



Riku Misora
Illustration by **SACRANECO**





"Can I get
a 'hell yeah'?"

"Whoo-hoo!"

"We
have
to do
what?!"

As part of their reception, Jade and Mayoi suggested playing a party game to liven up the mood.

Upon hearing that whoever lost had to profess their love to another member of the group, Ringo and Lyrule jolted upright.

"Wh—?!"



† PRINCIPLES PARTY †
Tetra

“If we truly believe in **equality** for all, then there’s only one thing to be done. We have to turn **every nation** in the **world** into a **democracy!**”

“Everyone wants to make sure they and their loved ones are safe. They shouldn’t have to be dubbed **cowards** just for saying as much.”

† REFORM PARTY †
Juno



"As you can see, I'm
wearing a towel, so
I'm perfectly decent.
Pretend as
though I'm not
even here!"

**Keine
Kanzaki**
DOCTOR

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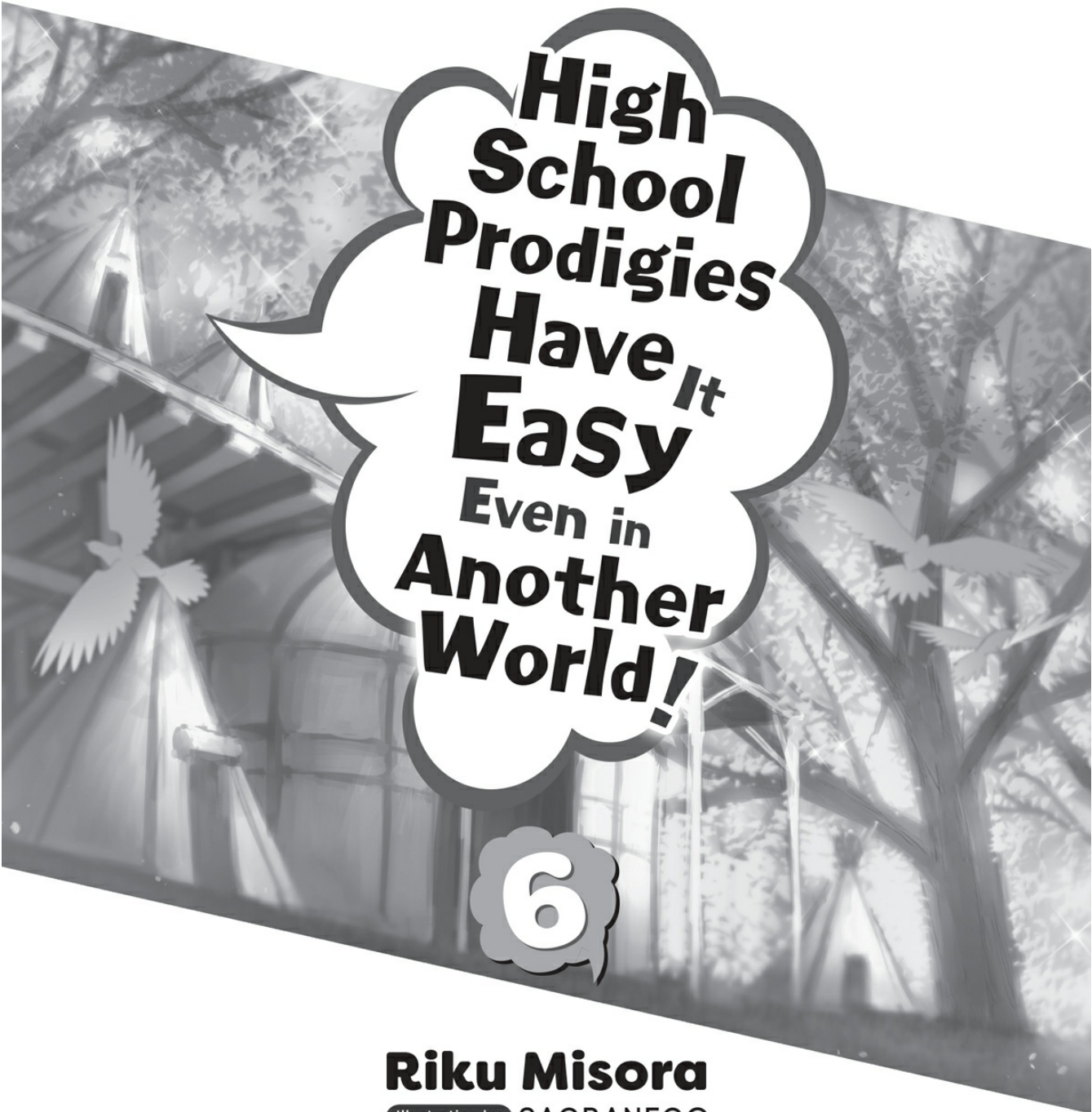
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RIKU MISORA
ILLUSTRATION BY
SACRANECO

High School Prodigies
Have It Easy Even in
Another World!



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

6

Riku Misora

Illustration by **SACRANECO**


NEW YORK

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High School Prodigies Have It Easy Even in Another World!, Vol. 6

Riku Misora

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CHOUJIN KOUKOUSEI TACHI HA ISEKAI DEMO YOYU DE IKINUKU YOUDESU!
Vol. 6

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CHAPTER 4

✿ The Truth about Yamato ✿

Once, another nation shared the continent with the Freyjagard Empire, one that differed in many ways.

That country was called Yamato.

The people of Yamato were a modest sort. Despite their military prowess, they valued honorable poverty and found more beauty in rustic simplicity than in overt shows of power and wealth.

Curiously, Yamato bore a striking resemblance to a historical version of the High School Prodigies' homeland, Japan.

The fact that Freyjagard and the country next to it had such radically different cultures was the fruit of Yamato's long-standing national policy of isolationism. Due to its insular ways, Yamato fostered a completely different value system and set of customs from its Goliath of a neighbor.

Three years ago, however, that humble, peaceful nation met an abrupt end.

After the militaristic Lindworm forcefully deposed Freyjagard's previous emperor, he turned his sights to Yamato. With the help of a treacherous Yamato princess named Mayoi, the imperial forces successfully invaded Yamato and killed its emperor, Gekkou.

Presently, the country exists as an imperial dominion. Yamato remains in name only.

...Or so it would seem to the outsider.

In truth, there was one who still carried its torch—Emperor Gekkou’s eldest daughter and rightful heir, Kaguya.

After fleeing Freyjagardian forces with her loyal retainer, she waited for a chance to reclaim her nation from the betrayer Mayoi. That opportunity came when the Seven Luminaries defeated Gustav the Fastidious Duke and founded the Republic of Elm, and she seized it. She appeared before the Seven Luminaries and implored them to save Yamato, turning the High School Prodigies’ motto of “equality for all” against them. She asserted that if they truly believed what they espoused, then it was their duty to pull the Yamato people from beneath the thumb of the empire.

Her request created several problems.

The Prodigies had been about to hold the Republic of Elm’s very first democratic election so that they might relinquish power to the people of this world. The last thing they wanted to do was antagonize Freyjagard.

On the other hand, though, the fact that they had founded their nation on the principle of equality meant that they couldn’t reject Kaguya’s request outright. Parity was their whole justification for seceding from the Freyjagard Empire in the first place. If they ignored Kaguya’s petition, other nations would surely denounce them for paying lip service to the idea of equality only when it suited their fancy. It would call the young Republic of Elm’s legitimacy into question.

Thus, the Prodigies suddenly found themselves between a rock and a hard place.

Fortunately, the high schoolers from Earth masquerading as the Seven Luminaries were led by a young man hailed as a skilled politician, Tsukasa Mikogami, and he knew exactly how to proceed.

Tsukasa understood that protecting their creed was worth setting their relationship with Freyjagard back a few steps.

No entity, nation or otherwise, had the right to infringe on people’s basic dignity. As a democracy, the Republic of Elm’s long-term survival hinged on the ability to raise that and the other principles of equality from mere local beliefs to universally held morals shared by all of humanity.

Attaining true peace demanded tribulation, and the High School Prodigies couldn't afford to shy away from such conflicts.

Tsukasa was well aware of this as he decided what stance his interim government would take. Having heard Kaguya's plea, he intended to demand that the Freyjagard Empire correct what injustices existed, if any.

Then he got to work.

The first order of business was determining the veracity of Kaguya's allegations.

To do so, he took Lyrule, Ringo Oohoshi, and Aoi Ichijou with him and headed for Yamato. However, what he found there wholly blindsided him. When the High School Prodigies saw the Yamato dominion's condition, they couldn't believe their eyes.

The horrors and utter state of crisis Kaguya had described were nowhere to be seen.

On the contrary, the people of Yamato were lively. If anything, their quality of life was higher than that of the residents of the empire proper, and their relationship with their government was as positive as could be. Although dominion lord Mayoi had aided Freyjagard's troops during the war and had facilitated the invasion, none of her subjects had a single bad thing to say about her. Whenever they spoke of her governance, their voices rang with gratitude.

In contrast, the rebellion Kaguya was leading to save Yamato had failed to earn the support of the very people it was trying to rescue. In their eyes, the Resistance was little more than a nuisance.

All in all, the conditions on the ground stood in stark contrast to the picture Yamato Kaguya had painted.

It didn't add up.

Perhaps Kaguya had lied to the good people of Elm in an attempt to manipulate them. Or maybe...there was something more subtle at work.

Regardless, it was clear that Tsukasa's initial inspection wouldn't give him and the others the answers they were looking for. With questions still burning in

their minds, they followed imperial administrator Jade von Saint-Germain and dominion lord Mayoi, the latter of whom had ridden out to join them on horseback, to the dominion's old imperial capital—Azuchi.



When the Elm ambassadors arrived at Azuchi Castle, the first hospitality proffered was a warm bath. Their dominion government hosts had judged that dinner would taste better after cleaning away the sand and sweat from their journey, and Tsukasa and the others gratefully accepted their offer.

A group of maids washed their clothes while they bathed, and after Lyrule dried the outfits with magic, the Elm delegation was shown into a room with sliding doors and tatami-mat flooring.

That was where they would be sharing a meal with Yamato dominion lord Mayoi and dominion administrator Jade.

Jade was the one who set the dinner up, and he was the one who decided that their smaller head count meant that it would be more convenient to eat in the cozier two-hundred-square-foot room rather than in the comparatively ostentatious banquet hall.

Before long, *byuma* maids entered with trays full of Yamato delicacies from both land and sea.

There were abalone skewers sliced just thin enough to have a satisfying bite to them, taro corm cut into hefty chunks and stewed, and mackerel and vegetable *namasu* pickled in rice vinegar, with pickled eggplant on the side. And no Yamato meal could be complete without its famous miso soup.

“We’ve prepared some refined sake from Mogami for you,” one of the maids said. “And we also have tea, so if anyone prefers not to drink, please don’t hesitate to let us know.”

As Ringo sat before the small trays, she whispered, “These flavors...bring back...memories...”

Tsukasa, who was sitting beside her, nodded. “They do indeed. Everything about this place, from the buildings and the clothes to the cuisine, reminds me of Japan.”

“I concur!” Aoi added heartily. “These soy sauce–based side dishes make the meal, that they do!”

The fragrant smell of the soy sauce on the abalone, the aromatic steam rising from the miso, and the grains of white rice gleaming like ivory pearls all reminded the Prodigies of their homeland and filled them with joy.

“Ah! No, little potato friend, come back!”

Lyrule, however, had never eaten Yamato or Japanese food before and was fighting a losing battle against her chopsticks.

A piece of taro tumbled from her pair and rolled across the tatami floor.

“Oh, how rude of me. I’m terribly sorry!” she apologized, face red with embarrassment.

However, Lyrule’s seatmates Jade and Mayoi reacted not with mockery but with merriment.

“Don’t you worry, Lycchi,” Jade encouraged her. “Using sticks to gobble down your grub takes some mad getting used to.”

“Totes,” Mayoi added. “And the help’ll clean it all up, so it’s no problemo.”

“Course, my crazy finger skills let me use these things like a regular pro.”

“Psh, as if. My boo was dropping potatoes all over the place until, like, five minutes ago.”

“Hey, Mayo-Mayo, why you gotta put me on blast like that? If that’s the way it’s gonna be, two can play at that game. I mean, peep this. The two of us went to this imperial shindig the other day, right? Well, while we’re there, she grabs her finger bowl and takes a big ol’ swig! I wish you coulda seen it.”

“Ahhh! Stop, stop! Time out!”

“Ah-ha-ha.”

Mayoi’s cheeks flushed, and she balled up her fists and began hitting Jade’s shoulder.

Watching the lovers’ exchange brought a smile to Lyrule’s face.

“I’m sorry, Administrator Jade,” Tsukasa said, “but could we trouble you to

get a set of Freyjagard-style utensils for her?”

Jade replied to the request by giving him a quick “You betcha,” then turned to one of the servants.

“Yo, hook my girl Lycchi up with a fork and a spoon. On the double, if you could.”

“I-I’m sorry to be such a bother...,” Lyrule apologized.

“No biggie. I mean, we’re in the empire, so what’s wrong with using a spoon, amirite?” Jade replied.

“But now that I think about it, you angels are, like, blowing my mind over here. You’re all so good with ’em 🎵,” Mayoi remarked.

“For real, though. Are you guys just better with your hands than us normies, or what?”

“The divine realm we hail from has chopsticks as well, so we’ve had practice, that’s all,” Tsukasa responded. “However, that only goes for the three of us. I appreciate you making accommodations for Lyrule.”

“Hey, man, if the ladies ain’t vibing, it means the host screwed up. And speaking of vibing, I’ve got all sorts of dope activities up my sleeve. And it looks like bellies are starting to get full, so, hey, let’s get into it...with the JK Game! Can I get a ‘hell yeah’?”

Mayoi cheered excitedly. “Whoo-hoo!”

However, Tsukasa and the others only tilted their heads in confusion.

Whatever sort of game this was, they’d never heard of it before.

“Administrator Jade, could I ask you to describe this ‘JK Game’?”

“So this is a little number we thought up to get things hopping with the ladies. The way it works is, we spin this sake bottle in a circle, and whoever it points to is the loser. And when you lose, you have to profess your love to someone else in the room.”

“Wh—?!” Ringo cried.

“We have to do what?!” Lyrule joined in.

As the two young women bolted upright, Jade quickly elaborated.

“No, no, no, it’s not like that. You’re not hitting on ’em for real. The rule is, you always end with, *‘BTW, I was just kidding.’*”

Tsukasa nodded. “...Ah, hence the ‘JK.’ I see.”

“Yeah, you get it. It’s a hoot when someone tries to stunt but ends up bombing. The girls get mad cute when they’re embarrassed, and the rules are really simple, so you don’t have a bunch of stuff to remember before you can get groovy. And plus...it’s good practice for when you wanna do it for real.”

Jade shot Lyrule and Ringo a quick wink.

Seeing that made Ringo remember something that occurred at the Rashomon Gate, the entrance to Yamato. When they first met Jade, it hadn’t taken him long to realize that she and Lyrule had feelings for Tsukasa. At the time, he had promised to come up with a way for the two of them to get closer to the young man.

I can’t believe he was actually serious about that...

Ringo was at a loss for what to do.

“Just kidding” or not, there was no way she could profess her love to someone, especially not in front of an audience.

Ringo’s work in the Elm workshop forced her to interact with her imperial exchange student Cranberry and the other employees frequently. Thus, her social skills had improved to the point of being able to hold conversations with people other than just Tsukasa. However, the task set before her was too much for a girl who had lived in low orbit to get away from people until recently.

And Ringo wasn’t the only one with misgivings about this activity.

Lyrule wasn’t as bad about it as Ringo, but she was a bit of a late bloomer herself. Jade’s suggestion had frozen a forced smile onto her face.

Fortunately, Tsukasa was well aware of his compatriots’ personalities—

“What do you all think? As for me, I’d be perfectly happy just enjoying a regular meal.”

—and he took it upon himself to voice the rejection that they were having difficulty getting out themselves.

Making it sound like turning Jade down was his idea instead of theirs was his way of offering them a helping hand.

Ringo felt a surge of gratitude well up inside her, and she readily agreed.

“I—I...agree... It’s too...embarrassing...”

“That’s no good!” Mayoi interjected.

“——!”

“C’mon, Ringo! If you let a little game get you flustered, how’re you gonna stop yourself from clamming up when it’s time to ask your crush out for realsies? That’s no way to be! Being with the guy you’ve got the hots for is what every girl dreams of! ☆”

Mayoi’s tone may have been flippant, but the look on her face was as serious as could be. Ringo was no expert in reading people, but even she could tell how earnest the dominion lord was. Like Jade, Mayoi had probably figured out how Ringo and Lyrule felt as well. That was the inspiration behind her heartfelt advice.

The first person to succumb to Mayoi’s compassion—

“I’m in. It sounds like it could be fun.”

—was Lyrule.

Her fair cheeks were still ever-so-faintly scarlet, but her expression was free of its earlier hesitation and discomfort. She confidently smiled as she accepted Jade’s invitation. Lyrule was here as the Republic of Elm’s ambassador.

The JK Game might not have been the first activity she’d have chosen, but she knew how discourteous it would be to reject her host’s hospitality. Furthermore, winning over Mayoi and Jade would go a long way toward building a solid relationship between Elm and Yamato.

It was time for Lyrule to grow up. Spurred on by her newfound sense of responsibility, she chose to set her bashfulness aside.

Seeing that helped encourage Ringo, too. She gave it her all to speak up so that Jade and the others could hear her.

“O-okay... I’ll give it a try...”

Jade clapped his hands together, obviously pleased.

“Looks like the ladies gave us the go-ahead! Gather round, boys and girls, let’s get this ball rollin’ before anyone gets cold feet! Who’s with me?”

“Hooray! ☆”

Mayoi placed a tray in the center of the room and spun the sake bottle on it.

The tray’s lacquered surface offered little in the way of friction, but the bottle eventually began to slow.

Eventually, it came to a stop in front of...

“All righty! And the honors go to...Ringo!”

Ahhhhhhh! Ringo screamed internally.

The last time she had tried to get forward with Tsukasa, Lyrule had all but walked in on them. Why did bad things always have to happen to her on the rare occasions she was able to work up her courage?

“All right, girl, show us what you’ve got! Rin-go! Rin-go! Rin-go!”

“Rin-go! Rin-go! Rin-go!”

Jade and Mayoi began chanting in unison to set the mood. They probably intended to motivate the prodigy scientist, but Ringo felt more like they were cutting off all avenues of retreat.

Fake or not, the thought of having to confess her love to Tsukasa with so many people watching made her head spin.

She had agreed to participate, however. There was no backing down now. This was more than a game. Receiving hospitality with grace was an essential element of diplomacy.

That wasn’t the only reason Ringo needed to do this, though. In her heart, she knew Mayoi was right.

Much like her rival Lyrule, she was a late bloomer when it came to romance. Neither one of them was the type to come on strong when they had feelings for someone. Yet between the two, Lyrule was clearly more proactive.

Part of that likely came from her being raised in an era where women were expected to have children. Still, whatever the reason, Ringo was keenly aware that Lyrule was more willing to be bold.

And to make matters worse...Lyrule was pretty enough that even Ringo found her charming. The shy inventor had little confidence in her ability to overcome the sheer destructive power of the two massive warheads loaded in Lyrule's chest.

Ringo felt defeated in more ways than one. It didn't seem fair. Lyrule should have to get rid of them. However, she'd already refused to do that, so she left Ringo no choice. The only option was to get stronger. Enough so that a little game wouldn't give her pause.

Mayoi was right. Even though this was a game, if Ringo managed to express her affection for Tsukasa here, it would give her precious experience to draw upon when it came time for the real thing. It was like Shinobu had said, love was a hunt, and traps or not, she had to catch her prey somehow. The time had come for Ringo to don the mantle of love-huntress once more!

With her heart full of apprehension and resolve, Ringo made her move. She spun her body to the side, squeezed her target's hand a little more firmly than she needed to—

"I—I! I've always...loved you...! P-please...go out...with me!"

—and fired her bullet of love in as loud a voice as she could muster. Ringo's face was so crimson it appeared likely to catch fire at any moment.

"Wh-who, me?!"

The target was not Tsukasa, for Ringo had turned the opposite way and was now facing Lyrule.

I—I misfired!

"Do I! Spy! Some surprise girl-on-girl action?!" Jade exclaimed.

“Ha-ha! ☆” Mayoi laughed. “But I totes get it. Lycchi has it going on.”

“I...um...was just...kidding...! It was...for the game!” Ringo stammered.

“I—I know!” Lyrule replied, still flustered over having been struck by Ringo’s stray bullet.

Ringo hurriedly let go of the other girl’s hand, then let out a long moan, curled into a ball, and concealed her face behind her legs.

That hadn’t been the plan at all.

She’d worked up her resolve to target Tsukasa, she really had. But at the last moment, she froze, and her gun turned in a direction she’d never meant it to.

Ringo trembled in awe at the sheer incompetence she’d just displayed. Perhaps there was a good reason she hadn’t built up a single ounce of self-esteem since middle school. After all that courage she’d mustered, the girl had only succeeded in falling flat on her face.

It wasn’t just embarrassing; it was pathetic. Ringo wished she were anywhere else in the world but there.

“C’mon, don’t look so down!” Jade said. “That proposition was an easy ten-outta-ten! The whole modest-but-trying-her-best vibe you had going, any guy in the world would fall head over heels for that kinda sincerity!”

Mayoi joined in as well. “Yeah, you, like, nailed it! Don’cha agree, Mr. Silver-Haired Angel?”

“Oh, absolutely. That was perfectly charming. You did well.”

“Hwah...!”

Tsukasa was only thanking Ringo for prioritizing their relationship with Yamato despite her bashfulness, but the foremost thing Ringo heard was him calling her “charming.”

That was enough to make all the humiliation worth it.

Hrrm~~~~~.

Ringo kept her head shielded behind her legs, but now it was to hide the dopey smile on her face.

However—

“Whew, that first proposition was a giga-sized doozy. The bar’s set high...now, let’s see who’s gotta try and beat it!”

—she snapped her head right up when she heard Jade set the bottle spinning again.

She’d just realized something.

The only thing controlling this roulette was the hand of fate, and there wasn’t any rule against the same person having to go twice.

Ringo could practically feel the blood drain from her face. She’d already used up her entire supply of bravery, and it was going to take her at least three months to restock.

What would she do if the bottle landed on her again?

However, Ringo’s fears ended up being unfounded.

“Oh?! Well, well, well!” Jade cheered. “Looks like our second contestant is... Tsukasa!”

“Me, hmm?”

““.....!!!!””

Ringo and Lyrule suddenly perked up. The two of them had been so concerned about getting picked themselves that neither had even considered what would happen if Tsukasa was in the hot seat.

However, there was no reason for the roulette *not* to land on him. And now that it had, someone was about to receive a declaration of love from him.

Both young women hoped—no, prayed—that it would be them.

They knew it was just a game, that it wasn’t real.

Even so, they both found themselves leaning forward in anticipation.

Tsukasa, oblivious to the turmoil in their hearts—

“A question, Administrator Jade. Is it possible to choose the target via roulette as well?”

—put forth a proposal.

Tsukasa was reluctant to choose Ringo or Lyrule, knowing how uncomfortable the game made them. Aoi was still wordlessly wolfing down food, so he didn't want to bother her, either. That only left Mayoi, but Tsukasa knew too little about the dominion lord to understand how best to sweet-talk her. Hence, the proposal.

Jade gave Tsukasa a half-hearted shrug.

"I mean, nothing is stopping you, but I don't think it's a good idea."

"Maybe not, but if I had to pick on my own, we might be here all day. Would you mind doing the honors?"

"Sure thing, my dude."

Jade did as requested and spun the bottle.

Ringo and Lyrule couldn't have asked for a better turn of events. Tsukasa was well aware of how timid they both were, so there was little chance he would have picked either of them of his own accord. The bottle, however, had no such scruples.

The two girls stared at the sake bottle, hoping for it to land on them. When it came to a stop, it was facing Jade.

The result came as such a shock that Ringo and Lyrule practically collapsed. Jade, in contrast, had an exasperated I-told-you-so look on his face.

"Aaand that's what happens. I tried to warn you, man. Two hot babes hookin' up has a real choice aesthetic to it, but I dunno what anyone gets out of having a dude hit on another dude."

"I see," Tsukasa replied. "So this is the problem with picking randomly."

"Tee-hee! ☆ It's fine, it's fine! You're both hotties, so I'd say we're A-okay on the aesthetic front. Oh, but heads up, Mr. Angel—just 'cause my boo is a guy doesn't mean you're allowed to half-ass it. The game's no fun unless you really get into it, so good luck!"

"So you're saying I need to follow Ringo's lead and put my heart into it, even though I'm lying? This might be more difficult than I expected. What to do,

what to do..." Tsukasa sank deep into thought.

That prompted Jade to cut in. "Hey, whoa, you don't have to take it *that* seriously."

"Ha-ha, sorry about that. This is largely new territory for me, and between the fact that I just met you and the fact that you're a fellow man, I'm having trouble coming up with the right words."

"Then just wing it, man, shoot from the hip. Doesn't have to be perfect. Just show us what you're working with. Tsu-ka-sa. Tsu-ka-sa. Tsu-ka-sa."

Jade clearly wasn't excited about this latest pairing, and he wanted to get it over with and move on to the next duo as soon as possible. His chanting was decidedly less enthusiastic than it had been previously.

However, Tsukasa responded to Jade's urging by shaking his head. "I'm afraid I can't do that. As the Seven Luminaries angel in charge of matters of state, I have to take responsibility for what I say. It's a matter of personal pride."

"...What?"

"I'm saying that once I declare something, I stand by it, no matter the situation."

"Huh?!"

As Tsukasa made his rather alarming declaration, he strode over to Jade and gracefully took the other man's hand in his. Jade let out a sound like a chicken being strangled and tried to shake him off, but Tsukasa held fast.

"Jade von Saint-Germain, we may have only just met, and we may not know much about each other yet, but that's precisely why I know it will be such a pleasure for us to deepen our understanding of each other."

"Wh-whoa, man, back up a couple steps! You just said you couldn't lie, but, like, we're both dudes!"

"Gender is no barrier when it comes to love. I know it's too much to ask for now, but I hope that as we get to know each other better, you and I can foster that emotion between us."

Jade felt as though he was being sucked into Tsukasa's red and blue eyes.

“Are...are you for real?”

““~~~~~?!!””

Tsukasa’s speech rang so genuinely that Mayoi and the others completely forgot to keep up the chant. They fell silent.

None among them was more stunned than Jade himself, though.

The flashy young man was about as straight as they came, and he was still struggling to comprehend that nonsense about politicians being unable to lie.

Yet when he saw those eyes fixed on him and the nigh-magical intensity they bore, he could conjure no rebuttal. He started finding himself drawn to Tsukasa’s androgynous features and the way his eyes gleamed like gemstones. Jade’s throat quivered, and right as he was about to say something—

“I was just kidding, of course.”

—Tsukasa released Jade’s hand and stepped back.

“...Huh?”

“How was that? I wanted to give a performance on par with Ringo’s, so I mustered up as much sincerity as I could, but I don’t know how well I was able to pull it off.”

Mayoi let out a laugh that sounded almost relieved.

“Ah... Ha! Ha-ha! That was a masterclass! I was freaking out over here, like, am I gonna get NTR’d? But hey, what happened to politicians not lying?!”

“What I said about not lying was actually a lie in and of itself.”

“Ha! ☆ You’re a scary one, Mr. Angel! I was breaking out in goosebumps! Weren’t you, babe?”

Mayoi roared with laughter and nudged her partner’s shoulder.

Jade replied—

“.....Nah, I knew it wasn’t real.”

—with his head pointed down so as to hide his expression.

“Wait, hon, are you crying?”

“Who said my feelings were hurt?! I feel just fine!”

As Ringo and Lyrule listened to Jade’s oddly high-pitched denial, they both breathed quiet sighs of relief. They had dodged a bullet.

Both of them had wanted to be the one who got picked, yet now understood how perilous that would have been.

If Tsukasa had come on to either of them in such a profound, sincere manner, then turned around and told them he was just kidding, they wouldn’t have been able to get out of bed for a week.





After the game, the rest of the dinner between the two Yamato representatives and the Elm ambassador delegation continued pleasantly.

As Tsukasa followed the hosts' social cues while carefully observing everything that went on, he came to realize the extent of Jade's talents.

The game he'd suggested as entertainment was part of it. And between the way he'd gotten Mayoi to tell an embarrassing story about him when Lyrule messed up with her chopsticks and how he'd encouraged Ringo when she was balled up from embarrassment, it was clear that he was paying close attention to the people around him so he could deftly handle situations as they arose.

It went beyond just being friendly. Powers of observation like that took time and effort to cultivate. Conducting oneself the way Jade did required some serious talent.

Despite its storied history and the shortage of imperial nobles who actually wanted to rule Yamato, the nation was still a part of the empire. It was clear now why Jade had been chosen to represent it. He came across as a jokester, but his diplomatic skills were the real deal. Tsukasa knew that once they started negotiating in earnest, he would need to make sure not to underestimate Jade.

As Tsukasa mulled over his thoughts, Mayoi spoke up to break the ice. "Sooo... What brings y'all peeps down to Yamato? You here to see the sights?"

To his surprise, all Tsukasa saw in the girl's expression was earnest curiosity. "...We did exchange letters about this, you know."

She honestly didn't know. Mayoi had no idea what the ambassadors from Elm were doing here.

Tsukasa had been prepared for a lot of things, but the lord of this region not knowing the agenda wasn't one of them.

Although confused, Tsukasa answered Mayoi's question as best he could.

"Your sister, Princess Kaguya, came to us Seven Luminaries and told us that the people of Yamato were suffering. As I'm sure you're aware, our mission in this world is to spread a message of equality for all and ensure that everyone, no matter who they are or what they do, is treated with the dignity they

deserve. As such, we had to take her message seriously. We take a strong stance against human rights violations, and we have a duty to do whatever we can to see them rectified and prevented.”

“...Did she now?”

“However, that isn’t to say we just accepted her claims at face value, especially not when the issue is this important and affects the relationship between Elm and Freyjagard. We knew we needed to act prudently, meaning that the first order of business was finding out whether or not Princess Kaguya’s allegations were true. We requested that we be allowed to visit Yamato to see its condition for ourselves, and that brings us to where we are now.”

“Ah.”

After listening to Tsukasa’s explanation, Mayoi nodded in understanding—

“So that idiot still thinks she’s a Yamato princess.”

“...?!”

—then disparaged her sister in a voice so cold that Tsukasa and the others couldn’t help but gasp.

It wasn’t just her tone, either. It was the look that flashed across her face. It was an expression of deep, ugly hatred.

The contrast between it and the warm, welcoming demeanor she’d shown them previously left a strong impression.

However, the older sister had been heir to the throne, and the younger sister had helped the invaders snatch it away. It made sense that they wouldn’t be on the best of terms.

“You hear the trash Guya’s spewing, bae?” Jade asked, joining the discussion. “The Resistance isn’t doing too hot right now, so Guya fed you some bullshit to get you to do her dirty work. I mean, you saw what it’s like here, right? My Mayo-Mayo’s the best thing that ever happened to this place.”

Tsukasa had to agree with Jade’s assessment.

“True. Based on what we saw today, I find it hard to believe that anything like what Princess Kaguya suggested is going on.”

“Today, tomorrow, there’s nothing to see, my guy. So hey, could you do us a solid and hand Guya over? If anyone’s screwing over Yamato, it’s her and her rebellion. Once she’s outta the picture, Yamato’ll finally be able to integrate into the empire properly. Mayo-Mayo’s job will get easier, I’ll get mad props for overseeing the transition, and Elm and the empire will be bigger homies than ever. Win-win-win, baby.”

Once the geopolitical threat was gone, the empire would have an easier time investing in Yamato’s development, and its people’s quality of life would increase even further. There was a lot to be gained from handing Kaguya over.

Tsukasa knew that already.

It’s still too early to make a decision, though.

Since his arrival in Yamato, Tsukasa hadn’t been able to get one question out of his head: How had Mayoi pulled off such spectacular restoration efforts?

Up until just three years ago, Yamato had been locked in a fierce war with the Freyjugard Empire. Mending damaged infrastructure was one thing, but healing the war’s emotional wounds should have taken far longer than that. Yet by all accounts, Mayoi’s subjects were as cheerful as could be, almost overly so.

How had she brought that about?

Tsukasa couldn’t deduce the root of it for the life of him.

Healing the battered hearts of a defeated people and brokering a positive relationship between them and the empire that had vanquished them in such a short time shouldn’t have been possible. As someone who had seen more than his fair share of long-standing historical grudges play out, Tsukasa was uniquely qualified to declare as much.

Mayoi had seemingly accomplished it, however. That meant she was an even more brilliant politician than Tsukasa. The proof of such was before the young prime minister’s very eyes. Still, from what Tsukasa could tell, Mayoi didn’t come across as someone possessed of that kind of talent.

Jade wasn’t the only one Tsukasa had been keeping a close eye on during their dinner. He’d been observing Mayoi, too, and nothing about her eye movements, speech, or the way she timed them with her expressions suggested

that she was anywhere near as calculating as Jade.

She was enjoying herself the way anyone else might've been.

Tsukasa could have dismissed that as a friendly attitude if not for the question she had just asked. Mayoi was unaware of why the Elm delegation was visiting. No political mastermind could possibly be that inept.

There was a puzzling incongruity between Yamato's current state and her abilities as a leader.

As such—

“So, whaddaya—”

“I do have one question.”

—Tsukasa cut Jade off and turned his gaze to Mayoi.

He needed to figure out what was going on.

“As I went around Yamato, I found myself thinking how incredible its leader must be. The prompt repairs being made to its infrastructure were one thing, but what impressed me most were the looks on people's faces.

“Just three years ago, Yamato was at war with the empire, and I've heard that its casualty count reached as high as a tenth of the nation's population. The war might be over, but even so, I would have expected the people of Yamato to resent living under imperial rule. However, none of them showed me the slightest signs that this was the case.

“As the angel tasked with matters of state by God Akatsuki, I can appreciate how difficult that must have been to achieve. And in just three years? I tip my hat to you. I have to know, for my own benefit, what sort of policies you have in place that accomplished such a remarkable feat.”

Pleased by how Tsukasa was complimenting her, Mayoi gave him a cheerful laugh—

“Hee-hee! ☆ It was a piece of cake, actually. All I had to do...was make 'em forget all that sad stuff with my magic!”

—and, without a shred of guilt in her voice, shared the secret behind her

twisted miracle.



“...What?”

Mayoi’s careless comment sucked all the air from the room.

Lyrule and Ringo went completely silent, and Jade glanced around with a vexed look on his face. Tsukasa turned his attention from Mayoi to him.

“I’m sorry, but I think I just heard that you’ve been using magic to falsify your subjects’ memories. Were my ears playing tricks on me, Administrator?”

A bitter smile worked its way across Jade’s face. “...If I told you they were, wouldja believe me?”

Mayoi tilted her head in confusion at the sudden change of atmosphere. “Whoa, what’s with the sudden downer vibes? Don’t tell me I killed the mood. I mean, come on. Who wants a bunch of bumner memories about getting raped and pillaged and having their friends and families die? Remembering that stuff would be, like, a major buzzkill. Aren’t I just a big ol’ sweetheart for helping them forget?”

Now the Elm delegation finally understood.

Since arriving in Yamato, something had seemed eerily off. Suddenly, the idyllic situation that sprang up only three years after a devastating war made sense. The Yamato people didn’t even know that the war had occurred.

Their anger, sorrow, and even their ability to grieve for the people they’d lost had been stolen from them, leaving the traitor princess who’d brought that calamitous war to their doorsteps looking like a benevolent ruler.

“HOW DARE YOU CALL THAT GOVERNANCE!!!!” roared Tsukasa.

Confused, Mayoi asked frantically, “Whoa, hey, what’s with the shouting all of a sudden?!”

“You think something like a *government* has the right to do such a wicked thing?! No ruler, not even the most tyrannical of despots, can be permitted to have dominion over their subjects’ minds! Forget democracies and autocracies; this is a matter of basic human decency, of taboos that must never be violated!

Return the grief they're entitled to at once!"

Mayoi had altered her people's memories to turn them into docile puppets that she could rule. It was a wholly monstrous act, and it filled Tsukasa with a burning rage.

However—

"Huh? Getting lectured at is so not my jam," Mayoi replied without a shred of guilt in her voice. "The only reason I even *let them live* is 'cause my darling told me I had to be a good ruler. Otherwise, I woulda killed 'em off ages ago."

"...!"

The look in her eyes was the same spiteful sort she'd worn upon hearing Kaguya's name. This was a girl filled with hatred. That ire was not limited to her sister. Instead, it was directed at all of Yamato. Mayoi's disgust was so intense that she would have butchered every last one of her subjects if it were up to her.

Just as Kaguya had asserted, the people of Yamato were in grave danger.

"Lyrule, Ringo. Get up," Tsukasa said.

""O-okay...!""

"This fact-finding mission is over. The Yamato dominion government is coldheartedly stealing the minds of its people, and it's clear that the Elm provisional government has nothing to discuss with them. We're heading back to Elm now."

Tsukasa turned as though to indicate that there was nothing more to say.

However—

"So what, you're gonna head back, babble about 'something-something for all,' then make like Mayo-Mayo's sister and get all up in our business?"

—when Tsukasa made it clear that the negotiations were concluded, Jade rose to his feet.

"You really think I'm gonna let you do that, fam?"

Then he snapped his fingers.

The moment he did, the sliding doors on each side of the room burst open, and a dozen armed men charged in.

They were each clad in chain mail worn under a haori, and they each had a katana—a “Yamato sword,” as they were often called in this world—hanging from their waist.

It was a group of Yamato’s famous samurai warriors.

“Grandmaster Neuro made it clear that I wasn’t supposed to let anything mess with our relationship with Elm, and dead peeps tell no tales. But man, it sure was a bummer how you four slipped on a muddy road and fell to your deaths on your way to Azuchi Castle. Kill ‘em all, men! No need to take them alive!!”

Jade abandoned his personable facade and revealed his true nature. The samurai drew their blades at his command.

“Ts-Tsukasa...!”

The situation’s sudden shift sent Ringo and Lyrule into a panic. Tsukasa stepped in front of them without a hint of trepidation. Only an idiot ventured deep into enemy territory without a fallback plan, and Tsukasa Mikogami was no fool. He never knew what the future held, so he made it a habit to be prepared for all eventualities. That was why he’d kept an ace up his sleeve for just such an occasion.

“Aoi, a group of wicked ogres is blocking our path home. Would you mind clearing the way?”

Amid all the commotion, prodigy swordmaster Aoi Ichijou had never stopped partaking in the food. She looked at Tsukasa with a blank expression on her face and her chopsticks still in her mouth, then asked a question whose answer should have been obvious.

“Mrph? Did the negotiations fall through?”

“...Have you not been listening?”

“My task here did not involve thinking, so I thought it best that I stay out of the discussion. That said, one look at the menacing scene before us paints a

clear enough picture of the situation, that it does. It was a delightful meal, and I would have liked to pay my compliments to the chef, but it seems that won't be an option."

Aoi set down her chopsticks, then rose to her feet, not shrinking in the slightest before the Yamato samurai's ranks.

"I suppose sparing their lives will have to be thanks enough."

A fearless smile played on her shapely lips. Her arrogance clearly wounded her opponents' pride.

"Angel or not, don't you dare look down on the samurai of Yamato! Get her!!!!"

""Hraaaaaah!!!!""

The men raised their blades and fanned out to surround Aoi.

They slashed at her from every conceivable angle all at once, yet none of them found purchase. The samurai's eyes widened with disbelief.

"What the..."

"Wh-where'd she go?!"

"She's behind you, you fools!" Jade shouted as the soldiers gawked in confusion. The panic in his voice was audible, but he could hardly be blamed for that. In the time it took him to blink, Aoi had slipped past the samurai inundating her and made her way right to him.

Upon realizing the danger their master was in, the samurai whirled around.

"Wh—! You little...!"

"She gave us the slip!"

"Don't let her lay a finger on the princess!"

Despite their indignant declarations, the men collapsed to the tatami mats on the floor where they stood. It was like watching a group of marionettes get their strings cut at once.

"...Huh? Y-you assholes, this is no time for goofing arou—?!"

The impossible sight perplexed Jade, but it wasn't long before he realized what had happened. After witnessing the sword wounds spread across the prone samurai's bodies and Aoi's newly drawn white blade that spanned nearly six feet, it was hard not to.

She had cut every one of them down. And not only that, she'd done it while passing by them *before any realized she had done so*.

"Wh-when did you even have time to draw that stupid-big sword?!" Jade exclaimed in disbelief.

"That sword... That's totes Shura's sword...!" Mayoi cried.

The pair gawked at Aoi in astonishment.

Aoi had moved so swiftly that both the moment she drew her weapon and the arc it cast when she swung it were invisible to the untrained eye.

When people spoke of the superhuman sword skills of prodigy swordmaster Aoi Ichijou, those were precisely the kinds of feats they were talking about.

Losing her beloved Hoozukimaru in the battle against Gustav had left Aoi temporarily unable to use those skills to their full potential. Still, Aoi had made sure to overcome that setback before setting out for Yamato.

She had done so by going to Kaguya's retainer, Shura the White Wolf General, and borrowing her *nodachi* greatsword, Shoutou Byakuran.

"An impressive blade, that it is. It doesn't merely cut. It numbs the pain from the wounds of its own accord. I may be the one wielding it, but it feels as though the blade has as much control over who it cuts and who it kills as I do."

Aoi let out an amused laugh at her impression of Byakuran after her first live battle with the weapon.

Comparing it to Hoozukimaru, a blade so bloodthirsty that Aoi constantly had to avoid letting it cut deeper than intended, the personalities of the two weapons were like night and day, but they each possessed a strong-willed nature. That was what allowed Byakuran to withstand Aoi's techniques.

After Aoi commented on the blade in her grip, she shifted her gaze from it to Jade.

“I’m hardly the sharpest blade in the armory, so I may be misunderstanding the particulars, but as best I can tell, it seems as though many of our problems could be solved by cutting these two down where they stand. Tsukasa, m’lord, your orders?”

Byakuran should have been too long to wield in such a cramped space, yet Aoi leveled it at Jade and Mayoi with masterful finesse.

With the situation turned on them so abruptly, the two of them could do nothing but silently go pale.

Tsukasa shook his head. “No. Provisional or not, we’re still representatives of Elm’s government. It isn’t our place to execute others.”

Given the responsibilities Tsukasa and the others bore, killing Jade and Mayoi would be going too far.

“Then we had best not overstay our welcome. More soldiers come our way as we speak,” replied Aoi.

“True... That said, though, it makes us look weak if we let them get away with something as discourteous as drawing arms on a group of ambassadors.”

Diplomatically speaking, that was something Tsukasa wanted to avoid.

“What would you have us do, then?” Aoi questioned.

“Elm will respond to the Yamato dominion government’s impropriety with dignity. We won’t flee like common burglars—we’ll walk right out that castle gate with our heads held high.”

“...You would have us break through their ranks with just four people?”

“No,” Tsukasa stated plainly. “I want you to do it solo, prodigy swordmaster... Unless you don’t think you’re up to the task?” His tone sounded almost provocative.

Aoi flashed a fierce grin as she answered. “A perfect way to work off those calories. Aid me not, then, lest you get in my way.”

During the Rage Soleil incident, Aoi had told Tsukasa that her limits were so high that only she knew what she was and wasn’t capable of. Tsukasa’s order was a demonstration of trust in that claim. Thus, it was Aoi’s duty as a samurai

to meet his expectation. It was time for her to show the world what she was made of.

“Ringo, m’lady, Lyrule, m’lady! Stay close behind me!”

“O-okay!”

“You don’t...have to tell me twice.”

With that, the Elm delegation fled the room and began making their way toward the castle gate.

“You ain’t giving us the slip that easy...!” Jade spat, glaring at the four from behind.

He couldn’t afford to let them return to Elm alive.



Once dominion lord Mayoi’s inhuman governing methods came to light, the meeting between Elm and Yamato ended abruptly.

For Administrator Jade, who had been given direct orders from Neuro to handle the Kaguya problem quietly and peacefully, the situation could hardly have been worse. If he let the Elm ambassadors make it home and war broke out between them and Freyjagard because of it, his career was as good as over.

However, he wasn’t about to let that happen. Jade mobilized the castle’s one hundred and fifty guardsmen.

“There’s only four of them! Sure, one of them’s got some skills, but we’ll crush ’em with sheer numbers!”

The samurai did as instructed.

Most would have faltered upon being ordered to attack ambassadors of an allied nation, but the castle’s soldiers showed no such hesitation.

As a result of Mayoi’s brainwashing, they saw Jade as one of the core figures who’d spent the last three years raising their nation to a level of prosperity unheard of during the old rule. Plus, he was their esteemed ruler Mayoi’s lover, to boot.

The samurai obediently deployed in front of the group making their way

down the large corridor leading directly to the castle's entrance. The many armed men barred Tsukasa's and the others' way.

However...

"What the...?! There's *no way in hell* this is just four people!"

The samurai captain, a *byuma* named Gamou with water buffalo features, couldn't believe his eyes.

The corridor was a straight path with no forks or places to hide. His forces should have been more than enough to capture the quartet that was fleeing, and yet the Elm delegation's advance was continuing unabated.

Gamou had been told that the group from Elm numbered only four, yet it was plain to see...

...that their party was clearly at least thirty strong.

Thirty girls with the exact same face and ponytail sliced through his men like paper with their *nodachi* greatswords as they raced down the hall.

It went without saying that the girl was Aoi Ichijou.

Unsurprisingly, she didn't have the ability to clone herself. Aoi simply added countless little bits of misdirection into her movements to disorient her enemies.

In martial arts, feinting was an ordinary, everyday technique. When the person doing so was a High School Prodigy, though, the result was anything but ordinary.

On Earth, Aoi Ichijou had spent her life fighting on twenty-first-century battlefields far harsher and with crueler weapons than anything this world had to offer, and she'd done it with nothing but a single sword to her name. A large part of her success was the overwhelming battle aura she emitted. It was so tremendous that it bordered on the divine.

Any who dared to face her couldn't help but fall under its sway. It was inescapable.

The Yamato soldiers were skilled samurai, which was precisely why they were so helpless before Aoi's presence. To them, it looked like the young woman had

actually split into an army.

Her aura was so all-consuming that they had no way of discerning real from fake. To them, *everything* appeared genuine.

Every shift in her eyes or twitch in her shoulders made it seem like she had split off another clone of herself, and Yamato forces swiftly fell into disarray.

They ended up swinging their swords in all the wrong directions—

“_____”

—and before they could get their bearings, the real Aoi raced over and mowed them down.

One swing was all it took to best seven men. Aoi was like a farmer chopping through a thicket.

There had been over a hundred soldiers at first, but their ranks were dwindling in mere moments. Half of them had already been felled, and the Elm delegation hadn't slowed a step.

Aoi and the others pressed on, never once decelerating or veering from their course.

Gamou thought of the strongest samurai he knew, Shishi, and was struck speechless at how Aoi appeared to be just as unbeatable as he was.

We still have the numbers advantage...!

Gamou wasn't willing to give in just yet, however. There was a good reason why only a hundred of the castle's one hundred and fifty soldiers were present in the hall. It was because the others were setting up for a pincer attack!

“Here they come!”

All of a sudden, Gamou saw his other fifty men appear behind the crowd of Aois.

“We've got them surrounded!”

“Cut down every last scoundrel who dared to threaten Princess Mayoi!”

The second squad charged at the Elm delegation from behind.

The corridor was straight, meaning that Tsukasa's group had nowhere to retreat. They were trapped.

Tsukasa, Ringo, and Lyrule were all standing behind Aoi, and while Tsukasa could fight when the situation demanded it, he was not nearly as skilled as Aoi. There was no way he'd be able to fend off so many attackers. As such, Aoi would need to protect them. However, that required combating opponents from all directions simultaneously.

It was a tall order, even for the prodigy swordmaster. If Aoi were on her own, the young woman could have easily fought the soldiers off. She could have bested a force ten times their size. Protecting others at the same time complicated the matter, though.

Aoi had understood beforehand that a pincer maneuver like this was possible.

"Aid me not, then, lest you get in my way."

Yet she had still declared she would handle everything alone.

""""_____?""""

Just as the second squad was within striking distance of the Elm delegation from behind, something changed.

A thunderous sound echoed throughout the spacious chamber. The noise resembled that of a tree being torn to flinders, and it was coming from below.

""""Uh-oh...""""

By the time it reached the samurai's ears, it was too late. With a shrill creak, the ground beneath the second squad shattered.

""""AHHHHHH!!!!""""

They screamed as they plummeted to the basement below.

Aoi hadn't just repelled the enemies in front of her. She had also made preparations to deal with pursuers from the rear.

The way the ground felt under her feet had told her that there was a subterranean room below, and by carving gashes into key spots along the floor in between felling attackers, she had turned it into a makeshift pitfall trap that

gave way once burdened with sufficient weight.

The Yamato soldiers had fallen right into Aoi's trap.

Instead of striking the Elm delegation from behind like they were supposed to, half of them had gotten caught in the cave-in and fallen. The remaining half stood agape on the far side of the newly formed hole, with no way to carry out their orders.

The decision to trap the enemy on a one-way path with nowhere to escape had backfired entirely. There was no stopping Aoi now.

The unit guarding the main castle's entrance—the soldiers' final line of defense—was down to a mere twenty men.

"Damn it all!"

J-just how skilled a veteran is that girl...?!

Not only was she strong, but she'd also seen through their strategy and preempted it.

Gamou was struck speechless yet again at how coolheaded Aoi was, and his last few men trembled in fear as their foe approached.

By that point, they were little more than a disorderly crowd. It was only a matter of time before she charged past them, too.

"So without Shishi, this is all you're capable of? I shouldn't have expected anything more from a bunch of vanquished losers."

Suddenly, a new group of soldiers appeared at the entrance.

They were clad in heavy armor and equipped with pikes, and they shoved the samurai aside as they strode in. This new force totaled roughly fifty.

"I—I know you...!"

One of them was wearing a golden suit of plate armor that Gamou recognized immediately. It belonged to the Golden Knight, who had come over from the empire with Jade. The heavily equipped man cast a disparaging glance at Gamou through the opening in his helmet.

"I can't watch this shit anymore. Stand aside! Imperial Golden Knight Oath de

McBurn is taking over!”

Then he grabbed Gamou’s shoulder and forcefully pushed him back.

“Form up! Pikes at the ready!” he barked at his soldiers.

The imperials spread out across the width of the hallway and held their pikes forward in perfect coordination.

“I don’t care if she’s using magic or literally splitting into duplicates, and it doesn’t matter! If she thinks she can survive five lines of heavy infantry, she’s got another think coming! Chaaaaarge!!!!”

“““Sieg Kaiser!!!!”””

Spurred on by their commanding officer’s shout, the pikemen let out a cry and rushed forward. Five rows of ten pikemen apiece raced toward Aoi like a tidal wave.

Feints were meaningless against such a tactic. The pikes would rake across the entire corridor indiscriminately. Complicating the matter was the fact that Aoi had destroyed the floor behind her, leaving no room to retreat. McBurn had chosen the perfect strategy for the situation.

Still, Aoi Ichijou’s blade was by no means dull enough to be rendered helpless by such a tactic.

“You three would do well to crouch down and cover your ears.”

Tsukasa, Ringo, and Lyrule had no idea what their friend was about to attempt. However, none of them bothered asking for an explanation. Aoi was the one in charge right now, and they knew they needed only to trust her.

Tsukasa, Ringo, and Lyrule immediately did as instructed.

Once Aoi was sure they were safe, she faced the onrushing pikemen, lifted her *nodachi* horizontally into the air, and drew it back as one might do with an arrow. The swordmaster was making no efforts to mask her stance. In a moment, she was going to thrust her blade forward with all her might.

As the imperial pikemen bore down on her, a few of them chuckled. The Yamato *nodachi* was long, but it was still just a sword.

There was no way it could beat a polearm when it came to reach.

What's more, their ranks were comprised of heavy infantry, one of the best-outfitted units in the Freyjagard army. Compared to the Yamato samurai dressed in mere chain mail, the difference was like night and day. And there were fifty of them.

What did this one girl think she was going to accomplish with a single attack? Perhaps this was her futile struggle against certain doom. Or maybe it was her way of dutifully meeting fate head-on.

As the soldiers snickered, Aoi made her move. Just as her stance indicated, her strike was a thrust. The surprising part was how blisteringly quick it was.

There was a flash of light, and a burst of white flame erupted from the friction on Aoi's sleeve. Such was the terrifying speed of Aoi's thrust. The motion broke the sound barrier. Wind pressure built up on the tip of her blade, and upon reaching a certain threshold, it created a rift in the air.

In the space of a fleeting moment, that pocket shot forward, growing ever larger and broader as it did...until it eventually shattered.

Upon its rupture—

“My roaring secret technique—Dragon's Bellow!”

—the very air exploded.

When an object with mass broke the sound barrier, it caused a phenomenon known as a sonic boom. Aoi had done this with raw strength and launched it at her foes like a cannon.

Like a mighty dragon's roar, the shock wave thundered from Byakuran's tip and knocked away everything in her path.

Pikes splintered, and armor crumbled. All the imperial soldiers closing in on Aoi were blown aside. Not even Gamou and the other Yamato soldiers in the far back were spared.

Now there wasn't a single thing barring the Elm delegation's egress from the castle.

“Onward!” Aoi cried.

Her three companions rose to their feet and followed close behind. At long last, the Elm delegation made their way out.

Thanks to the heavy infantry dampening the blow for him, Gamou had just barely managed to retain consciousness, but all he could do was watch his enemies make their flight.

Now that the ambassadors were beyond the main castle, there was little more he could do. After all, such structures were designed to prevent attackers from entering, and that same principle left forces on the inside ill-equipped to pursue enemies who'd managed to get out.



That was why Gamou had devoted all his resources to capturing the four in the corridor, but nobody could have anticipated that a contingent of one hundred and fifty men would fail to stop a group of four. A warrior with skills on par with the samurai general Shishi was unheard of.

“Rgh...”

Gamou understood that now was not the time to lament this shame. He shook his head to clear his mind.

We still have a chance. We aren't out of this yet...!

It was true that many of the castle's defenses were of little use against fleeing prey. There were some assets still of use, however.

There were the stone stairwells, for example. Each step of Azuchi Castle's stairwells had been built at different lengths and widths.

If anyone unfamiliar with their intervals tried to run down them at full speed, they would inevitably sprain their ankles.

The Nioumon Gate couldn't be discounted, either, for at the moment, Mayoi was the only person capable of opening it. With it shut, the Elm delegation was still trapped.

And with that being the case...

“C-Captain Gamou! What in the world happened up here?!”

“——!”

Gamou turned and looked to the side.

There, he saw his second squad, who had just made their way back up from the basement. When they saw the devastation and their allies laid low, they let out a collective gasp. To them, it must have seemed that the entire chamber had come under cannon fire.

His knees screamed in painful objection, but Gamou managed to struggle to his feet.

“It hurts to admit, but our blades are of little use against that girl. We're stopping by the weapons room to grab the *you-know-whats*, then going after

them! Anyone fleet of foot, circle ahead and make the necessary preparations!”



Once Tsukasa and the rest of the Elm delegation were free of the main castle, they encountered no resistance. Navigating the castle’s peculiar stone stairs cost them some time, but they managed to get past them and arrive at the gate none the worse for wear.

The Nioumon Gate loomed before them, guarding Azuchi Castle’s entrance at an imposing thirty feet tall and fifteen feet wide.

“I take it our goal lies just beyond?” Aoi remarked. “How disappointingly uneventful.”

“But it’s...closed,” Ringo noted.

“Wasn’t it open when we got here, though?” Lyrule asked.

“They must have closed it in the interim. The sun has set, after all. From the look of things, it doesn’t seem to open and close in the typical way. Most of the time, gates such as these have a small room off to the side housing a mechanism that operates them, but I don’t see anything of the sort...”

As Tsukasa pondered how the gate operated, an angry voice called from behind, “Your rampage has gone on long enough!”

“...!”

The four spun around and saw several dozen Yamato soldiers glaring down at them from the stairway they had descended moments earlier.

One of them, a *byuma* who was noticeably larger than the others and had water buffalo traits, stood imposingly as he spoke.

“Together, the Nioumon Gate’s two doors weigh in at five tons! Human strength is powerless before them, and it takes two mages working in concert to open and close them! I regret to inform you that our mages are on temporary transfer to the empire, so the only thing that can operate the gate now is Lady Mayoi’s tremendous magic.”

Simply put, Gamou was making it clear that the Elm ambassadors would not be leaving.

“You’re finished! Men, ready!”

The single line of samurai did as instructed and readied their weapons. No longer were they wielding their katanas from before. Now, they were armed with long tubes of metal and wood.

“...Matchlocks, huh?” Tsukasa muttered.

It went without saying that they had loaded them on their way there.

“FIRE!!!!”

The muzzles of all fifty rifles flashed in unison.

The samurai of Yamato held a great deal of respect for one-on-one combat fought with katanas, to the extent that during the reign of the last Yamato emperor, they didn’t fight with firearms at all.

All the matchlock rifles they were now using had been sent over from the empire after the region became a self-governing dominion.

Their skills were lacking, and their marksmanship was terrible, but between the close range and the fact that there were fifty of them, neither of those things proved fettering.

Even at worst, the natural result would be for at least two or three bullets to hit each of their marks.

However, that never came to pass.

“Hyah!”

Once again, it was Aoi’s doing.

She took a single step forward and swung Byakuran to the side with its blade vertical.

Every bullet the samurai fired dropped impotently to the ground.

“““...What?!”””

She hadn’t even deflected them with her blade. The mere pressure from her swing had been enough to stop the projectiles in midair.

The sheer gulf between her strength and theirs left the samurai

dumbfounded—

“Q-quick, reload! Prepare another round!”

—but after a short while, they hurriedly got to work reloading their rifles.

Meanwhile, Aoi turned her gaze from them as though deeming them unworthy of any further concern.

“Tsukasa, m’lord. I apologize for having to ask, but I fear I have little head for numbers. Is five tons more or less than the weight of a tank?”

“I’m no expert when it comes to military equipment,” Tsukasa said. “It depends on the tank, but I imagine most of them come in at well over that.”

Aoi grinned. “Then this shall be no problem, that it shan’t!”

The young swordmaster sheathed Byakuran and handed it to Tsukasa for safekeeping. Then, she stood before the Nioumon Gate, placed a hand on each door—

“Hragh...!”

—and pushed.

The cobblestones beneath her feet began cracking loudly...and the massive Nioumon Gate began rumbling open.

The samurai went pale at the unbelievable sight—

“No way...”

“That skinny little girl...is opening the Nioumon Gate with her bare hands...?!”

“This is no time for gawking, you idiots! Hurry up and reload!”

—and tried to ready their matchlock rifles faster.

However, on top of their inexperience with firearms, Aoi Ichijou had struck terror into their hearts. Their bodies shook with fear for their opponent, causing them to spill their bullets and gunpowder and undo what little progress they were making.

While the samurai fumbled with their equipment, the Elm delegation passed through the gate.

“Commander,” Tsukasa called.

“...!”

“I have a message for the administrator. Would you pass it on for me? Tell him that we’re grateful for the lavish send-off...and that we’ll be sure to repay it in kind soon enough.”

When the white-haired boy was finished, the Nioumon Gate slammed shut behind him.

The Elm delegation made good on its promise to leave through the castle’s front gate with their heads held high. Despite having a fort and two hundred soldiers at their disposal, the Yamato forces had failed to so much as slow them down.



After successfully escaping Azuchi Castle through the Nioumon Gate, Tsukasa and the others realized the townspeople were watching them.

Although none of the locals had ventured close to the gate because it was off-limits to them, the opposite side of its moat was only about a hundred feet away, and a crowd of citizens with paper lanterns dotted the shoreline.

The gunshots and shouting from the castle had been audible in town, and everyone wanted to know what was happening. It was too far away for the Elm delegation to make out what the people were saying, but the crowd’s unease was plain.

If things descended into fighting again, some of the populace was liable to get caught in the cross fire.

The Elm delegation knew that they needed to get out of there as soon as possible. They headed to where they had parked their truck beside the Nioumon Gate.

However...

“Uh-oh.”

“Well, this isn’t good...”

The moonlight wasn’t bright enough to see distant details, but as they drew

near their truck, they immediately realized that something was off.

All of the tires were gone. The vehicle was sitting on its rims. Furthermore, there were strips of shredded rubber scattered all over the ground. It didn't take a detective to solve this mystery. That sort of damage didn't happen by accident. Someone had intentionally taken a knife to the tires in order to pop them.

You didn't have to know what a motor vehicle was to know that destroying a carriage's wheels was a surefire way to keep it from going anywhere.

Their foes were no idiots. While they had surely never seen a truck before, they knew it moved on wheels like machines they were familiar with.

"Ringo, do you think you can fix it?" Tsukasa asked.

The prodigy inventor gave him an apologetic look. "It won't...be easy...We only have...two spare tires...and even if I can come up with substitutes...it'll probably take a while."

"I broke their will to fight as best I could," Aoi noted. "But if we spend too long here, they're sure to send pursuers all the same, that they are."

"We still have the wheels," Tsukasa remarked. "Can we drive on just those?"

Ringo shook her head. "I don't think so. Not...with the state the roads are in."

"You have a point."

Tsukasa thought back to the journey they'd taken getting there.

Yesterday's rain had left the ground throughout Yamato muddy. Trying to drive across it without tires would be a nightmare. It would be just a matter of time before they got stuck in the mud. Walking was likely more reliable at the moment.

Lyrule and Aoi each offered a suggestion for how they might help to fix their popped-tire issue.

"If I may, I could ask the spirits to help firm up the road a little."

"I also saw a carriage in the castle's stable, that I did. Shall I go back in and retrieve it?"

Either of those solutions might have worked. However—

“That won’t be necessary. I made sure to state that we were heading back to Elm, but our true destination lies elsewhere,” Tsukasa replied. “As delegates from an interim government, our role was to determine if the people of Yamato were suffering, and if so, to leverage diplomatic pressure and foreign aid to better their circumstances. However, meeting with Mayoi made it abundantly clear to me that we don’t have the luxury of relying on incremental solutions. Just as Princess Kaguya said, the people of Yamato are in grave danger. Every second counts.”

When the conversation had turned to Kaguya and the Yamato people during their dinner, the intense hatred in Mayoi’s face had spoken volumes. She didn’t just hate the nation of Yamato. She despised *every single person in it* badly enough that she would’ve been content to butcher them all.

Mayoi herself had admitted that the only reason she hadn’t was that Jade had instructed her to be a good ruler. There was little doubt in Tsukasa’s mind that she would have razed Yamato to the ground already if not for that.

Aoi nodded in agreement. “Indeed. The hatred that woman possessed was so strong that it was akin to bloodlust. In my time on the battlefield, I have seen some destitute refugees with eyes like hers. Anger at the cruel whims of fate burns in some like the blackest flames, that it does. Such people often take weapons in hand and fight, letting their rage burn hot enough to consume all around them, including themselves. I know not where that woman’s indignation comes from, but she had best not be left to her own devices for too long. But Tsukasa, m’lord... Would it not have been easier to cut them down then and there?”

Tsukasa shook his head. “We couldn’t. Provisional government or not, we were still there as ambassadors of Elm.”

If they had attacked Jade and Mayoi, there would have been no going back.

Elm was in the middle of its national election, and the people of the republic were taking their very first step toward charting their destiny. Having Elm ambassadors murder the Yamato leadership would have made war with the Freyjagard Empire inevitable.

“That wasn’t an option. The people of Elm could still decide to stab the Seven Luminaries in the back and appeal to the empire. We don’t have the right to take that from them. The election must determine how that plays out.”

“Ah, so that was why,” Aoi said. “I’m afraid that all goes a bit over my head, that it does. How do you intend for us to save the people of Yamato? If we’re not returning to Elm, do we still have business in this land?”

Tsukasa had an answer ready. “The dominion government is denying Yamato its right to self-governance, and there’s already a group here who has every right to oust them. We’re going to help the Resistance win this battle in our place.”

That was Tsukasa’s plan—to join up with the Resistance and quietly lead them to victory. Discretion was of the essence, of course. They couldn’t afford to let the Freyjugard Empire realize what they were doing. Actually, they could, but they needed to be certain the empire couldn’t *prove* anything. Tsukasa was confident that the four of them would be able to pull it off. However, Lyrule wasn’t quite so sure.

“B-but...how will we even find the Resistance? We don’t even know where they are.”

That was going to make it difficult to assist them. Her concern was understandable, but fortunately, Tsukasa had an answer for that.

“Worry not. I came prepared.”

He reached into his breast pocket and retrieved something from it. Tsukasa had spoken with Shura before the trip to Yamato in order to borrow Byakuran, but also to ask for something else. It was a small white bone carving about the size of a woman’s pinky finger—a whistle.

Tsukasa held it to his mouth and blew. The sound emitted was inaudible to human ears. However, that was by design because it was a dog whistle.

The imperceptible noise echoed through the night...and eventually reached the ears it was meant for.

“Tsukasa, m’lord, was that...?!”

As Aoi trailed off mid-sentence, her expression grew grave. She unsheathed Byakuran. The moment she did, the mountain forest surrounding the town stirred.

A flock of birds hurriedly took flight to make way for whatever approached. Shortly after, screams erupted from the castle town. The shrieks grew louder until those with paper lanterns on the other side of the moat went scattering in all directions. Some of them were so panicked that they even fell in the water.

Ringo and Lyrule huddled together in fear and confusion, and no sooner had they done so than a massive creature came bounding toward them. It had leaped over trees, buildings, and crowds.

Tsukasa, Aoi, Ringo, and Lyrule were face-to-face with a massive wolf.

Grrrrr...

Even down on all fours, it was still tall enough to eclipse them, and its silvery-white fur shone brightly in the moonlight.

Lyrule had grown up in a hunting village, so seeing its sleek fur, massive frame, and, most importantly, its lupine face was enough for her to recognize it. They had met the beast before.

“Ts-Tsukasa, isn’t this...the wolf who was with Shura at the election announcement ceremony?!”

Tsukasa nodded. “His name is Shiro, or so I’m told. Shura gave me this whistle and told me to call on him if we ran into trouble.”

Aoi had previously mentioned that Shura’s sword had a chance of withstanding her power, so Tsukasa had gone and borrowed it on her behalf. That way, Aoi would be able to fight uninhibited if the negotiations fell through.

When Shura had handed Byakuran over, she gave him the whistle as well.

“If you end up using Byakuran, call for Shiro. He’ll help. And he’s back in Yamato now. He’ll be close enough to come if you whistle for him,” she had explained.

“...And he won’t just bite me out of the blue when he shows up?” Tsukasa had asked.

Kaguya answered that one. *“Nay. Shiro is a noble wolf—a descendent of Yamato’s guardian deity. He would never be so rude. If he were to bite you, he would make sure you saw it coming.”*

“I’d rather he didn’t bite me at all.”

“Ha-ha. I jest, I jest. I promise he shan’t bite you, so worry not. Shiro understands the speech of man, and if you show him the whistle, he will know you to be an ally.”

As he thought back to that conversation, Tsukasa did as Kaguya had instructed. He raised Shura’s whistle in front of Shiro’s nose and jaw, the latter of which looked big enough to rip a person’s head off in a single bite.

Then, he spoke.

“I need you to take us to Princess Kaguya’s allies. Can you do that?”

Wrff!

The white wolf responded by opening its maw wide—

“Ts-Tsukasa?!”

“Look...out...!”

—but despite Lyrule’s and Ringo’s warnings, Tsukasa did not move. All Shiro took in his teeth was the whistle, deftly hooking its cord around one of his fangs. Then, he turned his back to the group and stooped down. Clearly, the great beast was telling them to get on.

“We seem to have an understanding, that we do,” Aoi remarked.

Tsukasa had been worried seeing those powerful jaws open, but Shiro had made no move to attack. As such...

“Ringo, Lyrule, get on. If he’s going to offer, it would be rude not to take him up on it, and his back should be large enough to fit both of you.”

“But what will you two do?” Lyrule asked.

“Aoi and I will walk.”

Ringo gave him a worried look. “But won’t...they...come after us?”

“Remember this afternoon? Given how the other locals are giving them the cold shoulder, the Resistance base is probably somewhat remote. Getting there will require heading off the beaten path, which means we’ll be fine. Tracking people through dark mountains without a guide is easier said than done,” Tsukasa assured.

Even search-and-rescue parties in the Prodigies’ era had difficulty locating someone lost in the peaks. Tsukasa’s explanation proved satisfactory, and Ringo and Lyrule timidly mounted Shiro’s argent back.

“Oh, goodness,” Lyrule commented. “He’s so fluffy. Our village made its living hunting, so we dealt with all sorts of pelts, but I’ve never seen a wolf with such luxurious fur before. It’s like he came from another world or something...”

“You’re right,” Ringo agreed. “He’s so...silky.”

After seeing how readily Shiro accepted them onto his back, the two girls finally relaxed a bit. The wolf’s magnificent coat gleamed as they gazed spellbound at it.

“Huh? Wh—?! Tsu...Tsukasa!” Ringo suddenly exclaimed. She was practically screaming. Frantically, she pointed at the back of Shiro’s neck.

Alarmed at Ringo’s rare display of shock, Tsukasa rushed over.

“Well, that’s certainly something.”

Buried underneath Shiro’s fur in the spot Ringo was pointing at, sat a *black, jewel-like crystal*. It had merged with his skin, almost like a scab. The two of them recognized that stone, for they’d seen its like twice before.

The first time was on the Lord of the Woods near Elm Village, and the second was when Gustav showed up during the declaration of Elm’s independence.

The precise nature of the crystal remained unknown. According to Keine’s and Ringo’s analysis, it bore a close resemblance to human flesh, but past that...

Awoo!

Before Tsukasa had time to give the matter much consideration, though, Shiro rose to his feet as if to say it was time to depart. Now that the townsfolk had fled, the streets were empty, and he took off at a run.

Tsukasa thought for a moment to keep observing the odd stone, but he chose to set that matter aside for now. There was only so long a person could loiter a mere jog from his enemy's castle. The importance of the obsidian rock would have to be solved later. There were more pressing matters.

Tsukasa would get a chance to look into it eventually. Even knowing as much, it still bothered him.

There's still so much about this world we don't know.

That was why he needed to make sure that he was prepared for every eventuality, no matter how unlikely it might be.

For the moment, however, Tsukasa and Aoi followed Shiro's lead, leaving Yamato's former imperial capital, Azuchi, behind them and vanishing into the darkened forest.



After Mayoi's careless comment ruined the Yamato-Elm meeting, the Elm delegation had left in a hurry.

However, Jade was not content to let the visiting diplomats get away and was determined to have them killed to conceal that the discussion had gone sour. The first thing he did was send up a signal flare.

That red light illuminating the sky had informed the castle's soldiers that they were to intercept the intruders. Then, Jade had mobilized the ninja forces and sent them outside the castle's perimeter through tunnels so they could destroy the wheels of the Elm delegation's bizarre carriage. Surely, there was no way those four could escape. Jade had been confident of his victory.

"You couldn't stop them?!"

And that was why Gamou's report came as such a shock.

"To my great shame, no. Our foes were more skilled than we anticipated."

"That's why I sent *two hundred* of you nitwits! And you couldn't catch four lousy people?! What gives?! This is unacceptable, my guy! I mean, what do we even pay you for?! Okay, what about the ninjas, then?! I sent a bunch of them out. What happened?!"

“W-well, they did as you ordered and destroyed the wheels, but the wheels exploded the moment they stuck their knives in. They eventually succeeded in destroying them all, but they suffered serious injuries in the process. By their own admission, they had no choice but to retreat.”

“Rrrgh! You’re all useless, all of you!”

When you puncture large, off-road tires by hand, the air pressure released is strong enough to blast a person’s skin off. That the ninjas successfully destroyed all four despite that was worthy of praise. Jade was ignorant of that, though, so all he did was lambaste them as he cradled his head in his hands.

He was screwed.

Grandmaster Neuro ul Levias had personally instructed him to make sure the conference went smoothly, and given how the Elm ambassadors had reacted, especially Tsukasa, who was probably the nation’s de facto leader, the dominion government had likely just put the Freyjagard Empire in a disadvantageous position.

Neuro’s opinion of Jade was about to plummet, and with it, so would the career that Jade had scrabbled and bled to build. That was why it had been so crucial that Jade kill the Elm delegation in the castle, and yet...

Perhaps trying to calm her lover down, Mayo said, “Hey, it’s no biggie! Not like we were ever gonna be besties with ’em anyways. I mean, they’re hiding my sister from us, so I was totes down with killing their asses anyways. ☆ Just leave it to me! I’ll go round up ten thousand soldiers and kill ’em all dead! Two hundred might not have been enough, but with ten thousand, we’ll mop the floor with ’em! That’s me, always coming up with big-brain solutions. Holler! ☆”

When Jade heard that, something inside him snapped. “Leave it to YOU?!?!?”

“Aagh?!?”

He punched Mayo in the face so hard, she collapsed onto the ground. A single hit proved insufficient to sate his anger, so he began mercilessly kicking her in the stomach. Jade’s foot plunged into her gut again and again and again and again.

“L-Lady Mayoi!!!!”

“Hey Mayo-Mayo, remember what I told you yesterday? ‘Don’t say anything stupid’! But noooo, you just *had* to go and open your big mouth! Now I’ve got a giant goddamn mess to clean up, and it’s all your fault!!!! Plus, we had ‘em trapped in a closed-off castle, and two hundred people couldn’t get the job done. Now that they’ve made it outside, throwing bodies at the problem isn’t gonna cut it! Do you have any idea how thin they’d be spread, you stupid bitch?! Try using your fucking brain every once in a while!”

“Ow, ow, it hurts...! P-please stop...”

Mayoi clutched her stomach in agony just as Jade began to slam the girl’s head with his heel. “Knock knock, anybody home?!”

The violent outburst didn’t last much longer, however. Captain Gamou was still present, and he seized Jade by the collar and dragged him away from Mayoi.

“You wretch! How dare you lay a hand on Lady Mayoi!”

Gamou’s memories may have been false, but they were the indisputable truth to him. In his eyes, Mayoi was Yamato’s good and rightful ruler, and anyone who hurt her was going to have to answer to him. He drew his katana in righteous fury.

“Administrator from the empire or not, such actions are irredeemable! I’ll see that your head rolls for that affront!” Anger burned in Gamou’s eyes as he raised his blade aloft.

Jade responded...by shooting him a shockingly chilly glare. His voice was equally as icy as he spoke. “...What, you’re seriously gonna kill me? Ain’t that just crazy, Mayo-Mayo?”

Mayoi raised her voice, screaming through her violent coughs. “*Kaff!* Get —*koff!* Get away from him! Leave my darling alone!”

“What?! B-but my lady, after what he did to you—”

“I don’t care! Leave him alone and go crawl in a hole and die, you worthless piece of shit!”

As Mayoi shouted, a brilliant flash erupted from her body. Jade's kicking had torn her sash, leaving her belly bare, exposing a black crystal embedded in it.

When it let out its dark pulse—

“At once, Lady Mayoi.”

—Gamou replied in a voice empty of all emotion.

Then the *byuma* man used his katana to lop his own head off.

Blood spurted as he crumpled to the floor.

However, neither of the two witnesses offered much in the way of a reaction.

Mayoi didn't spare Gamou another glance. Instead, she pulled herself over to Jade.

“I-I'm so sorry about that, darling. Did—*kaff, koff*—did he hurt you?”

Jade slowly rose to his feet.

“Remember what I told you, Mayo-Mayo? Someday, I'm gonna claw my way to the imperial throne, so useful women are totally my type. But now look at this shit I'm in. With you slowing me down at every turn, Grandmaster Neuro ain't gonna think too highly of me. At some point, a guy starts running outta love and patience.”

The instant the words left his mouth, Mayoi let out a shrill scream and violently shook her head from side to side in denial.

“No. Noooo!!!! Don't say that! Please, take it back!”

“You and me? I'm thinking we're done.”

“NOOOOO!!!!”

It had been one thing while he was beating her, but her screams now were on a whole different level. Jade's words pained her like she was being rent in two. She clung to his leg and sobbed as she made her maddened, desperate plea.

“I'm sorry! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I'll be useful! I'd do anything for you, darling, you know that!! So, don't dump me! Don't dump me, please!! I don't wanna be singllllllllllllle!!!!”

“.....”

Seeing Mayoi debase herself like that helped Jade calm himself a bit.

Gotta chill, he chided himself. Then he began to work out a solution.

At this point, there was no way they'd be able to catch the runaways. Yamato was primarily woods and mountains, so trying to sniff out four people was a fool's errand. Securing the borders would help a little, but not enough to give him any real peace of mind. The safest option was to act under the assumption that the Elm delegation would be returning home without issue.

Trying to get ahead by piggybacking off Neuro's influence wasn't an option now that things had gone so awry.

Jade cursed under his breath at the state of it all. He'd put in such effort to manipulate Mayoi, subjugate Yamato, and rise to the position of administrator.

I'm still in this, though.

He wasn't done for just yet.

There was one more path he could take, turning to the Bluebloods—the faction of traditionalist Freyjagard nobles who were taking a stand against the Four Grandmasters. Jade believed that switching sides gave him the best shot.

It wasn't an appealing strategy. Jade knew quite well how wretched the Bluebloods were. Still, it seemed the best option in the long term.

With his plan set, Jade addressed the woman still clinging to his leg. “...Mayo-Mayo.”

Mayoi's whole body twitched. She was afraid she was about to get dumped. However, Jade took a far gentler tone than he had moments before—

“That thing about us breaking up...JK about all that.”

—and he stooped and rubbed Mayoi's head.

“Huh?”

“Ha-ha. C'mon, lighten up! It was all just part of the game. You know, the JK Game? C'mon, Mayo-Mayo. You know you're my ride or die.”

Changing his tune so blatantly took a lot of nerve. If anyone else had been

present, they would have scowled in disgust. Unfortunately, Mayoi's relief blinded her to how hollow his words were.

"...Ah, ha-ha. ☆ S-so it was all part of the game. W-well, yeah, like, obviously! I mean, we're the lovey-doveyest couple around! Oh, darling, you're such a tease!" She smiled, her face covered in tears and blood.

Jade gave her a saccharine grin.

"But when I said we were boned, I meant it. I screwed up Grandmaster Neuro's mission, so using him to climb the ladder is a no-go now. That means we gotta pivot and side with the Bluebloods. But if we wanna do that, we're gonna have to toss 'em a little something-something to make it worth their while."

"A something...something?"

"Yeah, like something that'll really insult the Grandmaster. Something that'll show the world how bad he blew it by making that alliance with Elm."

Jade knew precisely what would do the trick. Mayoi's pointed ears were neither *hyuma* nor *byuma*, but a special characteristic of those who had elven blood. He gently stroked them as he went on.

"Y'know Mayo-Mayo, your ears are pretty unique. There's only a couple people in the empire with triangular ones like these... Outside of you, Guya, and Lycchi, I've never seen any nearly this long. Anyone could tell they're yours just by looking at 'em. And man, if the Elm ambassadors pulled a sword on you during dinner and *sliced one of 'em off* before making a break for it...that'd be the scandal to end all scandals, don'cha think?"

"...I..." Mayoi's face went as pale as a sheet.

It was clear that Jade wanted to fabricate a story about the Elm ambassadors turning to violence during an otherwise peaceful discussion. A baseless claim wouldn't hold, however, so he planned to cut off one of Mayoi's ears to serve as "evidence." That would be proof enough, and because Neuro was the one who'd made peace with Elm, he was the one who'd take the fall.

The Bluebloods labored to oust Neuro, and a development like this was the sort that they'd latch on to immediately. That would be Jade's in with them.

“You meant it when you said you’d do anything for me, right?” Jade pressured, grabbing Mayoi’s ear with one hand. His other drew a knife from a waist pocket.

Mayoi trembled violently, yet instead of trying to run—

“If I do...will that make you love me even more?”

—she asked a desperate question.

Jade beamed. “What’re you talking about, babe? My love for you is as maxed out as it gets.” Then he placed the knife at the base of her ear...and lopped it clean off.

Jade didn’t hesitate. He went about the action with the casualness of someone plucking an apple from a tree.

“Ah, ah, AAAAAAARGH!!!!”

A scream surged from Mayoi’s throat as she crumpled to the ground from the overwhelming pain.

“GAH, AH, AHHHH...”

“...”

Jade looked down at her as she writhed. His lover had relinquished a part of her body for him, yet his expression remained entirely disinterested.

When I ship this ear over, I’ll need to ask ’em to send Shishi back from his teaching gig. Once those four return to Elm, there’s a chance they’ll launch an invasion.

Jade’s mind was preoccupied with his own plans, although that was to be expected.

To him, Mayoi was just a tool. He’d felt that way since the moment they met. She existed to help him claw his way up from the dregs of society, nothing more. His heart was empty and devoid of any love for her whatsoever.

The game had nothing to do with it— their entire relationship had been founded on lies.

If anything, Jade held Mayoi in contempt. She was weak and stupid. Looking

at her reminded the man of his past self, and it vexed him. Still, he couldn't afford to get rid of her yet. If he wanted to pitch himself to the Bluebloods, he would need Yamato.

Through Mayoi, Jade controlled Yamato's military like it was his own, and he needed that power if he was going to actualize his dreams. Thus, he had no recourse but to maintain the farce of a relationship.

Jade reached into his pocket, withdrew his handkerchief, and pressed it against the side of Mayoi's profusely bleeding head. It was a token gesture of sympathy—an act of love in pretext alone. Mayoi accepted it wholeheartedly, though, giving Jade a broad smile. The joyous look on her face was that of a woman who'd just been saved.



There sat a deep forest in northern Yamato that locals seldom ventured into. They called it the Sea of White Trees. The mountains surrounding the Sea of White Trees shrouded it in a protective mist, and much of the woods had yet to be mapped.

Within that shrouded forest sat a village.

It was composed of little more than simple wood-frame tents, with sheets of grass and cloth draped over them, and dwellings that had been cleverly built under rocky overpasses and in tree hollows. Humble plots of farmland accompanied the modest structures. Calling it a village was almost too generous. It was closer to a camp.

This was the Resistance hideout, where the soldiers who had escaped Mayoi's memory alteration conspired with Kaguya to reclaim their nation.

One of the tents was markedly larger than the others. That was their war room, where they held strategy meetings. Inside it sat a long-haired, bespectacled *hyuma* named Kira, who had once been the Yamato Empire's tactician. He had been taking notes a moment ago, but the new report he'd received caused him to stop writing and raise an eyebrow.

"Are... Are you sure, Hibari?"

The young woman across from him, Hibari, replied with a big nod.

“Certain. The red fireworks going up over Azuchi last night were visible from Yoshino’s red-light district. But isn’t it the wrong time of year to be holding a festival?”

“It must have been a signal. According to the soldiers we have observing the Rashomon Gate, the Elm ambassadors arrived yesterday, too... Did something happen during their meeting, I wonder...?”

“Well, let’s just hope that Elm didn’t agree to turn over Lady Kaguya.”

“Ghk!”

No sooner did the words leave Hibari’s mouth than Kira let out a loud, bloody cough. However, Hibari didn’t look the slightest bit concerned. To the contrary, she actually gave him an exasperated shrug.

“This again, Master Kira?”

“Rgh... I’m worried, dammit! You know how reckless Lady Kaguya is! I mean, going to a foreign land to ask for aid with only Shura there to defend her? They’re allied with the Freyjagard Empire, for crying out loud! I don’t care how important the mission was; she should have sent me instead! Wh-what if they’re torturing her?! And even if they aren’t, what if they stuff her in some freezing jail cell and she takes ill?! Oh, my stomach. My stomach...!”

“You’re such a worrywart, Master Kira.”

He was always like this.

Kira had more wisdom and talent than most people could dream of, between his military prowess and his skill as a poet, but he was also terribly faint of heart. The stress from even the smallest of troubles would cause him to cough up blood as his gastritis flared up. Everyone who knew him long enough saw the scene play out dozens of times. After realizing that he turned out fine, no matter how much blood he hacked up, they had more or less given up fretting over him.

“With Lady Shura there, I’m sure she’ll be all right. Here, drink some water.”

“Th-thank...you...”

Kira received the bamboo cup of water Hibari offered him and used it to wash

down some medicine of his own concoction. Doing so allowed him to regain some of his composure.

The man wasn't blind to his proclivities, after all. He knew that he had a bad habit of assuming the worst. In truth, there was little danger of Elm handling Kaguya that roughly. The country had been founded on the principle of equality for all, so mistreating someone who came to them asking for help would go against their entire creed.

Judging by Elm's current state, it clearly was in the hands of competent people. None of them would be foolish enough to risk jeopardizing their nation's moral standing. Kaguya had understood that much, too. That was the whole reason she'd enacted her daring plan.

Furthermore, Elm had refused to hand Kaguya over to the empire without visiting the Yamato dominion for themselves first. Things were proceeding more or less the way the princess had hoped. Still, Kira knew that they weren't out of the woods yet. There was no guarantee Elm would side with them.

The meeting in Yamato was worrisome, but Kira was more concerned about Elm's election. Depending on how that bold experiment played out, there was a possibility Elm would turn Kaguya over to Freyjagard anyway.

"...Hibari, what's the status on our troops?"

"We have roughly a hundred soldiers standing by and ready to act whenever, as per your orders, Master Kira."

"Have them hold their positions and remain on high alert. If Elm rejects Lady Kaguya's plea and chooses to give her up, then we'll storm their caravan on its way to Azuchi and rescue her no matter the cost. Without her, we'll never be able to restore Yamato."

"Yes, sir."

Satisfied by her reply, Kira picked up his brush and tried to get back to work. At the moment, he was in the middle of organizing the Resistance's supplies and finances. The papers laid out in front of him documented their current condition. They described food supplies, equipment, workforce, and so on. As Kira looked back over the figures he'd just tallied, he turned a pained thought to

the words he himself had just said.

“Restore Yamato,” huh...

With Kaguya and Shura gone, command of the Resistance had fallen to him. He'd put on a confident face in front of Hibari because that was a leader's responsibility.

Yet as things stand, we won't be able to put up a fight.

Guerilla tactics only worked with support from locals. Without the ability to source new supplies or personnel, it was taking all the Resistance had just to keep their heads above water. If Elm decided to oppose the rebellion, then miraculously recovering Kaguya would be a meaningless effort down the road anyway.

I have to make preparations to let Lady Kaguya survive, even if all else fails...

Kira's gut began throbbing again. Right as he started clutching at it, though, someone rushed into the tent. A single glance at the rabbit-eared *byuma* samurai's shocked demeanor was enough to tell him that something significant had occurred.

“M-Master Kira, big news!”

“Agh!” he cried. “Big?! As in, *bad* big?! Hibari, what do we do?!” Kira had already been feeling down, so, fearing the worst, he flew into a panic.

“Well, for starters, maybe we should hear her out?” Fortunately, Hibari's chiding managed to calm the man down.

“All right, what's this all about?” Kira asked.

“It's Shiro! He's back!” Hibari replied. “And he has four people with him who claim they're the Elm ambassadors!”

“Wh...WHAT...?!”



Thanks to Shiro's guidance, the Elm delegation managed to handily make their way through the dense mountain forest with no pursuers. They stopped once for the night, then arrived at the Resistance hideout the next day.

Kira and Hibari were managing things there in Kaguya's absence, so the two of them greeted their new visitors. After some light introductions, they ushered the visitors into the war room tent and gave them a warm meal, albeit a meager one.

"That's millet gruel and pheasant soup. Please, eat up while it's hot."

As Hibari handed Tsukasa and the others some trays, Kira gave them an apologetic bow.

"I'm sorry we have nothing nicer to offer you after you came such a long way to see us."

"Not at all," Tsukasa responded. "If anything, we should be the ones apologizing for the sudden intrusion." While the two of them exchanged their diplomatic pleasantries—

"Forgive me for starting without you, but I'm famished, that I am. Your hospitality is much appreciated!"

—Aoi, whose plan had been to abdicate all the thinking to Tsukasa from the get-go, began unconcernedly eating.

Hibari, who was still in the middle of setting the dishes on the trays, rushed over to her in alarm. "Oh no, be careful! The pheasant meat has little bones in it, so if you drink it so quickly, you might hurt your—"

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

"Delicious! It tastes like chicken cartilage, that it does! 🎵"

"Wow," Hibari replied. "I suppose that's an angel for you."

"That isn't an angel thing. It's just an Aoi thing." Impressed as Hibari was, Tsukasa preferred to avoid being lumped in with Aoi.

He had been served pheasant once before, back on Earth, so he knew just how tricky it was to eat on account of its tiny, sharp bones. If he tried to mimic what Aoi had just done, it would shred his mouth and esophagus, possibly even killing him. That said, it was still meat.

Given where the Resistance was hiding, such a dish must have been a rare treat. They really were welcoming them with as much hospitality as they were

able to muster.

Thankful for their hosts' thoughtfulness, Tsukasa warned Ringo and Lyrule about the bones, then partook of his portion. However, by the time he was a mere two or three bites in—

"I-if I may!"

—Kira could no longer contain himself.

"I don't mind in the slightest if you continue eating, but please, hear me out! I have so many questions!"

"...I imagine so. I don't blame you." Tsukasa signaled to the others that he would handle the inquiries, so they could go ahead and continue eating, then turned back to face Kira. "All right, ask away."

"Thank you for being so accommodating. First, there's something I absolutely need to know! Is our princess, Lady Kaguya, all right?! She hasn't been harmed, has she?!"

It was a natural thing for him to be curious about. Tsukasa had seen this coming and thus replied immediately.

"Perish the thought. Our alliance with the empire means that we can't go around treating her like a state guest, but rest assured that we've been treating her with the dignity and respect she deserves."

"What about her food?! Is she eating properly?!"

"Neither she nor Shura seemed to have much of a taste for bread, so we had the Freyjagard government help us import Yamato rice. We've been preparing foods she's accustomed to."

"Goodness, you really are showing her respect!"

Kira hadn't anticipated that Elm would go to such lengths. Hibari's eyes widened in surprise, but her superior's concerns had yet to be quelled.

"A-and what about her health?! The unfamiliar air hasn't caused her to take ill, has it...?!"

"We met right before I left Elm, and she looked as fine as ever."

“Ah, but looks can be deceiving! I mean, this is Lady Kaguya we’re talking about. Who’s to say she wasn’t just putting on a brave face?! But feces, feces never lie. Is she defecating daily?!”

“...I have no idea, and honestly, I think that’s for the best.”

Tsukasa didn’t know, nor did he want to.

“Don’t be gross, Master Kira. Can’t you see they’re trying to eat?”

“Ah, of...of course. My apologies.”

After Hibari cast him an icy look, Kira realized just how out of line that inquiry had been. His face went red. He then turned to Lyrule and Ringo, who had frozen mid-bite, and gave them a small bow.

“Sorry about that,” Hibari apologized. “He’s the nervous type.”

That much was plain to all in the tent.

From what Tsukasa had heard, Kira was a tactician by trade. In that line of work, discretion was often the better part of valor. Between him and Shura, it was plain to see that Kaguya was blessed with some excellent retainers.

“Worry not, Mr. Kira. Even if she was unfortunate enough to fall ill, the Seven Luminaries angel with the power of healing would be close at hand. I can guarantee you in the surest of terms that her well-being is in no danger.”

Even if Kaguya came down with a fatal illness, Tsukasa knew that Keine would find some way to cure it, and that unshakable confidence in her fueled the conviction in his words.

That declaration finally set Kira’s heart at ease.

“Oh, thank goodness... What a load off my chest...”

“I take it that’s enough to satisfy you?”

“Indeed it is. On behalf of the people of Yamato, and as their representative, I thank you for the warm reception you’ve given Lady Kaguya.” Kira bowed low as he spoke.

Tsukasa knew the best course of action would be to accept Kira’s gratitude. Instead of offering a humble deflection, he only waited for Kira to raise his

head.

After a few moments...

“...If I may be so bold, I have another question I’d like to ask.”

Kira was ready to move on to other matters now that he knew Kaguya was unharmed. The worry had vanished from his face and was replaced by a sagacious gleam in his eyes. He observed Tsukasa carefully as he spoke.

“What in the world compels you to visit our humble camp? As I recall, you’re scheduled to be in the middle of a conference regarding Kaguya’s fate over in Azuchi right now. Shiro brought you here himself, so I know you’re no impostors. And then there’s the matter of the red fireworks sighted over Azuchi last night. While launched during celebrations, they’re also used to relay orders to soldiers. Did something happen during your meeting with Princess Mayoi?”

“I see you have keen eyes and sharp ears,” remarked Tsukasa. It was impressive that Kira’s forces had gathered that information both swiftly and accurately. “To get straight to the point, the negotiations between the Seven Luminaries and the Yamato dominion government have completely broken down.”

“...!”

“During our brief time at Azuchi Castle, we learned about how the Yamato people’s memories were tampered with and how a warmongering usurper was being revered as a benevolent ruler. The Seven Luminaries hold the principle of equality for all and the idea that people’s rights and dignity must be protected at all costs to be sacred. As such, we’re unable to turn a blind eye to Yamato’s current situation.”

“Do you mean to say...?!”

“The Seven Luminaries will be taking immediate action to answer Princess Kaguya’s plea. Your Resistance movement has our full support.”

“W-we did it, Master Kira! They’re joining our side!” Hibari immediately let out a joyful cheer when she heard the news. Kira’s expression was still as stern as ever, though.

“...You said ‘the Seven Luminaries.’ Am I correct in taking that to mean that the Republic of Elm will *not* be offering us its assistance?” Unlike Hibari, he had picked up on the nuance in Tsukasa’s wording.

Tsukasa nodded openly. “You are. The only ones with the power to determine Elm’s future course of action are the people who get chosen for the national assembly in the election that’s currently underway. The Seven Luminaries have no say in their decisions, which means I can only guarantee support from us angels. I hope that doesn’t come as a letdown.”

“Not in the slightest!” Kira gave his head a slightly exaggerated shake. “I’ve heard all the stories about how the Republic of Elm came to be. Through the guidance of a group of divine agents, a revolution that began in a single small mountain village quickly expanded until it had wrenched four northern domains from imperial control. What you achieved was a miracle. Nothing could be more heartening to have by our side than your miraculous strength!”

Tsukasa got the sense that Kira was trying to convince himself as much as he was Tsukasa. If he had the option between a mere seven people and the might of the entire nation of Elm, he would have picked the latter in a heartbeat, and Tsukasa wouldn’t have held that against him.

All Kira knew of the Prodigies were the tiny bits and pieces he’d picked up from rumors, and he was wise enough not to believe everything he heard. Trusting claims about angels leading a mountain village to form an entire nation was ludicrous. He only chose to put his faith in those wild anecdotes because he had nowhere else to turn. Kira still didn’t trust them. Tsukasa was going to have to prove himself. Fortunately, he knew just what to do.

“Then, without further ado, I’d like to discuss how we’re going to overthrow the dominion government. If possible, I’d like us to make our first move tomorrow.”

“Th-th-that soon?! Do you already have a plan or something?”

As Kira gawked in surprise, Tsukasa gave his reply. “I have several, but to know how realistic they are, I need you to help me understand the Resistance’s present situation. How many able-bodied soldiers would you be able to muster?”

Kira fumbled for a reply, but eventually said, “I’m ashamed to admit it, but although we’ve been fighting on behalf of the Yamato people, their altered memories have made it difficult to garner support. The only way we’ve been able to maintain even our meager existence is with what little money we’ve scraped together by selling our spare game and what our members working in red-light districts have been able to send back. Only one hundred of our seven hundred soldiers are ready for combat...”

“What?!” Tsukasa cried in a rare show of incredulity. That number fell well outside the young man’s expectations. With the Resistance unable to earn widespread support and teetering on the edge of poverty—

“You have a hundred battle-ready soldiers?!”

—it was amazing that they were able to maintain forces like that.

“That’s correct, yes. I had them on standby for a recovery mission if you decided to have Elm hand Lady Kaguya over to the empire. Come to think of it, I was just in the middle of updating the documents on our current supplies. It also had a list of our human resources, so it would probably be faster to show you.”

Kira took the stack of rolled-up papers sitting on his desk and somewhat sheepishly handed it over. When Tsukasa read through them, he found the entirety of the Resistance’s logistics situation listed as it currently stood.

...I’m impressed.

They were impoverished, to be sure, but they hadn’t let that dull their blades. The reports listed resources in almost excessive detail, and Tsukasa could see that they were well and truly ready for battle. Much of that was owed to their airtight leadership. There was more to it than that, however.

I see. It’s no wonder the wise Princess Kaguya decided to play such a bold move.

What impressed Tsukasa most of all was the sheet that detailed the Resistance’s capable fighters. It described the responsibilities of every person in easily digestible terms. Most notably, it also revealed how many the Resistance was holding in reserve.

Given the way they had failed to earn support from the locals, the temptation to have everyone out working, so they could scrape together a little more money, must have been overwhelming, yet they had avoided doing so. Kira had successfully kept the big picture in mind. They weren't there just to survive; they were there to fight.

Still, doing that was no easy feat. You had to shed as much of your arrogance, negligence, and greed as possible and focus entirely on the task at hand. Even then, you could never achieve more than your base goal. That was the price success demanded.

The fact that Kira could do that meant that he was the best bureaucrat a person could ask for. Part of the reason Kaguya had decided to take action herself was that she knew Kira would be able to hold the Resistance together in her absence.

"With this much manpower and supplies, we'll be able to get to work overthrowing the dominion government at once," Tsukasa stated.

"W-with so few people?! But how...?"

"I'll explain in a moment. Hibari, I think I see a map of Yamato hanging on the wall over there. Would you mind if I borrowed it?"

"O-of course not. Let me get it for you."

Hibari pulled the tacks from the map and spread the chart on the floor.

After looking the entire thing over, Tsukasa asked, "This mark represents our current location, correct?"

"It's an approximation, but yes."

"On our journey here, we passed by a large fortress. Right around...here."

"Ah, you mean Fort Steadfast. It's an impregnable bastion that's repelled many Freyjagard invasions over our nation's long history."

"Sounds like it lives up to its name. That makes it all the more suited for our purposes. The plan is to have you storm the fortress with your hundred men, possibly by as soon as next week, to secure us an outpost on our path to Azuchi. After that, and this is the important part..."

Tsukasa explained his plan to Kira and Hibari, speaking in a pleasant tone neither too fervent nor too aloof. One by one, he laid out the actions they would need to carry out and the steps necessary to overturn the dominion government. The strategy was shockingly straightforward, yet at the same time chillingly effective—so much so that it earned gasps from the two Resistance members and the other three from Elm.

“Ah...! I—I never even considered such a strategy! But...it just might work! You’re right—the forces we have on hand would be plenty for that!” Kira cried.

“W-wow!” Hibari concurred. “I can’t believe you devised all that!”

“I didn’t,” Tsukasa replied. “I copied it off a certain scoundrel who used it in an actual battle. They say Yamato’s standing army is ten thousand strong, and if all goes well, this should go a long way toward evening the playing field. It’s a gamble, but the odds will be in our favor.”

All that remained was for Kira to agree to his plan or reject it. Tsukasa gave the man a look to let him know that the final decision lay in the Resistance’s hands. Kira spent a few moments in thought—

“All right. Let’s do it!”

—before choosing to adopt Tsukasa’s strategy.

He understood the Resistance’s current condition better than anyone, and he knew that this plan was the best shot they had.

“But...would you mind if I asked you one question?” Kira said while regarding Tsukasa with a bewildered look.

Tsukasa tilted his head in confusion. His explanation should have been clear enough that there shouldn’t have been any part requiring further clarification.

“What’s on your mind, Mr. Kira?”

“It’s just, this plan... I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how much danger it puts you all in... Why would you go so far for the people of Yamato?”

Ah, Tsukasa thought. So that’s what he’s hung up on.

He had only just met Kira, but it was clear to see just how nervous—cautious, perhaps—a man he was. To him, the whole arrangement undoubtedly seemed

too good to be true. To the point that he was prepared to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Tsukasa recognized that coming clean was the best approach in this situation. Instead of lying and saying it was because they were angels, he decided to tell Kira the truth about how they had a dog in the fight as well. It was time to reveal the other thing they had come to Yamato for.

“...Mr. Kira, I’m afraid you’re working under two misconceptions. First off, although this strategy does endanger us, we’re more than talented enough to see it through. Don’t think of it as us taking on an excess of risk, but rather as us taking on responsibilities worthy of our skills.

“Second, while we do truly want to help liberate Yamato, I would be remiss not to mention that we have a separate, more personal goal we hope to achieve. There’s a place we’re looking for somewhere in Yamato, and with the dominion government trying to kill us, it’s going to make searching for it unreasonably difficult.”

“What place, might I ask?”

“I take it you’re familiar with ‘elves,’ Mr. Kira?”

Kira replied in the affirmative. “Of course. The empress was one.”

“Princess Kaguya and Princess Mayoi’s mother, yes. We’re hoping to find the elf settlement where she used to live. Do either of you know anything about it, by any chance?”

Kira shook his head apologetically. “...Unfortunately, I’m afraid not. Hibari?”

The woman mirrored her superior’s gesture. “I’m sorry, I can’t say where it is, either. I know that’s where Lady Hinowa came from, that’s all. I’ve heard there was a law against revealing anything about the settlement’s location to outsiders.”

“...Well, thank you anyway,” Tsukasa answered.

That was more or less what he’d anticipated.

He had posed the same question to Hinowa’s daughter Kaguya when he went to borrow Byakuran and the dog whistle, but even she was unsure. All her

mother had told her was that it lay somewhere in the woods.

If the Prodigies wanted to find the settlement, they would have to search for it themselves. Right as the discouragement was starting to hit Tsukasa in earnest, though, Kira spoke up as though he'd just remembered something.

"Wait!! Actually, I might have something that could point you in the right direction!"

"You do?!" Tsukasa said, surprised.

"Hold on just a moment! As I recall, it was somewhere around here..." Kira hurriedly stood and rushed over to the other side of the tent, where he began tearing through the mound of wicker boxes piled high in the back.

After getting to the bottom of the heap—

"Aha! I found it!"

—he opened one of the lowest boxes and pulled out an old, roughly bound book.

"What is it?"

"It's a journal that once belonged to a merchant named Adel who often visited Yamato on his travels. He and the empress knew each other before she married Emperor Gekkou, so there might be something in here about the elf settle—"

"HOLD ON A MOMENT!!!!" cried a female voice.

""""_____?!?!""""

Lyrule had risen to her feet. She had dutifully been keeping quiet to not disturb the discussion, so her abrupt shout came as a bit of a shock to everyone present.

Everyone looked at her in astonishment. Lyrule was far too preoccupied to worry about that, however.

"M-may I please take a look at that journal?!" she entreated hastily.

"Of course. Be my guest."

Kira handed it over, and the blond elf hurriedly opened it and stared intently

at the writing within.

“~~~~~!”

The more she read, the wider her eyes grew. An outburst from Lyrule, who was usually so modest and polite, was enough to get Ringo to speak up in front of strangers.

“...What’s...wrong?” the shy inventor asked.

Tsukasa, meanwhile, was sinking into thought.

Adel.

Now that he thought about it, that same name had come up in a conversation from a long time ago. If he remembered correctly...

“Lyrule, are they talking about who I think they are?”

Nodding slowly, Lyrule answered, “They are. It’s... It’s him; I know it is. I’d recognize these characters anywhere. They’re a perfect match to the ones Elch and I studied to learn how to read!”

Sure enough, the notebook’s former owner was none other than...

“This handwriting is Elch’s father’s!!”

CHAPTER 5

❖ Opposing Ideals ❖

The Republic of Elm's first national election was underway, and its people would soon get a chance to vote in order to choose who it was who would lead their nation.

In the span of under half a year, the High School Prodigies had used ideas and technology that this world wouldn't have otherwise known for centuries to found the Republic of Elm, this planet's first democratic government. This election was a crucial step in allowing them to hand the country's sovereignty over to the citizens.

It was the first election that this world had ever seen, and it had been a chaotic affair since day one.

During the announcement ceremony, Yamato's rightful successor, Kaguya, crashed the event and pleaded for the Republic of Elm to save Yamato from the Freyjugard Empire's rule and used their Seven Luminaries national religion and its "equality for all" creed to make her case.

Tsukasa, leader of the Republic's provisional government, responded to Kaguya's request by arresting her for the crime of illegal entry. After he tossed her in prison, the Freyjugard Empire demanded that the Republic of Elm turn her over for being a dangerous insurgent, but Tsukasa used the terms of Elm's treaty with them to refuse. Instead of giving in to Kaguya's request or the empire's, he made the call to defer the decision. In reply, disgruntled citizens entered his office to protest that choice.

One of them was Juno, an accountant from Buchwald. She sought to protect Elm's relationship with Freyjagard and the recent cease-fire, so she insisted that Kaguya be deported to the empire immediately.

The other was Tetra, captain of the Gustav Vigilante Corps. In her opinion, the idea of equality for all meant that Elm had a duty to liberate others who were suffering. She insisted that Elm fight the empire on Yamato's behalf.

Neither of them was happy with the provisional government's decision to wait on the matter of Princess Kaguya, but they had each wanted the nation to take a radically different course. Tsukasa had answered by reminding them that both Tetra and Juno only represented small handfuls of voices. Steering a democratic country meant earning the trust of a majority. That was why they held elections.

Satisfied by his argument, the two women both announced their candidacy and began campaigning to voters. There was no shortage of others running for office, but Juno and Tetra quickly became the two favorites. After all, they were the ones speaking to the issue that was on the forefront of everyone's minds. What became of Kaguya affected everyone in the nation.

The masses then began demanding that all candidates make statements about their stance on the Yamato situation, and before long, the political spectrum became divided into two major factions.

Tetra led the Principles Party, which asserted that Elm's value of equality was paramount. Opposing them was Juno's Reform Party, which believed the top priority was working with Freyjagard to ensure lasting peace.

At first, the two parties were on equal ground, with the Principles Party holding the bulk of support in the Findolph and Gustav provinces and the Reform Party taking the lead in Buchwald and Archride.

Those numbers could largely be attributed to the extent to which the Seven Luminaries had contributed to each province. Findolph, where the People's Revolution started, and Gustav, where Lord Gustav had pushed the populace to the brink of starvation, placed much more weight on the idea of equality for all than Buchwald and Archride did. A clever strategy of Tsukasa's and a wise decision by Marquis Archride had led to the regions getting annexed in one fell

swoop with little fuss or fanfare, and many people who lived there were happy to continue prioritizing self-preservation.

After a series of public debates, however, support began to shift. In Buchwald and Archride, where the Reform Party had enjoyed a comfortable lead, there was a sudden surge in youths who had just reached voting age (fifteen) rallying in support of the Principles Party.

Some of them were simply the rebellious sort that balked at the prospect of kowtowing to the empire they'd seceded from. Others felt intoxicated with feelings of heroism when they heard the Principles Party's impassioned speeches about battling for fairness in all lands. More still thought Elm invincible because of the incredible technology the High School Prodigies had bestowed upon them.

Each belief fed into the same sentiment—that this new nation was mightier than Freyjagard, so they need not concern themselves with its whims. If anything, it should be the empire that needed to be catering to theirs.

When news of what transpired during the Elm delegation's trip to Yamato broke, opinion shifted even more in favor of the Principles Party.

God Akatsuki was made aware of everything via satellite. In particular, he was informed that the Yamato citizenry had been magically brainwashed in one of the greatest human rights violations imaginable. And on Tsukasa's orders, Akatsuki made that information public.

Tsukasa's goal wasn't to help the Principles Party. The whole point behind the Yamato excursion was to give the people of Elm the opportunity for a more informed vote, and that was what he was doing. As a result, however, the Principles Party supporters got all fired up. In contrast, the Reform Party supporters found it more difficult to voice their desire for self-preservation publicly. As the Republic of Elm's inaugural election moved toward its final stages, the scales were clearly slanted in the former group's favor.



A plaza sat in the heart of Neue, the third largest city in the Archride province, and it was there that a beautiful raven-haired woman sank to her knees and let out a beseeching cry.

“Oh, brave King McGillis! O mighty leader of men, who founded a nation for the sake of his people! As we speak, the people of my country are starving and suffering under the yoke of a wicked empire! Please, use your great power to save my people as you once saved yours!”

The handsome blond man across from her responded by drawing the brilliantly ornamented sword hanging from his waist.

“Come now, fair foreign princess, raise your head! You need shed tears no longer! For Sun God Akatsuki has heard your request! With my holy blade, I shall bring forth the dawn on your beloved homeland’s eternal night!”

At his avowal, an ugly, slovenly dressed woman spoke up.

“Please, McGillis, stay your sword! This woman’s words mustn’t sway you! What profit is there to be had in warring with the empire any further?! This is some foreign nation’s problem, not ours! Come now, take your holy sword and lop that witch’s head off! Doing so will grant us a decade of peace!”

“Hyaaaaah!”

“Gaaaaaah!”

The man did indeed bring his blade down, but it was upon the hag.

His voice trembled with rage as he cried out, “If anyone’s a witch, it’s you! You’re a devil’s familiar, a serpent who steals men away with honeyed words! Neither I nor the people who fought beside me would be base enough to forsake those in need! Sun God Akatsuki’s love shines on the world without reserve! It’s our duty to be bringers of that light! Behold!! For Sun God Akatsuki’s spirit dwells within my blade!!!!”

“”””HOORAYYYY!!!!””””

When the blond man raised his weapon aloft, the throngs of people gathered in the plaza all cheered in unison and did the same with their fists.

The spectacle had all been part of a play put on by Luvirche, one of the foremost theatrical troupes in the Freyjagard Empire. It detailed the story of a hero blessed by God Akatsuki rescuing a foreign nation and its black-haired princess.

The plot bore a striking resemblance to the Republic of Elm's situation, and that was no accident. The whole thing was part of the Principles Party's propaganda campaign.

"That was a wonderful show you put on, Mr. Glaux," commented a woman with silvery-gray hair as she observed the audience's standing ovation from a distance. A scythe large enough to cleave a tiger's head clean off hung from her back. This was Tetra, the official leader of the Principles Party.

The portly gentleman beside her responded to her compliment with a warm smile. "Hoh-hoh-hoh, I'm so glad you enjoyed it."

His name was Glaux, and he, too, was running as a Principles Party candidate. Because Tetra was not proficient with administrative matters, she had left him in charge of running the campaign. Without his financial backing and connections, the performances put on by Luvirche and other major theatrical groups all across Elm would be nothing more than ideas on paper. He was the party's fixer and, in many senses, the one truly in charge.

"Personally speaking..." Glaux continued, "I was a little disappointed with the scriptwriter's inability to envision a proper democracy. They ended up having the story feature a monarchy."

"I don't think the play was any worse off for that at all. Seeing McGillis's drive as he fought for the people filled my heart with passion, and I imagine all the people watching today felt the exact same way. I'm sure this performance will help inspire a righteous fury in the people. And it's all thanks to you. You were even the one who suggested I bring my scythe with me, and seeing it seems to have gotten our supporters quite fired up...though I'll admit I'm not entirely sure why."

"Tales of your valiant exploits have traveled far, Tetra. Our faction's been promising an expansion of armaments, and the fact that its leader bravely stood on the front lines herself reminds our supporters that we're more than just talk. That weapon of yours is a powerful symbol."

"I see... Really, Mr. Glaux, I don't know where I'd be without you. I've heard that you've poured a full half of your fortune into the Principles Party's coffers. I might be our leader in name alone, but still, you have my heartfelt thanks."

“Hoh-hoh-hoh, take it merely as a sign of how much this cause means to me. I was once a noble of the empire, with all the status of the title, so I know far too well just how rotten Freyjagard is, and how much we need the Seven Luminaries’ creed of equality. But those Reformist fools... All they want is to turn back the clock, and we can’t let them have their way. If stopping them is what it takes to defend the rights of our fellow man, then half my fortune is a small price to pay.”

Glaux’s veins bulged as he squeezed his cane. Upon hearing the righteous indignation in his voice, Tetra felt gratitude wash over her.

“I feel truly fortunate to have been blessed with such a wise ally.”

Glaux shook his head modestly—

“You steal the words right out of my mouth. That zeal of yours is what holds our whole party together. It brings out the best in all of us, myself included.”

—and complimented Tetra right back.

For them, it had all started when she took the initiative to go to the Seven Luminaries and beseech them to take firm action against the empire.

“...The Gustav domain was my home,” Tetra responded by lowering her gaze sadly. “But his rule... It was so pointlessly wicked.”

She thought back to what life had been like just a few months ago. The memories weren’t pleasant ones.

Tetra remembered all too well the draconian taxes Gustav had levied to build a solid-gold statue as a gift to Emperor Lindworm, the outrageous public works projects he launched to beautify the domain, and the terrible quality of life the people had under his heartless rule. Anyone who dared express complaints or who resisted his policies was savagely butchered. He ruled by fear, and his people starved in that climate of terror.

Tetra’s farming village was fortunate enough to sit on the coast, so they could live off the land well enough not to starve, but the inland settlements weren’t so lucky. No small number of people turned to cannibalism to survive, while others became bandits. Once it was clear that there wasn’t enough food for everyone, many people began slaughtering each other.

Tetra formed the Vigilante Corps to combat the thieves, but even they were nothing more than starving civilians. She could still see the grief-stricken faces of the people who attacked her—the ones she killed. The images were burned into her brain. Those weren't the faces of people who reveled in violence. They had all been gaunt, tears streaming from their bloodshot eyes, and their war cries had been little more than sobs. They weren't changing anything, and neither was she. It was simply the only choice any of them had. It was the only way they had to survive.

“...And it wasn't fair. Why should the starving masses have to kill and steal from each other while the man responsible for it didn't suffer in the slightest?! We can't let something like that happen ever again. Not here...not anywhere!” Tetra cried.

“Oh, I agree wholeheartedly,” Glaux replied. “God Akatsuki and his angels saved us, so saving the Yamato people from the inhumane rule they're under is simply the right thing to do. Equality for all means equality for *all*, not just for us. Soon, the people of Elm will come to see that, too.”

However—

“Not just Yamato.”

—Tetra shook her head.

“Hmm?”

“Saving Yamato will just fix a symptom, but not the disease. So long as there are people in this world who've never suffered a day in their lives ruling over the weak and the helpless, these tragedies will continue. If we truly believe in equality for all, then there's only one thing to be done.

“We have to turn *every nation in the world* into a democracy!”

“No more can we allow privileged classes to exist! The only way forward is to have people in power who understand the suffering of the powerless!!”

“...!”

“We have to take every autocracy in the world, starting with the Freyjagard Empire, and build them into countries where the only people who gain power

are those who sympathize with the downtrodden. *That* is the duty we people of Elm must carry out now that we've been entrusted with God Akatsuki's ideals. It's the only justifiable route, and dealing with the situation in Yamato will be but the first step in our great holy war. This fight will be a long and arduous one, but with you on our side, Mr. Glaux, I'm certain we will prevail. I hope I can count on you to keep lending us your strength and wisdom."

Tetra reached out and offered Glaux her hand. The man's narrow eyes widened for a moment as though in shock, but his usual genial smile quickly returned to his face. He returned Tetra's handshake.

"But of course. It would be my pleasure. 'Long live democracy' is the watchword our party lives by. I don't know how much time this old bag of bones has left in it, but I mean to spend the rest of it fighting the good fight as God Akatsuki's vanguard."

"That means so much; thank you!"

Upon hearing Glaux's ready consent, Tetra smiled broadly, the smile spreading across her face.

Then—

"Captain Tetra, ma'am! It's time to give your speech!"

—one of her Vigilante Corps subordinates, who was currently acting as her aide, came calling for her.

"I'll be right there... Well, Mr. Glaux, I'm afraid I must take my leave." She gave Glaux a slight bow.

He returned it with one of his own. "I'll see you next at the final debate, then, yes? Do take care until then."

Glaux's kindly smile never wavered as he watched Tetra hurry off. His words, however, were anything but.

"Goodness me, what a hopelessly stupid woman."

The dissonance between the warmth of his voice and expression and the sheer coldness of his words was unsettling.

"She really thinks that because a leader is elected from the common folk,

they'll govern with a sympathetic hand? Utter naïveté. The moment they get a taste of power, they'll forget all about the helpless and use it to further their own selfish ends. During his youth, back when he was just a Golden Knight, Duke Gustav was just as softhearted as Count Blumheart. Look at what he turned into! Democracy is the bricks by which the masses built a new aristocracy. And she believes in it so badly she's willing to fight the whole world just to support it? Why, listening to her insipid drivel was so bad I could barely keep the smile on my face."

This was the sort of person Glaux truly was. He wasn't driven by passion and righteous rage the way Tetra was. No, he was after the privilege and influence that being on the national assembly would afford him. He was a vulture, paying lip service to the Principles Party's ideals to amass personal power.

And there were plenty of others just like him, not the least of which was the young man standing behind him.

"Ha-ha-ha, you said it! What a simpleton!" He was a Principles Party candidate, too, but his heart had none of Tetra's zeal—only greed and calculated self-interest. He ran for election only to benefit himself. "I mean, she actually thinks we're gonna keep our campaign promises and go to war with the empire! Who the hell would be stupid enough to do that?!"

"Hoh-hoh, well put. Campaign promises are nothing more than empty slogans to sway idiots to our side in the election. Once those assembly seats are ours, those promises will mean nothing. We can devise the flimsiest of excuses to do the exact opposite of what we said, and the people will be helpless to stop us. Winning the election—*having the masses choose us*—will give us the justification to do whatever we want."

Elm was in the middle of a massive transition, and vulturous politicians like them were going to scrape as much of the sizable national budget into their pockets as they could.

Glaux had led his subordinates in worming their way into the Principles Party's ranks. For whenever wicked men schemed, it was rarely long before like-minded scoundrels joined them.

"Duke Glaux, sir."

A black-bearded man with bags under his eyes so dark it looked as though someone had splashed ink on him slipped through the riveted audience and made his way to Glaux.

Glaux's lips curled into a sneer beneath his bushy white mustache.

"Hoh-hoh, who is this 'duke' you speak of? The aristocracy is gone, my dear fellow. Please, it's *Assemblyman* Glaux."

The election wasn't over yet, but Glaux wasn't about to let details like that bother him, and the other man had no interest in pointing that out, either.

"Of course, assemblyman. A slip of the tongue. Now, I was hoping to talk to you about that art museum project we discussed. Could you spare a minute?"

"Art museum?" asked the young candidate. He cocked his head to the side. "What's he on about?"

Glaux was all too happy to explain. "Hoh-hoh, just a little public works project for after we've seized power. Art is a wonderful thing, isn't it? Think of how this will enrich the people's lives."

"Ha-ha, very funny. Half these hillbillies are illiterate boors. What makes you think they'll even come? The way I see it, that museum's gonna be a ghost town."

"Whether they visit or not, it doesn't much matter to me. And if it turns into a ghost town, so be it."

"Huh?"

"Community buildings are public works, so we get to appropriate the funds for their construction right out of the national treasury. If we work out deals with people like this gentleman in advance, we can make sure they get the work, and in exchange, they pay us a handsome agent's fee right out of the budget as a kickback for granting them such a cushy job. That process is the only part that matters. The museum can succeed or fail, but either way, there's no money coming out of *our* pockets...which means it doesn't matter in the slightest."

"I...I see!"

When the young man thought about it, he realized that Glaux had a point. He was struck with awe at how clever the man standing before him was. It was no wonder Glaux had once held a key administrative post down in Drachen. He was smart, but more importantly, he was practiced in the art of corruption.

However—

“That’s great and all, but...we haven’t actually won yet. You sure you’re okay with this?”

—the young man wasn’t certain why the baggy-eyed man was willing to agree to a shady deal when the election hadn’t even happened yet.

The tired-looking man replied, “It’s plain as daylight that you and Mr. Glaux will come out on top of all this, and we merchants know better than most to strike while the iron is hot. The national budget is huge, but it isn’t infinite, so we need to get our piece of the pie while the getting is good. Worry not, though. You and yours will be well compensated for your troubles.” Then he retrieved a piece of parchment and showed it to the young man who’d questioned him.

It listed the museum’s budget proposal, and the young man’s eyes lit up the moment he saw it. “These numbers... Are these real?!” he exclaimed with incredulity.

The budget proposal contained a line item for the agent’s fee they were going to pay to the Principles Party members, and the number next to it was several times more money than he had earned in his entire life to date.

“Well, all right then! Glaux, sir, this is incredible! Long live democracy!”

“So it is, so it is. Hoh-hoh-hoh.”

The man grinned from ear to ear, unable to contain himself. As Glaux glanced at him, a thought crossed his mind.

Such is the nature of man.

Nobles were cruel, but were commoners any better? That clean delineation was nothing more than a fantasy. Everyone was born with greed in their souls, and everyone was wicked. No, that wasn’t quite true. There were a scant few

who were honestly righteous.

Tetra was one such example, and Glaux recognized that much. Her selfless attitude was undoubtedly genuine. She would stand on her holy war's front lines without ever doubting herself, and if she had to lay down her life, she would do so with pride. That was an exception, however, not the rule. Few held fast to their lofty ideals as she did.

In a monarchy, a valiant hero like Tetra could have usurped the ruler and built a better, kinder world on her own. But in a democracy, authority was too decentralized for a single hero or saint to overcome the weak, selfish, wicked mass known as the majority. Once people like that obtained power, they would use their numbers to ostracize the hero, then enact laws that protected their own selfish interests and seek out like-minded people to join forces with.

Before long, *there would be so much collusion and corruption swaying the constituency that assembly seats would become all but hereditary, creating a new entrenched ruling class.*

That was how Glaux predicted things would play out for democracy and for the nation of Elm—the exact same way they had on Earth, a world whose culture was several centuries beyond that of his own. He might well have been the most insightful person in all of Elm at that moment. Age had done little to dull his wits. Glaux knew that mankind was evil. No system of governance was capable of subverting that fact.

Only the truly wise could hope to tame them.

Only the finest of leaders.

Democracy and “equality for all” are nothing more than tools for me to wield.



While Glaux and the other former aristocrats of the Principles Party spared no expense in promoting their cause, the Reform Party's efforts were much more subdued. The vast majority of their candidates had been commoners under the old system, and it had taken all they had to scrape together the deposits to get on the ballot in the first place. By and large, their promotional activities were limited to having the candidates themselves go around on foot to visit the various villages in their electoral districts.

Juno, their leader, was no exception.

While Luvirche was putting on its play in Archride, Juno was spending her day visiting a facility on the outskirts of a small village in Buchwald—an orphanage filled with war orphans from the Gustav domain.

The civil war between the Fastidious Duke Gustav and the Blue Brigade had been so fierce that the domain's capital had burned to the ground. Hence, the casualty count was high, and many of the dead left behind children who had nowhere to go.

When children lost their parents, they were usually taken in by distant relatives or village mayors. However, Duke Gustav's tyrannical rule had damaged his people's quality of life so severely that many settlements simply didn't have the resources to take in and raise children who were too young to work, leaving many of the poor youths abandoned.

When the Elm provisional government came into power, they established emergency public facilities in the comparatively better-off Archride and Buchwald domains to shelter the displaced children. Juno was at one such place.

The Reform Party's petite, bespectacled leader sat in the orphanage teaching a group of six children, all under five, some basic arithmetic.

"All right, everyone, there's one apple on the plate. If I take another apple and put it next to it, how many apples do we have now?"

""Two!""

"Very good! But let's say I took one of our two apples and gobbled it up. Can you tell me how many we have left?"

"What?! No fair!"

"I want an apple, too!"

"You're a meanie, miss!"

"What? No, that was just an example..."

"Meanie! Meanie! Meanie!"

“I wanna apple, I wanna apple, I wanna apple!”

“...Sh-should we call it snack time now?”

“““Yeahhh!!!!””””

“C’mon, ya can’t let ’em push you around like that...,” scolded an exasperated voice from the hallway.

As Juno handed apples out to the kids, she looked over her shoulder and saw the *byuma* farmers who’d gone with her to see the Seven Luminaries and had since been helping her set up the Reform Party.

“Finished fixin’ the roof.”

“We got the rotting fence and siding all replaced, too.”

“And the stairs to the second floor looked kinda dangerous, so I went ahead and put up a handrail.”

Juno’s friends had gone around mending everything in the orphanage that was damaged or out of shape. “Thanks for the hard work, everyone,” she replied.

“Oh, it’s so nice having some handy people around for a change. And Juno, you even looked after the kids? You’re all such dears,” praised a middle-aged woman who stepped out from behind the farmers. She was the orphanage’s director.

“It was nothing. I finished up early, so I didn’t have much else to do,” Juno replied. She handed the woman a dozen or so sheets of paper bound with string. “I finished all your incomplete ledgers, and the finished ones had a couple of omissions and errors, so I made sure to correct those as well.”

“Thank you so much. It wasn’t too much work, I hope? I know there were quite a lot of them.”

“No, not at all. This is what I do best.”

“I knew I needed to get around to doing them, but there was always something more urgent, so I kept putting them off and putting them off...”

“I don’t blame you...” Juno had just learned firsthand how difficult raising

children was. Basic addition dictated that if watching one child took five units of effort, then watching two would take ten...but that wasn't how the math worked out at all.

If one of them started crying, then the other would as well, and that would make the first one cry even harder. And if a child got mad, it wouldn't be long before another did, too, each one making the other angrier until it devolved into a fistfight.

Increasing the number of children didn't *add* to the workload; it *multiplied* it. Even worse, all the children in the orphanage were too young to have developed any self-control yet. And the director was watching over six of them all on her own. Although she had an obligation to keep accurate ledgers to report how the orphanage's funds were being used, she could hardly be blamed for putting off any work that wasn't completely necessary.

Many of the people who staffed the orphanages were widows who had lost their husbands and children in the war, much the way the children had lost their parents. They were assigned to their caretaker positions after being unable to find any other work. Naturally, most of them possessed no bookkeeping experience whatsoever, and many of them weren't even literate. It wasn't surprising that they lacked the skills necessary to keep accurate records.

The provisional government was aware of these challenges, but it was happy that the orphanage directors were doing their best for the time being. The plan was to conduct regular training and gradually tighten the regulation on recordkeeping.

"You all must be tired from all that election work you're doing. I know just the thing. I'll go brew some relaxing herbal tea, so why don't you stick around and have some?"

The orphanage director wanted to thank Juno and her farmers for all their hard work, but Juno had to turn her offer down apologetically.

"I'm sorry, but we actually have to get going. We've got a strategy meeting for the big debate we need to get to."

"Is that so? Well, if you must. I know what an important time this is for you."

A slight look of disappointment crossed the director's face, but she didn't press the issue. The woman knew full well how busy Juno and the others were. "The debate is being held in Dulleskoff, as I recall?"

"That's right—it's in Dulleskoff Central Park next Monday," Juno replied.

"Oh, that's perfect. I have some shopping I need to get done in the city, so the little ones and I can come to cheer you on."

"That would be lovely! I hope we'll see you there."

Juno and the farmers bowed good-bye to the director, then departed the orphanage and headed for the carriage they'd parked outside. As they walked, one of Juno's companions spoke up.

"Hey, Juno...you really sure we should be doin' stuff like this?"

Juno stopped, then turned around and tilted her head.

"How d'ya mean?"

"Look, I hate to say it, but visiting orphanages ain't gonna win us any elections."

"Them kiddos can't vote," another man agreed.

Ah, Juno realized. *That's what they mean.* She gave them a pained smile. "Part of the Reform Party's platform is pacifism, but we also promised to improve social welfare. How're we supposed to do that if we haven't put in the work and don't even know what's happening on the ground?"

"I mean, I get all that, but..."

"You heard how the Principles Party is throwin' money around like there's no tomorrow to put on plays and stuff, right? They're gaining supporters like crazy, and we're too broke to follow their lead."

"And besides...think about what the angels saw down in Yamato. Lotta loud voices speakin' up about them Yamato folks who're getting their memories fiddled with. We used to have the lead here in Buchwald and over in Archride, but now we're barely holding even. At this rate, we might lose 'em."

"Things ain't lookin' too good for us. If we wanna win back support, don'cha

think we should listen to how worried people are about Yamato and change our position to be a little more like the Principles Party? This is a democracy, after all. Ain't nothing wrong with giving the people what they want."

The suggestion came as a shock to Juno. These were the same men who had given her the push she'd needed to bring her case to the Seven Luminaries. When had they lost their passion? Watching the Principles Party gain ground so rapidly must have really shaken them. There were even several candidates who had swapped party allegiances, leaving the Reform Party.

Juno supposed it was only natural that they falter a bit in the face of odds as steep as theirs.

"I don't think—"

Just as she started to reply, another voice interrupted her.

"Ex-excuse me...!"

"!"

When Juno and the others turned to look, they found a young pigtailed girl standing on the path and looking up at them. She was holding a doll covered in patches. Juno recognized her as one of the children who lived at the orphanage.

"It's Sara, right? What's the matter?" Juno asked.

This child had gone out of her way to follow after them, so she clearly had something she wanted to say. Juno knew this and thus stooped to meet the young girl's eye level.

The girl cast her eyes down as she replied sadly, "The people in the village have been acting scary lately..."

"How so?"

"They used to be so nice, but now they're all talking about fighting for Yamato. They're carrying around weapons, and they've got scary voices and looks on their faces, and they're all practicing fighting. People keep shouting that anyone who doesn't fight is a coward..."

"..."

“Is there gonna be more fighting? Is...is everyone gonna die again?”

When she saw the terrified look on the girl’s face, Juno lamented the state of Elm’s public discourse.

When the ambassadors reported the injustices perpetrated on the Yamato people, it sent a huge wave of support to the Principles Party. Many of the hot-blooded younger people at the center of that movement were already training to enlist in the military campaign the Principles Party promised they would launch to liberate Yamato.

Although they were acting out of passion rather than malice, their forceful methods were frightening children like Sara all the same. There were still plenty of people who wanted to protect themselves and their loved ones above all else, but it was getting more difficult to admit that in public.

With all that going on, how could the leader of the anti-war Reform Party allow herself to pander to the masses? Respecting the will of the people was important, but as Juno saw it, that was only true once you took office. Elections determined the country’s course, so it was essential to give the citizenry as many different choices as possible.

Catering to the majority in search of votes and ignoring the voices of smaller groups was always an option...

...But it’s never the right one!

“Don’t you worry. We’re not going to let them,” Juno said.

“Hic...”

Juno wrapped her arms around the girl and hugged her tight. “Wars happen when both sides are trying to fight, so if we just stop, we’ll be able to get along with anyone, even the empire. We won’t let it come to fighting. And we’re working hard to help everyone else see things our way, too. That’s why we need people like you cheering us on, Sara.”

You had to be fifteen to participate in the election, so earning the kid’s support wouldn’t bring Juno any closer to victory.



Yet the slight woman trusted that Sara's voice would aid them nonetheless.

Upon hearing Juno's request, the girl wiped away her tears of worry—

"Y-you...can do it!"

—and shouted encouraging words as loudly as she could.

"Thanks!" Juno responded confidently, and after exchanging some good-byes, the two of them parted ways.

Juno watched the girl hurry back toward the orphanage, then turned to her friends.

"Look, I know we're behind. People are still all fired up from the secession, and while I knew things'd be tough, the stuff the angels saw down in Yamato was way worse than I imagined. At this rate, the Reform Party's probably going to lose the election."

"Exactly, so we should—"

"But!"

"I"

"If we go twisting our ideals to chase votes, what'll happen to people like that girl? Everyone wants to make sure they and their loved ones are safe. They shouldn't have to be dubbed cowards just for saying as much.

"Sympathy for Yamato is great, and it's brave of the many people who want to fight to help them out. But when the discourse gets this heated, it can end up twisting that bravery into recklessness. Out of all those people cheering for a war, how many of them are genuinely ready to accept the consequences of one without any regrets? They're going to lose family and friends, and that's if they don't perish themselves.

"How many of them would actually be happy to do that for a bunch of strangers they've never met? I'd wager that it isn't many. Right now, people are so drunk on previous victories that they're ready to dismiss any dissent as cowardice. That's why we have to hold fast to our anti-war stance and keep making our case. We're the only ones fighting for people like that poor girl.

“That’s why we have to be patient and keep speaking up. Even though they’ve been cowed into silence, our words are still reaching the people who feel the same way we do.”

Speaking as the Reform Party’s leader, Juno told her allies what she knew they needed to do—hold their current positions, no matter what adversity they faced.

Beneath her glasses, her eyes burned with the fierce light of conviction.

The farmers replied—

“Y’know, Juno, you’ve changed.”

—with admiration.

“Who, me?”

“Yeah, for sure. You’ve become a real leader.”

“You used to get all scared when anyone even raised their voice, and look at you now!”

Juno scratched her cheek, feeling a little put on the spot by her friends’ praise. “...Maybe, but you’re the ones I have to thank for that.”

The bespectacled young woman was aware that not too long ago, she never would have dreamed of accepting the responsibilities she held now. If the farmers hadn’t given her the push she needed to make her case before the Seven Luminaries, she would have remained that powerless girl grumbling and complaining in a tiny village’s town hall.

However...

“But it doesn’t much matter how I got here. What’s important is that I’m a candidate now. Every citizen with a ballot holds a piece of sovereignty in their hands, and we’re trying to convince them to spend it on us. If we hope to succeed...we can’t keep moping around like this.”

Juno needed to become someone worthy of earning that trust. She wasn’t just an activist anymore.

“All right, guys, you heard the boss! No cheap tricks; we’re gonna fight for the

Reform Party fair and square!”

“You got it! They might have gold, but we’ve got guts! The Principles Party ain’t takin’ power on our watch!”

“““Yeah!!!!”””

Seeing how confident and resolute Juno was renewed her compatriots’ morale. The woman breathed a sigh of relief. At least they could still fight...even if winning was off the table.

The woman was no fool. She had long since realized that the Reform Party would never hold the reins of power in Elm’s government. However, there was still a reason not to quit, and it lay in what was going to come *after* the election.

She was thinking about what the national assembly—the fifty elected representatives who would collectively hold the nation’s future in their hands—was going to look like. The Elm constitution stated that they needed a two-thirds majority for the national assembly to pass a resolution.

In other words, she didn’t *need* to win. If the Reform Party held seventeen of those fifty seats, they could keep the others in check. Unfortunately, the inverse was true as well. If Juno and her constituents only claimed sixteen seats, the Principles Party could push their agenda however they liked. That needed to be avoided at all costs.

Everything rests on this last debate.

Next week would be Juno’s final chance to face off against the Principles Party before the election. The Seven Luminaries were going to use their power to broadcast the verbal duel all across Elm, so the Reform Party needed to come out on top.

And I’m the Reform Party’s leader, so it’s all resting on me...!

Juno shivered at the weight of the responsibility she bore, but she clenched her fists tight and forced her body to stop.

This was her chance to prove how far she’d come—far enough to give a voice to the silent majority.



Elm's inaugural national election was reaching its final stages. Two factions had formed during the campaign trail, the Reform Party and the Principles Party, and things between them were finally going to come to a head.

Tomorrow's public debate in Dulleskoff, Elm's capital city, was the only thing left on the agenda. This was going to be the final match between Juno and Tetra. It was no exaggeration to say that whoever came out on top would win the election and gain control of the national assembly. The stakes couldn't have been higher.

As the decisive clash loomed, the election steering committee led by Ringo Oohoshi's autonomous robot Bearabbit worked tirelessly in Dulleskoff to get everything ready. Meanwhile, over in the Department of the Interior building's bathhouse, the Seven Luminaries' winsome fake god and prodigy magician Prince Akatsuki heaved a heavy sigh.

"Maaan... With Aoi down in Yamato, I thought I'd *finally* get a chance to bathe in peace without having a babysitter, but..." Akatsuki cast a dejected look over at the large public bath's rim. His gaze landed on the fair-skinned lady sitting there with naught but a single thin towel to cover her up. It was prodigy doctor Keine Kanzaki. "...Nobody told me *you* were gonna be taking over for her."

Akatsuki's voice rang with disappointment and annoyance. Keine gave him a broad smile.

"I should think it would have been obvious that someone would take over as your bodyguard. You are the living symbol of the Seven Luminaries, after all. We wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

"Okay, fine, but why *you*?"

"My, how hurtful. I may not be Aoi, but I can certainly hold my own in a scuffle. The only suitable candidates for Aoi's replacement were Shinobu and I, and with Shinobu infiltrating the empire, the process of elimination dictated that I take up the responsibility. Besides, the people of the Gustav domain have all made full recoveries, so I had some time on my hands anyhow."

Handling election work on top of their regular duties meant that Bearabbit and the other government staff were all swamped. In Keine's eyes, it was only natural that Tsukasa had chosen her for this job.

“Rrgh...!” Akatsuki shouted in frustration. “When he gets back, I’m gonna give him a piece of my mind!”

Tsukasa had trampled on the poor magician’s basic human rights one too many times, and Akatsuki was fed up with it. Was it because he looked like a girl? Was that it? Akatsuki had questions, and Tsukasa was going to answer them. Furious as he was, though, Akatsuki did at least recognize the position he was in.

Although the Prodigies were ostensibly on good terms with the Freyjagard Empire, there was no shortage of former nobles in Elm who had little love for the Seven Luminaries. There was a genuine chance that they’d send assassins after Akatsuki, and he was poorly equipped to fend them off on his own.

Akatsuki didn’t mind having a bodyguard. In fact, he insisted on it because he was terrified. However, having them follow him to the bath was a bridge too far. Scared or not, Akatsuki still had his pride.

“...Fine, you can be my bodyguard. I’ll stop complaining. But, like...at least let me bathe on my own, okay? This is embarrassing,” the blond boy asserted, hoping to convince Keine to spare a tiny bit of his privacy.

When he had made the same request to Aoi, the swordmaster had shut him down immediately, but he hoped Keine would be more reasonable.

“It is? Well, if you insist, then I suppose that could be arranged,” Keine responded.

“F-for real?”

“Of course. Just so long as you let me *restructure your body a little to make you strong enough not to require protection.*”

“...Huh?”

“Nothing major, of course, just a few incisions. A muscle graft here, a bone extension there, that sort of thing. Although I will want to get your reaction speed up, so I’ll have to operate on your cerebellum a little bit.”

“You wanna mess with my brain?!”

“Oh, worry not—it’s uniquely excruciating, but I assure you it’s nonlethal.”

“I’M PRETTY WORRIED!”

“Well, I suppose you’ll have to put up with a little babysitting, then, won’t you?”

“Ugh...”

Evidently, Keine was willing to respect Akatsuki’s request, in a way.

Akatsuki submerged himself up to his nose and let out a sigh of resignation. As the prodigy illusionist sank into the water, a hand rose out of the bath from beside him.

“U-um, if I may...,” came a timid voice. It belonged to a fox-eared and fox-tailed *byuma* boy whose features were just as feminine as Akatsuki’s—the imperial exchange student Nio Harvey.

“He’s a god, so I understand why he needs a bodyguard, but...wh-why am I here?”

Nio’s gaze darted about in an affected manner as he tried his very best to avoid looking at Keine’s half-naked body. He wasn’t entirely clear on why he wasn’t permitted to leave.

He had already been soaking when Keine and Akatsuki had shown up, and, not being one for mixed baths, he had frantically tried to scurry away upon spotting Keine. However, she had ordered him to remain without explaining why.

Despite Nio’s clear bashfulness, Keine didn’t seem embarrassed in the slightest. She knelt atop a towel and replied with an impeccable bedside manner as she stirred the liquid in the bucket beside her.

“I’m sorry for keeping you, but I just had a *liiittle* something I needed you for. It will take a moment to prepare, so feel free to continue warming yourself in the tub while you wait.”

“I, um... All right.”

“As you can see, Akatsuki and I are wearing towels, so we’re perfectly decent. Pretend as though we aren’t even here.”

“That’s easier said than done...,” Akatsuki shot back sullenly.

Keine wasn't wrong. She *did* have a towel wrapped around her torso. However, it was little more than a thin bit of cloth, and it had absorbed so much water from the humid bathhouse that it was stuck tight to her feminine curves. The color of her skin was even somewhat visible beneath it.

Aoi had bared her entire body without so much as a shred of shame, yet Akatsuki felt that this was somehow worse.

"*Hahhh...* Why do all the girls on our team have to be such exhibitionists? I guess in your case, seeing naked people is kind of an occupational hazard, huh," Akatsuki remarked.

"To some extent, certainly. But even I get hot and bothered at the sight of men's bodies from time to time, you know."

"Really? What kind of guys are you into, doc?"

"Oh, I simply can't get enough of gentlemen with healthy, pink viscera. I always have to stop myself from staring."

"That's a little *too* naked!!"

After asking an innocent question and getting a far more grotesque answer than he'd bargained for, Akatsuki felt a wave of fatigue wash over him. The magician slumped down on the side of the tub, wholly defeated.

Nio called over to him sympathetically. "I guess gods have it rough, too, huh?"

Akatsuki gave the other boy a strained smile. "...C'mon, I'm not a deity, and you know it. Thanks for being such a good sport about that, by the way. Man, when Masato went and blabbed that in front of you, I totally freaked out."

Akatsuki was referring to the incident that had happened a short while ago between him and the other Prodigies. When prodigy businessman Masato Sanada was in the middle of parting ways with the group due to a difference in priorities, he carelessly let it slip to the outsider Nio that the Prodigies were just regular people.

After that, Tsukasa had told Nio the whole story, the hidden truth known only by a select few. He explained that they were from another world and had started a religion to unite the people.

Once he was finished, Tsukasa requested that Nio not tell anyone. Although the young man from Freyjagard was shocked, he did agree to keep the secret.

His going and running his mouth would do little to shake the people's unassailable faith in the Seven Luminaries. A group of insurrectionists headed by former imperial nobles was biding its time in Elm, and Nio understood it was better to avoid giving them anything to work with. The Prodigies were all thankful for his understanding of the situation, but their gratitude came paired with guilt at the fact that they were making him an accomplice to their lies.

Akatsuki was a good-natured person by heart, so he wanted to take this chance to apologize. "...Sorry we all lied to you, by the way, and that we're making you play along."

The deception might not have been his idea, but there was no denying that he was a key player in the ruse. Among the High School Prodigies, he undoubtedly felt the most guilty.

"Oh, don't be!" Nio shook his head, his expression marked by a slight hint of surprise. "That's not how I think of it at all. The idea that you *couldn't* appear as humans for risk of allowing the Republic of Elm to become a monarchy all over again... Why, I'm amazed that Mr. Tsukasa even thought of that. Every day, I thank my lucky stars that I get to learn about governance from someone as talented as he is. If perhaps it was a real god that guided you to this world, I would owe them my eternal gratitude."

His eyes glittered with admiration as he spoke.

"You're really taken with Tsukasa, huh?" Akatsuki asked.

"Oh, absolutely. It's my dream to become a politician half as fantastic as him."

"Is that right?"

The prodigy magician didn't wish Nio luck. He couldn't, not after seeing what it had done to Tsukasa back on Earth.

The young prime minister was selfless to a fault, and he prioritized the good of his citizens over everything, even if it meant ripping his own family apart. The way he acted was so inhuman that even Masato couldn't help but call him crazy. Akatsuki didn't feel comfortable encouraging anyone to follow in

Tsukasa's footsteps. Thus, he opted to change the subject.

"Hey, I've got a different question. As a politician-in-the-making, who would you rather win the election?"

"Th-that's a tricky one..." Nio fell into thought for a moment before replying. "Well, setting aside my personal feelings as a citizen of Freyjagard," he prefaced his answer, "I think Mr. Tsukasa had it right, and it would be better if the Principles Party won."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the Reform Party's platform of abandoning Yamato goes against Elm's foundational doctrine of equality for all. Doing that would damage the country's standing considerably. If the Republic of Elm does something as blatantly self-serving as chanting about fairness while they secede from the empire, and then immediately turning a blind eye to the suffering of others, then its voice will lose a lot of weight in the international community."

"You don't think the empire is just as bad on that front?" Akatsuki pressed.

Nio shook his head. "It doesn't matter. The empire makes its decisions based on the criteria of developing the continent and maintaining order. A nation's creed is the bedrock that holds it up, and without it, pressure from powers within and without cause the country to fall apart. And that's even more true when the nation's strength comes from the trust its people have in it, as a democracy does."

"Oh, huh."

"All that said, I do think the Principles Party is being a little too hard-line in some of its stances...and there's *something else* that's been bugging me, too."

"What's that?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing directly related to the election. More importantly, what about you, Mr. God? Do you not want the Principles Party to win?"

"I don't want another war..." Akatsuki thought back to the one time he had made an appearance on the battlefield. "I only had to fight back in Findolph. It was just once, but the memory's burned into my brain. There was so much

blood, so many chopped-off body parts... And the screaming! I don't...I don't ever want to go back there."

Akatsuki still suffered nightmares of that day. Combat had been the only option. He knew that. If they hadn't gone to battle, there was no telling what might have happened to Lyrule and Elm Village.

Still, it hadn't warmed him to the idea of more fighting.

Nio had a response to that, asserting, "Even if the Reform Party wins, there's no guarantee that there *won't* be a war. Not all fights break out for bilateral reasons. A country might attack to weaken an internal faction of theirs. If something like that happened, the empire could concoct a flimsy pretext to open hostilities no matter how friendly Elm was with them. This world doesn't have the sort of moral structures in place for people to condemn that sort of thing as evil. In my opinion, fostering those institutions requires initiative of the sort the Principles Party demonstrated."

Akatsuki gave him a hesitant nod. "...Yeah, that makes sense. Whenever I hear you or Tsukasa explain stuff out like that, I'm always, like, 'Hey, I guess they're right!' I feel like I'm always just getting caught up in the moment, and I can never see the bigger picture. I mean, I don't even know what *I* want to do. Pretty funny, having a guy that clueless pretending to be a deity..."

"Mr. God...", Nio muttered, unable to respond with anything else at Akatsuki's self-deprecation.

Everyone else revered him and hailed the blond boy as a god, yet he was just some guy who barely had any idea what was happening. Nio was smart enough to comprehend that he couldn't relate to that amount of psychological pressure.

"But the thing is...", Akatsuki continued, a determined glint to his eyes. "...I figure even someone like me can figure out what it is he's *gotta* do."

"What—"

Before Nio could finish asking what the other young man meant, Keine cut him off.

"Apologies for the wait! I'm ready for you two now."

She had finished whatever she'd been up to during the conversation.

"Doc?"

"Ready...to do what?" Nio questioned. "What are those towels for?"

When the two boys turned to look, they saw that Keine had spread towels out across the floor. They covered an area large enough for the pair to lie down. A pepperminty smell wafted up from the bucket she'd been stirring earlier.

Was it some sort of medicine?

Akatsuki and Nio cocked their heads, bemused.

"Nio, you've been pulling consecutive all-nighters," Keine stated.

"What? Huh? How do you know that?"

"As a doctor, I can tell just by looking at you. Given the level of eyestrain you're exhibiting, I take it you've been using that time to study?"

"Y-yes'm. Mr. Tsukasa is gone, but that just means I need to work that much harder analyzing Elm's governing system from the perspective of a citizen of the empire."

"Your devotion to your education is admirable, but moderation in all things is key. You have tension building up in your neck and lower back, and if left untreated, your skeleton is liable to warp, giving you chronic lumbago." Keine turned her attention to her fellow High School Prodigy. "The same goes for you, Akatsuki. You've been practicing your magic tricks quite a lot lately, haven't you?"

"Well, yeah... I'm supposed to be a god, so I have to work harder to make sure I don't screw any of them up."

"While I'm certainly heartened by how seriously you're taking your role, heightened motivation can often lead people to overwork their bodies—much as you're doing right now. You might not be having any symptoms yet, but constantly exerting yourself without giving your body time to rest takes a heavy toll on your organs. I'm ordering both of you to take it easy. At this rate, you'll both end up breaking down, so I'm going to have to perform some preventive maintenance on your bodies."

“M-maintenance? What kind of maintenance?” Akatsuki asked worriedly. “Y-you’re not gonna try and restructure my body, are you?!”

“No, no, nothing of the sort. I’m just going to give you both some basic massages.”

“That’s it?” Nio inquired, a bit doubtful.

“Nothing more, I assure you. For you, Nio, I’m offering a simple massage to relieve muscle fatigue. As for you, Akatsuki, I’ve prepared a round of acupuncture and moxibustion to help your organs recover. Now, come over here and lie down unclothed.”

““Wh—!””

When Keine loudly patted the towels laid out on the ground, Akatsuki was abruptly reminded of the reception he’d received from the Blue Brigade some time ago. A chill ran down his spine. He never wanted to go through anything that embarrassing again.

“A-actually, I think I’m good!” he yelped. “Besides, I feel okay! You must be seeing things!”

Nio voiced his support for the sentiment. “I—I think I’ll pass, too, but thank you! I’ll make sure I go to bed at a reasonable time from now on!”

The two of them leaped out of the tub and tried to make their escape.

“W-wait, huh?”

“Why’s my body...feel so tingly?!”

They soon discovered that their flight had been destined to end in failure.

Right as they were about to open the bathhouse door, a prickling sensation shot through them from out of nowhere, and their bodies felt as heavy as lead. Unable to withstand the weight, Akatsuki and Nio dropped to their knees and crumpled to the floor. They would have wondered why, but they didn’t even get a chance to.

“Oh-ho-ho. I’m sorry, did you two forget who I am?”

““——!””

A dark shadow descended upon them, and a pair of cold hands grabbed the two boys by the ankles.

When they turned their leaden heads to look over their shoulders—

“I am Keine Kanzaki, prodigy doctor. None but the healthy shall be rid of me, not even the dead.”

—they found a beautiful demon standing with a wide grin on her face.

““AHHHHH!!!!””

The two boys screamed as they were dragged away. An hour later, a Department of the Interior employee found them sprawled on the floor with dead eyes and ecstatic expressions on their faces.



CHAPTER 6

✻ The Public Debate ✻

Summer was winding down, and the season's hottest days had come and gone. It was the time of year where the sun's intensity waned, and its heat became pleasant rather than overbearing.

At long last, it was time for the final debate between the Principles Party and the Reform Party.

Some of the people who'd gathered in Dulleskoff's central plaza to watch were from the city, but far more had rushed over from nearby villages. The plaza was completely packed, and the crowd was so large that it spilled out onto the city's main road. All in all, there were easily over a hundred thousand people in attendance.

Naturally, most people in Elm couldn't make it to Dulleskoff in person, but thanks to the "obelisk" speakers Ringo Oohoshi had installed in every settlement in the country, they were able to listen in to the debate.

It was no exaggeration to say that all eyes in Elm were on the debate. There had been several smaller gatherings with minor candidates facing off against their local opponents, but this was the first time that the two major parties' key representatives would square off.

Everyone was dying to know what the leaders of each side had to say.

And with all of Elm watching—

"All right, everyone, let's get this public debate between the leaders of the Principles Party and the Reform Party started."

—Elch, chairman of the election steering committee, stood atop the stage Bearabbit had prepared in the plaza. With a mic in hand, he gave the opening announcements.

“Before we get into the debate proper, each side will get a chance to speak briefly about their campaign promises and policy positions. Reform Party, you have the floor.”

Elch stepped back to the rear of the stage and traded places with one of the people waiting in the wings.

Excluding Elch, four people were atop the stage: Tetra from the Principles Party, Juno from the Reform Party, and each of their advisers.

Juno, the one Elch had ceded the floor to, rose from her chair, strode to the center of the platform, and addressed the crowd.

“My name is Juno, and I’m here representing the Reform Party. The first thing I’d like to do is address a misconception I’ve heard a lot lately. People seem to think that the Reform Party holds little respect for the divine teaching of equality for all, but nothing could be further from the truth.

“Similar to the Principles Party, we of the Reform Party drafted plans with our national creed of equality for all in the forefront of our minds. Unlike the angels of the Seven Luminaries, we’re only human. There are limits to what we can do, and because of that, we have to establish priorities.

“As you’re all aware, the Republic of Elm has yet to fully recover from our last war. Some people have been disabled and left without homes. Many have even lost their families. And the relief we’ve been able to offer them has been far from sufficient. A nation and its government have a duty first and foremost to its own people. Until we’ve made sure that everyone within our borders is okay, offering aid to other countries has to wait.

“Our policy platform is based around three central pillars. The first one is...”

The Reform Party’s agenda and policies were structured around three main ideas: peaceful diplomacy, disarmament, and welfare.

Specifically, they wanted to maintain peaceful relations with the neighboring Freyjugard Empire, reduce armaments in concert with the continued use of

foreign trade to expand their economy, and make a dedicated push to improve education, increase access to medical care, and strengthen financial safety nets across the country.

Juno explained all that to the masses in plain, easy-to-understand terms. Her voice was free of faltering or hesitation, settling gently in the voters' ears all across Elm almost like a pleasant tune. The woman clearly knew her party's campaign promises backward and forward. Her address went on for about ten minutes, and after she was finished, she bowed to the crowd. Then Juno returned to her seat amid scattered applause from her supporters.

Then, Principles Party representative Tetra rose and began her statements. Like Juno, Tetra's promises were structured around a trio of ideas: aggressive diplomacy, armament expansion, and rescuing Yamato.

In keeping with the nation's core principle of equality for all, one of the party's top priorities was rescuing Yamato. Tetra's plan was to increase Elm's military capacity massively, then use that to pressure the Freyjagard Empire into returning Yamato's sovereignty. If Freyjagard refused, they would then invade Yamato and liberate it by force. That was the future the Principles Party envisioned.

Tetra gripped the mic so tightly, it seemed about to break as she outlined her platform, reiterating her points over and over. Her cries were so animated the crowd could see the back of her throat, and the fact that she was sending spittle through the air didn't slow her down in the slightest.

If Juno's speech was akin to a song, Tetra's was a violent roar.

The way she was shouting was wholly unnecessary. The crowd could hear her just fine through the mic, and if anything, all her volume was doing was causing audio feedback. Tetra didn't care, however. She continued crying out at the top of her lungs.

Glaux was the brains of their operation, and she was following his instructions strictly. The Principles Party's philosophy was one of action, and there was nothing less compelling than a decisive plan delivered in a mellow, emotionless tone. Glaux knew that the way to reach people was with passion and vigor, even if it meant sacrificing some audio quality, and his tactic was a complete

success.

Tetra was a conventionally attractive woman by just about any standard, so her valiant willingness to abandon that dignity as she championed her holy war gave her a different sort of beauty altogether, a mysterious charisma that filled men's hearts with valor and women's with admiration.

"If they're willing to magically manipulate their people's minds, who knows what other cruelties they're subjecting the Yamato populace to?! Even as we speak, the danger to their lives grows! As humanitarians, we cannot allow the Yamato situation to persist for even a second more! God Akatsuki blessed us with the grand cause of equality for all, and we must not allow it to be stained!!"

""""Yeahhh!!!!""""

At Tetra's call to action, a thunderous round of applause erupted from the crowd.

"She's right, dammit! We need to step up!"

"We're God's vanguard! We'll never back down!"

"It's time we taught those imperial thugs a lesson!"

Tetra's words resonated with men and women of all ages. As their applause shook the air, Juno's adviser gulped from the seat beside hers.

"Things aren't looking great for us, are they? If this frenzy carries through to the election, we'll have trouble getting even a third of the seats, let alone a majority..."

"Don't worry," Juno assured him, brushing her compatriot's worries aside with a tone as sharp as a knife.

"Juno?"

The man couldn't help but glance at her doubtfully. There wasn't so much as a shred of fear or hesitation in her expression. Instead, determination shone in her eyes as she looked on at Tetra.

"After that big flashy speech, it'd be weirder if the crowd *wasn't* on their side. But that's about to change."

The debate between the two representatives taking place that day wasn't just some street fight. Before he left for Yamato, Tsukasa Mikogami himself had organized the event so that it would give as much useful information to the voters as possible. The event followed a series of strict rules.

One of those guidelines prevented candidates from offering rebuttals or comments during their opponent's opening statement. If both sides were free to say whatever they wanted, it would be all too trivial for them to drown out the opposing side's opening statement with ad hominem attacks and pointless questions. Doing so would plunge the audience into chaos, preventing them from understanding what points were even being made.

Limiting all interaction defeated the purpose of a debate, though, so Tsukasa had deliberately divided the event into two parts: the opening statements phase and the discussion phase.

At the moment, the debate was still in the first stage, where the voters were given a chance to listen to and review each side's philosophy. No matter how many objections one side had to what the other was saying, they weren't allowed to interject. The rules dictated that they just sit still and listen.

Once Tetra was done, the time for review would be over. Then, the *real* debate—the decisive battle between the Principles Party and the Reform Party—would begin.

“They’ve got a *glaring flaw* in their plan. Once I get a chance to point it out, their whole position will come tumbling down,” Juno whispered. It was no secret that the Reform Party was on the back foot, but Juno planned on turning the tables on the Principles Party with all of Elm’s voters watching.

...It'll be okay. I can do this.

The petite woman glanced down at the document on the table before her. That file was the weapon she'd prepared to take charge of this showdown.

Juno took heart by reminding herself that the facts were on her side.

“All right. Now that both parties have restated their campaign promises, we're going to move on to the debate between the representatives. If either side has comments to make on the other's positions, please raise your hand.

And both of you, let's make sure to keep things civil," announced Elch.

Immediately, Juno thrust her arm into the air like a mighty warrior raising their sword. "The Reform Party has a question."



"Then you have the floor. Unless there are any objections?"

Tetra gave Elch's question a shake of the head. "Please, be my guest." She was confident she could handle anything Juno lobbed at her. There was no doubt in Tetra's mind that her side was just. However, Juno felt the exact same way.

Uncowed by Tetra's piercing gaze, Juno rose from her seat and went on the offensive.

"This is something that's been on my mind for a while. Based on your speech, my takeaway is that the Principles Party is determined to liberate Yamato, even if it means taking up arms against the Freyjagard Empire. This is because the principle of equality for all doesn't stop at Elm's borders, but applies to the people of Yamato as well, and by extension, to all the people of the world. Do I understand that correctly?"

"You do. God Akatsuki taught us the importance of fairness and demonstrated his faith in us by asking that we steward Elm's path ourselves. Turning our backs on that philosophy out of base self-preservation would be a gross betrayal of that trust. Just as we were once saved, it now falls on us to save the people of Yamato. As God's vanguard, we have a moral obligation to do so."

Behind her glasses, Juno narrowed her gaze at Tetra's answer. "That's what I thought."

Tetra was overlooking something. Something huge.

"I must admit, I'm impressed by your piety. Unfortunately, *your plan won't work.*"

"What are you talking about? Are you suggesting that the empire is stronger than us?"

Tetra made no effort to hide her indignation, but Juno just shook her head.

“Not at all. It’s not an issue of winning or losing.”

“...?”

“Even if your military push successfully frees Yamato, the battle with the empire will leave countless people dead and wounded. We’ll need to offer substantial amounts of public aid to families who’ve lost their livelihoods and to soldiers too badly injured to work.”

“We will, and my talented staff has drawn up a budget accounting for that. Thanks to the current economic boom we’re experiencing, I can guarantee we’ll be able to provide for those in need. The financial details are all listed in the policy document we sent you. Have you not read it?”

Tetra was referring to a pamphlet that detailed all her party’s campaign promises. With assistance from the election steering committee, they’d been able to distribute copies to both parties’ candidates as well as to any voters who wanted one.

Not only had Juno read it, but she’d also gone over it with a fine-toothed comb. That was why she spoke with such confidence.

“I’m sorry, but your calculations have a flaw.”

“What...?!”

“The thing is, *they don’t take into account the public aid to Yamato’s dead and wounded.*”

“?! ”

When Juno made her declaration, an audible stir ran through the crowd.

Everyone was baffled. Why should they have to shoulder the bill for Yamato’s war victims?

As Juno was about to point out, though, that was because their conceptions of war were stuck under old paradigms.

“Fighting a war in the name of equality means it can’t be a conflict of aggression. It must be one of liberation. You can’t fund it with pillaging like people used to. Once Yamato is free, Elm will have a moral duty to treat its citizens with the same consideration it does its own. You aren’t planning on

enslaving them after you save them, are you?”

“O-of course not!”

That was the obvious answer, coming from the Principles Party. However...

“The problem is, the expansion of armaments you’ve promised to carry out is going to drain the budget to the point where we simply won’t have the money to help Yamato. In other words, even if you win your war against the empire, Elm still won’t be able to save anyone. I’ve prepared an amended version of your budget that takes the aid and infrastructure repair Yamato will need into account.

“Now, I have some doubts about your one thousand five hundred percent projected economic growth rate, given that we’ll have just gone to war with our biggest trading partner, the Freyjagard Empire, but we can leave that as it is for the moment and just take a look at the costs that will come after we free Yamato.”

At this, the man beside Juno stood, then walked across the stage and handed copies of the revised budget Juno had prepared to Tetra and her second-in-command.

“If anyone in the audience wants to take a look, we’ll be distributing copies later. However, to sum it up for you...the amount of money we’d need to liberate Yamato comes out to triple our next year’s projected tax revenues. If you force this plan through, it’ll completely destroy our economy. How do you intend to square that away? The Principles Party has an obligation to the people to explain themselves!”

“.....!”

A flicker of unease flashed across Tetra’s face at her opponent’s attack. Juno had worked as an accountant in a relatively sizable town, and she had more significant experience in this area. Although she knew on a conceptual level that waging a war of liberation would be costly, the thought that the newly liberated Yamato people would need an even larger sum of money hadn’t even crossed Tetra’s mind.

The leader of the Principles Party floundered for a response. The silence in the

air was palpable. She was visibly flustered. Juno's statement had struck Tetra right where it hurt.

Nations tolerated spending vast sums of money on war because they planned on making it back through plunder. When you defeated someone in war, you got to take their land, money, and even manpower.

That wouldn't work for Elm, however. As long as they operated under the philosophy of equality for all, they weren't going to be able to loot and pillage their enemies. For them, war was nothing more than a giant money pit. It simply wasn't viable.

Juno could feel it—her question had cut deep. Her heart brimmed with hope. If she was lucky, this would pull all of the Principles Party's support right out from under their feet. Unfortunately...that was not to be.

Tetra might not have been much of a thinker, but she had someone with her who was capable of picking up that slack.

"If I may." The old man sitting beside Tetra raised his hand and slowly rose to his feet. "My name is Glaux von Einzgarm of the Principles Party, and I believe I can answer your question." As he spoke, a temperate smile danced across his lips.



Juno knew this man. Glaux von Einzgarm was a former noble and current candidate running as a Principles Party member in the Gustav province. If he was the one standing up now, then it meant that Tetra was just the Principles Party's figurehead, and he was the one who actually controlled the party.

Juno realized this when she saw his composed smile—

"Go ahead."

—and she shifted her gaze to him, knowing that he was her true adversary.

Glaux gave Juno a calm bow, then offered her his reply. "The Reform Party makes a valid point, and I certainly understand where you're coming from. Taking care of Yamato's dead and wounded will cost money; that much is true. However, as the person who drew up those budget estimates, I can assure you I was aware of that when I did. The thing is, my original draft takes Yamato's

welfare into full account, so your revisions won't be necessary."

Juno cocked her head to the side. "I don't understand. The budget you sent out didn't have a line item for restoring Yamato."

"Oh, of course not."

"...?"

Juno couldn't make heads or tails of Glaux's statement. What was he talking about?

As confusion began creeping into her expression, Glaux maintained his genial smile—

"Our recovery efforts will include substantial welfare efforts for the people of Yamato, and the Principles Party intends to *make the Freyjagard Empire foot the entire bill in the form of reparations.*"

—and gave her an utterly outrageous reply.

"?!?!"

"So, as you can see, we don't need to amend the budget at all."

"D-do you even hear yourself right now?! You want to seize an imperial domain by force, and you plan on demanding reparations on top of that? The empire will never agree!" Glaux's claim was so ridiculous that Juno couldn't help but shout as she made her rebuttal.

If all they did was *free* Yamato, that would have been one thing. After all, the empire barely even wanted it. The Resistance's presence made holding the land dangerous, and Yamato had no major industries to make that risk worthwhile. Nobles refused to govern the region, so even after Freyjagard had gone out of its way to invade and annex Yamato, it had to name the country a self-governing dominion, embarrassing Freyjagard in the process.

Despite being part of the Reform Party, even Juno had to admit that taking Yamato wouldn't necessarily sink their relationship with the empire. Demanding that the empire pay for the reconstruction efforts would be an entirely different story.

"If you do that, then the Yamato self-governing dominion will be the least of

our worries! It'll mean an all-out war between Elm and Freyjagard!! You want us to march into battle with the scars from the People's Revolution still fresh?! We don't have the military strength or the finances to fight a conflict that big!! It's simply not possible!!"

Glaux's promises were, at best, irresponsible and, at worst, outright lies. Given his position as someone trying to earn the trust of the people, that was unacceptable.

However, when Juno bellowed indignantly at his dishonest answer—

"Impossible?! Nothing is impossible!!"

—Glaux's calm demeanor vanished, and he met her volume, roaring back at the woman.

"How dare you flippantly declare that it isn't possible?! Why, we've *already proved that it can be done*! The Republic of Elm started as a humble, remote village, and the People's Revolution forged us into a nation! We need only repeat what we've done!

"It was a lone village, up against the full might of the Freyjagard Empire! Think about how much simpler the task before us is! The citizens of Elm stand strong and free, and together, there's nothing we can't do!

"You would turn to those needy villagers and talk of budgets and pinching goss?! As a proud citizen of the republic, you should be ashamed of yourself! We have a duty to offer these people a helping hand, just as God Akatsuki did for us! What other option do we have?!"

"You aren't addressing my question at all!" Juno replied. "I'm talking about how realistic your campaign promises are. Please stop dodging the issue!"

"Dodging the issue?! If anyone's evading the problem, it's you, young lady!"

"What?!"

"Fighting wars because you have money, negotiating peace when you're broke? That's not what we're talking about here! This is a discussion about rescuing Yamato from the wicked empire. And if we need more money to do so, then it's our job as politicians to do *whatever it takes* to produce that capital!

“All you’ve been doing is rattling off flimsy excuses about why you should get to sit on your hands, nothing more! If finances are an issue, we can solve that problem when we get to it. Everything else must come second to spreading equality across the world!” declared Glaux.

“All-out war against the Freyjagard Empire, who controls their citizens through force, is nothing to scoff at!” Juno hurriedly shot back.

Glaux thrust his fist into the air as he spoke. “The empire is nothing to fear! When our forces march on Drachen with freedom in their hearts, those who suffer under the empire’s oppressive rule will welcome us with open arms. Why, they’ll take up weapons themselves and join our cause...!!”

Juno was aghast. *He’s talking a lot, but he isn’t saying anything!*

After shouting down her question, Glaux had gone on to make an impassioned speech full of sound and fury, but he hadn’t even attempted to address her concerns about how unrealistic his pledges were.

This nonsense wasn’t a debate. This was a mockery—a gross display of contempt for Juno and the intelligence of every voter listening. There was no way anyone would fall for such a blatant—

“““YEAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”””

“Wh—?!”

“You tell her, Einzgarm!”

“We’re not gonna sit here and let the empire push us around!”

“Hell yeah! We beat ’em once, and we can do it again!”

“We’re proud, we’re free, and we’re gonna save Yamato!”

Cheers erupted from the crowd, and everyone raised their fists in the air one after another, just as Glaux had.

Juno was flabbergasted at this enthusiasm. What were they cheering about? It didn’t make a lick of sense. Eventually, though, something dawned on her.

Do they not realize that he’s mocking them?!

Hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh... Glaux watched through narrowed eyes as Juno’s face

went pale from shock at the crowd's unexpected response. He sneered to himself beneath his bushy white mustache. *You're a clever one, girl, so it's no wonder you don't understand their reaction. I never gave you a proper answer, and I didn't say a single thing of substance. Yet they take my side all the same.*

Glaux understood that the facts were on Juno's side. Not only did Elm have no way of making the empire cough up the money to help Yamato, but the budget he'd concocted was a complete fabrication.

A month ago, the Elm Ministry of Finance had put out an estimate for their trade surplus for the next year, and the Freyjagard Empire had accounted for about 80 percent of it. The hope of reaching that 1,500 percent growth rate after declaring war was a pipe dream.

Furthermore, even if the Republic of Elm was able to hit that number by some miracle, no pillaging to offset war costs meant that a drawn-out conflict would leave the nation in ruin before long.

All your doubts are justified, girl, and yet despite that—or perhaps because of that...

Juno had failed to realize something critical.

Being correct never guaranteed that people would agree with you.

You're a clever one, girl. Sadly, the voters aren't nearly as bright as you give them credit for. Most of them used to be commoners. The minute you start talking about accurate or inaccurate budgets, you've already gone over their heads.

Glaux knew that Juno might as well have been speaking a foreign language to the masses.

All they understand is how things feel to them, so just make as many bombastic campaign promises as you can, and they'll be eating out of your hand. Consistency, how you're going to pay for it... None of that matters. Once you get elected, you can just ignore every oath you ever took. You could even do exactly what you swore not to, and the rabble will have no way of stopping you.

Trying to win votes through honesty was a sucker's game. Reality could never compete with dreams, and when the voters couldn't tell the difference, it only

made things easier. Of course, Glaux could never admit all that in front of his prudish leader or her Principles Party true believers.

To assembly members like me, people who don't attempt to run for election are nothing more than kites floating through the air. They're not like you, girl. They aren't planning for the future or acting with clear goals in mind. All they do is drift about and follow the crowd.

Now that Elm was finally free from the empire, there was a solid anti-Freyjagard sentiment in the air. Playing nice with the empire was the last thing anyone wanted to do. People wanted to act tough, even if it didn't accomplish anything. The fact that the Principles Party would come out on top had been obvious from the get-go.

That's why I'm sitting over here and not there next to you.

Glaux had one more ace up his sleeve, too. He was aware of something that gave the Principles Party an insurmountable edge over the Reform Party. It was connected to the Yamato situation.

I'm going to reveal it in front of everyone...and choke out what little life the Reform Party has left.

"Now that I've satisfied the voters, I have a question of my own I'd like to ask."



Satisfied the voters?!

Glaux's declaration made Juno want to scream, but she restrained herself. Nothing he said had even come close to a satisfactory answer. She had accused the Principles Party's ideals of being hot air, and Glaux hadn't actually refuted it.

When Juno peered down at the crowd, however, she realized that the former nobleman was correct; his statement *had* satisfied them. If she kept hounding him, all it would do was lower their estimation of her.

Juno choked back her frustration and nodded. "...Go ahead."

"Thank you for indulging me," Glaux replied with a relaxed bow. "After hearing the Reform Party's campaign promises again, I was reminded that despite our differences, your ideals are worthy of admiration as well. If you

were able to implement all the public welfare reforms you intend to successfully, Elm would become a great nation indeed.”

“There’s no ifs about it. We’ve performed dozens of calculations, and as we’ve detailed in our pamphlet, our campaign’s plans are based on a reliable system that Elm’s budget can support. When the Reform Party takes office, we *will* make that a reality.”

All of Juno’s assertions were based on numbers. Elm was a fledgling country and in desperate need of startup funds. Thus, the angels’ provisional government had issued bonds in lieu of just confiscating land belonging to former nobles. Juno knew that by expanding those bonds so that anyone could buy them, she could raise the funds she needed for her party’s welfare projects.

The young woman was a longtime accountant, so she was perfectly at home handling those sorts of issues. The Principles Party’s promises may have been founded upon smoke and mirrors, but hers were firm as concrete.

Glaux gave an exaggerated tilt of his head. “Would you, I wonder?”

“...?”

“The plan you published was marvelously constructed, to be sure. I do not doubt that your new bonds could raise the amount you hope for. Yet ultimately, the task of allocating those funds will still fall on *people*.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re implying.”

“Then let me be blunt: I have serious concerns about whether the Reform Party will actually use those funds to advance social welfare.”

“Wh—?!”

Juno’s adviser, unable to restrain himself, let out an indignant roar. “You callin’ us liars?!”

Glaux was content to ignore the outburst and instead kept his gaze trained on Juno. “I’ve read up on you, Ms. Juno. You work as an accountant in Narnia City in Buchwald, is that correct?”

“...Yes, so?”

“I actually made a stop at Narnia on my campaign trail. It might not be the

biggest city around, but it has a lot of beauty and heart. As its auditor, you single-handedly oversee the entire municipality's finances, and I'm sure you command quite a respectable salary for doing so. I hear you even paid your entire election deposit in cash. That's quite impressive, especially for someone your age."

"I don't see what my personal funds have to do with this election." Juno tried to suppress it, but her annoyance leaked into her voice all the same. She had no idea what Glaux was getting at. What did her profession have to do with how trustworthy the Reform Party was?

"Why did you have so much money saved up?"

"Excuse me?"

"Allow me to rephrase. *Why didn't you give it to the poor?*"

"...?!"

"If you truly cared about others, amassing wealth should have been the farthest thing from your mind. You should have donated as much as you could toward helping the widows and orphans that you yourself just admitted required aid. But you didn't, did you? You hoarded it all away for yourself. And yet now you want us to believe that you're prepared to work selflessly for the sake of our nation's people?!"

Oh, I get it. That's his angle?

When Juno finally deduced Glaux's attack plan, it left her appalled. The whole point of the debate was for both sides to get a chance to raise and answer questions about campaign promises to give the voters more information to make their choice. However, Glaux's question—if it could even be called that—was only a thinly veiled dig to try and undermine the populace's trust in her.

Unable to conceal her hatred for the old man standing across from her any longer, Juno fired back. "That's a bold accusation, especially coming from the wealthiest man in Archride. Why, I could say the exact same thing about you, *former duke* Glaux von Einzgarm. Or are you going to pass off your predatory lending practices as some sort of great public good?"

The moment the words left her lips, Glaux's narrowed eyes gleamed.

“Oh, of course not. In fact, I agree wholeheartedly—I’m no more trustworthy than you are. Earning people’s trust requires performing noble deeds, a field in which I’m sorely lacking. *And that’s precisely why I declined to serve as the Principles Party’s representative.*”

“Ah—” A shiver ran down Juno’s spine.

“As you and our audience are undoubtedly aware, the heroism of Great Scythe Tetra, our party’s representative, is second to none. When the Gustav domain was in crisis, she took up arms with no concern for her own safety and fought to protect her neighbors! With her at our helm, the Principles Party can offer the voters pledges they can believe in. They can trust her to work tirelessly for the public, never once being swayed by personal interests. But you? What can you and your Reform Party offer as a guarantee? Why should the people believe a woman who covets wealth and has never sacrificed for others in her life?!”

The crowd stirred.

“That’s a good point.”

“Will someone who only thinks about herself really decide to help the needy?”

“Who’s to say she won’t help herself to our public funds?”

Oh, this is bad...

When she heard the vitriolic whispers coming from the crowd, Juno broke into a cold sweat.

As he watched her face grow ever paler, Glaux chuckled.

Finally realized, have you?

Juno didn’t own territory or have a title the way wealthy nobles did. She was just a commoner, albeit a relatively well-off one. Saving her money when she had extra to spare was the smart thing to do. If anything, Glaux was the odd one for lambasting her fiscal responsibility. Compared to Tetra, though, Juno came up short.

Tetra had built a volunteer army and put her own life on the line. There was

no competing with that. At best, Juno looked like a nobody, and that was why Glaux had sided with the Principles Party. Tetra had what Juno didn't. She possessed a history of working selflessly for others, which gave her an undeniable appeal.

And if you want people to follow you, young lady, you need charisma more than anything.

Juno was talented, but her proficiencies lay on the bureaucratic side of things. Being a successful politician demanded something else—prestige.

It could come from your pedigree. Perhaps you were even a relative of the emperor's. Or maybe you were a general with a distinguished military career. Regardless, your renown had to come from somewhere, and when it did, people listened to you. Even when what you were saying was nonsense, they would support you all the same. Illogical as it was, Glaux had seen things play out that way many times during his tenure in the Freyjagard government.

Nobles and commoners alike adored notoriety. They couldn't get enough of it, whether you were a fast runner, kind of cute, or had the benefit of others simply recognizing your name. You might not think it, but a lot of people voted based on such qualities. The combination of Tetra's valiant military background and the fame that accompanied it gave her an overwhelming advantage in the election. Juno would never be able to surpass her opponent on that front, and Glaux understood that focusing on that was a surefire way to ensure the Principles Party came out on top.

"You're right. I don't have experience doing this kind of work," Juno responded. "But there's no time like the present, and when the provisional government announced that they were going to ignore the empire's demand to turn Princess Kaguya over, I knew that something had to change! Elm is heading on a course for war again, but it's not too late to stop it, and I'm prepared to do everything I can to make that happen! Please believe me. All I can do is ask for your trust...!"

"But you would say anything, wouldn't you? Especially if you intended to embezzle the country's funds for yourself. Or worse...perhaps your plans to scale back our military are so you can hand us back to the empire on a silver

platter! We have no way of knowing what brand of wickedness truly lies within your heart.”

“I would never—”

Juno scrambled to assemble a counterargument, but Glaux laughed her off. The talk among the audience shifted more to his side with each passing moment. Cold looks were hurled at the Reform Party from every direction.

Juno bit her lip in frustration. *There’s nothing I can do!*

Glaux was right. There wasn’t anything she could say that would make a difference now. Juno’s lack of philanthropic experience wasn’t the sort of thing that could be outweighed by an impassioned speech or two. She had carried out her professional duties with aplomb, never committing even the smallest of indiscretions and always giving work her best effort for the sake of her town. Anyone who lived there could attest to her dedication.

Unfortunately, it was only a job. There was no way something like that could hold a candle to the paragon of selflessness that was Tetra.

“Mr. Glaux, I think that’s quite enough!”

“...?!”

Right as Juno was about to consider defeat, help came from the last place anyone would have expected: Tetra. Her voice cut through the air as she admonished Glaux and turned her furious gaze upon him.

“There’s nothing wrong with finding your calling later in life! I admit that I got a bit heated myself the first time she and I met, but although our approaches differ, Juno is fighting on behalf of the Republic of Elm just as we are! I would ask that you not slander her good intentions!”

The rage in her eyes and the indignation in her voice were the real deal. Upon receiving the full brunt of them both, Glaux turned to Juno—

“Of course, my apologies. You’re absolutely right; I went too far. We took as much time in choosing this vocation as Ms. Juno did, after all. I hope you can forgive me for my uncouth remarks. I have no further questions.”

—and halted his offensive, then took his seat.

Tetra offered Juno an apology as well before sitting back down alongside him, leaving Juno the only one standing.

They played me...! she thought as a bitter feeling spread throughout her chest.

“Sigh... That Tetra, always so gallant...”

“And noble, too... Y’know, those imperial knights could stand to learn a thing or two from her.”

“That Juno probably isn’t a bad person or anything, but if I had to pick one to trust, it’d be Tetra every time.”

Forcing Tetra to intervene had been Glaux’s plan. Juno hadn’t been able to deflect the former nobleman’s questions independently. Instead, Tetra had stepped in to save her with everyone there to see it. If the power dynamic between the two of them hadn’t been clear before, it was now. The Reform Party had been defeated in the worst way possible.

“Rrgh...!”

Glaux had her dancing on the palm of his hand throughout the whole event. Juno trembled at the realization, and she had to fight desperately to make it stop.

No, I can’t cry! I can still...

She could still fight.

As the bespectacled young woman’s heart threatened to break in two, she tried her hardest to find her confidence again.





Akatsuki looked down, watching the debate from his special seat atop the rooftop terrace of a nearby four-story building.

“Phew... I was afraid they were going to start brawling right there on the stage. It’s a good thing Tetra stepped in when she did.” As he breathed a sigh of relief, he turned and looked at Keine, his bodyguard and seatmate. “By the way, Doc, who would you rather see win?”

“An interesting question,” she replied before considering her answer for a moment. “While I can certainly appreciate the points Tsukasa made about morality, I must say that as a physician, I was quite taken with the pragmatism of the Reform Party’s ideas about how to advance the nation’s medical care. From what I can see, however, it doesn’t look like our Reform Party friends are doing too well.”

The immediate reply to Keine’s musings—

“They’re not, but more importantly, they picked a fight with the wrong man.”

—came in a deep, booming voice slightly hoarsened from a touch of alcohol.

It certainly hadn’t come from Akatsuki. When the two High School Prodigies turned to look, they found a familiar face and figure standing at the entrance to the rooftop.

“Marquis Archride. It’s been too long.”

“Please, Dr. Keine, I’m just a humble vice-minister of defense now.”

The man’s impeccable posture and muscular frame belied his advanced age. He was known as the Shrewd General of the North, and as the former lord of the Archride region, he’d once gone up against Tsukasa on orders from Gustav. Now, though, as he’d just pointed out, he was a Republic of Elm cabinet vice-minister working under Tsukasa’s command and overseeing the Ministry of Defense and its military arm, the Order of the Seven Luminaries.

“And God Akatsuki, it’s been some time.”

“A-ahem! V-verily! So it has, but worry yourself not! Bwa-ha-ha!”

“Mr. Archride, I’m a bit surprised that you didn’t run in the election yourself.

Your reputation would have made you a front-runner,” Keine remarked.

“Perhaps, but it would have been irresponsible for me to abandon my duties so soon after taking them on. Moreover...the people won this nation with their grit and determination. It would have felt wrong for me, a former noble, to force my way into their national assembly. We had our day, and now it’s time for us to assume advisory roles so we can help the populace as they shape their new country themselves,” Archride responded.

The man strode over to the terrace railing and directed his gaze down to Glaux. The look in his eyes was sharp, almost reproachfully so. “Not everyone shares my sentiment, however. I knew he would show his face eventually, but I never imagined he would make his move in the very first election.”

With doubt in his voice, Akatsuki questioned, “Is the old man really all that?”

“He was the foreign chancellor under the previous emperor.”

That was enough to earn a reaction out of even Keine. “Goodness. He must really be quite something.”

In the Freyjagard Empire, the foreign chancellor held near-complete authority over all matters related to diplomacy. Although they were sometimes looked down upon for how little domestic power they possessed compared to other members of the Five Chancellors, the fact remained that it was one of the highest-ranking bureaucratic titles in the Freyjagard Empire.

“He was forced to flee the capital after losing a power struggle against Archduke Weltenbruger, but his mind is as sharp as ever. During my time as a domain lord, his council saved me more times than I can count.”

“So, if he’s siding with the Principles Party, then...does that mean the Reform Party’s going to lose?”

Archride gave Akatsuki’s inquiry a nod. “Miss Juno is a clever one, but she is yet young.” Juno had come into the debate under the assumption that it would be the election’s deciding moment, but as Archride went on to point out, she had it all wrong. “When you gather this big of a crowd together, the side that *currently has more supporters* is going to have an overwhelming advantage. With the sort of fervor and enthusiasm they’ll bring, trying to change the tides

and get them back onto your side is all but impossible.

“The true turning point wasn’t today, it was everything up until now, and Mr. Glaux knew it. That’s why he was willing to pay through the nose to hold public events across the nation and stir people up with anti-Freyjagard sentiments. He wanted to make sure that his side would be so impassioned on the day of the debate that they wouldn’t dream of reconsidering their votes. Everyone here—the audience, Miss Juno, even Miss Tetra—they’re all dancing to his tune.”

As a practiced controversialist, Glaux knew exactly where battles like this election were won and lost.

“...Perhaps it was a mistake for me not to run. The way things are going, everything will end up playing out exactly as he intends.”

Archride only had a vague notion of how dangerous that would be for the Republic of Elm, but even that was enough to frighten him. He knew better than most what kind of people nobles tended to be.



The debate went on for another hour after that, but its proceedings were just as lopsided as Archride predicted. Juno tried attacking the Principles Party’s shaky foundations from every angle she could think of. However, Glaux’s masterful audience provocation ensured that nothing she said stuck with people. He continued stirring up more and more anti-imperial sentiment and convinced the crowd that they were mighty for having bested Freyjagard.

It was odd when you thought about it. Most of those present had nothing to do with the People’s Revolution the High School Prodigies had started. It had begun without their knowledge and ended in the same way. Yet despite their connection to the actual revolt being nonexistent, they cheered for it now and called for another war as though they were already on the front lines.

The habit of taking predecessors’ successes as one’s own and gloating about them was a common occurrence. Perhaps that was due to the social nature of humans.

Glaux’s time as a noble had taught him all about that psychological quirk. He had seen how it was in a person’s nature to cling to things like lineage. Some grew so enamored with the prestige of those who came before them that they

tried to claim a part of it for themselves. And because Glaux knew about that tendency, he was able to exploit it.

Once the discussion portion of the debate had concluded, it was time to take questions from the audience. The exercise made painfully clear the difference between the two sides' prospects. The idea was to have the candidates look through the crowd for people with raised hands and call them up, but so few people had inquiries for the Reform Party that Juno had to strain her eyes to find enough. Meanwhile, the Principles Party had no end of questions to choose from, even after responding to two dozen.

The audience had all but completely lost interest in the Reform Party. They were so enraptured by the Principles Party buzz that all they cared about was its plan. It was plain that many were assuming that Tetra's victory was assured now.

"What do you plan on doing for the people fighting for Yamato who die or get injured too grievously to work?"

"I'm totally on board with the war, but won't it mean higher taxes like with past conflicts?"

"I'm no fan of toadying to the empire like the Reform Party wants us to, but... I'm no fan of us spending all our money on fighting them, either..."

In between quick consulting sessions with Glaux, Tetra satisfied all inquiries with a smile.

"Elm shall regard all who suffer casualties as heroes, and it will be the government's privilege to ensure they are cared for! Families of the fallen will receive enough arable land to live comfortably on, and a tax exemption, to boot. Those incapable of providing for themselves will receive a substantial solatium as well as a large enough annual stipend that they'll never need to worry about going hungry!

"No! I can assure you here and now that the Republic of Elm will never force its people to labor under onerous taxes like the villainous empire did, for we are executors of justice! The brightest minds in the Principles Party have calculated how we'll be able to fund military campaigns with some innovative fiscal effort, so rest easy and leave it all to us!

“The Principles Party has no intention of slacking on the domestic front, either! Isn’t that right, Mr. Glaux?”

“That’s correct. The education and public health revisions the Reform Party laid out are a great starting point, but we intend to give you more still, even if the money has to come from our own pockets. If push comes to shove, we’re prepared to sacrifice our comfort for the sake of this nation’s people. If we did anything less, we’d be failing to live up to the example set by our leader, Great Scythe Tetra, hero of Gustav and champion of the weak!”

“““Yeahhhhhhhhh!!!!”””

As Juno listened to the back-and-forth from the other side of the stage, she hung her head. Her head began to swim. The things the Principles Party was promising didn’t make a lick of sense.

They were going to massively expand the military and offer better public services than what her faction proposed, and yet somehow, they were going to pay for it all without raising taxes? The Reform Party’s comparatively modest plan had presumed that they would stay on good terms with their biggest trading partner, the Freyjagard Empire. Even then, they would have needed to issue deficit-covering bonds to finance it all. The Principles Party could swear to pay for it out of their own pockets all they liked, but no matter how you sliced it, their group only had fifty people. No organization that small could support an entire country’s budget, regardless of how rich they were. They might hold out for a year at the very best, but it certainly wasn’t sustainable.

A twisted spectacle was unfolding before Juno’s eyes, yet she was powerless to stop it.

Am I...going about this all wrong?

In a democracy, politicians held power conferred to them by citizens who used their priceless votes to put their trust in those representatives. Juno took that to mean she needed to be sincere with her constituents, never lying about her beliefs or promising them the impossible to secure votes.

Evidently, that had been the incorrect model to follow. The final debate was about to end with the Reform Party in abject defeat, and the election was barely more than a week away. There was no time left to mount a comeback.

As the inevitability of her defeat started sinking in, Juno's thoughts turned to the little girl she met at the orphanage cowering at the holy war's growing support.

I'm sorry, Sara...

Shaking at her own inability, Juno whispered a silent apology—

"Now then, young lady, I believe you had a question. Could we get your name, please?"

"I, um, I'm... I'm Sara..."

"——?!"

—only to jerk her head up when her ears caught a familiar voice. The very girl Juno had been thinking of was now on stage and standing next to Elch, the moderator.



"The Principles Party has no intention of slacking on the domestic front, either! Isn't that right, Mr. Glaux?"

"That's correct. The education and public health revisions the Reform Party laid out are a great starting point, but we intend to give you more still, even if the money has to come from our own pockets. If push comes to shove, we're prepared to sacrifice our comfort for the sake of this nation's people. If we did anything less, we'd be failing to live up to the example set by our leader, Great Scythe Tetra, hero of Gustav and champion of the weak!"

""""Yeahhhhhhhh!!!!""""

Excited cheers rose from the crowd.

Tetra could feel their enthusiasm in her bones. It filled her with a profound sense of accomplishment, and she knew she had Glaux to thank for all of it. No amount of thanking him would ever be enough to express the gratitude she felt for the kind old man standing next to her.

Not only had Glaux devised the idea for their nationwide promotional campaign, but he had also gotten hold of the troupes himself, and he'd even paid the actors' fees out of his own pocket. And when Tetra's lack of book

smarts got in her way, he was always willing to step in and handle the bookkeeping and draft campaign promises. Tetra had no shortage of passion but little mind for tactics, so Glaux was perfect for covering her weaknesses.

She couldn't have asked for a better running mate.

The applause swelled. The people's hearts were united, and they were ready to rise up for the grand cause of equality for all. Fire and energy burned beneath the surface of everyone in the audience. All they were waiting for was that tiny push that would cause them to erupt.

The Principles Party was going to give them that nudge.

Judging by the crowd's response, winning thirty-four seats and controlling two-thirds of the assembly was well within reach. Once that happened, the Principles Party could pass whatever measures they liked, and the Reform Party would be powerless to stop them. Nothing would stand between them and their holy war.

When the Principles Party urged the populace, the resulting support would enable them to mete out justice as they pleased. The Yamato people, who were so oppressed that they weren't even allowed to suffer, would finally be free.

And that's just the beginning! Tetra thought excitedly.

After that, the *true* campaign would begin—the war to make every nation in the world a democracy so that everyone was governed by those who cared about the powerless. Ideas like that had once seemed farther than the distant reaches of the sky, but after today, Tetra was certain that she was at least on the right path toward reaching that utopia.

"We're running out of time, so this next question is going to be our last one. Tetra, the choice is yours."

"Thank you."

On Elch's instruction, Tetra cast her gaze out over the throng of attendees vying to raise their hands higher than one another.

Then—

Oh...?

—she saw something unusual.

Buried within the crowd, Tetra spotted a tiny hand. She strained her eyes and glimpsed a little girl standing on the tips of her toes with her arm raised as high as she could manage. The child obviously wasn't of voting age, but seeing her like that filled Tetra's heart with joy all the same.

To think that someone as young as she was interested in her nation's government! Tetra couldn't imagine a grander sight. During the empire's rule, such a thing would have been unthinkable. Tetra wanted badly to call on her. She might not have been able to vote, but she was the Republic of Elm's future.

Still, it was a disadvantageous move that wouldn't win any more votes. Tetra couldn't make this call, not on her own. She turned to Glaux for advice—

"Tetra, why don't you call on the girl in the red dress?"

—but before she could even say anything, Glaux whispered something unexpected in her ear.

"I—are you sure? She's a minor."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Glaux replied, giving Tetra a relaxed and gentle smile. "She might not be able to vote herself, but giving her a sincere answer will earn us more favor with the voters."

Aha, Tetra realized. *I hadn't thought of it that way*. Once again, she found herself amazed at Glaux's insight. She didn't feel great about using the child as a prop like that, but she'd wished to answer the girl's question from the get-go. Thus, Tetra chose to follow her gut.

"Mr. Elch, would you be so kind as to bring that girl in the red dress up here?"

"You... You got it." The request momentarily caught Elch off guard, but he swiftly recovered and hopped off the stage, waded through the crowd, and retrieved the girl and her family.

"Now then, young lady, I believe you had a question. Could we get your name, please?"

"I, um, I'm... I'm Sara..."

A woman accompanying Sara bowed apologetically. "I-I'm so sorry! I told her

that children weren't allowed to raise their hands, but she refused to listen..."

At that point, Tetra noticed how dissimilar the two of them looked. Five other young children were also accompanying them, all of whom had different facial features. Some were *byuma*, too. Tetra had initially assumed that they were a family, but she could see now that wasn't the case.

"And who might you be? I take it you aren't her mother," Tetra asked.

"Ah, forgive me for my rudeness," the woman replied, then introduced herself. "I work at their orphanage..."

The lack of resemblance made sense now.

"I hope you can forgive us for this. She's normally such an obedient girl, so I have no idea what got into her...", the woman explained with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Director...", Sara responded, eyes downcast.

When the orphanage director started admonishing Sara for raising her hand despite not being eligible to vote, Tetra stepped in. "Oh, no, don't worry about it. I'm the one who called on her, after all." Then, she stooped down to get on Sara's eye level. "Being able to vote or not doesn't matter here. This is something that affects everyone in the republic. Go ahead, Sara. Ask me anything you want to."

Sara appeared to lose her nerve for a moment, but after shutting her eyes tight and steeling her resolve, she posed her question.

"Okay, well, Ms. Director always tells us that fighting is wrong. And back when I still had my mommy, she always got mad at my brother and me when we fought, too. She got so angry that it was kind of scary. But lately, everyone in the village has been practicing fighting. They all have such scary looks on their faces, and they talk in such scary voices... I don't like it at all. Miss, why is it you want to fight so bad?"

Ah.

Tetra had just likened the masses' righteous fury to magma, but she could imagine how anxious it was making poor Sara. Perhaps some of that was inevitable, but Tetra still wanted to teach the child the difference between their

holy war and the kind of conflict she was talking about. Unfortunately, Tetra wasn't sure how to do so.

The leader of the Principles Party turned to the girl's guardian, the orphanage director. "Pardon my asking, but she wouldn't happen to be from *Gustav*, by any chance?"

"Sh-she is, ma'am. She lost her family when the capital burned down during the Blue Brigade attack..."

"...I see."

Tetra had expected that.

Although a handful of soldiers had perished during the Seven Luminaries' People's Revolution, the number paled before the death toll of the battle between the Fastidious Duke and the Blue Brigade. And to make matters worse, the fight had consumed an entire metropolis in flames, meaning there were many civilian casualties.

Handling war orphans was a major issue plaguing Elm at the moment, and that one skirmish was responsible for no small percentage of them.

"Sara, if you were in Gustav, then I'll bet you remember what things were like a few months ago better than you'd like to. Do you remember how sad and hungry everyone was? Well, it was because the evil lord was bullying them. God and the Blue Brigade fought to get rid of him. That's why you and I can enjoy the freedom we have now."

Tetra knew that Sara had seen the exact same hellscape she had.

"It's true that warring for selfish reasons is wrong. Yet...sometimes you have to because it's the only way to help people who are hurting. That kind of fighting is good and brave. God saved us when we were suffering, but now the people of Yamato are in trouble just like we were. It's our job to assist. Ignoring those in need just to keep ourselves safe would make us cowards.

"Our battles will be for the correct reasons. Everyone in Yamato is waiting for us, so there's nothing to be afraid of... Does that all make sense?"

Surely that would get through to her. After living through hell in the Gustav

domain, Sara surely comprehended that kind of helplessness, and she was undoubtedly grateful to have been rescued from it.

Tetra placed her hand atop Sara's shoulder, confident that she had explained herself well. The moment she did, Sara's well-mannered expression contorted like crumpled paper—

“No! If everyone's gonna die, then I don't want to help!!”

—and she began shouting. Fat tears rolled down from her big, round eyes.

“I don't care if I don't get much to eat! I want my mommy and my brother back...!” Her voice trembled with the trauma of one who was forced to listen helplessly as her family succumbed to the flames consuming their home.

Tetra had gotten it all wrong. Sara hadn't been saved—she'd been robbed. The justice Tetra championed had stolen that girl's precious family from her. From Sara's perspective, Tetra and the Principles Party's quest to begin another campaign of bloodshed made them no better than Gustav.

“I don't care if I have to be a coward or a scaredy-cat. I just don't want anyone else to die! I don't want the people in my village to disappear...and I don't want them to have to kill anyone, either! Is it really so wrong for me to feel this way?!”

““...!””

Seeing the innocent tears stream ceaselessly down her face as Sara made her desperate plea left Tetra at a loss for words. And it wasn't just her, either. Everyone there, Glau included, lapsed into an ashamed silence.

And honestly, who could blame them? If prodigy politician Tsukasa Mikogami had been there, he likely would have done the same.

Profit, self-preservation, status—when faced with the innocent love of a child who had nothing, none of those things even seemed worth mentioning.

Sara would have died alongside her family if Gustav's rule had persisted. Even if she was the only survivor, that alone was something to be celebrated. The logic was sound, but hollow, and poor consolation for a distraught child.

The earth-shaking fervor and applause from just moments ago had vanished.

There was only the sound of Sara's crying.

What effect did that girl's tears have on the election's course? How much had she altered the hearts of the voters? It was impossible to know. Those innocent tears forced the people drunk on enthusiasm to grapple with difficult questions.



What was it that really mattered to them? Who was it they truly wanted to protect? After a few weeks, would they find themselves in the same position as that girl?

The consequences of the actions they championed quickly became more evident. The Principles Party had dominated the final debate from start to finish, and many had expected the public opinion polls to reflect that. And although they managed to hold on to their majority, they ended up polling short of the two-thirds supermajority they needed to force through whatever bills they wanted.

Despite the insurmountable enemy she faced, Juno's uncompromising dedication to addressing the populace honestly and plainly kept the Reform Party alive.

CHAPTER 7

✻ The True Weapon ✻

“Sigh...”

The day after the debate, Tetra was lying buck naked in her bed and looking up reproachfully at the morning light streaming in through her window. Her clothes were scattered haphazardly across the floor. She’d dumped them there the night prior and had gone to bed without so much as putting on her pajamas.

Her eyes were dry, bloodshot, and flanked by heavy bags from exhaustion. The young woman had returned to her inn room after a group dinner with the other members of the Principles Party, but she hadn’t slept a wink.

Between the Principles Party campaign trail, speeches, and the momentous debate last night, her schedule had been packed to bursting, and her entire body felt like lead. Still, slumber would not come.

Every time Tetra closed her eyes, she saw Sara begging her not to fight. The image was seared into her brain. More than anything, it was the girl’s big, beautiful, tear-filled eyes that stuck with her. They had been so full of grief and, deep within them, a fiery rage.

Tetra was no stranger to that expression. It was identical to the one she had worn back when she thought of Gustav. She must have appeared as awful as that madman to Sara. That anger had motivated Tetra to insurrection to ensure that nobody ever repeated his actions again.

“Am I making a horrible mistake...?” she muttered softly. The question had been troubling her since last evening, yet she was no closer to answering it.

Worried or not, Tetra was not the sort to spend the entire day wallowing in doubt, though.

“Nnph.” She sat up and clapped herself hard on the cheeks. “When did I let myself get so gutless...?!”

The fact that she hadn’t gotten through to the girl was lamentable, but it certainly didn’t mean that her mission was wrong. Even now, the people of Yamato desperately needed aid. They were unable to mourn their dead, let alone hate the people who deserved to be hated. There could be no righteousness in ignoring them. The battle to save Yamato was a noble and just fight founded on the principle of equality for all. Sara would come to realize that once she grew up.

And so—

“What I should be focusing on now is winning this election!”

—Tetra turned her mind to the next hurdle.

At the party dinner, one of the staff members had delivered a piece of breaking news. After conducting a survey in the four largest Elm metropolises—Nirvana, Herbery, Dormundt, and Dulleskoff—and using the Seven Luminaries’ obelisks to aggregate the results electronically, they had a reliable projection of how many seats each party was slated to win. All in all, the Principles Party was on track to win the election...but thirty seats was about the best they could expect. Their thirty-four-seat goal, which would give them two-thirds of the assembly and allow them to steamroll their way through its votes, looked to be beyond their reach.

The news cast a pall over the dinner party.

If the Reform Party claimed a third of the positions, the national assembly would descend into gridlock, and they wouldn’t be able to take the prompt action that saving Yamato demanded. It was the one situation they had desperately wanted to avoid.

Tetra racked her brain. There was only a week left before the election, and there weren’t any significant events like the public debate they could use to earn greater favor. How could her party claw back the votes they’d just lost to

the Reform Party? She needed to come up with a strategy. After sinking into silence and thinking on the matter for a good long while, Tetra eventually arrived at a realization.

“There’s no point in sitting here and trying to think of something all on my own.”

Tetra recognized her shortcomings, but understood just as well that she had the perfect remedy: her allies. Skilled comrades who could help shore up her weaknesses.

“Mr. Glaux will know what to do. I’m sure of it!”

The deadline was fast approaching, and there was no time to waste. Tetra hopped out of bed and began preparing to go out.



It was the day after the public debate, and evening had fallen on the far reaches of the Gustav province.

“Damn that little shit! Death would be too good for her!”

Glaux von Einzgarm’s villa sat by a spring near the Buchwald border, and the Principles Party’s vultures were having a meeting in the dining room. The topic of conversation was what to do about the projected loss of their two-thirds majority. The air rang with angry, impatient shouts.

“We were *this close*! This close to winning everything, and then that stupid brat decides to show her ugly face!”

“Thanks to those obelisks, all of Elm got to hear her little breakdown. We used to dominate in Findolph and Gustav, but that report says we’re losing votes to the Reform Party there, too.”

“If we don’t get two-thirds of the seats, how’re we supposed to push through our bills and our draft budget?! We’re screwed! We’re gonna have to keep an eye out for those Reform Party assholes every time we skim off the budget or make a shady deal with a contractor!”

“Keeping an eye out for ’em won’t cut it, man. Their leader, that Juno chick, is supposed to be one of the best accountants in Buchwald. We try to pull even the smallest shit, and she’s gonna jump down our throats and tear us a new

one.”

“But that means our whole plan is ruined! How is it that we were so close to scooping this whole country up for ourselves, and then one little kid throwing a tantrum messes it all up? We gotta do something!”

“And Glaux, why’d you call on that kid in the first place? It’s not like she’s old enough to vote, so answering her question wasn’t going to do jack for us anyways. If anyone’s to blame here, it’s you.”

With that, the ten or so Principles Party candidates sitting around the table all turned their gazes to the portly older adult sitting calmly at the table’s head. Glaux had long been the fixer of the little congregation, but the other vultures didn’t hesitate to descend on him like an angry flock.

“Yeah, what’s your deal? We haven’t heard a peep outta you since yesterday!”

“You got us into this mess. Why don’t you use that big head of yours to get us out of it?!”

“Got anything to say for yourself, Glaux?”

Perhaps they had a point. His decision to call Sara up to the stage certainly appeared to have been a mistake. However, there was no logical reason to keep criticizing him for it. Nothing would change the situation. And besides, all of the others had chosen to follow Glaux. They should have known that riding his coattails would mean taking the bad with the good. That his fellows dared to turn on him was utterly hypocritical.

Glaux glared at his cohorts’ idiotic display through his narrowed eyes—

“Hmph. Dullards, the lot of you.”

—and let out a sigh that reeked of derision and liquor.



A few hours earlier, Tetra had finished pulling herself together and was on her way to visit the inn where Glaux was staying, hoping for his counsel.

Tetra was unaware that her adviser had already departed. When she asked around, she was told that Glaux had called for his carriage the night prior and

had left then. Hoping to learn more about his whereabouts, she consulted some other Principles Party candidates.

“Mr. Glaux? I’m afraid we haven’t the faintest... Ah, but I heard Mr. Morgan and Mr. Marco telling their driver to take them to Mr. Glaux’s mansion in Gustav, so you might be able to find him there.”

Morgan Donitz and Marco Lewis had both joined the Principles Party on Glaux’s recommendation, and everyone knew how serious their current situation was. Tetra reasoned that they were in the midst of a strategy meeting, and she felt grateful to be blessed with such wonderful comrades.

And then, here I am...

All Tetra had been doing was lying awake, griping. It was pathetic, and the young woman was loath to let it continue. Even if it was in name alone, she was still the Principles Party’s leader. She knew that any ideas she came up with wouldn’t amount to much, but at the very least, they might provide inspiration for someone more intelligent to build from. She needed to join the others to help them plan.

Thus, after traveling for half a day, Tetra arrived at Glaux’s villa in Gustav.

“What a beautiful structure...”

The manor’s chalky-white walls were completely spotless, and they shone radiantly under the sunset’s fiery scarlet hues. Its fence and gatepost were covered in ornate carvings, and while its size was relatively modest, the quality of its architecture was breathtaking.

“Are the windows all made of glass? And their frames...is that solid gold?”

What’s more, this wasn’t even Glaux’s primary residence. It boggled the mind.

Perhaps this much was to be expected, since the man was the former foreign chancellor of the Freyjagard Empire. His ability to bankroll as many acting troupes as he had suddenly made a lot more sense. After being reminded once more of just how staggering Glaux von Einzgarm’s fortune was, Tetra rode her horse up to the gate and called out to the spear-wielding watchman standing there.

“Sorry to bother you, sir. I’m Tetra, the representative of the Principles Party. Is Mr. Glaux here?”

The guard replied in an almost mechanical tone, barring the way in with his spear all the while. “Yes. The master is in, but if you want to enter, you must give me the watchword.”

The what? Tetra thought. A passphrase felt oddly paranoid of Glaux.

However, it was a truly magnificent abode. Everything down to the stones in the garden seemed like they’d be worth stealing, so perhaps it made sense that the owner wished to keep out unwanted visitors. That was a problem for Tetra, though, as she had no idea what this “watchword” might be.

Well, I suppose there’s nothing for it.

All she could do now was request that the guard call for Glaux. Once they met face-to-face, she’d definitely be granted entry. Yet right as she was about to ask the guard to fetch his employer, a conversation she’d once had with Glaux flashed back through her mind.

“But of course. It would be my pleasure. ‘Long live democracy’ is the watchword our party lives by. I don’t know how much time this old bag of bones has left in it, but I mean to spend the rest of it fighting the good fight as God Akatsuki’s vanguard.”

Back then, he had used the term “watchword.” Tetra was reasonably confident he had, at least. No, she was certain of it.

“Long live democracy?”

The guard lowered his spear.

“Of course, ma’am. If you dismount here, I can take your horse for you. Just call for me when you wish to leave. The master is taking dinner with the others at the moment. Follow the carpet, and it’s the door at the end.”

“Thank you kindly!”

Tetra left her horse with the man and went inside.

The manor was even more lavish within than without, but Tetra didn’t waste any time taking in the sights. Her mind was already fixed on the upcoming

battle. Never one to shy from a fight, she hurried along the deep red carpet at a swift pace, ignorant that the door she was nearing led straight to the lion's den.



“How dare you!”

“Who are you calling dullards?!”

“You think you’re better than us?”

As his followers raged at him, Glaux glared back and replied without a hint of remorse in his voice. “Hoh-hoh-hoh. I know I am.” He wet his lips with a mouthful of wine, then continued. “Holding two-thirds of the seats is beyond us, and Juno will sniff out our indiscretions and block us at every turn. What is there to do, then? The answer should be abundantly clear.”

Glaux’s miserable lackeys stared at him in bewilderment. He felt sorry for them. How could they fail to solve such a simple *subtraction* problem? Disgust flared in his bushy mustache and aged eyes for a moment before he went on.

“We need only make the woman disappear. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, her efforts single-handedly power the entire Reform Party. Their policy platform, their bookkeeping, their electioneering—she’s at the center of it all. She *is* the Reform Party, and without her, it’ll be a chicken with its head chopped off. And when that happens, one-third of the assembly or not, we can crush them at our leisure. Am I wrong?”

One of the young candidates pounded the table. “After that pompous lead-up, *that’s* your plan?! If we could do that, we wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with! You might not know this, Mr. Former Noble, but the people in Juno’s hometown love her to pieces. There’s no way we’ll be able to flip ’em and make her lose the election!”

“Who said anything about the election? What I said was, she needs to *disappear*,” Glaux countered placidly.

““““Wh—””””

In the blink of an eye, the air in the dining room went from humid with anger and frustration to bone-chillingly cold. Not literally, perhaps, but everyone there felt the change. Now they understood what Glaux was getting at.

“W-wait, you’re not saying...”

“You mean...*killing* her?”

“Did I stutter?”

Glaux’s toadies practically shrieked at his retort.

“But that’s—!”

“Th-that’s crazy talk, man! You’re outta your mind!”

“We can’t just kill her!”

Their leader, however, just chuckled. “Oh, please. Compared to trying to take your entire homeland for yourselves, a single woman’s life is like piss in the wind. Think of how many people will die if the war we’re inciting actually starts. Things have already been set in motion, gentlemen. It’s far too late to be getting cold feet.”

“Th-that’s not the problem! I mean, think about it for a second! The election is down to a tug-of-war between the Principles Party and the Reform Party. If the other side’s leader gets killed, they’ll put two and two together and figure out it was us in no time!”

That was a reasonable point. If Juno turned up dead, everyone would immediately suspect the Principles Party, and it would ruin their chances in the election. Naturally, Glaux was way ahead of such an obvious concern.

“Hoh-hoh-hoh. You mistake me, my friend. She’ll be disappearing, yes, but I never said anything about *us* being the ones to do the deed. Not a word, in fact.” Glaux took out some sheets of parchment and slid them across the table.

“What’s this?”

“...A promissory note?”

“Precisely,” Glaux replied. “I’m sure you all know what business I’m in.”

“You’re a moneylender, right? A real shark of one.”

“Oh, I assure you that my interest rates are designed to make sure both sides walk away happy... All bullshit aside, the important part is that this debt belongs to one of my many clients. Mr. Donitz?”

“Y-yeah?”

“Does the name written there look familiar to you?”

Startled at having had his name called, Mr. Donitz picked up the note and quickly looked it over. His eyes widened.

“Jean Pommel?! That’s... It can’t be!”

“Oh, but it is. It’s the Reform Party candidate running in the same district as you.”

“““!!!!””””

“Our dear Mr. Pommel makes his living over in Neue as a seller of traditional cutlery. He found himself in need of some working capital, and I was all too happy to lend it to him.

“As you can see, it comes out to quite a tidy sum. Including all the interest, he already owes me thrice the initial principal, and with him being three months behind on his payments, I’m afraid he won’t be paying it off anytime soon.

“The thing is, the porcelain we’re importing from Lakan nowadays has all but pushed his traditional goods out of the market. Poor Mr. Pommel. I’m sympathetic to his plight, of course, but I, too, am running a business. As he is unable to make payments, I’m going to have to start seizing his assets sooner or later. Regrettably, the story gets sadder still, as his loans have swelled to such a size that even his workshop combined with all his worldly possessions wouldn’t even come close to covering them.

“Thus, I am forced to reclaim my dues elsewhere. And as luck would have it, Mr. Pommel has a wife and two daughters, all of them picturesque imperial blond-haired blue-eyed beauties. I have a powerful acquaintance in Lakan who’s offered a handsome price for the trio, and let’s just say that he’s not exactly looking for *maids*, and that his tastes skew on the *eclectic* side. I do feel awful for Mrs. Pommel and the children, though, so I went to Pommel about a month ago and asked if he would be open to us putting our heads together and coming up with a way to save his family from meeting a tragic fate.

“He promised to do anything so long as I spared his family. Tugs on the heartstrings, doesn’t it? A man, sacrificing himself to protect his loved ones...

Truly, an example to fathers everywhere.”

By the end of Glaux’s speech, even his dim lackeys had deduced what he was implying. Glaux’s connections didn’t end with the Principles Party. He had placed pawns in the Reform Party’s ranks as well. They were walking time bombs ready to explode at Glaux’s orders.

“So, you’re going to make *him* do it?”

Glaux nodded in satisfaction, pleased that everyone finally understood.

“As for his motive...we’ll have him claim it was lovesickness. A petty scandal that ends in bloodshed like that will drive disillusioned supporters to our doorstep.”

“““”””

Glaux was right. If everything went smoothly, the Principles Party would have new followers by the boatload. None of the man’s coconspirators looked pleased with this, however. There was clear hesitation in their pale faces. While they agreed with Glaux’s methods on a practical level, their hearts refused to accept them.

What he was proposing was murder.

Although Glaux had drawn them in with his promises of using the election to scoop up Elm’s national budget, most of them were still small-time crooks deep down. There was a limit to how much raw evil they were willing to condone, and homicide definitely crossed the line.

“Fear not. None of you actually need to do anything. It will all happen out of your sight and without your knowledge, so rest easy. Even if what truly happened comes to light, I’m the only one who will have to answer for it. There won’t be a single thing to link you to our dear friend Pommel.”

The others eased up at this. They had been reticent only out of self-preservation. Whatever morals they had only ran skin-deep.

Glaux was experienced at manipulating greedy cowards, and he had thus lined things up so that they had everything to gain and nothing to lose. Scum like them would make excellent tools for achieving his true objective.

Sinister grins spread across the faces of all present in the chamber.

“What in the world...are you saying, Mr. Glaux?”

Then there came a familiar voice. It was that of a woman who shouldn't have been there. The smiles quickly vanished from the wicked men's faces.



“T-Tetra...?”

“R-Rep, what're you doing here?”

The schemers in the dining room went white as sheets at Tetra's sudden intrusion, and her face was of a similar color.

“I wanted...to talk to you all about our plans for the election... And when I heard you were all here, I came rushing over. But this... What did I just walk in on?”

Her expression was one of utter horror as she looked to Glaux. She was begging him to deny the horrible things she'd just discovered.

Although Glaux initially reacted to Tetra's arrival with unconcealed shock—

“Hoh-hoh-hoh... Goodness, my dear, I can't say I was expecting you. Now, I must ask...how long were you listening?”

—his typical affable expression swiftly returned, and he posed a question to the woman standing frozen in the entrance to his dining room.

His voice was the same as ever, and Tetra desperately wished to believe this was the same kind old man she'd relied on so many times. There was no way he had said all those horrible things. It was unthinkable. Tetra forced herself to believe that something had fooled her senses.

“You were talking about...h-having Ms. Juno killed. My ears were just playing tricks on me, though, right?! Heh... Heh-heh-heh...”

“Ah. So you heard everything, then.”

“...I...”

The young woman fell into stunned silence.

“You're not mistaken, Tetra. Once that woman dies, the Reform Party will

crumble. The masses will flock to us, and our victory will be assured,” Glaux admitted. He hadn’t even bothered attempting to conceal his scheme.

Tetra’s blood had run cold a moment ago, but now it was boiling. Her whole body shook as the emotions burst out of her.

“Y-YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS!!!!”

“Oh, I assure you, we are.”

“Then that makes it even worse! How could the Principles Party claim to stand for justice if we seized power through illegal means?! We would be betraying the trust of our supporters and the entire nation of Elm!! They’ll never let you get away with this!!”

Fury practically seeped from Tetra’s body as she strode into the room and slammed her fists on the table.

“““Eep...!!!!”””

The upper body strength she regularly used to lift a scythe as long as she was tall threatened to splinter the wooden table. Food and drink tumbled to the floor, and Glaux’s toadies cowered so badly they fell off their chairs. Glaux alone didn’t seem cowed in the slightest. He remained in his seat, relaxed as could be—

“Betraying the people’s *trust*? Hoh-hoh... Bwa-ha-ha-ha!”

—and laughed louder than anyone had heard from him before.

“Mr. Glaux...?!”

“You’re still going on about that nonsense? Do you genuinely believe that we’re a part of your Principles Party? My dear, if we were straitlaced enough to actually care about equality for all or saving Yamato from tyranny, we would have never even *considered* turning to homicide to win an election. No one here—myself included—ever gave a damn about the masses. They can condone our actions or not; we don’t much care either way.”

“You never... From the very start?! Wh-what exactly is the meaning of this?!”

Tetra trampled half-eaten food underfoot as she stomped her way over to Glaux. The look in her eyes suggested she might bite the treacherous man’s

head off at any moment.

Yet the moment she reached for him, a blast sounded in the dining room.

The noise was akin to a roar of thunder and was accompanied by a flash like lightning.

“...Wh—”

“Does that make things clearer?”

Glaux had fired from the flintlock pistol he’d withdrawn from his pocket.

“.....I...Urgh...”

““““Ahhhhh!””””

Tetra buckled and collapsed to her knees before Glaux. A ribbon of blood bloomed across the tablecloth beneath her. The bullet had struck her squarely in the heart.

“We can embezzle public funds and cover our tracks by declaring their use ‘state secrets.’ We can take kickbacks to give public works projects to contractors who benefit us. We can write a bit of legislature that makes the assembly a de facto privileged class. We can introduce ‘tax reforms’ that suck even more money from our hapless citizens. The possibilities are endless.

“Yet you would have us what, improve social welfare? Liberate Yamato? Spend our own damn money to avoid levies? Ridiculous. As if we would ever cooperate with such inane initiatives. Campaign promises are nothing more than lies to scam idiots out of their votes. We can discard them like trash, and the ignorant masses will be powerless to stop us. According to their beloved angels’ laws, being elected guarantees your seat on the assembly for the next three years.”

“How...dare...you!”

“We intend to sacrifice nothing, abandon Yamato to its fate, and allow welfare programs to fester and rot. The plan is to abolish any programs that don’t suit us. For example, those war orphans? I think they’ve leeches off the government long enough. If we sell them off to foreign nations as slaves under the guise of an ‘adoption drive,’ we’ll get some good money. Who was that girl

who ruined our debate...Sara, was it? She's got a promising future ahead of her, so I imagine she'll command quite a sum. She won't have much of a future after she gets bought as a plaything, but such is the way of the world."

Glaux's whole body shook as he laughed.

Images of Juno and Sara flashed through Tetra's mind. They were good people who cared about their country, about others, and that man wanted to destroy them. The determined young woman refused to let that happen. She might not be able to stop it all, but she was damn well going to stop *him*!

"HRAAAAAH!!!!"

A burst of pure, unadulterated fury surged through Tetra's dying—no, already dead—body. Blood loss had left her limbs immobile, so it was rage alone that powered her actions as she leaped at the one who had betrayed her.



Tetra reached out, intent on grabbing his throat and crushing it in her grip, but through it all, Glaux's relaxed grin never wavered.

"Ah...gah...?!"

The moment before she could reach his bushy white mustache, her hands lost their strength. A man in a butler uniform had plunged from the ceiling with a sword held in his hand, thrust it through her slender neck from above, and landed on her back to knock her down.

Glaux enjoyed another cackle as he looked down on Tetra, pinned to the floor like an insect in a specimen box.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh. I can't say I expected you to show up today, but this may well have been a stroke of good fortune. With the debate over and nothing left for the people to do but vote, your charisma is a liability to us now. We were always going to have to get rid of you at some point, and you've given us a wonderful opportunity to clean house. Thank you for your contribution, Tetra. Your boundless foolishness has served us this nation on a silver platter. We couldn't have done it without you, but I'm afraid your services are no longer required."

"Mr.... Gla...?!"

The fire in Tetra's eyes was suddenly snuffed as a loud noise like the sound of a thick branch snapping in two cut her words short. The man who stabbed her had twisted his sword to the side and shattered the bone it was piercing. The woman's body convulsed violently, then went limp and still.

Tetra had been robbed of everything.

"It's done," the butler reported in a matter-of-fact tone. He wrenched his blade free from the corpse's neck.

"Good work, Sasuke," Glaux thanked him. "Now, get to Neue as quickly as you can and tell Pommel to meet me here. It's not the victim we had in mind, but the plan is still the same. 'With no other way to stop us, the Reform Party leader had him kill the Principles Party leader.' Why, it sounds almost plausible."

“Very well, sir.”

“Oh, and don’t use the Seven Luminaries’ digital bulletin boards. Being able to send messages in an instant would be convenient, but somehow or other, they record everything that’s written in them. You’ll be traced. And don’t pass through any checkpoints, either. Can you do that?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Then be off.”

Glaux waved his hand, and the servant named Sasuke jumped back through the hole in the roof he had entered from and vanished.

Sasuke was a ninja who’d fled Yamato, and the fact he had survived so long with no support from his homeland was proof enough of his skills. Glaux had little doubt he’d be able to reach Neue by the morning. Thus, there was only one thing left to do. Glaux leisurely rose from his seat and clapped his hands together.

“Now then, we have our plan. Come on, enough cowering on the ground already. It’s time you all got back to your electoral districts. We have to show the people that while we’re heartbroken at the loss of our grand leader, our patriotism remains as steadfast as ever. Oh, and do make sure you don’t say anything stupid out there.”

“O-of course!”

“L-leave it to us...”

Still trembling at the grim spectacle they had witnessed, Glaux’s followers bobbed their heads up and down in clumsy nods. Sycophantic smiles sat plastered across each of their blanched faces. Seeing a *true* villain at work had scared them out of their minds.

There was little they could do but obey him. Glaux thought back to how they had been mouthing off at him just minutes earlier, and he smiled in satisfaction.

“Remember, we have seven days left until the election. Let’s see this thing through, shall we?”



“I killed Tetra off the main Gustav highway.”

It was the morning five days before the election when Reform Party candidate Jean Pommel surrendered himself at a knight station.

Upon finding out about the tragedy, the election steering committee decided to use the obelisks to broadcast the information across Elm as an emergency alert. To the people of Elm, hearing the news was like getting struck by lightning.

Although the only facts they made public were Tetra’s death and the name of the perpetrator—

“The Principles Party drew its support from Tetra’s overwhelming popularity, so if we killed her, the Reform Party was sure to win. Our leader, Juno, gave me the order, but once I realized what I’d done, I was so overwhelmed with guilt that I decided to turn myself in.”

—it barely took a day before everyone from Findolph to Gustav knew the contents of Jean Pommel’s confession. It wasn’t clear who had leaked it, but there was no stopping the information once it was out there.

Hearing what had happened sent the Principles Party and their supporters into a mad frenzy, and when the Principles Party candidates made grand speeches in their districts about the anger and sorrow they felt, it stirred up their supporters’ rage even further. By the second day after the crime came to light, the post-debate upsurge of support for the Reform Party had been completely reversed.

The streets were full of people shouting and cursing at the Reform Party for having resorted to murder. Many of the vilified party’s more vocal supporters found themselves on the receiving end of threats, intimidation, and even violence. Things were so out of hand that the Order of the Seven Luminaries had to cancel all time off just to mobilize enough troops to keep the peace.

It got to the point where admitting you supported the Reform Party was akin to confessing to murder yourself.

Of course, the Reform Party had no intention of sitting on their hands and doing nothing. Just past noon on the third day before the election, Reform Party

representative Juno made her move and started a rally in Dulleskoff so she could publicly proclaim her innocence. She expressed regret that the killer was of her faction but insisted that he had acted alone. For Juno, it was the logical move to make. If she allowed the false accusation to stand, they would get destroyed in the election. Denying it was the only option.

Unfortunately, the Principles Party supporters were in no state of mind to accept her claims at face value. If anything, seeing the person they thought of as the mastermind assert her blamelessness only stoked their rage. It wasn't long before a riot broke out.

"Geez, it's like a war zone down there...," Akatsuki remarked. He and Elch had ridden atop Bearabbit's back and had arrived on a rooftop overlooking the central plaza.

The Principles Party supporters, the Reform Party supporters, and soldiers trying to mediate were all mixed up and exchanging blows below. It was like looking at an actual battlefield.

"God Akatsuki!" exclaimed one-eyed *byuma* Zest Bernard. He had rushed over after learning of Akatsuki's arrival. "Sorry for havin' to call you in, but the folks down there are so riled up they won't listen to a word we say! Please, we need your help!"

The problem was, the rioting civilians vastly outnumbered the soldiers. Akatsuki knew that maintaining order in so many places was spreading them thin, and he readily nodded.

"V-very well. Bearabbit, let's do this."

"Pawger that!"

With that, Bearabbit pointed his primary camera at Akatsuki and synced up his onboard mic with the public broadcast obelisk down below. A massive image of Akatsuki's face appeared in the air—

"Halt! Cease this violence at once, mortals!"

—and his sharp declaration rocked the crowd's ears.

"You dare fight each other in my presence?! Hold your tongues and obey the

soldiers' orders! Any who are fool enough to disturb the peace any further will face the wrath of my divine lightning!"

It was religion that had let the Republic of Elm rise to nationhood in the first place, and to its people, the deity Akatsuki played was the one absolute thing in their lives. Principles Party, Reform Party, it didn't matter. Nobody was about to risk inviting his fury. That one bellow of his was enough to quell the fighting, and medics rushed in and began treating the wounded without missing a beat.

"Preciate it, sir," Zest said gratefully. "If you hadn't stepped in, things coulda turned real ugly."

"You made a good call asking him for help when you did," Elch replied. He was the one who'd brought Akatsuki over. "If your men had tried to match the riot in violence, I think a whole lot more people would've gotten hurt. I can see why Tsukasa chose you to lead the Order."

"Much obliged."

"Still, I'm not surprised things got rough. Everyone's been on edge since the news broke, so I figured it was only a matter of time, but still... Who was it that started this mess?"

"A Principles Party candidate named Lloyd from the next district over's been pushing for this. We've got him in custody, so things should settle down for a bit, but...I figure he's not the only candidate who's pissed about the murder."

"So you're saying stuff like this could start happening all over Elm? I don't like the sound of that."

"Believe me: I don't either."

Elch and Zest dejectedly peered down at the plaza. Akatsuki did the same—

"...Ah—"

—and when he did, he spotted a familiar face.

It was a little distance away, but he could see that medics were treating her. Had she gotten hurt? Was she okay? Worried, Akatsuki rushed down the stairs and made straight for her.

"Are... Are you all right?"

When the woman—Reform Party leader Juno—heard his voice, her eyes widened in astonishment.

“G-God Akatsuki, sir!”

She hurriedly rose to her feet and tried to straighten her posture. Akatsuki had to put a quick stop to that.

“A-at ease, mortal! You’re wounded, so don’t move!”

Elch, having followed after the High School Prodigy magician, spoke up from behind him. “Is your arm hurt, Ms. Juno?”

The short man standing beside the Reform Party leader answered in her place. “One of those hooligans threw a torch, and she got burned shielding me. I’m so sorry...”

“Don’t you worry about it,” Juno reassured the man. “We’ve got to pull together and look out for each other if we want to get through this. This is nothing.”

“...”

Juno was putting on a brave face, but cold sweat was on her forehead. Akatsuki looked down and gasped. The fire had done a number on her. It hadn’t spread, but sections of Juno’s flesh were a gruesome shade of red, and chunks of charred fabric were stuck to it. Inexperienced with medicine though he was, Akatsuki could tell that the scar would be difficult for anyone to bear, let alone a young woman in her prime.

“...Keine should be available soon. As the agent of my powers of healing, she’ll make it as though that burn never happened.”

“I appreciate your—”

But the moment Juno tried to thank Akatsuki—

“What’re you doing taking *her* side, God?!?!?”

“““!””””

—an angry shout silenced the discussion.

“Hey, you, watch your tone! That’s God Akatsuki you’re talking to!”

“Dammit, soldier boy, get offa me! They’re the ones who started all this!”

When Akatsuki and the others looked to see what was happening, they saw a *hyuma* man in iron shackles. He was glaring daggers at Juno and Akatsuki, and if not for the soldier pinning his hands behind his back, he would undoubtedly have thrown a punch.

“Tetra devoted herself to you, God! She was doing her damndest to spread your ‘equality for all’ teachings across the world! And that woman took her from us! She ended Tetra’s life just to get a few more seats on the assembly! Aren’t you gonna punish her?! Are you seriously taking her side?! Lemme go, dammit! LEMME GO!!”

Tears of rage and loathing ran down the bound man’s cheeks as he thrashed about and tried to escape his restraints. Although he was no larger than the soldier holding him back, he shook the other man around so much that he very nearly managed to get free.

Zest, who had come down with Elch, barked, “What’re you still doin’ loafing around here, soldier?! Get him into a holding cell already! I’ll deal with interrogating him myself!”

“C-Commander, sir, yes sir! You three, give me a hand here!”

““““Roger!””””

With the help of a few nearby allies, the soldier finally managed to wrestle the man to the ground. Zest spoke as he watched them drag him away. “That was the candidate who instigated this riot. I’ll keep you all updated on our investigation.”

“...Whatever reasons he had, we caught him red-handed. As of right now, that there’s a *former* candidate,” Elch responded.

Akatsuki suddenly realized he had seen the instigator before.

He was there with Tetra that first time she barged in on us. I think his name was Lloyd.

In all likelihood, he had shared Tetra’s beliefs for quite some time. Akatsuki had seen it in his face—the pain, sorrow, and rage of having a longtime sister-

in-arms slain while her mission was yet unfinished. It was as good a motive as any. Akatsuki sympathized with Juno and her injury, but he couldn't bring himself to hate the man, either.

"God Akatsuki, I don't understand why he would, but is Pommel really saying that he was acting on my orders?" Juno inquired as she watched Lloyd get hauled off.

Although the details of Pommel's testimony hadn't been officially made public, just about everyone in the country knew what he'd said. There wasn't much point in keeping up the charade, and besides, if anyone had a right to know, it was Juno.

Akatsuki nodded. "He is."

"I swear to you. I did nothing of the sort."

"H-hey, that's right!" another Reform Party candidate said. "You already know she's innocent, right, God?! Please, tell everyone she didn't do it!"

Akatsuki averted his eyes, not totally sure how to answer the request. "Ah, erm, well... Yes, discerning the truth would be trivial for me! But as an omniscient being, I like to revel in chaos from time to time! Bwa-ha-ha-ha!"

The Reform Party candidate was none too happy about that. "What?! But why...?!"

Zest chose that moment to step in. "Verbal testimony alone ain't enough for us knights or the steering committee to point any fingers at the Reform Party. We're doin' everything we can to look into Tetra's case, so just hang in there." After smoothing things over, he turned back toward Juno. "For now, though, what's important is that y'all stay safe. We're gonna assign some soldiers to guard you, but it's hard for 'em to do their jobs in gatherings like today's. Until the election's over, I gotta ask you to stay away from crowds and big groups."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Juno said, rejecting the request in no uncertain terms. "I understand how low the Order is on manpower, but right now is do-or-die for the Reform Party. We're fighting for Elm's future here, and we're not about to let this nonsense stand in our way. If we did...i-it'd be a damn insult to Tetra's memory!"

Unable to contain her raging emotions any longer, Juno forgot her manners for a moment. A single tear ran down her cheek. She had the same grief-and rage-filled glint in her eyes as Lloyd.

“...Yeah, I figured you’d say that. Then at least let us in on your planning process. That way, we can come up with the best protection plans we can with the guys we got.”

“Thank you for being so understanding.”

Right as the two of them finished hashing out their arrangement, a group of medics with a gurney came rushing over to Juno. All they could do on-site was administer emergency first aid. Proper treatment meant a hospital visit.

After watching the medics take Juno away, Akatsuki whispered, “...You think she really did it? Ordered that hit?”

“The steering committee’s got people from all the ministries pitching in for the investigation, and for now, the only thing linking her to the crime is the murderer’s word,” Elch answered. “The prevailing opinion is that we don’t have anything firm one way or the other. We’ll probably know more once Dr. Keine is done with the autopsy, but...what about you? It seems like you think she’s innocent.”

Akatsuki nodded immediately. “She isn’t a killer.”

That tear Juno just shed was as anguished as Lloyd’s. Tetra’s death had wounded her as grievously as her rival’s longtime friends. Akatsuki refused to believe that someone like that would be capable of murder.

Elch nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I think so, too. I’ve crossed paths with her a couple of times as part of the steering committee, and I’m telling you, that woman is smart. The way the killer put it, she wanted to beat the Principles Party, so she had their charismatic leader slain to weaken their base so the Reform Party could win. So he offs Tetra on her orders, then gets cold feet and turns himself in. The thing is, even if he hadn’t confessed, the timing of the death is so uncanny that everyone would’ve suspected the Reform Party anyway. There’s no way a person like Juno would’ve overlooked something so obvious. That guy’s lying through his teeth... I just don’t understand *why*.”

Elch was right. It *didn't* make sense.

The killer was from the Reform Party himself. Why would he go out of his way to sabotage them? What did he stand to gain? As things stood, the Reform Party had lost much of their popular support, and the Principles Party had lost their outstanding leader. It was difficult to see how anyone benefited from that.

It was at times like these when Akatsuki wished Tsukasa was here. He very nearly admitted as much aloud.

““““God Akatsuki!!!!””””

Before he had the chance, however, a chorus of unified voices sounded from behind, prompting the blond magician to whirl around in surprise.

“Huh?!”

Soldiers were blockading the entrance to the plaza, but there were crowds of people who had fled to escape the violence who were now gathered just beyond the perimeter. Their numbers must have reached the tens of thousands.

Elch and Zest moved to shield Akatsuki from the massive crowd with their bodies. The group did not attack, though. Instead, they did something more surprising. Everyone dropped to their knees with their hands clasped and raised in begging prayer.

“Save us, God Akatsuki!”

“We don't know what to believe in anymore!”

“I put my faith in Juno, and she turned out to be a killer! It's terrifying just thinking about it!”

“But the Principles Party's holy war is even scarier!”

“We can't trust *any* human! We need you to take the nation's helm, God!”

“Please, put a stop to this election!”

“Don't abandon us!”

“We're begging you, God, keep protecting us!”

These people were here to implore their guardian deity not to leave them in

the hands of selfish beings so willing to engage in evil.

“The murder threw the voters for a pretty bad loop, especially the Reform Party supporters,” Elch explained to Akatsuki. After Tetra’s death, he had watched a third ideology rapidly take root among the people of Elm. “Some folks are pressing to have the election canceled. All our municipal offices are getting flooded with petitions to have the Seven Luminaries step back in and resume leadership.”

It was a logical turn of events, given the circumstances.

“I should probably try to stay out of the public eye to lighten the load on the Order, then. I’m gonna head back to the Department of the Interior,” Akatsuki decided.

“Yeah, that’d be a big help,” Zest replied. “Things’re calm now, but if all of them decided to come rushin’ over at once, we wouldn’t be able to stop ’em.”

A development like that could mean another riot. They needed to avoid letting that happen, no matter what. With a crowd that size, that could mean widespread casualties. Akatsuki climbed onto Bearabbit’s back so he could return to the Department of the Interior building. The moment he did, though, he heard the voice of a familiar young lady.

“Oh, you’re heading out? Perfect timing, then.”

“Dr. Keine!”

It was indeed none other than the High School Prodigy doctor.

“Did you finish the autopsy?! What did you find?!” Elch frantically pressed. The committee members in charge of investigating the case had been waiting eagerly for Keine to get back to them.

Although Keine gestured for him to settle down, she was drenched in sweat, and her ever-present smile was absent.

“I did find something quite amiss, but there are too many prying eyes and ears here. I’ll fill you in when we’re behind closed doors. I’ve already called the rest of the committee to the Department of the Interior building.”



When Keine revealed the surprising news, the steering committee officials gasped.

“The time of death...doesn’t line up?”

Keine gave them a firm nod. “Correct. Upon turning himself in, Pommel said that he committed the deed three nights prior, and it was two evenings ago that the crime was first discovered and I got ahold of the body. The problem is, forensics tells me that Tetra had already been dead for forty-eight hours when she got to me.”

“W-wait, you can tell how long people have been dead for?!”

“I’m a doctor, aren’t I? And I’ll have you know that the accuracy of my autopsies is second to none.”

“But if you’re right...then that’s weird, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is. If Pommel’s testimony is to be believed, then the body should have only been twenty-four hours old when I started my autopsy. That leaves an entire day unaccounted for.”

“So you’re saying he killed her four days ago, then lied and said it was just three?”

“Nah, that ain’t it,” Elch cut in. “I had Commander Bernard look into Pommel’s travel records. He left his electoral district in Archride and went to Gustav, where the body was found, in the morning three days ago. When Tetra died, *Pommel wasn’t even in the same province...!*”

“““———!!!!””””

At the shocking revelation, a stir ran through those gathered in the room.

Keine raised her hand, then waited for everyone to give her their attention before speaking. “That’s not all. I also examined the blood where Tetra’s body was found by the road. It wasn’t hers.”

“Wait...WHAT?! You mean it was someone else’s?!” Akatsuki exclaimed, astonished.

Keine shook her head, however. “It didn’t belong to a human at all. It was pig’s blood.”

“What? But why would...”

The committee members cocked their heads to the side. Why would anyone cover a murder victim in pig blood? It was Zest who gave them their answer.

“Good money says someone wanted to make it look like that was where the crime happened.”

“What do you mean, Commander Bernard?!”

“There’s only so much blood in a body, y’know. There won’t be enough blood at your new spot if you try to move the corpse. People’ll figure out that something’s up. That’s why they had to dress the scene a bit.”

This time, Keine bobbed her head in the affirmative. “Given all the facts, I think it’s quite plain that Tetra didn’t die by the side of that road three days ago. Everything about the corpse and the supposed crime scene says it isn’t possible. In my professional opinion, the true time line of the crime is as follows: Tetra was killed at some unknown site four nights ago, then was carried to the false crime scene a day later.”

The committee members gasped at the conclusion. After all, if everything that Keine asserted was true...

“Based on the checkpoint records, Tetra entered Gustav from Buchwald four days ago...”

“And at that time, Mr. Pommel was in Archride. He couldn’t have been the killer!”

These new facts overturned everything.

“I can’t believe it! Pommel played us for fools!”

A young committee member started tugging at his hair in frustrated confusion. “But wait, that doesn’t make any sense! Why would he lie to us and confess to a crime he didn’t commit...?!”

“He’s probably covering for someone,” Elch replied. “I don’t know if he’s doing it on his own or if he’s being pressured to, but it’s the only reason I can think of. The question is, who’s he taking the fall for? ...Commander, do you think you could get him to talk?”

“Lettin’ him know that we’re onto him is a good start, but...it’s tough to say. Murder is a serious crime. If he’s willin’ to fess up to *that*, it means he’s ready to lay down his life for this. With torture banned, I dunno how far we’ll get with him.”

“Yeah, fair enough...”

“Considering the timing, it’s probably someone involved with the election, right?”

“Pommel’s saying he acted on Juno’s orders. Maybe there’s a grain of truth in there, and she’s the one he’s protecting.”

“Nah, that doesn’t follow. If that were the case, wouldn’t he have stated that Juno ordered him to *say* he did it?”

“Oh yeah, you’re right.”

“What about someone from the Principles Party, then? The way things shook out, this whole murder scandal ended up turning the tides back in their favor after they lost some support during the debate. They definitely came out ahead of the Reform Party in all this. Wouldn’t you agree, Vice-Minister?”

Elch understood the other committee member’s point, but he didn’t buy it. “...I dunno, I’m not really feeling it. Tetra’s been at the heart of the Principles Party since day one. It wouldn’t make sense for someone to join up with her if they disagreed with the way she ran things, and I can’t imagine them sacrificing their group’s emotional bedrock like that just to scrape together a couple more seats.”

Elch thought back to Lloyd’s anguish. That man had been mourning Tetra’s passing in earnest. Doubting it was difficult.

“I’m not so sure about that,” someone objected. The voice belonged to a short *byuma* who had yet to shed the last vestiges of childhood. It was the imperial exchange student who’d joined the election steering committee on recommendation from Tsukasa Mikogami himself, Nio Harvey.

“What do you mean, Nio?”

Despite being surrounded by fully grown adult men and women, Nio gave an

unwavering reply. “As I’m sure most of you fine Elm folk are aware, the empire is locked in a standoff between the Four Grandmasters and the Bluebloods. The other day, Grandmaster Neuro initiated a purge of everyone at the Imperial Mint who had connections to the Bluebloods. The bigger an organization gets, the more its subdivisions start breaking into factions and competing with one another for control. As far as your voters are concerned at present, one is with either the Principles Party or the Reform Party. There’s no way any fence-sitters will get seats at the table. So...it’s totally possible that a member of the Principles Party didn’t much care for the overwhelming amount of sway Tetra had. I guess that’s just as true for the Reform Party, though.”

“...I see what you’re getting at. You’re right. That does sound plausible.” Hearing Nio lay it out like that made Elch reconsider things in a new light.

Someone in the Principles Party who didn’t care for Tetra might have killed her and pinned it on Pommel. Alternatively, someone in the Reform Party who didn’t care for Juno might have been responsible, as Tetra’s untimely death would harm Juno’s reputation and get rid of a powerful political rival at the same time. Either option was conceivable, and that meant the mastermind could be anyone.

More clues were required, but none present had the slightest inkling where to look.

Right as Elch started groaning—

“In any case, I don’t think letting the election progress with things as they are is a good idea.”

—one of the committee members spoke up.

“Yeah, you’re right. We should postpone it until after we know what really happened.”

“The voters are going nuts, man. Did you see what’s going on outside?”

“You mean all the people facing the building and praying? Yeah, that was new. They must’ve followed God here from the plaza.”

“What do you say, Chairman Elch? Should we delay the election?”

As more and more of his colleagues voiced their support for the idea, Elch could only give them an awkward frown.

“...I don’t have the authority to do that.”

“What?!”

“How? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Back when this mess started coming to light, I had the same thought,” Elch stated. “So I looked over the bylaws Tsukasa drafted for the election and read up on the steering committee’s powers, but there wasn’t anything in there about suspending the election or even the process for how we’d do so. All we’re permitted is the ability to monitor the proceedings impartially. Stopping the election is beyond our right.”

“B-but why?!”

“D-did Mr. Tsukasa forget to add that part or something?”

Elch didn’t know the answer to that question. Still, Elm was a nation governed by laws, and he couldn’t exercise authority he didn’t have.

“Still, if there’s anyone who might be able to suspend the election...”

“...it’s Akatsuki, ruler of the angels. He, and no one else.”



Every pair of eyes in the room fell to the diminutive blond, who recoiled promptly.

“Wait, huh? Me?”

Elch elaborated. “We could also contact Tsukasa and get permission directly, but it sounds like he’s got his hands full right now. I’d rather not bother him unless it’s life-or-death. But you, God Akatsuki, hold a singular position here in Elm. If you declared that the election was on hold, there isn’t a person in the nation who’d object.”

“Hey, he’s right!”

“If we let things persist, we might end up with a killer in the national assembly...”

“And besides, everyone’s in turmoil over the murder, and a bunch of people were calling for the election to be postponed already. If we’re going to do this, now’s the time.”

“Please, God, make the announcement! Tell the people what’s up!”

“I’ll get everything up and running for you.”

The committee members unanimously agreed that this was the best option they had available. Bearabbit began hooking up the mic and sound equipment without a moment’s hesitation.

However—

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! I’m afraid that...is not an option! The show must go on!”

—Akatsuki shouted them all down.

“““What...?!”””

“B-but A-Akatsuki, why?!”

Elch and the other committee members stared at him in bewilderment, and Akatsuki summoned up as much swagger and bravado as his short body could muster.

“Why, you ask?! That much should be obvious! Because Elm isn’t my nation. It belongs to you mortals!”

“!”

“The Republic of Elm is a democracy, and in a democracy, everyone has a right to democratic elections! Those elections are their sovereignty manifest, and nobody has the right to interfere with or obstruct them!! *Not even an omnipotent god!* Otherwise, it ceases to be a democracy!”

As Akatsuki spoke, he thought back to a question he’d once casually asked Tsukasa after class back in middle school. Tsukasa was always going on about how a democracy’s failures were also the failures of its citizens, the people who’d elected its officials. What Akatsuki had wanted to know was whether the same thing held true for the Empire of Japan. After all, they held elections back then, too, so was the bitter defeat Japan suffered in World War II the fault of its people as well?

Tsukasa had answered with a definitive “No.” That was different.

“Sovereignty and rights aren’t always the same. Japan was a constitutional monarchy at the time, and sovereignty rested with the emperor. The people only had what ‘rights’ they were permitted to have, and those rights could be—and were—obstructed on a whim.

“The most egregious example was the Lower House Term Extension Act. It allowed the cabinet to use the geopolitical situation as an excuse to postpone lower house elections for a year. The people may have appointed them at first, but they robbed the people of the right to choose their leadership.

“And do you know what they did during that year? They bombed Pearl Harbor and intentionally pushed us past the point of no return, then established a wartime regime through a farce of an election where anyone who didn’t support the military was driven out.

“It seems pretty clear that they wanted to leave America’s President Roosevelt with no choice but to declare war.

“Theory holds that the military and the mass media that supported it were hoping to use special wartime procurement to overcome their economic slump, and the people themselves wanted to see that boom as well.

“There’s no denying that Japan’s economy was in rough shape at the time, so it’s possible that combat was unavoidable. It’s impossible to say how right or wrong the decision itself was. However, while the people elected the officials at first, those in power did the unforgivable and used the emperor’s sovereignty to rob the citizens of their rights. In a situation like that, the populace bears no responsibility for the war or election that followed.

“We can’t afford to make the same mistake they did. If Japan wants to call itself a free democracy, then even if the world were going to end tomorrow, we would still have a duty to carry out our elections. The instant that the right to democratic elections is arbitrarily obstructed marks the moment that the will of its people no longer governs a country.”

“If there’s a system in place to interfere with people’s rights, then sooner or later, it’ll get used for evil. Tsukasa knew that, and that’s why he didn’t give you that authority. It doesn’t matter if there’s a murder, or if war breaks out...or if

the world falls apart! He knew that nothing would be enough, nothing *could* be enough, to justify violating the citizens' sovereignty!"

Most importantly, *Tsukasa himself* was the one who decided to hold the election *now*. Tsukasa, the prodigy politician who always made sure of everything. There was no way he hadn't foreseen an upset like this. The fact he'd decided to hold the election despite that meant that it was simply that important for the Republic of Elm.

I...I basically don't know anything.

Akatsuki hadn't the faintest idea what was best, how he could help, or even what he wanted. All of the other six Prodigies were so mature that he felt like a child compared to them. Still, the blond magician understood who deserved his trust.

He knew who was willing to sacrifice everything if it meant that even one more person got to live a happy life. It was the man who agonized over everything, far more than anyone else. Akatsuki trusted him even more than himself. That was why there was never any uncertainty about whether he should delay the election.

"So...I'm countin' on you to keep looking after Tsukasa for me."

He just needed to keep backing up the person he trusted—prodigy politician Tsukasa Mikogami!



*

“If the people lose focus on the election, I’ll talk to them and get it back! When more riots break out, I’ll stop them! I’ll do whatever I can. So I need you guys to give it everything you’ve got, too, so we can make this election fair and impartial! After all...this is your country we’re talking about here!”

Akatsuki mustered up all the volume and determination he could to express that absolute confidence in Tsukasa and how inviolable the election was. He was trying so hard to convey his point that he made a significant mistake.

About halfway through his speech, he completely forgot that he was supposed to be speaking with the majesty befitting a deity.

“Er, I mean...verily, this *doth* be *thine country*! Fwah-ha-ha-ha!”

He frantically tried to amend the end of his statement, but it was too little too late. He broke out in a cold sweat. Elch, one of the only other people present who knew the truth, buried his face in his hands—

“Dammit, now I feel pathetic. There I go trying to off-load my problems on other people again. If Masato were here, he’d be laughing his head off at me.”

—and let out a self-deprecating chuckle.

It wasn’t Akatsuki’s blunder he was worried about. It was his own weakness.

“Ha-ha, you ’n’ me both.” Zest agreed with a laugh. “This Yamato situation started when Princess Kaguya showed up, and now Elm’s gotta make the call. The Principles Party wants us to follow the Seven Luminaries’ lead, and the Reform Party wants us to appease the empire. Still, either way, the country’s gotta choose what path it wants to take, and it’s gotta make that choice now. If we wanna see our People’s Revolution through to its end, then this is somethin’ we can’t put off.”

“The Commander’s right. How’d we miss something so obvious?!”

“C’mon, guys, we’re not just commoners getting jerked around anymore!”

“Yeah! We decided to stand on our own two feet, and that’s what we’re going to do!”

As it turned out, Elch and Zest weren't the only ones who felt that way. Resolve shone brightly on the face of every Elm bureaucrat in the room. And it wasn't because their God, Akatsuki, had given the order, either. It was because they had finally remembered just how precious the rights they'd been endowed with were. No one would sully them ever again.

"Thanks, Akatsuki. You really woke us up." After sincerely thanking the Prodigy illusionist for that reminder, Elch slammed his palms down onto the table to gather everyone's attention. "All right, the committee's decided! No more of this crap about postponing the election! We're gonna find the schemers who've been trying to manipulate things from the shadows, drag 'em out into the light, and get our country back on the right path! Including today, we've got three days left before the election. Let's make 'em count!"

""""Yeahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!""""

The others responded to Elch's enthusiasm in kind. They pumped their fists in the air and gave war cries so loud it felt like the room was shaking.

Now, more than ever, they were determined to fight back against whoever it was who dared to infringe upon their sovereignty.

"Should we start by announcing that Pommel lied about the time of death, then?" one of the committee members proposed.

"...Nah, we'd best keep that to ourselves for as long as we can," Zest replied. "If the real perp finds out we're closin' in, they might start trashing evidence. When we hit election day, Bearabbit, the Order, and I can announce everything we know for sure just before the polls open."

"What we *need* is a clue or something. Have any of you noticed anything unusual recently? It doesn't matter how small it seemed at the time!" said Elch. Unfortunately, his attempt to find something to work from got a much weaker response than his previous rousing statement. The committee members dredged through their memories as best they could, but all they could find to give him were dejected groans.

Then, one person shyly raised his hand.

"U-um, if I may..." It was Nio, the exchange student. "I know I'm from the

empire, so it might not be my place to say, but...there is one thing that's been bugging me."

"Tsukasa trusted you enough to leave a fair chunk of his job to you while he was gone. You've got as much right to talk as anyone. Hit us with what you've got."

When Elch urged him on, Nio nodded and voiced his concern. "Well...there was something about Luvirche that didn't sit right with me."

"The actors?" one of the committee members asked.

"Oh, I recall them," another one added. "They're one of the troupes that the Principles Party used for their propaganda campaign."

"Oh yeah, those guys. They were putting on shows all across Elm, right?"

"Now that I think about it, the Principles Party must have burned a *lot* of cash on them. You think the money was dirty or something?"

Elch quickly shot that theory down. "Nah, we kept a close eye on that stuff over at the Ministry of Finance. They invested a ton, but none of it violated Tsukasa's campaign finance laws. The thing is, Glaux used to be the foreign chancellor. He ended up spending something like a quarter of his whole fortune, but all the money came from him. We even double-checked with the troupes, and everything was on the level. Nio, I'm guessing there was something else that caught your eye?"

"Yes. The thing is, Luvirche—and most of the other troupes they used, for that matter—were based out of Freyjagard's Emperor domain. It made me wonder... why was the Principles Party able to hire them?"

"Well, you can't really blame them for that. It's...Nio, right? You're an exchange student, so you probably know this already, but while the angels' technology grew Elm's engineering capabilities by leaps and bounds, Drachen and the rest of the Emperor domain still put us to shame when it comes to the arts. There's a reason all the exchange students we sent your way are studying artsy stuff. And when it comes to actors, Freyjagard's got us beat in quantity and quality both. We never really had troupes like that up here in the north. The Principles Party didn't really have much choice in the matter," replied a

committee member.

Nio gave the answer a shake of his head. "I'm not talking about why they chose to hire them. I'm asking why they were *able* to."

"...I don't follow."

"Luvirche is based out of the empire, so they're going to be doing shows there for the rest of their careers. Them performing and speaking of equality for all and working with a group that's talking about going to war with Freyjagard would surely earn them no friends back home."

"I never thought of that...!!"

"If the Principles Party wins, and if conflict actually breaks out, they're going to get raked over the coals for their part in it. I don't know exactly how much the Principles Party is paying them, but even an entire mountain of gold wouldn't be enough to make up for what they stand to lose."

Once Nio pointed out the oddity, everyone found themselves agreeing with him. The more they thought about it, the stranger it seemed.

Perhaps some of the more minor troupes the Principles Party hired had been strapped for cash. However, that still didn't explain how they'd gotten a group as renowned as Luvirche to play their propaganda for them. Luvirche had a bright future ahead of it, and this job had a genuine chance of jeopardizing that.

The question gnawed at everyone present in the room.

"...Still, I don't see much of a link between that and our murder," Elch commented.

Odd or not, Luvirche's decision didn't seem to bear much relevance to the murder.

"I'm sorry," Nio apologized, realizing that Elch was correct. No sooner had he done so than—

"I'm not so sure about that, Vice-Minister."

—the door swung upon, and a dignified, powerful voice cut in.

"It's no wonder Mr. Tsukasa took such a liking to you, young man. He has a

discerning eye.” An older man stepped into the room, and the deep wrinkles on his face bunched up as he smiled and praised Nio.

When Elch saw the latest arrival, his eyebrows shot up. “Vice-Minister Archride! Where the hell have you been?!” he cried indignantly.

“I do apologize for my tardiness. The search took me longer than I expected. God Akatsuki, I’m terribly sorry I was late to a meeting graced by your presence. I had to scour the storehouse top to bottom, but I think what I found will be of some interest. Vice-Minister Elch, take a look at this.”

Archride withdrew a few grayish sheets of paper. Due to their hue, it was easy to tell at a glance that they weren’t the pulp-based stock that the Seven Luminaries popularized. The sheets were from when Freyjagard still controlled the region.

Elch took the papers and flipped through them. “What am I looking at here?” he questioned.

“Something I remembered when I first heard the name of Tetra’s killer. One year ago, back when I was lord of the Archride domain, a man named Jean Pommel, who ran a crockery workshop in Neue, came and asked me for a tax exemption because his business had fallen on hard times.”

A look flashed across Elch’s eyes, and the rest of the committee members were no different.

“W-wait, you’re saying...it’s the same guy?!”

Archride nodded.

“I investigated his workshop’s financials and discovered that Lakan’s porcelainware was pushing his ceramic products out of the market. I told him that I couldn’t forgive his taxes, but I could let him pay them in installments over a longer period. I found those documents as part of my investigation. They detail a loan he took out to maintain working capital. When you see who the creditor is, I think you’ll understand why I brought them.”

Elch turned his attention back to the documents and read them over carefully. It didn’t take long before he went agape, for the name of the lending party was...

“Glaux von Einzgarm...!”

That was it. That was the connection between the two seemingly unrelated Reform Party and Principles Party candidates.

“Sorry, *what?!?*”

“H-hey, lemme see that!”

“W-wait, so this proves there was a financial link between Pommel and Glaux of the Principles Party!”

“The document doesn’t list the interest rate or the payment deadline, but nobody would issue a mid-to long-term loan to a workshop whose finances were so bad they needed an installment plan for their taxes. The longest term I can see anyone offering would be a year, and since that much time has passed since my investigation, the loan must already be due. Regrettable though it is, I doubt Pommel was able to pay it back. It’s just too much money, and the Lakan porcelain boom is still going strong. There’s no way his workshop was able to turn the corner and come up with this much cash. Thus, there’s a good chance this debt is still active. And that’s a connection we can’t afford to ignore.”

Elch knew that Archride was onto something. The debt was the kind of amount people got killed over. In fact, one man’s life wouldn’t be enough to settle an account like this—the creditor might well drag the borrower’s family into it, too.

“And that deficit isn’t the only thing that deserves our attention. Mr. Glaux’s financial dealings with the troupe the young exchange student mentioned have a shady side to them as well. I want the Ministry of Finance to help me look into them,” Archride appended.

The remark caused Elch to look up from the documents so quickly it was like he’d been struck. “W-wait, shady how?!” His expression was marked by complete bewilderment.

Elch, along with the rest of the Ministry of Finance, had been going over all the election-related transactions with a fine-toothed comb, and as far as they’d been able to tell, everything was on the level.

Archride laid a hand atop Elch’s shoulder. Unlike those of the others in the

room, Archride's hands were large, rugged, and mottled with scars. They were the hands of a man who had survived more harsh battles than could be tallied.

"If my suspicions are right, that money trail holds the answers to all our questions. And my gut tells me they are. So how do you feel about betting on Brichs Archride, Shrewd General of the North?"



A young woman arrived at Glaux's villa near a small spring in the Gustav province. The structure's pale walls were dyed scarlet from the setting sun. She was Hilda, and she was Luvirche's star actress.

Hilda's dress was so white it seemed almost radiant, and the gold dust mixed into her lipstick gleamed as she smiled across the table at Glaux.

"Hm-hmm. I stopped by the town on my way here, and my gracious, the people are just in love with the Principles Party. If anyone still supports the Reform Party, they certainly aren't vocal about it. It's all just as you planned. You never fail to impress, Assemblyman Glaux."

"Hoh-hoh-hoh. It was all thanks to Luvirche's unflagging support and the archduke's generous financial assistance, my lady."

"Oh, you're too modest... There is something that weighs on me, though."

"Do tell."

"Aren't you worried about the commoners coming after you over the money and the way you've been paying us actors?"

"Oh, that? I assure you, there's nothing to be concerned about. Even if some rare stroke of misfortune leads the election officials to discover the way we've been moving funds between me, the archduke, and the troupes, they won't be able to charge me with anything."

"And you're quite certain of that?"

"Don't spare it another thought. I've taken great care in ensuring our safety."

"Hmm, now that *is* good to hear. That prudence is one of the things my husband, Archduke Weltenbruger, appreciates most about you."

"I'm honored." Despite the woman before him being young enough to be his

granddaughter, Glaux gave her a bow of utmost respect.

Hilda looked down at him. To her, his deference was merely a matter of course. “Between the Seven Luminaries’ horrible ear-cutting incident in Yamato and the alarming rise of a party who calls for invading Freyjagard, the Four Grandmasters will come under fire for their lax governance.

“Not even their lives will be enough to atone for the damage they’ve dealt to the empire’s dignity and legacy, and Kaiser Lindworm will be made to pay for granting power to those lowborn scum and for leading us into a pointless war.

“My husband has consensus from the other Bluebloods, Assemblyman Glaux. For your noble deeds in righting the empire’s course, we wish to put that acumen of yours to good use and welcome you back as foreign chancellor under *Emperor Weltenbruger*’s command.

“We hope you can let bygones be bygones and help us fight for the Freyjagard we both respect so dearly.”

The bygone in question was the political struggle between Glaux and Weltenbruger that had ended with the former fleeing the capital. To Glaux, the bitterness of that defeat was still fresh. However, he made sure not to let the slightest hint of his resentment show on his face—

“For Archduke Weltenbruger to not just forgive me my past slights against him, but to even welcome me into his new administration as a chancellor... Truly, the great ocean stretching to the south could hardly even begin to contain the vastness of his heart.”

—as he abased himself before the old foe Hilda had come representing.

“I pledge to show you results worthy of this favor the archduke has bestowed upon me.”

Satisfied by the man’s display of fidelity, Hilda stood. “Then the next time we see each other, may it be in the Dragon City, Drachen—and may we be meeting as its foreign chancellor and its empress.” She flashed Glaux a smile that had captivated so many tens of thousands, then took her leave.

Glaux saw her off, waiting until her carriage had disappeared from view before raising his head. “That wretched concubine is nothing more than a

pretty face, and she thinks she can look down on *me?!?*!”

He stomped the ground to vent his fury, driving his foot against the hard earth repeatedly. The action did little to quell his anger.

“And, what, she thinks *Weltenbruger* is going to be *emperor?!?* That baboon who holds nothing to his name save his pedigree?! What is this world coming to?!?”

Weltenbruger had little in the way of talent or intelligence. If not for his bloodline, he would have been worthless. Glaux would have never lost to a man like that had he not been the former emperor’s nephew! No amount of insults would be enough to capture the way Glaux felt about Weltenbruger, so he took a deep breath and swallowed his hatred.

“Now I need only bide my time...”

The boiling rage sat heavy in his stomach, but he knew that he simply needed to endure it. Going along with Weltenbruger was necessary to return the Freyjagard Empire to its former glory.

That was Glaux von Einzgarm’s goal. It was what he’d been after since the beginning. Not only had he filled the Principles Party with petty louts and scoundrels so he could abuse the Republic of Elm’s democratic governing system and feast upon its bounty, but he was deceiving his allies, too. His goal didn’t lie with the Republic of Elm. There was only one thing he desired.

By allowing the belligerent Principles Party to take control of Elm, he could launch a reckless invasion under the pretense of waging a righteous war. That would coincide with the Weltenbruger regime’s seizing of Freyjagard. By feeding them the republic’s exact invasion plans, he could deal a crippling blow to Elm and ensure that the empire retook it. With that accomplishment under his belt, he would be welcomed back into Freyjagard’s inner circle with open arms.

Glaux had been working with Freyjagard’s Bluebloods since day one. Soon, all his ambitions would be realized. The Principles Party was well situated to secure over two-thirds of the seats on the national assembly.

“Assemblyman? Equality? Hah! The thought of being put on the same level as

those animals makes me sick! I refuse to be left here to rot any longer. I'm going to be an imperial duke again. I'm going to be a chancellor again...!"

Glaux's eyelids sagged with age, but beneath them, his ambition burned just as bright as ever.



The fateful morning was finally upon them. Elm's inaugural national election was here, and the polls were slated to open at noon on the dot.

The process was as follows: When an eligible voter entered the polling site, they were given a wooden tag with their name to put in the box associated with the candidate of their choice. That way, even people who couldn't read or write could still cast their votes.

Although the polls weren't open yet, huge crowds were already gathered around the sites. Everyone was eager to cast their ballot. In part due to Akatsuki's impassioned speeches, they were all determined to take their future into their own hands.

Would it be the Principles Party, or the Reform Party? Was Yamato to be saved or abandoned? One way or the other, today's vote would determine the Republic of Elm's course. This time, it wouldn't be the High School Prodigies calling the shots. The citizens were acting of their own volition.

However, a single person had a different future in mind, one where the Republic of Elm collapsed. That man was Glaux von Einzgarm.

Glaux had taken over Tetra's position as leader of the Principles Party. He had come to Dulleskoff that morning to give an address to the nation after the election was over, announcing the establishment of the new Glaux cabinet. Once he got there, he joined up with the Principles Party candidate from the local district, then headed for the candidates' waiting room that the Department of the Interior had prepared for them.

When they got there—

"Ah."

—they ran into a woman sitting on the sofa with one of her arms wrapped in bandages. She was Juno, leader of the Reform Party. Accompanying her was a

young *byuma* who appeared to be her secretary. Like Glaux, she must have come to give the Reform Party's post-election address in the studio Bearabbit was setting up.

"You're quite the early bird, Ms. Juno."

"...Well, I do live in Buchwald."

"Tch! We gotta share a waiting room with *them*?! This sucks!"

The disparaging remark came from the Principles Party candidate who'd accompanied Glaux into the room. Like Lloyd, the man arrested a few days ago, this person had fought in Tetra's volunteer army and had been one of the earliest supporters of her ideals. In his eyes, Juno was the person responsible for the death of his sister-in-arms. He could barely stand to breathe the same air as her. The man's expression contorted in disgust, and he turned to leave.

Juno called to stop him, however. "Please, wait a moment." She gave the Principles Party duo a deep bow. "I want to apologize. If not for my inept leadership, this horrible situation might never have come to be."

Unfortunately, all her apology did was send Tetra's friend over the edge. "You've got a lotta nerve, standing there and feeding us that bullshit with a straight face!!" His cheeks flushed with anger, and he reached out to grab Juno.

"Hold it." Glaux interrupted, stopping his colleague. Then, he posed Juno a question. "The killer insisted he was acting on your orders. You still say he's lying?"

"I swear, I never did anything of the sort, but...I can understand why the Principles Party wouldn't believe me."

"You're damn right we don't believe you! You think I'm gonna listen to the monster who killed our—"

"I believe you."

Everyone's eyes went wide at Glaux's declaration.

"Huh...?!"

"What the hell, Glaux?! What're you on about?!" the Principles Party candidate bellowed. His voice was full of confusion and rage in equal measure.

Glaux replied, "Juno is a clever woman. After going up against her in the debate, I know that better than most. She isn't the kind of person who would resort to rash measures like murder."

"B-but...the killer said she gave him the order...!"

"A lie, no doubt. If nothing else, I would much sooner trust my own eyes than some unsubstantiated testimony." And with that, Glaux did the unthinkable. He turned to Juno and gave her a small bow of his own. "If anyone should be apologizing, it's us. We were so fixated on winning the election we went a little too far with our campaign promises, and now we'll have to make good on them. Getting through it will undoubtedly require your assistance. I hope you can find it in you to help the Principles Party shore up our weaknesses and work together, as fellow countrymen and patriots, to make our country the best it can be."

Glaux offered Juno his hand.

"..."

Glaux's gentle smile and display of goodwill sent a tremble down Juno's throat. She managed to choke back the sob, but she couldn't stop the emotions welling up inside her from showing on her face.

Ever since Tetra's death, it seemed like all anyone was doing was screaming and shouting at her like they would at a monster. Yet there were still people who believed and counted on her, so she'd braved the danger and stood before frightening crowds anyway. It had accomplished very little, though.

The Reform Party was still under heavy suspicion, and they had failed to win back the masses. Now it was election day, and Juno's heart was stretched well past its breaking point.

Hearing that from Glaux was the most significant relief imaginable for the tired and battered woman. Everyone knew that the new administration would revolve around him, and if he was presenting a chance for a sliver of the Reform Party's ideals to survive...perhaps Juno still had an opportunity to do some good.

"Of course! It would be my honor." Juno fought to blink back tears as she

reached forward to accept Glaux's handshake.

Glaux faced her head-on and sneered internally. *Ha. Tetra, this girl...fools, the lot of them.*

The way Glaux saw it, he was going to need as many pawns on the national assembly as he could get to successfully turn the Republic of Elm over to the Freyjagard Empire. If a little song and dance here would add another piece to his collection, it was well worth the price. By taking his hand, Juno would end up laboring to destroy the country she was trying to protect.

Glaux wondered what sort of look she would have on her face once the reborn Freyjagard Empire crushed Elm like a bug. He was going to enjoy finding out.

A gloating smile started creeping across his face, but then—

"I wouldn't touch that hand with a ten-foot pole if I were you, Juno. That guy's the last person you wanna associate with."

"Huh?"

"?!"

—a young man's declaration cut in.

Glaux's eyes widened a smidge, and he spun around to see who'd dared to interrupt him.

There he saw the election steering committee bureaucrats standing in the doorway.

One of them, a young *byuma* man, spat at him in a voice dripping with vitriol. "I gotta hand it to you, Glaux von Einzgarm. You make yourself sound like a goddamn saint."

The *byuma* in question happened to be the committee chairman.

"...It's Vice-Minister Elch, yes? Or would 'Chairman Elch' be more appropriate, perhaps? In any case, I daresay I sense some hostility. Did you need me for something?"

"You'd better believe it, Glaux von Einzgarm. I'm here to arrest you."

“_____”

Juno was struck speechless. She turned and looked at Glaux just in time to see a look of quiet sagacity flash across his narrowed eyes.



On the evening three days before the election, Elch gave latecomer Archride's suggestion the go-ahead.

“...Okay. I'll trust your gut and take another look at the money trail between Glaux and the troupes.”

The Shrewd General of the North was one of the wisest men in Elm. If there was anyone worth betting on, it was him.

“Before we get into it, though, would you mind explaining what exactly it was you thought looked shady? Otherwise, we might just miss it again.”

Archride nodded, then elaborated. “The way I heard it, Mr. Glaux took care of all the propaganda expenses on his own. But that doesn't make sense. There's no way he has enough money to pull that off.”

“Huh...? What do you mean? I get how much it all cost, but we're talking about one of the richest, if not *the* richest, guys in Elm. He could've paid for everything and still had more than half his fortune left. We looked into the net worth of every noble in the country back when Elm was founded, and that data should still hold more or less true.”

“If we were just talking about numbers, you'd be right. But there isn't a man alive whose entire fortune is liquid. You see, when we're talking about wealth, it actually falls into two categories. The first is assets that can't easily be converted into spendable money. That includes things like his manor in Archride and his villa in Gustav, as well as all the fine art that decorates them. Then, there's the kind that can be spent, like currency and drafts.

“Every fortune, no matter how large or small, can be divided into those two subcategories. The trouble lies with Glaux's asset ratio. As you're well aware, the man is a moneylender. Doesn't it stand to reason that most of his fortune would be in credits and IOUs rather than actual cash?”

“Hey, yeah...!!”

“And the thing about credits is that they have fixed repayment dates. Until his debtors reimbursed him, he couldn’t easily trade those IOUs for money. The only way he could afford all those troupes is if all his credits miraculously came to term at precisely the right time, and that’s unlikely.

“The Republic of Elm wouldn’t allow him to force his debtors to cough up early. If he tried, he’d be arrested. The only ones he could’ve legally collected on are bonds that were overdue already, but that wouldn’t have worked, either.

“If someone’s not paying their overdue debts, it’s generally because they don’t have the money. There’s no point in trying to squeeze blood from a stone. Even if Glaux seized a debtor’s assets, or the borrower themselves, it would still take time and effort to turn that into currency.”

Archride explained that Glaux’s liquid assets ultimately represented only around 20 percent of his fortune, 30 percent at the absolute most.

“Funding all he claimed to is impossible. He might technically have enough *wealth*, but not enough actual money.”

“Y-you’re right...!”

The sheer size of Glaux’s fortune had blinded Elch to the truth and made him overlook how most of it wasn’t spendable.

“But Vice-Minister Elch, the troupes putting on their propaganda are getting paid just fine! We knew in advance that putting on such a large-scale propaganda campaign would take huge amounts of money, so the Ministry of Finance has been monitoring them closely!” remarked a Ministry of Finance bureaucrat.

Elch had seen those reports and knew that was correct. The money definitely existed, and it was unquestionably changing hands. So then, where was it coming from? In a flash of insight, all the puzzle pieces came together in Elch’s mind and revealed the horrible truth.

That’s what’s going on...!

“So there is dirty money involved!” he cried.

“You mean...someone’s trying to interfere with the election monetarily?”

“But wait, Glaux is probably the richest guy in Elm! If he can’t come up with that kind of money, nobody can!”

“Not anyone in Elm, anyway.” A stir ran through the committee members, and Elch slammed his fist against the table. “Rrgh! Dammit, they got us good!”

“V-Vice-Minister Elch?!”

“A war would play into those bastards’ hands real nicely, wouldn’t it?! And they’d have no problem getting Luvirche involved! It’s the Freyjagard Empire Bluebloods that are trying to mess with Elm’s inaugural election!”

“““———!!!!””””

Until that moment, none present had known the depths of the conspiracy plaguing their country or the fact that Elm’s survival hung in the balance.

“Finance team, I want you to find me every piece of gold Glaux has ever so much as looked at since the day Elm was founded! Also, get ahold of Jaccoy and tell him to scour through the currency exchange logs, starting with when we first issued the goss! Unless we find a huge transaction there, that money’s undoubtedly dirty! Commander Zest, take your men and trace the paths Luvirche and the other troupes took through Elm, as well as everywhere Glaux went since Elm was founded! Hurry, people! If the Bluebloods are channeling funds to Glaux, there’s gotta be proof of it somewhere!”

“It was easy once we knew where to look,” Elch explained to Glaux. It had taken several sleepless nights, but he had the man trapped now. “In that inspection we conducted when Elm was first founded, we found that forty percent of your fortune was tied up in fixed assets like houses and art, and only twenty percent was liquid. The last forty percent was all credits. We didn’t look too closely at who exactly owed you what, so I don’t have all the details on hand. Still, I’d bet that there’s no way you were able to collect on all those dues in the short time frame before the election. Plus, we went through all the currency exchange logs, and there’s no record of you trading for all the imperial currency you’d need to pay off a bunch of troupes based in Freyjagard. One day, out of the blue, a pile of imperial gold half the size of your whole fortune just happened to fall in your lap, huh?”

“.....”

“The Order checked the checkpoint records, and you know, your family members have been making an awful lot of trips between here and Freyjagard lately. Plus, your housekeeper confirmed that just last month, Imperial Golden Knight Karl du Glühen—who works for Archduke Weltenbruger—visited your main residence in Archride. Because you got your campaign funds straight from Archduke Weltenbruger!”

Elch and his coworkers had been rushing all over the country to build their case during the past few days. Their efforts had forged a mighty blade of truth, which Elch now wielded against the greatest villain of them all.

Glaux, faced with such compelling evidence, burst into laughter.



“Hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh! I was wondering what you had to say, but this? This is preposterous.”

“Mr.... Mr. Glaux?”

Juno stood dumbfounded, not yet entirely comprehending what was happening. Meanwhile, Glaux enjoyed his chortling for a moment more—

“Hoh-hoh-hoh, so I did. And what of it?”

—then freely confessed to the accusation. He didn’t so much as try to make excuses. It was all true.

The Principles Party candidate accompanying him went pale. “W-wait, what?! But accepting contributions from a foreign national is a major campaign finance violation!”

However, he was the only one who seemed alarmed. Glaux himself didn’t look concerned in the slightest.

“Please take care not to misinterpret my statement,” Glaux asserted with a tone that bordered on brazen. “I didn’t take a single campaign contribution from the man. You see, I sold a number of my assets to Archduke Weltenbruger, and that money was simply my proceeds. I needed quite a bit of money to run my campaign. Yet regrettably, I am only a humble moneylender. Spendable capital is not something I’m blessed with an abundance of, and to be

honest with you, I was at a bit of a loss.

“It was then that I came up with the idea of conveying some of my outstanding credits to my old acquaintance Archduke Weltenbruger to raise the money I needed. The payment I accepted came in the form of imperial gold, and I believe that explains why it didn’t show up in your foreign exchange ledgers.

“If you still suspect me of wrongdoing, then, by all means, come visit my villa in Gustav. My head butler Sasuke would be more than happy to show you a detailed account of exactly which credits I sold and for how much. If you compare those numbers against my current holdings and my fortune at the time of your last inspection, it should prove my innocence.”

As Glaux laid out his explanation, a disdainful grin spread beneath his bushy mustache.

Hoh-hoh-hoh. What shallow minds the common rabble have.

As soon as anyone compared the massive expenses of his propaganda campaign against his current assets, it would only be a matter of time before they discovered the illicit contributions. Glaux had known that all along. That was why he’d never taken any illegal contributions.

When those idiot Bluebloods tried to fatten up his campaign fund, he had intentionally turned them down and instead suggested that they buy his credits so he could avoid breaking the law.

After hearing Glaux’s rebuttal...Elch gave him a nod. “Yeah, my Ministry of Finance guys went to your villa and looked over those documents this morning. According to the report they sent me, there wasn’t so much as a single misplaced zero. The files were so meticulously detailed it made a couple of us wonder if you didn’t draw them up with the express purpose of showing ’em to us.”

“Well, you aren’t necessarily wrong about that. I recognized that I was moving a lot of money around, so I made sure my records were spotless in case I drew any undeserved scrutiny.”

“I gotta say, there was some really interesting stuff in there. Y’see, it wasn’t

just loans in good standing where the debtors were making regular payments you sold off. A bunch of 'em were unrecoverable garbage over a year past their payment dates, and yet you somehow sold them off for *full face value*. That's quite convenient."

"What can I say? I bought low and sold high; that's just good business."

Archduke Weltenbruger was the leader of the Bluebloods, a group that had loudly voiced its displeasure at Elm's secession. It didn't make sense for him to be doing business with anyone in Elm, much less a Principles Party member who was calling for a holy war to be waged against his country. Suspicious as it was, though, nothing illegal had actually happened. There was nothing people like Elch could do about it.

Glaux knew he was in no danger. He turned his nose up at Elch—

"Now that you've looked through my books, you understand as well as anyone that the money I used for my campaign was acquired in a completely legal manner. I haven't done anything illicit, and to be quite blunt with you, I don't appreciate the way you've been baiting me and making baseless accusations. Once I'm elected to the assembly, I'll make sure you answer for this witch hunt of an investigation you've conducted."

—and glared daggers at him from beneath his droopy eyelids.

Glaux is probably grinning like he's won under that bushy white 'stache of his, Elch realized. Had the young *byuma* been alone, that was as far as things would have progressed. Even if he'd noticed the discrepancy in Glaux's asset ratio and looked into it, he wouldn't have been able to get any further than he was right now.

Fortunately, he'd had assistance.

"The thing is, proving that the money came from the Bluebloods won't do us any good."

"What are you talking about, Vice-Minister Archride?"

"The amount of money it took the Principles Party to run their plays all across Elm is tremendous, and there's no way Mr. Glaux would have overlooked how much attention that would draw from the steering committee. I find it hard to

imagine he would let himself get nailed for something as obvious as that. See, there's nothing illegal about moving the money itself as long as you do it right, and I suspect he fixed that problem by selling off his assets and taking the cash as 'profits.' As long as it isn't technically a donation, our campaign finance laws can't touch him."

"So why bother looking into his cash flow if it's not going to get us anywhere?"

"The important part about all this isn't where the money came from. It's about what he sold to get it.

"Considering who stands to gain, I can all but guarantee you that it's the Bluebloods he dealt with. If the Principles Party starts a war with Freyjagard, they can use that as leverage to oust the Four Grandmasters for choosing to appease us, so it's in their interest to funnel as much currency to his side as they legally can. They don't care about the details; they just want the money moved, so for Mr. Glaux, this is a golden opportunity to off-load all his bad loans in one fell swoop. Now, that brings us back to our friend Mr. Pommel. Given his workshop's financial setup, the standard kind of short-term loan you'd offer him would come due after just a few months. If that kind of loan was still sitting on Mr. Glaux's books after a full year, any moneylender in their right mind would write it off as nonperforming. So what if...out of all the bad loans he has, it turns out that's the only one he intentionally chose to hold on to?"

If the cunning old Glaux von Einzgarm gave up his chance to get rid of it, that could only mean one thing. That loan itself was the *true weapon* behind their murder mystery.

"Vice-Minister Archride was right. It wasn't there! We went over that tidy little transaction log you drew up for us, and out of all the piles of good and bad debt you sold off for face value, there was but one loan missing from it—your short-term loan to Jean Pommel!!"

"——!!"

A shock ran through Glaux's body like he'd been struck by lightning.

The provisional government had been so overloaded when they conducted that initial wealth survey that they'd only checked the values of his debts, not

any of their details or who owed the money. So how? How could they have known about that loan...?!

“J-Jean Pommel, you say?! Why, I’ve never loaned the man money in my life! This is slander!”

Elch responded to Glaux’s skeptical deflection by shoving the inspection documents in his face. “A year ago, when Vice-Minister Archride was *Lord* Archride, Jean Pommel put in a request for a tax exemption. This is what the Vice-Minister found when he investigated the workshop’s financials—loan documents with your name written all across ’em.”

N-no! It can’t be!!

Overlooking that was Glaux’s fatal mistake. However, that much was understandable. In his eyes, the lowly commoners were nothing more than livestock to be squeezed for everything they had. After spending so much time in Freyjagard’s innermost political circles, he had grown overly accustomed to thinking of nobles like himself as inherently superior. What Archride had done—actually listening to the commoner’s woes, conducting a survey of his financials, and even agreeing to a tax payment plan when total relief wasn’t on the table—was highly irregular for a noble. The possibility of such a thing happening had never even crossed Glaux’s mind.

“O-oh, *that* debt! Right, right, now I remember! I assure you, that loan was already—”

“What, paid off in full? Fat chance. We’ve got his ledger as evidence. You could squeeze every drop of gold from that dying workshop, and it wouldn’t even come out to a tenth of the money he owed you!”

“Rrrr~~~~!”

“Two hours ago, when we found proof you still owned that credit, Commander Zest and the Order of the Seven Luminaries stormed your manor in Archride and rescued Pommel’s wife and two daughters from where you had them locked up. When we told Pommel they were safe, he sang like a bird and told us that you’re the one who put him up to lying! I hope you’re ready to face the music!”

“Lies, all of it!!!!” The last thread holding Glaux together finally snapped. “This is a frame job, nothing more!! You filthy bureaucrats are trying to drag me down so you can keep all the power for yourselves! Th-that man said the girl ordered him to do it, didn’t he?! She’s obviously the true culprit!”

“Wh—!”

“Why, using a bunch of officials to try and sully the name of a dutifully elected politician is an act that goes against the very fabric of democracy! Shame on you!!”

Nothing remained of Glaux’s former gentlemanly facade. Even the wily schemer who’d gotten the Principles Party and the Reform Party to dance on the palm of his hand was gone. He had been reduced to a hideous rat. His face was flushed scarlet, his mouth was open as wide as it could go, and he was blustering at the top of his lungs without a care for the way his spittle was flying or the fact that he had told Juno he believed her mere moments ago.

However, Glaux’s final futile line of defense crumbled—

“...Why don’t you try telling that to *her*?”

—when Elch and the other bureaucrats stepped out of the doorway, and he saw the woman accompanying them.

“I——”

“...”

It was almost noon, so they were in broad daylight, yet Glaux’s face changed from red to white in the blink of an eye. He looked like he’d seen a ghost, and for a good reason. The silver-haired woman leaning on prodigy doctor Keine Kanzaki’s shoulder behind Elch and the others...

...was none other than Tetra, the woman Glaux had murdered.

“T-Tet...ra...?! ”

“C-Captain! But... But how?! ” the Principles Party candidate cried.

“N-no, this isn’t possible!!” Glaux bellowed. “Y-you’re supposed to be dead! I KILLED YOU MYSELF!”

“That’s right,” Tetra replied. “You did kill me. But the thing is...”

She paused there to glance at Keine. The High School Prodigy doctor gave the room her usual bedside-manner smile.

“As far as I’m concerned, anything within the first forty-eight hours hardly counts as *dead*.”

Glaux lost the last dregs of his vigor and sank to his knees upon hearing that.

“By the way, I didn’t get a chance to tell you what the charges were.



“Glaux von Einzgarm.

“You’re under arrest for blackmail, assault, kidnapping, election tampering, and finally, *attempted* murder.”

“No... I... Rrgh... ARRRRRRRRRRGH!!!!”

At last, the plot surrounding Elm’s first election had been exposed.



“Captain, you’re alive!! That is you, right, Captain?! You’re really here?!”

After Glaux was hauled off, the other Principles Party candidate rushed over to Tetra and touched her shoulder. “Y-you’re solid! You’re actually alive!” he cried. Tears of joy cascaded down his face.

Tetra wiped them away with her finger. “I’m sorry for causing so much worry. I’m back now, and it’s all thanks to this angel here.”

“Th-thank you, Dr. Keine! Thank you so, so much!”

The young man tried to prostrate himself in a show of gratitude, but Keine gestured for him to stop. She gave the two of them a pained smile. “I should warn you that I wasn’t able to get her all the way back to how she was before.”

“Anything within the first forty-eight hours hardly counts as dead.”

Keine had meant what she said, but that typically only applied to corpses that had been adequately preserved. Tetra’s body had been badly damaged and had started to decompose when Keine had started her work.

Knowing she didn’t have so much as a tenth of a second to spare, Keine had dismissed all of her assistants and had spent thirty hours straight focused on bringing Tetra back. That was why she was so late in reporting the discrepancy in the time of death. Resuscitating Tetra was her top priority.

Every moment mattered, but Tetra was saved, thanks to Keine’s speed. Unfortunately, Tetra ended up suffering significant losses to the vision in her right eye, her muscle strength, and her cardio-pulmonary and digestive capabilities. Keine blamed herself for all of that.

Still, Tetra was grateful. “You saved my life. That’s more than I could have

possibly asked for.” Then, she turned to her rival, who stood motionless, still trying to comprehend everything that had happened. “Juno, I’m so sorry for all the trouble I caused you...”

Once Tetra was done, Elch took a turn bowing to Juno as well.

“I’d also like to apologize on behalf of the steering committee. We figured out that Pommel was lying a few days ago, but we intentionally held off on making that public to stop the real criminal from covering their tracks. The plan was always to tell the voters before the election started, but even so... I know that made things tougher on you than they had to be.”

Juno waved the two off with a smile. “No, no, don’t apologize. If you hadn’t done that, the full truth might never have come to light.”

Elch’s decision had been necessary to ensure the investigation’s success, and no one was going to argue that Tetra had been a victim. However—

“My blunder may have led to Glaux getting caught, but that still doesn’t excuse it.”

—the look on Tetra’s face as she responded spoke of terrible remorse.

She clenched her eyes tight for a moment, then turned to Elch as though having made up her mind.

“Mr. Chairman, I would like to withdraw my candidacy.”

“Wh-what?! B-but Captain, why?!”

The case was solved, and the culprit had been apprehended. There didn’t appear to be a reason behind Tetra’s decision.

“Unwitting though it may have been, the fact remains that I participated in a scheme to sell out this nation. I tricked people, stirred up a big fuss, and even got Ms. Juno wounded. I cannot deny my culpability in all this, and my ignorance does nothing to absolve me of it!”

When Juno saw the fierce resolve in Tetra’s eyes, her thoughts began turning. Based on what Elch had just said, the election bureaucrats were on schedule to tell the voters exactly what had happened before the polls opened. If Tetra dropped out on top of that, the Principles Party would be finished. The Reform

Party would sweep the election and secure two-thirds of the seats with ease.

“...You’re right, you know. Ever since this whole scandal started, I’ve been terrified. It was the first time in my life I’ve ever had so many people hate me. That was like torture. I was so scared they were going to kill me, I couldn’t even sleep.”

Elch tried to repeat his apology. “Again, we’re so—”

“But going through that...it made me realize just how incredible Ms. Tetra is.”

“...Huh?”

“Great Scythe Tetra has been fighting to protect people weaker than she is since long before the election, and she’s had to face that same fear the whole time.

“Now I understand how much courage and fortitude that must have taken.

“Ms. Tetra, I don’t think you need absolution at all.

“If not for the inspiration your strength of character gave me, I don’t know if I’d even have been able to show my face today. Maybe the people won’t accept you back, but I don’t think that’s something you should just go and decide on your own. I think you should go out and ask them.

“...I can’t speak for anyone else, but in my opinion, this country is better off with you in it. Good people like you are the kind I want to protect this country alongside.”

If Tetra dropped out, the Reform Party’s victory would become unassailable, which was a problem. The Republic of Elm needed her Principles Party—and her.

“B-but...you and I don’t see eye to eye on anything!”

“Exactly, and that’s why I want to work together.”

Tetra floundered in confusion, but Juno remained unwavering. She had originally believed that taking a pacifist stance would be enough to prevent war from breaking out, but the debacle they’d just gone through had shown her how naive that notion was.

“There are people in this world who are so unbelievably selfish that they’d be happy to expose foreign nations and their own to the ravages of war if it meant they would get to come out on top. No matter how hard we try to take friendly diplomatic stances, no matter how much support we give the Freyjagard Empire, people like that will do whatever it takes to make us go fight anyway. If we want to stop them, we need to make sure that everyone understands how precious equality and human lives are. But a coward like me isn’t going to be strong enough to foster those beliefs on my own. I don’t have enough courage... My people won’t be able to protect those children on our own.”

And that was why...

“Please, Ms. Tetra, lend us your bravery and your strength. Our ideals and beliefs might be different, but it’s when different ways of thinking clash and we talk things over that we can find answers that neither of us might have discovered on our own, like blue and red paint mixing to become purple. I think...I think that right there is what makes parliamentary democracy such a wonderful system.”

Juno offered her hand to the woman who had the skills and qualities she lacked and who loved her country just as much as Juno did.

Tetra felt a wave of shame wash over her. She hadn’t been thinking about any of that. All she had done was try to dominate the assembly through a majority. The only kind of justice she had any claim to was a blind, self-aggrandizing sort. That was what had enabled Glaux to go on the rampage he did. It was lamentably pathetic.

Tetra knew she was a fool and that politics was too heavy a responsibility for someone like her to shoulder... On her own, that was.

But with *her*...

Alongside someone who was deliberate and prudent and thoughtful, she just might be able to do some good. She might be able to build a world where the horrors she’d seen under Gustav’s rule would never be allowed to happen again. And she wouldn’t do it with a war. She would do it with a superior method that she and Juno would devise together.

By that point, Tetra knew she already had her answer.

“Very well.”

She squeezed Juno’s hand back.

“If the voters will have me, then... Then I look forward to having many more conversations with you. Conversations about what we think is right and what we believe is just. Conversations for the sake of our beloved nation!”

That’s when the dam burst.

“Ah, ah...!”

Even since Tetra’s death, Juno had been holding it in. She hadn’t cried, no matter how much they cursed her name or what they threw at her, but the tears now flowed freely. She dropped to her knees and sobbed, unable to hold back her emotions any longer. Everyone rushed over and called to her in concern when they saw her sudden breakdown. Juno didn’t have the composure to reply, but she never let go of Tetra’s hand.

She squeezed it for a long time.

That night, an hour after sunset, they announced the results of Elm’s first national election.

Principles Party: twenty seats. Reform Party: thirty seats.

News of Glaux’s arrest came as a big shock. Between that and Tetra’s testimony leading to the arrest of a double-digit number of Principles Party candidates for helping cover up her murder, Principles Party supporters switched sides to the Reform Party in droves. Despite her group’s adverse situation, though, the newly revived Tetra managed to win an eye-popping 90 percent of the vote in her electoral district, massively outperforming the now-popular candidate, Juno, and allowing the Principles Party to maintain some of its dignity.

Although it had seen many ups and downs, the Republic of Elm’s first election successfully concluded. The People’s Revolution was well and truly complete.



When the tally was finished, the ballot-counting room in Dulleskoff’s Department of the Interior building looked like a war zone.

Some people were collapsed on their desks, and others were slumped against the wall. Most were lying on the floor. All of them were unconscious and snoring loudly.

The steering committee had been working around the clock, contacting and coordinating with people across Elm to solve the case, and the minute it all ended, they collapsed.

Archride let out an amused laugh as he draped the furs he'd brought over each of them in turn. As he was doing so, he glanced at the window. Moonbeams streamed through it, and beyond them, he spotted a figure out on the balcony.

A *byuma* was leaning limply on its railing.

"You look like a dead man walking, Vice-Minister. Aren't the young supposed to be full of vim and vigor?"

"...I think I've earned a bit of rest." As Archride strode out to join him, Elch continued hoarsely, "I've been up since that meeting, digging through mountains of currency exchange logs, and then there was the big roundup today, and *then* there was the ballot count. Everyone else is passed out inside. Cleanup's gonna have to wait for tomorrow."

"Oh yes, it's like one of my old battlefields in there. I made sure to pay my respects in passing."

Archride tossed Elch the last of his furs.

"Preciate it." Elch took it and draped the thing over his shoulders. Then, he leaned back against the railing and let out a long, heavy sigh. "Guess the news came as a pretty big shock to the voters, huh? Up until yesterday, the Principles Party was running away with the election, but things really turned around."

"I would certainly think so, given what happened. Why, do you have something on your mind?"

"Thanks to the commander's hard work, we were able to get the announcement out before the polls opened, but it was still so sudden... I figure there's got to be many Principles Party supporters who ended up voting for the Reform Party before they had a chance to sit down and process everything.

When I look at it that way, it makes me think maybe we shoulda at least told people about the different time of death earlier.”

The question continued to trouble Elch, even in his exhausted state. As chairman, was there a better path he could have taken?

His older counterpart shrugged.

“Who knows? Maybe that would have worked out for the best, or perhaps announcing the state of our investigation would have driven Mr. Glaux to kill Mr. Pommel’s family to ensure we couldn’t find them. The bottom line is, we aren’t gods. Our reach is limited, and always making the right choice is no easy thing to do. It’s like trying to snatch a star out of the sky. Regardless, I’m confident we made the best decision we could have in the moment. I think that ought to be enough. Don’t you?”

There was no point in beating yourself up for not being perfect. On hearing Archride’s reasoning, Elch broke into a wide smile—

“Hey, if the man behind cracking the case says so. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t even have the luxury of standing around wringing my hands like this. I feel like you shoulda been the one to make the arrest. It made me feel odd, having to stroll in there and act all smug over something I didn’t figure out myself.”

—and shot a snarky complaint back at him.

Archride let out a hearty laugh. “Ha-ha-ha. Showdowns like that are a young man’s game. Everyone knows that. It felt good, didn’t it? Getting to take down that treasonous ex-duke.”

Based on Archride’s tone, he expected Elch to agree readily.

“...Not really.”

Instead, Elch cast his eyes downward and gave Archride the opposite answer from the one he’d been expecting.

“Honestly...I was scared stiff.”

“How so?”

“Right before you showed up, Akatsuki gave a big speech about how free

elections were the way people exerted their sovereignty, and how that meant nobody had the right to interfere with 'em. He made a lotta sense, and we were all totally on board, but...when we arrested Glaux, I realized we could only do so because we were overseeing the election.”

“ ...”

“It freaked me out. I’m just a hunter from a little mountain village, but before I knew it, I was holding all this authority. I looked at him, and I figured that if power changes people, and I had the ability to shape the course of a nation... what’s to stop me from becoming just like him?”

The prospect terrified Elch from the bottom of his heart. His face went a little pale as he hung his head. His shoulders trembled, and the nippy night air had nothing to do with it.

Archride responded to Elch’s despondent display—

“Ha-ha-ha! I see, I see. So that scared you, huh? Don’t worry, son.”

—by letting out a big laugh and rudely tousling Elch’s hair.

“I-I’m not a *kid*, you know!” Elch spat as he swatted the older man’s hand away.

Archride found the youth’s reaction adorable. “Sorry, sorry,” he replied without a shred of remorse in his voice. When he continued, though, his voice was solemn and booming. “Make sure you never forget that fear.”

“Huh...?”

“Today marked the true beginning of Elm as a country, and from now on, bureaucrats like us will need to work together and rely on each other, not the angels. The obstruction-of-justice charges against Glaux’s coconspirators kept them from getting elected, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t people on the assembly who think the same way they did. Sooner or later, we’re going to run into folks like them again.”

If politicians were a nation’s brains, then bureaucrats were its legs. Nothing, good or bad, could get done without both halves working together. The bureaucrats’ rights could change depending on the national assembly’s

decisions. They might lose the ability to arrest candidates mid-election like they had that day. Still, Archride remained aware that so long as bureaucrats were the ones who got things done, they would always hold some degree of power.

He also understood that wicked politicians would invariably seek them out for their own designs. They would come offering power and privilege to trap the unsuspecting.

However, Archride knew that the young man before him understood the dangers. He had seen what could happen, and he recognized the threat to his values.

“Remember that threat, and you will never become Glaux von Einzgarm.”

Archride mussed Elch’s hair again as he spoke.

Elch pursed his lips in annoyance—

“If you say so...”

—but he didn’t seem to mind it as much this time. He averted his gaze in embarrassment, but he made no move to shake Archride off.

Archride turned and left the balcony. His work there was done. Of course, handling the furs had been part of it, but he’d visited for a more important reason.

I’d planned on giving them a scolding if they let surviving the election go to their heads, but it looks like I was worried for nothing.

He thought back to a conversation he’d had in passing with Tsukasa in the Department of the Interior building right before the angel had left for Yamato.

“You chose not to run, Vice-Minister Archride?”

“Wouldn’t want to bail on this job right after taking it. And besides, I think I’m more cut out for bureaucracy anyhow.”

“...I see.”

Archride could still remember the expression that crossed Tsukasa’s face back then. Tsukasa was the one who’d appointed Archride to his position at the Ministry of Defense, and he felt guilty that action had narrowed Archride’s

options. He was clearly pleased that the man had elected to stay on as a bureaucrat, though.

“In that case, I want you to be a mentor to the younger ones. They know the terror of being ruled by force, but none of them realize the terror of wielding that might themselves. As far as I know, you’re the only person in Elm who can do that.”

It was the greatest honor Archride had ever received, for Tsukasa believed he was worthy of serving as an example to the entire Republic of Elm. Yet Archride wasn’t so sure about that anymore.

The younger generation was far more capable than he and Tsukasa had given them credit for. Their skills were lacking, but they made up for it in character, which was the most important trait because it couldn’t be taught.

Archride reminisced on the work they’d done over the past few days, then glanced in the direction of the mountain range visible through the southeastern window. The Yamato dominion lay beyond it, as did a certain angel.

“I promise you that Elm is going to become a damn fine country.”



✪ A Commotion Begins ✪

Once Elm's inaugural election was finished, the fifty chosen assembly members decided to put off choosing cabinet ministers and instead convened the assembly. There was only one docket item, but it was of the utmost urgency—what they were going to do with Yamato princess and Resistance leader Kaguya and her attendant Shura, both of whom they were detaining for the crime of illegal entry.

Would they choose a different path than that of the provisional government and comply with the empire's demand that they hand them over?

The Reform Party, who had initially wanted to prioritize their relationship with the empire, held the majority, so one would have expected the loudest voices in the assembly to call for Kaguya and Shura to be relinquished to Freyjugard, but that wasn't how things played out. For Juno and the rest of the Reform Party, finding out that the Bluebloods had tried to use Glaux to take over Elm's government came as a severe shock.

They had believed that fostering mutual development with the empire would be enough to prevent war, but now that hope lay shattered.

Once the Reform Party's members understood there were people so irredeemable they would start a war to make Elm's government their puppet, they turned to their ideological rivals, the Principles Party, to discuss how to proceed. Eventually, after a long, protracted session, the two groups came to an agreement, and the new Elm government announced its verdict.

They would not be turning Kaguya over.

“We do not condone the inhumane governing conditions in Yamato. Furthermore, the fact that the empire would go against both our bilateral agreement and our nation’s laws threatens to damage not only our country’s dignity but also the great notion of equality for all. The Elm National Assembly hereby announces its unanimous decision to reject the empire’s demand.”

After reading off their verdict in her capacity as the first speaker of the National Assembly, Juno delivered a letter of protest to the Freyjagard Empire that detailed the truth Tsukasa had discovered about Yamato. In it, she denounced the decision to control the Yamato people by meddling with their memories, stating that a human rights violation on that scale was an international issue. Juno insisted in the strongest of terms that they switch to a more humane style of governing.

The letter, which made no allusions to liberating Yamato or any sort of military activities, outlined how Elm was prepared to assist in any way necessary in restoring Yamato. It also demonstrated in full how deliberate the new Elm government was and how dedicated they were to solving the issue.

The message was sent to the grandmaster’s estate, but it soon spread among the imperial nobles’ information networks and whipped the aristocracy into a rage. It was beyond comprehension that an upstart nation of commoners had scolded the Freyjagard Empire like a child.

The message did not refer to exercising military force, but that didn’t matter. The nobles’ pride refused to let them accept it.

Blueblood leader Lucius von Weltenbruger had been livid after learning of Glaux’s loss, but the outrage proved to be an unexpected tailwind for him. Many of the nobles who’d been fence-sitting on the Grandmasters-versus-Bluebloods issue were past caring about the fact that the Grandmasters had been left in charge by the emperor. They hated Neuro for allowing Elm’s founding, and they sided with the Bluebloods because of it. Weltenbruger suddenly found himself with overwhelming support in Drachen and the empire’s outlying areas.

This was exactly what he’d been waiting for.

Assassinating Neuro wouldn't be enough for him to seize the throne. He would need support from the lords if he wanted to hold control, and now he did. Everyone was on board with his brand of justice, so there was no point in delaying.

That very day, Weltenbruger finally put his plan into action. He'd already laid the groundwork and filled the Drachen guard with knights loyal to him. They wouldn't be an issue. With his Shwarz-richten-ritter Obsidian Knights in tow, he stormed Grandmaster Neuro's office.



"There he is! We found the Blue Grandmaster!"

"Move out, surround him! We can't let him get away!"

"Oh goodness me," Neuro remarked. "What's this, now? Some of us are trying to work in here, you know."

Obsidian-clad soldiers kicked down the door to the grandmaster's estate's audience chamber and charged in. Neuro was sitting in a long-backed chair working on official business, and the soldiers fanned out to surround him from a healthy distance.

"Hello, Grandmaster Neuro. It's been some time."

Weltenbruger strode into the room and greeted Neuro as his men leveled their swords and spears at him. The leader of the insurgency was short of stature, and his face was adorned with countless wrinkles and an oversized pair of eyes. Neuro frowned at the old man's arrival.

"So you're the one behind this ruckus, then? Look, Lucy, I don't know what the big idea is, but as you can see, I'm trying to get some work done. Would you mind taking this somewhere else?"

"How industrious of you. If you have any love for the empire, though, I hope you'll cut us a break. Our nation is in crisis, and we have taken sword in hand to right that!"

As he spoke, Weltenbruger gesticulated wildly like an actor on a stage.

"Well, golly. I do like the sound of that," Neuro replied with an unruffled shrug. "But I have to say, this is the first I'm hearing about a crisis. What's

happened?” He propped his elbows upon his armrests, rested his cheeks on his hands, and posed his question to Weltenbruger with a relaxed air about him.

Weltenbruger waved his arms about like an actor once more as he raised his voice.

“Do you have any idea what’s occurring in Yamato?!”

“Well, the Elm provisional government envoys went down there to chat about Kaguya about a month ago, but I haven’t heard a peep out of Jade since then. Given how their election turned out, though, I’m guessing the discussion didn’t get anywhere. That Jade’s got a pretty face, but I gotta say, he’s utterly useless. I guess guys like me who’ve got the brains to go with the looks don’t exactly grow on trees.”

“So you are aware of nothing, then.” Weltenbruger scoffed and tossed a dark-red parcel at Neuro’s feet. A shattering noise rang out when it hit the floor, and it came undone and rolled open. Inside, there was a distinctively pointy ear, along with the chunk of ice it had been wrapped in.

“Is that...?”

“You know whom that belongs to, don’t you, Grandmaster? It’s dominion lord Mayo’s. You see, the Elm ambassador angels took up arms out of nowhere at that meeting. They attacked her for showing allegiance to the empire and sliced her ear clean off. Then, they fled Azuchi Castle and left a trail of its soldiers in their wake.

“Administrator Jade came to my mansion in person to tell me as much, and to inform me that you were too soft on Elm and couldn’t be trusted. You’re so pathetic that even your own lapdog turned his back on you.”

“...”

“And then we have that protest letter! *‘We demand that you reapproach the way you govern Yamato. Altering people’s memories and suppressing their will is a brutal human rights violation that sullies the empire’s dignity. If there is anything Elm can do to assist, we would be more than happy to do so.’* That sorry excuse of a nation the peasant scum cobbled together dares treat the mighty Freyjagard Empire like an inferior!

“And what’s more, Administrator Jade’s newest report asserts that the empire’s decline in influence has inspired the Resistance as well. They’ve already taken Fort Steadfast! The empire’s been reduced to a miserable shadow of its former glory! We should be second to none, yet people have lost so much respect for us that those Azure and Lakan rats had the nerve to double-cross my dear friend Rosenlink! What would you call that, if not a crisis?!”

By the time Weltenbruger was done bellowing, his face was a deep shade of crimson.

“I see, I see,” Neuro muttered after listening to the gesticulation-filled summary. “Not even reporting that rebels took the fort, huh? I swear, it’s so hard finding decent help these days. Don’t you worry, Lucy, I read you loud and clear. You were right to be concerned.

“I’ll make sure to get ahold of Jade straightaway so we can figure out how to deal with this rebellion. And if the Republic of Elm or the Seven Luminaries try to get involved, well, I’ll handle them, too. That little dominion is more important to me than you know. I think I’d best remind Yamato of who owns it. Thank you for bringing this all to my attention. I’ll handle the rest, so you can go ahead and stand down.”

“You really think you can get off the hook that easy?!” Weltenbruger ignored Neuro’s order to leave. On the contrary, he took another step forward. “None of this would have happened if you hadn’t allowed Elm to form in the first place! It was your lenience that degraded the empire’s storied reputation and allowed those upstarts to get all their big ideas!”

“Sure, and that’s why I’m saying I’ll clean this up myself.”

“Hmph. We’re long past the point where a paltry atonement like that would suffice! This is a black mark on Freyjagard’s noble history, and it can only be washed away with the blood of the Four Grandmasters who monopolized our government and enabled the calamitous Republic of Elm. Lindworm, that fool of an emperor, is just as guilty, too. He was the one who slighted the long-serving Blueblood by handing power over to you!”

As he lambasted Neuro, the other Grandmasters, and the reigning emperor, Weltenbruger drew the ornate sword that had been hanging at his hip.

“Goodness. So it’s treason, then?”

“Treason?! You hold your tongue, traitor! This is no mutiny. It is a sacred battle to win back the empire’s rightful place! Our glorious founder Fafnir von Freyjadard is in heaven, and I stand here to deliver divine justice in his place! Present me your neck, Neuro ul Levias!!”

Weltenbruger leveled his blade at the Grandmaster and demanded his head. Upon hearing the little old man’s bellow...Neuro burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

“Pfft. Haaa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Those are some big words, Lucy. So, what, you’re saying that you carry the empire on your back or something? I mean, you’re the emperor’s nephew, so I sorta get where you’re coming from, but still...”

Despite being inundated with sharpened steel, Neuro chuckled as though blind to the danger. Although perhaps it was more accurate to state that he was aware of the weapons but thought them beneath his attention.

He continued to revel in amusement for a long while, but he eventually stopped. “The thing is, Lucy,” he began as he shot a piercing gaze at Weltenbruger, “you’re only supposed to give big speeches like that when you’ve got the upper hand.”

Neuro rose to his feet, and as he did, he picked up the staff resting against his chair.

“We Four Grandmasters are all Prime Mages. You can bring a thousand of your little tin men, but if you think that’s going to be enough to take down the Blue Grandmaster, you’ve got another think coming. It looks like I need to teach a poorly trained little monkey who his master is!”

Neuro brandished his staff and readied his spell, calling on the wind spirits to engulf the area around him in a tornado. Once cast, it would dash Weltenbruger and all of his soldiers against the wall and reduce them to paste. Yet the magic never took effect.

“.....——?!”

Neuro gaped in shock. This time, it was Weltenbruger’s turn to guffaw triumphantly.

“Heh-heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha! If only you could see your face, Grandmaster! See, now that’s the expression I was waiting for! After all those years of thankless toiling, it’s so nice to see it finally pay off!”

“What manner of trick is this?”

“You thought I would just stroll in empty-handed, you dunce?! When we took the grandmaster’s estate, I had the mages I gathered from all the Blueblood-supporting lords surround the building and use their magic to put the castle’s spirits to sleep! Most of them are only Second-Class because all the First-Class mages are with Lindworm in the New World, but their ranks are still thirty strong! Not even a Prime Mage can stand up to that many alone! The spells you’re oh-so-proud of are useless!”

“_____”

Neuro’s face went pale. There was no way he could have predicted Weltenbruger would be so thorough.

A rush of bliss ran through Weltenbruger when he saw the fear in the other man’s eyes. The Four Grandmasters had replaced the Five Chancellors and stolen the authority that should have rested with the imperial nobles, and no words could describe the loathing he felt toward them. He had always wanted to rip them limb from limb, and he had waited a very long time for this day to come. At last, all his dreams were about to come true.

“Without their magic, mages are nothing to fear! Subdue this man, but make sure you don’t kill him yet! He doesn’t get to die until we’ve stripped every inch of skin from his fingertips, then the rest of his flesh, then his bones. We’ll show him what a fool he was ever to oppose us nobles!”

“W-wait, wait, I hear you! You’re mad that we took your power, right? In that case, I can bring back the Five Chancellors and transfer all that power back! Please, we can talk about this...!”

“Oh, we’re long past that point! Take him, men!!”

“““YESSIR!!!!”””

On Weltenbruger’s order, the Schwarz-richten-ritter all charged at Neuro.

Faced with an ebon tsunami surging toward him, Neuro screamed, “S-stay back!”

Weltenbruger, however, did not heed the cry. “Heh-heh-heh! Bwah-ha-ha-ha!!”

“Just kidding.”

Neuro’s expression suddenly changed to a sneer as a waterfall-like roar sounded, and the Shwarz-richten-ritter were *blasted full of holes*.

“...Huh?”

The Obsidian Knights collapsed into bloody heaps. Weltenbruger stood frozen, unable to process what had just happened. Then, before his very eyes—

“Showing up when your client needs you with exactly what your client needs? You really are a professional.”

—he saw what had happened behind Neuro’s chair.

The shock must have destroyed its hanger, as the red curtain covering the wall fell to the ground. Behind it were dozens of soldiers dressed in viridian and armed with bolt-action rifles.

“Obviously. There’s a reason they call me a prodigy businessman, y’know,” answered Masato Sanada, the boy who had left the Seven Luminaries.





AFTERWORD

Thank you all for buying and reading *High School Prodigies*, Vol. 6.

I'm Riku Misora, the author.

It's November at the time of writing, and I have to say, it feels like it got cold really quickly after summer ended this year, so I never got a chance to wear my nice long-sleeved linen shirts. What's up with that? Where'd my autumn go?

This time around, the former imperial intelligentsia got to strut their stuff. Juno and Tetra had passion in spades, but they were total amateurs when it came to politics. It's only natural that someone with Glaux's experience was able to run circles around them. And in the end, the person who ultimately saved them was another former noble as well.

Back in Volume 2, Tsukasa told Heiseraat that he wanted the nobles on his side as well, and this was why. Even if a bunch of formerly uneducated people got together and said, "Hey, we're independent now," they wouldn't have any political or administrative know-how, and their country would fall apart in the blink of an eye.

In a country's early days, the goal shouldn't be to eliminate the old intellectual and privileged class. They have to be assigned to the right places to help usher in a new era.

The passing of that knowledge will mark the moment that the People's Revolution of Elm is truly complete. Of course, that'll take decades to finish, and I'm not planning on having the story extend that far into the future (lol).

For the time being, the People's Revolution has completed its first primary stage, and now, the story's going to shift to Yamato in earnest. I hope you all stick with me as that happens.

Before I go, I'd like to extend my gratitude to a few people.

To everyone in the GA Bunko editorial department; to Sacraneco, the series illustrator; and to Kotaro Yamada, who's working on the manga adaptation;

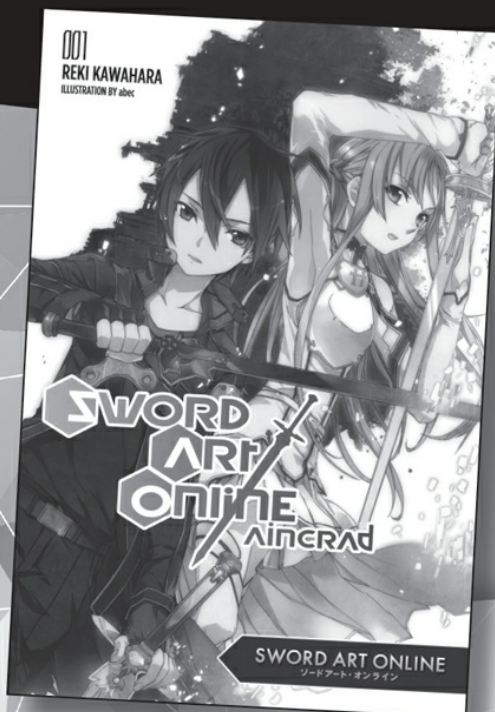
thank you all so much for your help making this series possible.

Also, I'd like to thank all the readers for supporting the series. Because of you, the High School Prodigies will be getting official voices as of Volume 7! As an author, I'm dying to find out what they all sound like.

Until the next volume's afterword, I bid you adieu.

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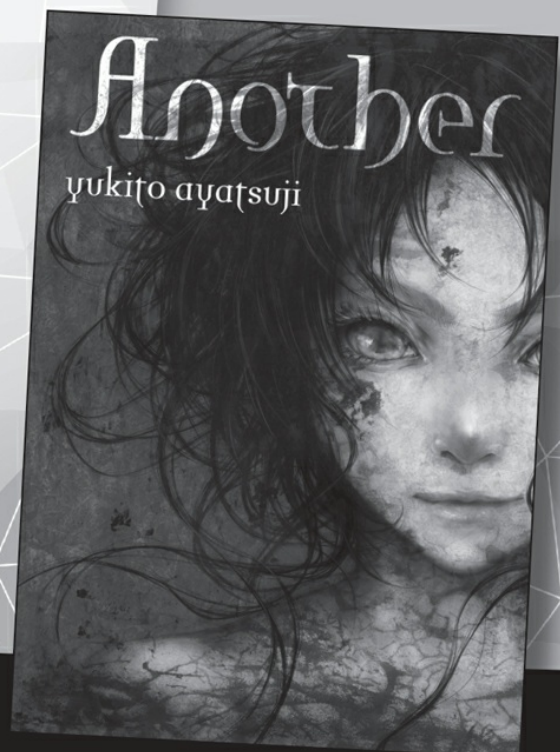
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