




9

**High
School
Prodigies
Have It
Easy
Even in
Another
World!**

Riku Misora

Illustration by **SACRANECO**



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Prodigies
Have It
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9

**A Maximum-Security
Cell in Drachen**

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**“So that’s the
intruder, huh?”**

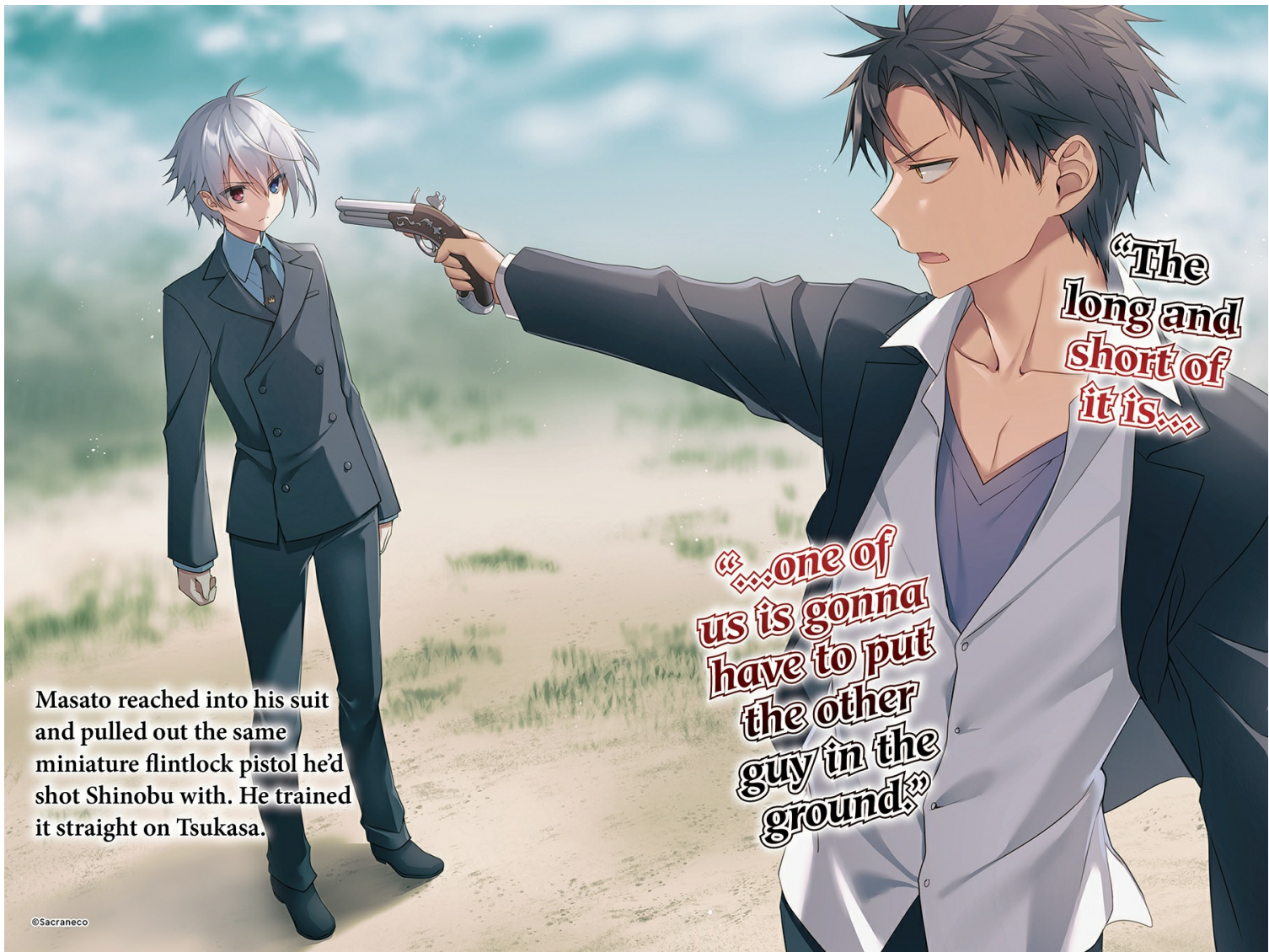


“Back in Elm Village...they’re probably starting to hunker down for the winter right about now.”

“That makes sense. It’s getting to be that season.”

“That means... it’s been... a whole year... since we got here.”





Masato reached into his suit and pulled out the same miniature flintlock pistol he'd shot Shinobu with. He trained it straight on Tsukasa.

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RIKU MISORA
ILLUSTRATION BY
SACRANECO

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Riku Misora

Illustration by **SACRANECO**

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ON**
NEW YORK

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High School Prodigies Have It Easy Even in Another World!, Vol. 9

Riku Misora

TRANSLATION BY NATHANIEL HIROSHI THRASHER

COVER ART BY SACRANECO

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CHOUJIN KOUKOUSEI TACHI HA ISEKAI DEMO YOYU DE IKINUKU YOUDESU!
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CHAPTER 4

✿ A Devil Is Born ✿

The young prodigy businessman Masato Sanada was in charge of the Sanada Group, a conglomerate rumored to control as much as 30 percent of the world's wealth.

As a child, however, the only particularly remarkable thing about that future prodigy was that his family was rich. All his grades, aside from PE, were below average, and he was hardly the image of a model student. He brought manga and portable game consoles to school with him, and when his teachers confiscated them, he used his parents' money to buy new copies for the next day. The comments his teachers left on his report cards made it pretty clear how fed up with him they were. The one nice thing they had to say about Masato was how many friends he had.

Wherever Masato went, a crowd always followed. He was a bit taller than the other kids, his voice was a bit louder, and most importantly, he used his family's funds to get his peers whatever they wanted. All of that made him seem larger-than-life in their eyes.

That said, his clout at the time began and ended at being the leader of a pack of kids. None of that was indicative of the charisma and global control that would eventually be enjoyed by the young man who came to be known as the Devil of Finance. Unlike Tsukasa Mikogami and Ringo Oohoshi, who were known as marvels even at a young age, or even the likes of Akatsuki or Keine, who became aware of their talents quickly, too, the young Masato had no idea who he was yet.

That all changed during his first summer in middle school.

Masato remembered that day well. He recalled the sweltering summer heat and the flies' obnoxious buzzing. The choking stench mixed with the thick smell of nature was burned into his memory. His father's body dangled from the bedroom rafters like a shoddy wind chime that refused to ring.

Masato was the first to find the corpse of his father, the Sanada Group's third president. The Sanada Group had been struggling the past few years, and Masato's father had agonized over it. Japan's economic situation had rapidly declined after the father of Masato's childhood friend, Tsukasa Mikogami, took over as prime minister. While there was certainly an argument to be made that he was to blame, what really sealed the Sanada Group's fate was its internal power struggle.

The ringleaders behind the coup were some of the biggest names in the Sanada Group—people whom the Sanadas had looked after for generations. The parties in question declared that the conglomerate's poor performance was a management issue, and they loudly denounced the Sanada family, splitting the enterprise into two factions. The ensuing chaos caused the group's companies to fall out of sync, and the Sanada Group all but stopped being able to function as an organization.

That marked a golden opportunity for the Sanada Group's biggest rival, the Mikasa Group, one it wasn't about to let slip.

After all, the Mikasas were the ones who engineered that power struggle in the first place.

With the Sanada Group on the verge of collapse from within, it lacked the strength to withstand its rival's attack, and the battle between Japan's two largest corporate conglomerates ended in an overwhelming victory for the Mikasas. The Sanada Group's one lifeline was its market share in the foreign export sector, and when the Mikasa Group seized that, too, the Sanada Group crumbled. Seventy percent of its companies had to declare bankruptcy, and it was reduced to a shell of its former self.

As the Sanada Group's third president, Masato's father spent sleepless nights toiling to right the ship. Saving a smaller company would have been one thing;

reorganizing a massive corporation in the midst of a downfall was no simple task. Businesses burned through colossal amounts of working capital simply by existing, and that only intensified the greater the size. In the end, Masato's father's efforts were for naught, and the debts piled up at a horrifying pace.

However, Masato's father never whined or grumbled about work around his son. Masato had heard the rumors going around, but when he asked about them, his father simply gave him a haggard smile and told him that everything was going to be okay. He knew that sharing his woes with a child who'd only just entered middle school would solely serve to frighten him. That was part of it anyway. The real reason he didn't tell Masato anything was much more sentimental in nature. For Masato's father, maintaining that brave front was his final act of obstinance. It was what let him keep his heart from shattering from the futility of it all as he took his single bucket and bailed the water out of the hole-ridden ship.

He never complained, even when he took his own life.

Masato's father had no relatives but his child, and in his suicide note, he left Masato some advice about how to proceed. The letter concluded with a simple, two-word apology: *I'm sorry.*

All of this was beyond a child's ability to comprehend. Masato could only gaze at his father's dangling body.

He sat at his father's feet and stared at him for a long, long time.

Others undoubtedly saw Masato as a sad, grieving child—a poor, powerless boy who'd just lost his only blood relative. Perhaps that's why they didn't realize. In fact, it took the household staff a full three hours to notice. Only then did they recognize that Masato wasn't sobbing or clinging to his father desperately. He simply stared at the man's corpse like he was trying to burn it into his mind.

Only then did they see the sinister hatred burning in his eyes.

I'll kill them.

The boy had grown up never wanting for a thing. This was the first time his heart had harbored the craving that was bloodlust. Fueled by anger, Masato got

to work immediately. The first thing he did was to completely disregard his father's wishes and the advice from his team of lawyers. He accepted his father's inheritance. In other words, he chose to take over the dying Sanada Group as its fourth president.

The people around him, particularly the people who'd laid the Sanada Group low, probably thought he'd gone mad. Taking over the Sanada Group meant acquiring its debts—debts so massive that no individual could ever hope to repay them. The act was tantamount to suicide, especially for such a young kid.

However, Masato made that decision with a plan.

Building an organization from scratch was an endeavor that took unbelievable amounts of work. Businesses weren't just piles of people and money. They were the aggregate of their history, facilities, personnel, and assets as well as the reputation and trust that having all those things carried. Sure, building a company from the ground up would let him start from a healthier financial position. However, developing it until it was big enough to strike the Mikasa Group down would take time, and Masato couldn't wait that long. If he delayed, he ran the risk of having one of the targets of his revenge die of old age or from an accident or the like. That possibility was completely unacceptable to Masato. A cleared and tilled field was preferable to an unplowed one, but the Sanada Group was the only weapon Masato had. If he wanted to carry out his revenge, he couldn't afford to cast it aside, no matter how risky holding on to it might be.

In short, accepting his father's inheritance was a declaration of war on the Mikasa Group.

However, Masato's foes thought little of him and failed to pick up on his intentions. They assumed that he'd lost it or reasoned that he was a spoiled rich boy who didn't comprehend the consequences of the debt. The Mikasa Group and the Sanada Group members who'd betrayed the company for positions at the rival corporation all laughed at Masato. They quickly lost interest in him and didn't pay the boy any mind.

That condescension proved to be their undoing.

Once Masato took over as the fourth president, the Sanada Group began

recovering at an unbelievably rapid pace. The comeback was nothing short of incredible, and three things made it possible.

The first was the size of the conglomerate. It wasn't much to look at now, but the Sanada Group had cultivated expertise and connections over the course of its long history, and trust didn't vanish quite the way money did. It stuck around. While diminished, it still remained. It didn't take long for any companies with strong foundations to get back on their feet under the right stewardship. Masato's decision to inherit the Sanada Group despite the risks paid off.

The second was the newly reborn Sanada Group's agility. When Masato came in, he summoned the presidents of all thirty businesses and had them simultaneously debrief him on their respective industries' best practices, indicators, and current landscapes. And he understood it all. Masato had honed his powers of concentration as a tool of revenge, and doing so allowed him to develop a superhuman skill called multi-listening that let him comprehend multiple conversations at once. In the space of a single week, Masato was able to perfectly copy the inner workings of each of his subsidiary companies' leaders. Immediately thereafter, he took over the role of president for every business in the group. By personally handling the decision-making for the entire conglomerate, he was able to run the whole conglomerate as a one-man army.

Thanks to its new management style, the Sanada Group operated with the flexibility of a sole proprietorship despite being a major corporation. Whenever decisions needed to be made, they could be determined in an instant without having to worry about people protecting their own skins, getting territorial, or picking fights as a way to climb the corporate ladder. Everything, from simple planning and credit decisions all the way up to cross-company initiatives that would normally take countless meetings to orchestrate, all happened in Masato's head at the speed it took electrical signals to travel across his brain. The Sanada Group functioned at an unprecedented pace for such a large conglomerate. Naturally, competitors like the Mikasa Group couldn't keep up.

And the final advantage...was the global financial crisis that started right as Masato took over.

Under normal circumstances, economies operated to a large degree on

inertia. In times of plenty, clients often continued dealing with the same trade partners, even if they weren't totally happy with them. In moments of crisis, though, all of that changed. It did so by necessity. And in a world where turbulent macroeconomic forces made everyone demand change, the Sanada Group's lightning-fast reaction speed served as a weapon that turned things in its favor. By using the financial crisis as a tailwind to push itself to dazzling heights, the Sanada Group gobbled up the Mikasa Group's market share like there was no tomorrow.

The crisis took a year to die down, and during that time, the Mikasa Group found itself pillaged clean with no way to resist. It lost more business than it had stolen from the Sanada Group. Shortly thereafter, the Mikasa Group fell apart.

Undoubtedly, it was frustrating for the Mikasa Group's members. "If it wasn't for that financial crisis," they all cursed. Without it, Masato's blade would never have traced across the neck of the titan that was the Mikasa Group.

Was it really a coincidence that a financial crisis struck when Masato needed it to?

It was like it had waited for him to take over as president before striking. That was pure nonsense, of course. The odds of something like that occurring were so astronomically low that it didn't even bear consideration.

However, that was precisely what had happened.

There were plenty of causes someone could attribute to the Sanada Group's revival, but ultimately, there was one true reason. It wasn't wisdom or talent. It was Masato's ability to take the ebb and flow of everything that was happening in the world, events too big for any one person to control—what some might call fate—and pull them his way. It was a power that defied comprehension. This inhuman capability bordered on the divine. It was *prodigious*.

That was why the Mikasa Group fell—because Masato Sanada was unmistakably a prodigy businessman.

Masato didn't let up his onslaught after the Mikasa Group dissolved. He continued crushing his foes long after it made financial sense to do so, and many of them ended up filing for bankruptcy or dying by suicide. The public

denounced Masato for the ferocity of his crusade, and several of his associates tried to talk him down, but his stance was alarmingly stubborn on that issue.

After the Mikasa Group dissolved and all the people who'd driven Masato's father to his death lost their jobs, Masato changed his targets from the companies to the individuals and tore them down in every way he could. No place in the world where the Sanada Group held influence was safe.

Surely this is plenty.

I've taken things far enough.

I think it's time I forgave them.

Masato Sanada lacked the ability to make such compromises with the pain he carried. His father had sunk into the blackest mud and left Masato an apology that must have pained him to write, and yet the people who'd driven him to that point were still alive. They would rise to see tomorrow's sun. To Masato, that was unacceptable, and it made him so furious it practically drove him mad.

In the end, Masato continued his dogged assault until every last person involved in his father's death had fallen into a despair so deep they chose to kill themselves. The exhaustive way in which he dealt with his enemies sent a shock through the entire financial sphere, and the boy was soon dubbed the Devil of Finance and feared the world over.

That said, the only people he was merciless with were his foes. When it came to his employees, he was as magnanimous as could be. The world had plenty of people who were leaders in name alone, but unlike them, Masato never foisted blame on his subordinates. Instead, he took the heat for failures himself. His people revered him, and he returned their faith with love. It resembled the way one treated their family. Perhaps that's what he'd been craving all along.

After awakening to his talents, Masato made up his mind to walk the conqueror's road alongside his people, working tirelessly to earn more than anyone else so the employees who adored and relied on him could live even happier lives. The time he spent that way meant a lot to him, and he enjoyed every minute of it.

Before long, though, someone came and stood in the way of his conquest:

Tsukasa Mikogami, a young man whose very being struck fear into the Devil of Finance.



“Chancellor Advisor, Chancellor Advisor.”

Masato Sanada heard someone calling for him by the title he’d received during his time in the Lakan Archipelago. It made him realize that he’d fallen asleep in the back of his wagon.

It was only evening, but winter was near, and the world was already draped in darkness. Even the moon’s light shining between the pine needles held a certain coldness.

Masato shook his head to clear away his drowsiness and turned to the person who’d called for him. “What?”

The speaker, the mercenary captain Masato had hired with the help of Lakan’s new chancellor, Shenmei Li, chuckled as he gave his report. “We’ve located a group of infantry marching down the highway to the north-northwest. They’re flying the Republic of Elm’s standard.”

Masato gave him a confident grin. “They’re taking the route we expected, then. How many troops have they got?”

“Roughly twenty-five thousand. It’s a damn big force they’re working with.”

“Makes sense. With the way they tout equality for all, abandoning Yamato ain’t an option for them.”

Equality for all was Elm’s national creed, so writing off the war as Yamato’s problem would have harmed the new nation’s legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. That Elm’s national assembly recognized that fact was a testament to the skill of its elected officials.

“The grandmaster told us to stop ’em, but how are you planning on doing that? Charging from the forest and attacking their flank?”

“Don’t be a dumbass. We’ve only got three thousand. Surprise attack or not, we’d barely slow ’em down. Why would we wanna do that when we’ve got another method that has zero risk and’ll actually work?”

“What’s that?”

“Didja forget? Those guys think I’m an angel.”

With that, Masato took his Qinglong Gang mercenaries and led them from their hiding spots in the woods directly toward the main Republic of Elm army marching across the imperial mountain trail on its way to Yamato.

“Hey, what’s up?” he called out.

“Wh-who’s there?!”

Elch, who was riding with the Elm army’s central company, panicked when he saw the group emerge from the forest. He and the soldiers leveled their rifles at Masato and the mercenaries...

“C’mon, Elch! Don’t go pointing those things at me!”

“Masato?!”

...but when they realized they were dealing with an old friend, they all hurriedly lowered their guns.

“It’s an angel!”

“What’s an angel doing here?!”

“Didn’t they say he went over to Lakan?!”

“Wh-what are you doing here, Masato? I heard that after you returned from Lakan, you helped the Blue Grandmaster purge the Bluebloods...”

“Sounds like you’ve been keeping on top of things,” Masato said, impressed by Elm’s intelligence-gathering capabilities. “Well, I bailed on him, that’s what. As soon as Neuro started fighting Tsukasa and the others for real, I decided to get the hell out. Figured it was only a matter of time before I woke up dead.”

“I heard you were working for him.”

“You seriously think I’ve got the patience to work *for* anyone?”

That there was a bald-faced lie. Masato was still cooperating with Neuro. He was here in the northwesternmost part of the empire specifically to stop Elm’s forces. The Elm army had its enemies at gunpoint and let them off the hook.

However, the army could hardly be faulted for that. After all, the only person who knew that Masato had cast his lot completely with Neuro was Shinobu Sarutobi, who'd sneaked into Drachen a few days prior. And Shinobu wasn't in any position to share that information.

Masato made sure to keep all that to himself as he moved closer to Elch. "If Tsukasa was the only one in danger, I might've just said screw him, but Akatsuki and Ringo are over there, too. I'm not gonna throw them to the wolves. That's why I took the Lakan mercs I hired, sneaked away, and waited here to join up with the Elm reinforcements. I've only got three thousand dudes here, so I figured we wouldn't be much use to Yamato on our own."

"Well, if you're here to pitch in, that'd be a huge help. We'd be happy to have you. That's agreeable with you, right, Commander?" Elch said.

"Of course. In battles, every warm body counts."

Masato was still seen as one of the saviors among the people of Elm. Elch certainly had no reason to doubt him, nor did Commander Zest. As a result, the two of them offered him their unconditional trust.

"It's just...adding another three thousand soldiers will put a hell of a burden on our supplies," Zest continued. "I'm sure you know this, Elch, but supplies are an army's lifeblood."

"Don't you worry about that, my man." Masato pointed at the mercenaries behind him. They all carried large casks and burlap sacks. "We brought along loads of food and booze we swiped from Drachen when we skipped town. If you wanna load 'em onto your supply wagon, that'd be a huge help. We brought too much for our own carts, so my guys have been lugging them by hand. Judging by the size of the invading army, this war's gonna be a long one, and we figured there was no such thing as too many supplies."

"Ha-ha." Elch laughed. "That's the Masato I know. Always prepared."

"A good merchant always gets you what you need, when you need it," Masato replied.

"That's a huge help," Zest said. "I'll have my troops load up the wagons right away."

“Thanks.” Masato turned to the mercenaries. “Hey, guys, you all should help out, too. And make it snappy.”

“““You got it, sir.”””

With that, the Qinglong Gang handed their stolen provisions over to the Elm supply squad. There was nothing unusual about the provisions. They weren’t poisoned or rigged with explosives. As such, the Elm troops readily added them to their own supplies.

However, Masato had a plan. Of course he did. Neuro had predicted that the Republic of Elm would send in reinforcements, and he’d tasked Masato with stopping them so that Neuro could conquer Yamato unopposed. Masato harbored a scheme that would let him do just that.

“That’s a pretty huge supply squad you’ve got,” Masato remarked to Elch as he watched the troops secure everything. “Must’ve been a hell of a job gathering up all these people.”

“You can say that again. Not everyone in the republic is happy about launching this big military campaign just to help Yamato,” Elch replied with a nod. “Still, we can’t abandon them. Especially when Tsukasa and the others are still over there.”

“This is Tsukasa we’re talking about, though. I’m sure that before he went and stirred up shit with Neuro, with the empire, he gave you guys a way to cut ties with the Seven Luminaries. He offered it, and you didn’t accept. You sure that was the right call? A whole load of these people are gonna die.”

“We know that.”

Masato being Masato, he knew the sort of person Tsukasa was, and sure enough, that was exactly what Tsukasa had done. By sending Shinobu in to break Kaguya out of jail, Tsukasa had given the Republic of Elm’s newly formed national assembly the option to denounce him and the other so-called angels of the Seven Luminaries. Yet despite that...

“The representatives we selected as a nation got together, hashed things out, and made their call. The Republic of Elm has spoken, and we want to fight this war.”

...Elm had elected instead to save both Yamato and the Prodigies.

It wasn't a battle anyone forced the country into. The representatives chose this fight because they felt it was the right thing to do, and Elch spoke of that with pride.

A gentle smile spread across Masato's face as he looked over at Elch. "Damn, Elch. I look away for one minute, and you sound like a real man."

".....! C-c'mon, don't treat me like a kid! We're basically the same age!"

"Ha-ha. My bad, my bad."

Masato's smile didn't fade in the face of Elch's anger. He was legitimately happy at how much Elch had grown. That growth meant that he wasn't there as Masato's student, but as an adult fighting for what he believed in.

Masato wouldn't have to pull any punches.

"I'm glad I got to see you again," Elch said. "When you split off after that argument about how to treat Lady Kaguya, I was afraid you might never come back. But I knew you cared about your allies."

"...Yeah. You're right." Masato flashed his canines. "And that's why I gotta do this."

"Huh?"

"Chancellor Advisor, we've finished loading the supplies!"

The Qinglong Gang mercenaries and the Elm soldiers came over to report that they'd finished moving all the new provisions.

Upon hearing that, Masato loudly thanked them...

"Good work! Now hurry up...and start the fire."

...and gave the order.

As soon as he did, the mercenaries sprang into action. Some threw the torches they held, and others shot flaming arrows. All aimed for the supply squad wagons.

Fire engulfed the wagons in the blink of an eye.

“...What?”

Elch and the others stared in shock, unable to comprehend what was happening.

Beside them, Masato clapped his hands together in delight like he was watching a fireworks show. “That’s Azure Whiskey for you. Burns like a charm.”

“Masato, what are you...? What do you think you’re doing? What the HELL?!”

When Elch finally realized what he was looking at, he grabbed Masato by the collar with rage burning in his eyes.

“What do you mean?” Masato replied unapologetically. “It’s exactly like you said.”

“What?!”

“I never abandon an ally. And my allies are the employees I’ve got waiting for me to come home.”

“——! You bastard!” Elch raised his fist.

Unfortunately, he’d chosen his opponent poorly. Much like Tsukasa, Masato had his share of assassination attempts back on Earth, and he’d picked up the combat skills necessary for a person in his position. He casually evaded Elch’s punch, countered by grabbing his arm, and performed a one-armed shoulder throw to send Elch slamming into the ground.

“Gah!” Elch gasped.

“Elch!” Zest cried.

“Sorry, Elch, but this is the one thing I can’t budge on. Even if it means letting Lyrule get killed.”

“Lyrule?! What does Lyrule have to do with anything?! What are you planning on doing to her?!”

Neuro was trying to kill Lyrule to resurrect his creator, and when Masato gave voice to that tidbit he’d learned from Shinobu, Elch tried to grab at him again. However, he was still reeling so badly from the throw that he couldn’t get back on his feet.



Then...

“Chancellor Advisor, all of us are ready to evacuate.”

“All right, let’s hit the bricks! Everyone, into the forest!”

...Masato shot the briefest of glances at the Elm army, whose members stared in horror at the angel’s betrayal, before beating a hasty retreat into the forest with his troops. They fled so quickly that it was like watching a herd of wildcats.

Naturally, Elch hurried to give chase...

“Hey! G-get back here, you son of a bitch!”

“Elch, no!”

...but Zest pinioned him the moment he tried to head for the woods.

“Commander, why’d you stop me?!” Elch protested.

Deep furrows stretched across Zest’s brow as he gave his answer. “I knew those soldiers looked familiar. That was the Qinglong Gang, the foremost mercenary outfit in all of Lakan. And to make matters worse, more than half the archipelago is woodland. Guerilla warfare in the forest is their bread and butter! I don’t even want to think about how many we’d lose charging in after them!”

“Grrr!”

Zest’s explanation was enough to get Elch to yield. Now that he thought about it, the massive Qinglong Gang force had surely been traveling right along their flank, and Elch had been none the wiser. The leadership skills it took to facilitate such a maneuver were terrifying to consider. A messy fight in the forest threatened the entire Elm force.

All Elch could do was stare silently at the trees Masato and his forces vanished into.

Rage colored his expression, but it was outweighed by sorrow.



“Looks like they’re not chasing us.”

“Well, that’s boring. I was all excited to mow them down when they came

bumbling after us like fools.”

“Old man Zest is no dumbass. He’s not gonna chase us when we’ve got advantageous terrain. Still, make sure you keep up your guards.”

As Masato and his soldiers hurried away from the Elm army, the mercenary outfit’s captain shot Masato a question. “Chancellor Advisor, all we did was burn their supplies. Are you sure it’s all right for us to leave? The Blue Grandmaster told us to stop them in their tracks. Your betrayal broke their morale. Wouldn’t it have been better for us to draw them into the forest and fight them here?”

“No way,” Masato replied. “There’s a time for taking risks, and this ain’t it. Besides, that stunt might not have stopped imperial troops, but against Elm, it’ll put ’em right out of commission.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because they can’t pillage,” Masato explained.

Freyjagard’s and Elm’s respective national policies of survival of the fittest and equality for all respectively meant that the two nations went about war in completely different ways.

For Freyjagard, warfare was a way of bolstering their economy by pillaging their foes and placing them under colonial rule. Wars cost money, but Freyjagard made up for that with the wealth it plundered.

In contrast, Elm espoused the philosophy of equality for all, and that meant it couldn’t ransack, not even from enemies. Doing so would go against the national creed, which applied both on a macro level in respect to Elm’s national economy and on a micro level regarding their ability to procure supplies locally during the war itself. Slowing down an army that believed in equality was simple—all it took was burning its provisions.

“Elch and Zest knew that, so they put their supplies right next to their main force and made sure they were guarded well.”

“But they let you stroll right past their defenses.”

Masato nodded. “Trying to run a long-distance military campaign without

supplies spells death. Plus, the imperial army they're up against is a hundred thousand strong. Even with Yamato, the fight will drag on for ages. The only thing the Elm army can do now is sit on its ass and wait for more supplies to show up."

"Is there any danger they'll consolidate what little food they've got left among small companies and send them on ahead?"

"And break their army into tiny, useless chunks? If the empire lost to a plan that stupid, it wouldn't deserve our help," Masato replied with a shrug. The mercenaries snickered in agreement. "Besides, even if they did do something that stupid, it would be too little too late. We're about to turn right around to back up Neuro."

Masato's words caused the mercenaries to quicken their march. More than half of the Lakan Archipelago's territory was covered in tropical forests, and as the nation's finest mercenary outfit, the Qinglong Gang was able to trek through the forested mountains without so much as breaking a sweat. They moved through the trees as fast as others might run down a well-maintained highway. Not even mounted cavalry could have kept pace with them. Yamato was just as forested as Lakan, so this advantage would only grow when they crossed the border. Even if Elch and Zest forced their army onward, Masato and his mercenaries were still bound to reach the battlefield first.

The Qinglong Gang, comprised of three thousand troops, would help drive the final nail into the exhausted Yamato army's coffin.

For my dream—my avarice.

A memory surfaced in Masato's mind. It was a recollection of the day his friend and enemy, prodigy politician Tsukasa Mikogami, barred the way on his road to conquest.

"As the stats above show, the levels of wealth inequality brought about by our capitalist economy have already exceeded acceptable bounds. This needs to be remedied as soon as possible, and as a government body with jurisdiction over wealth redistribution, the duty to do so lies with us. As such, we propose introducing a system of universal basic income wherein every citizen is allotted a fixed sum each month as a way to lessen inequality."

Universal basic income, or UBI, was exactly what it sounded like. It was a program whereby every citizen was unconditionally allotted the minimum amount of money they needed to function. Financing for that system came from two places—a consolidation of miscellaneous social safety nets and a progressive tax on the rich. In other words, it was a policy that used state power to shave away at the fortunes of wealthy people like Masato.

Tsukasa was trying to steal from the Sanada Group.

He was trying to rob them of their riches, just like the Mikasa Group once had. And that meant they were going to fight. Masato had no choice, not as long as the image of his father's body remained seared into the backs of his eyelids. He refused to lose his family again.

"I don't show my foes a shred of mercy. But you know that already, don't you —Tsukasa?"

The cold wind was a harbinger of the winter to come, but Masato's words carried a greater chill.



Meanwhile, in a maximum-security cell in Drachen...

"So that's the intruder, huh?"

"Yeah. They say the fallen angel who betrayed the Seven Luminaries caught her."

"Seems like a whole lot of restraints for a single chick. How many padlocks are even on that door?"

"The fallen angel says she'd slip out with anything less."

"I dunno, looks like overkill. You could at least let me in there. I mean, how am I supposed to enjoy myself out here?"

"Not a chance. The grandmaster sent us a message from the front as a reminder. He says not to loosen her restraints, no matter what. She might not appear like much, but she's still an angel. Who knows what she'd do to us if she got free."

"*Tch.* This job sucks."

“ ”
...

CHAPTER 5

✿ The Second Winter ✿

Once the Yamato dominion government was toppled, the Resistance founded a new, legitimate administration.

However, the Freyjagard Empire wasn't about to sit back and let that slide. Grandmaster Neuro ul Levias held the reins of power while Emperor Lindworm was off on his campaign. After stamping out the empire's internal dissidents, the first thing Neuro did was mobilize every military asset he could into a subjugating army roughly 150,000 strong to storm the land the Yamato government had taken from them.

Yamato's standing forces totaled less than five thousand, and even with temporary enlistment, the number didn't reach twenty thousand. The numbers disadvantage was staggering. Yamato had managed to successfully rout an enemy force in the first battle, the night raid by the border. However, that victory was owed to a combination of two factors: the Yamato people's incredible physical abilities as descendants of the evil dragon's test subjects and the tactic the High School Prodigies employed. That was to be the last of Yamato's victories. Prodigy politician Tsukasa Mikogami had described that battle as the only time they'd get to go on the offensive. Sure enough, once the subjugating army's main force arrived, the imperials' numbers advantage grew more pronounced still, forcing the Yamato army to retreat again and again.

Thanks to the tactical edge that fighting defensive battles while retreating offered the Yamato army, it managed to keep casualties to under a tenth of the imperial army's. Unfortunately, Freyjagard had soldiers to spare. What

mattered far more was the number of garrisons Yamato had to abandon and how far Freyjagard pushed it into its own territory. Yamato was by no means a large country, and there was only so far the army could flee.

Now, after having retreated deep into its borders, the Yamato army was forming up at the Byakkokan Checkpoint—the stronghold blocking the highway that led from the west straight into the heart of Yamato. Fort Steadfast was the only remaining bastion of note between it and Yamato’s capital, Azuchi.

For Yamato and the High School Prodigies, this was do-or-die.



The Byakkokan Checkpoint was a key strategic position on the west side of Yamato. It sealed the nation’s western plains off from the mountain road leading to its center. After getting driven back from the border, that was where the Yamato army, Tsukasa, and the other Prodigies found themselves holed up. They stationed rows of archers atop the ramparts as well as the towering, craggy mountains that surrounded and overlooked it. They deployed gunners all around the stronghold as well. Together, they all stared down the imperial army as its advance across the distant plains before them caused the very ground to rumble.

Meanwhile, the subjugating army’s remaining soldiers marched in a formation three times as wide as the mountain road the Byakkokan Checkpoint defended, approaching the Yamato forces like it was spreading its arms out wide to grab the smaller force.

The subjugating army was made up of 130,000 soldiers, and the force defending the checkpoint was barely fifteen thousand. From the Yamato side’s perspective, watching the imperial army’s approach was as jaw-dropping as a tsunami.

However, not a single one of them cowered in fear, even though the bulk of their army was made up of conscripted amateurs. That was because their supreme commander, Tsukasa Mikogami, had drilled them as he deployed their strategy of slowly whittling the enemy forces down. As a matter of fact, that strategy afforded them a golden opportunity. If you stuck a bunch of fresh new recruits into a fortress, they would be completely useless. There was a principle

that was true across war, politics, and finance: The only way to avoid freezing during crucial moments was through experience. Fortunately, the Yamato people had taken to Tsukasa's drills better than he hoped. Their seething hatred for the empire helped bolster their courage, and by the time the Yamato army got to its critical battle at the Byakkokan Checkpoint with Azuchi at their back, it had improved by leaps and bounds and was ready to face off against its hated foe.

The empire advanced, and Yamato waited, ready.

As the distance between the two armies shrank, the Freyjagard vanguard arrived at the wide, shallow river that separated the plains from the mountainous region where the Byakkokan Checkpoint stood. And as it did...the gunners stationed atop the Byakkokan Checkpoint's ramparts and in its gunports made their move and opened fire. Round shot made from carved stone burst from every opening in the checkpoint, lanced across the river, and rained down upon the imperials. The Byakkokan Checkpoint's cannons weren't designed to be transported, so they'd been built large and long, and while the river's opposite bank was over 6,500 feet away, it lay well within the cannons' range.

Human beings were powerless against the terrifying kinetic energy those masses of stone carried. Imperial soldiers and cavalry alike exploded into fleshy chunks without the chance to scream.

However, the empire's soldiers were battle-hardened regulars. Even when a neighboring platoon exploded, they kept formation. Round shot was designed to destroy objects with its sheer mass. While that made it extremely effective against ships and fortresses, it was little more than harassment against troops. Uncowed by the bombardment from the Byakkokan Checkpoint, the imperial soldiers pushed ahead and arrived at the riverbank.

The bald giant riding one of Freyjagard's prized monoceros magical warhorses at the forefront of the army swept his gaze across the garrison sitting upon the opposite shore. Then squinted at it contentedly and stroked his braided beard. "That fortress is huge, and looking at it up close, it's damn fine, too. Not even we have anything so impressive, do we, Erik?"

The middle-aged Gold Knight sitting atop the monoceros beside the giant's nodded...

"Because nobody would dare try to invade the Freyjagard Empire."

...then after giving his reply, laid out the battlefield data he'd looked up ahead of time.

"They've long since destroyed the bridge, so it won't do us any good, but we measured the river back when this place was a self-governing dominion. Even at its deepest, it'll only come up to our waists. We shouldn't have any problems crossing on foot."

Even with the facts efficiently laid out like that, the bald giant hesitated. The river depth had already been clear from examining the remains of the bridge and the color of the water. He turned his attention away from the adjutant and took another look at the stronghold. This time, he opened his eyes wide and etched it into his gaze, like he was trying to comprehend the fortress in its entirety.

"It appears to be about sixty feet tall, and at some two hundred and thirty feet wide, it's as broad as the mountain path.

"Each of its sides is flanked by a mountain as tall as the fortress itself, and both mountains protrude out concavely in front of it.

"If we try to charge the checkpoint head-on like simpletons, they'll rain volleys on us from the mountains on both sides. They're so bloodthirsty, it's giving me chills."

"But the mountain slopes should be scalable if we put our minds to it. Couldn't we just use them to circle behind the fort?" Erik asked.

"We most certainly could not. I swear, you're as stupid as you are ugly."

"B-but why not?"

"Have you forgotten what happened to our advance troops on the first day of the war? These bastards are masters when it comes to individual combat. You think we're really going to accomplish anything by sending our soldiers up a mountain where the Yamatoans have already dug in and secured a positional

advantage?”

“Ah...”

When that was pointed out to him, the middle-aged Gold Knight adjutant cast his gaze down in embarrassment. The giant was absolutely right. There was a limit to how many people they could send up the mountains in one go, and that meant they would be forced into a much smaller-scale battle. And what would happen if they attempted that against an army that had demolished the empire’s thirty-thousand-strong advance guard with just a thousand troops? The answer was obvious. In the time it took a single imperial soldier to climb one of those mountains, a Yamato soldier could cut down five of their comrades without breaking a sweat.

“The only way we’re taking down that fortress is by creating a situation where we can storm it with a single overwhelming wave of soldiers. As the people standing straight across from our objective, we have the most critical job. While our troops on both flanks are distracting their forces on the mountains and giving them more targets than they can handle, we need to punch a hole right through the middle of that checkpoint. That’s what it’s going to take to win this battle.”

Their enemies had set up a U-shaped formation, and their kill zone was directly in front of the checkpoint. Charging it would mean taking some heavy concentrated fire, but at least the imperials could deploy huge numbers all at once, unlike with the mountain flanks. The imperial forces were individually weaker than their foes, and their numbers advantage was the sole weapon in their arsenal. If they didn’t utilize it, they were doomed. The giant had accurately identified the one route to victory.

“Ah, how I want to see him. My dear angel Tsukasa, my silver-haired princeling. Ever since I caught that first glimpse of you as you retreated, I’ve wanted to fill up that pretty little mouth of yours so bad I’ve been trembling!”

The young man leading the enemy’s attrition efforts was so beautiful he could have easily been mistaken for a girl. Thinking about his heterochromatic eyes made the bald giant’s nostrils flare with excitement, and his member was so visibly erect it was lifting his heavy chain waist apron.

Erik, who rode next to him, grimaced. He might not have been as pedigreed as the Bluebloods, but he was still a perfectly legitimate noble, and the sheer crassness of the man beside him was hard to stomach. His accent, countenance, and sexual hunger were all vulgar. Despite that, the man held the highest martial rank the empire conferred: the title of Platinum Knight. The lofty title was impossible to attain without possessing overwhelming combat prowess, a keen mind for war, and meaningful accomplishments to boot. Now that Gustav was out of the picture, this man—Platinum Knight Walter du Gascorge—was the sole person in charge of commanding the empire’s armed forces. Erik found a lot about him difficult to comprehend, but he knew his word was law to the army.

“So how do you intend on punching a hole through that mighty checkpoint, General Gascorge?”

When Erik asked for instructions, Gascorge the giant urged his steed onward as he replied. “The first thing we need to do is close the distance.

“We’ll wait for our troops to charge the mountains on the sides, then send in our infantry when they do.

“Then we’ll use our siege cannons along the riverside and bombing runs from our Dragon Knights to cover us as we ford the river.

“Once we cross, our gunners and field guns will be able to get in range of the checkpoint.

“And once we make it that far—I’ll show you a sight you won’t soon forget.”

With that, the two armies began the conflict in earnest.

The imperial infantry began forcing its way across the river. The river was a hair under five thousand feet wide, and the soldiers made good time across its first half. The river’s width gave it a gentle flow, and even at its deepest, it never made it above the waist. For trained imperial regular soldiers, such conditions were a walk in the park.

Once they made it halfway across, though, the onslaught from the Byakkokan Checkpoint intensified. Now that the gap between the two sides had shrunk, the Yamato gunners were able to switch out their ammo. Instead of filling their

many cannons with processed stone round shot, they were able to use buckshot made up of countless stones wrapped in sailcloth. Buckshot lacked the range and raw destructive power of round shot, but what it did have was coverage, and against the spread-out ranks of imperial soldiers, its effectiveness was unparalleled. A deluge of tiny stones rained down, blowing the faces and legs off of anyone unfortunate enough to catch a hit.

The soldiers hurriedly readied their wooden shields, but it was to no avail. The stones may only have been as large as a person's fist, but they'd been shot from cannons. They tore through the shields' dry wood like it was paper and shattered the bones beneath.

Once the oppressive buckshot bombardment commenced, the imperials' advance slowed. As the river turned red with blood, the soldiers' valiant war cries gave way to screams of terror and agony. Yet even so...

...the imperials never stopped advancing.

They trampled over the bodies of their fallen comrades, and wherever the piles of corpses were tall enough, they used them as cover to continue the charge through the buckshot storm. They never stood still, not once. Not even for a moment. No matter how many stones you threw at a tsunami, it would swallow them with its sheer mass. A mere hundred or so gunports had no hope of pushing back the tens of thousands of imperial foot soldiers. To make matters worse, the imperials began firing back at the Byakkokan Checkpoint from the distant shore, and their Dragon Knights began braving the Yamatoans' arrows to bomb the checkpoint from above to provide further support for the infantry in the river.

Thanks to all that backup, the imperial procession succeeded in making it to the other riverbank.

It was a disastrous turn of events for the Yamato side.

Now that the imperials had made it to the shore, they were only some 1,600 feet away. That was beyond the optimal range of guns and bows, but it was still within effective distance. And if shots could reach their targets, there was no reason not to fire. In light of that fact, the Yamato forces began desperately shooting the invaders. Now that they could couple their buckshot barrages with

volleys of bullets and arrows, the imperial army casualties grew exponentially.

Despite having just crossed a river, the imperials showed no indication of fatigue. If anything, their morale had risen. But that was to be expected.

Their guns and bows were in range now, too.

After all that time they'd spent getting pummeled with no recourse, they were finally able to fight back.

Thus began the counterattack.

Once the river was behind the imperials, their gunners moved into position. While the rest of the infantry defended them, they reassembled field guns out of the platforms, wheels, and barrels they'd lugged across the river, then began firing in unison. The weapons were small, but the sound of over five hundred of them all spitting out rounds at once was awe-inspiring. The cannons were aimed almost straight up, and their cannonballs soared over the heads of the Yamato soldiers stationed atop the Byakkokan Checkpoint's ramparts...

...and exploded in midair.

The imperials weren't using ordinary round shot or buckshot made of small stones wrapped in fabric. It was a new weapon the imperial workshops had devised called high-explosive shells that ruptured over the enemy's head and used the force of that explosion to scatter metal shrapnel.

High-explosive shells weren't designed around kinetic energy-based destruction, so they posed little threat to the Byakkokan Checkpoint itself. For the Yamato soldiers, however, it was terrifying. There was nothing they could use for cover atop the ramparts.

Metal shrapnel lanced from the blast zone and tore into the Yamato soldiers, whose screams echoed into the uncaring blue sky.

The Yamato forces on the mountains tried to help, but the empire wasn't about to let that happen. The Dragon Knights began bombing even harder than before to keep them pinned down, and the mages riding behind the Dragon Knights struck with magic, as well. Fire, lightning, ice, and steel all poured down from overhead.

In the blink of an eye, the battlefield around the Byakkokan Checkpoint was a cacophony akin to a thousand peals of thunder.

When faced with the intensity of the empire's onslaught, the Yamato army's counterattacks weakened, and the empire used that opening to send another wave of troops across the river. This time, some of them were armed with massive siege cannons pulled along by horses. That was the imperial siege corps.

When the corps got to the checkpoint-side shore, it dived behind the fortifications the previous wave of soldiers had set up and began assembling cannons from disparate parts. Its members drove stakes deep into the ground to set up platforms to support their cannons, then mounted the barrels atop them.

These were the empire's cutting-edge siege cannons, and their barrels had been polished to a sheen. They weren't as long as the siege cannons the empire used to provide covering fire from the far shore, but they were of a much higher caliber, and the siege corps loaded the massive weapons with round shot perfectly designed for raw destruction. The ammunition was made of metal instead of stone.

Then the firing began.

A deafening roar split the air as the kinetic energy from the explosions drove the outrageously heavy 110-pound metal spheres directly into the Byakkokan Checkpoint. Each and every one of them had enough force to smash a stone fortress wall to smithereens. However...

...things didn't pan out quite as the imperials planned.

The five new siege cannons' mighty attacks barely put a dent in the Byakkokan Checkpoint's walls. One of the shots went high, caving in a gunport near the ramparts and crushing part of the wall's exterior, but the damage didn't spread. Meanwhile, the rest of the shots smashed into the edifice proper, but all they did was sink into it rather than break through.

Gascorge looked quizzically upon what had just happened from his central command post.

“Oh my. It’s so much tougher than I expected.”

“The Byakkokan Checkpoint isn’t just tall, it’s also over sixty feet deep at its longest point. It’s open in the center, of course, but the walls are extremely thick.”

Gascorge squinted doubtfully. “Is that all there is to it, though?”

All of a sudden, a teasing voice came from behind his back. “Looks like you’re in a bit of a bind. Yup.”

When Gascorge and Erik turned around, they saw a little man looking up at them. The newcomer’s face was so covered in bandages that only his eyes were visible, and he was wearing a turban adorned with peacock feathers.

The two knights recognized the figure, and once Gascorge realized who it was, he leaped off his monoceros and cried out with delight. “Dear me, if it isn’t my adorable little Sai!”

“Don’t get near me with that creepy look on your face. Yup.”

“It’s not your moment to shine yet, you know. Shouldn’t you be asleep?”

“You really think you have time to worry over others right now? Your prized siege cannons are in a bad way. Yup.”

Over where the short new arrival pointed, the state-of-the-art siege encampment was taking heavy fire. The fortification its military engineers erected had held out as long as it could, but it ultimately crumbled. The five cannons were worthless now.

“If you haven’t blasted even tiny holes in that thing by the time I wake, I’m going to strap bombs to your entire army and have it charge the fortress. It’s a brilliant idea, if I do say so myself. Yup,” the pipsqueak said, undaunted by the height gap between himself and the knights. If anything, the way he spoke made it feel like he was the one looking down on Gascorge.

Gascorge replied with a throaty chuckle. “Impatient as ever, I see. I assure you that won’t be necessary. After all, I’m about to give us the opening we need. It’s time for the wheel bomb squad to work its magic.”

He gave the order, and in response, the team he’d referred to as the wheel

bomb squad, *who'd been setting up while the enemy was distracted by the siege cannons*, got into position.

Platinum Knight Gascorge's tactics revolved around tempo. Every action inspired an enemy reaction, so he made sure to spend that time getting his next attack prepped so he could keep up the pressure without giving his foes a chance to breathe. Doing so allowed him to constantly maintain the initiative, forcing the battle to adapt to his pace and leading things toward his desired conclusion. And the team he'd chosen for his big finale was the wheel bomb squad.

When Sai saw the *bizarre* objects the squad had, his eyes went wide. "Gas... What even are those wheel monster things?"

"I'm told they're a new weapon developed by one of the Elm exchange students. The wheel is an unpiloted explosive propelled by a series of rockets fixed to its frame. I believe they're called panjandrums."

"That all sounds like a bad joke. Do they really work?"

The harsh appraisal earned another burst of laughter from Gascorge. "Not in the slightest. They're heaps of junk. Why, we don't even know what direction they're going to roll."

"Excuse me?"

"But you see, even junk has its uses. For example, situations where no matter where they roll, they're guaranteed to strike a desired target."

"You're saying that you brought those things over from the empire because you anticipated they would hole up there all along, Sir Gascorge...?"

"Wasn't it obvious? This is their key western stronghold."

Gascorge had known since the onset, based on the route his foes were taking, that the Byakkokan Checkpoint was where they would make their stand. He'd also known it was incredibly large, well fortified, and geographically advantaged. Punching through a stronghold like that required firepower, massive firepower the likes of which could wipe it off the map in a single blow. The problem was that dragons couldn't carry something like that. Even ground soldiers would be hard-pressed to transport it. It would simply be too heavy.

Thus, Gascorge had zeroed in on a nonsensical invention the imperial workshop engineers had built based on a report from an exchange student, one that could carry huge amounts of explosives at high speeds unpiloted.

“The panjandrum may be junk, but stone fortresses that are good for nothing but their size and bulk are even more useless still. In this era where siege weaponry and gunpowder technology advance by the day, fortresses need to be more than that.”

As progress marched on, traditional fortresses were fast becoming nothing more than sitting ducks. The first person to realize that fact was an imperial noble named Oban, who began developing bastion-style fortresses with ramparts made of earthen walls rather than stone to better resist cannon fire. He arranged the structures in the shapes of stars to blunt the enemy’s attacks while allowing for crossfire from the protruding edges.

That was something Gascorge knew as well, and from his perspective, their enemies were utter dunces for choosing to hole themselves up in an outdated fortress with no merits save its size. It was his job to show them just how foolish they were.

The toll of making an error like that against a general such as him would be steep.

“Now go blast the bast into rubble and end this!”

The bomb wheel squad had finished crossing the river while the siege cannons were being used as bait, and when Gascorge gave the order, they ignited their panjandrums. Once they had double-checked to make sure all their fire rockets were lit, they gave the main wheels a firm kick to get them on their way. The 120 panjandrums began rolling. Several of them toppled over from the uneven ground or crashed into the mountains on the side when some fire rockets fell off one side of their wheels, but over 70 percent reached their target...

...and caused a *boom* and a shock wave so mighty it was akin to a star falling from the sky.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Ohhhhh, what a lovely sound! I felt that deep in my heart!”

“You settled it in one fell swoop,” Erik remarked. “There isn’t a fortress in the world that could survive an explosion of that size.”

The blast had truly been gigantic, and it kicked up a dust storm around the Byakkokan Checkpoint so large that it was impossible for them to confirm the scope of the damage. Even so, neither Gascorge nor Sai had any reason to doubt Erik’s assessment. There was no way a stone fortress so old-fashioned could withstand such an assault. That much was apparent, which was precisely why Gascorge froze when the dust settled.

“What in the...?”

The Byakkokan Checkpoint hadn’t emerged unscathed, but it hadn’t collapsed, either. It stood tall, still blocking the mountain path.

“What’s going on?” Gascorge wondered. “Surely its sturdiness must have its limits.”

“...Ah, clever. I guess our foes aren’t total fools after all. Yup,” Sai muttered as he surveyed the scene through an imperial workshop-made telescope.

“Sai?”

“They used sandbags.”

“!”

Gascorge gave the Byakkokan Checkpoint another good, hard look, and when he did, he finally spotted the massive amounts of sand that had come pouring out to plug the holes left by the panjandrums.

“From the outset, they’d given up on using the Byakkokan Checkpoint as a fortress. Yup. Instead, they filled it with sandbags. The checkpoint is nothing more than a facade. That’s no garrison anymore; it’s a massive wall of dirt. Any minor holes we punch in it will just repair themselves. Trying to blast it away with cannons and bombs will be an uphill battle. Yup.”

“...Tch.”

Gascorge’s previous nonchalant confidence was gone. The panjandrums were his finisher, the tool he’d brought to end the battle with. His whole plan had centered on using them to deal crippling damage to the Byakkokan Checkpoint

so his soldiers could surge in through the openings.

Now that strategy was in ruins.

It had been foiled by an enemy who'd believed that Gascorge would go after the checkpoint itself and not the mountains on its flanks. They'd known he was coming, and they'd stopped him handily. Surely that meant a counterattack was imminent.

As though to confirm Gascorge's theory, it began.

A barrage of arrows came pouring from the Byakkokan Checkpoint and the surrounding mountains at the soldiers who'd crossed the river—too many to possibly count.

"Shit! Arrows, incoming! Get those shields up!"

The imperial soldiers hurriedly raised their wooden shields overhead to protect themselves. Arrows were far lighter than buckshot, so the imperials were certain that the projectiles would do little to slow them down. They quickly came to understand that was an incorrect assumption.

"ARRRRRGH!!!!"

"E-eeeeeeek?!"

Those were no normal arrowheads. A porcelain siphon was attached to the end of each shaft, and fire came gushing out when they shattered from the force of the impact. Anyone who blocked the arrows with a shield immediately found themselves alight.

On seeing that, the Gold Knight in charge of commanding the forces on the front lines clicked his tongue...

"Fire arrows, huh? Clever bastards! Get back in the river!"

...and gave the order to extinguish the fire.

That was when the tragedy truly began.

""""AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!""""

When the flame-enveloped soldiers rushed into the river, it didn't quench fire. On the contrary, the burning intensified, swallowing the afflicted troops

whole. In the blink of an eye, the river became a sea of flames.

“I’ve heard of this stuff. They say the New World has a kind of gunpowder that burns with a fire that grows stronger when soaked with water. Not even the empire’s figured out how to produce it, but I guess these guys have...”

Sai trembled as he gazed upon the nightmarish inferno and the charred, writhing corpses. However, the reality was even worse than he imagined. What the Yamato soldiers were using wasn’t a New World concoction but a distant descendant of that compound based on hundreds of years of improvement on a planet called Earth. Each of those arrows was a perfected combustion tool that used naphtha as its main fuel source—a napalm bomb. Extinguishing that fire was impossible for this world’s technology. The battle line the imperials had built by forcing their way across the river collapsed. And to make matters worse...

“Messenger, coming through! General Balentien’s vanguard forces attacking the left mountain have been wiped out! Gold Knight Parth has perished!”

...their soldiers on the left mountain, who were supposed to support their attack on the center, also got pushed back.

“Goodness, what a shame to lose a swordfighter as handsome and talented as Parthy-poo.” Gascorge looked up and saw an angel standing atop the blood-drenched mountain on the left. Her long hair fluttered, and she carried a lapis lazuli blade in hand. “Heh. I see they don’t call them angels for nothing. Oh, this is good stuff. It’s making me hard.”

“Th-this is bad! General, you have to pull your troops back! At this rate, we’ll get slaughtered!”

Once the imperials on the left flank were driven off, the enemy soldiers on that mountain turned their attention to the central area where Gascorge and the others were. Face pale, Erik offered his counsel, but Gascorge didn’t make any hasty decisions. Instead, he glanced over at Sai.

“Heh. A fair point. Sai, how would you have us handle the situation?”

“There’s only one thing to be done,” Sai replied like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “We brute-force our way right through. Yup.”

“What?!”

Erik’s eyes went wide, but Sai continued without paying him any mind. “The gunports on top of the stronghold are still usable, so I doubt the structure is actually filled to the brim with sandbags. They can’t be stacked higher than thirty feet at most. Yup.

“Knowing that, the first thing we should do is concentrate our cannon fire on the top part of the stronghold where those pesky gunners and archers are set up. Once we destroy the top sections, our soldiers can scale the rubble. It’s a perfectly viable strategy. After all, no fort stands forever.”

“Th-that might work eventually, but the losses we’ll suffer in the meantime will be unthinkable!” Erik protested.

“So what? Dying is part of your job.”

“What...?!”

“Our enemies never intended to use the Byakkokan Checkpoint as a proper fortress. They’re unlikely to bother defending it to the bitter end. Rather, they know that defending it to the death isn’t an option. Yup.

“The enemy leader clearly knows what is and isn’t within his forces’ capabilities. He won’t go for unsound gambits in a battle like this, and he’s not searching for easy wins. Thus, outflanking him won’t work. It’d just end up with us throwing away time and lives for nothing. Our best play is to crush him with superior numbers.

“Greasing the fallen sand with the blood of our soldiers will make it that much easier to climb. We’ll pave ourselves a path to victory with imperial flesh and blood. Yup. This is what war is all about. That’s what makes it so wonderful.”

“Heh. I see.”

Gascorge’s eyes narrowed in satisfaction...

...and he raised his sledgehammer up by the side of his head.

A moment later, something smashed into it and shattered it to pieces.

“A-ahhh! Wh-what’s going on?! Are we being sniped?!”

Erik trembled with fear, but his superior's smile broadened.

"Ah, so we, too, get to drink deep of the sweet wine of battle. My heart is racing already."

Gascorge cast aside his destroyed sledgehammer, mounted his monoceros, and took up its reins.

"General Gascorge, where are you going?!"

"Tell the soldiers to continue their assault, Erik. I'm going to go meddle on the left flank for a bit. Now that we know we're not getting through that checkpoint anytime soon, our forces on the sides are more important than ever. On his own, Balentien doesn't have the troops to hold out."



"....."

Tsukasa frowned after trying to snipe the man who appeared to be the enemy leader from one of the Byakkokan Checkpoint's watchtowers with one of Ringo's specially made rifles.

The man had blocked his shot.

Tsukasa pulled himself together and peered through his scope with the intention of aiming his second shot at the turban-clad man beside the giant. However, he soon shifted his gunsight.

Why even take the shot? I'd just be wasting a bullet.

Their gazes had met through the scope. More than 6,500 feet separated them, yet after a single shot, Tsukasa's enemies zeroed in on him. The bald giant was one thing, but the short guy with his head wrapped was clearly a force to be reckoned with, too. The empire was nothing to be trifled with, not if they still had people of Gustav's capability up its sleeve.

I don't have time to waste fixating on dangerous individual opponents.

For the imperial nationals who were dying before his very eyes, the war to retake Yamato was a meaningless battle without merit. The conflict's purpose was to fulfill the ambitions of a single mage who came from another world.

Tsukasa needed to end the fighting as quickly as he possibly could.

To that end...

Where's Neuro?

...he searched the enemy army for the Blue Grandmaster.

Killing that man would force the conflict to conclude.

According to Yggdra, the whole reason the empire sought to retake Yamato was to revive the otherworldly mage known as the evil dragon who existed within Emperor Lindworm. Simply put, the evil dragon faction was fighting for personal gain. The imperial nobles, on the other hand, had no attachment to Yamato whatsoever. If anything, they wanted nothing to do with it. That meant there was room for reconciliation.



To make that a reality, Tsukasa strained his eyes scanning for Neuro. However, his efforts were in vain. The sun eventually set, and night fell. With that, the first day of the clash at the Byakkokan Checkpoint ended in an overwhelming victory for the Yamato side, with Neuro still nowhere to be seen.



“Take a gander at all those corpses of our enemies.”

“For sure. I bet you could go through Yamato’s entire history and never find a single win against the empire as big as today’s.”

“We can do this. We’ve got a shot!”

The evening sky was dyed vermilion, but the earth was stained a grimmer shade of red. Too many bodies were scattered across the ground to count, and all of them belonged to imperial soldiers.

Yamato’s forces fighting out of a fort had given them an advantage, of course, but that alone couldn’t account for the tremendous difference in casualties. That was thanks to the anti-cannon and anti-explosive defensive position the High School Prodigies had devised, as well as the sheer destruction of the napalm arrows. Now the imperial army was fleeing as though in hot pursuit of the setting sun.

The Yamato soldiers hadn’t known a win like this since the first battle of the war. They erupted in cheers.

Tsukasa watched their foes flee from one of the Byakkokan Checkpoint’s rampart watchtowers.

“Mr. Tsukasa, your plan to fill the checkpoint with sandbags worked like a charm!” Kira, a Yamato tactician, said gleefully.

At first, Kira had been reluctant to endorse a defensive stand here. He understood how far cannon technology had come—and that an old bastion like this was no more than an easy target. However, the Prodigies had dispelled all his concerns and driven back the empire’s finest. The respect in his voice was evident to all.

Despite this...

“...”

...Tsukasa's expression was sullen.

He hadn't been able to find Neuro, and that certainly wasn't helping his mood. But on top of that...

“Now, we just need to set up camp for the night, and—”

“W-we're under attack! We're under attaaaaaack!”

“Wh-what?!”

“This is what I was afraid of.”

...Tsukasa knew.

He knew what their foes' next move would be, and he knew it would bring hell to the Byakkokan Checkpoint.



“Where do they get off, deciding the battle's over? Yup. What do they think we *split our army in two* for?”

On the far shore from the Byakkokan Checkpoint, Sai stood at the head of the army, seemingly having taken over for Gascorge. He pulled a single feather out of his pocket, held it aloft...

“*Blitzfalken.*”

...and recited his incantation.

The lightning sealed in the feather with spirit power turned into light and exploded outward.

It was magic.

Sai took the lightning, molded it into the shape of an arrow, nocked it in his bow, and fired. It soared over the heads of Gascorge's retreating forces and smashed into the top section of the Byakkokan Checkpoint's wall, sending an electric shock through the building and knocking out dozens of nearby Yamato guards. Sai's attack was of a different level than the lightning bolts the dragon-riding mages had hurled. Each of those had only knocked out five people at most. Such power was to be expected of this little man, after all...

“Out of the way, losers. Yup. It’s time to let Prime Mage Saizer do his work.”

...he’d attained the rank of Imperial Prime Mage, the highest title of its class.

“You got it. We’re all counting on you,” Gascorge replied, urging his soldiers to hasten their retreat.

The imperials’ strategy revolved around splitting their forces so they could maintain round-the-clock pressure on the Byakkokan Checkpoint. They wouldn’t permit their enemies the tiniest bit of rest. The Yamato soldiers were going to have to stay on constant alert at all hours, and as the days dragged on, their mounting exhaustion would spell their downfall.

Ironically, both the imperial and Yamato leaders shared the same estimate of how long it would take for the Yamato soldiers to reach their breaking point.

The Byakkokan Checkpoint would fall within seven days.

“Heh. You won’t be getting any sleep tonight, my dear Tsukasa. ♡”



“Watchtower three is lost! We’ve got a lot of soldiers down!”

“It’s too dark for us to see where the enemy siege cannons are! We’re sitting ducks up here!”

“We’ve got hostiles gathering around watchtower four! Preparing to intercept!”

“Push them back! Do whatever it takes!”

“I have news from the garrison on the left mountain! The enemy is using the cover of night to scale the cliffs, and the fighting over there is growing! Our soldiers on that side are too pinned down to back us up!”

“Agh! We’ve got another lightning hit! We’ve suffered major casualties!”

“Shit! Each shot of that damn magic takes out dozens of our troops! Plug the hole now! They’re trying to climb through it!”

Near the Byakkokan Checkpoint, against the right-side mountain, stood a military station erected from stone. At first glance, it looked no bigger than a large pub or tavern, but in truth, it ran below the mountain, making it sturdier

and more spacious than it appeared. Presently, the Yamato leadership and the High School Prodigies were using it as their headquarters and managing their army from within.

However...

The Yamato samurai sat in a row, frustration visible on all their faces. Reports were coming in one after another, and none of them boded well.

“Things are bad, no matter how you look at it,” Kira said. His brow was furrowed deep, and his chronic stomachaches had apparently returned, for he clutched his gut. “They’re taking advantage of their numbers to mount constant attacks through the night. This is the one thing we hoped wouldn’t happen, and our foes knew it. Truthfully...I didn’t think they would actually be able to pull it off.”

The Yamato samurai nodded in agreement. Any position that was constantly attacked would eventually fall, no matter how impregnable. No breakwater could hold back a tsunami forever. However, these weren’t unfeeling droplets of water they were dealing with. Each of those soldiers had a family and something that got them out of bed in the morning. Maintaining discipline and morale in hellish battlefield conditions where soldiers saw comrades get blown to pieces was challenging. And keeping them up for an entire day straight simply couldn’t be done. That’s what the Yamato army’s leaders had assumed anyway. Not even the people of Yamato, famed for their intense loyalty, could have managed it.

Yet somehow, Freyjagard had found a way.

Five full hours had passed since dusk, but the war cries hadn’t abated. Kira and the others knew that there were times when the bonds forged on battlefields transcended even those of love, but the ferocity of the imperials’ assault was astonishing.

“No matter how many allies they lose, their formations never waver,” Kira continued. “Their commander must be skilled.”

“Agreed,” said Hibari, Yamato’s chief archer. “They’ve suffered so many more casualties than we have, but it doesn’t feel like we’re winning at all...”

“For in truth, it is we who are being cornered.”

The final remark came from the young woman sitting at the head of the long table. It originated from Kaguya, a daughter of Yamato’s former emperor.

Her black hair shone in the torchlight as she toyed with it between her fingers. “The other side’s death toll doth exceed ours, but our casualties are likewise too great to ignore. At this rate, the gap in our forces shall grow. But what troubles me more than our personnel losses is our dwindling armament supply.”

Holes in battle formations could always be plugged by throwing more bodies at the problem, but the same wasn’t true of equipment shortages. After the first day of fighting, Yamato was missing nearly twenty cannons. That reduction in firepower would serve to embolden the enemy. It was a serious problem—and one they needed to deal with.

“The Byakkokan Checkpoint is tremendously sturdy thanks to the angels, but the first day hath left it battered. It remains functional as a bulwark for the time being, but...it shall not hold forever, and I daresay the enemy is unlikely to give us the time we need for repairs.”

Sooner or later, that wall would reach its limit. They couldn’t stay holed up in the Byakkokan Checkpoint forever. The problem was...

“Regrettably, we have *nowhere left to retreat.*”

The samurai gathered in the headquarters silently agreed with Kaguya’s assessment. Fort Steadfast was the only major fortress left between the Byakkokan Checkpoint and the capital.

“Fort Steadfast serves as a threat solely because of its ability to receive reinforcements from Azuchi. With all the forces Yamato can muster already stationed here at the Byakkokan Checkpoint, barricading a small handful of them in Fort Steadfast is an exercise in futility. They would simply find themselves besieged, which would spell our doom.”

It wouldn’t even buy time. The other side had more than enough fighters to pull off the maneuver Kaguya had described. Fort Steadfast was too small to hold back the great tide they were up against.

“And as you are all aware, Azuchi is not built to be held in situations such as these. The city and its castle were constructed atop a flat plain, and the whole of it lies within range of their siege cannons. Azuchi is helpless against a modern-day siege. Come what may, we have no choice but to settle this war here at the Byakkokan Checkpoint. Or rather...

“...we *had* no choice.”

Once Kaguya finished her speech, she bit her lower lip in chagrin. Freyjagard’s assault proved more ferocious than anticipated, and she knew that, as a result, the original plan to follow Tsukasa’s attrition tactics to buy time while the Byakkokan Checkpoint was fortified lay in shambles.

“Shura is launching strikes against enemy cannons under the veil of night, but our enemies simply possess too many to dispatch. The Byakkokan Checkpoint will hold but another seven days.” Kaguya turned her gaze to prodigy politician Tsukasa Mikogami, who sat at the far end of the long table directly across from her. “The Republic of Elm said it would send us reinforcements. Do you believe they are coming?”

The reinforcements in question were a key factor in whether Yamato could survive the empire’s campaign. If Freyjagard’s army found itself flanked between Yamato and Elm, it would be forced to retreat. Yet although National Assembly Speaker Juno had sent an official letter stating that Elm was deploying its army “as quickly as possible,” there hadn’t been any word from Elm since.

“...A fair amount of time has passed since we received that letter. By all rights, the reinforcements should have arrived by now,” Tsukasa replied.

“You don’t think...they were lying...do you?” whispered Ringo Oohoshi, one of the four Prodigies waiting behind Tsukasa.

However, Tsukasa shot down that theory. “I doubt it. Lying like that would draw ire from Yamato and the empire alike. It would make enemies out of both sides. There’s no reason for Elm to do that.”

If Elm never intended to aid Yamato, it simply wouldn’t have sent the missive in the first place. Deception was irrational. That wasn’t what was going on.

“As such,” Tsukasa declared, “the safest assumption is that Elm’s force has

been intercepted.”

Tsukasa was suggesting that the Elm army had departed for Yamato, but the empire saw it coming and intervened.

Kaguya narrowed her eyes in doubt. “So despite the size of the force they hath brought to Yamato, the empire possessed the resources to cripple the Elm army as it marched south? That hardly seems possible for a nation fatigued by civil war and foreign campaigns. Do imperial soldiers grow on trees, perchance?”

The joke was her way of suggesting that Tsukasa’s supposition was impossible. Honestly, Tsukasa agreed. Between the New World campaign and quelling the Blueblood uprising, the imperial army was exhausted. By contrast, Tsukasa and the other Prodigies had used advanced technology to modernize Elm’s forces, the order of the Seven Luminaries, turning them into a formidable threat. Stopping them would have been no mean feat for Freyjagard. It simply wasn’t feasible, especially knowing the number of soldiers the empire committed to Yamato. Elm should have continued unbothered.

Still, Tsukasa hadn’t suggested a possible attack on Elm’s army without reason.

“There’s a single individual in Drachen with the power to stall our reinforcements without an actual battle—a man who could approach the Elm army without raising alarm and use that to cripple it.”

“Tsukasa...are you...talking about...?”

“Y-you don’t mean!”

One of the Prodigies behind Tsukasa, prodigy magician Prince Akatsuki, went pale. A terrible possibility had just occurred to him.

A moment later, Tsukasa affirmed it. “I’m talking about Merchant. He’s made his move.”

“.....!”

“H-hold on! There’s no way!” Akatsuki shouted in disbelief, while news of one of the angels’ betrayal sent a stir through the room. “I mean, Neuro’s goal is to

kill Lyrule! Masato wouldn't go along with something like that! M-maybe Shinobu just wasn't able to get the message to him!"

Tsukasa nodded. "That's certainly a possibility, yes." He was lying, of course.

By now, Shinobu had undoubtedly succeeded in delivering the information. She was the kind of person who always followed through on a promise. The word *failure* wasn't in prodigy journalist Shinobu Sarutobi's vocabulary, yet she'd gone missing without any warning ahead of time.

That meant something truly unexpected had transpired, something like, say, a betrayal by Masato, the very person she'd tried to save.

Akatsuki wouldn't be able to keep his cool if Tsukasa pointed that out, though. He possessed a kind heart, and he believed in Masato. He'd only ever known Masato as a friend and viewed him as a reliable teammate who got mad when allies were mistreated.

Tsukasa was different. He knew Masato's true nature—and how chillingly rational and selfish he could be. That granted him insight into Masato's goals. Tsukasa was no fool. He'd understood what would become of his relationship with Masato the moment he tried to institute universal basic income. He understood what it would stir up in Masato.

"...Whatever the case, it's safe to say that we can't pin our hopes on the Republic of Elm's reinforcements."

Tsukasa's statement earned a heavy sigh from Kaguya. "Then we had best steel our resolves. Kira, thou mayest wish to prepare us some suicide pills to go with thy stomach medicine."

"I've been meaning to say this for a while, my lady; your sense of humor is absolutely atrocious." Kira let out a single bleak laugh, then continued with deep conviction. "Our determination has been firm since the days of the Resistance. I have no intention of letting the empire toy with our lives again. If the alternative is surviving by crawling on the ground like livestock and groveling for Freyjagard's forgiveness, I would rather see this war through to the end."

The mood in the headquarters had been restless, but when Kira made his

pledge, the air in the room took on a stern energy. Every Yamato citizen present harbored the same sentiment as Kira, and when they looked to Kaguya with determination in their eyes...

“I know.”

...she quietly closed hers.

She couldn't bear to meet their gazes head-on. The imperial family's popularity with the people was the cornerstone of Yamato's structure and the peace it had enjoyed for so long. Kaguya understood precisely how that popularity had been maintained.

However, she was adept enough not to let that sentimentality show. She opened her eyes and made her proclamation with all the dignity the people expected of their ruler. “Surrender is no option in my mind, either. I have no intention of reviving the Resistance. If thou are prepared to lay down thine lives for the sake of Yamato, then as its sovereign, I shall return thy devotion in kind. There shall be no surrender. We fight to the last.”

That sent an even larger stir through the headquarters. Sometimes, getting drunk on the wine of ruin was the only way to maintain morale in the face of overwhelming odds.

However...

“There's no need to despair just yet.”

...Tsukasa went and put a stop to all that.

It was too early for them to resign themselves to death.

And that was because...

“There's a way we can turn the situation around.”

“““!!!”””

“A-are you certain, Mr. Angel?!”

Tsukasa made sure to give the war council a confident, exaggerated bow to calm their nerves. “The empire's army is powerful, that's for certain. We've seen with our own eyes how strong their frontal assault on the Byakkokan

Checkpoint has been. They aren't afraid to die, and as Princess Kaguya said, the checkpoint, for all its new fortifications, will be lucky to survive a week. However, the force we're up against has a fatal weakness, one that could cause it to fall apart."

"Wh-what's that?"

"It's the fact that its supreme commander, Neuro, harbors a completely different objective than the people fighting. As you Yamatoans know from Shura's report, this war, as well as your previous one against Freyjagard, links back to the age of myth and legend."

Everyone present was already up to speed on the information from Yggdra. Over a thousand years ago, a mage and five homunculi had fled to this world from another one. They'd utilized this planet as a test site for magical experiments until Yggdra, one of the homunculi, had a crisis of conscience and used the world's indigenous elves to seal the mage away.

"In recent years, the evil dragon's homunculi—Neuro and the other Four Imperial Grandmasters—were reborn. Now they're trying to destroy the seal so they can sacrifice Emperor Lindworm and revive the mage who created them, the evil dragon.

"The motive behind this war is to murder Lyrule, the person who's inherited the evil dragon's seal.

"At the end of the day, though, that is a personal objective of Neuro's. It's not what the imperial army is fighting for. Its goal is to reclaim Yamato and punish the Resistance. And what's more, the Freyjagardians aren't enthusiastic about this war. As far as the imperial nobles are concerned, Yamato is more trouble than it's worth. The last war only happened because Neuro and the other members of the Four Imperial Grandmasters ignored the aristocracy's complaints, exacerbating the disapproval of this second campaign.

"Neuro and the troops are after separate wants entirely. That's a dangerous position for an organization—it makes it fragile. I'm confident that therein lies an opening for us to seize victory."

"You mean by homing in on Neuro's deception and severing the foe's head from its body?" Kaguya asked.

“Exactly,” Tsukasa replied with a nod. “Right now, Neuro is the only person who actually stands to gain anything from this fight. All we have to do is remove him from the equation, and we should be able to find a healthy middle ground with the rest of the imperials.”

That would get Yamato and the Prodigies out of their current predicament, if nothing else. If the choice was between defeating the imperial army or just Neuro, it was clear which was simpler.

It still didn’t promise to be easy, though. Prodigy physician Keine Kanzaki and prodigy swordmaster Aoi Ichijou were quick to point that out.

“But we have no idea where Grandmaster Neuro is, do we? He’s surely hiding precisely because he understands the situation.”

“Additionally, there is a chance he is absent from the battlefield altogether. The powerful tend to avoid the front lines, that they do.”

The Yamato officials shared the same concern. They nodded, then waited for Tsukasa’s reply.

“Oh, he’s here, all right,” he said firmly.

“You say that with such confidence,” Kaguya noted.

“I’ve got a good reason. We’re all aware Neuro’s goal is different from the rest of Freyjagard’s. From the military’s perspective, Lyrule is just another rebel. Should she try to escape alone, she’s not meaningful enough for the army to hunt her down. But the same doesn’t go for Neuro.

“If Lyrule gets away, this entire war will have been meaningless for him. It’s the one thing he needs to prevent. The problem is, the army believes it’s battling to reconquer Yamato, so no matter what orders he gives them, they’re never going to treat a single young woman as the most important target. They’ll ask Neuro for an explanation, and he won’t be able to give them one.”

That much was pretty self-explanatory. Neuro’s intention to sacrifice Emperor Lindworm to resurrect the evil dragon was an act of betrayal against the empire. There was no way he could reveal it to the army, and trying to get it to deviate from retaking Yamato while keeping that hidden would be challenging.

Alternatively, Neuro might employ magic to forcibly bend soldiers to his will, but if he had the power to control a force that vast, he would have used it on his enemies long ago. Like Yggdra said, being reincarnated as a human had substantially curtailed his strength.

Considering all that, it would take time for Neuro to convince the imperial army to go after Lyrule.

“If Lyrule disappears while Neuro’s busy getting his house in order, his whole strategy will be for naught, and he knows it. So what will he do? There’s only one thing he *can* do.

“He needs to keep a combat force under his direct command disguised as reserve troops, and if the situation calls for it, he’ll split it from the rest of the army to pursue Lyrule. All we need to do to draw him out is have Lyrule try to run.”

“You want to use Lyrule as bait?”

Akatsuki sounded uncomfortable with that, so Tsukasa elaborated. “Naturally, we wouldn’t send her off alone. We’d ensure a group tags along for her protection. Then, when Neuro pursues, we’ll engage his troops and crush them. Of the tactical options available to us, I believe it’s the one that gives us the best odds.”

As Tsukasa spoke, he rose from his chair and faced Lyrule. The elf girl was standing back by the wall.

“Now that you understand, I’d like to ask for your help.”

Lyrule, who’d listened to the entire meeting in silence, looked down with sadness in her eyes for a moment...

“This battle, and all those before it, should never have been your problem, Tsukasa. My being here was what dragged you into them, yet none of you ever blamed me. You risked your lives fighting with us.

“Knowing that, I can’t just run off and hide on my own. I can’t, and I won’t! This is a battle to protect my world! So at this point, you don’t even need to ask! If you’ll have me, then I’d like to help however I can! Please, let me fight by your side!”

...before elegantly expressing her desires.

After watching this discussion play out...

“...Splitting our army between Yamato and the angels, then having the angels lure the grandmaster out of hiding and lopping off the imperials’ head while we keep the main force occupied here at the Byakkokan Checkpoint. Heh. ’Tis a more practical strategy than mounting a futile resistance from Azuchi, that much is certain.”

...Kaguya stopped toying with her hair and stood.

Her next words were those of a ruler issuing an order.

“This is the strategy we shall use to defeat our foe! Hurry, now, and organize thy troops.”

““““Yes, my lady!””””

The samurai gave a vigorous reply, then each set to their tasks.

After watching them go, Kaguya turned her attention to the Prodigies, who’d stayed behind. “We cannot afford to neglect our defenses here. I can offer thee but two thousand soldiers to take along with thee. Will that suffice?”

“There’s no sense wishing for something we don’t have,” Tsukasa replied. “We’ll make do.”

“Have you a plan to fell Neuro?”

“I do.”

Tsukasa spread a map of Yamato on the table and pointed at the depiction of the Byakkokan Checkpoint.

“First of all, we’re going to take Lyrule and the detached force and leave the Byakkokan Checkpoint tonight.”

“Thou intendest to depart so soon? If thou wishest to draw his attention to Lyrule, would it not be better to travel by day?” Kaguya asked.

“The whole point of this operation is to draw Neuro away from the rest of his army. I want to take advantage of the darkness to cover some distance first. Once we distance ourselves from the Byakkokan Checkpoint, we’ll be able to

get some sleep, too. There's no way we'd get any decent shut-eye with this gunfire pouring down on us all night long."

"But what if Neuro isn't able to find us? If that happens, he won't even have a chance to take the bait."

"Spoken like a magician who excels in directing people's attention, Akatsuki. Don't worry; that won't happen. Lyrule's escape is the one thing our opponent fears above all else. Neuro has Dragon Knights patrolling our movements from the sky. As soon as it gets bright, they'll immediately figure out where we've gone, and he'll send his cavalry after us at top speed. We'll engage him when he does."

With that, Tsukasa slid his finger from the Byakkokan Checkpoint to a wide, recessed plain—the Tomino Basin. It sat at the edge of the woodlands of northern Yamato.

After casting a glance at Tsukasa's chosen location for the showdown, Kaguya tilted her head. "If thou anticipatest the enemy to come charging in with cavalry, what sense is there in making thy stand at the Tomino Basin? Most of our ranks are infantry, and the basin hath naught for cover but a few gentle hills. Picking a fight with cavalry there hardly seems like the most prudent decision."

Kaguya's argument was sound. It was founded in standard tactical doctrine, and everyone present nodded in agreement. Tsukasa alone shook his head in dissent. "This is the only viable place for us to fight. The detached force's attack disguised as a defensive battle is our one big chance to end the entire war. Holding it in the woods or mountains would give us an edge in the skirmish itself, but it would increase the chance of losing track of Neuro and giving him the opportunity to escape. Our foes can't afford to let Lyrule get away, but we're in the same boat with Neuro."

"Ah, indeed. Thou hast a point."

"In this wide-open basin, we won't have to worry about that. That said, we don't want to go against cavalry without proper equipment, so we'll want to reach the basin as quickly as possible so we have time to find a suitable hill and fortify it with an abatis."

An abatis was a basic defensive installation made of logs driven into the ground and sharpened to a point. Simple as they were, they were a serious challenge for a cavalry to cross. Their cost-effectiveness was incredible.

“The abatis and the incline will blunt the enemy cavalry’s charge, and with how powerful Yamato soldiers are, they should stand a good chance against slowed-down horses.”

“Aye. Yamato soldiers should prevail. Now, I understand how thou meanest to deal with the cavalry. But that is a defensive tactic, is it not? I wish to know thy plan for seizing the offensive. Thou still lackest a means of taking Neuro’s head while contending with thy mounted foes.”

Tsukasa was well aware of that. “As we fortify the hill, we’ll also get to work prepping our offensive. And the cornerstone of our strategy...” Tsukasa paused and shifted his gaze from Kaguya to someone else, the short boy standing behind him, prodigy magician Prince Akatsuki. “...is Akatsuki.”

“Wh—whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!?!?!?!?”



Bearabbit had overseen fortifying the Byakkokan Checkpoint, and after finishing the briefing, the Prodigies left him behind to help defend it as they left in the night with Lyrule for the Tomino Basin.

The chosen path was a northbound mountain trail designed to let people escape the battlefield. It wasn’t particularly perilous, and while the road was narrow and unsuited for transporting a whole army, it was just the right size for the mere two thousand troops the Prodigies had been allocated.

After they wove through the mountains for an hour with only the pale wintry moonlight to light the way, the sound of cannon fire grew distant enough for them to stop and get some rest. They didn’t bother setting up camp, instead huddling together to sleep. The ground was hard, and the winter air was chilly. The conditions were hardly ideal for relieving fatigue, but at least they were able to conserve more stamina than they would have back at the besieged Byakkokan Checkpoint.

The generals were afforded tented, horse-drawn wagons, and the Prodigies were granted the same luxury. They had two wagons between them—one for

the boys, the other for the girls.

That night, a short blond boy visited the girls' wagon. It was Prince Akatsuki.

Keine and Aoi sat in the wagon bed, and when they realized they had a guest, Aoi asked, "Akatsuki, m'lord. What brings you here?"

"I actually have something I want to talk with Keine about..."

"Oh, me?"

"Hey, Keine... Could I get some more of those pills?"

Keine gave Akatsuki's fawning tone a frown. He was referring to the tranquilizers she'd prescribed him before they set out. They were meant to settle Akatsuki's nerves before the showdown with Neuro.

"You may not. You're already at the maximum recommended dosage. Taking any more would only have adverse effects."

"Whaaat? C'mon, can't you help a guy out? I've got an *early morning* tomorrow, remember? If I don't get them now, I might not get another chance..."

"When I said no, I meant it," Keine chided lightly. It was easy to develop a dependency on the pills. The drug itself wasn't addictive, but it didn't take much for someone to get used to turning to drugs to wipe away their worries. They had to be prescribed judiciously. "If you absolutely insist that I help you deal with your fear, though, I'd be happy to open your head and remove the part that causes fear."

"Thanks, but absolutely no thanks."

"I assure you, it's highly effective. It would come with the minor side effect of changing your personality into that of a stray dog, but still."

"I dunno if I'd call losing my humanity a minor side effect..."

"I must say, I expected a sharper comeback than that."

Akatsuki normally reacted to Keine's dark humor with loud, vigorous objections, yet his retort had been feeble and dejected. He must have been seriously worn out. Perhaps that was unavoidable, given the situation.

“To be fair, he has been tasked with a heavy responsibility, that he has,” Aoi said.

“Urgh,” Akatsuki groaned. “Don’t remind me. My stomach’s cramping just thinking about it.”

Aoi was referring to the anti-Neuro tactic Tsukasa had entrusted Akatsuki with. By Tsukasa’s estimation, Neuro’s personal force would have a minimum of eight thousand soldiers, and at least a thousand of them would be cavalry. In contrast, the Prodigies had a mere two thousand infantry, so fighting head-on would be dangerous. Yamato soldiers were strong, to be certain; each of them could do the work of ten imperials given the right conditions. They’d proven as much during the night raid. This would be a clash in broad daylight, however. Between that and the fact that they were up against cavalry, it was unreasonable to expect them to perform as they had during that first fight.

That was why they needed a plan. Or at least, that was how Tsukasa had explained it. And he’d told Akatsuki that his contribution would be indispensable to making it work. However...

Akatsuki is a prodigy when it comes to stage magic techniques, but in every other regard, he’s just a normal adolescent.

That was the fundamental difference between Akatsuki and the rest of the Prodigies. The others—even timid Ringo—were familiar with conflict to varying degrees. They’d experienced environments where it was kill or be killed. People had tried to murder them back on Earth, and they’d killed there, too.

Akatsuki alone was different.

Unlike the other six, he’d known an entirely normal life. Nobody had ever tried to murder him, and he’d never had to use violence. All the outlandish things that had transpired since the Prodigies arrived on this planet were seriously burdening Akatsuki. In Keine’s opinion, that could very well end up causing PTSD. Putting a boy like Akatsuki in a role where the fate of the war rested on his shoulders...was a bit cruel.

“If it’s really weighing on you that much, have you considered discussing it with Tsukasa?” Keine suggested.

“Indeed,” Aoi agreed. She must have been thinking the same thing, for she followed up on Keine’s suggestion with evident concern. “This is a war. Failing because you took on more than you could handle will have dire consequences, that it will. Tsukasa does not want that. If you find it too hard to broach the subject alone, I am happy to accompany you.”

Despite his pale complexion...

“Thanks, but...I’ll pass.”

...Akatsuki turned down the offer.

Keine found that rather surprising. “May I ask why? Considering how exacting his preparations are, I’m sure he must have a second or third strategy beyond what we discussed during the meeting.”

“Yeah, but...that’s kind of the reason right there.”

Keine cocked her head in confusion.

Seeing that, Akatsuki explained, “Tsukasa, see... He doesn’t think of himself as a Prodigy. He told me once that all he ever did was what any politician should do: think up policies, advocate for them, and carry them out as he said he would. That’s all, and people started calling him a Prodigy for it. I don’t know how right he is about that, but I do know that his belief explains why he puts so much thought into everything.”

Tsukasa considered situations where things went his way—and those that didn’t. He thought about unexpected possibilities. He took every scenario his mind could muster into account, then prepared countermeasures to deal with them.

After all, he wasn’t a Prodigy like Masato Sanada, who could anticipate the future. Tsukasa’s ideas only went as far as the average person’s. Since they couldn’t reach extremes, he wanted them to cover as much ground as possible to compensate. Despite not being a Prodigy, Tsukasa had been entrusted with sovereignty over an entire nation of people, and it was up to him to make them as happy as possible.

Doing so required a tremendous amount of effort, and Akatsuki knew it.

“After all that thinking, he decided that the best option was to rely on me. I... want live up to that.” Akatsuki’s face was still pale, but his eyes burned with determination. “Besides, Tsukasa promised we’d all go home together.”

Akatsuki had listened intently when Tsukasa laid out the tactic they would use against Neuro...

“This plan is going to help all seven of us get back to Earth together, right?”

...then asked Tsukasa a question.

He needed to make sure that Tsukasa hadn’t given up on Shinobu and Masato, their two missing team members.

“Of course,” Tsukasa had replied.

“So I’m going to do my best. I *want* to do my part, if it will help us all get back. But my body isn’t on the same page. I’m scared that I’ll screw it all up.”

“Ah, so that’s what you’re worried about.” Upon hearing Akatsuki’s explanation, everything made sense to Keine. “However, that’s all the more reason you don’t need me to prescribe anything.”

“Indeed,” Aoi agreed. “She’s right, that she is.”

“Huh? I—I don’t get it.”

Akatsuki couldn’t make sense of their responses. He’d assumed that Keine might be willing to cut him some slack after hearing how determined he was, but instead, she’d told him that that wasn’t necessary.

Keine went ahead and explained herself. “Out of everyone present, you’re the bravest of us all.”

That only served to deepen Akatsuki’s confusion. “Wh-what? There’s no way. The two of you look totally composed, and I’m over here freaking out.”

“While it’s true that Aoi and I are calmer than you, that isn’t quite the same as courage.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I’ve observed a lot of people during my time on the battlefield, and it made me realize that it isn’t courage that drives people to fight with no regard for

their own lives. It's either rage, confidence, or some combination thereof.

"Of the two, rage is by far the more common motive. Being subjected to oppression or indignities, or witnessing such things befall a loved one, will fill a person with hate. When that feeling reaches a certain point, it can overwrite fear and drive the person to fight."

Keine asserted that was the category that the imperials and Yamatoans fell into. The Yamato soldiers were enraged at how Freyjagard had treated them and used that fury as fuel. The imperial soldiers had their pride as members of the greatest superpower in the world and were exacting their indignation on the rebels who dared to oppose them.

"Then there's confidence, which applies to Aoi and me. People like us are powerful enough to overcome most hardships that befall us single-handedly. This war is the perfect example. Even if the war's tide takes a turn for the worse, it's unlikely that Aoi or I will die.

"This world simply lacks the strength to take us down, and we know it. That allows us to remain comparatively calm, no matter the situation.

"...In addition to Aoi and me, and our 'justified' confidence, I suppose you could also count fools who incorrectly think of themselves as invincible among the same category."

Keine had been on a lot of battlefields and borne witness to combat firsthand. The anger and composure she described were either tragic or cold and calculating. They didn't deserve to be described so beautifully as courageous.

"But you, Akatsuki, are neither. You aren't burning with a rage that makes you unconcerned for your own safety, nor do you possess the confidence to know you'll survive, come what may. Yet despite that—here you are, willingly stepping up and fighting on our behalf.

"You have no wrath or assurance, yet you're facing that inescapable fear of death all living creatures possess head-on."

What did that feel like?

Keine was strong enough that she didn't know. She couldn't comprehend how Akatsuki could bear to do something so terrifying. Human beings just weren't

built to do that. The boy's actions were absurd, and they defied all medical explanations.

There was only one word to describe something like that.

"Akatsuki, I think that right there is what it means to be courageous."

"..."

"You should believe in yourself a bit more, Akatsuki, m'lord," Aoi added. "If nothing else, none of us doubts you. Think about it. If Tsukasa was not certain of your success, why would he have entrusted you with a critical role in his first choice of plan?"

"~~~~~"

Aoi's and Keine's praise brought a touch of scarlet to Akatsuki's pallid cheeks. He was short and skinny, his face looked more feminine than most girls', and he was just as timid as his appearance suggested.

It wasn't every day that someone complimented him on his courage. That's what made it so embarrassing.

"You don't have to talk me up so much, you know..."

Akatsuki was so overcome with bashfulness that he averted his gaze to keep from looking the two girls in the eye. He knew of his cowardice better than anyone, and being told he was brave felt like mockery.

Or it would have...coming from anyone else.

Akatsuki didn't believe in himself, but he trusted these two and the rest of his prodigy friends unconditionally. He knew that they'd never tell such a cruel lie. As embarrassing as it was, he was able to believe the praise.

It made his heart feel a bit lighter...

"But...thanks."

...and he offered some feeble words of gratitude.

That was when it happened.

Because Akatsuki was averting his gaze, he was able to catch a glimpse of the white flecks fluttering down outside the wagon.

“Oh,” he said. “It’s snowing.”

“I see. ’Tis the season, that it is,” Aoi replied.

“That means it’s been a full year since we came to this world,” Keine added.

“So much has happened since that it feels like the time just flew by.” Seeing the snow reminded Akatsuki of when they first arrived. Back when he woke up, he’d struggled to believe they were actually in a different world. He’d worried that the shock from the crash had driven him mad. “At the start, the only clue we had for how to get home was Winona’s folktale, but that was so vague that I worried we’d be stuck here for ages. But...now the finish line’s in sight after only a year.”

“Heh-heh.” Keine chuckled. “When you put the Seven Prodigies together, nothing is impossible. It’s exactly like Tsukasa said back in Elm Village.”

“I never doubted us for a moment, that I didn’t,” Aoi agreed. “Although I do admit that Shinobu and Tsukasa did most of the legwork, and all I was ever good for was fighting.”

“Do either of you have anything you wanna do once you get back to Earth?”

“Anything I want to do?” Aoi ran her fingers along the gift from Yamato that rested beside her—the precious sword Mikazuki. “What I have always done—return to the battlefield and protect the powerless. Even a simpleton such as I recognizes the headaches I cause for Japan and Tsukasa, but...Tsukasa cannot become their blade. Only I can, and doing so is a task I refuse to abandon.”

“I intend to head back to the battlefield upon returning to Earth as well. This was supposed to be a one-week vacation, and it’s stretched far longer than intended. I can only imagine how chaotic things must have gotten.”

“...You guys are incredible,” Akatsuki said. “After finally getting released from all this blood and strife, you want to go out and risk your lives more?”

Aoi nodded. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Nor would I,” Keine said. “I’m doing what I love.”

“That said, you will probably want to get some rest, Akatsuki, m’lord.”

“Rest is certainly important, but as a physician, I would also recommend

spending some time in therapy. I'm not seeing any issues at the moment, but the human psyche is a complex creature. I can't say whether the things you've experienced will cause you to develop PTSD, but you'll want to take it easy for a spell."

"...Yeah. That's the plan."

Akatsuki nodded in reply to Keine's advice. He knew just how fragile his heart was—and had no intention of neglecting it. Returning to his old work could wait. However...

"But you know, once I've rested up, there's something I want to do, too."

"And what might that be?"

"I've done a lot of stuff with magic in this world. I have passed it off as divine miracles, and I've put on shows all over the place. As I did, I realized something... I really do just like making people smile."

Sleight of hand had yet to take off in this world, and that was part of the reason Akatsuki got so many heartwarming reactions to his magic shows. It had been a joy for him, with the performance in the Gustav domain leaving a big impact on him in particular.

Fastidious Duke Gustav was as much a demon as a man, and he'd forced his fanaticism upon his subjects and ruled so tyrannically it even turned the other nobles against him. Things got so bad that the commoners of the Gustav domain resorted to cannibalism to keep from starving. They'd been driven to the brink, both in body and spirit.

Akatsuki had been even shorter back in elementary school and was bullied for it. Seeing the people of the Gustav domain applaud his magic shows with smiles on their faces brought to mind how a traveling magician's show in his local shopping district cheered him up as a young boy. It reminded him of why he became a magician in the first place.

"Joy and wonder can give people the energy they need to keep going on, and I want to grant that to as many people as I can, to the people who need it most. Coming to this world made that more apparent than ever before. So I was wondering if you'd let me know what you thought...about maybe putting on

free shows at refugee camps?”

““———!””

Keine’s and Aoi’s eyes went wide at Akatsuki’s proposal.

“B-but hey...if you think I’d just be making a nuisance of myself, I’ll take your word for it. I know that I’m just deadweight who’s no good for anything other than magic, but—”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

Keine’s and Aoi’s reactions made Akatsuki start backpedaling out of fear that they would disapprove. However, he was jumping to conclusions. The two of them were shocked at how much their friend had grown up in just a short year. Between his courageous determination to live up to Tsukasa’s expectations and his new idea, it was possible Akatsuki had matured the most over the course of this strange journey to another world.

Akatsuki tried to pull back, but Keine took his hand and gave him a firm handshake and a delighted smile. “Ah, the energy to keep going on. You’re absolutely right about that. That there...is something that Aoi, who is *powerless to do anything but keep people alive*, and I, who can do *nothing but mend others’ bodies*, can’t offer. There are plenty of people who only you can save on the battlefield. If you’re serious, I would be honored to lend you whatever assistance I can.” She paused. “After you rest up, of course.”

Keine’s caveat was very doctorly, and Akatsuki responded by giving her a smile as radiant as a midsummer sun.



While Keine, Aoi, and Akatsuki conversed, Tsukasa and Ringo were having a discussion of their own in the back of the boy’s wagon.

Given that they were about to head into a climactic showdown, the topic was unsurprisingly violent.

“Our Thor’s Hammer nuclear missiles are still fully functional even with the satellite gone, right?” Tsukasa asked.

“Y-yeah,” Ringo replied. “When...the Bearabbit AI in the watchtower on the Elm border...sees me fire off a red emergency flare...he’ll use the obelisk

network...to deliver the launch order. From there...the Bearabbit AI in the missile itself...can handle the targeting manually.”

“That’s good to hear. Losing our eye in the sky and our long-range communications hurts, but continued access to our big guns is huge.”

“...You’re not...going to use them now, are you?”

“I’m not. No amount of casualties will convince the empire to back down. Only killing Neuro will, and firing blind without knowing his position hardly seems like a winning strategy. More importantly, there’s still a lot we don’t know about Neuro’s abilities. I’m planning on using every missile we have left on Neuro and the other reincarnated Four Imperial Grandmaster homunculi. That’s the consensus the Yamato leadership and I reached.”

“I...see...”

Launching a nuclear saturation attack and wiping out all one-hundred-thousand-plus imperial soldiers was a viable tactical option, and Ringo’s expression lightened upon hearing that it wasn’t the plan.

“The thing is: Neuro already knows about our nukes, so I doubt he’ll come unprepared. Relying on them too heavily could easily cost us dearly, which is why I’m asking so much of Akatsuki.”

“Oh, that’s right. This is for you...” Tsukasa had given Ringo a gun and asked her to make some *very specific* modifications to it, and this talk reminded her to give it back to him. It was the flintlock pistol they’d confiscated from Marquis Findolph, the man who once ruled the Findolph domain. “I did...what you asked with the bullets...but...”

“Was there some sort of problem?”

Ringo bobbed her head up and down in the affirmative. “I wasn’t...able to process them very accurately. I don’t think...they’ll hit...unless you fire them from up close. I’m...sorry. My equipment wasn’t up to the task...,” she said dejectedly.

However, Tsukasa patted her shoulder and thanked her for following through on his unreasonable request. “The fact that you managed to get it functional at all is plenty. This might well prove to be our trump card in this upcoming battle.

I really appreciate it, Ringo.”

“Heh, heh...”

The praise left Ringo a little bashful. Considering how in love with Tsukasa she was, nothing could have made her happier.

When Ringo thought about it, she realized it had been one war after another since arriving in Yamato, and the Prodigies had been pulling overtime. It had been a long while since she got to sit shoulder to shoulder with Tsukasa alone and chat. She wanted it to go on forever and couldn’t help but wish for the morning never to come.

However, they were soon interrupted.

“Hello, Tsukasa and Ringo.”

“.....!”

The greeting came from a young woman whose blond hair and fair skin shone beautifully in the moonlight—Lyrule.

“Hello, Lyrule,” Tsukasa replied. “I’m surprised you’re still awake.”

“I could say the same to you,” Lyrule said, sounding a bit bemused. She took the fur pelts she was carrying under her arm and handed them to Tsukasa and Ringo. “It’s warmer here than in Elm, but the nights are still chilly. You’ll catch a cold if you try to go outside dressed as you are.”

“Thanks for looking out for us. I was just going over some things with Ringo about our upcoming battle.”

“Here, Ringo, I have one for you, too.”

“.....Thank...you...”

Ringo reflexively averted her gaze from Lyrule, even as she took the proffered blanket. As she did, she realized she was being rude to someone who’d brought her a blanket out of the goodness of her heart, but it was too late to do anything now.

“I...don’t plan on losing.”

Since the day she discovered that Lyrule was in love with the same person she

was, things had been awkward between them. This was the first time Ringo had some alone time with Tsukasa in a long while, and Lyrule was the last person she wanted to see. It almost made her feel like Lyrule was making a nuisance of herself, and the fact that thought even crossed her mind made Ringo ashamed of her own spinelessness. She continued looking away from her rival, staring into space.

And that's when she noticed white flecks dancing through the night.

"It's snowing..."

Upon hearing Ringo's whispered words, Tsukasa and Lyrule noticed it as well.

Lyrule looked up at the sky and spoke wistfully. "Back in Elm Village...they're probably starting to hunker down for the winter right about now."

"That makes sense," Tsukasa replied. "It's getting to be that season."

"That means...it's been...a whole year...since we got here."

"It was thanks to you all that we enjoyed such a plentiful winter last year," Lyrule said.

"Ah, that's right. When Merchant went off to run that errand for Ringo, he ended up bringing back quite a lot."

"That was part of it, but that mayonnaise you made played a big part, too. Everyone loved it, from the kids to the adults. I never even knew you could do that with olive oil."

"Ha-ha. I'm glad you all enjoyed it so much, although I admit I regretted introducing it a little when we had nothing but potatoes with mayonnaise for the next two weeks straight. I guess I underestimated mayo's power. I had no idea things would get so bad when Merchant presented mayo to Dormundt."

"Things got...kind of ugly...with that black-market mayo..."

Ringo grinned as she recalled the incident.

It happened in the Findolph domain, back when they needed to get the city of Dormundt to open its gates. Prodigy businessman Masato Sanada devised the out-of-the-box idea of getting Dormundt's people *addicted to mayonnaise*. Although the mayo he distributed had the intended effect of bolstering popular

support for the Seven Luminaries, it also inspired some shrewd businesspeople to manufacture poorly made knockoffs after they realized how marketable the food was. A lot of people ended up getting food poisoning from the black-market mayo. The one silver lining was that Tsukasa and Aoi were able to step in and get the situation under control before anyone died.

“And aside from the mayo, there was also that hot spring you made for us.”

“Ah, the public bathhouse that we built with Aoi. If I’m being honest, we made that for ourselves as much as for Elm...”

“Really?”

“The country we come from is relatively warm, so the Findolph domain’s cold climate was hard on us.”

“Well, I’m grateful for how sensitive you all are to the cold. Thanks to you, we spent the chilly winter in comfort.”

“I’m sure Aoi and Bearabbit would be thrilled to hear that the people of the village feel that way.”

With that, Tsukasa and Lyrule’s conversation shifted from the mayonnaise to another pleasant memory.

The truth was: There was another reason why Tsukasa had decided to build the bathhouse, and that was to maintain the team’s mental health. At present, prodigy swordmaster Aoi Ichijou was using her martial skills to get all sorts of things done for the Prodigies, but back then, she’d been left with too much time on her hands and nothing to do with it but lambaste herself for her uselessness. Another member of the team—Bearabbit—had been beating himself up over the fact that the plane he piloted had crashed and sent Ringo and the others to this other world. Tsukasa had approached the two of them about building the bathhouse in the hope that it would help take their minds off of things.

Ringo had heard about that from Bearabbit, but things had been so hectic when Lyrule got kidnapped shortly afterward that she never got a chance to thank Tsukasa. As Bearabbit’s creator, she knew that this was the perfect chance to tell him how much she appreciated it...

“Ah.....”

...but her mind and her body weren't in sync presently.

The entirety of her considerable intellect was occupied with the image of Tsukasa taking a soak in the bathhouse. The conversation had dredged it up from her memory. At the time, her mighty brain had operated at full power to save the image.

"By the way, Ringo."

"E-EEK! I... I'm sorry!"

"Hmm...? What are you apologizing for?"

"N-n-n-noth...ing...at all! I wasn't thinking...about anything weird! Nope! Anyway...what is it?"

Ringo pushed away the indecent memory and feigned composure as she urged Tsukasa to continue. He cocked his head, confused, but continued. "Our conversation reminded me that once all's said and done, and we head back to Elm, I'd appreciate it if you could do some maintenance on the bathhouse boiler. Before we leave this world, I mean."

"Oh...yeah. I don't...mind at all," Ringo said. It wouldn't be that much work. "And while we're there...I should probably...do inspections on everything else, too."

The boiler wasn't the only thing Ringo had a hand in building. When Lyrule got kidnapped right after the bathhouse project, the Prodigies took up arms against the empire. That had been the start of the People's Revolution, and the thermal power station and ordnance factory Ringo built in Findolph's capital, Dormundt, played huge roles in its early stages. Ringo thought it might be nice to check in on them while they were in the neighborhood.

However, Tsukasa shook his head. "No, that all is out of our hands now. We can leave those facilities to this world's engineers."

A questioning expression crossed Ringo's face. Making a pit stop in Dormundt on their way to Elm Village would be no trouble at all. She couldn't think of any reason for Tsukasa to veto the idea. "But...it would be safer...if I did it."

"I don't doubt it, but the people of the Republic of Elm can't rely on you

forever. After all, we're going to be returning home. Dangerous or not, we were always going to have to let them take over eventually."

"Ah..."

Him saying that reminded Ringo that after they defeated Duke Gustav, Tsukasa had transferred his governmental duties to the people despite knowing the risks involved. And he'd been right to do so. The Prodigies owed a debt to the people of Elm Village, but that aside, they needed to draw the line somewhere regarding their duties to the rest of this world. They had to keep their meddling to a minimum.

"Besides, the mere fact that there are now examples to work off of will make it substantially easier for technology to progress. People might maintain the old ones, expand on them, let them gather dust... That decision is the newly inaugurated national assembly's to make."

Tsukasa had decided to use the Republic of Elm's first election as the aforementioned line. It was a logical cutoff point, and Ringo nodded in agreement.

I'm sure...they'll be okay.

As Tsukasa had pointed out, studying an existing model was far easier than inventing something from scratch. Plus, Ringo wouldn't be leaving this world's people in the dark on how to manage her equipment. She'd trained plenty of engineers in the workshop she set up in Dulleskoff, the Republic of Elm's capital. Some of her best pupils, like the imperial exchange student Cranberry, had already learned how to build steam engines and rudimentary generators.

Ringo was sure that the workshop staff would manage just fine.

When the national assembly entered the conversation, Tsukasa, Lyrule, and Ringo continued down the trail of memories.

"Ah, the national assembly..." Lyrule murmured. "That formed while we were here in Yamato, didn't it?"

"That's right. A national assembly is the symbol of a democratic republic, and now, Elm finally has one. I'm a little sad that I didn't get to see its creation in person. Though...from what Akatsuki tells me, things got a little bumpy."

A group of scheming politicians had tried to exploit how democracies operated to monopolize Elm's government for themselves, and they'd engaged in a large-scale conspiracy to that end. When Tsukasa had mentioned risks a moment ago, this was exactly the kind of thing he'd been talking about.

Ringo had heard the story from Bearabbit, so she knew the broad strokes as well.

"As I understand it, the Reform Party, the group against involvement in the Yamato conflict, ultimately won the Republic of Elm's first national election, and Ms. Juno was installed as speaker. I'm sure you two remember her; she's the short woman who barged in on that one meeting."

"The one with the glasses? But wait, wasn't she against the war? Why did Elm agree to send reinforcements down, then?" Lyrule asked, confused.

"That's how parliamentary democracies work," Tsukasa replied. "Reform Party members weren't the only ones elected into the assembly. The Reform Party outnumbers them, but Ms. Tetra and other members of the Principles Party hold seats, too.

"That means that the Reform Party can't just unilaterally enact their agenda. If they want to pass policies, they need to convince the Principles Party to go along with them.

"That process causes all sorts of different ideas, viewpoints, and opinions to clash and form solutions that no single way of thinking ever could. For example, Speaker Juno revised her original policy of nonresistance and adopted some of the Principles Party's stances.

"That's what makes parliamentary democracy so incredible. It's an example my own government could stand to learn from."

"But that...has to be hard...on the assembly members," Ringo said, voicing the first thought that came to mind. What Tsukasa had described was certainly an amazing part of the parliamentary system. However, it couldn't be wonderful all the time. If nothing else, it had one big downside that even a political layperson like Ringo could spot—a slow response time. Having a government comprised of multiple contradicting opinions robbed that administration of its speed. And how could it not, when everyone needed to get their say on every issue that

came up?

As someone who did a fair bit of programming, that sort of organizational structure left Ringo exhausted at the mere thought. She'd never use a program so riddled with processing loops. It would put too much strain on the hard disk for too little gain.

Tsukasa nodded at Ringo's assessment and gave her an ever-so-slightly-wry smile. "Whenever they want to get the tiniest thing done, they have to gather the whole assembly, and that puts a major strain on its members. They're probably cursing us angels for setting up the rules that way."

"Not at all." Lyrule was quick to shut down Tsukasa's self-deprecation. "Before you all showed up, peasants were seen as subhuman. You were the ones who brought in a new era by smashing down the walls between nobles and commoners. We're all so grateful to you."

She looked straight at Tsukasa, eyes brimming with appreciation and respect.

Upon seeing Lyrule's expression...

...Ringo felt her heart throb violently as she broke out in an unpleasant sweat.

"But gratitude isn't the only emotion I feel for you."

Lyrule continued gazing at Tsukasa as she went on, and Ringo's panic deepened. She realized that although she sat beside Lyrule, in that moment, or perhaps for the whole day...

...Lyrule's blue eyes didn't register her presence.

"Tsukasa, when this whole business with the evil dragon is over...would you mind if I took a little bit of your time? There's something I very dearly wish to tell you."

A shudder ran through Ringo's whole body.

According to prodigy physician Keine Kanzaki, women had the ability to dilate their pupils when looking at people they were in love with to make themselves appear more adorable. That's precisely what Lyrule was doing. Her eyes flitted downward occasionally out of embarrassment, yet they shone with intense affection. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and her lips had a bewitchingly

moist sheen to them.



The emotions she'd kept shut in her heart were now plain on her face.

Even as a fellow woman, Ringo felt breathless in the face of Lyrule's beauty.

Tsukasa's eyes went wide with shock for a moment at the love in Lyrule's expression...

"Sure. Once everything's finished, I'll hear you out."

...and he gave his reply.

A delighted Lyrule bowed slightly. "I'll head on back, then. I'll see you there, Ringo." Her long hair swayed as she returned to the girls' wagon.

Ringo watched her go, heart raging like the sea in a storm.

"~~~~!"

All the blood had drained from Ringo's lips, and she bit down on her lower one. Her chest felt like it was in the grips of a vise, and she couldn't get the sound of her heartbeat out of her ears. Lyrule's words echoed louder than her pulse, however.

"So...once your work here is done, and you all go back to your own world...I'm going to confess to Tsukasa..."

If only that moment could have lasted forever...

What a foolish wish that had been. Ringo knew full well that it was never going to happen.

Lyrule was serious about this.

There were times when she acted unbelievably bold because, like Ringo, she understood the sort of person Tsukasa was. They knew that he'd end up alone if they didn't make a move.

"I..."

The question was, how did Tsukasa feel about Lyrule? Ringo had no idea. Still, she harbored no delusions about being able to beat Lyrule in a head-to-head. Lyrule possessed perfect, doll-like features, radiant blond hair, eyes like tiny starry skies, and a figure that positively exuded femininity. Ringo lost in every category.

If Lyrule managed to seize the initiative, the love Ringo had secretly harbored since middle school might meet its end without her ever being able to tell him how she felt.

I don't want that.

The thought was horrible. She couldn't bear it.

This was her only chance.

Ringo needed to tell him. Now.

She needed to get the jump on Lyrule.

Otherwise, she was doomed.

Knowing that, Ringo opened her mouth...

"I—I...um...! I also...should be...heading back."

...but all she was able to do was flee.

Ringo got down from the back of the wagon and returned to the girls' one, leaving Tsukasa alone. She hadn't been able to get the words out. The moment she opened her mouth to try...

"You should never have been born."

...the image of her mother's face surfaced in her mind and froze her.

Now Ringo understood. All that stuff about looks was just an excuse. The truth was that she was simply scared that someone she cared about would reject her again. And that fear overpowered her love. The proof...was Ringo's heart, which had been pounding so hard it hurt moments ago, yet it had settled quickly.

Ringo didn't feel jealous of Lyrule or despondent over her unrequited love. She was relieved that she hadn't been able to get the words out.

She'd never been at Lyrule's level. She wasn't a real contender in the contest that was love.

I'm not even qualified to be disappointed...

Ringo squeezed her slender shoulders and dug in her nails.

She hated that she was too relieved to so much as cry in regret.



After being left on his own just outside the tented wagon, Tsukasa cast his red and blue eyes up at the snow-speckled night sky and let out a foggy exhale.

“...Hahhh.”

How long? No, that’s wrong.

He quickly reconsidered the question.

Then...

“How long are you going to keep pretending to be surprised, Tsukasa Mikogami?”

...he spoke to himself almost contemptuously.

Tsukasa wasn’t so dense as to not realize what Lyrule wanted to talk about. Her expression made it obvious. He understood the sort of feelings she had.

His heart pounded not because her feelings had thrown him for a loop. He was torn up because he hadn’t noticed until now.

Tsukasa Mikogami wasn’t prone to overconfidence, but at the same time, he made sure not to underestimate himself. For better or worse, he was a person who understood his own capabilities exceedingly well. Thus, he could say with certainty that someone with his powers of observation should have noticed the signs that Lyrule was in love. Yet he’d remained ignorant until the moment she confessed.

Why?

The answer was simple.

It was because he’d elected not to notice that he was already aware.

“I’m such a piece of shit.”

He was so livid with himself that he cursed. His nails dug into his chest as though to gouge out his heart. This might well have been the first time in his life he ever felt such self-loathing.

At the same time, his cold, ruthless side shot him a question.

Even if you did notice how she felt, would you have been capable of doing anything besides pretending that you didn't?

"..."

The answer arrived quickly.

He wouldn't have been able to do a thing.

Had he acknowledged Lyrule's feelings, he still wouldn't have been able to answer them. Tsukasa didn't dislike her; if anything...he greatly cared for her.

But...

"You killed your own father for 'the people'? For complete strangers? You're insane!"

"Such hubris—and from a common impostor. We cannot save anyone."

"If, knowing that you are but a common man, you would still try to aid as many as you can, know, too, that not a soul shall be able to accompany you on the harsh path you tread."

Tsukasa Mikogami was unequivocally unqualified to be loved, and he knew it, so he feigned obliviousness. He didn't want to deal with the fact that the only answer he could give Lyrule was the one she didn't want.

However...now that she intended to press him for an answer, he'd have to give her one. Silence was no longer an option. If there was a silver lining, it was that Lyrule hadn't verbally expressed the affection so present in her eyes yet. Depending on what Neuro did, they might find themselves embroiled in combat as soon as tomorrow. Tsukasa and the others would do everything in their power to keep Lyrule safe, but she'd still be embroiled in more danger than back at the Byakkokan Checkpoint. Tsukasa didn't wish to upset her right before such a large fight.

"..."

Tsukasa sighed heavily, disappointed that he was considering things on those terms. He was disgusted with himself. Even now, he schemed to manipulate Lyrule's feelings for his gain.

"I think Merchant said it best..."

Masato had once accused Tsukasa of being completely crazy, and Tsukasa was inclined to agree. Tsukasa would never be so passionate about one person that everything else ceased to matter, and that was all the more reason why he wasn't qualified to receive another's love.

There was no greater tragedy in life than loving someone who couldn't love you back.

A kind girl like Lyrule shouldn't have to sacrifice herself for someone so broken.

Tsukasa had no idea.

He'd chosen the Tomino Basin as the location for the showdown with Neuro. Unbeknownst to him, it would soon become the site of a terrible tragedy.

When the day of reckoning arrived, fate dealt the Prodigies the worst hand imaginable.

CHAPTER 6

✿ Showdown at the Tomino Basin ✿

As soon as dawn broke, Neuro learned of the group that left the Byakkokan Checkpoint under the cover of night. He knew it totaled around a thousand and that Tsukasa Mikogami, Ringo Oohoshi, Aoi Ichijou, Keine Kanzaki, Prince Akatsuki, and Lyrule—his target—were among those who fled.

How had Neuro learned so many details so quickly? It was all thanks to the Dragon Knights he'd sent to patrol the skies. By using the sight-copying spell he'd once cast on Nio and the other exchange students, he was able to project what the Dragon Knights saw directly onto his crystal ball and maintain a bird's-eye view of the battlefield from countless different perspectives. He quite literally had eyes in the sky. He saw everything through them. No surprise attack was safe from his all-penetrating surveillance, and it allowed Neuro to devise swift, effective countermeasures to every enemy maneuver. It was much the same as how Tsukasa and the Prodigies had fought using their military satellite. However, they'd recently lost that particular asset, and Neuro was using the same tactic against them.

After utilizing his aerial viewpoint to spot the Prodigies, Neuro took the ten thousand soldiers he'd assigned as a reserve corps and pursued his quarry down the Byakkokan Checkpoint detour. Light cavalry riders were the second-fastest type of imperial troops after Dragon Knights. Neuro selected five hundred of them to strip all nonessential equipment—and chase the detached Yamato force with no regard to rank or formation. Once their initial attacks slowed the enemy, the plan was to swoop in with the other two thousand cavalry members and 7,500 infantry troops and crush them.

Neuro's actions were as swift as possible, a testament to his fear of losing Lyrule.

"You're not going anywhere..."

Neuro's words had none of their usual easygoing lilt. His voice positively brimmed with purpose. He urged his horse onward through the night.

The plan to kill Lyrule, the person who'd inherited Yggdra's seal, and revive his creator, Father, using Emperor Lindworm's body wasn't something that Neuro had devised on his own. It was a collaborative plot with the other Four Imperial Grandmaster homunculi, who were presently hunting elves in the New World. If Neuro had wished to make certain of his success, he would have waited for them to return before resuming the fight with the Prodigies.

However, that wasn't what Neuro did. Everything from Neuro offering to send the Prodigies home to the current war had been his decision. He hadn't sent a single report to the others—and for good reason. Neuro wished to produce better results than the others so Father would praise him.

Neuro had been born a little after the others, and he was always the one who got the short end of the stick. Being abandoned in the empire was the latest evidence of that. His siblings constantly stuck him with the boring jobs and took the responsibilities that would earn Father's praise for themselves.

It really pissed him off.

However, Neuro had discovered that the information about the elves fleeing to the New World was just a distraction they'd cooked up with Yggdra. Neuro, the one left behind in Freyjagard, was the closest to the elf protecting the seal.

Neuro had no intention of letting that stroke of good fortune pass him by.

For all the opportunity, there were risks, too. If Lyrule managed to elude him, he'd have to shoulder the entirety of the blame. That would incur Father's displeasure. Neuro might even lose his chance to get Father to return him to his original body.

"..."

The thought was so terrifying that it made him tremble.

It reminded Neuro of when they'd attacked Yamato in the hope of tracking down leads on the seal. When Neuro and the other grandmasters finally located the elf village, they also found the body of their old compatriot, Yggdra. They tried to destroy the traitor's corpse but couldn't get the job done. Yggdra had evolved into an all-but-perfect life-form, and though she was dead, mortal human bodies couldn't so much as damage her.

Neuro had never cursed his new form more than at that moment.

If, by some improbable stroke of misfortune, he failed to kill Lyrule, and Father blamed him and forced him to remain in that inferior ape form...

Neuro couldn't bear the thought of such a wretched existence. He would rather die.

If it ends up coming to that...

Neuro cast a furtive glance down at his pocket...

However, he quickly clicked his tongue and tore his gaze away.

"There's a one in a million chance that ends up being necessary. No, one in a *billion*."

...and shook his head to drive off that horrible notion.

The otherworldly Prodigies guarding Lyrule were a nuisance, to be sure, but they were still only human. They weren't angels, just apes who died when you stabbed them. Neuro only required his overwhelming magic and military assets to crush them. Even without his original body, his magical knowledge was years more advanced than anything this world possessed. There was no way he could lose.

He decided to stop worrying about unlikely possibilities. Instead, he focused himself and glared into the distance toward his target.

Neuro knew full well that his enemies' movements were a trap designed to lure him out. Yamato couldn't win this war traditionally, so it made sense that they'd aim to launch a pinpoint strike on him, the one person responsible for the conflict. Neuro had to give his opponents credit; it was a clever move. When faced with the possibility of Lyrule getting away, Neuro had no choice but to

pursue. The High School Prodigies likely intended to launch their nuclear missiles and defeat him with extreme firepower.

“I have to say, you’re really not giving me much credit.”

Neuro was a little offended. How could they ever hope to kill him with a weapon that had failed to finish off the likes of Gustav? Neuro’s only concern was the possibility his foes had increased their strength via unexpected backup. However, he’d already taken measures against the aid from Elm. Masato Sanada’s hatred for Tsukasa Mikogami was the genuine article. There were no signs that he was lying, so Neuro was willing to put a fair bit of trust in him. He felt confident that Masato would stop the Elm reinforcements.

That meant all he need worry about were the thousand troops accompanying Lyrule, and they were no match for him.

“I’m going to make you regret refusing my offer to send you home.”

Neuro chased after Lyrule and the rest of the group that had fled from the main battle. The relentless nature of his pursuit meant that his foot soldiers were left behind, but he’d never counted on their strength. He was only up against an infantry of a thousand. Even taking the Yamato soldiers’ raw combat prowess into account, Neuro had 2,500 cavalry members, counting the five hundred that rode off ahead. That was more than sufficient.

After all, Neuro’s mounted troops were no ordinary riders.

Neuro’s aggressively swift response, facilitated by his reserve force that answered only to him, paid off.

Roughly forty hours after Neuro began his pursuit, right as the sun crested the mountains, Neuro’s light cavalry advance troops finally slowed the Prodigies and their thousand Yamato soldiers enough for him to catch sight of them in the Tomino Basin.



The Tomino Basin was located on the northern side of Yamato, and when the Yamato detached force arrived there from the Byakkokan Checkpoint, it stopped its march and set to erecting defensive fortifications on a hill situated right on the edge of the basin and the forest.

This position was necessary to fend off the impending five-hundred-person cavalry charge. Lightly equipped or not, cavalry was still cavalry. The Yamato detached force was primarily composed of infantry, and it wasn't hard to see just how poorly things would go if they engaged the Freyjagard force without a solid defensive position.

Like it or not, retreat was no longer an option. Granted, the Prodigies' goal had never been to help Lyrule escape, but to use her as bait to draw out Neuro, so they hadn't been fleeing in earnest anyway. Still, there was no reason to let their enemies know that.

The Prodigies stopped in their tracks, pretending that the oncoming cavalry had left them with no choice as they set up their position atop a hill in the Tomino Basin, the location that they'd been planning to make their stand at from the very onset. They placed their main forces at the hill's apex, then surrounded it on all sides with a defensive line about halfway up the hill in preparation for the light cavalry's attack.

Because the Prodigies had gotten a head start, they knew their foes would need to use cavalry to catch up. In anticipation of that, they assembled their force with over four times as many soldiers with pikes and great shield carriers as usual and arranged them in a square formation. Repelling the light cavalry would be child's play.

The imperials lost over half their troops and gained nothing in return after the first charge. Then they forfeited another half of the remainder during the second, and suffered more casualties during the Yamato counterattack before they could mount a third assault.

However, due in no small part to the fact that the Yamato side fought defensively because it couldn't afford to waste any soldiers, the conflict took a long while.

As a result, by the time the light cavalry was dispatched, Neuro's other two thousand mounted warriors had arrived.



"They showed up quite quickly, that they did."

Aoi glared at Neuro's troops from atop a small hill as they surged from the

mountain path. The Tomino Basin had few trees, making it easy to spot foes from as far as three miles.

“By my count...there’s close to two thousand of them.”

“When he found out there were only a thousand of us, Neuro must have decided that he didn’t need an infantry and sent the faster members of his force’s army ahead.”

Tsukasa turned his attention to the clear white winter sky. Three dark shadows circled overhead—Dragon Knights. They must have employed some method to transmit the Prodigies’ whereabouts and the size of their force to Neuro. Tsukasa was sure of it. It was precisely what he’d wanted the Dragon Knights to do—and the reason why he’d left them in the air unbothered.

However...

“That’s quite a lot more cavalry than we expected,” Keine remarked.

“Indeed,” Tsukasa said, grimacing. He’d known that Neuro would take his cavalry and ride on ahead. As a matter of fact, Tsukasa had acted specifically to get Neuro to do that. However, that was a hell of a lot of cavalry. He’d expected to face less than half that total. “Neuro’s army hasn’t fought on the front lines a single time during this war. It’s been kept in reserve throughout the entire conflict. The fact that the grandmaster was able to hold that cavalry back... Suppressing that Blueblood uprising must have made him even more influential than before.”

The enemy cavalry outnumbered the Yamato forces defending the hill by a factor of about two to one. What’s more, the light cavalry battle earlier had prevented the Prodigies and their troops from fortifying the hill as planned. Splitting up your forces and having them fight independently was normally a go-to example of poor military strategy, but Neuro’s decision had denied Tsukasa and the others the time to enact their tactic properly. Now the Prodigies had to fight off the tidal wave of imperial cavalry with nothing guarding their position on the gentle slope but a handful of loosely scattered trees and boulders.

All that said, though...

That Neuro devoted so much to launch such a blistering pursuit just goes to

show how terrified he is of the prospect of Lyrule escaping.

Despite the complications, the situation proceeded exactly as expected.

“We’re sticking to the original plan. Our job is to draw our foes in and hold this hill until Akatsuki has time to finish setting up the plan,” Tsukasa declared.

One of the Yamato generals hurried over to deliver a report. “Mr. Angel, the hostiles are on the move!”

A second look at the enemy forces in the distance revealed they were charging straight toward the hill.

As the brains of the detached force, Tsukasa reacted in turn. “Ringo, do you have a lock on Neuro’s position?”

Ringo had been using her goggles’ binocular function to search for Neuro. “I— I do! He’s with the central company, near the back!” she replied.

“Good. Then let’s pay our opponent back for the other day before he has a chance to close in. On my mark.”

“Got it...!”

Ringo and Tsukasa nodded, then held their bright-red flare guns aloft.

They pulled the triggers.

“Thor’s Hammer, numbers eight and eleven, fire!”



The two red signal flares rising into the air were a sign to the watchtower on the Elm border to launch a pair of nuclear missiles. Upon spotting them, the Bearabbit AI in the watchtower promptly relayed the order to the missile site in Elm proper.

Without a moment’s delay, a pair of missiles went speeding for the Tomino Basin.

Neuro had eradicated the Prodigies’ military satellite, so the Bearabbit AI loaded onto the missiles themselves had to handle the post-launch aiming. The Prodigies had used the network to inform the Bearabbit AI that Neuro was a full-fledged enemy back when the satellite was still up and running, so Ringo’s

brilliant creation wouldn't mistake his target.

The missiles sped in from the distance straight for Neuro's army. All they had to do was hit, and the Prodigies would win. It was a shame that so many soldiers would die in the process, but ending the war now would keep the deaths to a minimum.

However...

"Ah..."

Ringo found herself at a loss for what to say.

Just before the missiles connected with the imperials, a series of lights that resembled laser beams shot from Neuro's army, cleaving the rockets in two. Ringo used implosion-type nuclear missiles, so as soon as they were cut through from warheads to vents, the damage made them incapable of triggering nuclear explosions.

After rupturing half-heartedly in midair because of their propellants and ignition powder, the missiles tumbled to the ground as impotent hunks of scrap metal.

"They both...got shot down..."

"Were those lasers?"

"Presumably, it was a tactical magic version of the war magic he used the last time. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that Grandmaster Neuro is keeping such a close watch on the sky."

This development earned a slight shrug from Tsukasa. There wasn't any serious disappointment in the gesture or in the expressions of the other Prodigies. They'd seen this coming, after all. Neuro knew about nuclear missiles. He wouldn't have come out of hiding without countermeasures ready. This wasn't the result the Prodigies had wanted, but it was the one they'd expected.

"I hoped to get a little payback for the war magic he used the other day before he was too close to fire nuclear arms, but I guess he's intent on doing this the hard way. Apparently, there's no other choice, then. All units, prepare to intercept!"

Tsukasa adapted swiftly and issued orders.

“We’re up against cavalry. They’ll want to take advantage of their momentum, so we don’t have to worry about them going past the tree line and slipping behind our hill. Instead, they’re going to charge and meet us on the slope. We’ll need to intercept them from three sides, the right flank, the left flank, and head-on.

“The front group will defend against the brunt of the hostiles, while the groups on the sides will be positioned for when the enemy tries to close around us. Listen, our opponents aren’t going throw all their strength at us from the onset. There isn’t much point in attacking in tall vertical formations with cavalry. Instead, I expect them to divide into a forward and rear group and attack us in waves. Our defensive formations need to remain intact at all times.”

The instant Tsukasa finished his explanation, the oncoming cavalry did exactly what he predicted and split into a vanguard and a rearguard. The rearguard decelerated to a stop at the base of the hill, while the vanguard continued up alone.

The first clash would begin in less than a minute.

Knowing that, the Yamato general raised his voice and issued one final directive to his troops. “They outnumber us two to one! And what’s more, they’re almost all mounted! Yet we have nothing to fear! We are soldiers of Yamato, and our strength is known the continent over! Let’s show these sons of bitches who reigns supreme here on our home turf!!!!”

“““YEAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”””

The soldiers on the hill answered their general’s fervor with a war cry as they formed a defensive wall halfway down the hill with their shields, pikes, and bodies. The warrior’s gritted teeth were proof of their determination not to cede a single inch to the overwhelming force barreling forward.

However...

“““Arrrrrrgh!!!!”””

...a full section of the Yamato central defensive line got blasted away,

determination and all. Their bodies were shredded into flying chunks.

The two armies had yet to collide. What had happened?

Soldiers hurriedly scanned their surroundings, and when they did—they saw them.

They saw the balls of fire the enemy army was firing off as they charged.

“They’ve got cannons—no, magic!”

“Tch! Stay frosty! That’s no ordinary cavalry! It’s a mage cavalry!”



“Ha-ha-ha! Weaklings, weaklings, weakliiiiings!”

“Did those numbskulls seriously think we were just cavalry?”

“As if a few hunks of wood were ever going to stop our mage cavalry, the strongest military division on the continent!”

The charging vanguard mockery rang out loud and clear as a handful of them shot fireballs and lightning from their swords. It was tactical magic. The vanguard forerunners were anything but your run-of-the-mill mounted soldiers. They were members of a mage cavalry, a unit made up of Imperial Mages. Their spells gave them firepower on par with mortar gunners’.

Fire and lightning rained from the sky, causing explosions that tore huge chunks out of the Yamato soldiers’ formation.

“W-we’re getting slammed here! Archers, aim for the spellcasters!”

While the Yamato soldiers watched their comrades fall in droves, they fought back by having each of their archers fire off a volley. For all their accuracy, the arrows flew wide like leaves scattered by the wind.

“It’s no use! Every arrow is missing! They’re still coming!”

“They’re using wind spirits to cast protection spells!”

“Grab every shield you can off the ground! I don’t care if you have to gnaw their horses’ legs off; just don’t let them break our line!”

Moments later, the two armies finally made contact.

The hill's slope dulled the cavalry's charge a little, but they were still a serious threat to any unmounted infantry. Many of the Yamato soldiers got injured when the incoming steeds slammed them into the soldiers behind them, and some of the unlucky ones got crushed to death.

However, the Yamato soldiers were strong and proud, and they refused to go down easily. Their general had given them an order right before they clashed with the enemy, and they were determined to obey. Wherever the frontline soldiers had dropped their shields upon getting blown apart by magic, the soldiers in the back ranks scooped them up and plugged the gaps in the formation. All the soldiers who had been selected to leave the Byakkokan Checkpoint were veterans. There wasn't a single rookie conscript among their ranks. Field battles demanded more experience than simply defending a fortified position, and Kaguya had made the appropriate arrangements knowing that.

Now that decision was paying off.

Thanks to their experience, the Yamato soldiers were able to quickly reassemble the defensive line and just barely keep the charging cavalry in check by skewering the oncoming foes with their long line of pikes. Then, anyone not equipped with a pike went in and stabbed at the immobilized horses with their katanas. When the animals bucked wildly from the pain, they sent their riders flying to be trampled by their own mount and those around them.

Despite the efficacy of the Yamato force's techniques, it wasn't enough to keep Freyjagard's soldiers down.

The reason for that was simple: The imperials were mounted. People often misunderstood why cavalry units were so powerful, but it wasn't just the speed and force of a mounted charge. Even in stationary melees, cavalry soldiers were leagues more powerful than infantry warriors. Being on horseback gave them the high ground, but the mightiest weapon of all was the steed itself. Even the lightest warhorse was six or seven hundred pounds, and while the damage they could do with a full charge went without saying, they could easily lay someone out just by casually gamboling around. A kick with a horse's weight behind it was more than enough to crush a person's lungs. That made warhorses plenty scary.

All this meant that cavalry soldiers were a problem, but that was only half the issue. Neuro's army had mages mixed among the ranks. While the two armies butchered their way through each other on the front lines, the mage cavalry enjoyed the run of the battle. Wind spirits were gathered around their swords in the shape of blades. With each swing, they sliced through five or six Yamato soldiers, shields and all. Against strength on that scale, even the mighty Yamato samurai were powerless to stop them. There weren't that many mages, so they weren't able to completely obliterate the Yamato defensive line, but they did manage to chew through the wall of bodies here and there.

Neuro laughed in delight as he watched it all play out from the rearguard. "Heh-heh-heh. Those apes should have fled into the mountains like good little monkeys. Did our scant numbers fool you into believing you could hold us off? Well, you're dead wrong."

Most of the Imperial Mages were off on the New World campaign, but Neuro's personal army boasted a considerable number of those who'd remained.

All those mages under the nobles' command were technically just on loan from the imperial household, so they only had a few at their disposal. The same wasn't true of Neuro, however. He and the other grandmasters weren't nobles, instead fighting for the emperor directly. Lindworm trusted them deeply—and thus allotted them far more spellcasters than usual. That meant Neuro's army was more powerful than anything the Prodigies had fought to date. It almost defied comparison.

"This is probably your first time going up against an army with magic-users. After all, most of the nobility's mages are over in the New World. This must be your lucky day. You finally get to taste their terrifying might for yourselves."

Neuro raised his hand and gave the signal, and fifty or so foot soldiers who'd been waiting with the rearguard at the base of the hill stepped forward.

The group had ridden to the battlefield by wagon, and it was comprised of boys and girls with faces that had yet to shed their youthful innocence. They were Imperial Second-Class Mages—students still attending the magic school owned and controlled by the imperial family. Individually, their spells were

weak, and more importantly, they required time to cast, so they couldn't wade into the fray like the mage cavalry. However, they could still be an effective asset when gathered in one place to act as a fixed battery.

"Assume the artillery formation."

""""Yes, sir!!!!""""

The youths gave Neuro's command a rousing reply as they formed a line. Each drew a wooden wand off their hip and gathered fire spirits to its tip. The light at the ends of their wands gradually intensified, becoming flames. Then...

"On my mark, Firebolts!"

...by Neuro's command, the students launched their flames in unison at the hill where the Yamato formation made its stand. They aimed for the center of the battle, paying no mind to the presence of allies. Neuro's army suffered major casualties, of course, but the Yamato side lost even more. The bombardment left the Yamato defensive line so tattered it barely even functioned anymore.

Neuro wasn't going to let that opportunity go to waste.

He gave the order to the rearguard cavalry that had remained at the base of the hill when he split his forces front to back. "All rearguard units, advance! Break through the enemy's line while it's reeling and trample it into the ground!"



When Neuro gave the order for the rearguard to charge, the vanguard cavalry soldiers battling the Yamato defensive line heard the bugle call. They followed the plan and pulled back at the sound. After making their way back down the gentle slope and putting some distance between themselves and their foes, they took a breather and prepared for the next push.

However, the Yamato soldiers were afforded no such luxury.

As the Freyjagard vanguard disengaged, the rearguard stormed up to take its place. And that wasn't all. Just as the vanguard had been full of mounted mages, the rearguard sported plenty of special units, too. A magical monoceros carried several times the strength of a regular warhorse. An armored one with a

rider created a squad capable of the deadliest charge in the entire imperial army.

The magical bombardment had destroyed the Yamato side's formation, and the armored cavalry's assault gouged nearly halfway through their defensive line in one fell swoop.

"We've got armored cavalry soldiers attacking from the center! We're suffering enormous losses!"

"The mage bombardment sent our left flank into disarray, and the hostiles are breaking through our line! It's chaos out there!"

"O-our right flank's getting pounded from overhead! The Dragon Knights are going on the offensive! We're taking heavy hits!"

"W-we can't hold out any longer, Mr. Angel! The enemy's bombing us from the sky with their magic, and we can't maintain our formation!"

Tsukasa's expression turned grimmer with each report about the fight. The Yamato forces were falling quicker than anticipated. He'd assumed that an army made of powerful Yamato soldiers fighting with the high-ground advantage would hold out a bit longer.

That mage cavalry's a problem.

The armored cavalry was threatening, too, but ultimately, it was formed of stronger horse riders. Its strength was the force of its charges, but the terrain did a fair bit to blunt that. However, it did nothing to slow the mage cavalry. It had the mobility of a mounted company paired with the close-quarters capabilities of infantry and the long-range destructive power of artillery, allowing them to single-handedly embody the principle of combined arms. With how limited the Prodigies' resources were, the mage cavalry was a nasty foe to contend with. It had fallen back for the time being while the imperial rearguard took center stage, but as soon as the rearguard faltered, the mages would swoop in for the imperials' third assault.

If they get another chance to attack us...

As things stood, that would be more than the Yamato defensive line could withstand, and Tsukasa wasn't the only one who knew it.

“Mr. Angel, shouldn’t we be pulling back our forces and retreating into the trees?!” one of the Yamato generals asked.

However...

“We can’t. *Not yet.*”

...Tsukasa shut him down.

“B-but why?!”

“Because we can’t afford a protracted battle. Retreating into the forest will allow us to survive the present situation, but it will extend the fight and give the enemy’s infantry time to get here. If that happens, we’re done for. If we want to win, we have to maintain this position and hold the enemy in the Tomino Basin kill zone so we can gamble on the plan I gave Akatsuki.”

Tsukasa made his call.

“Aoi and Keine, we’re going to go assist on the front lines.”

“You’re moving out, too?” Keine asked.

“Things are worse than I anticipated, especially over on our right flank. We’ve probably lost our general over there to one of the bombing runs. I’m going to bring some soldiers from up here with me and rendezvous with the right flank so I can get it back in fighting form. Ringo?”

“Yeah?”

“This will leave the headquarters underdefended for a bit. Neuro’s strategy is based on giving his cavalry room to build up speed, so I doubt he’ll try using the tree line to circle behind the hill. Still, stranger things have happened. Make sure you stay vigilant.”

“Y-you...got it!”

“Keine, I want you on the left flank. Aoi, you’re in charge of the center. Your jobs are to help our fighters maintain the front while we pull our defensive line eight-tenths of the way up the hill. Our Yamato veterans withstood the first and second charges by the skin of their teeth, but the third charge will be the death of us. By falling back a bit, we can reduce the amount of ground our line needs to cover and bolster our density.”

“If we pull back that far, our line will be right up against the headquarters and Lyrule,” Keine said. “Are you comfortable with that?”

“It’s fine. Better that than holding our current position and having the hostiles break right through.”

“Very well, then.”

“It shall be done!”

Tsukasa nodded at their responses.

Akatsuki hadn’t said a word the whole time, and Tsukasa shot a glance over at him...or rather, at the ninja disguised as him...

“Akatsuki says he’ll be finished in thirty minutes, and I’m confident he’ll come through. This is do-or-die for us. We need to put everything we have into holding the line here, no matter what it takes.”

...then offered some words of encouragement, as much for himself as anything, and drew the rifle off his shoulder as he made to descend the hill.

Aoi and Keine followed.

Before they got very far, someone called after them.

“Hold on a moment!”

It was Lyrule. Tsukasa, Aoi, and Keine turned to face her, confused.

When they did, she spoke in a voice with an uncommon degree of conviction.

“I want to fight, too!”



Meanwhile, over on the front lines, Neuro’s rearguard gnashed at the Yamato soldiers fighting desperately to hold them off.

The Yamato side was taking full advantage of its uphill position and its anti-cavalry pikes and bows to stop the imperials just short of breaking through the line. Such a feat would have been impossible if not for the Yamato troops’ morale.

However, any front held together by morale alone eventually reached its breaking point.

The Yamato soldiers boasted incredible strength, but this was still a battle of cavalry against infantry, and the enemy had mounted mages and armored warhorses. It went without saying which side was stronger, and the majority of the corpses tumbling down the bloodstained slope belonged to those fighting for Yamato.

In the short time since the battle to defend the hill began, the Yamato army had already lost more than half its ranks. It had managed to hold against the second charge and bring things to a melee, but the soldiers all felt it. They wouldn't survive a third.

"Shit! That magic is a problem, but the armored cavalry's no joke, either!"

"I know how to slice through iron when it's just sitting there, but doing it against a moving horse is a different story!"

"If only Master Shishi were with us!"

"Yeah, well, he isn't!"

Two of the samurai fighting on the front lines exchanged complaints like they were trying to spit out the nasty feeling of despair rising in their chests. However...

"Ha! These poor bastards put up a good fight, but they don't know when to give up! There's no way a group of foot soldiers could ever beat our monoceros warhorses!"

"Eat this, you rebel dogs!"

...no matter how hopeless the situation nor how much their bodies ached, they never felt the urge to flee.

"Enemy reinforcements are coming in. Thirty on horseback, all of 'em armored. You want to make a break for it?"

"You're kidding, right? Like hell I'm gonna let those imperials walk all over us."

"I couldn't have put it better myself. If I go down here, I'm dragging every one of those bastards to hell with me!"

The samurai kept their battered bodies upright with little more than sheer willpower as they glared at the armored cavalry racing up the hill. They were

determined to stop the warhorses, even if it meant biting through the horses' legs.

Then it happened.

"That's the spirit, that it is!"

The Yamato headquarters enacted the plan to change the tide of the battle.

A girl leaped over the two samurai battling the cavalry and landed in front of them. There, with both her indigo-blue kimono and black hair so glossy it nearly looked wet fluttering in the breeze, stood prodigy swordmaster Aoi Ichijou.

"M-Ms. Angel?!"

"It's admirable that you haven't let your spirits waver in such a dire situation! There is still time yet to be bought, though. It is too early for you to be burning yourselves out, that it is!" After telling off the samurai, she gestured at the charging cavalry with her lapis lazuli blade. "I shall stop the enemy's charge. Follow along after me!"

"Wh-what do you mean, 'stop the—'?"

How did she plan on halting the enemy's advance?

The Yamato soldiers never got a chance to ask.

Aoi took action faster than they could voice their doubts. She stood in front of the cavalry alone, inhaled deeply...

"HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!!"

...and shouted.

The sound was more than just vocal cord vibration. It was a bellow squeezed from every inch of her body. It wasn't the sort meant to encourage herself or her allies.

"Eek!"

"Gah! Ah?!"

Aoi's cry carried her bloodlust, pure and unvarnished. It far outstripped that of either army.

The samurai near Aoi weren't her targets, yet they shivered so intensely that they struggled to stand up straight. The imperials had it even worse.

"Ahhhhhhh?!"

"Wh-what's going on?! Shit! My horse is freaking out!"

"The hell's wrong with you? Why'd you stop?!"

The riders themselves didn't react too strongly, but the warhorses were cowardly herbivores by nature, and the intense fury in that cry threw them into a panic. They stopped in their tracks, turned to run, and wound up crashing into each other.

Aoi seized upon that dysfunction immediately.

"Forgive me—Iron-Cleaving Flash."

She raced forward, practically gliding over the ground as she charged into the steeds while her body spun like a top. Aoi's slash was low and even, and with a single blow, she sliced through a good ten horses' legs, armor and all.

"You...you demon!"

The riders thrown to the ground went pale at the incomprehensible development, but they drew their swords all the same.

However, cavalrymen without their mounts were hardly anything to fear.

"Hraaaaaaah!!!!"

The Yamato soldiers who'd followed Aoi as per her orders slew the imperials without giving them time to stand.

"I guess that's the power of an angel for you! I can't believe she stopped the armored cavalry in its tracks with just her voice!"

"Now that the horses are standing still, we can handle them, too! Everyone, aim for the monoceros' hind legs! The plates back there can't possibly be too thick! We should be able to cleave through their armor!"

""""Yeahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!""""

These veterans hadn't survived Yamato's many battles on luck alone. Now that they'd been afforded an opportunity to get off the ropes, their actions

were as swift as they were precise. The two samurai and their troops descended upon the remaining horses, targeting their hind legs. The monoceros' armor hadn't been designed to withstand rear attacks, and the Yamato soldiers swiftly rendered the beasts powerless.

The cavalry attacking the center of the Yamato formation suffered critical damage from the sudden organized counterattack. Eventually, the Freyjagard troops abandoned the fight altogether. They turned around and descended the hill so they could rebuild their momentum.

While this was happening, something similar was transpiring on the left flank.

"Let me go, dammit! I can still fight!"

"Not with half your guts spilling out, you can't! I need bandages! Someone get some bandages over here, now!"

"Owww! It huuuuurts!"

"Quit your whining! It's just a broken leg!"

The situation here wasn't much better than the one at the center. Soon after the magical bombardment had thrown things into chaos, the cavalry charge had inflicted grievous casualties.

A short distance from the front lines, halfway up the hill, soldiers incapable of fighting were receiving emergency first aid. However, there was only so much the combat medics could do so close to an active battle. Most of the wounded had bled out, and even those the medics narrowly managed to stabilize were racked with too much pain to be useful. If Neuro's forces got through, the wounded would be massacred.

One of the medics grimaced at the sorry state of affairs. "Man, this magic stuff is killer... It's just like three years ago, when we couldn't do a thing against Gustav's Rage Soleil..."

The *byuma* samurai receiving treatment grew furious at the medic's complaints. "That's loser talk! Master Kira and the others back at the checkpoint are fighting an army many times the size of this one! Once you're done patching us up, we're heading right back to the front lines! Those with broken legs can drag themselves into the fray! Even from the ground, we can

still stab an imperial in the balls!”

“I told you to quit shouting! I just got your guts back in, and now they’re falling out again!”

“Oh, shaddup!”

The samurai was so intoxicated with passion that he couldn’t feel pain. Ignoring the hole in his abdomen left by a spear, he tried to stand and return to the battle.

That’s when *she* arrived.

“Well, what a lively bunch of patients we have here.”

“A-Angel Keine?! Wh-what’re you doing on the front lines?!” the soldiers exclaimed. She was supposed to be up at the headquarters.

Keine didn’t answer the question. Rather than wasting time indulging their confusion...

“...Lacerations on the left torso, fracture in the right ocular fundus, partial break on the right upper arm, multiple sternum fractures, right leg completely missing, multiple open abdomen wounds, open fractures and stab injuries in the femoral area, one punctured lung, dislocated left shoulder, partial breaks on the right-hand ring and pinkie fingers...and minor burns and subcutaneous bleeding from blunt trauma across the board.”

...She cast her gaze over the wounded and promptly diagnosed the level of every injury.

Her white gown billowed as she hurled several rolls of bandages over the injured soldiers’ heads.

“Now, this will only take a moment.”

““““Huh? Whaaaat?!““““

With only the slightest of warnings, Keine charged into the injured soldiers’ ranks. The troops braced themselves, unsure of what she intended to do, but their caution was unfounded.

Keine wasn’t the sort to hurt people. She was a doctor.

She ran like the wind, weaving her way past the wounded, then whirled around once she got to the end, caught the bandages in both hands, and stowed them in her gown. “I have stanching the major wounds and provided stopgap treatment for all the fractures. I’ve also dulled the pain, so it should be easier for you to get around.”

“Huh? Whoa! My wounds! They’re all closed up!”

“What? C’mon, man, don’t be ridiculous—wait, what?!”

On hearing Keine’s announcement, the soldiers looked down at their bodies and cried out in disbelief. All their wounds, even the serious ones, had been wholly mended.

“She did all that running past us?! Angelic power is incredible!” the *byuma* samurai who’d been trying to return to the battle despite having his guts hanging out exclaimed. He squeezed at his sutured wound to test it, and though he felt a dull, painful tightness, not a single drop of blood escaped. With a suture like that, he could get wild without fretting over it coming undone.

“M-much appreciated. Now we can get back to the fight! To arms, everyone!”

“Way ahead of you! I can move again! This is no time to be lazing about!”

“Thank you, Ms. Angel!”

The Yamato soldiers had their fire back.

As Keine watched them, her shoulders sank. “It brings me no joy as a physician to help people overexert themselves. But I do recognize that this is a situation where you have little choice but to keep fighting despite your wounds. I intend to assist in whatever meager way I can to help you do the most with what you have.”

Keine’s support ended up playing a huge role in keeping the left flank together. Some of the soldiers’ wounds were beyond treatment, but Keine was able to get anyone with superficial punctures and lacerations right back to the front lines. Clashing against a defensive line that remained unbroken no matter how much they carved away at it started taking its toll on Neuro’s forces, and eventually, they had to retreat from the front lines.

And the right flank, the one closest to collapse from the Dragon Knight's bombs, was no different.

"Th-they're nosediving again! Those Dragon Knights are coming in for another bombing run!"

"Spread out, spread out! If we clump up, they'll just blow us all away!"

"Archers, FIIIIIRE!"

"It's no good! They keep dodging!"

"Dammit, what the hell are we supposed to do?!"

"COLLECT YOURSELVES!!!!"

The shout cleaved through the disarray like a knife.

The Yamato soldiers turned to the source and saw that Tsukasa had come down from HQ with more soldiers in tow.

With all eyes upon them, he said, "Collect yourselves. It's true that enemy air forces are powerful, but you're devoting too much attention to them. Can't you hear the sound of hooves?"

"Wh—?!"

"Oh, shit! The cavalry's coming!"

"A Dragon Knight can't carry very many bombs at once. They've already used up their supply. That last nosedive they did was a diversion to thin our formation."

""""Ah...""""

Realization dawned on the soldiers upon having Tsukasa point it out. Now that they thought about it, the Dragon Knights hadn't actually bombed them on any of their last few nosedives. Merely losing their general had sent the troops into such a panic that they were falling for the most rudimentary of bluffs.

Embarrassment was plain on their faces. And if they were embarrassed, then they were paying attention again. When Tsukasa saw their expressions, he felt confident the soldiers could still fight. "We're never going to survive a cavalry charge this spread out. I brought reinforcements from HQ, so let's tighten up

that defensive line! Form up!”

“““Y-yes, sir!”””

On Tsukasa’s orders, the newly composed Yamato soldiers quickly reassembled their formation. With shield carriers in front and pike soldiers in the back, they engaged their foes as a wall of murder. The Dragon Knights up in the sky swooped down to scare them off again, but this time...

...Tsukasa’s rifle had something to say about that.

He quickly shot each Dragon Knight down as they dived...

“Hold the liiiiiine!!”

...and under his command, the right flank rallied and successfully drove the cavalry off.



“Our second wave of armored cavalry failed to break through the enemy’s center!”

“Something weird is going on over on the left flank! The enemy ranks just aren’t dwindling! We’re getting pushed back!”

“We’re charging straight into their right flank, but the enemies are so skilled that we keep losing ground!”

“The enemy vanguard troops are pulling themselves together, Your Excellency!”

Neuro clicked his tongue at the reports from the hill. “Tch. What the hell are you people dawdling around for?”

He’d assumed that the second charge would be more than enough to demolish a tiny group of infantry, but the pests were proving more tenacious than he’d expected.

“It would appear our enemies anticipated we would come at them with cavalry. They’re defending themselves well, and none of our forces except the armored cavalry and mage cavalry have been able to make any headway.”

“Your Excellency, we have news from the left flank! Apparently, the angels

have come to the front lines and are commanding the Yamato soldiers in person!”

“...!”

Upon hearing that, Neuro’s look of displeasure transformed into a malicious grin.

“Ohhh? So they’ve joined directly. They must really be at their wits’ end. Enemy ringleaders brazenly exposing themselves presents us with a perfect opportunity. Focus the Second-Class Mages’ Firebolts on the enemy’s right flank. We’ll blow their heads clean off. Then, as the Firebolts land, our vanguard forces will go back in for their next attack and send them straight to the afterlife.”

“At once!”

When Neuro gave the order, the Second-Class Mages at the foot of the hill acted. Again, they lined up horizontally, summoned up their fire spirits, and launched their spells.

“Aim all Firebolts at the enemy’s right flank! FIRE!”

The Second-Class Mages were far from experienced, but Neuro was taking full advantage of their numbers to launch a powerful suppressive bombardment. A wave of burning spheres erupted from the mages’ ranks. It arced through the blue sky and rained down on the Yamato army’s right flank.

Countless fiery blasts bloomed simultaneously, engulfing the hillside in the blink of an eye and the right flank along with it. No amount of armor was enough to survive concentrated power on that level. The Yamato soldiers and the hill itself had undoubtedly been blasted away. Anything less was inconceivable. And that was precisely why...

“What the...?”

...Neuro couldn’t help but gasp.

The fire had obscured his view, and once the wind blew it away, he saw that the hill yet stood, despite being buried by explosions. It wasn’t even smoldering.

It was almost as if...



...an invisible wall had stopped the volley short of striking the hill.

“It can’t be...”

Neuro hit upon a hunch of how this had happened.

And that idea...was right on the money.

Beyond both armies’ battle lines, standing in Yamato’s headquarters...

“I did it!”

...the young elf Lyrule clenched her fist.



“I want to fight, too! If we’re putting everything we have into this, then I want to help out!”

Lyrule volunteered herself back when the imperials’ second big charge crashed into Yamato’s defensive line, shortly after Tsukasa made the call to deploy the headquarter forces on the front lines.

At first, Tsukasa was reluctant. “But, Lyrule, you can’t use offensive magic.”

Tsukasa didn’t understand magic, and he couldn’t use it himself. However, Lyrule had explained to him what magic was to her. Apparently, it involved her talking to creatures called spirits that were as innocent as children and asking them to manifest the phenomena that she desired. Those spirits were gentle beings who disliked hurting people.

Lyrule heard the spirits’ voices because of her elven heritage. She knew how much they sobbed when normal mages who couldn’t hear them unknowingly forced them to commit acts of cruelty.

“As far as I’m concerned, asking you to do that isn’t an option. In fact, I wouldn’t ask anyone to,” Tsukasa had replied.

He didn’t know if Lyrule’s interpretation of magic was a universal truth, but in her eyes, using offensive magic was like handing a knife to a crying child and forcing them to murder someone. There was no way he could ask that of her. Moral reasons aside, he had practical concerns about putting their lives in Lyrule’s hands when he had no way of knowing when her conscience might get

the better of her.

However, Lyrule's suggestion was different than what Tsukasa imagined. "Oh, that was never my intention. Rather, I want to protect everyone!"

"What...?"

"I got the idea back when I used that bell in Yamato. I knew I couldn't ask the little ones to hurt people, but I realized I could request that they protect people. It's what the spirits wanted to do in the first place."

Lyrule had been talking about defensive magic. She'd already used magic to support Keine, and back in the Gustav domain, she'd used it to help manufacture sulfa drugs for sepsis victims. An ex-Imperial First-Class Mage had even given her skills his stamp of approval. When it came to anything besides offensive magic, Lyrule's skills were the real deal. However...

"I'm no expert when it comes to magic, but once you agree to do this, we'll be operating under the assumption you can pull this off. Once you commit, it'll be too late to say, 'Oops, I guess I can't do it after all.' If people die, it'll be entirely your fault."

...Tsukasa had pressed her with a harsh reply.

Still, Lyrule had been undaunted. She'd given her response without falter. "Yesterday, you asked for my help. And when you did, I said I would fight by your side!"

When Tsukasa had seen the determination in her eyes, he steeled his own resolve. "All right, then. I'll incorporate your abilities into our strategy. Honestly, you warding off the magical attacks is the best thing we could have asked for. We'll be counting on you."

"I won't let you down!"

The results spoke for themselves.

"Wh-what?! I'm...alive?"

"I thought I was a goner for sure..."

"Hey, look! Some sort of invisible wall blocked the flames!"

“Could this be one of God Akatsuki’s miracles?!”

She did it!

Of all the deadly spells that rained down upon Tsukasa’s forces at the right flank, not one reached the ground. They all simply crashed into the wind spirit wall and scattered into nothing.

Neuro’s army’s attack on the Yamato troops came to a complete pause. The second wave of cavalry was retreating, the magical bombardment had fizzled, and Neuro was too flabbergasted to order his soldiers to resume their assault. Things on the battlefield had been so chaotic that the Yamato army had lacked a moment of reprieve, yet now everything was calm.

That’s when Tsukasa pounced.

“All forces, pull back to eight-tenths of the way up the hill!”

The Yamato army retreated from halfway up the hill to near the top. By moving their defensive line closer to their headquarters, they were able to reduce the length of their perimeter, building a tighter formation.



Thanks to Lyrule’s defensive magic, the Second-Class Mages’ bombardment ended in failure. The Yamato army was able to use that window to pull its battle line back and reconvene.

Neuro’s army didn’t just sit around befuddled forever, though. Before long, the grandmaster ordered his vanguard to take over for the rearguard and begin another charge. The mage cavalry had completely trounced the Yamato line at the top of the battle, and most of them were assigned to the vanguard.

However, the third charge didn’t produce the results that Neuro hoped for. It took place eight-tenths of the way up the hill, and this time, Neuro’s side suffered heavy casualties despite the advantages it held over the Yamato infantry.

It seemed unthinkable, but there was a good reason why Tsukasa had pulled his defensive line back. Under normal circumstances, the cavalry would have easily climbed a slope that gentle. Its momentum should have allowed it to smash through any obstacle. Whether eight-tenths of the way up or standing on

the peak shouldn't have made a difference.

However, that logic was true only in sterile conditions.

Presently, there was a mountain of human and horse carcasses halfway up the hill, and in aggregate, they formed barricades that slowed the cavalry charge. Neuro's army was also suffering from internal and external factors. The mounted troops had galloped to the Tomino Basin, leaving the Freyjagard infantry behind. Fatigue was weakening the horses and their riders.

The steeds lost their momentum and collapsed, foaming at the mouth from exhaustion. Meanwhile, the Yamato army had just fortified its defensive line by condensing its length. The imperials could barely stand; there was no way they'd break the Yamato formation.

Down at the base of the hill, Neuro's staff officers groaned at the unfavorable turn.

"The Yamato troops have completely recovered... They were so thrown off when our mage cavalry launched its first attack, but now..."

"Yeah. Now even the mage cavalry is struggling. It all started when the angels joined the battle. Even with our spellcasters, we're no match for that weirdly powerful gun and that chick dressed like a samurai."

"Plus, it's a pain how quickly they recover from their wounds. How are we supposed to break their line when all their wounds close up so fast? It must be one of Akatsuki's miracles at work."

"If only our last bombardment had succeeded."

"Who could have foreseen the enemy having access to a mage with such incredible defensive magic?"

"Is this really divine providence?"

Staff members muttered helplessly to each other. Their leader, Neuro, however, paid their unhelpful exchanges no mind. Instead, he stared at the battle on the hill.

"..."

"Your Excellency, um, if I might be so bold? Given that we can't maintain our

momentum, it's my humble opinion that we ought to consider using the trees for cover and circle behind our foes," an officer suggested timidly. He probably took Neuro's silence for anger. In truth, though, Neuro wasn't upset about the current state of affairs at all. If anything...

...This turn of events is pretty favorable.

Neuro hadn't expected the magical bombardment to be blocked, but it was proof that Lyrule was here, fighting. The same went for the Prodigies placing themselves in the fray. This was far preferable to them scurrying away into the forest.

However, that advantage...

Is it just me, or does something seem off?

...was exactly what troubled Neuro.

He knew that the Prodigies had used this detached force as bait to lure him out, but he'd assumed they made a stand in the Tomino Basin because they had no choice after he shot down their nuclear missiles.

He was less certain of it now. If they'd really been forced into an open siege, why did they deploy Lyrule instead of securing her escape? In a short while, the battle would end in Freyjugard's victory. It was inevitable. Neuro's 7,500-strong infantry was due to arrive before long. The Yamatoans would be helpless. Neuro's enemies should have been able to estimate Neuro's full ranks based on the size of his cavalry. Yet they weren't fleeing into the woods with Lyrule. Why?

It feels like they chose this fight for a reason.

Could it be? Did they have some kind of weapon besides the nuclear missiles at their disposal? Had they devised a plan that might actually kill him? It certainly didn't look that way. Neuro's Dragon Knights maintained a watchful eye on the entire region from the air, and there were no signs of reinforcements, no troops waiting in ambush, and no Elm backup on its way. The only forces near the Tomino Basin were Neuro's and the Prodigies'. Technically, one other army approached, but it was on Neuro's side. The enemy was limited to its soldiers on the hill. But if that was the case, then how did the

Prodigies intend to kill him?

“Oh, forget it. This is a waste of time.”

Neuro threw all his pondering out the window. Sparing so much worry on a bunch of apes felt absurd.

“Listen up.”

“Yes, Your Excellency! What is it?”

“I’m going to go handle this personally. You there, chief of staff. You’re in charge of managing the troops.”

“What?!”

With that, Neuro alighted from his steed and brandished his staff. The spell he cast...

“Levitation.”

...allowed him to float. By Imperial Mage standards, it was an incredibly difficult feat of magic that only Prime Mages could manage. With its power, Neuro flew like the wind over to the eight-tenths mark where the armies were fighting.

“Wh-what’s that guy’s deal?!”

“He’s flying! Is that Levitation?!”

“Only Prime Mages can use that spell... Wait, does that mean that’s the Blue Grandmaster up there?!”

The Yamato soldiers gawked at the sight of their sworn foe. And while they did, Neuro made his move.

“Blue Splash.”

The gem on the end of his staff shone blue, and an array of beams shot from it. The surging light coursed down toward the Yamato soldiers below Neuro at the eight-tenths mark, cutting through them.

As it turned out, the light was actually formed from pressurized water—the same trick Neuro had used to shoot down the missiles. The innumerable watery blades traced their way across the ground, tearing it to shreds along with the

soldiers standing atop it. No shield or armor could save the troops from being sliced apart. Thirty soldiers perished, then fifty. Wherever the blue beams went, they slaughtered the huddled Yamato soldiers, leaving them minced and unrecognizable.

“~~~~~!”

Up at the hill’s summit, Lyrule’s expression contorted with grief as she beheld the scene. She’d tried to protect the soldiers from Neuro’s attack just as she had with the earlier bombardment, but Neuro’s magic tore right through the defensive wall the wind spirits built for her.

“My magic is far beyond the pale imitation these apes can manage. I’d appreciate it if you gave me a little credit.”

After a snide laugh, Neuro gazed at the massacre he’d committed...

“Still, I guess it’ll take more than that to take *you* down.”

...and muttered a remark colored by some small respect.

His comment was directed at the girl who’d evaded every last one of the pressurized water beams, who stood amid the mountain of shredded corpses atop the mangled hill’s slope.

“Aoi, was it? It’s been a while. A shame our reunion isn’t under better circumstances.”



“Blue Splash!”

“Rgh...”

The pressurized jets of water sped for Aoi. She narrowly managed to dodge them with feints and tight footwork, but that was all she could manage. Neuro was over 150 feet off the ground. No katana could reach that far.

Having forced Aoi into a purely defensive battle, Neuro laughed at her from the sky. “Ha-ha-ha. What’s the matter? Running around will only get all your allies killed. Aren’t you supposed to be an angel? A beacon for the people? Come on, fight me! If you don’t...”

“Ms. Angel!”

“We’re coming to help!”

“What?!”

Male voices caught Aoi’s ear, and when she whirled around, she saw fifty-odd armored soldiers rushing over to her with their shields held high.

She went pale and screamed...

“STAY BACK!!!!”

...but the words came too slow.

The blue blades changed their target from Aoi to the soldiers and cleaved right through them, shields and all. Their wooden protection was useless against water pressure intense enough to cleave through the earth.

“YOU FIEND!!!!”

The sight of the soldiers’ brutal deaths lit a fire in Aoi’s heart. She poured her rage into Mikazuki, the precious sword that Kaguya had given her.

For prodigy swordmaster Aoi Ichijou, 150 feet was well within range. She possessed a technique to generate a funnel vacuum to cut down her foes—Dew-Blade Breeze.

She took aim at her aerial foe and tried to loose the same attack she’d used to slice off Gustav’s arms...

“My whirling secret technique... Wh—?!”

...but when she did, Mikazuki let out a scream.

A shallow fissure ran down its lapis lazuli blade with a cracking sound. Aoi had no choice but to call off her attack.

As I feared, this blade will not hold!

Aoi’s prodigy swordmaster techniques put a considerable strain on the blade she wielded. Only cursed or bewitched blades with powerful emotions forged into their steel, senses of purposes so strong one might call them souls, could withstand that kind of force.

Mikazuki was an excellent sword, the product of a skilled smith, but it fell just short of the mark. Still, Aoi had already managed three Iron-Cleaving Flashes

during the fight. Mikazuki had done an excellent job holding out, but it was starting to falter. Aoi's rage had driven her to use a technique she was unable to follow through on, a big mistake. Being forced to stop herself mid-swing left her terribly vulnerable.



Now that she wasn't devoting all her efforts to dodging, her feet lingered in place, and Neuro pounced upon it immediately. He took the opportunity to renew his assault, and the high-pressure jets bore down on Aoi. She quickly took evasive action, but her reaction was delayed, earning her a light gash on her left thigh.

"Ngh!"

Her speed dropped precipitously. The blue razors came for her again, and her dodges became more desperate.

Tsukasa and the others on the right flank saw what was happening because of the consolidated battle line.

"Mr. Tsukasa, Ms. Aoi won't last like this!"

"Do you have some sort of plan?!"

Neuro's arrival left the soldiers panicked and desperate for a solution.

"I didn't expect Neuro to take to the front lines at this point. I never even considered it. It's caught me completely off guard," Tsukasa answered candidly.

"No!"

The soldiers stared at Tsukasa in shock. They'd all fought by his side since the battle against Mayoi. They'd borne witness to him reading every engagement like a book and used that information to turn the tides. How had he been caught off guard? Terror built in the pits of their stomachs.

However, they'd jumped to the wrong conclusion.

The thing was...

"This is the kind of unanticipated development that seems *almost too good to be true*."

"Huh?"

"Evidently, he's considerably more immature than I took him for."

Tsukasa glanced down at the silver watch wrapped around his arm.

He took a deep breath, steeled his resolve, and ran down the hill toward Aoi.

Once he was near enough, he raised his rifle, swapped out the empty magazine, and opened fire at the airborne Neuro.

“Oh?”

Neuro hovered higher than the top of the hill, so unsurprisingly, he saw Tsukasa coming. By the time the prodigy politician started shooting, Neuro had already finished erecting a wind spirit bulwark. Before Tsukasa’s bullets reached the grandmaster, they veered in the wrong direction and flew into the distance.

However, Tsukasa had never expected his shots to serve as anything more than a distraction. While his bullets drew Neuro’s attention, he shouted orders to everyone atop the hill, Aoi included.

“Fall back to the forest *like we planned!* Hurry!”

The Yamato army was staging a full retreat. It had held Neuro’s forces at the eight-tenths mark with the fortitude of a boulder, but now its defensive line unraveled all at once. Soldiers abandoned their position and fled into the woods.

Neuro cocked an eyebrow at this development...

“Tsukaaaaasa! Whatever are you plottinggggggg? Even I can tell that you’re up to something, you know!”

...and turned his water pressure jets on Tsukasa.

However, they never reached him.

After catching her breath, Aoi promptly raced over to Tsukasa, grabbed him, and kept running. She dodged the deadly blades chasing her with a precision that might convince onlookers she had eyes in the back of her head and disappeared between the trees.

By that point, most of the Yamato forces from the eight-tenths mark had successfully escaped. The path to the forest was piled high with Yamato corpses. Midway through the retreat, the cavalry caught up with some Yamato soldiers, but none of them slowed. The Yamato army’s sheer determination as it fled made it obvious this was a maneuver with *some sort of objective* in mind. However...

“Heh-heh-heh, it doesn’t matter. Spin up all the little schemes you want. That’s what prey does. It racks its brain to escape predators... If you think running into the forest means you’ve given me the slip, then you’re selling Neuro ul Levias a little too short.”

...in Neuro’s opinion, Tsukasa’s tactic didn’t matter. Ultimately, the grandmaster’s enemies were just apes, and fretting over their every action was meaningless.

No matter what they had up their sleeves, he needed only to crush it.

Crush it with an unbeatable display of force.

“““AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!””””

A cruel smile spread across Neuro’s face as he raised his hand.

And with that, the tragedy began.

Below him, the mage cavalry units that were part of the vanguard in the midst of the third charge exploded from within.

When the shocked light cavalry members looked to see what was happening, they saw black crystals emerging from the mages’ flesh. The crystals cracked, shattered, and flew into the air, glowing with a sinister red light as they congregated atop Neuro’s raised palm.

Once he’d assembled the crystals from nearly a hundred mages, flames gushed forth from Neuro’s hand. They billowed and raged as Neuro molded them into the shape of a spear.

The Yamato soldiers gasped when they saw the fire.

“Th-that... That light...!”

“A-AHHHH! I’d recognize those flames anywhere!”

“That’s Gustav’s Rage Soleil!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Looks like some of you apes actually have some idea what you’re talking about! You know what this spell is, don’t you?! The trees are shedding leaves this close to winter, but rooting a single one of you hiding among them is a hassle. But all I need do is burn down the entire forest! You assumed the

forest would make it harder for the cavalry to chase you, but you didn't think this through. Wood burns well this time of year! These woods shall be your grave!"

Neuro raised his dread weapon from his position high in the air.

Tsukasa, who'd joined back up with the Yamato leaders, frowned as he beheld the spell. "Isn't Rage Soleil supposed to take years just to prepare?"

"That...man used Philosopher's Stones on his own soldiers and took their magic to bend the spirits to his will...!" Lyrule said, her face pale. She probably heard the spirits' screams.

The Philosopher's Stones she mentioned were coagulated chunks of blood and flesh from Neuro's master, the evil dragon. According to Yggdra—another homunculus—the evil dragon had forced his body to evolve repeatedly in the pursuit of revenge against his home world, which exiled him. Thus, the cells of his body tissue possessed incredible power. When introduced to another organism's system, the evil dragon's cells overwrote the host's, forcing the organism to evolve into something stronger. The involuntary evolution massively bolstered the host's physical and magical capabilities, but human bodies weren't built to withstand that sort of transformation and ended up breaking down. That's why Yggdra had suggested that Neuro would be unwilling to use them on himself.

"He wants to spare his body, but he's fine transforming others, huh? When I think about how we nearly trusted that vulgar man with sending us home, I feel like we dodged a bullet," Tsukasa remarked.

"This is bad, that it is," Aoi replied. "If that is the same magic as Gustav's, then those flames will pursue us. If he launches such an attack into the forest...we will all surely perish!"

"Tsukasa, do you have some sort of countermeasure?" Keine asked.

The others all turned to Tsukasa for guidance in the face of the impending crisis.

For all their worries, though...

"We won't need one."

...Tsukasa's answer was succinct and confident.

"The key to our victory lies in capable hands. Don't worry. As a prodigy magician, he's a professional among professionals. He wouldn't accept a job he couldn't see through to completion. He agreed, and I have the utmost confidence he'll pull it off!"

Tsukasa checked his wristwatch. It was just past the appointed hour...

"Bwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!!!!"

...and on cue, a familiar laugh boomed from the other side of the hill the Yamato forces had just crossed.



Back at the briefing before the Prodigies left the Byakkokan Checkpoint, Tsukasa Mikogami entrusted Prince Akatsuki with a role that would turn the impending battle their way.

"Akatsuki, I want you to set out tomorrow morning before sunrise and take half of our two thousand soldiers with you."

"Wh-whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold on a second! I can't lead a thousand people! I—I don't know the first thing about fighting, s-so even with that many, I'd still be useless!"

"I'm not asking you to command them in the battle itself," Tsukasa had replied to reassure Akatsuki, who was flabbergasted at the sudden assignment. "I have a different task in mind for you, and it's one that only you can pull off."

"Huh?"

"I want you to take those one thousand troops to this exact spot on the south side of the Tomino Basin, and I want you to do so completely undetected."

"...!"

"'Tis to be an ambush, then?" Kaguya had said. "But...are you not asking the impossible? By your own admission, the enemy's Dragon Knights have reign of the sky. They shall spot our scheme the moment dawn breaks."

"Lady Kaguya is absolutely right," Kira had agreed. "With how many eyes the enemy has in the air, there's no way we can move a thousand people

undetected.”

Neither of them were sold on Tsukasa’s plan. Given the situation as it stood, their odds of success were nonexistent.

“I’m of the same opinion,” Tsukasa had replied confidently.

““What?””

“And that’s because I’m just a common man. As an ordinary person, I have no idea where the limits of specialists hailed and feared as *superhuman* lie. So tell me, Akatsuki. As a prodigy magician who stands at the very forefront of illusionists who deal in misdirection—can you pull it off?”

All worry had faded from Akatsuki’s expression at the inquiry. After closing his eyes and considering things for a bit, he’d replied, “To answer your question with a question... This plan is going to help *all seven of us* get back to Earth together, right?”

He’d opened his eyes and fixed them on Tsukasa. There’d been a statement—a threat, really—present in that gaze: “Don’t you dare lie to me.”

Tsukasa hadn’t hesitated. “Of course,” he’d said, as though the question didn’t bear asking.

At that, Akatsuki had breathed a sigh of relief...

“Okay. Then I’ll do it.”

...and promised to fulfill Tsukasa’s request.

“And you’re certain you’re up to the task?”

“The surveillance is basically just a couple dozen drones hovering around, right? Compared to my performances, this is going to be a walk in the park. You’re talking to the magician who made the Statue of Liberty vanish from right under the US military’s nose, remember?”

“How are you going to do it?”

Tsukasa had known just how outrageous his request was, and he needed to be sure. However, Akatsuki had let out an exasperated snicker and told Tsukasa the same thing he had once before.

Nobody can do that!”

“But if they were waiting in ambush, our Dragon Knights would have spotted them!”



“I’ve heard that the Seven Luminaries’ god can move mountains with his miracles! I think they actually teleported!”

This unforeseen turn of events sent a wave of terror through Neuro’s staff officers. The Freyjagard HQ was in chaos, and with Neuro absent, there was no way to reorder things.

Amid the madness...

“Reverse course! All rearguard units, turn around! And make it fast!”

...the chief of staff invoked his authority upon realizing that they were on track to get annihilated.

“Ch-Chief?! D-do you really have the right to just move the army like that?!”

“Of course not, but what choice do we have?! The enemy is on our doorstep! If we don’t pull ourselves together, we’ll be slaughtered! All forces, charge at the hostiles coming from the south! If it’s a messy fight they want, we’ll meet them and strike hard! I’ll take full responsibility for this!”

After hearing that the chief of staff would take the heat for this, the rearguard cavalry troops at the base of the hill managed to regain some sense of order. So long as they had someone in charge, they were the best cavalry in the empire. They swiftly turned around and reversed course.

“Our foes are many, but they’re only infantry! Plus, they’re coming off their hill down into the basin! This is where mounted warriors shine! Make them regret underestimating us!”

The enemy ambush forces were about a third of a mile away, which was plenty of space for the cavalry to build up momentum.

Up in the sky...

“Wh-what the hell do those apes think they’re doing?!”

...a furious Neuro paled at his forces’ decision.

His staff officers had made the worst decision possible for their situation. Half of the Freyjagard troops were engaged with Yamato’s, yet the forces that were supposed to back them up abandoned their post. They were dividing

themselves like idiots. The imperial rearguard could no longer fulfill its appointed duty. Neuro's soldiers and officers should have held their ground and intercepted the surprise charge from their original position. People couldn't just vanish like smoke and teleport away, after all.

However, Neuro only knew that because he understood that Akatsuki's miracles were magic tricks. The same couldn't be said of his officers. What's more, *they couldn't see Tsukasa or the original Yamato army*. Tsukasa had pulled his forces back from the eight-tenths mark to the forest behind the hill ahead of time. The rearguard troops waiting at the base of the hill had no eyes on the woods behind it. A man revered across the continent as a god using a miracle to teleport the Yamato soldiers south seemed entirely possible.

The trick had been based around visual angles, Akatsuki's talents, and the public perception of the prodigy magician. Together, those factors caused the rearguard to make a fatal error. Now the vanguard was left alone. And Neuro had a riven army.

When the Blue Grandmaster realized this...

Oh no!

...a wave of alarm raced through him. He turned his attention back to the forest the Prodigies fled into.

And that's when a young woman came speeding from the trees like an arrow.

It was prodigy swordmaster Aoi Ichijou.

Is she using Levitation?! Shi—

"HRAAAAAAAH!!!!"

"~~~~~!!!!"

Aoi flew through by way of Lyrule's magic, closed in on Neuro in the blink of an eye, and brought a full-force attack down on his head. Neuro narrowly managed to block the slash with his flaming Rage Soleil spear, but not even that was enough to dull the raw force of the attack. He was smacked from the air to crash near the top of the hill by his vanguard.

"G-GAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!"

“““Grandmaster Neuro!”””

Neuro writhed in agony after being dashed against the ground, and his soldiers panicked at this sudden development.

It was a golden opportunity for Tsukasa, and he took advantage just as Neuro had anticipated.

“Our enemies have no backup, and their wave tactics have stalled! This is our chance to strike!

“Our target is the enemy commander, Neuro ul Levias!

“All units, CHAAAAARGE!!”

When they heard Tsukasa’s order, the soldiers who’d fled into the trees ran forward with all their strength.

“He did it, Mr. Angel!” said the ninja disguised as Akatsuki running alongside Tsukasa.

“That he did,” Tsukasa replied. His voice rang with respect for Akatsuki, who was more than worthy of being called a Prodigy.

The Prodigies had been unable to go on the offensive because the empire always had a group in reserve, ready for anything. But now that Akatsuki’s units had lured that backup away, the Yamato army could go in without fear of a counterattack. What’s more, Neuro had conveniently defied Tsukasa’s expectations and taken to the battlefield in person. There was no better time to go for Neuro’s throat!

“With this one attack, we can put this entire pointless war to rest!” Tsukasa cried as he helped clear the cavalry away with his rifle while racing forward with the Yamato soldiers.

The scattered Yamato infantry charged without formation, but given the situation, that was for the best. By climbing the hill, the imperial vanguard cavalry had taken the high ground. If the Yamato troops had tried to group up for an attack, the enemy cavalry would have taken them all out at once. Attacking as scattered units was the right call, especially when those units were skilled Yamato warriors.

One of the Yamato army's core merits was the raw prowess of its warriors, and now they were able to put that strength to full use. Neuro's cavalry was unable to fully withstand the all-out offensive, and the Yamato troops tore through its ranks with ease.

The Yamato soldiers were closing in on Neuro by the second.

"Agh! Shit!" he shouted, cursing the circumstances. He would have loved to run.

"HRAAAAAAH!"

"Rrrrgh!" The problem was, Aoi wouldn't let up, pursuing him down the hill. Neuro met her attacks with his fiery spear, locking blades. "Don't you dare look down on me, you wretched APE!!!!"

"Protect the grandmasterrrr!!!!"

"You are in my way, that you are!!!!"

Neuro was up against the prodigy swordmaster.

The nearby Freyjagard soldiers tried to step in to help, but they couldn't stop Aoi's ferocious assault. That said, their relinquished lives managed to slow her down a bit, offering Neuro a chance to collect himself.

First, he dispelled his Rage Soleil. Large-scale war magic would hit him, too, in close quarters. He didn't give a damn how many Yamatoans or imperials he incinerated, but he wouldn't risk catching himself in the blast radius. Neuro released the fire spirits he'd pressed into the shape of a spear, then took the magic binding them and spun it into a different spell.

"Shadowfang!"

Neuro slammed the butt of his staff on the ground—against his own shadow. Its shape flickered, then rapidly expanded and surged for Aoi and the oncoming Yamato soldiers.

The moment it made contact with their shadows, a horde of black dogs came leaping out.

"Ah!"

“What are the—? Arrrrgh!”

The dogs sank their fangs into the shocked Yamato soldiers’ throats, wrestled them to the ground, and dragged them down into the shadows. The Yamato soldiers were so fired up when Tsukasa gave the order to attack, but between the unexpected surprise attack and the bizarre sight of people being devoured by shadows, their morale plummeted. Screams and terror spread through the troops, and the Yamato charge slowed to a crawl.

Aoi was the only one who fully evaded the dark hounds emerging from all directions and the imperial cavalry...

“Rkh...”

...but even so, she had no choice but to delay the attack.

That was precisely what Neuro hoped for. There was no better chance to escape this absolute mess of a battle. It was now or never. He shot a glance toward the base of the hill below, but what he saw there left him speechless.

“AAAAAAAAAAARGH!!!!”

“W-we’ve got trouble! They’ve broken past our rearguard!”

“I see Neuro! He’s over there!”

“Don’t waste any time helping our captured troops! Chaaaaarge!! Kill him, and victory is ours!”

Akatsuki’s army of a thousand had shrunk considerably, the price of crashing into the rearguard cavalry, but it had never stalled. Its soldiers stormed up the hill. Their cries emboldened the soldiers fighting off the dogs behind the hill. The Yamato soldiers who’d charged from the forest gritted their teeth and resumed their advance.

Shit! They’re in front of me; they’re behind me... At this rate...!

A pincer maneuver was closing in around Neuro, and he was the sole target. There was nowhere for him to flee on the hill. Even if he tried escaping to the air, they’d just follow after him with Levitation, so it wouldn’t do him any good. And with how close the enemies were, war magic was too dangerous to rely on.

I’m out of options.

The moment that despair-inducing thought crept through his head, Neuro felt a heavy weight in his pocket.

He *did* have a card he could play.

There was a syringe in his pocket full of refined Philosopher's Stone that he could inject into his veins. Doing so would trigger a gentler evolution than the violent transformation caused by forcibly implanting it in its stone form. If he used the Philosopher's Stone, he would be unstoppable. Once the evolution gave him his former power back, he could...

Should I do it?! But...if I do...!

Neuro took the syringe and made to plunge its tip into one of his veins. However, the chill of the needle against his skin sent shivers down his entire body. It was true that evolution via refined Philosopher's Stones was comparatively gentle, but that didn't change the fact that he would be forcibly overwriting the composition of his body. Would frail human flesh really be able to withstand that change? There was an infinitesimal chance it would backfire.

Actually, no. Based on the data from their original experiments, the odds of a bad outcome were actually higher than that. The probability of a human body transforming successfully was about 90 percent. In other words, there was a 10 percent failure rate.

Neuro thought back to his past life, to the countless experiments they ran on this world's natives. He remembered how people contorted in pain when injected with factors that forced them to evolve. He remembered the horrible ways they perished as their innards tore themselves apart. Neuro found the way they writhed on the ground like worms hilarious at the time, but the thought of the same thing happening to him...

...is no laughing matter!

"Why should someone like *me* have to take such an inane risk?!"

However, the fact of the matter was that Aoi was almost upon him. Neuro only had moments left before she broke past his knights. On seeing that, Neuro bit his lip, groaned, took his syringe...

"What the hell does that *lout* think he's doing?!"

...and cursed someone.

Before the battle, his Dragon Knights had told him about the other army approaching the Tomino Basin. Not his delayed infantry—a *different* allied force.

And that was when it happened.

A veritable squall of gunshots roared across the whole of the battlefield.

“Wh-what’s that noise?!”

“Gunshots?! Wait, who’re they?!”

Yamato and imperial soldiers alike froze in shock at the unexpected sound. The entire situation turned on its head before their very eyes.

An army equipped with *bolt-action rifles* came pouring out from behind every tree and shrub in the forest around the Tomino Basin. From the look of it, it was a massive force made up of well over two thousand fighters. They’d even been lurking in the very same section of woods behind the hill Tsukasa’s forces had emerged from. The large army was made up of both *hyuma* and *byuma*... It was the Qinglong Gang.

And it was being led...

“Cool your jets, Aoi.”

...by prodigy businessman Masato Sanada.

“M-Masato, m’lord...?!”

“Both armies are gonna have a temporary cease-fire. As of now, I’m in charge.”

CHAPTER 7

✧ An Archenemy Barring the Way ✧

“Go secure the grandmaster.”

After the three-thousand Qinglong Gang mercenaries entered the Tomino Basin from the surrounding woods, their employer, Masato Sanada, gave them orders as he surveyed the state of the battle.

Despite the sounds of fighting, his voice traveled uncannily well, and the Qinglong Gang mercenaries responded by getting to work. They cut a path between the Neuro and the Yamato armies, surrounding and protecting the grandmaster.

“Wh-who are these people?! That’s not the imperial standard they’re flying. Who are they fighting for?!”

“Get out of the way! If you don’t, we’ll cut you down!”

“STOP!!!!”

The Yamato soldiers were so bewildered they nearly went on the offensive, but Tsukasa shouted to stop them.

“Mr. Angel...?”

“The situation’s completely changed. Gather up all troops and fall back behind me.”

With that, Tsukasa recalled Aoi and the rest of the soldiers who’d fought Neuro. The Qinglong Gang’s strength had forced his hand.

Masato had single-handedly run Elm’s distribution networks, allowing him to

equip the mercenaries with black-market weapons. They were a fully modern fighting force equipped with top-of-the-line bolt-action rifles across the board. Those guns had demonstrated their terrifying power time and time again during Elm's fight for independence. Their effective range and destructive rapid-fire capabilities far surpassed anything native to the current era.

That was a gap no amount of tactical wit could close. Attacking the Qinglong Gang head-on would doom everyone but Aoi to death.

Tsukasa had no choice but to tell his forces to stand down.

"Well, hey, look who's feelin' all reasonable." Masato had joined his troops by Neuro, and he gave Tsukasa's sensible decision a satisfied smile. "Don't shoot anyone who's fleeing. Just get in there and form a wall between the two armies."

""""Yes, sir!""""

Following Tsukasa's lead, Akatsuki's ambush troops stopped their attack and reassumed their formation. Meanwhile, the scattered imperial army gathered with their nearby allies, too. Finally, the Qinglong Gang stepped in and lined up so as to block the two sides from each other in their entirety. The battlefield was now cleanly partitioned.

Seeing the soldiers get shuffled around caused Neuro, who was still under the gunmen's protection, to snap. He couldn't comprehend why Masato acted so leisurely. "MASATO!! Why aren't you attacking?! This is the perfect time to strike!!"

Masato replied with a simple shrug. "Hold your horses, Grandmaster. I've got this whole procedure I'm following."

"Look around you! You don't need procedures; just shoot the bastards already! That's an order!"

"Oh, shut up."

"?!"

Frustration at having nearly been backed into a corner caused Neuro's tone to take a harsh edge, but the cutting reply he got back left him speechless.

Masato sounded more than a little exasperated as he continued. “I think you’ve got a few things mixed up, Grandmaster. I told you that I’d help, and that’s exactly what I’ve been doing, but I don’t remember ever agreeing to be your lapdog. I control who wins this battle right now, and I’m free to sell it to whoever I damn well please.”

“Y-you little...!”

“Let me repeat myself. I don’t want either army moving an inch. If you even think about pulling anything, just know that as soon as you do, you’ll have made enemies out of me and all three thousand of my Qinglong Gang mercs. Now, Tsukasa...you and I have an important business arrangement to hash out.”

A touch of bafflement colored Tsukasa’s expression. “Business arrangement” didn’t seem at all like the appropriate term given the situation.

“A what?”

Masato was no longer interested in Neuro, and he shifted his attention away from him...

“You heard me. And I won’t take no for an answer. *Engineering this situation, this moment, was the whole reason I left you all in the first place.*”

“What?”

“Now, come to the negotiation table, Tsukasa. Before I change my mind.”

...and over to Tsukasa. He cast the boy a piercing stare while beckoning him from more than half a mile away.

“For my end, I’m offering you this battle up on a silver platter. And in return, I want you to take that policy you’re pushing back on Earth...

“...your universal basic income plan, and shelve it in perpetuity.”



Universal basic income was a social security system where the government provided each of its citizens with enough money to guarantee their access to a cultured life as ensured by the Japanese constitution. Unlike current public welfare systems, there were no special procedures or checks you had to undergo to get the money. If you were a citizen, you were eligible. The policy

was incredibly fair, and its fundamental simplicity allowed it to avoid getting bogged down in the privileging and arbitrary screenings that plagued its current counterparts. Implementing UBI would eliminate benefit fraud and take the many problematic situations of existing welfare programs—such as people improperly getting payments despite their relatives having stable incomes, people starving because welfare workers made an incorrect call, and beneficiaries being discriminated against—and eliminate them in one fell swoop.

UBI had the power to save countless people from poverty.

That's why prodigy politician Tsukasa Mikogami had been pushing it as a mid-to-long-term goal for Japan and trying to earn public support for the system. However...

"If you ask me, UBI is a dog-shit system that only benefits slackers who want enough to get by on without having to work at all."

...prodigy businessman Masato Sanada had some harsh things to say about the idea.

"Money doesn't just grow on trees. Nations only have finite budgets, and they gotta make their social security systems work within 'em. If you tried to give everyone enough money to survive with no strings attached, you'd burn through your bankroll in a heartbeat."

Masato had a point. UBI was an experiment with a lot of potential, but at the same time, it had many problems people were concerned about, too.

The biggest one of all was how to finance it. The policy involved unconditionally providing each citizen with enough money to subsist on. If you assumed that amount was eighty thousand yen a month, then the program's annual outlay would be north of one hundred trillion yen. Preexisting funding methods weren't enough to cover that amount, so the difference was going to have to come from somewhere, and the initial suggestion was a tax hike on corporations and the wealthy.

In the eyes of Masato Sanada, the greatest businessman in the world, that solution was unacceptable. He made no attempts to hide the hatred and animosity in his expression. "I'm gonna be honest with you. I'm not fucking

having it. I put a lot of time and money into amassing my fortune. Sometimes, I even had to take huge risks that meant putting my life on the line. I'll be damned if I let it be stolen by a bunch of loafers who've never built a thing in their life and who spend their days lazing about."

"...I see." After lending an ear to Masato's criticism of his policy, Tsukasa nodded. Then he scowled at Masato and gave him a look with a hint of rage. "In other words, you intend to use this battle, the lives of everyone fighting here, as ammo for this negotiation. You'll turn your guns on us if I don't do what you say. That's a low move. You really think it's right to take our dispute from Earth to this world?"

Tsukasa's expression was even harsher than during the battle with Neuro.

However...

"Yeah, it's low; I'll give you that. But that cuts two ways. What you're trying to do is goddamn highway robbery. Looting, carried out under the name of governmental authority. I've been waiting for a long time... A *looong* time for an opportunity to shut you down."



...the judgmental look in Tsukasa's eyes did nothing to change Masato's attitude. Once again, Masato beckoned him over to negotiate.

After hesitating for a moment, Tsukasa told his soldiers to stay back, then stepped forward from his battle line alone and approached his old friend.

Tsukasa was ready. He knew now that the true enemy wasn't Neuro, it was Masato. And Tsukasa was the only one capable of bringing him down.

His resolve came through loud and clear to Masato. Tsukasa's choice to step forward marked the start of the true battle.

"...I mean, think about it," Masato continued. "What'll happen if you funnel money to a bunch of people who don't own companies? Salaries exist because of wealthy people doing business, and without them making investments, the economy stops functioning. When rich people have money, that money ends up flowing downstream. It's what they call the trickle-down effect, and it's how the economy works. Go on, tell me I'm wrong."

"That argument's fallacious and you know it, Merchant." With that one intense word, *fallacious*, Tsukasa cut right through Masato's retort. "In the past, there have been administrations that based their economic policy around that very same trickle-down theory. Do you know what happened?"

"Companies' retained earnings, the savings they kept for themselves instead of distributing into the economy, rose to never-before-seen levels. All the riches that were supposed to flow downward stopped right at the top. Instead of money trickling down, real wages declined. Trying to advance your argument while completely disregarding actual case studies hardly seems like a productive course of action."

Trickle-down economics had already proven to be ineffective, so as Tsukasa saw it, another option was necessary.

"The problems our nation is grappling with can't be solved merely by increasing the size of our economy. The issue is that a tiny percentage of wealthy individuals control seventy percent of the total wealth—and it's the system that enables them that's at fault."

"People like me have our money because we *earned* it."

“Absolutely; I don’t deny that. But if we allow the fact that you earned your money to serve as a justification for maintaining the status quo, *then we might as well not have a democracy at all.*”

“What?”

“The primary objective of UBI is to ensure our civil rights are protected by taking the money flowing through our nation like water and mandating that its waterways be maintained. That’s right, *mandating*. Many of our nation’s problems are rooted in how the wealthy have dug in and protected their vested interests over the past century or so. The masses don’t trust you to self-regulate, so they elected my administration to make that choice for you.”

“Spoken like a true populist,” Masato said, sighing overdramatically to express his exasperation. “Always gotta pander to the masses, don’t you? Those people don’t have talent, they don’t have skills, they don’t even have a proper *work ethic*, and you treat them like gods. What’s your endgame here, goddamn mob rule?”

“What would be wrong with that?”

“Sorry, run that by me again?”

“Mob rule is just an outcome. If the people’s foolishness leads them to destroy themselves, they have no one but themselves to blame. It’s a perfectly viable conclusion, one might even say a healthy conclusion, for a democracy. The *worst* possible outcome for a democracy is for a small group of people to recognize that possibility, denounce it as inane, and use that as a pretext to seize power for themselves and use it at their whim.”

“...”

“You have every right to oppose my campaign promises, Merchant, and our constitution guarantees you the right to run for office with that as your policy platform. If that’s what you want to do, then be my guest. But trying to have your way by force is something I cannot abide.”

“...Big words for a guy standing where you are.”

A bitter smirk spread across Masato’s face as he watched Tsukasa approach unhurriedly. The situation was such that Masato effectively had a gun pressed

to Tsukasa's head, yet Tsukasa didn't seem daunted in the slightest.

"But hey, you've always been a bit hardheaded. Don't worry, I never thought it'd be easy to get you to walk back your plan. But here's the thing..."

Tsukasa's demeanor wasn't enough to make Masato lose his cool. He was supremely confident that he was in the right here.

"If you keep pushing for UBI, the people who blindly support you for being the *messiah who took down the twisted old administration* are gonna get hopped up on hype, and Japan's gonna descend into exactly the kind of mob rule you described. And you wanna know why? It's because UBI's got this one fatal flaw."



"Does it?"

When Tsukasa stopped in his tracks and posed his question, Masato gave him a theatrical nod. "You'd be giving people an entitlement that assures them they can survive without working. *You're removing the necessity for labor.*"

The question was: What happened when you took away the need for people to work?

The way Masato put it, their desire to try would decrease, and the labor participation rate would deteriorate.

"The quality of service will go to shit. Then there's the progressive tax you'll need to implement to fund UBI. With the one-two combo of lower quality and worse cashflow, our nation's industries are gonna stop being competitive in the global marketplace. And you know what'll happen then?

"Our GDP's gonna shrink, and your tax revenue will drop with it. Eventually, you won't even be able to keep funding your UBI."

If the government attempted to maintain UBI through lower tax yields, it would have to increase taxation. However, that increase would hurt corporations all over again.

"It's a vicious circle, and it'll end with our domestic industries in ruins. All those people who supported you will change their tunes. 'Con man!' they'll call you. 'You'll just say whatever gets you elected!'"

“That’s a pretty bold conclusion.”

“Yeah, well, it’s true. That’s the way it’ll all go down. Look, Tsukasa. As a manager, I’ve observed a lot of people, and I’m talking from experience here. People are fundamentally lazy deep down. Unless something forces them, gives them no choice, they’ll drift through life slothfully.

“Maybe you could call it a biological mechanism. Lions raised in captivity don’t hunt, and it’s the same deal with people. If the government raises its people like that, they’ll stop working altogether, and the nation will fall.”

“Interesting. So to sum up, Masato, this fatal flaw you see...”

“Is that it goes against human nature. *That’s* the main problem with UBI. Japan’s a country that sells tech and buys resources. If our people stop working, our companies will wither, and our economy will tank so badly that we won’t even be able to keep the lights on. Without our companies, we won’t have a nation.

“Sure, wealth is getting concentrated, and maybe there isn’t that much trickling down. But if someone has a problem with that, all they gotta do is start their own business and use it to climb higher.

“They can found a company, they can get a job in a public sector... Japan doesn’t have any have laws against that. It’s all totally legal, so the idea of plunging everyone into poverty for a bunch of slackers who won’t even try is straight-up pigheaded. That right there is a system that *makes fools out of anyone who actually puts in effort*, and there’s nothing more unfair than that.

“I say some people aren’t worth saving. Nations aren’t built by gods. They’re built by people, and that means they can’t rescue everyone. Call it an evil of democracy if you like, but as long as we’re working with finite resources, our systems are gonna have limits. In democracies, politicians are meant to do their best within those limitations.

“So c’mon, ditch the pipe dreams and work with me here. That’ll let you bring happiness to the most people possible. That right there is one of those ‘better compromises’ you love so much, right?”

People were creatures of sloth. Masato was certain of it, and he built an

argument upon that conviction to show Tsukasa how wrong he was.

There was less than a hundred feet between the two Prodigies now. Masato extended his hand toward Tsukasa. All Tsukasa had to do was take it, and their negotiation would reach its conclusion. Perhaps the gesture was also meant symbolically, like he was trying to pull his friend back from the brink before Tsukasa destroyed himself chasing an impossible dream.

However, Tsukasa took Masato's words and outstretched hand...

"Wrong."

...and rejected them both without a shred of hesitation.

"..."

Tsukasa's tone was as sharp and unwavering as a knife, and Masato's eyes went wide with shock. He knew that Tsukasa was exceedingly careful when it came to the future and matters unknown and that he always considered every possibility to choose the best. That was just the kind of person Tsukasa was, and that was precisely why Masato hadn't expected him to refuse so firmly.

Was Tsukasa letting his emotions get the better of him? No, that wasn't it. Masato was sure it had to be something else. There wasn't a person he knew more detached from their feelings than Tsukasa.

Masato shot him a questioning look that asked, "What are you basing that refusal on?"

Tsukasa replied, "It's true that lazily drifting through life is a biological mechanism, Merchant, and I admit that humans are furnished with that feature. In primeval times, it may well have been the truest expression of our nature. But now... *Now things are different.* There's something we now have that animals don't, and its creation changed us on a fundamental level."

"What's that?"

"I'm surprised. I didn't think you'd need to ask. You're the prodigy businessman, aren't you? There's one thing we have that animals don't, and that thing is currency."

"I"

“Its creation increased the range at which goods could be distributed and the diversity of those goods. It meant that distant civilizations could engage in cultural exchange, and it spurred on human society’s rapid growth. However, it also created the ability to use currency to pervert society—hoarding.”

Tsukasa pointed out that currency didn’t degrade over time, and that gave people the ability to easily store value.

“Its presence altered our very natures from creatures that live for the moment to creatures that live for tomorrow.

“‘I might need this someday, so I’ll save it.’

“‘I might need this someday, so I’ll gather up more of it.’

“We began seeking value for use in the future, *even though we couldn’t know for sure whether we’d be able to use it*. And it turns out that behavior has no limits. The mere existence of value that you can store without it ever spoiling takes those bounds and destroys them. It stops being about having enough for tomorrow or the day after. It becomes about the next year, or the next decade, or the next generation, or the next three generations. People gather up more and more and strive for greater wealth than they could ever possibly use. They keep on hoarding it, but no matter how much they hold, it’s never enough. The future is infinite, after all.

“So the question is, what happens then?

“Naturally, some people will be really good at making money, which eventually leads to colossal wealth inequality. There are people who don’t have enough to feed themselves tomorrow coexisting with those carrying fortunes substantial enough to do as they like for generations and never fear going broke. Our homeland exists at the endpoint of that history, where we have people starving to death while dumpsters overflow with food.”

“So you’re saying that what drives humankind...,” Masato began.

“Is greed,” Tsukasa finished. “It drives people in our world of extreme wealth inequality, and it motivates the citizens of this world that recently had a revolution. Greed motivates citizens to seek better futures for themselves. By doing so, they change society. You’ve stood by Roo’s side and seen how

powerful that drive is yourself.”

“ ... ”

Roo was a slave girl who, spurred by a desire to buy back her lost family, put her life on the line to convince Masato of her hunger. There was a value to the avarice burning in her young eyes, and Masato recognized that better than anyone.

Masato had no way to refute Tsukasa’s assertion. He sank into awed silence.

Meanwhile, Tsukasa strode onward with intensity in his steps.

“With that fact in mind, I not only refute your theory that people are inherently slothful, but I can also state that your fears about UBI destroying the framework of our society are baseless! No matter how the system changes, there’s no end to humanity’s appetite. We can never go back to being wild beasts.

“With UBI, I intend to take our countless welfare systems, the ones that have purposely been needlessly subdivided to create power structures, and unify them to break down the barriers keeping wealth stagnant and create a vast financial canal that flows back and forth between our nation and its people. It will set countless things in motion.

“And the first thing it will do is change our relationship with work.

“The fact that UBI gives people enough to live off of means that workers will possess a lifeline to escape from abusive workplaces. Companies won’t be able to exploit laborers anymore. That will lead to moral working environments, which in turn will have a direct impact on employee motivation. A lot of people have big dreams for the future but are tied down by simply having to survive, and this will give them an opportunity to embrace new challenges. They can start businesses, go into research, create works of art—the world will be their oyster. As you said, Merchant, Japan is a nation with few resources that gets by selling technology. This will allow more people to embrace their potential, which will serve our national interests.

“On top of that, the flow of goods will shift as well.

“When the massive waterway that is UBI sends wealth flowing to the masses,

tons of goods produced only to be sent to dumpsters will end up in the hands of people who need them instead. The interplay between supply and demand shall become more efficient than ever, and the scale of our nation's markets will expand dramatically.

"It will fundamentally change the way money operates in the long run.

"Once people know that there's a baseline income level they'll always have access to, they'll stop thinking of money as something to be hoarded. It will become something to be spent, or perhaps invested. Of the estimated two quadrillion yen the Japanese public owns in personal assets, nearly sixty percent is held in bank deposits. That number is almost unreasonably conservative by international standards, and if we can get that asset ratio more active, it's impossible to estimate how much good it will do for our economy.

"People, goods, money...the massive UBI river will carry them through our nation with hitherto unseen mobility. That will allow us to *systematically* build a country where nobody starves again. We'll be trailblazers for a new era and a guiding light for democracies heading into the twenty-second century. That's something I feel deeply confident about."

Tsukasa's stance on human nature differed from Masato's. And after laying it bare, he made his stand. Tsukasa stood before Masato's proffered hand, but rather than spare a glance at it, he looked his old friend straight in the eye.

His gaze declared that UBI would work.

"...You seriously think you're gonna be able to pull that off? You're not talkin' about changing Japan anymore. You're talking about changing the whole damn world."

"I do. People's greed has altered the world before. If people want it, I'll get it done. After all...that's what politicians are for."

"..."

Seeing Tsukasa talk like that, with his blue and red eyes shining with ice-cold rationality and fiery passion, dredged up a memory of Masato's from a few years ago.

He recalled the night when Tsukasa, who was just a boy, came to him and

suggested they take down Tsukasa's father.



"Your old man is a problem for me, too. He's already laying the groundwork to sell off our nation, and I can't be who I am in a socialist state. This plan of yours has my full support."

"That means a lot. I can't think of anyone I'd rather have in my corner than you, Merchant."

Tsukasa and Masato had met at night in the park, beneath a streetlight that had been left broken to save on infrastructure renovation costs and atop a bench with all its paint peeling. Tsukasa's father, Mitsuhide Mikogami, was running Japan into the ground with his misgovernance, and Masato and Tsukasa had come together to discuss their plan to oust him.

Masato had already made a name for himself as a talented businessman, and he offered Tsukasa his full support. At the same time, though...

"But here's the thing. When the plan succeeds, your old man's gonna get executed, no ifs, ands, or buts. The only statutory penalty on the books for treason is the death penalty. In other words, you'll be murdering your father with your own two hands. You're gonna regret it no matter what."

...he also issued a warning.

Masato was all too familiar with the pain of losing one's family. Blood was nothing to be made light of.

To that...

"You're right. I'm sure I will."

...Tsukasa had given him a small nod. Then...

"I loved my father. He cared for me and gave me the best life and education I could have asked for. Without my mother's and father's unconditional love, I wouldn't have the clothes I'm wearing or the knowledge I possess. I wouldn't even exist. He gave me more time, energy, and love than a child could possibly hope to repay. My father is a great man. He's a kind man. A kind man! So why? Why?! Why couldn't he care about the masses the same way he loves me?!"

...he let out a violent wail of grief and tore at his hair. The roots were already starting to go white.

Masato distinctly remembered Tsukasa's expression that night. It stuck with him partially because it was the first and final time Masato ever saw him sob in public, but more importantly...

"Every person possesses the kindness to care about other people. Everyone loves and is loved by someone—their mothers, their fathers, their children, their friends.

"So why do tragedies like this happen? Why do people forget their nobler instincts?

"The thing about me, Merchant, is that I never want anyone to feel the way I do right now. I want to build a nation where things like this don't happen. A country without starvation, where no one has to kill or be killed, and everyone can live happily.

"I'm not going to rely on some vague notion of humanity's inherent goodness like God did when he forbade us from eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. With proper logic, I can manipulate humanity's wickedness and create a systemized Eden!

"I don't know what method will make that possible, not yet. But someday, I'll find it. Just wait and see.

"This battle is only the first step on that journey."

"..."

...it was the awe and dread he felt over his friend trying to achieve something that even God himself had failed to do.



You really found it, huh? You found the road to your destination.

As he reflected on the past, Masato realized something. Ever since that day, Tsukasa had never stopped looking for a way to regulate people. People, who had the beautiful ability to love others yet were unable to rid themselves of their inherent evil.

After all that searching, the answer he'd arrived at was UBI.

That's why Tsukasa's explanation of how UBI would change the world *didn't rely at all on the innate goodness of humanity*. Humankind's greed had built the world as it currently stood, and Tsukasa was trying take that avarice and carefully direct it toward constructing a world that was kind to as many people as possible. It was the same thing he'd done with the People's Revolution on this planet.

As a prodigy businessman, Masato couldn't flat-out deny the possibility of Tsukasa's vision. Beasts knew nothing of currency, whereas humans did. While both were technically living creatures, it was difficult to truly describe them as being one and the same. Beasts existed for the moment while humans lived for tomorrow, and that formed a fundamental difference to their approaches.

Now that humanity had obtained the standardized, quantifiable happiness that money represented, for it to return to being beasts would require so much effort that it was about as far from sloth as you could get.

"Tsukasa, I get where you're coming from."

Unlike Tsukasa, who'd rejected Masato's opinion immediately, Masato confessed to understanding. He was unable to do anything else. As a prodigy businessman, he knew full well the power and allure of currency.

He couldn't reject it, and yet...

"But at the end of the day, that's just a single possibility. For rich people like me who already have it good, that's not a strong enough reason for us to shell out. If you decide that you're gonna push your UBI plan through no matter what, then the long and short of it is *one of us is gonna have to put the other guy in the ground.*"

Masato agreed with Tsukasa's logic. However, that didn't mean he needed to actively work with him.

The prodigy businessman and prodigy politician's negotiation had concluded.

As Masato lowered his outstretched hand, he reached into his suit with his other hand and pulled out the same miniature flintlock pistol he'd shot Shinobu with. He trained it straight on Tsukasa.

The other Prodigies had been watching from afar, and a stir ran through their ranks.

Tsukasa wore the slightest smile, and without a shred of trepidation or shock...

“You’re the best businessman in the world, Merchant, and you’re connected to nearly a third of Earth’s wealth. If I can’t sell *you* on UBI, then I harbor no delusions that I’ll be able to make it work. So if I have to bet my life to set my ideals against yours, then so be it.”

...he stepped toward the barrel leveled at him.

Masato tensed his trigger finger.

Aoi dropped her center of gravity, ready to break into a dash.

The next moment...

“But the thing is...”

“Yeah, the thing is...”

““...that’s a conversation for another time.””

...Masato cast his gun aside and high-fived Tsukasa.

“Guh-GAHHHHH?!?!”

Neuro’s screams erupted from a cacophony of gunshots.



The shots came from the Qinglong Gang mercenaries who’d been stationed around the grandmaster. They’d originally surrounded Neuro to protect him, but then they whirled around and fired at him.

Masato casting his gun aside had been the signal.

“Wh...why?!”

Neuro collapsed, his body full of lead. Death claimed him slowly, though. He posed his question with his face drenched in blood and contorted with the rage of being unable to understand what had happened.



Wasn't he supposed to be your enemy?

Didn't you say you wanted to kill him?

Your negotiations broke down, so why am I the one you shot?

Masato looked down at Neuro and spoke with cold indifference. "There isn't a person alive I disagree with or want to kill more than this guy. My bloodlust is *genuine*. That's why I don't want our showdown to be a sideshow for something else."

"...?!"

"Sorry, but your fate was sealed *the moment Shinobu got to me*. As soon as she did, you stopped being a useful way for us to reach our goal. The only reason I stuck with you after that was so I could take my enemy—my one true archenemy—and risk my life to make sure he had the guts to fight me to the death *once we get back*. Now that I've done that, I'm through with you."

"You little piece of SHIIIT!!"

Blood sprayed from Neuro's mouth as he screamed furiously and forced his dying body to perform magic. He dug his nails into the ground, and his shadow reacted by extending like a snake and joining itself to Masato's. Masato's shadow frothed, and a black dog leaped from within to tear the prodigy businessman's throat.

However, its fangs never reached him.

A series of kunai sped through the air, striking the dog in its side and hurling it to the ground. After a short death throes, it turned into mist and dispersed.

Masato didn't so much as flinch at this development...

"I guess you used magic or something to see if I was lying, but the moment you thought a petty trick would turn me into your pawn was the moment your luck ran out. There's plenty of ways you can lead someone by the nose with nothing but the truth. I'm not some cheap con man, y'know. I'm a prodigy businessman."

...and as he spoke, he gave the order to retaliate.

The mercenaries had finished ejecting their spent casings. When their rifles flashed in unison again, Neuro breathed his last.

Masato turned his gaze from where Neuro was lying facedown in a pool of blood over to the Qinglong Gang mercenary who'd thrown the kunai. "I figured you'd sneaked in there somewhere, Shinobu."

The mercenary he spoke to stripped her viridian battle uniform to reveal a sailor uniform and scarf. It was the prodigy journalist who'd gone missing in Drachen, Shinobu Sarutobi.

"You've got a lotta nerve, bub," she said with a look of resentment on her adorable face. "As I recall, you're the one who shot this frail li'l maiden and locked her up in a cell."

"Yeah, 'cause I knew that whatever we did, you'd figure out a way to escape. Besides, I didn't expect you to pass out after I intentionally aimed for your bulletproof stuff. At first, I thought you were just playing along, but when I realized that you'd actually lost consciousness, I freaked out. You sure you aren't losin' your touch?"

"I got my ribs smashed up before I even got to you! Of course I passed out after you shot me!"

"...Look, I had my own plans I was working through. Plus, I couldn't just bail and leave Roo behind, so I figured shoving you in a cell was the safest option for a bunch of reasons. Sorry about that."

"I mean, I get it. That's why I saved you."

Masato had a point. Roo had been away when Shinobu came to Drachen, making her plan of extracting them both a bust. At the time, Shinobu had been too weak to do more. She knew that she'd come up short and kept her complaints and anger to a minimum.

As soon as she calmed down, a different set of furious bellows began. They came from Neuro's army, which had just lost its leader to a supposed ally, Masato.

"G-Grandmaster Neuro!"

“Those Lakan savages! They won’t get away with this!”

They charged on horseback for Masato, the Yamato soldiers, and the Qinglong Gang.

Masato, Shinobu, and Tsukasa exchanged a look...

“We’ve got some catching up to do, but that can come later. Let’s deal with the pests first.”

“Agreed.”

“Sha-sha.”

...and with the overwhelming power of the Yamato army combined with an additional three thousand modernized troops, they delivered a fitting end to the fools who’d mistaken recklessness for valor.



It was nearly winter, and by the time all the fighting was done, the sun had begun its swift descent, filling the sky with the indigo hue of night.

“Masatooooo!!”

“Heya, Prince! Howya been? I bet you were all lonely without me around to —”

“HRAHHHHH!!!!”

“Gwuh?!”

After routing the enemy and making the Tomino Basin safe to cross, Akatsuki ran over to Masato, then sank a full-body dropkick into his abdomen. Petite as Akatsuki was, the sheer momentum behind his strike was enough to send Masato flying.

“Ghck! Kaff?! Wh-what’s the big idea?”

“That’s what I wanna know! One minute you’re showing up out of nowhere, the next you’re pointing a gun at Tsukasa! Then you start spouting off some complicated stuff and making it sound like you joined Neuro’s side! What the heck were you thinking?!”

Akatsuki had been off in the distance, so he hadn’t fully grasped the situation,

and now he was furious.

To that...

“You did great back there, Akatsuki. You really took a load off my shoulders.”

...Tsukasa chose to compliment his actions rather than explain the situation. Then he turned and glared at Masato. “Merchant, when you told us you were leaving Elm, you gave me a signal by tapping your spoon against your teacup. I knew that crass action was out of character for you. *You were trying to remind me about how Neuro showed us that image of Tokyo in his teacup.* You wanted me to remember that a man with such power might well have been watching us that very moment through another ‘window’ he opened.”

Masato nodded. “Yup. I figured you’d pick up on that. If Neuro was peeping on our meeting, then turning against him as a full group would’ve been the dumbest thing we could do. It might’ve lost us our only way home. Hedging against risk is just as important in business as it is in politics.”

“True enough. Once I saw that Tokyo skyline, I worried that Neuro might be able to observe whatever part of this world he pleased, too. When it comes to dealing with magic, there’s no such thing as too cautious. With how little we know about magic, that’s the only way to keep ourselves safe from it. That’s why I didn’t stop you from leaving and operating independently.”

Their separation hadn’t been caused by a difference of opinion at all. Between needing to be careful about the unknown capabilities of spells and the then-uncertainty about Neuro’s trustworthiness, Tsukasa and Masato had devised a situation where they could come out on top no matter the result. They’d set up their combo play without exchanging a single word or message aside from simply tapping the rim of a cup.

Given that Neuro had, in fact, been watching their discussion play out through Nio’s eyes, their precautions ended up being completely justified. That much was all well and good. However...

“Still, I can’t believe you used that to force me into that discussion. I can’t let my guard down around you for a second, can I?”

“You make it sound so sinister. Just think of me as shrewd. I’m the kind of guy

who gets restless if I don't take full advantage of every opportunity that comes my way. Woulda been smooth sailing for me back on Earth if you'd yielded here, but I guess that was too much to hope for."

"Of course it was. Issues like this are for the people to decide, not for you and me to determine on our own."

For all of Tsukasa's scolding, Masato didn't look the slightest bit contrite. Tsukasa sighed. Masato was so shamelessly shrewd that Tsukasa had gone right past being angry with him and all the way to feeling begrudgingly reassured.

Once people had their fill of piling on Masato...

"At any rate, this should put a stop to this war."

...Keine clapped her hands together and changed the subject back to the present situation.

Tsukasa nodded. "That's right. I've already sent word, and the enemy Dragon Knights are probably doing the same. Things at the Byakkokan Checkpoint should settle down before long."

Neuro had been the only person who actually stood to gain anything from the war. The empire didn't even want to hold Yamato, so it was unlikely to shed further blood pursuing this conflict.

Now it was up to the Prodigies to make the armistice official.

"Where's Roo at, Merchant?"

"Running an errand for me in Lakan. There's this one *particular* slave couple I sent her to buy from a powerful Lakan clan."

"How much did you give her?"

"Enough for one adult woman."

"...That's one nasty mentor Roo's got."

"Hey, it's how I show my love."

"Oh, I know," Tsukasa replied with a thin smile...

"We should collect Neuro's body and head back to the Byakkokan Checkpoint. The rest of the evil dragon's homunculi, the other members of the Four Imperial

Grandmasters, are still alive and well. We need to get organized so we're ready to fight them by the time they get back from the—"

...and got to work setting up for the unavoidable fight that was just around the corner.

More accurately, he *tried* to get to work.

But that was when it happened.

"Heh... Heh-heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha..."

That was when they heard laughter echoing in their heads like it had come straight from their brains.

""""?!""""

The Prodigies all heard the voice, of course, but so did the Lakan and Yamato armies around them. An uproar spread through the Tomino Basin.

This was no normal laughter...

"I-isn't that Neuro's voice?!"

...it belonged to a man who had already breathed his last.

"No way... Get on that!"

"W-we definitely got him, sir!"

On Masato's orders, the Qinglong Gang mercenaries promptly double-checked the body. Sure enough, Neuro was dead. That was an indisputable fact. Yet somehow, the laughter continued.

"Oh, you definitely got me good. Losing my body to a bunch of apes... Forget Father, I'm not even going to be able to look my horrid siblings in the eye after this."

A projection of Neuro's body appeared before their eyes. The translucent, wavering image hung directly over his corpse like a mirage.

Upon seeing this...

"I-is he a ghost?!"

...some people, like Akatsuki, went pale with fright. Others, like Ringo, were

struck speechless at the fantastical development. More, like Aoi, recognized the emergency and braced themselves for battle.

Neuro laughed mockingly at the shock coloring everyone's expressions. *"Why so surprised? You met Yggdra, didn't you? She's a homunculus just like me, so it should have been obvious that I can maintain myself after being reduced to this spectral form."* Grief showed on his face. *"That said, having my soul stick around isn't going to do me much good. Even if I reincarnate as a human again, I doubt Father will restore my true magnificence, considering how I failed so spectacularly acting on my own."*

Neuro hung his head and let out a profoundly despondent sigh.

Then...

"That would be too much to bear."

...he looked back up and glared at the people who'd reduced him to this—the Prodigies. He spoke with fury and determination.

"If the alternative is going back to being an ape, then I'd rather spend my soul reclaiming my honor."

A sinister red light exploded from the Neuro mirage. The glow swelled in size and intensity, then emitted so much wind that it was impossible for people to keep their eyes fully open. The power spewed out in all directions like lightning.

The soldiers struck by the bolts went flying as though kicked by horses.

"Wh-what's the hell's going on?! What's happening?!"

"Settle down! If he comes back to life, all we have to do is kill him again! Fire! Fire!"

The Qinglong Gang mercenaries immediately staged a counteroffensive. They shot blind, without bothering to get into formation.

However, it had no effect. The red light with Neuro at its center continued to grow, staining the night crimson and emitting a gale so intense it was impossible to stand upright. Eventually, it erupted toward the sky and formed a massive, heaven-piercing pillar.

"Hey, Tsukasa, what do we do?!"

“Fall back! Everyone, get away from that thing!!”

The spectacle was akin to the end of the world. Naturally, the first thing the Prodigies were worried about was war magic. Neuro had expended the people he implanted with Philosopher’s Stones to cast Rage Soleil. If he was using his own life to do the same thing...

...there was no telling what might happen.

Tsukasa and Masato ordered their respective armies to flee. They ran as fast as their legs could carry them while issuing their orders.

Midway through their panicked flight...

“I beseech you, Father, please forgive this incompetent son of yours. I love... you...”

...Tsukasa heard something.

He heard Neuro’s words of repentance, all but drowned out by the raging gale. But there was something else. Something besides the wind—a rumbling in the ground.

The hill was shaking.

Was it an earthquake?

No.

Those are the sounds...of hoofbeats!

Tsukasa had to strain his ears to make out the noise buried under the wind’s discord, and the tremors came from a massive group of horses that emerged... from within the pillar of light that stretched to the heavens.

“On your guard!” Tsukasa shouted. “Something’s coming!”

Then they arrived.

“““HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!”””

With a great war cry, a group of cavalry soldiers wearing fire-red cloaks charged from within the pillar of light. There were far more of them than should have been able to fit in the pillar. They spread across the Tomino Basin and flooded the hill, spilling forth like wine.

Only when the heaven-piercing light subsided did the full situation become clear. The forces that had appeared atop the hill were imperial troops; that much was clear from their equipment. At a glance, there looked to be over a thousand of them.

When Tsukasa saw the results of the grandmaster's efforts, his expression tensed. "Neuro must have teleported them in!"

Yggdra had summoned him and the other Prodigies from Earth, so it was no surprise that Neuro could achieve a similar feat. Tsukasa surmised that Neuro must have burned through the last of his life and power in an attempt to exact revenge, and he was right.



He was right...

“Wait...Tsukes! Look at that banner!”

“I”

...but in the worst way possible.

When he heard Shinobu’s desperate cry, he squinted. Nightfall was swiftly approaching, but with the help of torchlight illuminating the enemy banner in the gloom, he spied that it was emblazoned with the Freyjagard Empire’s coat of arms. There was only one group in the whole imperial army that would use the flag, the symbol of Freyjagard itself, as its battle standard. Namely...

“That’s Emperor Lindworm’s army, the one that’s supposed to be over in the New World!”



✻ War Emperor Lindworm ✻

A slender man in a green cloak stood atop a hill in the Tomino Basin, at the center of the army that had appeared from the pillar of light that burst out of Neuro. His eyes were string thin, and he narrowed them even more...

"I see. So it was Neuro who made the gate."

...as he looked down at Neuro's corpse.

There was a coldness to the contempt in his gaze.

"All I sense here is a body, no soul. He must have reduced it to magical energy to manipulate high-grade space-time spirits. Doing so would make it possible for a human body to open a gate of that size."

The brutish-looking man in the black cloak standing beside the green-cloaked one nodded in agreement. Then he turned his attention down to the base of the hill, where a group of Yamato soldiers stood on the border of a forest. "I sense Yggdra's seal down there, by the trees," he spat in a voice dripping with annoyance. "That's what I was trying and failing to find the whole time we were searching that sand-and rock-riddled continent. Looks like the elves pulled a fast one on us."

"Indeed. They must have intentionally left a trail for us to follow when they set out for the New World. Neuro surely realized it and tried to hog all the glory for himself. But the elf fought back, and this is the result."

"So he called us here to clean up his mess? The work never ends when you've got an idiot little brother who can't even house-sit properly."

As the black-and-green duo lambasted Neuro, their fragile-looking yellow-cloaked companion embraced Neuro's gunshot-shredded body tightly...

"Wahhhh! Oh, poor little Neuro! If you'd only resigned yourself to being our stupid little errand boy, they never would have done this to you! Wahhhh!"

...although the way he mourned Neuro's passing sounded less like sympathy and more like scorn.

Those three, with their disparately colored cloaks, were the other members of the Four Imperial Grandmasters, the reincarnated homunculi who'd come to this world with the otherworldly mage known as the evil dragon.

"Belial. Luther. Deneb."

The man who addressed the three stood at the center of the army and cut an imposing figure thanks to his sharp features and the massive sword hanging on his back. He was the emperor of the Freyjagard Empire, Lindworm von Freyjagard.

He peered down the hill from atop his massive steed, which was a full two sizes larger than a monoceros...

"That girl... *That's her, isn't it?*"

...and posed a question to his confidants—or rather, the people he believed to be his confidants.

The three living grandmasters promptly knelt. "You can tell, my emperor?" the narrow-eyed Green Grandmaster, Deneb, asked without rising.

"I can. I can't tear my eyes from her. I sense it—the fire sealed deep within me is stirring."

"Precisely. These are the followers of your hated foe, Yggdra. And that girl is a descendant of the elves, the race that locked away your tremendous power out of contempt for humanity. Once you execute her, all the power you feel sealed within your being will be set free, and you will become the flawless ruler you've always dreamed of being."

Deneb kept his head lowered respectfully as he spoke; as he *lied*. The homunculi hadn't told Lindworm about the evil dragon they schemed to revive.

They definitely hadn't told him that doing so would consume Lindworm's soul.

However, Lindworm had no way of knowing that.

"In that case..."

Thus, he got to work trying to release the seal on the power the Four Imperial Grandmasters claimed slumbered inside him.

He wished to become stronger still.

"All units, open a path for me."



""""For the emperor!!!!""""

The bellows of a thousand warriors shook the air like thunder, and the red cavalry charged down the slope. They were an avalanche, and when Tsukasa saw where that avalanche was headed, he realized what the enemy was after. "Dammit, they're targeting Lyrule! Stop them, no matter what it takes!"

The fact that the Prodigies had sent their soldiers back ahead of time ended up working in their favor, as their forces were able to swiftly move to intercept.

The Qinglong Gang got in formation and opened fire on the incoming cavalry. Their bolt-action rifles allowed them to loose a storm of bullets denser than this world's technology could manage. The imperials who rushed into it unprepared suffered incredible damage.

"GAHHHHHHHHH!"

"H-how are they firing so many bullets?!"

"I've never even seen guns that can shoot so many times in a row!"

"Fire, fire, fire! Hit 'em with everything you've got! Any dead cavalry in the front row will block the way of the ones behind them! Build a fortress out of their corpses!!"

The hail of gunfire shredded soldiers and horses alike, and when the horses in front collapsed, they took the ones to their rear down with them. Casualties spread like wildfire. The cavalry was completely helpless before the might of a modernized army's firing line.

However, that was only true of those on horseback.

“*Wind Edge.*”

“Gyack!”

“Hurgh!”

“...?!”

Suddenly, the *entire formation* standing beside Masato went flying. A hundred soldiers were split like rice stalks.

The massacre came from invisible blades of air conjured by a man leisurely descending the hill, his green cloak fluttering after him—Green Grandmaster Deneb ul Typhon.

“I see, I see. Bolt-action rifles, huh? This world doesn’t have those. *Not yet*, at least. You haven’t changed a bit in the last thousand years, have you, little sis? Still causing problems for the family.”

“Protect the chancellor advisor!”

The Qinglong Gang moved fast. Even in the face of such a tragedy, they acted with efficiency befitting a mercenary outfit of its pedigree. After quickly surrounding their employer, Masato, they took aim and concentrated fire on the incoming Green Grandmaster. However, Deneb simply held out a single hand and summoned a thin layer of wind to block the bullets. The mercenaries succeeded in stopping him in his tracks, but not one of their shots reached him.

Seeing that confirmed something for Masato. Trying to fight with these enemies was a no-go, given how completely unprepared they were. If they wanted to prevail, there was only one option available to them. “Aoi! I’ve got a job for you!! That guy on the hill with the giant-ass gold sword on his back is the emperor!”

“Understood!”

At Masato’s shout, the Prodigies’ strongest combat asset, Aoi Ichijou, sprang into action. She raced up the hill with the speed of an arrow and charged for the riders beneath the Freyjagard flag. Hundreds of cavalry soldiers stood in her way...

“What’s the deal with this girl?! She’s rushing a group of charging horses on her own!”

“Ignore her! Just crush her underfoot!”

“HRAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!”

...but they posed no threat to Aoi Ichijou.

While the cavalry soldiers raced down the hill, Aoi stormed their line and broke right through with a series of lethal slashes that laid fifty of her foes low.

She was nearly to Lindworm.

However, her blade failed to reach his throat. Right before she got to him, a dark figure swooped in from the side to keep her in check. It was a knight clad in a black cloak—Black Grandmaster Belial ul Salamandra. “Going straight for the emperor? Looks like we’ve got an upstart ape on our hands.”

“Grahhhhhhh!!”

Aoi’s assault was cut short when she locked blades with Belial, but she reacted swiftly. Instead of continuing the clash, she spun her body like a top and kicked Belial in the side. Belial prevented her from getting a clean hit by blocking with his arm, but the weight of the impact still sent him skidding to the side.

Having overcome her obstacle, Aoi made to resume her charge on the emperor. Unfortunately...

“Heh-heh-heh, you’ve got some skills. That auto-translation charm you’ve got... I can sense Yggdra’s magic. I swear, that woman doesn’t know when to quit. Even as a bone-dry corpse, she’s still nipping at our heels. Once dad gives me my perfect body back, I’m gonna dismantle her piece by piece. Just like this! *Fire Vulcan!*”

“Gh!”

...her advance was stalled a second time over.

The tactical magic Belial cast created an array—or rather, a gun battery—of fireballs and rapidly shot them much the way a vulcan cannon did. The shots lacked the raw power of a Firebolt, but they were still more than enough to

gouge through soft human flesh, and there were too many of them for even Aoi to dodge with her back turned. She had no choice but to pull her gaze away from the emperor.

Aoi had been stopped short...

This is bad...

...and Tsukasa felt a cold sweat gathering on his back. The grandmasters joining the fight had sent the Qinglong Gang's formation into disarray, and the imperial cavalry was taking advantage of that to break through here and there. They were even starting to tear into the Yamato forces behind the mercenaries. The successive battles had sapped the Yamato soldiers of their stamina. This clash was a one-sided massacre, and it had already reached the final line of defense protecting Lyrule.

If Yggdra's story was to be believed, Lyrule's death would spell defeat for the Prodigies and the entire world. They had to keep her safe at all costs.

To that end, Tsukasa turned and shouted to Lyrule, who was over in the distance with the rearguard. "Lyrule, you have to make a break for it into the forest!! We can't let you die, no matter what!"

However, his shouting was in vain, for the trees burst into flames as though to mock him. Lyrule had tried to follow his instructions, but she had no choice but to stop. Heading into the burning woods was tantamount to suicide. Lyrule could safeguard herself with magic, but even that had its limits.

Right as her escape route was cut off, Lindworm took off down the hill, racing along the path his grandmasters and cavalry had carved for him.

"He's coming!"

Now there was only one way to protect Lyrule.

They needed to kill Emperor Lindworm, the man Neuro and his siblings had chosen to be the evil dragon's vessel. With no vessel, their ambitions would be thwarted, and their reason for wanting to kill Lyrule would vanish.

To that end, Tsukasa ran up the hill and leaped directly into Lindworm's path. Any shots he took from the side were more likely to miss, and Tsukasa didn't

want to waste a single bullet. He quickly readied his rifle and pulled the trigger again and again, firing every bullet left in the magazine.

However, Lindworm swatted them all aside with his massive sword like he was slicing through cardboard...

“Out of the way.”

...and sent Tsukasa flying with his gigantic warhorse without so much as slowing down.

After soaring more than thirty feet, Tsukasa crashed into the ground and rolled another thirty.

“~~~~~Gh, ngh...”

Tsukasa only lived because he’d used his gun’s barrel as a shield at the very last moment. He’d still sustained a serious shock, though. The force of the impact made his body go numb, and his vision spun. He tried to get back to his feet, but the task was beyond him. His limbs gave out, and he collapsed.

He glanced down and saw that his right leg was broken. He wasn’t going to be standing or walking soon. The only thing left he could do...

“W-wait!! Emperor Lindworm!!”

...was shout after the emperor as he rode off.

“The Four Imperial Grandmasters are just using you! I don’t know what lies they’ve been feeding you, but if you kill Lyrule, that elf girl, then you’ll be sealing your own—?!”

Unfortunately, Tsukasa’s voice was blocked by a stone barrier that rose to separate him from Lindworm. The yellow-cloaked Yellow Grandmaster, Luther ul Fafnir, sat atop the rock with a look of scorn adorning his androgynous face.

“C’mon, that’s not going to fly. Look, I get that little Yggdra ran her mouth about a bunch of stuff she really shouldn’t have, but the actor’s already taken the stage. Trying to shut the play down now is a major faux pas. The clown’s gotta keep playing the part of the fool until the curtain falls, see?”

“ ... ”

Tsukasa wasted no time commenting on Luther's decision to call Lindworm a clown. Instead, he discarded his bent rifle and drew a new weapon from within his jacket.

It was the small flintlock pistol he'd taken from Marquis Findolph and asked Ringo to modify.



The relief of victory had been snatched away. Now the Tomino Basin echoed with cries of fear and despair. Neuro's gate had brought the emperor's personal army over from the New World, and it was composed of the best Freyjagard had to offer. Neuro's army wasn't weak by any stretch of the imagination, but these soldiers were on a different level.

The imperials had appeared at the top of the hill, too, which gave them an excellent advantage. The Qinglong Gang managed to hold them off at first with their bolt-action rifles, but the emperor's forces quickly figured out a way to respond. Instead of bunching up and getting into multi-horse pileups for no reason, the cavalry units spread out their formation and went for an enveloping charge.

Not even the Qinglong Gang could stop all of them. Holes began popping up in their defensive line, and when the cavalry poured through those openings, they widened further. The avalanche consumed the Qinglong Gang and drained it of its ability to serve as a breakwater.

Once the Qinglong Gang fell, the battered Yamato army was the only thing standing in the imperials' way. After how hard the Yamatoans fought just to get to this point, they lacked the strength to hold back such a mighty force.

They got massacred. There was nothing they could do.

Seeing that...

"Ahhh...!"

...pained Lyrule deeply.

What should I do? What...what can I do?

The situation had deteriorated so awfully. Lyrule still struggled to accept everything that was occurring. Tsukasa's voice had been her guiding light, but

her escape route was ablaze now. Fleeing wasn't an option anymore.

Lyrule was growing more flummoxed by the moment, and in the midst of her confusion...

"So you're the Key Maiden that my grandmasters told me about."

"~~~~~!"

...her path crossed his.

At long last, she met the man she never should have. The menace that her parents, Elch's father, and so many other people died trying to keep from her. And yet...

Wait, but he...

...when she nervously looked up at her mounted foe, the fear that had kept her so paralyzed faded away. For the man looking down at her, the one trying to kill her, had a certain look on his face and a light in his eyes.

A sort that reminded her of the young man she loved so dearly.

"I have no interest in the past. Nor do I care why you elves sealed my power away. But in order for me to bring about a perfect world, I need you to die," Lindworm declared matter-of-factly. As Lyrule stood there, too dazed to be afraid, the emperor raised his greatsword.

If he brought it down, Lyrule's life would end.

Then...



“If you have any last words, then speak.”

...he asked for her final statement.

The unmistakable murder in his voice returned the terror to Lyrule...

“If you kill me, you’ll die, too.”

...and she fought for her life.

Her weapon of choice was Yggdra’s information about the grandmasters’ ambitions. They intended to sacrifice Lyrule, holder of the seal, and Lindworm, the man who would become the vessel.

She spurred herself on with all the courage she could muster and glared at Lindworm. “Two souls can’t coexist in one body. When the other soul is freed, it’s going to swallow yours and extinguish it. Did they tell you that?!”

“No.”

“Then...”

She meant to say “Then why don’t you stop this foolishness?” She never got the words out, though.

“But it matters not.”

Before she could, Lindworm declared the whole thing to be trivial.

“?!”

“Whether the Four Imperial Grandmasters lied to me is a trifling matter. I understand the power that slumbers within me better than anyone. If it tries to consume me, I will simply devour it first and subsume it into my own flesh and blood. Survival of the fittest is law in this imperfect world, and I need only abide by it.”

If Lindworm was a man who abhorred putting himself in danger the way Neuro did, then Lyrule might have been able to convince him. However, he was an emperor in the truest sense of the word. He was willing to risk annihilation to see his dream fulfilled. Lindworm heard the truth, and it didn’t shake him. He believed Lyrule, but after hearing her, he decided that it didn’t matter.

With that, the final tool to stop the emperor was gone.

“But that all ends today. This inane world where people use petty tools like power, wealth, and lineage to squabble over insignificant pecking orders will be no more. In the New World, there will be no strong or weak. All will be equal before my supreme might. They will know my protection equally.

“In surpassing humankind, I, Prodigy King Lindworm von Freyjagard, will create a world without flaw!”

The sword came down, sending blood spraying.

Lyrule’s vision went dark.

Her consciousness slipped away.

The cries of the young man she loved seemed terribly distant.

The world ended for the girl who’d inherited an ancient fate.



AFTERWORD



Hello, readers. Thank you for reading Volume 9 of *High School Prodigies*, which currently has a hit anime airing.

That's right, the anime started, and it's unreal! The animation is so slick! The voice actors are the same ones from the drama CDs, and I've been told that the narrator, Jouji Nakata, is coming back to voice Gustav! He's going to nail it (I'm sure of it).

A huge thank-you to the entire anime staff for making such a fantastic show. It's only just begun, so I know we still have tons to look forward to. I have to say, I really want a Bearabbit doll now. I mean, don't you? I wonder if they're going to make merch of him (I say, hopefully).

As for the books, this is the ninth one. The Prodigies finally had their showdown with Neuro, and Masato threw a big wrench in the works. From his perspective as a prodigy businessman, the moves he made allowed him to negotiate with his real foe on favorable terms while maintaining his relationship with Neuro until the last possible moment. It was offense and risk management bundled into one, so passing it up would have been too much to ask.

On top of that, the evil dragon's chosen vessel and self-proclaimed Prodigy King, Emperor Lindworm, has finally made his appearance.

What will become of Lyrule?

Will Gustav's ominous prophecy be fulfilled?

Will the Prodigies be able to get back to Earth in one piece?

The next book, Volume 10, will be the final stop on the Prodigies' strange journey, and the plan is for it to be the final book in the series as a whole. I'd like to do one more volume after that as a sort of epilogue, but nothing's set in stone. I don't know if that's going to be possible, but whatever the case, I'm going to do my best in this final stretch, so I hope you stick with me for a little longer.

Sacraneco and my editor were absolutely indispensable in getting this book finished, so I'd like to sincerely thank both of them, as well as Kotaro Yamato, who's working on the manga adaptation, and everyone involved in the anime.

Finally, I'd like to extend my utmost gratitude to all the readers who've followed the series and any potential new ones who got into it via the anime.

I hope we meet again in the Volume 10 afterword.

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