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超次元ゲイム
ネプテューヌ
はいすく〜る4



櫻ノ杜ぶんど

超次元ゲームネプテューヌ はいすくーる4

おかず



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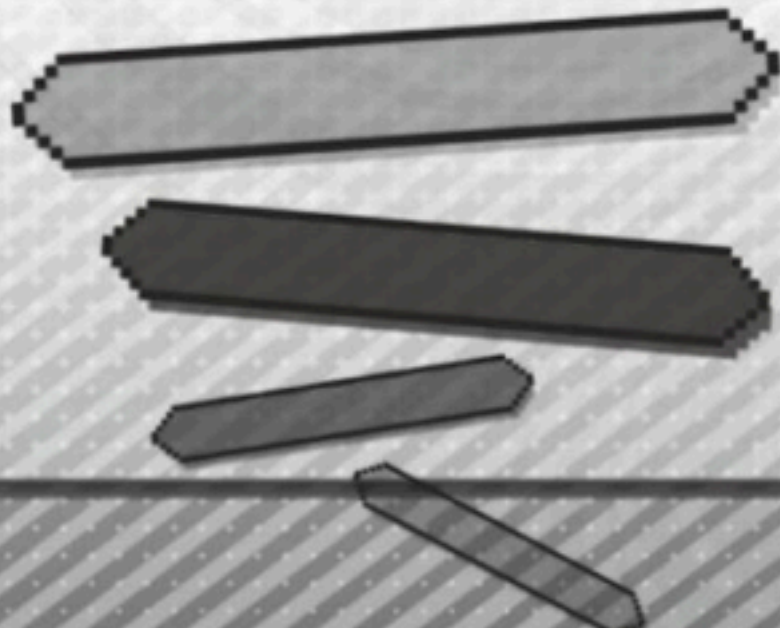
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データロードが完了しました。



「ネプテューヌはひすくーる」
を再開します。



Recap

This is a summary of the previous volume!!

Phew... ha.... ... Okay!

H-hello everyone! I'm everyone's idol Neptune's... little sister, Nepgear! Um, hmm... N-Neptune... please pass me the cue card. ... Oh, right. I look forward to meeting those who are reading this for the first time. As for everyone else, long time no see!

T-this time, I'll summarize the last volume instead of my sister. ... Huh? What was that, Neptune?

This volume's short, so you want to fast forward? Ah... she means that I have to talk fast. B-but even if you say that, I'm still a little nervous.... Ah! Wait! Why are you passing it to me like that?! Huh? There's also going to be a video mixed in?

"... I'll leave the rest to you, Nepgear."

"Neptune?! Neptune!!"

Oh, this is the video...

That's how I lost my sister after the battle in Celestia. So, I descended to Gamindustri to find Neptune.

But something went wrong. I was dropped off at a place called Otori Island in the southern sea reaaaaally far away from the mainland.

I also fell into the water. Uu... my future looked sort of bleak.

"Ugh... huh...? Where am I? ... This place doesn't look familiar..."

"Yeah. I'm Uni. You owe Brave-sensei and I your life. You should be grateful."

Wow, the editing is very well done.... Ah, this isn't the time to fool around.

The person who helped me was Uni-chan, a girl attending the only school on the island, the 'Histoire Memorial Academy Otori Island branch.'

I'm thankful that I was saved, but I couldn't contact Histy-san in Celestia.

Besides Uni-chan, I was also helped by the cute twin sisters, Rom-chan and Ram-chan, the kind Mina Nishizawa-sensei, and the strong and powerful robot-type creature Brave-sensei. I attended the school as a special transfer student while waiting for the ferry that sails to the mainland.

But during that time, I didn't reveal where I came from or who I was. The kinder they treated me, the more I lied to them to hide the truth. It was really painful doing all of that...

"Oh, this is it! 'Some nonsensical freshman enrolled into the academy. Her name's Neptune.' ... Huh?"

"Ram-chan! Repeat that again!"

"Her name's Neptune. ... Ah! This is it, Rom-chan! It's written right here in our diary exchange!"

As time passed without me revealing the truth, I learned that Neptune was at the academy's main branch.

But then I had to reveal my identity to meet with my sister.... I felt awful for not saying anything about it, so I ran away from the teacher's office.

"... Nobody thinks of you as a liar. I know that you're not the kind of person who can lie in good conscience."

"Uni-chan..."

"But it's okay now. I'll be with you from now on. So don't cry."

I was prepared to be hated by everyone... but everyone, including Uni-chan, forgave me. What's more, they came with me to go to the main branch on the mainland.

"I finally found you... Neptune!"

"I'm your... big sister? You sure you're not mistaking me for... someone else?"

And at long last, I finally had an emotional reunion with Neptune... but there was another problem. When she fell to Gamindustri, the shock left her with amnesia! We finally reunited but... how could this happen?

Honestly, I was exhausted and confused. But Neptune was distressed, herself...

"Why... why can't I remember? Why can't I remember my own sister who loves and cares about me this much...?"

"... Neptune..."

... Uu... no matter how many times I watch this scene... uwaaaah!

... Huh? Did that clip finish already?

Uh... um... p-please excuse me.... Neptune was also feeling remorseful about her lost memories. While I wasn't aware of it, she was desperately trying her best to regain her memories.

"... The next time we have a holiday, we should go around to places that the two of you have been to before. Then, we can hear from Gear-chan. You might remember something this way, don't you think? How's my idea?"

"That's it, Compa! That's a *great* idea! I've been waiting for something like that!"

One day, thanks to Compa-san's idea, we had a field trip to visit places in Gamindustri where Neptune and I have visited before in secret.

As I was spending time with everyone happily...

"I didn't do any research. When Nepgear and I ate here together, I was surprised by how delicious it was."

"W-what do you mean, Neptune? Did you not realize what you just said?"

"Huh? It's because Nepgear and I ate here before..."

"Wait! Hold it right there! Repeat that one more time!"

At the takoyaki shop in the food court, she finally regained a part of her memory! Just a little more! Just a little more and all of her memories will return!

But then, something unexpected happened!

The evil construction company Magic Co. that did terrible things to my big sister and the others took over the largest radio tower in the continent, Planeptower.

Magic's crew was scheming to transmit brainwashing waves from Planeptower across the entire continent to mind control everyone, and force them all to obey their every command. Unforgivable!

"Uni! Wake up!"

"Noire... I-I'm sorry."

"... I saw these... these cute little girls and their leader. I couldn't resist! Such irresistible temptation!"

"N-no! Don't you big pervert!"

"... *Sniff*... stop."

"You bastard! Now you're crossing the line!"

But those Magic Co. guys resorted to cowardly tactics and took Uni-chan and the others, who entered the tower unbeknownst to us, as hostages, and challenged us to a one sided battle under the guise of a 'game.'

With Uni-chan and the others taken as hostages, we couldn't fight properly.

Everyone collapsed one by one.... And finally, Neptune...

But it was Brave-sensei, Compa-san and IF-san who rescued us from that crisis.

I'm not sure if it was because of the impact of Magic's kick or because she fell from the sky just like that time she disappeared two years ago... but Neptune regained her memories thanks to the miracle of her feelings towards me!

"But right now, you're the only one here, Nepgear. Please. Lend me your power."

"Imbue your powers into this sword together with me. That's all you have to do. After that, the blade will cleanse this evil spirit."

After Neptune regained her memories, the two of us worked together and finally defeated Magic... or should I say, we managed to get rid of the otherworldly villains possessing Magic's crew.

"I'm so sorry. You must've been through a lot, right?"

"Neptune..."

"But it's okay now. I won't leave you alone again. I promise."

"... Neptune!"

And just like that... I got to truly meet my sister again. But...

"Let's go, then."

"It's been short, but thank you!"

This is just the beginning for us.

We have something we need to do back at Celestia.

... Was that okay, Neptune? Great? Perfect? Phew... what a relief.

That's good to hear. Do you do this every time? I think that this one time is enough for me. I'm sweating a lot... but maybe that's because I was anxious. I'll leave it to my sister next time... huh? What? This isn't the end?

'T-take a look at this,' you say? ... Hmm...

...

'SIDE-GEAR'? You mean 'GEAR' as in the 'gear' in my name? 'P-please read it from start to finish? ... Whaaat~?! I can't do that! I just did that flashback part! And that was really long!

'Y-you can do it'? 'Do your best'? ... You didn't have to write *that* much on the cue card... no, that's besides the point!

R-really, Neptune?!

I'm going to start 'Hyperdimension Neptunia High School 4 - SIDE-GEAR'? And there's no cue card?!

...

Please wait! Wait, Neptune! Neptuuuuuuune!!



PROLOGUE

Prologue

"It's been short, but thank you!"

Neptune bows down at the empty dorm room.

"Let's go, then," she says as she nudges my waist with her elbow.

"I know that I just asked you this, but is this really, really alright, Neptune?" Even if it'll only cause more trouble to ask when she's mentally unprepared, I have to make sure. "Hm.... Well, if I don't go, then I'll be stuck studying for final exams. So it's a good time to leave." That joking attitude makes me anxious.

"What about you, Nepgear? Are you okay? There's still time to visit the island using HDD, you know?" She asks as she worries over me.

"I think I've done my proper goodbyes."

"You think... huh."

She frowns at my ambiguous answer.

When she regained her memories, and when Magic... or should I call her Magic-san since we severed the other world's villainous Magic from her body?

It's been a week since we returned Magic-san back to normal.

After spending our days happily with our big sisters, Uni-chan, Rom-chan, and Ram-chan all returned to the island with Brave-sensei.

"You better come back!"

"... Bye, Nepgear-chan."

"A lot has happened, but it was fun. Let's meet again if possible."

I thought that it'd probably be the last time that we'd see each other, but...

"Yes, let's meet again!"

I smiled and bid my farewells. So... so I'm fine.

But Neptune...

We face each other for a little while.

"Ah, no, no, no! Enough of this depressing mood!" she says, waving her hands in front of her face.

"Nepgear, it's not like we can't come back, right? Let's not think about it too seriously. Let's just go back home and show Histy that we're safe and sound."

"To Histy-san?"

"Yeah, Histy. She's probably lonely without us. Let's give her a peace of mind by showing her that the Nep sisters are fine. After the three of us quickly take care of everything, we can just come back to Gamindustri, right? Right?"

'Quickly take care of everything'... she says with a bright smile. But what's waiting for us back at Celestia is not that simple.

She probably knows as well. But that's why she decided that only the two of us should return.

We can't let our precious friends get involved in our problems.

“Yes! Let’s resolve everything as soon as possible! We have everything we need.”

“Right! Histy’s definitely in for a shock.”

“Yeah, and let’s do our best to come back before the final exams!”

“... Er, no. About that...”

Neptune and I cheer each other up, walk out of the dorm and head to the front gate. On our way to the entrance,

“Ah, Nep-Nep. Is the girl next to you your rumored little sister?”

“Where are you two going? Shopping?”

Are they classmates? On the opposite side, two girls who seem to be friends with my sister talk to her.

“... Well, I’ll be back,” Neptune says, waving at them as we pass them by.

“See you tomorrow, then.”

“Watch out for cars.”

“Yeah.”

After that, several others talk to Neptune as we make our way towards the front gate. Boys, girls, teachers, and even the cats living on campus... everyone looks and smiles at her.

Neptune, you’re really popular.

As I feel a complicated mix of pride and jealousy... I stop myself from saying those words multiple times.

We walk slowly across the huge campus with smiles on our faces. Has it been 15 minutes? Or has it been 20?

We finally arrive at the front gate.

“Ah...”

She stops walking.

A woman wearing a business suit stands in front of the gate with her arms crossed.

That person...

After holding her smile for so long, Neptune’s face starts to wear a troubled expression.

“Uwaa... why now...?”

As Neptune puts her hands on her face in distress, the woman—Principal Arfoire—approaches us with the sound of high heels tapping the ground.

“H-hello, Principal Arfoire. So... h-how about that weather?”

She forces a smile and speaks to her.

“... ”

But Principal Arfoire looks at us with a serious expression.

“I have something I need to talk to you two about. Come to my office, both of you,” she says in a stern tone, giving off an aura that we can’t reject.

“Um, well... we have some important business to attend to... right, Neptune?” I answer while

forcing a smile of my own.

“Y-yeah! Right! It’s reeeeeeally important business.”

I nod a few times in sync with Neptune.

“I’m well aware. The battle that will decide the fate of the world,” Principal Arfoire replies as if she knows everything. We can’t think of anything to reply with.

“If you girls wanted to leave as soon as possible, then you would have activated HDD to fly away.... But it’s obvious that you were both taking your time to take in and remember the scenery before you leave. Foolish kids,” Principal Arfoire continues.

Calling us ‘foolish kids’ aside, I can see affection in her eyes.

“W-whaaaat...? I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Neptune speaks again in an evasive manner. But I guess we’ve reached our limit...

“That’s enough. Follow me. Neither of you are in trouble, so don’t worry.”

Yeah, it’s no use.

It’s like we’ve fallen into a scene where we’ll just be stuck in an infinite loop if we keep choosing ‘no’.

It looks like there won’t be any progression in the story if we don’t select ‘yes’...

“Let’s go, you two. Chins up, now!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

We give up and nod.



STAGE 1

Stage 1

Stage 1 - Part 1

“Bad Nep-Nep! Bad Gear-chan! Bad girls!”

Someone was waiting for us at the Principal’s office. An angry and sulking Compa-san.

“C-Compa, we can explain. We have a reason deeper than the deepest ocean trench and more complex than docking hardware...” Neptune speaks gibberish to make an excuse.

“You better actually apologize instead of spewing nonsense,” IF-san interrupts my sister. She’s standing next to Compa-san with her arms crossed.

“You can’t just pass this off by apologizing, Nep-Nep, Nepgear-chan,” Vert-san adds on.

“... I don’t like how you two tried to disappear without so much as a word,” Blanc-san mutters as she glares at us as if she’s trying to make us feel guilty.

“Besides Nepgear, it’s just not like you, Neptune. You’re never this considerate of others. When you think of your stupid ideas, it affects us, too.... It’s best to tell us what’s on your mind from the start, don’t you think?” Noire-san says at last.

Neptune’s overwhelmed by the mood.

“W-what should I do, Nepgear? Everyone looks preeeeetty angry.”

She grabs my arm out of anxiety.

But just from looking at everyone’s faces... I don’t know what to do, either.

Everyone said that they were called by Principal Arfoire and were waiting here this whole time. It seems like our plan of returning to Celestia in secrecy was found out.

“Nep-Nep, Gear-chan, you should apologize to everyone,” Compa-san says as her face blushes in frustration.

Everyone else nods in agreement to her words.

“We... don’t have much of a choice, do we? It’s our fault, after all. Let’s apologize, Neptune.”

“Y-yeah. It’s a big deal if even Compa of all people tells us to apologize...”

Three turns have passed, and now they’re ready to unleash a special attack to wipe our party out.... We’ve been caught in the heat of the moment, so...

“We were planning to return to Celestia without telling anyone. I’m sorry.”

“We didn’t mean any harm! I’m telling the truth. I didn’t want to cause any trouble for you guys. Sorry!”

Our voices mix together as we give everyone our heartfelt apology.



Compa-san approaches us.

“Yes, those are proper apologies. Good girls, both of you. Good girls.”

As if the menacing face that she was wearing just now was a facade, she kindly embraces us.

“Let’s all work together from now on,” she says, releasing her hands.

“Work together.... Compa, how did you find out that we were planning to go back?” Neptune asks with a serious expression that she usually doesn’t wear.

“Principal Arfoire told us about the rough situation.” Compa-san answers and nods.

“Well, it looks like we can hear more about the details, now. That’s why we’re all here. I know that this wasn’t an easy decision for the both of you, but we have so much to say, ourselves. ... So let’s not point any fingers,” IF-san continues from Compa-san’s answer.

“Sorry, Principal Arfoire. That’s all that we wanted to say for now,” Noire-san says as she looks to Principal Arfoire, who has been silently handling her laptop ever since we entered the office.

She closes her laptop and raises her head.

“Honestly, you girls are quite the handful. Oh, well. It’s fine. Now, let’s get straight to the point.”

Stage 1 - Part 2

The ‘point’ Principal Arfoire had mentioned is very simple.

“I need your powers to save the world from this unknown crisis,” she says after putting her laptop away into a large drawer and clasping her hands above her desk.

It feels like she’s about to say something like, ‘I preordered a newly released game. Go to the store and fetch it for me.’

“I heard about this yesterday, as well. You asked for our help because it looked like Nep-Nep and Nepgear-chan were trying to solve it on their own...”

“Not that it matters, but can you tell me specifically what to do?”

Vert-san and Noire-san replies.

Since we’re under the assumption that we’ve already accepted Principal Arfoire’s request, Neptune and I can only blink and listen. Principal Arfoire then looks at us.

“It would be faster to ask the ones who are directly involved. Neptune.”

“Huh? Me?”

She points at Neptune, the center of the issue.

“Yes, you. Tell us about what’s happening in Celestia, and how it affects Gamindustri.”

As Principal Arfoire nods, everyone stares at Neptune.

“S-sure? Okay, then...”

She opens her mouth. ... But is it alright? I’m starting to get a little nervous.

“It’s a long story, just so you all know. First of all, one day, when Nepgear and I were patrolling Celestia... oh, right. I should mention that Celestia isn’t that large. So we tried to take care of our stuff as fast as possible so we could watch shows broadcasting from Gamindustri...”

Now I’m *really* nervous.

N-Neptune? You don’t have to talk about TV. Neptune? Are you listening?

“Then, we saw something shocking. How can I describe it... I guess they’re dark, round, shiny things with glittering eyes and something like hands or feet? Eh, close enough. Anyways, those

things just popped up and starting rolling, so Nepgear and I were reeeeeal surprised.”

Ah... err, Neptune...

That isn't the best way to describe it. Maybe I should do the explaining instead. A whistle sounds out of nowhere and stops Neptune's explanation... if you can even call it that.

Huh? As I look around to find the source of the noise, I see Blanc-san with a whistle in her mouth as she holds a red card above her head.

“You're terrible at explaining. Blatantly obvious stalling definitely warrants a red card, which means you're out.”

“B-Blanc... where did you get that?” IF-san asks in confusion.

“I just had soccer for PE earlier. I'm the referee,” Blanc-san replies, ignoring IF-san's puzzled expression as she looks at Principal Arfoire.

“Making Neptune explain was a poor choice.”

“I guess you're right. Oh dear...” Principal Arfoire replies as she puts her hand on her forehead in disappointment and frowns. Well, it's to be expected, I suppose...

But Neptune looks a little dissatisfied.

“Wait! Waaaaait! We're just getting to the good part! Pushing the start button to skip a cutscene that you've never watched before is a little harsh, don't you think?”

She's not thrilled about being interrupted in the middle of her story. She's trying to ignore Blanc-san's red card to continue her tale, but,

“That's enough. Letting Neptune explain will only end up wasting our time.” “You can always rewatch cutscenes later.”

She gets shot down by Noire-san and Vert-san.

“W-wait! If I had cue cards and a video on me like Nepgear's recap, this wouldn't...”

“What are you talking about? Cut that meta crap out. Just calm down and stay quiet. ... Alright. Sorry, Nepgear, but could you do the explaining this time? Preferably if you concise it a bit.”

IF-san looks at me as she blocks my sister from butting in.

“Yes, no problem.”

I glance at Neptune with an apologetic look. As I get ready to continue the story, --*Dururururu* ♪

This time, it isn't Blanc-san's whistle. Instead, a cellphone's ringtone echoes through the office.

“... It's me. What is it?”

It's Principal Arfoire's phone.

“... Yeah? Understood.”

Losing my chance to speak, Principal Arfoire gestures to wait a moment and continues her conversation.

Eventually,

“I understand. I'll be there soon. Prepare in the meantime.”

After issuing a command to whoever she was talking to, she hangs up.

“So... may I continue?”

Just as I think that I'd be given the go-ahead,

“No, that's fine.”

Principal Arfoire shakes her head. Everyone else stares at her with puzzled looks, as well.

“I have a more suitable person to explain. Sorry, but we'll have to move someplace else. Everyone, follow me,” she continues. She gives us an incredibly brief smile.

Stage 1 - Part 3

“I have a more suitable person to explain'.... Principal Arfoire takes us to the forest on campus.

“So a place like this exists within the academy grounds.... I had no idea,” I wonder out loud. “Ah, right. Nepgear, you haven't come here yet,” Neptune says, clapping as she walks next to me. It looks like she already knows where we're going.

Then maybe the others know as well? I ask the people around me.

“We were shocked when you arrived, Gear-chan,” Compa-san answers.

“We tried to find time to take you guys here, but our timing wasn't the greatest. Uni and the others have already gone back, and you two tried returning to Celestia without saying anything,” IF-san follows up on Compa-san's answer.

“I already said that I'm sorry. You're just the type that keeps bringing the same stuff up over and over and over again,” Neptune replies.

“You see that, Nepgear?” She changes the subject as she points forward.

My eyes widen from what I see. A small building made from stone.

“Is that a church? It certainly looks like one,” I ask.

“Yes, we renovated this old church here,” Vert-san replies as she looks back at me.

“R-renovated?!”

I look at the church again in shock.

No matter how I look at it, it's an old, worn out church with moss-covered walls. But when

I look further up to examine the roof, I see solar panels and a parabolic antenna.

“That's an internet receiver. It's been made possible thanks to solar batteries and satellite signals. Electricity and internet are essential for playing games in leisure at our secret base.”

“S-secret base...? But can't you do that in your room?”

“My entire room has become a gaming device.”

S-sorry, Vert-san, but I don't know what you're talking about...

Where do I even start? But should I... even criticize it...? I hold that thought as I reply by saying 'hahaha... a-amazing' as we approach the building.

“Over here, Nepgear! Come on over to our secret base!” Neptune raises her voice and opens the large, magnificent door.

The interior is astonishing.

The altar located at the very back is the only thing that resembles a church, but everything else... hm.... It doesn't look anything like a worn out church as the exterior would suggest.

"Couches, a TV, gaming consoles... and a sewing machine? Why a sewing machine...?"

This place looks more like a living room than a secret base.

"Did you bring all these, Neptune?" I ask as my eyes are still widened in awe.

"... But aren't you guys using it for overly personal reasons?" Principal Arfoire asks.

'A secret base on *my* campus?' Judging from Principal Arfoire's intense gaze as she scans the interior, that's probably what she thinks.

I feel like this was a mistake. I look over to see Neptune and the others realize that they went too far. I hear them all try to make excuses.

"... We'll discuss this later. I have business underground."

She stops talking and walks towards the altar.

Relieved, Neptune and the others follow from behind. I follow them all, too. It seems like this place has a few more surprises.

First, the altar can be moved, and under it is a secret staircase leading to an underground level.

Second, at the bottom of the staircase is an underground temple unlike the church on the surface.

And third...

"I have been waiting, Principal Arfoire."

"We've just finished the preparations."

The person greeting us is the boss of Magic Co., CFW Magic.... The Magic who fought with her life against us not too long ago.

And there's someone else who I'm not familiar with.

They have three horns! That's one more than Brave-sensei's. He raises his hand.

"Yo, ladies. How have you been?" He says, looking our way.

"Magic? And Judge?! Why are you guys here?!"

So this sharp-faced person seems to be Judge-san.

Noire-san's mixed voice of surprise and wariness spelt it out for me.

"Principal Arfoire, what's going on?!" Noire-san continues, asking the Principal with an agitated voice.

"Relax, Noire. I don't feel any sort of hostility from these people," Blanc-san says in her usual level-headed manner, calming Noire-san down.

"Right. The lady with the hat... what's your name?"

"... Blanc."

"Thanks. It's as Blanc said. We didn't come here to fight you guys," the sharp-faced Judge-san replies.

"I heard that you guys cleansed the evil spirit or whatever that was possessing me. And not only me, but Magic and Trick, too. ... Right, Magic?"

“... Yes, I am grateful,” Magic-san speaks bluntly as she glances at Neptune and the others. “Is that a... new type of tsundere? What do you think, Noire?” IF-san looks at her and whispers. “Why’re you asking me?!”

“I-I-chan, you shouldn’t make fun of her.” Compa-san humors the two before bowing down at Magic-san.

“S-so... you two are no longer bad people, right?”

“Oh, yeah, we’re good people now. We weren’t even villains from the start. You guys should know that, right?” Judge-san nods and answers firmly.

“You weren’t a villain from the start, you say? That’s some big talk coming from someone who’s been a thorn in my side in the past. The academy’s Four Heavenly Kings, was it?”

Principal Arfoire jabs Judge-san’s chest with a playful expression.

“Oh, give me a break. Now’s... not the time to reminisce...”

It feels like Judge-san and Magic-san are trying to read our minds.

“It looks like Principal Arfoire and Magic Co. have a preeeeetty deep relationship. But come to think of it, Magic *did* say that there’s ‘nothing more painful than Principal Arfoire’s iron fist’ after coming back to her senses.”

“Oh my, for such a thing to happen without my knowledge,” Neptune and Vert-san whisper to each other as they stare at the scene.

“When Compa, Brave-sensei and I flew up to the tower, Brave-sensei said something to Trick. Something about old friends...”

“So the Magic Co. people were Principal Arfoire’s students before.”

“And Brave-sensei, too. That’s unexpected.”

And before I knew it, IF-san, Compa-san, Blanc-san... practically everyone except me joins the conversation...

Stare...

The spotlight is focused on Principal Arfoire, Magic-san and the others.

“A-anyways, Judge and I installed the device as per the Principal’s orders, and Trick is heading there by ferry as we speak.”

Embarrassed, Magic-san clears her throat and hides behind Principal Arfoire as if she’s trying to avoid our sight.

“You’re not fully recovered, I take it. Sorry about that. You’ve been great help. So is that the device?”

Principal Arfoire smiles and looks at the temple interior.

We follow her eyes. Deep inside the temple is something that looks artificial.

It’s a square-shaped machine with a large keyhole floating in the middle, and four pillars are standing around the machine.

“That...”

Thinking that it looks familiar, I approach the device.

“Ah, Nepgear! Wait!”

Ignoring Neptune's voice, I start investigating the machine.

First, the machine in the middle... is there a sensor inside the hole? So is this a device that analyzes something? Then the pillars around it are probably...

"Hey, these pillars are some sort of transmission device, right? They're the kind that connects to external antennae. With four of these devices connected to the data scanner... where is it getting its signal from?" I turn back and ask.

"Ah, I used the parabolic antenna on the roof. It's small, but the reception is great. It's pretty useful for civilian use.... You're well informed, lady."

The person who answered me was unexpectedly... oh, it's rude of me to say this, but... it was Judge-san.

Even Neptune looks like she thinks the same way.

"N-no way.... For the battle hungry Judge who was shouting 'Give me a fight! Show me violence! Kihyahyaha!' to easily answer Nepgear's tech question..."

"You shouldn't judge someone by his looks. That parabolic antenna's a prototype developed by Leanbox's military."

Neptune listens to the conversation with a blank on her face.

After listening to Judge-san's explanation, I finally realize the purpose of this device.

"This has a separate console, right? Is there a cable?"

"Hmmm.... You see that cable and port over there?"

"This uses Gamindustri's... no, Planeptune's standard voltage. For this, if I use the N-gear's multi jack..." I murmur. I take out my N-gear from the pouch on my waist and connect the cable that Judge-san had mentioned to my N-gear.

"Hey... that lady's your little sister, right? Just who *is* she?"

"Nepgear's a genius mechanic.... But / should be the one asking that question! Judge, aren't you the kind of character who's obsessed with fighting?"

"Don't say that. That was the me from the other world, you know? I may not look like it, but I graduated as a major in data processing."

While Neptune and Judge-san talk to each other, I continue working to verify whether my assumption is right or not.

After connecting the cable to the device, I activate the device with my N-gear's multi console app.

The machine starts up with a low hum, and the device starts moving. The LEDs at the end of the four pillars begin to shine with blue light.

Then,

"Hello, Nepgear-san. You have contacted me with a rather special method. Is there a problem?"

On the N-gear's screen, a familiar face appears, and a familiar voice accompanies it through the speakers.

Stage 1 - Part 4

"Are the recent climate abnormalities due to problems with Celestia's Gamindustri management system?"

“Correct. I apologize for causing harm to the people of Gamindustri.”

Histy-san is projected on my N-gear’s screen. She’s at the center of the control system that balances the natural environment of Gamindustri, located right in the middle of Celestia.... Well, it’d be more accurate to say that she’s essentially the system itself.

So this ‘suitable person’ that Principal Arfoire was referring to is Histy-san. I

see. “How did such a problem even occur in the first place?” IF-san asks

Histy-san.

Since IF-san is in the agent curriculum, which focuses on topics like investigations and reconnaissance, naturally, she wants to ask and learn as much as possible.

As soon as the machine that Magic-san and the others had installed established a connection to my N-gear to contact Histy-san, Histy-san begins to speak her mind.

“That has something to do with the otherworldly beings that had possessed Arfoire-san and the others,” Histy-san replies. Then, she turns her sight on Principal Arfoire.

“It has been quite some time, Arfoire-san. I was worried when I couldn’t contact you,” Histy-san continues.

“Ah, sorry about that,” Principal Arfoire apologizes quickly and nods.

“It’s been a while for me, too, Histy! Think about me too!”

Neptune pushes Principal Arfoire aside and pops her head out.

“O-of course, I was worried about you as well, Neptune-san. I believe that I told you that last time...”

“That was then, and this is now. We literally just started talking again. I haven’t even told you about everything I went through! So...”

Neptune tries to move the conversation at her own pace.

“Ugh, I don’t know what you’re on about! Someone, stop Nep-ko!”

IF-san grabs Neptune’s hair and tries to pull her out.

“Neptune! Just stay there and be quiet until the conversation is over!”

Like a cat grabbing its naughty kitten, Noire-san drags Neptune by her sleeve.

I’m sorry, IF-san, Noire-san. I’m supposed to take care of my big sister, but my hands are full at the moment.... So I’ll leave her to you two.

Anyways, after restraining my irresponsible sister,

“Sorry about the conversation turning sideways, Histoire. Continue,” Principal Arfoire says.

I’m bothered by the way Principal Arfoire is speaking. She said to Histy-san that it’s ‘been a while.’ It looks like they’ve known each other for a long time...

But asking questions right now will only interrupt the conversation, so I hold myself back. First, I need to inform everyone about what’s happening in Celestia.

“It will be a long story...”

Histy-san begins to speak.

To summarize everything,

According to Neptune, one day, something happened in the other world. The Neptune of the other world—CPU Purple Heart—and the Principal Arfoire of the other world—the great witch Arfoire—fought. Their battle created a portal connecting our worlds as a result.

It all started when the Arfoire and the CFW Magic of the other world came to ours through the portal.

“... Rare distortions or significant changes in this world are usually fixed as our world tries to balance itself. This time, however, this distortion was too great. The system of our world could not handle the foreign substances... or in other words, the great witch and her minions from the other world. As a result, our world has begun to overload.”

“... So would it be comparable to forcibly causing bugs in games?”

“That is an excellent example, Blanc-san. For a moment, let us consider this entire world as a huge game world. It is analogous to inputting unexpected and invalid numbers to cause the management program to go haywire and malfunction.”

Naturally, the world wouldn't just let this abnormal phenomenon happen, so it tries to erase the foreign substances. But unfortunately, the minds from the other world stole the bodies of Principal Arfoire and Magic's crew, and integrated into our society.

“Translating that back into our situation, the system itself malfunctioned and went berserk. Even I, the administrator, could not control it. So as a last resort, I ordered Neptune-san and Nepgear-san to manually reactivate the system.”

Things were getting really bad, but that wasn't the only sign of trouble. My computer started to malfunction, as well, so I had to frequently reboot it whenever it bugged out.

But as we tried to manually reactivate the system, we encountered swarms of guardroids that were lying in wait.

The overloaded system saw us as part of the distortion and activated its defense program.

In the battle against the defense program, Neptune tried to protect me...

“Damn! It feels weird to badmouth ourselves, but our versions from the other world were incredibly villainous. They should've just accepted defeat once they lost. Back in our day, that was how delinquents lived.”

Like Brave-sensei, it seems that Judge-san was a delinquent as well a long time ago.... Ah, this isn't the time to think about that. I shouldn't interrupt the conversation.

“... Unfortunately, our plan failed, and we lost the key to reactivating the system, Neptune-san's sword. But thanks to Neptune-san and everyone else, the villains from the other world were purified. As a result, the system has been in an inactive state ever since. That is all that has happened so far.”

Reaching that point in the story, Histy-san glances at our faces from the screen.

“Do you have any questions?”

In that moment, for some reason,

“H... *Sniff...*”

Compa-san's eyes are full of tears.

“It was all so fast and was too difficult to comprehend. I didn't understand a single word.... Uwa... I-chan...”

“It's okay, Compa. It's okay. Don't think too hard. Just understand that it'll be dangerous to leave

the abnormal phenomenon in Celestia as is,” IF-san replies, patting Compa-san’s head.

“... But I see. What Purple Heart and the Histoire-sama of the other world said before.... Nep-ko, come here,” IF-san continues. She nods as if understanding something and calls for my sister.

“Huh? Me? Understood~.”

She walks over to IF-san’s side as if it’s her time to shine.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m here, I-chan. What business do you have with me? What is it? Whaddya want?”

“I have ‘business’ with that thing on your back. Show me the sword,” IF-san replies. Then, she takes out the sword and shows it to Histy-san.

“Histoire-sama, can we replace the reactivation key with this?”

“That sword...! IF-san, Neptune-san, where did you...?”

Histy-san stares at Neptune and IF-san with a serious expression.

“Aw, man.... I was going to return to Celestia and surprise her with that. ... Well, the cat’s out of the bag, I guess. I received this sword from the me of the other world, CPU Purple Heart!”

After receiving the sword from IF-san, Neptune snorts and shoves the sword towards the screen.

“... It is just as I expected. In fact, when Nepgear-san descended to Gamindustri to look for you, I received a call from another me... librarian Histoire. This is what she spoke of.”

Histy-san, who’s usually cool-headed in a way that’s different from Blanc-san, stares at the sword in Neptune’s hand.

“It most certainly shares the same shape as the reactivation key, but I must conduct further research to see whether or not we can use it as it is.”

It was brief, but the way that Histy-san immediately answered in a calm manner reminds me of her usual self.

Research? ... Oh! I’ve got it!

“I see! So *that’s* what this machine is for! ... Neptune, put the sword into that empty slot on the machine!”

I hold my N-gear with one hand and point at the machine with the other.

“This is starting to turn into a real mess.... Why did I bother going through all that trouble of being discharged from the hospital...? You agree with me, right, Magic?”

“Don’t bother. In the end, you were a big help to the Principal. That should be enough.”

It looks like Judge-san’s reaction proves my theory.

“Huh? L-like this? Do I push it this way?”

As I instruct her on what to do, Neptune pushes the sword into the slot in the middle of the machine.

On my N-gear’s screen, another window pops up, asking for permission to scan the sword. This is it! Bingo! I select ‘YES’ without hesitation.

I see. The transmission devices linked to this scanner are designed to send scanned data to Celestia over a stable connection.

“... This may not be the best time to bring it up, but it looks like the previous channel that I was using is still active,” Principal Arfoire comments as she readily scans the sword’s data and looks at the device.

After a few minutes, I send every bit of data to Histy-san.

“How is it, Histy-san?” I ask.

“... There are a few problems that require my attention, but this should suffice. Thank you, Nepgear-san. These results are quite promising.”

Histy-san smiles through the screen.



STAGE 2

Stage 2

Stage 2 - Part 1

A blue sky.

“Haaaaa!”

A sandy white beach.

“Weak! Put in more strength!”

The sound of crashing waves.

“Not yet!”

“Your core lacks fortitude!”

But the most amazing thing of all is... Uni-chan's and Brave-sensei's intense training session!

Ah, Otori Island is still as nice as I remember. The air is so soothing.... Huh? What's that thing?

I tilt my head.

“Kyaaa! Move! Move!!”

Uni-chan screams as she's thrown back from Brave-sensei's attack! Clouds of sand dazzling under the sunlight scatters to the sound of a powerful impact.

“Woah! A-are you alright, Uni-chan?”

I try to help Uni-chan up as she lies down on the sand.

“Don't touch me! I can stand up on my own!”

She pushes my hand aside as she pants heavily.

“Not yet...! I'm not done yet!”

Like she said, she doesn't need my help. She grits her teeth and stands up.

The Uni-chan who's getting thrown around on the sand looks a little... no, she looks *very* different from the Uni-chan I know.

Her usual pitch-black hair is now silver, and while she still has pigtails, they're curled into spirals. This might be a weird comparison, but they sort of look like drills, I guess?

Her dark red eyes are now a vibrant green.

And above all, the most distinct change is her outfit. She's wearing a combat suit like Neptune and mine whenever we transform.

But the most eye-catching part isn't the shape of the outfit. It's that her outfit is more... what would be a good word? ... Daring? It exposes much more skin compared to mine...

A-anyways, while in her HDD form,

“I have to... try... harder...!”

She doesn't even glance at me. Instead, she gazes at the sky with a determined look.

She tries to kick off of the ground, but by the looks of her trembling legs, she doesn't seem to have much strength left.

As her remaining energy drains and her knees drop onto the sand, her transformation reverts. Her

outfit scatters into particles of light, and her hair returns to its usual dark color.

“Hm. Roughly 20 minutes. That’s the longest you’ve stayed transformed for so far.”

I hear a voice from above. Brave-sensei slowly descends. He’s wearing the same flight pack that he had equipped when he helped us at Planeptower.

“You’ve shown incredible progress considering that you’ve only started training not too long ago.”

“But my HDD form still has a time limit. I can’t show such a pathetic sight to my sister. One more time!”

Uni-chan stares at Brave-sensei, who’s kneeling down to match our eye level. She looks exhausted, but her voice sounds so powerful. I guess that I shouldn’t worry about her.

“Wait. Going at it again won’t change anything. Rest up. We can continue tomorrow. Besides, Nepgear is here as well...”

“There’s no time to rest! If I wait around, Noire will gradually get further and further.... Right, Nepgear?”

Uni-chan vigorously shakes her head against Brave-sensei’s suggestion and looks at me. ‘Further and further’...?

I don’t think that’s the case, but I can’t just say that.

Hm... how should I put it?

Oh, while I think about that for a moment, let me briefly explain what’s happened so far.

I rode a private helicopter prepared by Principal Arfoire to come back to Otori Island.

After scanning Neptune’s sword with the machine that Magic-san’s gang had assembled, we left early next morning.

At the time, Histy-san said that there are a few problems that require her attention.

So I came back to the island to solve one of those problems.

“This sword’s material, shape, and method of manufacture are identical to that of the lost sword’s.... However, the data recorded within it is different. To use it as a reactivation key, we must fill out the differences.”

Histy-san sounded hopeful for only a moment before her expression darkened.

“As I expected,” Principal Arfoire said as she nodded heavily.

“No matter how similar the other world is, there are clear differences. Our worlds are not the same.”

“... You say that as if you’ve been to the other world before. How do you know all that?” I asked.

“I have, in a way. It sounds strange, but I’ve retained that witch’s memories. ... Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been able to prepare this device.”

Principal Arfoire said that not everything is necessarily the same between our worlds. According to Histy-san and the Principal, Neptune’s sword is a weapon, a reactivation key and a high performance recording device all in one.

The sword contains components that stores data meant to be loaded onto the system when it reboots, but the data that we have right now is from the other world.

“We need to input data collected from oceans, forests, grasslands... any and all natural environments relevant to its parameters. If possible, I would also like to retrieve data on volcanoes,” Histy-san said while investigating the data of the sword I sent.

“You two would’ve just ended up wasting time if you went on your own, right?”

Principal Arfoire grinned and gave Neptune a slap on the back.

Yes.... Neptune and I... were naïve. To think that we would’ve had to handle this with just us two...

So we let Magic-san’s crew and Histy-san analyze the sword in the underground temple and returned to the Principal’s office.

As soon as we returned, Principal Arfoire started forming teams to collect data.

“To collect and transfer data, using the N-gears would be in our best interest. Let’s split into two teams. First, Neptune, Noire, Blanc, Vert, Compa, and IF are on Team A...”

“W-wait. That’s sounds real imbalanced. Isn’t it a standard to set up three frontline and three backline party members? Sending Nepgear alone won’t be good for her. I’ll give my N-gear to I-chan, so I can go with Nepgear,” Neptune said, butting in.

“Let me finish. Who said anything about sending Nepgear off by herself? Nepgear, I want you to head to the Otori Island branch. You can probably guess why,” Principal Arfoire continued as she looked at me.

Because of her work ethic, she’s very efficient in that regard. I didn’t even have enough time to breathe.

“... Hm. Since we need to investigate mountainous and oceanic regions, Otori Island would be the perfect place. I’m supposed to team up with Uni-chan, Rom-chan, and Ram-chan, right?” I answered as I began to piece together her plan.

“Oh! Well now I wanna go with Nepgear even more! I wanna have a vacation on the southern island!” Neptune said to butt in again.

“That’s exactly why I’m separating you from Nepgear. You baby her, and she’s too soft on you,” Principal Arfoire said mercilessly.

“Uu... Nepgear...”

I could feel my sister trying to ask for help with her puppy dog eyes.

Uwa... honestly, I wanted to go with my sister.

I really wanted to, but...

“Furthermore,” Principal Arfoire opened her mouth again and looked at me before I could tell Neptune to endure it.

“It’s not just about you, Neptune. Team A also has final exams to account for. So you can’t go with Nepgear regardless.”

That was the final blow.

“M-maybe... people wouldn’t mind if exams are postponed for a couple of days, right?”

“That would be an abuse of authority.”

Neptune suddenly made a bold proposal, but was shot down instantly. I guess that everyone’s sighs of surrender dampened the mood.

W-well... do your best, Neptune! I’ll try my hardest, too!

Stage 2 - Part 2

And with that, that sums up my explanation of our current situation.

Maybe I can tell Uni-chan that she doesn't have to worry since her sister has finals to study for?

...

N-no, that wouldn't help. Even if I say that, given Uni-chan's personality...

It'd be nice if she said something like, 'Really? That's a relief... I don't have to be so hasty, then.' But she won't accept it that easily.

She's more likely to say something like, 'Alright then, I should close the gap in the meantime! It's time to start my special training!'

... That's probably how it would turn out.

"...gear."

Tap tap.

With the feeling of something tapping my forehead, I come back to reality.

Uni-chan is staring at my face, frowning.

"Huh? Uni-chan?"

"Don't 'Huh?' me. You were mumbling some strange things like 'naïve' and 'abuse of authority.' What happened? Did you get a sunstroke?"

A-ah! How embarrassing!

Subconsciously voicing my thoughts aside, I was trying to find ways to encourage Uni-chan. But she ended up getting all worried about me instead...

"I asked you about the key to success just now, but you just gave me a blank stare."

"K-key? What?"

"So you weren't even listening."

Uwa... I'm in big trouble.

I-I'm sorry!

After apologizing the best I could, I listen to Uni-chan from the start again.

Um... uh... hmm.... How to maintain HDD for a longer period of time...?

"I'm usually not the type that goes to others for advice, but you *do* know that this time is different, right? Now's not the time to fuss over stuff like that, so please, tell me the secret to maintaining HDD."

E-even if you word it that way, I've never been conscious of it, so I really don't know.

I wasn't able to transform from birth. But one day, Neptune and I were able to activate HDD, I suppose.... Oh! Well, in my case, I got the hang of it after copying how Neptune did it...

But Uni-chan's really serious right now.

She's trying to swallow her pride to ask for advice, but I feel bad about not being able to give a proper answer. So I decide to just answer honestly.

After hearing my words, Uni-chan sighs.

“So I guess you’re just ingenious, too?”

“I... ingen...?”

I try to make sense of that word that I’ve never heard of before.

“Yeah. Your sister’s probably the same. We learned of her whereabouts through Rom’s and Ram’s diary exchange, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“After that, I took another look through my messages with Noire. One of her messages said that she had a mock battle against a girl who could transform without ever training before.”

“Are you saying that the girl Noire-san referred to is my sister? I’ve never heard of the word ‘ingenious’ before,” I reply.

“That applies to the people of Gamindustri. They may not hold true for Neptune and Nepgear.”

Brave-sensei, who was eavesdropping on us, intervenes.

“What are you talking about?”

“HDD is a recently established field of research. As the alternate term ‘goddess transformation’ implies, the only ones capable of transforming are talented women. Like Uni said, there are those who are naturally adept with using HDD. But for most others, their proficiency with the ability must first be manifested through one’s own effort.”

“Then what about Uni-chan?”

“You can probably tell already, but I fall in the latter. It’s thanks to Brave-sensei’s guidance that I’ve reached the point where I can maintain my CPU Candidate form for more than five minutes.”

“People who can activate HDD are rare, and those who are naturally proficient with the ability are even rarer. Principal Arfoire has been scouting for students with the gift of HDD, but from what I’ve heard, those naturally born with the talent makes up only around 10% of the world’s population.”

“I see...”

“Yeah, and unlike me who falls into the 90% category, those kids are the rare 10%.”

“Kids?”

Uni-chan shrugs and points at something behind me.

Huh? As soon as I turn back, I blink several times to make sure that my eyes aren’t deceiving me.

Under the shade of a palm tree about 100 meters away from here are Rom-chan and Ram-chan, who I haven’t seen since this morning.

They’re holding each other’s hands in peace. They look happy.

... But that’s not the problem. The problem is the person with those children. Those glaring eyes and long tongue. A chameleon-like face and a round, barrel-shaped body. Judge-san and Brave-sensei look distinct, but that person’s appearance is too unique to forget...

“T-T-T-Trick-san?!”

“Yeah, that’s a weird sight, right?” Uni-chan asks me.

“It sure is weird, alright.... How did I not notice that...?”

Trick-san is no longer an enemy. I know that, but...

I never fought Judge-san, and Magic-san is... different from Trick-san.

"He's... he's okay, right?" I ask Uni-chan. Now that I think about it, yesterday, Magic-san said, 'Trick is heading there by ferry as we speak'.... So *this* was his destination.

"He *seems* fine, at least. ... I get it, though. I couldn't believe him, myself."

It's just as Uni-chan says.

"Ah, Nepgear-chan and Uni-chan!"

"Brave-sensei, too."

Their side notices us, as well. Ram-chan shouts at us and starts to run over.

But Trick-san grabs Ram-chan's hand.

"Wait a moment, Ram. If you run like that, you'll end up tripping like you did a little while ago," Trick-san warns her.

"Okaaaaaay."

To my surprise, Ram-chan, who's just as carefree and tomboyish as my sister, obediently stops running.

"... Yeah. You'll trip."

Rom-chan has been holding on tight to Trick-san's hand from the beginning, not letting go.

With Trick-san in the middle, the three of them hold hands and walk over.... Uni-chan said that he's fine, but I still can't believe it.

"Oh, Nepgear! Sorry. I had business with the Fishery Association yesterday, so I didn't have the chance to come by and greet you until now."

"A-ah... no, that's okay. Did Principal Arfoire order you to come to the island, Trick-san?"

"Indeed. After you girls saved me, Magic and I were hospitalized and Principal Arfoire visited us shortly after that. She said that this is an important matter, so Judge, who was discharged earlier because of 'how boring the hospital is', decided to lend a hand as a sign of apology."

As Trick-san says 'apology', he scratches his head with his huge hand.

His tone and manner of speech doesn't give off any feelings of terror or disgust like that time during the Planeptower incident.

"As soon as Trick came to the island, he said sorry to me, Rom-chan and Uni-chan. So we decided to forgive him. Right, Rom-chan?"

"... Yes. Trick-san is a really good person. You should get along with him too, Nepgear-chan."

For Rom-chan, who was so afraid of Trick-san, to say that.... It's surprising. But judging from the way he is now, there shouldn't be any problems.

I look at Uni-chan to get her input. She looks into my eyes and shrugs, implying that 'it should be good enough'.

"Besides these youngsters, I've done some terrible things to you and Uni.... Your skepticism is understandable. But I've finally come back to my senses, so you don't have to worry," Trick-san reassures us as if he can read my thoughts.

"N-no, we should be the ones apologizing," I reply.

"You don't have to apologize. Yes... I definitely like young girls! Very much so!"

... Huh?

As Trick-san clenches his fist and shouts that line, my anxiety that I thought had disappeared rushes back to me.

I-is that part of him still... intact?

"I love taking in this childlike scent. I love flat chests. I love lisping voices! I love all of the healthy young girls that roam around the streets, amusement parks, swimming pools, and school grounds!"

W-what? Whaaat?!

"However! People who love young girls must still be gentlemanly. A gentleman must not harass young girls or make them cry. It may sound odd coming from me, but ignoring the hearts of frightened little girls and indulging in one's own desire is not right! Would that not be outrageous?!"

H-he's saying good things, right? Right?! Uni-chan, can we really trust him?

"... As I recall, the other world's me was a pathetic thing. Instead of possessing evil ambitions, capturing and licking young girls against their will, I have opened my heart to master the ways of treating young girls properly. That way, young girls will come on their own... kuu..." Trick-san declares with a stern tone and teary eyes.

He gazes at the blue sky to stop his tears from falling.

Don! Don! Don! Don!

I hear an oddly cheerful and rhythmical sound.

I look over to see Ram-chan knocking on Trick-san's huge stomach.

"Look at this, Rom-chan! Trick's belly is like a big drum!"

"... That looks fun. I want to try, too. *Smile*"

"Okay, let's play it together, Rom-chan! Don!"

Don! Don! Don! Don!

... I'm not sure whether or not this sound is of Trick-san 'mastering the way of treating young girls properly'.

"... Trick, I believe that you came here to discuss something?" Brave-sensei asks.

This whole scene is so surreal. Even Brave-sensei feels embarrassed by him.

Trick-san finally snaps back to reality.

"Right, right. My, oh my. I almost forgot about that," he replies as Rom-chan and Ram-chan keep drumming his belly.

"I've finished talking to the Fishery Association. Telling them the truth would frighten them, so I told them that it'd be a resource investigation in addition to an extracurricular lesson for the Otori Island branch. With that, we now have their cooperation for the maritime survey."

"Really? You've managed to persuade that stubborn association? Good work."

"Well, that old man is human, after all. He's obsessed about his adorable granddaughter. When I complimented... I mean, when I said that she was cute and drank with him all night, he gave me permission. My belly looks like this now thanks to that."

Don! Don! Dooon!

"... Ram-chan, you're really good at this."

“That’s a 50 hit combo! Don!”

... I guess this is okay. I feel all warm and fuzzy watching those two.

So preparations for the data collection effort has been underway, even when I wasn’t aware of it.

Both the rhythm of Trick-san’s belly, and Rom-chan’s and Ram-chan’s laughter continues to echo across the sandy beach.

Stage 2 - Part 3

The next morning, I opened my eyes to the Otori Island branch’s guest room like last time. Together with Uni-chan, we headed out to the island’s harbor at the break of dawn.

While passing by the island’s shopping district on our way to the harbor, I noticed that both sides of the road were decorated with lanterns.

“Uni-chan, what are those lanterns? They weren’t here the last time I came,” I

asked. “Huh? ... Oh, the festival’s coming soon, so people are starting to prepare for it.” “A festival?! That sounds fun!” I exclaimed in excitement.

“... Yeah, it’ll be fun.”

She sounded flat. Now that I think about it, she looked depressed when we met up earlier.

“Uni-chan, what’s wrong? Are you sick?”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry.”

‘It’s nothing,’ she said. She sighed, but... I thought that it’d be rude of me to keep asking.

As we arrived at the harbor, I had a bad taste in my mouth.

Waiting for us were Mina-sensei and Trick-san, who have brought Rom-chan and Ram-chan. But Brave-sensei stayed back at the school. It’d be a problem for the others if a teacher isn’t present.

“Sorry for being late.”

“We are ready to leave. We should hurry.”

Mina-sensei urged us to hurry, so Uni-chan and I boarded the mid-sized fishing boat by the pier.

...

It’s been two hours since we left on a fishing boat driven by a young fisherman.

Right now, we’re in the middle of the sea. I glance around to see that there are no boundaries between the sea and the sky. Then, I realize why Uni-chan’s been looking depressed.

“Do you two understand? After leaving this machine at the designated location, you are to resurface right away. Do not get sidetracked by fish or the beautiful coral. Promise?”

“Really, Mina-chan? You still treat us like kids. Don’t worry! We’ll be fine.”

“... I’ll be alright with Ram-chan. I’ll do my best.”

Mina-sensei hands them both netted pouches with sea urchin-like machines sitting inside

them. Uni-chan stares at the scene with a dejected expression.

I finally understand.

“Here we go then, Rom-chan! One, two...! Transform!”

“... Yes! Transform! *Flash*”



As Uni-chan watches, Rom-chan and Ram-chan are engulfed by sparkling light as they transform. Like their big sister, Blanc-san, they're wearing cute white and pink outfits.

"I'll be right back!"

"... The water's cold, but... yah!"

They both hold onto their pouches containing the sea urchin sensors, jump into the water and disappear into the sea.

"W-will they be okay, Trick-san? Even though Principal Arfoire ordered it... I feel that it is too early to allow them to activate HDD."

"Nishizawa-sensei, it's natural for young girls to sometimes escape the grip of grownups. We adults should observe their growth with love and care."

"... Y-young girls..."

"They're more skilled than you think, Nishizawa-sensei. I'm better than anyone when it comes to judging young girls. There's a saying: 'Send cute young girls onto a journey.'"

"I do not think that that only applies to young girls... but that is not my point.... Ah... I worry for them."

Unlike the enthusiastic Rom-chan and Ram-chan who have just dived into the water, Mina-sensei stares at sea with anxiety.

On the other hand, I look at Uni-chan, who looks even more depressed after watching the two transform.

"Uni-chan..."

"I don't need sympathy."

"T-that's not true..."

Uni-chan stares at me with her sharp eyes, making me step back in shock. She gasps with an apologetic expression.

"S-sorry. I... shouldn't have lashed out at you," she says, scratching her head. "... We can't just send someone whose HDD can cancel at any time into the sea," she continues. "Uni-chan, you..."

"It's fine. It's your turn next, so you should get ready. I'll help as much as I can," she says as if to encourage me. Then, she grabs my cheeks.

"The data arrived quickly. Those two are pretty good. Uni, Nishizawa-sensei, sorry, but could you please monitor the situation in the waters? I'm busy with analyzing the data."

I hear Trick-san's voice as he looks at the device connected to my N-gear.

"Okay, I got it."

After taking her hands off of my face, Uni-chan slaps her own cheeks and walks towards Trick-san.

"I just need to watch this monitor, right?"

"That's right. But according to the fishermen, large sharks seem to roam around the area. So if you spot anything strange, let me know."

"Understood."

As Uni-chan's and Trick-san's brief conversation ends,

"C-c-c-cold!"

"... Uu, it's cold~... *Sniff*"

Rom-chan and Ram-chan land back on deck.

They embrace their small shoulders and tremble. Their lips are all purple, too.

But their pouches are empty.

They made it!

“Good job! Here’s some warm cocoa.”

I run over to them and hand them a thermal bottle that Mina-sensei had prepared before we departed.

“... C-cold. Nepgear-chan, I did my best.”

“Yes, I know. You’re amazing, Rom-chan!”

“... Ehehe. Nepgear-chan praised me.”

“Why are you all excited over that, Rom-chan? It was super tiring! It’s totally different from swimming near the island. It was all deep and black and cold and the fish looked scary! Uwa, Mina-chan!”

“Yes, yes. You girls did well. I should apologize for making you two go this far. Here, take this blanket.”

I’m glad to see that they’re still okay, but Mina-sensei seems to be more choked up. Her eyes are all teary.

They’re still so young, so diving into the depths of the sea for the first time must’ve been hard on them.

But I have to do the same. Though, I still have trauma from falling into the water last time.... I need to get a hold of myself.... Okay!

Besides Trick-san’s and Mina-sensei’s support, Uni-chan seems to have overcome her depression and is showing her bright side. I can’t let them down!

“Haaaaa!”

I psyche myself up with a shout and transform.

“Are you ready? Then here’s the plan. Swim in circles around the boat with this.”

Trick-san hands me a huge doughnut-shaped object. Is it different from the sea urchin-looking sensors?

“What’s this?”

The doughnut-shaped object is heavy. It must be filled with something. I wouldn’t be able to lift it in my normal form. ... It smells really fishy, too.

“It’s fish bait mixed with a bio investigation nanosensors. While you swim with it, it will slowly dissolve, and nearby creatures will be attracted by the bait. Then, the nanosensors will send the data on the sea life that comes by to eat the bait,” Trick-san says. According to Judge-san, Trick-san was in the department of technology when he was still a student.

“Nanosensors.... You’ve prepared this on such a short notice.”

“All I did was calibrate it. Principal Arfoire was the one who arranged it. From what I heard, she had this prepared while she was dealing with your sister’s memory loss.”

“Principal Arfoire?”

I’m relieved since she’s the one overseeing this whole operation, but now that I think about it,

she's shrouded in mystery.

For instance, she prepared all of this as if she knew about Neptune's sword being the key from the very beginning.

She and Histy-san seem to have known each other for quite a while, too. But in the end, I came here without learning much about the details.

It would've been great if we could have a nice, slow conversation, but she's kind of hard to deal with, so I can't talk to her that easily.

"What's wrong, Nepgear? Your eyebrows are trembling.... This side is ready."

... O-oh, goodness. I've been so concerned about Principal Arfoire, but I have to focus on this for now.

"I-I'm fine. I'm ready to go!"

I raise the smelly doughnut-shaped sensor above my head and stand on the bow.

"Be careful, Nepgear. If something happens to you in the sea... I can't come down to help you," Uni-chan says as I get ready to jump.

As I look back, I see Uni-chan's lonely eyes.

"... Yes, understood. I'll be right back."

I answer her with a smile and jump into the deep blue sea.

Stage 2 - Part 4

Despite how heavy the nanosensor bait is, it feels good to swim in the sea for the first time. ... If only that were actually the case.

It's different from that time when I went snorkeling with everyone by the seaside. Like Rom-chan said, the deeper I dive, the colder the water becomes.

That's because sunlight and heat can't reach this deep.

I'm maybe about 200 meters from the sea floor? I wouldn't be able to handle these conditions in my normal form. It's hard to see my surroundings, and the water pressure would have crushed me.

But still... this is tough. Rom-chan and Ram-chan did their best to traverse these dark and unpleasant areas, too.

As their senior, I shouldn't be complaining this much.

First, I dive deep enough to land my feet on the rough rock fields. Then, as I start to head back to the surface, I begin to swim in circles around the boat.

The bait slowly cracks into fragments and spreads throughout the sea.

In order to spread the nanosensors out as far as possible, I have to swim slowly for as long as I can hold my breath.

I'm about halfway back to the surface when I'm taken aback by the intimidating deep sea fish and mysterious, alien-like creatures that Ram-chan talked about. Then, I sense something.

It feels like someone's watching me...

But this is the depths of the sea. While the sea life here *do* have large, glaring eyes, I don't feel like they're staring at me.

Right. Uni-chan said that she'd be monitoring the boat's surroundings. She'll contact me if there

are any sudden changes.

Since I can't speak underwater, it'll have to be a one way communication. But if there's no signal, then there wouldn't be any issues.

Maybe it was just my imagination. It feels really creepy, but there can't possibly be someone watching me in the depths of the sea, right?

Or so I thought.

I feel something touching my leg.

No, this isn't just my imagination. Something definitely touched me! W-w-w-what is it?

When I turn around, I see it.

With my enhanced vision in my HDD form, I can clearly see the eyes glaring at me from below.

"... Large sharks seem to roam around the area."

I remember what Trick-san said earlier. But what's looking at me isn't a shark.

Sharks don't have legs with suction cups, right?

The thing that wrapped around my leg looks like a squid or octopus tentacle...

But are squids supposed to be this big? Each of its swaying legs are larger and thicker than my entire body...

...

This feels really dangerous. I-I have to get away!

Now's not the time to think about spreading those nanosensors out!

I make a break for the surface at top speed.

Ack! Uni-chan, you should've warned me if something like that was approaching! My heart's beating rapidly, and my oxygen is gradually depleting. But I can't slow down. I can sense something chasing after me from below. And it isn't my imagination! Absolutely not! It's the main body. It's the main body of that squid or octopus thing!

I'm terrified, but I can't scream underwater. I need to hurry!

I can't hold my breath any longer, but the sunlight shining through the surface is getting warmer.

Just a little more! I swim with everything I've got. Throwing away the nanosensors, I break through the water and finally fly out from the sea.

"S-squid!" I shout as loud as possible

Following my voice, the surface begins to bubble, and a huge tentacle comes out. In the blink of an eye, it wraps around me as I try to fly away.

"Kyaaa! H-h-h... help me!"

I see everyone's jaws drop as they watch me from the boat. It's like they're slowly quivering in fear.

"A g-g-great demonic king squid?!"

Trick-san's loud voice sounds slowly like the siren of a passing ambulance or police car.

I see.... So this *is* a squid, not an octopus.... Wait, that's not the point!

“Help me!”

I shout as loud as Trick-san. I see the deep blue surface right before my eyes. I-I’m being dragged under!

I desperately try to break away from the tentacle constricting me to take to the skies once more. “Don’t mess with me!” I shout as I vomit salty seawater.

Demon king or no, if I get serious, then one or two squids won’t be a problem! Wait, maybe there’s another? Ah, no, that doesn’t matter!

Grabbing the end of the tentacle constricting me, I squirm vigorously. I’ll escape no matter what!

... Or so I thought. This is more difficult than I imagined.

It’s slippery, so I can’t get a proper hold on it, and the suction cups stick to my outfit. This is bad! But that’s not the only problem!

“N-no!”

A second and third arm rises from the sea and latches onto my cheek and my back. Gross!



“Shake them off, Nepgear! In terms of size, a great demonic king squid is like a large battleship on the final level. It’s considered the devil of the sea! You won’t stand a chance if you’re dragged into the abyss!” I faintly hear Trick-san’s voice.

“L-large battleship...? What should I do?!”

“... H-how is this possible? The ecology of the great demonic king squids have long been shrouded in mystery. Recently, Lowee’s public news had recorded a video of a great demonic king squid for the first time ever, and it became an internet sensation...”

“I don’t need to know that kind of information right now! ... Kyaaaa!”

The great demonic king squid starts tightening its tentacle wrapped around my body.

I-it hurts...! It feels like my bones will break at this rate! I’m going to end up being food for this squid. I don’t want that!

As I look at the boat with teary eyes, I see Trick-san with his hands on his head, indicating his confusion on what to do, and Mina-sensei, who’s embracing Rom-chan and Ram-chan as they’re wrapped in a blanket.

“N-Nishizawa-sensei! Can’t you ask the children for help? I can’t do much if the opponent is in the water!”

“T-Trick-san, they’re both still shivering from the cold. They’re in no condition to move!”

“But at this rate, the boat will also... ugh!”

Trick-san shouts as if arguing with Mina-sensei. The squid’s leg starts to stretch towards the boat’s stern, where the rudder is located.

The boat is just a simple fishing boat without any means of protection. I can’t do anything but watch the rudder get torn off.

Somebody... help...!

If I’m dragged underwater, then it’ll be all over for me. I can’t let that happen!

I try to fly out of the squid’s grasp again. Left, right, every direction. I’m like a fish trying to get off the hook. Though, the situation here is reversed.

Trying to resist the squid’s flailing is tiring as is. I can’t afford to save the ship.

Rom-chan and Ram-chan can’t move right now.

The only person who can help...

I see someone looking at me from the swaying deck.

“Nepgear, get a hold of yourself!”

“Uni-chan!”

“Don’t give up! Hang in there!”

“Yes, I’ll try...! I’ll... try.... Please... Uni-chan...”

The flailing suddenly becomes stronger.

The great demonic king squid might’ve become impatient. It’s trying to dive with all its might.

I can’t breathe. My strength is failing. I’m being dragged underwater in an instant.

“Uni-chan...”

“Nepgear?! Nepgear!”

“Uni-chan... help... me...”

Salty seawater gets into my mouth. My sight gradually dims.

Ah.... So this is it...

I'm on the verge of giving up.

"I said to get a hold of yourself!"

... Huh? Uni-chan's voice.... As I open my eyes... it's bright. I can breathe. "Wake up! I can't let my rival lose to a squid of all things!"

... Uni-chan?

It's Uni-chan!

Silver, swiss roll-like pigtails. A dark but... very exposed outfit. Those green eyes.

There's no mistaking it. The transformed Uni-chan is right in front of me.

As she tries to pull me from the squid's grasp, she slaps my face several times to wake me up.

"Are you okay? I'll lend you a hand, so just hang in there!"

As she finishes speaking, I nod to confirm my condition. She lets go of my hand and dives into the water, disappearing into the sea.

I hear something like an earthquake from below, and a large wave surges.

Then, the tentacle that's wrapped around my body loosens its grip.

There's my chance! Once again, I try to break out of the squid's grip.

Pok pok, tcck!

"O-ouch! That hurts!"

As another tear falls from my eyes, I escape from the tentacle with suction cup markings all over my body.

"*Puwaha!* I can do it if I set my mind to it! Piece of cake!" Uni-chan says as she emerges from the water. She makes a peace sign with her hand.

"The squid has a weak spot between its eyes. While it was concentrating on you, I dove in and gave it a good kick," she continues, brushing off water from her hair.

I give her a big hug.

"Thank you, Uni-chan! I love you!"

"L-love...?! I-idiot! Why would you say that at a time like this?!" She shouts at me, blushing.

"But it's not over yet! Hurry. We need to distance ourselves while it's confused!" Uni-chan continues as she drags me and flies to the back of the boat where the broken rudder is.

"Uwa! Wait!"

As I look at the squid, it looks to be out of strength judging from its tentacles. It's probably limping because of Uni-chan's kick. ... It looks really disgusting, floating in the water like that.

"When are you going to stop hugging me?! Head to the opposite end. We need to carry the boat as far away as possible."

"H-huh? Ah, understood! But running away isn't like you, Uni-chan. You just said that it was a piece of cake a moment ago," I say to Uni-chan as she lifts the boat from the stern. She shakes her head with a serious expression.

"This is a different story. I would hate having to fight that thing again. Trick wasn't exaggerating

when he compared it to a large battleship.”

“... Did you see its main body?”

“Yeah, I saw it! Honestly, I was thinking of pulling the boat by myself if you didn’t wake up.”

“All by yourself?!”

“Alright, let’s cut the chatter!” Uni-chan replies as she goes from a serious to an intimidating expression.

“Okay!”

I fly to the front of the boat like Uni-chan ordered. Then, I notice the squid’s leg. Just the part that’s above water looks to be about 20 meters long...

Obviously, facing that thing again would be difficult.

Right. Fighting isn’t our only option. We shouldn’t provoke it while it’s disoriented. We have to escape quietly...

Uni-chan and I need to work together to lift the boat slowly.

“... Nepgear-chan, are you okay? May I help?” Rom-chan asks anxiously. She walks over to the bow of the ship, still shivering in her blanket.

“I’m okay. Leave it to Uni-chan and I. We’ll be back at the island in no time,” I answer with a smile.

Then, Uni-chan taps the bottom of the ship. I follow her signal and start to quietly lift the ship from the water.

As soon as we start moving,

“Nepgear-chan, behind us!” Rom-chan shouts, popping her head over the bow as she points to the back.

Trying not to let this opportunity escape it, the squid comes back to its senses.

Even without looking back, I can feel the great demonic king squid chasing us.

“Uni-chan! We need to hurry!”

“I know!”

And so the great game of tag begins.

“Right! It’s coming from the right!”

“... Now it’s coming from the other side!”

Each tentacle moves like separate entities and swarms us from all sides.

But Rom-chan and Ram-chan jump in to help inform us about the squid’s movement. Relying on their guidance, we manage to escape!

... That was like an action game that requires precise movement.

I said this before, but I’m not really good at action games!

I want to cry, but I can’t. Not after seeing how desperately Uni-chan is struggling despite not being used to maintaining her CPU Candidate form.

So we continue flying, believing that it won’t chase us once we reach shallow waters. But we’re reaching our limit.

Not me, but Uni-chan.

Suddenly, I feel the weight shift forward, and our flight speed begins to slow down.

“Uni-chan, hang in there!”

“I... I told you already! Don't... worry about me...!”

Uni-chan gives me a resolute reply, but no matter how you look at it, she looks to be in pain.

Meanwhile, I can sense the squid's tentacles closing in on us from behind.

Clouds block out the sun, and dark shadows fall upon us.

Wow, those legs are really long!

The squid's tentacles rise about 5 meters into the air as it tries to take down the ship.

The previous hit already left the boat creaking. If it suffers another impact... The shadows darken, and ominous sounds of raging wind can be heard.

I prepare for the worst.

“Rom-chan, let's go!”

“... Okay!”

“One... two...!”

“Ice Coffin!”

I hear Rom-chan and Ram-chan shout at the same time, and a strong, chilly gust of wind unlike the southern sea's breeze blows through my hair.

As I look up, I see two of the tentacles freeze into pillars of ice just moments before they were about to smash the ship!

D-did Rom-chan and Ram-chan do that?

“Run while you can!”

“... Sorry. This is all I can do for now.”

Since they recklessly used their finishing move without having the proper time to recover, they both stagger and collapse on deck. Mina-sensei rushes over to them as they revert to their normal forms.

“I will take care of these two. We must make our way back to the island as soon as possible!”

“Understood! ... Uni-chan, let's keep this up just a little more!”

“Who... who do you think... you're talking to?! I can't just let things end like this after those kids showed off!”

“That's the spirit, Uni-chan! Let's do our best!”

“Uni, you and Nepgear are now our only hope. Please!”

“Uni-chan, fight it out!”

“... You can do it!”

“Uni, this is the climax! Fly like you're about to give Brave a good smack!”

Everyone's hearts unite and pour onto Uni-chan.

“If you're all counting on me... then I have no choice but to try my

hardest!” In that moment, the weight of the ship lightens.

“I-I won’t lose! I... I’ll save everyone! I’ll be the one who does it!”

The ship slowly begins to move forward.

“Uni! Uni!”

Meeting their cheers, Uni-chan pushes her strength beyond her limit.

As a fruit of that unyielding effort, we can finally see the harbor in the distance.

We’re so close! Just a little more! Let’s give it our all until the very end!

... And touchdown! We made it!

We let the ship down at the pier.

“That was close.... I was worried about what might’ve happened,” I say, letting out a sigh of relief.

Filled with the feeling of accomplishment, I wipe off the sweat on my forehead and glance at everyone on the boat.

But they don’t look too happy.... How come?

...

I have a bad feeling about this...

I slowly look back.

And I see something that shouldn’t be there in the distance.

“They seem to have increased in numbers...”

Everyone nods simultaneously to my words.

There were only three of them before... but now... there’s four, five of them... And what’s *that* thing? That dark red lump between the tentacles. Doesn’t it look a little too huge? Five increases to six, and six to seven. They’re slowly coming our way.

We should be fine if we get off the ship and run away. But for some reason, I can’t move my feet.

“Ack! From the sea! The sea!”

In the distance, the sunlight shines down upon the wriggling squid legs and what looks to be its main body.

I lose my mind and scream from the insane, menacing scene in front of us. “**Uoooo!**”

Then, a great shout masks my screams.

It’s a very familiar voice.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

That trustworthy sound of footsteps rocking the entire harbor!

“I don’t care if you’re scheduled to be shown at the national exposition this summer. Protected species or not, I won’t forgive anyone who dares to lay even so much as a finger on my studeeeents!”

Brave-sensei!

“Uryaaaa!”

I hear the sound of something kicking the ground, and a large shadow flies overhead. “Brave-sensei, take ‘em down!”

“... Brave-sensei is so cool.”

“Why do you arrive at the very last moment...? ... But I guess I should be thankful.”

Contrasting my horrified reaction from looking at the giant squid’s tentacles, the shadow flying above is relieving to see.

“By my blade, I swear to carry out justice as a teacher!” Brave-sensei shouts again, swinging a sword lit by scarlet flames.

“... Uooooo! Burn, my blade! Brave... Swooord!!”

This really reminds me of a warrior facing off against a great demon king. There’s no doubting CFW Brave! Honestly, no words can describe how awesome he is!

The sword of flames swings diagonally, making a clean cut through one of the tentacles.

He did it!

You’re so cool, Brave-sensei!



STAGE 3

Stage 3

Stage 3 - Part 1

<Then let's try the 'infiltration mission pose.'>

I hear a voice from the TV within the empty classroom.

"From now on, I'll make sure not to upset Brave-sensei, no matter what," Uni-chan says as she crawls forward to match the pose on the TV screen.

I agree with her.

I still remember that scene vividly.

A roaring Brave-sensei, a burning sword, and howling beam cannons.

The longest of the squid's super long tentacles, and the main body that resembled a small island.

Nine of the squid's legs swarmed at us ferociously. There were ten at first, but Brave-sensei cut one off at the start. His wings were damaged, but despite that, he courageously rushed towards the main body. In the end, it was a grand battle between the great demon king of the sea and a teacher of the island, both putting their pride on the line.

Brave-sensei's massive punch landed on the giant squid, spraying ink everywhere and forcing it to run away. Brave-sensei cut a tentacle and pulled out another. With a leg in each hand, he returned...



<Next is the 'curled hedgehog pose.'>

"It was so cool! I watched it again!"

The happy Ram-chan copies the TV's instructions and rolls her body up like a ball.

"... But I feel sorry for the squid," Rom-chan says.

Witnessing that battle has given me higher standards for action scenes. I don't think that I'll be able to enjoy action movies anymore. But I'm a little nervous...

<Good. Now then, next is the 'spinning bird pose.' Place your head against your mat and perform a handstand. Then, stretch one leg out in front of your body and the other leg behind your body.>

I hear the next set of instructions from the TV.

On the screen is a CG lady in a training outfit making poses as she gives out instructions. "This fitness game starts getting harder from this point on," Uni-chan says.

I-is that so? Doing a handstand sounds difficult in and of itself...

Two days have passed since we were attacked by that great demonic king squid during our sea life investigation.

Thanks to Uni-chan's quick thinking, we were able to escape unharmed, and the sea urchin-like sensors that Rom-chan and Ram-chan had installed are fine.

And because of the giant squid causing a disturbance in the waters, the nanosensors that I had scattered were spread out far and wide, and are currently collecting data.

Right now, Trick-san is borrowing a corner of the staff room and is busy analyzing the data. The island is scorching hot today, so it must be unbearable for Trick-san, but there's no other way out for him other than to keep up the hard work.

Until the data analysis and transfer is complete, we have a chance to rest... but we can't afford to do that. Instead, we've been doing a special training regiment that Uni-chan had been doing on her own after school up until now.

According to Uni-chan, having to make these weird and awkward poses are all a part of this special training.

"The goal is to improve your focus. I've come to realize that the secret to prolonging HDD isn't about any external factors. Rather, it's about *internal* factors. That's why we need to practice breathing techniques and work on maintaining a calm state of mind."

So the solution to that seems to be yoga.

Continuing this will help us find balance between our bodies and souls, and enable those breathing techniques that Uni-chan had mentioned... apparently. Are those even true?

Two days ago during that incident, Uni-chan broke her personal record for the amount of time that she's stayed in her HDD form. But I'm a little concerned that that might've only been the case because of the extreme circumstances. It was the complete opposite of relaxing.

"... Ah, my legs hurt... *Sniff*"

"No, no, no! N! O! We can still transform without doing this stuff!"

"You guys said that you wanted to do it. I didn't ask, so don't complain. Plus, if you master your breathing techniques, you'll be able to slow your aging process. Your skin will stay smooth, and you'll be able to maintain your youth. Well, that's what I've heard, at least."

"But we're... still young.... Our skin will... stay smooth? Owwww!"

"And what else...? Oh, right! You can defeat immortal vampires with it, too. *Vampires!*"

T-there's no way we'd fight a vampire.

<Nepgear-san, your balance is off. Breathe slowly and sit comfortably.>

I-I can't. I can't do it, lady.

<Last of all, we have the 'drill kick pose.' Lift your body into the air, cross your arms on your chest and spin on the spot.>

Lift my body into the air...? Normal people can't do all of that at the same time, you know?

Besides Uni-chan, the rest of us grumble as we continue doing yoga. For reference, Uni-chan transformed just to do the drill kick pose. That's cheating!

"... What are you all doing?"

Mina-sensei enters the classroom with a puzzled look.

"U-uh... special training?"

"Why did you make that sound like a question?"

I'd like to know the answer to that too, Mina-sensei.

I give off an ambiguous smile.

"Well, no matter.... Once you are all done, please come by the staff room. I will explain tomorrow's Otori Mountain expedition," Mina-sensei says as she adjusts her glasses and shakes her head.

Stage 3 - Part 2

"Now that I think about it, I've never gone up to Otori Mountain before," I say as I scan the map that I had just received.

The map has 'Otori Island Tour Association' written on it with pictures of flowers and animals.

This is definitely a pamphlet meant for tourists visiting the island.

"We will proceed with the investigation by following the hiking path. On our way to the top of the mountain, we will plant observation sensors and spray animals with bait mixed with nanosensors. We will be done once we collect samples of stone from the top of the mountain for data."

Mina-sensei has a larger version of the pamphlet on the whiteboard. She points at a path colored in to indicate that it's a recommended trail.

"A pamphlet that highlights trails for tourists... is that it? It looks like it'll be a lot easier than the sea," Uni-chan asks as she uses her hand to gesture dismissively.

"Allow me to answer that question. Otori Mountain is technically the entire island itself. Every corner of the island is a part of the active volcano. Several science institutions have been studying its geological features and characteristics for quite some time," Trick-san explains.

"So all we have to do is bring back data. Is that it?"

"Yes. It sounds simple, right?"

"That's what I'm saying. It's too easy."

Uni-chan pouts at Trick-san's words.

"Wouldn't it being easy be a good thing? It's better than what happened last time," I say.

"I've mastered the essence of HDD ever since we were put into that life-or-death situation. If I want to catch up to my constantly improving sister, then I need harsher environments..." Uni-chan answers and points her finger at me.

"... Is that so? I think it'd be best not to transform and fight if possible."

I ask Rom-chan and Ram-chan for their opinions.

"I love transforming! I can use really cool magic. I become super strong."

"... I can fly."

As expected, their answers are so innocent.

"No. Your talents with HDD must not be taken lightly!"

Mina-sensei scolds Rom-chan and Ram-chan with a stern tone.

"This is a special case. Principal Arfoire asked, so I had no choice but to allow it. After this is all said and done, I will once again seal your abilities to transform."

Wow... that's no fun. Rom-chan and Ram-chan must have it tough.

They protest fiercely, but Mina-sensei doesn't even budge.

"No. Until your bodies are honed, your minds are mature, and you both begin to live to help the people, I will not allow it. Such powers must not be abused for entertainment."

"But we *are* honing our bodies! I did yoga with Uni-chan a little while ago!"

"No means no."

"Uwaa! Mina-chan, you big dummy!"

G-goodness...

I-is this my fault? This whole situation is bewildering...

"Nishizawa-sensei, let's talk about that later. It's no good if you strike a sour note on these spirited young girls."

I'm not sure if this is the correct way to describe it, but... that... that perverted side of him is nowhere to be seen. He's turned into a reliable old man as he's trying to calm Mina-sensei.

"So why is it limited to young gi... women?"

"W-whatever do you mean, Nishizawa-sensei?"

"Even though you are a friend of Brave-sensei, defying education policies is in all honesty..."

Uwaaaa...

This conversation is getting out of hand.

"U-um, Mina-sensei, Trick-san, you two should leave it at that. That aside, when will the investigation start?" I intervene.

... Finally, it's quiet. ... Phew.

I barely managed to resolve their argument. Ram-chan, you can stop sulking and hiding behind

Trick-san now, right?

“... We will leave tomorrow morning. This time, we will have our biology class together with the other students. Just come to class at your usual time, understood?”

After stopping her lecture, Mina-sensei looks at all of our faces.

As she asks whether anyone has any questions, I raise my hand.

“Yes, Nepgear?”

“If the other students are coming tomorrow, then does that mean that Brave-sensei is coming as well? Considering what happened at sea...”

“I would like him to come, but his wings were damaged during his fight against the great demonic king squid, so he will be staying behind. It looks as though it will take some time to repair them.”

I guess we don't have a choice.

“Furthermore, he said that he has a muscle ache since it has been so long since he has exerted that much force.... He said that it is not severe, but he would like to avoid climbing the mountain.”

There's a slight change in the atmosphere.

“M-muscle ache?” Uni-chan says with a cryptic expression. I can't tell if she's laughing or if she's irritated.

But we're probably thinking the exact same thing.

... Isn't Brave-sensei a machine?

“Whatever is the matter? Why the odd faces? You may all be on your way, now. Be sure to sleep early, and do not be late for tomorrow,” Mina-sensei says with conviction in her words.

In the end, we leave the staff room without bothering to bring it up.

So we're exploring a mountain after the sea...

It's wonderful being able to take in the natural scenery of Otori Island, but it's a little sad that I can't spend my time here leisurely.

Once we're done with all of this, I want to come back again with Neptune and relax as much as I want with her.

But for that to happen, tomorrow's expedition has to be successful.

Right now, Neptune and the others are probably doing their best to explore regions like jungles and such.

I can't wait for her to praise me after we meet up again. Though, I can't help but feel a little competitive. It's not on the same level as Uni-chan and her sister, but I feel like I shouldn't lose to Neptune.

But for now, there's that mountain expedition to look forward to. Let's do our best! As I psyche myself up after leaving the staff room, I turn to Uni-chan, Rom-chan and Ram-chan.

“Hey, do you guys want to have a sleepover at the guest room that I'm staying in? You three probably know more about Otori Mountain than I do.”

Stage 3 - Part 3

“Hm... so Otori Mountain is 777 meters tall, and the caldera is about 1.5 kilometers in diameter.

The surrounding vegetation is...”

“Nepgear-chan, what’s a ‘vegetation?’”

“It means the kind of plants that grow in an area. Rom-chan, what kind of plants are found on Otori Island?”

“... Hmm. Flowers. *Smile*”

“Flowers...? Can you give me more details?”

“Beautiful flowers. Red and yellow ones. *Smile*”

Rom-chan approaches me as I’m writing down notes from a book about Otori Mountain that I borrowed from the library.

Across the small table, I see her facing me as she excitingly looks at my notes with her hands on her cheeks.

“... Was my information helpful? *Curious*”

“Of course. I’ll be sure to write that down. ‘The plant life found on Otori Mountain includes beautiful red and yellow flowers...’”

“... That’s good. *Smile*”

As I jot down notes in front of the happy Rom-chan,

“You know, you’re pretty diligent, taking notes like that,” Uni-chan says as she turns towards me. She’s playing with Ram-chan on a console connected to the small TV in the room.

“Oh, the game’s over. Alright, let me educate you on something.”

Rom-chan’s answers are cute and innocent, but they’re not enough. With my pen, I tap on an empty space in my notes.

“You’ll end up filling your brain with useless pieces of information if you rely solely on books and notes. You should move your body a little more and exercise your mind,” she says, feeling confused as she unfolds her arms.

Ram-chan drops her controller and looks back.

“There you go again, Uni-chan. You always act like a big sister.”

She pokes at Uni-chan’s waist.

“W-what? I’m just...”

“I know that you used the notes that Nepgear-chan left behind to study for that last test!”

“H-huh?! How do you...”

“How do I know?”

“... N-no, not that! I was just about to say that I didn’t do such a thing, that’s all!”

“Liar!”

“I’m not lying!”

“Please calm down, you two.”

I intervene the argument between the irritated Uni-chan and the grinning Ram-chan. This is the second time that I’ve played mediator today...

"I-I understand what Uni-chan is trying to say. It's just that sometimes, I get a little too caught up in the details. But Brave-sensei isn't coming to help us this time, right? That's why I want to prepare for any possible situation," I continue, thinking about putting an ice pack on Uni-chan's head as if she has a fever.

"... You have a point."

"R-right? If we keep relying on Brave-sensei all the time, then we'll never catch up to our sisters."

I try to persuade Uni-chan by weaving in a justification that will work on her. She strokes her chin and sighs. She reacts just as I hoped.

"True. In a way, we all failed since Brave-sensei had to step in. Maybe... our sisters would have been able to overcome that crisis on their own."

I take her words into consideration.

I tried to help Neptune when she was still suffering from amnesia during the PlanepTower incident, but I ended up relying on her in the end.

What would she have done if she fought the great demonic king squid? Would she have defeated it after activating her HDD form? I guess that would be her first instinct. Or maybe she would try to befriend the squid instead?

"W-what's up with you two? Why are you both nodding all of a sudden? It's weird."

"... Do you need more information?"

Rom-chan and Ram-chan ask with puzzled looks as Uni-chan and I nod to each other.

We continue nodding for a moment.

"... It's important to make ample preparations. Even Noire said so."

"I may not be able to solve situations in the same way that Neptune can... but I can still study the data to prepare myself!"

Uni-chan and I open our mouths at the same time.

The next morning...

We're gathered in a classroom this time, not a harbor. Under Mina-sensei's lead, we're about to head to the hiking trail up Otori Mountain.

I'm a little tired after staying up until midnight with Uni-chan to prepare for the expedition. But thanks to our efforts, we've perfected our ecology notes.

With a notebook filled to the brim with information that rivals travel guides in hand, we march! Together with the other students, we install the observation sensors without any problems. Our notes did a great job at preparing us for Mina-sensei's lesson, too.

"We studied the plant life during last year's hiking trip, but this time, we will study the mountain itself. As everyone knows, Otori Mountain is an actuality a volcano. The bowl-like formation formed by volcanic eruptions is called..."

"I know! It's called a caldera!"

“... C-correct, Uni. I see that you are quite knowledgeable regarding this topic.”

“I studied in advance.”

“I-I see. Then, the green part of the caldera here is called...”

“That would be the crater!”

“C-correct, Nepgear.”

“I researched it beforehand, too!”

Great!

Our classmates are all awed, whispering things like ‘ooh’ or ‘amazing’. Mina-sensei blinks several times in confusion at first, but she slowly starts to realize that our enthusiasm is genuine.

“Amazing.... To study to this extent.... I... I am delighted.”

She’s so emotionally moved that her eyes are starting to tear up.

But Uni-chan and I don’t stop at that.

“We figured that out back at school!”

We clear every one of Mina-sensei’s questions.

With all of the research that we’ve done, maybe we could even draw an educational cartoon to show that you can study and collect data at the same time!

But as Trick-san had mentioned yesterday, our data collection methods are just installing the sensors on the ground or nearby trees, and spreading nanosensors mixed in with animal bait. It’s essentially the same thing as what we did out on the sea, but this time around, it’s really fun.

The abnormally high temperatures as of late have died down for today, so the weather is perfect. It’s completely different from suffering from the deep, freezing depths of the sea.

And unlike the grotesque, abyssal sea life, the animals we’re coming across today are cute birds. I can’t help but snap photos of them.

Ah! So these must be the red and yellow flowers that Rom-chan was talking about. *Click!*

The data collection process and Mina-sensei’s field class proceeds smoothly. We’ll be done once we collect rock samples from the summit of the mountain in just a moment.

I hear someone say that we should take a break and have lunch, so I unfold a picnic blanket at the top of Otori Mountain. Or in other words, the ridge of the crater in front of us.

As I’m about to enjoy lunch...

“Did something tremble just now?” Uni-chan says something strange. With her fork, she points at the lunch box that Mina-sensei had prepared for us early this morning.

“A-are you trying to distract me so you can eat it all? Is that your plan?” I reply. I try to pass it off at first, thinking that she’s joking.

“Hey, I’m not a glutton! And I’m not joking, either. Look closely. The lids of the lunch boxes are rattling,” she answers with a serious expression.

Huh? Is that even possible? It’s not like lunch boxes are alive.

I giggle with a paper cup filled with tea in my hand.

“There! Look inside your cup.”

Uni-chan points to my tea, still wearing her humorless expression. Finally understanding that she’s not joking around, I look at my cup.

I then realize it.

My tea is trembling like a wave.

I swear, it’s not my hands that are doing the trembling, either. I’m holding it still. So why...?

Rrrrrrr...!

I feel something blasting off the ground, and the earth below our feet starts to tremor.

“I-it is an earthquake! Everyone, put your hands on the ground and lower your stance!”
Mina-sensei shouts.

“You guys, look over there! In the crater!” Ram-chan shouts as she points to the center of the summit.

Dropping ourselves to the ground under Mina-sensei’s guidance, we react to Ram-chan’s words all together and look towards the center of Otori Mountain.

“... That’s...! Nepgear!”

As if realizing something, Uni-chan looks at me.

I nod without a word.

Smoke that wasn’t there a moment ago starts coming out of the crater.

At first, it was the same color as the clouds in the sky. But as time passes, it turns into a dark grey.

This situation can only mean one thing. Uni-chan realized that and is asking me for reaffirmation.

“Mina-sensei! This isn’t an earthquake. This tremor is... a volcanic eruption! Otori Mountain is about to burst!” I crawl over to Mina-sensei like a baby to inform her.

“Nepgear, I know that you have studied diligently, but a volcanic eruption...” Mina-sensei is confounded by my desperate reaction.

But as if trying to compose herself, she straightens her crooked glasses and slowly begins to speak to everyone.

“Everyone, remain calm, understood? If a volcano were to erupt, there would be signs to forewarn us. There are machines installed all over Otori Mountain to watch for any signs of an eruption...” It’s highly improbable that a volcano would instantaneously erupt without any warnings.

That’s what Mina-sensei probably wants to say. She doesn’t want to make baseless assumptions to make everyone anxious. Rather, she wants to calm all of us down and move on. As expected of a teacher, it’s a good call.

The book that I borrowed from the library mentioned the exact same thing.

But the same smoke that was described in the text is emerging right in front of my eyes. Unlike

Mina-sensei's calm decision making, the situation is unraveling at a rapid pace.

Rrrrrrrrr!

As soon as Mina-sensei finishes speaking, another shock is felt. This one is stronger than the last! I hear everyone's screams.

"R-relax! Everyone, please calm down!"

As Mina-sensei shouts in a desperate attempt to calm us all down, I observe the situation of the crater over her shoulder.

I can see it clearly.

The dark, dense smoke spreads across the sky in an instant.

Under the thick smoke, a small, orange light soars up into the air, appearing and disappearing like an angry dragon opening its mouth to dart its tongue.

Huge chunks of the earth bursts from beneath the smoke and spreads all over the place. And some of them are flying right at us!

"Nepgear! Where are you going?!"

Before I know it, I stand up and start running. Around 10 meters away, I jump and transform in sync!

My outfit wraps my entire body. As if accepting my will, the shining M.P.B.L. forms near my hands.

"M.P.B.L. rifle mode! Forgoing the limiter initialization!"

As I confirm the weight of the materialized M.P.B.L., I pull the trigger without hesitation.

Stage 3 - Part 4

The light flies away.

The beams fired from my M.P.B.L. pierce and vaporize each volcanic bomb.

Cold sweat drips down my face. They're about the same size as large watermelons, but they could hit the others. I'm fortunate to have made it in time.

But it's no time to celebrate yet.

Thanks to our preliminary studies, I know that the chunks from the eruption are volcanic bombs... but I didn't know that the information would actually come in handy. This gives me a complicated feeling.

With that on my mind, volcanic bombs keep pouring out from the smoke. I can't see it yet, but the volcano's vent is probably massive.

"Mina-sensei, please hurry and run away. It's dangerous here!" I look back and shout. I see Mina-sensei soothing the frightened children. She hangs up her phone and shakes her head as if giving up.

"There is no reception. I cannot ask for help like this..."

How is that possible...? What should I do?

My shoulders slump from Mina-sensei's answer. As if aiming to take advantage of the opportunity, another large volcanic bomb flies at us.

"Nepgear! Behind you!"

Hearing Uni-chan's voice, I hurriedly fire my M.P.B.L. several more times and somehow manage to take it down. T-that was close.

"Rom-chan, Ram-chan, transform! You guys should help as well!"

I hear Uni-chan's voice again.

"Got it!"

"... Understood."

As three separate pillars of light disperse, the three of them rush to me in their CPU Candidate forms.

"You said that we should help, but what do we do, Uni-chan?"

"Should we carry the others?"

Ram-chan and I ask Uni-chan at the same time.

"Hey, don't ask all at once! Give me a second to think!"

"... The explosion should definitely be visible from the school. ... Should I call Brave-sensei?
Hesitation"

Uni-chan shakes her head to Rom-chan's latter comment.

"Mina-sensei said that she can't reach anyone by phone. Brave-sensei is probably on his way here as we speak, but we can't wait until then."

"What should we do, then? Do we go with Ram-chan's suggestion and..."

"Including Mina-sensei, we all need to carry two or three people at a time. Are you confident that you won't drop anyone without using any safety nets?"

"... No."

Even if I try my hardest not to drop anyone, someone holding onto me could lose their strength. And if a volcanic bomb flies at me while I'm carrying three people, then I won't be able to avoid it.

"It's fine! We're not Mina-sensei, but we have to stay composed at a time like this. That's the solution," Uni-chan says. She scratches the back of her neck.

But she's not level-headed at all right now.

W-what do we do? How...

As I get more and more anxious, my mind begins to go blank and spin in circles.

In the meantime, the eruption starts to become exponentially stronger.

Large vibrating sounds rumble from the mountain, and both the air and land tremble.

A giant squid from the deep sea abyss. A volcanic eruption from the mountain. Isn't this all a little too coincidental? It feels like someone's hindering our progress.

Ah... if only there was a ship that could carry everyone like last time...

As that runs through my mind, an idea pops up in my head.

Ship... that's it! A ship!

I remember the joint attack that Rom-chan and Ram-chan pulled off when the squid tried to smash the fishing boat that Uni-chan and I were carrying. The technique that froze the squid's tentacles instantly. Maybe if we can use that...!

"That's it! I've got it! I have a plan! Please listen to me!" I exclaim as I stamp my feet repeatedly and wave my hand.

"Ice! We can use ice! Rom-chan and Ram-chan can use their magic to create a boat made of ice.... No, it doesn't have to be a boat. How about creating something like a bathtub, putting everyone in and carry them from the bottom?"

"Ooh!" The three nod at the same time.

"Nice idea, Nepgear! Let's do that. Codename: Operation Ice Ark! ... Rom, Ram! Hurry and make ice!" Uni-chan commands, pushing Rom-chan and Ram-chan from behind.

"Okay! ... But we might not be able to make it like a bathtub."

"I have an idea. It doesn't have to be a complicated shape. Can you create a large chunk of ice that everyone can ride on? That should be enough."

"W-we... should be able to do it, right, Rom-chan?"

"... Yes, we can do it. *Sparkle*"

Then please, hurry! As Uni-chan claps as a signal, Rom-chan and Ram-chan put about 5 meters of distance between themselves and face each other.

The twins telepathically raise their hands above their heads at the same time as if they're mirror images of each other.

"One, two!" They shout.

Then, they let down their hands. In an instant, the surrounding temperature drops.

Like that time where I felt a cold gust of wind near the harbor on our sea investigation, I feel a chill run down the back of my neck and shoulders. A massive chunk of ice forms between Rom-chan and Ram-chan.

It keeps growing in size before finally halting at being around 3 meters in length and 4 meters taller than me in height.

"Stay right there. Next is Nepgear's turn!"

It's more amazing than I had originally imagined. I gaze at the ice, forgetting our crisis for a brief moment. Uni-chan taps on my shoulder.

"Huh? Me?"

"Yes, you! You're not thinking of putting everyone on a flat sheet of slippery ice, are you? Carve it with your M.P.B.L."

I see. You're amazing, Uni-chan.

It'd be difficult to create a bathtub-shaped structure from the start, but with this.... Okay. Leave it to me! I'll carve it artistically with my M.P.B.L.!

I fly above the ice and fire a beam at it to pierce a hole while trying to avoid destroying the rest. "Melee mode!"

My M.P.B.L. switches to melee mode on my command, and I use its blade to carve the block. There's no time. I have to hurry!

I said 'artistically', but I don't have time to consider the details. Should it be about the size of a large bathtub?

I carve deep enough for Mina-sensei and our classmates to ride on.

"Mina-sensei! Everyone! Hurry and get over here!" I shout on the 'Ice Ark' named by Uni-chan. We put everyone on the ark.

"And last is my turn!" Mina-sensei says as she gets on after everyone else. Phew... haa...

Uni-chan takes a deep breath. She crosses and drops her arms.

"Uni-chan, what are you doing?"

"With this! Oraaaa!"

With a focused cry, Uni-chan stabs the bottom of the Ice Ark with her fingers.

"Haaa!"

Following an even louder shout, she lifts the heavy block of ice over her head in one shot.

"With my fingers jabbed into the ice like this, I won't have to worry about slipping off. Let's hurry and get out of here before we get frostbite."

Uni-chan hugs the ark and floats.

"Rom, Ram, support the Ice Ark from the top. Nepgear, shoot down anything that comes near us."

"O-okay!"

"Sounds good. Let's go, Rom-chan!"

"... Okay!"

It's a solid display of teamwork.

Uni-chan carries the ark. Rom-chan and Ram-chan adjusts its direction. I shoot down the volcanic bombs.

I kind of feel like I'm bragging, but aren't we amazing?

We can help everyone without relying on our big sisters or Brave-sensei!

Neptune will be proud.



STAGE 4



Stage 4 - Part 1

“Excellent work! Nepgear, Uni, Rom, Ram.... I... I’m proud of you four!”

Brave-sensei praised us after we dropped the Ice Ark off back in the schoolyard and let everyone return to their families.

Later on, I heard from Uni-chan that naturally, Brave-sensei was ready to run up to Otori Mountain as soon as it erupted.

But Trick-san stopped him.

“I understand your feelings, but what would happen if there were no school personnel around once people evacuate their homes and come here? Safeguarding those people is just as important. Don’t worry. Those children are strong. I fought them myself, so trust me on this,” he said.

Speaking of refugees, the law dictates that the school would be designated as a shelter in the event that Otori Mountain erupts.

As a matter of fact, a lot of people were gathered on campus when we returned.

Among them were the parents of our classmates who were with us on our hiking trip. Everyone showed their gratitude while crying.

Brave-sensei walks up to us to praise us after we let the children reunite with their parents and reverted back to our normal forms.

I push Uni-chan, who’s hiding behind me in embarrassment as everyone thanks her.

“It was Uni-chan who gave the three of us orders,” I say.

“Uni did? ... I see. Good job.”



Brave-sensei pats Uni-chan's head lightly with his large index finger.

"I-i-it's not like I wanted to be praised.... And it was Nepgear who came up with the idea first. I

shouldn't be the only one who gets credit..."

Uni-chan blushes, mutters to herself and tries to hide behind me again.

Is... is she shy?

So I thought. And a bit away from her,

"W-what're you doing, Mina-chan? If you hug me like this..."

"... I can't breathe..."

"Please... just let me stay like this for a while longer..."

Switching her expression from 'everyone's teacher' to 'Rom-chan and Ram-chan's guardian,' Mina-sensei squeezes the twins in a tight embrace.

I'm sure that both Brave-sensei and Mina-sensei are proud and overjoyed that the students they take care of have solved the crisis. Especially when no one has suffered any injuries or casualties.

If possible, I'd like to take a moment to enjoy this emotional scene, but it doesn't seem like we have time for that.

"Are you girls still here? We contacted the mainland through a satellite channel. Please hurry and come to the staff room."

Trick-san brings us back to reality as he runs towards us, panting.

"... Yes, got it. Alright, you five, come with me. Brave, please continue scouting the surrounding areas and take in any refugees!" Trick-san continues.

"Understood. I will leave this side to Brave-sensei," Mina-sensei says after resuming her teacher mode. We then leave Brave-sensei behind at the schoolyard and head to the staff room.

"It seems that a disaster has occurred."

"First, tell me about the situation over there."

On the computer screen that Trick-san is facing in the staff room are Histy-san's and Principal Arfoire's... er, I mean Magic-san's faces.

"Wow! It's a fairy!"

"... Cute. *Smile*"

"So who are you?"

"Are you a staff member?"

Mina-sensei, Uni-chan, Rom-chan, and Ram-chan are meeting Histy-san for the first time, so I explain to them that she's the academy's namesake... the 'Histoire-sama' of Gamindustri.

It was amazing to see how surprised everyone was, but since there's no time to get into the details, I'll have to skip that part.

Once they finally calmed down from the initial shock,

"Setting the Celestia girl aside, why are *you* here? What about Principal Arfoire?" Trick-san opens his mouth.

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"When did I imply that? You're back to normal, so emulate me and act affectionate. Otherwise, there'll still be some misunderstanding."

"Don't bring up irrelevant garbage. ... Since Principal Arfoire is with Neptune and the others, I'm here in her stead. Just cut to the chase already."

Wow, she's scary!

Even before being possessed, it seems like Magic-san was always a level-headed person.

"Back during our high school days, Magic was our leader. We all got along very well. I suppose she was what people would refer to as a sukeban?"

I hear Trick-san's voice as I cower.

"S-sukeban...?"

You mean the kind of people who would wear long school skirts or swing yo-yos with iron chains instead of thread... right?

"Back then, the academy wasn't as large as it is today. So opposing Principal Arfoire was a group of brave..."

"... Trick."

K-kya!

So *this* is what's called an 'intimidating voice.'

With a tone that I can't possibly make even if I'm angry, Magic-san stares at Trick-san through the screen.

Her voice has enough punch to make Rom-chan scream and tear up.

"Okay, let's not scare these young girls whom I've finally befriended, now. You're not even trying to understand my sentiments when it comes to changing your attitude. Oh dear."

Trick-san grumbles for a moment before continuing to speak.

"... Hm. Simply put, the situation is not good. The patterns of the volcanic eruption are unlike any other that Otori Mountain has produced in the past."

"So... were there really no signs of it? After being appointed as a teacher, I began to participate in the Otori Mountain observation effort, but this was all so sudden," Mina-sensei asks, nervously raising her hand.

"No. This is just conjecture, but based on these patterns, I suspect that it was caused by someone's evil intent," Trick-san answers immediately. So his theory is the same as mine.

I can't just sit around.

"I-I also thought the same thing. Not just the eruption, but the incident at the sea, too. It's like someone's trying to halt our progress," I say to speak my mind.

"But who would that be?" Magic-san asks.

"That... I don't know. But isn't it strange? Yesterday, I did some research on great demonic king squids in the library. The creature's ecology is shrouded in mystery, and it was mentioned that there are almost no cases of sightings. Could such a thing accidentally appear in the area where we were spreading the nanosensors?"

I feel strange about all of this. But there's no point in stopping now that I've brought it up, so...

"And this eruption... it's like it was targeting us. This is all too coincidental," I continue as if emptying the air in my lungs.

"That is a possibility," Histy-san replies first.

"The overloaded system has on several occasions attacked areas that are under my control. It is still in a state where infiltration is not possible, but I cannot say whether or not

it perfectly counteracted our current situation.”

“H-Histoire-sama, d-does that mean that information is being leaked to the enemy from areas that you’re not aware of?” Uni-chan asks Histy-san with a nervous tone.

“Please, you do not have to worry about formalities, Uni-san. I am not a ‘god’ like the people of Gamindustri might think,” Histy-san responds, trying to calm down Uni-chan.

“However, Uni-san made a good point. Simply put, let me take the weather management system as an example. Not even I can haphazardly connect to this system. But we have an emergency on our hands. Perhaps the overloaded system considers us as threats to the world’s harmony, and, as a result, is trying to eliminate us.”

“If what the young lady says is true, then this is a catastrophe on an enormous scale. We would be fighting against the world itself. This is beyond the scope of individuals,” Trick-san speaks with his mouth wide open as he wraps his head around the problem to think of our next plan.

As Trick-san ponders to himself,

“Hey, Trick,” a sulky Ram-chan says, tapping Trick-san’s belly.

“This isn’t simple at all. You guys have been talking about hard to understand stuff. It’s not funny! You don’t get it either, right. Rom-chan?”

“... Yes. *Sad*”

“See? Rom-chan said that she doesn’t get it either. You’re an adult, so explain it in a way that we can understand!”

Don! Don! Don! Don!

“Uu... uhoo!”

Trick-san lets out a horrible shriek that I’ve never heard of before. Mina-sensei frowns at that moment.

“Let me see.... Hm... here’s an example. It’s like trying to play a game that doesn’t work at all, even though you put it into the console properly. It’s like blowing into a game cartridge’s socket, and it still won’t work.”

“Game cartridge? What’s that?”

“... Do you put something like that in a console?”

“Don’t we insert cards or discs into consoles?”

“... Or download games.”

“O-oh dear. I’ve made a mistake. It seems like children nowadays don’t seem to know about blowing into game cartridges...”

Trick-san loosens his shoulders as they nitpick his example.

Is this a generational difference? Trick-san, an old man, grew up with different consoles than what Rom-chan and Ram-chan have grown up with, so I guess it’s only natural.

Oh, right. I know what he means by game cartridges. They’re large ROM cartridges from the 8-bit era. They’re so cute! They even have strips of gold running down the bottom of them! ... Goodness, that won’t do.

How can I explain it so that those two can understand? As I ponder on how to help Trick-san,

“Honestly... Trick’s explanation isn’t helping. Rom, say something,” Uni-chan butts in. “...

Tch.”

Ram-chan is annoyed since her question has gone unanswered, so she hits Trick-san’s belly even harder.

“Oh, ooh! Ha! It feels so good for a young girl to scold me.... This is opening my eyes to a new way of life.... N-no, no. My gentlemanliness is at its limit...”

With every one of Ram-chan’s hits of anger, Trick-san makes blissful expressions.

T-this is a bit...

“Rom, Ram, settle down. The both of you.”

After enduring the scene for long enough, Mina-sensei stretches her arms and drags the two back to her side. W-well, I guess she didn’t have a choice...

“... Should I have sent Judge to the island instead?”

On the screen, Magic-san places her hand on her temple and sighs. After that, she lifts her head back up as if coming back to reality.

“Anyways, if Histoire and Nepgear are right, then the ‘enemy’ has already failed twice. That means that they’ll try to come up with a much more effective method. I would do the same if I were them.”

My face freezes from hearing Magic-san’s words.

“A more effective method... like what?”

“There are no signs of Otori Mountain’s eruption dying down, right? It’s on a small scale for now, but at this rate...”

As soon as Magic-san answers my question with those sharp eyes of hers,

“Uwaaaaa!”

“W-what? What just happened?!”

I hear a voice that sort of sounds like a warrior father screaming as his precious child is taken hostage by a hideous monster.

“Brave-sensei!”

Uni-chan quickly runs out of the staff room.

It was Brave-sensei’s voice.

‘Uni-chan, wait! I’ll go, too!’

This isn’t good.

Led by my intuition, I follow Uni-chan from behind.

Stage 4 - Part 2

Following Brave-sensei’s voice, we witness a spectacular scene.

Behind the Otori Island branch’s school building is Otori Mountain off in the distance, while the schoolyard faces the sea. Brave-sensei is standing between the school building and the mountain.

He’s shielding the building with his entire body.

A large volcanic bomb that was larger than the Ice Ark, and was scorching hot from lava was on a collision course with the campus. It reminds me of the summoning magic, Meteor. And

Brave-sensei just blocked it with his body!

And smaller volcanic bombs continue to rain down mercilessly.

“Brave-sensei!”

“I’m coming!”

Transforming immediately, Uni-chan and I decide to take out the small volcanic bombs. Although they’re about the size of watermelons, there are too many of them. Just three or four of them would be enough to crush a wooden building.

Uni-chan quickly flies up to pulverize incoming volcanic bombs with kicks and punches, and with my M.P.B.L., I snipe down the ones that she missed or are too large.

It’s like an old pixel graphic game. For 10 minutes, we hold off the burning

rain. “Just a little more!”

Uni-chan and I start to break the larger volcanic bombs that Brave-sensei is

blocking. I switch my M.P.B.L. to melee mode. After I slice them in two, Uni-chan...

“Yeeooowch! That burns! It’s too hot!”

Contrary to lifting the Ice Ark earlier, she endures the intense heat and throws them to the schoolyard one at a time.

Waiting there are Rom-chan and Ram-chan, who’ve made it in time.

As they use their ice magic to freeze them,

“Uryaaaa!”

I slash them again to make sure that they’re destroyed for good!

“Brave-sensei, are you alright?”

After finishing everything off, I approach Brave-sensei. His body is sizzling with heat and white smoke is rising from it.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. But I must say, the four of you have amazing teamwork,” Brave-sensei replies, dusting off any remaining fragments of volcanic bombs.

To still be standing after shielding against those things for so long... there’s no doubt about how amazing Brave-sensei is.

Looking at the scene, Uni-chan beats her chest with her fist loud enough to make a sound. “To throw things as large as those at the campus.... If Brave-sensei wasn’t here, then what would’ve happened? Weren’t they targeting us from the start?”

“What are you talking about, Uni?”

Since Brave-sensei wasn’t there at the staff room, I explain everything to him.

“... I see. If this ‘enemy’ really does exist, then they may be toying with us. Look over there,” he says, pointing at the top of the mountain.

As I follow his finger, I notice the smoke starting to disappear, and a faint blue sky peers in between it.

“Did the eruption... die down?”

“No, that’s not the case. It’s most likely calmed down, but only for a brief period of time.”

Perhaps the one enjoying our struggle has gotten tired of it and has gone off to eat an early dinner?”

D-dinner...? That doesn't sound right.

I'm not sure if Brave-sensei is joking or if he's being serious, so I glance at Uni-chan.

“It'd be great if this is the last of it... but we should prepare for the worst case scenario. Is Nishizawa-sensei still in the staff room?” he says with a serious tone this time as he turns his head towards the schoolyard.

My heart beats from those words. 'Worst case scenario.' What does he...

As I hesitantly ready myself to ask,

“Nishizawa-sensei.”

I see Mina-sensei and Trick-san come to the schoolyard.

“Are you able to contact the mainland?”

“Yes, we are connected with them as we speak. I have placed them on hold until we can confirm the situation here,” Mina-sensei shouts back with both of her hands around her mouth, trying to make her voice loud enough for Brave-sensei to hear.

“Then let's request the academy or Planeptune's government to prepare ships right away. Ones that can carry as many people as possible.”

'Ones that can carry as many people as possible'...

I finally realize the 'worst case scenario' that Brave-sensei alluded to.

There's no way that Mina-sensei would be unaware of his intentions. Even I understand what he means.

“The island's administrative staff will arrive soon. Let us discuss our course of action and arrange escape boats.”

'Arrange escape boats.'

That's what Mina-sensei said.

...

“Are we... going to flee from the island?” Uni-chan asks. She's sitting down with her legs stretched out, leaning against the pillar next to the guest room's closet.

“We ran away from the sea and the mountain. And now we're escaping the island? Is running away all we can do?” she continues. She flaps her legs around in annoyance like a whining child.

Mina-sensei, Trick-san and the administrative staff are probably holding a meeting in the staff room right about now.

Calculating the damages made ever since the first eruption. Determining how many people have evacuated. And most importantly, what we should do from here on out.

There's nothing we can do until that meeting comes to a conclusion.

But we'll be needed if another incident happens. So we're waiting in the tatami-matted guest room separated from the gym filled with refugees.

As soon as we got back to the guest room, Rom-chan and Ram-chan hugged each other like

kittens and fell asleep. They must be exhausted. Given what's happened, it's only natural.

Uni-chan and I were supposed to go to the hot spring after finishing our investigation. But sadly, that won't be happening.

We can't have a fun discussion. But staying still is making me feel stiff, so...

"Uni-chan, do you hate running away?" I ask without a qualm.

But that question seems to have set her off.

"Of course I hate it!" she answers in a fierce tone.

"Y-you don't have to get angry..."

"I'm not getting angry. I'm frustrated!"

"Frustrated?"

"Running away means that we admit defeat. It just doesn't suit me, and..."

"And?"

She avoids my eyes after uttering that.

"... And what would Noire have done? That's how I think. Don't you think so... Nepgear?" she asks me.

"What would Noire-san have done,' you say..."

I'm used to the way Neptune thinks and acts, but Uni-chan's sister... Noire-san... she's always reliable, and even without considering her CPU Candidate form, is a top student regardless. I suppose that as Noire-san's little sister, Uni-chan feels pressured to try and catch up to her.

"Ha.... Weather management system, an unknown enemy, I don't care. I want to kick its ass no matter what."

But going against the enemy.... I understand where Uni-chan is coming from, but I'm more concerned about the safety of the people of the island.

"The meeting... is still going on," I say as I stare at the clock hanging on the pillar that Uni-chan is leaning against.

There's nothing we can do. Since the twins are sleeping peacefully, I can't play any games. I have to wait in silence.