

High
School
Prodigies
Have It
Easy

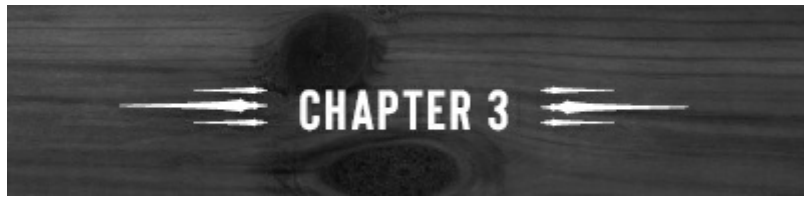
Even in
Another
World!

2



Riku Misora

Illustration by **SACRANECO**



✿ Roo's Multiplication Matter ✿

Tsukasa and the others were out bringing reform to Dormundt.

Winona, having returned to Elm Village, was treating the wounds Ulgar had sustained in his battle against the monster known as the Lord of the Woods.

"Wow, this is really something. The wound's already almost completely closed." It was hard to imagine it coming from an attack that had sliced his guts to ribbons. As Winona unrolled the bandages and disinfected the wound with alcohol, she marveled at Keine Kanzaki's handiwork. "And the stitch is so clean, it probably won't even leave a scar. That Keine kid is something else."

Ulgar, who'd awoken from his coma the week before, was currently wincing a little from the sting of the disinfectant and made no effort to mince words.

"You know, you could learn a thing or two from her. You sew up people like you're sewing up dishrags."

"It's fine, it's fine! Having a few dozen scars makes a guy look more handsome anyway."

"For heaven's sake, hun... You saying stuff like that puts the beauty you inherited from your late mother to waste. If you don't learn some delicacy, how will we ever find you a new husband? There's this little thing called tenderness, y'know. Ever heard of it?"

"Don't go setting your sights too high, now. I'm *your* daughter, after all. There, your new bandages are all...set!"

"OW!" Ulgar let out a pained yelp as Winona slapped the man's back hard enough to leave a handprint.

“And besides, this is no time to be thinking about marriage. We just picked a fight with the empire, y’know.”

“...A lot happened while I was out, huh.”

“Yeah, you missed your chance to show off.”

“Ha-ha, that I did.” Ulgar laughed heartily. Not once had he criticized the decision they’d made. After all, he was pretty sure he would have done the same if he’d been in their shoes.

“I gotta get better quick so I can go join the fight.”

“Don’t go trying to act cool, Pops. Leave the bravado to Elch and enjoy your retirement.”

“...Elch, huh. He’s off helping young Shinobu sneak into Buchwald right now, yeah?” To Ulgar, that had been the most surprising development since he’d regained consciousness.

Elch was clever and good in a fight, but because of that, he had a bit of a calculating side to him. Ulgar could hardly believe that same grandson of his had agreed to go on an espionage mission.

“He’s gotten brave of late.”

“He’s your grandson and my and Adel’s son, you know. The boy knows how to pull through when it counts. And besides,” Winona added with an ill-natured grin, “I think he has a thing for Shinobu.”

“Oh-ho! Should I expect them to come back with a great-grandchild in tow?”

“Ha-ha-ha, I doubt it. My gut tells me she’s been around the block a few times. That virgin boy of mine’s probably just gonna end up wrapped around her little finger.” Winona laughed her father down, then stood up and gave her tail a light shake to straighten out her fur.

“I’ll bring lunch over, so you just stay there and rest up.” The woman headed toward the door leading out of the shed they were staying in, in lieu of the mayor’s burned-down house.

Before she could get there, though, she heard the sound of creaking wood coming from the other door leading farther inside. She and Ulgar both turned to

look, but neither was particularly surprised.

Although the closet had previously been used to hold farming implements, they both knew it had been cleared out so someone could live there. Winona called over to its inhabitant cheerfully.

“Roo, did you want to come have lunch with—?!”

Her tail sprang up in alarm. Roo had come crawling out from behind the door on her hands and knees, so gaunt she looked like a desiccated cat corpse.

“So...hun...gry...bleh.”

““Roo?!?!””



“Whew. Roo’s alive again. She’s been brought back from the dead.”

The little girl breathed a sigh of relief. Now that they’d fed and rehydrated her, her body had made like a dried shiitake mushroom submerged in water and returned to its original volume.

Winona got right to business. “How many days were you cooped up in there? There’s such a thing as being too diligent, y’know.”

“I’d just assumed you were using the room’s other door to go straight outside. I had no idea you were in there the whole time. What were you doing, skipping all those meals?”

“Teacher...” Roo’s triangular cat ears slumped as she answered their questions. “Teacher gave Roo some tests she needs to take. He told Roo she can’t come back to the city until she gets a perfect score on the multiplication test... He said that times tables make it easy to remember, but Roo’s having trouble with that, too...”

“What’s a ‘times table’?”

“Teacher said it’s a trick that helps you remember how to multiply.”

“You know about this, Pops?”

“Can’t say I do. Never really had much of a head for letters or numbers.”

“Ha-ha, me neither. I just left all that to Adel and Elch. But hey, Roo, chin up.

You don't need letters or numbers to lead a good life! Just look at us!"

"Right! We're doing fine! Gah-ha-ha!" Winona's and Ulgar's dog ears perked up as they laughed merrily. When Roo looked at them, her young heart was seized by a pang of apprehension.

Roo doesn't know why...but she's pretty sure if she listens to them, she's not gonna turn out too good.

"Anyway, I dunno what to tell you about all that stuff, but first things first." Winona pulled out a linen towel from a nearby drawer and tossed it to Roo. "You haven't had a bath since you came back to Elm, right? We've got a hot spring now, so why not take a dip? Nothing like getting clean to clear your head."

Roo hesitated. After all, if she had time to take a bath, she'd rather spend it studying. However, even she could tell that staying cooped up in that room wasn't doing her ability to concentrate any favors. Also, she reeked, and her hair was all oily and gross. The former slave made up her mind.

"...Okay. Roo will do that..." As Winona had suggested, Roo decided to start by taking a bath.



"One by four is four, one by five is five, one by six is six..."

In order to get in a better headspace, Roo had gone over to the hot spring Tsukasa, Aoi, and Bearabbit had built on the riverbank, but when someone was in a rut, relaxing was easier said than done. Roo floated in the water, her head still swirling with numbers.

However—

"Two by four is eight, two by five is ten, two by six...pick up sticks...?"

—no matter how many times she repeated the times tables like Masato had taught her, none of it stuck.

The numbers are all just floating around. Can't get them to stick in Roo's head... All she was doing was single-mindedly listing the calculations off one after another. Doing that made it all feel too abstract, and she would quickly lose focus. The girl's issue wasn't confined to just multiplication, either. Back

when she was working on addition and subtraction, she'd felt the same.

"Math doesn't make any seeeense!" She kicked her legs aimlessly, splashing water all around her as she grumbled. Then, her ears picked something up.

"Don't look, okay? Make sure you don't look until I say you can! You promise?!"

"I read you loud and clear, m'lord, so hurry up and strip."

Roo could hear two familiar voices coming from the hot spring's newly added changing room. It was Prince Akatsuki and Aoi Ichijou, two of the people who'd returned to the village with her.

"...Look, can we please not go into the bath together? It's super embarrassing."

"This is a battle you've long since lost. At the moment, you are akin to our daimyo, that you are. Having a bodyguard by your side at all times is but common sense."

"Man, why is this happening to me...? You know, for a break, this hasn't been restful at all."

"Why not simply ignore me and relax as though I were not here?"

"Trust me, I would if I could! ...All right, I'm ready on my end."

"I have been ready for some time, that I have."

"Cool, let's get in the—WH-WH-WH-WHY ARE YOU NAKED?!"

"Hmm? Does one not always remove their clothes when bathing?"

"Not when it's a mixed-gender bath! You're supposed to cover yourself up with a towel or something!"

"As a child of Edo, I despise such effeminate notions, that I do!"

"Quit power posing like that! And besides, you're a girl, so you should try to be at least a little effeminate!"

"Oh, enough with your whining already! Just get in the bath—!"

"HWAAAAH?!"

All of a sudden, there was a kicking sound, and Akatsuki hurtled through the changing room's curtain.

“Gweh?!”

Then, he landed directly in front of Roo, who'd been listening intently to their conversation, and a huge wave erupted before the girl.



“You have my deepest apologies. I had no idea there was another bather here. I've not brought you injury, have I?”

“N-no. Roo's fine. Just a little startled.”

The young girl shook her head from side to side to get the water off.

“Akatsuki, m'lord, none of this would have happened had you not put up such a fuss.”

“Y'know, that's weird. I could have sworn I was one of the victims, yet here I am getting blamed. Something doesn't add up.” Akatsuki averted his gaze from Aoi's immodest figure, bubbles rising from his mouth as he complained with half of his head underwater. As far as the magician was concerned, it was clear Aoi was the one who'd taken things too far. Still, they'd gotten an innocent bystander wrapped up in their spat, so he knew he should apologize nonetheless.

When he turned to the victim in question, though, he noticed something unusual.

Roo's expression, which was normally as bright as the sun in the tropics, was decidedly glum.

“Hmm? What's got you down, Roo?”

“Now that you mention it... Are you quite certain you're uninjured, m'lady?”

“Roo's fine... She just has a lot on her mind...”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“...Well, actually...”

The other two were worried about her, so Roo went ahead and told them

about how she was having trouble with multiplication. Akatsuki and Aoi nodded sympathetically. They'd both suffered through the same thing back in elementary school.

"Times tables, you say. Ah, how nostalgic."

"Yeah, right? We had to learn those back around second grade, too, Roo."

"How did it go again? Three by one is three, three by two is six, three by three is...do-re-mi?"

"Wait, are you serious?!"

"Ha-ha. The truth is, that was around the time I began devoting myself solely to the blade, so I know little of numbers beyond addition and subtraction."

"How did you make it to high school like that?!"

"I am a student athlete, that I am!"



“Student athlete programs everywhere should sue you for slander!” While Akatsuki offered pointed comebacks to Aoi’s assertions, Roo bobbed her way over to him.

“Akatsuki, do you know the times tables?”

“I mean, I might be bad at schoolwork, but even I know the times tables.”

Roo grabbed his shoulders, her eyes glistening. “P-please, teach Roo! Teach Roo how to learn them!”

“Uh, I’m not really sure how... Well, for starters, multiplication is just taking the same number and adding it up a certain number of times. Like, three times one is the same as taking one three. Three times two is two threes, so it’s three plus three, so it’s six. From there, you can just add one more of the original number each time.”

“Yeah... Teacher told Roo that, too...” Roo already knew that conceptually, but when she used it to multiply something like three times nine, she’d end up with so many threes, it made her head spin.

“So Roo ran out of time on the test, and she didn’t pass...”

“Yeah, that’s why we use the times table to shorten that long process. Hmm, I guess repeated memorization might be your only option. If you don’t know your times tables, multiplying two-digit numbers is a nightmare.”

“Oh no...” Roo’s ears slumped. She submerged her face up to her nose. The thought of having to keep memorizing that weird chant was depressing.

Seeing how much anguish the little girl was in, Aoi offered her a kind smile. “You know, when I see you working so hard to become a merchant, it reminds me of my own days in training, that it does. I recall being utterly fed up with having to repeat the same forms time and time again.”

“Oh yeah. Learning magic is all about repetition, too, so I know how you feel,” Akatsuki remarked. “And because I know how the tricks work, it’s not even all that fun.”

“You two were the same as Roo...?” The young *byuma* knew that these two, as well as the rest of the High School Prodigies, were all experts in their fields.

However, she hadn't considered that they'd gotten to that point by going through the same tedious process she was currently experiencing for herself. Such a revelation made Roo curious about something.

"How did you two stick with it?"

Aoi's answer didn't take much thinking. "I had an objective, that I did."

"What's an 'objective'...?"

"Something you want to do or perhaps something you want to gain. When I was a child, I watched a period drama called *The Unfettered Shogun*, and it made me want to take up the sword to protect the powerless. That meant I needed to train, so I did."

"And you, Akatsuki?"

"Yeah, basically. By the time I was in elementary, I already knew I was going to become a magician. It was the only thing I could really see myself doing."

"...Roo has something she wants to do, too." After hearing their stories, the girl remembered she was the same. She and her parents had been loaded onto separate slave ships, but she was going to buy them back and live with them again. That was why she was becoming a merchant. It was why Masato had bought her, for an amount that made Roo's head spin, no less.

"Nyaaaah!"

The little girl gave her cheeks a loud clap.

When she thought of those lines of artificial numbers, it had made her light-headed and caused her to question why she was even bothering. But Roo couldn't let herself complain about something as insignificant as that. She had a dream, after all. The only way to achieve it was by overcoming her current hardship.

"Roo's gonna try her best, too! She's gonna learn her times tables, even when they're boring, and she's gonna beat multiplication!"

"Very good. That's the spirit, that it is." Aoi rubbed Roo's newly invigorated head.

As Akatsuki watched them from the side, a lightbulb went off in his brain.

“Hey, Roo, what’s your favorite thing?”

“Money!”

“Uh...okay. Well, that works. If you’re having trouble just thinking of numbers, why don’t you try thinking of them as gold coins instead? Five times five can be five stacks with five coins in each, that kinda thing.”

“—!”

Hearing Akatsuki’s suggestion made Roo feel like something had just gone off in her mind. The five stacks of five coins had appeared like a vision in her mind, and she knew instantly there were twenty-five of them in all.

“Roo gets it! She can beat multiplication without needing to use times tables now! Give Roo a problem!” she begged Akatsuki.

“Okay, what’s two times nine?”

“Eighteen coins!”

“Hey, you got it right. Good job.”

“Another! A harder one, this time!”

“All right, well, here’s a tricky one: seven times seven.”

“Forty-nine coins!”

“Wow, seriously? Okay, here’s a nasty one: three hundred and sixty-five times twenty-four.” “Eight thousand seven hundred and sixty coins!” “Geez, that was fast!”

It was the only problem using the hundreds column that Akatsuki knew the answer to off the top of his head, and Roo had answered it without breaking a sweat. Even Akatsuki, the one who’d proposed counting gold coins in the first place, was shocked. He hadn’t expected it to work nearly that well.

“Wow! I know not whether you got it right, but that was impressive nonetheless!”

“N-no, she definitely got it right... I guess when you do what you love, success really *does* follow.”

“Roo gets it! She gets it now! Roo’s finally conquered multiplication!” The girl

leaped around the bathtub excitedly.

Akatsuki knew that her innocent exterior belied a worrying degree of avarice. The magician pondered for a moment if he'd made the right choice, but the girl herself seemed so happy that he decided not to think too hard about it. Besides, she was already Masato's disciple. That alone meant she was beyond saving.

In any case, though, Roo successfully mastered not just her times tables but even triple-digit multiplication, allowing her to pass her test that day with flying colors. Masato gave her the go-ahead to move on to the next step.

...However...

The next day, when Aoi and Akatsuki went to the dining hall to eat their breakfast, they found Roo looking up at the snowy clouds. The light had completely faded from her eyes.

“...”

“...Hmm? Akatsuki, m'lord, I thought Roo passed her multiplication test. Why do her eyes look like those of a fish washed up on the shore?”

“Well, y'see...her next test's on division.”

“...Ah. The merchant's path is an arduous one, that it is.”

“Too true.”

“Roo's money... All her coins are splitting up and shrinking... Division is scary... too scary...” For genius businessman Masato Sanada's finest student, Roo, the former slave girl, the long road to riches was only just beginning.



III-Boding Flames

“To hell with that albino freak!”

The snowfall was heavy that night.

Over in Dormundt’s High-End Residential District, an angry voice could be heard, along with the sound of something getting kicked. A well-dressed young man with wolf ears was throwing a drunken tantrum.

“Angels? Gimme a break! He sure looks like a normal guy to me! Dammit, I wanna pummel his stupid, girly face until it looks like a potato!”

“Kyle’s temper seems worse than usual today...”

“I don’t blame him. Viscount Niersbach, his father, was prosecuted and imprisoned by the commoners. They even stripped him of his right to govern Ravale, an authority originally granted to him by Marquis Findolph.”

The raging drunk, Kyle, was accompanied by two others of similar dress. One was bespectacled and looked more intellectual, while the other was chubby and seemed rather meek. Each was a former noble who lived in the High-End Residential District.

“It’s a crying shame,” the bespectacled young man said in reference to the fate of Kyle’s father. “But soon, our days of biding time will be over, and our counterattack can begin.”

At those words, Kyle spun around from where he was kicking at a stone wall. “You mean, you got the goods?”

“Huh? What are you two talking about?”

“My family and the Archride family are distant relatives. They sympathize with our situation, so they sent us something to help... Namely, these.”

With an evil grin, the bespectacled young man pulled a round pot out from under his coat.

“What’s that, some sort of pottery? If it is, it looks a little crude.”

“Of course it does; it’s full of gunpowder. It’s a bomb they call Roaring Thunder.”

“A—a bomb?!”

“Not so loud, moron! But still, I’m surprised you were able to sneak them in. Shipping those things over during the night is one thing, but getting bombs into the city proper must have been tough.”

“Oh, not at all. The commoner swine are only wary of us nobles.”

“You mean, you used peasants as mules?”

“Of course. And we’re running the whole operation through their filthy hovel of a residential district, so our efforts should go undetected for some time.”

“I-I’m surprised you got those peasants to side with you.”

“Heh... Equality might seem nice on the surface but leads to a world that’s harsh on the incompetent, and there’s no shortage of incompetents among the commoners.” The man was right. Not all the commoners were on board with the message the Seven Luminaries were spreading.

Some people just wanted to leech off the nobles. Others doubted their own abilities and feared the prospect of a society built on competition. More still simply didn’t trust the Seven Luminaries themselves. There were folk of many minds on the subject. The bespectacled noble had gathered such people and used them to sneak the bombs into the city.

“When spring comes, and the subjugating army with it, we’ll use catapults to blanket the town in these things. The Seven Luminaries will find themselves hit from both sides.”

“Heh, I’m looking forward to it. I can’t wait to watch that albino punk crap himself.”

“B-but...if we do that, the commoners might actually kill us...”

“What are you talking about?! We’re nobles! We have justice on our side!”

“Quite right. The emperor is sure to be most pleased with our hard work. You’re a member of the imperial nobility, too. It’s time to start acting like it.”

“O-okay... Yeah, you’re right.”

The trio continued making their way down the darkened street.

“Huh? What’s that?”

Right in front of them, they saw a strange structure cast in the moonlight. It was like a little unfinished hut built right off the side of the road. It had a roof and supports but only two walls. The glasses-wearing noble looked down at it.

“Ah, it’s one of the shrines the Seven Luminaries have been building around town of late.”

“What’s a shrine?”

“A word of Yamato origin. They worship some idol called a *jizou* by way of these little huts.”

“Huh. So what, they’ve got a little statue of that blond kid in there?”

Curious, Kyle walked over to the half-built hut and popped in through one of the unfinished walls.

However, it was too dark to make out anything clearly.

“Tch. I can’t see for shit. Hey, Marco, gimme some light in here.”

“S-sure.”

The plump noble lit up his lantern.

Now that it was illuminated, Kyle could make out a large, cylindrical pillar inside the hut.

“Huh? What’s this supposed to be?”

“...Yeah, why’s it a cylinder?”

“It certainly doesn’t look like a statue...”

“Heh-heh-heh. I figured it out, guys. Those lowly savages don’t have the technology to carve statues, so they just stuck a big rock here instead to try and trick us.”

“That seems eminently plausible. Primitives are fond of their stone circles, after all.”

The two of them let out scornful laughs.

“Guess we don’t have a choice, huh? As representatives of the empire’s greatness, it’s our job to teach them a thing or two about class.”

Kyle turned the wine bottle he was holding over and poured its contents onto the pedestal on which the cylinder was enshrined.

“You like that? Tasty, huh? Nothing like the stale wort you paupers drink. This here is sweet, mellow, full-bodied booze. The finest stuff around. Drink up, O mighty God of the poor savages! Ha-ha!”

Suddenly, the three heard something. The sound of metal on metal and footsteps treading on the fallen snow.

“Kyle, someone’s coming!”

“I recall hearing that they assigned guards to their little shrines, so I suspect it’s that.”

“Tch. It’d be a pain if they found us here. Let’s bounce.”

Kyle and the others quickly left the unfinished hut and vanished down an alley. Not a moment later, the bespectacled noble was proven right, as the guard returned.

“...Whew. Man, when it gets this cold out, the ol’ bladder starts working overtime...”

The young, shivering soldier had no idea. He hadn’t the slightest hunch just how much his little mistake would contribute to the coming tragedy.



❧ Infiltrating the Gustav Domain ❧

It had been around a month now since the Seven Luminaries took over Dormundt. Shinobu Sarutobi and Elch, for their part, had just made it into the Gustav domain. The shallow snow on the footpaths crunched pleasantly under their feet. Up ahead, they could make out a small village. Shinobu suggested they find lodging there, and Elch readily agreed. It was only just past noon, but in order to sneak past the checkpoint, they'd spent the previous two days sleeping in the snow-filled forest. It was doing a number on their stamina.

From where they stood, the village looked like it couldn't possibly have more than a hundred residents. It might not have had proper inns, but for some coin, the two could likely guarantee a room of some kind over their heads, at least. With that thought carrying them forward, Shinobu and Elch made their way onward. Eventually—

"No way..."

"What *is* this place...?"

Arriving at the village, they couldn't believe their eyes.

"Th-this is...nuts. And this is just a little farming village?"

"Merely by crossing the border, it's like we stepped into a whole other world..."

They knew about all the commoners who'd tried to flee from the region, so the two of them had envisioned the Gustav domain as some sort of awful hellscape. Sure, they'd heard it was the most beautiful place in the whole empire, but it was assumed that only held true of the big cities. They'd

expected the smaller villages to be ruins filled with worn-down farmhouses.

However, that assumption stood in stark contrast with the scene before them. There wasn't a speck of dirt anywhere to be seen, and all the farmhouses were covered in pastel coats so bright, it seemed as though they'd just been painted.

Furthermore, the streets were all neatly paved with milky-white stone brick, and streetlamps were installed at regular intervals. To top it all off, the town square was adorned with an intricately carved fountain.

The two travelers were dumbstruck.

"This is unreal, El-El. I mean, look! All the houses have glass windows!"

"Yeah, and they even have a fountain... Who knows how much that must have cost...?"

It was like being in some sort of high-society garden. Yet, in spite of that, it was just a common farming village. The splendor of the buildings wasn't the only impressive thing about the town, either. As they wandered about gawking at their surroundings, the passing villagers all called out to them.

"Good day!"

"Good day! Fine weather today, no?"

"Good day! Welcome to Coconono Village!"

Each villager bore a sociable smile and offered Shinobu and Elch cheery greetings. The people were just as amiable as the scenery was pleasant. More than just smiles and welcoming attitudes, their clothes were nice, too.

These weren't the bundles of cloth the Findolph and Buchwald villagers wore to stave off the cold. No, these were colorful, well-coordinated outfits and dresses. The fabric wasn't just plain linen, either. It was adorned with lace and gold trim. Nothing too outlandish but still was nothing peasants should have been able to afford. In fact, not even nobles would own items like that unless they were dedicated fashionistas.

"They still seem like commoners, but it looks like they've got it pretty good here."

“Yeah. So it does...”

The two both let out amazed remarks about the Gustav domain’s unexpected wealth. Then, they heard a voice.

“Look, we have guests! Emelada, over here!”

An elderly *hyuma* man called after a young *byuma* woman and a girl of about ten, both with bear-like ears.

“Good day, travelers!”

“Good day!”

The woman and girl both offered Shinobu and Elch small bows. Other villagers had passed them by and gone on their way, but these three stopped to greet them. The two weary travelers stopped in turn and returned the greeting.

“Good day to you, too. I gotta say, you’re all real friendly here.”

“As a small rural village, we don’t have much to offer visitors, so the least we can give them is hospitality.” The young woman smiled as she made the jest, then gave them her name. “Oh, I should introduce myself. I’m Emelada, and this here is my daughter, Milinda.”

“These two run the town’s inn. The sun’ll be setting soon, and the next town over’s a fair bit away. Why don’t you stay the night at their place? You’re the only customers today, so all the rooms are open.” It appeared the old man had gone and summoned the proprietor of the local lodgings for them.

“Wow, thanks for the help! Staying at an inn was our plan all along, so you saved us the trouble of having to look for one.”

“Oh, is that so? Well, glad to be of help.” The toothy grin the elderly *hyuma* flashed them was oddly white and shiny. When Shinobu looked, she could tell his teeth were artificial. They seemed to be carved from ivory or the like. The technology to mass-produce such things didn’t exist in this era, so they must have been as valuable as jewels.

How was this tiny village able to sustain such a high standard of living? As questions swirled through Shinobu’s mind, young Milinda happily called out to her.

“Hey, miss, mister. Are you two married?”

Elch’s cheeks went scarlet. He immediately opened his mouth to deny it.

“There’s no—mmph?!” However, Shinobu clamped her hand over his mouth.

“Tee-hee, yup! We’re a traveling entertainer couple!”

“HmMMmmM?!”

“It’s too fishy to have a young guy and gal traveling together if they aren’t married. Just play along.”

“O-oh, okay...”

After Shinobu whispered in Elch’s ear, he realized the ninja-journalist was right and quickly agreed to her cover story.

Not a moment later—

“Wow, that’s great! Hey, fellas! Apparently, these two are traveling entertainers!”

“Whoa, seriously?!”

“That’s so cool! What kind of tricks do you do?! You gotta show us!”

—the two found themselves surrounded by excited villagers.

The old man who introduced them to Emelada and Milinda made them an offer.

“What do you say? Would you be so kind as to show us your stuff? There’s no fieldwork to be done this time of year, and we don’t get too many merchants, neither. Most of us are bored sick. If you put on a show for us, we can repay you with food and booze!”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, please do. My daughter would love it, too. I’d be happy to let you stay the night for free in exchange.”

Had they just offered free room and board? Shinobu gleefully accepted.

“You guys drive a hard bargain, but sure, we’ll do it! Right, El-El?”

“Uh, sure...?”

“Huzzah! Everyone, make preparations for a feast!”

“You got it! Today’s gonna be great!”

And thus, the two of them ended up trading a display of their talents in exchange for free food and a place to sleep for the night. The part about them being traveling performers was a lie, but they *did* both possess specialized skills.

Shinobu elected to juggle some borrowed pottery while balancing atop a ball, while Elch showed off his masterful archery by performing tricks such as shooting a snowball off of his companion’s head. Both were met with hearty applause from the villagers. The young Milinda was especially enthusiastic, hopping up and down and clapping so hard that Shinobu and Elch were worried the girl was going to hurt her hands.

As thanks for their performance, the villagers threw them a lavish feast. There were meat skewers dripping with juices, stew full of hearty sustenance, and plenty of sweet beer to go around.

At the villagers’ urging, Elch downed tankard after tankard of the drink. Before long, he noticed his head feeling fuzzy and his body feeling hot. It went down so easy, the young man hadn’t noticed it at first, but the beer must have been fairly strong. The smiling villagers praised them for their skills and refilled their steins.

It was unclear if Shinobu realized it was alcoholic or not, but the atmosphere being lively, she was gulping the stuff down like there was no tomorrow. Elch, swept up by the mood, emptied his own mug in kind. By the time the sun started setting, the two of them were well and truly plastered.



After the lively reception dinner, Milinda and Emelada led their inebriated guests to the inn. In keeping with the rest of the village, it was built from tidy red bricks and boasted an impressive chimney. Off to the side, it had a wooden stable to accommodate visiting merchants. An unmanned wagon was resting inside, almost ornamentally.

“Wheeee... The world ish melting... Like cheeeese... Hee-hee-hee.”

“C’mon, Shinobu, keep it together... Hic...”

Elch tried to tell off the journalist, who had gotten so drunk he'd had to carry her to their lodging on his back. However, the beer had made his face so red and his gait so tottering that it looked like he needed the advice just as badly as she did. Emelada gave a concerned bow as the pair approached.

"Are you two all right? I'm so sorry. We tend to get a little carried away here."

"No, no... I'm fine..." Elch groaned.

"Yeah, I'm jusht peachy! I can keep going all night! ...Urp."

"Hey! Don't go throwing up on my back, you hear!"

Struck by an ominous premonition, Elch set Shinobu down. She covered her mouth, face pale.

"Hwehhh... Why doesh it feel sho good and sho bad at the shame time?"

"Cause you were downing the beer like it was water, that's why. Not that I'm anyone to talk, mind you."

"Urrrgh... I'm gonna go outshide to get shome air..."

"Oh! Th-that door doesn't go outside!"

Shinobu staggered straight toward the wooden door in front of her, but Emelada quickly stopped her and lent her a hand.

"The door outside is over here. Milinda, Mom's going to keep an eye on Shinobu, so could you be a dear and show Elch up to their room?"

Milinda nodded.

"Thank you, darling," Emelada replied as she led Shinobu outside.

"And shank *you*, Msh. Emelada. You're sho nische...urp!"

"Oh my! P-please don't throw up until we're actually outside!"

"Is...she gonna be okay?"

Elch turned around, worried, but Milinda called for him and bade the young man to follow her. The girl led him up to the second floor.

"Here's your room."

"Ah, thanks... I had a bit too much to drink, too, so I'm gonna go ahead and lie

down. Standing makes me feel faint.” Elch sat down on one of the room’s two beds as he thanked Milinda. As he did, though, he noticed something.

Hmm...?

There was a hint of trepidation in the *byuma* girl’s expression. Her smile from before was gone...and her eyes were swimming as though she was agonizing over something. Then...

“Mister...”

Milinda looked at Elch as though she’d made up her mind.

“You have to hurry and get out of—” She was trying to tell him something. However, the girl wasn’t able to get the end of her message out. Emelada had come up the stairs with Shinobu in tow.

“Thank you for showing our guest his room, Milinda.”

“...”

The moment Emelada showed up, Milinda went silent and scampered down to the ground floor. Emelada, who was lending Shinobu her shoulder, took her place.

“Is Shinobu...er, my wife okay?”

“Oh, she’s fine. Once she threw up, she seemed a lot better.”

“It feels like I’m floating on a cloud...” The moment Shinobu made it into the room, she plopped herself drunkenly onto the floor. The High School Prodigy might not have needed to throw up anymore, but she still looked pretty wasted.

“Sorry for all the trouble...”

“Oh, not at all. If anything, it’s our fault for encouraging you to drink so much.” Emelada chuckled wryly. “But please, make yourselves at home.” She gave the pair a slight bow, then exited the room and closed the door.

After Emelada had left, Elch summed up his thoughts on the village. “Y’know, I was worried about how things’d go after we made it over the border, but this village actually seems really pleasant. Their buildings are nice, their clothes are

fancy, and everyone's really friendly... I'd expected all the commoners to be wearing shabby stuff like we do, but I guess things are just different here, huh."

From what he'd heard during the feast, the villagers were largely wheat farmers. As they'd happily explained, they didn't have much income, but because of how well Emperor Lindworm von Freyjagard and Lord Oslo el Gustav kept the peace, they were able to live in comfort despite that.

Honestly, Elch had trouble believing it all. He could never have imagined commoners in the empire being so blessed with luxury.

"It looks like they've got it pretty good here, so I dunno how excited they'll be about the Seven Luminaries' teachings. Got any backup plans?" Elch had directed the question at Shinobu.

However, instead of an answer—

"Zzz... Zzz..."

—the only response he got was snores.

When he looked, he saw her lying facedown on the floor.

It appeared she'd never actually made it onto the bed.

"Wait, are you seriously asleep...? Man, what am I gonna do with you?" Elch sighed in exasperation, then drunkenly tottered over to Shinobu to lift her onto the bed.

"C'mon, now. If we don't at least get a blanket on you, you're gonna catch a cold."

The next moment, though, something unbelievable happened. Shinobu's arms shot up and wrapped themselves around the back of the young man's head. When she yanked him toward herself, their lips met.

"Mwah. ♡"

"MmmmMMmph?!?!?"

They pressed deep against each other. The girl's mouth was hot from the alcohol. Elch froze up, unsure how to process what was happening. What was going on? Should he have done something? However, he quickly returned to his

senses and pushed Shinobu off. He voiced his objections with a bright-red face.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what’s the big idea?! Y-you! Drunk or not, y-you can’t just —?!”

“Well? All sobered up now?”

“Huh...?” Elch found himself at a loss for words. This wasn’t the reaction he’d been expecting at all. He’d thought that Shinobu was so plastered that the girl didn’t know what she was doing. Judging by her expression, however, she didn’t seem intoxicated in the slightest.

“You...aren’t drunk?”

“Of course not. It’d take more than that to get a ninja sloshed. Besides, I made sure to take a liver supplement beforehand.” Shinobu’s tone was the same as ever. She was well and truly sober. But if that was the case, then why...?

“Why the act, then?”

“If I didn’t fake it, they’d have kept bringing out drinks until I really *was* wasted. Didn’t you notice? The villagers were all trying to get us to live it up, but they barely touched their own drinks at all.”

“Wait, why?”

“That’s what I wanna know. Why were they so insistent on getting us drunk? Plus, their houses and clothes were clearly expensive, but all the people... *Why do they look like they’re starving?*”

“They do?”

“Their heavy winter clothes did a good job of hiding it, and they were using makeup to make their faces look presentable. Their skin was all dry and ragged, though. Even an amateur could make out the jaundice in their eyes.” Such symptoms were typical of malnutrition.

The first time Shinobu had set eyes on the villagers, she’d caught on immediately. Something about the village was fishy.

“...It wasn’t until we got to the inn that I realized *why* everything was so weird. C’mere.”

“Wh-where are we going?”

“Through that door I tried to go through before... Don’t worry. When I was pressing my ear against the ground earlier, I made sure our two hosts were gone.” Shinobu left the room and moved briskly toward the door in question. It was down the stairs and past the service counter.

When opened, the two found a stairwell leading down. Using Shinobu’s smartphone as a light, the pair began their descent. Before long, they found themselves in front of yet another door. Shinobu paused before it and turned to Elch.

“El-El...no matter what we find here, you can’t scream. Got it?”

“O-okay.” Elch nodded, and Shinobu pulled the handle toward herself.

Elch felt a cold sensation run down his spine. The cause was easy enough to deduce: the smell. The moment Shinobu opened the door...the rank smell of blood assailed his nostrils. The young man’s eyes went wide as morbid curiosity made him wonder as to the source of the horrible odor. The *kunoichi* -journalist shone her light into the room.

Inside—

“——???!!!”

“This here...is the village’s secret.”

—they saw them.

Cast in the light against the dark background were brutalized human corpses dangling from the ceiling.



The room felt eerily cold.

Elch’s voice trembled at the unbelievably gruesome spectacle laid before him.

“Th-those are...people?!”

“They probably employed a bunch of different lies to lure travelers to the inn, got them drunk so they couldn’t fight back...then brought them down here.”

“Wh-why would they do something like this?! Ah—” Suddenly, Elch

remembered wondering how a simple farming village could possess such wealth.

“That’s it! They kill travelers and take their money! That’s why they seem so rich...”

However—

“That’s what I thought at first, but it looks like money wasn’t the only thing they were after.”

—Shinobu rejected his hypothesis as she stepped into the cellar.

She cast her light on one of the suspended corpses’ ankles. It looked to have once been a man but was missing a head and one of its hands.

“Look. See the deep cut on the ankle? You’re a hunter, so you know what that means.”

The question sent a chill up Elch’s spine. He did. Cut off the head. Slice through the vein in the ankle. Hang upside down.

There was no mistaking that process.

“...They’ve had their blood drained...”

“That’s right. And the organs were removed cleanly, so they’re definitely being prepared for consumption... This village is a den of murderers, right down to the bone. Literally.”

“Bluuurgh!”

Unable to take it anymore, Elch dropped to his knees and ejected the contents of his dinner.

“Yeah, probably better just to get it all out of your system. Guess I beat you to the punch a bit there.”

“This is sick... So wait, do you think what they fed us was...?”

“Nah, we’re fine there. That was all horse meat.”

“H-horse?”

“Remember that abandoned wagon by the inn? It probably belonged to one

of these guys. The villagers used its horse to throw us that feast. If they fed us people and scared us off, it'd defeat the whole purpose. Besides, trading the horse flesh it takes to fill a couple bellies for two whole bodies' worth of meat is a pretty good deal."

"Urrrgh..." The idea of using *hyuma* and *byuma* as food filled Elch's throat with bile all over again. How could people even do that? Elch thought back to the smiles the villagers had been wearing all afternoon. They'd seemed like decent people, not barbarians.

Then, it hit him.

As he was thinking about the villagers' faces, he finally realized something. Everyone else had been smiling from beginning to end, but Milinda's expression had wavered for a moment.

Wait, was she...?

Had she been trying to warn them? However, the young man's train of thought was soon interrupted. A shrill, ear-piercing whistle shattered the air.

""——?!""

As the two of them looked up in confusion, they heard a voice echo down from aboveground: loud, male, and booming.

"Silver Knight Jeanne du Leblanc is here for an inspection! Show yourselves!"

"What's going on?"

"Dunno. Guess we'd better go check it out...!"



After emerging from the inn's cellar, Shinobu and Elch sneaked out the back entrance and looked toward the central plaza's fountain from their concealed spot. A most unusual scene greeted the duo's eyes.

Some dozen-odd armored soldiers were taking the villagers and lining them up. Emelada, her daughter, and the old man who'd introduced them to Shinobu and Elch were among them.

Then...

"ALL HAIL!"

When the conspicuously large soldier shouted at them, the villagers chanted a reply in unison while wearing the same radiant smiles with which they'd greeted Shinobu and Elch.

""""We are grateful for your visit!""""

""""It's been another day of joy and good fortune for us common folk!""""

""""And we owe it all to His Majesty, the Emperor!""""

With the villagers' practiced mantra completed, the red-haired, silver-armored woman who'd been waiting behind the soldiers dismounted from her horse and strode over to them.

She swept her razor-sharp gaze across their lineup.

"Indeed. I am here today to judge whether or not you present in ways befitting subjects of His Grace... Last week I inspected your village itself, and today, my focus shifts to the appearances and smiles of you, its people. Now, straighten those backs!" The order was issued with a dignified tone.

""""Yes! Thank you!""""

The villagers all stood at attention, their backs held unnaturally straight.

The female knight looked each villager over from head to toe, her eagle eyes sparing no detail. After her inspection had gone on for a bit, she ordered those assembled to turn around and repeated the process.

Once the knight was satisfied—

"Very well."

—she would utter a short assessment before moving on to the next in line.

It was like watching someone appraise goods.

"...Oh, huh. I think I get what's going on," Shinobu said.

"You do?"

"I'm just spitballing, but I think this village...no, this whole domain is being *forced* by its lord to keep their towns pretty, their clothes fashionable, and their faces bright."

“B-but what does that even accomplish?”

“I dunno, but...it’s not too uncommon for people with absolute power over others to go and do stuff that doesn’t really make any sense.”

Earth had no shortage of examples. There was a shogun who’d enforced an egotistical set of laws called the Edicts on Compassion for Living Things. Elsewhere, a countess kidnapped serfs and peasant girls, subjected them to sadistic torture, and bathed ecstatically in their blood. Plenty of rulers went and did things that seemed irrational to people with normal dispositions.

Compared to them, that sex maniac Findolph looks like a friendly old man. As Shinobu grinned sarcastically at the thought, a sudden question caught the pair’s ears.

“What exactly is this, girl?” The knight’s hard question was directed at one person in particular.

“Milinda...!” The girl from the inn where Shinobu and Elch were staying.

“...!”

“The hem of your dress is soiled... One’s clothing must be pristine and beautiful, never frayed or stained. Such is the basic requirement for citizens of His Grace’s empire. It is my duty to punish those who cannot fulfill such basic requirements.”

“Ah... I...”

As the knight solemnly issued her verdict, Milinda’s whole body began shaking pitifully as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Her mother, Emelada, quickly moved as though to shield her—

“P-please wait, my lady!”

—and offered the knight a plea.

“A child’s failing lies with her parent. Please punish me instead...!”

The woman’s reply, “No,” was short and final.

“Parent, child, it matters not. Our lord commands that the guilty be punished —You. Prepare her.”

“Yes, my lady!”

“Mama! Help me, Mama!”

“Milinda! Please, I beg of you, have mercy...!” Emelada made another desperate petition. However, her words fell on deaf ears.

“Your smile is slipping.” The voice of the female knight was like cold steel—utterly devoid of mercy.

“...?!”

“The citizens under His Grace’s protection must always smile as proof of their gratitude. Our lord has decreed that as law... I am willing to overlook your fault thus far as that of a concerned parent. However, there will be no second chances. If you persist in your whining and obstruction of justice, I will have the heads of you and your daughter both.”

“...”

“Smile.” As the knight spoke, the woman moved her hand to the sword at her waist.

If Emelada failed to comply, her life would end in a single slash. Her daughter, Milinda, would be next. As such...Emelada had no choice but to forcibly raise the corners of her mouth into a stiff smile. All the while, the soldiers were binding Milinda.

A brawny one held the poor girl’s head still while the others drove a pair of stakes into the ground, wound a rope around them, and used it to bind her legs. Milinda sobbed and tried to flee, but there was only so much a child’s strength could accomplish. A soldier with a lash made from a series of leather straps stood behind her.

“Keep the strikes to her buttocks. If you hit a girl that small in the back or the chest, she’d die before you got to the thirtieth lash,” the knight commanded.

“Yes, my lady!”

“Now, begin the punishment.”

A dry crack echoed through the twilit winter night.

Watching Milinda crumple to the ground, the soldier who'd been whipping her stopped.

"Milady, she's passed out..."

Jeanne, the red-headed knight, remained implacable. "...Continue with the prescribed number of lashes."

"Yes, my lady!"

"No, noooooo! Stop, just stop! My daughter's the only thing I have left of my late husband! She's our future. Please stop hitting her!!!!" Emelada's screams grew ever more frantic.

That moment, though, a star-shaped chunk of metal came flying out of the distant thicket and embedded itself in the lash-wielding soldier's hand.

"AAAAARGH!!!!"

"Huh?!"

"What's going on?!"

"All right, all right, that's enough of that. The girl's gonna die if you keep that up, you know." The sudden attack sent a stir through the soldiers. They all turned toward the source of the voice.

It was a girl with peach-blond hair and a long, fluttering skirt. Shinobu Sarutobi, prodigy journalist.

"Who are you?! You don't look like one of the villagers!"

One of the soldiers drew his sword threateningly and prepared to charge Shinobu. However, Jeanne stopped him.

"Stand down."

"My lady?"

"That peculiar star-shaped throwing weapon is a shuriken. It's a tool used by the Yamato ninjas. There's no telling what could happen if you charge in recklessly."

"Ninja?! You mean...she's one of those?!"

“She wasn’t just a traveling performer...!”

Hearing the word *ninja* seemed to strike fear into the villagers and soldiers alike. In fact, the only one who seemed unfazed was Jeanne. She strode toward Shinobu.

“I thought all the ninja villages had been burned to the ground, but it seems there was a survivor. Why show yourself to us, though?”

“I told you, didn’t I? I wanted to stop you from killing the girl.”

“You wanted to save the child? How foolhardy.”

“...”

While the red-haired knight was speaking, soldiers moved to surround Shinobu. Once they’d cut off any avenue of escape, Jeanne drew her sword.

“Unlike samurai, ninja are supposed to remain hidden and strike from the shadows. Now that you’ve shown yourself and let us pin you down, you’re powerless.”

Shinobu was indeed encircled by swords on all sides. However, it didn’t look like she felt cornered in the slightest.

“How ’bout this, lady knight. Wanna make a deal?” Shinobu grinned like the Cheshire cat as she twirled a kunai around on her finger.

“A deal?”

“Yup. You’re right. I can’t win against this many people when we’re out in the open...but I’m taking at least half of you down with me. And you’re first on my list.”

“...!”

“But if you promise not to hurt the girl anymore, I’ll come along quietly. Whaddaya say? Not a bad offer, right?”

“...”

Jeanne hesitated, her sword still pointed at the ninja. After a moment, she called to her subordinate holding Milinda’s head down.

“Very well. I accept your condition... Release the child.”

“Are you sure, my lady?”

“Make it snappy.” The soldier did as he was bid. Seeing that, Shinobu tossed her kunai off to the side.

“Thanks kindly.”

Now that she was unarmed, the soldiers rushed at her, kicked her to the ground, and stripped her of her freedom. After making sure the iron manacles were secured around Shinobu’s wrists, Jeanne gave an order.

“We’re going back to Count Blumheart’s castle. Bring the ninja.”

“““Yes, my lady!”””

Clapped in chains and in the custody of Jeanne, Shinobu was carted off to Castle Blumheart.



A few minutes earlier, back when Shinobu had stopped Elch from rushing out.

“W-wait, you’re gonna go?!”

“Yeah. Here, hold on to my phone and ninja tools for me. Oh, and later, let Tsukes know that I got captured on purpose. You know how to use my phone, right?”

“I—I do, but couldn’t the two of us just take them out without getting taken prisoner...?”

“No, no, you’re thinking about it all wrong. We’re on an espionage mission. If I let them catch me, I’ll be able to make it all the way into their base without lifting a finger. I can’t pass up on an opportunity like that... Oh, don’t look so worried. I’ll have you know that jailbreaks are my specialty.”

This was how they decided Shinobu should allow herself to be captured in order to sneak deep into enemy territory.

Elch, who’d been left alone in the village, helped Emelada carry Milinda back into the inn. The little *byuma*’s wounds were brutal and would likely leave a lifelong scar. Fortunately, though, her breathing eventually stabilized, and she drifted into a quiet slumber. Emelada dropped to her hands and knees, thanking Elch between relieved sobs.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you...! You saved my daughter...!”

“I’d like to thank you, too. I don’t know what we would have done if you hadn’t been here...,” the old man who’d first introduced the mother and daughter added.

However...after seeing what was in the cellar, Elch had no desire to accept their gratitude.

“...I don’t need your thanks.” The hunter decided to cut right to the chase. “Not when you were planning to kill and eat us.”

Emelada’s and the old man’s faces went pale.

“Wh—?!”

“H-how do you...?!”

“We found the cellar. It made me chuck up my dinner, so I’m nice and sober now.”

“...I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t need your apologies, either. I just want an explanation. Why’d you do it?”

As Elch cut off Emelada’s apology—

“...It’s a simple thing, really. It was the only way we could survive.”

—the old man answered.

“There’s nothing else in the town to eat, see.”

In a resigned tone, he explained to Elch what had happened to the village. Originally, Coconono Village had made their living harvesting grain. They hadn’t been rich by any means but were blessed with fertile land, so they were able to live modest lives free of want. However, once Gustav was granted control over the domain in recognition of his efforts destroying the Yamato Empire, everything went to hell.

The duke ordered that the land was to be made into “a garden befitting His Grace’s majesty,” decreeing that all the towns and villages in the domain undergo beautification projects. The citizens were forced to rebuild their old

houses, repaint them at regular intervals, install glass windows, and wear tailored outfits the likes of which were normally reserved for nobles. All the expenses for these fineries came out of the citizens' pockets, of course.

Such imperatives quickly drained the coffers of the people. Complicating things were the regular inspections by the soldiers. These check-ins meant the commoners couldn't get dirty, preventing any decent fieldwork from getting done. While their expenses increased, their productivity dropped off a cliff. As a result, the people fell into famine and destitution.

Then, to make matters worse, Gustav decided he wanted to build a monument and give it to the emperor to commemorate his conquest of the New World. He immediately commissioned a sixteen-foot-tall solid gold statue of Emperor Lindworm.

However, the heavy taxes its construction demanded would have been crippling in the best of times and marked the final nail in the coffins of the commoners. The people of Coconono were no exception.

"At that rate, the only fate that awaited us was death by starvation. But the mayor gave us an order... He told us to ply travelers with alcohol, offer them lodging, kill them, strip them of their possessions...and partake of their flesh."

"...!" Elch was struck speechless by Gustav's atrocious governance. No matter how hard the commoners worked, there was no way they could pay for a gold statue, cosmetic upkeep on their villages, glass windows, and fountains while still having enough to feed themselves. The situation was impossible no matter how you looked at it. And yet...

No matter how bad you have it, there are still things you just can't do...! The sins the village had committed were utterly inhuman. They were the acts of savage beasts who had cast aside morals and reason.

"Lemme see this mayor of yours! I need to give that jackass a piece of my mind!"

"...That's not possible."

"Oh yeah?! And why not?!" As Elch snapped at him, the old man replied in an exhausted tone.

“The mayor...my son—Emelada’s husband...left us those instructions in his will. As penance for the savagery he’d suggested, he offered up his flesh as the first of our new meals...”

“...!” Elch was stunned quiet yet again. How must Emelada and the others have felt eating his body to prolong their own lives? Just thinking about it left the hunter from Elm at a loss for words. The silence was broken by the old man’s weeping.

“Why...? Why did this happen to us...? Our houses were run-down, our clothes were shabby, and we were always covered in dirt...but sharing simple meals with our families was all the happiness we needed... Just that was enough to make us joyous from the bottom of our hearts. But now...not even our smiles are our own...”

There was nothing to smile about, no happiness to be found. Yet they’d been forced to spend their days beaming. It had stretched the old man’s spirit to its limit.

That was why—

“I’m just...so tired...”

“Father!”

—the old man pulled a dagger from his coat pocket and stabbed himself through the neck.

Or rather, he tried to. Elch had grabbed it by the blade in the nick of time.

“...Please don’t stop me. Just let me die.”

“That’s not gonna happen.”

“...You would have me keep suffering...?” The old man spat the words like a curse. Elch responded by shaking his head.

“That’s not it. I just don’t want you giving those bastards your life on top of everything else!”

Once again, it became clear to Elch how important their battle was. They needed to change the world. The continued existence of a world that let things like this keep happening was unforgivable. Thus, the young hunter swore an

oath to the old man and all the other citizens of this domain.

“I can’t do much about all the stuff you’ve lost...but I swear, we’re gonna help you get your smiles back! That’s what we’re standing up and fighting for...!”



Evening turned to night.

Jeanne had taken the captured Shinobu Sarutobi to the castle of Count Blumheart, the man Lord Gustav had entrusted with managing many of the domain’s towns and villages, including Coconono.

At the moment, Shinobu was in the castle’s underground dungeon, stripped down to her underwear and chained to the wall by her wrists. Likely, her cell doubled as an interrogation room. Other than the ninja, it was home to a number of ghastly objects.

Whoa, they’ve got a Spanish donkey? I’ve never seen one in person before. Looks pretttty nasty. And is that one a scavenger’s daughter? I think so.

“Heh-heh. Scared?”

“Get ready, ’cause we’re gonna be using all of them.”

The two guards outside the cell cast vulgar gazes up and down Shinobu’s body. The girl ignored them and began planning.

Now then, what to do?

It was a shame they hadn’t taken her to the actual lord’s castle, but there was still probably valuable information she could get here. The question was, how best to go about it? If Shinobu wanted to, she could force her way out whenever she pleased...but in doing so, her captors would go on high alert, making it harder to scour the castle for intel.

The journalist decided it would be better to lie low and wait for a chance to stage a stealthier breakout. After which, Shinobu could sneak into the count’s chambers and take him hostage. Pumping that man for the information she needed on Gustav would probably be the easiest way to go.

Suddenly, something interrupted the young woman’s train of thought. She could hear the door leading out of the dungeon opening, and her jailer, Jeanne,

entered with a bespectacled *byuma* maid in tow. The maid carried a large wooden box.

“Elaine, set the tools down over there.”

“Ah, yes, milady...! There we are.” A loud, metal clang rang out from inside the container as the maid set it down. Within were pliers, a hammer, a saw, and a variety of other normal-looking tools. However, all of them were covered in dark red rust.

Shinobu could tell they hadn’t been used to build anything. These were implements for taking people apart.

I figured she wouldn’t be coming around today ’cause of how late it is, but I guess she’s pulling overtime. Lady cares about her job, I’ll give her that. I would’ve preferred she didn’t, but oh well.

However, even in the face of all those cruel utensils, Shinobu didn’t flinch. The girl was no normal high schooler. She was an honest-to-god *kunoichi* and a member of a proud line that stretched all the way back to the Sengoku period. Shinobu had trained to resist any conceivable form of torture. Such experience had given the girl confidence. Tools of that caliber had no chance of breaking her.

Guess I just gotta grit my teeth and endure it for now, huh.

There seemed no urgency to act until the damage to her body looked like it might impact her ability to break out. As Shinobu settled on her strategy, the two guards opened her cell.

“Hee-hee, want us to get started right away?”

“This is gonna be good.”

However, Jeanne gave them a new order.

“You two, outside.”

“Huh? B-but, Captain, won’t it be dangerous with just you?!”

“I’m a woman, too, you know. Even I have my qualms about letting men leer at a lady in agony.”

“She’s the enemy. You don’t need to show her mercy like that...”

“Don’t mistake this for what it isn’t. I find it objectionable, nothing more. Now leave...before I make you.” With that, Jeanne drew the silvery metal whip from her waist and cracked it by the guards’ feet. The strike drew fractures in the stone brick floor.

“Eep!”

“Y-yes, my lady! Please, take your time!”



The guards shrieked and noisily clambered up the stairs leading out of the dungeon. Shinobu grinned sarcastically at Jeanne's decision.

"I might not look like I'm in much of a position to be saying this, but aren't you taking this ninja a bit too lightly?"

"Not in the slightest," the knight replied with a faint smile as she approached Shinobu...

...and unfastened the restraints around her wrists.

"Huh?"

Jeanne hadn't just unlocked one side but both of them. There was nothing binding the young *kunoichi* -journalist anymore. Topping off this unusual turn of events, Jeanne even knelt before Shinobu and offered her a bow.

"You have my deepest thanks for saving that girl. You do your Yamato brethren proud."

"...Beg your pardon?"

Wait, what gives? Shinobu was unable to hide her confusion at the thoroughly unexpected conclusion to her imprisonment.

As she gawked—

"Elaine?"

"Ah, yes, right away, ma'am."

—the knight ordered Elaine to give Shinobu all her clothes and equipment back from where they'd been concealed, beneath the torture implements.

"It's winter, so if you stay like that too long, you'll catch a cold. I believe these belong to you."

"...Wait, what's going on right now?" Shinobu asked, still totally baffled.

Jeanne rose and clenched her fist in front of her chest.

"Allow me to introduce myself once more. I am Jeanne du Leblanc, a Silver Knight in service to the empire and to Count Blumheart. I am also a member of the Blue Brigade, an organization that fears for the future of the Gustav

domain. You, who traveled far from Yamato to infiltrate this land, and we of the Blue Brigade share a common enemy—the Fastidious Duke, Oslo el Gustav.

“It is said that ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend.’ Ninja of Yamato, won’t you lend us your dauntless courage that we might save the suffering people of this land?”



❖ **Crimson Night** ❖

“It’s magnificent! Its beauty stirs my very soul!”

The Gustav domain was home to the Office of the Warden of the North. There, enshrined in the palace, was a gold statue glimmering beautifully in the bright torchlight. A majestic middle-aged man with long black hair and an impressive beard—Oslo el Gustav, the Fastidious Duke—shed tears of joy as he beheld the sight of the monument.

He sighed feverishly as he spoke. “Immortalizing His Grace in bronze or stone? That would be inexcusable. But a statue of pure gold is just the thing to cement the emperor’s authority in the minds of the people...”

“I’ve already talked to Count Perscheid about having it placed in the imperial capital’s central gardens, milord. As soon as we transport it there, it’ll be installed in the middle of the main fountain. If it pleases you, I have a concept sketch here.”

As Gustav trembled on his knees before the statue, his secretary—a short, older man named Oscar—stepped into the shadow Gustav cast in the light of the flame and gave his report in a high, nasally voice. The man handed his lord a rolled-up piece of parchment.

Gustav unfurled it and nodded in satisfaction. “Marvelous work. Count Perscheid is hailed as the most stylish man in the empire, so I knew I could count on him... Have the means of transport been arranged?”

“Yes, milord. As you know, a statue of pure gold is too heavy for horses, cattle, or dragons to pull. I was thinking that we might use elephants.”

“What’s an ‘elephant’?”

“A beast we’ve been importing alongside the slaves from the New World. They used to live in the southern parts of the empire as well but were wiped out due to the high demand for their ivory. Their bodies are massive, and they boast such strength that some New World natives even ride them into battle. A team of four such creatures should be sufficient to carry the statue to the capital.”

“...So feral horses?”

Gustav wasn’t exactly pleased at having creatures like that be the ones to transport the physical symbol of his loyalty. At the same time, however, it seemed somewhat fitting to have the statue extolling the emperor’s authority carried by beasts belonging to the tribes the emperor himself was in the process of subjugating. The two contradictory thoughts clashed within the Fastidious Duke, but he eventually gave his verdict.

“Very well. However, I place little faith in those savage creatures. I want a troop guarding the statue during transport, and I demand their utmost vigilance. If it suffers so much as a single scratch, every one of those soldiers and their families are to be executed... Am I understood?”

“Absolutely, milord. I will be sure to impress upon them the gravity of their task.”

“Hmph. One other thing, Oscar.”

“Yes, milord?”

Gustav had called out to his manservant as the latter was preparing to leave. The duke spoke in the same voice he might use to demand a glass of water.

“I hereby commission four more identical statues, one to be installed in each of the empire’s cardinal wards. Begin collecting the gold at once.” However, the man’s request was downright insane.

“Wh—?! F-four more statues, a-all of pure gold, milord?!”

“For the time being. When all is said and done, I aim to have one in every domain in the empire so as to remind the commoners who it is that they serve.”

Oscar's face went pale as sweat began gushing out of pores he didn't even know he had.

"N-not gilded, but...solid gold?!"

"Naturally. I will not stand for gilding or other such deception when it comes to the manifestation of my undying loyalty! Or, perhaps, are you suggesting that my devotion itself is gilded, merely surface deep?" As Gustav glowered at him, Oscar instinctively dropped to one knee and bowed.

"H-h-h-heavens no, milord! I—I know full well that your loyalty to His Grace is beyond reproach. H-however, i-if I might be candid... This single gold statue has already put a great burden on the people. I've heard tell that no shortage of them have even been forced to kill and eat their families and travelers to stave off starvation. Should we ask them to produce the funds for four more, well..."

"They'll starve to death, is that it?"

"Y-yes, milord...!"

"Then so be it."

"What?!"

Oscar's eyes went wide. That wasn't the reaction he'd expected.

However, Gustav didn't pay Oscar's surprise the slightest bit of attention. He merely gazed reverently at the statue as he spoke.

"Knights demonstrate their fidelity through martial feats. Nobles, by properly tending to their lands. How, then, are peasants meant to show their loyalty? They have no valor. No wisdom. What minimal gesture can those base creatures make in hopes of showing their devotion?"

"There is but one answer: to die for His Grace."

"Wha...?!"

"It's for his sake that they must wear fineries and keep their towns resplendent despite their poverty. Proper expression of gratitude toward the emperor demands that they must wear perpetual smiles despite their misery. That is how the peasantry must comport themselves. The fact that it's wrung from their bodies is what gives the statue's gold its meaning."

As far as Gustav was concerned, gold was little more than lumps of glittering clay. It had no intrinsic difference from inferior materials like bronze and stone. Normally, it would have no right bearing the emperor's form. However, the gold he had used for the statue was no ordinary metal. It had been metaphorically scraped off the peasants' bones, making it the crystallization of their lifeblood.

"This statue is imbued with the devotion of all who dwell within my lands. That is why it's able to serve as a symbol of my loyalty to His Grace! Do you understand now, Oscar?"

Gustav's black gaze drifted toward the servant. Oscar quivered internally. There was no hint of sycophancy, vanity, or self-interest in Gustav's obsidian eyes. The only thing glimmering in their depths was a nigh-boyish sense of unconditional devotion to the emperor.

"It is as you say, milord..." As he acquiesced out of fear, Oscar found his convictions reaffirmed.

...The man's loyalty is unquestionable. Duke Gustav doesn't have a selfish bone in his body. Just an unflagging willingness to give his all for the emperor. Beautifying the domain, building the gold statue... It's all solely for His Majesty's sake. If His Grace told him to die, Gustav would surely kill himself with a smile on his face.

Between the duke's mentality and his steadfast devotion, none could be better described as *heroic* than he.

But...as a leader, he's the greatest fool there is!

If things continued as they were, the Gustav domain would be in ruins in the next few years. With their tax base eviscerated, the nobles would be unable to maintain their lifestyle. If that man remained in charge any longer, everyone would be ruined. Gustav's grotesque devotion would be the death of commoners and nobles alike.

We of the Blue Brigade need to carry out our plan, and soon... But to do that, we must have a way to deal with the Treasure Spear. As long as it's converged, trying to destroy it is futile. If only there were some way...

As Oscar contemplated his secret treachery, a voice stirred him from his

reverie.

“Now, something else concerns me, Oscar.” Gustav went ahead and changed the subject.

Terrified that he’d been found out, Oscar piped up with a shrill, startled “Yes, milord?!”

Fortunately for him, though—

“Has the rebellion in Findolph been suppressed yet?”

—what Gustav wanted to talk about had nothing to do with his secretary’s secret.

Oh, it’s just that... Oscar breathed an internal sigh of relief as he gave his answer.

“We’ve successfully coordinated with Marquises Buchwald and Archride, milord. Supplies and provisions are being brought to the Le Luk Mountain Range checkpoint as we speak, and our troops are amassing in the foothills. Come spring, the military roads will be usable, and a hundred thousand of our troops will march on Dormundt and purge every last traitor from its walls.”

They were making full use of the time before the war started to get their supply lines up and running. Marquis Archride had been renowned as a masterful general during the last emperor’s rule, and it was clear why. Oscar then went on, laying out their troops’ movements while praising Archride for his superb leadership of the domain’s unified forces. Or, rather, that’s what the servant tried to do.

However...

“Perhaps I misheard you.”

At Gustav’s interjection, Oscar went silent. The Fastidious Duke’s statement and the tone in which he made it sent a chill down the man’s spine. Gustav’s voice was a blade of ice. Oscar could practically feel the air around him freeze, crack, and shatter into tiny fragments. The secretive conspirator had a nasty feeling about this.

“...‘Come spring’? ‘Come spring,’ you said? You mean to tell me that Buchwald

and Archride have yet to act? It's been over a month since I ordered the subjugating army to deploy! Those vermin still trample upon one of our emperor's holy domains...

"...AND WE ALLOW THEM TO RUN RAMPANT?!?!?!"

"Yeeeeeeeeeeeeek!!!!" Oscar's fears had been instantly confirmed.

Gustav bellowed in rage, lashing out around himself as he clawed at his scalp and ripped out his hair. "Such...such utter disgrace! Such utter ineptitude! His Grace entrusted me with these northern lands! How could I let those insects fester for an entire month?! AaaaaaaaaaAAAAAARRRRGGGGHHHH!!!!"

When his shriek reached its climax, he knelt before the gold statue, placed his hands on the ground...

...and smashed his head into the hard floor.

"M-milord?!"

"O-one thousand apologies, Your Graaaaaace! I'm an inept fool! H-how can I ever atone for this?! Grrrr...GRAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!"

It wasn't just once, either. In a display of utter mercilessness, Gustav brought his forehead to bear on the stone floor over and over again as he wailed. Even as his skin tore and blood pooled on the ground, he refused to stop.

"Eep..." Oscar could no longer begin to comprehend Gustav's behavior, and when someone was faced with something outside their ability to understand, their only option was to fear it. The servant's heart froze. All he could do was cower in silence as he watched his deranged master.

Eventually, Gustav stopped slamming his head and called for his manservant. "...Oscar."

"Y-yes, milord!"

"Bring me Rage Soleil from my bedchamber..."

Oscar found himself unable to hide his shock.

"Y-you really mean to use the Treasure Spear now...?!"

"ARE YOU DEAF, YOU IMBECILE?! I SAID TO BRING IT HERE!!!!"

“R-right away, milord!”

The sheer menace of the duke’s bloodstained face and furious howling sent Oscar dashing over to Gustav’s nearby bedchamber.

Enshrined almost reverently on a pedestal at the back of the room was a pulsating red spear. That was the true form of Gustav’s legendary so-called Heavenly Fire.

“Rage Soleil.”

For five long years, Gustav had spent five hours each day chanting incantations before a raging flame in order to complete his war magic. It was his ultimate trump card.

Oscar lifted the spear, pedestal and all. The weapon was formed from a convergence of bound, materialized blaze spirits, so it was as hot as burning iron. For a normal person, touching it was out of the question. Making sure to hold it by the pedestal, the servant returned to his lord. Finally, he knelt before Gustav, who was waiting by the gold statue.

“Milord, if I—”

“Out of the way!” Gustav didn’t hesitate for a moment before grabbing the spear with his bare hands and kicking Oscar aside. The little man let out a “Gyah!” as the Fastidious Duke shoved past him and made for the palace’s highest spire.

I was an idiot for trusting the likes of Buchwald and Archride! Worthless incompetents, the lot of them! They’re toxic parasites leeching off of the empire, nothing more...!

Gustav made his way up the spire’s spiral staircase, paying no heed to the heat searing his flesh down to the bone. Eventually, the man reached the tower’s apex. Standing before a large golden bell, the duke glared off into the northern sky.

He was staring at the land past the horizon. Gustav was certain something was squirming just beyond his view. Vermin, running rampant in His Grace’s territory, encroaching on Findolph and devouring it all! It was unacceptable. Utterly unforgivable. There was only one natural recourse in the duke’s mind...

Now is the time to unleash my fury—my Rage Soleil!

“HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH...!”

The moment Gustav unleashed the seal on his spear-shaped war magic, he used every ounce of his spiritual energy to bind the wind spirits dwelling in the atmosphere. From the spirits, a green aura began welling up. Gustav’s curse bound them, imbuing the spear with the power of flight. Such was the energy it needed to cross seas and mountains, piercing through clouds on its journey to strike down its master’s hideous enemies.

With the deadly magic prepared—

“THEY WILL LEARN JUST HOW HOT MY WRATH BURNS!!!!”

—Oslo el Gustav hurled the spear into the northern sky toward Dormundt.



As the snow laid thick atop the ground, a thunderous gust of wind cleaved through the cloudy night. Lyrule heard a strange voice call to her in a dream.

“Please, wake up...”

Jade-green flecks of light floated up through the darkness of her unconscious mind, drifting in a snowflake-like pattern. That was where the sound originated. It was the voice of a woman.



The noise wasn't hitting her eardrums but rather echoing directly in her brain.

"A crisis...befalls the Seven Heroes... A crisis...is imminent..."

"The Seven Heroes." Lyrule didn't understand what that meant, but she knew it referred to her friends from Earth. For some reason, she was certain of it. Like she'd known it from the very beginning.

The voice continued.

"They require...your power... Please...you have to...guide them..." It was pleading with the girl.

"—?!"

Quite suddenly, Lyrule sprang up from the world of dreams. Her breath was ragged. She placed a hand on her chest.

"What...was that, just now...?" The young woman didn't know. She couldn't even begin to comprehend it. Yet, curiously, Lyrule was filled with certainty.

Something terrible was about to happen to her friends.

I'm scared... The blond girl's body trembled. What in the world was happening to her? Lyrule didn't know, and it terrified her.

However, as if to drive the point home—

"...Help..."

"...?!"

—a heartbroken voice echoed through her ears.

It wasn't the woman from the dream but rather...children. Thousands of them, crying out in unison. Lyrule leaped out of her bed and threw open her window.

"Please...help us..."

It was more than the imagination of a sleepy mind. The girl could really hear them. Their voices were quieter than the sound of snow falling, yet still their cries reached Lyrule. She could hear them calling out from above the snow-laden clouds.



Meanwhile—

“This is beary baaaaaaaad!!!!”

In Ringo Oohoshi’s lab in the newly established Manufacturing District, Bearabbit rose from sleep mode with a shout.

“Bearabbit?!” Ringo sat up, wondering what had the AI so alarmed all of a sudden.

The artificial creature broadcast the situation through the myriad communication terminals to which he was linked.

“This is an emergency notification to all devices! Altitude, twenty thousand feet! Distance, one hundred and twenty-five miles away! A projectile has been located approaching Dormundt from the south-southeast! Enacting emergency protocols!”

“...! Open all air-defense missile pods! Prepare to intercept!”

“Pawger that!” Bearabbit set to immediately carrying out Ringo’s instructions. As the center of the air-defense system’s network, he opened the missile pods’ anti-snow roofs and readied them to fire. Then...

“Ringo.”

The inventor had quickly opened up her Bearabbit-synched laptop, and its communication app initialized. A call was coming from Tsukasa, who’d been leading a staff meeting over in Dormundt proper.

“Oh, um, Tsukasa! I, uh...”

“I got the gist of the situation from the emergency notification just now. Do we know what the bogey is yet?”

“From what the sonar analysis is telling us, I think it’s a spear.”

“Based on its current trajectory and bearing, we’ve got a point of origin! It came from the Gustav domain!”

“A-at this rate, it’s going to hit...r-right in the middle of Dormundt!”

“That’s clearly no ordinary spear. Odds are it’s Oslo el Gustav’s infamous

Heavenly Fire. Do whatever it takes to shoot it down, Ringo."

The scientific genius accepted the order without hesitation. "Leave it...to us! Bearabbit! The air-defense counterattack is ready, right?!"

"Fur sure!" Bearabbit sent the command to have one of their four missile pods launch its entire salvo.

Smoke burst from the cylindrical pod as its twenty miniature missiles blasted off into the snowy sky. Each one hurtled toward the crimson shooting star that had just penetrated the cloud line over Dormundt.

Flowers of red flame blossomed in the cold winter sky. Twenty massive blossoms. A moment later, the sounds of the explosion rocked the city. Thanks to the unparalleled accuracy of Bearabbit's guidance, each missile had struck true.

However...

The AI was monitoring the situation via radar, so he noticed the abnormality before all the eyesight-reliant humans. Despite how heavily it had just been bombed, the projectile was undamaged.

"N-no good! That whole bearrage had no effect?!"

"But...why...?!" Ringo's eyes swam; she couldn't believe it. From the other end of the call, Tsukasa offered her a possible explanation.

"It must be guarded by some kind of magic..."

"If it took that hit without a scratch, then shooting it down is going to be nigh impawsible."

"But then...what can we do...?"

Ringo flew into a tizzy at the unexpected turn of events. However, Tsukasa was different. The young prime minister was the type to be prepared for each and every eventuality he could conceive of. Cool and collected, he moved on to their next option.

"...Ringo, was there any change in the spear's trajectory and landing site before and after our counterstrike?"

“Ah, um, h-hold on a second... I’ll run the numbers!” The scientist did as requested and recalculated the spear’s flight path. The results...gave her a ray of hope.

“It shifted...to the High-End Residential District in the southwest...!”

“If we can’t destroy it, maybe we can push it away. New plan: I need you to use the missiles to divert the spear outside the city. The farther, the better.”

Despite the new plan, Ringo faltered. “W-will we be okay...?” She was clearly worried. Even without her saying specifically what she was concerned about, Tsukasa could tell.

She was scared that even if they managed to knock the spear off its initial target, they might still get swallowed in the ensuing destruction. Thankfully, Tsukasa had already come up with an answer to that problem.

“Gustav’s Heavenly Fire posed a significant threat to us, so I’ve spent quite a bit of my free time over the past month researching it. We’re a good distance from the battlefield he fought the Yamato Empire on, so it’s been difficult to track down accurate accounts. From the size of the base he destroyed, the time it took for the base to fall, and the consistencies between various retellings of the story, though, it appears Heavenly Fire is less like an explosive and more like a firebomb. If we don’t take the hit head-on, we shouldn’t be in much danger. Do it.”

Tsukasa hadn’t just spent the past month wallowing in helplessness. The white-haired boy had busied himself taking in all the information he possibly could and used it to discern their enigmatic foe’s true nature. Armed with such knowledge, the young man spoke very assuredly.

Despite being of another world—with little knowledge about magic—Tsukasa had a pretty good handle on Rage Soleil’s specifics. Now that she knew about the research and investigation backing up Tsukasa’s confidence, Ringo was satisfied.

“Got...it! Bearabbit, let’s use the missiles to knock the spear’s angle down...so it lands in the sea outside the city!”

“Pawger that!” Bearabbit followed Ringo’s instructions and activated the

second missile pod. After he guided the projectiles' trajectory so as to strike the spear's raised head from above, they made impact.

The plan was flawless.

Rage Soleil itself was composed of the blaze spirits Gustav had spent five years binding together. Shallow attacks like those of the missiles couldn't so much as scratch it. However, the magic Gustav was using to make it fly wasn't nearly so powerful.

Destroying the spear may not have been possible, but when the duke had thrown it, all he'd been able to enchant it with was tactical magic. Using missiles to mess with its propulsion was definitely feasible. Its projected landing site crept farther and farther away from the city's center and moved ever closer to the sea outside the city.

With the third missile pod, they were able to shift it all the way to the city's outskirts. All that was left was the fourth and final barrage.

Once they launched the missiles from the High-End Residential District's pod, they'd be able to make the spear crash into the sea. Ringo breathed a sigh of relief, but it proved to be short-lived.

"Good stuff! Now, the furth pod should seal the—what?!"

Suddenly, Bearabbit let out an alarmed cry.

"What's wrong?!"

"The launch mechanism in the High-End Residential District's missile pod isn't responding! We can't launch the missiles!"

"You're kidding?!" Ringo tried frantically to access the fourth pod from her computer and force-start the launch sequence. However, all she got for her troubles was a big error message informing her that there was an analog equipment failure.

"Analog error? How?! Did some snow get in and damage the system?!"

"It's too late! The spear's making impact!"

"Ah! Tsukasa, run—!"

“GET DOWN!!!!”

“——?!”

Ringo’s body reacted to Tsukasa’s bellow faster than her mind did. She threw herself to the ground. The next moment, a red flash of light engulfed the city.



After crossing seas and mountains, Rage Soleil finally crashed in Dormundt. The magic spear landed in the High-End Residential District’s park, a hot spot for social gatherings.

On impact, the already-luminous weapon let out its largest flash of light yet. The crimson glare was so intense, it was visible all the way from the Former-Commoners’ Residential District. After the light, the spear emitted a bright-red blast of flame. It instantly spread three hundred feet in each direction before spiraling up into the air. All in the city wondered what was happening.

Seeing the light, feeling the heat, and hearing the screams of those caught up in the inferno snapped the High-End Residential District’s residents back to their senses. They fled to escape the terrible magic’s radius.

That was when it appeared.

As the pillar of flame rose into the sky, it took on the shape of a person. The fires writhed as though possessing a will of their own, molding themselves into the form of a man’s torso. The crackling blaze became the visage of an austere man with long hair and a beard.

“I-i-it’s hiiiiim!”

Some of the district’s nobles trembled as they stared into the fiery face. They had seen its like before. Eventually, the crimson man’s mouth moved to speak. Its words blew through the whole of Dormundt like a tempestuous wind.

“I am His Grace’s loyal knight. I am Oslo el Gustav. I speak now to the insects defiling His Grace’s sacred garden and to those foolish enough to ally with them.

“Know now that there is nowhere in these northern lands I protect for the likes of you to nest. The flames of my rage...shall burn your very souls to dust!”

And with that, the fiery figure raised its molten arms to the heavens and

spoke the incantation.

“RAGE SOLEIL!”

That moment, the figure crumbled from the base up...and released a tidal wave of awesome fire.

In the blink of an eye, the flood consumed half the district. And the fires didn't stop spreading there. Plants, buildings, and people were all burned away indiscriminately.

“Ahhhhhh!”

“Wh-what's going on?!”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeek!

“It's Duke Gustav's Heavenly Fire! We're doomed!”

Engulfed in flame, the High-End Residential District looked like hell on earth. Crimson tongues licked at the residences' beautifully tiled walls, consuming them along with the lustrous blue rooftops that had served as a symbol of the nobles' statuses. However, what really made the landscape seem hellish were the screams of its residents.

Some people had to flee their burning houses with only the clothes on their backs. Others greedily tried making off with their riches in tow only to be swallowed by the inferno. More still had already been reduced to human-shaped mounds of charcoal.

Nobles and their employees fled every which way, trying desperately to escape the waking nightmare. Among them were the three young nobles who'd refused to submit to the Seven Luminaries and had been plotting to collude with Marquis Archride and commit acts of terrorism.

“Hey, Kyle! What's going on?!”

“How the hell should I know?!”

“Did I just hear that thing say ‘Oslo el Gustav’?!”

“D-don't be a dumbass! He'd never attack while we nobles are still in the city! Wh—?!”

That's when the three saw it; a large object was falling toward them from above. By the time they'd spotted it, there was nothing they could have done. A burning home's chimney had crumbled at its base and was toppling toward the three of them.

Responding to imminent danger required training to develop the reflexes needed for proper evasion. Most folk were like deer. No matter how nimble they were, these people would freeze up when faced with an onrushing car. The three would-be-terrorist-nobles were no exception. They went stock-still. Not even screams escaped their mouths.

However—

“Hyaaaaaaah!”

—something stopped the crumbling mass of brick the moment before it could crush them.

A man rushed toward them like a gust of wind, then swung his crude iron slab of sword and smashed the chimney away. The stone column must have weighed hundreds of pounds, yet this man had been able to repel it with brute strength alone.

“Hey, it's Niersbach and co. You kids all right?”

“Y-you're that...”

Their savor was familiar to all three of the nobles. That one-eyed *byuma* with droopy dog ears had once served as Dormundt's captain of the guard. However, out of lust for authority, he'd abandoned his pride, betrayed his country, and taken a job as commander of the Order of the Seven Luminaries. At least, that was how the nobles evaluated the ex-Silver Knight, Zest Bernard.

The man in question had responded to the crisis quickly. Having shed their armor, he and his soldiers had come running to help.



“Is everyone all right?”

Tsakasa turned his gaze away from the window where he'd just watched the blazing figure vanish and now turned toward the government officials gathered in the conference room.

Right before the spear landed, they'd reflexively thrown themselves to the ground at Tsukasa's instruction. Now, upon hearing his question, they gingerly rose back to their feet. Fortunately, none of them were injured. The municipal office was fairly close to the city's center, a fair distance from Rage Soleil's impact site over by the outer perimeter.

That was not to say that the assembled politicians were of sound mind after the attack. Given their expressions, many of them were clearly panicking over the current state of emergency.

"Mr. Tsukasa! Wh-what's going on...?!"

"It appears the High-End Residential District was hit by a spear-like projectile originating from the Gustav domain. The empire has clearly launched some manner of magical attack against us."

"B-but that must be...!"

"C-could it really be the Fastidious Duke's infamous Heavenly Fire?!"

"The attack he used in the war against Yamato to destroy their massive base in a single night?!"

Winter was only half over, so the officials were shaken by Tsukasa's declaration.

"Mr. Tsukasa, wh-what do we do?!"

"The fire's gonna be here any minute now! We gotta get outta here!"

"B-but not all the residents managed to get out yet...!"

However, right as the officials started getting restless—

"Remaaaaaaain caaaaaalm!"

—a booming voice filled the air.

It was so loud it was likely heard through all of Dormundt.

Akatsuki's voice echoed from the megaphones installed throughout the city.

"This is Akatsuki, God of the Seven Luminaries! Right now, I'm speaking directly into your minds! Employees and former nobles of the High-End Residential District, listen well!"

“As I’m sure you’re aware, the empire has launched an underhanded attack against Dormundt! They wanted to destroy our fair city and were happy to let you former nobles burn along with it! But worry not! We of the Seven Luminaries will not forsake you!”

“Our soldiers are heading your way to carry out rescue operations! Follow their instructions so you can get to safety quickly! If any of you are trapped inside burning buildings, lean out a window and wave your hands so they can find you! We won’t leave a single man, woman, or child behind! I repeat—”

At the moment, he was soaring above the burning district, making a show of himself and casting his voice to encourage its evacuating residents. All the while, the unarmored soldiers were following Zest’s orders, directing the fleeing civilians toward shelter and rescuing people from burning buildings.

The fire had barely even started, yet their efforts were already well under way. None of them had panicked or hesitated for a moment. However, that was to be expected. Everything they were doing had been laid out well ahead of time.

“That’s right! Item three, clause two in the *Emergency Manual*!” It was Mayor Heiseraat who realized.

“Ah, I see you’ve remembered.” Tsukasa nodded to indicate that the man was right.

The *Emergency Manual* was exactly what its name suggested—it was a document detailing what each person in the city needed to do in the event of one of any number of dire situations. Having a large-scale fire break out in the High-End Residential District was item three, clause two of that manual.

Tsukasa Mikogami knew all too well that he wasn’t omnipotent. He couldn’t know what the future held. This was why he made a plan for every conceivable eventuality before it happened.

“At this stage, I have no direct orders for you all. You already know what you need to do in situations like this, and you have the manpower and tools to carry it out. Once I’m gone, you all will be responsible for protecting this city for many years to come... Remain calm and collected; mindfully do what needs to be done.” To demonstrate that there was no need to panic, Tsukasa leisurely

positioned himself on the sofa.

With a rare smile—

“It’ll be okay. You can do this.”

—he indicated to the officials his wholehearted confidence in them.

The white-haired boy’s demeanor demonstrated something to the gathered bureaucrats. What drove Tsukasa to work so unreasonably hard all the time wasn’t a mere addiction to the job. Rather, it was so he could act calmly in times of crisis. Simply put, it was so Tsukasa could get enough done ahead of time to give everyone else some room to breathe when the time came. Such dedication touched the hearts of those he worked alongside.

“““Yes, sir!””” The officials responded confidently, then got busy performing their individual tasks.

One of them contacted companies around the city and made arrangements to have blankets delivered to those who’d lost their homes in the fire. Another organized the office employees and began moving key documents off-site. A third reached out to the prodigy doctor, Keine Kanzaki, and coordinated the construction of a treatment camp for the injured.

Once they’d started, each acted with speed and precision. The fact that they could do so was a large part of why they were there. After all, part of a politician’s job was to surround themselves with capable staff. Even without Tsukasa lifting a finger, the people were still in good hands.

Even so, I hadn’t expected the fire to be quite so ferocious. Tsukasa looked out a shattered window. The blaze had already nearly made its way to his office.

At that rate, the High-End Residential District was going to be completely engulfed, and the fire would spread to the neighboring Port and Former-Commoners’ Residential Districts as well. Dormundt was a symbol of the notion of equality that had finally taken root in that world. Tsukasa wasn’t about to let it get burned to the ground. He couldn’t. The billions of lives yet to enter this world depended on it.

“...It’s me.” To that end, Tsukasa picked up his phone and got another ball rolling.



After Zest smashed the falling chimney aside, a young *byuma* noble, Kyle, shot him a scathing glare. “You’re that traitorous knight who sold out your country to rebels to amass status for yourself. What are you doing saving a bunch of imperial nobles like us?!”

Kyle’s one-eyed savior lowered his crude greatsword and let out a small sigh. “...C’mon, li’l Niersbach. Enough of that, already.” The old dog-eared soldier grinned sarcastically.

“What?!”

“You kids have it in your heads that you’re imperial nobles, so no matter what, the empire’s gonna swoop in and save you. But the Fastidious Duke ain’t half that kind. You couldn’t protect the territory you were entrusted with, and in his eyes, that means you’re dead. Look around you; this should be proof enough.”

“...”

“Survival of the fittest, remember? That’s the empire’s policy, and at the end of the day, commoners and nobles are no different from them in that respect. You live when the people above you allow it, and you die like worms when your betters demand it.”

“Well, no shit...! That’s our empire’s golden rule!”

“Well then, you’d better go throw yourselves into Duke Gustav’s angry flames, eh? As law-abiding nobles of the realm, ain’t that your duty now?”

“Rgh...! Th-that’s...” Kyle was at a loss for a response. After all, nobody wanted to die to satisfy another’s rage. However, imperial law demanded he submit to that absurdity. Kyle had spent his whole life living under that law. He’d believed it to be the one true absolute. Yet now...

“...But see, the Seven Luminaries are trying to build a world where that ain’t the case. A gentler world, where shit like class and bloodlines don’t determine how you live and die... Leaving a world like that behind for my daughter? Now that’s a dream worth dying for. *That’s* the reason I became their commander.”

It was never about status for Zest. That wasn’t something worth putting his

life on the line for. The former knight risked death because he had a dream about something bigger than himself. As Zest finished giving his speech, he turned around.

“I can’t begin to imagine how much confusion, pain, and anger you must feel at having to give up the privileges you’ve spent your whole life enjoying. But... when you start looking at others as equals, you see all sorts of stuff you never even realized you were missing. Do me a favor and remember that.”

Zest kept moving. There were still others who needed rescuing. Kyle spat a curse while he watched the old man depart.

“Hey, nobody asked for your help! C’mon, guys, let’s get out of here!” The younger *byuma* and his friends ran off to escape the flames.

They, along with the rest of the High-End Residential District’s survivors, followed the roadside soldiers’ directions and made for the park in the city’s central plaza. When they did, though, the blaze ramped up in intensity, as if trying to pursue the fleeing townsfolk. The way the flames were spreading out and engulfing the city, it was like they had a will of their own. However, Tsukasa wasn’t about to let that savagery continue.

“Mr. Tsukasa! We’re done evacuating the survivors!”

“Good work.”

Each division’s supervisor had been equipped with a rudimentary comms terminal. After receiving an update from one of them, Tsukasa gave an order to the head of his recently formed counterintelligence division.

“Victor, the evacuation is finished. You’re all set to detonate.”

“Roger that.”

Despite the state of emergency, the reply from the other end was perfunctory and businesslike. A moment later—

“““——?!?!?!”””

—the sound of several hundred explosions going off rocked the eardrums of every person in the city.

All of Dormundt looked in the direction of the turmoil to try and figure out

what was going on. Every building lining the High-End Residential District's main road had been blasted away without a trace.

Keine, who was in the central plaza treating the injured, immediately understood what had happened. "Ah, I see. By widening the road that divides the city into four sections, he aims to limit the fire's spread."

Aoi nodded as she helped carry survivors too wounded to walk. "Water alone is insufficient to extinguish a conflagration that severe, so that was the only course of action, that it was. Masato, m'lord, I would hardly have thought it possible to acquire such quantities of gunpowder, but it seems I underestimated you."

Masato was directing the flow of supplies, but hearing Aoi's praise, he grinned malevolently. "Oh, I didn't lift a finger. Ol' Saint Nick came over the cold wintry seas to bring them to us as a present."

"Well, I suppose we'll have to thank him, now, won't we?"

"Ah! So Santa exists in this world, too?! A pleasant surprise, that it is!"

Keine chuckled, understanding what Masato was hinting at. Aoi missed the point entirely but was impressed nonetheless.

Suddenly, though—

"...It's not...enough..."

—they saw a familiar blond girl desperately making her way toward them through the crowd.

"Heya, Lyrule. Didja come to help out—" But before Masato could get the "or something?" part out, the good look he got at her stunned him into silence. Even though it was a chilly night in the dead of winter, she was sweating like crazy.

"Hey, whoa, what's with all the sweat?!"

"Oh my, were you burned?!"

Lyrule shook her head at her concerned friends. That wasn't what had happened. She spoke, practically having to wring her voice out of her throat to do so.

“...Widening the road...isn’t enough! It won’t...be able to stop...Rage Soleil...!”

“Lyrule, what are you—?” Again, before Masato could finish, he was interrupted.

“Don’t think for a moment that your petty tricks are enough to escape my wrath!”

Just like before, a gale-force bellow rocked Dormundt.

“““Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!”””” A great wave of screams rose from the refugee-packed plaza. Cause for such renewed alarm was quickly evident. Having finally burned through the High-End Residential District, the conflagration stopped in front of the explosion-widened main road.

But right when it looked like the blaze was contained...

...thousands of human-shaped flames began crawling out from the inferno.

They slowly rose to their burning feet and began walking forward with their arms outstretched like the blind. With tottering, unstable steps, they crossed the roads toward the Port and Former-Commoners’ Residential Districts, grabbing any buildings they could to spread their flames.

Terrifyingly, though, the buildings weren’t their only targets. Some even started gradually making their way toward the people gathered in the central plaza.

“The *hell*...?” By Earth logic, it was utterly unfathomable. Even Masato was taken aback.

Gustav cackled scornfully.

“Heh-heh, ah-ha-ha-haaaaaa!!!! Tremble in fear! Cower in terror! For this is the true might of my devotion! This is the might of my war magic, Rage Soleil!

“Once activated, its flames will burn their way to the end of the continent! This nation has nowhere you can hide! Now, die! Die! Atone for your sins with your lives! Perish for the sin of soiling His Grace’s sacred lands with your filthy, traitorous feet!!!!”

“Eeeeeek!”

“We’re doomed! There’s no way we can beat the empire!”

“Ruuuuuuuun!”

Having the flames walk toward them of their own volition was something beyond a nightmare. At such a hellish sight, the people of Dormundt finally knew the height of fear. Frenzied screams echoed from all directions as everyone scrambled to be the first out of the city. As long as the fire yet burned, trying to calm them would be an exercise in futility.

With a bitter expression on his face, Mayor Heiseraat got on his comms and issued the order. “Attention, all personnel. We’re moving to item three, clause four in the *Emergency Manual*. Evacuate the entire city! We’re...abandoning Dormundt!”



With Mayor Heiseraat having given the order to evacuate, people in every district fled outside Dormundt’s walls.

Terrified as they were of the fantastical flames that had finally swallowed up the High-End Residential District, they rushed to the open gates with only the barest amount of luggage possible. The air was filled with fearful, anxious screams.

Amid all that, Masato and the others remained fixed, steadfast in their positions—and not without reason. As the mayor was giving the evacuation order, Tsukasa had sent them a message.

“I’ve got one last idea left. Ringo and I are headed your way, so hang tight in the central plaza.”

They’d had no problem with the prime minister’s new directive. After all, Lyrule had told them pretty much the same thing.

“Fleeing isn’t necessary. There’s a way to break Rage Soleil.”

A little under a minute later...

“Merchant!”

Accompanied by Ringo and Bearabbit, who’d come running over from the Manufacturing District, Tsukasa joined the group. Not even waiting to catch his

breath, he immediately pressed Masato for information. The white-haired boy wanted to know if Lyrule's claim about Rage Soleil was accurate or not.

"That message you sent me, is it true?"

"...Go ahead and ask her yourself."

Tsukasa's gaze shifted to the blond girl from Elm, who was currently being tended to by Keine.

"Lyrule...do you really know how to break that spell?"

The girl nodded. Sweat was still beading on her forehead. "Rage Soleil is war magic. To cast it, you have to spend years compressing blaze spirits together. And as long as its core, the cursed spear that binds and controls the spirits, is intact, the fires will never go out! But the opposite is true, too. If you destroy the spear, you can break the spell!"

"But how do you know that...?" The question came from Akatsuki, who'd just alighted from above.

Lyrule shook her pallid head. "I...don't know..."

"You don't know?"

"I can't be sure how I know. But...even though I'm not sure why...*I know this will work!* The moment I saw those flames, I knew what kind of magic it was, what it did, everything. It all just popped into my head. It was like... It was like I'd known since before I was even born..."

"...I see."

"You probably think I'm crazy, but it's true! If we run, the fire will follow us forever! As long as that cursed core exists, it'll never stop! That's how the spell works! Please, you have to believe me!" Lyrule had no idea how she knew any of that, but even though she didn't know why, she was certain it was correct. Running away wouldn't solve anything or save anyone.

Despite realizing how unreasonable she was being, the blond girl needed to get them to understand. Lyrule had to convince the Prodigies to trust her words.

Tsukasa didn't even pause to think.

“All right. I believe you.”

His reply was matter-of-fact.

“Huh...?”

“That said, the problem is how we’re going to destroy the spear. That’s going to be somewhat of a hurdle.”

“Yeah, all those missiles bearly scratched it. This is a toughie.”

“Any ideas poppin’ into your head about that bit, Lyrule?”

Tsukasa wasn’t the only one who was immediately on board. Not a single one of the bunch cast a dubious look at Lyrule. In fact, not only were they seriously discussing the info she’d given them, they were even asking for her input.

At their unanimous response, Lyrule couldn’t help but ask, “You all...really believe me...? I-it’s a little strange to be saying this after I asked for your trust, but...the things I’m telling you are...crazy, aren’t they?”

Tsukasa’s reply was simple. “Of course we believe you.” As he spoke, he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped Lyrule’s cheek.

It was wet with fearful tears. Having a head full of strange information and no idea how it got there was frightening. Voices that came from nowhere were plenty startling. Indeed, it had been jarring enough to make Lyrule cry. However, that hadn’t stopped the girl from speaking up.

“The change inside you was so confusing and scary, you were trembling. But you came out here to help us anyway. How could we ever doubt bravery like that?”

All the other Prodigies nodded in agreement. Seeing them treat her not with fear or revulsion but with the same trust they always did...filled Lyrule with courage.

“——!” She took a deep breath to steady her racing heart. Her body had, at last, stopped trembling. Then, in a clear, confident tone, she answered Masato’s earlier question—the one about how to destroy the heart of the terrible magic.

“...Destroying the spear won’t take a special power or technique. Any sort of decent blow should be able to do it.”

“B-but even our missiles weren’t good enough for that.”

“That was before Rage Soleil activated. Back then, the spear was strong because of all the blaze spirits converged inside it... Now that Rage Soleil’s activated, though, the blaze spirits have scattered throughout the city. Given its current state, an attack like one of the ones before could easily destroy it.”

Hearing that, Tsukasa asked Ringo for a status report.

“Ringo, do we have any missiles left?”

“Th-there’s one...loaded in Bearabbit...but...” Ringo’s voice was quiet, and she curled her body up apologetically.

They did, in fact, have one missile left. It was small but designed to take out ships, so it still packed a considerable punch. Also, because it was a cruise missile, it was equipped with wings and a jet engine. Their target was well within its effective range. However, trying to hit a target as small as a spear gave rise to a new problem. Namely, how to guide the projectile.

“With how hot the flames are...guiding it...might not go too well.”

Because the spear had already landed, it was outside the range of their anti-air radar. Air turbulence from the conflagration created a factor of randomness that meant guiding the missile in remotely could easily go wrong.

Compounding things was the fact that this was no ordinary fire. The way it was able to act autonomously made it more like a monster.

Masato offered a suggestion: “Couldn’t Bearabbit just carry the missile in directly?”

However...

“N-no way. At the end of the day, this body is only koalafied to help Ringo with her day-to-day tasks. If I tried to go somewhere that unbearably hot, all my circuit boards would melt...”

Bearabbit shot his idea down, alarmed at the very notion. It sounded like using the missile to destroy the spear was a nonstarter.

But just as everyone was ready to give up—

“I shall go.”

—Aoi Ichijou, who’d been listening silently to the discussion up until that point, announced her candidacy.

“Whaddaya mean, you’ll go?”

“Once Bearabbit launches the missile, I shall run alongside it and guide it to its destination, that I shall.”

““Whaaaaaaaat?!””

“I have to say, that sounds...incredibly reckless.”

A human directly guiding the missile. Masato and Akatsuki reacted to the bizarre idea with outright shock, and Tsukasa laid out his entirely natural misgivings. Aoi made no effort to conceal how disappointed she was in the white-haired boy.

“Tsukasa, m’lord, with all due respect...*I ask that you not make light of me.*”

“...!”

“I am hailed the world over as a martial prodigy, that I am. My abilities lie outside your capacity to measure, and my limits are known to none in this world but myself. Thus, if I say I am capable of something, know that it can be done, no matter how hard that may be for you to believe. Tsukasa, m’lord, I ask of you this: Do you truly think I am the sort of fool who would knowingly take on a task beyond her abilities and, in doing so, endanger her friends and allies?” Aoi spoke with an air of utmost confidence about her.

As far as Tsukasa was concerned—as far as everyone but the swordswoman who’d put the idea forward was concerned—it was difficult to imagine such a thing being possible. However, they also knew that Aoi Ichijou was not the type of girl to claim she could do something she couldn’t at a time like this. As their representative, Tsukasa gave his answer.

“Very well. I have faith...in our prodigious swordmaster, Aoi Ichijou.” The young prime minister resolved to bet everything on the girl’s abilities. Aoi gave him an unflappable, pearly-white smile.

“I shall not let you down.”

Now that they had their plan, everyone got to work.

“Roo! Prince! We need to get water from the soldiers!”

“O-okay!”

“Got it!”

“I have some dressing, if you’d like. You could use it in place of a sash,” Keine offered.

“I am in your debt.”

“...Taking things to extremes as ever, aren’t you, Aoi?”

“Such is a swordswoman’s lot, that it is.” Aoi took the dressing and used it to tie up her sleeves. Then, she drew her beloved katana, Hoozukimaru, and sliced her ankle-length hakama off at the knee.

“Aoi! We’ve got the water!”

“Ah, many thanks! Now pour it on me, if you would!”

“Comin’ right up!”

“Here you go!”

“Heave ho!”

Masato, Akatsuki, and Roo took their wooden buckets and soaked Aoi from head to toe. With any luck, it would offer her body some protection against the heat. Finally, Aoi went barefoot, casting her socks and wooden sandals aside.

“Ringo, m’lady! I am prepared, that I am!” The swordmaster dropped into a crouching start as she gave Ringo her cue. The genius inventor nodded, then sat down and tapped away at her laptop. Bearabbit sprang into motion as the commands flowed in.

First, anchor bolts shot out of the manipulators he was using as legs, fastening him to the ground. Then, his display shut down and slid into his backpack body. A red-and-white missile about as thick as a man’s bicep jutted out in its place. Of all the armaments loaded inside Bearabbit, that missile was his trump card. Once it was fully in position, Bearabbit gave the signal.

“I’m teddy here, too!”

“Aoi, get that missile where it needs to go!”

“That I shall!”

With her agreement serving as their final confirmation—

“Fur in the hole!”

—Bearabbit launched the missile.

The moment he did, Aoi kicked off against the ground so hard, she shattered the stone pavement.

Then, as the flame-spewing missile tried to pass her by—

“HYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!”

—she grabbed onto its two wings and carried it with her as she dashed into the burning High-End Residential District.





Aoi started by identifying the hill road that gave her the straightest shot from the central plaza to the spear's location in the High-End Residential District's park, then charged into the flames.

It wasn't as large as the main road that divided Dormundt into four sections, but it was still a wide enough berth for three carriages to comfortably pass each other by—not narrow by any definition.

Rage Soleil's fiery spawn did not take the young woman's intrusion lying down. The flaming automatons began walking toward her, trying to grab Aoi before she could reach their core. However, their speed was nothing to write home about.

It certainly wasn't enough to catch Aoi, who was using the missile's propulsion to aid her sprint. In the blink of an eye, she was out of the central plaza and heading up the hill road.

Rows of houses flanking either side of the swordswoman had been torched all the way to their roofs by flames. Aoi pushed her way through the veritable tunnel of fire at a blistering clip. Tsukasa and the others, who were watching it all play out via the camera installed on the missile's head, were at the edge of their seats.

"That's nuts. She's actually running alongside the missile..."

"Damn, I'm impressed her legs can keep up with it. At this rate, she's gonna get there in no time." However, Masato's optimism was met with doubt.

"...Unfortunately, it doesn't look like things will go quite that smoothly." Tsukasa frowned as he studied the video feed on Ringo's laptop.

Fiery figures had shuffled out of the burning houses, filling up the street and blocking Aoi's path like a wall. Forward was no longer an option. Evidently, Aoi had foreseen the appearance of such an obstacle.

"Nyaaaaah!" The Prodigy shifted her center of gravity backward with all her might, no longer running with the missile but against it. She was using her entire body to yank the missile to the side.

By that point, her feet were moving faster than the untrained eye could make

out. The pavement under her feet cracked and shattered, and she dug her heels into the ground beneath it to stop the missile in midair.

Then, still grasping its wings—

“Hyuh!”

—she pulled with her left hand and pushed with her right, forcibly spinning the missile around.

“Hyah!”

By smashing her honed glutes into its backside at the same time, she was able to get it to make a sharp, ninety-degree left turn toward one of the alleyways spidering off the hill road.

“She’s...incredible...!” Even Ringo, who balked at talking in front of others, couldn’t help but let out a cry of amazement at the nigh superhuman feat. Everyone else watching felt the same.

“This is bad...!” All except Tsukasa, the one person who had the city’s layout memorized. For some reason, his expression grew grim. It wasn’t long before the others discovered why.

Aoi leaned into the gentle curve, but right when she thought she’d made it through the alley—

“...!”

—she found a thirty-foot-tall burning wall in her path.

The alley didn’t lead anywhere. It was a complete dead end. To make matters worse, fire creatures began creeping toward her from all directions, boxing her into the cul-de-sac like they’d been waiting for her.

“Oh no! She’s trapped!”

“Aoi...!”

As far as the swordmaster was concerned, though, the situation didn’t even register as a predicament. Not seeming alarmed in the slightest, she took a deep breath as she barreled toward the wall.

Then, after digging in hard with her feet, shattering the ground, and bringing

the missile to a stop—

“NOW RIIIIIIISE!”

—she pulled with all her strength and lifted the missile’s head.

By doing so, she was able to shift the missile. The young woman changed its trajectory from parallel to the ground to perpendicular. The missile shot into the sky over Dormundt’s burning cityscape with Aoi in tow.

Having lost their mark, the fiery figures crashed into the cul-de-sac wall and collapsed. Even they couldn’t follow her into the air. At that rate, though, the missile would just keep rising, never to find its target. That wouldn’t get the job done. Thankfully, Aoi had a plan.

Once she and the missile reached a certain altitude, she lifted her body as though performing a pull-up, sandwiched the missile between her sizable breasts...and blocked its air vents. By doing so, she drastically reduced the amount of oxygen flowing through the missile’s internal combustion engine.

As the engine stalled, so did the projectile itself. For an instant, it hung still in the air. In that fleeting moment, Aoi let go of the vents, grabbed the wing on top of the missile, and threw herself into the air. Then, after spinning herself around the wing like it was a high bar, she leveled a solid kick at the missile’s lower half.

That caused the projectile to spin upward in a semicircle. As a natural consequence, the warhead ended up pointing down. Immediately thereafter, the newly oxygenated engine fired back up.

At the end of Aoi’s trapeze-like act acrobatics, she and the missile began making their way back downward. Specifically, they were gliding straight toward the High-End Residential District’s park—the spot where the spear was embedded. Aoi’s dramatic shortcut had allowed her to avoid every obstacle. In less than thirty seconds, the missile was going to blow the spear to kingdom come.

But then—

“...?!”

—Aoi's expression stiffened for the first time during her plan.

Down in the burning city, she saw something strange. Fire. The enchanted blaze that burned through the High-End Residential District had been trying to engulf the neighboring Port and Residential districts in turn. Now, however, it was beginning to swirl around like a whirlpool.

Flames previously spread across the city now all came falling back and converged into a vortex. Aoi's target—Rage Soleil's core—lay at the vortex's center.

Eventually, a burning pillar rose up from within the swirling crimson and took on Gustav's form once more. The duke was seething with rage.

"I imagine you shan't let me through so easily."

"Insolent little fly...!" As the massive figure of Gustav growled at her, it swung its right arm. It dredged up burnt houses by their foundations and hurled their spent wreckages at the swordswoman.

"FALL AND PERISH!"

"Rkh!"

The debris shot at her like cannon fire. In response, Aoi unfurled her legs from around the missile and used them to catch the wind and control her flight path. She wove her way between one chunk of rubble and the next. However...

"FALL, FALL, FAAAAAAAAAALL!!!!"

Enraged, Gustav's fiery form cleaved through the city and sent an overwhelming barrage of debris toward her. It quickly became a struggle just to evade at all. Worse, the density of the duke's attacks only grew as Aoi got closer. At that rate, she'd end up getting shot down before ever reaching the spear.

Aoi elected to give up on her frontal assault. After dropping the missile's altitude low enough that it was grazing the tops of the taller apartment buildings, she reached out with her right hand and grabbed a passing chimney. Her fingers left five deep gashes in the brick as she used it as an axle to make a sharp right turn. By fleeing back into an alley, the young woman was able to use

it as a trench against the barrage.

“Where are you hiding, pesky fly?!?!”

Even with Aoi out of his line of sight, though, Gustav didn’t let up with his onslaught. He waved his hands to and fro, hurling rubble about like a child throwing a temper tantrum. Yet, with Aoi practically scraping the ground of her alley trench, none of it came anywhere close to connecting with her.

At last, she shot out of the alley into a wide, open area. It was the hill road she’d been trying to take back at the start. The detour had been long, but the High School Prodigy finally made it. Straining her eyes, Aoi could make out a long, thin object embedded in the top of the hill. It was the spear—Rage Soleil’s core.

The moment Aoi spotted it—

“Ringo, m’ladyyyyyyyyyy!!!!”

—she pointed the missile’s warhead at the hill’s peak and shouted.

“Target locked!”

Ringo’s finger raced over the keyboard as she sent the missile its command. At the same time, Aoi released the projectile and shoved it forward. It barreled toward the hilltop spear. The target was a thousand feet out—straight ahead. Even with the random temperature variations in the air, at that range, the missile was guaranteed to hit. This was checkmate, or so they all thought...

“NOT ON MY WAAAAATCH!!!!”

“Impawsible...?!”

“““What?!””””

The camera atop the missile showed something unbelievable. Up until now, houses flanking the road had been engulfed in fire. Now, though, two blazing masses had blown them completely away and were closing in on the missile from both sides. They were Gustav’s great, fiery arms. The duke was trying to smash the missile between his hands like one would crush a pesky mosquito.

“My whirling secret technique—Dew-Blade Breeze!”

Before the Fastidious Duke could succeed, however, a tornado-shaped vacuum burst from Hoozukimaru, slicing off the arms of Gustav's hellish visage while leaving the missile untouched.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!!!”

“I did tell you, that I did. If I say I can do something, then do it I can.”

The missile burst out of the spiraling slash attack and smashed head-on into the crimson spear. An explosion rocked the air, accompanied by a violent flash...

When the dust settled, not a trace of the spear remained.



A pillar of smoke and flame billowed from the High-End Residential District's peak, and everyone gazed up at it. Masato and Akatsuki reacted with cries of admiration at their fellow Prodigy's superhuman feat.

““Aoi, that was nuts!””

Keine, on the hand, was no stranger to sharing battlefields with the swordmaster. The doctor merely shrugged in relief. “Honestly, that girl only knows how to overdo things.”

The explosion wasn't the only visible change, either.

“Impossible...! How can this beeeeeee?!?!” Gustav, who had manifested as a blazing colossus, screamed as his luminous flames were scattered to the wind. The fires throughout the city responded in kind, losing their vigor and vanishing into nothingness.

“L-look! The...fires...”

“They're going out...”

“...The blaze spirits were freed from the curse,” Lyrule murmured as she watched the inferno flicker and wane. The blond girl could hear their voices.

“““Thank you, miss... You saved us... Thank you all...””” The spirits were expressing their gratitude.

“They're saying that now that the cursed core is destroyed, they can stop burning the city. And...they're grateful to us.”

Tsukasa seemed a little surprised. "You can talk to spirits?"

Lyrule nodded. "...I've been hearing their screams this whole time. The blaze spirits were shouting 'help us' and 'we don't want to do this.' But...now, they're okay."

"Well, that's good to hear." Tsukasa gave a long exhale, then offered the long-eared woman a handshake.

"Allow me to thank you as well, Lyrule. The only reason we were able to keep the damage to the city this minimal was because of your bravery. Thank you for that."

However, Lyrule responded to his gratitude with a mixed expression. She seemed to be half smiling and half crying. "...But there were so many people we couldn't save."



The flames were gone, and snow was falling gently from the winter sky. Lyrule looked out at the blackened city. Dormundt's High-End Residential Area had been burned to the ground.

True, the voice in her head and her sudden onrush of knowledge had allowed them to keep the city from being destroyed in its entirety. However, the things they'd lost today were never coming back. Furthermore, it was clear the tragedy was a result of their actions.

"And this all started because of what we did."

Had they not gone to war with Findolph, this calamity could have been avoided. Knowing that tormented the blond girl. Tsukasa could see it written all over her face.

"If you're thinking this wouldn't have happened if not for us starting the war... then your regrets are misplaced." The prime minister attempted to correct Lyrule's misunderstanding.

"Huh?"

"With societal growth, this war—this People's Revolution against the feudal system—was always going to happen. Even if the battle for freedom and equality in Freyjagard hadn't started in Elm, someone somewhere else would have started it instead—and just as many lives would have been lost seeing it through. But make no mistake, it would have kept on going. Just like the revolts in our world."

What Tsukasa was saying was that such tragedies were an inevitability. After all...

"Any country willing to slaughter its own citizens has no future."

"...!"

He was right. Lyrule's regrets *were* misplaced. If anything, the blame lay with the cruel oppressors who had made the revolution a necessity in the first place.

Even if Lyrule and the others had done nothing, as long as the noble class viewed the commoners as wretched worms, horrors like this would have happened time and time again.

“In other words, we shouldn’t give in to remorse and seek forgiveness from those whose lives were lost. Instead, we need to see this fight through to secure a future for the billions of lives waiting to come into this world. Don’t you agree?”

“...Y-yes!” Lyrule gave Tsukasa a big nod and returned his handshake. Her grip was firm and resolute.

No sooner had she done so than—

“Hey! There they are! The God and his angels!”

“Th-that’s incredible! They stayed here this whole time?!”

“They must have been the ones who took down that giant monster!”

“Thank you, God!”

—the townsfolk, seeing that the fire had gone out, streamed back into the city.

They were all wondering the same thing: Had the Seven Luminaries really defeated the creature of flame? When they saw the Prodigies standing in the central plaza, the battlefield’s front line, the citizens let out a resounding cheer. Tsukasa looked out over the crowd as a tidal wave of joy washed over them all.

“Ladies and gentlemen, rejoice! God Akatsuki’s miracle has obliterated the empire’s monster! Not even a flaming beast that towers to the heavens poses a threat to our God!”

As the crowd’s excitement swelled, the white-haired boy clapped Akatsuki on the shoulder.

“They’re all warmed up for you. Go get ’em.”

“Wait, you’re getting them riled up and then bailing on me?”

“I have a postmortem with the mayor I need to get to. Sorry, but I’m delegating this one to you.” Tsukasa scurried away from Akatsuki to make his escape.

As he tried to leave, though—

“Tsukasa!”

—Lyrule called out to him. With a serious look on her face, she told him about the woman who'd spoken to her in her dream.

“Right before this all started, I heard a voice in my dream. A woman told me that I needed to use my power to guide the Seven Heroes.”

“Oh?” Tsukasa stopped in his tracks and looked back over his shoulder.

“Then, right after she spoke to me, knowledge about magic started welling up in my mind and I was able to hear the spirits.”

“The timing seems too serendipitous to write it off as merely an odd dream.”

“Isn't it? I have no idea who it was or why I could hear her, but...when she said ‘my power,’ I think she was talking about my knowledge of magic and my ability to hear spirits. So...” Lyrule paused for a moment and took a deep breath to steel herself before resuming.

“...I'm going to start studying magic! Once I can use it, I might be able to help you fight, and also...if this person talking to me has something to do with why you seven are here in this world, I might be able to help you all find a way back home...!” Lyrule's eyes burned bright with the light of fresh determination.

Tsukasa could tell that resolve of hers was going to be a big asset for him and his friends. The young man's lips curled into a soft smile as he spoke. “...Honestly, that would be fantastic. I've actually picked up quite a bit about magic over this past month myself, so if you need any help, don't hesitate to ask.”



At the same time, back in Gustav's castle, the duke himself was howling in agony.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!!!”

“M-milord?!” Hearing the screams, Oscar came running, but what he found shocked him. Both of the Fastidious Duke's arms had been severed from the elbow down.

“Milord, are you all right?! What happened...?!”

However, it was like Gustav didn't even hear him. The man merely stared at the blood gushing from his stumps in disbelief.

“H-how can this be...?! My Rage Soleil...was destroyed?!” There was a quiver in the man’s voice.

Through Rage Soleil, he’d been able to witness everything that had transpired in Dormundt. Of note, he’d seen Aoi dodging his attacks as she carried her missile.

Those garments, that sword... She’s a Yamato agent, I’m sure of it!

But that missile, the flame-spitting, free-flying cannonball? It was the first time he’d seen anything like it. Gustav had no idea what to make of it. Who were those people? Clearly, they couldn’t have been mere survivors from Yamato. For whatever reason, the northern rebellion had access to weapons that even the Yamato Imperial Army hadn’t. But why?

Gustav had no idea.

There was one thing he was certain of, however. Those scuttling little things were no ordinary pests. They were a threat—not just to the north, but to the entire empire, and even to Emperor Lindworm.

“...!” The duke could not tolerate their continued existence, not for another minute, not for another second!

At the moment, Emperor Lindworm was off in the New World. What kind of knight would Gustav be if he failed to protect the realm in his master’s absence?! Was that conduct befitting a noble?!

“RrrrrrrRRRRRGRRRAAAHHH!!!!”

After cauterizing his wounds with magic fire, arms of crimson flames sprouting from his stumps, Gustav rose.

“Oscaaaar...”

The duke’s eyes burned with rage as he looked down upon his aide.

“Y-yes, milord?!”

“Summon every soldier in the domain to the capital at once. The full might of our forces will march on Findolph!”

“B-but didn’t you delegate that to Marquis Archride?”

“That dithering incompetent allowed vermin to fester in His Grace’s sacred lands for over a month! He’s useless to me!

“Relay this to those fools Archride and Buchwald: We leave not a single ant alive in our wake! And unless they do their damned jobs and march, they, too, will find themselves tasting the flames of my wrath!”



❖ A Battle Ignited ❖

It was just before dawn. The snow had stopped falling, but it was still bitter cold outside. Over in a nook of the High-End Residential District's park, a trio of former nobles shivered as they stared at the burnt remains of their homes.

"What's...what's gonna happen to us?"

"Hell if I know."

The pudgy youth sounded like he was on the verge of tears, but Kyle, their *byuma* leader, replied bluntly.

"I had no idea the empire would take such extreme measures while we nobles were still in the city..." The tall youth, who'd lost his glasses in the evacuation, seemed to be at his wit's end. As a relative of Marquis Archride's, the young man had never felt so fearful for his life before. However, the truth laid out before their eyes was all too clear. They'd been left with nothing.

But as they crouched there despondently—

"Hey, wee nobles over there."

—a middle-aged common-born woman holding a stack of blankets called out to them.

"We've got a fire goin' and some food cookin', so c'mon over. And here, take these. You kids'll catch your death of cold, dressed as you are." The woman handed them each one of the quilts. Two of them eagerly received the kindness, but Kyle...

"...Giving charity to nobles, huh? I bet you're getting a real kick outta this."

Still crouching, he glared at her and spat out a snide remark.

“Wh—?!”

“K-Kyle, this is no time to be saying stuff like that...!”

“Y-yeah, that’s right! C’mon, you gotta apologize...!”

The *byuma* was uninterested in the advice of his friends, however. His upbringing and the way he’d lived his life forbade him from accepting anything from the woman. Why should a noble like him have to accept charity from a commoner? He would’ve rather frozen to death than live with the shame.

Instead of reaching out, he piled on the vitriol.

“You rabble must be having a hoot seeing us like this. You’re all filthy hypocrites!”

The woman sighed in exasperation. “Look, you nobles spent generations actin’ all high and mighty and lookin’ down on us even though you didn’t do squat. If you ask me if I like y’all or not, to be honest, I hate your guts.” The woman gazed down at Kyle with contempt in her eyes.

“See?! Then why even bother?” But when Kyle tried to shoo her away...

“But noble or commoner, an empty belly on a cold winter night hurts just the same.”

Suddenly, warmth filled the young *byuma* boy’s body. The woman had draped the blanket around his shivering shoulders. As she stared straight into his bloodshot eyes, the corners of her mouth curled into a gentle smile.

“We’re all just people, and we know darn well how tough life can be. We’re not about to leave you boys in the lurch.”

“Rkh...!”

“Now, c’mon and get your butts over here already. Gimme any more lip, and I’ll just drag you there myself!”

With that, the woman hoisted Kyle up by the collar and carted him off. As an aristocrat, he’d never worked a day in his life. To him, this older woman seemed unbelievably strong. Her actions left Kyle at a loss for words.

He couldn't bring himself to spew any more complaints or hostility. That smile she'd given him had begun melting the cold around his heart. In that moment, Kyle finally realized something—just how little he understood. The pompous *byuma* had known nothing about the world or the kindness of the people who lived in it. Such a realization brought a tremble to his voice.

“...I'm sorry...”

In his heart, Kyle resolved to confess to the Seven Luminaries about the terrorist attack he'd been plotting with the Roaring Thunder bombs.



Meanwhile, Tsukasa Mikogami was sitting atop the burnt wreckage of the city's municipal office and talking to someone on the phone. The call was from Shinobu Sarutobi, who was in the middle of her mission to infiltrate the Gustav domain.

After getting in touch with the Blue Brigade resistance movement, she'd heard about Heavenly Fire—the war magic known as Rage Soleil—and had retrieved her phone from Elch to warn Tsukasa of its danger.

However, upon discovering her report had come too late—

“NO WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!!!!”

—she shrieked so loudly the phone speaker's audio peaked.

Tsukasa's right ear took the hit directly, very nearly blowing out his eardrum. With a grimace, the boy switched the phone to his still-functioning left ear and made his displeasure known.

“Keep it down, Shinobu.”

“So wait, you're serious? You guys already got hit by Rage Soleil?!”

“Indeed.”

“I-is everyone okay?! From what I heard, that spell is a real nasty piece of work!”

“Everyone pulled together, so we were able to limit the damages to only a third of the city.”

“Oof... Th-this is a bad look. In fact, if I had to rank every humiliating thing

that's ever happened to me, this'd be third from the top! I'm supposed to always get the scoop on dirty dealings before they go live, but this time, I missed my deadline! I mean, Gustav did go off on his own without even getting in touch with his army... Dammit. Has this guy never heard of a little thing called patience?! Go bald, jackass!"

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather you keep the strange curses to yourself."

Shinobu, who normally hid her true feelings behind an evasive front, was throwing a fit like a child. She must really have been upset. After all, the prodigy journalist prided herself on being the best. Finding that fact somewhat reassuring, Tsukasa changed the subject.

"...As far as Rage Soleil goes, what's done is done. There's no point brooding about it. Now, about this resistance you mentioned...the Blue Brigade. Good work getting in contact with them. That alone made your mission well worth the effort. I want you and Elch to continue working with them while feeding us any strategic information they give you. I'll need intel on those rebels, too... There's no guarantee they'll stay an ally forever."

"...Aight, got it. I'll text you what I know so far."

"Please do."

"I really am sorry, you know..."

After an apology that sounded like she was on the verge of tears, the call ended. Masato, who'd been waiting in the wings with a stack of papers in one hand, called over to Tsukasa.

"Was that Shinobu?"

"It was. She was calling to warn us about Rage Soleil."

"Little late to the party on that one."

"And quite torn up about it, too."

"Ha-ha. Yeah, that's gotta be a rough blow for a top journalist like her," Masato laughed. "But hey, these things happen, y'know?" The fact that Shinobu regularly exposed the Sanada Group's legally murky dealings probably factored into Masato's amusement.

“Oh, and by the way, what was that ‘last idea’ of yours?”

“Hmm? What are you talking about?”

“When you called us, you said you might have a way to deal with the magic fire, remember?”

“Ah, that,” Tsukasa replied. “It was more or less the same as what Lyrule told us. I was going to suggest firing another missile at the spear. Apparently, magic’s power is proportional to the number of spirits it employs. The more ice spirits your ice bullet uses, the greater its penetrative power; the more wind spirits you use in your wind slash, the sharper it’ll be.

“With enough of them, even mere spears of frozen water made with tactical magic could pierce iron shields. Taking that into account, converged-state war magic is probably tougher than steel. It made sense that our missiles couldn’t break it...but with the flames spread out around the city, I thought we might have a chance. It was all just conjecture, though; no guarantee it would’ve worked.”

“Yeah, but you hit the nail on the head.”

“In this world, magic is just another technical system. Proper research goes a long way. I took what I’d learned and made an educated guess.”

After making it all sound easy, Tsukasa picked up his phone to make another call. Seeing his friend like that filled Masato with confidence. Magic hadn’t even existed in their world, but in just one short month, Tsukasa had been able to get enough of a grasp on it to make an accurate prediction in a time of crisis.

Lyrule’s awakening had been an unexpected boon for them, but even without that, Tsukasa had already taken the threat magic posed into account and made proper preparations to deal with it. Honestly, the guy was unreal.

Y’know, you’re the only person in this whole world I can truly rely on. That was precisely what made Tsukasa so scary.

You’re trying to save as many people as you can, and I’m trying to get my hands on as much stuff as I can. Eventually...our paths are gonna diverge.

Masato was certain of it. At some point, he and his childhood friend were

going to end up as enemies. That battle was bound to be the fiercest, most trying battle the Devil of Finance would ever face. A pang of loneliness crossed Masato's face as he thought about the future.

"Oh, Merchant, there was something I wanted to tell you. Lyrule remembered something." Tsukasa was evidently finished with his short conversation.

"Apparently, she heard a female voice in her dream telling her that she needed to 'guide the Seven Heroes.'"

Burying his worries for the future, Masato replied, "Huh... That's pretty specific, isn't it?"

"I'd suspected as much since the incident at Castle Findolph, but Lyrule, the reason we're here, and this strange woman's voice all seem deeply connected. The voice wants us to defeat this 'evil dragon' or what have you, and it also wants Lyrule to help us do it... Given the information we have so far, that's about the shape of things."

"Well, at least this voice doesn't seem like an enemy..."

"...But there's no guarantee it's an ally, either."

"True, true. Hey, you said you were looking into Lyrule's origins, right? How'd that go?"

"I stopped by Elm last week and asked Winona and the mayor about it again. Nothing new on that front."

"They just found her in the woods, huh?"

Tsukasa nodded.

"I kept an eye on their pupils and lip movements, but it didn't seem as though either of them was lying."

"So we're at an impasse..."

"It's fine. This time, the unknown took a step toward us. Besides, once we decided that we'd see the People's Revolution through, information on how to get home shifted down in our priority list. Right now, what we should be worrying about...is what's listed in that stack of papers you're holding."

“You can say that again.” The prodigy businessman heaved a gloomy sigh as he rapidly flipped through the stack. That was all he needed to parse the words and numbers recorded within. Enumerated on the documents was a list of all the food and supplies that Dormundt had lost in the fire.

“Thanks to those inventories you had us put together in advance, rebuilding the city should go pretty smoothly, but the food situation’s a little dire. Losing the Port District’s warehouses hit us pretty hard.”

“How long do we have?”

“Even with contributions from nearby villages, we’re gonna run dry in about a month... And that’s right when winter gets its coldest and nastiest.”

“I figured as much.”

“Yep. So what’s the plan?”

“This.” As the word left Tsukasa’s mouth, a throng of soldiers came rushing over and stood at attention before them. At their head was the Order of the Seven Luminaries’ commander, Bernard. His voice boomed as he spoke.

“Mr. Tsukasa, the first squadron’s armaments have been fully modernized. We’re fifty in total, at your call.”

It was just as the commander said. The soldiers had traded their armor for winter gear and their swords and spears for the newly minted wood-and-iron firearms.



In the Le Luk Mountain Range, it was a struggle just finding somewhere to stand. However, there was a single, wide, smooth road that cut across that treacherous terrain.

A few generations ago, when the Freyjugard Empire had ordered the Findolph family to break ground to the north, they’d carved their way through the mountains and built the mountainous region’s only road capable of supporting carriage traffic.

Naturally, such a path had a checkpoint.

The stone brickwork checkpoint barred the way to the mountain’s wide

valley, and it boasted a gigantic gate easily thirty feet tall.

Normally, it had fifty Buchwald soldiers stationed in it, keeping watch twenty-four hours a day. Now that they were on high alert, though, that number had been quadrupled. The checkpoint stood two hundred guardsmen strong. They were split into three teams, each taking an eight-hour shift, and together, they made sure to survey from every direction.

It was midnight, a few days after Rage Soleil had set Dormundt on fire.

“Gah, I’m freezing my balls off here. Looks like we’ve got another blizzard today, too.”

“Hey, it’s time for the shift change.”

“Ah, you’re a lifesaver. If I had to stay in this drafty rat trap any longer, I’d probably freeze to death.”

“Yeah, they could at least put up some glass windows or something.”

There were a number of little watchhouses mounted atop the stone ramparts stretching across the mountain valley. The soldiers stationed in one of them glanced off into the blizzard as they shivered from the bone-chilling cold.

“Nah, glass’d get all fogged up. Can’t keep watch if you can’t see.”

“Who cares? Not like anyone’d be stupid enough to try crossing Le Luk in the winter... Now, c’mon, let’s get back to the barracks already. I wanna sneak some booze and jerky from the larders on our way back.”

Hearing the gaunt-faced soldier say that took his stubbly, stern-looking partner aback. “Hey, whoa, they execute people for that kind of stuff.”

“Not if they don’t find out. The cold storage is always packed to the gills during the winter, and with how they’re prepping for war this year, it’s practically overflowing. Who’s gonna notice if a bottle or two goes missing?”

“Yeah, I say go for it. The battalion commander turns a blind eye to that stuff on purpose. After all, going to sleep in weather like this without a little something to warm you up means you risk not waking up at all.”

Seeing the relief-shift soldiers agree so strongly turned the sterner guardsman’s opinion around. “Well, when you put it like that...”

“Then hey, let’s—”

But right as the two off-the-clock watchmen made to leave their post, something unusual happened.

The sound of an explosion rocked the ears of the four guards, and a mighty tremor ran through the floor.

“Wh-what’s going on?!”

After frantically grabbing torches, they made for the ramparts and looked down. The soldiers stationed at the next watchhouse over looked to be doing the same. Below, they spotted it: a massive hole blown in the side of the wall’s masonry.

“Th-there’s a hole in the wall?!”

“If someone broke through, d-does that mean the noise just now was cannon fire?!”

From atop the ramparts, the soldiers squinted in disbelief out into the thick darkness. That very same moment, a number of sparks flashed in the rumbling gloom.

“Gah?! ”

A few soldiers toppled backward, blood gushing from their bodies.

“Was that gunfire just now?!”

“Th-there’s no way! No one could aim a gun in a blizzard like—geh!”

“No, it is; I’m positive! We’re under fire!”

Bullets were barreling out of the blackness, speeding toward the soldiers visible atop the ramparts. At that point, there was no doubting it. One of the soldiers let out the cry of alarm.

“We’re under attaaaaaaack!”

No sooner had he done so than the alarm bells affixed to the watchhouses all began sounding, and the checkpoint came alive. The guardsmen had already been on high alert, so a squad of crossbow archers was ready on the wall in no time.

However...

“Agh!”

“Gah?!”

“What are you doing?! Hurry up and return fire!”

“We can’t, Captain! I-it’s too dark to see, so we don’t know where to shoot—geh?!”

“Rgh...!”

The lack of light and the raging blizzard meant the soldiers had no recourse against the unbelievably accurate bullets but to roll over and die. The resident Bronze Knight captain had no idea what to make of it.

The only guns the man could think of capable of shooting accurately in a snowstorm were flintlock rifles. However, those were so new that even the forces in the imperial capital weren’t all equipped with them yet. Most of the Freyjagard Army was still using matchlock guns.

What’s more, defending Findolph hadn’t exactly been high on the empire’s list of priorities. As far as the knight knew, the region barely had any guns at all. How had the rebels who’d overthrown Findolph gotten their hands on such quality armaments? Perhaps more importantly, even if the insurgents did have flintlock rifles...

“How are they shooting us so accurately when it’s this pitch dark...?!”

The answer to that question lay on the heads of the Order of the Seven Luminaries’ fifty-man squad. Each one of them was wearing a large pair of goggles. The genius inventor, Ringo Oohoshi, had armed the battalion with night-vision specs.

“These are great! Still wish we had some sunlight, but even with how dark it is, I can totally make the enemies out!”

“The guns are nasty, too. Wind’s completely nuts, but most of our shots are still landing. This magic gear from the angels is no joke!”

It wasn’t exactly magic, but there was still a good reason for the strength of the weapons. Their guns, produced at the arms factory beside the power plant

in Dormundt, made use of a technique that even the imperial workshops hadn't been able to come up with a cost-efficient way of implementing. It was a process called broaching—in short, they had rifling. Older gun models couldn't hold a candle to them when it came to range and ballistic stability.

All fifty of the soldiers from Dormundt were equipped with night-vision goggles and rifles, making their ranged battle against the hundred-odd crossbow archers decidedly one-sided. Little by little, the Order of the Seven Luminaries whittled down their enemy's ranks while the Buchwald army remained unable to land a single bolt. Eventually, the imperial side seemed to have their hands full reloading, as their crossbow fire died down for a moment.

Now's the time!

Commander Bernard used that pause to give his order. "Conrad Squadron! Concentrate your fire on the top of the fortress wall! Don't let them stick their heads out!"

""""Yes, sir!""""

"Bernard Squadron, you're with me! Charge!"

""""Hraaaaaaaah!""""

At the command, twenty or so soldiers who'd been chosen in advance roared as they charged through the snow toward the checkpoint's bastion.

"A battle cry?!"

"This is bad! They're rushing toward that hole they blew open!"

"Don't let them inside! Shoot to kill!"

Having finished reloading their crossbows, the soldiers obeyed their captain and leaned out over the ramparts to take aim at the now-visible insurgents.

As brave as a frontal charge may have seemed, the snow was up to the incursion's calves. Getting anywhere fast was out of the question. Even through a blizzard, they were like sitting ducks.

However—

"Damn th—akh?!"

—a fierce barrage of gunfire hammered the ramparts and stopped the archers in their tracks. Two storms surged through the mountain pass now, and one was made of lead.

“I-it’s no use! There’s too much gunfire for us to risk sticking our heads out!”

“There’s too many of them! They’ll blow us away the second we stand!”

“Rgh...!”

The Bronze Knight captain couldn’t even rebuke what his men were saying. He himself was thinking the very same thing. The leaden squall pounded over their heads without letting up for a moment.

To the warriors of this world, who were only familiar with guns that required manual reloading from the muzzle after every shot, the rapid-fire barrage was like a bolt-action nightmare. The hearts of the guardsmen froze over, and it had nothing to do with the temperature. The ability to maintain that level of high-density fire was unbelievable.

Just how many hundreds of flintlock snipers does the enemy have out there?!



It had been a short while now since the battle started over on the Findolph side of the checkpoint.

From the Buchwald side, the back door attached to the main gate swung open, and five soldiers waded into the snow. Each was a messenger tasked with delivering news of the enemy raid to the main army down in the foothills.

With desperate expressions on their faces, the quintet rushed through the snow. Each was eager to escape the hellish site of battle as quickly as possible. Then, right as the sounds of the insurgents’ gunfire began to fade into the distance...

“Ah—”

“Huh?”

Bang, bang, bang.

Sparks flashed from the dark nearby, and all five couriers crumpled onto the ground. A little while afterward, five figures robed in white cloth crunched

across the snow.

“...I won’t apologize for this. Our lives are on the line just as much as yours were.” The voice speaking to the dead men was dignified, despite its obvious youth. It belonged to Tsukasa Mikogami. In order to cut off any messengers the checkpoint might’ve sent, the young prime minister had led a small group around to its Buchwald side.

“Still, these Le Luk bastards are all sorts of shoddy.”

“Yeah, for real. We managed to sneak past their defenses like they were nothing.”

“Maybe they’re all just napping on the job ’cause it’s too cold.”

The exasperation of the Seven Luminaries’ soldiers was only natural. After all, they hadn’t needed to hide, take a treacherous route, or anything of the like.

They just strolled across the mountain.

By doing so, they’d found themselves on the other side of the checkpoint in no time at all. Such an achievement brought on a wave of relief for the soldiers. Perhaps their enemies weren’t as tough as they’d been made out to be. However, Tsukasa knew that wasn’t the case.

His group not getting caught had nothing to do with the Buchwald army’s proficiency. The thing was, the route they’d taken was the same path Shinobu and Elch had used to cross the border themselves. If anything, Shinobu’s ability to spot the holes in defenses was just that fearsome. Little of the merit for their feat belonged to the young white-haired man and his soldiers.

Tsukasa barked an order to the others to keep them from letting their guards down. “That’s enough chatter. Our job is to stay here until the Bernard Squadron conquers the checkpoint, shooting any enemies who try to flee. We can’t let a single person through. If anyone escapes, *it’s game over*. Keep your wits about you.”

“““Y-yes, sir.”””

The four soldiers obediently straightened up. It was clear from their conduct how much they respected the boy with heterochromatic eyes.

The angels of the Seven Luminaries had built weapons these troops had never seen before, improved conditions for the common folk, and even defeated a giant fire monster. After they'd accomplished all that, there were none left who doubted their divinity.

Meanwhile, as Tsukasa and his men were cutting off their enemies' escape route from the Buchwald side...

Bernard's squadron had taken the western half of the east-west bifurcated checkpoint. They raced through the central courtyard, ready to claim the opposite side as well.

"D-dammit! How'd they get this far already?!"

"The west side is done for! Lower the iron gate!"

Unable to fight back against the power of modern weaponry, the checkpoint's guards fled to the east half. Despite the fact that they still had allies stuck on the west side, the retreating men dropped a heavy iron grille onto the path that led out from the central courtyard.

"H-hey! You're just gonna leave us here?!"

"You bastaaaaards!"

"Commander, there's an iron gate...!"

"Leave it to me."

Bernard took a step forward and readied his weapon.

The gun, which consisted of a short, squat barrel affixed to a disk, hadn't been built in the arms factory. It was a special weapon Bearabbit had made himself, and the AI only gave it to those he trusted—a grenade launcher.

The explosive Bernard fired hit the grille with a peculiar *plink*, then detonated in a large explosion.

Just like the checkpoint's outer wall before it, the gate was completely blasted away—along with the enemy soldiers who'd been clinging to it.

"...M-magic...?" One soldier who'd miraculously survived let out a small yelp as he stared, aghast, at the obliterated barricade.

Bernard and his men rushed past the frightened survivor, charging into the east wing. Their enemies were forced farther and farther up and responded to the insurgent push by forming a defensive line on the east wing's spiral staircase.

The corkscrew set of stairs had been built counterclockwise on purpose. That way, intruders coming from below wouldn't be able to use their dominant hands, whereas the defenders above would have no such restriction.

However—

“Don't retreat this far, idiots! You're practically handing them the fort on a silver platter!”

“E-easy for you to say...!”

“What's with their shields?! They're so huge, but they're carrying them like they weigh nothing!”

—even that was no match for the duralumin shields the intruders' vanguard was carrying.

Spears, clubs, and swords were all rendered useless. The silvery shields repelled them all and forced the Buchwald soldiers to give more and more ground.

Finally, their brawny Bronze Knight leader roared in exasperation, “All right, rank and file, outta the way! I, Bronze Knight Gambino the Great, will take them on myself!”

He kicked his allies aside, then swung his metal flail toward the duralumin shields. The weapon's iron ball weighed over forty pounds, meaning it should have easily crushed the shields and skulls of the invaders in one fell swing.

However—

“_____”

—it was like they'd known it was coming, as a double-barreled shotgun peeked its head out from the gap between two shields.

Fire erupted.

Bronze Knight Gambino, who'd made a valiant charge on his foes, felt a terrible impact in his abdomen. Blown against the stairs, he passed out. The shot had left a gruesome dent in the man's armor.

Instead of lead, the shotgun was packed with buckshot made from small stones. At close range, the attack had quite literally rocked him. The Bronze Knight was going to be out for a while, and with no CO, the Buchwald soldiers were routed.

"Eeeeeeeek?!?!"

"Ah! They got Gambino the Great!"

"We can't stop them! No one can stop them!"

The guardsmen grew more and more terrified by the minute. As far as they were concerned, power that overwhelming could've only been magic. Against such strength, all they could do was scream and flee.

"Their weapons are nuts! Who are these people?!"

Well, that and curse their misfortune for having been there in the first place.

An hour after the battle started, Tsukasa got a call from Bernard. It was to inform the young politician that they'd seized complete control of the checkpoint. When he heard the news, Tsukasa turned around, looked toward the Buchwald side of the fortress, and thought back.

The boy recalled the conversation he'd had with Masato in front of the soldiers before they'd launched the attack.

"...Hey, yo, what's the plan here?"

While Masato glanced at the fully armed soldiers, Tsukasa had answered.

"As I'm sure a tremendous businessman like yourself is well aware, patience is an indispensable quality for anyone hoping to manage personnel or capital.

"Gustav is the type of man to fire off his Rage Soleil without waiting to mobilize an army. The odds that he keeps himself in check until the snow melts are slim. In fact, I imagine he's already getting ready to march on us. And he's probably given Buchwald's and Archride's forces the order to move out, as well. I'd bet the duke told them that he'd cut them down from behind if anyone

questioned his order. With the Warden of the North being so forceful, they had no choice but to follow his command.

“However, they prepared all their equipment under the assumption the invasion would be in spring. Crossing Le Luk in the gear they have will be a suicide march; it’s the best chance we could have asked for. I see no reason to sit around waiting for them to cross the range. Do you?”

Tsukasa’s tone had been matter-of-fact, but a cruel, fierce light had burned in his blue eye.

“We’ll meet them in the mountains, slaughter them, and take the three northern domains before winter’s end. With that territory in hand, we’ll raise the flag of our democratic nation.”

It was thus that a new battle began.



AFTERWORD

Happy New Year!

I'm Riku Misora, the author.

This is my first book of 2016, so even though it's February already, I wanted to give you all a New Year's greeting. In my defense, I'm technically writing this in the middle of January, so I hope you'll cut me some slack :P

By the way, I'd like to thank you all for last year. I mentioned this on the book's belly band as well, but you helped *High School Prodigies Have It Easy Even in Another World!* get off to an amazing start.

I'll try to make the rest of the series good enough to be worthy of the overwhelming support you've shown. I hope you'll all continue reading it.

Next, I'd like to thank everyone for reading the second volume of *High School Prodigies Have It Easy Even in Another World!* (*Choyoyu* for short, a nickname that comes from the Japanese title) through to the end.

In Volume 2, Akatsuki used his "miracles" (illusions) to build a military through religious support.

Then, Ringo got a stable source of fuel to support her present-day-level factory and was able to modernize part of their army. Compared to Volume 1, where her main trick was the duralumin, she was able to strengthen their faction a great deal.

Also, Shinobu sneaked deep into enemy territory; Aoi and the awakened Lyrule were able to ward off Gustav's supposed trump card, Rage Soleil; and the High School Prodigies managed to steadily back him—a commander of the empire—into a corner. However, only time will tell if they manage to make good on Tsukasa's claim, beat Gustav, and take the three northern domains before winter's end.

I hope you all continue watching over the High School Prodigies as they make their way through their new world in the next volume and beyond.

Now, I'd like to hijack this space for a bit and thank all the people who put their hard work into *Choyoyu's* second volume.

Sacraneco, thank you for all your delightful illustrations! When I hit my Volume 2 *kunoichi* quota by having Shinobu get captured by the enemy, I thought, *I gotta see this part illustrated!* When I saw the art, I was beside myself with joy!

I'd also like to thank my editor, Kohara, and the rest of the editorial staff over at GA Bunko. Having you all point out my typos and omitted words was a huge help.

Finally, my utmost gratitude to all the readers who stuck with me for not just one but two whole volumes.

I'll do my best to repay you all in the form of interesting stories!

Anyway, that's all from me! I hope we meet again in book three!

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