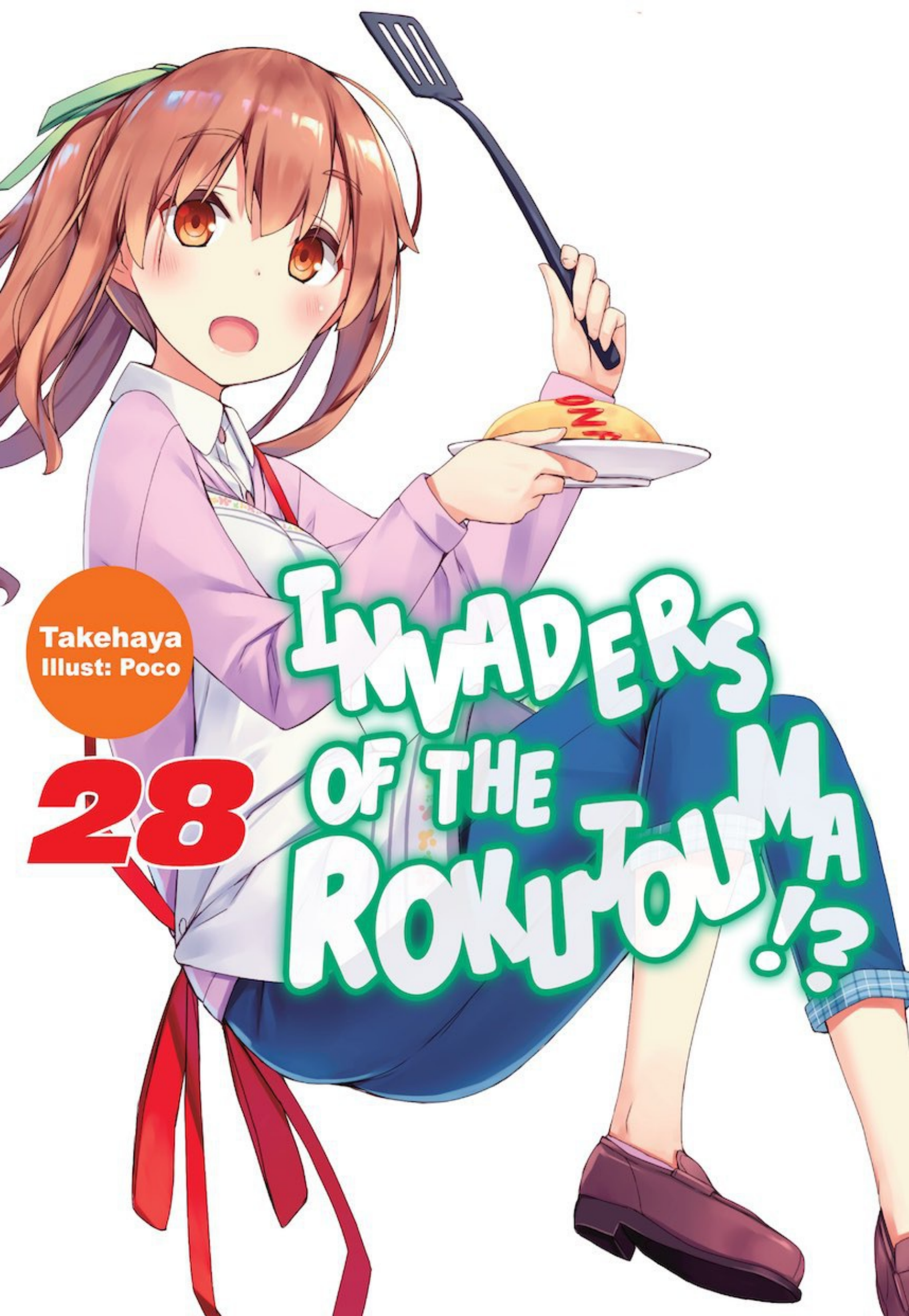

Takehaya
Illust: Poco
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Invaders of the Rokujouma!?

The Usual Morning

Tuesday, March 1st

March mornings in Kisshouharukaze City were still quite cold. While asleep, Koutarou unconsciously pulled up his quilt to cover his face. Poking out from the quilt, however, was a small, clenched fist. It was far too petite and feminine to be his. The fist opened and closed a couple of times before completely falling limp like a wilted flower. About that time, Ruth peeked out from the kitchen and called out to the hand's owner.

"Your Highness, would you like some help?"

"...mmr..."

Alongside that indistinguishable mumble, the hand swept back and forth. Seeing that, Ruth returned to the kitchen with a smile. Kiriha was there in the kitchen as well, since they were in the middle of preparing breakfast.

"How's Theia-dono doing?"

"It seems she wants to continue trying on her own."

As they cooked together, the two girls whimsically chatted away. This was pretty typically for their mornings in room 106, and the topic this time was Theia.

"I'd bet she's frustrated that Harumi and Maki can wake him up relatively easily."

"I wonder why there's such a difference..."

"They just keep going at it until Koutarou wakes up."

"Ah, I think I see. If either of them kept at it, kind Master would have no choice but to wake up, heehee..."

Today, Theia had decided to challenge herself to the task of gently waking up Koutarou. But instead, Koutarou had literally caught her up in his terrible sleeping habits. Right now she was in his arms, wrapped up between him and

the quilt. Being well-versed in martial arts, Theia wouldn't have had any trouble breaking free if she got serious. Or waking Koutarou up, for that matter. But her pride got in the way. She wanted to wake him up with words and gentle shaking because that's how Harumi and Maki did it.

"But in Theia-dono's case, that's the biggest obstacle she could face."

"From Master's point of view, he must be depending on Her Highness... thinking he could leave everything to her."

"But Theia-dono doesn't see it that way. Which is, I believe, how things have ended up like this."

"It's a little different from what Her Highness wants him to do, or rather, from the love she wants. Heehee..."

In the end, Theia was at Koutarou's mercy. Kiriha and Ruth understood exactly why, and had no trouble seeing where this was going. As such, they quickly lost interest in Theia and Koutarou and moved on to the next topic.

Around Koutarou's left eye was bruised, and there was a bump on Theia's head. Normally if two people like that were sitting down and eating breakfast next to each other, it would invite questions. But here in room 106, nobody thought it was all that strange. "They did it again, huh?" was about the only reaction it would elicit. If anything, the other girls were a little envious.

"Um, Theiamillis-san, how do you get Satomi-kun to hit you seriously like that?" Harumi asked.

"Yes, please tell us. We would love to know," Maki echoed.

"Harumi, Maki, are you two trying to pick a fight with me?" Theia demanded.

"We wouldn't dare," both girls said in harmony as they shook their heads.

Harumi and Maki knew Koutarou treasured them, but tended to fall on the side of being a little *too* nice. They were dying to know how Theia had actually managed to get Koutarou to hit her seriously.

"Here I was having a nice sleep and she just up and put me in a joint lock,"

Koutarou muttered while pouring soy sauce on his pickles.

Hearing that, Harumi and Maki looked at Theia in awe.

“Amazing!”

Harumi had an intrinsic resistance to hurting people, so she felt nothing but admiration for Theia who could hit Koutarou without damaging their relationship.

“Is that true?!”

In Maki’s case, she had such a dark past that she craved as much contact as possible with the person she treasured most, even if it was on the violent side. It would just be another aspect to their relationship, and help confirm their bond. While that was all unnecessary now that she had the crest on her forehead, it wasn’t like she could change the way her heart was programmed overnight. Such thoughts and desires were merely second nature to her now.

“I woke you up like I was supposed to! I even did what Harumi and Maki usually do!”

“Don’t lie. If you had, I would’ve woken up.”

“It’s not a lie! But you just ignored me like you didn’t have a care in the world! So I switched to using force! I wasn’t the one at fault!”

Theia’s cheeks puffed out in humiliation and discontent. Harumi and Maki had no trouble waking him up sweetly, but she just couldn’t do it. And Koutarou himself didn’t appreciate the difference. Theia was irritated, and she was about to hit her limit.

“Is that true, Ruth-san?” he asked.

“Yes. Her Highness tried to wake you politely even though she felt that it wasn’t like her to do so. But when you showed no signs of waking up, Her Highness had no choice but to resort to force.”

“So it was true...”

“See? I told you so. It wasn’t my fault. Now what do you have to say for yourself?”

Theia boasted triumphantly now that she'd gotten the upper hand in all this thanks to Ruth backing her up. She then pressed Koutarou for an apology by lightly headbutting his shoulder.

To go for physical contact so naturally, Theiamillis-san really is amazing...

So that's how you do it... but I have to get him angry at me first? How do I do that?

Harumi and Maki were still admiringly watching Theia. Theia herself hadn't noticed that they were staring. But perhaps that was for the better. She certainly would have been unhappy about it.

"I don't care! You still could have woken me up normally. Why did you go straight from shaking me to putting me in a joint lock?"

"What?! That's what you're harping on?!"

And just as their conversation was about to devolve into a quarrel...

"Hey, Theia."

Sanae, who was sitting next to Theia, called to her and tugged on her sleeve. The moment he saw it, Koutarou suddenly got a bad feeling. Sanae had the expression on her face she always did when she was about to play a trick on someone.

"I'm going to let you in on a little secret."

"What's that?"

"The easiest way to wake up Koutarou."

"There's such a thing?! Please tell me!"

Just as Sanae had hoped, Theia took the bait. Holding back her laughter, she began explaining in a confident tone.

"Well, first you have to reign in your feelings as best you can and focus."

"I see, I see. So feelings come first..."

"Then you slowly lean in and try to kiss Koutarou."

"And next comes this kiss... Wait, the kiss?!"

Hearing that word, Theia blushed. It was a most unexpected suggestion. But nevertheless, her interest was piqued and she stared at Sanae, waiting for her to continue.

“Yeah. And when you do, Koutarou will sense it and wake up to run away. This was a plan crafted by Kiriha herself, so it’s guaranteed to succeed.”

“I see. Guaranteed success...”

“Stop it! Anything but that! I won’t be able to rest in peace!”

Sanae’s advice was starting to twist in an unexpected direction. Koutarou had been the victim of such mischief at Kiriha’s hands before, but with Theia doing it too, the danger he was in would increase dramatically. He could read other’s feelings through their auras, but sensing goodwill from up close was difficult. That was because the other party’s aura would completely envelop him. That’s why he couldn’t be certain he would notice that kind of thing in time.

“If it works, he wakes up. And if it fails, you get to kiss him. It’s the perfect plan.”

“But isn’t it shameless for a princess to kiss someone who’s sleeping without permission?”

“Yes! Yes, it most certainly is, Theia!”

Koutarou was on the defensive here. All he could think to do was appeal to Theia’s pride in her nobility.

“It’s only shameless if there’s no love on it,” Sanae continued on. “But there is love, right?”

“Well, that’s true...”

“Don’t let that persuade you, princess! Defend the prestige and honor of the royal families!”

Theia was on the verge of being swayed, but Harumi and Maki were floored by the potential power of the plan to kiss Koutarou in his sleep.

“...”

“...”

After looking at each other with dumbfounded expressions, their faces turned red from imagining themselves trying it. A kiss on the lips was on a totally different level than one to the cheek or hand.

If he does wake up, he might brandish his fists... But even then, it might be a good chance...

I bet Satomi-kun would get angry... But that might be good too... I wouldn't mind if he got angry with me like he did with Theia-san or Yurika...

Even if he were sleeping, kissing him would be far too forward an expression of love. It was a big hurdle for these two modest girls, but they knew giving up outright would be a waste.

Shizuka, who lived upstairs in room 206, met up with Koutarou and the others either during breakfast or when it was time to go to school. Since her daily karate training had run late today, she ended up grouping up with them on the way to school. And without any context from the prior conversation, she was curious as to why Koutarou had snatched Theia's smartphone and was staring quite intently at it.

"What are you looking at, Satomi-kun?"

"Nothing, it's just... I'm on an alarm clock maker's site. I'm hoping to find a real loud one."

"Why?"

Shizuka tilted her head in confusion. With so many people going in and out of room 106, she found it hard to believe Koutarou needed help waking up.

"I guess you could say I've recently had a moment of enlightenment... Perhaps a premonition of danger would be more accurate."

"A premonition...?"

His answer only puzzled Shizuka even more.

"Actually..."

Seeing Shizuka's confusion, Yurika leaned over and whispered something into

her ear.

“...Ah, so he got his comeuppance for letting you do as you please.”

“That’s right.”

Now that Yurika had explained, Shizuka clapped her hands together and smiled. Considering his situation, poor Koutarou had no choice but to buy an alarm.

Satomi-kun thinking that he’ll get out of this somehow is cute. Even I’ve kissed him on the cheek, heehee...

Shizuka had a few opinions on the matter, but chose not to voice them. She felt it was her job as a lady to show some discretion when it came to men here and there.

“Yurika, do you need a loud one too?” Koutarou asked.

“Naw.”

“Why not?”

“I get the feeling I’d set it wrong and end up waking everyone up in the middle of the night.”

“I wouldn’t want that either. All right, none for you then.”

“Yeah, you can just wake me up instead, Satomi-san. And gently if possible.”

“It’s not possible.”

“Well, at least don’t use hot water please...”

“We’ll see.”

Kiriha and Ruth seemed to share Shizuka’s opinion on all this, and both exchanged knowing looks with her. Koutarou had no idea that while he was carefreely chatting away with Yurika, the girls’ encirclement was gradually closing in.

“Why don’t you just wake up Yurika with a kiss too, Koutarou?” Sanae asked.

“Whaaaaat?!” Yurika shrieked.

“You wouldn’t want him to?”

“I-It’s not like I wouldn’t want him to... I’d just... rather be awake. It would be a waste in my sleep...”

“Or so she says,” Shizuka said with a giggle.

“Don’t worry. You don’t have anything to be worried about. More importantly, Yurika, Sanae, you’ll have to start studying soon.”

Koutarou put his foot down and changed the topic. Things weren’t going in his favor right now and he didn’t want any talk of this to continue, so brining up someone else’s problems seemed like the best way to go.

“Whaaat?! But we just finished studying for the test the other day!”

“Yurika’s right! We studied a lot for that!”

After just overcoming the educational assessment test from Folsaria, Yurika and Sanae had no interest in studying any more. They felt like their brains would fry if they tried to stuff anything else into them.

“We have finals soon. That’s what’s going to decide if you flunk or not. The test from before was just a warm up.”

Final exams would come in the middle of March. If they failed now, the test from the other day would have all been for nothing. They’d have to repeat a year anyway. And since this wasn’t being administered by Rainbow Heart, who had their best interests in mind, there would be no room to argue with the results. In that sense, finals were much scarier. Sanae and Yurika’s crisis had only just begun.

“But, but... why are we the only ones who have to study?! Doesn’t everyone have to too?!” Yurika pleaded.

“That’s because your grades are terrible,” Koutarou explained.

“But I had a passing grade!” Sanae argued.

“Just barely.”

While everyone had passed the test in the end, Sanae had only just barely managed to scrape by, and Yurika was so borderline that Theia had had to plead her case and argue that they make a special exception for her because of an error in one of the questions. If left to their own devices, both of them would

bomb their finals for sure. Koutarou wanted to make sure they studied properly so that they could all move on to their final year of high school together.

“What are you two going to do if you really end up repeating a year?”

“It’s okay, that won’t—”

“Yeah, more importantly, Kou, take a look at this picture.”

But before a conclusion could be reached, a familiar voice muscled its way into the discussion and steered the topic away from studies. That unmistakable voice was Kenji’s. In the past, Kenji used to meet up with Koutarou at Corona House. But after all this time, Kenji knew Koutarou’s route and his schedule well enough that he would just meet up with him on the way there. That meant that neither of them would ever be kept waiting, so both boys were just as happy this way.

“You’re early today, Mackenzie.”

“Who cares? Just come over here and take a look at this!”

Kenji was rather excited for some reason, and he shoved his phone in front of Koutarou as he got closer. On display was a picture of a certain someone Kenji adored.

“Kin-chan, huh? Oh, that’s our uniform! That’s right. She’ll be starting high school soon, right?”

“You betcha! And she’s super cute, isn’t she?! I couldn’t help taking a picture.”

The picture was of Kenji’s little sister, Mackinley, also known as Matsudaira Kotori. Kotori was very shy and would often follow after her older brother Kenji. Kenji treasured his sister in return, and his personality changed whenever he talked about her. His normally cool attitude disappeared, and he would turn into nothing more than a doting older brother. So when it came to Kotori, it was almost like Koutarou and Kenji reversed their roles.

“But what’s with the uniform? She just passed, so she shouldn’t have gotten a uniform yet, right?”

Kisshouharukaze High School held its entrance exams in February. The results

were announced at the end of the month, so Kotori should have only heard that she had passed within the last few days. Of course, she shouldn't have a uniform yet either. Despite that, here Kenji was with a picture of her in the Harukaze High uniform. Koutarou found that a little odd.

"Yeah, I just got her to try it on yesterday. I borrowed a uniform from one of the upperclassmen in the drama club. It's my cute little sister's high school debut! I had to make sure we ordered her one that was the perfect size!"

"...You're an idiot, aren't you?"



“Don’t be so rude! What’s wrong with treasuring your sister?!”

It seemed the inner workings of Kenji’s mind were truly strange. Once he could appreciate that, Koutarou smiled bitterly. He knew Kotori was a good girl, but felt Kenji took things a little too far.

“I didn’t say it was bad. I just think it’s a bit much.”

“What can I do when she’s just so darned cute?”

“Yeah. I bet the boys won’t leave her alone.”

“That’s exactly what I’m worried about, Kouuu! I wonder if she’ll be able to properly turn them down.”

Kenji looked anxious from the bottom of his heart as he held his head. He was normally very calm, but he could never keep his cool when his little sister was involved. Since he had plenty of relationship experience himself, he was constantly worried about his overly shy sister.

“She’ll probably be fine. Kin-chan’s a high schooler now.”

“I know, but just look at her! She’s so freakin’ cute! And weak to peer pressure!”

“You’re overthinking things.”

“But I don’t know if I’d be able to take it if she gets taken in by some bad boy and changes on me.”

“Come on, Mackenzie... This is just getting gross.”

“You’re awfully cold today, Kou.”

“No, you’re just being weird today.”

Kenji was practically clinging to Koutarou, but Koutarou pushed him away. In the middle of their antics, they were both struck by tresses of golden hair reflecting the sunshine fluttering next to them.

“Let’s see here... I believe I’ve seen her face before.”

“Your Highness, it was New Year’s Day.”

“Ah, that’s right, of course! It’s the girl from that time! I’m glad to see she’s in

good health!”

It was Theia who leaned in to see the picture, and Ruth who jogged her memory about where they’d met before. It seemed the other girls were interested in Kenji’s little sister, and had hall gathered around Koutarou to see the picture.

“Look at this, Aika-san,” said Harumi. “When we saw her last, she was merely a girl, but she’s rapidly becoming more feminine.”

“I wonder if Satomi-kun likes girls with this kind of atmosphere to them...” Maki sighed.

“Not at all,” Kiriha interjected. “Koutarou isn’t simplistic enough to make up his mind over just atmosphere.”

“Heehee... Kiriha-san is right. Besides, isn’t that why we’re all struggling?” Harumi asked with a giggle.

The girls grabbed the smartphone from Koutarou’s hands and all gave their opinions while looking at Kotori. While admiring her picture, Koutarou could see how interested they all were in this kind of thing. They were all normal teenage girls in the end.

“Kou, do you think Kotori would be able to fit in with a circle of friends like that? Oh, I’m so worried...”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine. It’s not like Kin-chan hasn’t been a girl for fifteen years for nothing.”

“But I’ve never seen her talk to anyone but me and you...”

“Just because it’s been like that doesn’t mean it’ll *always* be like that. Just have a little faith in her.”

“If it doesn’t work out, you better take responsibility, Kou! Got it?!”

“Okay, okay, jeez...”

Koutarou shrugged with a wry smile. Kenji was a handful whenever it came to his sister, but Koutarou couldn’t bring himself to criticize him too strongly. After all, it was because Kenji was so doting and caring that he’d stayed friends with Koutarou all this time even when things got rough. And Koutarou was grateful

for that. That was why he'd never really be able to scorn that side of his personality, even if he was a handful at times like this.

"Hey, Mackenzie, do you have more pictures of your little sister?"

"Would you like to see them, Theiamillis-san?!"

"Indeed, show me!"

"Look at that, Kou! This is what I wanted to see!"

Kenji gleefully ran towards Theia and the others. Not long ago, Koutarou probably would have just watched over them from where he stood. But not today. Recently, Koutarou had changed a little. And after thinking about it for a good ten seconds or so, he walked over to Kenji and the others.

"..."

Noticing this, Harumi followed Koutarou with her eyes. However, she simply smiled and said nothing. She even took a few steps back to make way for him. He was walking over to the others as it was, but he stopped where Harumi stood and seemed to be thinking about something again.

"..."

"...!"

Having made up his mind, he grabbed Harumi's hand. Pulling the surprised Harumi along, the two of them joined in on the commotion with Kenji and the others. Reflecting on what had just happened, Harumi was truly happy. She no longer needed to say anything.

"...They seem to be having fun... without me..."

That's why it wasn't Harumi who muttered those words, but Clan. She was watching over the group through an observation device, and she occasionally witnessed such wordless interactions between Koutarou and Harumi. It was seeing it happen now that made her think to herself...

"I think I will start attending Kisshouharukaze High School starting next month. It's a good idea, politically speaking. And it should be more convenient to be near Theiamillis-san. Politically speaking..."

Despite the reason being clear, not being able to admit to it was simply the kind of girl Clan was. Though it looked like she was losing out, there was a space for her in that cheerful group. If she could just grasp that, everyone would be happy.

Alien Invasion?!

Tuesday, March 1st

Maki's skill in the kitchen was a few notches above average. Originally a soldier, she'd learned the basics of cooking as part of her survival skills. Her abilities only improved from there as she served her master, Maya, and took missions that required blending in as a normal civilian. But not once had she wanted to cook of her own free will until she entered Kisshouharukaze High School. In other words, not until she had people she considered friends.

"Everyone, Maki-san has made lunch, so make sure you don't buy lunch in the cafeteria today," said Ruth.

"Oh? Maki's made lunch, has she? Interesting," Theia commented.

"Yurika, Yurika! That means you get to eat for free," called Sanae.

"Really?! Thank you, Maki-chan!" cheered Yurika.

Indeed, today Maki had decided to challenge herself to boxed lunches. Making them for ten people was hard work. She'd done all of the prep work the night before, and had gotten up early this morning to give it a try. While she still had much to learn, the ever-serious Maki loyally followed a recipe book. She added in her own touches here and there, but stayed true to the instructions. Unlike with Sanae and Yurika and their strange inventiveness, there was no need to worry about the taste of the final product with Maki cooking.

"I see, so that's what the package I received this morning was..."

The diligent, considerate Maki had even made sure to make and send lunch to Clan too. She would often join in with the others around lunchtime via her communication device. Since students were free to eat lunch where they liked, they often went to other classrooms to visit friends. That meant there were always different people in the room, and no one ever noticed one more voice than there should be.

"I just hope it's to your liking..." said Maki.

“More importantly, I think we should focus on capturing Satomi Koutarou, who’s currently trying to flee,” suggested Kiriha.

The girls all looked over towards the classroom door and spied Koutarou, who was indeed trying to sneak out. Of course, they wouldn’t let him get away with that.

“Jeez, Satomi-kun! Why don’t you just learn to give up?!”

“Say what you want, Landlord-san! For me, it’s either get beat up after eating, or after school!”

What Koutarou was really trying to escape was the wrath of his male classmates. The girls drew enough attention as it was, and Koutarou joining in to eat lunch with them would only stand out more. He was already considered a traitor by the unpopular boys alliance, so flaunting his closeness with the girls during school hours would only make him more of a target. And that was exactly what he was trying to avoid.

“Then just don’t let them beat you up. That should be easy for you, right?”

Shizuka cut straight to the chase. It was true that if Koutarou got serious, he could easily handle anything his friends could throw at him and come out on top. No matter how many untrained high school students attacked him, they wouldn’t stand a chance against Koutarou and the powers that protected them.

“If I pulled a stunt like that, it’d ruin my life here!”

Shizuka had a point, but Koutarou had a good reason for not taking that route. He strictly made sure not to use any special powers while he was at school. It would be one thing if a robber or something came into the school, but openly using his special powers would completely destroy his school life as he knew it. That’s why, while he was at school, he tried his hardest to be a normal teenage boy. He wanted to be on the same page as his classmates and friends. So he especially didn’t want to use his powers to resolve a conflict with then.

“Then tell that to Aika-san,” Shizuka said.

“I’m sorry, Satomi-kun. I wasn’t thinking of your circumstances...” Maki said, apologizing before Koutarou could respond.

Maki was a master of mind manipulation, but that also made her a master at reading people. She understood exactly how Koutarou felt. Realizing that she may have put him in a tough spot, Maki lowered her head, apologized, and looked up at Koutarou with a remorseful look.

“Go on, Satomi-kun, you have to say something to her.”

Shizuka urged Koutarou on with a nudge of her elbow. When it came to things like this, she wouldn’t back down.

“Ugh...”

Shizuka was trying to get Koutarou to explain himself to Maki, but he seemed to have a change of heart. He couldn’t bring himself to say it when she was looking at him like that.

“...Aika-san, let’s not stand around here. Let’s eat lunch already.”

“Ah...”

Maki’s face lit up at Koutarou’s words. Seeing that, Koutarou sighed a little in relief. He wasn’t looking forward to getting beat up, but he’d rather risk it than have to see Maki so downcast. He could always hedge his bets on being able to run away.

“I eat a lot though. Are you sure you have enough?”

“Yes! I even put in extra for you, Satomi-kun!”

“That’s more like it, Satomi-kun,” Shizuka said with a giggle. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to protect you later, okay?”

“That’d be extremely uncool, so thanks but no thanks.”

“Well said, Satomi-kun! What a soldier! What a man!”

And so Koutarou ended up having lunch with the girls anyway. He might have earned the ire of the boys around him, but at this rate, it seemed like that would be the new normal. In fact, seeing him with the girls now, it looked as though a small piece of the wall around his heart had started to crumble.

The boxed lunches that Maki had made weren't especially elaborate. The dishes included all came from the lunch section of a recipe book, and Maki had chosen things that looked like they would be easy enough to make. She'd picked out things like rice, deep-fried chicken, potato salad, corn stir-fried with butter, and spaghetti flavored with ketchup. She wanted to make sure there was something everyone would enjoy. She even included a small bag of furikake so they could season things to suit their tastes. In the end, Maki's boxed lunches were a symbol of affection for the people she intended to feed.

"Ah, only Koutarou's portion has meat. That's unfair!" whined Sanae.

"That's love for you," Theia mumbled.

"Your research on Master is spot on, Maki-san," said Ruth.

"Um, thank you very much..." Maki mumbled.

Though each of the lunches had been made with care, she'd especially put her heart into one in particular. Koutarou's boxed lunch was bigger than the rest and had a wider variety of things in it. He had more rice and fried chicken than anyone else, along with some dumplings from yesterday's dinner and the little bit of leftover pork fried with ginger. She'd tried to craft something that would be more appealing to a boy.

"Share with me," said Sanae.

"Whaddaya want?" Koutarou asked.

"All of the extras."

"You're gonna take them all from me?!"

"Just a little bit of everything. I'll give you some of my deep-fried chicken in exchange."

"I guess that's okay."

"Me too, please!" piped up Yurika.

After trading around some side dishes, the group all sat down to eat together. Before digging in, each one gave their thanks.

"Thank you for the food!"

After how long they'd all spent together, good manners had started to rub off on the less polished friends in the group. Sanae even held her chopsticks properly now. Partially because she'd spent so long as a ghost, her table manners had really suffered.

"Maki-san, this deep-fried chicken is really good."

"That's because of your guidance, Sakuraba-senpai. Thank you very much."

"The potato salad leaves you wanting more. It's truly delicious," added Theia.

"Maki-san, you used chicken broth as a secret ingredient, didn't you?" asked Kiriha.

"Yes, that's right. I thought that the flavor would be too bland after it cooled, so I added in a little chicken broth to make up for that."

Fortunately, Maki's lunch was well received. The menu itself was solid, and the dishes had been made to keep well and be easy to eat. All in all, it was quite well made for a high school girl's home cooking.

"Satomi-kun, stop acting all tough and say something."

"I'm not acting tough. I would have said something right away if it weren't for... you know..."

"Being a boy sure is tough, huh?"

"Please cut me some slack, Landlord-san."

Just as he expected, while eating with eight girls, Koutarou drew a lot of attention. He was getting glares from around the room, and he could feel nearly every one stabbing at him. The room was practically full of tension and bloodlust, and it wasn't hard to imagine all-out war breaking out if Koutarou smiled the wrong way or said the wrong thing. The happier he looked right now, the more danger he was in.

But even then, I can't just not say anything... I know! Saguratin, please!

Koutarou called out to his sword in his mind. After the last battle, Nalfalaren had split back into the two original swords. Since he couldn't walk around with them in Japan, he'd left them in Clan's care. And even thought they were separated by some distance now, its powers of protection were still working.

Taking a hint from that, Koutarou called out to the sword to try and activate a different power. When he did, a faint indigo crest appeared on Maki's forehead.

"Satomi-kun? What is it?"

"Aika-san, your lunch is really good. Thank you."

Koutarou told Maki how he felt through Saguratin. Saguratin's spiritual connection with Koutarou was extremely strong, so it was more suited than Signaltin for conveying something analog like his impressions of taste. With its power, Koutarou could discreetly tell Maki what he thought of her cooking and she would be able to tell exactly how good it tasted to him. Sharing that kind of connection with him lifted Maki's spirits. Normally, that alone would be enough to satisfy her, but today she decided to press for more.

"Um, what did you like about it?"

"I guess the best is the deep-fried chicken? The meat is tender, and the smell is... Is the oil different?"

"No, the cooking oil is the same, but I used sesame oil to season it."

"So that's what that smell is, huh? Also, the pork is good. It's heavy on the seasoning, just the way I like it."

"Heehee, I was hoping you would say that."

"Then it was a success."

"Yes!"

The connection they were sharing and the positive energy Koutarou was sending her way made Maki happy and confident, and it showed on her face. Maki's bright and energetic smile reminded him of when they first met. He hoped that she'd be able to smile like that all the time someday.

"Heh..."

"Aww..."

"Hahh..."

There was just one problem. While they couldn't overhear Koutarou and Maki's telepathic conversation, the other girls could clearly tell that Koutarou

had used the sword to talk with Maki, and that it had made her very happy. They were happy for her, and warmly watched over the two of them as they interacted silently. But that wouldn’t last forever. As soon as they were done sharing their private moment, the other girls were sure to raise a fuss for being left out.



After finishing their lunches, the group shifted over to having a tea party. Ruth pulled out the tea and snacks from somewhere, presumably Blue Knight. It wasn't an issue right now, but Koutarou was rubbing a bump on his head and thinking about how he would have to put a stop to things like that before long.

"Satomi-san, I'll make lunch tomorrow!" Yurika suddenly declared with sparkling eyes.

Koutarou quickly had to shift mental gears. Maki's lunch had gone over so well that the girls were now talking about making lunches on a rotating basis.

"Give it up. You can't cook, can you?" he said.

"I can at least make pork cutlets! Shizuka-san taught me!"

"Wasn't your success rate at that abysmal? You'll get fat again from eating all your failures."

"I have a healthy appetite and get poor mileage, so I'm sure I'll be fine!"

Yurika was only getting more fired up. Koutarou was about to give her a hard time—the question "Is that something to brag about?" in particular came to mind.

But... hmm...

However, in the end, Koutarou chose to swallow his words. After scratching his head a couple of times, he said something different.

"If you're willing to go that far, then give it a shot. I can help you out with some of your failures. Even if they're a little burnt, putting them on rice to make katsudon should make them a little more palatable."

"Satomi-san...?"

Yurika was taken aback at Koutarou's unexpected offer. She was sure he would object and gripe a little more before she'd be able to get him to agree.

"What? You're making a strange face, you know."

"I-It's nothing! Please look forward to it!"

Koutarou telling her to give it a shot was surprising, but she was still happy about it. She was now beaming, and turned to Shizuka and Ruth for tips and

tricks for making pork cutlets, as well as advice on garnishing them. She was clearly even more motivated now after talking to Koutarou about it.

“So you do have a good side to you... What changed your mind, Satomi Koutarou?” Kiriha asked with a smile.

She’d been paying attention to their conversation, and like Yurika, was a little surprised at what he’d said. But she knew it was a good thing, and was smiling softly at his kindness.

“What can I say...? Heck, I don’t really know. I don’t know, but I figured that if she wanted to try, I should let her.”

“Say, Koutarou, have you ever wondered why Yurika is clumsy?”

“Not really... I mean, it’s probably just her personality.”

“I’ve always found it mysterious. If she were really that clumsy, then she should be like that all the time. Even when things get rough. But I’ve never seen Yurika falter when it mattered most.”

“That’s... Well, me neither.”

Whenever they were in battle or someone was in danger, Yurika—surprisingly enough—always pulled her weight. Thinking about it, it was quite strange. And Kiriha had reached a conclusion based on that discrepancy.

“In other words, Yurika isn’t really clumsy. She’s just bad at focusing. So I want you to take a good look at how motivated Yurika is right now. Especially since you’ve encouraged her.”

“And?”

“Nothing. Just look forward to lunch.”

“...Yeah.”

With Yurika this determined, surely she’d be able to make a proper lunch. Of course, she was still inexperienced, so it wouldn’t be anything like Kiriha or Ruth’s cooking. But certainly she would still be able to make something as good as the next person. That’s what Kiriha believed. And now, so did Koutarou.

“Kiriha-san, you know...”

“Hmm?”

“No one’s going to hold it against you if you pursue your own happiness.”

Koutarou believed that Kiriha was right about Yurika. But in turn, he began worrying that Kiriha was too fixated on the other girls and not herself.

“I know.”

“Huh?”

“But brushing off the others won’t make me happy. Really, having a good memory can be problematic from time to time.”

It would probably be easy for Kiriha to act to her own advantage. But her intuition, keen mind, and considerate nature kept her from doing that. If she acted selfishly, she would feel every ounce of the sadness, pain, and trouble she inflicted on everyone else. And she knew she would regret it. In a way, that was a burden for her.

Now that I think about it, it was the same back when we were fighting on Forthorthe...

Koutarou recalled a similar problem. It was back when she was working as their tactician. Since she could accurately estimate how many lives her strategies would cost, that weighed heavily on her.

“A gentle genius, huh? Nice girls finish last too, I guess.”

“No, I won’t lose.”

“Yeah?”

“The man I love isn’t self-important enough to be able to overlook that kind of thing himself.”

“So he’s just some normal dude?”

“Indeed. That’s why we can support each other.”

“...I guess he has it rough.”

“Heehee...”

Koutarou was well aware of what Kiriha was saying. He knew exactly, but he

was embarrassed to admit it to her face, so he just played it off. But Kiriha could tell, and she grinned.

“If only he’d sleep together with me...”

“You’re still a high school student, you know?! Don’t you think it’s still early for a relationship like that?!”

“Oh? I’m sorry, I didn’t know you’d take it so personally. I didn’t think it had anything to do with you.”

“Urgh...”

“Heehee...”

Then, just as Koutarou had been silenced by Kiriha...

“Koutarou, you should just give— Huh?”

Sanae, who was watching the two of them tease each other, suddenly noticed a change in the atmosphere of the classroom. It was like the hostility directed at Koutarou just moments ago had passed, and now the energy in the room was a chaotic tangle of emotion. There was surprise, confusion, curiosity, excitement, doubt, and more all at once. Positive and negative emotions intermingled and filled the entire classroom.

“Koutarou, Koutarou! What is this?”

“Hmm? This is—”

Koutarou realized something was strange too after Sanae pointed it out. He looked around to try to figure out what, but before he could...

“Turn on the TV! This is big!”

Kenji, who had gone to the school cafeteria, came flying back into the classroom. He was as white as a sheet and shouting about the TV. Someone sitting near it listened to him and turned it on, and everyone else in the classroom turned to look.

“...Thank you for tuning in to this special broadcast; we have breaking news. Just moments ago, the government held an emergency press conference and announced that envoys of a nation from another galaxy, the Holy Forthorthe

Galactic Empire, have come here to Japan to establish diplomatic relations. I repeat...”

News of the Forthorthian aliens sent shockwaves around the globe and plunged the planet into confusion.

“Wait, Forthorthe?!”

“Teehee...”

“Don’t ‘teehee’ me, Theia!”

Koutarou and the others were thrown into chaos as well, but for a slightly different reason.

According to the official statement from the government, the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire was a nation over ten million light years away that had come to Earth—which they had only recently discovered—seeking a peaceful cultural exchange.

Forthorthe was restricting their diplomatic relations to just Japan, and limiting their exchange to just cultural and human capital. Their policy was to observe how that exchange went, and then gradually expand from there. Such caution was necessary in order to prevent any tragedies—the kind that the histories of both Earth and Forthorthe indicated could happen when two new cultures met. Both sides agreed things would be safer this way.

As to why Japan had been selected for their diplomatic engagement, Forthorthe claimed that it was simply because among the countries with a largest economies, Japan had the best public order. Since they were interested in sending their own citizens to their destination country, they wanted to make sure it would be a safe environment. It was a fairly compelling argument, and seemed to confirm that they meant well.

Conversely, it also meant that they wouldn’t be doing business with any dangerous nations. If the exchange between Forthorthe and Japan went well, they could always expand their diplomatic relations with other countries in the future. In hopes of that, the rest of the world would likely put more resources

into maintaining peace and public order. It was predicted that Earth would, for largely selfish reasons, become a little safer overall.

That was roughly how the first emergency press conference on the arrival of aliens had gone. Of course, it was just the official announcement. Forthorthe had ulterior motives in all this, and Koutarou questioned Theia and Ruth to get the details.

“Basically, it’s like I said before. That time has come,” said Theia.

“Things are going according to the schedule that we prepared beforehand,” added Ruth.

Forthorthe primarily had two goals. The first was preparing a legal route for the People of the Earth and the citizens of Folsaria to return to their original home. The second was important, but it would take more work to accomplish. It was bringing the Blue Knight, Koutarou, back to Forthorthe.

Forthorthe had established diplomatic relations with Japan in order to fulfill their first goal. The People of the Earth and the people of Folsaria both existed by relying on Japan’s economy and social structures as things were. If they were to suddenly emigrate, Japan would be losing a part of its workforce. So even if these people weren’t registered citizens of Japan, if Forthorthe took them without any prior arrangement with Japan, it would look bad diplomatically. That wasn’t something a self-respecting nation would do. That was why forming a relationship with Japan was a crucial step in being able to boldly and properly bring their people home.

Compared to that, the secondary objective of bringing back the Blue Knight was a far more elusive goal. Since the Blue Knight’s status was such that not even the royal families could order him around, Theia and the others had essentially come to Earth to ask nicely. All they could do was prepare the way and wait for Koutarou to come around on his own.

Of course, Theia and the others weren’t simply waiting without a plan. They were going to make use of any means possible, as long as Koutarou didn’t disapprove, in order to make him nod his head.

“Come on... There had to be a better way to go about this, right?” Koutarou

groaned.

“I personally take pride in this being a considerably soft landing,” said Ruth.

“She’s right!” agreed Theia.

“You could have at least told me when this was gonna happen. That was one hell of a surprise.”

“Nuh-uh! You didn’t tell us either!”

“Nuh-uh! I...”

Not telling Koutarou about the timing of the announcement was simply their way of getting a little revenge. Since he had left Forthorthe without telling them, Theia, Ruth, and Clan felt no need to announce their arrival. They wanted to give him quite a shock too.

“Is that the sound of you reflecting on your actions?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Then you won’t leave without telling us again?”

“I won’t. Actually, I tried to tell you. It was just too little too late, I guess.”

“Hmm, well, that’s true. Okay, I forgive you. I’ll let you in on things from now on.”

“I’m honored.”

After getting their revenge on Koutarou, Theia and the others were satisfied. They were only so mad about him leaving without warning because they loved him. And since they’d followed him all the way here, it wasn’t like they really wanted to do anything mean to him. They just wanted to give him a taste of his own medicine, and they felt like they’d gotten their point across now. That was all that was necessary. After all, they wanted Koutarou to be their ally in the future. They couldn’t go too far.

“So what are you going to do now?”

“About that...”

She’d been enjoying herself so far, but Theia’s expression suddenly turned serious. It was the face she wore as a princess when something important was

happening.

“We’ll allow people to come and go while we conduct our cultural exchange. I believe you’ve experienced something similar for yourself, but while we’re still seen as mysterious aliens, people here won’t understand us no matter what we do.”

“That’s true. And there’s probably no avoiding people feeling that way at first.”

“They won’t miraculously be able to understand each other through fighting like we did.”

“So you’ll have to wait for the ice to thaw... And you hate waiting like that.”

“That’s right. Sitting around just doing nothing is agonizing to me!”

“But for better or worse, we don’t have the time to sit around and do nothing now,” Ruth said, adding on to Theia and Koutarou’s conversation. “There are piles of problems. Would the two of you look over there? The first one has already arrived.”

Before Ruth even finished speaking, someone darted into the classroom. It was one of Kisshouharukaze High School’s Japanese teachers, Miyama Reina.

“So this is where you were, Satomi-san!”

Once Reina spotted Koutarou and the others, she came running over to them with an awfully serious expression.

“Something has happened, hasn’t it?”

Reina, who normally took care to play the part of a teacher, spoke to Koutarou more formally than usual as she ran up to him with a pale face. That alone was enough to tell him something serious had happened. Ruth wasn’t the only one who could tell that now.

“Yes! There are some guests for you and Kiriha-san. Please come to the guidance counseling office right away!”

“I understand. Let’s go, Kiriha-san.”

“Right.”

“Ruth and I will go too! I doubt it’s unrelated to us.”

“All right, you come along too.”

Koutarou invited Theia and headed for the classroom door. Lunch break was about to end, but they would be excused from class since a teacher had summoned them.

“I thought we would be able to take it easy after coming back...”

Yurika despondently drooped her shoulders. Koutarou’s expression when he hurried out of the classroom wasn’t his usual, carefree look that she loved so much. From here on, Koutarou and the others’ actions would greatly affect the futures of both Earth and Forthorthe. While the danger wasn’t as imminent as during the battle with Vandarion, a lapse in judgment here could invite even bigger danger than back then. And knowing that full well, Koutarou and the girls approached the matter at hand like they had that fateful battle.

“Me too, but we can’t just ignore Folsaria and the People of Earth... It’ll be a little while yet before things calm down.”

Shizuka brought a cookie to her mouth as she said that. It had tasted great when she took a bite just moments ago, but it seemed a little bland now for some reason. And her cookies weren’t the only thing. There was something dull about the tea, the air, and even the scenery. It was the sensation of being left behind.

“Or maybe this will become our normal...” Harumi muttered.

The other girls turned to look at her when she said that. The normal becoming extraordinary after the extraordinary became normal. No one wanted to acknowledge that, but it was an undeniable possibility for them. Japan’s public opinion wasn’t united, and neither was Folsaria’s or the People of the Earth’s, so the chances of problems being prolonged was high.

“...”

Sanae, who was looking at Harumi with great anxiety, suddenly heard a whisper in her ear. That was without a doubt someone’s voice, but she couldn’t make out was it was saying. It was mysterious.

“There it is again... Just where is it coming from?”

Sanae restlessly looked around trying to track down the origin of the voice, but she didn’t see anything. The same thing had happened several times before, and she had never been able to figure out who was talking to her.

“Sanae-san, is something the matter?” asked Maki.

She’d noticed Sanae looking around and was worried something was wrong. Seeing that Maki was concerned, Sanae smiled and shook her head.

“No, it’s nothing. I think I’m just hearing things.”

As of late, Sanae had been hearing the mysterious voice more often. That’s why, though she had at first figured that she must have been hearing things, she now began suspecting that the voice was a sign of something. But since she didn’t have anything to go off of, she kept it a secret to herself so as not to cause needless worry.

A most unexpected group greeted Koutarou and the others as they approached the guidance office. It was five youths standing together as a team.

“Sun Rangers!”

“It’s been a while, Baron-san!”

The Sun Rangers of the Sun Squad were a quick response force that the government had secretly created to deal with invaders. In the past they had been useless employees with nothing to do, but when the problems with the People of the Earth had surfaced, their situation had completely changed. They ended up in fierce fights on the front lines. That was when they met Koutarou and the others, and together they fought against the radical faction of the People of the Earth. They were comrades-in-arms that would never forget what they’d done for each other.

“Hmm...?”

But looking at the five of them, Koutarou felt something was different. Their presence had changed a little.

“It looks like you guys have been through a lot... Seems you’ve gotten a lot

stronger, too.”

The change was in their auras. They were emitting calm and refreshing auras, but they were keeping up their guard and watching their surroundings. Based on experience, Koutarou honestly didn’t want to fight against people with that kind of presence. They had obviously gotten stronger. And there were five of them.

“Can you tell?”

The expression of their leader, Red Shine AKA Kenichi, eased up. While Koutarou was younger than the rangers, they respected him as their model hero and were quite happy to receive his praise.

“Yeah. You feel like you might even be stronger than me now.”

Koutarou was only strong because of the powers the girls had given him. That’s why he felt like in a one-on-one fight without using any special powers or equipment, any of the Sun Rangers might be able to beat him.

“Strength isn’t really what matters for a hero. You’re still leagues beyond us, Baron-san,” Kenichi said boldly.

The others seemed to agree, as they nodded and smiled.

“You guys...”

Koutarou felt like crying, but he managed to stop himself just before the first tear rolled down his cheek. The Sun Rangers had looked unreliable before, but they had completely transformed themselves. After surviving their own battles and achieving their own victories, they had the look of real heroes.

In that case, I better keep it together too!

Since they respected Koutarou so much, he wanted to live up to that. And because Koutarou respected them in return, that desire was especially strong. He braced himself and looked at them all.

“So... if you’ve come to see me after getting so strong, the situation must be serious, right?”

“It’s just as you suspect. We’ve come to consult with you about it.”

The Sun Rangers had proven themselves in battle and become true heroes. And in order to protect Koutarou and the others they'd fought alongside, they had refused to surrender any information to the top brass. They must have had a very important reason to come and meet with Koutarou and others in person, even at the risk of letting that information leak.

"Japan and Forthorthe will first of all have a peaceful cultural exchange," Theia explained.

"There's no mistaking that, is there?" Kenichi asked.

"Correct. Through many years of international support, our nation understands the delicacies of making contact with worlds where there's a significant technological difference. With all due respect, we are well aware of the risks involved."

"So what are you guys doing here?" Koutarou asked.

"We're taking measures against the problems that will inevitably occur," Kenichi replied.

"Problems?"

"Yes. Actually..."

Kenichi began explaining why the Sun Rangers had come.

Taking into consideration the risks of Forthorthian technology flowing into Japan too quickly and causing rapid changes in society, Japan and Forthorthe agreed to limit their exchanges the to cultural and human. On the premise of bolstering the relationship between the two countries and furthering their civilizations, they would make strategic technological exchanges in waves in order to lessen the shock.

However, that wouldn't stop extreme factions like terrorists from wanted to get their hands on Forthorthe's technology as soon as possible. There would likely be a large influx of people to Japan from around the world hoping to steal some of Forthorthe's technology. Of course, Kisshouharukaze City would be at the center of all that since it was serving as the space diplomacy headquarters.

"And that's why you're here. In order to prevent such problems," Kiriha said,

her eyes slightly narrowed.

With her keen intellect, she swiftly had a firm grasp of the situation. To her, the Sun Rangers' goal was obvious. And Kenichi nodded to confirm what she'd said.

"It's just as you've discerned, Black Rose-san. The government is hurrying along to improve related legislation, but they're expecting resistance from within all political parties, so we're needed to buy time."

"Those with connections to factions or nations that want the technology right away will resist governmental regulations on the matter... which means that until appropriate legislation is changed to mobilize police, for example, the work falls on you as the Sun Rangers since you're already in position."

The Sun Rangers were a secret force, but they operated strictly by the letter of the law. Their commissioned role was to defend the nation from invaders. However, since this was a matter of maintaining public order due to problems originating from contact with aliens, it fell under their purview one way or another and they were authorized to act while other measures were being put in place. As a result, while they were considered to be high-cost salary thieves, no one wanted to neglect taking appropriate measures against invaders.

"Yes. And while this is very difficult to say, we would like to ask for Baron-san and the others to help. We are well aware that this is due to our, or rather our nation's unpreparedness. However..."

That was the real reason the Sun Rangers had come to meet Koutarou and the others. While they had moved out right away, they were woefully undermanned. They were hoping to call on their old allies for a little backup. They knew just how capable Koutarou and the others were, and that their hearts would be in the right place.

"Even then, you can't afford to overlook anything. I understand. We'll help."

Koutarou didn't hesitate to offer his cooperation. Since they had helped him out in the past, working together this time around wouldn't be so bad. He also knew that they were good guys. They would be reliable allies.

"Thank you very much, Baron-san!"

“We did it, Kenichi!”

“See? It’s just like I said. I told you Baron-san would definitely help us out.”

The Sun Rangers all looked a little relieved. They had believed from the start that Koutarou and the girls would help, but they were still happy to hear it. It was a great comfort to have a proven ally on your side when facing an unknown challenge.

“You’d decide that without even asking us?” asked Kiriha.

Unlike the Sun Rangers, she wasn’t celebrating. She gave him a dour sidelong glance, but Koutarou didn’t back down.

“I didn’t think it was necessary. Or are you unhappy?”

“No, I’m exceptionally happy.”

Kiriha’s expression then turned into a smile. She never had any complains about his decision. She’d only suggested otherwise to try and tease him, though she’d been rather unsuccessful.

“A woman sometimes wants to be treated like she belongs to someone. Besides, I feel the same way. Just like you believed that I would.”

“Good.”

Koutarou hadn’t consulted with the others because he was convinced that they felt the same way he did. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have hesitated to ask. In short, he believed in how well he knew them.

“A wise decision! That’s more like my knight!”

“I would obey Master, no matter what.”

Theia held her hand in front of her mouth and let out an elegant giggle. Ruth was standing at attention, giving Koutarou and trusting stare. They both felt the same way Kiriha did. Seeing Koutarou and the others like that, Kenichi once again felt that their strength came together like a monolith. He decided to ask something that had been on his mind for a while.

“Well then, if we’re going to be working together... there is something I would like to ask you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Would Princess Devil-san and her attendant happen to be from Forthorthe?”

It was something that he had vaguely suspected. During the decisive battle against the radical faction, the weaponry Theia had used quite clearly surpassed anything available on Earth. Moreover, their design and markings were similar to the vehicle that the visiting Forthorthians used. He suspected there was a connection.

“That’s right. I’m impressed you stayed quiet despite knowing that much. You have my appreciation, Sun Rangers.” Theia gave a smile and a nod and decided to reveal the truth. “I am Theiamillis Gre Forthorthe, the seventh princess of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire and the one in charge of our mission to Earth.”

The government also knew that Theia was a Forthorthian, but they were still unaware that she was the seventh princess of her country and had complete authority over the negotiations with Japan. Those details were kept hidden in order to lower the risks. The government only thought of Theia as a member of the diplomatic envoy. Her identity was top secret, making the Sun Rangers the first Earthlings apart from Koutarou and the others to learn about it.

“So that really was the case... It’s starting to make sense now. Hayato, it looks like you win the bet.”

“...It’s not one I wanted to win.”

Being dragged into the conversation, Blue Shine AKA Hayato shrugged. Considering the bond between Koutarou and the girls, if Theia was a Forthorthian, it seemed chances were high that Forthorthe and the People of the Earth had something to do with each other. That was how Hayato had seen it. However, his prediction being right told them that things were certainly more complex than they appeared to be. That put the Sun Rangers in quite the predicament.

“Strictly speaking, we have several goals... But overall, it can summed up into a single point. We want to create a path so that people here related to Forthorthe, such as the People of the Earth, can formally return to our country.”

“The People of the Earth are related to Forthorthians?!”

All five Sun Rangers went slack-jawed. They knew that the underground dwellers' spiritual energy technology was superb, and they suspected that they were on friendly terms with Forthorthe. But they'd never guessed they were actually from the same country.

"There's no end to the problems in our nation either, you see. And due to the influence of some chaos in the past, some of our people ended up drifting to Earth. It's the duty of our nation to make so that their descendants can properly return to their homeland if they wish."

"So that's why you wanted to establish diplomatic relations with Japan... However, it seems that the government doesn't know anything about what you just said."

"As for the reason... Blue Shine, you know, don't you?"

"The People of the Earth are a minority with excellent technology. If their existence and relationship with Forthorthe were revealed right now, they would be easy targets."

The people that wanted to get their hands on Forthorthian technology would most likely be interested in the People of the Earth's technology as well. Moreover, the People of the Earth had a small population, and they would have a difficult time protecting themselves on their own. The best way for them to stay safe was for their existence to remain a secret. While the Japanese government had some information on the underground dwellers, as long as they were kept in the dark about their relationship with Forthorthe, it would most likely be buried as dubious intelligence.

"In fact, there are more people in a similar situation to the People of the Earth. They're—"

"Please wait, Princess Devil-san!"

"Hmm?"

"Please keep that a secret from us too until it's absolutely necessary. We're happy that you trust us, but it would be safer this way."

The Sun Rangers of course had no intention of leaking this information. But no one and nothing was perfect. It was possible someone might found out

through espionage, or even a simple slip of the tongue. That meant them not knowing at all was the safer option.

“Again... you have my appreciation, Sun Rangers. I would even be willing to take you all as vassals.”

“We’re honored, princess, but we’re the guardians of this country.”

“Ohoho, that’s true. Then forget I said anything.”

As Theia held the brave rangers in high esteem, she’d been honest when she said she wouldn’t mind employing them. But at the same time, she didn’t want them to switch loyalties so easily. In a way, she was happy they turned her down. Speaking up after Theia, Koutarou summed things up.

“So our goal for now is to respond against people trying to steal Forthorthe’s technology while also keeping watch to make sure no one is snooping around for information on the People of Earth. I think that’s about the size of it.”

“We’ll deal with the latter. Though we would like your cooperation against those trying to steal technology.”

“That’s true. Being on the outside, there’s a lot we’d be better at doing in that regard. I’m looking forward to working with you, Sun Rangers.”

“Likewise!”

Koutarou exchanged a firm handshake with Kenichi. Fortunately, their interests lined up as well as their thoughts about how to proceed. That was likely due to their experiences as allies in the past. They were more or less on the same wavelength. But that would draw their conference to an and for now. They’d need to confer about details, but that could wait until later. After they’d discussed things with the rest of their respective groups. Sensing that their business had come to an end, Reina called out to Kiriha.

“Kiriha-san, could I have some of your time after this?”

“I can probably manage to do without my afternoon classes.”

“Thank you.”

Reina was a Folsarian agent, so there was a lot that she wanted to consult with Kiriha about, especially concerning the involvement of the Sun Rangers.

After Kiriha and Reina made their appointment together, Koutarou turned to see the Sun Rangers off.



“Well then, see you later, Sun Rangers.”

“That’s right. Oh, Baron-san, one last thing...”

“What?”

“Why are you cooperating with them? I mean, you’re... you’re supposed to be just a normal person.”

Even after looking into Koutarou’s background, he had no connections to the People of the Earth or Forthorthe. It just looked like a completely normal person had gotten caught up with these strange people. That was something that Kenichi had always wanted to ask Koutarou.

“You don’t need a reason to help your friends.”

“Friends...” Kenichi’s eyes opened wide.

“Is that strange?”

“No, it’s a truly marvelous answer. We think of Black Rose-san and Princess Devil-san as friends too.”

Kenichi still referred to Kiriha and Theia by their stage names. He and the others hadn’t met an underground person and an alien, but performers at a hero show.

“...See you, Sun Rangers.”

“Yeah. Let us meet again.”

There was undoubtedly trouble awaiting Koutarou and the others. But they had allies and hope. That’s why Koutarou’s mood hadn’t soured in the slightest as he left the guidance counseling office.

The World Begins to Change

Friday, March 4th

Just as the Sun Rangers had said, the National Diet soon began discussing legislation related to Forthorthe. And as expected, voices against it rose up from all sides. Since these would be bills assuming that Forthorthe forged an exclusive diplomatic relationship with Japan, certain parties objected, saying they wanted to hold a conference with the UN or at least the G7 on the matter first. It was only obvious that their true intentions were to pass off whatever alien technology they could get their hands on to their own connections. That was why they were trying to stall legislation as long as possible, even if they were doing it under the pretense of equality, justice, and humanity.

“It’s the same in any country, isn’t it? Evil deeds are performed under the guise of good intentions.”

Clan’s criticism was pointed. She had done something similar once. And she looked on Japan’s confused politics with the same judging eyes that she did her past self.

“To think that those claiming to stand for equality and justice would let so many spies enter the country in such a short amount of time... I’m amazed.”

A long stream of images flowed past Clan’s eyes. They were pictures of spies that were confirmed to have infiltrated the country over the past few days. Almost all UN member states with the financial capability to do so had sent one or more. Moreover, these were just the spies that the Sun Rangers had confirmed. The real headcount was likely much higher. That seemed proof enough that the “equality” and “justice” other countries and their Japanese allies were clamoring for was all a sham.

“Don’t be so angry, Clan,” Koutarou said, reaching out and patting her on the head. “Sadly enough, we Earthlings are just neanderthals, after all.”

While he didn’t want to admit it, he had no choice but to accept that what

Theia had said in the past was true.

“You are not neanderthals. Just like us Forthorthians, you just have a few villains mixed in.”

“We can’t overcome our fear of the unknown, either. Just like you and me at first.”

“Veltlion...?”

Those unexpected words left Clan staring at Koutarou wide-eyed. She could feel deep sympathy for her coming from him.

“So like I said, don’t get so angry. You should only get worked up about dumber things.”

“...Veltlion, you really have changed a little.”

Perhaps because her focus had shifted to Koutarou, Clan’s angry expression relaxed a little and slowly became a smile.

“Even I know that there’s a time and place for everything, you know.”

Clan’s beaming smile was so dazzling that Koutarou had to look up at the ceiling. He then scratched his head uncomfortably.

“You did that before too. Right now—”

Koutarou patted her on the head again to cut her off.

“Please just leave it at that.”

“Heh, okay.”

“You’ve changed too, Clan.”

“I’m at least willing to humor your requests now. A lot has happened, after all.”



“Yeah. It really has.”

Koutarou nodded at stared the faces of the lineup of spies. Naturally following his lead, Clan did the same thing. Everything that had happened before this day was what had led the two of them to grow, and much more likely lay ahead for them in the future. The information on the spies that the Sun Rangers had delivered was only a sign of what was to come.

While resistance to the legislation concerning Forthorthe had been considerable at first, its advocates lost their momentum as time passed. There were primarily two reasons for that.

The first was that it was Forthorthe that had decided to establish diplomatic relations exclusively with Japan. They also made it clear that if things didn’t work out with Japan, they would consider their trip to Earth premature and return home without trying to contact any other nations. If that happened, everyone would lose out.

The second reason was the voice of the people. The public in general said that making the Forthorthians, who had come from so very far away, wait for no reason was rude. They pressed the government to make a quick decisions on whether or not they would accept establishing diplomatic relations with the aliens.

And because the citizens’ objection to holding up the process any longer grew stronger by the day, the people who were actually causing the delays became the victims of the public’s wrath. If the commotion continued any longer, a snap election would be held and they would lose out anyway. So in the end, public opinion pressured them into reluctantly proceeding with the legislation. And after that, the necessary bills moved to be voted upon with exceptional speed.

Upon reading the headline “Forthorthe Bills Pass the House of Councillors,” Koutarou looked up from his newspaper and scanned the room. Laying eyes on the person he was looking for, he called out to her.

“Kiriha-san, what are the Forthorthe bills anyways?”

“Roughly, it’s legislation divided into three parts. The first part defines aliens

and sets basic rules concerning how to accept Forthorthe as a nation."

"I guess that makes sense. It's not like Japan's laws were made under the assumption that countries exist on other planets..."

Japan's laws were naturally centered around what went on inside of Japan, but while they acknowledged the existence of other countries, they didn't acknowledge the existence of aliens. The bylaws of the Sun Rangers included aliens on their list of potential invading threats, but that was something of a precautionary addition. In recent years with signal analysis and the likes being used in search for aliens, the alien clause had been added in just in case. It wasn't like the matter of aliens had ever actually been discussed in legal terms. That idea had seemed quite silly until just recently. No one had ever thought they'd show up, and when and if Earth managed to discover them somehow, talks could proceed from there. Any detailed discussions of aliens without any actual aliens had been universally panned as a waste of time.

"The second part concerns the people, including changes to laws about nationality, which creates a new framework in the event Forthorthians visit Japan. Of course, the reverse has been discussed as well."

"So that would be relevant for us."

"It's developed about as well as we'd hoped. If the new laws are put into effect, the People of the Earth and the Folsarians will freely be able to become Forthorthians."

The Forthorthians had been heavily consulted on the Forthorthe bills, and they'd made sure to covertly include concessions for the underground dwellers and the Folsarians. Kiriha had come up with the details of the plan, so there was no need to worry about any oversights.

"I guess Forthorthe has the advantage in all these negotiations since they can just peace if things don't go their way, huh? Well, what's the third part?"

"The third part concerns rules regarding the exchange. Japan and Forthorthe will establish diplomatic relations, but any and all exchanges between the two will be limited to cultural and human capital for the time being. Prohibitions and penalties have been put in place for anything else."

“Since other countries and terrorists are going to be after Forthorthe’s technology, I bet that’s the part they’re not gonna be happy about.”

“Certainly, but it provides a legal basis for cracking down on those activities for now. Being able to curb the initial influx of such behavior over the next few years will be key.”

Everything was in place now. Since the bills had been decided on so quickly, they were relatively simple and straightforward about their goals and purposes. More or less, existing laws were just being altered to accommodate aliens. But even then, nothing is perfect. How they would deal with those who abused the legal loopholes in the legislation would be the deciding factor in how this all turned out.

“We’ll need to keep it together too,” said Koutarou.

“Indeed,” agreed Kiriha. “Our role is an important one.”

Koutarou and the others would cooperate with the Sun Rangers to deal with whatever trouble may arise. Since the People of the Earth and Folsaria were the primary reason Forthorthe had come into contact with Japan, it was a good call. But everything would be for naught if Earth was thrown into chaos and war over their arrival. Koutarou and the others’ hard work would play a large part in determining everyone’s future from here on out.

The day after the Forthorthe bills were approved, Koutarou and the others could already see changes in their lives. As they were walking to school, several large trucks passed by. Their commute ran along a main road of the city, so seeing large trucks there wasn’t unheard of. But it had never been this many.

“Looks like things are already getting started...”

“What things?” Sanae cocked her head to the side at Koutarou’s muttering.

When Koutarou or Theia talked about complicated things, Sanae would earnestly listen at first, but usually ended up dozing off. Thanks to that, she didn’t fully understand what was going on despite having been there when it was explained. Theia smiled a little and gave her a refresher.

“Facilities for accepting exchange students from Forthorthe are being

constructed or expanded. They can only accept a limited number as things are. Both housing and educational facilities are needed, and the question of security needs to be resolved as well.”

“So those trucks are making dormitories and new schoolhouses?”

“Precisely! Kisshouharukaze City will lead the world by becoming the model city for accepting exchange students from Forthorthe!”

Theia had been smiling all the while, and she ended her explanation with fire in her eyes. There was no doubt danger was lurking just around the corner, but two nations were taking a giant step together towards what could be a glorious new future for both of them. Theia wanted to take pride in that.

“Kiriha-san, what’s a model city?” Yurika asked.

Theia’s choice of words had puzzled her. Yurika had long given up on trying to understand what was going on, so she spent her time during their discussions just reading manga. Ultimately, she was in the same boat as Sanae.

“Accepting exchange students throughout all of Japan right away would be very risky. Instead, special districts will be made in select locations, and only those will accept Forthorthian exchange students. The idea is to start small and see how things go. There’s also the matter of budget.”

“So does that mean where we live is going to be one of those places?”

“That’s right.”

“Hmm... Why Kisshouharukaze City?”

Yurika was only casually asking out of curiosity, but she’d hit upon something very important. So instead of Koutarou rebuking her for asking a dumb question like usual, he gave her a very serious answer.

“That’s because you and Kiriha-san are here.”

“Hueh?”

Koutarou’s answer sailed right over Yurika’s head. She just stood there, mouth agape and head cocked to the side. She didn’t know what she and Kiriha had to do with it. Seeing Yurika’s confounded expression, Koutarou realized that he hadn’t been specific enough. He then took a second try at explaining.

“It means that Kisshouharukaze City, with the People of the Earth’s stronghold right below us and the gates to Folsaria scattered about, is important.”

“Ah, so that’s what you mean. So it really is because me and Kiriha-san are here,” Yurika said, nodding repeatedly like she understood everything now.

“There’s a high risk of gathering attention, but we’re in a dilemma because we need the laws to protect us,” Kiriha added.

Weighing the pros and cons, Kiriha had concluded it would ultimately be in their favor to have Theia specify Kisshouharukaze City as one of the special districts The downside was that Kisshouharukaze becoming a model city would inevitably draw attention, especially considering it was a rather ordinary town that stuck out among the list of major cities that had been chosen. That would mean spies and agents would be sent in, which was exactly what Clan had been looking in to. But even though that was a drawback, Kiriha thought it would be better for them to come under the protection of the law as soon as possible. Considering the likely future ahead, they’d have to protect themselves some way.

“From here on, Kisshouharukaze High School will be accepting exchange students. Staff will be increased, a new school building will be constructed, and the surrounding environment will be maintained. It should cause quite a fuss soon enough,” Theia explained.

Kisshouharukaze High School and Kisshou University would be reoutfitted in order to accept new exchange students. It was primarily a measure to safely and comfortably accept the new students, but since this would make them nationally known schools, prospective Japanese students would likely pour in as well. If that happened, the current grounds, classrooms, and facilities wouldn’t be enough. A large-scale upgrade was necessary.

“And the Sun Rangers are going undercover at the schools, huh?” Koutarou asked.

“It’s a good plan, isn’t it?” Theia affirmed.

“Yeah.”

Since the school was expanding, it would need to hire more personnel. It was the perfect opportunity for the Sun Rangers to infiltrate. Putting them right at the source of potential trouble would make doing their jobs a lot easier. Koutarou was truly impressed by how clever it all was.

“Was that your suggestion, Kiriha-san?”

“No, it was Clan-dono’s.”

“Clan sure is a master when it comes to schemes. Just what I’d expect.”

“That’s none of your business!”

Koutarou really was impressed, but his comment seemed to upset the person in question. Clan wasted no time shouting at him through the bracelet on his wrist.

She sounds the same as ever, but... those eyes... Something’s different.

Even though she was shouting at him, Clan didn’t actually look all that angry. If anything, she seemed to be enjoying herself. After flashing a small smile, she pulled down her lower eyelid, stuck her tongue out, and cut the hologram.

“Things are just getting more and more difficult... jeez...”

“What’s that, Satomi Koutarou?”

“Hmm? Oh, I was just thinking that everything’s changing.”

“That’s right. Completely contrary to your own wishes.”

Kiriha shouldn’t have known anything about Koutarou and Clan’s discussion the other day, but the look on her face told Koutarou that she knew everything. About how Koutarou had changed. About how Clan had. About how Kiriha herself and the other girls had too. The gentle look on her face smiled over all of them.

“As a result, Japan that will lead the way in space diplomacy and space tourism. Kisshouharukaze City will be at the forefront of all of it. Of course, people up to no good will gather from all over the world here. Industrialized countries that have been left out, scoundrels after our technology, and terrorist groups that want weapons. We’ll need to pay very careful attention from now on.”

Theia's expression was the exact opposite of Kiriha's. She looked quite serious, but perhaps that was to be expected. Right now, she held the fate of two worlds in her hands. She looked like a leader ready to take charge and cut a path to the future.

"Thinking about it all, you really did put a lot of thought into this," said Koutarou.

Kiriha had an excellent handle and perspective on things, but so did Theia. Koutarou respected them both for it, but she didn't seem thrilled at the way he expressed it.

"What?! Did you think we were idiots?!"

"Yeah, honestly."

Koutarou was under the impression that Theia and the others had only come to Earth to give him a hard time. Essentially, that it had all been on impulse. Of course, that wasn't the case. Theia had taken action with Forthorthe, Folsaria, and the People of the Earth in mind. If anything, her revenge on Koutarou was just a bonus. That's why she was personally offended that he had thought anything otherwise.

"You're the idiot! Two thousand years have passed since Empress Alaia's time! How dare you think we don't know anything about establishing diplomatic relations with other nations!"

"Yeah, my bad."

"Then isn't there something you have to say to the lord you hold in such high esteem?"

"I am terribly sorry, princess."

"And don't you have something to say to your beloved Theiamillis-chan?"

"Beloved...?"

"Am I wrong?"

Theia's piercing glare hit Koutarou like a cold blade. Realizing there wasn't an easy way out of this one, he awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck and asked for clemency.

“Um, I implore you to show some mercy on a humble servant such as I.”

“You are such a pain... Fine, don’t you have something to say to your close friend Theiamillis-chan?”

“Would you like a chocolate parfait or something on the way home?”

“Very good! Very good indeed!”

In reality, Theia had already forgiven Koutarou and the chocolate parfait wasn’t necessary, but he knew he shouldn’t say anything on that front. After peeking into his wallet, he switched gears a bit and changed the subject.

“But... we can’t let our guard down. There’s no real precedent for spiritual energy technology or magic in your world either.”

“That’s the biggest problem.”

Theia willingly abandoned talk of the parfait and got back to the matter at hand. It was serious business, and she trusted Koutarou to uphold his word.

“Our technology isn’t the only thing we need to protect. Spiritual energy technology or magic leaking into Forthorthe would be bad too.”

People trying to steal Forthorthe’s technology wasn’t exactly a new thing, so they had a good idea of how to safeguard it in order to prevent that. But what of spiritual energy technology and magic? Could they protect those the same they could advanced science? And if someone could get their hands on them, would it then make it easier for them to steal Forthorthe’s technology too? The wild cards of spiritual energy technology and magic had the potential to throw everything for a loop. In the end, it looked like making contact with Earth would be far more difficult than anyone had expected.

“There’s technology on Earth that can’t be leaked to Forthorthe either. Plus there’s still the footage of our fight in Forthorthe...”

“That’s right, Koutarou. That’s partly why Theia-dono had to hurry in initiating contact with Earth. Who knows what would have happened if she’d taken her time and someone like Vandarion snuck down to Earth...”

“Then they would clearly be out to get a monopoly on spiritual energy technology and magic. And without diplomatic relations with Earth, Forthorthe

wouldn’t be able to openly intervene, huh? Smart thinking, Theia.”

When Kiriha laid it all out for him, a lightbulb came on over Koutarou’s head. Theia’s revenge would have been an extraordinarily petty reason for them to go to all this trouble, so it made a lot more sense if there was a grander reason behind it. And that reason was protecting both Forthorthe and Earth.

“I’m glad to hear you praise me, but this was actually my mother’s wisdom.”

Theia smiled wryly, but also looked smug. While she wished she’d been the one to come up with it all, she was proud of her mother’s doing.

“So it was Elle, huh? I guess that’s an empress for you. Nice.”

“You owe that compliment to her.”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure to thank her.”

Koutarou obediently nodded. He was extraordinarily grateful that Elfaria had been so insightful in setting this up. He knew the least he had to do was thank her.

“Directly, you hear?”

“Yeah.”

“Ahaha, you said it! Now you *have* to return to Forthorthe!”

“C-Crap!”

With a lightened mood, Koutarou and the others moved away from the topic of the troubles with Earth and Forthorthe. Instead, Koutarou and Theia began talking about this and that with carefree, heartwarming banner befitting of two high school students.

It’s really much better this way... The princess, the legendary hero, and their allies aren’t our true identities...

Harumi watched on with a relieved smile. A small incident in a small room had developed into a great tumult that had even crossed galaxies. It constantly changed shape, demanding one thing after another from Koutarou and the girls. Harumi didn’t think it was right. She wished to return to that small room, and to return to being normal boys and girls.

“Sakuraba-san...”

Maki gave Harumi with a worried look. At first, Maki had been satisfied with the idea living and dying for Koutarou’s sake, but now she understood Harumi’s feelings. That was because she’d realized that she wanted a regular life and friends too.

“It’s okay. I was just thinking that when he became a hero in Forthorthe... this must have been how Satomi-kun felt.”

“I... I think so too...”

Regardless of what they’d wanted, the world still needed Koutarou and the girls to act as a hero and his allies. And with the wellbeing and happiness of so many at stake, it wasn’t something they could turn down. Especially not this time since things were largely the result of their own doing. But thanks to that, even their everyday lives were becoming strange. Harumi and Maki were a little saddened by that, so they prayed together for peaceful days to return.

Since it was decided that they would be accepting exchange students from Forthorthe, Kisshouharukaze High School suddenly found itself in need of more staff. Normally any new faculty would be hired in April, but the situation being what it was, the hiring timeline was pushed forward to the middle of March. Decisions were made quickly, and the new staff was brought in to be introduced to the students. It would give them time to get to know each other before there was an influx of new students, and let the new employees get a feel for the school.

“Dr. Mukojima here is going to be a new school nurse, but she’s got a lot of experience resolving problems around school. Since things are going to be getting busier around here, she should be a valuable addition to the team.”

“That’s right, everyone! I’m Mukojima Megumi! Pleased to meet you all! If there’s ever something bothering you, come see me in the infirmary!”

Part of the new hires at Harukaze High included the Sun Rangers. The new school nurse, Mukojima, was among them. She was really Megumi, the Sun Rangers’ Pink Shine. Her energetic voice, amplified by the speakers, echoed through the gym filled with students.

“And Matsuzaka Kenichi-sensei here specializes in physical education. The Forthorthian exchange students are interested in Japanese sports, so—”

“...Don’t they stand out too much? I mean... is this really okay?”

Koutarou couldn’t help looking skeptically at the Sun Rangers standing up on the stage introducing themselves. As allies of justice, their battle-hardened bodies were a sight to behold. They were toned, fit, and young. They looked like models standing among the other faculty. Megumi’s legs peeking out from her skirt captivated the male students and made the girls sigh. Kenichi’s masculine facial features, tall stature, and well-trained body made all the female students squeal and all the boys put up their guard. Kenichi in particular had such an earnest personality that this kind of thing seemed like it would only get worse as time went on. But that was the problem. The more they stood out, the harder it would be for them to do their jobs.

It was a bit different, but Green Shine was in a similar situation. Taking advantage of his small stature, he’d infiltrated the school as a student. The only exception was Yellow Shine, Daisaku, whose giant stature made him the odd man out.

“Kenichi-san and the others are pretty cool after all. I see why the students are causing a fuss... I bet they’d look good in cosplay too.”

“It’s okay if you switch sides, Yurika. Leave Satomi-kun to me.”

“Maki-chan, putting it like that is mean!”

Yurika and the other girls could understand why their classmates were all so interested. The Sun Rangers not only looked good, they were genuinely good people. If the girls didn’t already all have their special someone, they very well may have been a little smitten too.

“There’s no real problem, Koutarou. This is just temporary. Aliens will be showing up soon, after all.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Koutarou nodded. What Theia was saying made plenty of sense. While the Sun Rangers were the center of attention now, the spotlight would undoubtedly shift soon. When it came to things that stood out, there wasn’t really much that

topped being an extraterrestrial. No matter how much the Sun Rangers stood out right now, they'd just be normal humans once aliens arrived at the school.

"Now that I think about it, you should be exposed before long thanks to your plays."

"Indeed. The drama club is already putting out feelers, but I expect the truth to come to light when the new school term starts."

Before now, Theia had been pretending to be nobility from a small country in Europe. But since she'd written about Forthorthe by name in her plays, it was only a matter of time before someone caught on. The same went for Ruth.

"Well, if it doesn't happen until the new term..."

"Indeed. It'll just be like there's one more exchange student."

The Forthorthian exchange students had all been given a gag order in regards to Theia's status, but that still wouldn't be enough to keep her identity a secret. The truth would surface eventually, but delaying the inevitably would help ease the shock. That was why the incoming exchange students had been told to keep quiet on the matter.

"Theia-dono being here might unexpectedly lead to Kisshouharukaze High School being the first real place to understand and accept the aliens," said Kiriha.

"Huh, yeah. I guess the people who already know Theia won't be as scared of aliens," said Shizuka.

"That's right, Shizuka! That was my plan all along!" proclaimed Theia.

"You liar," chimed in Koutarou. "The way things worked out just happened to benefit you."

"Lucky me. Teehee!"

"Hey, don't think a cute giggle makes this all okay, you idiot!"

Little did they know they weren't the only ones undergoing a change. Things were happening all around them too, and from here on out, that would build at a frightening pace. The fate of countless people depended on how well Koutarou and the others would be able to surf that wave of change. They would

need to use everything at their disposal to keep their heads above water and accomplish their goals. Theia had laughed it off, but they should have all been hoping luck was on their side right about now.

“...”

“Hmm...?”

As everyone else was talking, Sanae heard what sounded like someone whispering in her ear again.

“I really can hear someone! Who’s there?! ”

“...The promised time is coming... the time for your greatest trial...”

Surprisingly enough, Sanae could clearly hear what the voice was saying this time.

“The promised time?! What trial?!”

Sanae quickly stood up and looked around for the source of the voice, but couldn’t find it. All she saw were her friends looking at her in confusion.

“...I wish for you to pray too... that just one small miracle will happen...”

“Who are you?! Where are you?!”

No matter how much Sanae looked, she couldn’t find the source. She had no idea what was going on. She didn’t know who was talking to her or what their intentions were. All she could tell was that it was a woman’s voice. It was mysterious. It sounded like a voice she’d heard before, but she couldn’t remember where or when.



On the same day the Sun Squad infiltrated Kisshouharukaze High School, Clan detected one of the persons on the ranger's watch list in her surveillance network. From overhead in the Cradle, she'd been using her observation drones and hacking skills to monitor the city. One of her cameras picked up a suspicious person trying to blend in with the crowd as he left the station.

"Veltlion, based on his actions and movements, he appears to be highly trained."

After spotting the person in question, Clan contacted Koutarou. He was unhappy at first since he was in the middle of class, but his attitude changed when he heard what she had to say.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

His voice over the comms no longer sounded the slightest bit perturbed. Rather, he sounded quite serious and invested now. Responsible and ready to act. It was the voice of Princess Clariossa's beloved knight among knights, which was different from the normal boy that the girl named Clan loved.

"Yes. I just finished a facial recognition match. It seems to be a spy that's entered through a neighboring country."

"There's a lot of people getting in that way. I guess neighboring countries are the perfect place to pick up a fake passport and infiltrate Japan."

"His country of origin seems to be in the middle of a conflict. Which means... he'll jump right in."

Clan was also different from her usual self right now. She was talking and behaving like Princess Clariossa. While she understood that this was a dangerous situation, she could still understand why someone would want a trump card to end domestic conflict back home. That's why she felt a little reluctant to brand this man a pure villain. Her kindness and compassion showed in her words.

"...Clan, I know how you feel, but him stealing your technology won't resolve that conflict."

"That doesn't sound like you... Why do you say that?"

Considering Koutarou's personality, she was a bit puzzled by him suggesting something like that. She thought that he'd be unsure of what to do, just like her.

"Because he's careless."

"Careless?"

"For starters, he was caught on surveillance cameras the moment he entered the city, not to mention the fact that he's on the watch list. If he gets his hands on Forthorthian technology, he'll definitely leak it, and that'll plunge the world into a serious situation. So the conflict won't end. If anything, it'll get worse. Or that's what Kiriha-san is telling me."

In reality, Koutarou felt the same way Clan did at first. But once Kiriha had pointed that much out, he realized the truth of the matter. That was why he was saying something so unlike him.

"So it was Kii's suggestion... I'm glad to hear it."

"Hmm? What are you talking about?"

"Nothing at all. Heh..."

Slightly relieved, Clan flashed a small smile. Koutarou was still Koutarou. She was happy to be able to confirm that. But she also felt like he was right. Careless sympathy in a situation like this might just make things worse.

"Anyways, we can't just do nothing. Pass this information to the Sun Rangers."

"Yes, I will."

Clan did as he asked and called up the Sun Rangers. She was still acting as Princess Clariossa, but Clan herself felt quite a bit better now.

The spy Clan found was just the start of suspicious foreigners beginning to appear in town. Since Kisshouharukaze City was rather rural and fairly removed from the more populated parts of Japan, it wasn't an area with many foreigners to begin with. Thanks to that, the sudden influx of foreigners rather stood out, and it was easy enough to keep tabs on the spies and secret agents. But they

weren't who Kiriha was worried about.

"If anything, the bigger danger is..."

After cleaning up from lunch, Kiriha sat up straight on the picnic sheet. The weather today was pleasant enough that, while a bit unseasonable for it yet, the group had decided to enjoy their lunch out in the courtyard. It was just cold enough still that there weren't many other people around, which made it a better place for them to talk privately than the classroom.

"If there are Japanese working together with any of these organizations, they'll be much harder to identify than these foreigners coming in."

Kiriha was worried about potential Japanese operatives. Not necessarily Japanese citizens, but also people of Japanese origin from abroad. They wouldn't look any different from the domestic population, and they would know how to blend in culturally without a problem. They were far more of a threat than any other agents.

Then there was the matter of domestic spies, too. In addition to the foreign operatives coming into the country, there were inevitably agents sent by Japanese organizations to investigate. Just because Forthorthe was working together with the Japanese government didn't mean that there wouldn't be individuals, private corporations, and other organizations that also wanted their hands on Forthorthian secrets.

"My experience tells me that spies who can be picked out just by looking at them are mere diversions."

Maki was of the same opinion as Kiriha. Moreover, since she'd once been part of an evil organization herself, she had some personal insight into the tactics these people might be using.

"Most likely. That's presumably why they intentionally sent people who were on the watch list."

Kiriha thought what Maki was saying made perfect sense. There would be a flashy, attention-grabbing decoy, while the real threat would come quietly. It was common strategy in magic tricks and scams. The suspicious foreigners were a perfect example of it. They were only a distraction.

“In fact, there’s a high chance that most of the easily distinguishable spies might be sent to different model cities,” added Ruth.

“That’s true. Sending a diversion and the real thing to the same place would only risk raising more red flags. It would be counterproductive,” said Maki.

“Hmm...” said Theia. “If that’s true, Maki, then...”

“Yes. The groups that appear not to have sent anyone here are the ones that have sent in their elites.”

“That’s not good... Ruth, I need you to investigate. Make a list of the countries and organizations that look like they haven’t made a move yet or have only sent personnel to the other model cities.”

“Right away, Your Highness!”

“Jeez... I was prepared for this, but things sure have gotten bothersome,” Theia said with a bitter expression.

This kind of information warfare was outside of her expertise. Not only did she not have a lot of insight into it, it didn’t suit her personality, either. That’s why Kiriha and Maki’s help and advice were extremely welcome under the circumstances. Theia took great comfort in them, but her heart was still heavy on the matter. In a vain attempt to lift her spirits a little, Theia looked up overhead, where she saw a sparrow riding in on the spring breeze.

“Hey!”

She also heard a familiar male voice call out.

“Hmm?”

Looking back down, the man who’d shouted over to them had just come out of the school. It was the Sun Rangers’ Red Shine, who went by Matsuzaka Kenichi at Harukaze High.

“Koutarou, Kenichi is here.”

“What?”

When Theia said that, Koutarou turned around to look for himself. He saw Kenichi eagerly running over to them.

“Huh, you’re right. I wonder what’s up.”

Based on how he looked, Koutarou figured that it must have been urgent, and he swiftly went to meet Kenichi. Regardless of what had happened in the past, Kenichi was older than him, and moreover, he was a teacher at their school now. Koutarou was polite (and active) enough that the idea of sitting where he was and waiting for Kenichi to come to him never even crossed his mind.

“Baron-sa—”

“Stop, Kenichi-sensei!”

When the approaching Kenichi was just about to say something careless, Koutarou loudly shouted out to interrupt him. While it was still cold and there were only a few of them, there were still some other students out in the courtyard. It could be trouble if anyone saw Kenichi and Koutarou being overly casual with each other.

“Oh ye— I mean, that’s right. Satomi-kun, I want to talk to you about your future, so could you come with me to the guidance counseling office?”

“What, again?”

“Please. I’m still not used to all this. And I want to settle the problems with you before the people from Forthorthe come.”

“Okay, fine... Guys, I’ll be back later.”

Since Kenichi brought up Forthorthe, Koutarou sensed that it was an urgent matter. He quickly said goodbye to the girls and followed Kenichi back inside the school building.

“Don’t you have anything else to say before you run off, Satomi-kun? Gosh...” Shizuka complained as he moved farther and farther away.

She’d been the one to make lunch boxes for everyone today, and she considered them to be quite the masterpiece. That’s why she couldn’t stop herself from complaining even though Koutarou was too far away to hear.

“No mercy from you, Shizuka, I see,” Kiriha giggled.

Shizuka had wanted a little bit of attention, but hadn’t gotten it. Before he could praise her handiwork, Kenichi had come and stolen Koutarou away. The

circumstances being what they were, however, she couldn't tell him not to go. Kiriha understood how Shizuka felt, which was why she gently smiled at her.

"But, but, but don't you feel that Satomi-san has changed lately? Like he's flailing around trying to be nice to us."

Yurika, surprisingly enough, pointed out the minute change that come over him. While the other girls were surprised by that for a moment, they realized that she couldn't stay the same forever either.

"I agree. Then again... While we have an easy enough time saying it, being a man gets in his way and prevents him from honestly expressing it..."

The holographic Clan about the size of a doll put her hand on her hip and smiled bitterly. When she'd talked to Koutarou previously, he'd spoken to her with kind words. But he'd also said that even he knew that there was a time and place for everything. That told her his true intentions lay elsewhere. It was likely just his pride—even his stubbornness—as a man, and that part of him wouldn't change any time soon. From Clan's perspective, however, it all seemed rather needlessly roundabout. It was a bit frustrating, but she thought a good woman would be able to forgive him that much.

"That's exactly the problem! Couldn't you just try a *little* harder, Satomi-kun?!"

"Aren't you being a little greedy, Shizuka...?" Theia asked.

"I think Master is doing his best," Ruth added.

Koutarou wasn't exactly in the wrong. He was putting in the effort. But since the girls could all understand Shizuka's frustration after how hard she'd worked on making lunch, all they could do was laugh half-heartedly.

"Hey!"

In the middle of their conversation, however, Koutarou called out to them from over by the entrance to the courtyard.

"Thank you for the food, Landlord-san! It was really good!"

Just as he was about to enter the building, he'd remembered that he hadn't thanked Shizuka for lunch yet. Koutarou in the past might have just kept

walking. But Koutarou now was, as Yurika put it, flailing, and managed to squeeze out a simple thanks. After waving with his arms at the girls, he disappeared into the school.

“Satomi-kun...”

As Shizuka had practically given up hope, those words were like a surprise attack. She unintentionally gasped a little and held her breath.

“Shizuka, Shizuka! Any comments?” Sanae asked eagerly.

“Oh jeez, Satomi-kuuun! Shouting out so loudly... Everyone’s listening too, jeeeeez!”

Shizuka had used words that made it sound like she felt troubled. But that was just the words. Her discontent from a few seconds ago was no longer anywhere to be seen; Shizuka’s smile made it look like she might melt at any moment. It was pretty clear how happy she was that Koutarou had called out to her like that.

“It looks like she’s as pleased as can be.”

“So it seems.”

Maki and Harumi couldn’t help but giggle at the change that had come over Shizuka. They secretly swore to themselves that they would try and become as assertive as she was.

“All riiight, let’s work hard on the next one too!”

The commotion raised the spirits of the slightly out-of-sorts girls. Despite what was going on around them, they would still have to find a way to cope. And though it most likely wasn’t Shizuka’s intent (although Kiriha was suspicious), her complaining had helped out all the girls.



Rather than the guidance counseling office, Kenichi took Koutarou to one of the school's reference rooms. At least, what was labeled a reference room. It was filled with communications equipment, computers, and various other technology kept under lock and key. The large wooden desk in the center of the room and thick curtains covering the window were the only leftovers from its original use as a reference room. It was now serving as a temporary secret base. Once the new wing of the school was completed, they'd have a proper base there, but for now this would have to do.

"So, what happened?"

Entering the room, Koutarou returned to acting like normal. They didn't have to act like teacher and student once they were behind closed doors, and neither one of them wanted to waste any time with unnecessary formalities.

"In short, there are some people paying close attention to the drama club."

"The drama club? I see... It must be because of the plays."

"If they find Devil Princess-san, that's one thing, but if it turns into something bigger than that, it would be a problem..."

"That's true. It would be a problem if they get to Yuri— I mean, Jet Black King or Black Rose."

"The details are still unknown, but it's presumed that an intelligence agency is closing in."

"What's your basis for that?"

"Kotaro."

With that, Kenichi turned around and looked at Green Shine, who was also in the room. Kotaro pulled up several pictures on the monitor of one of the computers. They were all taken from afar using a telescopic lens. Despite the distance, their face was clearly visible. In addition to that, it was obvious they were on the phone with someone, and more importantly, there was a gun peeking out from under their jacket.

"Baron-san, that gun's the MST-A9 that the old Zangaarb Federation's intelligence agency used," a third Shine added.

Blue Shine, Hayato, was an expert on firearms. He could only see part of the grip in the photos, but that was enough for him to know what model it was.

“It’s as compact as a normal gun, but it’s specially made with a built-in silencer. From a resupply standpoint, it requires unique ammunition, so they probably brought plenty with them.”

With normal guns, a large silencer needed to be added to the barrel of a pistol in order to reduce the sound of gunfire. Hayato was saying this gun was different, and had been specifically constructed to be as silent as possible. Of course, accomplishing that wasn’t simple, and it required a particular type of bullet to work.

All of this narrowed down the possibilities about who was behind it. Since the bullets used for the gun were drastically different from normal ones, the user would need to have a decent supply on hand or risk being slowed down in their mission when they ran out. It wasn’t like they could just go buy more. So if someone was using a specialty gun like that, that meant they had plenty of ammunition on them, as well as a connection to someone who could supply it.

“...In other words, there’s a high chance they’re from one of the four western countries formed from the old Zangaarb Federation?”

Hayato nodded. Koutarou had hit the nail on the head.

“All four of those countries are domestically and politically unstable, so they all have motives.”

The Zangaarb Federation had split up into several countries some time ago. As the largest nation after the split, the Zangaarb Republic had repeatedly undergone military reform. It was hard to imagine that they would still use weaponry that was produced in the late 80s and early 90s. Compared to that, the other four independent countries had been much slower to develop than the Zangaarb Republic in terms of military affairs. They were still known to use weapons from that era or even before. To them, even the tanks from the 70s were important resources. Moreover, due to their instability terrorist organizations ran rampant there. It wasn’t hard to imagine an operative from one of those four countries to be using that gun.

“Megumi-chan, let’s have Baron-san take a look at that.”

“Okay, Daisaku-san.”

After waiting for Hayato to finish his explanation, Megumi brought up a different series of pictures on the large monitor. It was still the same person in question, but these photos showcased what they’d been up to: surveying the high school and some house, as well as speaking to members of the drama club. Kenichi eyed the pictures with an unpleasant look on his face.

“Baron-san, as you can see, they’ve already come into contact with the drama club. At this rate, it’ll only be a matter of time before they get to Jet Black King-san and Black Rose-san.”

Jet Black King was Yurika, and Black Rose was Kiriha. Just like they called Koutarou Baron Demon, the Sun Rangers still referred to the girls by the hero show roles they’d once played. And now with things what they were, there was no harm in using codenames.

“So this suspected spy is getting dangerously close to Folsaria and the People of the Earth, huh?” Koutarou asked.

“That’s the problem. If the world finds out about Folsaria and the People of the Earth before Forthorthe and Japan can establish the right groundwork, Earth will suffer for it. Both magic and spiritual energy are something people would kill to get their hands on,” Kenichi answered.

“I see. And that’s why you called me.”

“Yes. We think if we can present Jet Black King-san and Black Rose-san as normal high school students, that would be the best way to protect them.”

“I think that’d be for the best too. We have some people that excel at methods like that, so we’ll give it a shot.”

“Please do. We’re not very good at those kind of things...”

“That can’t be helped. You’re heroes of justice, after all.”

The person in question was trying to identify the person who had written the manuscript—in other words, Theia—and obtain information and technology from Forthorthe, so they weren’t directly after Yurika or Kiriha. So if the spy were made to believe that those two were just normal high schoolers, they

would quickly be removed from the list of persons of interest. And since it would be revealed soon enough that Theia was from Forthorthe, there would be no more need to investigate the drama club after that. With the exchange students coming in too, it was highly likely spies would turn their eyes elsewhere to try and collect information anyway. It would all be a matter of keeping Yurika and Kiriha's true identities a secret until then.

Koutarou called on two of his friends to help with the difficult task of concealing Yurika and Kiriha's secrets. If he used a team of too many people, they'd just stand out. Moreover, since replacements would be necessary while Koutarou and his team worked, bringing as few people on board as possible made sense. That's why he chose two experts in particular. However...

"I can't accept this."

"I bet not."

"I want to retire from this kind of shady work!"

One of them seemed unhappy about their nomination. That was of course Clan, who was peerless when it came to computers and science in general.

"Satomi-kun, I'm happy that you came straight to me when you were troubled. I'd do anything for your sake."

The other party seemed very receptive, however, as she looked at Koutarou with trust and joy in her eyes. It was none other than Maki, who specialized in mind manipulation and illusions.

"The truth is that I'd rather not make you do this, Aika-san. I know you hate deceit and prefer to tackle things head-on."

"It's fine. When I work for someone, I feel like I'm alive... even more so when it's the right thing to do."

"All right, then I'm counting on you, Aika-san."

"I'm glad."

"What about me, Veltlion?!"

Koutarou wanted to conceal the girls' identities using Clan's scientific prowess

and Maki's magic. And if any work was required, he'd deal with it. And on top of that both Clan and Maki were strong, so they'd be useful in a fight. They were a fantastic trifecta of a team.

"Clan, it's not a joke or a prank this time. It's just that I need you."

"I know that! It's in order to hide information on us too, after all!"

Even though she understood Koutarou's idea, she couldn't accept it. Him asking her to do this kind of thing reminded her of a version of herself she didn't like.

"You seem awfully unhappy about it, though."

"That's because it's still upsetting!"

Clan wanted to become a splendid princess, but there was no denying she excelled at this sort of shady work. So even though she was trying to change, her past was holding her back. Rather than being angry at Koutarou, she was mad at herself. She was so miserable she could cry.

"Then once this is over, ask me for anything you like in return. To make you feel better."

Koutarou knew he was asking Clan to do something she'd really rather not be doing, but he didn't have a lot of other options. He'd have to make it worth her while. It was only fair.

"You're being awfully kind today..."

Clan's expression changed at his unexpected offer. She figured he was just going to tease her or tell her to get over it. But instead, he'd said something that almost sounded like he would answer to her frustrations. It was quite a surprise.

"That's just how serious it is. Besides..."

Pop!

Koutarou flicked Clan's forehead with his finger. It made a loud sound, indicating that it was a good, solid hit.

"Ow!"

“I’ve been thinking a little more about what it means for that crest to be engraved there.”

“Veltlion...”

Tears formed in Clan’s eyes. Most of them were because her forehead hurt, but a at least a few were because of what Koutarou’s words.

“Then I’ve made up my mind,” Clan said.

Despite the tears, she was smiling. Koutarou would answer to her directionless feelings. She was happy.

“What do I have to do?” he asked.

“Even after this is over, I want you to stay just like you are now for a little while.”

“That’s surprisingly hard, you know?”

Koutarou let out a small sight. When there wasn’t a crisis or some other pressing matter at hand, he had a hard time being honest. But he couldn’t refuse her request. This is what she was asking for in exchange for her help.

“Yes, I am aware. Your love is complicated, after all.”

“My love...”

“Oh, am I wrong?”

“...I wish for Her Highness to use a softer expression.”

“You menfolk sure are troublesome. But that won’t happen!”

Clan’s mood was back to normal. Actually, it was more accurate to say she was in an even better mood than before.

It’s probably just as Kiriha-san... This is probably what she means when she says it’s only a matter of time. Heehee...

Watching over Koutarou and Clan, Maki began smiling as well. All Koutarou was doing was trying to hide an answer that had already been made clear. Not just to Clan, but to himself too. While the dam he’d built was strong, it already had several small cracks in it and was leaking water. Maki was sure it would burst any day now.

Thanks to the information gathered by the Sun Rangers, Koutarou and his team were able to locate the hideout of the spy closing in on Theia. It was in a high-rise apartment building near the station. It was fairly clever. Nobody would suspect anything regardless of what hour someone came or went, and in a building with this many tenants, neighbors hardly knew each other. It was the perfect place for a modern spy to hide.

“So that room furthest in, huh? It’s hard to tell from a distance, but they’re probably not alone. We should take a closer look,” observed Koutarou.

“We can’t approach carelessly,” warned Clan. “There are surveillance cameras, personal radars, and most likely bugs around too. We’d be detected right away.”

They were observing the hideout from around a corner down the hall. According to Clan’s intel, the spy had far more than an amateur’s defenses in place. It was dangerous to approach without a plan.

“I’ll go,” offered Maki.

“It’s dangerous, you know?” cautioned Koutarou.

“Who do you think I am, Satomi-kun?”

Poof!

All of a sudden, Maki was no longer a cute young girl, but an older delivery man. It was an illusion she’d cast. As it was something she’d often use during missions, she was very skilled at it, and the illusory disguise she donned was strikingly realistic and detailed. From every angle, she looked just like a tired middle-aged man.

“Clan-san, the device to gather information, please.”

“Ah, r-right. Hold on to this.”

“Okay. Then I’m off.”

Maki smiled with the face of a middle-aged man, and walked with determined steps towards the room in question. Since she was used to undercover missions like this, Maki wasn’t nervous in the slightest.

“Veltlion, she may have said that, but...”

“I know. I’ll follow up on her after this.”

Maki had long stopped living as Dark Navy and started living as Aika Maki. But her skillful use of a disguise like this to gather information was clearly a holdover from her life as Dark Navy. She’d said that she didn’t mind, but Clan knew better than anyone how she must feel about her old self.

“You know, you really are especially kind with her...”

“I think Aika-san would say the opposite, honestly. That I’m depending on you especially.”

Ding-dong!

Koutarou and Clan’s discussion didn’t last long. When Maki pushed the button for the apartment’s intercom, they both fell silent and looked serious.

“I have a delivery for Yamada-san here.”

Maki spoke into the intercom with the voice of an older man. There was no hesitation or tension. A beautiful act.

“This isn’t the Yamada residence.”

“Is this not apartment 603?”

“Apartment 603 is one floor below.”

“Ah... I am very sorry for bothering you.”

Maki, completely in character, had a brief conversation with someone through the intercom before bowing and walking over to the nearest stairwell. It was only natural, considering the flow of their conversation. From there, Maki headed one floor down. Koutarou and Clan would follow her later.

“I found a lot through that,” said Clan.

The device that Maki had been holding observed the inside of the room and delivered the information to Clan’s bracelet-shaped computer. Not only could the sonic sensor determine the arrangement of the apartment, but through the metallic and electric sensors, it was possible to determine with relative certainty what was inside.

“Same here. There’s three people inside.”

“Are you certain?”

“Aika-san pushing the intercom button gathered all their attention in one place, but they reacted differently. One of them answered intercom. Another one moved up to the door and stood at the ready with a weapon.”

Koutarou had been able to tell that much by spiritual energy. Since the people inside were on edge because of the potential threat, Koutarou could get detailed information on them and their movements even from this distance by reading their excited auras.

“The last one has been caught on the observation device’s camera,” said Clan. “He moved over to the balcony. It seems that they’re keeping watch on the outside too. They’re most likely assuming an attack and planning their escape.”

“Won’t they pick up your observation device?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve positioned it far away and it’s surveying at maximum magnification. I’m even picking up the conversation in the room.”

“Good work. We probably won’t be find out then, but we shouldn’t poke at them anymore. Keep watch on them with the observation device, and let’s attack them with your forte, Clan.”

While they had collected some general intelligence, Koutarou and the others still hadn’t gotten the information that they were after. That was who these people were and why they had made contact with the drama club. The easiest way to find that out would be to eavesdrop on them and intercept all outgoing communication. Both of which were in Clan’s wheelhouse, regardless whether or not she liked it.

Koutarou, Clan, and Maki continued observing the room from the Cradle for two whole days. As a result, they were able to identify the group in question. They were indeed from one of the countries formed from the old Zangaarb Federation. More specifically, they were spies sent by the Melgaard Republic. Some of their Asian people had been chosen and sent in for the mission.

“What kind of country is the Melgaard Republic?” Clan asked.

“It’s a devastated country that remained a battlefield for the entire civil war because of their abundant mineral resources. On their way to recovery, old Zangaarb was split and they became independent. While they became independent, their national power was weakened, unfortunately, and they decided to participate in an alliance and economic union that another country is spearheading in order to avoid the Zangaarb Republic from intervening,” Koutarou explained.

“That doesn’t sound unfortunate.”

“Well, it wasn’t at first. But when they moved to introduce a common currency a few years later, the situation went sideways.”

“A common currency...? That means it wouldn’t fluctuate in proportion to their economic situation. And in a union, Melgaard wouldn’t be able to make full use of their abundant mineral resources. Conversely, the already economically stable countries only stood to gain something. And they’d get cheaper resources, even from the poor Melgaard, with a trade agreement within the union. All of that would just be upholding the existing framework and solidifying it along with its problems. In fact, the stronger countries would just suck up all the wealth and increase the gap... which would be the worst possible outcome for them,” Clan extrapolated.

The Melgaard Republic was a very unlucky country. Because their restoration from the civil war coincided with the country splitting, they found themselves in financial dire straits, and other countries began targeting them for their resources. They had joined an alliance in order to protect themselves, but it had ended up dealing them the finishing blow. Stuck in the pitfall of international economy, they were unable to get out.

And things only got worse from there. Mining products became oversupplied worldwide, and prices of rare earth metals dropped because of technological advancements. Melgaard just couldn’t catch a break. As so many problems stacking up against them, even the most excellent leader would have a hard time getting the country back on its feet. Slowly but surely, the country was withering away.

“And just the other day, Melgaard broke down financially. Right now, they’ve

shifted to austerity measures and are frantically trying to restore their economy."

"No wonder they want Forthorthe's technology. As a Folsarian, I can understand that much."

Maki and the Folsarians relied on magic in the face of crisis. The Melgaard Republic didn't have that, but they might be able to get their hands on Forthorthe's technology. Even if it was someone else's power rather than theirs, Maki could understand why they wanted it and the lengths they were willing to go to in order to get it.

"So they're desperate to protect their country and their people... I'm not sure how I feel about this when we're not going up against villains..." Clan sighed.

"But the whole world will suffer if they actually get Forthorthe's technology. Same with magic or spiritual energy. If they're not real villains, then that's all the more reason we should stop them," argued Koutarou.

In Folsaria, magicians had become the ruling class. That was how Darkness Rainbow had come about, and going off of that, the same thing would likely happen in Melgaard, just with technology instead of magic. There would be a scramble over who would monopolize the technology and dominate. It wouldn't be pretty.

"That's true. We have to stop them... We can't let them ruin their lives and lose their families because of this..."

They weren't bad men. They were just doing their jobs. They probably even meant well. But they had gotten close to the truth, and if left unchecked, they could potentially plunge the world into chaos. "This isn't what we wanted" wouldn't cut it then. That's why Koutarou and the others had to keep that from proceeding down this path any further.

"Veltlion, this is the same problem we had back then, isn't it?"

Clan smiled wryly as she adjusted her glasses and let out a light sigh. She looked like she was being self-critical.

"Hmm?"

“When we were in the past, we worried over who we should and shouldn’t save, remember? Don’t you think something similar to that is happening now?”

Since they were from the future, Koutarou and Clan had known how things were going to play out when they were in the past. They potentially had the ability to prevent or avert all kinds of tragedy. But they didn’t have the time to stop them all. They’d had to come up with a rule about how much they were willing to interfere. About who to save and who to leave to fate. They were ultimately unable to answer the question of how to determine which lives were the most valuable, so they’d agreed to only get involved in situations that crossed their paths directly.

“Yeah, I guess so. We... no... You have to decide who to reach your hand out to and who to let be. It’s the same as back then.”

This time, Forthorthe had to choose which nations they were going to parley with. Right now, Japan was the only one on that list. It was a measure to resolve the problems with the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria and the People of the Earth. That was the problem that had directly crossed their path.

“Heh, no. Saying ‘we’ was right. But it’s a bit late for that now, Lord Layous Fatra Veltlion.”

“...You’re right. But unlike back then, this is our ordinary.”

“Yes, back then it was just an extraordinary accident. Moreover, our worries were limited.”

“And right now, all of our choices lead back to this. To put it differently, our ordinary is being invaded by the extraordinary.”

The world around Koutarou and the others was rapidly changing. Koutarou was a normal high school student, but before he knew it, he found himself on the forefront of interplanetary diplomacy. He never could have imagined that two years ago. Back then, he’d only been protecting his home—a humble six tatami mat apartment. And while he was still protecting his home, it was on a much larger scale. He had Earth and Forthorthe to think about.

“I feel like everything up until now was extraordinary too, though,” said Clan.

“It’s not like Sanae flying or Aika-san using magic. It’s, you know, a matter of

feelings.”

“I can kind of understand that... Like there’s not enough love.”

“Yeah, but it’s hard for a guy like me to use that kind of expression.”

“Then... there’s not enough kindness?”

“Let’s compromise with that.”

Right now, Koutarou felt that the girls who had been so extraordinary at first were now so very ordinary. No matter how odd they might look or what they might do, they were really just normal girls. Compared to that, reality was what was extraordinary. Koutarou couldn’t help feeling like he’d strayed into some bizarre world.

Whirlpool of Chaos

Tuesday, March 29th

Clan was watching over the communications of the Melgaard Republic's spies, but that alone wouldn't accomplish their goals. They would also need to come up with a way to fool the spies. That job was assigned to Koutarou and Maki, particularly Maki thanks to her skills with illusions and mind manipulation.

"Aika-san, could you try and avoid manipulating their minds unless its absolutely necessary?" Koutarou asked.

"Yes, I'll try and get by using illusions alone if possible. They're not bad people, so I want to avoid having to manipulate their minds or memories, too."

"Cool. I'm glad we're on the same page. Clan will probably say we're being naive, though..."

"I will not! How rude"

Koutarou and Maki were currently trailing one of the spies from the high-rise apartment building. There were three spies in total, but they'd split up their duties. Only one was in charge of the actual mission, and the other two supported from a distance: one from somewhere nearby in a car, and the other from all the way back at their hideout. So since they were really only dealing with one target, Koutarou and Maki figured they'd be able to pull the wool over their eyes if Clan manipulated the comms and kept the other two at bay.

"He's entering the school. That's pretty bold," observed Koutarou.

"He's made an appointment with the school claiming that his daughter is considering studying abroad next year. And it seems he'll be visiting his real goal while on campus: the drama club."

"That'll give him free reign to walk around the school. It won't be suspicious if he takes pictures, either. And he probably blends right in since there's been an influx of prospective students like that... Dang, these guys are good."

“Don’t forget we have an advantage too. We won’t stand out if we’re in our uniforms.”

“I guess a bunch of students’ll be staring at him since he’ll stand out on campus, so it won’t be weird if we do either.”

“That’s right.”

Koutarou and Maki followed the spy and entered Kisshouharukaze High School. The spy was specifically interested in gathering information on the drama club. And thanks to the plays Theia had written, it wouldn’t take a lot of digging before she was exposed. Then the spies would narrow their sights on her and her circle of friends. When that happened, Koutarou and Maki’s job was to make sure the spies thought that Yurika and Kiriha were normal high school girls.

After finishing the necessary paperwork in the school’s office and getting a visitor’s pass, the spy headed straight for the drama club. They were working on preparations for a new performance today. because they wanted to be able to show off to the new students when they arrived and try to recruit some new members. That’s why they were perfectly willing to entertain a visitor who had a daughter that might want to join next year too.

“Clan, how does it look inside?” Koutarou asked.

“They’ve finished greeting the spy and have moved on to their regular club activities. The club president is explaining what everyone’s doing.”

“So since the drama club doesn’t know that he’s a spy, they’ve just welcomed him as the father of a daughter that’ll be coming from overseas, huh?”

“Seems like it. I’ll let you know if the situation changes.”

“Please do.”

Koutarou and Maki were in the knitting society’s club room. Since it was in the same club building as the room the drama club used, it was the ideal place to stand by.

“Aika-san, we’ll wait here for a while.”

“Is there anyone in the drama club that knows about Theia-san’s or Yurika’s real identities?”

“There isn’t. They just think of Theia as a passionate playwright and Yurika as a goofy cosplayer. That’s probably all they’ll be able to tell him, so we’ll wait here until he moves on.”

“Okay.”

Even though the goal was to protect Theia’s and the others girls’ secret, they didn’t have much cause to worry about the spy interacting with people who didn’t know anything. So rather than doing something like jumping the gun too early and blowing their cover, Koutarou decided they should hang back and let Clan handle eavesdropping on the club and intercepting any communication. So figuring they might be there a while, Koutarou took a seat in his usual chair.

“...”

Looking at Koutarou like that, Maki was unable to move for a moment. She then looked back and forth between the chair by the window and the chair right next to Koutarou, which until very recently, only Harumi had ever sat in. After thinking it over long and hard, Maki sat down in the chair next to Koutarou with a flushed face.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Oh, n-nothing...”

Fortunately, Koutarou didn’t press too hard about what was on Maki’s mind. She was relieved. She was also thrilled she was getting to see a part of Koutarou she usually didn’t get to in more detail.

“Now that I think about it, something like this happened in Forthorthe too, Aika-san.”

Oblivious to what she was thinking and feeling, Koutarou simply smiled at her nostalgically.

“You mean... When we went to meet with Maya-sama and Elexis, right?”

Though it was a serious mission, Maki had gotten a little emotional while they were out together. At least for a little while, it had felt like a date.

This is no good... I have to keep it together. I can't let...

Maki's serious inner-self scolded her. Their enemy this time around was no Maya or Elexis, but even then, these men were still putting their lives on the line for their mission. Letting her guard down around opponents like that would cost her. Maki was painfully aware of that after having fought against Yurika.

"I wondered what happened to them..."

Maki was being awfully cute, but Koutarou's mind was somewhere else. He was sitting there staring out the window. It was only 4 in the afternoon, but since it was still March, the sun had already begun to set. Koutarou was staring past the glowing orange sky. Somewhere far beyond it was space, the vast sea of stars where Elexis and Maya had vanished.

"Are you worried?" Maki asked.

"I'm not worried as much as I am just hoping that they're not dead. I can't say that they were good guys, but they saved us in the end, you know?"

Elexis and Maya had both committed unforgivable crimes, the worst of which was perhaps manipulating Ceilēshu the way they had. But as bad as it all was, they'd always acted with purpose. They moved logically, and they even avoided using methods of attack that would cause unnecessary casualties. Even in Ceilēshu's case, they'd offered to cure her sick father in exchange for her help. It was a villainous way to get her on their side, but it could have been worse. And when it came down to it in the end, they'd come to help Koutarou and the others. So while Koutarou was still wary of them on the whole, he hoped that they were all right.

"You probably hope Maya's alive too, don't you? She's your master, after all."

"It's true. I can't help it... It finally felt like I could talk to her and everything..."

Maki and Maya had been at odds for a long time. But even so, Maya had saved Maki and trained her. They had a long history of a relationship together, and there was no way Maki would celebrate her demise. Especially not now. Maya had acted to save Green, and Maki finally felt they had connected again.

"Then I'll keep praying for their safety too."

“Satomi-kun...”

“But if I ever see them again, I’m gonna lecture the heck out of them. With their talents, they should both be walking a better path in life.”

If Maki said she needed it, Koutarou needed it too. And if it would put Maki at peace, Koutarou would even wish for Maya and Elexis to come back alive.

“Um, but that’s troubling, Satomi-kun...”

What Koutarou said shook Maki. She looked up at him with imploring eyes, yet she almost looked a little angry. It was a rare expression for Maki.

“Hmm? Did I say something wrong?”

“If you say things like that, I’ll forget about the mission...”

“Then just forget about it for a while. I’ll keep watch.”

“I-I can’t do that!” Maki said, furiously shaking her head.

She was determined to be a worthy magical girl and warrior, yet Koutarou’s casual remark had easily destroyed her determination. And if Maki couldn’t do her job, that meant she’d lose her reason for being her. It would mean Koutarou would be in danger. So even though she wanted to dwell on his words and the thoughts of her lost master, she had to put them aside for now. Complex feelings swirled inside her.

“Sorry to interrupt you fun.”

All of a sudden, a hologram of Clan making a sour face appeared between Koutarou and Maki.

“Kyah!”

She’d stopped paying attention to her surroundings, so Maki jumped back in surprise at the intrusion.

“What is it?” Koutarou asked.

“That spy has begun asking about the manuscript, so the conversation’s starting to shift over to Theiamillis-san and the people around her.”

“Let us listen in too.”

“Oh? You know, I don’t mind if you continue your conversation instead.”

Clan gave both Koutarou and Maki a dirty look. She was angry that they were having fun together while she was busy working, which was perfectly understandable.

“Please, Clan-san!”

“Okay, okay. Fine. Jeez...”

But when Maki earnestly pleaded with her, Clan acquiesced and opened the communications channel so they could hear what was going on. She knew that it wasn’t Maki’s fault.

I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to ask for something that will knock your socks off, Veltlion!

That’s why she directed all of her irritation at Koutarou.

The drama club had earned a lot of praise for the original productions they’d put on the last two years called “The Silver Princess and the Blue Knight” plays. The spy explained to the club president that his daughter had taken an interest in Harukaze High after she heard about them. The club president, of course, was flattered. She gushed on and on about them, happily telling him about the scripts, the girl who’d written them, and who’d played what parts in the premieres.

“I imagine he’ll be going to visit Theiamillis-san and the others next,” commented Maki.

“Yes, he’s moving just as we anticipated. At this rate, he might fall right for our trap,” added Clan.

“All right, let’s follow him,” said Koutarou.

Once he got his hand on information about Theia and her friends, the spy immediately moved to confirm it. Koutarou and Maki followed after him. He seemed to be going straight for the girl who’d written the manuscript: Theia.

“It looks like he’s going for the cheerleading squad club room,” observed Maki.

“Well, she is part of it,” said Koutarou.

Theia was technically a member of the cheerleading squad. She had taken it over in order to win the obstacle marathon their first year at school. But she hadn’t had much reason to participate in activities since then, so her membership was only on paper now. Of course, the spy didn’t know that, so he headed for their club room assuming Theia might be there.

“He tried asking the squad members for information on Theiamillis-san, but he didn’t get any proper answers. It seems the golden-haired monster is something of a legend now.”

“She was kind of a monster back then...”

Theia was at the height of her maniacal rampaging after she first came to Earth when she took over the club. Because of that, she’d only really used them as tools. But that benefitted her now since they didn’t know much about her. Theia had actually talked about Forthorthe back then, but since almost two years had passed since then, no one really remembered the details anymore. The spy wasn’t able to get anything useful.

“Theiamillis-san has already gone home, hasn’t she?” asked Clan.

“Yeah, she went home after Kiriha-san’s instructions. Which means that the spy will want to check out Theia’s locker or desk... but since there are still plenty of students around, he can’t touch them. Instead, he’ll probably prioritize the people around Theia. He’ll try and find Kiriha-san, who’s helping out at the committee, or Yurika, who’s at the cosclub. Or at least that’s what Kiriha-san said.”

Kiriha had predicted the spy’s actions. Since he only had a limited amount of time at the school, he’d have to move as efficiently as possible. He’d try and take the swiftest, most logical course of action, which was fairly easy to predict.

“Seems he’s headed towards the cosclub, just like Kii said.”

“So he’s going for the cosclub since it’s in the same building, rather than the committee room that’s back in the main building... I’m glad that he’s so calculating. This is where the match will be settled.”

Koutarou and the others believed that everything hinged on whether or not

Yurika could protect the secret. They weren't worried at all about Kiriha. Even if she got herself into trouble, she could talk her way out of anything. Yurika, on the other hand, could be trouble. While she probably wouldn't blurt out anything about Folsaria or the People of the Earth directly, if she had to think carefully about everything she said, the spy might suspect something. And if he got a clue and pressed her hard for details, things could get problematic. Yurika would have to be cool and natural enough that he would never suspect a thing in the first place.

"I'll initiate the holographic projection."

So Koutarou and the others had come up with the plan of creating a fake club room. Since the room next to the cosclub room was free, they would bring in some spare furniture and props, and then use Clan's holograms to make it a perfect replica of the real thing. Then they'd just move the sign outside the door to lure the spy in.

"Aika-san, I'm counting on you."

"Please leave it to me!"

Maki nodded, full of confidence... But it was nearly impossible to tell it was her. Right now, she looked exactly like Yurika. It was a key part of the plan, since she was going to act as her body double.

After entering the cosclub, the spy asked the holographic club president to call over Yurika. All of the cosclub had actually participated in the play. The spy knew that, but he was singling out Yurika since she was one of Theia's friends.

"You are Nijino Yurika-san, yes?"

"Yes, that's me. Who are you?"

Maki's acting and disguise were both perfect. She was indistinguishable from the real Yurika. She had shown her transformation to Koutarou and the others, and from there polished the details in order to get everything just right. Though Yurika insisted that the real deal was cuter, everyone else had given her the highest praise. She was even able to replicate Yurika's mannerisms and way of talking with ease since they spent so much time together. And just to be safe,

she was using a spell that dulled people's senses at close range, which would make it nigh impossible for the spy to see through Maki's disguise.

"Pardon me. I am Alexei Belachev. The truth is that my daughter is interested in studying abroad at this school, so I'm visiting on tour while I'm in Japan for business."

"Oh, I see. Can I help you with something then?"

"My daughter is into acting, and she took an interest in this school after hearing about the plays you were a part of."

"Ah, I see."

At this point in the conversation, Maki realized she'd screwed up a little. Yurika wasn't that quick-witted. She would probably never be able to intuit what he wanted to talk about just from him mentioning his daughter was interested in acting. So from here on out, Maki made a conscious effort to stay more in character.

"So if you don't mind me asking, what part did you play, Yurika-san?"

"Oh, all kinds of parts. I was a bandit, a horse, a dragon... I was always busy."

Fortunately, it didn't seem the spy had noticed anything. It was a good thing it was their first time meeting. That worked a great deal in Maki's favor. She had nothing to worry about. Really, it was the spy who was on edge. It was too suspicious to jump right into asking about Theia, so he had to dance around the subject carefully. He tried asking "Yurika" a bit about herself.

"And they all laugh at me for being weird when I'm being serious! Don't you think they're terrible?!"

"But who could take such a cute girl playing a bandit seriously?"

"I'm cute?!"

"But of course. By the way... what kind of person is this Theiamillis-san who wrote the play?"

After talking to "Yurika" for a while, the spy finally moved in for the kill. Maki didn't miss his face stiffening up a little when he did. She steeled herself to make sure that she wouldn't make any mistakes from here on.

“Um, Theia-chan is an exchange student from overseas. Ah, that’s just like your daughter!”

“Did she ever talk about legends from her homeland while working on the play?”

“Homeland?”

Maki tilted head to the side and looked at the man with puzzled eyes. Koutarou and Clan, who were watching through a hidden camera, could hardly believe it was Maki. She was imitating Yurika perfectly.

“Oh, I mean the country she was born in.”

Completely taken in by Maki’s acting, the spy explained with a forced smile. Seeing that, Maki was a little relieved It was a good sign.

“Ah! I do think she said something like that. Like they were pretty famous historical characters or something. Apparently Theia-chan is a big fan of them.”

“So, from what country is Theiamillis-san from?”

“H-Huh? Oh, um... President-san, what country was Theia-chan from again?”

“How would I know when you’re her friend and don’t know?”

It was a hologram of the cosclub president that responded to Yurika. She and the other cosclub members had voices that were synthesized by the Cradle’s AI. Clan would step in on anything that was too difficult for the AI to handle and speak through a processed voice made to sound like the club members, but this was well within the range of what the AI could handle.

“Oh... I’m sorry, I don’t know. Should I call her and ask?”

“Oh no, that won’t be necessary.”

“It won’t take long.”

“Don’t trouble yourself. I plan on visiting her myself, so I can ask then.”

“I see. Then I guess it’s okay.”

“Yurika” smiled with a heartwarming expression. Based on her puzzled

reaction when he asked about Theia's homeland, he reached the conclusion that she didn't know anything about the truth.

"Well, thank you for answering my questions. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask one more before I go."

"What's that?"

"How did you and Theiamillis-san meet?"

That was something that Maki normally wouldn't be able to answer, but she showed no sign of faltering and answered with the same confidence she had up until now.

"Theia-chan transferred in during my first year. We didn't get along very well at first, but now she's a precious friend, teehee!"

Kiriha had made a detailed list of questions she thought the spy might ask, and had come up with answers for all of them in advance. This was something that had been on the list, so Maki answered without batting an eye.

Oh no... Should I have thought about the answer before saying anything?

Maki ended up cold sweating again. She'd answered the question flawlessly, but she'd answered it so confidently that she'd broken character again. When undercover, it was mistakes like that that could be fatal. Especially so when the other party was a professional.

"Is that so? I hope my daughter can make friends like that too."

"Hmm... I'm sure she will! Especially if she joins the drama club!"

"You're probably right. I'll let her know. Well, thank you again, Yurika-san. It's probably about time I get going."

"Already?"

"Yes, I'm still in the middle of my tour of the school, so there are places and people I need to visit before I go."

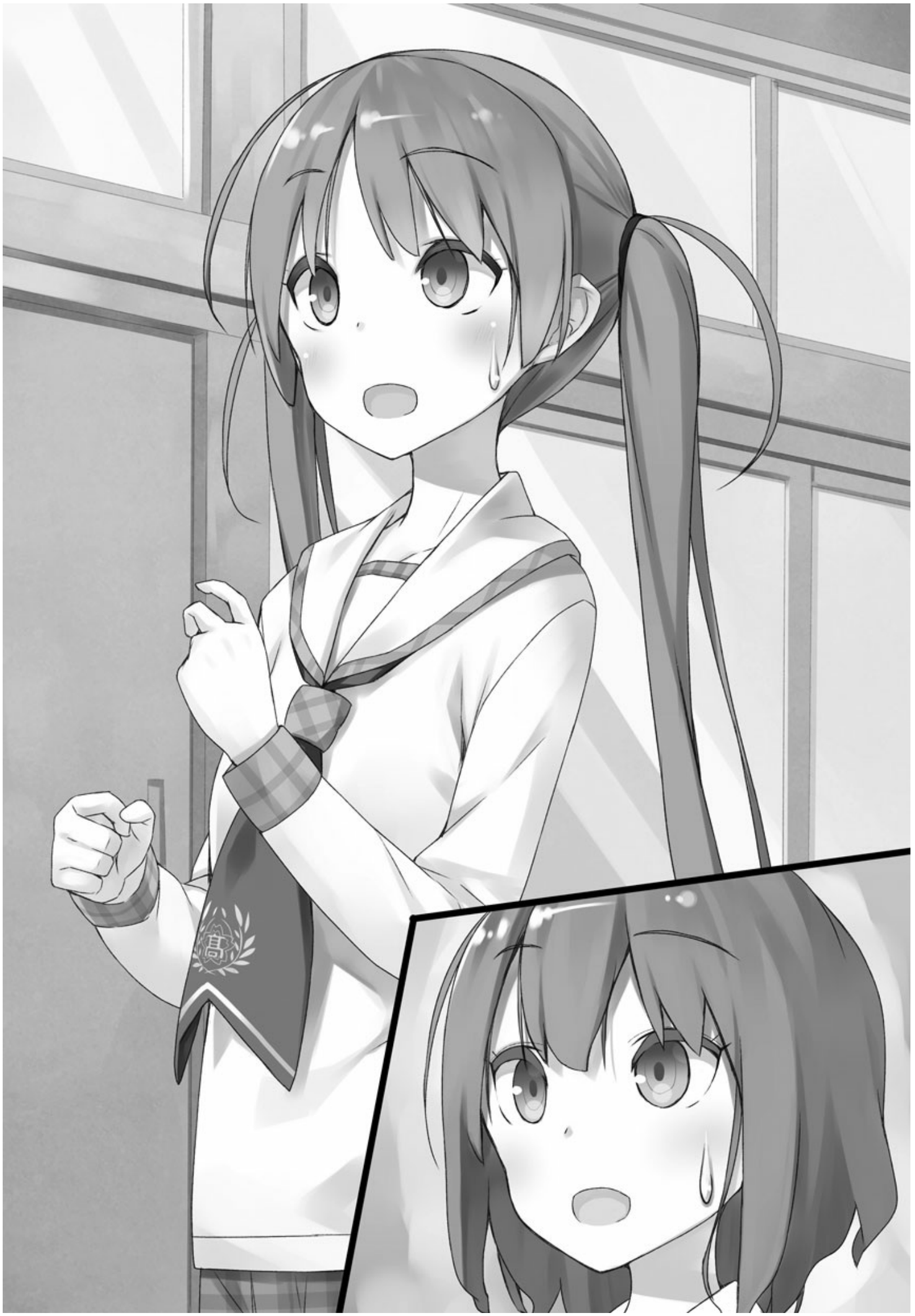
Fortunately, it seemed that Maki's worries had been for naught. To the spy, Yurika wasn't of any particular note. She was just another potential lead in a case. He hadn't detected anything suspicious about her, so he didn't dwell on it

or her. If he sweat minor details like that on everyone he talked to, he'd just be wasting precious time.

"Oh, I see. Well then, goodbye, Alexei-san."

"Yes, farewell."

Maki didn't let any of the relief she felt show as she saw the spy left. He played the part of a loving father from start to finish, while Maki played the part of a carefree cosclub member. They were both great performances, which was a victory in Maki's favor.



Even after the spy left, Maki's work wasn't done. Next, she had to visit the cosclub disguised as the spy. She'd also have to talk with Yurika like the spy just had with her so the actual cosclub would see it. There would be a few minutes' gap in the timeline, but it was unlikely anyone would notice that. Everything else would match up as long as she moved quickly. And with that, she hurried to the real cosclub room next doors.

"I have to say... magical disguises sure are convenient. She transformed from Yurika-san into that man in a flash," said Clan.

"You'd never be able to find Aika-san in hide and seek... Wait, more importantly, what's going on with the spy?" Koutarou asked.

"He's headed towards the room where Kii is."

"Kiriha-san should be able to handle herself, but I'll move closer just in case. Expect the unexpected and all that..."

"I'll relocate the observation device then."

"You do that."

While Maki was at the cosclub, Koutarou and Clan headed over to Kiriha's location as backup. Kiriha was always cool and confident, even in situations like this. Her acting would undoubtedly be flawless. But Koutarou wanted to go anyway just in case something went wrong. He also knew a little emotional support wouldn't hurt. Kiriha was hiding her weak side, after all. And so he headed towards the committee room where Kiriha was working as part of the lifestyle committee. Today just so happened to be the day of their monthly meeting.

"Please be careful. He hasn't entered the room yet."

"I caught up thanks to that, but... why hasn't he gone in?"

Hiding by the nearby staircase, Koutarou leaned out from behind it to peek into the hallway. He saw the spy leaning against the wall outside the committee room, looking at his wristwatch. He'd walked right into the cosclub room without any hesitation, so this seemed a bit odd.

"Perhaps because they're in the middle of a meeting? The cosclub was just

casually working on stuff, so this is a little different.”

“I see, so he’s waiting for it to end. That said, if he’s willing to wait around, it probably won’t go on for much longer.”

It if looked like he’d have to wait around for a while, the spy would have gone somewhere else first. He had a limited amount of time on the school grounds, after all. So if he was waiting for the meeting to adjourn, it would likely be soon.

“I think that’s what’s going on. The person who seems to be the chairman is making closing remarks now.”

“All right... It’s all up to you now, Kiriha-san.”

Just as those words left Koutarou’s mouth, the door to the committee room swung open. The students of the lifestyle committee then came filing out. They were late for their other club activities thanks to the meeting. After waiting for the crowd of people to pass, the spy entered the committee room. His goal was of course Kiriha, who was gathering papers from the table in the middle of the room.

“Excuse me, are you Kurano Kiriha-san?”

“Yes, and who are you?”

“Pardon me. I am Alexei Belachev. I am Alexei Belachev. The truth is that my daughter is interested in studying abroad at this school, so I’m visiting on tour while I’m in Japan for business.”

The spy facing Kiriha introduced himself in fluent Japanese. Clan frowned as she eavesdropped on their conversation.

“He used the exact same introduction he did with Yurika.”

“That’s probably got this bit down pat.”

“Honestly, his Japanese is so good that he doesn’t sound like a foreigner at all. It sort of stands out more than him having an accent.”

“That’s just how serious these people were about coming here to get their hands on information or technology. And we have to do our best to stop them.”

“I know what you mean.”

Clan knew that the spies were after Forthorthe's technology in order to help their country and protect their families and neighbors. She had been sympathetic with them at first, but now she realized how dangerous it would be to give them information.

"By the way... Kiriha-san, what kind of person is this Theiamillis-san who wrote the play?"

"Theia-san is..."

Kiriha and the spy continued talking as Clan was complaining. He ran through the same set of questions he had with Yurika, staring with asking her about herself first and then naturally steering the conversation towards Theia. He was so focused on making sure everything sounded natural that he even spoke some of the same lines verbatim. That in and of itself was a slip-up, as he never considered anyone was listening in on him.

As Koutarou and the others expected, Kiriha's interview with the spy ended without any problems. Kiriha was known for her many talents, including her way with words, so she kept the conversation going at a good pace and in her favor. She certainly had a much easier time than Maki, who had to try to imitate the carefree Yurika.

"How did it go?" Maki asked.

After the spy left the committee room and headed elsewhere, Maki approached Koutarou, who was secretly tailing him. She'd just finished with her cover act over at the cosclub.

"Just as you'd expect for Kiriha, a perfect honor student from start to finish."

"Thinking about it, it's an act she's been keeping up for two years now."

"Veltlion, Maki, the spy is headed towards the gym."

"So he's back to gathering information... It looks like we succeeded."

Their goal wasn't to protect Theia's identity as much as it was Yurika and Kiriha's. Theia would be announcing that she was a Forthorthian soon enough

with the arrival of the exchange students. Specifically, they wanted to keep the heat off of Yurika and Kiriha until that happened. And since the spy had apparently lost interest in them, it seemed safe to assume that they'd succeeded in convincing him that Yurika and Kiriha were just normal high school girls that happened to be friends with Theia.

"So it seems. It doesn't look like he's communicating with anyone either, so I believe he no longer considers them persons of interest. He's likely just moving down his list now," said Clan.

"Thank god... So mission completed?" asked Maki.

"Yeah. Good work, you two. But let's continue tailing him until he goes home just to be sure."

"Because you never know when the unexpected might happen?"

"That's exactly right, Clan."

While they had accomplished their immediate goal, Koutarou and the others didn't let their guard down and continued tailing the spy. The spy moved on to the rest of Theia's circle of friends, talking with Sanae, Shizuka, and their other classmates. But since none of them had particularly extraordinary origins, there was less of a concern over them making contact with the spy. Their biggest concern at this point would be the spy finding out about Sanae or Shizuka's powers.

"It seems that his last objective is snooping around Theiamillis-san's personal belongings. He's headed towards your classroom now."

Ding dong, ding dong...

The bell that sounded when it was five minutes before the school's closing time for the day rang out across campus. Knowing this was his last chance, the spy made his way towards Koutarou and the girls' classroom. At this hour, there shouldn't be anyone left in the classroom. And since there would be at least ten minutes before any faculty came by to lock up, the spy would have plenty of time to check out Theia's desk and locker.

"I just hope he falls for this trap..." said Koutarou.

“This all depends on luck, so let’s say a little pray that it’s on our side,” replied Maki.

“I’m not good with relying on prayers...” grumbled Clan.

Entering the empty class 2-A schoolroom, the spy headed straight for Theia’s desk without hesitation. He’d investigated the seating arrangement ahead of time, so he knew exactly where it was. The spy went through Theia’s desk with a steady, fearless hand. All he found, however, was average school supplies like a dictionary, a few pencils, and a ruler.

“Damn it...”

The spy cursed to himself and carefully returned the contents of the desk to their original positions. Since the classroom was otherwise empty and silent, even his small mutter was picked loud and clear up by Clan’s observation device positioned outside the window.

Next, he moved to the lockers in the back of the classroom.

Clunk.

The spy pulled on the door to Theia’s locker, but it didn’t open. It appeared to be locked. Unfazed, the spy pulled out two long, thin metal tools and slid them into the keyhole. Since the lockers in the class room were rather old, the locks on them were rather simplistic. Even an amateur lockpick would be able to handle them with ease.

Click!

It only took a few seconds for him to pop the lock open. He put away his tools and reached out for the door again.

Squeak...

This time, the door opened without any resistance. He stopped to listen and scan the classroom once more just to make sure there wasn’t anyone nearby before examining Theia’s locker.

“I just hope there’s something here...”

Inside the locker were ordinary things like a jacket, a folding umbrella, and gym clothes that Theia had forgotten to take home. Just as the spy was about to

give up hope that his search would yield anything useful, his fingertips ran across something in the back of her locker.

“This is...!”

It was a plastic file. Suppressing his rash excitement, he quickly pulled it out.

“The first edition of the ‘Silver Princess and the Blue Knight’ manuscript! And here are notes on her ideas!”

Opening the file, the spy discovered the original manuscript for the play, complete with Theia’s memos and notes on writing it. Overcome with joy, he clenched his fist in the air.

“This is it, Johan! Sophia! With this, we might be able to save our country!”

While calling out the names of his son and wife, he hurriedly flipped through the pages of the notebook of ideas. If Theia was a Forthorthian as they suspected, then they might be able to get their hands on Forthorthe’s technology ahead of time by tracing her personal connections. It might just save their failing country. And if he could make good on this mission, he would undoubtedly be promoted, which would let his wife and son live a better life. Hope began taking root in his heart, however...

“Balsarg, Baltarin, Fortharg, Forthorthe, Balthorthe, Foltarin, Talinbal...?”

Towards the end of the notebook was a series of scribbles that extinguished that hope. It appeared Theia had had a great deal of difficulty coming up with a name for the country. She’d written down one name, crossed it out, written another, and crossed it out too. The process repeated over and over. She was moving the letters around, swapping syllables, and so on each time. From all this brainstorming, she’d generated a shortlist of five or six candidates before finally circling “Forthorthe.” If Theia really was from Forthorthe, she wouldn’t have to do that. There would have been no need for it. Which could only mean one thing.

“So this was all just a coincidence?! She just combined some random sounds and happened to end up with Forthorthe?!”

Little did he know this wasn’t just a coincidence. It was all part of Kiriha’s plan. Knowing the spy would be looking for proof of a connection between Theia and

Forthorthe, she wanted to make him think the opposite—that there was none and never had been. So they'd written down a fake list of country names in Theia's idea notebook and left it for the spy to find. With that, they'd be able to buy some time. It wouldn't be much in the grand scheme of things, but all they needed was to make it to the new school year.

"No, this can't be it! I won't accept that we were just being jerked around by a coincidence! That we can't save our country after all!"

The red herring notebook had exactly the result Kiriha had intended. The spy was now under the impression that his investigation had been sent back to square one. But it came at a cost. It broke him. He thought he'd finally found valuable information on the aliens that could save his homeland, the Melgaard Republic, and give him and his family a better life. And it was because his hopes were so high that having them dashed came as so great a shock. Unable to properly stand because of the despair and powerlessness that overcame him, he instinctively leaned on a nearby desk to support himself.

After seeing Theia's notes, the spy was like a sleepwalker or a zombie straight out of the movies. He staggered about, visibly devastated and in the throes of despair. Though what they'd done was necessary, Koutarou and the others felt sorry for him as they watched on.

"This is probably because of the continued predicament his homeland is in. He finally found someone he thought was connected to Forthorthe, but it led him to a dead end. It was the same with Ceilēshu-san... Hope can sometimes be so cruel."

Say there was a family suffering because of a drought. The father opens up a small hole in a dam to help them. However, opening even that small hole would lead to water bursting out and the ultimate collapse of the entire dam. He certainly wasn't wrong to want to help his family. His desire was honorable and justifiable, but that didn't mean his actions were. And there were too many people who wouldn't hesitate to spring a leak in the dam for their own sake, whether not they knew the consequences. That was why Clan and the others had to safeguard it. And though Clan knew it was her duty to do exactly that, she still couldn't help feeling sorry for the people it affected.

“Thinking you can help everyone is arrogant, Clan. We’re only human.”

“Those words carry a lot of weight coming from you...”

“Isn’t it the same for you?”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right...”

Clan’s expression eased up at Koutarou’s words. They’d travelled through time together. Being from the future, they knew how events would play out in the past, but there was a limit to the time they had. They had infinite choice, and finite time. That’s why, whether it was the coup d’etat in Forthorthe two thousand years ago or the more recent events concerning and Clan’s grandmother and Koutarou’s mother, there were a great many people they’d been unable to save... even knowing they were going to die. It was proof that Koutarou and Clan were only human.

“All we can do is wish to save everyone.”

“Veltlion...”

Wishing for it was fine. Surely that wish in and of itself would save someone. But Koutarou thought it was arrogant to think it was truly possible to help everyone, or to feel guilty about the limits of what they could do. And he wanted Clan to understand that. If possible, he wanted the spy who was suffering so much right to understand that too.

“...Veltlion, I love you.”

“What?”

Koutarou’s eyes shot wide open. Clan had come out and said something that had no bearing on their conversation. But her words were an expression of her honest and rarely ever heard true feelings. Clan had been so comforted by what Koutarou said that she wanted to tell him.

“...I know. I know that, so right now shut up and get to work.”

Koutarou didn’t tease Clan. Based on the look on her face, he that now wasn’t the time for that. Instead, he activated the power of Saguratin for a moment. Saguratin was currently being stored on the Cradle, but its powers continued to protect Koutarou even from a distance. And when he activated it, the forehead

of Clan's hologram glowed for an instant.

"...Yes. Leave it to me."

As if following the glow, Clan put her hand on her forehead and nodded. Koutarou's words were snappish, but the crest glowing on her forehead signaled something else. The person Clan loved the most understood her. And not just the difficult problems she faced, but the conflict she felt because of them. But now that she knew that, Clan no longer had any hesitation. Flashing a trusting, loving smile, she got back to work as requested.

"Jeez... She's so..."

Embarrassed, Koutarou looked up and scratched his head. Watching over all of this with a heartwarming smile, Maki used her bracelet to call Clan. She then happily whispered into the bracelet so Koutarou couldn't hear.

"Clan-san, you really are getting special treatment from Satomi-kun, aren't you?"

"M-Maki... um... that's..."

"Heehee."

With a red face, Clan fumbled for an answer. Maki laughed before chasing after Koutarou, who had gone on ahead. Like Koutarou said, they needed to get back to their mission.

"Aika-san, stop."

"Satomi-kun?"

Koutarou held out an arm to stop Maki, who was walking next to him. He'd stopped walking too. Confused, Maki looked at Koutarou and saw a stern expression on his face that hadn't been there previously. It was almost as if an enemy had appeared.

"I have a bad feeling. This is almost like..."

Koutarou and Maki were still following the spy, and Clan was offering support from a distance. The spy in question was on his way back to his hideout via an isolated road. When he reached the darkened promenade jutting out from the park forest, Koutarou felt a strange change in his aura. It was clearly something

abnormal, extremely unpleasant and mixed with all kinds of malice. As it came over him, the spy's will and presence as an individual started to become vague.

Chink!

"Satomi-kun, Saguratin and Signaltin!"

The next moment, two swords appeared as if to protect Koutarou and Maki.

"I didn't call for them!"

"Me neither."

The swords' owner, Koutarou, and any of their contractors, including Maki, had the ability to summon them regardless of distance. But neither of them had. Clan had the ability to do so as well, but she likely hadn't even grasped the situation yet through her observation device. In other words, the swords had come forth on their own to protect Koutarou.

"Which means... it really is that whirlpool?!"

Koutarou became convinced of it when his two swords appeared. The change that had come over the spy was similar to what had happened to Vandarion and Tayuma. That was a sign of, as Sanae would call it, the grey, disgusting spinning thing—the whirlpool of chaos. And as if to affirm Koutarou's terrible suspicion, the swords merged on their own and became Nalfalaren. Unlike the seemingly colorless whirlpool, Nalfalaren glowed in nine distinct hues.



“Satomi-kun, please use the sword!”

“Wouldn’t it be better if you used it, Aika-san?”

In the past, Signaltin’s owner and its contractor being two different people had caused a lot of problems. But when Nalfalaren was born, the contract was rewritten to prevent all of that.

“No, Satomi-kun. That sword is a gift to you from all of us.”

Maki declared that Koutarou was the rightful wielder of the sword with a smile as she readied her staff. It was wrapped in the glow of red mana and transformed into a greatsword. She was planning on fighting with her own power.

“...You guys are idiots, aren’t you?”

“We all agreed that love is all.”

“I know! That’s why I’m saying you’re all idiots!”

When Koutarou took the sword beautifully decorated with silver and gold in his hands, the nine lights all started glowing brighter. It was a symbol of the girls’ decisive will to protect Koutarou no matter what, and to see him walk down the path he desired.

As if responding to the appearance of Nalfalaren, the spy turned around. He fixed his cloudy eyes on Koutarou.

“Guh, gah... you... you again...”

The sun was already in the midst of setting, and the surrounding area was cloaked in twilight. On the promenade by the forest, the lighting was especially poor at this time of day. The spy appeared to fade into the quickly darkening surroundings.

“Why... do you always get in my way... abominable... abominable...”

No, it wasn’t just that he appeared to fade. His very silhouette was growing indistinct. In growing dusk, he was gradually turning into something different. However, he himself was unaware of it. His consciousness was already under the influence of the whirlpool of chaos. As his self-awareness dimmed, and the

boundary between his consciousness and the others in the whirlpool blurred.

“I guess he was pulled in by his desire to do anything to save his country and family.”

“Or maybe his despair served as the trigger to summon the malice from all over his homeland.”

His own wish, and the expectations of those around him. Hope and despair. His wish that overleaped what he was capable of easily transformed into greed, even if it was born from love and a sense of responsibility. In the past, Koutarou and Clan had been able to stop, but the spy hadn’t been able to do the same. Seeing his own country fall to ruin and feeling the weight of the expectations of everyone around him to stop it, the spy couldn’t stop it. Somebody probably just needed to tell him that he didn’t need to carry all of that weight on his own. That it was okay that there were things he couldn’t do. Just like Koutarou and Clan had told each other. But because of his isolated life as a spy, his misfortune was such that there was no one at his side to tell him those things.

“But I can’t let you fulfill that wish!”

The man’s wish had come from a good place. It was pure, and it was strong. He would do anything for the sake of his country, his family, and his allies. But that was exactly what had attracted the whirlpool. His consciousness had been engulfed by his willingness to do anything, including trampling down others, to accomplish his goal. That’s why Koutarou pointed his sword at the spy. Even if his goals were understandable, there were still means that were unacceptable.

“Veltlion, you’re not wearing your armor, so be careful!”

Several unmanned crafts suddenly appeared around Koutarou and Maki. They had been sent by Clan from the Cradle. Since Koutarou wasn’t in his best fighting condition without his armor, she wanted to supplement his defense.

“I get it. Who knows what you guys would do if I get done in...”

“That’s right. So if you don’t want to become the universe’s strongest super knight, I suggest that you protect yourself.”

“That’s a frightening thought. I’ll be careful.”

The girls had already staked their lives to create Nalfalaren. Just what would they resort to if Koutarou were to die? And what would they sacrifice to do it? Koutarou didn't even want to think about it. He knew that he needed to protect himself in order to keep that from happening.

I often tell people to take better care of themselves since it's not just for their sake... This must be what that really means...

Koutarou had said something similar to others many times before. For example, when Maki had tried to sacrifice herself, he told her that it wasn't just herself that she needed to live. But this was the first time Koutarou realized the same thing applied to him.

But... can I really win against that thing unharmed...?

Beyond the tip of the sword was the spy who was losing his shape.

"Why... why do only you get to have everything... how hateful... I want everything... with that I can save... save the country... save everything..."

According to the spiritual energy that Koutarou sensed, the spy didn't have as much power as Vandarion. But Koutarou had almost no support apart from Nalfalaren. He didn't have Blue Knight or his armor. Moreover, the last him he'd used this sword, it only had such overwhelming power because the will of the people of Forthorthe had been focused on him. In other words, Koutarou, like the whirlpool of chaos, was significantly weaker now than they last time they faced off. His intuition told him that this had the potential to get ugly.

"It's okay, Satomi-kun. You'll win! I'll make sure you do!"

"Aika-san... You're right, we'll win this!"

"Yes, let's go!"

To Maki, Koutarou's victory was everything. She would do anything she could to make it happen. In that sense, her wish appeared to be the same as the spy's. But there was an important difference. Maki knew what conditions were required for Koutarou to be truly victorious. To her, Koutarou's victory would be the three of them returning to room 106 with smiles on their faces. That was what set Maki apart from the spy. Pouring wish—which Sanae would surely call love—into her weapon, she attacked the spy.

“Keep it together!” Maki shouted.

“Out of my waaay!” the spy shouted back.

He easily caught Maki’s deadly blow. And emptyhanded, at that. Having grown abnormally large because of the whirlpool of chaos, the spy’s physical and magical capabilities towered over Maki’s. It looked like he would send her flying, but her attack hadn’t ended yet.

“Don’t fight with a power like this! Use your own! For your country and your family’s sake!”

Swish!

Maki fought using a combination of sword and sorcery. Not only had she changed her staff into a blade, but she had charged it with magic. Her chosen spell was specialty of hers: mind manipulation magic. This one in particular blocked signals from the brain to the body and restrained movement.

“As if something like this could stop meee!”

Maki could only use intermediate spells in combination with her sword, and it seemed that wouldn’t be strong enough to completely stop the spy. The vast power from the whirlpool of chaos overcame her magic in short order. She’d only been able to keep him at bay for a few moments.

“Then how about this?!”

But that was good enough. Maki wasn’t alone. Using the few seconds’ opening Maki had created, Koutarou swung down Nalfalaren. And unable to move, the spy took the hit directly.

Fwooosh!

The power of chaos around the spy came into contact with the power of harmony emitted by Nalfalaren. The two powers negated one another and released a wave of energy that swept out into their surroundings, threatening to blow everything away.

“Get back, Veltlion!”

The wave of energy assaulted Koutarou as well. But before it could break his body to pieces, Clan’s unmanned crafts gathered in front of him and deployed a

barrier. Since the annihilation of the two powers had only released a shockwave and heat, the barrier was enough to block it.

“Y-You saved me! Thanks, Clan!”

“Can you please be more careful?!”

“Satomi-kun! It’s dangerous to use your power all at once!”

In his armor, Koutarou could normally deflect a wave of energy like that without a problem. Between the armor’s defenses and its barrier, he’d be fine. At least he had been in the fight against Vandarion. But he wasn’t that lucky now. Without the armor, using all of his power and creating a blast like that was dangerous for him.

“I’m not good at holding back though.”

Nalfalaren’s power itself couldn’t harm Koutarou. It was created to protect him, after all. But the shockwave and the heat from the annihilation of positive and negative energy was different. So in order to stay safe, he’d need to tone down Nalfalaren’s power. But if he toned it down too much, he wouldn’t be able to get through the spy’s defenses. He’d have to figure out where that line was.

“You don’t have a choice, Veltlion!”

“I know! Let’s try it one more time, you two!”

“Ready over here!”

“You can count on me!”

Koutarou decided to stop emitting the blade’s power at full force and focus on the blade itself instead. Making use of the annihilation, he was planning on trying to cut through the whirlpool this time. With that, his attack power wouldn’t drop too much and he wouldn’t get hit by the wave of energy.

“I’ll go first!”

Bang, bang, bang!

Clan started off by having all of her unmanned crafts open fire. As the whirlpool of chaos was protecting the spy, long range attacks wouldn’t deal any

real damage. However, it was enough to pin down the spy and keep him from moving too much.

“How about this?!”

When Clan began her assault, Maki let go of her sword with her right hand and focused orange mana into it. It was a sign of her using alteration magic. She cast a spell that changed the element of the air.

“Well done, Maki!”

Bang, bang, bang!

Clan realized what Maki was thinking, and strengthened her attack even more. The unmanned crafts rained down bullets on the spy, but they did no damage. They simply ricocheted off the surface of his enhanced, enlarged body and vanished into the distance.

Fwoosh!

But that was when something surprising happened. All of a sudden, the spy’s body was wrapped in roaring flames. That was thanks to the spell that Maki had just cast. She had changed the air around the spy into pure oxygen and combustible gas, which was then ignited by Clan’s bullets. The end result was the spy being swallowed by a giant ball of fire.

“Guaaaaah!”

“Good work, you two!”

The fireball blocked the spy from seeing anything for a couple of seconds. In contrast, Koutarou could still see just fine thanks to his spirit sight. He could clearly make out the spy’s twisting body as he was burned by the flames, and took the opportunity to take a swing with Nalfalaren.

Shing!

“Gyaaaaah!”

“All right, I can do this!”

The attack brought about the results Koutarou had hoped for. Having grown enormous, the spy’s body was mostly made up of the power of the whirlpool of

chaos. So when Nalfalaren came into contact with him, the power around the blade caused the annihilation to take place within the spy's body, and Koutarou was able to cut off his right arm that way. The severed arm wriggled around like a living creature before splitting apart and disappearing.

"C-Curse you, B-Blue Knight... once again, you..."

But just like with Vandarion, the missing limb was quickly regenerated. Flesh swelled up around the wound and sculpted itself into the shape of an arm as if it were clay. The spy's negative emotions tried to call forth even more power from the whirlpool of chaos.

"Did you say Blue Knight?! Is Vandarion mixed in with you?!"

Now that he was pulling more power from the whirlpool, the emotions of people that had been connected to the whirlpool previously flowed into the spy along with its negative energy. And with his own sense of self diluted in the chaos, he felt those emotions like they were his own. In fact, the hostility he felt towards Koutarou and the others might have been from the whirlpool to begin with.

"Keep it together! You have to bring yourself back! Who are you?! What are you fighting for?!"

"I-I'm... Alex... No, Vand... It doesn't matter! I will kill you and obtain everything! The world will fall into my hands! Power! Give me more power!"

As Koutarou and the others distanced themselves and watched the transformation take place, the spy's whole body began changing as if were forcibly being molded into something else. He turned from a three meter giant to a two-legged dragon. It wasn't dissimilar from the robot dragon Vandarion had controlled.

"No, you're Alexei Belachev! You were supposed to be fighting for your family waiting for you at home, and for your country that has fallen on hard times! You aren't after the world! Try and remember! Remember what you were here for!"

"Gaaaaah! Shut up, shuuut uuuuup!"

Snap.

Even after his death, fragments of Vandarion's conscience continued to self-assert itself within the whirlpool. Because of his overly strong ambitions, he could retrain his desire and hatred even within the whirlpool. And as Vandarion sought to rule all, he exerted an extraordinary amount of control over anyone who came into contact with the remnants of his being. But because of Koutarou's words, the spy began to suffer as he recalled his wife and son, and the starving people of their country. And trying to escape from that suffering, he began rampaging, throwing his limbs and tail about. But rather than trying to defeat Koutarou, it was an expression of the frustration he felt at being unable to escape the pain. His flailing rampage wasn't directed at anyone.

"We might still be able to do something! Aika-san!"

However, that gave Koutarou hope. Seeing the spy venting his frustration made Koutarou realize that he still hadn't been fully absorbed into the whirlpool. Just like Yurika had done with Purple, it might still be possible to save him. Koutarou was staking his bet on that.

"Greater Force Field!"

Seeing Koutarou's sword starting to glow, Maki realized that he was planning on doing something. While it might have been extremely dangerous, Maki would do whatever she could for the man she loved. And supporting him as best she could right now would be how she protected him. Maki cast a defensive spell on Koutarou and glared at the spy as she firmly held her staff in both hands. If Koutarou's idea was what Maki thought it was, she was holding the key to this battle.

"This will be settled in an instant! Don't miss your chance, you two!"

"Right!"

"Leave it to us!"

With the sword glowing intensely in his hand, Koutarou charged at the spy. Attacking with this much power, the energy released from the annihilation would be significant. And Koutarou had gone on the offensive well aware of that. While his methods might have been wrong, the spy had committed no crime that should cost him his life. Koutarou didn't want to kill him.

“Haaaaaaaaaah!”

“Haste!”

After readying Nalfalaren, Koutarou’s movement began increasing rapidly. That was thanks to Maki’s spell. Koutarou hadn’t told her to cast it, but she thought it would be necessary. And Koutarou wasn’t surprised or confused by the sudden increase in his speed. He’d been counting on Maki to help him out.

“I’ll make sure I kill you this time! Now dieeeeeeee!”

Sensing danger from the approaching sword, the man-turned-dragon spewed flames at Koutarou. It was a literal pillar of fire, and it swept from left to right to mow Koutarou down.

“Aika-san—”

“Quick Cast Force Field!”

“—Footing!”

Wham.

By the time Koutarou finished making his request, it was already done. Using the magical shield that appeared before him, Koutarou kicked off it and jumped as high as he could. With his movements accelerated, he escaped the flaming pillar with just a few singed hairs.

“Satomi-kun—”

“Sword, please!”

“—Blind him!”

A bright flash was released from Koutarou’s sword. The spy who stared right at the blade was stopped in his tracks.

“Gah! D-Damn it, my eyes! My eyes!”

“Hahh...”

Exhaling sharply, Maki stepped forward as the spy flailed in confusion. Unlike before, the spy could attack from range, so Maki needed an opening like this to be able to advance. As she approached, Koutarou took his place next to her, and they stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the spy.

“Curse youuu!”

Swoosh!

The spy swept his long tail across the ground, trying to knock back both of them. However, it passed through right where they were standing with no resistance. The two people he’d seen were mere holograms.

“Wha?!”

The tail swipe had missed, and its violent momentum threw the spy off balance as his body twisted in a half circle. Clan had been waiting for just that moment.

“What did you think the flash was for?!”

Crash!

“Guah!”

Clan rammed one of the unmanned crafts into the spy. Normally it would have been sent flying, but with the spy off balance, that didn’t happen. With his equilibrium already compromised, the blow sent him to his knees.

“You really are a genius, Clan!”

That was when Koutarou—the real one—appeared with his sword at the ready. He swung down the glowing Nalfalaren at the fallen spy.

“Praise me for something else for once, would you, stupid boy?!”

The power of the whirlpool of chaos around the man and the power of Nalfalaren reacted violently to one another and unleashed an intense blast of heat and accompanying shockwave. At such close range, Koutarou was sure to take a lot of damage. However, Maki’s defensive spell and the barrier from the unmanned craft that had rammed the spy protected him. Thanks to that, the spy was the only one who suffered any harm from it.

“Greater Dispelling!”

Maki made the final move. The fastest way of saving the spy was to cut the magical cord between him and whirlpool of chaos. However, in its usual state, the whirlpool’s defenses were very high, making it exceedingly difficult to sever

any ties. And since Maki wasn't as much of a prodigy when it came to magic as Yurika was, the task was even harder for her. That was why Koutarou had weakened the whirlpool with his sword first.

"Return to your family, Alexei Belachev. Use your own powers to protect them, your friends, and you country... I'm sure you'll be able to do it..."

Covered in the power to dispel magic, Maki's sword didn't hurt the spy. It only slashed the magical bond between him and the whirlpool. Having lost its foothold to exist, the whirlpool rapidly began weakening and vanished, presumably returning to the mysterious nothingness from whence it came.

Disappearance

Tuesday, March 29th

As the whirlpool of chaos disappeared, the spy returned to his normal appearance. Just as Koutarou and the girls had suspected, underneath it all, the spy still maintained his sense of self. That was what allowed him to return to his normal self after being cut off from the whirlpool—his attachment to his powerful feelings of love for his wife, his child, and his country.

“Aika-san, how does he look?”

“He’s not in a good shape. Temporarily letting that thing take control seems to have put a lot of strain on his psyche...”

According to Maki’s analysis, the spy was able to return to his normal body without a problem. What had really been damaged while coming into contact with the whirlpool was his mind. The uncontrolled power of raw chaos was simply too much for normal humans to handle. And after it had taken over his mind, even though it wasn’t for long, it had run rampant and left him in mental shambles. It was uncertain if he’d ever wake up again in this state.

“So in the worst case, he’s in a vegetative state, but even if he does come to...” Koutarou trailed off.

“If he had trained his mind and had magic to protect him like Purple did, it probably wouldn’t have been this bad,” said Maki.

“Can’t we do something?” asked Clan.

“While I don’t really want to do so without permission, I think the best we could do is erase all of his memories after coming into contact with the whirlpool,” Maki replied.

In order to return the spy to normal, they’d need to use magic to brainwash him. The chaos had had such a profound effect on him that they would try and

abate its influence by erasing his memories of it. Maki wouldn't have thought twice about doing such a thing in the past, but now she was hesitating. Though the man's mind had been tainted by chaos, she didn't like the idea of doing anything against someone's will.

"Aika-san, that thing broke his mind. It's better for him to return it to how things used to be, even if it doesn't make that much difference in the end. No matter what, it'll be better than how things are now. If we leave him be, he'll just be wandering through a nightmare until death finds him."

Koutarou believed firmly that they should erase his memories. He might never wake up as things were, and if they did nothing until then, the nightmares would just eat away at his mind. In other words, he would end up twisted and corrupted by chaos even though he was cut off from the whirlpool. So between that and trying to help him, erasing his memories was the right thing to do as far as Koutarou was concerned. It was best for this man, as well as his family and the people he was trying to protect.

"Sadly, we can't always help everyone the way we'd want to. So I need you to step and do this, Aika-san. That's an order."

"...Thank you for that, Satomi-kun... I've gotten very weak lately..."

After meeting Koutarou and the others and learning what it meant to have true friends, Maki had faced all kinds of worries she never had before. This was a good example. Even though she knew what Koutarou was asking was the logical thing to do, she couldn't help thinking—hoping—that there was a better solution somewhere, somehow. So Koutarou making it an order was a saving grace to Maki. She thought of Koutarou's desires as her own, so she could do this if he wanted her to. Steeling herself, Maki readied her staff.

"I'll take responsibility," said Koutarou.

"No, *we* will take responsibility," responded Maki.

"She's right. I support this too," added Clan.

After that, Maki cast several spells to mend the spy's mind. She erased the memories that were taxing his psyche, restored the damaged parts of his mind, and more. And she cast each and every spell with the utmost care so that he

would wake up as close as possible to his original self. While she had reservations about what she was doing, once she got started, there was no hesitation in Maki's actions. That was something of a relief for Koutarou, but as Maki was treating the spy, a new worry crossed his mind. It was about the whirlpool of chaos he'd fought against several times now.

For starters, why does that unpleasant whirlpool only ever materialize around us...?

Considering the characteristics of the whirlpool, it wouldn't be strange for it to appear on the other side of the planet or even the universe and cause all kinds of galactically-scaled problems. But it only ever seemed to materialze near Koutarou and the others, and powered up their enemies. As far as he knew, it only showed up when they were around.

"That's a gloomy face you have there, Veltlion."

Noticing Koutarou's pensive face, Clan's hologram moved closer to get a better look at him.

"Mm... Yeah, I was just thinking about something."

"About what?"

"Just that we're getting a little too familiar with that whirlpool."

Since it wasn't anything worth hiding, Koutarou honestly told her what was on his mind.

"Now that you mention it, we have been running into it lately. But it's all technically related to Folsaria, so doesn't that make sense?"

"I can't deny that. This time it happened here, the former center of Darkness Rainbow's activities."

Clan's suggestion fit with Koutarou's impressions. If the overuse of magic or spiritual energy was what brought about the whirlpool, it wasn't strange that they were coming into contact with them. After all, they were always fighting against the misuse of magic and such powers.

"But compared to you guys coming to Earth so grandly, this is nothing."

"How rude! I can't have you comparing me to such bothersome things!"

“Don’t worry. I’m only talking about importance.”

Koutarou was smiling, but he was bracing himself inside. If Clan was right, the spreading of magic and spiritual energy would mean the spreading of the whirlpool of chaos. That was an incredibly dangerous prospect. So in order to avoid that future, Koutarou and the others would have to try their hardest to keep the secrets of the Folsarians and the People of the Earth safe.

After Maki finished treating the spy, they let the Sun Rangers take over handling the incident. That was what they’d planned on doing from the start. It was going to take experts to check up on the spy who’d had his memory erased and to investigate the movements of the Melgaard Republic. It would also take serious resources to interfere with the spies’ communication and manipulate information. In other words, they needed the help of a powerful organization like the Sun Rangers.

“I see... The monster from that time...”

Kenichi listened to Koutarou’s report with a very serious expression on his face. As the Sun Rangers had been involved with battle against Tayuma, they knew about the whirlpool of chaos. Kenichi had realized at the time that the situation might take a turn for the worse, so he’d already thinking about countermeasures for just that scenario.

“Red Shine, I think we should get them moved as quickly as possible.”

“Yeah. I don’t think there’s any place in Japan, or really, any place in this world where they’d be safe.”

Japan was too small to hide the People of the Earth and the Folsarians. And there were more people than ever after their secrets. If nothing was done about it, magic and spiritual energy technology would spread, causing trouble all over the world. It would create endless opportunities for the whirlpool of chaos to be summoned, which would be a dark time indeed.

“They have developing planets over there. Forthorthe could probably give them their own world where no one could touch them.”

“That would be a great solution for everyone. I’ll try steering the top brass in

that direction.”

“Please do.”

Koutarou and the others welcomed the fact that Sun Rangers were playing a sort of intermediary between the nation of Japan, and the underground dwellers and Folsarians. Since they understood the real situation at hand, they had everyone’s best interests in mind and could act accordingly. But it went both ways. The Sun Rangers were grateful that Koutarou and the others were intermediaries between Earth and Forthorthe.

“Red Shine, compared to now, things were much easier when we were fighting side by side.”

“You’re right. We only needed to fight back then.”

The two men looked at each other and smirked. In the past, they’d only needed to fight alongside their allies. But things were more complicated now. They were no longer just soldiers.

“I’d prefer to be fighting, don’t get me wrong, but I know in my heart that it’s good we’re not.”

“Yeah, it’ll be better if things just continue this way.”

When they were done talking, Koutarou and Kenichi held their arms out and lightly bumped fists. It was like an unofficial salute between two soldiers who’d fought in the same war together. They’d both climbed the ranks since those days, but they held a great deal of respect for each other.

“Welcome back, Satomi-kun.”

“...Are you already done?”

Maki and Clan both greeted Koutarou in their own way as he returned from talking with Kenichi. Both of them were smiling.

“Yeah. This strange job is over for us, so let’s go home.”

They’d completed their real goal at hand. They’d successfully protected Yurika and Kiriha’s cover as normal high school students, and planted the fake evidence to make the spies believe Theia was an Earthling. The fight at the end had been unexpected, but ultimately, everything had been resolved. All that

was left was red tape and politics, so Koutarou and the girls let the Sun Rangers take over from here.

Koutarou took the two girls and hurried home. The sun had already set, so it had gotten quite dark outside. On the promenade coming out of the forest in the park, the only light they had to guide their was a streetlamp some meters ahead.

“Satomi-kun, even though we’re not used to it, I think there will be a lot more work like this in the future. We should get more used to it if we can,” said Maki.

“The Sun Rangers are lamenting that too,” answered Koutarou.

“I hear they were promoted quite a lot,” added Clan.

“When it comes to fighting suspicious people, they’re the best after all. They’re just having a hard time adjusting to being on the side giving orders.”

“A little like you, who went a civilian from an unrelated nation to the commander-in-chief of an empire, Veltlion.”

“Having gone from a neanderthal to commander-in-chief, my relationship with Her Highness has changed quite a bit.”

“Again with that!”

Though their surroundings were dark, the atmosphere around Koutarou and the two girls was bright and cheerful. Finally relaxing a bit after their troublesome task for the day, they were in high spirits. They’d finished their work, and everyone was safe. Once they got back to room 106, their smiles would surely become even brighter.

“Ook, ook, ook!”

“...I really will kill you some day.”

“Ook?”

“Eeeeek!”

“Come on now, Clan-san. I’ll give you a banana, so calm down.”

“Maki, are you aware that your behavior has been on the malicious side recently?”

“That’s what I’ve been going for.”

“That’s *not* something you should be going for!”

“Keep at it, Aika-san! What else are friends for?”

“O-Ook?”

“Come on!”

Years ago, not one of them would have ever expected to end up like this. Koutarou lived alone in room 106, Clan was scheming to entrap the other princesses, and Maki didn’t know how to trust in other people. Things had changed for the better for all of them, and in ways they never imagined.

“Joking aside...”

“Hey, don’t just change the subject!”

“Listen, things aren’t going to be as simple as just defeating our opponents anymore. I agree with what Aika-san said.”

“Even if we defeat one enemy, someone else will come to take their place. And they’ll grow wary and change their approach. That’s why we need to find them immediately. We’ll let them move about freely and think things are going their way, but manipulate them like this from the shadows.”

“So we’ll be relying on you, Clan.”

“I won’t forgive you even if you say that!”

“I know. That’s why I made you angry. It’s hard to say things like that when you’re serious.”

“You twisted, good-for-nothing ingrate!”

“It looks to me like he’s being kind, though.”

“I know that! That’s what makes it so aggravating!”

“Oh my.”

They’d surely be faced with all sorts of trouble from here on out. But they would be able to overcome it as long as they were with each other. And then they’d go back to living their ordinary daily lives together. That was the strength

of the bond they'd come to build over the past two years, and that was why Koutarou could smile even after what they'd just been through.

"Why can't you just be honest?!"

"If I'm honest... You know."

"Know what?! Say it!"

"If I'm being honest, I might soon end up doing or saying something serious."

"Then get on with it!"

"Are you stupid?! As if I could do something that irresponsible!"

Watching the two of them, Maki thought to herself that while Koutarou and Theia's exclusive way of communicating might be fistfights, Koutarou and Clan's might be shouting matches. No matter what they yelled at each other, it had absolutely no effect on their relationship afterwards. And when they shouted at each other, it was like they were on the exact same level. Like they only had eyes for each other. Maki felt it was just the same as his fights with Theia. So she watched on with a smile, and that smile was proof that her own bonds with Koutarou and the others had grown stronger and deeper.

"Satomi-kun, shout at me too."

"I can't do that, Aika-san. You're precious to me."

"Why can't you say things like that to me, Veltlion?!"

"That'd just be weird!"

Comparing her own relationship with Koutarou to his with Clan, Maki felt like there was still some distance between them. But it was only slight. Her relationship with Koutarou had always been different from the other girls'. But now, with the crest on her forehead, she felt at at ease about it. Even if there was still some distance between them, that crest made her feel sure she'd make it up in no time.

Am I really allowed to be this happy...? Just two years ago, I was an ice cold, evil magical girl. It's like that was all a dream now...

She knew that hardship awaited them. Things would surely be dangerous.

There would inevitably be times she wasn't smiling. But even knowing that, Maki was happy. It wasn't too much or too little; it was just the right amount of happiness. She was right where she belonged, and Maki relished that from the bottom of her heart.

"Aika-san always holds back, so I have to be nice to her!"

"It's not like I'm holding back... I like being like this. I don't want to interfere, just to watch over... It's... hard to express..."

"So why can't you be nice to me too?!"

"You're always demanding things of me, so why would I?!"

"Grrr, you always have a comeback! Jeez!"

All Maki wanted was to give and receive that happiness. She earnestly believed that was everything, and that she didn't need anything else.

I wouldn't have any regrets if I died right now... I'm sure I would reborn over and over, and come to Satomi-kun's side every time...

There was nothing to fear. Even if the unfortunate ending of death awaited her, Maki was sure that would be able to return to her beloved, just like Alaia had. She was confident she loved him just as much and would be able to do the same.

"But still... Where has the Aika-san who loved money and asked me for everything gone?"

"She's still here. But I now know that money was just an easy way to make a connection with people. But now I have something even better engraved on my forehead."

"...That's the result of the connection, and not the connection itself."

"Yes, but its proof of it. It's like that bond given form, and that means everything to a girl."

"I guess I should just be happy you can talk about being a girl and girly things so naturally now..."

"But *I'm* still unhappy!"

“You really are persistent, Clan...”

Koutarou and Clan went right back into their umpteenth quarrel. Maki smiled at them before looking up at the moon.

Crimson, I’m happily living my life now. What about you? Are you getting along with everyone? Knowing you, you’re being stubborn and making people angry, aren’t you?

Staring into the night sky, Maki’s thoughts turned to her faraway friend. Listening to Koutarou and Clan bicker, she recalled her own feisty friend.

Maybe I don’t need to worry about that since you all went to save Green. Heehee, if it’s possible, I’d love to hear your stories the next time we meet...

Maki prayed for her old friend’s happiness. She now had plenty of other people she cared about, too. And she wasn’t just focused on her friends anymore; no, she was trying to help them save the whole world. That may have been the most compelling sign of the change that had come over Maki. Something like that would have been a giant leap for the person Maki used to be, but it was just a baby step for who she was now.

Huh...?

All of a sudden, Maki’s body was suddenly surrounded by a soft indigo light. When she held her hand up to her face to get a better look at it, it appeared to be transparent. She could see Koutarou and Clan right through it. It was as though her body was slowly losing its substance, and melting away into the light.

Satomi-ku...

Maki instinctively tried to call out to her beloved. It wasn’t that she wanted him to do something. She just wanted to talk to him once more before she disappeared. She knew this would wound him deeply. But no matter how much she screamed, she would never reach the boy just a few meters in front of her. Her body was already fading into the indigo light, and her voice vanished along with her.

I see... The promised time has come... The time for our final trial...

Maki didn’t feel any fear. When the light wrapped around her, she had come to understand everything. Why she was here, why she was disappearing, what would happen from here on, and what that meant. And with that understanding, Maki only wished for one thing.

I hope that we will be able to overcome the final trial...

Everything was to that end. The long way the invaders had come was all to make a small miracle possible in their last trial. Everything had led up to this, and everything was starting to take shape around it. And all Maki could do was pray. She wouldn’t be the one who would make the miracle happen.

I love you, Satomi-kun. I will believe that you feel the same way...

With that prayer, Maki vanished with the light, and up until the very end, she never doubted the strength of the bond she had with her friends and her beloved.

“...Aika-san?”

The moment Maki vanished, Koutarou turned around. He felt like he’d heard her call out to him.



“Huh?”

But Maki wasn’t there. He looked around, yet still didn’t see her anywhere. All there seemed to be was a chilly wind whirling in the area.

“What’s the matter?”

“Aika-san is gone.”

“Did she go somewhere?”

“Knowing Aika-san, she might have spotted someone suspicious.”

Clan and Koutarou searched for Maki together, but they would never find her.

Start of the Trial

Tuesday, March 29th

At first, Koutarou and Clan simply thought that Maki had spotted a suspicious character and gone off to tail them, but they soon realized that wasn't the case. They waited a long time for her, but she didn't come back. She hadn't contacted them either. And when Koutarou and Clan tried to call her, they couldn't get through.

"It looks like her cellphone is out of range."

"Gravitational waves aren't reaching her bracelet either. It's either been turned off or it's being jammed."

"What does this mean? Where did Aika-san go?"

"I can't imagine that she was kidnapped. Personally or practically."

Considering the circumstances, it was highly unlikely Maki alone would have been attacked by an enemy, And since gravitational waves weren't reaching her, that would imply that either a Folsarian, an underground dweller, or a Forthorthian was responsible. But none of them had any reason to kidnap Maki. Even if someone from the anti-government groups was making a move, there would have been better choices. If it was about Folsaria, Yurika would have been the go-to choice; and if it was the People of the Earth, Kiriha. Yet if Maki hadn't been kidnapped, all signs pointed to her disappearing of her own accord.

"Did your machines record anything?"

"I stowed the observation devices already, and unless its an emergency, the computer only automatically records what's in my line of sight..."

"Guess that's a bust, then. Let's try checking out the places she might have gone to."

"Please wait a moment. I'll ask Theiamillis-san and the others to look for Maki too."

“Good idea.”

Maki had disappeared without a trace. Being unable to contact her, Koutarou and the others decided to split up and look for her. Koutarou would go with Clan and check out places they thought she might go. And since it was already nighttime, the other girls would form groups of two or three and try searching other places. They made sure no one was alone, however, because while it was unlikely, there was still the possibility that Maki had been kidnapped.

Koutarou and Clan first headed to Kisshouharukaze High School. They were the closest to it, and it was the first place that came to mind for Koutarou considering how they met. They made their way towards the class 1-A classroom.

“...How *did* you and Maki meet?”

“Aika-san was after the mana gathered in room 106.”

“Signaltin’s?”

“Considering how things turned out, probably. And she transferred into this school to observe us and keep her identity hidden.”

“A high school student would be able to walk around the town more naturally than some random unemployed young woman, after all.”

Maki was an evil magical girl from Darkness Rainbow. In preparation for their battle with Rainbow Heart, she’d come after the vast pool of mana gathered in room 106. Operating undercover, she’d started attending Harukaze High to blend in.

“There was also the cosclub. As long as she was part of it, no one would think it was weird to see her in a magical girl costume.”

“...Now that you mention it, that’s true. It’s such a simple, obvious idea, yet it works brilliantly.”

Maki had copied Yurika, her enemy, and joined the cosplay society. She had been under the false impression that she was using it as a way to hide her real identity. It was all a misunderstanding, but it turned out to be quite an effective

strategy. Who would ever think that a real magical girl would be part of the cosclub? Even if she openly paraded around in her magical girl outfit, people would only think of her as an oddball cosplayer.

“Actually, Aika-san had it rough from the start. Yurika introduced her as an evil magical girl the day she transferred in.”

Koutarou could remember the look on Maki’s face even now. When Yurika called her out in front of the whole class, she completely froze.

“Satomi-san, Satomi-san! Look! Please look!”

“What is it, Yurika?”

“They came! They finally came!”

“Who did?”

“The enemy! The evil magical girls are finally here!”

“Wha?!”

At first, Koutarou had thought Maki was just mortified over being outed as a cosplayer, but thinking back on it, he knew what she was really thinking. She must have been completely stunned that Yurika had revealed something that should have been an absolute secret for both of them.

“But people knew Yurika as a member of the cosclub, right? I can’t imagine it actually caused any trouble.”

“Yeah. Everyone just thought Maki was an old cosplay friend of Yurika’s, and that Yurika was being dramatic.”

Koutarou looked into the pitch black classroom. Though it was dark, he could imagine Maki standing there, clear as day. But Maki then was hardly the same Maki he knew now. Back then, she’d been full of hostility.

“I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not...”

“Considering how it all turned out, I think it was good.”

“Was it? It certainly doesn’t sound like it...”

“Because we all got involved, it drew out the battle between Aika-san and Yurika, so she got to experience a little bit of life as a normal high school girl. It

seems like that was what ultimately led to her change of heart.”

“...So she wasn’t much different from me.”

“Hmm?”

“In my case, I was blown into the past with you, remember?”

“Yeah... Because of unavoidable circumstances, we ended up working together, and that changed things between us. That does sound like what happened with you and me.”

Maki had at first appeared as Koutarou and the girls’ enemy. All misunderstandings aside, that part was undeniable. But what slowly led to that changing was her everyday life. Slowly she learned to live, not as Dark Navy, but as Aika Maki.

Unfortunately, Maki wasn’t in their old classroom. Koutarou and Clan went and checked the cosclub too, just to be sure, but she wasn’t there either.

“Is there anywhere else Maki might go?”

“Yeah, but it’s all pretty far away.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. Let’s use the Cradle.”

“Good ol’ Cradle.”

“Yes, the very same one who betrayed me, its owner, and brought you back to Earth.”

“Forgive it already. It wasn’t its fault.”

“Indeed, it was 100 percent your fault.”

“Forgive me already too.”

“No way. Until you become more honest with us, I reserve the right to hold it against you.”

Next, they used the Cradle to take them to the ski resort where their class had gone for their winter excursion during their first year of high school. Even though it was in the mountains, there was hardly any snow right now. April was just around the corner, so the last of winter was chased away weeks ago. But

even it was unseasonal, this was a special place for Koutarou and Maki. What had transpired here had greatly changed their relationship.

“Next time, I’d like to come here at a better time. During the day, for starters.”

“Haha, yeah. But since we’re looking for Aika-san, this might be just about right.”

“What happened here?”

“It was over there. Let’s talk on the way.”

Koutarou took Clan with him to the ski resort’s woodland course. The incident with Maki had taken place at a steep slope deeper into the forest.

“One night on our trip, Maki disappeared. We found this out later, but it seems a demon from Folsaria had made its nest here, and she tried to tame it.”

“Tame it...? Ah, I see. Her specialty is mind manipulation magic, after all, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. But we didn’t know about that back then, so we were concerned about our classmate who’d gone missing.”

“Well, I guess that makes sense.”

“But she made a miscalculation. It seems like the demon knew about us, and when it realized that I was coming, it went into a panic yelling, ‘Fatra, Fatra!’”

“So it was one of the ones that Grevanas and Maxfern used...”

“Yurika got frozen, and Aika-san was seriously injured. And I dragged the wounded Aika-san... to this lodge.”

Creak...

The door to the lodge was unlocked. Since it was far off the course and people rarely visited it, it was never locked to begin with. It was a dusty, rather bare room with an unshaded lightbulb for lighting. There was a snow shovel and some firewood lying on the floor. It seemed the place hadn’t changed a bit in the year since Koutarou had last been there.

“What happened here?” Clan asked.

Koutarou's worried eyes turned soft as they entered the lodge. Clan could tell that he was waxing nostalgic.

"Aika-san was badly hurt. She was on death's door, so I called for Signaltin."

"Aaaaaahhh! I remember now! You're talking about that time, aren't you?!"

"Hmm?"

"The time you forcibly called for the sword and made a mess out of my lab!"

"Ah, right, I remember that."

Back then, Koutarou and Clan had only just returned from the past. Only Clan knew that he was the Blue Knight, and because of that, they left Signaltin on the Cradle to keep it a secret. Clan was researching it, and she'd had it hooked up to all kinds of sensitive equipment when Koutarou called on the Cradle to transfer it. It ruined the whole experiment, as well as some of the equipment. This was the first she'd ever heard of why he'd done it.

"I asked you to wait three minutes! The Cradle betrayed me then, too!"

"Aika-san would have been dead in three minutes."

"Urk..."

"Well, that's how it is."

"...There's no replacement for Maki. I'll forgive you."

At the time, Koutarou hadn't bothered explaining what was going on to Clan. Even if he had, she likely wouldn't have chosen the life of an enemy over he precious lab equipment. She was only able to understand what he'd done now after time had passed and their relationships had changed.

"I'm sorry, Clan."

"It's fine. So what happened after that?"

"I treated Aika-san with Signaltin. That was when something strange happened. Signaltin showed me a vision of Aika-san's solitude. And according to her, she saw the same thing about me."

Within the light that Signaltin had unleashed to treat Maki, Koutarou had seen a much younger version of her. Maki had seen Koutarou as a boy as well.

And through those visions of each other's pasts, they came to understand what the other was missing. What they needed. And it was from there that they took the first steps to saving each other.

"That sounds less like it was Signaltin, and more like Alaia-san."

"I think so too. I'm always in her debt..."

"You just can't match Alaia-san... We're both princesses, so how is it that she's so different from me?"

Clan hung her head down, closed her eyes with a sigh, and laughed at herself as she played with her hair. When she recalled how Alaia had been as a princess, she became extremely self-conscious. She felt there was an insurmountable gap between them.

"There's no reason for you and Her Majesty to be the same. You both have your own good sides."

"Veltlion..."

Clan hadn't been expecting any words of comfort, but she took great consolation in what he said. She realized that she wanted someone—preferably Koutarou—to say exactly that to her.

"Two Alaias couldn't have saved Forthorthe; we needed you, too. Have some more confidence in yourself. You're planning on becoming the empress, aren't you?"

"...You're being awfully kind today. Normally you'd be saying all sorts of things."

"That's the kind of promise we had, right?"

"That's true... I don't hate that dutiful side of yours."

"Besides, we're not in that kind of situation right now."

"Indeed... Just where has Maki gone?"

And it wasn't just Koutarou and Clan looking for Maki; Theia and the others were all searching too. But no one had been able to find her. It was hard to believe that Maki would be able to fully escape Kiriha, Ruth, Sanae, and Yurika.

That’s why everyone expected something serious had happened, but they couldn’t imagine what. Koutarou and the others continued their search as a growing feeling of anxiety loomed over all of them.

The last place Koutarou and Clan visited for the day was the coastal side of Kisshouharukaze City where the amusement park was. They didn’t have any business with the amusement park itself, however, but a nearby warehouse.

“If we don’t find her here, I don’t know where else to look. I hope she’s here...”

“I remember this place. Let’s see, it was...”

Koutarou took Clan with him to the alley behind the warehouse. It looked familiar to her, but she couldn’t quite place it. Since her computer retained map data, however, she quickly realized its significance.

“I see. This is where I sent your armor that time.”

“Yeah. It was back when Darkness Rainbow launched their attack.”

“I wasn’t sure what was going on when Pardomshiha sent a rescue signal.”

Koutarou and Maki had come here because the evil magical girls of Darkness Rainbow had made their move. They’d split Koutarou and the others up, then attacked. Clan had transferred Koutarou’s armor to this back alley so he could pick it up and go save the other girls.

“I came here to get the armor, but I ran into an unexpected obstacle.”

“Maki, you mean?”

“Yeah. It turned out Aika-san was an evil magical girl too.”

When he tried to put on the armor, Maki stopped him. After all, she was the evil magical girl Dark Navy. Her mission from Darkness Rainbow that day was to keep Koutarou at the amusement park while the girls were taken out and his apartment was seized.

“Activate Engage. Activate Safeguard, using the exception article to preserve life. Make Satomi-kun unable to walk.”

“Wh-What?! I can’t move my legs?! What is going on?!”

“I activated the contract between us, Satomi-kun. If it’s to protect you, it will even do things like restrain you.”

When he used it to save Maki’s life in the lodge, Signaltin had formed a magical contract between the two of them. Maki had invoked that contract to deprive him of his freedom and keep him from leaving. She was trying to save his life, because she genuinely believed the others couldn’t win against Darkness Rainbow. She thought Koutarou would be walking into a death trap. That’s why Maki had taken on the mission of stalling Koutarou—to keep him safe.

“Aika-san tried to keep me away from the fighting to protect me.”

“But you wanted to protect everyone. How did you get free?”

“I persuaded her.”

“That’s my Blue Knight.”

Unable to move, Koutarou tried to persuade Maki to free him. But it was no simple matter. Her underlying fear of being alone made her cling to him even harder.

“You don’t have to fight me just because you let me go, right?! You should never have to! You’re not the kind of girl who should be fighting!”

“I can’t do that! We would definitely become enemies! Letting you go would mean I have to annul the contract! And if I do that, you won’t think of me as important! I won’t think of you as important either! We’ll only be able to see each other as enemies!”

Maki didn’t fear enemies or death, but solitude. She was scared that if the magical bond between her and Koutarou was dissolved, she would return to that solitude. She would much rather have Koutarou. Even if it meant he hated her, she’d rather feel that burn than the numbing coldness of isolation.

“Back then, Aika-san had already begun to make real friends. She just had to realize it. So it wasn’t by my hand; Aika-san saved herself.”

“Jeez... how stupid...”

“It’s not stupid. It’s important.”

“No, I meant that *you’re* stupid.”

Clan, a dumbfounded expression on her face, poked the tip of Koutarou’s nose with her finger. Koutarou’s eyes opened wide.

“Why?”

“Because you don’t understand how women feel at all! Maki herself believes she was saved by you! You really are so stupid!”

Boop, boop...

Clan repeatedly poked at Koutarou’s nose. She was one part astounded, and one part envious. She was amazed that Koutarou didn’t understand anything, but at the same time she was jealous of Maki’s spectacular romance. It was all part of her complex feelings as a woman.

“The way you girls think is too much for me...”

“You really are stupid... You’d only have to admit one thing... I’m sure Maki had a hard time with this stupidity of yours too...”

“Stop it with the stupid stuff. It’s started to hurt lately.”

“I can imagine... Anyway, Maki is more important right now.”

Clan then moved to operating her bracelet and had the observation device stationed above them gather information on the area. Several holograms popped up.

“How does it look?”

Koutarou looked at the holograms with Clan, but he didn’t speak much Modern Forthorthian. He would need Clan to interpret the information for him.

“She doesn’t seem to be nearby. Sound, heat, electric and gravitational waves... I’ve tried every method I could think of, but I can’t find a pattern corresponding to Maki. What about you?”

“I can’t feel Aika-san’s presence. She probably hasn’t come here.”

Even between Clan’s technology and Koutarou’s psychic powers, they couldn’t find a single trace of Maki. Unless she’d perfectly concealed her

presence, there was no way she was in the area.

“Then we still don’t know...”

“Yeah. Aika-san, where did you go...?”

They had searched everywhere they could think of, but had come up emptyhanded. Unease brewed in their hearts. The worry that something might have actually happened to Maki grew stronger and stronger in Koutarou and Clan. As their shoulders slumped, both of their bracelets began emitting a shrill sound.

Beeeeep...

“Koutarou, glasses girl, can you hear me?!”

Before the tone even ended, a transparent version of Sanae’s face was displayed in front of them. It wasn’t an astral projection, but a hologram created by their bracelets.

“What is it, Sanae?! Did you find Aika-san?!”

“No, just the opposite! We can’t find her anywhere!”

“Yeah, I mean, that’s why we’re looking for her...”

“No, that’s not... Um, we went to the place where you lost sight of Maki, just in case. We tried lots of ways to pick up her tracks, but it’s like she’s just gone! We can’t find any clues at all. It’s really weird, Koutarou!”

“What?!”

Maki had literally disappeared. All traces of her ended at the promenade by the forest. There would be footprints if she had just walked away. If she’d flown, there would be lingering abnormalities with the gravity in the area, and if she’d used magic, there’d be traces of mana left. Same with spiritual energy. A person disappearing without a single trace was impossible.

“Clan, could someone erase the traces afterwards?”

“It wouldn’t be impossible, but it would take time. It’s a pain to do because covering up tracks leaves its own tracks. So it’s not something that can be taken care of quickly, and certainly not to the extent that those girls wouldn’t be able

to tell.”

It was impossible to think anyone could fool all of them. Each of the girls looking for Maki was an expert in her own techniques.

“What does this mean...?”

“I couldn’t say...”

Sanae’s report confused Koutarou and Clan, but that wasn’t the end of it. Sanae’s hologram disappeared and was replaced with Ruth’s.

“Master, Clan-sama! I found footage from the cameras in the park!”

“Well done, Pardomshiha.”

“Show us!”

“Right away!”

Making use of her wits, Ruth had hacked into the computer at the park’s management office and found recorded surveillance footage. She located the closest camera to where they’d been, and narrowed it down to the time Maki should have gone missing. She played that footage for Koutarou and Clan now, and they saw themselves standing in the park a few hours ago.

“Aika-san is still there...”

“But this is definitely it. Look, there’s where you turn around, and...”

That was when it began. All of a sudden, Maki’s body was wrapped in an indigo light.

“What’s that light?!”

“Maki!”

After looking at her hand with a confused expression, she reached out to the two people in front of her. Her mouth moved like she was trying to tell them something, but no sound played. Either she was too quiet for the microphone to pick up, or her voice couldn’t come out at all.

“She disappeared?! She really disappeared!”

“What is this?! It’s as if she was never there to begin with!”

All that happened was Maki being wrapped in the indigo light. And when it disappeared, she went with it. There was no sign of her after that. It was like she'd never been there in the first place. Like they'd just been seeing an illusion or a dream. But before Koutarou and the others could recover from the shock of seeing Maki disappear, something else strange began to happen.

"Clan, what's with that light?!"

"Huh...?"

Before she knew it, Clan's body was surrounded in an orange light. It wasn't anything of her doing. It was like her body was emitting the light on its own.

I see, so this is what it was!

The moment Clan became aware of the light, she understood the situation. It was happening because it should. The promised time had come. They barely had any time left. And all she could do was pray.

"Veltlion! If you stay stubborn until the very end—"

Like with Maki, Clan was vanishing, and her voice right along with it.

"Clan?!"

"—I will never forgive youuu...!"

Perhaps because she'd realized what was happening sooner than Maki, Clan was able to say what she wanted before the end. She then wrapped her vanishing arms around Koutarou's neck.

Please, grant us a miracle... Please listen to our wish...

Clan brought Koutarou closer with her arms, and pressed her lips against his in her final moments. But by then, she'd already lost most of her substance, which was why Koutarou couldn't feel the sensation of her lips.



It was a dim room built out of stone. The walls had beautiful sculptures engraved into them that made elegant use of curving lines, indicating this room was a grand, special place. The splendor of the engravings, however, was partially obscured by the dust that covered them. This was a long forgotten room where time had stopped and nothing happened.

But a few hours ago, that had changed. All of a sudden, a modest indigo light appeared in the middle of the room. At the center of the room was a circle of nine pillars, each topped with a translucent sphere. One of them had begun glowing.

And with the indigo light of that pillar shining, the statue in the middle of it all was softly illuminated. It was a statue of a person, but it was impossible to tell who in just the dull indigo light shining on it from behind.

But soon enough, a second light came on. From the top of another pillar came a warm orange glow. It was on the opposite side of the statue from the indigo one, and revealed the front of the statue.

Together, the indigo and orange lights illuminated the stone figure of a young girl. She had long hair and wore an outfit much like a shrine maiden’s. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were clasped in front of her chest as if she were praying for something.

She was waiting. For the time a certain person would visit again. And she really was praying... for a small miracle across endless time and immeasurable distance.

Afterword

Long time no see. It's the author, Takehaya. This is yet another short afterword, so I'd like to get right to it. Oh, and this afterword has spoilers, so make sure you've read the volume first.

With this volume, the series has finally reached thirty volumes. Partially to commemorate that, the final episode from when I was in the series' planning stage has begun. Ten years have passed since then and things will continue from here, but this was the finale in the terms of the original plan.

But no matter how I tried to write it, I couldn't get it to fit in a single volume. I realized that I'd need at least a volume and a half. Needless to say, this volume will feed right into the next one, which is why it ends where it does.

This series was designed to be long, but I didn't have the green light for that at the start. I finally got it around the time we were discussing if the series would get to thirteen volumes or not, so a little bit before it was decided that there would be an anime adaptation. So originally, I was expecting to have to use this episode after volume 7 or 13. That wouldn't be a problem for the structure of the story, but I had one concern, and that was if the readers would be able to imagine how Koutarou felt after Maki and Clan disappeared.

I wasn't very confident that everyone would be able to imagine Koutarou's feelings if this happened earlier in the series. By volume 7, Koutarou was firmly in the role of the girls' best friend, and by 13 he'd only just broken through that role. As another matter entirely, without spending as much time with the characters, I was worried readers' connections to them wouldn't be as strong. I'm sure you wouldn't feel the same way you do now about the two of them disappearing.

That's why I'm very happy that I was able to deliver this story after the amount of time I think was necessary for it, which was why I chose not to touch on Koutarou's feelings at the end. I believe they're conveyed to you now without me even having to write them. And I hope to be able to deliver a satisfying conclusion. These might be a frustrating few months to come, but

please bear with me.

With such limited space for the afterword, I've run out of room already. If I wrote any more than this, I'd have to write another sixteen pages thanks to how bookbinding works, so I have to cut things here. I'll keep the details for the next volume.

Finally, I'd like to conclude with my heartfelt thanks to everyone at the editorial department for their help with the publication of this book; Poco-san who is continuously drawing up illustrations; and the readers for their continued support.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 29.

February, 2018

Takehaya