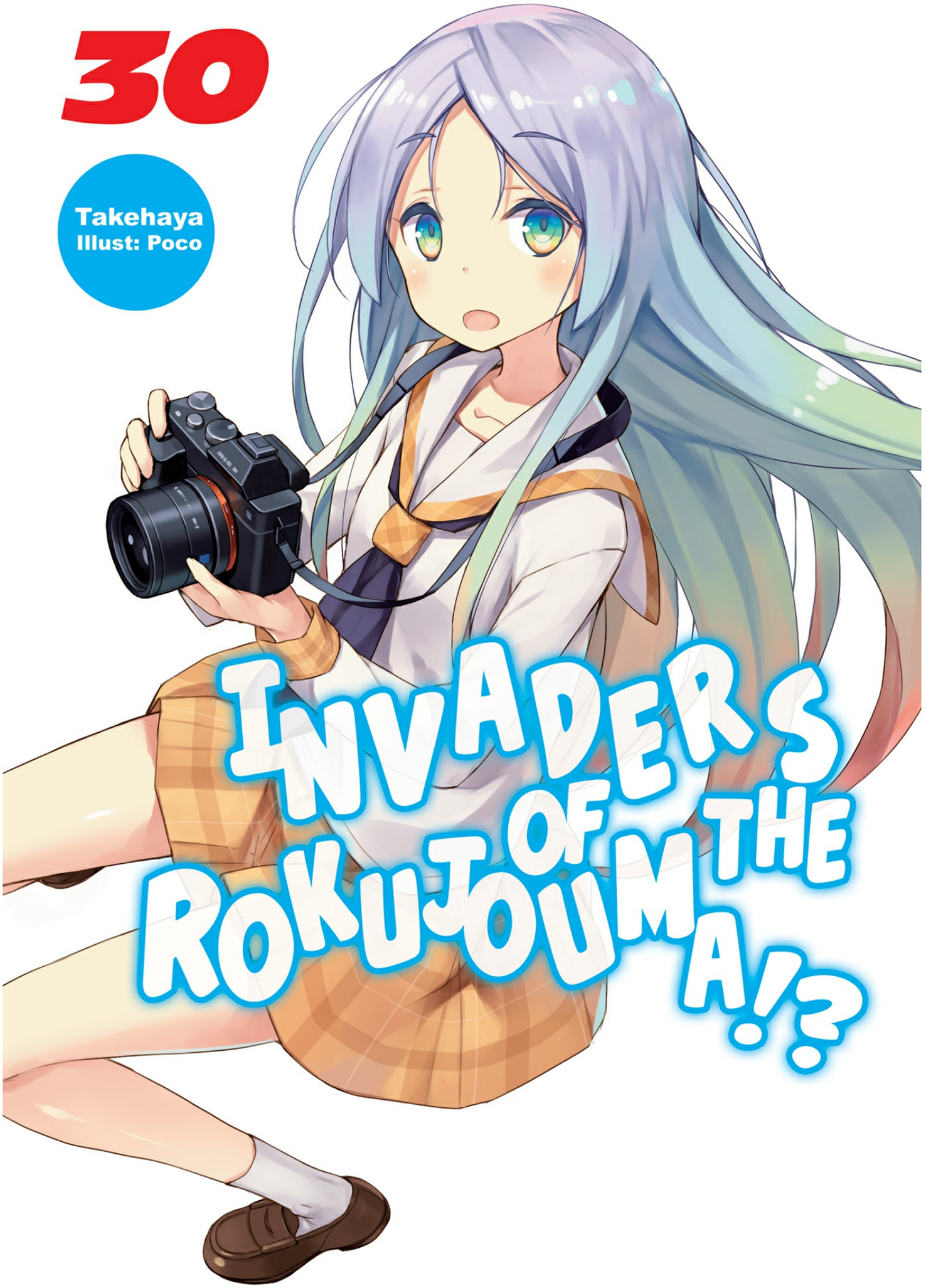
30

Takehaya
Illust: Poco



Invaders of the Rokujouma!?


"GOOD MORNING, KOU-NIISAN!"
"WOW, YOU MUST BE STARTING HIGH SCHOOL THIS YEAR, HUH, KIN-CHAN?"
THERE WAS A YOUNGER GIRL WALKING NEXT TO KENJI, WHO WAS PUSHING HIS BIKE.
INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 30


"OWOWOW..."
A DITZY TRANSFER STUDENT INVADES?!


"NICE TO MEET YOU. I'M NALFA LAREN, A TRANSFER STUDENT FROM FORT-HORTHE."
"HOW'D YOU TRIP OVER NOTHING?"


"COME, SAGURATIIIIIN!"
BY GIVING A PORTION OF HER LIFE TO SIGNALTIN AND SAGURATIN, SANAE WAS NOW OFFICIALLY A MAGICAL GIRL.

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FACTIONS MAP



KASAGI SHIZUKA
Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House. Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA
Heiress of the underground who's finally found her beloved. With her quick wits and big heart, she's a master of both tactics and love.

UNDERGROUND DWELLERS
(OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)



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

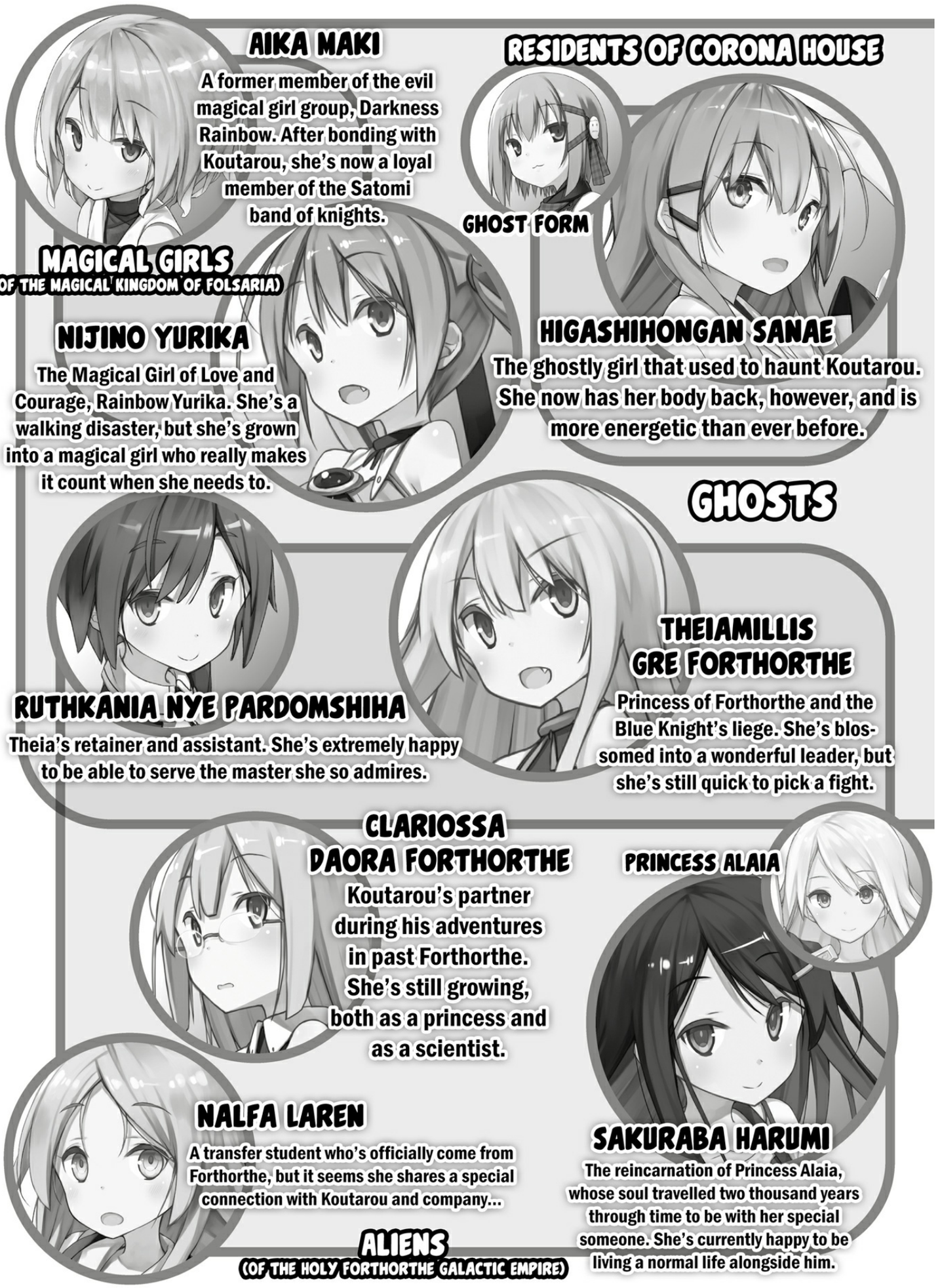


MATSUDAIRA KENJI
Koutarou's best friend-cum-partner in crime. He can be a bit tasteless, but he's a good guy at heart.

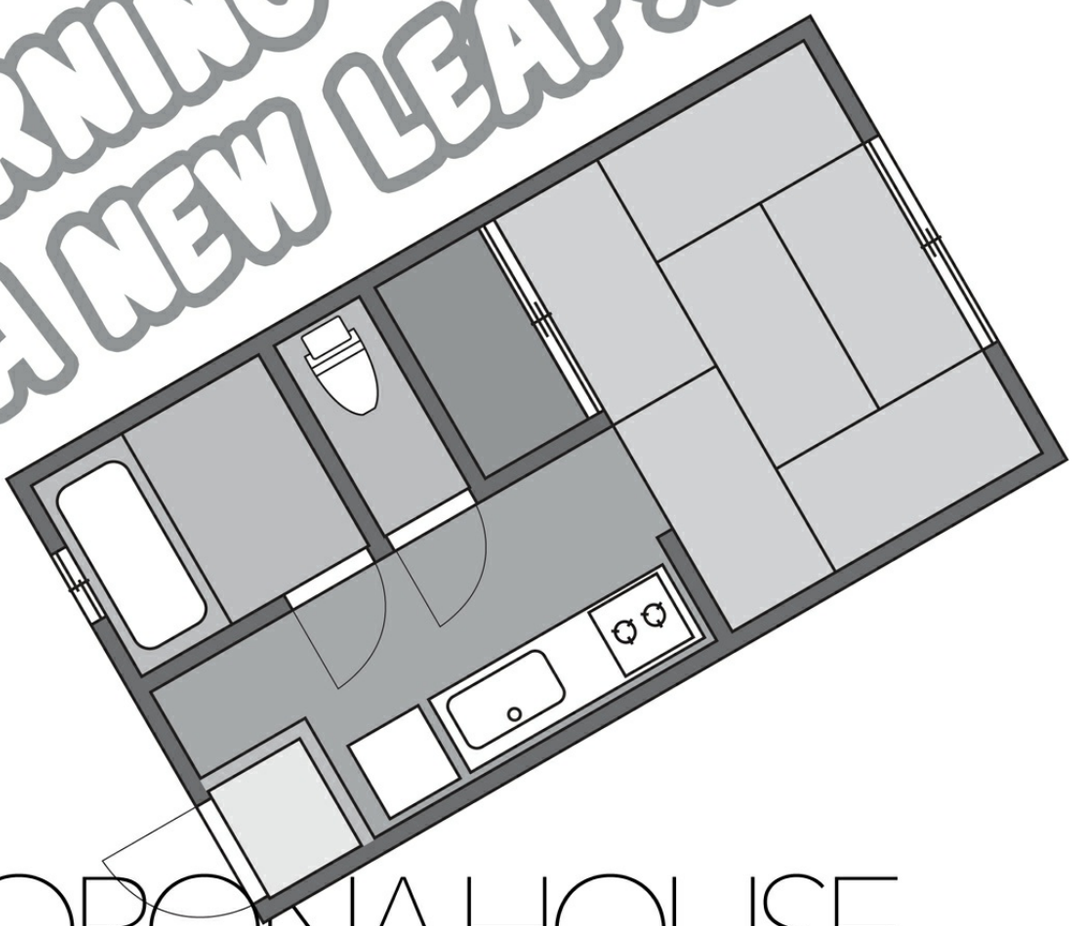


MATSUDAIRA KOTORI
Kenji's little sister, but you'd never know it. An introvert through and through. She's now enrolled at Harukaze High.

KOUTAROU'S CHILDHOOD FRIENDS


AIKA MAKI
A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. After bonding with Koutarou, she's now a loyal member of the Satomi band of knights.
RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE
GHOST FORM
HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE
The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back, however, and is more energetic than ever before.
MAGICAL GIRLS
(OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)
NIJINO YURIKA
The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow Yurika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.
GHOSTS
THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE
Princess of Forthorthe and the Blue Knight's liege. She's blossomed into a wonderful leader, but she's still quick to pick a fight.
RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA
Theia's retainer and assistant. She's extremely happy to be able to serve the master she so admires.
CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE
Koutarou's partner during his adventures in past Forthorthe. She's still growing, both as a princess and as a scientist.
PRINCESS ALAIA
NALFA LAREN
A transfer student who's officially come from Forthorthe, but it seems she shares a special connection with Koutarou and company...
SAKURABA HARUMI
The reincarnation of Princess Alaia, whose soul travelled two thousand years through time to be with her special someone. She's currently happy to be living a normal life alongside him.
ALIENS
(OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF?!



CORONA HOUSE

ROOM 106

The Freshman and the Exchange Student

Wednesday, April 6th

Today, Wednesday, April 6th, was the first day of the new school year at Kisshouharukaze High School. Spring break had just ended, and the students were now starting off fresh in a new season in a new grade. But the atmosphere amongst the students today was a little different compared to last year. They were all walking to school with their friends the same way they always did, but there was a buzz in the air. Something big was awaiting them this semester.

“Everyone sure is restless...”

The indigo magician Aika Maki was well-trained enough in the ways of mind manipulation that she was able to get a general grasp of everyone’s feelings without even having to do anything. She could just feel the excitement and curiosity coming off of the other students. Most of it was in anticipation of school’s entrance ceremony. Sensing that, she smiled and turned to look at Harukaze High, comfortably nestled halfway up the hillside. The school building, half concealed from view by the neighboring forest, was currently surrounded by construction scaffolding. It was in the middle of undergoing a great expansion.

“Well, aliens are transferring to our school, after all...”

Shizuka looked up at the school with her. The students on their way to school were excited because today would be the day the Forthorthian exchange students started at Harukaze High. This was completely different from an idol or a famous youth athlete transferring in. They would be real, honest to goodness aliens. This wasn’t just a change for the school, but a change for the world. Starting today, Earthlings would be living together with visitors from outer space. It was a truly world-changing event.

“Aliens have been going to school with them for the past two years, though.”

“Heehee, that’s right, Your Highness. Imagine their surprise...”

Little did everyone at school know that they'd actually been in the company of Forthorthians for years. Really, the world wouldn't be changing as much as they thought it would, but that in and of itself would only make for a greater surprise. Thinking about it, smiles appeared on both Theia and Ruth's faces.

"I'm a little nervous about how I'll be able to get along with the people of this country..."

In contrast to Theia and Ruth, Clan's expression was clouded. She would be formally enrolling in school this year, and was growing anxious about the changes this would mean for her life.

"Wait, that's got nothing to do with the country, right? You're just bad with people in general."

"That might be true, but..."

Listening to Koutarou jab at her, Clan clasped her hands together and forlornly looked down. She would ordinarily argue, but today of all days, she knew he was right. It wasn't a great feeling.

"Satomi Koutarou, you're saying the wrong thing. That's not what you should be telling her," Kiriha scolded with a smile.

She knew that Clan was nervous about more than just school, and she wanted Koutarou to consider that.

"Hmm..."

Koutarou glanced at Clan and racked his brain for a moment. He then pulled together a few words, hoping it was the right combination.

"You don't have to worry, Clan. The uniform looks great on you, and I'm sure you'll fit in with the class in no time."

"Wha— I-It's not like I was worried about that!"

Clan blushed and picked up the pace, rushing ahead of the others. Since she usually walked at a slow to leisurely speed at best, that alone made it plain as day to everyone that she was agitated.

"That's better, Satomi Koutarou."

Kiriha smiled happily and picked up the pace to catch up with Clan. Koutarou watched the two of them speed off, feeling relieved underneath it all that he'd managed to say the right thing.

In the past, I would have just said something mean in that situation... So why is it that I put so much thought into what I said just now? And, moreover, why am I glad it all worked out?

Koutarou was puzzled by his own actions. He was starting to see the gap between his current and past selves, and thusly began wondering how he'd gotten here. It wasn't a bad feeling, however. He thought this change was for the better.

"Lately you've been showing off what a nice guy you are, Satomi-kun."

Seeing Koutarou so lost in thought, Harumi looked up at him and smiled gently. Looking at her smile, Koutarou knew for certain he was in the right place.

"What can I say? I've really started to feel how important to me you all are, so I didn't want to say anything to hurt her feelings."

That was essentially the conclusion Koutarou had come to after getting his own feelings in order. As of late, he'd become more aware of what the girls were thinking and how they felt. So if he was going to tease Clan, he would prefer it to be over something a little more lighthearted.

"I see... That's a wonderful way of thinking."

"I'll be graduating high school before too long, so I have to work on this maturity thing."

"Then is there anything you're holding back with me, Satomi-kun?"

"Of course. You're the only university student in our circle, Senpai."

"The thing is... It actually feels a little lonely."

As of this year, Harumi would be starting university. But since she didn't have classes today, she'd decided to walk to school with her friends anyway. She would hang around for the day, just in case her magic powers might come in handy if something went wrong.

“I think that Harumi should get to take a year off since she missed out on so much being sickly and all.”

“She’s right, Sakuraba-senpai! You should build up your stamina while having some fun! And if you wait a year for us, we can all start university together!”

Sanae and Yurika felt like Harumi should get some bonus time for herself. Growing up with a weak constitution had certainly cost her some fun in her teenage years. She’d worked hard all the way through high school regardless, so they felt like she deserved a break.

“My parents actually said the same thing. They suggested I take a gap year and build up my stamina doing something I enjoy.”

“They must really trust you, huh? Actually, I guess that’s only natural...”

“We trust you too, of course. Thank you for helping us out today.”

“I’m sorry to ask you to use your precious free time like this, Harumi-sama...”

“Don’t mention it. I’m more than happy to be here with you all.”

“Don’t think I’m going to go so easy on you, Sakuraba-senpai. I’m never going to tell you just to do whatever you like.”

“Of course not. If you did, I’d never be able to stay in Kisshou U.”

Koutarou and the others would be third-years starting today, but there would be another major change in their school lives. Harumi had graduated and moved on to higher education, but Clan would be joining in her stead. And with all the potential trouble regarding the Forthorthians and their time on Earth, Harumi would do her best to stick around and visit the school frequently. Koutarou was happy with this arrangement, and everyone else was more than welcoming of her help.

While Koutarou and the girls wouldn’t be at all surprised by the news about the Forthorthians, there were other surprises waiting for them at school.

“Hey, Kou!”

“Sup, Mackenzie?”

Kenji called out to Koutarou from somewhere behind him. He would usually meet up with Koutarou and the girls along their route to school. He seemed to be running a little late today, but that wasn't totally unusual either. Koutarou turned to give a casual wave like normal, and that was when he realized this was more than just their normal meet-up.

"Good morning, Kou-niisan!"

There was a younger girl walking next to Kenji, pushing his bike along for him. It wasn't unusual for Kenji to be with a girl, but it was a rare sight for that girl not to be his girlfriend.

"Kin-chan!"

"It's been too long, but I see you're looking as spirited as ever!"

"Wow, you must be starting high school this year, huh, Kin-chan?"

"That's right! Please take good care of me, Senpai!"

The girl that Koutarou was calling Kin-chan was Matsudaira Kotori, Kenji's little sister. Koutarou had known her almost as long as he had Kenji. In terms of personality, she was timid and got lonely easily, so she'd often tagged along with Kenji and Koutarou in their antics when they were children. While they had started drifting apart when the boys started high school, she'd always looked up to Koutarou like he was a brother. Everyone called her McKinley. Except for Koutarou, that is, who called her Kin-chan. And she certainly didn't mind him having a special nickname just for her.

"Your uniform looks great on you, Kin-chan."

"Really? I was worried the fit isn't so great since I'm growing..."

"If it gets too small for you, I'll just buy you a new one."

"There goes Mackenzie, the world's greatest big brother. Always generous when it comes to his little sister..."

As Koutarou and the Matsudaira siblings were exchanging their greetings, the girls of room 106 began to gather around. Kenji's little sister entering school was a point of interest for them too.

"It's been a while, McKinley."

Theia had met Kotori before during a New Year's shrine visit. Kenji was quite a doting older brother, and always happy to show off pictures of his darling little sister. The girls almost felt like they already knew her.

"Ah, um... Thank you for always looking after my brother..."

"What's wrong? You've gone pale."

Kotori seemed to grow visibly uncomfortable as the other girls closed in on her, and the shaky tone of her voice only made it more obvious. And as if looking for help, she shot furtive glances at Koutarou and Kenji.

"Oh, nothing... I just, um..."

"Hmm?"

"Back off, Theia."

Realizing that Kotori was uncomfortable, Koutarou grabbed the back of Theia's head and pulled her back a step. And Theia, at having her head grabbed, glowered at Koutarou.

"Hey, don't grab me by the head! That's not how you treat a girl!"

"I'm sure you can't even imagine what it's like, but Kin-chan is shy. So don't be so pushy with her or she won't like you."

Kotori was indeed a very timid, shy girl. Having grown up alongside to Koutarou and Kenji, two very assertive boys, talking with strangers was usually not her job. She normally just hung back and let them handle everything. As a result, talking to strangers and people she didn't know still wasn't a strong suit of hers.

"Why are you making it sound like I'm some barbarian!"

"You are. No matter how you look at it."

"Oh yeah? Would you like a taste of real barbarism, then?"

"Yeah, sure. Why don't you show me what you've got, hmm?"

Fortunately, Theia's attention shifted completely to Koutarou. Kotori then felt like she had some room to breathe, but she still couldn't relax. There were several other girls staring at her, and the tense look on her face said exactly

how nervous she was.

“Sorry for the commotion. Neither of them mean any harm,” Kiriha apologized.

Kotori didn’t know her, but Kiriha had a calm aura, gentle eyes, a kind smile, and an assuring voice. Her honors student act worked well for her, and her composed demeanor helped put Kotori at ease.

“Kou-niisan is always helping me out, so I know he means no harm... and I’m sure Theia-san is the same way...”

“Always, you say? Have you known Koutarou-kun for a long time?”

“Yes! Ever since grade school, I’ve always been chasing after Nii-san and Kou-niisan!”

That was the magic topic. When it came to Koutarou, Kotori always got a lot more talkative. She normally struggled for conversation topics and what to say on the spot, but talking about a good friend was like a conversational safety zone. If it was about Koutarou, she could probably talk to anyone. And once she got going, her tension eased a little more. A small smile even appeared on her lips. Seeing that, Kiriha kept the conversation going.

“But Koutarou-kun has an overly rough and boyish streak, doesn’t he? Were you okay around that?”

“I think he struck a good balance with my overprotective brother. Besides, he’s also the kind of person that never takes anything too far.”

“He certainly is, isn’t he? He’s surprisingly considerate.”

“He is! On my tenth birthday, he ran all over town to buy me my favorite book... I still treasure it to this day!”

Thanks to Kiriha’s skillful conversationalism, she’d gotten Kotori to open up a little. She was now happily reminiscing about the past. Though she was shy, it wasn’t like she disliked talking to people. As long as they had something in common, she actually quite enjoyed conversation. She was always like this when talking with Kenji or Koutarou.

“How ’bout it, Kou? Kotori is as cute as ever, right?”

“Yeah, she’s wasted on you.”

“Don’t make a move on her, okay? Alternatively go all out.”

“Which one is it?”

“I don’t care, but I won’t forgive anything half-assed.”

“Please stop that! It’s embarrassing!”



And so Kotori's introduction to the girls of room 106 went over well. Koutarou and Kenji gave her a passing grade for being able to talk with everyone in spite of her shyness. She'd been nervous at first, but by the time they'd all made it to the school gate, she was talking to the other girls on her own, even if somewhat reservedly. Between the more mature girls, namely Kiriha and Harumi, being especially kind and inviting her into the conversation and all their talk about Kenji and Koutarou, Kotori seemed to be holding her own. It was a good start to a wonderful thing, and the conversation started to flow freely from there. Shizuka had brought up afterschool clubs, and they were now talking about Koutarou's interesting choice in that department.

"I was surprised when I heard that Kou-niisan joined the knitting society, but when I thought about it, it kinda made sense."

"You really do understand Satomi-kun, don't you, Kotori-chan? Oh, by the way, Kotori-chan, have you decided on what club you're going to join? Why not join ours—the cooking society?"

"The cooking society, huh?"

"Are you any good in the kitchen?"

"I've read some recipe books, but I don't have a lot of practical experience."

"Do you like reading, then?"

"Yes, I do. I feel like I should read through every book at least once..."

"Then do I have some news for you! The cooking society has some special out-of-print recipe books that have been passed down for generations."

"I want to hear more about that!"

Kotori was only able to chat with Shizuka like so until they passed through the school gates, where her demeanor suddenly went stiff. As for the reason, someone she didn't know was approaching.

"Good morning, everyone!"

The person greeting them was Matsuzaka Kenichi, the school's new PE teacher. With a refreshing smile on his face, he greeted everyone and walked over to Koutarou.

“This is a little sudden, but can I borrow you for a while, Satomi-kun?”

“What’s the matter?”

“There’s something I’d like to ask of you in regards to the entrance ceremony today. Could you come with me to the guidance office?”

Kotori didn’t know him, but Koutarou did. Matsuzaka Kenichi was actually the leader of the Sun Rangers, Red Shine. And if he’d come to ask something of Koutarou, he knew what it must be about.

“Of course. Do you need just me?”

“It would be a big help if Theia-san and Kiriha-san could come too, actually.”

They would be talking about Forthorthe, so Kenichi would prefer to have Theia, who was a Forthorthian diplomat, and Kiriha, their advisor, in on the discussion as well. Koutarou turned to the girls, but Theia, Ruth, and Kiriha were already walking over.

“Welp, you heard the teach. I’ll see you later, Mackenzie.”

“Sure. Oh, hey, want me to take your bag to the classroom?”

“Yeah, sure. Thanks. And... since we’re going to the same school now, I guess I’ll be seeing you around, Kin-chan.”

“Yes, I’ll see you around.”

“Later, guys.”

After bidding the others farewell, Koutarou and the three girls with him followed Kenichi inside. Everyone else continued as they had been, making their way to class.

“You left me behind again...”

The only one unhappy about this arrangement was Clan. She prided herself on being Koutarou’s partner, so she didn’t like being treated this way. While she understood why the other girls had been asked to go with him, she still wanted him to ask her to go too.

“Again? Do you know Kou, Clan-san?”

“Ah, y-yes, we’ve met a few times through Theia-san. Ohohoho!”

Kenji and Kotori had only been told that Clan was a cousin of Theia's who would be transferring in. Since Clan had carelessly mumbled about something contradicting that, she now had to desperately dodge their questions. She was on equal terms with Kotori when it came to shyness, which quickly overrode her irritation with Koutarou.

The entire Sun Squad, including Professor Roppongi, was waiting for Koutarou and the others in the guidance office. They all looked nervous, which was perhaps to be expected considering the opening and entrance ceremonies were today. In other words, today was the day that Forthorthian students would officially be welcomed into Kisshouharukaze High School. Since the Sun Rangers were a special taskforce commissioned to deal with invasions, until legislation could catch up to the politics of the situation, they were duty-bound to be on the forefront of anything and everything happening with the Forthorthians—including them going to school. Since this would be a big deal regarding Japan's diplomatic relations with Forthorthe, it was only natural that they'd be feeling somewhat anxious about it.

"Relax a little. You won't be able to spring into action when you need to like that."

"I know, but it's not that easy."

Two years ago, the Sun Rangers were practically a joke. But now they had their own fancy department and applicants were practically lining up to join them. It was unreasonable to tell them not to be nervous after undergoing such a dramatic change in their jobs and status. Their role model was Koutarou, who had fought his way through countless battles, and Kenichi had called him here for his advice.

"What did you do at times like this, Baron-san?"

"In my case... wanting to protect my friends led to protecting everyone. It's not like I was thinking anything special."

In past Forthorthe, Koutarou had fought to protect Alaia, Charl, and Clan, but that also meant he was fighting to protect Theia's ideals. And in the end, he just so happened to save Forthorthe in the process. But it wasn't like his goal had

been something that grand. It had all started small.

“Then we’ll start with just protecting the new student coming from the other side of the universe.”

“I think that’d be fine. That’s a teacher’s duty, after all.”

“Haha, yes, you’re right. Well, let’s get down to it. Please take a look at this—it’s information that was released this morning.”

With the personal part of their conversation over, Kenichi turned to the order of business at hand and gave Koutarou a document containing information on the transfer student.

“So it’s a girl... and her name’s Nalfa Laren...”

This was the moment the transfer student’s name was revealed to Koutarou and the others. Not even Theia had known who it would be ahead of time. From a security point of view, everything was being kept as secretive as possible until the official announcement for the safety of the students. If no one knew who they were, they wouldn’t have to worry about harassment of any kind. But now that the first day of school had finally rolled around, the information was making its way down the pipes.

“...Nalfa Laren?”

Something about that name piqued Koutarou’s interest. Nalfa meant "before dawn," and Laren meant "rainbow." Put together, her full name meant something to the effect of "the rainbow running across the sky before dawn." It was pretty, but not particularly uncommon as far as Forthorthian names were concerned.

This should be the first time I’ve ever heard of her, but...

Koutarou couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d heard that name somewhere before, but he couldn’t place it. Nothing in his memories stood out to him. But the same strange feeling gripped him again when he saw her photo.

Why... Why do I feel like I’ve seen her somewhere before?

It was almost an uncanny sense of deja vu. No matter how long or hard he racked his brain, he just couldn’t place it. And he was sure he’d remember a girl

like that, too. Her uniquely rainbow-colored hair was quite striking. Surely something like that would be a piece of cake to replicate with all of Forthorthe's incredible science, but Koutarou was sure he'd remember seeing a girl with hair that shimmered the colors of the rainbow. And with that, he came to the conclusion that he had, in fact, never actually met her before.

"Hey, Koutarou."

As Koutarou was lost in thought, Theia's face suddenly appeared in front of him. She looked unhappy and demonstratively pushed her finger against his nose.

"That's the wrong girl to be smitten with."

"I'm not smitten."

"Then what is it?"

"I felt like I'd seen her somewhere before, but it must be my imagination."

Koutarou put the documents down on the desk and sandwiched Theia's face between his hands as he rubbed her cheeks.

"Acshually, I fheel lhike I'hve mhet her befohre too, but I chan't rhemembher where."

Theia had some difficulty talking with her cheeks actively being mushed, but her unhappy expression seemed to vanish. It looked like she wasn't displeased with the current situation.

"I believe I know the reason for that, Your Highness."

"Really?!"

She wasn't displeased at all, but she was extremely interested in what Ruth had to say, so she broke free of Koutarou's grasp and eagerly peered at what Ruth had in her hand.

"It seems that Nalfa-sama is the little sister of journalist Danesford Laren."

"Danesford...? Wait, that quack reporter from *The Mastir Economist*?!"

That name brought back bad memories for Theia. Back when the battle against Vandarion was still ongoing, Danesford Laren was the journalist who

continued to ask questions during the press conference in an attempt to expose Koutarou's identity. He was a reporter for *The Mastir Economist*, a journal whose main focus was Forthorthian economics, who zeroed in on Koutarou's identity by asking Theia pointed questions in an attempt to get her to say something. Later, he was awarded a national prize for his contributions to journalism at the time, and was now considered the hottest reporter in Forthorthe. It was rumored that his little sister was accepted as a transfer student because of his achievements.

"Since you know Mr. Danesford, perhaps you saw a bit of him in Nalfa-sama, Your Highness?"

It wasn't uncommon for family members to share likenesses. Maybe Nalfa had even attended a press conference with her brother once. Either way, Ruth figured that was why she looked familiar to Theia and Koutarou.

"I don't think I like this Nalfa girl..."

"Isn't it her brother that you don't like?"

"If she's anything like him, then I don't like her either."

"It'll be fine... probably. She'll be paying more attention to Japan than you."

Theia didn't think highly of Danesford after the way he'd tormented her with all those questions at the press conferences. And to Koutarou, it looked she was prematurely taking that out on Nalfa. But it wasn't like Nalfa was a journalist. If anything, she'd be a tourist here on Earth. She would certainly have a lot more to pay attention to than just Theia, so Koutarou didn't think she really had anything to worry about.

"Kenichi-dono, it seems her address was left blank."

In contrast to Theia and her more personal worries, Kiriha was focused on work. She'd found what seemed like a critical omission in the paperwork and asked Kenichi about it.

"That's simply due to delay. Who would be going where was only decided a few hours ago in Forthorthe, so it just hasn't reached us yet."

"So should we assume that her residence will be the dormitory being built on

the school grounds?”

“Most likely. I’ve gotten word that at least one room will be ready in time.”

“When will she be moving in?”

“We’re planning for that to take place after the opening and entrance ceremonies.”

“Okay, then we’ll work under that assumption.”

Kiriha took notes on Kenichi’s report and continued reading through the documents. Every time she came across something that she had questions about, she would ask the Sun Rangers for clarification. Her thorough workstyle didn’t even let Theia and Koutarou get a word in edgewise.

“We’re completely useless, huh?”

“Indeed. I wonder why we even came. All we’re doing is making things more lively.”

The two of them looked through the documents as well, but they didn’t have the kind of grasp on this thing that Kiriha did. Ruth, meanwhile, had received a digital copy of the documents and was analyzing them that way. That left Koutarou and Theia to sit back and drink tea while they waited.

“It’s okay, Baron-sama! We’ll get into guard detail next, and that’s where you and Princess Devil-sama will shine!”

Megumi, who brought out the tea, called out to the two of them with a smile. Despite dating Daisaku now, it seemed she was still quite a Baron Demon fangirl. She’d been staring at Koutarou longingly from across the room this entire time.

“That’s good. Megumi-san, can I have a floor plan of the gym?”

“Of course! Right away!”

“Sorry for interrupting you while you’re working, Ruth, but can you give me the data on the nonlethal weapons on the fighters?”

“As you wish.”

Thanks to Megumi, Koutarou and Theia found work for themselves too. Their

carefree expressions from before faded as they got down to business.

“Aaahh, Baron-samaaa... You’re as gallant-looking as ever...”

“Kenichi-niichan, Megumi-neechan’s broken again.”

“Daisaku, please.”

“Roger. Okay, Megu-chan, this way. Let’s have a seat over here and look at Baron-san.”

“Okaaaaay! I’ll be a good giiirl!”

It seemed Megumi was now the one who didn’t have anything to do. Or rather, there wasn’t anything she could do in this state. She was expected to make a full recovery after Koutarou and the others left the guidance office.

The moment the principal stepped up to the podium to introduce the transfer students from Forthorthe, the entire gym fell silent. Everyone’s eyes were glued on the stage as they eagerly awaited a glimpse of the new students. Only the Sun Rangers and the Corona House crew were exceptions.

I can’t sense any hostility. It looks like we’ll be fine...

Through the psychic powers he borrowed from Sanae, Koutarou could sense all kinds of feelings floating around the gym in anticipation of the new students. Curiosity, excitement, nervousness. But there was nothing that concerned him —no hostility and no bloodlust. Based on that, it didn’t seem any shady characters had snuck into the gym.

“No problems here. Clan, Ruth-san, how does it look over there?”

“I can’t detect any spatial distortions or gravitational waves from hyperspace communications.”

“Master, there’s a small increase in electromagnetic waves, but that could just be increased cellphone communication. I can’t see any encrypted commands like those meant for automated weaponry.”

“I think we can safely assume that there are no signs of anyone attacking the ceremony at this point.”

Clan and Ruth were in charge of scanning for things that Koutarou couldn't sense, but they hadn't found any cause for alarm yet either.

"Satomi-kun, I did a lap around the outside of the gym, but I couldn't sense any mana. I'll do another round just to be sure."

"Please do, Sakuraba-senpai."

Harumi was in charge of monitoring magic in the area. Since she wasn't a student anymore, she was keeping tabs on things outside. But as far as she could tell, the coast was all clear.

"I can't say I like this. Waiting for an enemy that may or may not come is worse than waiting for an enemy you know is coming," complained Shizuka.

"I understand how you feel. You're always on edge," agreed Yurika.

"Yeah, it feels like the attacker always has the advantage. Defending is a lot of work!" echoed Sanae.

The three of them were currently using their position as students as cover. They'd blended into the crowd, and were keeping an eye out for anything that might be suspicious. Staying on constant watch, however, strained their nerves.

"There's almost no point in aiming for the transfer student now. If they wanted to make a statement, it would be more effective to attack at tonight's welcome reception. Trying to kidnap the transfer student would only be harder now with all the attention on her, too. But do stay focused."

"Keep it together, Yurika. The enemy will be looking to strike when you're worn out."

Kiriha and Maki were taking advantage of their mature appearances and had gone to sit over with the parents. They were doing the same thing Shizuka, Yurika, and Sanae were, just from a different vantage point.

"I think we're good, Theia," said Koutarou, giving her the all clear.

"All right, I'm bringing Nalfa out on stage now."

Theia was currently with Nalfa. Not only was she a Forthorthian diplomat, she was incredibly skilled in combat and made an excellent body guard. The five Sun Rangers were also nearby for that exact reason. But once Koutarou had

confirmed everything was safe, Theia thought it was time for Nalfa to make her entrance. She gave the Sun Rangers a signal to let the principal know it was time.

“Now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for! Let us welcome our transfer student from the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Nalfa Laren-san!”

The principal artfully brought his speech to a close and called for Nalfa. When he did, Kenichi and Hayato escorted her onto the stage.

Nalfa Laren was certainly an eye-catching girl. She had a slender figure and porcelain skin. She looked ethereal and almost fragile, like she might break if you touched her. But what stood out the most by far was her long hair. At first glance, it looked silver or platinum blonde, but it shone iridescent in the light. It may not have been that unique to Forthorthians, but it was absolutely one-of-a-kind here in Japan. It was almost strange to see a girl like her in a typical school uniform. And as she walked on stage...

“Kyaaaaah!”

Whunk!

After just a few steps, she tripped over nothing and pitched forward to the floor. She rolled a good way before stopping, lying splayed out on the stage floor. Koutarou would later describe it as an “epic Yurika fail.”

“Owowow...”

“Are you okay, Nalfa-san?”

“Yes, Kenichi-sensei. Thank you.”

“How’d you trip over nothing?”

“Shh, Hayato! You’re too loud!”

The two Sun Rangers rushed over to help Nalfa up. Fortunately she was unhurt, and she walked right over to the principal like nothing had happened at all. It seemed she did things at her own pace. But the events that had just unfolded shocked the entire student body, which may have been for the best. After such a catastrophic fall, the students started looking at Nalfa differently. She seemed like a mysterious creature before, but now she seemed like she

might just be a normal girl. The effect was dramatic. Koutarou and Sanae could see it happening in real-time with their spirit sight.

“Are you all right, Nalfa-san?”

“Yes. Sorry for the commotion.”

“Good, good. Well then, allow me to introduce her again. This is Nalfa Laren-san!”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Nalfa Laren, a transfer student from Forthorthe. I’m looking forward to getting to know you all.”

Perhaps that was why, when Nalfa introduced herself and bowed, the gym erupted into loud cheers. The frozen air of anticipation and wonder was blown away.

She kept things short and sweet, but after Nalfa introduced herself to the school, the principle explained the circumstances of her intergalactic transfer. All of the Forthorthian transfer students were volunteers who’d been vetted by both the Forthorthian and Japanese governments. Applicants who were determined to be suitable candidates were moved to the seven model cities in groups of four, meaning there were twenty-eight Forthorthian transfer students in all. How they managed in their lives on Earth would determine how other transfer students would be handled in the future, how diplomatic relations between Japan and Forthorthe would proceed, and a great many other things. In other words, Nalfa was standing before the students and faculty of Harukaze High with a very important role today. And in order to make sure the students understood that, the principal was particularly thorough about warning them to be on their best behavior.

But once the principal got that far in his lecture, the students at large began wondering about something else altogether—the number of transfer students. They’d heard that there would be four transfer students from Forthorthe, yet only Nalfa had walked onto the stage so far. By all accounts, three students were missing. Of course, there was a reason for that. In fact, it was because the other three Forthorthian transfer students were already living in Kisshouharukaze City.

“I was surprised myself,” explained the principal, “but as it turns out, our very own Theiamillis-san and Ruthkania-san are actually from Forthorthe.”

“The two years we’ve already spent with you all have been wonderful, and we’re looking forward to spending our senior year here with you as well. Please don’t think of us any differently.”

“We’re sorry for hiding our origin for so long. It was only to avoid any needless confusion, so we hope you can forgive us.”

“And last but not least, we have Theiamillis-san’s cousin, Clariossa-san, joining us. She’s also been living on Earth for a while now, but she’ll be joining us for the new school year here at Harukaze High.”

“Greetings, everyone. I’m also looking forward to my next year here with you all. I hope you’ll take care of me the same way you have Theiamillis-san.”

When Theia, Ruth, and Clan came clean about where they were from, they subsequently filled the roles of the three remaining transfer students. They chose not to mention that they were royalty, though they weren’t going particularly out of their way to hide it. The circumstances were chaotic enough as they were, so they were simply keeping it hush for a while to keep from confusing things further. That said, some of the students already had their guesses about Theia based on the plays she’d written. It would only be a matter of days before those rumors were circulating through the entire school.

“These four girls will all be your fellow students this year as Kisshouharukaze High School takes a brave step into the unknown. Truth be told, I never dreamed our humble school would be pioneering something so incredible. I’m sure you students didn’t either. However, that is simply the nature of life. Things never quite go as we expect them to. And so, let us all join hands as we face this new and exciting time together!”

All things considered, Harukaze High was in a rather fortunate position. Theia was practically a celebrity around school. Everyone already knew her, her personality, and her talents; her being an alien was completely secondary to that. If anything, the students already knowing her predisposed them to a largely positive opinion of Forthorthians in general. She and Ruth had both made a big difference in that sense, and Nalfa and Clan were both benefiting

from it. No one—students and faculty alike—was prejudiced against them or afraid of them.

And in the future, that would make both Kisshouharukaze City and Kisshouharukaze High School lynchpins in Forthorthe-Japan relations, though only a small handful of people realized that just yet. Ironically, it seemed to be those who were after Forthorthe's technology and those who were opposed to diplomacy with the aliens that were sensing the signs. One such example was currently at the assembly in the gym, observing things as they played out. After taking several photos, he discretely left. Since he was only there to scout things out, Koutarou and the others never noticed him. His aura indicated curiosity and intrigue rather than hostility or maliciousness, which made it easy for him to blend in with the other press representatives. Right now, hope and danger were battling it out at Harukaze High, and nobody yet knew which would win in the end.

While waiting for the homeroom teacher to call her in, Nalfa was standing in the hallway looking up at the plate on the door that read, "1-A."

"Aww, I wanted to be in the same class as Layous-sama... That's a shame..."

Nalfa wanted to be in class 3-A with the Blue Knight and Princess Theiamillis. Both as a girl of age and the little sister of a journalist, she had a rather heightened sense of curiosity and was just dying to know how they were living here on Earth. But, to her dismay, her age qualified her as a freshman.

"But there's no point crying over spilled milk! Just like my older brother always says, 'When it seems like there's no way, just make your own!'"

While Nalfa hadn't ended up in class 3-A like she'd hoped, Harukaze still had plenty of school-wide events that grouped classes across years alphabetically. In other words, class 1-A would often end up doing things with classes 2-A and 3-A. If she was patient and waited for the right time, she'd still get her chance to see them. Nalfa had learned a lot from her brother, and was planning on putting all of his reporter know-how to good use.

"Nalfa-san, could you come in?"

"Yes!"

Immediately after she got herself pumped up, the middle-aged homeroom teacher called her into the classroom. With an energetic reply and her heart racing with excitement, Nalfa took a bold step forward...

Thud.

“Kyah!”

...Right into the not-fully-open sliding door. She was perfectly fine, but that didn’t stop the tears from welling in her eyes as she rubbed her throbbing forehead.

“Are you okay, Nalfa-san?” asked the worried homeroom teacher.

“I-I’m okay. I’ve always been a little careless...” answered Nalfa with an embarrassed laugh.

That much was true. Nalfa had always been somewhat clumsy. Ever since she was a young girl, she was always tripping over nothing and smacking her head on things. Her brother was always teasing her about it, saying things like “get your head out of the clouds” and “you must have been a ghost that could walk through walls in a previous life.” Nalfa never wanted to hear it, of course, but after having two such incidents today alone, she couldn’t really deny that he was probably right.

“If you’re okay, then would you mind coming over here? I’d like to introduce you to the class.”

“Okay!”

Nalfa then entered classroom 1-A with both her forehead and cheeks red, though for completely different reasons. The second she stepped inside, her new classmates were all staring at her. It reminded her of the press conference she’d had to take part in before leaving Forthorthe. And in that sense, it was a little comforting. Maybe things weren’t so different from planet to planet.

“Hello, everyone. I’m Nalfa Laren from the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire. It’s nice to meet all of you.”

Her forehead and cheeks were still red, but she introduced herself calmly and bowed to the class. Though she was embarrassed over running into the door,

she was a rather courageous and composed girl for her age. In that sense, she was much like her brother, Danesford, who didn't back down even before royalty.

"Man, she's just as cute as Theia-senpai!"

"A transfer student from space, and it's a *girl*! There is a god!"

"What beautiful hair... I wonder if they're going to import hair care products like that?"

"Is everyone from Forthorthe like her? I'm starting to lose my confidence..."

As soon as Nalfa introduced herself, the students all began whispering amongst themselves. They were all first-years too, and though some of them knew each other from middle school, they were mostly getting to know each other for the first time. Compared to coming all the way here from space, however, that felt like nothing. They'd all been chatting it up before the teacher had brought Nalfa into the classroom, but "what middle school did you go to?" was now outdated. The introductory question of the twenty-first century from now on would be "what planet are you from?"

This is kind of different from what I imagined... I was prepared for them to look at me like some strange attraction... but this is more worldly, isn't it?

As Nalfa raised her head from bowing, she realized the class had gotten rather noisy. Rather than looking at her like she was something peculiar, however, they were all simply regarding her as the new transfer student. The boys were all celebrating while the girls were all sighing longingly.

Nalfa looking almost identical to any other Earthling played a big part in that. And with her flawless translation machine, nobody would ever know Japanese wasn't her first language unless she told them. On top of all that, the Forthorthian delegation actively making public appearances was doing a fair bit to acclimate the public to Forthorthians. They would walk around town, eat at local establishments, and converse with the townsfolk whenever they had the chance. Videos of it all spread across the internet like wildfire, so the people of Earth were quickly getting used to the idea of aliens and what they looked like. Elfaria and Theia had taken measures to ensure that people would think Forthorthians were normal people rather than strange monsters.

“Let’s see, Nalfa-san... Why don’t you take that desk over there?”

“Sure thing.”

Nalfa made her way over to the empty seat the teacher had pointed out. The students’ eyes all stayed glued on her until she walked past them. With her assigned desk in the back of the classroom, it would be hard for everyone to keep staring. Their homeroom teacher had thought this one out in advance.

“Nalfa-san has only just recently come to Japan. So since you’re sitting next to her, Matsudaira-san, would you mind showing her around and helping her get the hang of things?”

“M-Me?!”

“Would you rather not?”

“N-No, that’s not what I...”

The homeroom teacher had also intentionally seated Matsudaira Kotori next to where she planned on seating Nalfa. She’d never met her before, but one of her previous teachers had left a note about her shyness in her student record. So by putting the two girls together, she was hoping that Nalfa would have a guide to help her acclimate to life in Japan, and Kotori would have a friend that could help her overcome her timidity. Needless to say, this wasn’t her first time teaching.

“Then please take good care of her.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

“Nice to meet you, Matsudaira-san.”

“Um, p-please call me Kotori.”

“Then it’s nice to meet you, Kotori-san.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Nalfa-san.”

Kotori was quite shaken by this unexpected turn of events. She was bad enough at dealing with strangers as it was, and this one was an alien of all things. She didn’t think she’d ever been so nervous. It might take more than a veteran teachers’ intuition to help her get over that.

A Brother's Dignity at Risk?!

Wednesday, April 6th

Though the opening and entrance ceremonies had ultimately gone by without issue, Koutarou didn't return home right away. He had a meeting with the Forthorthians and the Sun Rangers afterward, which didn't wrap up until after 5PM.

"Uh, what is this?"

"Ooh, what is it?"

What greeted Koutarou and Sanae when they finally returned to room 106 was a transparent cylinder about fifty centimeters in diameter and several meters long. It stretched all the way from the inner room to the front door. Sanae quickly kicked off her shoes and followed it to the other end.

"It's dangerous to stand there, Veltlion."

"Of course this is your doing."

Koutarou neatly put both his and Sanae's shoes away before entering the inner room, where he found Clan standing next to a strange machine that the plastic tube was apparently attached to. Sanae was already looking at it curiously from one angle and then the next.

"Glasses, what are you making here?"

"I'm testing it rather than making it... but it's a ping-pong cannon."

"What the heck is a ping-pong cannon?"

"It's just what it sounds like. It's a cannon I've made using Earth technology that accelerates ping-pong balls to maximum velocity and fires them."

Clan adjusted her glasses as she explained the contraption to Koutarou and Sanae. And as she said, it was quite true to name. The ping-pong cannon was a cannon meant to shoot ping-pong balls.

“When you say ‘maximum velocity,’ what are we talking about here?”

“Currently, it clocks at just over 1,000 kilometers per hour. Any higher than that and the sound barrier would get in the way... That’s what I’m trying to figure out how to deal with now.”

Clan’s purported results were only about 200 kilometers per hour shy of the speed of sound. Her cannon could already fire ping-pong balls at nearly inconceivable speeds, so figuring out how to shoot them any faster would be quite difficult. And that was the challenge Clan was currently trying to puzzle out.

“The sound barrier would get in the way? What?”

“Well... simply put, because the balls would be going too fast, the air in front of them would compress and create resistance, which would throw the ball off course. And it would take an extraordinary amount of energy to overcome that. That resistance is at its strongest around the speed of sound, which is why it’s conventionally known as the sound barrier.”

The sound barrier was typically only a problem for the fastest of aircrafts, yet Clan was challenging it with mere ping-pong balls. This was serious business. Even the science-illiterate Koutarou could tell that much.

“It sounds like you’d be crushing the ping-pong ball.”

“That’s precisely what happens. Take a look.”

“These balls are all in pieces...”

“This is what happens when I fire them at 1,100 kilometers an hour without any countermeasures.”

“So I guess they’re colliding directly with the sound barrier?”

“That’s why I need to think of a way to overcome it.”

“Ping-pong balls just don’t seem up to the task...”

In reality, firing ping-pong balls beyond the speed of sound would be a simple matter with Forthorthian technology. By protecting the ping-pong ball with a barrier and carefully controlling gravity and inertia, it could be launched at any conceivable speed. However, the challenge here was that Clan had chosen to

work exclusively with Earth technology. It sounded like an impossible task at first, but that piqued Koutarou's interest.

"That sounds like fun. Let me help too."

"That's awfully positive for you."

His reaction surprised Clan. She was sure that he'd laugh at her for doing something so silly.

"I don't hate stuff like this. It's like a summer break research project or something."

"Now that you mention it, you did enjoy keeping those beetles, didn't you?"

Beetle-keeping would be an equally silly task in the eyes of most. But Koutarou had enjoyed it nevertheless, and he certainly didn't see the harm in Clan goofing around with Earth technology. The same as someone else might build a plastic model for fun, Clan would build new inventions—it was really just a hobby.

"Let me join in too! I wanna see these super fast ping-pong balls!"

"You won't be able to see them if they're too fast, you know?"

"I bet I'll be able to see the holes in the wall!"

Sanae was on board too. She loved this kind of silly project. And so the three of them began work on mastering the fastest ping-pong ball the world had ever seen.

After going over the ping-pong cannon together, Koutarou and the girls sat down at the tea table to discuss how to proceed.

"The cannons you see in anime are all twisty, right? Aren't you going to make it like that?" asked Sanae.

"Twisty? You mean the spiral on the inside of the barrel?" asked Koutarou in turn.

"Yeah, that."

"That's not a bad idea," remarked Clan. "Putting a spin on the balls will make

sure that they fly smoothly, and it might reduce their drag."

"But won't that make the problem you mentioned where the air pushing the ball forward leaks out and ends up in front of it even worse?"

"I'll try making several barrels with different specs. We can compare results and figure out which designs work best to create the optimal outcome."

"Wow, that totally sounded like something a scientist would say."

"I *am* a scientist!"

Koutarou continued chatting with Clan and Sanae like that for a while, but when he went to set his tea cup down, he realized that someone else was sitting at the table with them. She had an open magazine in her hands and an uncharacteristically tense look on her face.

"What are you doing, Yurika?"

"What did I mess up this time?!"

Since Yurika was scolded on a near daily basis, she'd misinterpreted Koutarou's question as an accusation. She lowered her magazine and looked up at him with teary eyes.

"No, that's not what I meant. I was just wondering what you were doing."

"Oh... You scared me."

Yurika let out a sigh of relief upon realizing she wasn't in trouble. A smile returned to her face, and she proudly showed Koutarou the cover of what she was reading.

"Here."

"Looking for a part-time job, huh?"

The magazine she had in her hands was really a catalogue of part-time job listings that the local chamber of commerce put together. Since it was all local, niche work, the pay for listed jobs wasn't stellar, but it would all be nearby and none of it would be high competition. It was perfect way for Yurika to search for a part-time job.

"I ran out of money, so I was thinking of working."

“Yeah, you did buy a ton of manga.”

After all the time they’d spent in Forthorthe, Yurika had a long list of new releases to catch up on when they returned. As a result, she’d ended up blowing all of her savings, and now had no more money to buy new manga with. In order to make up the difference, she was considering picking up a short-term part-time job.

“Or you could give me an allowance instead if you’d like, Satomi-san.”

“Earn your spending money yourself.”

Koutarou and Yurika had been through a lot together, including a trip to Forthorthe now. If it had been an essential or something she really needed, Koutarou would’ve been happy to support her. But he drew the line at manga. He knew that making her earn that for herself would be for her own good.

“I thought you’d say that, which is why I’m looking for a job.”

“That was the correct decision.”

“Hey, speaking of allowances, I want a bigger one, Koutarou!”

Sanae was still receiving an allowance from Koutarou. It was a carryover from the days when she was still a ghost, and it didn’t amount to much. She only got 300 yen a week, but the amount wasn’t what was important. Sanae just liked getting an allowance from Koutarou. And Koutarou didn’t hate giving her one, either. In that sense, it was no different than Theia giving him a salary.

“You’re getting one from your parents too, aren’t you? Isn’t that enough?”

“Yeah, it totally is. But I think negotiation and compromise is part of a healthy relationship!”

“So *that’s* what you’re really after.”

“Veltlion, if you’d like, you can contribute to my research costs too.”

“...I’m going to hit both of you...”

As the conversation shifted off of her, Yurika went back to reading through the job listings. To her, lack of manga funds was a serious problem and an immediate solution was necessary.

Let's see... This one pays... 20,000 yen a day?! And it's paid daily?!

On one particular page was a listing for a rather high-paying job, but when she tried looking up the company on her phone, she didn't get any hits. Nothing came up when she tried looking up their number, either. The listing was under "odd jobs" and said it would be warehouse cleaning, but that didn't explain the pay. The only clue was the word "confidential" written in big, bold letters at the end of the ad. It was sketchy enough that it gave even Yurika second thoughts.

I hope it's not the kind of job I shouldn't be doing. Satomi-san would be disappointed then, but... I could just get my 20,000 yen and go back to studying! Aaauuuuugh... What do I do?!

The high pay was just too enticing, but she was still scared of what the fine print might be. She had a lot on the line as a young girl in love, and there were certain lines she couldn't cross. And so she hatched a plan.

That's it! I only need to give them the safehouse's address! I can even use a fake name!

In case it turned out to be something totally fishy, Yurika decided to apply for the job with fake information. She may not be able to use magic for personal gain, but there were still plenty of perks that came with being an archwizard of Rainbow Heart. She was freely allowed to use the safehouse, fake names, and other such safeguards. Even though it would be for personal use in this particular instance, hiding her identity would benefit Rainbow Heart too.

I should also use magic to protect myself at the interview and when I go in for the job... Surely it'll be allowed since it's to protect myself!

It was one of Rainbow Heart's cardinal rules that magic should not be used for personal gain, but it could freely be used to keep people safe.

"Now, let's see... Towano Yuria... female... seventeen years old..."

Yurika penciled in the fake identity she used as a member of Rainbow Heart on the application. It was probably pushing the boundaries of acceptable behavior for an archwizard, but the offer of 20,000 yen for a single day's work was just too attractive. It would also keep her from getting distracted from her studies for too long, so she convinced herself this was the right thing to do and

turned in her application.

Kotori and Nalfa went out into the courtyard one day that week to have lunch. Nalfa would be swarmed by the other students if they stayed in the classroom, so they'd ventured outside to hide out in the courtyard for a little while.

"Nii-san and Kou-niisan were always running off somewhere like this, so my mom was always angry..."

"Kou-niisan?"

"Oh, I mean Satomi Koutarou-san. He's a childhood friend of me and my brother."

Kotori was a very shy girl, but she was already getting used to talking to Nalfa. The homeroom teacher pairing them off together had helped a great deal in that regard. Kotori was also diligent and responsible by nature, so she was determined to do her job well. Thanks to that, she and Nalfa were making fast friends. It was exactly what their homeroom teacher had been hoping for.

"You're Koutarou-sama's childhood friend?! Really?!"

"Um, y-yes. My brother met Kou-niisan in grade school, and I was kind of just always tagging along with them..."

Koutarou also played a large part in helping the two girls bond. To a Forthorthian like Nalfa, Koutarou was a modern hero and a living legend. Kotori being his childhood friend undoubtedly meant she knew all kinds of things about him, and Nalfa was dying to know every last secret. It was like she'd stumbled upon a treasure trove. And since Kotori loved talking about Koutarou, they had plenty to talk about right off the bat.

"But how do you know Kou-niisan, Nalfa-chan?"

"Ah, u-um... I can't give you any details, but in short, Koutarou-sama saved Theiamillis-sama and her family, so he's very well known in Forthorthe."

Koutarou being the Blue Knight, savior of Forthorthe, was still being kept secret, so Nalfa kept her explanation as brief as possible. She knew that she and

Kotori would be close, so she thought it would be better to tell her the truth—however much of it she could—instead of some half-baked lie that she'd have to correct later on.

"I see... That does sound like something Kou-niisan would do. He's always been a real nice guy."

"Ooh, tell me more!"

Fortunately, Kotori readily accepted Nalfa's story. She knew that Koutarou got along well with Theia even before it was revealed that she was an alien, so it wasn't hard to believe something so momentous had happened between them. Theia was also a member of the Forthorthian delegation, so she figured that it might be something political. Like her brother, Kotori was rather sharp, which ended up working out in Nalfa's favor since she didn't ask a lot of questions.

"Where should I start?"

"Tell me how you first met Koutarou-sama!"

"How I first met him? Gee, I wonder when that was..."

"Kotori, do you mind if I record your story?"

There, Nalfa pulled a camera out of her bag. She was forbidden from bringing in Forthorthian technology, so it was a Japanese-made camera she'd managed to get her hands on. It could take both still pictures and video, and was actually a rather expensive model.

"I don't mind, but what are you going to use it for?"

"I'll upload it so I can show my friends on Earth to everyone back home. Of course, I'll include the stories about Koutarou, too."

"So Forthorthe has something like the internet too, huh?"

"We call it the pan-galactic network."

"So you're like a vlogger, Nalfa-chan."

"Heehee, I guess so."

"Okay, then. Just give me a second."



Kotori was a modern girl and had no opposition to being filmed, but she still wanted to make sure she looked cute on camera. She pulled out a small mirror to check her hair and uniform. It took a few minutes of minor adjustments before she was satisfied. After putting her mirror away, Kotori faced Nalfa again.

“Sorry about that.”

“No, I totally understand. I’m a girl too, you know?”

“Heehee. So, we were talking about when I first met Kou-niisan...”

“Yes, tell me more.”

“I think that was when I was still...”

Kotori then told the story of how she’d met Koutarou from the very beginning. Nalfa recorded her, only stopping her every now and then when she used words or phrases she didn’t know. The soft spring light shone down on the girls, and a gentle breeze blew lightly through the courtyard. It was a lovely afternoon.

“And even on days when Nii-san and Kou-niisan’s team didn’t have baseball practice, they were always chasing after a ball. I remember my mom complaining about how dirty their uniforms would get.”

“I see... So what’s baseball?”

“Oh, it’s a group sport that’s really popular here. You have two teams that alternate pitching and hitting... Well, there are lots of rules, but in short, the team that hits the ball the best wins.”

“Wow, an Earth sport... Maybe I should make a video to introduce it to everyone?”

“Ahaha, that sounds fun!”

Both girls were enjoying their lovely afternoon lunch, and they would have continued to do so were it not for the conversation they were about to overhear.

“...Mackenzie-senpai...”

Kotori's ears perked up upon hearing her brother's name. There were two girls walking by, chatting as they went. There was nothing out of the ordinary about that, except for what they were talking about.

"I'm totally Mackenzie-senpai's type, so maybe I should ask him out."

"Give it up. At best, you'll only end up becoming one of his mistresses."

"What? Those rumors are true?"

"Are you kidding? He goes through girls like toilet paper. And if he doesn't want you as his girlfriend, he'll just mess around with you and then dump you."

Hearing those words, Kotori froze and remained motionless for a while. It wasn't until the girls had walked past the courtyard that she came back to life. Almost a full minute had passed, but that was simply how long it took for her to process what she'd just heard. It was truly that shocking.

"M-M-My brother?! *My* brother has a bunch of girlfriends?! H-How... How obscene!"

"Kotori, calm down!"

"Oh, I am calm! I couldn't be any calmer than I am right now!"

"Where are you going?! Wait a moment!"

Everything Kotori had been doing completely left her mind, and she made a beeline for the classroom 3-A. She was naturally introverted, but she also had a tendency to idealize people. There was no way that she could accept that her older brother had multiple girlfriends. She needed to get to the bottom of this immediately.

Several days had passed since his little sister started life at Harukaze High, and Kenji was in high spirits. At first he'd been worried that she wouldn't be able to fit in or make any friends, but one good thing had happened after another, and he'd ultimately come to realize that he had nothing to be concerned about.

"I gotta hand it to the transfer student, Kou," Kenji said with a smile as he sipped his coffee-flavored milk.

He normally gave off a sharp and cool impression, but he turned warm and

bright the moment his little sister was involved. Right now, he looked like nothing more than a doting parent. Thanks to that, Koutarou could tell he was talking about Kotori even though he'd never said her name.

"Did something happen between Kin-chan and the transfer student?"

Koutarou was actually receiving reports on how Nalfa was doing, but unless the circumstances warranted it, he tried to keep out of her personal life. Kiriha was the one who made that call, so if there were any problems, he would get the information from her. Since Nalfa was a girl, Koutarou was trying to be as considerate as possible.

"Well, it seems like Kotori was assigned the job of taking care of the transfer student, and they're actually getting along great."

"So she's made a friend already? That's great."

Koutarou also worried for the timid Kotori, but this news made him feel better both about her and Nalfa.

"That's right. She's taken her first real step into high school life. All that's left is whether or not she'll be able to fit in with the rest of the class, but her relationship with the transfer student is helping her out there too, so it looks like everything'll be okay."

"That's a relief. Things just work themselves out sometimes, huh?"

"Yes, but there's one problem, Kou. Boys."

"What, you're worried that boys are trying to talk to her already? As her brother, you should have some faith in her."

"I know, but still."

Kenji was honestly thrilled that his little sister was adjusting well to high school. He'd been so worried about her lately that he was even spending less time on girls. Boys coming after his little sister was something he'd been dreading for ages, but he couldn't deny that Koutarou was right. He needed to have faith in her. Resolving to do just that, he started to calm down some.

"See, if you'd go out with Kotori, I wouldn't have to worry, Kou."

"You make it sound so simple, but both Kin-chan and I have our own stuff

going on.”

“So put it all behind you and move on.”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous for the sake of your own peace of mind.”

“I know.”

Really, what would solve all of Kenji’s worries at once would be if Kotori and Koutarou started dating. If that happened, he wouldn’t have to worry about either of them anymore. He could simply dote on his little sister as he pleased, and leave protecting her to the trusty Koutarou. It would be the ideal development for Kenji, but alas, that ideal would never be realized.

“Nii-san! Matsudaira Kenji!”

“Wha?”

A familiar but unusual voice shouted Kenji’s name from the door of classroom 3-A. Kenji turned to look in that direction with a stunned look on his face.

“Nii-san!”

“Kotori?!”

It was Kotori, but no... It couldn’t be. This was nothing like her. In fact, the sight of her stomping across the classroom was almost too much for him to believe. Who was this girl and what had she done with his little sister?

“Nii-san, is it true that you have a bunch of mistresses?!”

The words that came out of her mouth were the most unbelievable thing yet. Not just Kenji, but the entire class was left dumbfounded with one exception.

“Hmm, this is getting interesting.”

That exception was Kurano Kiriha.

“Wh-Who told you that, Kotori?!”

“I’m hearing rumors all around school! I’m so embarrassed I could die!”

It was true. Kenji was a popular guy and almost all the girls liked to talk about him. That was ultimately how the rumor mill had started, but the kids of class 3-A knew better since they had a much better idea of what kind of person he was.

So did the girls of room 106. They trusted Kenji implicitly as Koutarou's friend, and didn't give any credence to the rumors about him whatsoever. Nevertheless, this got most of his classmates whispering.

"Isn't that his little sister?"

"Really...?"

"Wait, so the rumors are true?"

"What a shock!"

"Seriously? Just how many girls has he duped?"

Kotori's little outburst had them doubting Kenji left and right. Surely if his little sister was yelling at him, there had to be something to it.

"W-Wait a minute, Kotori! This is a misunderstanding!"

"Of course you'd say that! There's no way you'd admit it!"

"Calm down! Besides, calling them mistresses is a bit much! It's not like I'm married!"

"So you don't deny dating an unspecified amount of girls?!"

"No, that's not what I mean! I do always have a girlfriend! *A* girlfriend! One!"

"Yeah, whichever girl is standing in front of you, right? How crass!"

The spat between Kotori, who had lost sight of herself in anger, and Kenji, who was desperately trying to resolve the misunderstanding, only got more intense. The entire class had their eyes on them, so nobody noticed the second girl who quietly entered the classroom.

"Ah, thank goodness... I finally found you, Kotori."

It was Nalfa, who had come running after her friend. Right now she was one of the most famous people in Japan, but other than her hair, she was just an ordinary girl. She was no match for the titanic clash going on between siblings on the other side of the classroom. Things might have been different if she'd called out to Kotori, but something else caught her eye and distracted her. It was the couple that had a very special meaning to both her and all of Forthorthe...

“Rock, paper, scissors!”

“Rock, paper, scissors!”

Nalfa lifted her camera and watched Koutarou and Theia playing rock, paper, scissors through he viewfinder. After several days at school, she was already quite familiar with this game. It would still be alien to most Forthorthians, however, so she’d probably need to include some annotations if she uploaded this video.

“Look right!”

After winning the current round, Koutarou pointed right. In response, Theia swiftly turned her head left. Koutarou then frowned bitterly as Theia flashed a triumphant smile.

Is this... some other game that’s been combined with rock, paper, scissors, I wonder? Do you lose if you look in the wrong direction? Oh, I see, you’re not supposed to look in the direction the winner points.

Nalfa had her questions, but continued to record. She could work out the details later. Right now, the most important thing was catching this moment between Koutarou and Theia.

“Rock, paper, scissors!”

“Rock, paper, scissors!”

Theia won the second round and pointed her finger.

“Look down!”

“...Ugh!”

It seemed Koutarou had reflexive looked in the same direction. Seeing that, Theia pumped a celebratory fist into the air. Meanwhile, Koutarou’s shoulders drooped. Nalfa had quickly caught on to the gist of the game, and Theia was ultimately victorious. The most interesting part of their little game, however, had yet to come.

“Aah!”

“Ugh, fine...”

Theia leaned in closer to Koutarou, her small mouth open wide. Koutarou then reluctantly popped something into her mouth with his chopsticks. Nalfa then realized what the stakes of the game had been—the last piece of fried chicken.

“Hmm, mmm... That was good.”

“You’re stupid strong when it comes to this kind of thing.”

“You should hold your lord in higher esteem. I’m good at all manner of games.”

“Yes, yes, you’re wonderful, Your Highness.”

“That’s much better.”

It was an unimaginable sight. The act itself was common enough in Forthorthe. Nalfa and her brother would fight over snacks almost daily. But a princess and her knight doing it was something else entirely.

I’ve never seen Princess Theia act so cutely... And Layous-sama has such a soft expression... This is definitely not what you’d expect to see between a princess and knight!

Koutarou was currently sitting with an open manga magazine on his desk, and Theia was standing behind him with her arms draped around his neck and her head on his shoulder. It looked like they were reading together. Moreover, like this was perfectly casual for them. Like it was something they did every day. They looked like best friends.

From this... it looks like Princess Theia is definitely going to bring Layous-sama back home to Forthorthe... It doesn’t look like the two of them should ever be apart...

Nalfa watched them with an entranced gaze. The two of them were discussing the manga as Koutarou turned the pages. It was quite obvious it would take far longer to read this way, but neither of them seemed to care. The gentle spring sunlight filtering down on them through the windows, this charming scene simply seemed to be how the golden princess and the Blue Knight spent their lunches together.



There, Shizuka noticed Nalfa standing at the door, camera in hand.

“Theia-chan, it looks like you have a guest.”

“Hmm?”

When Theia heard that, she left Koutarou’s side and walked over to Nalfa. Nalfa was a little sorry to see the two of them part.

“I’m sorry for filming you without even saying hello... I’m Nalfa Laren, one of the Forthorthians chosen to become a transfer student.”

“I’m Theiamillis. Do you want to become a reporter like your brother?”

Theia looked at Nalfa’s hands. She was holding a Japanese camera, and a rather expensive one at that. That was what made Theia think she wanted to become a journalist.

“It’s just my hobby to record all kinds of things... If anything, I’d like to become a photographer or filmmaker.”

“Hmm, it sounds like you and I will get along just fine then. It’s nice to meet you.”

Unlike reporters who asked all sorts of nosey questions, photographers simply eternalized things as they were. Really, Theia was still just sour over Danesford. But after Nalfa’s earnest answer, she thought the two of them would could be friends without issue.

“Thank you very much, Your Highness!”

“Shh!”

“Oh, er... I’m sorry, Theia-sama.”

“Fortunately, thanks to the uproar over there, it seems that nobody heard you,” Theia said, indicating the ongoing fight between the Matsudaira siblings.

“Like I said, it’s all a misunderstanding!”

“I can’t believe you when you’re constantly switching girlfriends, Nii-san!”

“Th-That’s...”

“Luckily for you, I’m a little more forgiving than she is,” said Theia as she

turned back to Nalfa. “Don’t let it bother you.”

“I’ll be more careful in the future.”

Nalfa had reflexively addressed Theia as the princess she was. No one had noticed thanks to all the background noise, but Nalfa knew she wouldn’t always be that lucky. She’d have to make sure it didn’t happen again.

“By the way, what did you come here for?”

“I came here chasing after Kotori, but when I saw you and Layous-sama, I just started recording...”

“Well, you should avoid recording those two.”

“It’s okay. I left them out of the shot.”

“Then that’s fine. Well, since you’re here, why not record Koutarou? You want footage of him too, right?”

“Huh, me? I think I need to go lend Mackenzie a helping hand. He’s been looking at me pretty desperately for a while now.”

“I don’t care.”

“If possible, I would like to record not just you and Layous-sama, but the two of you, Clan-sama, and Ruth-sama all together. Everyone would love to see all of you.”

“That’s true. Maybe a group photo would be okay?”

“Yes!”

“Welp, sorry, Mackenzie. You’re going to have to hang in there a little while longer.”

“That’s just heartless!”

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, Nii-san!”

In the end, Nalfa showing up at classroom 3-A would only prolong Kenji’s suffering. Koutarou was distracted long enough that the bell rang before he ever got a chance to help him, and so Kotori and Nalfa both had to go back to their class. At the very least, that thankfully put an end to the ordeal before it got any more out of hand.

A Part-time Job and Wiretaps

Wednesday, April 13th

After the incident with Kotori and Kenji during lunch the other day, Nalfa would make an appearance from time to time. Her main goal was to record Koutarou and the Forthorthians, but she was also documenting daily student life at Harukaze High as something of a primer on Japanese culture. In that sense, Kotori was right. She was working much like a travel blogger, explaining bits and pieces of everyday Japanese life as she came to learn them herself.

Thud!

“Owww...”

And today, Nalfa just so happened to be focused on a particularly good shot. She was walking backward while filming, and thanks to her oblivious nature, ended up bumping into a utility pole and hit the back of her head. When Koutarou saw it, he ran over to her in a hurry.

“A-Are you okay? That sounded like it hurt...”

“I’m okay, Koutarou-sama. I’m a born ditz, so I walk into all kinds of stuff all the time. This is nothing; I’m totally used to it.”

“Hmm... Well, I guess if you can continue to film without even dropping the camera, you are probably fine.”

“Yup!”

No one really thought much of Nalfa filming things around school. Her classmates all figured that she was recording things to report to her friends and family back home, and they all thought Koutarou simply ended up being the focus of her filming because he was a friend.

“Theia-sama, please turn this way!”

“Sure— Wait, Nalfa, look out!”

“Master!”

“I’m on it!”

“Kyaaah!”

Screeeeech!

“Get outta the road, you stupid kid!”

“I-I’m so sorry!”

“You really need to watch where you’re going! You almost got yourself killed there!” scolded a worried Koutarou.

“I-I’m sorry for being so ditzy!” Nalfa apologized.

“Goodness.. We’re all going to die of heart attacks before she does,” sighed Theia.

And indeed, the only problem with Nalfa filming was that she would—quite literally—sometimes walk into danger. It kept her film subjects, Koutarou and the invaders, on constant edge. Things like her nearly getting hit by a car just now were an everyday occurrence. That was why Koutarou couldn’t help being a little harsh with her when it happened—it was really and truly troublesome.

“This is going to sound strange coming from me,” commented Yurika, “but I don’t think I’ve ever met someone so unreliable.”

“Me either,” agreed Sanae.

“At least this gives you some idea how we feel watching you, right, Yurika?” asked Maki.

“Wow... So this is how you guys felt, huh?”

“No, it’s how we *feel*, not how we *felt*.”

“What, really?!”

Even the clumsy, hard-luck Yurika could tell that Nalfa had it far worse than she did. Misfortune followed her around like a lost puppy, but Nalfa was just plain blind to her environment. And it made a critical difference. If a large hole suddenly appeared in front of them, for example, Yurika would at least *try* to get out of the way while Nalfa would walk right into it without ever being any

the wiser. Danger didn't need to come to her—she would inevitably find it.

"Harumi, I think I've figured out the reason she's like this," said Clan.

"Was there something in the documents?" asked Harumi.

"She's actually the daughter of a rather rich family—the granddaughter of the current president of the esteemed *Mastir Economist*, to be exact."

"Then you mean to say..."

"Yes. Before coming here, she was likely taken good care of—and kept safe—by everyone around her."

"If I recall correctly, the others said something about her brother being a very keen reporter..."

"And she's not anything like him, Sakuraba-senpai. In short, she's sheltered. Just like Clan when we first met her."

"Jeez, Veltlion, why do you always have to turn things around on me?! I mean, she is sheltered, but..."

Raised with all the privilege in the world, Nalfa had grown up the opposite of streetwise. If even Clan could recognize that, Koutarou figured her relatives and loved ones surely did. Maybe they'd even sent her to Earth for exactly that reason, hoping she would gain some worldliness.

But as Koutarou and the others fretted over Nalfa's naivety, Kiriha's mind was elsewhere. She was walking in the back of the group, pondering an extraordinary dilemma.

Something certainly felt strange on April 6th... To think this is what it was...

Kiriha pulled a letter from her bag—a letter that detailed the extraordinary dilemma on her mind. She trusted it implicitly, of course, because it was a letter she'd written to herself.

The letter had come yesterday. It was postmarked on the 6th, but had been scheduled to be delivered on the 12th. Considering the standard delay of the postal service, that likely meant that it had actually been put in the mail sometime on the 5th. Kiriha thought the letter was strange when she received

it, especially since her own handwriting decorated the outside of the envelope. She knew immediately that it had to be something important, and moreover that it had to be time-sensitive if she'd wanted it delivered on a specific day. So despite the strange feeling that came over her holding the letter in her hands, she diligently opened it.

Inside the envelope was a folded and sealed letter with a small note. The handwriting on the note was also hers, but the message it contained was utterly bizarre. It said that, on the night of April 5th, her memories as well as the others' had been altered somewhat. It stated that nothing was wrong, and the modification had been made explicitly for the purpose of them being able to relax and enjoy themselves for a time. Lastly, it explained that the folded and sealed letter contained information on what had actually happened and how to undo it should the need arise. That, however, was only to be done in the explicit case of an emergency. Otherwise, the letter was to be kept absolutely secret. It should only be a last resort in the most desperate of situations.

After thoroughly reading the note, Kiriha considered ignoring its instructions and opening the sealed letter anyway. That way, she would know what happened and could share the truth with the others should a situation ever arise where that was necessary. She would just have to keep it a secret in the meantime. But since Kiriha knew herself better than anyone, she'd had a special someone take precautions against exactly that. The end of the note contained a postscript in Koutarou's handwriting.

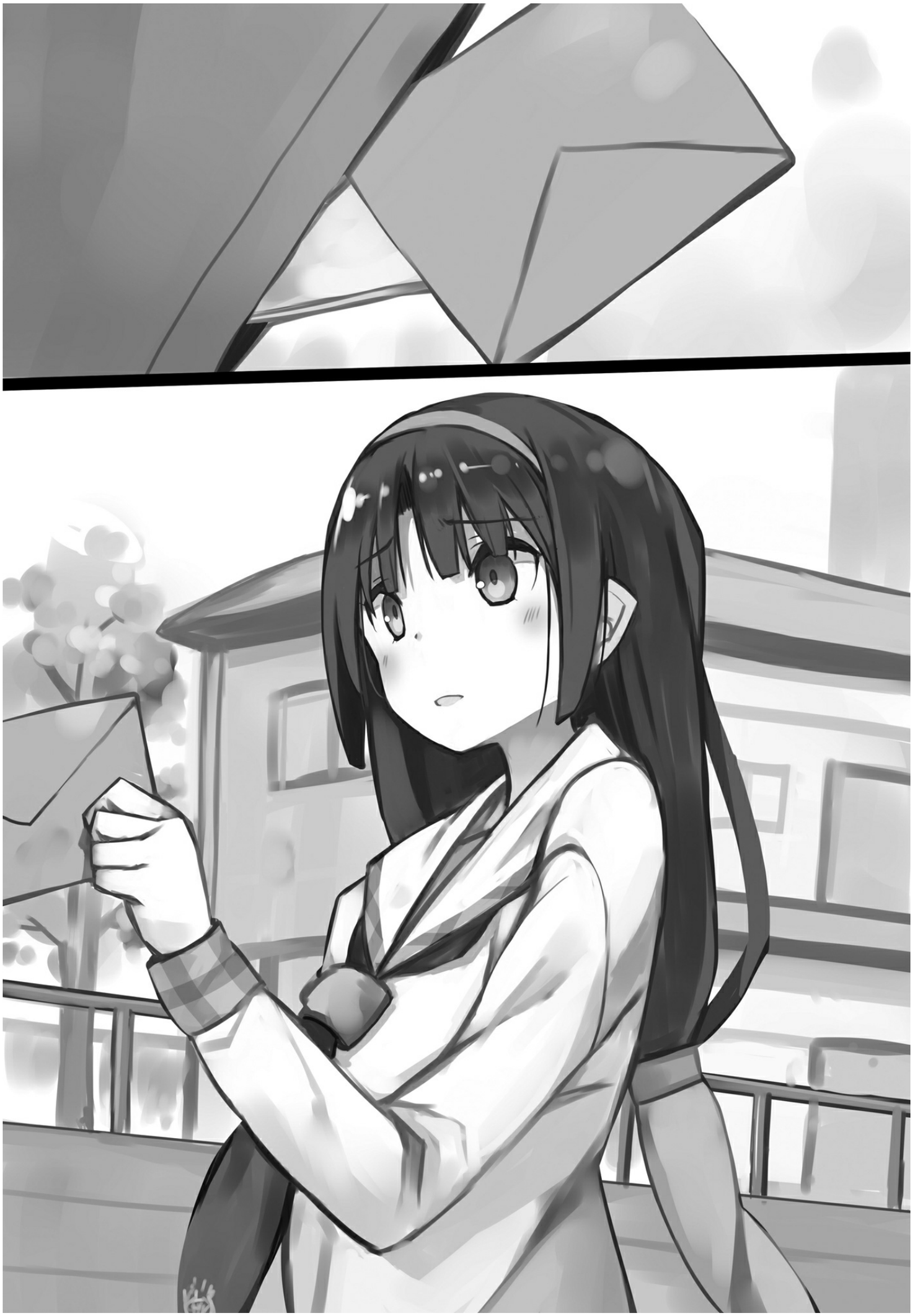
P.S. - If you open up the sealed letter for any reason other than an emergency, Kiriha-san, I will confiscate your Kabutonga card and return your necklace.

That stopped Kiriha cold. Even if it was an empty threat, she couldn't risk it. Koutarou had to have known the meaning of both of those items when he wrote that, so in other words, he was saying, "Don't open this if you love me." And Kiriha would never dare betray the trust her beloved put in her.

You really did put me in quite a spot... Really and truly...

Kiriha watched Koutarou walking along ahead of her with a half-loving and

half-resentful gaze. Since she had been entrusted with the letter and instructions to keep the truth hidden from everyone, it now fell on her to resolve or explain away any discrepancies that might arise because of their altered memories. The oddities she'd noticed so far only affected her: she was missing ten pieces of stationery and matching envelopes from her desk, and there were logs indicating some spiritual energy sensors had been used—neither of which she remembered having anything to do with, but now that made sense. Neither was a particularly big deal, either... But when she thought about the number of other such inconsistencies that might crop up for all ten of them, her head started to hurt. She knew in her heart of hearts that the job of keeping all that under wraps had been left to her because she was the most trustworthy, but that alone wasn't enough to make her feel better about it right now. She decided she'd get her revenge sometime by giving Koutarou a run for his money. He'd specifically written that postscript knowing how much she loved him, so she felt like she was perfectly within bounds to act on that love now. Getting his heart racing a little would be exactly what he deserved.



When Nalfa woke up in the morning, she would get ready for the day and then get her camera rolling first thing. She would record on her way to school, and sometimes even go chasing after things that caught her attention. Of course, there was only one thing demanding her attention right now—the Blue Knight Layous Veltlion, AKA Koutarou.

“Nalfa-san, look out!”

“What— Ack!”

Nalfa was completely lost in filming, so much so that she was about to fall right into a ditch. Seeing this, Koutarou leaped forward and grabbed her hand. She was so light that it took only the slightest tug from him to knock her off balance, and she fell tumbling towards him. She crashed right into him, but he caught her and helped steady her. He was more concerned about her being okay than he was about his own wellbeing.

“Phew... Thank god...”

It would be terrible if the transfer student got hurt, so it had become part of Koutarou’s daily routine to keep an eye on her while she was filming.

“I’m so sorry, Koutarou-sama.”

“Are you all right, Nalfa-san?”

“Yes, I’m quite happy.”

“Happy?”

“Every girl in Forthorthe dreams of being saved by the Blue Knight just like this.”

Since they were standing so close, Nalfa whispered that last part so no one else could hear it. The Blue Knight’s name wasn’t something she used lightly, but it brought a beaming smile to her lips now.

“Erk!”

Koutarou hurriedly let go of Nalfa... but not because she’d called him the Blue Knight. It was because he realized he had his arm around a girl he’d only met a few days ago.

“Aww, shucks...”

Nalfa’s beaming smile waned into a frown, but she quickly seemed to get over it and lifted her camera to begin filming again. She was dedicated, certainly—a model camerawoman always ready to get back behind the lens no matter what danger befell her.

“Be careful, you hear?”

“Yes, sir!”

Nalfa was oblivious, but she didn’t mean any harm. Koutarou knew she wasn’t causing trouble because she wanted to. Things just kind of snuck up on her, and he didn’t blame her for that. And nevertheless, she was determined to keep filming. At most, he was a little frustrated as he continued to watch over her.

“I’m worried...”

Koutarou’s unwitting mumbling reached the ears of his best friend walking next to him.

“Count your blessings, Kou. At least you have the leisure to be worried about someone else...”

Strangely enough, Kenji was alone today. He’d been walking with his little sister to school until recently, and Koutarou had a pretty good idea as to what had happened.

“Is Kin-chan still mad?”

“She’s angrier than she’s ever been. She’s treating me like I’m the scum of the earth.”

Kenji was still in the doghouse. Kotori had caught wind of all the rumors swirling around school about Kenji’s love life, and she’d marched all the way to classroom 3-A to confront Kenji about them the other day. Kenji, though only trying to defend himself, hadn’t given her a satisfactory answer, which had left the two of them in something of a rough patch.

“Well, Kin-chan’s a serious girl. Good luck with that.”

As a naturally shy girl, Kotori was tenderhearted and idealistic. She romanticized people and held love on the highest of pedestals. She believed in

the kind of pure, earnest love she'd read about in fairy tales... and hearing that her beloved brother was actually a playboy sent all her dreams crashing to the ground.

"Don't be so cold, Kou! Your best friend's in deep doodoo here! Can't you do *something*?!"

"Sorry, man. I don't think there's much I can do to help you this time. *I* know you're looking for a diamond in the rough, but Kin-chan's never gonna believe you if you tell her that."

Unlike Koutarou, Kenji had good looks, a charming personality, and was something of a social butterfly. Thanks to that, he'd always been popular with girls, including plenty that weren't so nice. Kenji was relatively intuitive, however, and it usually didn't take him long to see through a girlfriend who wasn't really compatible with him. That was why most of his relationships were notoriously short-lived. In his own way, he was just as romantic as Kotori. He was just trying to find the right girl. And Koutarou knew that. But he also knew that Kotori would never hear Kenji out, much less believe him.

"Then you go talk to her! She'll believe anything you say, Kou!"

"Yeah, sorry, this one's not my battle. You dug your own hole, bro."

Kenji wasn't to blame for wanting to find the right girl for him, but he was certainly to blame for how he'd gone about doing that... for over two years. Trying to explain that away now would only sound like excuses. Koutarou would have loved to help Kenji. That is, if he thought it were even remotely possible.

"Then I'll snitch to Kotori about you, too!"

"Who cares? I'm not in a single relationship that would anger Kin-chan."

"That's just unfair! You're totally surrounded by girls too!"

"Turns out going after just anyone was a bad move, Mackenzie. Better just go ahead and get on your hands and knees and apologize."

Koutarou earnestly thought that was the best advice he could give Kenji for now. There was no way he could talk his way out of this one with Kotori, so apologizing was his only real option. The pure-hearted Kotori would likely

accept no less.

But that was when something quite unexpected happened.

“You’re terrible, Satomi-kun. You and I have an extraordinary relationship. A very deep one. I’m sure Kotori-san would be shocked to hear about it.”

Before Koutarou knew it, Kiriha had walked up beside him. She’d wrapped her arm around his and was leaning on him, looking up at him with doe eyes and rosy cheeks.

And what she’d said was the absolute truth. She—really, all of the Corona House girls—had an extraordinary and deep bond with Koutarou. Kotori would indeed be shocked to learn of it, but that was only natural considering the extreme nature of what they’d been through together. However, she presented this information completely out of context. And considering how she was behaving, it sounded like she meant something else entirely.

“Kou, you bastard! Here you are talking like some goody two-shoes, but you’re no better than I am!”

“Kiriha-san, what are you trying to do?!”

“But I was only telling the truth—”

“You’re doing this on purpose!”

“That’s it! I’m taking you down with me, Kou! Just you wait! Tomorrow, you’re going to meet an entirely different Kotori!”

Kiriha’s interference—her payback—ended up sending the situation rolling in an unexpected direction. If things kept up, it seemed like Koutarou would end up in the doghouse right alongside Kenji... but things didn’t quite unfold that way.

This was the first time that Kotori had ever visited Koutarou’s apartment, but she didn’t at all seem nervous. She’d been to Koutarou’s house plenty of times before he moved, and she’d even seen his room before. He was still using a lot of the same furniture and décor, so she felt right at home.

“I see you kept this shelf, though what’s on it has changed a little...”

“Yeah, things and priorities kinda change when you’re on your own.”

“Heehee, sure looks like it.”

“I-I’m honored to be here, Koutarou-sama...”

In stark contrast to Kotori, Nalfa was nearly trembling with excitement and nervousness. In her eyes, Koutarou was a legendary hero rather than a childhood friend. Filming him in public was one thing, but this was the first time she’d stepped into his private domain. It’d be impossible for her not to be nervous.

“You don’t have to worry,” said Theia. “A great number of people pass through this room. Just think of it as an extension of the embassy.”

“O-Okay...”

The other thing making Nalfa a bundle of nerves was Theia, who was sitting right next to Koutarou like it was her prerogative. Though she had her legs stretched out in a rather casual and inelegant fashion, she was without a doubt a princess of Forthorthe. Being in front of Koutarou was one thing, but to be faced with both the legendary knight and his princess at the same time... It was almost too much. Even if Nalfa came from a well-off family, she was still a commoner. She couldn’t help feeling like she was out of her league.

“Oh, that’s right. I heard that you were from Forthorthe too, Theia-san.”

“Indeed, I am. I came into contact with Koutarou while visiting here for private reasons, and we’ve been on good terms ever since.”

“For private reasons? Then... were you also taking care of personal business when we first met?”

“Something like that, yes. Koutarou’s been looking after me for quite some time now.”

Kotori had met Theia and Ruth before. She was surprised to hear that they were aliens, but between her budding friendship with them and the fact that Koutarou was clearly friends with them, she wasn’t nervous to be around them at all. Things might be a little different if she knew Theia was a princess, however.

“Please have some tea, Kotori-sama, Nalfa-sama.”

“Thank you very much, Ruth-san.”

“I-I’m honored.”

“What’s the matter, Nalfa-chan? You look like you’re feeling down.”

Because Theia’s position was still being kept a secret, Kotori had no idea what had Nalfa so on edge. Under any other circumstance, she would avidly be recording everything she saw through her viewfinder, but right now she was just meekly looking around. That got Kotori curious.

“Oh, well, um... This is the first time I’ve ever been in boy’s room, so...”

“You don’t have to worry about Kou-niisan. He’s as upright as I am.”

“I know, but... Actually, more importantly, wasn’t there something you were going to ask about?”

“Oh, right!”

Fortunately for Nalfa, Kotori had come over to Koutarou’s place for a specific reason. There was something she wanted to consult him about. Upon recalling this, she quickly set the matter with Nalfa aside and got to the point of their visit.

“Kou-niisan, if you don’t mind, there’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“No need to be so formal. What’s up?”

“It’s about my brother.”

Kotori wanted to talk about Kenji. With her shy personality, she had very few people she could go to for heart-to-hearts outside of her family. And considering the subject at hand, it wasn’t something she wanted to talk to her family about. That was why she’d come to Koutarou. They were childhood friends, and she knew he would take her seriously.

“Oh, that...”

Koutarou couldn’t help the bitter smile that rose up on his lips. He knew exactly what this was and exactly where it was going. Kenji would have to honestly apologize for his ways, end of story. Koutarou two years ago probably

would have put that on the table immediately and called it a day. But after coming to understand the creatures known as women, he knew it would be better to at least listen to what Kotori had to say.

“Okay, hit me.”

“Thank you... Kou-niisan, just where did my brother go astray? He used to be so gentlemanly and chivalrous...”

Kotori had always been proud to have an older brother like Kenji. He was smart and kind, and was good both at sports and in school. He looked out for others and was always level-headed. He was even good looking. In her eyes, he was like some anime or manga protagonist come to life. But, somehow, immediately after starting high school, he’d turned into some womanizing scumbag. It was a heartbreaking development.

“He’s still gentlemanly and chivalrous.”

“A real gentleman wouldn’t go through girlfriends like that!”

“Now, now... Calm down, Kin-chan.”

Koutarou, smiling wryly, put his hands on the excited Kotori’s shoulders and kept her from leaning too far forward. It was rare for her to get this worked up over something, but that was just a sign of how serious this was to her.

“But I can’t calm down! I can’t stand the idea that I have some rogue ladykiller for a brother...”

“Same.”

“Theia!”

“Sorry. It just slipped.”

“Kin-chan, Mackenzie’s smart, right?”

“Well, yes...”

“He can’t help seeing girls for who they are—for better or worse. It just takes a little time to get to know someone.”

“That’s...”

That was something Kotori hadn’t considered. All she knew was that Kenji had

been going from girl to girl one after the other. She hadn't exactly stopped to think about why. She'd automatically assumed that he was the problem, not the girls he was dating.

"And he's popular, you know? Unlike a completely average guy like me, girls flock to him. Unfortunately, those girls don't always have the best intentions."

"But that doesn't make it okay for him to go after every girl he sees!"

"Well, this is where you guys have two different takes on the matter. Fundamentally, you're on the same page, and that's what I want you to know. But what you do with that knowledge is up to you."

There, Kotori fell silent and began thinking about what Koutarou said. He saw this from a completely different perspective, and it was hard for her to get her head around at first. Her heart was still a mess. And seeing her like that, Koutarou realized that it would still take some time before she could forgive Kenji.

"Then... have you ever had a girlfriend, Kou-niisan?"

Unable to find her own answer, Kotori turned to Koutarou. She thought of him as her second brother, so his input and perspective were valuable to her.

"No, but I do have several girls in my life that I cherish dearly."

At that, Theia and Ruth both looked over at Koutarou. They were quite interested in what he would say next.

"So... what are you going to do?"

"I can't say yet, but I want to do whatever it takes to make sure they're all happy in the future."

Upon hearing that, Theia and Ruth went back to what they were doing. Ruth poured up some fresh tea, and she and Theia drank it in silence. It was quite good, and she saw no need whatsoever to intervene.

"Those girls... They love me for who I am, good and bad. You know how important that is, don't you, Kin-chan?"

"Yes, I do."

Kotori nodded firmly. She knew what Koutarou's family situation was like. Kenji had talked with her about it several times. She was glad to hear that he'd finally found a way to let love into his heart.

"Sorry, that's probably not going to be of much use to you."

"No, it's a big help."

"Really? I'm glad."

Koutarou's answer hadn't been what Kotori was looking for, but it did point her in the right direction. The happiness of the people you love... She would try thinking over her dilemma with Kenji one more time using that as her compass.

After consulting with Koutarou, Kotori left room 106 to ponder things over. Nalfa remained behind, however. There was something she too wanted to talk with Koutarou about. She was worried about her friend, of course, but it would be more convenient if Kotori weren't here for this.

"Actually, Koutarou-sama, I sent the footage I took during the entrance ceremony back home and had my brother upload it to the pan-galactic network, and... Well, it's become quite popular."

After Kotori left, Nalfa pulled out her camera. She'd respectfully put it away while Kotori was having her heart-to-heart with Koutarou.

"Oh? What was it?"

"It was just some simple footage of life in Japan, and um... you and Princess Theia playing that 'look over there' game."

Nalfa had edited the footage together into a series of short videos and uploaded them to the net as "Nalfa Laren's Japan Chronicles." Technically, her brother had been the one to upload them for her, but there were three in total. One was a video introducing Japan at large, the second a video introducing Kisshouharukaze High School, and the third was the video of Koutarou and Theia playing.

Since this was Forthorthe's first real peak into the homeland of the Blue Knight, they'd racked up an insane amount of views within minutes of being

uploaded. They went viral almost instantly. The most popular of the videos was the one of Koutarou and Theia playing, which documented their chemistry together. People went nuts for it. Theia and Koutarou's noble princess-and-knight relationship became widely known throughout Forthorthe during the civil war, so people were absolutely smitten to see how cute they were with each other behind closed doors. There was keyboard smashing all throughout the nation, demanding more candid footage of the golden princess and the Blue Knight. Servers were crashing left and right between all the page refreshes and the comments.

And so, in short, Nalfa's debut as a filmmaker was a smash success.

"That's amazing. You're probably as famous as your brother now."

"I'd expect at least that much with Koutarou and me as your subjects."

"Heehee, I think that's got a lot to do with it. All the attention is on Your Excellency and Your Highness, after all. Not me."

It probably wouldn't have mattered who filmed it. That was just how much attention the couple—the Blue Knight in particular—attracted. Everyone wanted to see more of him and this strange world he was from. And if the princess was there, all the better. Essentially, the timely release and the content of Nalfa's videos was what had made them so popular, not her skills as a filmmaker.

"But I'm going to make sure that they'll be singing my praise someday!"

"That's the spirit! You may continue to film every day, then!"

"But... Try and be careful when you do, okay?"

"Yes, I'll do my best!"

Nalfa couldn't celebrate her success just yet. She knew that people were watching her videos for who was in them rather than who had filmed them. That's what she suspected, and her brother had cautioned her as much. But rather than getting a big head over it, Nalfa was more motivated than ever. She wanted people to praise her for her talents and be known as far and wide as her brother. This was only the first step. Until her skills were where they needed to be, she'd have to settle for being quick enough to pick the right

subject. It was a fine start.

Nalfa decided to go home just after 5PM. There was about an hour of daylight left, and she was planning on returning to the dorm before sundown.

“Thank you for having me today,” said Nalfa.

“Take care on your way home,” replied Koutarou.

“Be well... No, I should say see you tomorrow,” added Theia.

“Thank you very much. I’m looking forward to it,” said Nalfa.

“Nalfa-chan, I’ll walk you as far as the school.”

“Yurika, where are you going?”

“To my part-time job.”

“Oh, the one you mentioned getting the other day?”

“Yes. It’s about time for me to get going, so I figured I could walk with Nalfa-chan.”

Yurika was essentially offering to be her escort. The black suits with the Sun Rangers were on constant detail, but having Yurika with her was just an extra dose of reassurance. Yurika was Yurika, but she was also an archwizard of Rainbow Heart. It certainly made Koutarou feel better.

“Okay. I’m counting on you, Yurika.”

“Okay! Let’s go, Nalfa-chan.”

“Thank you kindly!”

And so the two girls left room 106 together. Nalfa was headed for the newly-built dormitory on campus, and Yurika’s destination was a warehouse on the outskirts of the city not too far beyond the school. They walked there via the usual route, which felt somewhat funny with their shadows trailing in the opposite direction from normal.

“Um, Yurika-san...”

“Yeah?”

“You’re a part of Koutarou-sama’s band of knights too, right?”

“That’s right. Though it’s kind of like a temporary assignment...”

With nothing else to do, the two began chatting along the way. Nalfa was quite curious about Yurika, who was one of Koutarou’s companions. She’d only seen bits and pieces of her in press footage from Forthorthe, so this was a great opportunity to get the real scoop.

“So are you strong too, Yurika-san?”

“Um...”

Yurika quickly began filtering through possible answers, what she could say and what she shouldn’t. She pondered it carefully and chose her words accordingly.

“I’m not as strong as everyone else, but I wouldn’t lose to a normal person.”

“What’s your specialty? Do you fight with guns? Or maybe with a sword and shield like a knight?”

“I, uh... I’m good with acid and poison.”

Since she couldn’t freely say that she was skilled with magic, Yurika answered to the best of her ability.

“That’s quite a surprise. I never would have guessed just looking at you, Yurika-san.”

Of course, Nalfa had no idea that Yurika was talking about spells. She figured that Yurika was specialized in chemical and biological weapons, which would have all kinds of applications in modern warfare. Her keen journalist of a brother likely would have felt something was off, but Nalfa was only a budding filmmaker. She didn’t doubt Yurika in the slightest.

“I know, right?! Frankly, I don’t even like it, but Satomi-san and the others keep telling me to put the guys on the other side of the wall to sleep and things like that. I’d much rather be fighting in a cuter way!”

“Well, it’s rare for people to actually be good at the things they want to do.”

“But you’re good at what you want to do, right, Nalfa-chan?”

“Not really. After all, Koutarou-sama is always getting angry with me.”

“So things aren’t going my way... or yours, huh?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Yurika and Nalfa continued chatting away as they made their way towards the school. Since it was a private conversation, Nalfa wasn’t recording with her camera, but she was still having fun. The two hapless girls had a lot in common and got along quite well.

Yurika’s part-time job was at a small warehouse at the edge of town. The trading firm next door was her employer proper, but the actual jobsite would be the warehouse. She was responsible for bringing packages in and out of the facility, watching over it to make sure no unauthorized people entered, and basic cleaning. On occasion, she’d also be called over to the trading firm headquarters for cleaning and other odd jobs as the ad had promised.

“Yuria-chan, could I get some tea?”

“Will three cups be enough?”

“That’d be great.”

“Coming right up!”

At work, Yurika went by the alias “Towano Yuria.” It was a fake name Rainbow Heart had given her to use when she needed it. Worried that such a well-paying job would be suspicious, she hadn’t wanted to give her employer any real information about herself. She was also using magic to disguise and protect herself. She didn’t want to take any chances.

“Here’s your tea!”

“Thank you, Yuria-chan.”

“Oh, Yuria-chan, can you organize the warehouse when you’re free? Some new goods will be coming in tonight.”

“Yes, leave it to me.”

Fortunately, it turned out to be a proper job. The pay and work were exactly

as advertised. The older men at the workplace were all kind of scary-looking and intimidating, but they weren't causing any trouble. And thankfully, because Yurika had matured over the past two years and actually come to learn her way around basic chores, she managed to get by without making any major blunders or embarrassing herself. In short, things were going swimmingly. She was even starting to think she could dismiss her spells soon.

"Now for cleaning..."

Yurika casually made her way over to the warehouse. The trading firm wasn't all that big, and their warehouse reflected that. She needed to get it organized quickly, or else there wouldn't be anywhere to put the next load. Sometimes more than one shipment even came on the same day.

"This one rattles, so it goes in the back."

Yurika loaded the cardboard boxes by the metallic shutter onto her hand truck and wheeled them to the back of the warehouse. All told, there were three kinds of boxes: boxes that sounded like they had hard things rubbing against each other inside of them, heavy boxes that felt like they were chock-full of powder, and boxes that gave off a metallic rattling, which were incidentally also heavy. With only those three clearly distinct types, not even Yurika could get them mixed up. She was even doing a good job, quite unlike the time she'd been tasked with loading goods onto Blue Knight. Overall, it seemed like she'd found the perfect job for her.

"This is great. Yeah, being able to do a hard day's work and earn a boatload of cash for it is pretty great."

Aside from some initial screw-ups on her first day, it had been smooth sailing. Yurika felt like she was making real progress, and she was quite satisfied with this arrangement. Particularly the pay. She'd be getting yet another envelope stuffed with 20,000 yen inside of it when she headed home tonight too. She was actually starting to wish it wasn't just a short-term job.

The Sun Rangers noticed something was off early the next morning. An unidentified signal, clearly not from any of Nalfa's belongings, was being broadcast from inside her room.

“We intercepted the signal,” explained Kenichi, “and it appears to be a bug.”

“And that’s why you called us, huh?” replied Koutarou.

The back of the dorm office was one of the Sun Ranger’s secret bases. They’d set up there so they could keep close tabs on the dorm where Nalfa would be staying. Right now, it was also where the Sun Rangers and Koutarou were meeting. He’d brought Kiriha, Ruth, Maki, and Clan with him—all the girls that specialized in information gathering and intelligence.

“Yes. Nalfa-san will be leaving for school soon. And when she does, we would like to investigate her room, but we figured that it would be safer to do so with your help.”

“A wise decision,” said Clan, nodding as she adjusted her glasses. “We don’t yet know which faction is responsible for the wiretap.”

Listening devices were problematic by nature. All removing them would do was prevent eavesdropping. It wouldn’t tell Koutarou and the others who had set them up or what they wanted, and that would make it impossible to prevent further incidents. They’d be in even more trouble if it wasn’t a standard wiretap, too. If it were magical, spiritual, or Forthorthian, that would mean the culprits were even more advanced than Koutarou and the others had thought, which would mean having to take additional precautions in the future. And that was why the Sun Rangers had wasted no time calling for backup.

“Kiriha-san, what do you think we should start by doing?” Koutarou asked.

“Let’s investigate Nalfa’s room like Kenichi-dono suggested. The top priority is ascertaining what level of technology we’re dealing with. We shouldn’t be trying to remove it just yet.”

The Sun Rangers had intercepted a signal, but that didn’t necessarily mean the device wasn’t magical, for example. The signal could be an auxiliary component, or even just a red herring. Kiriha thought they needed to stay on their toes and conduct a thorough investigation.

“Wait, you don’t think we should get rid of it if we find it?”

“Satomi-kun, if I might put my dark past to use here,” interjected Maki, “listening devices can be as useful as they are hurtful. If the wiretap stays in

place, whoever installed it will believe it's gone undiscovered, giving us an opportunity to use that to our advantage."

"That's right," added Kiriha. "It would make it quite easy to pass along fake information, for example."

"I see. So you're planning on misleading the enemy down the line, Kiriha-sama?"

"That's right. With Clan-dono's help, it should be simple."

"So you want me to cut into the signal?"

"If possible."

Removing the wiretap alone wouldn't fix the problem. Someone could simply try and spy on the room another way. So instead, some deception was in order. The ideal scenario would be to create an entirely fake audio to feed the device. That way, Nalfa's privacy would be protected and the enemy would think everything was working as normal. But even if that was too much to ask for, they could use the wiretap to feed the enemy false intelligence and flush them out. They could always remove the wiretap later.

"So where do we start?" asked Koutarou.

"This is where we shine, ho! We'll work together with Clan-chan, ho!"

"It's finally time for the mana sensor that we developed with Maki-chan to see the light of day, ho!"

The haniwas on top of Koutarou's head put on something reminisce of ski goggles. Inside of them were crystals that vibrated when they encountered mana, and by monitoring that vibration with precise lasers, it was possible to detect even miniscule amounts of mana. It wasn't as accurate as Maki's mana sense, but it was certainly good enough for a preliminary investigation. The haniwas could already detect electromagnetism and spiritual energy on their own. They had plenty of defensive capabilities, and Clan for backup, too. That's why they were being sent in to clear the room first.

"That's fine and all... but why have you two taken to using my head as a nest lately?"

“Just for a change of pace, ho! To get some new headspace, ho, ho!”

“We’re one with you, Big Brother! Ho!”

“I don’t get it at all, but we’re counting on you guys.”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

“We’re off, ho!”

The haniwas floated in front of Koutarou and proudly saluted. It was hard to get a read on their expressions, but Koutarou thought they seemed especially motivated. It wasn’t like anything had happened between them, but he decided not to complain about them riding on his head.

The haniwas had superior cloaking abilities in stealth mode, which had two classes. The first made them invisible and nullified the electromagnetic radiation and heat they emitted. The second concealed their spiritual energy on top of that.

“Class II Stealth Mode activated, ho!”

“All operations normal, ho! No interference to report with the mana sensor, ho!”

The two haniwas activated their higher-class stealth function and crept closer to Nalfa’s room. Flight pumped out a considerable amount of spiritual energy, so they couldn’t use it in Class II stealth and were currently earthbound. To make up for that, they bounced along as quietly as they could.

“We’ve made it to her door, ho!”

“We can’t sense anything like an active sensor yet, ho!”

The haniwas hadn’t detected any wiretaps or cameras on their way over from the stairwell. The brand new dormitory at Kisshouharukaze High School was built all according to the standard conventions of Earthling construction. It wasn’t particularly remarkable, and looked much like any other dorm building would. The hallways would be high-traffic areas once more students were living there, so anything like a bug or camera would likely be noticed. The culprits had probably bypassed such communal areas altogether, which was why the

haniwas hadn’t found anything so far.

“That’s convenient. Pardomshiha, please move the unmanned fighters up to the front door.”

“As you wish.”

If the hallway was safe, the small unmanned fighters could be moved closer without risk, and Ruth swiftly repositioned them according to Clan’s instructions. Their goal, of course, was to gather additional data.

“We’ll be fine on our own, ho!”

“You can send those back, ho!”

“Heh, don’t be like that. We humans are cowardly creatures.”

“If Ane-san wants them here, then I do too, ho!”

“We’ll get along nice with the other robots, ho!”

When the unmanned fighters got close, their cameras spotted the haniwas. The haniwas were atop an empty cardboard box they’d brought with them. Korama was on Karama’s shoulders, slowly opening the door to the room with a spare key.

Ka-chak!

The haniwas were being careful to be quiet, but there was no helping the sound the lock made when it was undone. Both haniwas froze nervously in a cold sweat on the spot when they heard it. It would be a good half a minute or so before they finally dared to move again.

“We’re now infiltrating Nalfa-chan’s room, ho!”

“It feels like we’re the bad guys, ho!”

Korama carefully twisted the doorknob while Karama gently pushed on the door. They were working together to keep noise to a minimum, and made their way silently inside like experienced cat burglars. They propped the door open with a rubber stop, and slowly proceeded further in.

“As expected, it doesn’t look like there’s a device observing the door, ho!”

“It doesn’t look like there’s a point in going that far, ho!”

The haniwas kept a vigilant eye out as they climbed up the single step at the entrance and entered the dorm room proper. They scanned it with their sensors, looking for any signals other than what the Sun Rangers had detected, be it mana, spiritual energy, or gravitational waves. They were looking for anything that might be used for communication, so lasers and other methods were included in their search too.

“There are two hidden cameras and two wiretaps, all four of which seem to be transmitting via electromagnetic radiation, ho!”

“There are no signs of mana, spiritual energy, or gravitational waves, ho! The sound and laser sensors haven’t found anything either, ho!”

“Phew... It seems like it’s just your standard Earthling technology, then.”

Clan let out a small sigh of relief. Fortunately enough, nothing in the room was that remarkable. There was no sign that their enemies had any special technology at their disposal, which meant that Koutarou and the others had been overly cautious.

“That said, this is a problem in itself. I know it’s just four devices, but when did they manage to sneak even those in? It was only decided that Nalfa-san would be living here after the entrance ceremony...” remarked Kenichi with a deeply furrowed brow.

The dormitory’s security was top notch. They’d detected the wiretaps the moment they started transmitting, and they had their own cameras set up around the building. It was hard to believe that someone had gotten past all those and managed to sneak into Nalfa’s room.

“The difficulty of infiltrating the dorm and the level of technology used here don’t match up. That must mean these devices weren’t installed recently. They were probably put here during construction,” said Kiriha.

Her thought was simple. The listening devices and cameras in question were installed before security was put in place, and had only recently been activated. In other words, the culprit hadn’t managed to slip past the building’s security at all. They’d made their move before it was ever in place, which was why they

hadn’t needed any special technology.

“Kenichi-dono, like you said it was only decided that Nalfa would live here after the entrance ceremony, so rather than waiting to come after one room specifically, it’s safe to assume they preemptively installed devices in every room.”

“Ah, so that must be why there’s only four devices here!”

“That’s right. Without knowing where they really needed to focus, they had to spread their resources thin.”

Nalfa had personally chosen her room after the entrance ceremony, so there was no conceivable way that anyone had predicted where she’d be staying. It was far more logical to assume that the culprits had simply cast a wide net to cover all their bases.

“Kenichi-dono, either someone from the construction company that built the dormitory is colluding with a spy, or we’re faced with the possibility that the construction company itself was responsible. I’d also like you to go through the surveillance cameras on campus. They might have caught whoever activated the devices in Nalfa’s room.”

“That’s Black Rose-san for you! I’ll get on it right away!”

Even if there were only four devices in each room, it would have taken a considerable amount of time to install them all in every room. The construction site for the dorm had been heavily restricted, so there was only a short list of people who’d had access to it. Moreover, the devices in Nalfa’s room had been activated sometime last night. Even if it was done wirelessly, whoever was responsible for doing it still would’ve had to confirm which room she was in. That meant chances were high someone was nearby when they did it, and might have been caught on camera. Between those two leads, Koutarou and the others would hopefully be able to narrow down their suspect pool.

“Too bad for our villains. Any naivety will leave them fully prey to Kii’s sharp mind,” smirked Clan.

“...”

“What’s with that face, Veltlion? I bet you’re thinking of teasing me and

comparing me to some villain, aren't you?!"

"Why, Your Highness simply looks lovely today. I, your humble subject, was merely admiring you."

"I won't fall for that kind of sweet talk! I know what you were really thinking!"

The Sun Rangers were able to identify the culprit a few hours after that using the methods Kiriha had suggested. The information they obtained would be delivered to Koutarou and the others shortly after school.

Mysterious Dealings

Thursday, April 14th

The Sun Rangers sent their suits to work after their meeting with Koutarou that morning. Collectively, they came up with a list of several potential suspects based on Kiriha's criteria. As it turned out, there were quite a few people who had accessed the construction site after hours, and the suits contacted each of them about why. The majority were just workers putting in some overtime to try and make up for various delays in the construction schedule. Said delays and the workers' timecards were all well documented, so everything seemed to check out there. But there were a handful of people who seemed to have less valid reasons for showing up to the construction site after hours—the interior decorating team.

"Yeah, that's suspicious. By pretending to be interior decorators, they could have installed devices in any room they wanted," remarked Koutarou upon hearing this.

"Moreover, it looks like the companies they work for are just dummy corporations," added Kiriha.

The interior decorators in question came from four different subcontractors, which were all really just dummy corporations puppeted by three trading firms. The Sun Rangers couldn't check out all three of them alone, so they'd called on Koutarou and the others for help in the investigation. The team consisted of the same group they'd met with that morning: Koutarou, Kiriha, Maki, Clan, and Ruth.

They'd gone to work straight away and had just arrived at the headquarters of the firm they'd been asked to look into.

"A trading firm?" asked Maki. "Even though they're supposed to be hiring out interior decorators?"

Maki was currently peeking out from cover, surveying the trading firm in

question. With the sun starting to set, the headquarters and the property it was sitting on were steeped in shadows. It only made the place look even more creepy.

“That’s not their only deception,” explained Kiriha. “It seems the entire operation is a front for a criminal organization. Their primary dealings are with firearms, drugs, and the like.”

“And now they want to add Forthorthian technology to that list?”

“In short, they’re really like an underworld trading firm.”

Maki peeked at the building again. A criminal organization would surely have access to listening devices and spy cameras. And by using their connections with the construction industry, they were trying to get their hands on Forthorthian technology through Nalfa. From there, they would sell it, making a tidy profit and spreading chaos throughout the world. Maki wasn’t just here because Koutarou wanted her to be. She personally wanted to put a stop to this.

“So should we assume that we’re going in to collect evidence of their misdeeds, Master?”

Laws had already been put into effect regarding Forthorthe’s proprietary technology, making it illegal for anyone to try and obtain it through anything but the proper channels. There was no way that the trading firm didn’t know what they were doing was illicit, so if Koutarou and the girls went through the front door and announced they were searching the place, there was a good risk of evidence being destroyed before they could get to it. It was a common trick for the president to have an emergency button in their office that would wipe all of the computers, for example. So in order to avoid anything like that, Koutarou and the girls would be taking a stealth approach.

“That’s right, Ruth-san. We’ll really be counting on you here.”

“Of course, Master. Please leave it to me.”

“Clan, I’m counting on you too.”

“You’re being awfully nice today.”

“I can tease you later if you do a bad job.”

“Ugh... You don’t have to worry about that.”

And so Koutarou and the girls continued to keep watch over the building and the surrounding area. It was still too early to sneak in. They’d be waiting until the sun fully set and most of the employees left before making their move.

At 8PM, there was some suspicious movement at the trading firm. Three cars pulled up to the office entrance, and three buff men got into each one. It looked like they were going somewhere.

“Clan.”

“I know.”

Clan was already on it by the time Koutarou nudged her. She called three small unmanned fighters from her ship, one to tail each of the cars. Figuring out where they were going was only tangential to what they’d come here for, but it was still a point of interest. Clan finished giving her drones instructions just as the three cars started to pull off...

“Look after the place while we’re gone, Yuria-chan.”

“Okay! Have a nice night!”

...leaving behind a lone girl energetically waving at them as they left. When Koutarou and the others saw her, they were stunned.

“That idiot! What is she thinking?!” exclaimed Koutarou.

“Y-Yurika?! Why is an archwizard of Rainbow Heart at a yakuza front?!” gasped Maki.

And indeed, the girl standing in front of the headquarters was Yurika. Moreover, she was wearing a black suit and shades like the buff men who’d just driven off. She looked just like a yakuza, albeit a somewhat comical one. Koutarou and Maki had been the ones to express their surprise with words, but Clan and Ruth looked equally shocked. The ever-composed Kiriha was comparatively calm, but even she was somewhat taken aback.

“...It would seem this is where she’s been working,” she commented.

“Hahh, I knew she was a bit of an odd one, but to think it was this bad...” sighed Clan.

“Could it be that Yurika-sama hasn’t realized she’s working for yakuza?” asked Ruth.

Encountering Yurika here was such an unexpected turn of events that everyone’s train of thought was well derailed for a good half a minute or so. But they all suddenly snapped backed to reality when it looked like Yurika was about to head back inside, and Koutarou quickly dialed her up.



Vrrring! Vrrring!

“Hello?”

“Yurika!”

“Oh, Satomi-san? Is something wrong?”

Yurika stopped with her hand on the door, and her voice coming through the phone conveyed no sense of danger or urgency.

“I’m still at work, so please keep it short.”

It was a perfectly proper response considering she was still on the clock. Koutarou knew that, but somehow that only irritated him even more. And that was reflected in his tone.

“Yurika, turn around and walk straight forward right this instant.”

“Excuse me?”

“Just do what I say!”

“Okay...”

Yurika had no idea what Koutarou was really asking her to do, but she obediently followed his instructions. She immediately spun around in place and began walking like she was told.

“Yurika, over here!”

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

Koutarou called out to her when she got closer, and Yurika responded by shouting back and waving. Of course, that was the opposite of what Koutarou wanted.

“Not so loud! Just get over here!”

“Okay...”

Yurika scratched her head repeatedly while making her way over to the group. She didn’t know why Koutarou and the others were at her place of work, or why he wanted her to be quiet.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

“What? Well, I’m working.”

She also had no idea why she was suddenly getting scolded. She thought she was doing good for herself to get a part-time job and be making her own money, so she was lost as to how this was getting turned around on her.

“Listen to me carefully, Yurika. Bad men work here.”

“Nuh-uh! Everyone here is really nice to me. They pay me well too, and the work isn’t all that hard.”

“This is a yakuza front. They’re running a ‘business’ here to cover up their *real* business. And with what we know right now, that business at least includes wiretapping Nalfa’s dorm room. That’s why we came to investigate, so imagine our surprise to find you here.”

“Whaaaaat?!”

Even the simple Yurika could understand what was going on when Koutarou put it that plainly. She knew Koutarou wouldn’t lie to her about something serious like this. And putting two and two together, she realized what she’d done. Though inadvertently, Yurika had become an evil underling.

“R-Really? A-Are you already sure?”

“We’re here to confirm it.”

“There are three companies on our suspect list,” explained Theia. “Any one of them—possibly all three of them—are involved. Including the company you’re working for.”

“But that means you don’t know 100 percent sure that they’re involved yet, right?! The Fifth, the young master, the collector, the gambler, Shima-san... They’re all good people! They’ve all been so kind to me! It must be the other two companies that are the bad ones!”

“I hope so, Yurika. I sure hope so...”

The names that Yurika so casually rattled off only made Koutarou and the others doubt this place even more, but they chose not to argue with her. They simply kept quiet as they began their investigation with Yurika now in tow.

The first order of business was checking out the warehouse that Yurika was in charge of organizing. Now that it was after hours, it was highly unlikely that anybody else would walk in on them while they investigated. It seemed like a good place to start.

“What have you been doing here anyway?”

“I sort the goods that come in. The rattling boxes go in the very back, the swishing ones go in the middle, and the clattering ones in front of everything else.”

“What the heck is that all about?”

“I don’t know what’s inside, but you can tell the difference between them by the sounds they make.”

Yurika guided the group to the back of the warehouse, where, as she’d said, the boxes were all neatly sorted and stacked.

“Karama, Korama.”

“We’re on it, Ane-san! Ho!”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

“I’ll help too.”

The haniwas and Clan approached the boxes, their tools at the ready. The haniwas surveyed them with their sensors, while Clan had a drone scan them.

“How does it look?”

“The rattling boxes are full of guns, ho!”

“The swishing ones are filled with pre-processed illegal drugs, ho!”

“And the clattering ones are stuffed with electronics. Specifically with devices that the Japanese government restricts... Oh, and listening devices and spy cameras.”

“Nuuuuu!”

Upon learning the content of the packages she’d been handling, Yurika broke down in tears. The shock was just too much for her.

“Hnnngh, Satomi-san... I really was an evil underling all along...”

“Calm down, Yurika. You didn’t know. You just got dragged into all this.”

“But, but, but... I’m an archwizard of Rainbow Heart and I’ve been helping bad men smuggle guns and drugs, not to mention commit space crimes against the transfer student... Waaah!”

Being betrayed by people you trusted was never easy, but it was a sad fact of life. It happened all the time. What truly shook Yurika to the core was that she’d betrayed her title as a magical girl. It was unintentional, certainly, but she was quite sure that Nana never would have done something like this. Moreover, there was the fact that it had only taken 20,000 yen a day to blind her.

“Satomi-san, I’m—hic—a failure as a magical girl, aren’t I...?”

“If you keep crying like that, probably.”

“Are you—hic—angry, Satomi-san?”

“If you keep crying like that, I will be.”

“Do you think—hic—I can make up for my failure if I try...?”

“Who knows? But the important part is that you try. I think that’s what a real magical girl would do.”

“!”

Yurika had collapsed into a puddle of tears, but upon hearing Koutarou say that, she suddenly sprung up from the ground and wiped her eyes. She’d remembered that she had people she couldn’t betray. She couldn’t betray their faith in her.

“Then I’ll try my best!”

“That’s the spirit.”

“Okay then! This way please, everyone! I’ll guide you to the office!”

There, Yurika took charge and began leading the others. She was like a completely different Yurika than the one who’d been crying on the floor just moments ago.

“I see you’ve continued to mature, Satomi Koutarou.”

Kiriha moved over next to Koutarou, trailing a little bit behind the others. There was a remarkably gentle smile on her face.

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Lately... you’ve been trying to close the distance between us as best as you can without forcing yourself. That makes me really happy.”

“It’s not like that this time... I just didn’t want her crying.”

“‘This time,’ huh? Heehee...”

Keeping Yurika from crying took priority over everything else, but otherwise, Kiriha was right on the money. Hearing that made her smile even brighter.

“Would you mind not being so observant, Kiriha-san? You’re making me self-conscious.”

“Then let me ask you something different... Did you not want Yurika crying just because she’s Yurika?”

A glimmer of seriousness flashed in Kiriha’s eyes. This was an important question to her. Koutarou fell silent for a moment as he contemplated his answer.

“No. I think I would have done the same if it had been you, or anyone else for that matter.”

“I see.”

The glimmer in Kiriha’s eye faded into a gentle, soft light. It was subtle enough that Koutarou hadn’t even noticed, but Kiriha was okay with that.

“Then I need to find something to fail at so you’ll comfort me like that too.”

“Hey now...”

“Heeheehee...”

Kiriha grabbed hold of Koutarou’s arm and embraced it. It was almost the exact same gesture as when she was teasing him in front of Kenji, but it seemed completely different now. Koutarou couldn’t help but wonder why.

“Say, Kiriha-san...”

“Hmm?”

“...It’s nothing. Never mind.”

“If you say so. Let’s go after Yurika, then.”

“Yeah.”

Koutarou wanted to ask Kiriha what the difference really was, but felt like she would only sidestep the question. In the end, he knew it was something he had to figure out for himself. And best of all, if he kept his mouth shut, he’d be able to see that special beaming smile on Kiriha’s face for a little while longer.

Apart from Yurika, there were only two employees left at the office. Of course, calling them “employees” was somewhat misleading; they were really yakuza. They were currently sipping on beers and watching the ball game on TV, which made them easy targets for Maki.

“Deep Sleep. Modifier: Multiple Targets.”

She cast a powerful sleep spell that would keep them out cold for a couple of hours or until she undid the spell, whichever came first. And with them out of the way, Koutarou and the others could take their time investigating.

“Looks like we’re all set here...”

The two men slowly leaned back on the sofa and fell into a deep, deep sleep. The empty beer cans they were holding clinked against the floor when they dropped them, but not even that showed any sign of waking them. Maki’s spell was working flawlessly.

“Thanks, Aika-san.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“All right, everyone, time to put gloves on. We don’t want to leave behind any evidence that we were here,” instructed Koutarou.

“Yurika, those men who left earlier... Where were they going?” asked Maki.

“Um, I think the Fifth said that he had some important business to attend to tonight.”

“Important business, hmm?” Kiriha mused.

She then approached a large desk in the back of the room, conspicuously decorated with the yakuza gang’s crest on the wall behind it. It was clearly the boss’ desk—the man that Yurika had called the Fifth.

“Clan-dono, could you examine this computer?”

“Leave it to me.”

Kiriha left the technological side of things while she investigated a certain something sitting out on the desk. Since trying to get their hands on Forthorthian technology would be an extremely important and sensitive matter, Kiriha couldn’t imagine that the boss would have left it to his underlings. The risks and responsibilities were just too great. That’s why she was sure the boss would be handling it himself.

“As we suspected, it seems this firm really is involved with the wiretapping.”

What had gotten Kiriha’s attention was a rough sketch of Nalfa’s dorm room. It contained circles showing the effective range of the spy devices, and calculations on necessary relays.

“Kii, I found a suspicious email.”

It didn’t take long for Clan to hack into the computer. The poorly maintained security that a criminal organization relied on was nothing more than child’s play to her. She was already into the email client and going through the recent mail. It was there she’d found something suspicious—an odd exchange with an unknown party.

“It looks like there are two deals going down tonight. The first is a drugs, but the second one is the real problem. This pretty explicitly references the purchase of Forthorthian devices.”

“What?!”

Kiriha was quite shocked and it was written all over her face. Surely that couldn’t be right. No, that shouldn’t even be possible. Right now, the Forthorthian fleet that Theia had come to Earth with was locked in orbit around the planet. No one should have been able to descend to Earth without them

noticing. Kiriha couldn't even imagine any other way Forthorthian weapons or tech had been brought to the surface, leaving her rightly staggered at this news.

"That must mean the drug deal beforehand is to secure funds..."

Even simple Forthorthian devices would fetch incredible sums. It was a seller's market, and anyone who had them could set whatever price they wanted. Surely the boss had gone to pad his wallet before the exchange.

"But that strikes me as strange too, Kii. Why would someone from Forthorthe want Earth currency...?"

Clan had a good point. Exactly how this unknown party had gotten their hands on Forthorthian technology was a big enough question as it was, but they also wanted to be paid in Japanese yen? It was starting to sound more and more like the yakuza had fallen for a scam, but the mere possibility that this was all real was far too alarming to ignore.

"What should we do, Master?"

"Let's leave investigating the rest of this place to the Sun Rangers while we go check out this deal."

Koutarou decided their top priority should be stopping a potential arms deal. If it ended up being a scam, that would be fine. They'd all be able to breathe a sigh of relief if that were the case. But if Forthorthian technology was actually about to change hands, that needed to be stopped. And right now, Koutarou and the girls were the only ones who stood a chance of doing anything about it. If this unknown party really had access to Forthorthian technology, then they likely had that or better to protect themselves.

Since it had come to this, Koutarou gathered all the invaders in room 106. Considering the seriousness of the situation, he needed everyone on board. They were potentially going up against well-equipped Forthorthians, after all.

"Yurika, Yurika, I heard you became an evil underling. Isn't that, like, super bad for a magical girl of love and justice?" asked Sanae.

"Aauuugh... S-Satomi-san, am I going to get arrested too?" Yurika asked Koutarou with teary eyes.

“Who knows? You were being tricked, so surely they’ll go easy on you,” he replied.

“Y-Yeah, that’s right!” she rallied.

“Collecting money from credit card scams like they had you doing at first might get you in trouble. I wonder if the police would actually buy that you’re completely innocent and were just being taken advantage of...?” mused Clan.

“I’d say you’re lucky that things turned out this way, Yurika. It looks like one of the conditions for the job was living on your own, so who knows what they might have done to silence you if it came to that...?” mused Maki in turn.

“Clan-san, Maki-chan, please stop saying scary things like that!” Yurika pleaded.

Now that everyone was back together, the tension in the room eased up a little. Koutarou was glad to see everyone so happy, so he decided to hold off on further instructions until they reached their destination.

As for that destination, Koutarou and company were now making their way to the exchange point where the deal would go down. They were being driven there in vans with the help of some suits sent by the Sun Rangers, primarily because they knew they would stand out a lot less in an Earth vehicle rather than a Forthorthian one.

At present, the group was split evenly between the two vans. The first contained Koutarou, Yurika, Sanae, Maki, and Clan; and Harumi, Shizuka, Ruth, Theia, and Kiriha were riding in the second. But even though they were in different vans, they were still connected via the comms system.

“Well, *we* know that Yurika isn’t a villain, but who knows what the police will think?” pondered Theia out loud.

“Yurika-chan, I think you should do your best to earn some brownie points in resolving this,” suggested Shizuka. “I’m sure that’ll help make the right impression.”

“You’re all so meeean! Why do you keep talking like I’m in trouble?!”

Morale was high. Except for when it came to poor Yurika, who still reckoning

with her brief stint as an underling. She had no idea what was going to happen to her after this, and that was a great source of anxiety for her. Seeing this, Harumi called out to her.

“Heehee, you don’t have to worry, Yurika-san. Calm down and look around you. Satomi-kun is wearing the same expression as always, right?”

“Um, yes... I think so...”

“If you actually were in trouble, would Satomi-kun really be looking like that right now?”

“Ah...”

If Yurika were genuinely in serious trouble, there was no way the devoted Koutarou would be taking all of this so casually. In other words, he didn’t think for a second that Yurika was really going to be arrested. The same went for everyone else. They were just having a little fun teasing her, which was something they wouldn’t have been doing at all if she were in over her head. And it wasn’t until the kind Harumi said something about it that Yurika realized that.

“So, Kiriha-sama... If Yurika-sama really did get arrested, what do you think Master would do?”

“Knowing Koutarou, he would put the law and all logic aside. Undoubtedly, he would want to rescue her.”

“W-Would you really, Satomi-san...?”

Hearing what Kiriha said, Yurika turned to Koutarou. She was dying to know if that was the truth.

“No way. I’m not cleaning up after you. You’re on your own, because I’m not coming to save you.”

Koutarou answered her with a bitter remark, but looked away when he said it. He hadn’t been in a bad mood before this, however, which told Yurika what was really going through his head.

“You can’t do something so dangerous for my sake, Satomi-san...”

Tears welled up in her eyes. Yes, she knew what this really meant. Koutarou

wouldn’t abandon her no matter what. Needless to say, they were tears of joy.

“I just said I wasn’t gonna save you.”

“Yeah, of course... Heehee...”

Joy, relief, trust, love... Her eyes radiated all kinds of emotion. Embarrassed by it all, Koutarou looked away again.

“A-All right, everyone! Time to get into gear! We’re almost there!”

“Okaaay!”

Of course, the girls all saw through him. As such, their smiles didn’t fade in the slightest, even when he was trying to get serious. A trusting, loving light was shining in their eyes too. Really, the odds were against Koutarou here. It would be a long ride.

Koutarou and the girls got out of the vans on the side of a road lined with tree cover. They were still some distance away from their destination, but they thought it better to go the rest of the way on foot. They didn’t want to attract any attention with the vans.

“Karama, Korama, how does it look over there?” Koutarou asked over the comms.

At first, Clan had her drones tracking the cars that had left the trading firm headquarters. But after the drug trade, they’d switched over to using the haniwas with a camouflage spell cast on them by Maki. They assumed that would lower their risk of being found out, since even if the enemy had access to Forthorthian technology, it wasn’t capable of detecting spiritual energy or mana. And since magic like that was an extension of her specialty—mind-manipulating indigo magic—Maki had a good many spells that were useful for stealth and undercover missions.

“Big Brother, continue south from where you are and approach from the west side of the building, ho. The entrance is on the south side, and that’s where the cars are, ho.”

“Their lookout is primarily focused on the south side where the road is, but he

turns around to check the north side every ten minutes or so, ho. So be careful, ho!”

The haniwas were reporting intelligence on the abandoned building where the deal was taking place, including relaying live footage. Since they were using a special spiritual energy based communications line, the video feed was a little rough around the edges, but there was no risk of it being intercepted.

“Understood. Keep up the good work.”

“Roger, ho!”

“You can count on us, ho!”

“Kiriha-san, we should be focusing on figuring out who this unknown party is rather than breaking up the exchange, right?”

“Right. The Sun Rangers will detain the yakuza when they try to leave, so unless they get their hands on something extremely dangerous, we can just leave them be. Instead, we should be identifying the party that approaches them.”

That was ultimately their goal tonight—to unmask whoever had orchestrated this deal. Rather than simply putting a stop to the trade, they needed to prioritize figuring out who and where the leaked technology had come from. That would tell them the seriousness and the scope of the compromise. Of course, that wasn’t to say the deal with the yakuza didn’t matter. They would just be leaving it to the Sun Rangers to handle. The suits were already moving into position, and they’d already gone to pick up the two sleeping men at the office and a few other men who’d taken part in the drug deal.

“All right... so we’ll listen in on the deal from a distance and see if we can figure out who shows up,” said Koutarou.

“I believe that’s a sound plan,” confirmed Kiriha.

“More hide and seek, huh? I’m not really good at this stuff...” bemoaned Shizuka.

“Me neither. I’ve never been very good at running. Or hiding.”

Neither Shizuka nor Alunaya were a fan of the plan Koutarou and Kiriha had

decided on. Shizuka's blood had gotten pumping at the thought of being able to chase some bad guys around, but stealth wasn't exactly her strong suit. And Alunaya felt largely the same way. Thanks to his massive size, hiding had never been his forte. So even though their reasons were somewhat different, neither one of them was too happy about this development in the operation.

"Then it's your turn to shine now, isn't it, Clan-san?"

"I swear... You're the only one who actually expects anything of me, Maki."

"I think Satomi-kun is expecting a lot of you right now too. Aren't you, Satomi-kun?"

"No comment."

"Jeez... I guess I'll have to settle for that."

Koutarou and the others took several measures to protect themselves before entering the woods. The deal would be going down at the abandoned building just on the other side of them. And the agreed hour was almost upon them.

After getting to within 200 meters of the building in question, the haniwas rendezvoused with the group. From here on, they'd be moving together just in case. Stealth was their highest priority right now, so breaking into groups only created more opportunities for them to be discovered.

"Has the other party arrived yet?" Koutarou asked when they returned.

"Not yet, ho. It's just a bunch of scary old men, ho."

"But if they don't get here soon, they'll be late, ho."

"Maybe they found out we're here and cancelled the deal?" wondered Clan aloud.

"In that case, the yakuza would be attacking," replied Theia. "I doubt they'll be arriving on foot, but perhaps there's something else going on..."

It was now only a few minutes out from the appointed meeting time. If the other party was coming by car, they should be able to see headlights down the road by now... But it was completely dark. Without any idea what was going on, Koutarou and the girls were stumped.

“Well, we can’t wait for them to make a move. Let’s get closer and secure a place to observe the deal like we planned,” suggested Kiriha.

“Ane-san, we’ve already found a great place for that, ho!”

“This way, ho! Everyone follow us, ho!”

Unsettling though the current circumstances may be, it wasn’t like the group had the option of just packing up and going home. Instead, they pressed forward, carefully following the haniwas as they kept a vigilant eye on their surroundings.

“Wait here a moment. The lookout is doing a patrol of the area...”

Once they got within fifty meters, Clan stopped the group. Everyone quickly dove for cover behind trees and in the underbrush. Everyone, except for...

“Wh-What?!”

“...Landlord-san, over here!”

Seeing Shizuka freeze up for a moment, Koutarou pulled her into the thicket he was hiding in. He took her in his arms and forced her to get down.

“Kyah!”

“Shh, Landlord-san... Stay still...”

“Er, ah, yeah... That would be smart...”

Just a few moments later, a large man wearing a suit and shades came around the corner of the building. Unlike Yurika, the outfit fit him incredibly well.

“Jeez, to think I’d live to see the day we do business with aliens...”

“Ah, that’s the debt collector,” whispered Yurika to the others. “He notices everything down to the smallest detail, so we should stay hidden awhile...”

“Huh? What was that? Hmm... Guess it was just my imagination. With all this trouble lately, I must be getting high strung...”

Listening to Yurika’s advice, Koutarou and the others decided to stay perfectly still under cover until the man was gone. But in the end, that wasn’t necessary. For just before he disappeared around the corner again, a quiet whooshing sound could be heard overhead.

“What the hell is that?!”

When the debt collector heard it and looked up, he went speechless and ran around to the front of the building a breakneck pace. Not a moment later, Clan’s bracelet began vibrating intensely. It was a warning about the origin of the whooshing sound, but since they were on a covert operation, Clan had the alarm silenced.

“A space distortion reaction?! This is an attack craft!” she yelped in surprise.

If the debt collector hadn’t already run off, he most certainly would’ve heard her. They were lucky he was in a hurry.

“An attack craft?! Are you sure?!”

“There’s no mistaking it, Veltlion! This reaction is unique to the generators installed on imperial army attack crafts!”

“Impossible! What’s an imperial army attack craft doing here?!”

Koutarou let go of Shizuka and hurried out from where he was hiding to look up into the sky. There, he saw the attack craft in question slowly descending. But even despite seeing it with his own eyes, Koutarou could hardly believe it. Theia’s fleet was in complete control over entry to Earth’s atmosphere. Moreover, they hadn’t brought over any military crafts. In other words, this vessel couldn’t have come from Theia’s fleet. But it shouldn’t have been possible for anyone to break through the surveillance net they had around Earth and descend without Theia knowing it... It was truly unbelievable.

“Master, I’ve solved the mystery! That attack craft is part of Vandarion’s fleet!”

“Vandarion’s fleet?!”

Based on the silhouette of the craft and its markings, Ruth was easily able to identify it. It wasn’t from Theia’s fleet at all, but one belonging to their former archenemy, Vandarion. With that critical piece of information, Kiriha put together what was going on.

“So that’s what it is! They once had a fleet come here to capture Theia-dono and Elfaria-dono, and they must have left some surveillance forces behind! In

other words, they didn't have to break through Theia's fleet! They were already here!"

It didn't matter how tight of a watch Theia's fleet kept over Earth's atmosphere if the threat had been right under their noses all along. They'd been moving around freely on the surface for months now, brewing some kind of plan. Their meeting with these yakuza was probably part of it. Which meant that this situation was far more dangerous than Koutarou and the others had imagined.

Having overcome the initial shock of this development, the group proceeded with observing the deal as planned. They were surprised to learn that there were still remnants of Vandarion's fleet around, but they'd need to learn more before they could figure out what Vandarion's men were really after.

"Master, I had a small scouting drone attach to the attack craft," Ruth reported.

The drone in question was only about ten centimeters big. She'd had it attach to the craft, then put it in sleep mode so she could wake it later and retrieve the data it was collecting. That way, they'd be able to keep track of the craft even if they lost sight of it. If they were lucky, it might even lead them directly to the enemy's headquarters.

"Thanks. The rest'll be up to us. Clan, how's it looking?"

"Just a little, longer... Sanae, how about this?"

"I can see them, Glasses!"

Koutarou and the others had infiltrated the abandoned building via a crumbled wall and snuck closer to the large room where the deal would be going down. In order to get an idea of what was actually happening inside, they'd pushed a cable with a miniature camera and microphone on the end through a crack in the wall. It gave them a good view of the room, so they then backed off to a safer distance to observe remotely.

"Pardomshiha, you process the sound. I'll take care of the video."

"Certainly. Leave it to me."

The group had the option of using unmanned fighters and the haniwas to spy on the deal, but they were worried about any sounds or signals they gave off being detected. And in order to thwart that, they'd chosen a more classical approach to spy tactics. It was certifiably lower-tech than all of their other options, but as long as they got it set up safely, it would go unnoticed and provide them with the surveillance they needed.

"What a surprise. To think you'd come from the sky..."

"It was the easiest way to prove to you that we're not some imposters. And as long as we keep a low altitude, it's the safest method of travel at the moment."

Clan was projecting a hologram of the video feed for Koutarou and the others at a safe distance. Ruth was playing the matching audio for them too. At first, the video had been skewed and distorted and the audio filled with static, but between Clan and Ruth's technological wizardry, they were able to sharpen things up in no time. The rest of the group almost felt like they were watching a movie.

"I didn't think about that. But speaking of safety, we should hurry things along here."

"I do believe that would be best."

There were two men talking in the room. One was the fifth and current head of the yakuza gang, and the other was who appeared to be the commander of the attack craft that had arrived. They spoke politely, but both had the aura of a restrained wild animal. These two were birds of a feather. Perhaps that was how they'd ended up coming to a deal in the first place.

"Facial recognition analysis complete. That's Lord Ralgwin Vester Vandarion of the Vandarion knights. He's the nephew of our nemesis, Marswell Daora Vandarion, and the number four of his band of knights. He's one of the guys that's been missing!"

Clan was able to identify the Forthorthian man via the hologram. And as it turned out, he was Vandarion's nephew. As he was still in his thirties, he hadn't been made a general yet, but with his position, he was undoubtedly a trusted subordinate of Vandarion's. That was why he had been left to see to things on Earth.

“I see...” mused Theia. “Thinking about it, it makes sense. We made powerful allies and were able to stage a glorious comeback here, so perhaps Vandarion was planning on doing the same if things didn’t go well.”

“So Elle hurrying diplomacy along was the right thing to do in the end, huh... If you guys hadn’t come, these guys would be running amok right now.”

Koutarou felt a chill run down his spine. They’d only incidentally discovered these remnants of Vandarion’s forces on Earth because Elfaria had been so quick in establishing diplomatic relations with Japan. If she hadn’t done that, these men could have leisurely taken their time investigating Koutarou and the others. That would eventually lead to them discovering magic and spiritual energy, and Koutarou didn’t want to imagine what kind of terrible things Vandarion’s men would do with them.

“We have the gravitational wave comms technology with us. It’s commonly used where we’re from, and makes communication possible over long distances regardless of obstacles. We have three devices as promised, and we’re even throwing in a decryption machine as a bonus.”

Ralgwin was offering the yakuza communications tech. Three devices wasn’t necessarily a lot, but they could be broken down and studied. And as soon as the yakuza discovered the secrets of gravitational wave communications—something unheard of on Earth—it would be worth an inconceivable fortune. They could even use it to intercept Forthorthian communications if they wanted. It was the perfect primer to Forthorthian technology.

“And we have the promised payment. Half is in bills—exactly one billion yen—and the other half is in weapons.”

“Excellent!”

In return for the technology they were getting, the yakuza were handing over the cash funds they’d amassed and a stockpile of weapons, mostly guns tossed together in a careless pile sitting next to an entire mountain of ammunition. It looked like they were preparing for war.

“I guess you could say this is our bonus for you. We thought the number of weapons you requested was a little on the low side, so we doubled the ammunition and threw in a rocket launcher.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Fifth-dono.”

Ralgwin ordered his subordinates to load the cash and weaponry aboard the attack craft. Meanwhile, the yakuza loaded the comms devices into their cars. The exchange was quick, and went down without issue.

“Well then, we’ll be taking our leave, Fifth-dono.”

“Very well. I’m looking forward to doing business with you again. I certainly hope we can have a long, prosperous relationship.”

“I hope so too. Now, until next time...”

After the heads of the operation said their goodbyes, Vandarion’s men and the yakuza got into their respective vehicles. It was a clean, cut-and-dry business transaction. They then vacated the area, the attack craft taking off into the sky and the yakuza’s black cars heading off down the road. Fortunately, it all went down without Koutarou and the girls ever being discovered. The rest would be up to Ruth’s drone in finding out where the attack craft landed. But so far, everything had gone off without a hitch. It was a relief to Koutarou and everyone else, and it all showed on their faces... except for Harumi, who looked rather pensive.

“Hmm... Satomi-kun, do you have a moment?”

Something struck her as odd about the deal they’d just witnessed.

“What’s up, Senpai?”

“Why would the remnants of Vandarion’s faction need Earth weapons? I can understand needing local currency while they’re here, but don’t they have far more advanced weapons than we do?”

That part didn’t add up to her. The Forthorthian military, even a remnant detachment, should have no need or even want for inferior Earth weapons. Moreover, they’d bought relatively commonplace ones. Nothing especially impressive or with that much firepower. Since Koutarou and most of the girls were Earthlings, the very idea of a weapons deal was frightening to them. But Harumi was right... There was something about this that was decidedly odd.

“You have a point... Why *would* they need Earth weapons?”

Theia was particularly perplexed. There was no conceivable point in reducing their firepower. Perhaps they'd been through so much combat already that they were having trouble maintaining their Forthorthian weapons and needed backup? Theia tried to parse the situation, and several possibilities ran through her mind, but nothing quite felt right.

"The reason is simple," declared Clan.

It seemed she'd figured it out already, and she expectantly looked over at Koutarou.

"What are you staring at me for?"

"N-Nothing..."

All kinds of emotions flickered on her face for a moment before she sighed in apparent defeat and halfheartedly explained what she meant.

"I said it's simple because there's only one reason they would want Earth weapons: they're planning an assassination, and they want to make it looks like it was Earthlings that did it."

Clan had once tried to kill Theia in much the same way. She limited herself to using resources found on Earth in an attempt to vindicate herself and make it appear as though Earthlings had been the guilty party. That was how she was so easily able to see though what the remnants of Vandarion's faction was trying to pull.

"Why are you patting my head?" she asked, looking up at Koutarou.

"No reason. It just happened to be nearby and look like it needed to be pat."

"...You're as rude as ever."

"If I was polite, wouldn't that be a problem in and of itself?"

There was a lot more to be said on the subject, but Koutarou chose not to touch on it for now. It wasn't exactly appropriate for the time and place, considering the situation had just escalated into an emergency.

Kiriha picked up with the details, "There's no real doubt that the remnants of Vandarion's faction want to overthrow the Forthorthian royal families. Before that, they'll want to uncover the secrets of our powers here on Earth. And once

they're fully prepared, they'll attempt to stage a grand comeback like Theia-dono did. It would be easier for them if there's tension between Earth and Forthorthe when that happens, which means they can only have one target: Nalfa."

In order to stage the same kind of sweeping comeback Theia had, they would need spiritual energy technology or magic—even though they didn't yet know about the existence of either one. But doing anything at all would be difficult with the planet under Forthorthe's constant surveillance and supervision. So in order to encourage Forthorthe to pull back, they were planning on killing a Forthorthian citizen and framing Earthlings for the crime.

"Wait, how do you know it's Nalfa-san?" asked Koutarou.

"If they're killing to breed friction, a politician would be better than a guard or soldier, and an innocent civilian would be better than a politician. And if the victim's a young girl, all the better. A transfer student who's ventured across the galaxy to promote peace and friendship is the ideal target, as a matter of fact. And doing it here in Kisshouharukaze City, basically right under Theia-dono's nose, would have the maximum possible shock value," Kiriha explained with a bitter expression.

If they'd caught on to this sooner, they could have stopped the deal from ever happening in the first place. It was a failure resulting from focusing too much on the deal itself and not on the consequences of it. That said, thinking about the bigger picture was a particularly difficult thing to do in a high-stress situation like a stealth operation that required all of your attention on the immediacy of the here and now. If anything, this was a stroke of intuitive genius on Harumi's part rather than any kind of oversight on Kiriha's.

"I get it! In that case, Nalfa-san is the perfect target!"

When Kiriha spelled it out for him, Koutarou saw exactly what Kiriha meant. Nalfa was the youngest of the Forthorthians on Earth, and she was a civilian transfer student. She was like the walking embodiment of Forthorthe's goodwill. If Vandarion's faction was able to take her out and make it look like xenophobic Earthlings had done it, it would certainly cast a dark shadow over the blossoming relationship between Forthorthe and Earth. It would give

Vandarion's faction the wiggle room they needed to go about plotting their overthrow of the royal families. Which meant that, now that they had the weapons, killing Nalfa would be the next step.

"Damn, we need to get back! Nalfa-san will be in danger if we don't hurry! They could be on their way right now!"

In the worst case scenario, the remnants of Vandarion's faction would go to work right away. Since they'd come and picked up the weapons in their attack craft, it would be a quick trip over to the school to finish the job. They probably even knew Nalfa's schedule thanks to the yakuza's wiretap. And if that was what was going on, Koutarou and the others would have to hurry; Nalfa's life depended on it. The attack craft had already departed.

Nalfa's Crisis

Thursday, April 14th

After school that day, Kotori had invited Nalfa over to her house to play for a while. Kotori's parents then invited her to stay for dinner, and Nalfa got her first glimpse into what Japanese family life was really like. It was a wonderful experience for a Forthorthian exchange student, and of course, she caught almost all of it on film. After some light editing, she'd be sure to upload it to the pangalactic network for the rest of Forthorthe to see.

"It's just a shame that I have to leave so soon... It's lonely at the dorm."

After all the fun she'd had at the Matsudairas', Nalfa was a little sorry she had to go back to the dormitory where she would be all alone. She glanced longingly back at their house even though it was already well out of view.

"That's right. You're still the only one living in the dorm, aren't you, Nalfa-chan?" asked Kotori.

"Don't worry. We'll walk you all the way home," said Kenji.

"...Maybe that's why she's worried."

Kotori's ice cold glare pierced right through Kenji, who was smiling at Nalfa. If looks could kill, he would have been in real trouble. And it was especially painful coming from his beloved little sister. That single glance was enough to render him completely speechless.

"I-I'm sorry..." he muttered pitifully.

"Say, Kotori, are you still not going to forgive your brother?"

Nalfa was starting to feel bad for Kenji, whose shoulders were slumped almost all the way to the ground. He'd been nice enough to offer to walk with them since he was worried about two girls being out at night all alone. Moreover, he'd admitted his faults and was doing his best to repent. He'd even promised to be more gentlemanly when it came to his relationships with

women. As such, Nalfa felt like he'd done plenty to earn Kotori's forgiveness already.

"Not yet. Kou-niisan hasn't properly scolded him yet."

Unfortunately for Kenji, he'd actually made another major blunder recently that earned Kotori's ire. If not for that, she likely would have forgiven him already. Said blunder occurred shortly after Kotori's talk with Koutarou, and just as she was starting to have a change of heart about her older brother.

"I still can't believe he had the nerve to try and use Kou-niisan as a scapegoat! He even tried to say that Kou-niisan was worse when it came to women!"

Indeed, that was the little slip that had landed Kenji in hot water all over again. It was true that Koutarou was constantly surrounded by girls, but he wasn't actually dating any of them. There was a line he still refused to cross. Kotori had confirmed that personally with both Koutarou and said girls. Moreover, Kotori knew that Koutarou had difficulty accepting others into his life. Kenji's problem was fundamentally different, and he had no tragic past to justify it. So in short, Kenji bringing Koutarou into all this simply came off as a desperate attempt to throw his best friend under the bus and make himself look better. In Kotori's eyes, anyway.

Well, compared to Layous-sama, any man would be... He kept his promise with his friends and the drama club, even turning down the legendary Princess Alaia in order to return home. I don't think Kotori realizes how impossibly high she's set her standards...

Nalfa could see both sides on the issue. Kotori hadn't yet realized that she was expecting far too much from her brother, and men in general. There were probably only a handful of men in the entire universe that would meet her standards. And in that sense, it certainly wasn't Kenji's fault that he'd never stack up. Nalfa realized that, but wasn't confident she'd be able to convince Kotori. Despite the fact that the pedestal she put people on was inordinately high, her heart was in the right place. And so Nalfa decided to leave her be. At least for a few more days until she calmed down about the whole thing.

"Koutarou-sama, huh...? Speaking of, Kotori, if you have any interesting stories about Koutarou-sama, would you mind sharing them with me?"

For the time being, Nalfa thought it might be best to try and change the subject. Rather than dwelling on the Kenji issue, surely she'd be happy to talk about Koutarou instead. That would get the heat off Kenji, and maybe even cheer her up.

"Stories about Kou-niisan? Hmm, let's see..."

And indeed, the moment Nalfa started asking about Koutarou, Kotori's face lit up. All her bitter thoughts about Kenji were quickly wiped away and replaced with nostalgic ones of Koutarou.

"Oh, I know! I'll tell you about the time Kou-niisan and I went fishing!"

By the time she'd decided on a story to tell, the anger was completely gone from her face and she was back to her usual smile.

"..."

Seeing this, Kenji put his hands together and silently thanked Nalfa. She flashed a subtle smile and a wink in return.

Wow, she really saved my hide there... I'll have to properly thank her later.

With that thought, Kenji let out a sigh of relief. Nalfa normally looked oh-so innocent, but she had a surprisingly mature side that shone through at times like this. And Kenji was extremely grateful for it.

"My brother was almost always with us, but there was one day I happened upon Kou-niisan by himself on his way out to go fishing."

"So did you follow him?"

"Yes, even though I knew I would only get in the way of the fishing."

"Were you a fussy girl when you were little?"

"I didn't mean like that. I was always very close to Kou-niisan."

"That would make it hard to hold a fishing rod, teehee..."

"Heehee, it sure did. And then..."

Kenji trailed behind the two girls as they continued to chat, exuding absolutely none of the usual cool prettyboy aura. It wasn't an exaggeration to say he was a different man when Kotori was around.

Hmm? What's that?

But Kenji suddenly noticed something that took his attention off of his precious little sister. Currently, he and the girls were on their way to Harukaze High via the promenade next to the river. The road was nice and flat and there were streetlights ever few meters, so it was perfectly illuminated even in the dead of night. Or at least, it should be. It looked like a couple of the lights were out up ahead around the bridge. Even in the darkness, Kenji could see several people gathered there. They were still some distance away, however, and it was something he ordinarily wouldn't have noticed. But right now, Kenji was in older brother mode and keeping a special eye out on their surroundings.

"...Kotori, Nalfa-san, we're changing routes."

While the promenade was relatively safe considering how well lit it was, delinquents sometimes took advantage of that. Kenji figured that was probably what was going on up ahead, and so suggested a detour. Kotori and Nalfa were both good looking young girls, and Nalfa was a particularly outstanding figure as a Forthorthian transfer student. Kenji felt like it was his job to help keep them out of trouble, and took a better-safe-than-sorry approach to the matter. Taking the scenic route was vastly preferable to the risk of getting hassled.

Yeah, something just doesn't feel right... We should get a move on.

Moreover, Kenji had a bad feeling. He didn't know why, but his gut was sending him warning signals. If he had to articulate it, he would've said it felt like picking up the wrong crayon to color a picture in a coloring book with. Something just wasn't right.

"Nii-san? What are you—"

Kotori's anger flared upon being interrupted, but Nalfa stopped her when she saw the serious look on Kenji's face.

"Wait, Kotori! What's the matter, Kenji-san?"

"You see those people up there hiding out at the bridge? I don't know who they are, but I think we should take a detour just in case."

"I understand. Let's go, Kotori."

“Oh, um, okay...”

Thanks to Nalfa’s interceding, Kotori readily cooperated and went along with Kenji’s suggestion. When she stopped to think about it calmly, she realized he was right. So it was a good thing Nalfa was there; things might have gotten ugly otherwise.

“What’s with those guys? Are they following us?”

There, Kenji’s bad feeling got even worse. As soon as he and the girls turned to change routes, the group ahead in the shadows went on the move.

Do they have some business with us? Or are they just after Nalfa-san? But from this distance...

Kenji was confused. He was still far enough from the bridge that he couldn’t clearly distinguish the people up ahead, so they shouldn’t have been able to recognize Kotori or Nalfa either. And they were certainly still too far away to start heckling them or anything. If they were just waiting for an opportunity to cause some trouble, they would have just waited for the next target to walk along. Especially now that Kenji and the girls had changed course. But now that they were steadily approaching, Kenji couldn’t shake the thought that they were coming after him and the girls.

“Nii-san, what are we going to do now?” Kotori asked.

“Let’s switch routes again. That way we can really see if they’re following us or not.”

“I might be their target,” said Nalfa. “I can’t imagine any reason someone would be after the two of you...”

“Let’s hope that’s not the case. Honestly, I’d be perfectly happy if this ended with me getting punched in the face at this point,” replied Kenji.

Kenji had his fingers crossed that they were just dealing with the boyfriend of a girl whose heart he’d broken. That would be much better than the alternative, which was that they were after one of the girls—specifically Nalfa. The worst case scenario was that they’d been waiting there for Nalfa all along, which would mean they’d known she’d be coming this way. Investigating Nalfa’s schedule and approaching her at the worst possible timing was well out of the

league of normal delinquents. No, if that's what was going on, they were dealing with men that were far more dangerous.

Bang, bang, bang!

"What?! Were those gunshots?!"

As Kenji and the girls turned the next corner to take a different street, they heard what sounded like gunfire coming from the promenade. Of course, none of them had ever actually heard real gunfire before, so they had no way of knowing for sure what it was. Confused, they stopped and turned to look in the direction the noises had come from. There, they saw two unfamiliar men in black suits appear from around the corner they'd just turned.

"Who are you?!" Kenji demanded.

His immediate suspicion was that they were part of the gang that had been hanging out under the bridge, and he promptly stepped in front of Kotori and Nalfa to defend them.

"Calm down, Kenji-kun! We're not your enemies; we're with the government! For now, I need you to take the transfer student and run! Get as far away as you can! They're not just after her, but all of you!"

There, Kenji realized he'd been mistaken. Both of these men were wounded; there was blood dripping onto the sidewalk from underneath their black suits. They also had guns drawn and were returning fire around the corner. It looked like they'd come to defend him and the girls, which gave Kenji a rough grasp of the situation.

My god, it really was gunfire! If the government's shown up, those guys must be people who are trying to ruin things between Japan and Forthorthe!

Their primary target was undoubtedly Nalfa. But even if they couldn't get her, they could still sour public opinion by killing her innocent friends. All they'd have to do was pin the blame on the Forthorthians somehow. It wouldn't be as effective as killing a near celebrity like Nalfa, but it would incite public rage. But the short of it for now was that they were all in danger.

"Shit, we've gotta get out of here! Kotori, Nalfa-san!"

“Y-Yeah!”

“Understood!”

There, Kotori and Nalfa took off running and Kenji followed close behind. They didn’t know who the black suits were, nor did they fully trust them, but the gunfire and blood was more than enough to tell them whatever was going on... it was serious. There was no time to hesitate. Even if the gunfight had nothing to do with them, they needed to get to safety as soon as possible.



Kenji was a clever boy who'd been around the block a few times. He'd met all kinds of people and been in all kinds of situations, which had helped him develop a relatively keen sense for danger. That was what had told him to avoid the people hanging around by the bridge in the first place. He'd sensed something ominous from them before he could even fully see them. And thanks to that, he'd been able to pull his little sister and Kotori out of a dangerous situation.

"That young man's pretty good..."

Ralgwin Vester Vandarion, the man in charge of the remnants of Vandarion's faction, was only in his thirties, but he had the aura of a mighty warrior. He'd seen plenty of combat, and knew full well the dangers of underestimating an opponent. Even though Kenji was a civilian, he had no intentions of taking him lightly. In fact, he held Kenji in high regard for being able to escape with both girls.

"Heh, don't you think this makes him a tougher opponent than the Japanese government's escort?"

"This is no laughing matter, Ralgwin-sama."

"I know. Send out another squad to keep the pressure on them. Additionally, put another two squads into position to keep them from fleeing the urban area."

"That makes one full platoon... Is it really necessary to go that far against three civilians?"

In the Forthorthian military, a squad consisted of ten people. And since there was already a squad pursuing Kenji and the girls, adding three more to the operation would mean a total of forty men—one full platoon—were on the job. That was quite a considerable amount of manpower, which gave the adjutant pause. Since they were isolated on Earth, it was a big risk for Vandarion's faction to send out so many soldiers at once.

"You're the one who said this was no laughing matter. Besides, that young man is the Blue Knight's friend. It'd be foolish for us to underestimate him, and we have to consider the Blue Knight himself might arrive as backup."

“I see... So we need to settle things before that happens.”

Before Ralgwin decided to attack Nalfa, he had investigated the Blue Knight—Koutarou—and his personal relationships. With that information, he’d chosen to attack while Nalfa was on her way home from playing at the Matsudairas’. The Matsudaira residence was a good distance from both the well-guarded school and Koutarou’s apartment. Nalfa was at her most vulnerable when she was en route between them. But now that they’d made their move, it was only a matter of time before backup arrived. This would be their only chance to achieve the victory they needed to drive a wedge between Forthorthe and Japan.

“And frankly speaking, the Blue Knight is the man who killed my uncle. If possible, I’d like to rip him apart with my own hands.”

“But you will come out victorious because you’re able to hold that in, Ralgwin-sama.”

“What a pain. My uncle left me some rather tedious homework...”

Ralgwin’s military prowess didn’t compare to Vandarion’s, and his intelligence was no match for Granado’s. At best, he had three-quarters their talent, but he had been put in charge of the Earth operation because he possessed *both* talents. With limited men and supplies, a flexible commander like Ralgwin would be critical. And in that sense, he was in much the same boat Kenji was.

“But you should be reaching your limits now, young man. You did good to make it this far on your own.”

Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that Kenji was in the same position Ralgwin was. He was isolated far from home, and had an important mission to achieve with limited resources—protecting Nalfa and his sister. But unlike Ralgwin, Kenji had been thrust into this desperate situation without any warning or preparation. He’d certainly gotten the short end of the stick, and was in far more danger because of it. It wouldn’t take long for the forty soldiers to have him cornered.

Kenji and the girls managed to run for as long as they had because Kenji had intuited the danger and given them a head start, they knew the lay of the land

better, and they'd had the sense to turn off their cellphones. If possible, Nalfa wanted to call the person in charge of the transfer students and Kenji wanted to call Theia. But Kenji also knew better. The precious seconds they'd waste on the phone could prove fatal. They badly wanted to call someone for help, but they also knew that they could easily be tracked by their phone signals. They'd be caught before they ever finished their call. So Kenji had refrained, and prudently chosen to kill the power to his phone. Instead, he was putting his money on getting to safety as quickly as possible.

"Damn it, this way won't work either!"

"Kotori, come back!"

"Coming!"

Unfortunately, that was turning out to be a losing bet. Things had all gone according to plan at first. After leaving the riverside, they'd used backroads that only locals would know to try and navigate their way towards the city center. But partway there, the enemy began cutting them off. By the time Kenji realized that that was because of their sheer numbers rather than luck or geographical knowledge, it was already too late. They were cornered, and had no way to double back and escape. They could only go forward, and were gradually being driven back towards the river. There was no telling what would await them there, but all signs pointed to nothing good.

"Nii-san, over there!"

"Got it! Nalfa-san, we're hiding!"

"Right!"

Just as the three of them thought they were at the end of the line, Kotori discovered a hole by the river. It led to what was once used as a discharge channel, but was now neglected after some maintenance on the embankment. It seemed the local children had turned it into a secret base of sorts, as it was lined with boxes and chairs. The hole that led inside had been camouflaged with shrubbery, making it hard to spot for anyone taller than a child. The petite Kotori had only stumbled upon it because she was running while crouched down. Surely the soldiers would never find it.

“You girls get as far back as you can!”

“Kotori, over here!”

“Coming!”

Kenji had the two girls hide in the back of the room while he observed what was going on outside through the hole, careful not to be spotted from above.

This is bad... We’re hidden, but we’ve got nowhere to go now...

Several of Vandarion’s men had already passed by. Of course, they were wearing Earth clothes and using Earth weapons, so it never dawned on Kenji that they were actually alien soldiers. But nevertheless, with them out and about just outside, there was no way Kenji and the girls could safely leave.

In movies, there’s always drones in the sky with heat detection and stuff too, so maybe it’s safer just to stay down here anyway. I guess the rest is up to luck...

Kenji carefully, silently stepped back from the hole. If they couldn’t leave, there was no real reason to keep a lookout.

“Nii-san, how does it look?”

“It’s not good. We’ll get busted the moment we try and leave, so we’ll just have to hide out here for a while instead.”

Kenji pulled over a nearby chair, sat down, and let out a heavy sigh. There was no longer anything he could do. He had no combat training, much less a weapon. He was also vastly outnumbered. Breaking through by force was a pipe dream, so all they could do now was pray the enemy didn’t find them.

“I’m sorry. This is all my fault...” Nalfa apologized.

“It’s not, Nalfa-chan! It’s their fault for attacking!” argued Kotori.

“Kotori’s right,” said Kenji. “Besides, I raised Kotori never to abandon her friends.”

“That’s the second generation Blue Knight for you... You’re so reliable,” remarked Nalfa.

“Heh, that’s just a role I play on stage. Really, I’m just a fake,” replied Kenji with a wry smile.

Koutarou had only played the part of the Blue Knight in their first year of high school. Kenji had taken over the role when the play got a second run the following year. He'd been shocked to learn it was actually based off of a true story from Forthorthe, but that was all the more reason not to blame Nalfa for this. No, the Blue Knight would never abandon his friends.

If you were in my shoes, you'd never abandon Nalfa-san, would you, Kou?

And that, even if secretly, was what Kenji was trying to live up to. It was difficult for him, but he used that as motivation to push himself forward and aim higher. He felt like he'd always be chasing after his best friend, but he wanted to be worthy of calling himself Koutarou's best friend.

"No one starts as the real deal. Who you are isn't as important as who you become, so you have to believe in yourself until you get there. Believe until the bitter end."

"Nalfa-san..."

Seeing her smile, Kenji thought to himself...

She really isn't who she seems to be. She's definitely hiding something, something very strong, deep down inside...

Unfortunately, that thought was cut short.

"I found the brats! They're over here!"

"Drag 'em outta there!"

"We're not doing them in?"

"Of course we are, but we're supposed to make a show out of it and record it."

"Scary... That's Ralgwin-sama for you..."

As misfortunate would have it, they were soon discovered by Vandarion's faction. Truth be told, with the advanced equipment and technology the soldiers had on their side, it was a wonder Kenji and the girls had been able to elude them this long. But alas, their luck had run out and they were now trapped. With the soldiers blocking off the only exit, they literally had nowhere to run. This was the end of the line.

“Get out here right now!”

“If you do, we’ll hold off on killing you right away!”

Hearing the brash voices of the shouting soldiers above, Kotori and Nalfa were frozen with fear. Kotori in particular had never seen anything of such violence, and was already on the verge of tears.

“Kotori, Nalfa-san... Get back.”

Kenji got up from his chair and motioned for the two girls to get behind him. In spite of the dire situation, Kenji was resolved to defend them until the end.

“Nii-san... You’re not the real Blue Knight, so don’t try and play it so cool...”

“What’s a guy to do? I’m no Blue Knight, but I’m still your brother.”

Kenji was going to protect his little sister and her friend. Even if he wasn’t the Blue Knight, he could still play the part when he needed to. He had faith in that, and he had faith in himself. So, fake or not, he certainly looked like the real deal in Kotori’s eyes. It gave her the courage and the strength to smile through the tears.

“You don’t have to worry anymore.”

Nalfa was smiling as well, but something about her smile was fundamentally different from Kotori’s. She was beaming with conviction that they’d be saved.

“Nalfa-san?”

“He’s here.”

Indeed, Nalfa’s smile was brighter because she believed in something greater than just Kenji.

“Who are you talking about, Nalfa-chan?”

“The man who believed in himself and made himself a real knight. The legendary hero—”

Boom!

“Waaah!”

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

The sound of a weak explosion followed by screaming could be heard from outside. It seemed someone had made a sudden appearance and blown away the soldiers that had gathered around the hole. And that someone...

“Good job, Mackenzie. I was able to make it in time thanks to you.”

“Layous Fatra Veltlion, the man known as the Blue Knight,” Nalfa muttered.

Indeed, the voice calling down from outside was familiar to both Kenji and Kotori.

“By the way, if you apologize to Kin-chan now, I’m sure she’ll forgive you.”

“Kou?!”

“Kou-niisan?!”

Of course, it was only natural that his voice was familiar to them. It was the voice of their childhood friend Satomi Koutarou. It was precious to both of them. So precious that they’d never be able to forget it even if they tried.

Sanae had been the one to locate Kenji and the girls. Since they’d turned off their phones to avoid being tracked, Koutarou and the others were forced to look for them by their auras. Sanae was able to isolate their general area, and once they got close enough, even Koutarou could pick up their auras. He then immediately took off and was the first to arrive on the scene.

“Sakuraba-senpai, I think we should reconsider this way of flying...” Koutarou mumbled.

“Really? But this is the most efficient way of using mana,” Harumi replied through the magic power of the sword.

“Riding, or rather standing on Signaltin makes me feel like I’m doing something I shouldn’t be.”

“Okay, then I’ll prepare some special slippers for the occasion next time.”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“Besides, I wanted to try this out so I could do this... Ha!”

“Whoa!”

Boom!

“Waaah!”

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

The explosion that Kenji and the girls had heard was Signaltin being thrust into the ground. It released all of the mana it has been using for flight, and in turn sent the nearby soldiers flying.

“...Haahh!”

Koutarou landed shortly after that. With Signaltin suddenly accelerating towards the ground out from under him, he’d actually fallen the last several meters of his trip. Of course, with spiritual energy and magic strengthening his body, he wasn’t hurt. Moreover, Signaltin’s mana burst had kicked up plenty of dust and dirt, which shielded him from incoming gunfire. Harumi had come up with this move for emergencies when Koutarou wasn’t wearing his armor—like right now. Having Koutarou move around on Signaltin before sending it in ahead of him to attack and then kicking up a cloud to protect him was all part of her plan, and it worked flawlessly.

“The soldiers aren’t dead, are they?”

After he hit the ground, Signaltin came spinning back to Koutarou, who readily snatched it out of the air.

“Don’t worry. They’re just out of commission.”

“Thank goodness...”

“Yeah. Now, more importantly... Good job, Mackenzie. I was able to make it in time thanks to you.”

Koutarou fixed his grip on Signaltin as he called down into the hole below. He could sense the auras of two people waver, telling him how surprised they were.

“By the way, if you apologize to Kin-chan now, I’m sure she’ll forgive you.”

“Kou?!”

“Kou-niisan?!”

It seemed the main source of their surprise was Koutarou himself. He could tell from their voices and their auras that they were shocked to see him.

“Kou, what are—”

“Don’t get any closer right now, you two! Wait until I take care of things up here!”

Seeing that they were both ready to run over to him, he beat them to the punch and warned them back.

“Nii-san, let’s wait for now.”

“Y-Yeah...”

While they didn’t understand what was going on and they were worried about Koutarou, they decided to listen to him for now. It was vexing, but if they went outside, they would only make the situation worse. It sounded like a few of the enemies had already been taken out, but there were still plenty more. They were converging on the spot at this very moment, meaning the danger was far from over.

Let’s see... There’s just under forty of them left. They really went all out on this, huh?

Koutarou didn’t need his spirit sight to see the approaching enemies. They were plain as day now that the dust cloud had dispersed on the wind.

“You think you can do something on your own, you stupid kid?!”

“You’ve gotta be the stupid one, man! That’s the Blue Knight!”

There were still more than thirty soldiers remaining, the vast majority of which were gradually closing ranks in an encirclement. The rest were dragging their blown away allies to safety.

There’s no hesitation in their movements. On top of that, they’re prioritizing the evacuation of their injured. These guys know what they’re doing...

Koutarou could tell that the soldiers were formidable and well trained from the way they were behaving. As the last of Vandarion’s troops isolated on Earth, a loss of manpower would be a devastating blow. That was why they’d prioritized rescuing their downed men while Koutarou was still alone and kept

in check by the rest of their forces, who were moving as one.

“Captain, are we still holding?”

“Don’t fire yet. Wait until the Blue Knight goes on the offensive and then focus your fire on him.”

They knew that not a single one of them would be able to beat Koutarou if they acted independently, so their plan was to cooperate and focus their fire. The squad captain in charge was well aware that Koutarou’s defenses would be lowest while he was attacking, so he ordered his troops to hold their fire until Koutarou made a move.

“That would ordinarily be a good idea...” said Koutarou when he realized what they were up to. “But this time, it’s going to come back to bite you.”

“What are you mumbling about?!” shouted a nearby soldier.

“...Here we go, Sakuraba-senpai!”

“All right. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

With his sword in both hands, Koutarou charged forward. In order to keep Kenji and the girls safe, he needed to take out as many enemies as possible.

“The Blue Knight’s making his move! Fire!”

Foreseeing that Koutarou was going on the offensive, the squad captain gave his men the order to attack. Following his lead, a total of twenty soldiers opened fire. Between the machine guns and rifles going off all at once, the gunfire was like a glorious crack of thunder. But not one of those several hundred bullets would ever reach Koutarou.

“Halt!”

At Harumi’s command, Signaltin emitted a white light that coalesced into a yellow shield around Koutarou that deflected the incoming bullets.

“Impossible! He’s not even wearing his armor!”

The squad captain was astonished. He’d seen the data collected on Koutarou, and knew that he normally wore armor equipped with a distortion field. Koutarou didn’t have it on now, however, and should have been totally

defenseless. Yet he didn't have a single scratch on him.

"Captain, there are no space distortion reactions or electromagnetic irregularities! That's not a distortion field or an electromagnetic field!"

"Then what mysterious technology is it?!"

"I don't know, sir!"

Completely unfazed by the rain of bullets, Koutarou swung Signaltin. He wasn't within reach of any of the soldiers, but five of them some meters ahead were sent flying thanks to the shockwave coming off of his blade.

"And what was that?!"

"I still don't know, sir! No distortion or electromagnetic reactions detected!"

"Where's that much power coming from?! No wonder His Excellency Vandarion couldn't win!"

The squad captain in charge gritted his teeth in frustration. Koutarou was but a lone boy, yet they couldn't defeat him. Certainly, their original plan had something to do with that. Their intent was to assassinate Nalfa with Earth weaponry, so that was all they'd brought with them and subsequently all they had to fight the Blue Knight with. It simply wasn't enough to break through his mysterious defenses. If they actually had Forthorthian weapons with them, things might have been different. But if they were going into what-if territory, they also had Koutarou's allies to take into account. Either way, it seemed there was no way they could win against him, so the squad captain swiftly abandoned hypotheticals and made his decision.

"All units, suppress the Blue Knight and fall back!"

After giving the order, the squad captain quickly got to work too. His plan was to withdraw from here. It had been made in haste, but it was the wise call. The captain knew they didn't stand a chance against Koutarou, so the only victory to be had was assassinating Nalfa. And in order to do that, they'd need to split up. Koutarou's greatest weakness was that there was only one of him. There was no way he'd be able to stop all three dozen soldiers from trying to get past him at once, which meant they'd actually done themselves a disservice by gathering and trying to work together.

“You’re not getting away!”

Koutarou boldly stepped forward in pursuit of the fleeing soldiers. His intent was to capture a couple if he could, both to reduce their numbers and gain information. But the remnants of Vandarion’s faction were an entirely different beast now that they were on the retreat.

“Don’t aim for the Blue Knight himself! Go for his footing! Throw your grenades towards the transfer student! We don’t have to fight him on his terms!”

The squad captain’s commanding shone even when withdrawing. Under his lead, the solders pinned Koutarou down with gunfire while bombarding him with grenades and rockets. They were no longer trying to kill him—they were just trying to keep him busy. The explosives they used destroyed the terrain, making it difficult for Koutarou to run. His spirit sight helped him see through all the dirt and smoke, but it didn’t help him keep his footing. All in all, it turned out to be quite a troublesome attack. And worse yet, while he was occupied, a handful of soldiers began lobbing attacks towards the hole where Nalfa and the others were hiding. They didn’t need to score a direct hit; they only needed to force Koutarou’s hand.

“Damn it, these guys really are formidable!”

Koutarou had no choice but to position himself between the soldiers and the hole. He then expanded the range of his magical defenses to try and keep his friends safe. And now that the soldiers had Koutarou pinned on the defensive, they had an opportunity to recover their fallen comrades and retreat in an orderly fashion. It was a simple reminder that no matter how strong Koutarou was, he couldn’t win on his own. This wasn’t just some squabble or a fistfight. This was war.

“I guess this is the best I can do on my own...”

“Ohoho! Now do you appreciate our true worth?”

Just as Koutarou realized the trouble he was in, a familiar voice called out to him from overhead. Reinforcements had arrived.

“Theia! Good timing!”

“This is just a standin for now.”

A small unmanned fighter descended next to Koutarou. It was the same kind that Ruth used, but it had an elegant coating of gold and red paint as well as several ornamental parts. Its silhouette was stylized to resemble the armor used in ages of old.

“So that’s the new one you made?”

“Indeed! It’s not as pretty as I am, but with me piloting it, you can bet it’s a sight to behold!”

Theia was controlling the fighter remotely. It was something she’d been crafting in her spare time for fun, but it happened to come in quite handy now. Launching it was far less time consuming than equipping her Combat Dress and sortieing herself. Using a remote fighter was also a nice and easy way to circumvent the faux pas of having a princess take the front lines.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Master.”

“Mackenzie-san and the others are safe now.”

The arrival of Theia’s fighter also heralded the arrival of the other girls. The reason for their delay was simply due to their speed and the time they needed to prepare. There was no way they could keep up with Koutarou, who’d flown in on Signaltin at a moment’s notice.

“Kou-niisan!”

“Kou, what’s going on here?!”

Kenji, Kotori, and Nalfa all emerged from the hole, protected by Ruth and Maki. Kenji and Kotori in particular couldn’t keep up with the situation, and were bewildered by the rapidly unfolding events. Considering that they were now surrounded by their friends—who they’d assumed were normal people—all decked out in full gear, perhaps that bewilderment was only natural.

“Wow, the Satomi band of knights all-stars are all here! This is great!”

In contrast to Kotori and Kenji, Nalfa was over the moon. She’d whipped out her camera once Koutarou arrived on the scene, and was happily filming away now. In her viewfinder were the Blue Knight wielding Signaltin, the Indigo

Swordsman standing next to him, Theia and Ruth's unmanned fighters soaring in the sky above, and a mysterious girl who was flying without any assistance. There was also a girl wielding a large staff, a martial artist brave enough to fight barehanded, and a dark-haired woman with keen eyes and two haniwas floating at her side. And behind all of them even still, watching over the progress of the battle, were Clan and a girl with silver hair. They were the Satomi band of knights, also known as Theiamillis's Blue Knights. And seeing them together was a dream come true for Nalfa. She simply couldn't contain her excitement.

"Well, it's complicated," Koutarou tried explaining to Kenji.

"You're telling me, Kou! Highashihongan-san over there is freaking flying!"

"Heya, Glasses-kun!"

"I'll fill you in on the details later. Right now we need to deal with those guys."

"'Deal with them'? Come on..."

Now that the girls were there to guard the defenseless Kenji, Kotori, and Nalfa, Koutarou could move freely. Turning away from the group, he strode forward without hesitation. Maki wielding a greatsword, Sanae flying circles in the air, a somewhat distracted Shizuka in half-dragon form, and Theia and Ruth's automated weaponry followed after him. Apart from the automated weapons, no one in that lineup really looked like they were cut out for fighting. Kenji stood there rooted in place, half confused and half worried.

"Don't you worry, Mackenzie. We're surprisingly strong."

Meanwhile, Koutarou was smiling. He knew there was no way they could lose to a mere forty infantrymen. In stark contrast to the bewildered Kenji, he was brimming with confidence.



Aside from when someone was in danger, Sanae's motivation was largely influenced by how much fun she thought something would be. And now that she knew Kenji, Kotori, and Nalfa were safe, it was time to have some fun—and she was more motivated than ever.

"Maki, let's advertise ourselves as a new magical girl duo! Oh, I know! As magical knights!"

"That might be a good idea since it looks like Yurika's looking to become the sixth head of a yakuza gang now."

Sanae was proudly wearing her blue and white Satomi knights uniform, embellished with touches of her personal color—purple. With Maki standing next to her in a matching outfit with indigo accents, they really did look like a pair of magical girls.

"I'm not going to become a yakuza anything!" objected Yurika.

"Well, you certainly don't look like a magical girl..." replied Maki.

"Nah, just go ahead and embrace it, Yurika. The sixth head can totally be a magical girl!" encouraged Sanae.

Yurika, who was still wearing her suit and sunglasses from work, stood out like a sore thumb standing next to Maki and Sanae. Maki was right—it definitely wasn't a magical girl look.

"No, I don't want that! Here, let me prove to you that I'm a real magical girl!" shouted Yurika.

"Sounds like you're getting fired up!" replied Maki.

"She better be!" added Sanae. "We'll be in a lot of trouble if she doesn't pull her weight here!"

Her outfit aside, Yurika promptly fell into her role as a magical girl and cast spell after spell to protect Koutarou and the others. While it wasn't on purpose, she *had* become a yakuza underling. In order to make up for that, she knew she needed to shine here and was surprisingly enthusiastic for once.

"I, for one, *really* don't want to pull my weight... But now's not the time to be worried about that."

“Shizuka, rather than trying to hold back with your power, I think it would be better to settle things forthwith.”

“I was just thinking the same thing, Uncle.”

While Shizuka loved martial arts, she didn’t actually care for combat—especially since getting serious in a fight meant a serious increase in her weight. But she was willing to make an exception right now. Her friends had almost been killed, so her temper was flaring in a way it didn’t usually. Her anger and Alunaya’s mana both welled up within her, transforming her into her fierce half-dragon form. Right now, she was more than ready to fight.

“Get ready to dig in, everyone. It looks like they’re getting serious too,” Koutarou suddenly called out to everyone.

Off in the direction he was looking, several mobile weapons had appeared. Each was meters in size, and easily capable of free flight and rapid fire. Compared to Ruth and Theia’s unmanned fighters, these were bigger, stronger, and better armored. They were more like tanks crossed with fighter jets. Koutarou and the others would need more than just defensive magic to protect themselves from these crafts. The fact that Vandarion’s faction had called them out to cover their retreat, however, was a testament to how seriously they were taking the threat that was the Blue Knight and his allies.

“The attack craft from earlier very well may have been carrying all forty of those soldiers. But for them to have six mobile weapons... They must have a destroyer hiding out there somewhere,” observed Theia.

“There were several ships from Vandarion’s fleet that were never located,” replied Ruth. “It’s not impossible that one or more of them may be here on Earth.”

“So despite being able to return of their own volition, they chose to stay and continue their investigation on this planet... These might turn out to be some problematic foes.”

Theia was concerned that they might actually be up against a greater force than they’d imagined, but put it out of her mind for the time being. Before she could get to the bottom of any of that, she’d have to take care of the six mobile weapons that had shown up.

“Ruth, let’s form a wall with our fighters! Protect Koutarou and the others as they move forward!”

“As you wish, my princess!”

Ruth positioned her twelve fighters in a star formation in front of Koutarou and the others. And not a moment later, the enemy mobile weapons made their move. They split into two groups of three, forming up in two triangles stacked on top of each other. They had no blind spots this way and could fire 360 degrees; it was a formation designed to maximize both defense and offense. And as soon they got into position, they began a bombardment with beam cannons.

“Engaging active defenses!”

Seeing the signs of an incoming bombardment, Ruth employed a defensive algorithm that she’d scripted with data based on all their previous encounters and moved her fighters accordingly. The distortion field a single one of them—just over a meter in size—deployed wouldn’t be able to block the large-caliber beam cannon fire. To make up for that, she grouped the fighters together in units of three to increase the strength of their barriers. By carefully positioning the four groups of fighters, she was successfully able to deflect the incoming beams. It was only by a few degrees, but that few degrees was enough to make sure Yurika’s spells and the haniwas’ spiritual energy field could do the rest. Over the past two years, Ruth had gone from a good operator to a superlative one, especially for her team. She knew just how to use her barriers to complement everyone else’s and could achieve things no one else could. And it was thanks to her that Koutarou and the others were able to close in on the mobile weapons safely, even while under attack.

“Pardomshiha really has been doing the incredible as if were nothing recently...”

“Ruth is a different type of genius from you, Clan-dono. She excels at gathering information and analyzing it. As a result, the more time passes and the bigger the scale of the battle, the more she can put her genius to work.”

“Ruth-chan knows what we can and can’t do, ho!”

“But in return, we have to do everything we can, ho! So no slacking off, ho!”

Ruth's real power was allowing her allies to perform to the maximum of their abilities. She could essentially draw out their true potential and help them put it to good use. It might seem like a superfluous, mundane power at first, but it made a critical difference in serious combat and large-scale battles.

"I think that Vandarion really should have gone after Ruth-san and Kiriha-san first. His obsession with Satomi-san was ultimately his downfall," said Harumi.

And she had a point. During their battles in Forthorthe, Kiriha had been their chief strategist while Ruth was always the one that helped make Kiriha's plans possible. The two of them, as keystones of the team, should have been Vandarion's primary targets. But Vandarion had been blinded by Koutarou, who always took the front line, and overlooked them. Excluding the influence of the whirlpool of chaos, there was a large gap between them. And right now, Ruth's mission was safely getting Koutarou and the others to the mobile weapons. There, they would be able to take the stage and attack at full strength.

Upon reaching the six mobile weapons, Sanae jumped into the air over the rest of the group using her psychic powers. She then extended her right hand and...

"Come, Saguratiiiiin!"

Her eyes sparkled as she loudly called out for the sword. As she did, a purple, sword-shaped crest appeared on her forehead which seemed to act as a beacon. For the next moment, a beautiful glowing sword appeared before her. Sanae reached out and took the handle of the golden blade floating in the air.

"It's here! My time is finally coooome!"

Sanae had always fancied herself a magical girl, but in reality, she was a psychic girl. However, by giving a portion of her life to Signaltin and Saguratin, she'd gained the ability to use a little magic. She could now summon Saguratin and communicate mentally with the other girls via the crest on her forehead. And so, as far as she was concerned, she'd done it—she didn't care how little magic it actually was. She was now officially a magical girl, and that was the reason she was feeling so motivated today.

"Saguratiiiiin, chaaarge!"

As Sanae gripped Saguratin tightly in her hands, the glow it was giving off turned purple. It also dramatically brightened now that she was pouring her own spiritual energy into it.

The sword's power came from a contract formed on the premise that Koutarou would be wielding it. So even Sanae, one of the contractors, couldn't use Saguratin at its full power. At best she could wield about one tenth of it, which was a far cry from the real thing or even the greatsword that Maki wielded. But when Sanae poured her own spiritual energy into the sword to forcibly make it stronger, that changed things. The purple glowing sword in her hands was about as strong as Maki's greatsword, and actually even a little stronger than the spiritual energy bow that Sanae usually used.

"Sanae-chaaan Special Attack!"

The petite Sanae would ordinarily be no match for the weight and momentum of a giant sword like Saguratin, but she used her psychic powers to keep herself balanced and in control as she hefted the blade overhead. As she did, the spiritual energy around the sword expanded outward like the very blade itself was growing. She then swung Saguratin downward in a full body spin.

Fwoosh!

The giant blade made of spiritual energy—two meters wide and nearly ten long—closed in on one of the mobile weapons at a frightening speed. The machine couldn't recognize spiritual energy, but after analyzing the visual data it was receiving from its cameras, it determined the incoming attack to be some kind of beam sword and deployed its distortion field. The mobile weapons had barriers durable enough to withstand their own beam cannons, so breaking through one would take an extraordinarily powerful attack.

"Heavenly Slaaaaash!"

Yet Sanae's spiritual energy blade slipped right through it. A spiritual energy attack was the same as an attack from a ghost—essentially ethereal. Bending space wasn't going to stop it. And so the purple blade easily cleaved the mobile weapon in two.

"...I've wasted my power on a worthless opponent."

With her target destroyed, Sanae landed gracefully on the ground and swiftly sheathed her sword. Having practiced the gesture hundreds of times before now, she looked like a master swordsman straight out of an anime. But as Sanae paused for theatrics, another mobile weapon appeared behind her.

“Aww, too cute! Did you wear those clothes today because you knew you were going to be using the sword?”

Crunch!

However, the moment the second mobile weapon was about to fire its weapon, a nonchalantly thrust fist punched a hole straight through the barrier and the machine itself. Silhouetted by the resulting explosion was Shizuka, casually standing there in her regular everyday clothes.

“Yup! It’s super magical girl-y if Maki and I wear matching outfits, right?”

Sanae grabbed the hem of her skirt and twirled around to show her outfit off to Shizuka. She’d been in her school uniform just before, but now she looked just like a magical knight.

“I’m really enjoying working together, Sanae-san...”

Next, five Makis attacked another mobile weapon. Two of them were shot down, but the remaining three closed in and swung their swords in synchronized fashion. Surprisingly, all three disappeared afterward. The next moment, a sixth Maki appeared inside the distortion field.

“But I’m still not sure what I think of the title of ‘magical knight,’ heehee...”

The sixth Maki was actually the real one—the other five had all been illusions. The illusions had been able to attack freely, and when the mobile weapon lowered its barrier to retaliate, Maki had closed in. And she was now walking away after thrusting her sword though the mobile weapon’s power source.

“Hey, I don’t mind you calling yourselves magical knights!”

Theia was currently fighting against yet another of the mobile weapons vicariously via her unmanned crimson fighter. Since the mobile weapon’s generator far surpassed hers in terms of output, however, almost all of her attacks were blocked by its distortion field... Or so they should have been. Yet

for some reason, every time Theia fired one of her guns, the round would pierce right through the mobile weapon's barrier.

"It sounds much more militaristic than regular old magical girls."

That effect was courtesy of the red sword crest glowing on Theia's forehead. As another one of the contractors, Theia had also gained the ability to manipulate the excess mana from Signaltin and Saguratin. As she had little talent with magic, however, that mana was simply converted into raw attack power. Not that Theia minded. She was a natural born sharpshooter, so pure power was all she craved.



Pew!

Enhanced by Theia's mana, the slightly red beam she fired penetrated the mobile weapon straight from the front. Its distortion field had already given out, so her beam went right through the most heavily armored part of the machine like a hot knife through butter.

Tink!

"Ah, that's much better. Signaltin is just too majestic to stand on."

Using Theia's fighter as a stepping stool, Koutarou made a move on the fifth mobile weapon. Without wearing his armor, however, he had difficulty moving in the air. Theia's fighter had just happened to be in a good spot, so Koutarou seized the opportunity to use it to get into position.

"Ah, yes. The Harumi De-de-do is quite cool, isn't it?"

The Harumi Bla**de** Ri**de** Torna**do** was what Theia had named Harumi's new move that combined mobility, offense, and defense—or the Harumi De-de-do for short.

"Um... Do we have to call it that?"

Harumi herself wasn't particularly pleased with the name, and looked a bit troubled over Theia insisting on it. She would have preferred something more romantic, like "Harumi's Shooting Star."

"Yes, we do."

"Don't worry, Sakuraba-senpai. I'll just win without the De-de-do!"

"Not you too, Satomi-kun!"

While listening to Harumi complain, Koutarou swung down Signaltin on the mobile weapon in front of him. Harumi's control of the sword was perfect even while pouting, and the instant it connected with the distortion field, she released a burst of mana. The massive flash of energy was converted into heat, and Signaltin easily burned through the distortion field and mobile weapon hiding behind it.

All said and done, it didn't take more than a few minutes for Koutarou and the others to destroy all but one of the original six mobile weapons. In Kenji's eyes, however, it was all over in an instant.

"I had no idea Kou was this strong..."

And that brief instant was revelatory. In it, Kenji realized that there was a side to Koutarou he didn't know. He easily repelled the forty soldiers that had trapped Kenji, Kotori, and Nalfa; and he and his friends readily dispatched the mobile weapons like it was nothing. Kenji's worries about his best friend, it seemed, were completely unfounded. He couldn't even imagine what Koutarou had been through for him to become this strong.

"Kou-niisan is... It's like that play came true..."

Kotori felt the same way. Really, what surprised the brother and sister so much was that they hadn't realized the change that had come over Koutarou during the past two years. That's what shook them the most. If they'd caught even a glimpse of it while it was happening, surely this wouldn't have been so much of a shock.

"It's not like he was that strong from the start. He was just a normal boy at first."

It was Nalfa, who was ardently filming even now, that answered the question on their minds. She knew what Koutarou had accomplished in Forthorthe, and she'd gotten the chance to get to know him a little after coming to Earth. As such, she had a rough grasp of the life Koutarou had been living and the path he'd walked to get there.

"But he could never overlook the misfortune before him. He always strode forward, desperately trying to overcome it."

"Yeah... That sounds just like Kou."

"He's been like that ever since he lost his mom..."

Kenji and Kotori knew what Nalfa was talking about. They hadn't realized that Koutarou was getting stronger, but there was a part of him that hadn't changed at all. Whether it was getting into fights or feeling like he was about to be crushed by loneliness, Koutarou had always moved forward with outstretched

hands.

“Even though he’s the one that needed help... Stupid Kou.”

“Yeah...”

“After an uncountable number of those small steps forward, he ended up carrying himself an unimaginable distance... The result of that is the man you see in front of you now—the Blue Knight, Layous Fatra Veltlion, who saved Forthorthe twice over.”

Koutarou had never intended to become a hero, but he carried the hopes and dreams everyone pinned on him as he walked forward. There were likely countless people who were genuinely stronger than he was, but Koutarou’s strength came from those hope and dreams. People supported him. They wanted him to win, and that inspired him to go even further. And that, eventually, was how he’d ended up becoming a hero.

“The Blue Knight...? Are you saying he really is the Blue Knight from the play?”

“Yes, that’s the short of it.”

“What an idiot... You should’ve just stuck to playing a part, Kou. What kind of dunce actually goes off and becomes a real hero? I need to teach you a thing or two about restraint...”

Kenji couldn’t help recalling all the scars he’d seen on Koutarou during their school trip as second-years. Koutarou had only stepped forward for the sake of the people around him. And because those people became special to him, he went above and beyond for them, going so far as to put his life on the line for them. The scars he carried were the result of that—proof that he’d lived selflessly as a hero.

“But everyone loves Kou-niisan precisely because he doesn’t know how to hold back. I don’t think he can help giving it his all.”

“Perhaps the ones fighting with him feel the same way...”

“Heh, yeah. I bet they do, Nalfa-san.”

As Kotori, Nalfa, and Kenji watched over Koutarou with all kinds of emotions whirling inside of them, he took out the final mobile weapon. Koutarou had

become a hero at a price, but all the scars he carried were a sign of the strength he'd gained along the way. Kenji and the girls could tell that Koutarou had only ended up this way because he'd stayed true to himself. Indeed, this was the result of ceaselessly walking forward, even if it was only one small step at a time.

It didn't take long for Koutarou and the girls to take out all six mobile weapons, but it was still long enough for the forty soldiers to retreat. Koutarou had wanted to capture at least one alive, so them all getting away was a painful blow.

"Veltlion! Of the two attack crafts that appeared, one is retreating with all of the troops! The other is unmanned and moving to attack! It's probably intended to stall us!"

"So they're sending over an attack craft to cover for them now? That's pretty bold. If things go south, they could lose the craft."

"If anything, it sounds like something you'd do, Veltlion."

"Nah. If they thought like I did, we wouldn't be fighting in the first place. I suspect they actually have something else in mind, so don't let your guard down."

While Koutarou and the others were fighting the mobile weapons, the retreating soldiers had boarded an attack craft and were now retreating on it. Moreover, they'd called a second to their location to keep Koutarou and the girls busy while they got away. It was much larger and sturdier than any of the mobile weapons, and packed a substantially bigger punch. Fighting it would be a totally different game.

"They're scared of you, after all, Satomi-kun. They're up against the legendary Blue Knight," said Maki.

She figured the enemy was going to such extreme lengths out of fear. It was a sign of desperation—they'd do anything they could to stop him. Since Maki had once felt that way herself, she had something of an idea what was going through their enemy's head right about now.

“So they’d treat me like the Blue Knight even when I’m not in my armor, huh? I’m not all that impressive on my own, though.”

“Based on results alone, you are truly legendary with or without your armor,” said Kiriha. “It’s perfectly natural for them to be overly cautious in a fight against you.”

“But if they’re getting serious, should we bring out the big guns too?” asked Theia.

And by “big guns,” she meant a bombardment from the Hazy Moon, which was currently in orbit. Ruth, however, objected to this idea.

“An orbital bombardment in an urban area is a violation of the galactic treaty.”

If the Hazy Moon were to attack the enemy craft from its current position, the only option was an orbital bombardment—which was expressly against the treaty Forthorthe had made with its neighboring nations upon entering its space age. It would also cause local problems here on Earth after the laws regarding Forthorthe that Japan had passed just the other day. So in short, they wouldn’t be able to attack directly with the Hazy Moon unless it was an absolute last resort.

“Hahh... Fine, I guess we’ll have to compromise. Hazy Moon, the anti-ship beam cannon!”

So instead, Theia decided to summon the largest weapon she could from the ship. That way, she’d have the excuse that she was using a hand-held firearm to protect herself... flimsy as it might be.

“As you wish, my princess.”

Obeying Theia’s order, the Hazy Moon produced a large cannon with a several-meter barrel from a space-time hole. Theia linked it up with her fighter’s firing control system and took aim at the attack craft. As she did, the sword-shaped crest appeared on her forehead again and the large cannon began glowing red. She was gathering excess energy from Signaltin and Saguratin to increase her attack power, just like she’d done earlier.

“I’m aiming for the one that’s transporting the troops!”

“Don’t you blow it up, Theia!”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?!”

As soon as preparations were complete, Theia pulled the trigger without hesitation. Her target was the attack craft carrying the retreating soldiers. It had only just taken off, so she intended to snipe its flight control system to force an emergency landing in the dry riverbed. Of course, that would be no simple task, but Theia’s marksmanship was prodigious. Her beam flew true, striking the heart of the computer compartment on the underside of the craft.

“That thing again?! Koutarou, that spinny thing is here! The disgusting spinning thing!”

“What?!”

When it hit the ship, Theia’s beam came into contact with something gray. The first thing to happen was a bright flash. As a result, the gray something shrunk somewhat, but the red light also vanished from Theia’s beam, reducing it to a normal beam attack. Immediately following that, it lost its brilliance and color altogether, and was swallowed by the murky gray darkness. The darkness then grew bigger and distinctly began swirling. That gray whirlpool was a terrible, chaotic force that empowered people through malice—and this wasn’t the first time Koutarou and the girls had seen it.

“Tch, why’d that thing have to appear now of all times?!”

Theia clicked her tongue in frustration. Not only had she lost the perfect opportunity to capture their enemy, but her gut told her that things were about to get hairy.

“But what is this...? It doesn’t have the same power it normally does.”

Sanae cocked her head to the side in confusion. She knew that the whirlpool appearing was bad, and she had felt it get stronger by absorbing the beam. But something was decidedly different from when they’d fought Vandarion or Dark Purple. The whirlpools they’d seen before had the power to overwhelm their surroundings, but Sanae couldn’t feel anything like that coming from the whirlpool on the craft.

“Is it possible it just doesn’t have enough willpower behind it yet, Sanae?”

Kiriha asked over the comms. “That thing converts hatred into power, right?”

“Maybe... It only looks like it’s trying to help the soldiers escape. I don’t see anything like it on the other craft, either. Maybe it’s just an echo of Vandarion’s will...”

What Sanae called the disgusting spinning thing—the whirlpool of chaos—absorbed people’s will and discharged the power to alter reality. Vandarion, who had been driven by terrific willpower, had received terrifying power from it. But the opponents Koutarou and the girls were facing now didn’t seem to be as strong-willed. They’d already abandoned the fight and were in the midst of a retreat. Sanae and Kiriha collectively concluded that the situation simply wasn’t conducive to the whirlpool’s dark powers.

The real question is why it showed up in the first place... I hope Sanae was right and it’s just an echo of Vandarion.

Kiriha still had her doubts, but she put them aside for the moment. Right now she needed to focus on coming up with a way to deal with the whirlpool.

“Master, there’s a high energy reaction coming from target B! They’re firing!”

Ruth was indicating the approaching attack craft. Attack crafts were multipurpose military spaceships, but their primary role was delivering troops to the front line. As such, they were equipped with the armaments necessary to breach enemy territory and the gear to land safely. They were inferior to ships intended explicitly for combat, but they still had more than enough firepower to take out ground troops. And its beam cannon would be firing any second now.

“This is bad! Everyone gather around! If we’re spread out—” Koutarou called out.

“Master!” Ruth interrupted. “It’s not aiming for us, but the city!”

“It’s what?!” Theia shrieked.

Ruth had analyzed the attack craft’s target based on the angle of its beam cannon’s barrel, and hearing her grim prediction shook Koutarou and the others to the core. In order to pin them down and escape safely, the enemy had chosen to attack the city. It was big, but defenseless. It didn’t have a prayer against a Forthorthian beam cannon. A single shot would kill dozens of people,

maybe even hundreds. That alone could end up being the ember that ignited public opinion against the aliens, so Koutarou and the girls had to drop their pursuit of the enemy and do everything they could to stop it. It was a terrifying attack that used Koutarou and the girls' priorities against them.

"No, they're not aiming for the city. They want me."

Koutarou unleashed Signaltin's power and used it to soar up into the sky. He was going to place himself in the beam cannon's line of fire and protect the city.

These are the remnants of Vandarion's faction... They're just as brutal as before and even more cunning!

Koutarou had caught on to the enemy's real goal. Their plan had three parts. The first was to pin down Koutarou and the others with the unmanned attack craft. The second was to drive a wedge between Japan and Forthorthe. And the third was Koutarou. If he stood in the way of the bombardment and got himself killed, that was fine. And if he didn't, they could use footage of the Blue Knight abandoning the Earthlings to save himself for propaganda purposes. That's why they'd intentionally given him time to choose to put himself in the line of fire or not—both options were fine with them They'd either get to assassinate Koutarou or the Blue Knight's image.

"Koutarou, you can't! The whirlpool is lending its strength to them! This isn't an attack you can deal with on your own! You're going to die!" Kiriha tried to warn him.

"It's unfortunate... but I can't use that as an excuse."

Koutarou had flown right into the enemy's trap knowing full well what he was doing. But there was no hesitation in his actions. He was simply taking another small step to prevent the tragedy about to occur in front of him.

It's not who your enemy is that matters. It's who you won't betray... That's what I told Her Majesty Alaia...

Koutarou didn't really care what happened to him. He didn't mind that the whirlpool was involved or that he might end up dying. All that mattered to him was standing in front of that beam cannon to protect the city and the hopes and dreams everyone had pinned on him up until this day.

Nalfa could tell something wasn't right as she was filming. The feeling first struck her when the gray whirlpool appeared. Something told her it just didn't belong, much the same way one might feel when noticing a UFO or a ghost in a photo. That sensation grabbed a far sterner hold on her attention than the attack craft about to fire its beam cannon.

I don't want to record Koutarou-sama being defeated by that...

Nalfa, however, wasn't aware that she was immediately recognized as an enemy by the whirlpool. No, all she was doing was praying for Koutarou's safety. She didn't want to film some tragic headline. She'd much rather record an uneventful day of Koutarou playing with his friends than the Blue Knight's dramatic final moments.

You don't have to pull off an amazing victory like in the movies. Just please come back safe, Koutarou-sama... If you're going to get hurt, I hope it's just something stupid we can all laugh about later. If not, I... We won't be able to take it.

Nalfa continued to pray as her camera rolled. That really was her only wish, and her humble prayer triggered something.

Sparkle...

If Kenji and Kotori had been looking at Nalfa in that moment, they would have seen her faintly glowing in the colors of the rainbow. But both of them were looking up at Koutarou, and Nalfa herself was focused on her camera. The three of them were oblivious.

Nalfa...? What is that light around her?

But the observant Kiriha, who was watching over things from the rear line, saw it. Yet not even she understood the meaning of the shimmering light Nalfa was emitting.

The attack craft was currently functioning without a pilot present, meaning

there was a limit to the extent of the control that the whirlpool was capable of exerting over it. The whirlpool was a rift in the order of the universe, but it still required a willing human conduit to generate power. And Ralgwin, who was operating the attack craft remotely, was also keeping a cool head. As such, the will he poured into the whirlpool was paltry, as was the power he gained in return. Even with the echoes of Vandarion's will lending him aid, the malice and willpower currently being channeled into and generated from the whirlpool were but a fraction of what Vandarion had exhibited in his decisive battle with Koutarou... but the same was true for Koutarou as well.

Back then, *Signaltin and Saguratin* had gathered not just the power of the invaders, but also the power of Koutarou's former comrades and the hopes and prayers of everyone wishing for his victory. Compared to that, Signaltin wasn't shining nearly as brightly now. With his will and the girls' combined, they should still easily be able to overcome the whirlpool of chaos, but Koutarou was at a clear disadvantage at the moment with the whirlpool's power being channeled directly into the attack craft's beam cannon.

I just hope this limits the damage to the city...

Koutarou readied Signaltin and drew as much power from the blade as he could manage. His resolve was firm. He didn't even have time to put on his armor, and he was going up against a large-caliber beam cannon with just the sword to protect himself. There was a considerable chance his defenses wouldn't hold. The beam would likely be fatal, and even if he survived, he would be seriously injured. One way or another, he would be knocked out of the battle and he'd have to leave the rest to the girls. He'd done his best—shoring up his defenses and placing himself directly in the beam's path to protect the city—and now all that was left was to pray.

"Do something, Saguratin!" shouted Sanae.

"Everyone, cast defensive spells on Satomi-kun!" rallied Harumi.

Sanae unleashed a powerful, protective burst of her spiritual energy and the magicians tried to help Koutarou with defensive spells, but in the end, it still likely wouldn't amount to much in the face of the enhanced-strength beam cannon. The only one that really stood a chance of shielding Koutarou was

Alunaya, who was too far away and would never make it in time. With the cards stacked against him, it seemed Koutarou's fate was sealed. He was going to die, and despite the desperation of the moment, none of the girls could do a single thing about it. They all fell into a panic, but it was too late. The moment was upon them.

Fwooooosh!

The beam the attack craft fired was stained a murky gray, but that wasn't an indication of a lack of power. No, rather than meaning the temperature of the particles making up the beam had dropped, it was simply the visual effect of the beam having been altered by an outside force. The dark gray torrent snaked its way towards Koutarou like it had a will of its own.

"Koutarou! Fly away!"

"Uncle, do something!"

"Ruth, have the fighters wedge themselves in!"

"I'm trying! But they won't—"

"Alaia-sama, please protect Satomi-kun!"

"Satomi-kun, take me with you if you're going to die!"

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Satomi-san!"

"Veltlion, don't leave me behind again!"

"We're not going to make it! Why now of all times?!"

All nine girls screamed out at the same time, their panicked voices overlapping in an indistinguishable panic. But the sentiment was the same—they were all worried for Koutarou's safety. But alas, worry as they might, that wouldn't be enough to save him. Yet in the very next moment, something strange happened.

"Huh, what is this?!" Sanae exclaimed.

"I don't care what it is, just use it to protect Koutarou!" Theia shouted.

All of a sudden, light began flowing out of the girls at an explosive rate. The colors varied, corresponding with the crests on their foreheads. And through

those crests, the nine lights were transferred to Signaltin.

“Is this everyone’s power?!”

While Koutarou was astonished by this strange phenomenon, the rainbow of lights flowing out from Signaltin wrapped his body in nine layers which came together to block the incoming beam. More accurately, the rainbow-colored light negated the murky darkness of the incoming attack, reducing it to a normal beam which it deflected upward. It took everyone by surprise, including Kiriha...

These nine colors... They’re the same as that glowing light around Nalfa. Is that coincidence... or inevitability? Does it have something to do with our lost memories?

But thanks to the small amount of insight she had into the situation, she was a little less taken aback than everyone else. That allowed her to snap back to her senses sooner, and she quickly shouted out to Koutarou and the others.

“Everyone, it’s time to counterattack! Don’t let it get off a second shot!”

Koutarou was now protected by the rainbow of light and the invaders were all aglow with power. At last, they were finally in a position to do something. But it would have to be quick. If they waited too long, the enemy ship would fire again with reckless abandon. They couldn’t afford to miss this opportunity.

“Aiming for the city?! You’re a disgrace to all warriors, you scum! And you dare fire at our precious Koutarou?!”

The first to move was, as expected, Theia. She had the crimson fighter that she was controlling remotely charge right at the attack craft while repeatedly firing its beam cannon. Normally, a beam cannon of its size and power wouldn’t be capable of doing any real damage to a full-on attack craft, but right now Theia and her fighter were both enveloped with a magical red light. It easily gave the small fighter’s cannon enough power to pierce through and shut down the ship’s distortion field generator. It was as magnificent a display as Theia fighting in her Combat Dress.

“Target B has released a large number of flying objects— they’re missiles!”

Like Theia, Ruth was also fighting with unmanned fighters. But in her case, she

was controlling multiple units like they were a single organism. Her control, which was already superb in its own right, became exquisite when she and her drones were draped in yellow light. They danced around each other, working flawlessly to block and shoot down all of the missiles incoming at high speed.

"Shizuka, Maki, let's go! Time for a triangle magical knight attack!" called Sanae.

"Ooh, I get to be a magical knight too?" asked Shizuka.

"Heehee, when it comes to mana, no one has more than you, Kasagi-san!" giggled Maki.

Thanks to Ruth's defensive maneuvering, the three of them were able to approach the attack craft without worry. With its distortion field already destroyed, they dared to brave engaging it at close range in order to unleash their most powerful attacks. Together, the three girls—Sanae wielding the purple Saguratin, Maki her indigo magical greatsword, and half-dragon Shizuka her dark flames—destroyed a great deal of the attack craft's weapons.

"We should aim for its propulsion engine towards the aft. But downing the craft recklessly could spell disaster in the city, so our best option would be to use high voltage to force a temporary shutdown," advised Kiriha.

"Okay, Yurika-san!" shouted Harumi.

"I'll match you, Sakuraba-senpai!" shouted Yurika right back.

With her keen wit sharpened even further by the green light around her, Kiriha immediately identified the optimal plan for bringing down the enemy ship. Harumi and Yurika then used their magic to make it happen. The gigantic bolt of white and blue lightning that they conjured by combining their powers directly assaulted the attack craft. As planned, the strike temporarily shut down the ship's system, engaging emergency devices that would safely land it.

"I've managed to infiltrate the craft while it's in the process of rebooting," announced Clan.

"You really are a genius when it comes to shady business like this," teased Koutarou.

“Clam it! Why don’t you ever compliment me on anything nice, like my feminine charm?!”

“Oh, but Your Highness happens to look particularly lovey today—”

“I said clam it!”

Like Kiriha, Clan’s intelligence was enhanced by the orange light around her. She could handle a computer intuitively as it was, but in this state, she worked it like it was an extension of her own body. And with it, she swiftly and decisively took control of the ship by wedging herself into its gravitational wave communications.

“...Wait, what’s this?! Veltlion, the craft is set to self-destruct!”

“So they’re planning on destroying any evidence!”

Upon taking over the ship, Clan realized a very dangerous and time-sensitive problem. The attack craft was set to explode soon, which would reduce it and anything around it to mere debris. Koutarou and Clan could only assume it was the enemy’s way of covering their tracks—and a sacrifice they’d decided to make once they realized they couldn’t win.

“I’ll leave that to you!” shouted Koutarou.

“What about you?!” shouted Clan.

“People are going to die if I don’t deal with that whirlpool!”

“Understood!”

Despite knowing the dangers of the self-destructing ship, Koutarou still prioritized the whirlpool of chaos. If the whirlpool added power to the explosion, it would turn a disaster into a catastrophe. He knew it had to be taken out first, for everyone’s safety, and he knew he could leave the exploding craft to the girls. He was sure they could handle it; he was confident in every single one of them.

“Sanae, you come with me!” he called.

“For a combo attack?!” she called back in excitement.

“That’s right!”

Sanae by his side, Koutarou flew off towards the whirlpool. Based on his previous experiences, it would take both Signaltin and Saguratin to get rid of it. Its magic would need to be dispelled, and the evil spiritual energy within it would need to be exorcised—just like what had happened with Vandarion.

“Heehee, our love is being tested!” Sanae giggled.

“I don’t think that’s what’s happening,” replied Koutarou.

“I’m not talking about *that* kind of love; I’m talking about the bigger kind!”

“Yeah, I guess it does feel like that’s being tested.”

“Right? But don’t worry! I know your love for Sanae-chan is bigger than the whole world!”

The whirlpool pulled away from them as if retreating from the rainbow speeding towards it. It seemed to know it was lacking in willpower, and therefore couldn’t stand up to Koutarou as he was. In order to remain intact until the ship self-destructed, its best option was escape. Of course, Koutarou and Sanae wouldn’t let it get away that easily. They chased after it with their magical and psychic powers, rapidly closing the distance. Seemingly displeased, the whirlpool began hurling attacks at them generated from the pure power of chaos.

“Sanae, get behind me!”

“That’s it! This is love!”

The chaotic energy condensed into bullet-like projectiles, each a dark, murky gray. Koutarou’s rainbow would be much more effective at blocking them than Sanae’s purple, so she circled around in an elegant, sweeping arc to get behind him, joyfully clinging to his back. Not a moment later, the chaos bullets struck them. The rainbow shield in front of Koutarou, however, was as tough as it was brilliant. Not only had it blocked the bullets, it continued to shine its warm, colorful light. The dark waves of chaotic energy didn’t stand a chance against it.

“All right! Now you follow me, Koutarou!!”

Realizing the danger had passed, Sanae kicked off Koutarou’s back and started flying again. She charged in towards the whirlpool, Saguratin held at the ready

in both hands. Koutarou flew right after her.

“Don’t get too reckless, Sanae!”

“Sometimes not looking back is its own form of love!”

“What are you on about?!”

As though it had realized its energy bullets had no effect, the whirlpool sped away from Koutarou and Sanae like it was fleeing. It tired to throw them off by suddenly changing direction and moving behind objects when possible, but it was all a fruitless struggle. It couldn’t escape Sanae’s spirit sight.

“Let’s do this, Koutarou!”

“Yeah!”

“Secret Technique: Heavenly Supreme Love Love V-Slaaash!”

Vwish!

Sanae came from the right and Koutarou came from the left, their strikes flawlessly coming together in the shape of a V. It cut into the whirlpool, which rapidly began shrinking as its magic and spiritual energy began bleeding away.



“Well, Sanae?”

“Um... Yeah, it’s completely gone. We’re okay now.”

Sanae continued staring at the whirlpool long after it seemed to disappear, keeping an eye on it with her spirit sight. It still existed even after it had shrunk down to the point it was no longer visible to the naked human eye. But at that size, it burst in a miniscule explosion when a single beam of the rainbow light shone upon it.

But that was Koutarou’s... wasn’t it?

Just before the shrunken whirlpool disappeared, Sanae thought she could feel the aura of a very familiar person on the other side “What’s wrong?” Koutarou asked.

“Oh, nothing. I think I was just imagining things,” she replied.

Surely that’s all it was. After all, the person she thought she felt was right beside her. There was no way someone could be on both sides of the whirlpool at the same time. It was far easier to think she’d simply been mistaken. So now, with their job finished, Sanae and Koutarou both turned around to see how their friends were doing. It was just about then that the explosion went off.

Boom!

The attack craft, which had landed on the riverbank, self-destructed. However, it was a rather small explosion. It scattered parts this way and that, but the ship was still largely intact. The surrounding baseball and soccer fields would be a mess, but that was about the extent of the damage.

“Is everyone okay?!” Koutarou called out.

Though the explosion was relatively small, he wasn’t sure where the girls had been when it went off. He wanted to know they were safe.

“No, I’m not okay! I have no idea how much I’m going to weigh after this!” shouted Shizuka immediately.

“Thanks to Shizuka and Yurika, we’re all fine over here,” clarified Kiriha.

Fortunately, all was well. After Clan hacked into attack craft’s systems and

landed it, Shizuka and Yurika broke in. They tried to dismantle the self-destruct device at first, but they ran out of time and were forced to let it blow. It was a dangerous proposition, but Yurika had used a teleportation spell to send the self-destruct device far away while Shizuka used Alunaya's mana to shield everyone.

"That's great news," said Koutarou with a sigh of relief.

"It's terrible! I'm going to weigh a ton!"

"We finished up here, Shizuka, so we're on our way back to you guys now."

"That would be good," said Kiriha. "Kenji and Kotori-san are asking for an explanation."

"Yeah, I bet... I'll be right there, so tell them to wait for me."

"Understood. I'll let them know."

Wrapping the discussion there, Kiriha cut the comms line. Koutarou let out another sigh. The battle was over, but he knew he had a whole other fight ahead of him.

"Are you going to tell them the truth?" asked Sanae.

"I think I should. They'll find out eventually even if I try and hide it," Koutarou replied.

"That's true."

"Jeez, what to do...?"

He realized that there was no longer a way he could keep things from Kenji. He'd come clean and tell him everything. At least, that's what he wanted to do —but he didn't have the slightest idea how to explain or even where to start. The story of how he'd gotten to be in the position he was in was so long and involved that he wasn't even sure he'd be able to tell it properly. The thought made his shoulders sink.

"Can't you just start from the beginning and explain everything in order? I'm sure it'll take a while, but even if you don't tell him now, it'll all come out eventually, right? Glasses-kun is your best friend, after all."

“Yeah, you’ve got a point there.”

Koutarou knew Sanae was right. Even if he only told Kenji the short version now, he’d end up giving him all the details eventually down the line. That being the case, he might as well just fess up and tell the whole story. He’d be saving himself time in the long run.

“You know, Sanae, you’re pretty brilliant every now and again.”

“Heehee, make sure you praise me when I am!”

“Good girl.”

“Eeheehee!”

In the end, the attack craft carrying Vandarion’s forty soldiers escaped, making the politics of the encounter rather complicated. But nevertheless, Nalfa and the Matsudaira siblings were safe. As far as Koutarou was concerned, that was a victory. He and Sanae could return to their friends with proud smiles on their faces.

The Truth and Ping-pong Balls

Saturday, March 16th

As expected, Koutarou went on for quite some time. There was a lot to tell, and he wasn't particularly good at storytelling. He'd started his tale at about noon, and didn't finish until about the time the sun was starting to set.

"It's nice to meet you, ho! We can finally talk, Mackenzie, ho! I'm Karama!"

"This may be the first time you've seen us, ho, but we've always been close by! I'm Korama!"

"Kou, how are these guys even moving?! They're clearly haniwas, but their bodies bend and wiggle with them!"

"I don't know the details, dude. Anyways, the most pressing part is that there are people coming to Earth to get their hands on mysterious technology like these little guys. And it'd be trouble for Theia and the others if this kind of technology gets leaked back to Forthorthe."

"We're very popular, you know, ho!"

"We can't fall into enemy hands, ho!"

There was a lot about Koutarou's story that Kenji simply couldn't believe, but he couldn't argue with the haniwas talking and moving right in front of him. It wasn't all that different from when the Forthorthians had come. At this rate, he'd end up believing even the most unbelievable part of the whole story—that Yurika was a magical girl. But that was thanks to Kenji's open mind, and certainly not thanks to Koutarou's lackluster storytelling.

"So there's some kind of moratorium on exporting technology, huh? I'm guessing this explains the incident with Nalfa the other day too."

"Basically. There are people who would use her as a way to bypass that moratorium."

“I can see how that’s a problem. That said, I’m not sure how Forthorthian militants could even get here, considering Forthorthe basically just made contact with Earth…”

Koutarou and the others had discovered that underground groups from both Forthorthe and Japan were clandestinely working together, but if they’d managed to kill Nalfa, it likely wouldn’t have mattered. All the public would see was that an innocent Forthorthian girl had been killed with Earth weapons. It would drive a wedge between the two nations, breaking down relations and mutually agreed upon conventions like the moratorium on tech exchange. Fortunately that had all been avoided, but both worlds had been dangerously close to being plunged into chaos.

“Politics sure is complicated... But I gotta say, Mackenzie, it seems like you have a knack for this intrigue stuff, huh?”

Koutarou was surprised by how easily Kenji seemed to get his head around the nuanced affairs at play. He didn’t seem the type, so Koutarou had thought Kenji would only consider all this to be a pain in the neck.

“I’m in the drama club, you know? I watch a lot of movies for research.”

The wide variety of film Kenji exposed himself to had helped broaden his horizons. In cinema, world-ending danger and politics were all too common. There were several movies he could think of on the spot that reminded him of the current situation, which gave him a certain sense of perspective.

“I’m glad you understand, Mackenzie. Makes it easy for me to explain. And I’ll be counting on you to relay this all to Kin-chan for me.”

“See, that’s what makes you a terrible friend. You always leave the troublesome stuff to me.”

Kotori wasn’t currently with the two boys. The plan was for Kenji to hear Koutarou’s story first to make sure it was suitable for his little sister’s ears, but in the end, Koutarou had passed the responsibility of retelling everything on to Kenji. Koutarou figured that would be easier and reduce the risk of any misunderstandings. He thought hearing it from her brother would be better than hearing it from him.

“Well, you two made up, right? I’m sure if you explain everything to her, she will think even better of you. What do you say?”

“You sure know how to hit where it hurts... Sheesh, what’s a brother to do?”

Kenji scratched his head and sighed. It was true that recent incidents had helped repair his relationship with Kotori. He’d been willing to protect Nalfa even though it meant putting his own life on the line, and Kotori admired him for that. Things were still a little awkward between them, however, so Koutarou thought that Kenji having a good excuse to talk to her for a while would help patch things up the rest of the way. Kenji agreed, albeit reluctantly.

“I just hope you’re not forced into making some other ridiculous promise, Mackenzie.”

“You’re telling me. When it comes to love... Kotori is way too romantic.”

Kenji sighed again and leaned against the railing of the roof. Kotori had already made him promise to handle his relationships with women more wholesomely in the future—that was the minimum condition for her to consider forgiving him. Nevertheless, it felt like a punishment to Kenji. In order to find his soulmate, he’d convinced himself he needed to date as many girls as possible until he met the right one. Kotori, meanwhile, believed that fate would bring soulmates together. It was simply something they’d never see eye-to-eye on.

“But to be honest, I’m on Kin-chan’s side this time.”

“Of course you are—you’re the very embodiment of Kotori’s ideals. If I tell her what’s really going on, she’ll just use you as an example to boast about how right she was.”

The relationship between Koutarou and the girls was like an intricate puzzle. If any one of them were missing, the full picture was lost. Fate had brought them together, and love kept them together. Kenji was right; that was exactly the kind of romanticism Kotori idealized. Koutarou not being able to settle on his soulmate was a bit of an issue, but because he treated all the girls so gentlemanly, Kotori didn’t complain. Not with Koutarou, anyway. It arguably made her grow stricter with Kenji.

“But, well... thanks to that, I can finally accept it, Kou.”

“So you finally give in?”

“Not that. I’m talking about you and those girls. I always thought it was strange. I always wondered how they got so close to you in such a short amount of time.”

“They didn’t *do* anything. It all just sort of happened.”

“I know; that’s exactly what Kotori would have wanted.”

Kenji knew better than anyone how hard it was for Koutarou to let people into his life. Once upon a time, he’d only made exceptions for Kenji and Kotori. But in just two short years, nine more exceptions had appeared. Kenji thought it was a good thing, but he’d always wondered how it happened. Hearing everything that had actually taken place over the last two years, however, it finally made sense. Koutarou had been through thick and thin with each of the girls. That was why there was no way he could pick just one of them over the others. Their mutual relationship was already too strong. And now that he realized that, Kenji decided he’d stop trying to rush his best friend into making a decision.

“So I just need to worry about Kotori, huh...?”

Kenji had a faint smile on his face as he looked up at the setting sun. Before today, he’d always been worried about Kotori and Koutarou. But now he realized there was nothing he could do for Koutarou. He’d have to leave him to the girls and focus on Kotori instead. This should have been a development worth celebrating, but Kenji felt a little sad about it for some reason.

“Sorry, but you’re not off the hook that easy, Mackenzie.”

“Hmm? What do you mean, Kou?”

“Since you’re my closest friend, both good people like Nalfa-san and villains like those guys the other day are going to be coming after you from now on.”

“Jeez, life would’ve been easier if you’d just skipped this legendary hero business... What am I gonna do with you? Or myself, for that matter? At this rate, I’m not ever going to get a chance to take it easy.”

“My bad. But at the very least, I’ll definitely protect you and Kin-chan... just like you guys did me.”

“I’m not worried about settling that score, Kou. I know you’re good for it.”

Koutarou was out of Kenji’s hands now, but a whole new load of problems had fallen in his lap in his place. The prospects were potentially quite dangerous, but Kenji was happy—just happy enough to make up for the sadness he felt over not being able to help his best friend anymore.



Forthorthe embraced freedom of the press just like Japan did, but it wasn't Nalfa's goal to test the limits of that. She didn't want to hurt anyone with her journalistic work, and so took great care in editing the footage she'd collected before uploading it to the pangalactic network. And there was someone who was none too happy to hear it.

"Is it true that we were censored, ho?!"

"We won't be making our pangalactic network debut, ho?!"

Or rather, two tiny someones—Karama and Korama. They woefully bounced over to Nalfa with tears in their eyes the next time she visited room 106. They'd been looking forward to debuting in Nalfa's documentary series.

"I-I'm sorry, little haniwas. I wanted to avoid revealing anything about the People of the Earth's technology."

Nalfa was sorry to disappoint them, but didn't want Forthorthe at large to know that the haniwas were really from Earth. They'd appeared occasionally in news footage during the civil war, but it was all too easy to assume they were just odd, custom-built robots. They hadn't really garnered any special attention. But if Nalfa released footage of them here on Earth, there would be clever observers that made the connection. She didn't want to risk that.

"Aww, I see, ho... Then I guess we can't complain, ho."

"Yeah, ho! And besides, ho, we've already made our debut on the news in Forthorthe!"

Contrary to Nalfa's expectations, however, the haniwas took it all rather well. It seemed their real goal was simply to be on film, not necessarily in Nalfa's videos.

"Nalfa-san's videos are really popular, so they have a lot of influence for better or for worse," said Koutarou. "You'll just have to bear with her for now, and I'm sure you'll get to be in them eventually."

"Really, ho?!"

"Do you mean it, ho?!"

"Of course," said Nalfa. "I'm sure robots will quickly become more common in

both places, so I'll ask you to be guest stars when the time is right."

"All right, ho!"

"We can't wait, ho!"

"Master, speaking of popular... The video that Nalfa-sama took of the battle the other day is getting a lot of attention in Forthorthe."

"Didn't you say the same thing about the last one?"

"This one is even more popular!"

"Really?"

"Er, well, you could say that. Thanks to you, Koutarou-sama... it's doing okay."

"Heehee, there's no need to be so modest, Nalfa-sama. It racked up more than 1.8 billion views on the first day, and right now it's quickly making its way to the 10 billion mark."

Nalfa released the new footage as part of her "Nalfa Laren's Japan Chronicles" series. It was a huge hit that had gone viral as soon as it was posted. It showcased the Satomi band of knights fighting together and the aftermath of the battle. Theia had run immediately over to check on Koutarou, and a small disagreement had led to a full-blown fistfight that culminated with Theia putting a bandage on the goose egg she'd given Koutarou. Their relationship was so special and uniquely cute that it was a hot topic among Forthorthians, particularly Forthorthian women who accounted for a large number of the video's views. Experts calculated that a considerable population was just watching the video over and over again.

"As a result of its popularity, Nalfa-sama has received a rather large royalty package."

"How large are we talking?"

"In Japanese currency, it would be roughly 3.8 billion yen."

"That much?!"

Koutarou was floored. In Forthorthe, videos on the pangalactic network received royalties based on the number of views. Those royalties, which added

up across videos, had reached a considerable sum for Nalfa. In the short time she'd been posting since coming to Earth, she'd gotten rich.

"That's amazing, Nalfa-san!"

"I-It's a bit embarrassing to admit, but that's what happened..."

Nalfa looked down, red in the cheeks. She was aware that Koutarou and Theia were really the ones who'd gotten all the attention. This was no different than the first few videos she'd uploaded, so she felt uncomfortable being the one to receive praise for her success.

"God is definitely playing favorites! Why is there such a big difference between me and Nalfa-chan?!"

As it turned out, there was someone other than the haniwas who was unhappy with how things had turned out. Yurika was practically in mourning. Comparing her personal situation to Nalfa's was just too depressing.

"That's what you get for jumping at shady job offers," scolded Koutarou.

Yurika had gladly accepted a part-time job that paid 200,000 yen a day, only to later discover she'd really been working for yakuza all along. Before she'd been able to earn anywhere near the sum she wanted, the office had been blown up.

"It's a good thing the Sun Rangers had already swooped in and carted everyone away," teased Theia.

"You didn't send the self-destruct device to the office just to destroy any evidence of you working there, did you?" asked Koutarou.

"O-Of course not! It was just the only place I could think of on the spot that would be deserted!"

It had been one thing after another recently, but Yurika just couldn't fight back the tears when she heard that Nalfa had earned several billion yen practically overnight.

"You're already rich, Satomi-san, so please take care of me."

"I'm poor on Earth, Yurika."

Yurika clung to Koutarou, her eyes still wet with tears. Koutarou tried to push her away, but she was clinging to him with such strength that he couldn't get her off.

To me, it looks like Yurika-san is really the one who came out on top here...

If Koutarou really wanted, he wouldn't have any trouble peeling Yurika off. And when Nalfa thought about why he hadn't done that already, she grew a little envious. She'd gladly give up all her money to be in Yurika's shoes right now.

After a thorough investigation, Kiriha concluded that the remnants of Vandarion's faction hadn't really been intent on causing any serious damage by self-destructing the attack craft. Shizuka and Yurika had been able to protect everyone from it, not just because of their incredible powers, but because the charge of the explosion was relatively small to begin with.

"Kii, what's your basis for all this?"

"I have three primary reasons, the first of which is that the wreckage of the craft makes it apparent that it wasn't maintained to spec."

The remains of the exploded craft indicated it wasn't fit for manned missions. There were faulty parts everywhere; any crew that dared to fly aboard it would risk dying before they ever saw combat.

"How did it end up like that...?"

Koutarou cocked his head to the side. He understood that a craft like that was an ideal candidate for remote control, but he couldn't understand why Vandarion's faction had a craft in that condition in the first place.

"They've probably long run out of service parts considering the length of time they've been away from Forthorthe," explained Kiriha. "I believe they'd been cannibalizing that ship in order to maintain others, which is why they sent it after us as a decoy."

If they had several malfunctioning ships on their hands and no parts to make the necessary repairs, rather than losing all of them, it made sense to sacrifice one to save the many. And that's exactly what they'd been forced to do since

they were so far away from home. That made it the perfect ship to send out on an unmanned mission it might never come back from.

“So it was a sacrificial pawn from the start, was it? That means that was their plan all along; they didn’t actually change their minds when things went south,” mused Clan.

“A self-destruct device was intentionally planted on the ship; that much is clear. But that begs another question. The explosive power of the device wasn’t enough to deal any serious damage to its surroundings,” said Kiriha.

And that was her second reason for thinking Vandarion’s faction hadn’t intended it to be much of an attack. By studying the remains of the blown-up yakuza office, she had a good idea of the power of the explosion. With that, she was able to determine that it hadn’t been strong or intense enough to do much more than take out a single building. There was never any risk of it demolishing the city.

“That’s strange. I thought it was a backup plan in the case they failed to assassinate Nalfa-san, so it doesn’t make any sense to cut down on the explosives,” said Koutarou.

He folded his arms and began thinking. Their goal had been to kill Nalfa with Earth weapons and turn Forthorthian public opinion against the Earthlings. It was a desperate move, and if all else failed, it seemed they would resort to dealing widespread damage in the city to forcibly deteriorate Japanese-Forthorthian relations. But they’d done near the opposite and used a compact charge when they self-destructed their ship. It wasn’t even enough to completely destroy the craft, much less the other evidence they were leaving behind. Koutarou couldn’t figure out why that was.

“The answer to that is my third reason. After gathering up all of the parts, we could only reassemble 80 percent of the craft,” said Kiriha.

“What does that mean?” asked Koutarou.

“It means that someone walked off with the other 20 percent.”

“So that’s why the explosion was so weak?! They knew it would be impossible to analyze the technology if it was all completely destroyed?!”

“That’s right. Their true motivation in using a weak charge was to indirectly hand over Forthorthian technology to Earthlings. And since we have no way of knowing who stumbled upon those parts, we have no way of tracking them down.”

The attack craft had already largely been cannibalized for parts, meaning it couldn’t be used for most normal missions. What, then, would be the most effective use of a predominantly useless craft? The answer Vandarion’s faction had arrived at was using it to further their goals by disseminating Forthorthian technology in the event the assassination failed.

“Our enemy is calm and collected. They’ve been prudent and levelheaded, strategically calculating just what they need to do in order to come out on top. They may be Vandarion’s faction, but they’re clearly nothing like Vandarion was,” said Kiriha.

If fighting erupted, terrorists and intelligence agencies from all over the world would be on the site in the blink of an eye. Snagging a piece of a self-destructed alien craft would be like finding gold, and anyone who managed to get their hands on some of it would likely take it right back to their organization. The radius the parts had been scattered was limited thanks to Yurika teleporting the bomb away, but about 20 percent of the ship was unaccounted for. It had likely wandered off in the wrong hands, which was a terrifying thought. Even if the parts were faulty or malfunctioning, they were still pieces of Forthorthian technology that could reveal any number of secrets if studied carefully.

“So this guy is like a thoroughly evil Elexis...” muttered Koutarou.

“That’s problematic... To think technology, even limited, would be leaked like this...” mumbled Clan.

Without knowing who had taken the parts or where, there was nothing Koutarou and the others could do to stop it. They would be powerless if forces of evil chose to use what they’d discovered for war or worse. Earth might yet be plunged into chaos, and relations with Forthorthe might yet be ruined. Indeed, this was a far more effective plan than crashing the ship in an attempt to destroy the city.

The ping-pong cannon that Clan had started building for fun was finally ready for a live test fire. She'd been through several prototypes and had settled on using a barrel just shy of eight meters long that pushed ping-pong balls through with compressed air while drawing from the air in front of them. She believed this would be the way to shoot them out as fast as possible, and today was the day she'd be putting that to the test. The sturdy, transparent plastic cannon was shining majestically in the light of the afternoon sun.

"Veltlion, preparations are complete."

"All right, then let's get started."

"Sanae, I'll leave that side to you."

"Righto, Glasses! Air goes out here! And goes in here!"

Brrrm!

The air inside the barrel was drained, and began building in the tank behind it. It would be that difference in pressure that gave the ping-pong balls their terrifying speed.

"The barrel and tank have reached their specified values. There are no obstacles in the line of fire. Koutarou, Sanae, Clan-dono, please fall back to safety," reported Kiriha.

"C'mon, Clan."

"Wait for me!"

"Heehee, hurry up, Glasses, or we'll leave you behind!"

Once their jobs were complete, Koutarou, Clan, and Sanae retreated behind a safety panel.

"All clear now," announced Clan. "We're ready to fire."

Preparations were finished and everyone was in a safe position. Kiriha powered up the control panel and opened the safety cover so that she could access the firing button at a moment's notice. If all went well, once it was pressed, the cannon would shoot a ping-pong ball at unprecedented speed.

"Clan-dono, the countdown, please," requested Kiriha.

“Here we go!” cheered Sanae.

“I just hope it goes well,” sighed Koutarou.

“Let us begin—five!” Clan called, initiating the countdown.

There was no real point in shooting a ping-pong ball fast enough to break the sound barrier. But Clan looked like she was enjoying herself, so even Koutarou was starting to get a little excited.

“Four! Three! Two! One! Fire!”

“Firing!”

Fwoom!

On command, the tank’s valve opened, unleashing a burst of compressed air into the barrel, inside of which was currently a vacuum. It sent the ping-pong ball flying, ejecting it right out the muzzle on the other side.

“It was so fast I couldn’t see anything,” remarked Koutarou.

“It was like the ball just suddenly disappeared,” added Sanae.

“The sound was unremarkable too. It didn’t have any impact,” observed Clan.

“But the results were interesting, you three. The measured speed of the ball after leaving the barrel was 2,482 kilometers per hour—just over Mach 2,” announced Kiriha.

“Then it was a huge success!” cheered Clan.

She had a big smile on her face as she excitedly pumped her fist in the air. The lively display was so out of character for her that it was utterly adorable. So much so that Koutarou, always the killjoy, almost blurted out a compliment.

“This was indeed a splendid result. Congratulations, Clan-dono.”

“You did it, Glasses!”

“Thank you, Kii, Sanae. It was all thanks to your assistance.”

“...*This* is how technology should be used.”

In the end, Koutarou refrained from commenting on Clan’s adorableness. While that was in part due to being a sourpuss, he also had something else

weighing on his mind.

“What do you mean?” asked Clan.

“I mean to make someone smile.”

That was the conclusion Koutarou had come to after their run-in with the attack craft. Firing a ping-pong ball at high speed for nothing other than fun... It made someone happy. The same could be said for Clan’s PAF, the device she’d invented to help Harumi. It wouldn’t usher in a new era of technology, but it had the potential to help handicapped people everywhere. In other words, it too had the power to spread smiles. Koutarou wanted Clan to continue creating inventions like that.

“That’s true. That’s perhaps the greatest reward yet.”

Clan was thinking something similar herself. Rather than making something that would revolutionize the world, she’d prefer making things that made people happy. And if those people happened to be her friends, then all the better.

“Too bad not everyone’s smiling.”

“Hey, who broke my window?!”

Unfortunately, the ping-pong cannon seemed to have wrought an unexpected outcome. The high-speed projectile had sailed so far that it smashed right through the window of a distant house. The homeowner there was furious.

“Th-That was a miscalculation! An accident! An accident, I tell you! It wasn’t like I did it on purpose!”

“Better go explain that to him.”

“Ugh... A-Ahem, Veltlion, if it’s not too much to ask, would you come with me?”

“Hah... Yeah, I guess. Let’s go, Clan.”

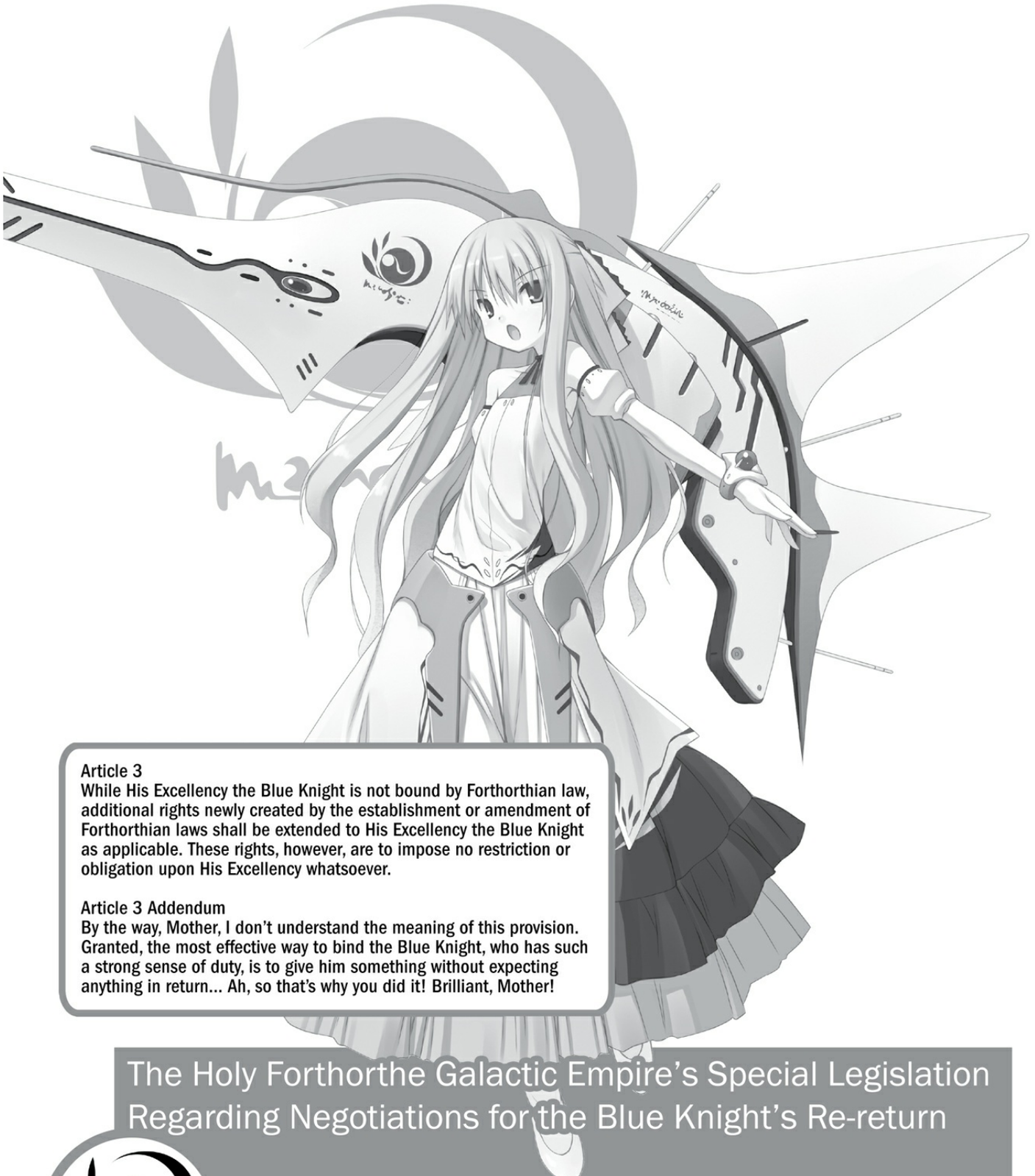
Though relieved, Clan had to wonder why Koutarou was willing to go with her. Ordinarily, he would tell her that this was her problem. That’s not to say she was unhappy about this development, however. She was actually quite pleased, so she decided to muster her courage. Maybe he wouldn’t say

anything now.

“...”

“...”

Walking by Koutarou’s side, she slowly reached out and held his hand. Koutarou was a little surprised, but didn’t say a word. As luck would have it, he thought she was being just as adorable now as she had been earlier.



Article 3
While His Excellency the Blue Knight is not bound by Forthorthian law, additional rights newly created by the establishment or amendment of Forthorthian laws shall be extended to His Excellency the Blue Knight as applicable. These rights, however, are to impose no restriction or obligation upon His Excellency whatsoever.

Article 3 Addendum
By the way, Mother, I don't understand the meaning of this provision. Granted, the most effective way to bind the Blue Knight, who has such a strong sense of duty, is to give him something without expecting anything in return... Ah, so that's why you did it! Brilliant, Mother!

The Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire's Special Legislation Regarding Negotiations for the Blue Knight's Re-return

New! January 31st, 2011

Afterword

Long time no see. It's the author, Takehaya. I've been given a longer space for the afterword this time around, so can take my time with this one. I could even write about how good the ramen I had yesterday was if I wanted. That said, I have plenty of things I do want to talk about, so let's get right to it.

This is volume 30 of *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?*. That's right, were finally at the big three-oh! Out of thousands of light novels, only a few last this long and they are practically all handled by major publishers. Being able to carve a piece of that for myself is thanks to the unending support of readers like you. Of course, I also owe special thanks to Poco-san, everyone in the editorial and publishing departments, the anime production team, the voice actors, and many more. If anyone above had been a little lazier, I don't think we would've made it this far. I think we're only here because of the miracle everyone involved in this series has managed to achieve. To each and every one of you, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Please continue to help me out going forward.

Now that the important bit is out of the way, I'd like to move on to discussing what actually happened this volume. There was a lot, particularly building off of the previous installment.

First up is our transfer student from Forthorthe finally making her appearance, Nalfa Laren-san. She triumphantly arrives at Kisshouharukaze High School, but her inborn klutziness rivals (or even surpasses?) Yurika's. So, with a camera in hand, she loses sight of her surroundings and puts herself in great danger. She means well, however, so Koutarou and the others can't bring themselves to be mad at her. Instead, they suffer right along with her. The result is a slightly more tense everyday life for everyone. And on top of that, it seems Nalfa has some secrets. That may eventually become a problem, but this time I decided to put the focus on her character. I hope everyone enjoyed it.

Also, McKinley—Matsudaira Kotori—who has been name-dropped before,

officially makes her debut. She's Mackenzie's little sister, but they're practically opposites. She's serious, timid, and especially romantic. She's always idealized Kenji as an older brother, so imagine her surprise when she begins high school and hears the rumors about him. It completely ruins her image of him, leading to a major crisis for Kenji as a doting older brother. He's really only reaping what he sowed, but Kotori's high standards are also at fault here. Strictly speaking, she and her brother are both quite romantic, but Kenji has a much more realistic approach to things. Kotori is definitely more on the dreamy side, so they unfortunately can't see eye to eye on the matter. Of course, as a writer, I'm also a bit of a dreamer. Sorry, Kenji, but I'm on Kin-chan's side here. But don't worry! Soon we'll get to see the siblings after making up. Even if they aren't quite on the same page, their hearts are in the same place. They'll find some way to work it out.

On a separate note, we see Kiriha drawing—or being forced to draw—the short straw. The end result of all the craziness from last volume gets dropped in her lap while everyone else gets to go about their lives as if nothing ever happened. Because of the letter, she knows that something happened, and she'll have to try and resolve any discrepancies that arise because of it. Nobody really noticed it this time, but if anyone had seen Nalfa glowing and started to wonder why, Kiriha would've had to step in. But in exchange for this troublesome job, she's decided to get even by teasing Koutarou a little. I think Koutarou and Kiriha both knew that would happen when they wrote the letter. I can imagine it now...

"So you're asking me to go through all of the hardships on my own?"

"Th-That's not..."

But in the end, Kiriha would have agreed. And that's how she's ended up in this position, pursuing the truth while keeping it secret from Koutarou and the others. Look forward to her playing a big role in the future too.

Oh, and since it might have looked like Nalfa was going to upstage Yurika as the most pathetic character, Yurika really steps up her game this volume. She blossoms, and shows off a totally new kind of patheticness. That's right! Yurika's been growing too lately. She's way more than just physically pathetic now. In the future, she'll leave all that to Nalfa while she moves on to bigger

and better things. Please watch over her warmly when it gets to be her turn in the spotlight. She's going through a lot.

And now, after reading through this volume, I'm sure you can imagine what's going to happen going forward. Not only will there be the interpersonal problems I mentioned above, but also the problems of various worlds coming into contact. The introduction of new technology always has socioeconomic consequences. And not only do we have Forthorthian technology coming to Earth, we have magic and spiritual energy technology reaching Forthorthe. The people who get their hands on it will want to monopolize it, but there will be plenty of other people who don't want that. They may even use violence to try and keep it from happening. That said, things are on the verge of getting dangerous. And that's all on top of the Corona House crew now mostly becoming third-years. Really, there are all kinds of problems popping up here and there. Koutarou and company are going to need a guide to navigate everything while trying to graduate high school.

While we're on the subject of the future, now's probably a good time to bring up the next volume. If we keep up the current pace, volume 31 will go on sale in the spring of 2019. Now, if you recall that the first volume of *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* went on sale in the spring of 2009... That's right! The next volume just so happens to overlap with the series' tenth anniversary. Truth be told, volume 30 hitting that benchmark would have worked out nicer, but oh well. Maybe I should have slacked off more (ha!).

As I've mentioned before, there's been talk of doing something for the ten-year anniversary. The volume will contain three stories from *Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Hercules!* from Read it! HJ Bunko, which will be getting illustrations in book form. But the real focus should be on the second half of the book, which will be all-new content. I'm planning on starting the "Koutarou is dating X" series, and I put a lot of thought into who should be featured first. We tossed around the idea of having a popularity poll, but that's exactly the kind of fare we'd also been considering for a tenth anniversary special. We likely also wouldn't have gotten the results in time. That's where Sakuraba Harumi-senpai stood out. The thought was that even if she didn't take the top spot, she'd surely end up second or third. We couldn't go wrong by starting with her, so

Harumi will be the star of the first installment.

As for the actual chapter, we'll be sneaking a peek of an alternate world where Koutarou decided to start going out with Harumi after starting his third year of high school. Essentially, it'll be a different April 6th from the one in this volume. One where Koutarou and Harumi are now a couple. I figure out of the 5,670,000,000 worlds, there's bound to be at least one where that actually happened. We'll be taking a little look into their happy life together, so you can look forward to that.

I talked to my editor, S-kun, about whether or not this would be enough to celebrate the series' tenth anniversary. We collectively agreed it wasn't and so began brainstorming ideas. What we decided was to have a special edition of volume 31 in addition to the regular one. The regular edition will be the usual book, but the special edition will come with a drama CD. Said drama CD will also be part of the "going out with X" series, but it won't be about Harumi. It's going to be about Alaia! It will be set in a parallel world where the Silver Princess had no choice but to follow the Blue Knight back home, so the story will be about her deepening relationship with Koutarou in present-day Japan.

I've actually already written the Alaia chapter for the drama CD and it has since been handed over to Yasukawa Shougo, who was the scriptwriter for the anime, to be turned into script format. So by the time you read this, the drama CD will already be in the works. As this is the usual process, I believe it will be of the same quality you've all come to expect. I hope you look forward to it. There's also going to be a digital version of the special edition with the drama CD, though that may come at a later date. I hope that's not too much of an inconvenience for anyone.

I still have some room, so I'd like to keep going... But what to talk about? Oh, I know. I touched on this in a *Hercules!* episode, but I'd like to explain a little about the differences between the modern language magic that Yurika and Maki use and the ancient language magic that Harumi uses. This was established a while back, but now that I think about it, it never really came up in the main series (ha!).

If an ancient language and modern language caster incant the same spell, the modern language caster would be able to incant it faster while the ancient

language user would be able to modify it more. Moreover, ancient language magic doesn't require tools while modern language magic requires a staff and outfit. Ancient language magic has no specific rules in place, and it's activated by reciting special words and using special gestures. Really, all of the spells that Harumi and Alaia use are ad-libbed. But because of that, an ancient language caster's talent plays a big role in the magic they can use. Very few are talented enough to use it freely.

And that's where the modern language magic comes in. It has clearly delineated rules, and incanting is performed through simplified chants and gestures. Yurika and Maki's spells aren't ad-libbed, but learned from spell books. They can be adjusted circumstantially with modifiers, but modifiers are cast the same way spells are—with simplified incantations and gestures. Therein lies the flaw of modern language magic. Ritual magic is an exception to this, where adjustments can be done on the fly. But since it's not an easy feat to whip out ritual magic in the middle of a fight, the spell chosen is of utmost importance. For example, let's say a spell that has a little effect to keep it from killing the opponent. On the other hand, since ancient language magic is ad-libbed, any spell can freely be modified to become nonlethal. It doesn't require the same kind of preplanning, but it would be harder to perform in the moment.

The other major difference between the two schools is tools. With ancient language magic, a caster's body is the only tool they need. The mana inside is molded through will and skill. In contrast, modern language magic requires the use of a staff and outfit to assist in casting spells. That's because, in order to simplify incantations, part of the required procedure to activate them is embedded in the staff. To an ancient language caster, a modern language caster probably only looks like they're only doing half the work because their tools do the other half. That's more or less why modern language magic is so fast and easy to use. But should a caster find themselves without the appropriate tools on hand, they're in for some trouble. That's the price of convenience.

But the reason modern language magic came about in the first place was because ancient language magic relied too much on an individual's talents. After being sent to a different world, the Folsarians knew they'd need as many

of their citizens to be able to use magic as possible in order to survive. To that end, they basically dumbed-down the magic language to make it easier for people to use. The acceleration in spellcasting was ultimately a byproduct of that, though it wasn't the outright intention. Another unintended effect was a magician supremacy bias.

Because of the involved nature of ancient language magic, Harumi is stuck on the rear line when it comes to battles. It takes a good deal of time and concentration to cast spells, so it would be too dangerous for her anywhere else. This isn't a problem for Yurika and Maki, however, who can quickly cast spells even on the front lines. Maki's favorite, her short-term memory loss spell, is a good example of this.

Looking at them overall, ancient language magic and modern language magic both have their pros and cons, so it's not like either is superior. If anything, I think Koutarou and the others are better off for having both. If I had to mention a specific strength, I think I'd have to point to Maki's fighting style, though. It wouldn't be possible to use physical attacks and spells at the same time without modern language magic. Harumi, meanwhile, is the only ancient magic user of the group. That ended up postponing any explanation of it, but that makes her special in its own way. I suppose it's also worth mentioning that Theia, even after making a contract with the sword, has very little talent for magic. All she's capable of is converting her mana into physical strength, which isn't all that different from what Alunaya does. So while it might be hard to see, Harumi is actually a magical genius.

I was told to really fill up this space, and I think I've finally done just that. That means it's time to say goodbye, so allow me to sign off with my usual acknowledgements.

I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to everyone at the editorial department; to Poco-san whose life I'm sure I made harder with the new character designs; and finally to all of you readers for your continued support over thirty plus volumes.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 31 for *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?*'s tenth birthday.

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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 30

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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