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Hiyoko Sumeragi

Illustration by  
Mika Pikazo

Backgrounds by  
mocha

The World Bows  
Down Before My Flames

THE DARK LORD'S  
CASTLE GOES BOOM



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### Proto

The mechanical life-form. Proto was created in outer space but then refashioned as a robot girl by Japanese engineers. She may be the product of advanced technologies, far beyond anything found on Earth, but she'd still rather solve problems with her fists. She's kind of a brat.

### Homura

The pyrokineticist. Homura possesses supernatural abilities that allow her to create fire from her body. She prides herself on being the normal one of the group, but what fiery desires does she harbor within her own soul...?

### Jin

The assassin. Jin comes from a long line of assassins who lurk in the seedy underbelly of Japan. Once upon a time she was only interested in cutting down evil, but since coming to this new world she has discovered a passion for testing her strength. She loves plain white rice.

"All right, let's burn this place!"

"I'll smash you to bits!"

"One creature feature, coming right up!"

"The fight can be as thrilling as the kill."

"I'll do my best to kill..."

### Psycho

The mad scientist. Psycho loves two things, human experimentation and B movies, and is determined to keep making her grotesque creations even in this new world. She may be smart, but she prefers to use those smarts to toy with others.

### Tsutsumi

The living bioweapon. Tsutsumi was designed to emit poisonous gas but was considered defective by her creators. Despite her ephemeral appearance, Tsutsumi has an insatiable appetite and zero qualms when it comes to killing. She is the squad's mascot.

BOW



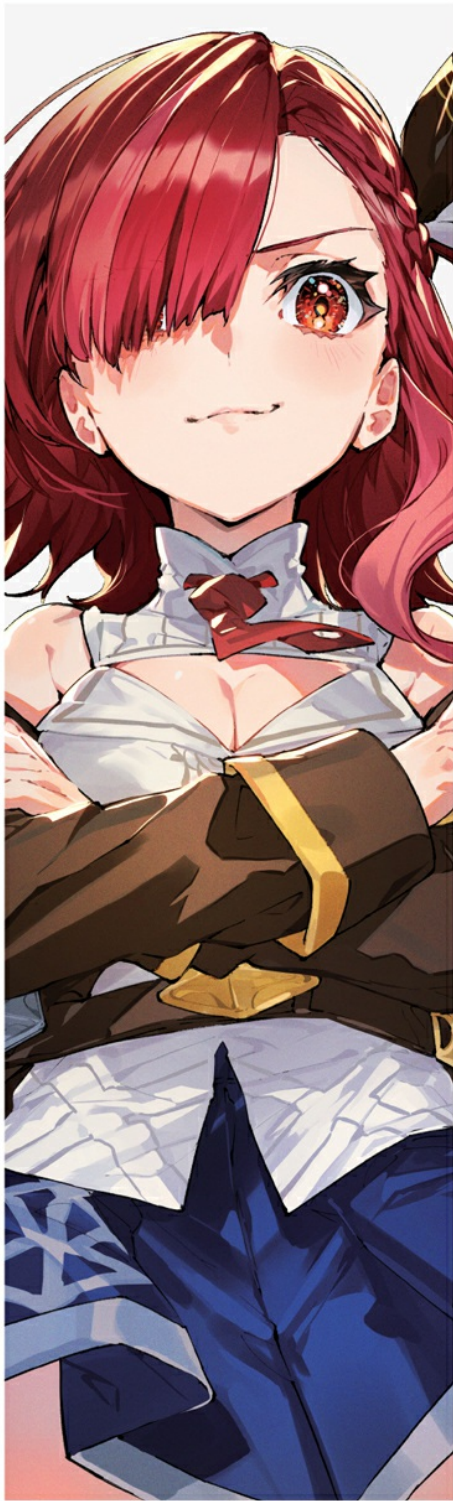
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# HOMURA

The pyrokineticist



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NEW YORK

# Copyright



## 1

**Hiyoko Sumeragi**

**Translation by James Balzer   Cover art by Mika Pikazo and mocha**

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WAGA HOMURA NI HIREFUSE SEKAI Vol. 1 MAO JO, MOYASHITEMITA

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## Prologue

### End of a Journey, Beginning of a World

This is the end of a journey, and the beginning of a world.

“Oops, I guess I did it again...”

The fiery redhead—Homura—seemed to feel only the slightest hint of remorse over what she had just done.

Before their eyes, the Dark Lord’s castle had gone up in a fiery blaze.

The scene looked like something you would expect to see in a theme park attraction. Five bruised and battered girls—or, more accurately, four girls and one girl-shaped mechanical life-form—craned their necks, staring upward at the surreal sight.

The castle was massive and imposing, nestled into a fortified rampart that rose grandly from the earth as if to cleave the land in half.

The Dark Lord’s castle was embedded directly into the ramparts and protruded outward defensively, a testament to the Dark Lord’s commitment to repelling invaders into his lands with his own two hands.

“What do you mean, ‘oops’?! I told you to take out the Dark Lord! Who said anything about burning his whole castle down?!”

Unfortunately for the Dark Lord and his convictions, this unyielding fortress, which could easily be described as “impregnable,” was now spitting out massive plumes of smoke in all directions, its master having been slain mere moments ago.

“All that precious loot, up in flames. Just because you get loopy every time you see fire. Seek help, you idiot!” shouted the mad scientist of the group.

The target of her rage was Homura, who had been responsible for setting this blaze.

“It’s not like I can help it! It just feels so good when it happens!”

“Well, the next time it happens, I’m gonna give you a piercing with the biggest needle I can find—right through that stupid skull of yours, you deviant!”

“Deviant...! That’s rich coming from a freak like you who likes to experiment on humans!”

“Yeah, yeah, keep talking, tits-for-brains.”

As the two argued, they began to square off against each other. It was a verbal sparring match for the title of worst of the worst, lowest of the low, and it was just about to enter round two: the “shut up before I make you shut up” phase.

“I’ve had enough of you! For the sake of all humanity, it’s time I finally melted that nasty mouth of yours shut!”

Flames swelled up around Homura’s fist, which was already stained black like coal. Their surroundings were lit up by incandescent flames, the air shimmering in the scorching heat.

“Bring it. I’ll turn you into a B movie monster of the week and hang you up in my collection!”

As Psycho continued to mouth off, she waved a sinister-looking dagger in the air.

The gesture was more than just a threat.

The blade left a gash in empty space. Darkness peered out from the newly formed crack, watching them.

A moment later, a misshapen hand appeared from within the shadowy crevice. The hand, which was too large and warped to be human, grabbed the edge of the crevice and began to audibly pry it open.

As this thing, whatever it was, attempted to leave its dimensional rift, a third girl suddenly stepped into the middle of this pointless altercation.

“All right, a fight! Count me in!” shouted Proto—the mechanical life-form—tossing herself into this powder keg like another lit fuse. “We can finally settle which of us is superior: me or you inferior carbon-based life-forms!”

As the android raised her fist into the air, the metal shard embedded in her bracelet shimmered with cold blue light.

Any one of these girls could have reduced a whole country to ruins if she decided to fight seriously. Their little spat, however, was brought to an end before it could even get started.

“A contest for dominance, you say...?” said a fourth participant in the madness. “Indeed. Perhaps I should join as well.”

“F...fine, I’ll let you off with a warning, for now.”

“Next time I’m gonna massacre you.”

“You got lucky.”

As soon as the deadly assassin, Jin, announced her intention to enter the fray, the other three girls quickly called a truce, and the dimensional rift hastily zipped shut.

Jin had drawn her katana, a devilish glint in her red eyes.

The three girls turned away, avoiding eye contact and trying to seem nonchalant, but inside they were shitting bricks.

“Enough... This is frivolous,” Jin said. “Look at Tsutsumi. She is hungry. Let’s finish this up quickly.”

“My tummy...is empty...,” announced Tsutsumi, the living bioweapon.

Tsutsumi’s stomach rumbled. Her voice sounded soft and wispy, but her tone made it clear—she was ready to eat, and she was ready now.

“Fine... Let’s get on with it, then. The Goddess wanted us to defeat the Dark Lord and save the world, right?”

“Yep, so that just leaves the ‘saving the world’ part. Now that the Dark Lord is taken care of, we’re free to save the hell out of this world.”

The girls couldn’t help but grin. It was time to save the world. And they all

knew what that meant. The path was clear.

“Let’s burn injustice to a crisp!”

“You’ve really got a one-track mind.”

“Well, what did you expect?”

“Hey, you do you, I guess.”

They wanted to live selfishly, egotistically, and be absolutely true to themselves. That was the dream, and these misfits had decided that their path to achieving it would be to save the world.

“We should take a commemorative photo while we’re here. In front of the Dark Lord’s castle, while it’s still on fire.” Psycho pulled her smartphone from her pocket.

The path might have been clear, but they still had time for a little detour.

“I don’t know. Taking a commemorative photo in front of someone’s burning house seems kind of wrong.”

At the very least, it didn’t seem right.

“But check out the lighting! It’ll be a great picture.”

Between the rising sun and the raging conflagration, the lighting on the Dark Lord’s castle was indeed gorgeous.

“I guess that’s one word for it...,” said Homura, starting to fix her hair, which had gotten disheveled during the fight.

Whatever little thimbleful of guilt Homura had originally felt seemed to have evaporated completely by this point.

“Speaking of which, why did you bring your phone anyway?”

“When else was I going to get a chance to use it? The whole reason I saved the battery for so long was for this moment,” bragged Psycho, as if it were obvious.

For Psycho, these heinous little touches were the spice of life.

“You’re a monster, you know that...?” said Homura, glancing at Psycho and

wrinkling her nose.

“Fine, then I won’t show you the picture afterward.”

Homura’s tune immediately changed. “A commemorative photo! In front of someone’s burning house, you say?! This is so much fun,” she shouted enthusiastically. Her stock as a human being had just taken a rapid plunge.

“Who’s the monster now...?”

Each girl thought the other was the bigger piece of trash, but in truth it was a dead tie. They were both complete and total scumbags.

The five girls crowded together, grinning broadly as the Dark Lord’s castle loomed in the background, amid the rising sun and the burning flames.

Here in this strange world, there was no way to actually reproduce a photo. Once the battery in Psycho’s smartphone ran out, they would never be able to look at that image again.

“Say cheese!”

The shutter snapped.

But the girls decided to commemorate it anyway—this moment between the great things they had done so far and the great things they were going to do in the future.

“After all...this day was a long time coming,” said Homura.

“Tell me about it.”

Once the photo was taken, the girls allowed themselves to wax nostalgic. The road they had journeyed through this strange world had been hazardous and bloody. And yet, looking back, it had all been worth it. A struggle they had undertaken to live their lives their own way.

As they stood before the Dark Lord’s burning castle, the five girls reflected on the road thus far.

## Chapter 1

### The Goddess of Being a Terrible Judge of Character

Asahi Homura was unsure how she had gotten to this infinite white space.

“H...huh? Where am I?”

She glanced around, one of her eyes hidden behind her reddish bangs.

Everything in the space was so white that it was impossible to tell if there were walls or a ceiling. The only reason she knew there was even a floor was the firmness beneath her feet. She wasn't sure how she managed to stay upright, the way the space was playing havoc with her sense of depth and balance.

Could it be? Was this heaven?

Asahi touched her head. There was no blood, and her skull still seemed intact. But she remembered that sense of falling. The image of the upside-down school building was still seared into the back of her mind.

Unless she was in another world, this had to be the afterlife.

*If I look up, she thought vaguely, slowly lifting her head, maybe I'll see God staring back down at me— “Ah...?”*





As Asahi glanced up, she made eye contact with a single ginormous eye. It hadn't been there just a second ago.

The wide-open eye blinked several times, apparently just as surprised as Asahi.

Its blazing golden iris was like the moon, somehow managing to be simultaneously gross and mysterious. For some reason, however, Asahi did not feel afraid.

It was not long before their staring contest was interrupted.

"Well, well! As far as entrances to hell go, they sure do keep this place clean. Are they closed for maintenance or something?" asked a loud and boorish voice, startling her.

While Asahi was distracted by the new voice, the floating eye disappeared.

There were now four other girls standing there with her.

Each seemed to be wearing a different school uniform. Based on their sizes and appearances, the girls were probably in either middle or high school.

Not one of them, however, seemed what you would call normal.

The girl who had just spoken was the easiest to pick out of the crowd. Apparently, she had assumed she was on her way to hell. Maybe this wasn't heaven after all.

She had short, unkempt golden-blond hair, which was gathered together in a messy ponytail. Her facial features didn't look entirely Japanese, so her hair color might be natural. Of course, her appearance was so outlandish that the color of her hair was probably the least noticeable thing about her.

She wore a pair of plain, black-framed glasses, and her ears were studded with a riot of aggressively spiked metal piercings. A black tattoo peeked out from the collar of her school uniform. And her hands were thrust into the pockets of the white lab coat she was wearing for reasons unknown.

Asahi had learned in school not to judge a book by its cover, but she had a feeling this was an exception to that rule. This girl was *scary*. Scary and presumably dangerous.

Asahi was still giving the girl the timid side-eye when a new voice suddenly spoke, this one clear and mellow.

“This is neither heaven nor hell. It is, however, a place far removed from the world of humanity. You’ve all died already.”

The owner of this voice was a sixth girl, who had appeared at some point when Asahi wasn’t looking. She had beautiful braided blond hair and eyes as beautiful as the moon, and she was dressed in a loose-fitting white robe. Despite her apparent youth, she had a mature air and manner of speaking. Asahi blushed.

“So what are you supposed to be, some kind of psychopomp or something?” said Piercings. She seemed combative. She also must not have been the type to scare easily, because she hardly seemed to be fazed by this other girl’s sudden appearance or the news that she was dead.

Of the group, the only two who seemed confused by the sudden developments were Asahi and one other girl, the smallest of the group, whose complexion was sickly. The other three only stood by stoically. Asahi had no idea how they could remain so calm under the circumstances.

“No, I’m not a psychopomp. I’m the one who created this world—I suppose what you might call God in your words. Of course, this is a different world. Not the one you five originally came from.”

*What is she even talking about?* thought Asahi. *This is crazy.* She remembered the floating eye, however, that she had seen earlier.

This girl was obviously a supernatural presence of some sort, and her eyes made Homura think of the moon, too. Maybe the floating eye was the girl’s true form.

Piercings seemed to be over the whole situation. With a heavy sigh, she plopped herself down onto the ground, her legs poking out in front of her. “Fine then, I’ll bite. What would a god from another world, or whatever you are, want from the likes of me—or rather, the likes of us?” she asked.

It seemed like she just wanted to get the ball rolling, rather than actually having any idea what was going on.

After taking a moment to gather her composure, the Goddess leveled her gaze at the five girls and began to speak.

“Please...won’t you save my world from the clutches of the Dark Lord?”

Everyone’s brain seemed to stall out for a moment.

The Goddess continued speaking. “There are signs that a great evil is returning to this world. It pains me to ask something like this from a group of ordinary girls such as yourselves. But please, won’t you defeat the Dark Lord and save this world?”

The Goddess’s voice was pleasing. Asahi still had no idea what was going on, but the Goddess, at least, seemed sincere. Not all of the girls, however, seemed quite so receptive to her entreaties.

“You gotta be kidding,” said Piercings. “That’s so cliché... What is this, some kind of B movie?”

“If we’re getting reborn in a new world, wouldn’t that make it more like a light novel rather than a movie...?” asked Asahi absentmindedly.

This did sound a lot like the plot from one of those *isekai* light novels that were all the rage lately.

“Movie, light novel, whatever. Either way, it’s too much to ask of an ‘ordinary girl’ like me. Go find someone else. I don’t give a rat’s ass about who gets to be head honcho of a completely different world.”

“Yes...I suppose you’re right...”

The Goddess turned her eyes away sadly. Asahi wanted to help her, but Piercings was right. This was a lot to ask. They were just a bunch of schoolgirls; how were they supposed to save the world?

Still, Piercings didn’t have to be so mean about it. Asahi was about to say something, but one of the other girls beat her to the punch.

“An *ordinary girl*? Not from where I stand. I know a cold-blooded scoundrel with no regard for human life when I see one. And I’ve seen many. You appear to be a scientist. How many subjects have been consumed by your brutal experiments?”

The girl who spoke had been standing silently until now, her arms crossed.

She was on the taller side, with distinctively narrow, almond-shaped eyes and long glossy hair gathered into a ponytail at the back of her head. She spoke like a character from a period drama about samurai, and she wore some sort of sword or katana at her waist. As she glared at the girl with the piercings, her eyes were as cold and as sharp as a blade.

Asahi had heard the phrase *if looks could kill* before, but this brought a whole new meaning to it.

The tension was painful.

“What’s your problem, Little Miss Samurai? So I’ve disposed of a few test subjects, so what? You clearly have no respect for human life, either. At least, not so long as you can convince yourself that the other person had it coming... Tell me, how many people have you cut down with that sword of yours?”

The girl with the piercings stood up slowly and stared back at the other girl.

*‘Disposed of’? ‘Cut down’? What are they talking about?* The only thing Asahi knew for sure was that whatever seedy part of Japan they had come from, it was part of the underworld.

“I’ve never bothered counting...but the number is about to go up by one.”

As Little Miss Samurai spoke, she drew her weapon from her waist. The black-lacquered blade gave off a dull sheen. The design was somewhat unusual, but it was obviously a traditional Japanese katana.

The two girls glared at each other, murderous hostility on one side versus repulsed disdain on the other. The tension had gone from painful to excruciating.

The small girl with the sickly complexion hid herself behind Asahi, apparently scared of the brewing hostility.

The last girl, who wore a strange pair of headphones on her head, did not react at all. She had yet to move a single inch since arriving. Calm might have been a virtue, but this was taking it overboard.

Now that a homicide was imminent, the Goddess seemed to finally realize

that this was not going as planned.

“I...think I might have made a horrible mistake.”

“You’re telling me...”

The Goddess had supposedly gathered together five “ordinary” girls, but of the five, at least two seemed to be as far from sugar and spice as you could possibly get. More like danger itself in schoolgirl clothing. The Goddess couldn’t have chosen worse if she had tried.

Step by step, the combatants drew closer. The air was thick with hostility. Asahi had to do something before this nice white floor got stained completely red with blood.

“N-n-now, now, now! How about we introduce ourselves first?! This is probably all just a big misunderstanding. Come on, what do you say?”

The two froze and turned their daggerlike glares toward Asahi. Asahi felt the soul leave her body.

*Farewell, living and breathing. Hello, impending death.*

As the silence dragged on, Asahi felt the acid begin to rise into her throat. Her stomach felt like it was doing somersaults inside her. Instead of red, pretty soon the white floor was going to be stained vomit yellow.

Asahi had suggested they introduce themselves as a last-ditch effort to prevent Little Miss Samurai from going all *Yojimbo* on everyone, but surprisingly, it was Piercings who took Asahi up on the offer.

“Fine, if you insist... It’s Saiko,” she said, scratching her head as she spoke. She sounded put out.

“Huh?”

“My name. It’s Saiko.”

“Psycho... That makes sense...”

It was almost too on the nose.

“What do you mean, ‘that makes sense’?! It’s from kanji. *Sai* as in ‘talented’ and *ko* as in ‘girl.’ I’m half Japanese, in case you didn’t notice!”

“Oh no! I’m so sorry!” Asahi realized she had said something very rude. The girl’s name was Saiko, not Psycho. The two just sounded similar.

“Anyway, it’s true, I did use human lab rats... But my subjects were all death row inmates anyway, so I don’t see what the big deal is.”

Psycho it was.

“Indeed...? Well, in that case...” The girl with the sword seemed to be having trouble deciding on the degree of Psycho’s guilt. Committing heinous acts against heinous people apparently counted as a gray zone. For her own part, Asahi thought it sounded pretty criminal either way.

“At the end of the day, I was basically carrying out their sentences. I just happened to do it through my research instead. Think of it as their chance to finally be useful to society before death. In fact, you might even consider it an act of good.” Psycho shrugged as if to suggest that she could not begin to fathom how her activities would seem evil to someone. The corner of her mouth, however, twisted up into a smirk that made it obvious she didn’t truly believe what she was saying.

“Calling it ‘an act of good’ is a bit too far, but there is some sense in what you say. I will lower my blade, for now. I apologize for the affront.”

“Hey now, water under the bridge! Besides, I was egging you on.” Psycho flashed a goofy grin as Little Miss Samurai resheathed her sword.

“Are you...sure you’re both from Japan?”

To someone listening from the sidelines, everything they said sounded bonkers. As it turned out, most of the “misunderstanding” was actually true—Asahi felt like she had just stolen a peek at a side of Japan she wasn’t meant to see. What kind of research could Psycho possibly be carrying out on death row inmates? And why did Little Miss Samurai seem satisfied with her answer?

“I am known as Jin. It is written with the kanji for ‘blade.’”

“What a name! What were your parents thinking?”

“It is my code name, as an assassin. I’m more accustomed to it now than I am to my real name.”

“Japan, right? We’re talking about Japan here?”

Human experiments on death row inmates and now assassins. What in the heck was happening? A moment ago, she was in a high fantasy, with other worlds and Dark Lords, but now things had turned real gritty real fast.

“What do you mean?” said Psycho. “This is just your standard girl talk.”

“Um, just because girls are talking doesn’t necessarily make it girl talk,” Homura replied.

“Ha-ha, I’m just joking around. Anyway, what about you? The cyclops with the titties. What’s your name?”

“Titties—?!” Asahi instinctively covered her chest with her arms.

Not much stood out about Asahi other than that one of her eyes was hidden and that her breasts were large; that was fair enough. But they were only large compared to everyone else’s present at the moment. It wasn’t like they were ginormous or anything.

“My name is Homura. Asa—”

“Homura. That’s actually a pretty cool name. How about you, the girl behind her? What’s your name?”

“What, no, that’s my last name. My first is... Oh, you’re not listening anymore...”

Asahi tried to correct her, but Psycho had already moved on. It felt kind of weird, having someone mix up her first and last names, but Psycho was right. It did sound pretty cool.

Besides, it didn’t really matter. Homura it was.

“What’s your name? Er, more importantly, what’s wrong with your skin? Are you actually human?” Psycho peered at the smaller girl suspiciously.

In response, the girl retreated behind Homura.

“Why would you say something like that?! Why can’t a person be gray? Maybe she’s just really pale! She could be a demon baby or something! Or maybe a dark elf!”

“Neither of those things is human!”

The small girl shrank down even farther. “Two...”

“Two? Two what?”

“My name. 223.”

Her name was “223”...?

“What, like your serial number?” asked Psycho, picking up on something the rest of them apparently didn’t get.

The girl pressed her forehead against Homura’s back and nodded shyly.

“What do you mean, serial number?” asked Homura.

“It means she’s the product of an experimental humanoid bioweapon program. Judging from her appearance, I’m guessing she was created through genetic manipulation. I never thought I’d get to lay eyes on one of these again. Ah, it sure takes me back. The things you see when you’re dead!” Psycho nodded, seemingly impressed.

“I was...defective. So they...disposed of me.”

“That’s even worse than the first two girls!”

Homura was glad she hadn’t learned about any of this stuff until after she was dead. If she had known what was going on in Japan while she was still alive, she might not have been able to sleep at night.

Bioweapon or not, though, it seemed kind of sad to only have a number for a name.

“Well, we can’t just go around calling you by a number. I know, what if I thought up a name for you?” asked Homura, spinning around and taking the girl by the hand.

“Really?”

“Really, really!”

The girl’s face seemed to brighten a little at the prospect of receiving a name other than her serial number. She seemed so pure. She stared up at Homura expectantly, through strangely colored eyes that peeked out from her dry,

disheveled hair.

“Let’s see, since your number is 223... How about Tsutsumi? Isn’t that cute?”

“That’s basically just her number. You could have given it at least a little thought...”

*Shut up, blonde!*

“Tsutsumi... Tsutsumi... I like it.”

The tiny weapon of mass destruction muttered the name to herself several times, as if testing it out, before breaking into a toothy smile.

“Tsutsumi it is, then! A pleasure to meet you!”

Homura grabbed Tsutsumi in a hug, which the girl returned. Tsutsumi’s delicate frame was chilly to the touch, but the hug still felt warm.

“Enough, let’s save the hugs and tears for later,” Psycho complained. “There’s still one person left... Huh? Actually, I’m not sure this one’s human, either.”

“Again? If you keep saying rude things to everyone, you’re not gonna be left with any friends.”

“Who’s being rude? Take a look for yourself.”

Homura released the smaller girl from her hug and turned toward the last member of the group.

She was small, though not as small as Tsutsumi, boyish in appearance, and silver haired (with a bluish undertone). Despite the current situation, she appeared to be exceptionally calm and collected. Other than that, however, there was nothing particularly strange about her.

“What are you talking about?” said Homura. “She’s just a normal, cute-looking g...girl? Is...is she a doll?”

“See?”

Looking closer, Homura realized the girl was standing completely still. So still, in fact, that Homura wasn’t sure she was breathing.

Homura peered closely into the girl’s face. It was exquisitely structured. At a glance, she really did look human. But there were small details where her

maker had failed to fully recreate the semblance of a living, breathing creature. The skin, which had appeared soft at first, looked firm when examined from up close. And the wide, round eyes, which were bordered with long lashes, were glossy in a way that seemed fake. The pupils, meanwhile, flickered with pulsing light.

“What the heck is this thing?”

Homura tried poking the doll’s face. The surface was plump and soft, but there was something hard underneath, just as she’d expected.

“Didn’t anyone ever teach you not to poke someone’s face while they’re in the middle of an update? This is why I hate inferior life-forms...”

“Aghh!!”

Homura leaped back in surprise as the doll’s expression changed to one of annoyance.

In contrast to moments earlier, the girl (?) was now moving in a seemingly lithe and natural manner. She still didn’t seem to be breathing, however.

“I could hear the conversation, though. You were introducing yourselves, right? I’m a prototype mechanized humanoid automaton maid. No name yet, though.”

“Seriously, what is going on back there in Japan?!”

“I wasn’t expecting an android. Aren’t we the rogue’s gallery?”

A tomboy robot maid. Could it get any stranger? In any case, those things stuck to the side of her head probably weren’t headphones after all. She also appeared to be on the brattier side of the maid scale.

“I’m not an android, exactly, but whatever. Any name is fine, I don’t care, just so long as it’s quick and easy.”

“All right. You’re a prototype, so how about Proto?” said Psycho quickly.

“What happened to giving it thought?!” protested Homura.

“Hey, it’s quick and easy, isn’t it?”

“As long as you’re all fine with it, I don’t really care.”

Homura grumbled quietly. She would rather have picked something cuter.

“Anyway, what’s the deal now? Us five weirdos are supposed to defeat this Dark Lord guy, was it?”

“Y...yes, of course! I would be very grateful for your help...I suppose...,” said the Goddess, having been entirely sidelined for the past several moments. Her current apprehension was evident from the way her words trailed off.

“Jin here seems like the only one of us who can fight, though. Are you sure you’ve got the right people?”

“I could smoosh a human easily enough if I tried,” Proto offered. Who knew robot maids could be so vicious?

“I guess I spoke too soon,” said Psycho. “Add one kill-o-matic to the list. Nice.”

Still, could a group like them really defeat this Dark Lord? Homura wasn’t exactly normal herself, but she didn’t think she would be very much help in a fight.

“I was pretty sure that I selected people with the special qualities needed to overthrow the Dark Lord. I know I’ve got no right to ask this, but be that as it may, I just want to save my world.”

“Well...I guess I’m already dead anyway. Why not give Dark Lord hunting a crack? Maybe it will be fun.”

It didn’t sound that fun to Homura. Well...maybe.

“I do wish you’d take the decision a little more seriously, though...,” said the Goddess. “I can trust you, can’t I?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, you worry too much,” said Psycho, flashing an extremely sketchy smile. A look of exasperation appeared on the Goddess’s face.

*Hang in there, Goddess!*

“It is a pretty big ask, though. Seems like maybe you could do more than just ask. In fact, maybe you should get down on your knees and beg.”

Psycho leered at the Goddess. Her eerie smile did a complete flip from extremely sketchy to utterly insidious in the blink of an eye.

“Y...yes, you’re right. Words alone are not enough...”

For whatever reason, the Goddess seemed to have taken Psycho’s foolishness at face value. She began to lower herself to her knees.

“W-w-w-w-wait! Stop, you don’t have to do that!”

Before the Goddess could bend down all the way, Homura raced forward and urged her back onto her feet.

“That was a nasty joke, you know that?!” said Homura.

“Duh, that’s why I said it!”

“I think there’s something wrong with you!” Homura was unable to stop herself from raising her voice. She could tell she wasn’t going to get along with this girl. “I can’t remember the last time I told someone I hated them, but I’m getting pretty close now.”

“There’s more to life than being liked,” said Psycho, starting to ham it up. “I would gladly suffer any scorn to protect what truly matters.”

Psycho was playing up the drama, but it was obvious to Homura that she didn’t believe a single word of what she was saying.

“Don’t try to pull my leg! I know you’re just making fun of me!”

“Tee-hee!” Psycho made a goofy face and stuck out her tongue.

“Why you little...!”

Homura was starting to get seriously miffed. She was this close to calling Psycho a nasty word.

“No, it’s fine. I know that what I’m asking is a lot.”

“Well...I guess that’s true...”

It was a heavy choice they were being given. And really, there was nothing in it for them if they agreed. The Goddess’s kneeling barely began to cut it.

And yet, still...

“Still...I accept your request!” said Homura. “In fact, I was just in the mood to help people.”

The Goddess's face suddenly lit up.

"Hey, it's not like there's anything holding you back to your previous life. Defeat the Dark Lord and save the world... Sounds kinda fun, doesn't it, like a video game?"

And the Goddess's face suddenly darkened again. "How about everyone else...?"

"I don't believe in regrets," said Jin. "You have my sword as well."

Tsutsumi and Proto also nodded, agreeing silently.

"I see..."

If the Goddess had been worried before, now she was beginning to really question her judgment. There was something not quite right about these girls. They seemed to be...missing something.

"I have received your pledge. Now please, step through this door."

A soft light began to materialize next to the Goddess, from within which a pure-white door emerged.

"Is this entrance the best you could do? This world better not be like some sort of B movie with sharks and zombies and stuff."

"I mean, yes, there are sharks and zombies in this world..."

"That was a joke!"

Psycho stood at the forefront of the group and opened the door. Light welled up from within. As the radiance increased, it enveloped the five girls in its warm embrace.

Homura was on her way to join a bunch of misfits on a journey through what was sure to be a crummy world. There was almost certainly nothing great waiting for them out there. And yet, for whatever reason, Homura's heart fluttered in her chest.

This was going to be such an adventure. She just had a feeling.

## Chapter 2

### The Burdens of Being Upright

Homura was once again unsure how she had gotten here. This time, she was in a forest.

The sunlight filtering through the trees was warm, and the fresh scent of trees and grass was carried along on the cool breeze. The girls seemed to be standing amid ruins of some sort, with a round patch of mossy stone tiles beneath their feet and several crumbling columns located nearby.

“Well, I guess we’re here now...” Homura double-checked her person. “Huh. Nothing’s changed...”

Despite having died along the way, she seemed to have popped into this world exactly as she had been before, clothing and all. Would that make it a “reincarnated into another world” *isekai* or a “transported into another world” *isekai*? Or maybe it was the “summoned into another world” type. Whichever subgenre it was, the hard reality was that she was here now.

“I expected a little more from a different world. This place is boring. Are we sure this isn’t Earth?” asked Psycho.

Homura looked around. It was true; nothing jumped out as being particularly different. There were bunches of trees and grass, and the sun was up in the sky. She continued to breathe in and out just like always.

“Give it some time. I bet a slime or a goblin or something is going to pop out of the bushes at any moment,” said Homura, half in anticipation.

“No, there’ll be a shark fin swimming through the grass,” Psycho countered. “And then BAM! A cheap-ass-looking CG shark will pop up out of nowhere.”

“What the heck are you talking about? Why would there be a shark on

land...?”

Four-Eyes was off her rocker. Still, better to be safe than sorry. Homura took another glance at their surroundings.

As Homura looked around again, she began to realize that something about herself felt off, physically. It was difficult to explain. A vague sensation, as if she were slightly lighter or more full of energy.

She was still puzzling over the source of this strange sensation when Jin suddenly began peering off into the far distance.

“I hear sounds of battle. I’m going ahead.”

With some difficulty, Homura managed to pick out faint noises in the distance that did not sound very nature-y.

“Hold up, don’t go running off on your— Hot damn, she’s fast!”

Jin had immediately darted off into the forest, completely ignoring Psycho’s attempts to stop her.

Her speed seemed practically superhuman, but maybe that was just standard running speed for professional assassins. It wasn’t like Homura had any way of knowing.

It was dangerous to split up, though. They still hadn’t gotten their bearings.

“Hmm. It looks like my sensors are malfunctioning,” said Proto. “I don’t seem to be detecting life-forms properly, so I can’t tell what’s happening over there.” She tapped repeatedly at the headphone-like devices attached to her ears.

Homura felt a little thrill hearing Proto talking like a real sci-fi character. Now wasn’t the time to geek out, however. She needed to focus!

“In any case, don’t you think we should be following her?” Homura suggested.

“Not that we’ll actually be able to do anything once we catch up to her...”

The rest of the girls began running.

Between the light feeling in her body and the speed at which Jin had run off earlier, Homura had begun to suspect they might have been gifted special physical abilities upon arriving in this world. Unfortunately, nothing could have

been further from the truth. It only took a few seconds of running before her sides began to hurt.

“Oh shoot, ow!”

Homura really wished someone would explain to her why running should give you side cramps.

The path beneath their feet could barely be called a road. It looked as if it had never been properly cleared or paved. Until today, Homura had had no idea that plants and trees could make it so difficult to run.

After a few moments of sprinting, they finally broke free of the woods, spotting a covered wagon that had stopped in the middle of the road. There were several dead bodies lying nearby—

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Psycho called. “Looks like you’ve been busy!”

“There are still several of them in hiding,” Jin replied. “Take heed.” As she spoke, she stared off into the woods on the other side of the road.

She gave her katana a flick, shaking off the accumulated blood. The crimson splatters soaked into the dirt below. The nearby pools of blood and the crimson splatters along the hood of the wagon gave off a metallic scent. Homura pinched her nose shut reflexively.

Several of the corpses lying on the ground had been beheaded—likely Jin’s work. Based on their appearance, they had all been ne’er-do-wells. Probably bandits.

The other bodies looked like the wagon’s coachman and guard. The cart horses were also lying on the ground, completely still. The bodies were littered with sword wounds and embedded with arrows.

The man who seemed to have been a guard was dressed in a full suit of metal armor, but he had likely been outnumbered and overwhelmed. Blood streamed from the joints and other chinks in his armor.

The fact that there had only been one guard suggested that this area was usually not that dangerous.

“I can’t believe our first fight is against other humans. Don’t they have any

slimes in this place...?”

It was a human-on-human bloodbath like nothing Homura had ever seen before. Her first glance at this new world had already left a bad taste in her mouth. This place was clearly far from peaceful.

“It’s dangerous there. Get behind the wagon,” Jin urged.

“O-okay!”

Homura snapped out of her daze, dropped down on all fours, and began to crawl pathetically toward the wagon. Unfortunately, someone chose that moment to release an arrow in her direction.

“Ah...!”

Homura stared dumbly at the projectile as it hurtled toward her face. It seemed to be moving in slow motion. Obviously, she had no idea what it was that was flying toward her—only that it brought death.

In the very last moment before the arrow hit, it suddenly came to a halt in midair.

“Huh...?”

Jin had caught it with her bare hands. Uncanny.

With incredible momentum, Jin whipped the arrow back into the bushes from which it had come. A man groaned from within the foliage and then immediately went silent.

“There’s three more, I believe.” Jin scanned the area, but there were no suspicious sounds from the undergrowth. The bandits must have been lying low.

Once they knew where the bandits were, Jin would be able to make short work of them, even if a battle broke out. As long as they remained hidden, however, it was too risky to make a move.

Surprisingly, it was Psycho who finally brought this stalemate to an end. Her methods, however, were highly questionable.

“Hey! If you keep hiding like that, your friend here is gonna get lonely!”

Homura could barely believe her eyes. Psycho had just reached down, picked up one of the decapitated bandit heads lying next to the wagon, and lobbed it into the bushes.

“Aiieeee!!”

The severed head spun through the air, leaving behind a whipping trail of blood. The bandits hiding in the bushes must have seen it as well. They let out stifled screams at the sight of the fate that awaited them.

“Found you.”

The instant Jin located her prey, she darted like a hawk into the bushes.

The men immediately began to run. They held crossbows in their hands but must have realized how useless they would be. Not one of them fired a single shot.

“You’re twisted, you know that?”

“Mwu-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

With victory now assured, Psycho began to enjoy herself, laughing at the top of her lungs. She didn’t bother remaining hidden behind the wagon. There was no use trying to figure out what went on in the mind of a madwoman.

“Kill them! Kill them! Kill them all!” she cried. “Off with their heads, every last one of them! Strip them naked and rob them blind!”

Psycho’s vicious tirade echoed throughout the peaceful forest, mingling with the sounds of slaughter and the voices of the bandits as they begged for their lives. Naturally, their entreaties fell on deaf ears.

Homura couldn’t fight. All she could do was wait breathlessly in the wagon’s shadow. Her pulse was racing, and her heart beat so loudly it sounded like it was next to her own ear.

Being so close to death felt terrifying. But there was also a thrill in Homura’s chest, something not entirely fear. A quickening she didn’t quite understand.

Homura was still trying to process what she was feeling when something unpleasantly warm came into contact with her hand.

It was blood, still flowing from the body of one of the headless corpses. There was so much of it that it had streamed underneath the wagon and trickled all the way over to Homura.

She flinched, pulling her hand away and wiping it on her skirt. Without really being sure why, Homura leaned down and took a peek underneath the wagon. Perhaps knowing she was safe in Jin's hands had stoked a morbid sense of curiosity inside her.

As she peeked underneath the wagon, she came face-to-neck with the cross section of a bandit's throat. The head had been sliced off so cleanly that the layers were still intact. Despite the blood, she could see all the bits and pieces clearly.

"Eww, splatterhouse! Gross!"

Homura immediately threw up. The smell of stomach acid joined the stench of blood already hanging in the air.

"A...are you okay...?"

Tsutsumi had been hiding in the same place, and she rubbed Homura's back comfortingly. So little, and yet so brave!

Homura worried her nose was going to start bleeding next—Tsutsumi was just so cute!

For her own part, Tsutsumi didn't seem bothered by the sight of the dead bodies. If anything, she seemed to be staring at them with a little too much interest. Maybe that just went with the territory when you were a living bioweapon.

"Holy shit, did you just throw up?! What are you, the rookie in some cop show? You trying to get on TV, auditioning for a part?" said Psycho, laughing at her. "You look like some yokel who just stumbled onto a crime scene! That's hilarious!"

Homura didn't see what was so funny about seeing someone throw up at the sight of a dead body. She barely had time to fume, however, before Jin returned. Despite having just slaughtered multiple bandits, she had managed to avoid getting even a single drop of their blood on herself.

The bandits were finally silent.

“Sorry,” said Proto. “I would have joined in, too, but there’s some kind of weird static going on, and my sensors don’t seem to be functioning right...”

Homura wondered if that weird static had anything to do with the strange sensation she was feeling. There was no point in racking her brain over it, however, since there was no way to know for sure.

“It’s fine. I was more than enough for these bandits.”

“Hey, don’t forget about my brilliant plan!”

“Indeed. Next time try using your own head.”

“Geez, lighten up already, killer!”

With their first battle safely over, the girls were just beginning to relax when the hood of the wagon, which had already been rattling slightly for the past several moments, suddenly popped open. A warrior, dressed from head to toe in full body armor, burst into the open.

“Did you think I would cower behind a bunch of little girls?! Bandits, prepare to face the mighty Geldorf!”

Silence filled the air.

“Um...the fight’s already over...”

“Impossible. There were too many of them. They are probably still hiding out there, somewhere.”

The stocky warrior held his war hammer ready as if he didn’t quite believe Homura.

“They’ve already shuffled off the mortal coil, old man.”

“Come now, that can’t be.”

Silence again.

“Really...?” he finally said.

The girls nodded.

“You mean you felled all of those men before I even finished changing into my

armor...? I cannot believe it!”

The man lifted the visor on his helmet, revealing the plump, jowly face of a middle-aged man. His features were fairly well defined, but there was a pudginess to everything that made it difficult to characterize him as good-looking.

“It doesn’t seem as if anyone else made it, however...”

The man who had referred to himself as Geldorf glanced down at his companions, who were now lying by the cart, immobile. A look of anguish appeared on his face. He placed a hand to his chest and lowered his eyes. Perhaps that was how people paid respect to the dead in this world.

“Hey, at least you survived, old man. Count your blessings.”

“True... I cannot believe that bandits have begun to show up even here. It is vexing, though not half as vexing as my own failure to prevent this tragedy...”

Geldorf’s remorse could be seen in his face.

Did the Dark Lord have anything to do with this area being more dangerous than usual? It was up to Homura and the others to save this world. The mission had come so suddenly that it still didn’t feel real. Slowly but surely, however, Homura was beginning to form an image of the task that lay before them.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s all very sad. Anyway, let’s talk rewards: We’ll need food, clothing, and shelter. Information, too, while you’re at it. You are rich, right, old man?”

“Psycho!”

How could she be so heartless?

Geldorf stared at Psycho in surprise, taken aback by her decision to bring this up now of all times.

Jin quickly interceded. “No reward is necessary. I chose to help of my own accord.”

“Are you nuts? We’re not running a charity here. We’ve got shit all to our name right now, in case you haven’t noticed.”

Even with Jin's assurances, however, the man seemed to have a strong sense of obligation. They were total strangers. The concept of not paying them back for their help seemed completely foreign to him.

"No, you came to my aid in my time of need. It is only fitting that I reward you properly."

Perhaps too strong a sense of obligation. Homura was well aware of how suspicious they looked.

"I see... Then you have my thanks," said Jin, respectfully.

In contrast, Psycho flashed an off-putting grin, happy to have gotten her way. Something about the expression gave Homura the heebie-jeebies.

"First, though, I need to bury my men. It pains me to be unable to carry them back for a proper funeral, but there are too many of us for that. The wagon will be heavy enough as it is."

Geldorf glanced at the bodies with chagrin.

"Understood," Jin replied. "Then we will help as well."

Psycho made no objections.

They decided to dig the graves a short distance from the road. There was a small clearing, with fewer trees, that was at least wide enough for two graves.

They still had one problem, however. Even with proper tools, digging a full grave was no easy task. They would have to settle for shallow graves and accept the fact that the corpses would eventually be disturbed by wild animals. The longer they were out here, the greater the chance that they would run into more bandits. It was out of their hands.

Or so they thought, until Proto offered her assistance.

"If it's a hole you need, just leave it to me. I'm pretty sure I'm the strongest here," she said, picking up Geldorf's war hammer without asking for permission first.

Homura had a feeling this wasn't going to end well.

"Wait, that's not for digging. Besides, it's far too heavy for a little girl like you.

Please give it back.”

“I think you must have me confused with one of those weak carbon-based life-forms. Step aside and watch.”

Once everyone was standing clear, Proto swung the war hammer down as hard as she could. As she swung, several incandescent, bluish-white wires shot out from her skirt, affixing Proto to the ground.

A high-pitched internal whine began to emit from inside Proto’s body, much like the sound of a fighter jet revving its engine.

“Here I go. And one, and two...!”

The next moment, there was a thunderous boom, and the ground beneath Proto’s feet disappeared.

It happened far too fast for Homura to see, but Proto had swung the war hammer down and through, scooping up a massive chunk of earth as she did so and flinging it into the air.

Everyone was too shocked to speak. Homura even went weak at the knees.

They were briefly surrounded by a cacophony of cries and shrieks as the animals of the forest stampeded. It was madness.

A giant, gaping hole had been left behind in the earth, more than deep enough to bury two people. In fact, they could have probably thrown the horses in as well and still had room to spare. Unfortunately, the dirt they needed to cover the bodies had been sent flying who knew where.





“Delicate work isn’t really my thing. I’ll leave the rest to you carbon-based life-forms.”

“Just what we needed. A fully automated meathead...,” muttered Psycho.

For once, Homura and Psycho were in agreement.

In the end, they decided to bury the bandits as well. Not out of respect, per se, but rather to keep wild animals from getting at the corpses.

Geldorf stared down at the unmarked grave by the side of the road, paying respect to his fallen comrades.

All was silent for a moment.

“All right, now that the wake is over, let’s start talking compensation,” said Psycho, breaking the silence.

She had been doing so well there, keeping her sarcasm to herself and barely making a peep while the others prayed silently.

Homura felt bad for Geldorf, considering what he must be feeling.

Psycho did have a point. The girls were completely destitute at the moment, in need of food, clothing, shelter, funds, and, of course, information. But now was probably not the best time to bring it up.

“Seriously, learn to read the room...”

“What? He’s already said his good-byes, right? It’s time to get down to business. They’re dead. It’s not like they’re coming back.”

“That still doesn’t mean you have to say it like that...”

“I don’t mind. She’s right; my attention should be on the living now.” Geldorf paused for a moment and then continued. “To start, why don’t you stay at my residence? Based on your unusual manner of dress, and the fact that you’re in need of food, clothing, and shelter, I assume that you are travelers? You can stay under my care for the time being.”

“Not travelers, exactly, but the details can wait for later, I suppose. So how do we get there? Just walk?”

That didn’t sound like much fun, but the horses were gone. Complaining

wasn't going to help.

"No, I can pull the wagon. I may not be as fast as the horses, but I should be strong enough to pull five young girls."

In any case, Geldorf explained, he couldn't just abandon the wagon and weapons.

That was to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands, apparently. If high-quality weapons and armor began circulating among the banditry, it could cause the area to become even more unsafe. That was why they had stripped the guard and bandits of their gear.

Geldorf wrapped the wagon harness around himself and gripped the shafts. Once he felt comfortable, he had the girls climb inside. Two benches lined the inside walls of the wagon.

Once everyone was settled, the wagon began to move. It rattled much less than Homura had expected.

Watching Geldorf pull all that weight by himself while also dressed in full armor was a keen reminder that they were now in a fantasy world. She was starting to enjoy herself a little, as inappropriate as that might sound.

About an hour after the wagon began moving, they finally reached the edge of the forest. Just as the view began to open up, Geldorf suddenly came to a stop.

"I...hate to say this to you when I owe you my life, but...it may not be the wisest idea to bring monsters into the city," he said, seeming uncomfortable.

"Monsters? What are you talking about, old man?"

"Why, that small girl there, of course. And you, the one who dug the hole."

He meant Tsutsumi and Proto. Tsutsumi was a living bioweapon and Proto was a mechanical life-form. They weren't human, not exactly, but did that qualify them as monsters instead?

"Oh, so you're calling me a monster, are you?" Proto glared at Geldorf, the light in her eyes pulsing dangerously.

"Stop, what are you doing?! You're giving me the evil eye, aren't you?!"

“Ha-ha. Messing with humans is so much fun.” Proto snickered loudly as Geldorf hid his face, trying to shield himself from her gaze.

“Proto, would you stop that?! We’re not going to get anywhere at this rate.”

“Fine...”

Like Psycho, the mechanical life-form Proto seemed to prioritize having a laugh over all else. Homura was starting to worry about their chances in this world.

“You misunderstand me. The problem isn’t whether you are actually monsters or not; the problem is whether people think you are monsters. I don’t know what things are like where you girls come from, but around these parts, people detest monsters. If anyone spots you two, there could be hell to pay,” said Geldorf.

He stared at each of them slowly in turn.

“We’ve been at war with the monsters for a very long time. Many people in our land hate them with every fiber of their being,” he said. “Naturally, that includes me.”

“What are we supposed to do, then? You weren’t lying to us about your promise earlier, were you?”

“Just listen. I should have specified—it’s unwise to bring you into the city looking the way you do now. If we could disguise you somehow, we should be all right. A costume, anything.”

Homura understood Geldorf wanted to pay them back, but why was he willing to put himself at so much risk to do so?

“Geldorf...why are you so determined to help us?”

It was a natural enough question.

“What do you mean? It is the duty of the old to assist the young,” said Geldorf.

As he spoke, however, he turned away, with sadness in his eyes. It was impossible to tell what that look meant, but clearly he had his own reasons for behaving the way he did.

“Well then,” said Psycho awkwardly, seeing Geldorf’s reaction. “So we need a disguise.”

Specifically, they needed to hide Tsutsumi’s skin and Proto’s head. If they could find costumes that covered them up entirely, that would work as well, but if the costumes were too big, that might just draw more suspicion instead.

In addition to Geldorf’s things, the wagon also contained the weapons and armor they had stripped from the bandits. Altogether, the only article that looked potentially useful was a hooded outer robe belonging to Geldorf.

“This coat would work for Tsutsumi. It’s a bit stinky, but it should cover her up completely.”

“You didn’t have to call it stinky.”

Homura helped Tsutsumi into the coat. With the hood all the way up, it was impossible to see her skin clearly unless you went out of your way to peer inside. It did make her look a little shady, but that was a small price to pay in the end.

It was obviously too long, but Jin used her sword to cut off the excess material. Geldorf watched on, speechless, as they carried out these alterations without his permission.

“Yes... It’s a little stinky, but this should be okay.”

“Would you both *please* stop calling it stinky?”

That just left Proto.

“Let’s see. Aside from those strange ornamentations on your ears, we need to find a way to hide your eyes. You may not actually be a monster, but once the people see your evil eye, they will be out for blood for sure.”

“It’s not an evil eye... But why don’t I just wear the helmet your friend was wearing? As long as I wear his armor, too, it shouldn’t look too suspicious.”

“That’s true...but isn’t it too big for you?”

“Watch and learn.”

As Proto spoke, she detached the wrist, elbow, and other joints of her arm.

She wasn't simply removing parts, however. Bundles of connecting wires, like the ones that had shot out of her skirt earlier, peeped out from within the open joints.

"I'll just change my size, easy-peasy!"

The bundles of wires elongated as Proto's body adjusted to match the armor's size. As she put on the helmet and armor, her wires spread to fill out the space inside.

"How are you doing that...?" murmured Homura, astounded by Proto's fantastic technology.

In mere moments, Proto had transformed, for all appearances, into a typical armored soldier. Her movements seemed completely natural as she tested the outfit out. The wires were now functioning like muscles, turning her essentially into an exoskeletal creature.

"I don't know why they don't make all skin out of metal. What do you think? Looks pretty good, am I right?"

"Yes, very good...for a monster! You—all five of you. What are you?"

Homura wasn't sure how to answer that. After all, she couldn't exactly just say they had been summoned from another world to defeat the Dark Lord.

"We came from another world. We're here to defeat the Dark Lord!"

Apparently Psycho could, though.

"What are you saying? Are you completely mad?!"

Homura could understand Geldorf's reaction. Even if they were telling the truth, they had no proof. What reason would he have to believe them?

Psycho, however, only swelled up proudly. Believe it or not, her overabundance of confidence seemed to have the desired effect on Geldorf.

"Wait...you really mean it?"

They still couldn't prove it, but Psycho seemed so sure of herself that Geldorf was actually beginning to believe her.

"Of course I mean it. Show some gratitude, old man! We're here to save the

world. I'm not really sure what a 'Dark Lord' is, though. No one really explained that part! Mwu-ha-ha!"

Now that Psycho mentioned it, Homura realized that the Goddess hadn't given them much to work with. Homura had just gotten carried away in the moment when she'd agreed to save this world.

"What on earth are you laughing for?! Do you girls have any idea what you're saying? Talk of other worlds aside, the very notion of defeating the Dark Lord..."

"So you're saying he's strong?"

"'Strong' isn't the half of it. During the war that happened one hundred years ago, it is said that entire countries fell to the might of the Dark Lord alone. We were victorious in the end, but only a handful of warriors were capable of standing against the Dark Lord's forces, let alone against the Dark Lord himself. The casualties were immense. You could not hope to defeat him. I know not who put this idea into your heads, but you would do best to keep it to yourself while out in public."

Both his face and his tone of voice were severe, but it was clear that he was worried for them.

Homura wondered what had made the Goddess say they possessed "special qualities" needed to overthrow the Dark Lord. She wasn't sure, but it was probably better not to mention this topic again for now.

"Psycho, just drop it..., " said Homura.

"What? But I'm enjoying watching the old man squirm."

"You're a real piece of work, you know that?"

"Tee-hee." Psycho had apparently taken Homura's statement as a compliment. "Fine then, forget everything I just said. We're just a bunch of normal village girls from the middle of Hicksville. Is that better?"

"Let's not overdo it now..."

There probably weren't any village girls like Psycho.

"Fine, fine, it doesn't matter anyway. We've got our disguises, so let's head toward your house. Are we close yet?"

“I live in a land known as Galdorssia. You’ll see it once we exit the forest.”

“Then we’re practically there. Let’s get moving already!”

“Just a moment. Let me catch my breath a little more. I fear I am beginning to feel the strain.”

Geldorf had been breathing heavily for the past several minutes. As well he might be. He was still dressed in the full suit of armor he had donned in order to fight the bandits, and he was pulling a wagon with five girls inside.

“Hmph... Clearly this is a job for a superior life-form! Let me pull it. You rest inside where it’s safe,” said Proto.

“Yes, I suppose this would be no problem for you. I hate to ask, but if you wouldn’t mind.”

Unable to watch Geldorf huff and puff any longer, Proto took over wagon-pulling duty. They began moving at a much faster clip than before.

“Hrm. Seeing how tough you girls are, and the way she pulls this wagon, I’m starting to realize we could have brought my friends’ bodies back with us for a proper burial after all...”

What Geldorf said was true.

Psycho, however, only sighed in response. “Is it the place that is important when honoring the dead, or is it the feeling? You meant it when you sent them off, didn’t you? Isn’t that what really matters?”

“Yes, I suppose so...”

Geldorf smiled sadly. Homura could hardly imagine the grief he must be feeling, but he seemed to be doing his best to remain strong.

“That was a very nice speech, but don’t let her fool you. Psycho here doesn’t care about anyone but herself,” said Homura.

It just needed to be said.

Instead of defending herself, however, Psycho stared at Homura with a look of mock innocence. Homura resisted the urge to slap that expression off of her face. She couldn’t resist entirely, however, and punched her lightly on the

shoulder instead.

“Heh, interesting, interesting,” Psycho said, grinning in a way that seemed deliberately calibrated to get underneath Homura’s skin. But what did Homura expect from a madwoman like Psycho, who seemed dead set on messing with every last person she met?

“Perhaps we should find a plot of land to bury this lowlife in, too, while we’re at it?”

The majority were in favor, but burying Psycho did seem like a lot of trouble right now. Maybe later. Homura was pretty sure she could count on everyone else’s help when the time came.

After exiting the forest, they caught sight of a massive stone wall located at the far end of an expanse of grassy plains. The wall looked defensive in nature, with towers situated along it at regular intervals. Even from this distance, the wall seemed formidable.

After a few more moments spent bouncing around inside the wagon, they finally drew near the city. The areas close to the wall were farmland. Now and again, they passed peasants working the fields, who stared at them from a distance as they went by.

Geldorf directed them toward a massive gate in the wall, located straight ahead.

The gate had a set of double iron portcullises and was manned by guards.

As the wagon reached the gate, two of the guards approached. They carried spears in their hands and wore the same kind of armor as Geldorf’s companion.

“Stop! Who is inside this wagon, and what happened to your horses?”

Geldorf poked his head out from the wagon to answer the guards’ questions. “It is I.”

“G...Geldorf, sir! Forgive me!”

The guards scrambled to bow their heads.

“But what happened to your horses?”

“On the way back, we were attacked by bandits. Some travelers who happened to be passing along came to my rescue, but sadly the others were already lost. I failed them...”

“I see. You have my sympathies... Still, would you mind if we checked inside the wagon? It is our duty, after all.”

“Of course. Oh, speaking of which, the travelers I mentioned earlier are with me as well. I mean to provide them with hospitality.”

The air inside the wagon grew tense. The guards didn't seem to suspect Proto, who was hidden by her suit of armor, but Tsutsumi might still attract suspicion. If they decided that Tsutsumi was a monster, getting turned away might turn out to be the least of their worries.

The guard pushed aside the curtain and peered inside. Everyone held their breath.

Homura thought about saying something, but she was worried her voice would come out shrill. She just awkwardly dipped her head instead.

Jin lowered her eyes and said nothing, while Tsutsumi huddled up next to Homura and tried to make herself small.

Meanwhile, Psycho bared her teeth at the guards in a threatening gesture.

“What is wrong with you!” Homura smacked Psycho upside the head.

After he glanced over the passengers, the guard's eyes went cold. The jig was up! Or so Homura thought. However...

“I had thought you were a man of integrity, Geldorf...,” said the guard, before gesturing for the wagon to pass through.

“Wait, what is that supposed to mean?! I think there has been some sort of misunderstanding!”

“You're a sweaty old man, huffing and puffing and surrounded by young girls. You can't blame a man for making assumptions.”

“Wait, no! It isn't like that! Please, look at me! You must believe me!”

But the wagon continued to trundle along with Geldorf's newly damaged

reputation in tow. The guard never even gave them a second glance.

“I don’t understand... All I wanted to do was pay back a favor...,” Geldorf moaned.

Homura wasn’t sure what to tell him. Although she was pretty sure that if they had just buried Psycho like she had wanted, none of this would have happened.

“What’s done is done, old man! Besides, I’m all gross and sweaty! There better be a bathtub at this house of yours!” said Psycho without an ounce of sympathy.

So much had been going on that Homura hadn’t noticed until now, but the inside of the wagon reeked of sweat and blood. The sour stench of vomit also lingered in the air, but Homura pretended not to know anything about that.

## Chapter 3

### More than Anything

“Phew... Thank goodness they’ve got baths in this world, too.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Indeed.”

The five girls were in the servants’ bath quarters at Geldorf’s estate, washing away the stress of the road.

The first thing they had seen after passing through the gate was a bustling marketplace. People milled about, purchasing foodstuffs from the various displays, while merchants drove wagons packed full of goods through the streets.

The rows of wooden houses located beyond the market were uniform in design, with pointed roofs and plastered walls like something from a quaint European town. Cobblestones ran between the neatly arranged houses, while the high road leading from the outer gate ended at a castle surrounded by its own set of inner walls.

It did not look to be an advanced civilization, but this world did seem to have unique technologies of its own. The first things that caught their eyes were the streetlamps, which were powered by neither gas nor electricity but instead contained pieces of some sort of glowing ore. It truly was a high fantasy world.

They spent another ten to twenty minutes inside the rattling wagon. Geldorf’s house was located on a street that ran along the castle wall.

“Are you sure you’re not rich...?” Homura gasped.

Geldorf's home was a spacious detached house with its own garden. Though it was a modest enough house, when they compared it to the kind of communal housing they had seen along the way, the difference in rank was obvious.

"No, not rich exactly. I was given this home as a reward for my achievements in battle. To be honest, it is far too big for the likes of me."

"Well, well... So this is our house now, as of today."

"No, I am not giving you the house! I am just lending you a room!"

As soon as Homura and the others arrived, they made taking a bath their first order of business.

Geldorf's estate included a servant. At first, the servant seemed shocked by the sight of Geldorf's strange guests, but once Geldorf explained the situation, Homura and the others were quickly shown to the bath.

Although still aware of the way people were staring at them, Homura was no longer so worried that there would be "hell to pay" because of how much the townspeople hated monsters. People clearly placed considerable faith in Geldorf.

As far as Homura could tell, there was only the one servant at the estate: the maid who had shown them to the bath. Maybe that was standard practice in this world, but for a house this big, it seemed a little sad.

The bathtub in the servants' quarters was made of stone and was large enough to fit all five of them at once and still have a little room left over. There was no soap of any kind, nor were there any mirrors. It was just for soaking in the water and washing the sweat away.

But at least it was a bath.

Homura was still soaking, letting the warmth penetrate into her soul, when Psycho suddenly spoke.

"Do you wear your hair like that to hide the burn scar?"

Until Psycho spoke, Homura had not realized that she had pushed her hair

back in front of everyone. It was a habit, just something she would have done when taking a bath alone.

An old and painful-looking burn scar surrounded Homura's right eye.

Homura had a bit of a complex about the scar, but it felt silly to cover it up now after everyone had already seen. Besides, no one was looking at her strangely. It was a little embarrassing, but Homura just left her hair as it was.

Maybe the other girls were just so strange that her hang-ups about her scar didn't seem as important anymore. Honestly, she didn't have the energy to care at the moment.

"Yes. Well, the way that I burned it is kind of embarrassing."

"Embarrassing?"

"Fire shot out of my eye and burned all the surrounding skin."

"What you should be so embarrassed about is being a dumbass. If you don't want to tell us the truth, then fine, I'm not going to push you."

"But that is the truth..."

Psycho rolled her eyes in disgust. "Whatever. You know what I really want to know, though..."

Psycho wagged her eyebrows at Homura. Homura caught the hint. She felt a little deflated at not being believed, but right now they had *bigger* things to focus on.

"Yeah, what we really want to know is..."

Homura and Psycho were now staring at the exact same thing: Jin's breasts.

"Where have you been hiding those bazoingas?!"

"You were wearing a chest binder, weren't you?!"

Jin's breasts were nearly as large as Homura's. Obviously, they hadn't suddenly grown. The only reason the girls hadn't noticed them underneath her clothes was that Jin had been binding her chest with a long strip of cotton.

"They get in the way when I move."

“Hah...,” said Psycho. “What I wouldn’t give to have your problems.”

“This is absurd...,” said Jin.

To an adult, something like this might not seem that important, but at their age it was hard not to care. Not that Psycho’s breasts were small, exactly. But apparently they weren’t as big as she would have preferred.

Psycho pouted a little and thrust her legs out in front of her in the bathtub, clearly exposing the tattoo encircling her ankle. As Homura had suspected, Psycho’s tattoos were not just at the base of her neck. She also had tattoos around her wrists and ankles. They resembled surgery scars and completely encircled the parts of the body where they were found.

Speaking of breasts...

“Yours are probably still growing, Tsutsumi. Make sure to eat well, and they’ll get there.”

“Really...?” Tsutsumi placed a hand on her own flat chest.

It wasn’t just Tsutsumi’s chest that was small. She looked skinny and underdeveloped in general. Homura had no trouble imagining the kind of treatment Tsutsumi must have been subjected to in her former life.

Either way, Homura had the biggest breasts, followed by Jin, Psycho, Proto, and then Tsutsumi.

Big, big, medium, small, none.

Homura pulled Tsutsumi up onto her knee and hugged her. A question suddenly occurred to her.

“By the way, Tsutsumi, how old are you?”

Homura had no idea how old Tsutsumi was. Or the other three girls—well, two girls and one machine—for that matter.

“I just turned sixteen...”

“Wait, you’re only one year younger than me! So that means you must have been in the first year of high school...?”

Homura had no idea what kind of school a living bioweapon might attend, but

since Tsutsumi didn't contradict her, that must be correct.

—But to still have a body like that at age sixteen...

“Actually, you know what, I think it's perfect! In fact, you should stay like this forever!”

Homura hugged Tsutsumi tighter. This time, however, her motives might not have been 100 percent pure.

“Get away from that sex offender in training, Tsutsumi.”

“Eww, gross, she's got a Lolita complex... You haven't been checking me out, too, have you?”

Psycho and Proto stared at Homura with contempt, like she was something they had just scraped off their shoes.

What a terrible misunderstanding! Homura had to explain herself.

“No, you've got it wrong! It's not that I have a Lolita complex! It's just that I like young, defenseless girls!”

“How is that different from having a Lolita complex?!”

“No, it's protective! I also like young boys!”

“You're just making it worse, you pedo!”

“Oh, like you're one to talk, Dr. Frankenstein!”

The more Homura tried to defend herself, the deeper she dug the hole. That look in their eyes only grew stronger. If she had just kept her big mouth shut, everything would be fine, but there was no convincing them now. She had just cemented her place in their minds as a member of the pervert reserves.

“A...anyway, enough about me. What about you, Proto?! Is it okay for a machine to take a bath like this? Aren't you going to short out or something?” Homura changed the subject in a desperate bid to divert attention away from herself.

Proto must have been fully waterproof, because she seemed completely fine being in the bath.

“Don't you worry. I'm not like those poorly constructed pieces of junk made

by Earth people.”

“Wait... What...?”

Homura needed an explanation. She wasn’t sure she had heard correctly.

“Well, the long and short of it is that I’m a mechanical life-form from outer space. So don’t lump me in with your standard Earth junk. Well, my current exterior was created by an Earthling, but they only fiddled around a little on the inside.”

Her “exterior” apparently referred to the parts they could see—meaning her girl-shaped “shell.” In terms of her chest, they had only modeled the contours. Apparently, it was enough to just pass.

Proto opened up a panel of her exterior shell near the base of her neck, exposing her insides and revealing a metal sphere, which was affixed to a frame and glowed bluish white.

“This is what I really look like.”

“Talk about science fiction...”

Homura had been impressed earlier by Proto’s technology, but she would never have guessed that Proto was in fact a product of alien science.

“Wait. So you’re telling me someone out there fiddled around with an outer space life-form in order to turn it into a tomboy robot maid? What in the hell is going on in Japan that would make someone want to do that...?”

The world was a sinful place.

“Still, we’ve got them to thank for making you so cute. God bless Japan!”

Homura offered a prayer of thanks to the nameless, faceless engineers who had built Proto’s shell.

“Ew,” said Proto indifferently.

As insults went, it was short and to the point.

“Wait, if you were supposed to be a maid, then why are you wearing a school uniform?”

“During beta, they had me attend school in a closed-off research city. I’ve

actually been in operation for hundreds of years, according to your Earth time, but they decided to place me in the first year of high school. I was supposed to learn how to move in a way that seemed natural for my appearance, or something like that.”

“Okay. Well, I guess that makes you my junior, then.”

Homura grinned. She didn’t know anything about “closed-off research cities,” or whatever it was Proto was rambling about, and she didn’t really care. All that mattered was that Proto was apparently her underclassman, which just made Proto even cuter in Homura’s eyes.

“You’re starting to piss me off, you perv. Would you get that creepy grin away from me?”

In any case, Proto was apparently more than just a machine. She was an actual life-form, and one that was unlike any creature that existed on Earth. That was why she could die, and why the Goddess had been able to find her among the dead.

“So we’ve got a genius, an assassin, a bioweapon, and a mechanical life-form. We’re certainly a strange bunch,” said Psycho.

“Aren’t you at all embarrassed to refer to yourself as a genius?”

“Why should I be? It’s the truth.”

“Geez...”

Psycho’s fetish for messing with others seemed to be rooted in a belief that she was in fact better than them.

“What about you, Homura? What are you supposed to be? I hope it’s something hilarious, like a magical girl.”

“I wish. Magical girls are cute.”

People loved magical girls. People wanted to be like them. Homura would have much preferred to be something like that.

“Well then, what’s the real answer?”

“I already told you. Fire comes out of my body. Or I make it. I don’t know.

Here, look.”

Homura made flames appear around her right hand for a brief moment. Everyone stared in surprise as the flames quietly sizzled out.

“Pyrokinesis...”

“Yes, apparently that’s what some people call it.”

Pyrokinesis. The supernatural ability to create flames.

There were documented cases of people who could make flames sprout from their bodies or cause things they looked at to burst into flame. Most turned out to be explained by other causes, or to be outright scams, but a limited number of people truly did possess the ability. Homura was one such person.

“I can create flames intentionally, but it’s not like I can control the fire once I create it, so I’m not sure what use it would be in a fight... Besides, if I keep it up, I burn just like anyone else.”

“You know...what you’re describing kind of sounds like magic. I guess I was right after all! You are a magical girl!”

“Wait a second...you’re right! Although calling myself a magical girl at my age feels kind of...I don’t know, embarrassing...”

Homura had dreamed of being a magical girl when she was little, but she was probably a little too old for that now. Not that there was an official age cap or anything.

“Don’t be so stupid. Remember, the Goddess said you’ve got something special, something that can help defeat the Dark Lord. Why get hung up on something so small when you already know that you’re not normal?”

By golly, Psycho was right!

Homura had let reality cast a damper upon her hopes and dreams, but it was finally time to shine again! If she could use it to help the people of this world, then maybe creating fire wasn’t so bad after all.

What was there to be embarrassed about?

“All right, I’ve decided...”

“Hmm?”

It was never too late.

“By the power of the flames, I’m going to be a magical girl!”

“Whoa, tone it down there, princess,” muttered Psycho. “You’re starting to get a little too special.”

The expression on Psycho’s face seemed to suggest that Homura was indeed a few years too late.

“What did you get me all riled up for, then?! You know what? Never mind. Cuteness is overrated.”

Who needed to be a magical girl anyway? All-powerful witch worked just as well.

Apparently, having “something special” was code for being a weirdo, but Homura no longer cared.

“In fact, this is even better! That’s what makes it an adventure!”

Their party, which had been assembled to defeat the Dark Lord, consisted of one mad scientist, one assassin, one living bioweapon, one mechanical life-form, and one pyrokineticist. No one was going to accuse them of being normal.

“So we’ve got three combat units now. I can be the chief of brains or something, I guess. What about you, Tsutsumi? You’re a weapon, right? What can you do?”

Tsutsumi curled up in shame. Her whole life, she had been told that she was defective. Her voice was nearly inaudible as she spoke. “I can’t control it very well, but...”

The girls waited with bated breath. Not only did they want to hear what she had to say, but they also wanted Tsutsumi to know that, defective or not, they accepted her. They were there with her.

“...poison comes out of my body.”

As soon as Tsutsumi spoke, the other girls quickly scrambled out of the bathtub, leaving little Tsutsumi on her own.

“I’m sorry, Tsutsumi.”

After finishing their bath, the girls apologized to Tsutsumi. They felt awful for reacting as if she were dangerous.

Currently, they were relaxing in the guest room at Geldorf’s estate.

The only clothing they now owned was currently being washed, so they had borrowed sleepwear from Geldorf’s maid.

The room was a little cramped for five people, but that was mostly because a second bed had been crammed inside. There hadn’t been enough sleeping space for all five of them, so in their own act of banditry, they had pilfered a second bed from one of the other rooms. They had not asked for permission.

The furniture in the guest room displayed a fair degree of workmanship, but the designs were simple and rustic. The girls didn’t know much about this world yet, but perhaps ornamentation was not considered very important here.

Each girl had staked out her preferred spot in the room. Tsutsumi was sitting at one end of the sofa, looking tiny and quiet.

“It’s my fault... I didn’t know how to explain...” Tsutsumi stared at the floor bashfully, perhaps realizing she had left out too many details.

“No, we shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions. Hey, you can raise your head. Let us see your face.”

It was an understandable mistake, but as it turned out, Tsutsumi was not in fact a danger to be around. The poison that Tsutsumi had mentioned was something she was *supposed* to be able to produce. But it was something that was missing. That was the part of her that was “defective.”

“Is that why they disposed of you? Because you couldn’t emit poison like you were supposed to?” asked Psycho, who was sprawled out like a slob on one of the beds.

“Yes...”

“Disposed of ”—a nice way of saying *killed*. Tsutsumi had said they had done

it because she was defective. More specifically, the organs they had altered to make her into a weapon did not seem to be working as expected.

“They said I have a gland. To make poison... But my gland doesn’t. Make poison. But I regenerate...better. Than working models.”

Tsutsumi didn’t seem very accustomed to speaking. She communicated slowly, stopping and starting frequently as she spoke.

“Hmm,” said Psycho. “Under normal circumstances, I might be able to do something, but I don’t have any of my lab equipment or materials here...”

“I didn’t think you were the type to do things for others.”

Psycho and Jin had been in their third and final year of high school, as it turned out. That left Homura stuck between two insane upperclassmen and two nonhuman underclassmen.

Jin seemed a little shocked to learn she had been lumped together with Psycho as insane, but from the standpoint of ordinary Japanese society at least, her willingness to cut down any foe she considered a “bad guy” at a moment’s notice classified her as pretty crazy.

“There’s no lengths I wouldn’t go to for a laugh,” said Psycho, “and fixing Tsutsumi up as a weapon of mass destruction honestly sounds like a riot.”

“Your motivations are worse than I expected.”

Homura should have known. It seemed Psycho was only interested in doing something for others if that also meant doing something for herself. Horrendous, maybe, but reassuring in its own right.

“If it makes me happy, then what’s the big deal? You want to be an unstoppable killing machine, too, don’t you, Tsutsumi?”

“Yes, please...”

“See? Everybody wins.”

“Well, if that’s what Tsutsumi wants, then I guess it’s fine...”

Something still didn’t sit quite right, but at the end of the day, who really cared about means or motives?

“Now that we’ve been brought back to life, we owe it to ourselves to have some fun. What would be really crazy would be to make saving this world our whole shebang when we’ve got literally no reason to actually care.”

“I don’t know. I mean, earlier, you said it sounded ‘like a video game.’ I just...”

With the state this world was in, it didn’t feel right to treat their mission like it was all fun and games.

“You think too much. Come on, cut loose, do all the things you wanted to do in your last life! Heck, find something new you want to do. As long we defeat the Dark Lord in the end, what’s it matter?”

Psycho had a point.

“Maybe you’re right. The Goddess probably wouldn’t mind...!” Homura was weak to temptation.

“You know, you worry me, kid. I didn’t expect you to fall for that.”

“Then stop trying to persuade me!”

Psycho looked genuinely worried. Infuriating!

“This is perfect timing, though. We should get to know each other a little better while we can, talk about what we want to do in this world. It would be lame if we had a falling out later, just when things started to get good. You first, Jin. You’re the scariest.”

Scary or not, Psycho was being her usual flippant self with her. Homura wasn’t sure if Psycho was trying to get herself killed or trying to avoid it, but at the very least, she seemed to enjoy poking the bear.

And if you ignored her attitude, Psycho made a good point.

They all had, or would probably soon be gaining, extremely lethal abilities. If the five of them had a falling-out, it could easily lead to the death of one of them, maybe more. To avoid that possibility, it was important that they get to know each other and try to understand what made everyone tick.

“The only thing that matters to me is cutting down evil. Although...I don’t actually know what evil looks like yet in this world. So for now, at least, instead of cutting down evil, I’ll settle for cutting down anyone I *think* is evil,” said Jin.

She leaned against the wall and stared to the side as she spoke. What a crazy thing to say!

“So basically, you’re a terrorist!”

“Call me what you like.”

She didn’t seem particularly interested in justice, either, just in chopping up baddies. On the other hand, she didn’t give the impression of someone who took lives for twisted pleasure, either, like a serial killer. Instead, this seemed to be the only thing she knew.

“I was right; you are the scariest. I’ll try to stay in bounds while I have my fun so I don’t wind up getting sent to the chophouse. How about you, Tsutsumi? You’re next.”

Tsutsumi froze for a moment as her turn came but soon began speaking in starts and stops. “I want to be...a very good weapon. So I can help.”

Whether it was just part of who she was or something that had been ingrained in her, Tsutsumi evidently took her role as weapon very seriously.

“Everyone’s just happy you’re here, Tsutsumi!”

Tsutsumi was so brave! Homura gave her a great big hug. Not that Homura had been biding her time or anything, waiting for the moment when she could give Tsutsumi another hug without making everyone mad. But if she had been, now would be the perfect time.

“Hey, Jin, I think I spotted some of that evil you were talking about.”

“Rejoice, Homura, for you shall be the first.”

The metallic ring of Jin’s blade against its sheath caused Homura’s blood to run cold.

“I’m not rejoicing! I’m not rejoicing at all!”

“It was just a joke... But I’m watching you.” Jin returned the blade to its sheath.

“Your joke almost gave me a heart attack...”

Homura would have to be more subtle with her admiration in the future.

Despite having just taken a warm bath, Homura felt chilled to the bone.

“What about you, Proto?”

“I don’t really have anything I want to do. I’m fine just tagging along, and if there’s something I want to do, I’ll just go ahead and do it.”

“Where’s your sense of individuality?” Psycho sounded disappointed. Apparently, she had been expecting a more exciting answer.

“My people had their own hierarchy. As a menial unit, I mostly just carried out the tasks I was given. I would like to have done a little more with my life than just subjugating lower life-forms, but I was good at it, and it was easy.”

“It’s a hard mechanical life.”

“It sure is.”

Homura had no idea what they were talking about, but she did understand one thing. “Hold on, you’ll do anything I ask? Anything at all?”

“Jin.”

“Understood.” Jin drew her sword once more.

“I didn’t even ask yet!”

“Maybe we should stick this pervert in isolation.”

“No! I want to stay with everyone else!” Homura had a feeling that if she had said what was on her mind, they would have executed her there on the spot.

“Well, what is it? What do you want? Choose your words carefully!”

“I don’t like what you’re implying!”

What did Psycho expect her to say?

“Well...”

Homura hesitated. It wasn’t something criminal, like Psycho suspected. But Homura knew her motivations weren’t good. Plus, she had a lot of bad memories holding her back.

“I...just want to help people.”

“But not just out of the goodness of your heart, I assume...?”

Homura must not have sounded very convincing, because Psycho pushed for her to elaborate.

“Promise me you won’t judge me...,” Homura said, pausing before finally spilling her guts. “But I want to prove that I’m different from those awful liars. I hate them so much.”

Homura remembered what had happened right before she died.

Those people, with their superficial masks of virtue. Convinced they were so perfect and good, when nothing could have been further from the truth.

“I can’t stand people who put on a big show of being good and moral just so that they can look down on others. So I want to try doing something good, even if I don’t really mean it. It’s stupid, right? I know. But it’s just something I need to do, to prove my independence. Give me that or give me death, I guess.”

Homura stood tall. She hadn’t wanted to share this part of herself, but it was out there now. It felt shameful, revealing her deep, dark secrets. But it also made her feel closer to Psycho and the others.

Homura knew her feelings of friendship were one-sided. But she was happy to have finally met people she wanted to think of as friends, even if they didn’t feel the same.

“I didn’t realize you were so lonely. That’s sad.”

“That was not the point!” Now Homura felt embarrassed for getting so angsty. “Besides, it’s not my fault! Obviously people are going to avoid you when they hear rumors you can make fire! And I’m pretty sure you didn’t have any friends, either!”

The room was quiet for a moment, until Psycho broke the silence.

“You got me there...!”

As it turned out, not one of them had had a single friend.

“This must be fate,” said Psycho, chuckling briefly.

Their meeting was turning out to be interesting in more ways than one. At first glance, they seemed as different from each other as could be, but there was one thing they all had in common: They had all been outcasts.

It looked like this was going to be an adventure after all.

Homura was just starting to feel the anticipation when they were suddenly interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Excuse me, ladies. I’m coming in.”

The door opened slightly, and Geldorf poked his head inside.

“Hey, who told you you’re allowed to come into our room?! You’re gonna get yourself gutted, old man!”

“But this is my house, and— Ahhh! Is that my bed?!”

After a brief argument with the owner of the house, Psycho managed to “persuade” him to let them keep the bed. It seemed Geldorf would be sleeping on the sofa in his room tonight. And probably every night after that.

“Anyway, I’m guessing you had a reason for coming in here?”

“Oh, of course... There was something I wanted to tell you girls.”

“So you’re here to lecture us?”

“No, I doubt you girls would listen even if I did— Well, that one, at least.”

“Hey!” Psycho shouted, but she was also smiling bashfully, as if pleased with herself.

“I never knew that a smile could be so infuriating...”

Even Geldorf seemed to be irritated by Psycho’s smile. Hang in there, Geldorf!

“Now then, let’s get down to business. I will not say any more about these plans of yours to defeat the Dark Lord. But if you truly wish to fight monsters, you will need to join either the Aegis Guard or the Phalanx of Blades.”

“The Aegis Guard and the Phalanx of Blades? What are those?”

Homura was glad that Psycho was around to step up and take charge during these conversations.

“While they both fight monsters, the Aegis Guard serves as the shield of the people. Aegis Guard soldiers are stationed in Galdorssia and other nearby settlements and focus on protecting our bases and citizens. The Phalanx of

Blades, meanwhile, serves as our sword and is sent to exterminate monsters farther afield.”

“So then, you’re saying we should enter the Phalanx of Blades? Since the Aegis Guard are tasked with protecting bases, it doesn’t sound like they offer a lot of freedom.”

“I’m glad you understand. The Dark Lord may not attack directly. If anyone will be tasked with making an expedition to bring down the Dark Lord, it will likely be the Phalanx. Of course, you could always try to build a name for yourself among the Aegis Guard instead, but that could prove difficult...”

Based on the way Geldorf was hemming and hawing, he clearly didn’t want to explain himself. Not that the reason was difficult for them to understand.

“In addition to fighting abilities, the Aegis Guard requires you to have a certain degree of...shall we say, character.”

“Well, that rules us out, then!”

“It certainly does!”

The Aegis Guard was clearly off the table. All five girls knew that integrity was not their strong suit. It was a done deal. Out of their hands. Finito.

“Besides, some of us need to avoid being seen. It’s probably better if we stay away from town as much as possible.”

“While I do not doubt the righteousness in your hearts...it’s true. You girls may be a little much for the people of Galdorssia.”

Geldorf did a good job of sugarcoating the message, but essentially what he was saying was that they liked to keep “crazy” as far away from the city as possible. Homura could empathize. Boy, could she empathize.

“Don’t worry about it... The five of us actually lack any sense of righteousness whatsoever!”

“There is no need to be so modest. You saved me, and that is the truth. If that is not righteousness, I do not know what is.”

Geldorf gazed at Homura and the others, his head held high.

Homura wished she could say that Psycho was wrong, but she couldn't. None of them seemed to have a very strong sense of justice. Even Homura, who wanted to help people, had yet another, less-than-noble reason for wanting to do so. Namely—

“No, really! We're only trying to defeat the Dark Lord because it seems fun.”

...Yeah.

“Well then, you may be even more suited to the Phalanx of Blades than I assumed.”

The Phalanx was apparently where they shipped off all their crazies.

“I didn't know what I was getting myself into when I invited you all here,” Geldorf went on. “But back to the subject at hand. Joining either group requires passing an enlistment exam. It is the same test regardless of which group you wish to join, and it is held once per month...”

When Geldorf reached this part of his explanation, his expression became stern.

“However, there are procedures that must be followed, and much you will need to do before even attempting the exam. I will explain in more detail in the coming days, but for now, you girls should rest. In particular, I think you should stay inside tomorrow. In fact, I insist upon it. Do not, under any circumstances, leave this house! Do you understand?”

Geldorf obviously had an ulterior motive for his insistence, but Psycho remained apathetic as she answered.

“Yeah, yeah. We just got to this world anyway. Obviously, we're gonna take it slow the first day.” She punctuated her assurances with a yawn.

The sky outside the glass windows had long since turned the color of night.

As Homura realized just how late it was, her drowsiness began to set in. Who could blame her? After all, she had died, traveled to another world, and even witnessed a massacre, all in the span of half a day.

“Fine, so long as you understand. Good night, then,” said Geldorf, before leaving the room.

With the exception of Jin, who wanted to sleep sitting up on the sofa, they agreed that they would all share the beds.

“All right, let’s get some rest.”

The five turned out the lights and lay down to sleep, exhausted.

Someone had already begun to snore, but Homura still wasn’t able to nod off.

She was exhausted after all that had happened, in both body and soul, but something was nagging at the corner of her mind: that conversation about what they wanted to do while in this world.

Homura had meant it when she said she wanted to help people. And she had meant it when she said that defeating the Dark Lord sounded like fun. As far as she knew, at least, none of that had been a lie.

So what was bothering her so much?

There was something she had wanted to do, right before she died. Some overpowering urge. But the memory felt vague now, and she couldn’t quite remember what it had been.

What did she want to do in this world? How did she feel about defeating the Dark Lord? There was still something else—a wish, something important.

But when she’d cracked her skull, it must have spilled out of her head and been left behind on Earth. All of Homura’s questions slipped through her fingers like so much smoke.

What did she really want? And where were those feelings leading her?

She had a wish, deep down in the bottom of her heart. The one thing she wanted to do, more than anything.

“If only I could remember...,” Homura said quietly to herself.

## Chapter 4

### Magical Molotovs

The next day.

“Ta-daa! We’re coming to you live, from the exam site!” Psycho announced.

As might have been expected, they did not in fact “take it slow” the next day.

“Why are you talking like a TV presenter?” Homura asked.

“Is it wrong to have some fun? Look, they *are* holding the exams today. I knew it.”

They had ignored Geldorf’s warning and sneaked out of the house. Homura had known all along that this was what was going to happen. How were they supposed to resist doing something when they had been explicitly forbidden from doing it “under any circumstances”? It was a classic setup!

To avoid causing a scene, however, they did have Tsutsumi and Proto wait at home.

“This is fun, I won’t argue with you there...but Geldorf is probably going to blow a gasket.”

“Don’t worry,” said Psycho. “I’ll take the blame for it.”

How responsible of her.

Homura would regret being so trusting later.

The streets were bustling in a way that seemed different from the day before. It was less of a peaceful bustle and more of a feverish excitement.

The reason, it turned out, was the enlistment exams.

The current of people was flowing toward a large stone edifice. This structure, which resembled a stadium, turned out to be the drill grounds for the city’s

soldiers.

The grounds weren't only used for training soldiers, however. They were also a place of amusement where people could watch the enlistment exams, which essentially took the form of a fighting tournament. This was more or less a sports arena.

Excited crowds poured through the entrance.

"We're just here to watch, though, right?"

"Absolutely!" Psycho flashed her usual grin.

Homura had only come along because she believed they were just there to watch. She was starting to get a bad feeling about this, however.

"You're plotting something, aren't you? That smile of yours is a dead giveaway. You're planning on being a spectator and definitely not taking the exam, right?"

"Absolutely!"

Psycho sounded like a broken record. Homura was not convinced, not in the slightest. She sighed. And then sighed again.

"Jin, you say something."

"Surely she would never do anything so foolhardy."

"I dunno..."

Homura felt no less uncertain. But if Psycho did try anything crazy, at least Jin was there to stop her. Jin was the only person Psycho was afraid of, so her presence helped Homura to relax.

"I'm joking, I'm joking. Now come on, let's hurry up and grab a good seat."

"Jokes are supposed to be funny..."

Homura was dragged along with them to the entrance.

When she realized that the entrance Psycho had led them to was in fact the one for spectators and not the one for soldiers, a wave of relief washed over her. The inside of the structure resembled that of the Roman Colosseum.

The actual grounds of the arena were large and oblong, like a track field, and surrounded by steplike tiered bleachers.

An awning was spread over the top of the drill grounds to provide shade, so it was not as hot inside as Homura had expected. The very front row of seats must have been reserved for special guests, as several distinguished-looking patrons lounged about in that area.

Naturally, Homura and the others couldn't access those VIP seats, but they were lucky enough to snag a spot right above one of the gateways from which combatants entered, so no spectators were in front of them to block their view. Of course, the only reason they managed to snag such good seats in the first place was that everyone seemed to be giving them a wide berth.

"This crowd is worked up already."

The energy was electric. People sat on the edges of their seats in anticipation of the heated battles soon to unfold.

"I wonder if this will really be that exciting... Shoot. Should've brought my phone. I could have taken a video to show to Tsutsumi and Proto."

"I'm begging you, please, don't do anything else to draw more attention to us. I'm embarrassed enough as it is..."

Homura glanced around furtively, keenly aware of the strange looks they were getting from the surrounding crowd.

Unfortunately, Psycho took that as an invitation to stand up and deliver a speech...

"You nincompoop, what kind of way is that to think?! What's the point of living if you're gonna do it with your tail tucked between your legs? If you wanna be true to yourself, kiddo, you gotta stand up, grab that world by the balls, and say, *'Hello, world! It's me! I'm here!'* Loud and proud!"

"'Loud and proud'? Some people just want to live their lives quietly, you know. It's called diversity, ever hear of that?! Who are you to tell people they've got their tails between their legs? In fact, you're so wrong that—!"

Homura surged to her feet as her own passion got the better of her.

“Ahem.” Jin interrupted sharply, stopping Homura mid-manifesto.

“That’s right, you tell her, too, Jin—”

“You’re the one drawing attention.”

Homura froze and glanced around.

Some of the nearby spectators were laughing and cheering as they watched Psycho and Homura’s argument heat up. As if they were part of the show.

Homura turned beet red and quickly sat back down in her seat, whereas Psycho began to work the crowd, drinking in the attention.

“Foolishness.”

“Sorry...”

Homura had just fallen for one of Psycho’s games hook, line, and sinker. Foolishness indeed.

Psycho was still hamming it up as Homura frantically pulled her back down into her seat.

“How can you be so attention hungry...?!”

“Hey, someone had to warm up the crowd!”

“Well, not you!” Homura smacked Psycho lightly on her thigh.

One seat in the audience was positioned higher than the rest. Just then, the man in that seat stood up and began speaking loudly. Listening more closely, Homura realized he was delivering the introductory remarks. Apparently he was the MC for the event.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome and good cheer—!”

The man’s voice echoed throughout the arena, perhaps amplified through some sort of magic. The crowd rippled with excitement.

“It’s starting! It’s starting!”

The announcer introduced the event and explained the rules.

Apparently the examinees, who were soldiers in training, would be fighting more seasoned soldiers who would be their examiners. Whether the examinees

passed or failed would depend on how the fights unfolded. They did not necessarily need to win their fights in order to pass the exam.

According to the announcer, the fights were going to be team battles rather than one-on-one matches. This was likely done to more closely mimic real-world battles.

The man then began introducing the contenders for the first match, reading off their names as well as the names and accomplishments of the veteran soldiers they would be facing. The excitement in the stands went up another notch.

The match was absolutely riveting.

Homura watched breathlessly. The more seasoned soldiers were obviously holding back, but even with restraint, the way they fought was incredible. Soldiers in full plate mail swung swords as long as the men were tall. Archers cut off flanking opponents with precision accuracy.

The examinees met the challenge bravely. Naturally, there were injuries. People suffered cuts, and some of the heavy blows knocked them unconscious.

“A hit like that could kill someone...!”

“I don’t know what happens if someone dies, but I don’t think the injuries are anything to worry about. Look over there by the exits. See? Those people over there waiting are probably the healers. It’s like a game.”

Psycho gestured with her chin toward several women who stood off to the side. They looked like priests or chaplains of some sort.

Once the fight was over, the women approached the combatants and began muttering something. The injuries the fighters had sustained began to heal before their very eyes.

“We’re in a fantasy world! An honest-to-goodness fantasy!”

“Would you stop wetting your pants every time something from a fantasy setting comes up?”

During one of the fights, Homura’s fantasy mania nearly went out of control when one of the combatants fired off a glowing bolt of attack magic.

Fortunately, Psycho managed to punch her in the stomach before she could jump to her feet and start screaming her head off. Safe.

Boy, that was a lightning-fast jab. Homura never even saw it coming.

“Next up, our last group.”

Before the MC had finished introducing the last group, however, the incident occurred.

“Okay, we’re up.”

“By your leave.”

“What? Up where?”

Psycho, cool as a cucumber, suddenly jumped onto the field.

“Psycho, wait! What are you... Huh?”

Homura was still shouting at Psycho when Jin suddenly lifted her up in a bear hug.

“Et tu, Jin...!”

“Last night I told you that all I care about is cutting down evil.”

“Yes... Which is why you should be putting me down right now...”

“It turns out I lied.”

It was an ambush! Jin was just as nuts as Psycho. She jumped down from the bleachers with Homura still clutched in her arms.

“Waugghhh!”

The crowd erupted at the sudden appearance of these interlopers. Homura’s feeble cries were swallowed up in the booming cheers of excitement.

“I apologize for involving you,” said Jin.

“Hmph... It’s fine. Let me guess, Psycho got into your head.”

“I am glad you understand. I could not resist the urge to test my strength.”

Homura gave up and followed Psycho and Jin toward the middle of the arena.

As they walked forward, she heard someone shout at them from behind.

“W...wait a second! Who are you three supposed to be?!”

As she turned around, Homura spotted the final group of examinees, who were now chasing after them. Their leader was dressed in a full suit of armor and wielded a longsword and an iron shield.

The surcoat he wore over his armor was a gorgeous indigo. For a trainee, he looked fairly well-to-do. His face, visible through his open visor, was youthful and intrepid. Homura was pretty sure the announcer had said his name was Ares.

“What do you mean, who are we? We’re just a couple high school girls on our way to enlist!” Psycho flashed her trademark smile, which seemed tailor-made to rub people the wrong way. This was no exception.

Although they were technically high school girls, it would have probably been more accurate if Psycho had described them as, say, miscreants. Or degenerates.

“What are you talking about?! You’re not making any sense!”

This angry protest came from the girl behind Ares. She was dressed in a robe and holding a staff, looking like as much of a magic user as it was possible to look. Homura could feel her excitement quietly climbing.

The other two members of their group were carrying a halberd and a greatbow, but they didn’t look to be on quite the same level as the other two.

“Leave them, Rhiann. I don’t know what they’re playing at, but they’re clearly no ordinary spectators.”

“But Ares...”

The girl addressed him informally, but from the deference in her voice it was clear that this Ares came from an important family.

Psycho had a despicable proposal for them. “As far as I see it, you’ve got two options,” she said. “Option one, you scram and leave this slot to us. Or option two, you fight us for it. Which is it gonna be?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What makes you think you’d get away with that?”

“You could always just ignore us if you like. But what do you think the crowd will say about that...?”

“Nrk...!”

The crowd was losing its mind in anticipation of what was about to unfold. The part of the crowd that had witnessed Psycho and Homura’s earlier argument was particularly worked up.

Ignoring Psycho’s proposal was apparently off the table.

The MC, for his part, not only refused to calm the crowd down but actually seemed to be trying to whip them up further. Part of candidacy for the Phalanx of Blades was apparently putting on a good show.

“Where is your sense of decency?” Ares protested.

“What’s that? Never heard of it.”

If they were looking for decency from Psycho, they were barking up the wrong tree. Still, this was pretty heinous behavior, even for her.

“Tsk... We’re obviously not going to just give up our spot without a fight!” said Ares, starting to lose his patience.

Ares and his teammates readied their weapons.

“Well, let’s hope you don’t embarrass yourselves,” said Psycho. “Jin, you’re up.”

“Indeed.”

Homura expected Jin to draw her own sword, but Jin quietly closed her eyes instead. Their opponents stared at her warily.

Jin took a deep breath—and then her eyes flew open, glaring with intensity.

That instant, Homura felt like someone had just jabbed a knife into her throat. Jin’s eyes seethed with silent fury.

One glare from Jin was enough to put the fear of death into them all. Ares and the other members of his group barely managed to remain standing. Homura’s knees, meanwhile, actually buckled underneath her.

The fighters weren’t the only ones to feel the effect. The entire crowd

instantly went quiet.

These weren't the eyes of a brave fighter. They were the eyes of a ruthless killer. A murderer. Eyes that had watched countless men go to their deaths.

The four soldiers in training stood frozen, unable to move or even speak. Eventually the MC remembered that he had a job to do.

"Um, well, I'm not sure what's going on, but it looks like we've got a change in contenders. Three young girls who just wandered onto the field!" he announced.

The crowd descended into a renewed frenzy.

"Phew... Doing that always wears me out."

"Great work, Jin."

"Couldn't you have held back at least a little?!" protested Homura, half in tears.

The original four contenders swallowed their frustration and walked away, feeling the excitement of the crowd behind their backs.

Homura hoped they had better luck next time. She wished she could leave the arena with them.

"I haven't seen your faces before, but you seem to know your way around a fight."

The man who spoke was large and dressed in an imposing suit of armor. He held a massive club, which Homura was pretty sure was called a mace, in both hands. It was a big weapon for a big man. The man's entire demeanor was threatening.

"We're Geldorf's favorite new disciples. If you've got a problem, go talk to him. 'Get out there and bust some heads, and if anyone asks questions, just send them to me.' Yep, that's what he said."

*"Bwa-ha-ha! I didn't know old Geldorf had it in him. I like you!"*

...was definitely not what the man actually said.

"Have you no sense of decency?" he cried.

“What’s that? Never heard of it.”

That was Psycho’s second time never hearing of it today.

“Geldorf is going to be so angry with us...”

Psycho seemed dead set on causing their host as much trouble as was humanly possible. Homura felt bad for Geldorf, but she was also starting to feel pretty bad for herself. If Psycho was such a jerk, then why didn’t Homura have the backbone to stand up to her?!

“How are we even supposed to fight? We don’t have weapons. And even if we did, I still don’t know how to use them.”

Jin was the only one of the three who was armed. Plus, Homura was just some schmuck from off the streets. She had never been in a real fight before in her entire life.

She could barely control her pyrokinetic abilities and doubted she could use them in combat. It wasn’t like she could just shoot out bolts of fire to incinerate her enemies from afar.

Homura had assumed that Psycho was unarmed as well, but she had apparently gotten her hands on a dagger. It looked like one of the daggers that the bandits had been carrying earlier. She must have swiped it.

“Hey, that’s not fair! How come I’m the only one without a weapon?!”

“Relax, I brought this just for you.”

Psycho reached into her lab coat and pulled out a strange item—Homura wasn’t sure how she had kept it hidden this whole time.

“Here you go. You know what *this* is, don’t you? When I give the cue, you throw it.”

“Wait a second, isn’t this...?”

Homura knew exactly what it was. The object didn’t exactly have good connotations for her—or for anyone, for that matter.

“Is that what you’re planning to fight with, little girl?” said a second man, smirking.

This man carried a pair of blades at his waist. Unlike the warrior in the heavy armor with the mace, this man was equipped with piecemeal leather armor that was strategically positioned along his body. He had a short beard and seemed fairly detached from everything.

The thing that the man was referring to was a bottle full of some sort of liquid with a piece of cloth stuffed into its mouth. Homura didn't have to check to know the liquid inside was flammable.

—That's right. It was a Molotov cocktail.

How did Psycho manage to get her hands on something like that?

"I'm not sure this is a great idea..."

Even if they could heal injuries in this world, every ounce of human decency that Homura possessed was currently setting off alarm bells in her head.

Moral dilemma or not, as far as the onlookers were concerned, Homura was now armed. Before Homura had a chance to protest, the signal was given, and the match began.

"Fight!"

It was too late now. Homura had no choice but to participate.

"Jin, you take care of that one."

"Indeed."

Jin squared off against the heavy warrior with the mace, leaving Homura and Psycho to deal with the lightly armored warrior with the two curved blades.

Jin dashed toward her opponent using the same blinding speed she had displayed while hunting down bandits—yet somehow the man with the mace reacted. He swung in Jin's direction, and a heavy whooshing sound followed in the weapon's wake. If the mace had connected, it would have undoubtedly done far worse than just break Jin's bones.

Jin dodged the blow by a hairbreadth and leaped back, maintaining perfect momentum.

"This is going to be more challenging than expected... Finally, a fight worth

having!”

Jin’s thin katana was a poor weapon against such thick armor. Despite this, Jin’s cheeks glowed red with excitement. She seemed to enjoy being in a situation where one wrong move could spell death.

Psycho, meanwhile, approached the other warrior casually, dagger in hand.

The warrior began to move forward as well, his stance just as casual as Psycho’s. Once they were close enough for either to get into the other’s pocket with a lunge, they both stopped.

“I hate to say this, little lady, but you don’t look too tough to me. In fact, it seems like you’re just trying to buy time until your friend with the sword can join you. You know you can’t pass the exam on someone else’s coattails, don’t you?”

“Nice guess, but try again,” Psycho replied. “This must be your lucky day, because we plan on messing you up all by ourselves.”

“It must...be!”

Before the man had finished his bluff, he lunged forward suddenly and swung at Psycho’s neck. The thin blade kissed her skin. Instead of blood, however, sparks flew into the air.

“Yikes, I thought I was gonna bite it there.”

A split second before the blade connected, Psycho had leaned back and brought her dagger up to intercept and parry the man’s sword.

“Shoot, you almost had her!” Homura called. “I mean...oh no. Psycho. Are you okay.”

“Once I’m done with him, I’m coming for you next!”

To Homura’s complete surprise, it seemed Psycho actually knew how to fight. She must have undergone combat training of some sort.

“I’m just testing out the waters, but you’re better than I thought.”

“I am a genius, after all.”

“In that case, let’s start getting serious.”

The man might have been holding back the first time, but Psycho managed to dodge his second and third parry as well. As the fight continued, however, Psycho began to accumulate small cuts as his attacks repeatedly grazed her.

While Jin and Psycho were busy fighting, Homura stood by, unsure of what to do. She felt a little antsy just standing there and doing nothing, but she tried to focus on the role that Psycho had given her.

“Okay, I think I’ve got a pretty good handle on your strength. It’s time I taught you a little lesson and brought this fight to a close.”

The man’s blows picked up their pace.

At this rate, Homura realized, it would not be long before Psycho was overwhelmed. Just then, however, Psycho suddenly lunged forward, as if to attack the man’s flank.

“The only thing that’s about to be finished is you. Enjoy your shave!”

This time it was Psycho’s turn to strike at the man’s neck.

With a sudden burst of speed, she thrust forward, the point of her dagger aimed directly at the man’s neck. Unfortunately, the dagger fell to the ground before it could reach its mark—along with Psycho’s hand.

Homura hadn’t even seen it happen.

Not that she had ever taken her eyes off them, but it had all happened so fast—the swing of the curved sword as it severed Psycho’s hand.

The blade had cut her hand clean off, almost as if the tattoo around Psycho’s slender wrist had served as a dotted guide line. Blood spurted from the exposed end.

“Phew, that was close,” said the man, although it didn’t sound as if he had actually been worried. “You’re pretty tough, you know that? Why don’t you forget about Geldorf and become my disciple inste— Huh?”

The man was in the middle of praising Psycho when he suddenly realized that something was wrong with his leg. The expression of ease quickly disappeared from his face.

There was a dagger stuck in the man’s thigh, and his trousers were quickly

turning red with the blood that poured from the wound.

“The fight’s just getting started, you nitwit.”

Psycho flashed a self-satisfied grin. She had been carrying a second, hidden dagger in her left hand, which she had used for a sneak attack.

Even if healing magic existed, purposely getting your hand chopped off in order to carry out an attack was just insane.

That was when Psycho gave the signal.

“Homura, now!”

“Oh... Okay!”

Although Psycho had sacrificed a hand to carry out her attack, the entire move had been no more than a diversion. The real finisher was Homura’s Molotov cocktail.

*Here goes nothing!*

“Spirits of fire, umm, lend me your strength!” Homura thought up a spell on the spur of the moment. Not that she needed to chant anything in the first place; this wasn’t magic.

“Just throw the damn thing, you moron!”

“Magical fire!” Homura lit the bottle and threw it at the kneeling man as hard as she could.

The bottle traced a parabola through the air, making contact—

“Agghhhhhh—!”

—directly with Psycho’s head.

The glass shattered, enveloping Psycho in flames. Homura went white.

“Oh shit...”

Psycho was going to be so mad at her.

Naturally, Homura felt bad for having just turned Psycho into a flamesicle, but she couldn’t help but wonder if maybe this was karma.

Either way, Homura had just wasted their trump card. Psycho, however,

seemed determined to turn that miss into a win.

“If I’m going down, you’re going down with me, Snagglepuss!”

Pyro Psycho latched on to her opponent, unwilling to surrender without a fight. The flames began to spread to the man as well. He desperately tried to pry himself free, but Psycho refused to let go.

“Augghhhh, fire! I give! I give! Let me go!”

In response, Psycho finally released the man.

The man beat at the flames, hurriedly putting himself out. Psycho, however, was already drenched in fuel, meaning that the flames that clung to her were not so easily extinguished.

Realizing that she was not going to be able to put the fire out anytime soon, Psycho changed tactics, instead setting her sights on the next person she planned to drag down to hell with her.

It was time for payback.

“You’re next, Homura! Aieeee!”

Still blazing at full force, Psycho charged after Homura like some sort of abominable hell beast. Psycho was surprisingly agile and easily caught Homura as she continued to stand there helplessly. Psycho grabbed her in a bear hug as they both collapsed to their knees, the flames of friendship burning bright.

“I’m sorryyyy—!!”

Homura’s apology, which echoed throughout the arena, was greeted by peals of laughter. Homura didn’t see what was so funny about it.

Despite her struggles, Psycho now had her in an iron grip.

“I didn’t do it on purpose! Forgive me—” Homura suddenly realized something.

It didn’t make sense.

“It’s...not hot.”

If Homura was burning, then why didn’t she feel it? She could see the shimmering heat as it flickered along her skin. This was no illusion. For a

moment, Homura wondered if maybe Psycho was fine as well. But no. Psycho's skin was blistering and turning red, and her hair had been singed. The flames were real. Homura felt strange inside.

The strength pooled in her hands, and she had a sudden feeling she couldn't explain—that the flames would obey her now if she tried.

"Psycho, hold still!"

"I'm on fire, you moron!" Even as a fiery ball of rage, Psycho held on tight.

"Flames! Please! Disappear!"

Homura voiced her intention, willing the flames that surrounded them to vanish. The seething inferno receded, as if the fire was being sucked into her hand. Psycho's body ceased its smoldering, leaving behind only the traces of damage already done.

Homura had never been able to control her pyrokinetic abilities before, but now she could suddenly manipulate the flames as if they were magic. Her palm felt slightly warm with the remnants of the vanished flame.

"Oh...? The fire is gone..."

Psycho blinked in stupefied silence as she realized that the torturous flames had disappeared. Homura hugged her in joy. Considering that Homura was the one who had started the fire in the first place, she seemed awfully pleased with herself just for putting it out.

Looking back, Homura realized that those feelings of being physically "off" she had been feeling since arriving in this world were in fact probably a change, or increase, in her powers. Maybe it was magic after all.

Jin's extraordinary speed. Psycho's fantastic reflexes. Homura was beginning to realize that these were actually supernatural abilities that they had acquired after arriving in this new world.

Her eyes sparkled. "Did you see what I just did?! I made the flames disappear! Like *poof*!"

"Maybe don't flambé your teammates in the first place!"

"Yes, in regard to that unfortunate incident, allow me to offer my utmost

apolo.....oww, ow ow ow ow ow!”

Psycho had just grabbed Homura’s entire face in her clawlike grip and was squeezing as hard as she could. Homura could hear her skull squeak. This must be what people meant when they said they could feel something “through their bones.”

Once Homura began to sob pathetically, Psycho finally let her go.

Just then, a massive rumble shook the earth. Homura and Psycho flinched in surprise, turning toward the source of the noise.

The heavy warrior had just brought his mace crashing into the ground, sending the surrounding earth flying.

“Yes, that’s the spirit! It’s time I started fighting seriously as well!”

Shattered clods of earth careened through the air, flying straight toward Jin. Even a glancing blow from one of those could have seriously injured a person. A direct hit would probably kill. However, they did not make contact.

She dashed toward the man, threading her way in between the rocks as if she could already see their trajectories.

Homura noticed a copious amount of blood pouring from Jin’s left arm. She must have been on the receiving end of a heavy blow, because the bones were obviously broken. She was moving as fast as ever, though, and managed to close the distance in the blink of an eye.

It was time to fight seriously—that was what the man had said. Jin, however, had dodged his flurry of stones with artful precision. Meanwhile, the man seemed unfazed.

Moving much faster than seemed possible for a man in such heavy armor, he lifted his mace high into the air and brought it down a step faster than Jin could approach.

“Try this on for size—!”

The mace hit the ground. He hadn’t been aiming for Jin, or even preparing another volley of flying stone. Clumps of dirt were sent flying from the impact, but this was just a distraction. His true aim lay elsewhere.

Jin whirled forward like a tornado. Just as her feet were about to land...

The earth suddenly exploded.

A stone spike shot upward from the ground with enough force to pierce the heavens, its ghastly pointed tip aimed straight at Jin.

Despite appearances, this was not a brute force move like the warrior's previous attacks. This was a well-honed magical strike.

Jin, however, was no longer there.

The crowd was certain this young, black-haired swordswoman's defeat had just been secured. How could anyone resist an attack so powerful and so precise?

What had happened?! Jin was now standing atop the very mace the man had just brought crashing to the ground. Her feet rested on the weapon's shaft, and her blade was already thrust deep into the visor of the warrior's helmet.

The sheer, unbridled joy on her face was unmistakable.

It was a glimpse into madness, her mouth and eyes distorted in deranged bliss.

She seemed to take pleasure even in her own pain, a woman consumed by the fight.

"I give...", the man moaned.

Jin withdrew her blade from the helmet's sights. The tip was stained slightly red. She had probably taken out the man's eye.

The crowd went completely wild.

Up until now, few if any of the exams had ended with the examinees defeating their examiners. Certainly, no previous contenders had given seasoned soldiers like these such a run for their money, even when the soldiers were still holding back.

"I-incredible! The examiners have surrendered! The match is won!"

In response, the healers stepped forward.

"Hey, blondie. You dropped this."

The soldier with the twin blades tossed Psycho her decapitated hand. Psycho caught it easily, taking umbrage at the careless way he had handled her digits.

“Hey, don’t go throwing people’s hands around like that! Ugh...all this blood loss is starting to make me dizzy.” Psycho staggered slightly.

What was that aroma she was emitting? Homura wondered. It smelled strangely appealing.

“Psycho, you smell so good all of a sudden. Did you put on perfume or something?”

“That’s the smell of my burning flesh, you freak! One of these days...”

If it was the smell of burning human flesh, then why did it smell so good to Homura? Homura sniffed the air doubtfully. Maybe some other change had come over her, in addition to her being able to control fire.





“I swear... I guess I’ve got to stick this hand back on before it will heal.”

“If you can do that, maybe you should switch jobs and become a priest. You could stick some manners on while you’re at it.”

“Hey, I’m a fricking model of decorum, I’ll have you know... Aha, there it goes.”

“Eww... That’s gross...”

After Psycho stuck the two cut ends of her arm together, a pale glow appeared where they touched. A moment later Psycho’s hand was moving like normal once more. Even the healers seemed surprised.

“I think I’m starting to understand what the Goddess meant when she said we had the ‘special qualities’ needed to defeat the Dark Lord,” grumbled Psycho as the healers began using their magic to treat her.

“You’re telling me,” muttered Homura.

This was just a first glimpse, but things were starting to get much clearer. Even in a world where magic was the norm, their abilities seemed to surprise people. Extraordinary, perhaps even heretical in nature—not only their abilities, but they themselves.

“Victory is ours, it seems.”

“Nice work, killer.”

Once the healers finished working on her, Jin was able to move her left arm normally once more. Her face had returned to its usual stony impassiveness, but Psycho knew what she had seen.

“Nice smile back there, by the way. You’re just like me after all. I knew it.”

“I doubt it.”

“Yeah, Psycho,” Homura added. “Don’t lump us in with you. You look like some kind of villain from Gotham City!”

“Like you’re one to talk! What was all that mumbo jumbo you were spouting when you were trying to make human barbecue?!”

The three continued to bicker back and forth as they headed toward the exit.

A wave of thunderous applause followed them.

After leaving the arena, they were shown to a room in an area of the grounds reserved for seasoned soldiers.

Upon opening the door, they were greeted by the sight of a tall, slender woman in glasses who was waiting for them inside. She looked mature in age. Her long chestnut-brown hair was gathered together into a single ponytail, and she was prim and self-contained to the point of coldness.

Homura thought they were going to be punished for ignoring the rules and causing a scene, but apparently, they were just there to do paperwork. Since they had intruded onto the field without being invited, they hadn't actually officially entered the exams yet.

A desk was placed in one corner of the room, and rows of bookshelves lined the walls behind it. There was a table in the center of the room with two long sofas sandwiching it on opposite ends.

While fairly plain, the pieces of furniture were well made and had clearly been built for practical use. The three girls were asked to sit on one of the sofas, and paperwork was placed before each of them. Entry sheets, apparently.

It felt like they were applying for jobs. Which, in a sense, Homura supposed they were.

"I thought you were going to be angry," she muttered, absentmindedly.

The woman in the glasses, apparently a clerk of some sort, stared at her hard. "What makes you think I'm not angry?"

"Eek! I'm sorry!"

She seemed very angry, actually. Her tone of voice might be icy, but the suppressed rage was hot enough to burn them to a crisp. Her sharp eyes remained fixed on Homura from behind her glasses. Homura could have sworn she felt the temperature in the room drop.

Psycho poked Homura with her elbow, as if cautioning her to keep her mouth shut.

“That stunt you three pulled was inexcusable, but your talent is undeniable. The orders came from above. For the sake of Galdorssia, we are going to overlook your behavior and allow you to pass. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes... I’m sorry...”

“Then fill out the necessary information on these papers.”

Her manner remained cold, but she did not press the issue. Either way, they had passed. And all Homura had had to do was throw a single Molotov cocktail.

Homura skimmed her paper. There was room for personal information, such as name and gender, as well as a space to indicate whether she had any guardians or next of kin.

She picked up a pen and was about to start writing when she suddenly realized something.

“Wait, why can I read this?”

Homura hadn’t noticed at first, but the letters were unfamiliar. The language in this world seemed to vaguely resemble English, but for some reason she was able to read and understand it as easily as if it were Japanese. It was a strange feeling.

“You’re just noticing that now? Might as well go with it; at least it works out in our favor. It’s not like thinking about it will help it make any more sense.”

“This must be the Goddess’s power.”

The clerk stared at them suspiciously, unsure what they were talking about.

Homura began filling out the form from the top and worked her way down. Her hand came to a stop midway through. She had reached the field asking if she had a guardian. She wasn’t sure what to write.

Should they just write Geldorf’s name without asking? She decided to put him down. He probably wouldn’t mind. She felt only the tiniest smidgen of guilt as she wrote Geldorf’s name.

“And then down at the end, circle ‘Phalanx of Blades’ as your preferred squad and fill out your reason for wanting to join.”

“I’m guessing we don’t have a choice in the matter...”

Phalanx of Blades it was. The Aegis Guard was off limits to crazies, just as they had expected.

That made sense, after all. Members of the Aegis Guard were responsible for defending the bases and had to mingle with the citizenry.

As their reason for wanting to join, all three girls wrote “Sounds like fun.” As might have been anticipated, the clerk frowned as she read their answers. By this point, defeating the Dark Lord was just a secondary objective for them.

After filling out the forms and handing them back, the girls were given badges. They were coppery red in color and each was shaped like a sword.

“These serve as proof of your membership in the Phalanx. They indicate rank, with bronze as the lowest, followed by silver and then gold. As long as you wear these badges, a variety of support will be made available to you. First and foremost, this includes advanced combat training, technical training in the magical arts, and provision of supplies and equipment.”

“Basically, what you’re saying is, you don’t have any time or knowledge to spare on riffraff.”

“Blunt, yes, but that is one way of putting it. We would rather focus our efforts on training those who have already demonstrated a modicum of talent.”

Perhaps that was the necessary approach in order to protect Galdorssia.

“Incidentally, the warriors you fought today wore gold shield badges. That means they hold gold badge rank in the Aegis Guard. They are superior fighters, and under normal circumstances, you would be lucky to get in even a few hits against them—”

As they continued to dutifully listen to the clerk’s admonishments, a knock suddenly came at the door.

“Ieskha, I’m coming in.”

“I’m in the middle of something. Go away.”

Without missing a beat, the clerk, who was apparently named Ieskha, tried to rebuff their visitor. The door opened anyway.

A swarthy man with blond hair and a playboy swagger entered the room.

He wore a shield on his chest. The lustrous white badge glittered brightly. Come to mention it, Ieskha was wearing an identical badge on her own collar.

“Oh-hoh-hoh, there they are. The entertaining fighters from earlier. You’re the one who burned her friend, you’re the one who stuck her own hand back on, and you’re the one who laughed after getting her arm crushed.”

Homura couldn’t argue with his descriptions, but it kind of felt like he was mocking them. Her face formed a pout.

“Who is this clown?”

“You look like some background horndog character who goes around harassing girls on the beach so that the main character can step in and look good.”

“I have no idea what that is supposed to mean,” the man said, “but I’m pretty sure it was an insult.” He laughed pleasantly. Despite his appearance, he actually had a pretty easygoing vibe.

“What did you want, Seigrat?”

“Nothing, I just wanted to get a good look at our new friends,” answered the playboy, who was apparently named Seigrat. He was still smiling.

He seemed to be used to Ieskha’s cold shoulder.

“Then you’ve accomplished your objective. You know where the door is, I presume. You can see yourself out.”

“I was joking. As a senior officer, I thought I might show them the ropes, school them in the appropriate mindset for a soldier.”

Seigrat sat down on the sofa next to Ieskha as he spoke. Ieskha scooted away from him, repositioning herself at the other end.

Seigrat began speaking, unfazed by Ieskha’s dismissive attitude. “Girls. As people with power, you have a great responsibility. Do you understand what that is?”

His tone as he spoke was laid-back, but he stared directly at each of them in

turn as he spoke. He seemed serious.

Psycho answered him confidently. "To defeat the Dark Lord, obviously!"

For a moment Ieskha and Seigrat both froze, taken aback. A moment later, Seigrat broke out into guffaws, while a sigh of exasperation escaped Ieskha's lips.

Once Seigrat finally stopped laughing, he apologized and continued. "Sorry, sorry. I was going to say you have a responsibility to serve as a shield for people without power, but I like your moxie, kid!"

What Seigrat was describing sounded like a form of noblesse oblige, although instead of just wealth and rank, he was also applying it to talent.

"In any case, stick to your training. You've still got lots to learn."

Seigrat's advice seemed to be directed at Jin as well, who was the only one who had defeated her opponent fair and square. If the examiners had really given it their all, it sounded as if even Jin would have been outclassed.

"You don't have a very strong grasp on magic yet, do you? In particular, you two."

He was referring to Homura and Psycho.

Magic. Homura understood that Psycho's trick with her hand had been a form of healing magic, but did Homura's pyrokinesis count as magic as well?

"I don't understand magic well, either," said Jin.

"All the more impressive. Either way, practice, practice, practice! Healing and fire magic in particular are rather rare, so it would be a waste if you didn't learn how to use them properly."

Fire magic was rare. That must have explained why Homura had managed to pass her exam when all she had done was throw one Molotov cocktail.

"So that's why I passed."

"Precisely," said Ieskha. "It would be a shame to allow a talent as rare as yours to wither on the vine. But fire magic is very difficult to use and is extremely dangerous. If you ever find yourself facing disciplinary measures,

expect the interrogation to be...intense.”

“Y-yes, ma’am...”

Homura felt her blood run cold in response.

Apparently, even in this world, Homura’s abilities singled her out for distrust. She felt a rising bleakness inside her and began to unconsciously bite her lip.

Just then, Homura felt someone suddenly smack her on the back. She jerked her head up in shock. That hurt!

“Buck up there, kiddo.” Psycho’s words helped snap Homura out of it.

“Ouch! You didn’t have to hit me so hard!”

Although honestly, it was probably the pain, more than anything, that chased Homura’s blues away.

Ieskha looked slightly disconcerted, as if realizing she might have gone too far.

“Are you okay? Ieskha has a tendency to go overboard, but don’t take anything she says too seriously.”

“No, I’m fine... I’m fine.”

Perhaps Psycho had discerned that Homura was still not in fact fine. Perhaps not. Either way, she stood up suddenly as if she was ready to go.

“The paperwork’s all done, so I guess we’ll be leaving now.”

“Fine. Geldorf can explain to you in better detail what you’ll need to do going forward.”

“Sounds great,” said Psycho, responding listlessly as they left the room.



Once the three got home, they found Geldorf waiting for them, and he was nearly apoplectic with fury. It seemed he had already been made aware of the situation.

“What were you thinking?! You reckless idiots!”

Geldorf bonked each of them on the head with his knuckles. They stood in a row and took their lumps, and when it was Homura’s turn, she felt her brain

shake.

“We only went because I knew it would work out fine in the end,” Psycho insisted. “So you see? It wasn’t reckless after all!”

She received an extra lump for that.

“I guess I’ve got no choice now but to mold you into soldiers who won’t embarrass me every time you leave the house. If I can’t stop you, then I’ll just have to set you on the straight and narrow instead. As much as that’s even possible. First things first, I expect you to come to me for advice. And I mean about everything. I may get angry, but I won’t stop you. Well, I might, sometimes!”

Even after all the trouble they had caused, Geldorf still wasn’t kicking them out. Was this that sense of obligation of his again, or was something else motivating him?

“You’re too nice for your own good, you know that, old man...? Speaking of which, I just noticed your badge is gold. You must be pretty strong, then.”

A golden shield badge adorned Geldorf’s chest.

“Come to think of it, weren’t Ileskha and Seigrat’s badges white? What does white mean? Administrative staff?”

“I can’t picture that horndog Seigrat doing office work. Can you?”

“No, I guess not.”

As Geldorf listened to them speak, his face went visibly pale. Was it something they’d said?

“You fools! Seigrat and Ileskha are Holy Protectorates of the Shield, the pinnacle of the entire Aegis Guard! Please tell me you didn’t do anything rude!” shouted Geldorf.

Geldorf’s face went beet red, and spittle flew from his lips. Pale one minute and red the next—Geldorf’s face was certainly getting a workout.

Eventually Geldorf explained that, unlike the Phalanx of Blades, the Aegis Guard had an additional rank of white, which put even the gold badges to shame.

“Those two? Are they really that strong?”

“The word *strong* doesn’t even begin to cut it. The Holy Protectorates are the most capable among us, responsible for protecting not only the people but the land itself. Ieskha the Ice Crusher and Seigrat the Dragon Render—their very names strike awe into the hearts of men!”

And here Homura had thought they were just a straitlaced secretary and her playboy sidekick. It turned out they were the real deal, and Homura and the others were like ants in comparison.

—It was their titles, however, that really captured the girls’ interest.

“Ooh, nicknames! That’s so cool!”

“We should hold a meeting to decide what ours should be.”

Geldorf watched as the three girls worked themselves up into a tizzy of excitement.

“Titles are supposed to be something you earn...,” he said.

Geldorf sighed, long and hard.

## Chapter 5

### The Dragon Render

The day after the enlistment exams, Homura and the others assembled for a meeting in Geldorf's study.

"I've gathered you all here for one reason: to discuss what awaits you."

The study featured a desk placed before a glass window, and rows of bookshelves lined up along the wall. The shelves were packed tightly with a wide variety of difficult-looking titles.

The expression on Geldorf's face as he stood before them was equally difficult to read.

"Every moment since I've met you girls has brought something new, and yet still I find myself surprised. I've just received a message that you are to visit the church, as Her Lady Falmeyr wishes to speak with you."

"Her Lady who?"

"Hmph...you really don't know, do you? She is our divinely appointed oracle and the hierarch of the Eye of the Moon, which is the state religion of Galdorssia. In other words, the most important person in all of Galdorssia wishes to meet with you. As difficult as I find it to believe, it seems you are special after all."

Geldorf stared off into the distance.

Up until now, Geldorf had assumed that everything the girls had told him was nonsense. Apparently, that was now beginning to change.

"We told you so... Anyway, so what? Some bigwig priestess wants to speak with us?"

"Lady Falmeyr provides spiritual guidance to Galdorssia, but she is also

Galdorssia's supreme military counselor, in charge of both the Phalanx of Blades and the Aegis Guard. I suspect she wishes to share some instruction with you on what you should do moving forward."

"The commander-in-chief of both the church and the military... I don't know if I like the sound of that..."

Homura thought back to her history lessons. A lot of blood had been spilled in the name of religion. It was a dark history, and it continued to this very day.

"Mind your tongue. I don't know what it was like where you came from, but that is how things are done around here."

Geldorf glared at them gravely. Homura couldn't help but fidget under his gaze.

"In any case, let us get back to the discussion at hand. Lady Falmeyr is able to invoke the Goddess to divinely possess her... You've met the Goddess once before, I gather?"

"I guess?"

"I wish you'd show a little more astonishment. I hope I don't need to say this, but you won't do anything rude in the Goddess's presence, will you? In the worst-case scenario, you might be sent to the dungeons."

"Something rude...? Like, say, telling the Goddess to get on her knees?"

"On her—?! You get over here, right now!"

But Psycho had already fled the room as fast as her legs could carry her.



Although he was still angry, Geldorf made no particular attempt to follow them. The girls piled into the carriage that had been sent for them and were soon headed toward the church.

Proto and Tsutsumi still needed to remain in disguise, but fortunately this time they had been provided with robes their own size. Geldorf's maid had tailored the robes specifically for the two girls. Despite the short notice, she had done an excellent job.

Homura felt bad that Proto and Tsutsumi had to go around hiding themselves

like a couple of criminals. Hopefully they would be able to walk outside and show their faces freely before long. After all, Psycho was out here basking in the sun, and she was the craziest of all of them.

The church was located directly next to the drill grounds.

They spoke to the coachman along the way, learning that the church was actually a complex with multiple buildings and served as more than just a place of worship.

The complex included a hospice, which cared for the sick and injured; a shelter where orphans up to a certain age were housed and cared for; and rectories, which housed the people who lived and worked at the church. This entire massive, sprawling complex was all referred to as “the church.”

Unlike the streets around town, which were simple and lacking in ornamentation, the church seemed to have been designed with some sense of pomp and reverence. The area was clearly considered both sacred and important.

After disembarking from the carriage and walking for a few moments, they reached the heart of the church, a building known as the Sanctuary of the Oracle. This building was slightly smaller than a chapel and cloaked in an air of solemnity.

“You, state your business!”

The guard who questioned them was carrying a spear. His tone was harsh.

Not that Homura could blame him for being suspicious. After all, he had just been approached by a random gaggle of five girls dressed in unfamiliar clothing—school uniforms from another world. On top of that, two of those five girls were wearing robes with the hoods up, as if they were trying to obscure their faces.

They also had a certain bigmouthed troublemaker along for the ride.

“We’re here to make the Goddess kneel!”

“To the dungeons with you!” The guard pointed his spear at Psycho.

“Geez! I’m just joking! What’s-her-name—Falmeyr asked us to come!” she

shouted, raising her hands in the air.

“Enjoy the dungeons, Psycho. It was nice knowing you.”

“It seems your journey ends here.”

“We’ll miss you... Well, not really. But I thought it would be a nice thing to say.”

“Psycho... Bye-bye...”

“You’re heartless, all of you!”

The other girls said their farewells to Psycho. In the end, however, she was spared incarceration.

“Calm down. Look at the way they’re dressed; it’s just as Her Ladyship described,” said the guard on the opposite side of the door. His tone was soothing.

“Oh, sorry. Your clothes were even stranger than I expected.”

“He did that on purpose to mess with me...”

“Well, maybe if you didn’t go spouting off all the time...”

“Ha-ha-ha, these girls are funny!”

“We heard you were coming. You may pass.”

“You could have just said that to begin with...”

The door to the Sanctuary of the Oracle opened before them.

They stepped inside, flanked by the smirking guard on one side and the grimacing guard on the other. The space inside was wonderful in a delicate way, like a bubble that would pop if you touched it.

“Ooh, pretty...”

It felt like being nestled inside a fantastic dream. A sense of awe welled up in Homura’s chest.

The Sanctuary of the Oracle was small and narrow, and unlike a chapel, it had no pews. The walls on either side were embedded with long, narrow blue stained glass windows that illuminated the floor with ethereal morning light.

The far wall, meanwhile, featured a stained glass image of a moon in the sky, which seemed to look down upon Homura and the others. Fitting for a religion known as the Eye of the Moon.

The reason the moon seemed to be looking down upon them was that the lead frame of the stained glass window had been fashioned to resemble an eye, with the moon as its pupil.

“Come to think of it, there was a moon eye looking down at us in that white space we were in when we arrived as well,” Homura commented.

“There was?” Psycho cocked her head.

“You mean you didn’t see it?” Homura turned to Jin and the others, but they seemed just as lost. “It was a ginormous eye, up in the sky.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure!”

The girls walked forward, following the cardinal-red carpet leading toward the back of the sanctuary. There was an altar waiting at the end of this scarlet road, which was adorned with a strange, staff-like spear.

A mature young woman dressed in priest robes stood on a dais before the altar. Several men, who appeared to be officiants of some sort, stood before her, a step lower. They seemed to be reporting something to the woman. Homura caught snippets of what they were saying—something about damage to villages? She guessed they were reporting on the status of nearby lands.

After finishing their reports, the men genuflected once before heading to leave.

The only people left inside the chapel now were Homura and her friends, along with Falmeyr and her attendants. Proto and Tsutsumi removed their hoods and revealed their faces, figuring that Falmeyr already knew about them.

The girls faced Falmeyr.

Falmeyr’s robes were a mixture of white and azure, with occasional gold trimming and embellishments. She also wore something like a rosary around her neck—a necklace with a white pendant in the shape of the moon.

Moon-shaped badges were apparently used to show membership in the priesthood. Falmeyr's badge was white, likely indicating her leadership status.

The mysterious space and her immaculate attire were both very striking, but no more striking than Falmeyr herself.

Her wispy blond hair, which reached down to her waist, shone with a beautiful silken luster. Although the smile that played about her face was gentle and mild, there was a dignity to her bearing that made one want to stand at attention while in her presence.

That alone was enough to lend her an air of refinement. But there was more. Homura gasped in surprise and covered her mouth.

“Ah...!”

All five girls stared. One element of Falmeyr's appearance demanded their attention above all else: a silvery-white mask that covered her eyes. It was decorated with a single large eye in the middle, which was surrounded by elaborately etched glyphs and patterns.

What was so surprising about this mask, however, was not its intricate craftsmanship. Rather, it was the structure of the mask itself.

The intricately crafted silver mask did not seem to include any eyeholes, and it hugged her face tightly. And, unless they were mistaken, the mask had been riveted directly into her skull. The grim brutality of it only further enhanced the aura of sanctity about Falmeyr.

Homura and the others were unable to take their eyes off her.

“Welcome. I've been looking forward to meeting you,” she said, greeting them brightly.

Falmeyr's soft voice fell pleasantly on their ears.

Her greeting was surprisingly friendly, considering the majesty of her person and the holiness of their surroundings. The contrast took Homura off guard.

“Greetings, I am Falmeyr. I heard tell of you from Eirene.”

“Nice...to meet you?” said Homura, stammering despite herself.

Eirene. Who was that? Homura had never heard the name before.

“Oh, so that was her name.” Only Psycho seemed to know who she was talking about.

“Yes. In fact, she would like to speak with you directly. I will call her down now.”

Homura was having trouble following the conversation. What in the heck were they talking about?

Ignoring Homura’s confusion, Falmeyr was bathed suddenly in soft light. Homura instinctively shielded her eyes, but the radiance was only blindingly bright for a split second.

Where the light had been—where Falmeyr had been standing—there was now a small girl. Her beautiful blond hair swayed gently as she stared at them with eyes the color of the moon.

“I’m glad to see you all again.”

The girl had a grown-up air about her that did not match her childlike appearance. Homura still remembered her voice.

“Oh, so this is what Geldorf meant when he said that Falmeyr could ‘invoke’ the Goddess.”

This small girl was the same Goddess who had summoned Homura and the others into this world. The one who had created this world. Apparently, she was able to manifest by using Falmeyr as a vessel.

Who knew that calling down a divine being would be so simple? That was easier than popping down to the corner store to buy some milk...

“So, then...” Homura’s face relaxed into a leering grin. “Your name was Eirene, was it?”

“Hmm... For some reason, your smile is giving me the creeps...” Eirene hugged herself, as if she was suddenly cold.

“Before we get down to whatever it is you wanted to talk about, I wanted to ask you something. Why did you choose us?” said Psycho, stepping in quickly before Homura could get any more “comfortable.”

Psycho wasn't the only one who wanted to know. They all did. Why had the Goddess chosen the five of them?

"You...won't be angry if I tell you, will you?" Eirene sounded uneasy.

"That depends on what you have to say."

"I suppose that makes sense... The truth is, it was almost entirely coincidence."

Homura deflated slightly. She had been hoping for something more inspiring, like *"you were all heroes in a past life"* or something like that.

Psycho seemed apathetic, however—neither angry nor disappointed.

"When you say 'almost entirely,' what about the part that wasn't coincidence? Does it have anything to do with what you said about us having 'special qualities' needed to defeat the Dark Lord?"

"Yes. There is no one answer for what is required, but you all have highly unusual souls. People with such souls tend to have exceptional abilities or rare magical affinities."

"So there are a lot of people in our world with twisted souls?"

"That is not a very nice way of putting it, but yes, I suppose so. Many people in your world have souls that would be unusual in ours. Psycho and Jin, you both lived in unusual ways. Tsutsumi, you were a person and yet were not. Proto, you were a life-form from outside your Earth. And of course, you, Homura..."

Eirene hesitated.

"You have an incredible power inside you, Homura. In terms of latent potential, your power greatly dwarfs that of the other four. But that strength could easily be your ruin as well... Please, don't let your power consume you."

"My...latent power...?"

It dwarfed the power of the other four?

Eirene's words instantly went to Homura's head. "Ahh...! I can feel it! My sealed eye is throbbing with power...! Everyone, stand back!" Homura shouted

in agony, pressing a hand to her completely not sealed, definitely not throbbing right eye.

“My child, what is wrong?!”

“Jin, would you chop off this dumbass’s head before she starts an apocalypse?”

“By your leave.” Jin drew her katana.

“Stop! Truce! Truce!” Homura’s attempt at being an edgelord had backfired spectacularly, but with enough pleading, she was able to eventually soothe everyone’s ruffled feathers. She still received a slap from Psycho for it, however. Ow!

“I see; you were joking. Please don’t surprise me like that...”

“She can be a real a pain once she gets worked up.”

*Still*, wondered Homura. All she could do so far was manipulate a little bit of fire. Did she really have more power inside than the other four did? The thought was thrilling in a way, but it was also scary. That meant she was even less normal than she had thought.

What was power in the first place? That was a difficult question to answer.

“I built this world, and I manage it on my own, so I don’t have very much time to meddle in other worlds. It was all I could do to select for qualities. The fact that it was you five, specifically, who were summoned was pure coincidence. Of course, the fact that you were dead made it easier for me to bring you here.”

“I see.”

“Yes.”

Indeed.

In other words, out of all the dead she might have easily summoned, she had wound up choosing five assholes.

“Unfortunately, justice is hollow without strength.”

“Justice...”

Without force to back it up, justice was powerless. Homura knew that this

was true, but she also understood the danger such thinking could lead to. She recalled her history lessons once again.

“I know we haven’t been here very long yet, but what does this world’s... No, what does your version of justice look like?”

Eirene seemed slightly surprised by Psycho’s question.

“That is a difficult question to answer... Until now, I have always just believed in myself and tried to reject evil and strive toward peace.”

To reject evil and strive for peace. Fair enough, but apparently even a goddess had trouble defining justice. Homura wasn’t sure how to put it, but something about Eirene’s response seemed surprisingly...human? Maybe the vantage points of gods and humans were not as distinct as Homura had assumed.

“Please, though, you have to trust me! Once you spend more time in this world, I’m sure you’ll see that I’m right!”

Eirene panicked slightly as she tried to persuade them, evidently concerned that her sense of righteousness was in question.

“Psycho, look at what you’ve done! You’ve made her feel bad...”

“Trust you, huh...? Whatever. I didn’t actually mean to ask anything that serious. I just don’t want us to go around doing whatever we please, only to suddenly find my head on the chopping block because I’ve run afoul of your definition of evil.”

“Oh, I see... Well, if you’re ever worried that you’re doing something bad, just consult your own conscience and counsel yourselves accordingly. And if you do go too far, I will simply lecture you when the time comes.”

Lectured by a god—that would certainly be an unusual experience, although not one Homura was particularly eager to have under her belt.

“Hee-hee, understood. Well, then, that’s everything I need to know. I’ll be going now.” Psycho turned on her heel, a look of satisfaction on her face.

“Yes, thank you for coming all this way. Please be careful on your way h— Wait a darn second! We haven’t even gotten down to the reason I called you here today!” Eirene protested.

“Oops, sorry. I forgot.” Psycho feigned an innocent expression, but she clearly knew what she had been doing.

“I called you here today because I’m angry! As you will be defeating the Dark Lord, it was already decided that you would be entering the Phalanx of Blades. But how could you skip so many steps and barge into the exams like that...?! Do you have any idea how much trouble I had smoothing things over?”

Apparently, they were getting lectured already.

Homura tried to make herself feel contrite, but little Eirene was just so cute when she got angry.

Psycho must have known they were going to get an earful. That was probably why she had attempted to leave so early.

“Usually, you find a position that suits your talents and go through training before attempting the exams. You will be getting letters of invitation later, so I want you all to go to your assigned locations and train properly, do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Don’t you ‘yes, ma’am’ me...”

Not even a goddess was safe from Psycho’s mockery.

“Also, I’m sorry, but Proto and Tsutsumi, you will both need to stay inside for a little while longer. You do understand, don’t you?”

“Still—? But there’s nothing to do there but clean.”

“It’s lonely...”

“I am sorry, but in your case, smoothing things over will likely take a little longer...”

If the people of this world decided that Tsutsumi and Proto were monsters, defeating the Dark Lord might turn out to be the last thing on their minds. It made sense to tread carefully.

“There was one other thing I wished to speak with you about, concerning the Dark Lord.” Eirene’s face grew more serious. “It has been about a hundred years

since the Dark Lord appeared to bring strife into this world. The Dark Lord's influence causes monsters to run rampant and invites the chaos of war. The very land was in danger of falling to his might, but somehow we managed to drive his armies back and regain peace. Recently, however, monsters have been stirring once more. Whether it is the same Dark Lord from one hundred years ago or a new successor who is behind this, I suspect he is at the center of this turmoil. That is why I sought your help in subjugating this threat."

"Wait, before you explain any further—what exactly are monsters?"

Homura was vaguely picturing something like the monsters she had seen in games or manga, but come to think of it, she didn't actually know what the monsters of this world looked like.

"Yes, that is a good question. Monsters are creatures whose souls have become twisted for whatever reason, causing them to mutate into aberrant beings. Usually, you would have been exposed to them during your battle training, but since you all skipped that part—"

"Yeah, yeah, our bad!"

In order to avoid another lecture, Psycho quickly spit out a hasty apology. She didn't actually seem very sorry, though.

"Getting back to the topic at hand, heretofore unseen varieties of monsters have been appearing lately. I suspect this is also the Dark Lord's work. He may be using some sort of magic to warp souls and intentionally create more powerful monsters."

"Artificially created monsters. My, my, that is terrible..."

The other four glanced surreptitiously at Psycho.

Homura wondered how Psycho managed to keep a straight face, considering the kinds of experiments she had carried out on human prisoners. The other four girls stared at her with judgment in their eyes, but Psycho pretended to be blissfully unaware.

"Artificial or not, these monsters are powerful enough to wipe out entire units of gold-badge Phalanx warriors."

“Gold badge...? That would place them on the same level as those two soldiers we fought yesterday, wouldn’t it...?”

“That is correct. Yet another gold-badge squadron was wiped out just yesterday.”

“But those two soldiers were no pushovers...”

Gold-badge Phalanx warriors—warriors with golden sword badges. Gold badges meant they were the same rank as the examiners the girls had fought during yesterday’s enlistment exams. According to Eirene, whole squadrons of such fighters had proven powerless against these new monsters. Jin was the most powerful fighter among the girls at the moment, which meant that Seigrat was right. They needed more training.

The girls might have been chosen for their special qualities, but at their current level, they weren’t even strong enough to qualify as dead-weight. Regardless of how they had been roped into all of this, in the end, they had chosen to overthrow the Dark Lord of their own accord. If they wanted to succeed, it was going to take a whole lot more effort on their part.

A loud bell suddenly began ringing, interrupting Homura’s feelings of inadequacy.

The echoes from the bell were still reverberating in the air when one of the guards from earlier suddenly burst into the sanctuary. Proto and Tsutsumi quickly pulled up their hoods, but the guard was hardly paying any attention to them.

“Attention! We’ve just received report that a massive dragon has been spotted flying toward Galdorssia!”

The bell had apparently been an alarm. There was danger coming.

A dragon. Talk about high fantasy! Despite the danger, Homura felt an inappropriate thrill dance along her spine.

She was going to see a dragon!

Eirene was swallowed up in light, and Falmeyr reappeared.

Despite having been possessed by the Goddess, she seemed to already be

aware of the situation and quickly began issuing orders.

“Understood. In that case, dispatch Seigrat.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The guard saluted and left in a hurry.

Incidentally, it was the rude guard.

“This is actually an excellent opportunity, if I may say. You should go watch Seigrat fight. I warn you, though, you will be in for a shock. He is very powerful.”

Falmeyr’s eyes might have been covered by her mask, but the pride was evident in her voice.

“Powerful? That horndog—?”

“Honestly, he really didn’t look that strong to me...”

“Indeed? Despite his foolish behavior, he carried himself like a true warrior.”

“Hey, no fair! Stop talking about stuff that happened while we weren’t there!”

“Hmph...!” Tsutsumi pouted, and Homura patted her on the head.

“Come, I’ll have them show you the way. You can watch from atop the ramparts.”

Falmeyr’s attendants nodded in confirmation.



The ramparts were extremely high.

Because of how thick and sturdy the wall was, the five of them were able to easily walk side by side along the walkway that had been built atop it.

Watching the sky past the battlements to the west, they spotted a massive winged creature flying in the distance.

From this far away, at least, it resembled a lizard with wings. A stereotypical dragon. Its size, however, was unnerving.

With its gigantic wings and scales like boulders, the creature’s size was intimidating even from a distance.

After glancing around, however, Homura noticed something strange.

The attendant had ordered everyone else to keep their distance, so there was no one in their immediate vicinity, but the soldiers standing farther down along the wall did not look at all worried as they watched the dragon approach.

When the guard had burst into the sanctuary earlier, he'd seemed to be panicking, and the peasants who usually worked the fields outside the walls had all been evacuated inside. Homura wasn't imagining things; this was definitely an emergency. Seigrat must be incredibly strong for everyone to be so calm.

"These overpowered monsters wander in sometimes. Do you think it would go away if I just asked nicely?"

Seigrat had approached, undetected, at some point. He now stood behind them.

"Yuck, where did you come from?" asked Homura, accidentally letting her true feelings slip out.

"We meet again."

He was dressed in a full suit of armor that concealed his face, but she could still tell from his voice and rascally demeanor that it was him. He wore a deep-purple helmet of draconic design upon his head, and he gripped a long spear in his hands.

"Is the dragon really that strong?"

"I think it might be the monster that wiped out that gold-badge Phalanx squadron the other day. There's a sword stuck in its back that I remember seeing before."

Homura tried squinting, but all she could tell was that something was indeed buried in the creature's back. The dragon was so massive that the sword looked like a toothpick by comparison.

"Yeah, yeah, very touching. Now hurry up and show us what you Holy Protectorates can do!"

"Geez, let a guy have a moment...", muttered Seigrat, slightly exasperated, as he climbed up onto the battlements.

Homura barely had time to register shock before Seigrat suddenly flexed his legs powerfully and leaped from the battlements. The force left a crack in the wall.

These ramparts were well over thirty meters tall. A normal person would die from such a fall. Seigrat, however, easily landed a significant distance from the wall. He fixed his gaze on the dragon as it continued to steadily draw closer.

“Is that that Seigrat guy you were all talking about? He just seems like some random skeeze to me.”

“You would think so, but from what everyone says, he’s more than just a horndog who can jump.”

“I think he’s like one of those ‘sidekick but hot so strangely popular’ characters. A real sleazeball but a fan favorite, you know? I wonder if he’s actually strong, though.”

“I know I’m hardly one to talk, but that seems like a terrible thing to say...”

As the girls watched in mingled expectation and unease, the attendant who had shown them onto the ramparts spoke up.

“Rest easy. Even should Seigrat fall, Galdorssia’s defenses remain unassailable.”

“Ouch. It doesn’t sound like you have much faith in the man...”

Seigrat readied his weapon while the girls continued to bad-mouth him from behind.

He thrust his left arm in front of himself and swept his right leg and spear arm far back.

It was a javelin-tossing pose.

His right pauldron was smaller than his left, allowing him to more easily throw his weapon.

“Here goes nothing!”

With a shout, Seigrat’s right hand began to glow crimson. The light grew brighter and brighter until it had completely spread to the long spear in his

hand.

“I better be gentle; I don’t want to break his sword...”

In a matter of mere seconds, Seigrat’s long spear was consumed in the swell, transforming into a brilliant beam of radiant light.

The surging beam emitted a piercing crackling sound that reached all the way to the ears of Homura and the others as they waited atop the wall.

As the spear of light continued to seethe, Seigrat took aim at the dragon—and then hurled his weapon with all his strength.

“Hyahhh—!!”

Seigrat’s battle cry thundered through the air. His right foot created a cloud of dust as he pushed off. His stable pivot foot created a crack in the earth.

The spear shot forward like a scarlet comet. It moved at blinding speed, leaving a trail of light in its shivering wake before hitting the flying dragon square in the head.

Or so it seemed...

But just before the shaft of light could pierce through the dragon’s skull, a wall of light suddenly appeared that held the spear in check.

It was a magical barrier. Homura thought back to the enlistment exams.

While Jin was fighting the heavy warrior, a shard of earth had been sent flying toward the crowd, but it had been intercepted by a similar barrier of light.

That must have been what the dragon had done. Summoned a barrier, lightning fast, to stop the spear as it hurtled through the air.

As the spear and the wall of light came into contact, a horrendous screeching noise pierced the sky. The barrier stood defiant, but the spear was still driving forward with increased power.

The resistance of the barrier and the destructive force of the spear seemed to be equally matched at first, but after another moment, a crack appeared in the wall of light.

Once the crack had formed, it all happened in the blink of an eye.

The spear broke through the barrier suddenly and pierced the dragon's head.

“Graaawwwrrrrrr—!”

The dragon roared.

This was not a death cry, however. As hard as it was to believe, the dragon was still alive and was now barreling straight toward Seigrat, enraged.

The sight of the dragon as it approached made the hairs on the backs of the girls' necks stand on end. Seigrat, however, stood firm.

“My attack wasn't finished yet.”

It almost sounded as if he pitied the thing.

As he finished speaking, the light from his spear expanded—and then exploded. There was a deafening rumble as a burst of red light obliterated the dragon's head.

Homura and the others watched, mouths agape, as the ripple from the explosion washed over them. Seigrat had as much firepower as a modern weapon of war.

Like a puppet when its strings are cut, the dragon's carcass surrendered to the law of inertia and came crashing to the ground before Seigrat.

The deafening shudder that was created as the creature's massive body collided with the earth was what finally snapped Homura and the others out of their reverie.





“Total cheese...”

“That was like a blockbuster movie...”

“So that is the power of a Holy Protectorate.”

“Does someone like that still qualify as human?”

“Wow...”

Although their choices of words were different, all five girls were of the same mind. Witnessing the peak of Galdorssia’s fighting power had left them speechless.

So this was why they called him the Dragon Render.

Cheers rose from the soldiers watching the battle. Seigrat waved in response as he pulled free the sword stuck in the dragon’s back.

“If they’ve got Seigrat, what do they need us for...?”

Having seen him fight, Homura found it hard to imagine there could be any battle he could not handle. For once, however, the expression on Psycho’s face as she responded seemed grim.

“Don’t you get it? That they summoned us to this world when they’ve already got someone like him means they must expect even more from us.”

Homura went pale. “That’s like insane difficulty...”

Latent potential or not, there wasn’t an iota of a chance that Homura would ever be able to fight like that. Forget insane, that was New Game+ insane.

“Incidentally, that over there is the aftermath from one of the Dark Lord’s attacks a hundred years ago,” said the attendant, pointing toward an unusual gorge located beyond the wall.

“You mean...”

“Yes, the Dark Lord hollowed a gorge from the earth with one single attack.”

“Make that New Game+++...”

The gorge completely dwarfed Seigrat’s attack. But the Dark Lord had also been beaten back, which meant there must be even stronger soldiers on

Galdorssia's side.

This was going to take a lot of training.

The learning curve was real.

Homura realized that the soldiers who had come out to watch the battle had already left at some point. Only those currently on guard duty were still around.

"I still can't believe a person could jump from this height and still be fine. I think we're going to have to step up our game..."

Once everything calmed down, Homura decided to take a peek over the battlements and down at the ground below.

"Huh...?"

As she peered over the edge, however, she was hit with a sense of dizzying fear unlike anything she had ever felt before. The sight brought back memories of those last moments just before her death.

Injustice and smiles. The nastiness of people. The images bled together like sludge, gnawing away at her chest.

Homura's vision swam. She wasn't sure she could remain standing. She wanted to call for help, but she couldn't speak.

The experience of dying had apparently left much larger scars upon her soul than she had realized.

*Somebody...*

*Help.*

"...ra! Earth to Homura!"

Just as Homura thought she was going to drown in her fear, a voice suddenly broke through the fog. Someone was calling her name.

The sound seemed to lift her back up into the light.

It was Psycho. She was shaking Homura by the shoulder.

"I...I'm sorry. It's so high up, it made me dizzy."

Homura tried willing herself to calm down. Unfortunately, Psycho wasn't giving her any space.

"Did it make you think of the time when you jumped?"

"Don't you have any delicacy?! You're talking about a person's death, you know! Speaking of which...when did I tell you that I jumped?"

Thinking back, Homura was pretty sure she had never mentioned her cause of death.

"You didn't. There were just a lot of clues."

"You should try using your powers of observation for good sometimes!"

"So what happened? You were bullied?"

"Yeah...more or less. People are so shitty and fake; I was just trying to run away. I don't think I was really consciously trying to kill myself; I just jumped before I realized what I was doing. The way they picked and picked at little unconnected crumbs, making up stories and convincing themselves they were the truth just because they had strung together something plausible... I hate them so much."

Injustice with a smile. People could be so nasty.

"I'm not really sure what you're talking about, but it sounds like you had it rough. By the way, in my case, I got plugged full of bullets. They turned me into Swiss cheese."

"Don't tell me that! I'm perfectly happy not learning anything more about the seedy underbelly of Japan!"

"As for me—," said Jin.

"I said no! This is not story time!"

"Well I—," said Proto.

"Now you're just messing with me!"

"When I died—"

"Not you, too, Tsutsumi!"

Strangely enough, the coldness Homura had been feeling inside seemed to go away during this silly exchange.

“Everybody, enough! We’ve seen Seigrat fight. I’m going back inside!”

Homura quickly turned on her heel, mainly to hide the smile that was creeping over her lips.

## Chapter 6

### Welcome to Guadhari Village: The Tutorial Mission

Before taking the enlistment exams, applicants were usually required to study combat theory and technique. Since Homura and the others had skipped that step, they were now being given letters of introduction, via Falmeyr, to begin training in separate locations.

Homura was to go to the Academy to learn more about fire magic, while Jin was to go to the drill grounds to train in advanced combat techniques.

Psycho, meanwhile, was sent to board at the church complex where she could apply herself to healing the sick and injured with her magic. While she was there, they also tried to instill a more priestly mindset in her. Obviously, that part of her training was having no effect.

After about a week of training, Homura was provided with her own equipment.

“Ta-daa! What do you think? This staff is pretty cute, isn’t it?”

Homura was in what she called her room—technically just a room in Geldorf’s estate—showing off the new weapon that had been made just for her.

Although pretty in design, the staff was actually a fearsome weapon with holes along the shaft that Homura could pump full of fire that would then spout from the tip.

“Ugh, working at the church is so fricking boring.”

“Aren’t you going to say something about my staff?!”

“Would you be quiet already?! I can’t believe you’re getting spoiled over there at the Academy like you’re everyone’s favorite granddaughter. According to the rumors, that place is supposed to be awful!”

“It’s not my fault. Apparently, I’m the first young girl to wind up at the Academy in ages. Hee-hee...”

Supposedly, the Academy existed in the shadows of Galdorssia. Homura had been wary at first, but as it turned out, it was quite a homey place to study, and the older wizards doted on her as if she were their own grandkid.

Fire-related magic was extremely difficult and dangerous, meaning that much of it was forbidden. As a result, fire users were generally shut up in the Academy along with people with affinities for other strictly regulated magic.

As a group of outcasts, they tended to be extremely permissive and forgiving with their own kind.

“It’s still not fair. I spend all day taking bops on the head instead.”

“Well, what are you doing to make them so angry?”

“That nasty old priestess will pay for this, I swear. The plebs in this world have no respect for the brain cells of a true genius.”

The church was a place where healing was carried out in the name of the Goddess. As a result, they were quite strict when it came to decorum. Considering the way Psycho generally behaved, it was no wonder that she was constantly getting yelled at or bonked on the head.

“I can’t believe I’m actually studying magic. This really is a different world.”

“In your case, it’s actually a supernatural ability, though.”

Previously, Homura had assumed that supernatural abilities and magic were essentially the same thing, but it turned out that was not the case.

“Since the fire doesn’t burn me, though, they said I must have a benediction.”

“But that’s still magic, right? What’s the difference again? Incantations are something you do on purpose, and a benediction is something that’s always there? That must mean you still have an affinity, I guess.”

Magic in this world was split into two major categories, incantations and benedictions, although the definition of benedictions was fairly broad. With the exception of self-buffing magic, which could be activated almost unconsciously, incantations generally required the user to chant a magic spell and intentionally

gather energy, whereas benedictions remained active on their own so long as there was still magical power available.

Benedictions could reside not only in living bodies, but also within substances. For instance, the glowing orestones used as lights inside homes around the city continued to glow freely once pumped full of mana.

“Honestly, the incantation part is much harder. I can manipulate the flames a little once I create them, but I definitely can’t shoot out balls of fire like my teacher can... I wonder if I really am suited for this. Although at least I’m good at getting rid of the flames.”

The Goddess had told them they had special qualities, but that was just potential. Unless Homura improved, she was just another schoolgirl with a fire in her heart.

“Enough, get to the good stuff already. Don’t you guys have any juicy gossip? While you’re out having fun, we’ve been stuck inside this whole week!”

Homura could be depressed later. Proto was bored. She was also dressed in a maid outfit.

Unlike Tsutsumi, who had kept her head buried in Geldorf’s books for the last week, Proto had decided to kill time by helping out the maid.

She currently sat cross-legged on the bed, looking disgruntled.

“That’s right, I almost forgot. I’ve actually got something interesting to share with you two latchkey kids,” said Psycho, standing up suddenly. “Remember when the Goddess was lecturing us and she said that twisted souls lead to aberrations? Well, boosting the body’s regenerative ability is not the only kind of recovery magic out there. There is also recovery magic that works directly on the soul. In this world, the soul and the body are closely related.”

“Yeah, and?”

The “latchkey kids” leaned forward as they listened to Psycho.

“Plus, inspecting a person’s soul is helpful when healing—and guess who’s just learned how to do it? Yours truly! Since neither of you are human, how about I take a look at your souls?”

“That’s great. Although I’m pretty sure nothing good will come of someone like you having that ability.”

Proto was right. The sticky-sweet smile on Psycho’s face wasn’t doing her any favors, either. She was clearly up to something.

Psycho had the two girls sit on the end of the bed and then placed her hand on Proto’s chest.

“A soul is usually a perfect circle, but I bet yours is going to be something crazy instead.”

As she spoke, Psycho closed her eyes. She began chanting in a soft voice. Once she was finished, the hand she had placed on Proto’s chest began to glow softly, and the spell seemed to activate.

“Ohh... I feel so seen,” said Proto, impressed.

At first, Psycho looked surprised. A moment later, however, her expression turned sour.

“What, what is it? Is my soul really strange?”

“No, not really... Maybe all souls are usually spheres, regardless of race, and it’s just the substance that changes. I hate to admit it, but yours is a perfect circle after all. It’s just the substance that seems different. It’s pale with a slight metallic tint.”

“What? That’s just like my core. Boring!” Proto tossed herself backward onto the bed.

“Well, when you think about it, just because you’re an outer-space life-form doesn’t mean you’re not normal where we come from... Incidentally, there doesn’t seem to be any magical essence connected to your soul.”

“What?! What’s that?! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“When magical essence resonates with a soul, it activates as something called magical power, or mana. That’s the power source when activating magic. In short, you won’t be able to use magic.”

“That’s not fair; magic sounds like fun! How come you guys get all the good stuff?! Whatever, you inferior carbonoids can have your stupid magic. I’d rather

stick to punching things anyway!”

She was obviously sulking.

Maybe Proto couldn't use magic, but she was already a technical marvel on par with magic from mankind's point of view. Homura kept that thought to herself, however. Proto was just too cute when she pouted.

“Okay... Next up is Tsutsumi...!”

Tsutsumi seemed to be enjoying this. Homura thought Tsutsumi had been fine staying at home and reading quietly, but maybe she'd found it boring after all.

“I'm gonna take a look now.”

Psycho placed her hand on Tsutsumi's chest, just as she had done with Proto. And then she furrowed her brow, again, just as she had done before.

“Hrmm... It's distorted, yes, I was expecting that... But this murkiness concerns me.”

“Murkiness..?”

“Yes. Her soul is muddled in a way that resembles a curse... Obviously she hasn't had any opportunities to get cursed since we've been here, so maybe the dysfunction in her poison gland is manifesting in a similar fashion.”

Tsutsumi cocked her head, not fully understanding what Psycho was saying.

“In other words, if I use my magic to dispel the curse, that might fix you.”

Tsutsumi's face lit up.

“It's worth giving it a try,” Psycho went on, “but there's no way to know for sure what might happen. Would you like me to, Tsutsumi?”

“I'm not scared...about what could happen. I'm very tough.”

“Okay, then, here goes nothing... *May this child be free of the curse that taints its soul.*”

As Psycho finished chanting, the light at Tsutsumi's chest suddenly grew more brilliant than before.

“Ngh...nrk...”

As the light grew stronger, however, Tsutsumi began to writhe in pain. She pressed a hand to her chest and groaned.

“Psycho!”

“No, it’s working! ...I think.”

Even Psycho, however, could not hide her unease at the amount of pain Tsutsumi seemed to be experiencing. Tsutsumi curled up in a ball on her side as her back began to undulate. It was as if there was some other creature thrashing beneath her skin.

“Tsutsumi, are you okay?!”

Just as Homura was about to rush to Tsutsumi’s side, something suddenly burst free from Tsutsumi’s back in a spray of blood.

Wings. Skeletal, with neither feathers nor skin. Wings of bone.

They made Homura think of bats rather than birds.

“Is this...Tsutsumi’s true form?”

“Possibly...,” answered Psycho, breathing heavily.

“Tsutsumi, does it hurt?” Homura asked.

“No, I’m fine... I’m used to pain...”

“Well, you shouldn’t be!”

Homura’s chest felt tight as she tried to imagine the conditions under which Tsutsumi had been raised. Maybe it was because of the similarity to her own experiences, but Homura was able to temporarily take her mind off her own troubles and worry about Tsutsumi’s instead.

She immediately examined Tsutsumi’s back. The bleeding must have already stopped, because the bloodstains weren’t spreading. Tsutsumi had mentioned before that she was able to regenerate more quickly than usual. This must have been what she meant.

“My body feels funny, though...”

“That makes sense, since you just physically changed shape. Well? Can you tell if your poison gland is functioning now?”

Psycho took a closer look at Tsutsumi’s wings, wondering what they were for.

Homura wasn’t sure what she had been expecting to happen, but she’d assumed it would involve Tsutsumi’s poison gland. She couldn’t see any reason for the wings, either.

“I don’t know...”

After having been treated as defective all her life, Tsutsumi didn’t seem to know much more about her own body than the rest of them did. She patted herself all over and then began opening and shutting her skeletal wings.

“Uh-oh...,” she muttered suddenly. “Everybody should run...”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Before they could process what she had said, Tsutsumi began to emit some sort of mist, which clung like tendrils to the bony framework of her wings. It was obviously poison gas.

“Watch out!”

“Not so fast—you’re not getting away on your own!”

Jin grasped the danger a moment before everyone else and began to run, but Psycho grabbed her by the legs before she could escape and knocked her to the ground.

“Hyah!”

Jin pushed the door closed, perhaps in retaliation. Now no one could get out.

“Why would you do that?!”

With Jin holding the door shut, Homura was obviously just as trapped as Psycho and Jin.

They began to helplessly scratch and pull at one another, trying to pry their way free. Before long, the poison gas had enveloped all three of them.

“Well, crap... I can’t move my arms or legs...”

The gas seemed to work by dulling the limbs and preventing all movement. At least it was only paralytic, instead of deadly.

“I’m sorrrrryyy!!”

Tsutsumi apologized frantically as Proto, who had been immune to poison all along, convulsed with laughter and pointed at the girls on the floor.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha, that’s hilarious! Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

Stupid space robot.



“Unbelievable! I know I should be giving you girls a good talking-to right now, but we don’t have time for that. The lecture will have to wait until later.”

After the poison gas incident, the five girls were now standing inside the drill grounds, fidgeting under Geldorf’s stern gaze.

“Her Lady Falmeyr has arranged for the five of you to undergo some special training today. We’ve even got the drill grounds reserved to ourselves. Hmph. I’ve never seen such a thing before.”

Since Proto and Tsutsumi couldn’t show their faces openly, it was just the five girls, along with Geldorf. The drill grounds were otherwise empty.

There were no huge crowds like last time, but the deserted arena was intimidating in its own way.

“Okay, but... Umm, what is that thing...?” Homura asked fearfully.

She was referring to the creature inside the cage, which had been making growling noises at them for the past several minutes.

“In order to get more practical experience, today you will be fighting a monster. This monster is known as a thornhound, and it’s a common creature in this area.”

“I knew it was a monster...! It’s freaking me out...”

The thornhound resembled a dog, but parts of its bones protruded from its skin like sharp spines. It stared threateningly at them from the other side of the

bars as it emitted a low growl.

“Don’t worry, a thornhound is only slightly more dangerous than your average wild dog.”

“Wild dogs are plenty dangerous!”

Homura had actually encountered a wild dog once before. Simply being in such close proximity to an untrained animal had been enough to make her tremble.

“It’s fine; you’ll get used to fighting monsters little by little. Tomorrow, you’re going to be dispatched to Guadhari Village, which is located nearby, for your first mission. Don’t worry, though; the captain of the garrison there is a man who goes by the name of Rotraud. He is a very accomplished warrior, even among other gold shield badges. Once upon a time, he and Seigrat were even rivals, though obviously, that’s changed by now. You should take this experience seriously and learn all you can from him.”

“Well, I’d rather not die again, that’s for sure.”

All the other girls, except for Psycho, nodded in agreement.

“Get ready; I’m releasing the thornhound.”

Geldorf placed his hand on the door of the cage, and the atmosphere instantly grew tense.

The door sprung upward, and the hound darted out into the open, making a beeline straight for Homura.

“What? Nooooooo! Why is it heading for me— Ooof!!”

Homura barely managed to wave her staff around in confusion before receiving a headbutt to her completely unguarded stomach.

“The hell are you doing?”

“I don’t want to...kill a doggy. Can’t we just find some bad guy for me to fry instead...?”

“How is a person better?”

Homura doubled over in pain.

Even if it was a monster, she didn't like the idea of killing an animal. Unlike animals, people knew what they were doing. Homura figured it would be easier to burn a person to a crisp than it would be to do the same to an animal, since people were at least capable of malice.

"I forgot to mention, but thornhounds don't just use their spikes to attack. Their tough skulls also double as a weapon, and their headbutts can be very painful."

"Why didn't you say that sooner, old man?" Psycho snapped. "Here, leave it to me. A stupid mutt should be no match for a genius like— Oh shit, my baaaaack!!"

The thornhound quickly put the kibosh on Psycho's bragging by delivering a single charging strike to her lower back from behind.

"Why didn't any of you warn me?!" she said as she writhed around on the ground in pain.

The others had all seen it coming, but they had chosen to keep their mouths shut—teamwork at its finest!

Two down, three to go. Jin strode forward and planted herself before the thornhound bravely.

"Allow me to demonstrate."

For the first time, the thornhound hesitated. There was something different about Jin.

"Sit!"

Despite its profound lack of obedience training, the thornhound seemed to instinctively grasp the meaning of Jin's command. It quickly planted its butt on the ground.

Homura was less surprised by the thornhound's reaction and more by hearing Jin speak in a loud voice for the first time.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh, now do you see? There is more to battle than just killing. A warrior has many skills."

Jin walked toward the trembling thornhound, a smug expression on her face.

Homura resisted the urge to remind her that this was just training.

“Paw.”

This time Jin extended her hand, expecting the thornhound to give her its paw.

The thornhound responded by promptly biting Jin’s fingers.

“My hannnd!!”

Jin bonked the thornhound on its head with her other hand, the one that hadn’t been bitten. The thornhound let go and ran, yelping, at full speed. Three down.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Hiiiilarious!”

“Fine, you give it a try, Proto!” shouted Jin, cradling her bleeding hand while Proto rolled around on the ground in hysterics.

“I’ll pass. Speedy little critters aren’t my thing. I’m not built for agility.”

Proto sat down atop her war hammer, which she had borrowed from Geldorf, content to just watch the others. Come to think of it, Homura couldn’t remember having ever seen Proto move quickly.

“So these are the girls who claimed they were going to defeat the Dark Lord. Hmph. This does not bode well...”

An exasperated sigh escaped Geldorf’s lips.

The warrior was still pondering how he had gotten himself into all of this when a high-pitched yelp suddenly drew their attention.

The five turned in the direction of the noise. Tsutsumi had just killed the thornhound with a single thrust of her dagger.

The thin blade had pierced through the creature’s lower jaw and was now poking out from the other side of its head. It didn’t get much deader than that.

Incidentally, Tsutsumi was now wearing a set of clothes that Geldorf’s maid had sewn for her for whenever she had to head outside or go on missions. It was easier for her to move in these new clothes. Additionally, the maid was also preparing a long robe, long boots, a mask, a hooded cloak, and other articles for

Tsutsumi's use, which would help her to better hide her skin. She was apparently already hard at work on the new outfit.

Tsutsumi was also able to freely express and withdraw her wings. At the moment, they were hidden inside her body. Tsutsumi's regenerative abilities were quite high, but Homura didn't like seeing the painful spray of blood that appeared each time the wings emerged.

Tsutsumi pulled her dagger free from the hound and raced toward everyone with a smile on her face.

"I did good!"

Judging by her expression, she seemed to expect praise. Blood and gore dripped from the blade.

"Oh yes, Tsutsumi, you did such a very good job! You're such a good girl! Yes you are!"

"Hee-hee, I can't use my poison real good yet, but I can fight, too..."

Homura began patting Tsutsumi's head. She seemed so happy.

This was the right path. If they wanted to defeat the Dark Lord, they were going to need to follow Tsutsumi's lead.

"You might just be the strongest out of all of us, Tsutsumi. Great job."

"Hee-hee..."

Psycho began stroking Tsutsumi's head as well.

"And I guess that would make Homura the weakest, then."

Homura's hand suddenly froze. She rose to her feet like a flame flickering upward, while her face remained a mask of cold composure.





“You may be able to run and jump around a little, Psycho, but I can make fire. I think it’s pretty clear which one of us is more powerful in combat.”

“The only thing you can beat me in is tit size. Well, that and butt and thigh size.”

Tsutsumi quickly fled to safer ground as the sparks began to fly between Homura and Psycho.

“Why, Psycho, are you...jealous? Of my figure?”

It was time for a roast! Homura shot back with what she knew was her one big advantage over Psycho: her body.

“Jealous? Of you? The other day you got stuck in a doorway because your butt was too big!”

“It’s not that big! But that’s just like you, sinking to despicable, childish insults! I’m going to beat the rottenness out of you... No, actually, you can stay rotten! I’ll just burn you whole instead! Let’s see which of us is really the strongest!”

“Bring it, kiddo! I’ll lay you out in a heartbeat!”

The two squared off against each other and raised their weapons.

The tension was electric. Jin and Proto watched from the side, stroking Tsutsumi’s head without concern.

Homura and Psycho managed to wrangle Proto into refereeing. If she wasn’t going to fight, she could at least make herself useful. Proto stood at the center of the ring and listlessly announced the start of the match.

“Ready...fight.”

“Burn the filth!” shouted Homura, channeling her inner postapocalyptic flamethrower man as she began to spout flames from her staff.

Homura wasn’t very good at controlling her flames yet, but her weapon was more than just a simple staff. It was a tool that helped her to direct her channeling. The space in front of Homura was instantly engulfed in fire.

Psycho, however, was no longer there.

“The only filth here is you!” Psycho dodged the flames and moved in close, staying low to the ground as she swept at Homura’s feet.

“Huh?”

Homura didn’t know what had happened, just that the world was suddenly spinning. The next thing she knew, she was staring up at the sky.

“I win! Who’s filth now?!”

Psycho had climbed on top of Homura to straddle her and was now holding a dagger to her throat.

“Ahhhhh! No fair! No fair!” wailed Homura, her screams filling the air.

In the end, all she had over Psycho was tits and ass after all.

“See there, Tsutsumi? That’s what we call filth,” said Proto.

But she was pointing at both of them.



The next day marked the girls’ first mission.

Geldorf had come to see off Homura and the others as they departed for Guadhari Village.

“Make sure to be on your best behavior while you’re there.”

“We will...try our best.”

Geldorf had given them countless warnings since the day before, but Homura still didn’t trust herself and the others not to cause trouble.

“Anyway, I get why you’re here, Geldorf, but who invited this sleazeball?”

“You wound me.”

Seigrat had come to see them off as well. His face remained calm. He was already used to Psycho’s cold attitude by this point and didn’t actually seem offended.

“I always make a habit of seeing off the new kids on their first mission.”

“That’s very diligent of you.”

Homura had been hoping they were special, but apparently, Seigrat did this

for everyone.

Despite Seigrat's easygoing manner, he actually took his duties quite seriously. Right now he seemed almost like a big brother, taking them under his wing.

"Well...I don't know if 'diligent' is the word."

An uncomfortable expression appeared on Seigrat's face.

"I don't mean to scare you by saying this...," he said, his countenance growing more serious, "but I wanted to be sure that I remember your faces. In case I never see you again."

Homura and the others gulped. If he never saw them again—in other words, if they died.

This mission was supposed to involve little if any danger. At the end of the day, however, anything could happen.

As people with power, Aegis and Phalanx soldiers were expected to go out into the world and protect others. Seigrat, in turn, made an effort to memorize the faces of these soldiers before they left, perhaps as part of his own sense of noblesse oblige.

"Two of you are still hiding your faces, though. Please let me see them. Even just a glimpse is fine."

"No thanks."

Proto, who was dressed in a full suit of armor, turned her head away. Even Tsutsumi, who was wearing her own mask, averted her face.

"Do you have some reason for hiding your faces? Or are you just upset because what I said scared you? Of course, what was I thinking? That must be it. You obviously didn't want to hear something like that before your very first mission. Don't worry, though; as long as you follow Rotraud's counsel, everything should be fine. He is very strong."

Rotraud was going to be their adviser in the village. Even Seigrat, Holy Protectorate of the Shield, seemed to hold the man in high regard. They probably had nothing to worry about.

“Although a little trouble might teach these girls a lesson or two.”

Geldorf’s eyes were clearly on Psycho as he spoke.

“Ha-ha, I know better than anyone that you don’t really mean that. Me and Rotty were actually Geldorf’s disciples back in the day.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

What an unexpected connection.

“Geldorf may be strict, but he’s a good man. It’s thanks to what he taught us that I now strive to be the type of person who can live up to my responsibilities.”

That explained why everyone placed so much faith in Geldorf.

“Yes, I’ve looked after the both of them ever since they were young—though they certainly didn’t make that job easy on me.”

Geldorf turned away, his face red with apparent embarrassment.

“Back then, I never took anything seriously. Whereas Rotty was the exact opposite, almost too serious.”

“Indeed—that boy used to question me for hours on end about the meaning of justice and the greater good.”

“Lately, he’s been giving me the third degree every time I see him. I think he’s trying to make sure I take these send-offs seriously. When it came to fighting ability, we were always pretty evenly matched, but Rotty had an intensity about him back in the day that was honestly kind of terrifying.”

Apparently, Rotraud wasn’t just a very capable person. He was also a very serious person.

“Hmm. He sounds kind of stuffy...”

This new workplace of theirs might be more suffocating than they had expected. What if Rotraud started questioning them about the greater good or whatever as well? How would Homura respond?

Seigrat seemed to sense Homura’s disappointment.

“Don’t worry—most of the time he’s smiling and good-natured. I don’t expect

he'll give any new faces the same third degree."

"Well, that's a relief... Sorry, should I not say that?"

"It's fine, it's fine. From here on out, you girls will need to find your own answers."

"I'll try..." Homura could only do what she could for now.

"Come on, let's go already," said Psycho, trying to hurry everyone along.

Maybe it was just the early hour, but she seemed to be in a bad mood.

"Take care!"

"And don't do anything reckless!"

Homura and the others boarded their carriage as the two men watched.



Homura and the others sat inside the rattling carriage until they arrived at their target destination, Guadhari Village.

Guadhari was another walled settlement, its borders protected by a wooden rather than a stone wall. The wall was surrounded by sprawling farmland, idyllic and pastoral.

After so much time spent inside the bumpy carriage, the girls, with the exception of Proto, were now moving stiffly. Their butts had just taken some serious damage.

"I can't believe our first mission is just village guard duty. That's so underwhelming. I thought we'd get to slay a dragon or something."

Homura had been hoping for a cooler mission, or even a powerful monster to fight. She was half-hopeful, half-wary of what awaited. In the back of her mind, she was still expecting some dramatic, unforeseen event, like what might happen in a game.

"You spent too much time watching all that fantasy crap. Obviously they're not going to give a dangerous mission right out of the gate to people who have never even been in a real battle before."

"I guess not."

“First mission” was really just a fancy name for on-site training. A chance to get some actual combat experience under their belts while under the supervision of a more experienced adviser. The purpose, apparently, was to help new recruits build their confidence through something safe and easy.

Guadhari Village was the perfect place for this. However, the villagers seemed to stare at them coldly as they passed. Based on the villagers’ reactions, Homura and the others could guess what people thought of the Phalanx of Blades.

Maybe if they had already demonstrated their trustworthiness and ability, the people of the village would have welcomed them more. But the girls did not yet possess either of those qualities. There was also the strange way they were dressed. They would have to accept the reception they were given, for now.

“They said the worst thing that shows up around here are those ugly thornhound dogs, right?”

“That’s because of how close it is to Galdorssia. There are monstrous beasts in the area, but supposedly, the ones around here don’t differ much from ordinary wild animals. And apparently, there are no demonkind settlements located nearby, either. Demons are the intelligent, humanoid versions of monsters. It’s the perfect place to send newbies.”

“I don’t know; those thornhounds seemed scary enough as is... What was our adviser’s name again? Rotraud? I sure hope he’s nice.”

The garrison was located close to the gate.

The small drill grounds connected to the garrison were completely deserted at the moment. When they peered through the doorway, there didn’t seem to be anyone inside the garrison, either. *Maybe they’re out*, thought Homura. A moment later, however, she heard faint voices coming from a room toward the back.

Finally, a lifeline! Homura had been feeling nervous about being in such an unfamiliar place.

“Excuse me!”

“Yes? What’s the probl—? Wait, who are you people? I don’t trust you!”

The man who emerged from the back room frowned noticeably as soon as he caught sight of Homura and the others. He looked slightly older than them and wore a dully gleaming silver shield badge, indicating his rank in the Aegis Guard, upon his collar. It was hardly the reaction Homura had been hoping for—but it was the reaction she had expected, considering how suspiciously they were dressed.

Proto was wearing a full suit of armor, after all, despite there being no battles on the horizon. And Tsutsumi had concealed every last inch of her skin.

Tsutsumi's mask had been crafted by Geldorf's maid. The maid seemed to have some pretty weird tastes, because the mask perfectly resembled a plague doctor's mask. It was unsettling in appearance and highly suspect.

"Show a little more respect. We're the new Phalanx recruits, you chump!"

"I'm sorry; please ignore her. It's true, though. We are new recruits, and we were sent here on a mission."

"Are you sure?"

Silver Badge continued to stare at them distrustfully until a more even-tempered voice eventually came to their rescue.

"Now, now; show our guests inside already."

The voice was coming from inside the back room. A sign above the door read OFFICE, allowing them to guess whom the voice belonged to.

"Are you sure? They look even stranger than we expected."

"Relax, Horeicho. If anything happens, I'm right here."

The man, Horeicho, grumpily gestured for them to come inside. Homura and the others stepped into the office.

As they entered, they spotted a man sitting at a desk at the back of the room. He smiled at them pleasantly. He looked to be about the same age as Seigrat, but, perhaps due to his calm demeanor, he seemed much more mature.

His face was warm and inviting. His build, meanwhile, was solid like a warrior's, and he was fairly tall as well. He wore a glittering gold badge in the shape of a shield upon his collar.

“Welcome; we’ve been waiting for you. My name is Rotraud. I am the captain of the Guadhari Village garrison. And you must be the girls who made such a big stir in Galdorssia the other day.”

“I didn’t realize we were famous...”

Obviously, what they had done was bound to have created gossip. Homura just hadn’t expected the rumors to reach all the way over to a neighboring village.

“Crashing the exams was unheard of until now. A group of lovely young ladies so desperate to enlist that they were willing to break in. What’s not to love about that?”

Taken out of context, Rotraud’s words might have seemed mocking, but given his gentle smile, there was clearly no ill will in what he said. Instead, Homura felt almost...

“Homura,” whispered Psycho quietly as she pulled her arm away.

Homura didn’t realize she had been gripping Psycho’s sleeve.

Homura wasn’t used to having so much kindness aimed her way. She felt like a deer in the headlights. Rotraud was in fact smiling and good-natured, just as Seigrat had said.

“Umm... It’s all right if our two friends join us, right? They’re not actually in the Phalanx,” said Homura, covering up her own confusion by introducing the two shadier members of the group.

Up until now, they had relied on Geldorf’s protection and Falmeyr’s support behind the scenes to smooth over any issues. But they were on their own out here. When leaving Galdorssia, they had just assumed that everything would work out in the end, but there were of course no guarantees.

“It’s fine; no need to worry. You aren’t the first recruits we’ve had who were unable to enter the exams but were still inducted into the Phalanx of Blades because of their skills, or because they had proven themselves. If anything, you’ve only piqued my interest further.”

For some reason, Rotraud seemed very pleased with them.

With the exception of Horeicho and Psycho, who were still glaring at each other from across the room, this meeting was turning out to be exceedingly pleasant. Unfortunately, a shadow soon crossed Rotraud's beaming face.

"Usually, I would have you clear out some of the monsters in the area, but things have gotten a little complicated at the moment..."

"'Complicated'...?"

"Yes. Lately, a bandit gang has begun plaguing the region. Dealing with them has demanded all of our attention. Until things become safer, we won't be able to send you outside the village."

A bandit gang—could it be? Homura thought back to the thugs they had encountered upon first arriving in this world.

"What if...?"

"What is it?"

"N...never mind..."

During that first encounter, Jin had made short work of the bandits. Homura, however, was just as useless now as she had been then. She had thought about proposing that they go bandit hunting along with Rotraud, but she had thought better of it in the end.

"It's nothing..."

Homura's own shortcomings were what made her want to be useful. But before she could be useful, she needed to become strong.

Obviously, there was more to strength than just violence, but Homura's options were limited.

Homura was forced to accept the fact that if she went with Rotraud, she would likely just put someone in danger. She was no closer to making progress now than she had been at the start.

"In any case, I'll need you girls to sit tight for now. The priests at the church will look after you while you're here. You should head that way first."

Much as with the Aegis Guard garrisons, there were satellite churches in all

nearby settlements, from which local priests carried out their ministry. This included the provision of food and shelter to Phalanx of Blades soldiers while they were stationed in those settlements.

Horeicho, who was still sulking, was tasked with showing them the way. They were about to leave when Rotraud asked Homura to stay back for a moment.

“You there, the redhead. Umm...”

Homura turned about on her heel, realizing he meant her. “Oh, we didn’t introduce ourselves, did we? I’m Homura.”

“Homura—what a nice name.”

Rotraud had stopped smiling. His face was serious as he stared into her eyes.

“Homura, just a moment ago, were you perhaps thinking that you would like to join us when we go out bandit hunting?”

Homura’s stomach did a little flip. Maybe it was obvious, but that was exactly what she had been thinking.

“Maybe. I guess. But not really. I don’t know...”

Homura had only just resigned herself to the sad truth that she wasn’t ready yet a few seconds ago, so she found it difficult to be up-front about what she was feeling.

“I’m sorry if this sounds heavy, but you mustn’t forget that the world is ruled by power. I understand the desire to distinguish yourself in action, but it’s important not to get ahead of yourself.”

“I...understand...,” said Homura, the weight of reality starting to get to her.

“However, that doesn’t mean there isn’t meaning in the struggle, even when you don’t have as much power as others,” added Rotraud kindly. “Struggling can do a lot; you never know where it might lead. There are more opportunities to make progress out there than you think.”





Homura's eyes widened.

"Just don't get reckless. Do you understand?"

"Y...yes!"

Strange as it seemed, Rotraud's words had already helped to cheer her up.

"Now then—sorry to have kept you. Head along now; the church is waiting."

Rotraud saw her off with a smile.

The church was not far from the garrison. A young priestess came out to greet them as they arrived.

"They're yours now, Leela."

"Leave them to me!"

After handing Homura and the others over into the care of the priestess, whom he referred to as Leela, Horeicho quickly departed back toward the garrison.

"Oh wow, you don't see many all-girl squads! There's so much for us to talk about!"

"Wow, somebody's energetic...!"

The young priestess, Leela, looked to be about the same age as the girls and had a cheerful, bubbly personality. Her bright eyes and long lashes were very cute. But Homura felt a little overwhelmed by her energy.

"Oh, I'm sorry; I got carried away. I don't get many opportunities to talk to girls my own age."

"No, I didn't mean anything by it! I was just a little surprised, that's all..."

The moon-shaped badge on the collar of Leela's clerical garb was bronze-colored. She was a newcomer, just like Homura and the others.

Like Aegis Guard soldiers, the priests who worked at these individual churches had all been dispatched from Galdorssia, meaning they'd been forced to say good-bye to previous relationships once they received their assignments. That explained why Leela had gotten so worked up over meeting them.

“Okay, then! In any case, we can all talk while I show you around.”

The barracks for Phalanx soldiers were located directly next to the church. The building looked a little more solid than the homes around the village, attesting to the preferential treatment given to soldiers.

The girls had their own individual rooms inside, as well as a shared space in which they could relax.

“By the way, have you met Rotraud yet?”

“Yeah...”

“He sure is something, isn’t he...?”

Leela blushed slightly. She seemed to have a crush.

“I don’t know, you’ve got to watch out for those nice guys. It’s always the nice one who turns out to be the mastermind in the end, stepping out from the shadows at the end of the story like, ‘Mwu-ha-ha-ha, it’s time I took care of you meddlesome kids with my own two hands!’”

What was that half-wit talking about now?

“Don’t mind her; she’s a little funny in the head—”

“Rotraud would never do something like that! He’s the nicest, kindest man I know! He doesn’t just take care of the Aegis Guard; he helps out all around the village, and he always encourages people to do their best, and he always has a smile for them! People even call him Rotraud the Smilegiver! That’s not even his real title, but people call him it anyway!”

Usually, people got their titles based on how they fought. Apparently, hot guys had other means of acquiring nicknames.

“Fine, sheesh, I was just joking. Obviously. Take it easy already.”

“Well, as long as you understand!”

Leela’s respect for Rotraud evidently ran very deep.

“Would you stop causing so much trouble? People hate us enough as it is,” whispered Homura, poking Psycho in the side.

“He’s not just kind, either; he’s also very strong. Right now, he’s still a gold

badge, but someday he'll be appointed to the Holy Protectorate like Seigrat, I just know it!"

"So then he is strong."

"Incredibly strong. In fact, before coming to Guadhari, he helped defend Galdorssia. Right now, we've got all this trouble with bandits, but Guadhari is usually far safer and more peaceful than any of the other settlements. Not even monstrous beasts dare show their faces when Rotraud is around. Plus, plus, did you know—?"

At that moment, a loud gurgle suddenly interrupted Leela's verbal stream. Her face went beet red. The sound had come from her own stomach.

"Oh... I'm babbling, aren't I?! I'll call for you once lunch is ready. You can just relax until then."

Leela left the room, as energetic as ever.

"That girl is a force of nature..."

"I feel tired already."

## Chapter 7

### Alpha

“That’s too bad. I was hoping I could join you.”

Leela frowned with obvious disappointment.

Meals for the priests and visiting Phalanx soldiers had been laid out in the small mess hall connected to the church. Some settlement churches apparently had dedicated chefs, but here, Leela was in charge of preparing their meals.

“I’m sorry; it’s complicated...”

Leela continued to linger in the hallway as Homura poked her head out from the cracked doorway, rejecting Leela’s invitation.

Tsutsumi needed to take her mask off in order to eat, which meant they had to get rid of company before they could dig in. The food had been laid out beautifully, but unfortunately, they would have to eat separately.

“Oh...! I’m being so selfish! I get it! You’ve got a secret, don’t you? Something that no one else can know!”

“Exactly, so if maybe you could keep your voice down...”

“I’m sorry! I’m so stupid! Please, take your time!” Leela walked away, a bounce in her step.

“How can anyone be so energetic? Doesn’t she ever run out?”

“Leela probably wouldn’t appreciate being bad-mouthed by a weirdo like you.”

“Probably not.”

“At least you’re self-aware.”

“I am a genius, after all.”

“What?”

“Hmm?”

Homura sat back down at the table as she and Psycho continued to exchange insults.

The table was laden with fragrant bread, jars of jam, a hearty soup, and some sort of small fruits that resembled apples.

“Let’s dig in.”

Apparently, the bread was meant to be spread with jam before it was eaten, but the stuff in the jars was some sort of viscous, gooey brown substance. It wasn’t easy putting something so strange-looking into one’s mouth, but Homura felt it would be rude to refuse the food that had so kindly been provided for them.

Screwing up her courage, she scooped up a small jam spoon’s worth of the substance and spread it on one of the slices of bread.

“L...let’s dig in...,” she said, accidentally repeating herself, this time more for her own benefit than for theirs.

She bit off a corner of the bread that did not have too much jam on it and began chewing.

“Hrm... hrrmm...?” Homura cocked her head. Her brain was having trouble reconciling expectation with reality. “It’s...good? I think?”

It didn’t taste at all as Homura had expected, but it was still good in its own right.

Underneath the sweetness, there was the hint of a salty tang. After that came a faint peppery oomph, followed by a richness that melted across the tongue. The mellowness probably came from the use of butter.

The flavor complemented the bread, but it had a strong umami profile that would likely have suited meat-based dishes as well. It was less of a sweet and more of a main-dish type of flavor.

Homura placed a second, then a third bite into her mouth.

However, she still couldn't figure out what the jam was made of. It was Psycho who eventually solved that riddle.

"I don't think this is fruit. I think it's onion or something."

"I think you're right."

The flavor did remind her of onion.

Once you got over the idea that jam had to be made from fruit, the fact that this jam was brown didn't seem so strange after all. Unlike fruit jams, this one had a rich, vegetable umami that was addictive.

Homura finished off her entire slice.

She turned to the soup next.

It was appealingly colorful. The broth was a pale translucent yellow, and it was swimming with leafy greens, root vegetables, and generous chunks of chicken.

The wafts of steam rising from the surface of the warm soup carried a mild and appetizing aroma. Homura could not get enough of the soup's delicious smell.

She scooped up a spoonful of the broth, together with a chunk of chicken, and shuttled the spoon toward her mouth.

With each bite into the pleasantly chewy meat, the rich juices coated her tongue, blending with the broth in her mouth to create new notes of flavor.

The soup was still hot as she swallowed, and the warmth penetrated her body. It was a comforting soup.

As for the flavor...

"Mm! It's very simple!"

"I find it kind of plain, actually."

You could call it simple and natural if you liked it. Plain if you didn't. It seemed like the only seasoning used had probably been salt.

Although the village was located close to Galdorssia, it did not seem to enjoy the bustling trade of the city. As a result, seasoning options were probably

limited.

“Yes, it’s plain, but it’s a nice plain. You agree with me, don’t you, Jin?” asked Homura.

Of the five, Jin seemed the most accustomed to simpler dishes.

“Indeed.”

Homura grinned in satisfaction. She had known Jin would be on her side.

“But soup aside...”

Jin suddenly put her spoon down, a look of deep sorrow on her face. Homura felt anxious. She had never seen an expression like that on Jin’s face before. Had Homura done something to offend her?

Homura’s pulse quickened. *What is it, Jin?*

Jin took a deep breath and then sighed in resignation.

“...I wish there were rice.”

Was that all?! Homura felt relieved, although now that Jin mentioned it, she found herself wanting some plain white rice as well.

“We haven’t had any since we’ve gotten here, have we?”

If there was rice somewhere out there in this world, they had yet to find it. Their Japanese blood demanded rice!

“Rice sounds great and all, but what I’d really kill for is some junk food!”

Homura could sympathize, but she’d be damned if she was going to agree with Psycho about anything.

“Imagine needing food. What poorly designed life-forms.”

Proto had removed her helmet and was now bathing in the interior lights. Her hair and eyes glowed faintly. Apparently, she was recharging herself.

“As long as I can expose myself to light, I’m fine. I don’t understand why humans need to acquire energy in such an inefficient way.”

“Go ask God. She’s over there in the church.”

“We really are in a different world.”

It was pretty crazy to think that the Grand Creator was just a hop, skip, and jump down the road.

Tsutsumi, meanwhile, continued to eat, paying absolutely no attention to their nonsense.

She even ate Proto's share, since Proto didn't need it. She shoveled the food down, mouthful after mouthful, with zero concern over what she was eating or how it might taste.

"I've noticed this before, but you sure can eat a lot, can't you, Tsutsumi?"

From everything Tsutsumi had said, it didn't sound as if she had been treated very well in her past life. That did not seem to apply to food, however. Originally, because of how thin Tsutsumi was, Homura had assumed that she had been nutritionally deprived—but it turned out she could eat ridiculous amounts of food and still not gain weight.

At the sound of her name, Tsutsumi finally stopped eating for a moment.

"My metab...metabolism? Is very high. So I have to eat. Lots of food."

"That's right; you mentioned that you regenerate. That must require a lot of energy," said Psycho.

"Burn me, stab me, I get back up...!" Tsutsumi raised her fist in a confident victory pose.

Because of her higher regenerative powers, she had likely been subjected to a wide battery of durability tests.

"Ugh, I don't want to hear about that. Especially not while eating..."

As Homura pictured the results, her food threatened to come back up into her throat.

Tsutsumi, however, had very different sensibilities. For her own part, she could not understand what could possibly be so unpleasant about what she had said.

After finishing their late lunch, Homura and the others returned to the

barracks to relax, since there wasn't anything else they needed to do at the moment. Or could do, for that matter.

Homura wondered how long it would take Rotraud and the others to get rid of the bandits. Until that happened, they were just going to have to sit tight.

As the afternoon dragged on, a visitor suddenly arrived at the Phalanx of Blades barracks.

"Hey, new girls!"

Glancing toward the entrance, they spotted Horeicho, the soldier from earlier. Horeicho had a decently attractive face, which was unfortunately made less so by the condescension in his eyes.

"You want to prove yourselves, right?" he asked, getting right down to business.

"You mean...?"

But obviously there was only one thing he could mean.

"Yes. The bandits have likely holed up in the remains of a nearby deserted village. We plan to raid the place tonight, but...what if you got there before us? It would be the perfect opportunity for you to score some points."

Soldiers in the Aegis Guard and the Phalanx of Blades received better treatment the higher they rose in rank. Of course, higher ranks were also assigned more difficult missions, but that was just par for the course for soldiers. Which was why Horeicho was acting like he was doing them a big favor.

He obviously wasn't doing it for their sakes. Horeicho's real motives were as plain as day—he just wanted to make life easier for himself and his friends.

"But..."

Homura was eager to grow strong, but she still remembered Rotraud's words from earlier.

Recklessness could easily lead to death in this world. There were probably times when it was best to take a chance, but this didn't seem like one of those times. If it was low-level monsters, maybe, but their enemies in this case were

human. Intelligent and dangerous.

Unfortunately...not everyone seemed as cautious as Homura.

“Sounds like fun. Count me in.”

“Psycho! It’s too reckless!”

Not only would it be dangerous, Horeicho clearly had ulterior motives. Homura wanted to refuse. Psycho, however, was starved for entertainment and wasn’t about to take no for an answer.

“It’s just a bunch of pathetic bandits. We can get rid of them super-quick and then come straight back to eat some real food.”

“You need to take this more seriously.”

Homura knew Psycho probably wasn’t taking the enemy for granted, despite appearances, but they couldn’t just rush into things like this.

“No, she’s right. Most people who turn to banditry are talentless clods with no magical aptitude. As long as you don’t let them surprise you, even a bunch of fresh meat like yourselves should be able to handle them,” Horeicho said, trying to talk the girls into it.

While it differed from person to person, apparently almost everyone in this world was able to use at least some degree of self-buffing magic. According to Horeicho, the few who could not often turned to a life of banditry instead.

Maybe getting rid of the bandits would be as simple as he said, but it wouldn’t pay to just take a leap in the dark like this.

“If you’re worried, then you can stay behind. I’m not saying that to be mean or anything. I don’t know if we’ll do any good there, either, but I’m not gonna just sit around playing patty-cake with you lot forever.”

Psycho had a point.

They might have come from another world, but they were members of this world now. This world was in danger, and they had the power to do something about it. If they didn’t act, they would only be hurting themselves in the end.

Glancing around the room, Homura realized that Psycho wasn’t the only one

who seemed to want to go.

“But...”

Homura wasn't sure what to say.

How could she get them to change their minds? Homura was still mulling it over when a new voice interrupted.

“Is this a private meeting?”

Although calm and gentle, the voice was tinged with an undercurrent of anger.

“Rotraud!”

“Homura.”

Rotraud flashed Homura a smile before quickly turning toward Horeicho once more with sternness in his eyes. It was clear that he had already gathered the gist of their conversation.

“I wondered what you were doing sneaking into the Phalanx barracks like this. Lo and behold...”

“I was only thinking of what's best for them...”

“Enough excuses.”

Horeicho trailed off awkwardly. He looked pale. Rotraud clearly didn't believe him.

Rotraud closed his eyes and seemed to think for a moment. He opened them again and turned toward Homura and the others.

“All right, I've come to a decision. I planned on staying to defend the village, but instead, I'll go now to defeat the bandits while Horeicho and the others stay behind. If I wait until tonight, you girls or Horeicho might try pulling something in the meantime. However, if you girls think that you're up to it, you can come with me. Naturally, I'll do my best to keep you safe.”

The look in Rotraud's eyes was serious.

He was giving them an opportunity to make progress. So long as they were with a gold shield badge, they were sure to be safe. Besides, he probably

wanted to keep an eye on them as well.

Psycho's mind was obviously already made up. She glanced toward Homura, as if to ask her what she wanted to do.

Homura wasn't sure.

Part of it was nerves, but anything could happen. Homura's powers were untested. Someone could get hurt because of her, or even killed. She wanted to be useful, but she was afraid she would just get in the way.

Homura sneaked a glance at Psycho, figuring she was probably getting impatient. Surprisingly, however, Psycho looked calm. She was giving Homura all the time she needed.

It was what helped Homura to finally make up her mind.

"I'll do it."

She would struggle. She would try. That was her answer.

"Let me go with you."

Homura knew they would have accepted her answer no matter what she said. That was why she'd accepted, even knowing the danger. Psycho was usually quick to drag her into all sorts of things, but this time she was letting Homura choose for herself. Homura realized she hadn't been giving her friends the trust they deserved.

It wasn't just Rotraud; Jin was a capable fighter as well. Psycho was smart. And "defective" or not, Tsutsumi had been raised as a walking weapon.

Homura wasn't so sure about Proto, but she was freakishly strong at the very least. She was a mechanical life-form from outer space, after all. That had to count for something, didn't it?

"Understood. I'll start making preparations, then. Once you girls are ready, come wait for me by the village gate. Horeicho, you guard the village with Gail and Khett. The bandits haven't attacked the village thus far, but there's a first time for everything. Don't let your guard down."

"Yes, sir!"

After receiving the orders, Horeicho exited the barracks as quickly as he could. He practically scampered away with his tail between his legs.

“You too, girls. Don’t let your guards down just because I’m here. The bandits may not have powers, but they’ve already taken the lives of several villagers. They will not hesitate to kill, so do not show them any sympathy.”

That was one thing Rotraud didn’t need to worry about. Sympathy was in short supply among the girls.

“I will see you soon.”

Rotraud smiled once more and then left, asking them to join him later.

As soon as Rotraud was out of sight, Psycho grinned in satisfaction. Homura had a bad feeling about this.

“All right, then, let’s make it a contest! Which of us can kill the most bandits? The one who kills the fewest has to do a dare!”

“What is wrong with you?!”

Homura knew she shouldn’t have trusted her. Psycho was the type of person to happily carry out human experiments on criminals. Mass slaughter was just her idea of a good time.

“Fine, whatever. Let’s just hurry up and get ready...”

Of course, Homura was still going to go. It would be too much trouble to take it all back now. She just wished Psycho would stop messing with her head.



The girls were already waiting outside the gate when Rotraud finally arrived, cradling his helmet in his hands.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Getting this armor on is a chore.”

Rotraud was equipped with a full suit of silver armor and was carrying a spear tipped with a long, flat, swordlike blade. Maybe it was the compact design, but the armor appeared light.

The surcoat he wore over his armor was also white, lending him a pure and noble impression that made it hard to believe he was on his way to battle.

“Nice, very nice.”

Jin stared at Rotraud’s equipment with fascination.

“You’re making me blush.”

“My apologies. Your armaments are just very interesting to me.”

Once upon a time, Jin’s only interest had been cutting down evildoers, but since coming to this new world, she had discovered a desire to test her strength against others’. Now she seemed to be cultivating an interest in arms and accoutrements.

“Of course. We get new recruits like you from time to time who are obsessed with weapons and armor. As you rise in rank, you’ll gain access to more expensive equipment, so if you work hard, you might get to wear something like this yourself someday.”

“I find that very motivating.”

Jin’s face was expressionless, but her eyes sparkled like those of a young boy watching action cartoons.

Whether they were in the Aegis Guard or the Phalanx of Blades, Galdorssia apparently saved the best equipment for soldiers of higher rank. This wasn’t just to preserve resources, however. It was also because if a soldier died, there was a possibility that their equipment could be stolen by bandits or other enemies. This was also part of the reason that new recruits were expected to start slowly with relatively safe missions.

“Incidentally, this armor becomes tougher when it’s infused with magical energy.”

“Impressive!”

Such magical armor was apparently out of reach to those whose rank was not high enough.

“That’s great and all, but can we get going already?”

“Sorry, sorry.”

Rotraud smiled cheerfully and began walking, while the girls followed behind.

The road was bordered on either side by fields. Peasants stopped what they were doing to wave to Rotraud as he passed. Rotraud smiled and waved back. Rotraud was obviously well loved among the people, just as Leela had said.

A passing breeze sent a ripple through the stalks of wheat.

The sight was so idyllic. It was hard to believe that they were on their way to kill a bunch of people.

After they'd walked a bit farther, the road forked. One path led into a forest and was overgrown with weeds. Obviously, that path must be the one that led to the abandoned village. The carriage ruts in the road were well-worn and remained mostly bare, perhaps because the earth had been packed too densely for growth.

"That's unsettling..."

"I don't sense anyone, but take care. There are many places where enemies could be lurking."

Rotraud donned his helmet so as to be ready for an attack at any time.

The road into the woods was a little off-putting. A dense canopy of trees blocked the light from overhead. It was dark and gloomy in a way that encouraged Homura to imagine the worst.

They had not been walking down that road for very long before Homura's misgivings were proven correct. A broken carriage lay abandoned by the side of the road, half-hidden among the undergrowth.

Psycho immediately went to investigate.

"I wouldn't look at that if I were you," said Rotraud.

"It's fine, I'm used to this kind of stuff." Psycho ignored the warning and began making her way through the brush.

"She's a stout one, I'll give her that," muttered Rotraud, following after.

Homura wasn't sure what they were talking about.

"I used to see stuff like this all the time back at the laboratory," said Psycho.

“The laboratory? You were a scholar?”

“In a sense. I carried out important research for the progress of mankind, stuff that expanded the limits of human possibility. You know, like giving people exoskeletal armor or sticking on extra limbs with hypersonic blades. Biological fusion, that sort of stuff.”

“I’m not sure I understand...,” said Rotraud.

“Trust me, you don’t want to know!”

Homura had no idea why Psycho was suddenly talking about her research, but she did know one thing, and that was that it was better if Rotraud didn’t understand.

“Ugh, they’re all gnashed up and torn apart,” said Psycho.

Homura shuddered. Now she finally understood what Psycho and Rotraud had been talking about. It wasn’t just a carriage. She couldn’t see them, but there were *people* inside.

Homura heard the faint buzzing of flies. The corpses had probably attracted a swarm of them.

“The bodies haven’t decayed much, so this must have happened fairly recently. The women have been stripped as well, so you know what *that* means.”

“We’re on the right path, then. The damage to this carriage concerns me, however. Look at those large claw marks. A monstrous beast must have done this. The bandits may have tamed monsters on their side.”

“Is that possible...?”

“It depends on the species. As long as I’m here, though, there shouldn’t be anything to worry about.”

A monstrous beast that was large enough to destroy a carriage—taming a creature like that would require a lot of food. After plundering the loot and having their way with the women, perhaps the bandits had fed the passengers to the beast as food.

Homura felt like she was going to throw up.

Regardless of whether what Homura was imagining was true, these bandits had caused people to die for their own selfish, self-centered ends. Negative emotions swirled in Homura's chest, although she was not sure if what she was feeling was anger or sadness.

"Let's hurry."

At Rotraud's insistence, they began moving forward once more. The jaunty atmosphere that had been present when they first set off had long since expired.

The air grew tense, and Homura's legs felt like lead. Proceeding with so much caution was more taxing mentally than it was physically. Rotraud and Jin both knew what they were doing, but that didn't mean that Homura could let down her guard.

They walked and walked, but after all that, nothing happened in the end. They were nearly at the village by this point. They had been on edge this whole time for no reason. The anticlimax made Homura feel even more drained.

"We should be able to see the village soon."

The village was still hidden from sight by the gloomy woods, but it was apparently very close now.

The group grew more on edge than ever, expecting a fight to break out at any moment. Just then, a light flashed behind them.

As they turned to see, they spotted a streak of light shooting up into the sky. It was visible in the cracks between the trees.

"That light... It's Khett's magic!"

It wasn't just a light; it was offensive magic. There must be a fight brewing back at Guadhari.

"Damn. The bandits must have seen me leave the village. That, or they have a collaborator on the inside... There's no time to worry about that now, though. I need to hurry back. The same monster that destroyed that carriage could be with them. You'll need to make your own way back to the village, but keep your eyes peeled!"

Rotraud turned without waiting for a response. Despite being fully armored, he dashed away at phenomenal speed.

A moment later, Homura and the others were alone. They had been left behind.

“Well...I guess we should head back, then,” said Homura, preparing to follow Rotraud.

Jin held up a hand to stop her. “We’re surrounded.”

“We’re what?”

Homura glanced around, but she didn’t have Jin’s keen senses. All she could see was bushes and trees.

Even if enemies were surrounding the girls, they yet to make a move. They were probably being cautious as well.

“Listen, let’s make a break for it. Head toward the abandoned village, where visibility should be better!”

“Huh?!”

They were already close, so naturally, getting to the abandoned village would be much faster than heading back the way they had come. Unfortunately, it would also mean barreling headfirst into the enemy’s hideout.

“I will bring up the rear.”

“Jin!”

Before Homura knew it, they had gotten themselves surrounded. Now they were fleeing to the abandoned village? It was all happening so fast, Homura couldn’t think.

“Me first!”

“Wait until I say go!”

“I’ll try to run fast!”

Proto suddenly began running, followed by Psycho and then Tsutsumi.

“Hey, wait for me!”

The five girls ran as hard as they could along the difficult, unkempt road.

Homura could hear snapping noises behind her. Likely Jin, batting away the bolts and arrows being fired their way.

Homura felt a sense of unease, heading straight into the lion's mouth as they were, but she also felt a kind of inexplicable thrill.

It was probably just because they were running like their lives depended on it, but it didn't seem very long at all before they found themselves charging through the dilapidated gate leading into the abandoned village.

This village was smaller than Guadhari, and it had obviously been a long time since anyone had last cared for the houses scattered throughout the area.

Inside, the village was deathly quiet and seemed to be deserted. Empty bottles were lying on the ground, however, and there was evidence of recent campfires.

The only sign of movement for now was some rustling in the bushes, where the bandits who had chased them were likely still hiding. Eventually, however, the quiet was broken by the sound of a door bursting loudly open.

Homura and the others frantically raised their weapons.

It became immediately apparent, however, that there was something strange about the person who came running out of the house.

"Help me—!"

It was a young woman, her hands tied together with rope. Her clothing was soiled and had been half-torn from her body. The clothing itself was a little gaudy, as if maybe she had been a traveling performer, but the woman was more than beautiful enough in her own right.

With her hands tied together, she only managed to run a few steps before falling over.

"Who said you could run?!"

A moment later, a nasty-looking man stepped out from the same doorway and hollered at the woman. He held a knife in his right hand. He grabbed the fallen woman and pressed the knife to her throat.

“Don’t move!” he said, wiggling the knife menacingly. “If you move, I’ll slit her — Huh...?”

The man blinked in confusion. What had happened to his hand? It had been there just a second ago.

“Is this the only woman you’ve kidnapped?”

He turned at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. It was coming from behind, where he had been just a moment before.

As the man turned, he was confronted by the sight of a young woman with long black hair. She held a katana dripping with blood in her hand, and another of his comrades was dead at her feet. He glanced back at the stump of his arm, which he finally realized was spurting fountains of hot, red blood.

It finally clicked.

“M...my hannnd—!!”

The young woman with the black hair had zipped past him at some point, cutting off his hand along the way.

“He doesn’t seem capable of answering me.”

The man was too busy screaming.

“It—it was just me!” answered the woman on the ground, in his stead.

“Indeed.”

With the situation confirmed, Jin began racing from house to house, demolishing each door with a flurry of slashes and slaughtering any bandits she found within.

The man whose hand she had cut off was not the only one who was slow to realize what was happening. It took Homura and the others a moment to catch up as well.

By the time Homura understood what she was witnessing, the screaming man had already gone quiet.

“Augh... Ahhhhhh—!”

A sudden war cry. Homura spun around in shock.

Another man had come charging out from one of the houses, waving a saber in the air. His war cry sounded almost like a scream. He was obviously panicking.

Whether he was out for revenge or had just sensed his own impending death, the man was no longer thinking clearly. He had just thrown away any hope of a surprise attack.

Psycho and Tsutsumi promptly sliced the man to ribbons with a few quick flicks of their blades.

“Oh... Who gets the point if we both kill the same guy?”

“You were serious about that?!”

Was Psycho seriously trying to have a competition over who could slaughter the most people? Did she have no sense of ethics?

“Ooh, hide-and-seek. Better watch out, here I come!”

Turning around, Homura saw Proto using her war hammer to demolish one of the houses. Occasional bandit screams mingled with the heavy crashing noises that resulted from Proto destroying another wall.

Maybe they had it coming, but Homura couldn't help but feel a little sorry for the bandits. Not that they had anyone to blame but themselves. They had brought this apocalypse crew down upon their own heads.

Using a knife that had fallen onto the ground, Homura cut loose the ropes binding the kidnapped woman's hands.

“S...stay close to me!”

Homura tried to sound brave, but her hands were shaking in fear. This was pandemonium. Death loomed in all directions.

Now free, the woman clung silently to Homura's side. She looked no less terrified than before, however.

Homura may have been unaccustomed to battle, but she was still stronger than an ordinary person. She remembered what Seigrat had said, about those with power needing to serve as a shield for those without.

Homura might not be able to do much, but she would fight tooth and nail to protect what little she could. That included this woman.

Homura had barely finished the thought when an arrow suddenly pierced the woman's throat, directly in front of Homura's eyes.

"Ah...?"

The woman was knocked back by the force of the arrow, landing in the dirt.

Her eyes went wide, and her mouth gaped helplessly as if to beg for help. But it was already too late. She could no longer speak.

The one thing Homura had tried to protect had already slipped through her fingers.

"Looks like I missed!"

Homura turned her eyes toward the source of the voice, spotting a large man holding a crossbow. Based on his outburst, he had actually been aiming for Homura.

Due to the crossbow's construction, it took a decent amount of time to load each bolt. The man tossed the crossbow aside and drew the sword at his waist instead.

"What do we have here? You've got a pretty nice body yourself." His frustration quickly disappeared in favor of a leering grin. "Don't resist, and I'll let you live as my plaything. Unless you'd like to try your luck at killing me instead."

The man obviously didn't feel very threatened. Homura could see the way he was staring at her, and she was pretty sure she knew where his eyes were pointed. He wasn't even interested in the woman he had just killed. Just in his next *diversion*.

"I'm glad the first person I kill is someone like you. This way, I won't have to feel bad about it when I burn you to a crisp."

Homura raised her staff.

Her hands were no longer shaking.







“Ooh, hide-and-seek! Better watch out, here I come!”

Proto spotted a bandit peeking out of one of the windows. She dashed forward, swinging her war hammer in the air.

“Ahhhh!!”

The house was quickly reduced to smithereens. The bandits screamed as they scurried about like so many beheaded chickens.

Proto had obliterated more than half of the house with just a single swing.

All the bandits who had been cowering next to the wall, or who had been hit by flying debris, were at best seriously injured and at worst already dead.

Proto didn't bother chasing after the few survivors lucky enough not to have been caught in the destruction. She just continued to move from house to house, wherever it looked like bandits might be hiding, crushing and smashing and flushing out the bandits within. Mostly she enjoyed seeing them run. The competition was a secondary concern for her.

“Now do you understand what it feels like to be on the receiving end of an attack?!”

The bandits never had a chance to answer, however. Jin, Psycho, and Tsutsumi were quick to ensure their silence.

“I'll check further back in the village.”

“You go get 'em, killer.”

Now that things in the immediate area had quieted down, Jin departed in search of further prey.

“What about the rest of you? I'm gonna stay here and crush more houses.”

“Okay, but try to leave some of the corpses intact while you're at it. I want to give something a try.”

“I'm sure it's nothing pleasant.”

“I knew you'd understand!”

Psycho flashed a devilish grin. In response, Proto used her synthetic voice modulator to approximate a sigh.



The man was dangerously close. Not quite in sword's reach, but close enough to quickly close the gap if he chose.

He hadn't made any decisive moves yet, but neither had Homura.

"Magic users have to mutter some sort of mumbo jumbo in order to focus, don't they? The moment you start chanting, you'll be left defenseless. Even I know that."

The man thought that Homura was a mage. He was waiting for her to start chanting a spell.

Homura's fire wasn't dependent on spell casting, but she didn't want to act before she knew the extent of his abilities. He looked pretty sturdy in appearance and had remained calm even while his fellow bandits were killed. He might be dangerous up close. It would be best if she waited for him to make a move, but if he managed to get the jump on her when that time came, that could also spell instant death.

The tension was almost painful. Homura's breathing grew shallow.

Faced with the prospect of death, Homura found it even more difficult to think straight than before. How could she beat him? Or get away? Or even just manage to survive? Her mind was clutching at straws.

She had only just made up her mind to fight a moment before, and now she was already at a loss as to how to proceed.

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of her face.

"We can stand here staring at each other all day, girlie, but once the boss man gets back, he's gonna draw and quarter every last one of you, soldiers or not."

The bandit's threat caused Homura to grow even more flustered.

Maybe he was just bluffing, but despite the situation, he had yet to even bat an eye. Maybe he believed what he said about this "boss man" of his.

Supposedly, most bandits turned to a life of crime because they lacked special

abilities, but there was no guarantee that would be true of their boss as well. Homura might have gotten herself caught up in something even more dangerous than she had assumed.

Just as Homura was considering taking her chances and using her flames, she suddenly heard a hound baying in the distance.

Although the noise was coming from far away, it was still loud enough to rattle the entire area. Homura sensed instinctively that this was no normal dog.

Homura flinched. But so did the man.

Realizing he had let his guard down, the man seemed to panic. Before he could think better of what he was doing, he made a lunge for Homura.

It was kill or be killed. The decision had been taken out of Homura's hands.

"Fire!!"

With a quick shout, Homura channeled her flames into the holes along her staff. The fire whipped through the internal cylinder that ran the length of the staff before spouting from the tip with diabolical force.

The man was engulfed before he could react.

"Argggghhhhh!!"

"Sorry, did I forget to mention? This is actually a supernatural ability, not magic."

Most magic spells took the form of a sentence, comprised of several phrases. The only reason for Homura's brief chant, however, had been to hype herself up.

Maybe it was because the man was a villain, but she didn't feel nearly as guilty about killing him as she had expected. Regardless of his character, though, the reality was still that she had just killed a person. The fact that she didn't feel more guilty left her a little disgusted with herself.

And yet, for some reason, she couldn't tear her eyes away as the flames continued to consume him.

The color of the burning flames, the sound of his frantic screaming, the smell

of burning human flesh.

It enthralled her.

The world around Homura seemed to grow dim. Only the bandit remained as he thrashed about in the flickering flames, the image searing itself into the backs of her eyes. Homura felt elated in a way she had never felt before.

Just as she was about to lose herself in the flames—

“Homura! Hey, Earth to Homura!”

Someone was shaking her by the shoulder. The world slowly came back into focus.

“What’s wrong with you? You are acting strange.”

Once the fog cleared, Homura realized that Proto was speaking to her.

“What just happened to me...?” Homura had dropped her staff at some point.

“Your face.”

Proto tapped her helmet with the tip of her finger, around where her mouth would be. Homura reached up to wipe her own cheek, thinking she had something on her face...

“Huh...?!”

She soon went from stroking her cheek to covering her mouth in horror.

*While watching the man burn, Homura had begun to smile.*

“Guess you and Psycho have more in common than you thought.”

“That can’t be...can it?” Homura offered a half-hearted protest.

The fight, meanwhile, seemed to be over. Homura realized that everything had grown quiet once more. She couldn’t see any of the other girls, however, only Proto. Maybe they were out on the hunt for more bad guys.

Glancing around, Homura noticed that the place was littered with bodies. Many of Proto’s victims, in particular, had been left in unrecognizable shape.

“Hurrk!” Homura suddenly felt nauseous.

“Forget about that, did you hear that dog howling earlier? The monster

Rotraud mentioned must be nearby.”

Homura recalled the remains of the carriage. If whatever had caused that carnage was nearby, they had to stop it before it did any more damage. Now, more than ever, was the time to fight.

Homura wiped her mouth and stood up straight. She could vomit later.

“Let’s go!”

Homura and Proto began walking toward the center of the village. As they drew closer, they heard the sounds of a battle. Eventually, they arrived in an open area, where they discovered Jin, who was breathing hard.

“What’s wrong?!”

“We’ve got trouble.”

“I knew this was going to happen...”

Homura followed Jin’s line of sight, laying eyes upon her opponent.

Homura was instantly left speechless. She had been expecting a monstrous beast.

“You murdered my henchman! You stupid children, I’ll kill you all!”

The creature that was glaring at them with murderous rage in its eyes was vaguely human in shape, but that was the only human thing about it.

“A monster...”

She didn’t know how else to describe it.

Its body was covered in fur, and its head was that of a wolf. If she had to give the creature a name, perhaps it could be called a werewolf, but it was far more hideous and misshapen than that word suggested.

Even from a distance, the thing was massive, covered in unnaturally thick cords of muscle. The sinews along its shoulders and arms were particularly swollen, so much so that they were visibly outlined beneath its fur.

The massive, razor-sharp fangs lining its mouth could easily tear a human to shreds, yet somehow the fang-like spikes lining its powerful arms were even larger still.

It was obvious at a glance that this demon was the creature responsible for destroying the carriage earlier. It had probably smashed it to bits just as easily as Homura could crush a fly.

As if to give further evidence of its power, patches of ground in the area were dredged up and cracked, having evidently been struck by the creature. The damage resembled what the heavy warrior with the mace had done during their enlistment exams, only this creature had done it with nothing but its bare fists.

“So...this is what a demon looks like...”

Homura had heard of monsters, known as demons, that were powerful enough to defeat even the most accomplished of warriors. This massive hulking wolf creature was obviously one such creature. Even Jin had recognized the trouble they were in. They needed to run, but Homura doubted the monster was going to let them go so easily.

“That scent...! You’re the same ones who killed my henchmen the other day!”

The creature must have been referring to the bandits they had encountered upon arriving in this world. The wolf-thing’s face distorted further in anger. It didn’t look like it was going to let them go.

“You mean the bandits that attacked that carriage... Consider that obedience training, you unruly mutt,” said Jin.

“‘Henchmen’?! ” shouted Proto. “You’re supposed to be a pet, not a master! Bad doggy!”

“Wh-wh-why are you trying to make it angry?! You’re gonna get us all killed!”

Just as Homura expected, the massive demon grew more incensed than before.

“I’ll kill you! I’ll gnaw on your bones!” it shouted, baring its fangs. Filthy drool splattered from its lips.

“I told you! Look at how angry you made him!”

The bandit leader dashed forward. It moved at incredible speed for its size, closing distance with the three girls in the blink of an eye. It raised a massive,

tree-trunk-like arm into the air. Homura sensed imminent death approaching.

“Homura, watch out!”

A split second before the arm came crashing down, Homura was hit with massive force from the side.

Before Homura knew what had happened, she was hurtling through the air. Standing where Homura had been a moment before, Proto was immediately sent flying by a powerful swipe of the wolf-demon’s claw. She had pushed Homura out of the way, saving her from the creature’s attack.

The swipe had gouged a hole in the armor Proto was wearing, exposing the rippling wires underneath.

“Owwwww!!”

Unfortunately, Homura’s arm was in too much pain at the moment for her to worry about Proto.

“Ow! Ow! Ow—! Are you kidding me? I think you broke my arm!”

Glancing at her throbbing arm, Homura could see that it was currently bent in a location where there was no joint. Proto had gotten carried away while coming to Homura’s aid and had knocked her out of the way with far more force than was necessary.

“Ha-ha, sorry!” Proto said, half laughing. “You can yell at me later!”

This was no time for joking!

The wolf-demon had become so enraged by Jin and Proto’s taunts that its attention was now focused almost entirely on them. It barely even seemed to notice Homura anymore. Mages were often targeted first because of how dangerous they could be, so maybe Proto was just playing a part for Homura’s sake. Still, she hadn’t needed to hit her so hard that her arm broke!

“Proto, do you think you can handle this creature?”

“Maybe, if I could hit it. But I don’t think I can.”

“I see. I fear it is too strong for me, as well.”

“Well, if we can’t beat it, we can always die trying!”

The two adjusted their grips on their weapons and charged forward in tandem. The pitched battle that unfolded was too fast for Homura's eyes to follow.

Jin delivered a flurry of strikes in quick succession, each of which would have been fatal had it hit home. Unfortunately, she couldn't manage to get close enough. Each time she made a lunge for an opening, the creature used its lightning-fast reflexes to dodge her strike without fail. They were matching each other move for move, tit for tat.

Each swing of the hulking wolf creature's arms left massive divots behind in the dirt, causing the ground to shake like in an earthquake.

Proto's hammer was even more powerful than the demon's swings, completely pulverizing the earth with each blow, but the creature's speed was inexhaustible. Even with Jin to keep it busy, it still managed to dodge Proto's attacks.

Instead, Proto was the one who found herself getting clobbered backward during the opening she left after each swing.

As the hulking wolf creature turned its attention toward Proto, Jin seized the opportunity to strike, but she could only manage to make shallow cuts in its hide. Their one hope was to try to wear the creature out, but it showed no sign of fatigue. If anything, it looked like the girls might wear themselves out first.

Just as it seemed things were about to go from bad to worse, a certain blond jackass finally joined the fray.

"What's the big idea, having all this fun without me?!"

Obviously the voice belonged to Psycho; however, there was also a large man standing next to her. He held a saber in his hand and seemed to be following her.

"My heeaaaad, somebody helllp meeee...!"

"I can't see, I can't see!"

"My body, what happened to my body?"

Multiple voices seemed to issue forth from the man at once.

There was more. Not only was the man far larger than any normal person could possibly be, for some reason he also had four arms, and the saber that Homura had thought the man was holding was in fact grafted directly into his arm where a hand ought to have been.

“Yikes... I knew Psycho was crazy, but I didn’t know she was this crazy.”

“Despicable.”

Homura glanced toward Proto and Jin. They seemed to have already grasped the situation. A moment later, the truth dawned on Homura as well.

“You didn’t...”

“Well, how does it feel to see your precious underlings turned into a creature feature?!”

“You’re demented!”

The man with the saber was evidently a product of Psycho’s mad experiments. Homura couldn’t believe someone so unhinged could be a part of her own team. Psycho’s face had become a mask of twisted glee at the sight of what she had done. Wickedness incarnate.

“I gave it a name. I call him Cringe in Terror! The Murderous Saberman Who Stalks the Abandoned Village!”

“You could have at least given him a proper name! Wait, no, that’s the least of your problems!”

“Saberman, kill that mangy fleabag!”

The creature, whose name had already been shortened to Saberman, did as he was told, charging toward the hulking wolf creature. Despite being made from the wolf-demon’s henchmen, the creature seemed to now be under Psycho’s control.

Homura had no idea what Psycho had done, but she did know one thing: that it was an affront to all that was good and pure. An abomination of the highest order.

Imagine needing to be saved by something so abhorrent!

Psycho's desire to help her friends, at least, was sincere. The moment she saw that Homura's arm was broken, she raced over to Homura's side. She quickly began chanting a healing spell, which mended the break.

The pain from the fracture quickly receded, but in its place Homura was left with a warm, burning sensation that was apparently a physical reaction to having such a serious wound healed so quickly.

"What...is that thing?"

"It's a primitive synthetic monster. I used my magic to patch together a few souls. It's healing magic; I basically just adapted it."

"More like maladapted..."

Homura shuddered to think what would happen if anyone learned what Psycho had done... She decided she would pretend not to know Psycho if that happened.

"My heaaad! Hellp meeee!"

Saberman begged its former boss for help, even as it continued to attack. It swung its saber arm around wildly as it stumbled and teetered around the wolf-demon. For a brief moment, it met the hulking wolf creature in combat, but it was quickly knocked over onto the ground.

"Tsk! You're making me look bad, Saberman!"

With an ear-shattering roar, the wolf-demon swung its fist downward.

"What, you didn't think all it could do was just swing its arms around like some dipshit, did you?"

Moments before Saberman's head would have been crushed, his (?) body suddenly began to balloon outward.

"What is it?! What's happening?"

The wolf-demon's fist stopped in midair as it tried to leap backward to safety, but Saberman's upper body exploded before the demon could get away.

"Urrk!"

In the same moment, a black mist spewed from inside Saberman's body,

enveloping the area. Homura had seen that mist before...

“Is that...Tsutsumi?!”

A lone girl stood in the center of the mist, where Saberman’s upper body had burst open a moment before. Homura jerked her head to the side, glaring at Psycho.

“I figured I’d stick Tsutsumi in there while I was at it.”

“What were you thinking, you moron?!” Homura smacked Psycho on the shoulder.

“Oww! Obviously I wouldn’t have done it unless I knew she’d be all right. Tsutsumi’s regeneration isn’t just physical; her spiritual regeneration is off the charts as well. Even if I tinker around with her a bit, she’ll be good as new in no time.”

“That’s not the point!” Homura punched Psycho again. “And you, Tsutsumi! How could you let her talk you into something so dangerous?!”

Tsutsumi just waved. She was still emitting her poisonous gas.

“Whatever! Let’s just get out of here while the getting’s good.”

Now was their chance—not to finish the creature, but to flee.

Homura expected the wolf-demon to get paralyzed by Tsutsumi’s poison, but it was still on its feet and fanning the mist away. Tsutsumi’s poison had incapacitated Homura and the others almost instantly, but it seemed to have barely had an effect on the wolf.

The wolf was definitely dazed, however. It didn’t even attempt to chase after Tsutsumi, who had used up all her poison when she burst free from the bandit clump and was now running away. Homura grabbed Tsutsumi’s hand as she raced toward her and began to flee.

A moment later, Tsutsumi had taken the lead and was instead pulling Homura along behind her.



They ran like their lives depended on it. Homura couldn’t remember passing through the forest. Before she knew it, they were already sprinting down the

road toward Guadhari Village.

“Ugh.....pew...”

Completely out of breath, Homura was impressed with herself for managing to run for so long. Maybe it was adrenaline, or maybe she had a knack for self-buffing magic as well.

Exhausted but probably safe for now, the girls began to walk the rest of the way. Before long, they spotted a group of people milling around in front of the village gates.

“What do you think they’re doing?”

“Cleanup, probably.”

“Cleanup?”

Once they got closer, Homura understood what Psycho had meant. The bodies of bandits were lined up on the ground. Most of the bodies had suffered multiple stab wounds. Apparently, it had been a bloodbath.

In addition to Horeicho, two other people, a man and a woman, were standing by the gate. Probably the two soldiers named Khett and Gail.

Horeicho was busy lining up the corpses, but he froze for a second when he saw them.

At first, Homura thought Horeicho’s surprise was just from his realization that they had been in a nasty fight, but something about the way he was acting seemed strange.

He looked shocked, almost as if he had just seen a ghost.

Jin’s eyes darkened as she saw the look on Horeicho’s face. They barely had enough time to feel suspicious, however, before his face returned to its usual expressionless mask.

“What happened to you? Did a bunch of bandits really give you that much trouble?” he said.

Something about his behavior seemed a little forced.

“Of course not. We just had a little fun. They were only bandits, after all,” said

Psycho, not bothering to hide her irritation. “You three seem to be enjoying yourselves, though. I mean, look at how ecstatic those corpses are.”

“Ecstatic?”

Homura had been too focused on the strange way Horeicho and the other two soldiers were acting to notice the strange expressions on the faces of the dead bandits at first. Almost all of the dead bandits’ faces were stretched taut. Depending on how you looked at them, they could almost seem to be smiling.

“Well, what can you expect? They’re bandits, after all. They’re bound to be a little strange,” said Horeicho, avoiding the subject with a dry laugh.

“Psycho, we don’t have time for this. We should go find Rotraud.”

“Good point.”

The whole situation smelled funny, but there was no point in pushing for details at the moment. Horeicho and the others would just play dumb anyway.

Right now, what they really needed to do was hurry up and report what had happened to Rotraud.

They found him inside the garrison office.

“You look hurt... I knew I should have stayed with you on the way back. I’m glad to see you’re safe, at least.”

Rotraud greeted Homura and the others with a look of profound relief upon his face. He had already removed his armor, but the stench of blood hanging in the air attested to how the battle must have gone.

“Rotraud, sir, actually...”

Homura explained what had happened at the abandoned village.

That the carriage probably hadn’t been destroyed by a monstrous beast, but rather by a demon. A demon who was leading the bandits. Naturally, she left out the part about how Psycho had transgressed against all that was good and decent.

Rotraud’s face grew stiff as he listened to her report.

“A beast-man monster resembling a wolf...? I’ve never heard of such a demon before. Perhaps it came from somewhere far away. Or...”

“Or...it could have been man-made?”

Rotraud’s eyes widened. “I’m surprised you realized that possibility for yourself.”

“Well, considering how strange its clothing was...”

“Its clothing?”

Homura couldn’t remember anything that unusual about that. Its upper body had been bare, but on its lower body it had worn a pair of pants that looked like tattered rags.

“The rips in its pants suggested that it had grown in size quite suddenly.”

“You’re right...!”

Homura hadn’t noticed at the time because of how much danger they were in, but that was strange. If its body had always been like that, then it should have had clothes that fit. There was probably a reason the pants were torn.

“You may already be aware of this, but there are rumors that the Dark Lord is active again. If the bandit leader was transformed as part of the Dark Lord’s plans, the situation may be even more dire than I suspected. There’s a good chance you only escaped death because the monster is not yet used to its new body. If the Dark Lord went to all the trouble of creating a monster, I doubt the monster he created would be very weak. Once it adjusts to its new form, even I may be no match for it...”

Rotraud’s face remained serious as he pulled out a sheet of paper and began to write.

“Your training is temporarily suspended. This is a letter asking for assistance from Seigrat, Holy Protectorate of the Shield. We need to eliminate this creature now. Please deliver this letter to Galdorssia for me.”

Homura accepted the letter.

“The sun will be going down soon. Wait until tomorrow, at daybreak, to depart.”

“Yes, sir!”

It was one unexpected development after another. The day would come, soon, when they would need to take care of these situations for themselves. Until then, it was imperative that they focus on becoming stronger. Homura felt a new purpose beating in her chest.

No sooner had they arrived at the barracks, however, than Psycho opened her mouth and ruined the mood.

“All right, meeting time. We still need to decide on Homura’s punishment!”

“The competition is still in effect?!”

A dare, after all, was a dare.

## Chapter 8

### Gnash

After dinner, the five girls discussed what had happened. They kept the lights off as they spoke.

“Horeicho was acting pretty suspicious, wasn’t he?”

Naturally, their discussion focused on the dubious expressions on the faces of Horeicho and the other soldiers as they returned to the village.

“They seem fishy.”

“Agreed. Whatever’s going on, they didn’t seem very happy to see us alive.”

Jin was staring out the window, keeping her eyes peeled for any suspicious activity on the soldiers’ parts.

It wasn’t just Horeicho. The other two soldiers helping to dispose of the bodies had seemed taken aback as well. For the time being, it was best to assume they were all working together.

Of the two soldiers, the woman appeared to be a magic user. Rotraud had mentioned that Khett was a mage, which meant Khett was probably the woman, and the other soldier, a large man, was probably the one named Gail.

“They’ll probably be rendezvousing with Fido soon. Maybe even as early as tonight.”

The bandit leader had likely moved from the abandoned village by now. The girls planned to tail Horeicho in order to ascertain the bandit leader’s new location.

“And once we know where he is, we can go tell Rotraud.”

“That won’t work,” said Psycho briskly.

“What? But why?”

“Because we’re going to score some points by beating the snot out of that thing ourselves.”

“What do you mean ‘points’?! Are you nuts?!”

“Hey, you wanted to get a leg up, didn’t you? You should be thanking me!”

“This isn’t a joke!”

However, Homura knew the talk of scoring points was just a front.

“Look, the truth is, if we go tell that pretty boy Rotraud, you know he’s just gonna stop us next time. And assuming he does go off in search of the mutt, it might just launch a surprise attack while he’s gone and destroy the whole village instead. Whereas if he decides to stay and defend the village, the creature could get away. Us going is the best option here.”

“If you were giving this serious thought, why didn’t you just say so from the beginning...?”

Homura was tired enough from her first real fight; she didn’t have the energy for stupid jokes right now. Although honestly, she had a feeling Psycho kind of meant what she said about scoring points.

“Of course I’m giving it serious thought. We don’t know anything about this world, so we’re under no obligation to save it. But even I’m not awful enough to just turn my back on the situation now that we’re involved.”

Psycho seemed to have recognized that she was now a member of this new world. As selfish and self-absorbed as she could be, she was still facing up to her responsibilities here, in her own way.

In fact, since she was actually trying to be proactive, she was actually showing more dedication than Homura was. Homura was impressed. She scolded herself for thinking so little of Psycho.

“You are awful in every other way, though,” interrupted Proto, ruining the moment.

“You shut up!”

Proto was right, of course. Psycho was pretty awful.

“Well, then, I’m assuming you have a plan?”

The wolf-demon was much stronger than they were. Last time, the girls had been forced to flee. Unless they could find a way to even the odds, the wolf-demon would get off scot-free once more, and this time with their heads as a trophy. They needed to think this thing through.

“Our linchpin is Tsutsumi. You can emit more poison, can’t you, Tsutsumi?”

“Food goes in...poison comes out...!”

Tsutsumi raised a victorious fist into the air to indicate that she was ready and willing.

Apparently, as long as she had food to eat, the poison would take care of itself. Still, Homura would rather they didn’t push her too hard. She knew they were in no position for her to say that, however.

“That silver badge and his two riffraff friends will be there as well, but Jin and Proto should be able to handle them. Our problem is the mutt. Tsutsumi’s poison at least had some effect, so that’s what we need to gamble on. Once the poison slows it down, you both need to come in fast and strong. If everything goes well, that will be your opportunity, Homura.”

“M...me?!”

“Yes. If you can burn it with your fire, that would probably do a lot of damage. I’m not expecting too much, though. After all, even Jin barely managed to get close.”

Jin wrinkled her nose in response. She didn’t like to admit defeat.

“I’ll try, but...ugh, I feel so nervous...”

Psycho had said she wasn’t expecting much, but the idea that Homura might turn out to be their trump card had left her feeling overwhelmed. It was a lot of pressure. Part of her was glad that Psycho would place so much faith in her, but so far, Homura had done nothing but make a complete fool of herself. She had zero confidence she would be able to live up to expectations.

“Remember, Tsutsumi still doesn’t have complete control over her poison, so

once she starts there's a good chance the poison will keep pumping until she runs out. It's all riding on that one shot. Our first priority has to be the mutt. If anything goes wrong, we have to hightail it out of there. If we do have to run, there's a good chance we won't all make it, so whoever does survive should go find Pretty Boy and figure out what to do next."

Psycho had even included a contingency plan. Homura felt her chest tighten at the prospect. She wasn't ready to die a second time.

"I don't think I need to ask the others...", said Psycho, turning her eyes toward Homura. "But what about you, Homura? Are you sure you want to come?"

Homura could run away if she wanted. It was still an option.

"Your power was made for fighting, but that doesn't mean anything. Until recently, you were just a normal person. Someone to be protected, not the other way around. Even I understand that. Are you really sure you want to risk your life for us when it might only raise our chance of success one percent?"

Homura didn't want to die, but she didn't want to run, either.

"I..." Homura closed her trembling hand into a fist. "I'm coming, too. It may have only been one person, but I killed someone during the fight as well. I won't run just because I'm scared. I can't."

He might have been a bad guy, but Homura had already killed a person. She was involved, and she couldn't turn her back on that responsibility now.

"I knew you had it in you. Don't get me wrong; you're still absolute deadweight, though. But don't worry, if we have to run, I'll make sure to let you go first!"

"You could have kept that last part to yourself! I was just starting to get into the right headspace!"

The tactical discussion was at an end. Just then, Jin, who was still keeping watch at the window, suddenly spoke.

"Everyone be quiet."

The air grew tense, and silence filled the room.

"Look."

Jin gestured with her chin. Horeicho, Khett, and Gail had just exited the garrison.

The sun had already set by this point, leaving only the moon and the magical orestones to illuminate the ground outside. The village was gloomy and quiet. The three Aegis soldiers began walking toward the gate, keeping their eyes peeled for unwelcome attention.

“It’s time. Let’s follow them.”

Homura and the other girls waited for the soldiers to exit the gate before they sneaked out from the barracks. In order to be less conspicuous, they split into two groups as they tailed the soldiers. Jin and Tsutsumi were better suited to clandestine activities and took the lead, while the remaining girls, Homura, Psycho, and Proto, made up the rear.

“What if they’re just out on patrol?” asked Homura, speaking to Psycho, who was in the rear group with her.

“Not a chance. Look at how they relaxed once they exited the gate.”

“Now that you mention it...”

While still inside the village, the soldiers had crept along as if on pins and needles. As soon as they stepped outside, however, all hesitation vanished from their steps.

The peasants who worked out in the fields had gone back into the village before the sun set. The only reason for the soldiers to be so unconcerned now was that they knew they no longer had a reason to worry.

Homura’s group lingered behind to ensure that Horeicho and the others didn’t notice them. Before long, they were following Jin and Tsutsumi’s backs rather than the soldiers themselves.

Those two backs turned down the path that led toward the abandoned village.

“What if we get ambushed by the survivors...?”

“From what I could tell, I doubt there are any survivors left. Other than Fido, that is.”

The road was decrepit and dark, with only the moonlight filtering through the trees to guide them. The forbidding woods appeared different now than during the day, awakening a primal fear within Homura’s heart.

Homura recalled that once, long ago, the forest had been considered a netherworld for some cultures in Europe—a dangerous place, separate from the one where humans lived. A place full of wild animals, bandits, and other deadly perils.

Walking through the forest now proved even more stressful than it had during the day, whittling away at Homura’s already frazzled nerves.

They were lucky, however—either that or the wild animals and bandits were all in hiding—because they reached the gate to the abandoned village without further incident. A sigh escaped Homura’s lips, possibly a sigh of relief.

Homura’s relief was short-lived, however, as she peered inside the gate.

“We have to go even further, don’t we?”

“Yeah, unless the mutt is stupid enough to be hiding out near the entrance.”

Even after reaching the abandoned village, Jin and Tsutsumi continued onward. The village was apparently just a relay point.

They let the others get a head start once again before following after.

As soon as Homura took her first step through the gate, a peculiar scent invaded her nostrils. She buried her nose in her arm reflexively.

“Ugh, that stench...”

It was blood. Traces of the massacre that had occurred earlier that day.

Homura expected to see bodies still littering the area. As she glanced around, however, she was surprised.

She couldn’t spot a single corpse.

There were, however, track marks in their place, along with bloodstains. Signs that something had been dragged. These multiple red tracks converged into a

single path that continued deeper into the village.

It seemed as if someone had gathered all the bodies together into one location. Homura doubted she was about to stumble upon a wake.

Jin and Tsutsumi continued, following the path of blood. Before long, they had exited the village from the other side and were inside the forest once again.

“It looks like there was a gate here as well.”

Unlike the gate that Homura and the others had passed through earlier, this one was fairly remote, with fewer houses located nearby. It was most likely the rear gate.

Beyond it, the smell of blood grew even stronger.

Homura resisted the urge to gag, placing one foot after the other. After walking through the forest for a few minutes, they reached the end of the bloody trail.

The path led to an abrupt cliff face rising out of the forest. The path disappeared inside a cave leading into the surface of the rock.

Jin and Tsutsumi appeared from behind a large boulder a short distance from the road. They gestured for Homura and the others to hide, and the girls all gathered in the hiding spot.

From there, they could see Horeicho and the two other soldiers speaking to someone inside the cave’s mouth. They seemed to be apologizing to the unseen person.

“I’m not asking you to forgive us, but there was a mistake.”

“A mistake! You’re saying my men were killed because of a mistake?!” shouted a voice from inside the darkness.

They were speaking to the bandit leader, just as expected.

The bandit leader’s voice was dripping with hostility and rage. It was shouting so hoarsely it sounded as if it might damage its throat.

“I knew they were in cahoots.” Psycho grinned savagely, her suspicions confirmed. Horeicho and his friends had indeed tried to kill them.

“As a way to make it up to you, we brought you more of this.” Horeicho held up a small bottle for the creature to see. There seemed to be some sort of liquid inside it.

“That makes up for nothing, you pissant! What even is that—?”

A moment earlier, the voice had been out of its mind with rage, but for some reason, it suddenly went quiet. Remaining silent, the hulking wolf creature finally emerged from the cave. Its mouth was stained red, as if it had just been eating fresh meat.

“Give it.”

The man-beast swiped the bottle from Horeicho’s hand, unstopped it, and downed the contents in a single gulp.

Homura didn’t get a good glimpse of what was inside the bottle, but whatever it was, it must have been valuable enough to mollify the demon.

Homura soon learned how right she had been. Seconds after swallowing the liquid, the wolf-demon began to twist and writhe.

“Urgh... ArrGghHhHH—!”

It shouted painfully, its body racked with spasms.

But the bottle clearly hadn’t contained poison.

With each painful shudder, the creature grew even larger, tearing through its own fur. Its claws and arm spikes grew thicker and stronger as it became more hideous by the second.

The combat advantages these new changes would confer were obvious.

Homura gulped in fear. They all did.

While the transformation was still underway, the creature might be defenseless. But it would be dangerous to approach. What should they do? Attack now or wait and see? Not even Psycho seemed to know the answer.

As soon as the transformation finished, the creature’s shouts of pain subsided. In charge of its faculties once more, it slowly began to crouch. It thrust one shoulder forward.

What was it doing? Before Homura could finish her thought, Psycho had begun shouting.

“Get back!”

“Huh?!”

Psycho knocked her out of the way. What was happening? Homura rolled across the ground, and she saw that the boulder they had been hiding behind was now gone, replaced by the hulking wolf creature.

When? How? The momentum continued to send her tumbling across the ground. It felt like she was being punched over her entire body.

Once she saw the shower of rocks and gravel that came raining down, she realized that the wolf-demon had blitzed forward and completely pulverized the boulder in the blink of an eye.

If Psycho hadn't been there to knock her out of the way, Homura would be dead right now.

“I didn't account for this! Retreat!” Psycho forcibly dragged Homura to her feet. Homura began to instinctively run back toward the village. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she was in so much pain it felt like she was going to break into pieces.

Strangely, despite the demon's earlier speed, it wasn't following them yet. The girls still continued to book it, however. There was no way it was going to just let them go.

After they passed through the gate, the area opened up once more, and they were able to see better. Homura stole a glance behind, but there was still no sign of the wolf creature.

Just then, a blast of wind struck them from the side.

Howling wind, concussive force, raging dust.

The whole world changed in the blink of an eye.

Several houses that had been standing completely unharmed just a moment ago were suddenly reduced to complete rubble. Homura's legs seized up in terror.

Turning around slowly, she saw several long grooves extending from the forest. And at the ends of those grooves stood the wolf-demon, its arms raised high into the air.

“I’m sorry. I should have seen this possibility coming,” muttered Psycho. A bead of cold sweat trickled down her cheek.

With a single swipe, the wolf-demon had created a shock wave so great that it had gouged deep wounds into the earth and annihilated those houses even from a distance. It was far stronger now than it had been during their last encounter. And it was now standing in their way.

“This *power*...!” Even the wolf-demon trembled at its newfound might, unable to hide its surprise. “Yes... Yes! Now I can finally kill Rotraud! Even the Holy Protectorates will have to fear me!”

The wolf-demon delighted in its new powers, overjoyed as a child with a new toy.

“But first, you five. I’ll rend your flesh and devour your bones!”

The wolf-demon turned on Homura and the others, its eyes piercing and filled with a murderous intent that sent chills down Homura’s spine. It was hungry for revenge for its fallen henchmen.

“I guess this is game over.” Psycho smiled reflexively, her jaw set. The situation looked hopeless.

Homura, meanwhile, said nothing. She couldn’t even get her breathing under control.

Jin, Proto, and Tsutsumi silently raised their weapons. None of them, however, truly believed they were getting out of there alive.

This was the end.

*Thump. Thump.* Step by step, the hulking wolf creature drew closer. It moved slowly, knowing its strength. Knowing that victory was already assured.

The distance grew inevitably shorter.

Homura couldn’t even shuffle backward. It was taking all her strength just to remain standing.

“Rotraud...”

The name slipped from Homura’s trembling lips like a cry for help.

But how would he hear her? He wasn’t even there.

They should have gone to him in the beginning, but that was the benefit of hindsight. Regardless of which path they had chosen, there had always been the possibility that someone would wind up dead.

But Homura wasn’t ready to die...

“You called for me, Homura?”

Homura spun around. It was the last voice she had expected to hear in that moment.

“I told you not to do anything reckless. What were you thinking?”

It was Rotraud. He was really there.

“Rotra—”

Homura began to repeat his name, her voice holding a mixture of joy and relief. Before she could get finish, however, the words caught in her throat. She had just gotten a better look at him as he passed in front of her.

“Oh, that’s right. I haven’t washed my armor yet.”

He was completely covered in red.

His silver armor and white surcoat, which had looked like beautiful pieces of art before, were now dank with bandit blood. In contrast to his voice, which was gentle and kind, he looked like some sort of blood-starved fiend.

“Rotraud! I-I’ll kill you!”

The hulking wolf swiped a paw through the air with blinding speed, releasing parallel shock waves from its mighty claws. The shock waves shot forward with an imposing boom, burrowing through the ground as they approached.

Those same shock waves had been powerful enough to reduce those houses to rubble earlier. There was no way Rotraud would be able to withstand them, gold badge or not.

Just as Homura was beginning to panic, Rotraud stepped in front of her to protect her.

Just one step. That was all.

He did not take up a defensive posture or even attempt to dodge. He just stood there. Homura stared in shock as the raging dust swooped upward to obscure her vision.

She heard the sonic boom, but the force of the impact never came.

She had been saved. Rotraud must have taken the blow for her. She could imagine him now, there in the dust cloud, grievously wounded.

And it was all their fault...

Homura couldn't take it; she felt like she was about to scream. Just then, a night breeze descended upon the abandoned village, washing the dust storm away.

As the dust cleared, Homura's eyes widened. Rotraud was still standing there, completely unchanged.

His silver armor, gleaming in the moonlight, hadn't even been scratched. Only his surcoat had been torn.

The wolf creature was sure it had just finished off its prey. Its body stiffened in disbelief.

"This isn't like the junk equipment you bandits manage to pilfer," Rotraud said as he moved to counterattack.

He dashed forward, brandishing his sword-spear and closing the gap in an instant.

The sword-spear slashed downward far too fast for the eye to see, but somehow the wolf creature managed to bring its left arm up just in time to block. The spikes growing along the arm snapped, and the blade sank into the demon's flesh.

"Is that all you've got?!"

The hulking wolf brushed the sword-spear aside and lunged forward quickly.

It delivered a single blow to Rotraud's exposed chest with its other arm.

There was a high-pitched noise like scraping metal, but Rotraud was merely knocked backward a single step. The perfect range for another strike.

With a diagonal upward slash, Rotraud lopped off the creature's right arm. He carried through into a second strike, cutting off the creature's left arm as well. He then thrust forward, easily planting his weapon in the creature's now defenseless torso.

"Gurrk!"

With a bestial grunt, the wolf-demon coughed up a spurt of blood.

The fierce violence of these two powerful warriors had left Homura speechless.

As strong as the wolf creature was in its own right, it had been completely helpless against the even more powerful Rotraud. The girls never had an opportunity to come to Rotraud's aid, but even if they had, it was fairly obvious that they would have just gotten in the way.

Horeicho and the two other soldiers had apparently made their way back to the abandoned village at some point. They, too, could do no more than watch from afar.

"Damn you! Haven't you killed enough?" howled the wolf-demon as it glared at Rotraud, who was still covered in the blood of the bandit leader's slaughtered henchmen.

"Oh, your men. Yes, I'm sorry about that. I should have just chased them off, but when I see how the weak struggle, it awakens something inside me."

Sword-spear still thrust into its chest, Rotraud lifted the hulking wolf creature high into the air.

The wolf-demon floundered, waving its stumps in the air. There was no way for it to pull out the sword-spear, which was deeply embedded in its chest. Its arms were already lying on the ground.

"Stop! No, don't!"

Homura knew Rotraud was on their side, but something about this exchange

was making her uneasy.

“I won’t disobey anymore! You have to believe me! I’ve done everything you’ve said so far, haven’t I?!”

*Of course*, thought Homura.

They should have known.

“Come now, don’t look so sad. You know I prefer it when you smile.”

“H-here! Here! Is this what you want?!”

The wolf-demon twisted its lips into the painful semblance of a smile. Homura had seen that same expression earlier in the day.

“There’s that lovely smile of yours.”

Rotraud’s voice sounded thick and syrupy. Homura knew without seeing his face that it was distorted in ecstasy beneath his helmet.

*“Gnash—”*

Countless black fangs suddenly appeared, puncturing and tearing the wolf-demon’s body. Not a word, but a spell.

The torrent of fangs sent sprays of blood into the air as they burst free from the creature’s body, creating a crimson rain that drenched Rotraud. The wolf-demon never had a chance to scream, transformed instead into a macabre work of avant-garde art.

“Come to think of it, I don’t believe I’ve mentioned my title yet. It is Rotraud the Gnasher. I’m not very fond of it, however. It seems so uncivilized.”

Rotraud tossed the demon’s corpse aside as if disposing of a piece of garbage. As the body fell, the black fangs piercing its body turned to dust and faded away.

The wounds that the fangs left behind also looked familiar to Homura.

“You...were behind everything after all, weren’t you?” Homura said, her voice shaky.

He was the cause of all the recent bandit activity.

“We should talk,” said Rotraud, his voice still calm. He sat down on the lifeless bandit leader’s corpse. “In Galdorssia, they believe those with power have a responsibility to serve as a ‘shield’ for those without. It is the creed at the center of all they do. But what is that creed, if not self-serving sophistry?”

Rotraud did not pause for an answer before continuing.

“The truth is that they love to be the ones on top, and their creed is how they justify that to themselves. Protecting the weak allows them to reinforce their own sense of superiority. Just as weak people search out those who are even weaker in order to feel better about themselves. It’s the pretty face they put on their own ugly, selfish desires so that they can maintain order.”

In a world like this, where individuals with incredible power existed, a strict code of ethics was needed to prevent society from disintegrating. Thus, a code that prohibited the strong from tyrannizing the weak had formed.

A code that Rotraud was arguing was mere sophistry.

But even if that creed was little more than words designed to maintain order, there were still those who took pride in those beliefs. There was no way that every single one of the people who espoused that code was actually looking down on the weak with scorn.

Homura wanted to tell Rotraud that he was wrong, but Rotraud’s warped worldview had left her at a loss. She wasn’t sure what to say.

Regardless of whether he noticed Homura’s reaction, Rotraud continued speaking.

“If we’re being truthful, almost everyone in the world is weak. In order to justify their own paltry existences, they try so very hard to smile and convince themselves that they are happy. Yes, those faces. I love to see them—so brave, so sweet. Don’t you think?”

“What...are you talking about...?” Homura asked, before she could stop herself.

Rotraud’s sudden tangent was disturbing. Homura felt an ineffable revulsion rise at the way he was talking about people as if they were pets to be doted upon.

“Homura, don’t take this madman’s ravings seriously.”

*“Look who’s talking,”* is what Homura might have told Psycho under normal conditions—but at the moment, she didn’t have the presence of mind.

“Hmph... It seems you girls are not willing to face reality after all. I had hoped for more from you.”

Rotraud sighed with seeming disappointment and spoke to Horeicho and the other two soldiers.

“Horeicho, Khett, Gail—kill these girls. That will be your punishment for botching everything.”

“Wha...? Y-yes, sir!”

“Do you see how much trouble you’ve caused, telling them where the bandits were hiding and then leading them straight here? It’s your fault now that they have to die. Consider this a punishment, and a lesson. Your careless incompetence can result in someone’s death. Maybe it’s you, maybe it’s your fellow soldiers. Think on that while you clean up your mess. Oh, but leave one alive. How about...little Homura there? We need someone to go run to Seigrat once everything is done.”

Why her? And what would he need her to get Seigrat for? Before Homura could ask any questions, however, Horeicho and the other soldiers were already standing in their way.

“Well, it looks like it’s come to this.”

Horeicho wielded an ax and a shield, Khett a staff, and Gail a club with a massive iron ball attached to its end by a chain—also known as a flail.

An ambush was one thing, but facing off against a squad of Aegis Guard soldiers head-on was going to be difficult. Their opponents, however, had yet to make a move, perhaps wary of the advantage in numbers the girls held.

The two groups continued to stare at each other, the situation explosive as a powder keg.

Horeicho was the first to break the tension.

“Khett, Gail. You know what to do, right?”

Homura and the others tightened their grips on their weapons.

“We know.”

“I’m ready.”

The other two soldiers replied.

They evidently had something up their sleeve.

Homura tried to focus, watching their opponents’ every move. She had a feeling she could take the mage, Khett, since she would need time to cast. She stared closely, trusting that Jin and the others could handle the more close combat-oriented Horeicho and Gail.

“Ready, set...”

It was coming.

In the next moment, the fight commenced...or so Homura thought.

But the three soldiers broke into a dash, moving in the exact opposite of the direction she had expected.

“Ruuunnnnnnn—!!”

“Ahhhhhh!!”

“Ohhh!!”

As anticlimactic as it sounded, the soldiers had decided to run.

“There’s no way we’re gonna beat anyone who survived against that monster!”

With one last parting shout, the soldiers knocked down a section of the town’s wall and vanished into the forest.

“Huh...”

Homura watched them disappear, mouth agape.

Horeicho and the other two soldiers might have been of higher rank, but the girls had crossed paths with the bandit leader and lived to tell about it. Apparently, it was clear which group was stronger.

“Well. I knew they were going to run away at some point. I just didn’t expect

it to be now.”

Rotraud stood up slowly. Despite his casual manner, an aura of death clung to him. Homura kept her distance.

“Rotraud, can I ask what you meant earlier?”

“About running to get Seigrat? What is there to understand? Out of all of you, you’re the weakest, Homura. Watching you struggle to grow stronger has captured my heart more than you can know. You want it, too, don’t you? To place yourself above others.”

Homura felt her blood begin to boil. What did he know? What right did he have to decide what she did or did not want?

“That isn’t true. The reason I want to become stronger is to help people. So that I can be who I am.”

Homura remembered her previous life. She wasn’t like the people who had driven her to her death. The way they ran roughshod over other people’s lives all the time with smiles on their faces.

Her motives were dirty, yes. Selfish, yes. But never once had she wanted to degrade others for her own ends.

“You do resemble Seigrat a little, after all. He always insisted he wanted to become strong in order to help others. Always clinging with such pride to that tedious creed, claiming to be driven by more than just duty, as if to convince us the world is all sunshine and roses. It’s time I finally peeled off that Seigrat’s mask.”

With those last words, Rotraud finally exposed himself, revealing a glimpse of some powerful ambition that had remained hidden until now.

“And so when you said you needed me to get Seigrat, you meant...”

“To lure him out so that I can kill him. Exactly. Once he finally faces a stronger opponent, he will be forced to abandon any pretense of altruism and beg for his own life. We’ll all see his lies for what they are, and the scales will fall from Galdorssia’s eyes.”

“You’re insane...”

Rotraud had allowed the bandits to run rampant, had even killed people himself. And for what? For this selfish stupidity?

“To be honest, I doubt you’d be able to beat Seigrat. Even if he is a bit of a skeeze...,” said Psycho, bluntly.

Rotraud might be strong, but surely he stood no chance against Seigrat. The girls had watched as Seigrat defeated the dragon. What Seigrat had done was on a completely different level from what Rotraud was showing.

“Sadly, I fear you are right.”

This seemed to be a sore point for Rotraud. His voice, however, remained calm.

“As I am *now*, that is.”

After Rotraud finished speaking, he withdrew a small bottle, just like the one Horeicho had given to the hulking wolf creature earlier.

“This unholy potion is used to create monsters. The witch who gave it to me said that it is known as the Curseblood of the Dark Lord.”

“The Dark Lord...!”

It was the first time the Dark Lord’s name had come up during their travels so far. The Dark Lord was the reason they had been summoned to this world in the first place, the very enemy they were there to defeat.

“An insipid name for such a powerful substance—but effective enough, I suppose, for spreading rumors of the Dark Lord’s return.”

Rotraud removed his helmet and quaffed the red liquid within the bottle.

“Disgusting, as expected.”

Rotraud seemed unsurprised by the taste.

Unlike with the bandit leader, there were no immediate physical changes, and Rotraud did not seem to be in pain. Maybe he was used to pain. Or maybe the bandit leader had just been incompatible with the curseblood.

“That bandit leader gave me a chance to test the potion’s strength on someone with no abilities, but it proved even more effective than I had hoped.

With this, I should be able to easily surpass Seigrat's power."

Short fur began to sprout from his uniformly pale, smooth face. Like the previous wolf-demon, Rotraud seemed to be transforming into some sort of beast-man.

The area around his mouth began to elongate. His maw widened, and his ears grew into points. It was a wolf's face, just like the bandit leader's. Unlike the bandit's, however, Rotraud's face retained an alluring grace.

His body did not grow dramatically larger, but it did increase in stature enough for the armor he was wearing to split open with a pop. His muscles grew more pronounced as well, although the effect was hardly overwhelming.

As a final touch, an elegant pair of deer antlers sprouted from his head. They were black as obsidian, like delicate works of art.

Whereas the bandit leader had transformed into something twisted, Rotraud's metamorphosis had turned him into something mysterious and beguiling. Not a hideous beast-man, but an exquisite beast.

The desires Rotraud harbored inside, however, were still warped and noxious. He was not a beautiful creature; he was a foul, sanguineous fiend.

"Be careful. He's far more powerful than before."

The difference in strength was not obvious from appearance alone, but Jin could sense the change.

Homura and the others held their breath. Rotraud, however, simply began to inspect himself.

"Oh, lovely. I adore soft, fluffy animals."

At the moment, Rotraud's behavior seemed happy and carefree—but one wrong move, and they could all be killed.

"Now then, let's give this a try." Rotraud casually waved an arm to the side, his movements just as relaxed as before.

"What—?"

Before Homura realized what was happening, the ground shook beneath their

feet, and a crashing boom reverberated through the air.

The noise had come from behind. They spun around in shock.

Above their heads loomed several massive formations that hadn't been there a moment before. Black claws, just like the ones that had appeared when Rotraud had killed the wolf-demon. These, however, stretched so far up from the ground that the girls had to crane their necks upward just to see them.

They were like parapets in size, dwarfing the claws he had summoned earlier. Each claw was large enough on its own to entirely demolish a house.

"Hrmm. It's a little difficult to control."

Rotraud cocked his head. Apparently, it hadn't gone as intended.

The towering black claws soon turned to mist, disappearing completely after only a few seconds and leaving behind large craters in the ground.

"This should be enough, though, to peel the mask off that hypocrite's face."

In the back of her mind, Homura had been hanging on to some faint hope that there was still a way to defeat him. That hope was now drowned in a thick flood of despair.

"I'll need some time to get used to this body. Be a dear and go fetch Seigrat for me in the meanwhile. Oh, I know—I'll have a little fun with the people of Guadhari while you're gone. We need to make sure Seigrat feels motivated to fight once he gets here."

The five began running.

But they weren't headed toward Galdorssia. They were headed toward the village to warn the others.

"Jin, baby, you're losing your edge! Why didn't you realize he was an evildoer?!"

"My apologies. It's hard to sniff them out when they're so thoroughly mad."

"Is this really the time for that?!"

The road was awful. They were running so fast that Homura imagined her heart exploding and her legs just continuing to move anyway. But she was far past caring about running cramps at this stage.

Several times her feet caught on roots and vines, but she managed to stay upright through sheer willpower alone. Fueled by desperation, they reached the village much sooner than they'd expected. Homura's breathing was frantic by this point, and her lungs were in so much pain they felt like they were going to burst.

Once the girls were inside the gate, the village seemed as peaceful as before. Lights burned dimly in the windows of the houses. They needed to warn everyone—there was no time to lose—but Homura could barely manage to speak, let alone shout. There was no way she was going to be able to reach everyone.

Homura was racking her brain, trying to figure out what she should do, when Psycho fortunately came to the rescue.

"Proto, strike the ground as hard as you can!"

"Roger that!"

Without waiting for an explanation, Proto did as she was asked. The ground quaked as her war hammer made contact, sending ripples throughout the entire village.

"What happened?! Is it an earthquake?!"

"A monster?"

One after another, surprised villagers poked their heads out from their doorways.

It was a brash move, but it proved far more successful at gathering attention than shouting alone would have done.

Once they had everyone's attention, Psycho began to issue her warning.

"Everyone, listen up! An extremely dangerous monster is headed this way! Rotraud and his men are gone, and the five of us can't stop it! Unless you want to die, you need to run now!"

Her voice wasn't loud enough to carry through the village, but hopefully, it would set off a chain reaction, with one person telling the next, and so on.

With their protectors gone, the people would have to understand the danger they were in. Or so Homura thought. But the villagers just stared at them suspiciously.

"Rotraud can't be gone. That's not possible."

"Wouldn't it be safer to stay inside than to leave the village?"

"You Phalanx of Blades people are all the same."

Between their distrust of the Phalanx of Blades and the massive faith they placed in Rotraud, very few of the villagers seemed willing to hear the girls out. The few who did listen simply shrugged and closed their doors once they saw the other villagers ignoring them.

"They've gotten so used to being protected, they no longer believe anything bad can happen..."

If the strong had a duty to protect the weak, the flip side was that, so as long as the strong were around, the weak had no need to protect themselves.

The strong would always be there to protect them—the villagers had probably never known anything else. And now they had grown complacent, unable to imagine a day when their illusions of peace could be shattered.

"Everyone, what's wrong?!"

"Leela!"

They explained the situation to Leela, who had just run up to the girls. Naturally, they left out the part about Rotraud being a monster on his way to kill the villagers. They wanted to avoid a panic.

"The truth is, a monster has shown up that is too powerful for us to handle... Maybe you could try convincing everyone to flee."

"If there's a monster, I'm sure Rotraud will—"

"We...tried telling the villagers, but Rotraud isn't here now. Not exactly..."

"He isn't? I see! Then there's no time to lose!"

The girls had tried for themselves, but hopefully the villagers would be more willing to listen to someone they already knew and trusted. The fact that Leela didn't even mention Horeicho and the other soldiers seemed to suggest that the village didn't place very much faith in them.

Hopefully, at least a few people would evacuate. Once even one person acted, others might follow.

If possible, they wanted to get everyone evacuated before Rotraud arrived.

Homura was trying to figure out what to do next when a voice spoke up from behind, startling her.

"Expecting someone?"

Homura felt her heart freeze in her chest.

"It didn't take as long to get used to this body as I had thought."

Homura had been sure they still had more time.

Unlike Homura, who couldn't bring herself to move, Jin, Proto, and Tsutsumi immediately threw themselves at Rotraud.

It was a split-second decision, and yet all three attacks were intercepted by large fangs that suddenly appeared from the ground. Unlike the claws Rotraud had summoned at the abandoned village, these were broad and just large enough to serve as personal shields.

Jin twisted to the side and kicked at the fang blocking her, leaping out of the way. Proto relied on brute force instead, punching her fang, but it only made a dull thud. The shield didn't even budge.

"I can't get close!"

"What is this thing made of?!"

Having blocked their attacks, the shields quickly dissipated into mist.

"A bit of improvisation, but that worked out better than I thought."

Using the fangs as shields had apparently been a spur-of-the-moment idea. Next time, he would be even more prepared. Their attacks most likely wouldn't connect.

“Leela, get back!”

Homura stepped in front of Leela and faced Rotraud. Homura was trying to shield her, but considering how much stronger he was, she offered about as much protection as a sheet of paper.

“That voice...”

Leela seemed confused by the sudden appearance of a monster in the village, especially when it spoke in a voice resembling Rotraud’s.

“Hello, Leela. Did you miss me?” Rotraud completely ignored the girl standing in front of Leela and trying to glare defiantly.

“How do you know my name? And that spear...”

“You mean you don’t recognize me? Shame on you. It’s me, Rotraud. We shared a stew together, just the other day.”

“No, you’re lying... It can’t be true.”

“It’s the truth. Everything that’s about to happen now is real.”

As soon as Rotraud finished speaking, massive black fangs sprang from the earth, demolishing the nearby homes.

Screams rose from all directions. People were frantically trying to crawl from their ruined homes. Others began digging through rubble, trying to save family members.

Villagers who attempted to flee were targeted with thinner fangs that appeared from out of nowhere. Rotraud seemed to want to cause maximum pain rather than to kill, intentionally avoiding vital organs.

“Now then, everyone—try to resist me! Try to resist death! Let me see you run for your pathetic little lives!” proclaimed Rotraud. “Well, Homura? Are you ready to call for Seigrat yet?”

Rotraud’s maw coiled upward into a smile at the sight of the hellscape he had created.

“You’re a monster...!”

Homura was irate. At herself for being unable to stop this, and at Rotraud for

the atrocities he was committing.

“Stop this! Rotraud, why are you doing this?!” said Leela, pushing Homura out of the way and clutching at her hero.

“Leela, get away from him!”

Homura began to rush forward, hoping to drag Leela away, but a claw instantly appeared at Homura’s neck. Another half step farther, and it would have opened a hole in her throat.

“*Why?* What do you mean *why*? For what reason do you all exist but to satisfy the egos of the powerful? You’ve grown complacent in your weakness and have begun to take our protection for granted, haven’t you? So then, what choice do you have but to accept being trampled underfoot for our gratification? If you don’t like it, then why didn’t you attempt to become stronger?”

Rotraud grabbed Leela by the throat, easily lifting her into the air.

“You place your life in the hands of others and then complain when the arrangement no longer suits you. So conceited.”

“S...stop...”

Leela struggled to escape his grasp.

“Come now, Leela, where is that beautiful smile of yours? Show it to me. You know how much I love your smile.”

Crying in fear, Leela forced herself to smile.

“Yes... So lovely, it makes me tingle all over... And so pathetic, it makes me seethe!”

Rotraud tossed Leela aside roughly. Leela’s tears streamed through the air as she traced a parabola toward the ground.

And directly into a bed of fangs.

“Leela!”

Homura shouted her name, but Leela had been impaled and was no longer moving.

“You son of a bitch!” Proto raised her war hammer into the air again and

swung sideways at Rotraud.

“I told you, it’s useless.”

Just as expected, one of Rotraud’s fangs appeared to shield him from the blow.

Homura expected Rotraud to just block this attack, like the last. However, the completely unexpected happened—a massive shock wave ripped through the village, momentarily drowning out the screams.

Proto had just obliterated Rotraud’s shield with one swing of her war hammer.

“Erk—!”

For the first time, Rotraud’s face showed surprise.

Due to the shock, he had left himself open. It was just a moment, but Jin didn’t let the opportunity go to waste. She closed the distance quickly, raising her sword high over her head and bringing it down in a decisive chop.

Sparks flew, and a piercing screech filled the air.

“That was close.”

Rotraud had managed to block the strike with his sword-spear in the nick of time.

Jin and Proto backed away once more.

“That noise coming from your body...that is no ordinary self-buffing magic, is it?”

As Rotraud said, Proto’s body was currently emitting a high-pitched humming sound.

Apparently, it was the sound that Proto’s body made whenever she overclocked herself. Doing so made her stronger, but it also consumed much more energy and thus was something she reserved only for extreme circumstances.

“Unfortunately, I’m not one of those powerless people. I am the crystallization of advanced technologies beyond anything you lower life-forms

could ever hope to accomplish.”

“I knew there was something interesting about you girls.”

Rotraud may not have understood what, exactly, Proto was talking about, but he seemed to be enjoying this brush with the unusual.

“I will follow your lead, Proto,” said Jin.

“Leave it to me.”

The two girls started an attack pattern, with Proto destroying a shield and then Jin swooping in afterward with her blade. However many attempts they made, however, Jin’s blade could never quite reach its mark.

Viewed from the outside, it might seem as though they were evenly matched, but the girls had already realized the truth. Rotraud was still holding back. He was enjoying playing with his weaker foes.

While Jin and Proto continued to fight, Homura and Psycho rushed over to Leela’s side.

“She’s all right, isn’t she, Psycho?”

“She’s still breathing. The fact that she’s not moving seems to be more of a mental issue.”

They pulled Leela free from the skewers and laid her on the ground.

Just as Psycho said, the mental damage seemed to be greater than the physical. Tears streamed down her face, and she deliriously repeated Rotraud’s name.

Psycho placed her hands on Leela’s body, which was now peppered with holes, and began to chant a spell.

*“Goddess of the moon, I call upon your mercy, heal this child of her grievous wounds—”*

As Psycho chanted, her hands began to glow, the light spreading throughout Leela’s body.

It was hard to tell if the gore-soaked wounds had actually closed, but the bleeding had at least stopped, so the healing must have been a success.

Leela, however, continued to stare blankly into space. Homura wished they could do more for her, but as harsh as it might sound, they had more important things to worry about at the moment.

“I’ll go around healing the injured; you go to Galdorssia and bring back that playboy Seigrat.”

“I can’t go without you—!”

Homura understood why Psycho wanted to send her. Homura was useless in battle. So useless, in fact, that Rotraud, with his perverted obsession with weaklings, had actually taken a liking to her. But leaving by herself felt like abandoning Psycho and the others.

Still, Psycho was right. Homura had to do this. She was the only one Rotraud would allow to leave.

“Besides, there’s another reason you need to survive.”

“Another reason...?”

Psycho stared at Homura, her face suddenly serious. Something unique, a reason Homura, in particular, needed to make it out of this—

“You still haven’t done your dare!”

“How are you still talking about that?!”

Homura wasn’t allowed to die until she had done her dare, apparently. But of course, she knew that was a joke.

“Do you know how to ride a horse?”

“I’ve never tried.”

“Try not to fall off, then!”

“You’re gonna get me killed!”

Homura began running as Psycho pushed her forward from behind.



Tsutsumi was biding her time.

She didn’t have Jin’s quick reflexes or Proto’s massive strength, but what she

could do was emit poison.

Rotraud's shields could stop all manner of attacks, but they would do little against poison gas. Rotraud was still toying with Jin and Proto. Tsutsumi needed to get as close as possible to ensure that Rotraud breathed in as much of the gas as he could.

While Rotraud was distracted, Tsutsumi hid in the shadows and extended her wings. She was ready to release her poison at any time now.

Tsutsumi still remembered what had happened with the wolf creature. She knew the gas alone would not be enough to decide the fight. She needed something else up her sleeve.

Without hesitation, Tsutsumi took the dagger she was holding and plunged it into her own chest.

Once she pulled the dagger free, it was coated in a black ichor mingled with streaks of her own blood. She had just coated the blade in poison directly from her gland.

She would only have one chance.

Jin and Proto continued their assault, while Tsutsumi waited for a strong opportunity to flank.

As Rotraud turned his attention to Jin, Tsutsumi instinctively sensed that her time had come.

Just this once, he was slow to meet Jin's lunge. She came in a step faster than her previous assaults.

Despite the fact that Jin had closed deep into his pocket, Rotraud was still able to block the strike with his sword-spear. However, although the strike hadn't landed, Jin had obviously taken him by surprise.

Now.

"Oops. Now that..."

Without making a sound, Tsutsumi flung herself at Rotraud, gas streaming from her wings. Her dagger swung downward toward his neck.

“...was an excellent attack.”

But Tsutsumi never made it.

Still speaking to Jin, Rotraud had caused several fangs to appear behind his back, aimed at Tsutsumi.

“Urrk!”

Tsutsumi was used to pain, but the feeling of being impaled on multiple foreign objects was still highly unpleasant.

Skewered in place, Tsutsumi continued to emit her poisonous gas.

“What a surprise. You’ve even got a demon on your side.”

Rotraud spun around and thrust with his sword-spear, planting it in Tsutsumi’s body.

“I’d rather not deal with poison, though, so I’m going to have to ask you to go over there.”

As he spoke, Rotraud hurled his sword-spear like a javelin, with Tsutsumi still impaled on its tip.

The spear flew at incredible speed, striking the church and embedding itself deeply in the wall. Tsutsumi was pinned.

“Leave her alone!” Proto swung her war hammer with incredible strength.

She was no longer trying to destroy Rotraud’s shields; she was trying to crush Rotraud completely. She swung her hardest yet, aiming to kill him with a single blow.

Unfortunately—

“It’s useless.”

Another fang shield sprouted from the earth, this one even thicker and harder than before. There was a dull thud, and Proto’s war hammer rebounded backward.

“It...didn’t break...”

“And I’m not even getting serious yet.”

Jin darted in silently while Rotraud was busy mocking Proto. She swung, striking him on the arm.

But the black-lacquered blade failed to slice off his arm. In fact, it didn't even leave a scratch.

"Ahh—!"

"It seems little Homura has finally gone for help. I think it's about time I ended this."

Rotraud smiled at the two.



Homura raced toward the stables.

All horses were kept in the stables near the gate, including the one that had pulled the carriage Homura and the others had arrived in.

As Homura ran, she couldn't help but notice injured villagers writhing in pain. The guilt and regret were gnawing at her.

Every fiber in Homura's being told her to turn back, but she forced herself to keep running. Once she finally arrived at the stables, she collapsed to her knees in shock.

The turmoil in the village had caused the horses to panic.

"P-please! Calm down!"

Through sheer force of will, Homura managed to stand back up. She rushed over to the carriage horse.

Homura had no idea how to calm a horse. And even if she could get it to calm down, she still didn't know how to ride one. But if she had to make her way back to Galdorssia on foot, then Psycho, her friends, the villagers—they were all as good as dead.

As Homura desperately attempted to soothe the horse, she suddenly realized that the sounds of battle, which had previously mingled with the villagers' screams, had now gone silent. Slowly, fearfully, Homura turned around to look.

Jin and Proto were lying motionless on the ground.

“No...”

Not only that, but Rotraud had found Psycho as she went around the village trying to heal the injured. He was currently standing behind her, looming over her. Without thinking, Homura began to run toward them.

It was difficult enough seeing the villagers injured and in pain, but when Homura saw her fallen friends, something new and unfamiliar came over her. She immediately sprang into action.

“Psycho, behind you!” Homura shouted as loud as she could, but her attempts were in vain.

After so many castings, Psycho was physically and spiritually exhausted. Rotraud captured her easily. She didn’t even put up a fight.

Rotraud lifted Psycho into the air with both hands, like a human catching a stray cat.

“Ugh, dammit. I can’t even think anymore.”

Psycho no longer had the strength to struggle. She seemed to have given up, accepting her impending death.

“Homura, dear, I’ll give you one last chance. Hurry along and call Seigrat for me, won’t you?” Rotraud tightened his grip slightly.

“Let her go!”

Even though Homura had made up her mind to fight, her hand trembled as she gripped her staff.

“To be honest, the only one I’m really interested in here is you. Should I kill them? Should I not? It’s like a game, to see how you’ll react.” Rotraud spoke as if he were scolding a wayward child. “You see? Just like this.” He tightened his grip.

“Urk...!”

There was a popping noise, like something had broken, and a gob of blood fell from Psycho’s mouth.

“You don’t want to die, do you? So then why don’t you struggle? Struggle,

struggle, struggle! How else can the weak like you live, other than by being floundering and pitiful?"

Drool dripped from the corners of Rotraud's demented, smiling lips as he waited in anticipation of seeing Psycho struggle and beg for her life. Psycho, however, was hardly obedient enough to give him the pleasure.

As Rotraud continued to gloat, Psycho hawked up another ball of bloody phlegm and spit it into his face.

"There's my answer. Got it?" Psycho flashed him a grin.

"Loud and clear..." Rotraud squeezed, utterly crushing Psycho's arm and chest.

"Psycho!" Rotraud tossed the now-limp Psycho aside like garbage.

For a brief moment, Homura made eye contact with Psycho. Although she was battered and exhausted, her expression remained as insolent as ever. She had been true to herself to the last. She tumbled to the ground like a bundle of scraps.

It had happened again. Homura was still as useless as ever. She didn't have the power to save anyone. She was forced to watch as her precious friends were crushed and humiliated, one after the other.

Nothing changed. Everything was so unfair, so selfish, so unjust.

Even after dying, she was still being bullied, a plaything for injustice.

"Run along now, Homura. I'm letting you go. Just you."

At the sound of his words, Homura felt something snap inside her.

"Eat shit..."

The first time around, her own life had been taken from her. This time, it was the lives of her friends. And all the while, Homura had just stood by passively until, before she knew it, it was already too late.

Nothing was ever going to change unless she started to fight back.

"You eat shit...!"

Enough.

Enough.

She'd had enough of things being taken from her!

"Don't tell me to bow down and take it. I've had enough bullshit. You want me to cower and run away... How about I just incinerate you instead?!"

Homura channeled every last bit of flame she could muster into her staff.

The tip of the staff glowed brightly. A moment later, a massive inferno exploded in Rotraud's direction.

"Such power!"

Unfortunately, Rotraud sensed the danger just in time and managed to throw up a row of fang shields several layers deep moments before the flames hit. It was practically a wall.

Even with that wall to protect him, the powerful heat left his flesh singed.

"This!" Homura shouted. "This is why the world can't be saved! Because there are people in it like *you*!"

Homura's benediction made her resistant to fire, but there was a limit to how much she could resist. Homura's arm had already exceeded that limit and had begun to blister and burn.

The shields, meanwhile, began to crack and then break, one after the other.

Rotraud was on the defensive now. All Homura had to do was keep it up, and she would be able to kill him.

The situation was one of life and death. Weirdly, however, Homura's lips began to curl up into a smile. Her blistered arm hurt, but she hardly cared. She just doubled down on the flames.

And then, moments before everything was reduced to ash, her flames suddenly disappeared.

"Huh...?" Homura glanced down in shock.

Her arm hung limply, so charred that it could no longer hold her staff.

"That can't be!"

“That was very close...”

Rotraud stepped out from behind his last remaining fang shield. He was singed over his entire body but seemed to be *completely unfazed*. Homura’s arm was now useless, but worse still, Rotraud was not nearly as injured as he had first appeared. It was likely only the outer layer of his skin that had been burned.

Judging from his tone of voice, he was not very worried.

“You really thought you were about to win, didn’t you? How did it feel? To be the powerful one? You’d be lying if you said it didn’t feel good, I bet.”

As Rotraud spoke, his body began to visibly heal. The black fangs weren’t his only new power. He seemed to have gained increased regeneration as well.

Homura was out of options. Without her staff, the only person she could immolate was herself.

“Still, though, I hadn’t expected that. It seems you’ve been hiding your strength all along... Of course, I understand. You enjoyed it, watching as your weaker friends struggled.”

“That’s not true!”

The pain shooting up her injured arm was so great that she could barely even move.

“Unfortunately, now that I know how strong you are, I’ve lost all interest in you.” Rotraud grabbed Homura’s neck in one of his powerful hands.

“Nrkk!”

He wasn’t going to let her go this time.

Homura felt her throat closing, her consciousness fading.

So this was how it ended. What did it even matter anymore?

As the world faded, Rotraud’s ecstatic smile seemed to float before her eyes. It reminded her of what she had seen back then, before dying for the first time.

A kaleidoscope of foul memories smoldered to life inside Homura’s mind.



Even when she was a little girl, people had shunned Homura.

It happened soon after she started elementary school. She had gotten into a fight with her mother. Homura could no longer even remember what the fight had been about.

They had both been in a bad mood and screaming at each other when all of a sudden, the right half of Homura's vision started to burn brightly. A moment later she realized it wasn't just bright but hot as well. It was not until later, however, that she would understand that her eye had been on fire.

"It burns! It burns!"

Homura cried and screamed. Her mother looked worried at first, but a moment later she was staring at her daughter as if she were a monster.

The flame was nearly impossible to put out and wound up burning the area around Homura's right eye, leaving her with weaker vision on that side.

The other children in her class teased her about her appearance, but it was likely her mother who was to blame for the rumors that fire had sprung out of her eye. She must have let it slip somewhere.

Once the rumors began, the other children stopped picking on her as much, but people also started to distance themselves. Even children who had once been her friends became mere acquaintances, never saying more than hello. Thinking back, their parents had likely told them to stay away from Homura. That she would burn them to death.

"I'm not a monster!"

But no one seemed to listen.

Homura made herself dead inside. On the surface, she acted bright and pleasant, even to people who spoke badly about her behind her back. She was polite and proper and even went out of her way to try to help others. All in an attempt to shed the label of "monster" that had attached itself to her.

She did her best not to hold a grudge; she didn't want to think of herself as a monster, either.

Instead of holding a grudge, however, she began to harbor an immense and deep-seated sense of self-loathing.

“How can I be good...with such a strange body...?”

Why would she hold anything against the others when she was the one who had something wrong with her?

Life continued like this for a while, until an incident occurred in her second year of high school.

An abandoned house in the area caught fire.

The fire happened in the middle of the night and so was not reported immediately, giving it time to develop into a blaze that spread to several other nearby homes. Two people suffered light injuries due to smoke inhalation. No one else was harmed.

*Most people were relieved to learn that, despite the size of the fire, so few had been hurt. I, however, felt no more alive inside than before.*

*In high school, people rarely openly avoided me like they had before. However, they became even less inclined to engage on anything more than a surface level.*

*While all my other connections were shallow, there was one girl who was willing to verbally attack me out in the open.*

*“Stay away from me! I don’t want to get burned to death.”*

*I still remember how it felt when the girl said that directly to my face.*

*She was one of the two who had been injured in the fire.*

*“What is she gonna do...? You know they’re going to suspect her...”*

*As I’d expected, rumors immediately began to spread that I had snapped and attempted to kill the girl for bullying me. In truth, I’d preferred the way she just said it in the open instead of letting me worry about what she was saying behind my back.*

*Of course, my classmates had no way of knowing what I was feeling.*

*“Those rumors that she makes fire with her body were probably true after all.”*

*“I heard she tried to kill that girl for not being nicer to her.”*

*“You can tell she’s a freak just by looking at her. I knew it all along.”*

*You had a fire, and someone with the ability to make fire. A bully, and a victim. The people in my life picked at the unconnected crumbs and let their imaginations do the rest, convincing themselves they had found the truth just because they had strung together something plausible.*

*Before I knew it, the rumors were being taken as fact.*

One after another, acquaintances who had at least pretended to be friendly completely changed their attitudes overnight.

The other students were certain they were right and became more and more open with their taunts.

It was a keen reminder that no matter how much of a facade people put up, deep down inside, they were all just vicious beasts.

Once the truth of the fire came out, everyone would be sure to understand. They had to. So as the investigation continued, Homura stopped going to school. Her parents had always been cold and began to grow even colder—but that was still preferable to the way she was being treated at school.

In the end, the culprits turned out to be a couple of middle school hooligans. They had sneaked into the abandoned house to smoke cigarettes and goof around. The cigarettes hadn’t been extinguished, which was what had led to the massive fire.

*And so I went back to school. Until now, we had always managed to keep up appearances. I figured they’d apologize, I’d accept, and we would go right back to the shallow way things had been, just more awkwardly. I was unprepared for what I saw, however, when I stepped into that classroom.*

*They were all smiling from ear to ear.*

*Their mouths dripped with superficial apologies and words of sympathy. It wasn’t what I’d expected. That they would forgive themselves, in my place.*

*“Sorry about all those awful things we said.”*

“It was a sensitive time for everyone.”

“I knew all along those rumors couldn’t be true.”

And all the time, they had the biggest shit-eating grins plastered across their faces.

*Monster*, they’d said. *Criminal. Freak*. All without an ounce of proof. Who said they were forgiven? Their fake smiles and hollow words were just a front to let them avoid reckoning with what they had done.

And it worked. They had deceived themselves into believing it. They weren’t the ones who were wrong. No, they were good.

That was what true injustice looked like.

It was more disgusting than anything Homura could have imagined. She ran to the bathroom, suddenly feeling nauseous.

She emptied the entire contents of her stomach into the toilet. Why couldn’t she stop shaking? She was terrified.

As long as people could convince themselves that they were good, they were willing to do anything to others. And if they ever stopped believing they were good, they just put on a superficial mask and pretended instead.

Homura’s head was spinning. How could she be surrounded by such cruel and petty creatures?

She needed to run, to get out of there. She had barely formed the thought before her hands were on the bathroom windowsill.

The school building was upside down, falling in reverse.

**###**

In that brief moment before death, when she could think anything she liked without consequences, she finally realized what she really felt inside.

*They’re trash, and I wish I could burn them all to a crisp.*



That's right, now Homura remembered.

Why she had wanted to help people with her pyrokinesis. And why she hadn't felt guilty about burning a bandit alive.

It was because she wanted to burn them all. To burn the trash.

It wasn't because she wanted to prove how different she was from the awful people who had looked down on her. It was just that she wanted to burn them. To burn out injustice. Turn them to ash.

The moment Homura realized what it was she really wanted, she was overcome by a new and powerful sensation. It felt like being connected to something greater. It felt the same way it had felt the first time she had made fire.

"That's right..."

Homura's mind grew clear. She was no longer producing fire, yet the air around her began to grow hot.

"I wanted to incinerate all the trash like you..."

The superheated air shimmered, wafting upward and revealing Homura's right eye, which had been hidden before underneath her bangs.

"That eye... It's the evil eye!"

Her once-hidden eye glowed brightly, as if a sliver of fire had been lodged inside.

"I wanted to burn all the unjust hypocrites like you..."

Their surroundings suddenly grew brighter.

"Wait, what's happening to you?!"

Rotraud stared past Homura's shoulder in astonishment. A scintillating nimbus, like concentrated sunlight, sparkled on her back.

Her burnt arm, which had been useless a moment earlier, began to glow, incandescent with heat. Without needing to think, she grabbed Rotraud by the arm.

Homura glared straight into Rotraud's eyes. He stared back, horrified by the creature before him.

"Buurrrrrnnnnnn!!" Homura's voice sizzled with pure murderous rage.

The flames that shot from the palm of her hand engulfed Rotraud, igniting even the air around him.

"Ha-ha-ha, is that all you can muster?"

Rotraud's body began to repair itself, starting from the outer edges of his wounds. Even his arm, which was in direct contact with Homura's burning hand, only seemed to suffer surface burns. His amazing regenerative ability was outpacing Homura's flames.

But Homura never stopped.

The gushing flames swelled with each passing moment, soon transforming into a torrent of fire.

"Struggle all you like, you'll—you'll... How can you have such power?!"

The confidence disappeared from Rotraud's face.

The healing burns now began to blister and spread. Slowly, surely, the flames began to spread to the deeper tissue underneath.

Rotraud's amazing powers of regeneration were no longer enough to resist the searing flames, and his arm began to burn like a log.

"Augghhhh!!"

The hand burned all the way through, detaching from the body and finally freeing Homura from his grip. Rotraud leaped back almost instinctively, now terrified of Homura's immense power.

"Ngh... It's fine, it's just an arm. It will grow back soon eno—" Rotraud stopped, suddenly speechless.

"What is this?! Why won't it heal?!"

The severed end was still burning. Rotraud's healing had failed to activate.

"Dammit, what is this? A curse?!"

“I burned it. That’s all.”

“No, that’s not possible! And your appearance—you drank the curseblood, too, didn’t you?!”

“Your pathetic little elixir doesn’t interest me.”

Rotraud desperately grasped at any explanation or possibility he could find, but Homura remained unmoved. Her lips began to curl upward in pleasure.

The fire continued to gnaw away at Rotraud’s arm, slowly reducing it to coal that crumbled as it burned.

“I can’t die here! It can’t be! I need to peel back the filthy lies from this world! To awaken the liars from their dreams...!”

“All you need to do now is die.”

Homura’s right eye grew brighter, and Rotraud was swallowed up in an explosion of flame.

“Arrggghhhhh!!” He collapsed to his knees, overcome by the infernal heat. “Dammit! Why won’t my fangs appear?!”

Rotraud waved his remaining arm around uselessly, desperately trying to summon his magic. But the fangs no longer seemed to obey him. Like his regenerative powers, his gnashing incantation had failed him.

All around Homura, the ground grew scorched. She reveled in the power, incinerating the *injustice* before her, obliterating it from existence.

He had used the bandits, even killed villagers himself. Rotraud’s atrocity could only be met with an atrocity of her own.

“Stop it! Please, stop!”

As the flames swallowed Rotraud up, he forced his lips into a smile. His burnt throat convulsed desperately as he attempted to beg for his life—just as he had once mocked others for doing.

“Ha-ha-ha! How does it feel?! How does it feel to be weak?!”

Her eye burned with brilliant scorn.

As she laughed, the flames swelled into a sudden torrent, becoming a pillar of

flame that lit up the sky as if it were day.

“No! I don’t want to d—”

Rotraud was consumed in the dreadful inferno, gone before he could finish his last words.



The rising conflagration saturated the area in crimson light, shaking the nearby forest with its crackling roar.

The column grew thinner and thinner, until it finally sputtered out.

Darkness returned to the sky.

Quiet returned to the forest.

The incident had only lasted a few seconds, but in the minds of the villagers who had witnessed it, the image would be fixed for a lifetime.

Nothing was left once the column of flames subsided. The ash had already been carried away on the wind.

So passed Rotraud's final moments.

The fight was over.

Injustice had been vanquished, and there were no other immediate threats present.

Homura had just snatched victory from the jaws of death and succeeded in her goal of helping others, even if it had been all for show.

And yet, despite her overpowering urge to "burn out injustice," Homura was left with only a giddy sense of elation, rather than accomplishment, at having consigned Rotraud to the flames.

With her feet back on solid ground once more, Homura tried to calm herself down. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with scorched air, and then exhaled slowly.

The scent of burnt flesh was delicious to her. Even now, the remaining embers continued to flicker, inviting her inward, inviting her deeper.

She hadn't meant to do it; it had just felt natural, the way the fire called to her. Homura had surrendered herself to it.

"Ha-ha-ha!"

Surrounded by flames, Homura laughed.

A choking cough.

Psycho hacked up a wad of blood from her lungs.

“Ugh... I’m lucky; I had just enough strength to heal myself.”

After getting her chest crushed by Rotraud, Psycho had barely managed to cling to life by applying some of her healing magic to herself.

The intense exhaustion and pain had caused her to lose consciousness for a brief moment, but she came to once again after the fight was over.

“Holy balls, this hurts... My arm...and my ribs are broken...”

Her injuries hadn’t yet fully healed, and her vision was fuzzy. Through blurry eyes, she spotted Homura standing at a distance.

Psycho’s memory was fuzzy, but the last thing she remembered seeing was Homura squaring off against Rotraud. As the memory returned, she searched for signs of Rotraud.

He was nowhere to be found.

“You’re kidding me...”

As hard as it was to believe, the only possible explanation was that Homura had defeated him. To lend credence to this possibility, Homura was currently standing amid a field of scorched earth, laughing with glee.

“Ah-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

Psycho rose shakily to her feet.

Despite the crippling pain she felt in her chest every time she breathed, she began rushing to Homura’s side as fast as she could.

A little positive reinforcement couldn’t hurt every now and again.

“Attaboy, Homura!”

Blood trickled from Psycho’s mouth as she staggered forward. Homura continued to spin around in circles, as if she were dancing.

“Well, someone’s certainly excited...,” grumbled Psycho. She couldn’t help but

smile, however, as she watched Homura dance.

It was their first big victory. Defeating the Dark Lord was still a long ways off, but this was a good first step. It was natural for Homura to get carried away. Only...

“You’re...acting kind of strange, actually. And you look different... What is that...?”

Homura’s dancing almost seemed delirious. There were flames sprouting underneath her feet and a penumbra of light upon her back. The penumbra was changing, extending into rays.

“Ah-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha!! This is the best! Who knew that the air could smell so good!”

As Homura laughed, the hollowed-out remains of one of the nearby destroyed homes suddenly burst into flames.

Homura’s eyes were blank with ecstasy.

“Hey! Hey! I think the sight of the flames has put you into some kind of trance!”

When humans stared into flames long enough, they could enter an altered, rapturous state in which the subconscious mind would rise to the surface.

There was something important that Homura had forgotten.

Ever since the fire had sprung from her eye that day, she had kept it buried deep inside, but at heart, Homura had an aggressive personality and an overwhelming obsession with fire.

The real reason she wanted to “burn out injustice” was that, if her target deserved it, she knew she could revel in the burning to her heart’s content.

“Wait, then this field...!”

Psycho had assumed the burning field surrounding Homura was just the remnants of whatever she had done to Rotraud, but apparently it was something she was doing now.

“Hey! Somebody stop this moron!” Psycho shouted.

But the villagers were too terrified to do anything but watch from a distance.

Psycho glanced around quickly, spotting Jin and Proto.

Proto wasn't moving. Jin, meanwhile, only managed to lift her head and feebly shake it from side to side. Apparently, she was down for the count as well.

Tsutsumi, meanwhile, was nowhere to be seen.

"Screw it! I guess I'll have to do it, then!"

Psycho was nearly at death's door, and that was putting it mildly. Despite this, she ran forward, pushing her way through the pain.

A good smack might do it, but Psycho's arm was broken. She didn't have any weapons, either.

Actually, no. She did have one.

The burning field was growing bigger by the moment. Psycho ran toward the center as fast as she could.

Her legs burned; her throat blistered.

But still she ran, grabbing Homura by the collar with her unbroken left hand.

"Genius! Headbutt! Smaassshhhhh—!!"

Psycho snapped her forehead downward as hard as she could, bringing it into direct contact with Homura's.

# Epilogue

## Among the Ashes

“Ugh... Huh? Psycho?”

For some reason, once Homura opened her eyes, she found herself staring directly into Psycho’s face.

“So you’re finally awake, you pyromaniac.”

“Pyromaniac...?”

Psycho moved, and Homura felt something hard strike her on the back of her head. Apparently, she had been lying with her head in Psycho’s lap.

Homura got up.

It wasn’t just the back of her head; her forehead hurt as well.

“After you torched Rotraud, you got high on the flames and started burning down the village instead.”

“I did what?!” Homura glanced around.

Even now, the earth continued to smolder. The nearby wreckage and the surface of the ground were black with soot. It was also much warmer than it should have been at that time of night.

The only person nearby who could control fire like this was Homura. She was obviously responsible for the devastation.

Homura went pale. What if she had injured innocent people while she was out of it?

Psycho seemed to sense what she was thinking.

“Relax, no one got hurt,” said Psycho, putting Homura’s mind at ease.

“Thank goodness...” Homura sighed in relief.

“Well, anyway...you did good, kid,” said Psycho, ruffling Homura’s hair suddenly.

Homura went silent, embarrassed to receive direct praise.

The choices she’d made had saved many. She could feel the appreciation in Psycho’s touch.

“Oh, speaking of which—you had a ring of light on your back. What was that about?”

“A ring of what on my where...?”

“Never mind. When it comes to supernatural abilities, what is any of this stuff after all?”

What was Psycho talking about? Now that Homura thought about it, she only vaguely remembered defeating Rotraud.

The village was illuminated brightly by the scattered orestone lamps, the light from the moon, and the remaining embers. The number of injured was astounding, but more than a few had been killed as well.

Homura had tried, but she hadn’t been able to protect them all. It hurt. The fact that it hurt proved Homura didn’t *only* care about burning out injustice. She really did want to help people as well.

But if she were to ask herself right now, in this moment—now that she had just discovered herself—which feeling was stronger, she would have to admit that it was the former.

“Homura. You’re finally awake.”

“It’s about time! We’ve been running ourselves ragged trying to take care of the aftermath.”

“I’m hungry...”

Jin, Proto, and Tsutsumi approached, having taken care of some of the most pressing cleanup.

“Everybody, you’re all right!”

“I was skewered through all four limbs.”

“I got hit so hard some of my systems went offline.”

“I got shish kebabbed...to a church.”

“Shish kebabbed to a church?!” Homura wasn’t sure exactly what had happened to Tsutsumi, but at least she seemed fine now.

Homura plopped herself down next to Tsutsumi and tried to act casual as she ran her hand over her head comfortingly. She glanced at Jin surreptitiously, but Jin just briefly rolled her eyes. Success! It looked like Jin was willing to let her get away with it this time.

“Leela snapped out of it as well. Well, she still seems to be having trouble coming to grips with the truth, but she’s going around treating the injured, at least.”

Taking a glance around, Homura spotted several priests, including Leela, busy healing the other villagers.

“I see...”

The damage Rotraud had left behind was not only physical. There were deep emotional scars as well.

Rotraud had been willing to do the unthinkable to others, all for his own self-centered gratification. Homura would never forgive that.

“I’ve made up my mind,” said Homura, standing as she spoke. “I’m going to burn the injustice out of this world. I’ve finally realized my truth. What I really wanted to do wasn’t to help people; it was to burn evil to a crisp. Helping people comes second. The person I really want to do this for is myself. Just you watch—I’m going to burn the injustice from this world and bring peace, and I’m going to do it all for myself!”

“It’s about time!”

Homura had just revealed her true self, in all its shameful pettiness, and her friends were still willing to accept her.

This was where Homura belonged.

A smile escaped her lips. “All right then! Let’s go do some missions and burn some villains! And guys, guys... Don’t be afraid to rely on me, okay? I mean, I am the strongest, after all!”

It took Homura exactly zero seconds before she got carried away. Trance or not, she had defeated Rotraud.

“Before you start mouthing off,” Psycho said, “how about you begin some spiritual training so you don’t go all loopy on us every single time you see fire? Until then, you’re not allowed to fight anyone, you nutcase!”

“For real!”

But this only encouraged Homura to fight back.

“In that case, Psycho, how about you stop carrying out human experiments?! If anyone sees one of your freaks, they’re going to think we’re with the Dark Lord!”

“You shut up! At least I don’t go around indiscriminately starting fires like you!”

“Yeah, well, I’ll try to be more careful next time!”

“And I’ll try not to do it on people!”

“So what?!”

“Yeah, you want a piece of me?!”

After a moment of silence, the two girls began to square off.

Despite the state they were in, both girls wanted to flex their muscles and show each other who was boss.

It quickly descended into a grapple—Homura with her burnt arm that had yet to heal completely, Psycho with her broken arm that had not yet mended.

“Good to see they’re getting along so well,” said Jin.

“Idiots of a feather flock together,” Proto added.

“That looks like fun...,” said Tsutsumi.

Meanwhile, the other three just smiled.

This was what real friendship was about. Saying how they really felt, straight to each other's faces.

Homura had finally found something that mattered.

A bunch of misfits on a journey through what was sure to be a crummy world. There was almost certainly nothing great waiting for them out there. And yet, for whatever reason, Homura's heart fluttered in her chest.

It was no longer just a feeling.

This was turning out to be such an adventure.





## Afterword

It's nice to meet you. My name is Hiyoko Sumeragi.

First allow me to express my gratitude to everyone for picking up this book. Thank you.

It is due to the support and cooperation of a great many people that I am able to now express my gratitude in this afterword, so I would like to take a moment to explain my background and offer thanks to these people. I hope you'll forgive me for writing so seriously now. I know it's a change of pace from the book itself.

Regarding myself, I decided to become an author after encountering the works of Yusuke Kishi. It was then that I transitioned from a reader to a writer. Although a long time passed between when I decided I wanted to write and when I actually started writing...

As a reader, I was only ever aware of the authors of the books I read. Or also the illustrators, in the case of light novels. But once I started writing, and began posting to fiction sites such as *Kakuyomu*, I became keenly aware, through firsthand experience, of how important it is to have people in your life who support you in your writing.

When readers are kind enough to enjoy the work, it provides motivation, and speaking with other creators offers a variety of perspectives on storytelling. To put it simply, it's a blessing to have friends and people on your side.

It was that, more than anything, that allowed me to continue writing, to have this work selected for the illustrious twenty-seventh Sneaker Award, and to see it transformed into a finished book.

To everyone in the Sneaker Bunko editorial department who selected this work for a grand prize, to Satoshi Hase, and to Takeru Kasukabe—thank you so

much for believing in my potential.

Once this work was chosen, I went from being just a “writer” to being a “professional writer” on the commercial stage. From there, I began to interact with a wide variety of other professionals and was astounded to learn just how many people are involved in bringing a book into this world.

To my editor, Natsuki Miyakawa. The illustrators, Mika Pikazo and mocha. The designer, Tsuyoshi Kusano. Koyuki, who is in charge of the manga adaptation. Natsume Akatsuki, who provided an endorsement. Ken Kitamura, who created the promotional video. Aya Hirano, who handled the promotional video narration. Kurone Mishima and Hagure Yuki, who provided supporting illustrations. Kumicho, who created 3D models. The radio dramatization voice actors, Hikaru Tono, Ai Fairouz, Aimi, Nao Toyama, and Maya Uchida, who played Homura and her friends; and Shogo Sakata and Fumiya Imai, who played the bandits. As well as all the related proofreaders, acoustic engineers, booksellers, marketing and tie-in staff, and the many other people who were kind enough to be involved in creating my book. I am incredibly, deeply thankful.

I promise to do my very utmost to continue to meet everyone’s expectations, including those of you, the readers.

That was a pretty formal afterword, wasn’t it...?

But now it’s time for me to talk about the book itself! Beware of spoilers!

This story is about a unique group of girls who set out to save the world, but none of them are really fighting for the world’s sake. They couldn’t care less about world peace. They have other goals they wish to accomplish, or are even doing it just for themselves.

In other words, Homura and her friends may be enemies of the wicked, but that doesn’t mean they are friends of the righteous. They’re selfish and headstrong. If you don’t know them well, they may appear good. But this is just who they are. They’re hypocrites just pretending to be upright. But they’re certainly not upright. It’s a little complicated, but it is what it is.

By the way, the subtitle of this first volume is *The Dark Lord's Castle Goes Boom*, but that doesn't refer to what actually happens in the first volume. It's about the end of their journey, which will stretch all the way from the first volume to the last.

How do they get where they are going, and what are their feelings along the way? Dear readers, I want you to join Homura and the others on this journey and experience everything they feel along with them.

Speaking of which! Speaking of which! There's no specific guarantee yet that the series will continue to be published to the end, but it would leave a lot of loose ends if it didn't. So I guess I'd better try my best!

And so this afterword comes to an end! In parting, everyone, I love you all!



HOORAY ON THE PUBLICATION  
OF THE WORLD BOWS DOWN!

---

MY NAME IS MIKA PIKAZO,  
AND I HANDLED CHARACTER  
DESIGNS AND ILLUSTRATIONS  
FOR THIS BOOK. THE CHARACTERS  
IN THE WORLD BOWS DOWN  
BEFORE MY FLAMES ARE ALL  
SO ADORABLE. EVERY TIME I  
MADE ANOTHER DRAWING OR  
READ A LITTLE MORE, I COULDN'T  
GET OVER HOW CUTE THEY  
ARE. I HESITATED A LOT  
WHEN DESIGNING HOMURA  
IN PARTICULAR, BUT SHE'S  
REALLY BECOME A FAVORITE,  
AND I'D LOVE TO DRAW  
MORE CHARACTERS LIKE  
HER! I LOOK FORWARD TO  
SEEING MORE OF HOMURA  
IN ACTION! THANK YOU  
AND GOOD-BYE!


CHIBI HOMURA



*Mika Pikazo*

MIKA PIKAZO





HOORAY! *THE WORLD BOWS DOWN* HAS BEEN RELEASED!!

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR BUYING THIS BOOK!

MY NAME IS MOCHA. I WAS IN CHARGE OF DRAWING THE BACKGROUNDS.

*THE WORLD BOWS DOWN BEFORE MY FLAMES* STARTED WITH THE CLIMAX...! IT'S NOT OFTEN YOU GET TO DRAW THE DARK LORD'S CASTLE EXPLODING AND IN FLAMES RIGHT FROM PAGE ONE. IT MADE FOR A NICE CHANGE OF PACE (LOL). I FEEL KIND OF BAD FOR THE CASTLE, THOUGH, SINCE IT MADE ITS FIRST APPEARANCE ALREADY IN SHAMBLES. THE COVER IS BASICALLY THE AFTER FROM A BEFORE-AND-AFTER. HERE'S TO KEEPING THE EXPLOSIVE MOMENTUM ROLLING. HOPEFULLY THIS SERIES WILL BECOME ONE OF YOUR FAVORITES!

*Mocha*  
MOCHA

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