

Riku Misora

Illustration by **SACRANECO**



10
FINAL

High School Prodigies
Have It Easy Even in
Another World!



**Keine
Kanzaki**

PRODIGY DOCTOR

**“Oh, I’m
afraid we can’t
have that.”**

A beautiful young woman wearing a white coat came down the stone stairs, her heels clicking with every step.



**Ringo
Oohoshi**
PRODIGY INVENTOR

“Come on
over here,
Bearabbit.
I’m going to
turn you into
scrap.”

**Masato
Sanada**
PRODIGY BUSINESSMAN







“This new era
we’re heading
into isn’t about
money! It’s
about **love and
peace, baby!**”



““““Hello,
everyone!
Welcome!””””

With Lyrule and
Shinobu at the
vanguard, the
beautiful women
cheerily greeted the
imperial crowd.

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Another World!



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High School Prodigies Have It Easy Even in Another World!, Vol. 10

Riku Misora

TRANSLATION BY NATHANIEL HIROSHI THRASHER

COVER ART BY SACRANECO

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CHOJINKOKOSEITACHI WA ISEKAI DEMO YOYU DE IKINUKUYOUESU! vol. 10

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First Yen On Edition: March 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Jordan Blanco

Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Misora, Riku, author. | Sacraneco, illustrator. | Thrasher, Nathaniel Hiroshi, translator.

Title: High school prodigies have it easy even in another world! / Riku Misora ; illustration by Sacraneco ; translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher.

Other titles: Chōjin-Kokoseitachi wa Isekai demo Yoyu de Ikinuku Yodesu!
English Identifiers: LCCN 2020016894 | ISBN 9781975309725 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975309749 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975309763 (v.3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975309787 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975309800 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975309824 (v. 6 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975350086 (v. 7 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975350109 (v. 8 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975350123 (v. 9 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975350147 (v. 10 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Gifted persons—Fiction. | Imaginary places—Fiction | Magic—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.M6843377 Hi 2020 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

ISBNs: 978-1-97535014-7 (paperback)

978-1-9753-5015-4 (ebook)

E3-20240220-JV-NF-ORI

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CHAPTER 8

✿ Prodigy King Lindworm ✿

The showdown at the Tomino Basin raged on.

As the emperor brought his sword down on Lyrule, Tsukasa Mikogami cast aside his ruined rifle and pulled out the flintlock pistol from this world—the one Ringo had modified for him. Yellow Grandmaster Luther ul Fafnir sat atop the stone wall that had risen up to cut Tsukasa off from Lyrule, and Tsukasa took aim at him...

“Ha! You really think that puny little peashooter is going to be able to beat—”

...and pulled the trigger without bothering to listen. A round bullet went flying at the grandmaster.

Luther held his hand aloft to stop it with some manner of spell, but the bullet raced forward unimpeded, piercing through him.

“Gah!”

Luther’s eyes widened in surprise. Surely, he was baffled at how the projectile had slipped through his magic. There was no way this world’s antiquated ordinance could have accomplished that. Only something imbued with greater magic than Luther’s own could best his defense.

And that’s when the grandmaster realized what had happened.

“AHHHHHH?!?!” he screamed. “D-did you make that out of Father?!?!”

The blood drained from Luther’s face. He began furiously trying to dig the bullet back out, but it was far too late for that.

Luther had underestimated his opponent. Tsukasa knew that he wasn't all-knowing, so he'd prepared countermeasures for anything this world might throw at him, and Luther had misjudged his meticulousness. The bullets loaded in Tsukasa's flintlock pistol were made from Philosopher's Stones, the crystallized flesh and blood of the evil dragon who'd created Luther and the other homunculi.

As soon as Yggdra, one of the other homunculi, had told Tsukasa about the destructive way Philosopher's Stones forced cells to evolve, Tsukasa had immediately thought of using them as a weapon against Neuro. Considering that Neuro had yet to use one of those stones on himself, the odds of a homunculus surviving the forced evolution had to be low. It was a dangerous option, of course, for it could go horribly wrong, but it stood to completely turn things around if the Prodigies ever had their backs to the wall.

Tsukasa's gamble paid off. It wasn't long before black crystals tore through Luther's skin...

"GYAAAAAARGH!!"

...transforming him into a mangled porcupine when his body proved unable to withstand the rapid evolution.

Tsukasa turned his attention from the Yellow Grandmaster...

"Lyrule!!"

...and let out a loud cry as he switched over to his automatic pistol. Emperor Lindworm was about to strike down Lyrule, and Tsukasa unloaded a series of rounds into both him and his warhorse.

All shots fired at Lindworm bounced off his armor, but three found purchase in the horse. Blood went flying, splattering on the emperor and his greatsword.

"Hn?!"

The horse bucked wildly, and the emperor lost his balance, causing his sword to swing wide of Lyrule, if only just. However...

"Agh!"

...the swing still had an unfathomable amount of force behind it. Even after

missing its mark and smashing into the ground, the impact sent earth flying with the force of a stick of dynamite.

Unfortunately, Lyrule was too close to emerge unscathed. She used magic to protect herself, but it wasn't enough to block the impact entirely. The sheer force of the blast sent her flying. After landing, it didn't seem she would be getting up. She must have been knocked unconscious. From a distance, it didn't look like she'd suffered any life-threatening external injuries, though.

Meanwhile, Tsukasa's counterattack was making waves all across the battlefield.

"Tch! You're like a damn cockroach! Just die already!!"

Prodigy swordmaster Aoi Ichijou had been forced on defense by Black Grandmaster Belial ul Salamandra's Fire Vulcan magic, yet she managed to evade the barrage of fireballs, much to the homunculus's frustration. Eventually, he raised a flaming sword in each hand...

"Eat this!!"

...and charged directly at her.

That was precisely what Aoi had been waiting for.

"At long last, I have lured you out, that I have."

"Wh—?!"

She met the grandmaster with a large swing from Mikazuki, the lapis lazuli sword she'd received from the people of Yamato.

"My ferocious secret technique—Iron-Cleaving Flash!!"

That one stroke was enough to smash one of Belial's twin swords to bits. However, Mikazuki was already covered in cracks, and this proved too much for the weapon. It shattered into pieces. No typical sword could withstand the prodigy swordmaster's techniques, and although Mikazuki had done well to hold up, the damage it had suffered during her Dew-Blade Breeze had pushed it close to breaking.

"What an idiot! You panicked and broke your own weapon! Now DIE!!"

Belial surely saw Aoi's weapon breaking as a golden opportunity. He lifted his remaining sword and brought it down toward Aoi's head. The burning sword traced an arc through the air as it made to split the girl's head in two.

However, it stopped just short of its mark.

Belial gaped in shock, quickly spotting why Aoi was still alive. "Dammit, you stole a weapon from a corpse?!"

She had indeed. They were in the middle of a battlefield, and the numerous Fire Vulcan volleys from Belial had felled many soldiers from both sides. Aoi had grabbed the sword off one of the fallen to replace Mikazuki and block Belial's attack.

This sword was little more than a lump of inferior steel, and the grandmaster's fiery weapon would melt through in less than a second, but the prodigy swordmaster was quicker than that. Before Belial finished melting the sword in Aoi's left hand, she'd already snatched up another with her right and swung it.

Belial wrenched back his blade to defend against Aoi's attack, which was as much a bludgeoning blow as a slashing one. The shoddy sword was unable to withstand Aoi's technique, of course, exploding into fragments. However, Aoi had expected that.

There were plenty of replacements to be found.

While Aoi attacked with one hand, she made sure to grab a new weapon with the other to maintain the pressure. It was a wasteful technique that used up and discarded a blade with each attack. Such a thing was only possible on a battlefield.

"Behold my chaotic secret technique—War Debris Dance!!"

And dance Aoi did, kicking up dirt in her wake as she moved across the blood-soaked basin.

In his anger with Aoi—with the entire human race—Belial had moved in too close, leaving him unable to safely retreat. The divine and brutal dance pulled him in.

Neuro hadn't underestimated the Prodigies, not after seeing their nuclear missiles and how they'd expanded their influence from a remote village to all four northern domains so quickly. As a result, he'd been able to combat them on relatively equal footing. However, the same couldn't be said of anyone who was so overconfident in their own abilities as to fight one of the Prodigies head-on without a plan or countermeasures in place. And that was doubly true when facing Aoi Ichijou!

"Gahhh!"

Belial didn't have time to even attempt a spell. It took everything he had to defend himself from the rampaging tornado of steel, and even his guard began to falter in short order. Eventually, his remaining fire sword shattered...

"It can't be... I lost to this primitive *creature*?!"

A sweep from a spear smashed his skull to fragments.

"Luther?! Belial?! Dammit!"

After watching the other two homunculi get struck down in rapid succession, one could hardly blame the final one, Green Grandmaster Deneb ul Typhon, for looking worried. Judging Aoi to be the biggest threat, he prepared to launch a blade of wind at her. However, the moment he tried, a cloud of colorful smoke erupted around him, shrouding his vision.

The smoke had come from the bombs prodigy magician Prince Akatsuki used in his performances.

"Poison?! No, it's just a smoke screen! Feh, how clever!"

The mere sight of ominously colored vapor was enough for people of this world to recoil in fear, but Deneb hailed from a more advanced civilization. It barely took him any time at all to realize that the smoke was harmless and clear it away with wind magic.

For Aoi, though, those scant few seconds were more than sufficient.

"Excellent work, Akatsuki, m'lord!!"

"Rgh!"

In a flash, Aoi closed in on Deneb and pulled him into her War Debris Dance.

“HRAAAAAAAH!!!!”

However, things didn't go as easily as they had with Belial. Deneb used his wind-clad staff to block Aoi's fearsome blows and retreated to an area with fewer casualties. By limiting the amount of weapons Aoi had access to, he slowed her attack and maintained his guard.

It was a smart tactic, but it didn't change the fact that Aoi alone had him against the ropes. Unfortunately for him, his other opponents seized upon that advantage quickly.

“Thanks to Aoi, our guys had time to regroup! Cut the emperor off from his troops! All forces, pump 'em full of lead and don't let up!!”

Prodigy businessman Masato Sanada had gotten his Lakan Qinglong Gang mercenary forces back into formation, and when Emperor Lindworm charged for Lyrule, Masato's men opened fire at the imperial knights hoping to join their liege. The Lakan Qinglong Gang's bolt-action rifles boasted a rate of fire that was unheard of in this world, and the weapons ripped through the imperials like wet paper.

The imperial army's sudden arrival and subsequent surprise attack had shifted the tides of battle, but the Prodigies were slowly pushing back thanks to their unique talents and exhaustive preparation.

With the emperor caught deep behind enemy lines...

“Wow, what kind of monster tries to hit a helpless maiden with a grisly old thing like that?! Your parents shoulda taught you better than that!”

...prodigy journalist Shinobu Sarutobi cut toward him like an arrow.

“Ninja Art: Bolt Release!!”

The emperor had descended from his raging steed, and Shinobu pressed the modified stun gun she'd brought with her from Earth against his armor, blasting the man full of electricity. A terrible noise split the air as bolts arced up and down Emperor Lindworm's body...

“Such futility.”

...yet Shinobu was the one caught by surprise. After taking the shock head-on,

Lindworm reached to grab her.



“!!”

Shinobu hurriedly put some distance between herself and Lindworm, landing beside Akatsuki. Had the emperor seized her, the electricity might have flowed into her.

“Shinobu! Are you all right?!”

“Yeah, but it looks like he is, too. And my stun gun has some pretty nasty modifications.”

Shinobu stared at Lindworm, disbelief coloring her expression. Despite all the electricity she’d pumped into him, he hadn’t so much as flinched, and he still stood on his own two feet. No human could have endured something like that.

As Shinobu thought back to the story she’d heard about a single swing of Lindworm’s sword being enough to break a Rage Soleil, something Ringo’s antiair missiles couldn’t stop, she swiftly moved to shield Akatsuki. However, Lindworm showed no interest in pursuing either of them. Instead, his gaze swept across the battlefield.

“How many have perished in these few seconds you’ve delayed me? How many soldiers would’ve lived had my blade reached the girl?” There was no rage in his voice, only remorse. His eyes went to Shinobu. Pity entered his tone. “But I forgive you.”

“I can see that in fighting for the girl, you people are fighting for what you believe to be just. But what of it? No matter your reasons, your actions have produced naught but mountains of corpses and rivers of blood. As long as multiple forms of justice exist, this world will never be able to change.

“Progress can only come about by entrusting everything to me.

“Once I obtain true power, then as prodigy king, my might will transcend the boundaries of nations, and my life will continue eternally. When I stand alone at the apex of strength, I will build a world with no races, nationalities, or anything of the sort. The weak will all live under me in peace as equals. I will suppress the greed that drives human conflict, and everything from war to the tiniest

quarrels will cease to exist. My absolute justice will ensure the world's perfection."

"....."

Lindworm's voice echoed loud and clear across the entire Tomino Basin. He hadn't raised his voice, not to any meaningful degree. However, the moment he'd opened his mouth, the fighting across the Tomino Basin hill came to a stop. Everyone—the imperials, the Yamato army, the Lakan Qinglong Gang, and even the Prodigies—had no choice but to stay their hands, hold their breaths, and lend their ears to the emperor's speech. It was like every nerve in their bodies screamed not to miss a word.

Emperor Lindworm's dream was impossible. It was idealistic to the point of delusional absurdity. Yet coming from him, it sounded nearly possible. No, almost inevitable.

It was the strangest feeling, yet it reminded the Prodigies of the undeniable reality of their situation. They wondered if they were making a terrible mistake. All this time, they'd believed Lindworm was the Four Grandmasters' sacrificial lamb, a vessel to host their resurrected Father. As such, they'd assumed that, at worst, they could simply destroy him and be done with it.

Seeing Lindworm in the flesh forced them to reconsider that viewpoint. Was he really a mere lamb?

No. No, he was not.

When Lyrule had explained that Lindworm would die too if he killed her, he'd confidently declared, *"Whether the Four Grandmasters lied to me or not is a trifling matter. I understand the power that slumbers within me better than anyone. If it tries to consume me, I will simply devour it first and subsume it into my own flesh and blood."*

This man was a dragon in his own right, one well capable of devouring the evil dragon.

In that moment, everyone present became certain of that. And if that was the case...

"In my world, all will live out their days in tranquility without taking or being

taken from. It will be a perfect world managed in its entirety by my supreme will. None will know hunger or thirst. That girl is the final sacrifice necessary to achieve all that.”

...then was turning their weapons against him, the prodigy king trying to bring about a world controlled by a single absolute ruler who left no room for conflict, truly the right thing?

What option would lead to the best outcome for the world?

The High School Prodigies had sworn to protect their dear friend Lyrule, but the question troubled them nonetheless.

On one hand, they had the life of someone who’d rescued them and fought by their side as a close ally, and on the other, they had the words of a man they’d only just met and who they knew nothing about beyond his name. The scale ought to have been tipped heavily in Lyrule’s favor, yet for a moment, it seemed evenly balanced. Lindworm’s overpowering dignity convinced any who beheld it of his righteousness, and the sheer magnitude of his presence drove others to submit to him in a way that defied reason.

When faced with his unnatural force of personality, a thought crossed Shinobu’s mind. Perhaps that man really *was* a genius, chosen by the heavens to rule.

However...

“So you’d have a single person rule by force from on high. Is that your brand of justice, Emperor Lindworm?”

...as everyone else stood speechless, one person trudged forward.

Using his mangled rifle as a walking stick, the young man dragged his broken leg behind him as he approached Lindworm.

He was prodigy politician Tsukasa Mikogami.

“Then I refuse to bend a knee to you.”



“Duke Gustav told me about you, Emperor Lindworm.”

“In time, you too will learn that this world exists for one man alone. Not an

impostor—a genius, chosen by the heavens to rule! The day you learn that, you too will kneel before the emperor.”

Gustav had left behind a fiery prophecy in his final moments, and it had been rattling around in the back of Tsukasa’s mind ever since. Who was Emperor Lindworm? Tsukasa had wondered. What kind of man had inspired such fanatical devotion in Gustav?

Now, having finally met him, Tsukasa felt sure of something.

“I get it now. That larger-than-life energy you have, the way you pity the weak, the drive you have to fulfill your ideals... Gustav was right. You really are a genius chosen to rule. A prodigy even. I’m sure that you carry out everything you promise to the letter. You would rule over everything all on your own, suppress any rebellion, and bring forth a world that was fair and peaceful with you standing at its zenith. Your ideals sound ridiculous, but you might just be able to make them into a reality.”

However...

“But the thing is, that world you’re describing is a far cry from perfect. It’s as imperfect as can be.”

“...What?”

Tsukasa took the world Lindworm offered and rejected it outright.

A part of him had found hope in Gustav’s words. As an ordinary man, things slipped through Tsukasa’s fingers constantly. He could only reach for the most happiness for the fewest sacrifices possible. If a genius of the sort Gustav had described really existed, then perhaps they’d bring about the greatest happiness without sacrificing anything at all.

Were someone like that to appear...Tsukasa might finally be able to regret all the things he’d done. Such had been his sliver of hope. However, Lindworm wasn’t that person.

“There’s *no room* in your world for human happiness.”

“...!”

“Happiness isn’t something you give people. It’s something their greed guides

them to. No matter how exemplary your rule, how magnificent a king you are, or how flawless your governing structure, it will never make people happy.

“All your ideals amount to is suppressing people’s greed to maintain your order, and history has seen many like you come and go. You’d keep it going for longer than others, but that’s all. I refuse to let you sacrifice Lyrule for an imperfect world! That’s why you must fail today, Emperor Lindworm!!”

As he spoke, Tsukasa strode for Lindworm, swapped out his magazine, and pointed his pistol straight at the man. He also signaled Shinobu, still close by, with his eyes. She saw it and prepared to strike the emperor from the other side. Tsukasa shot a similar glance at Masato, telling him to leave the people pinning down the imperials to their devices so he could take aim at Lindworm, too. Their next attack would use every ounce of firepower they had at their disposal.

However...

...that attack never came.

“——Ah...”

Suddenly, Tsukasa and the others doubled over. Before they could get out so much as a word, their consciousnesses began slipping away.

What had happened?

Tsukasa couldn’t understand.

“It would appear that, unlike you, someone understands what I’m saying.”

Upon hearing Lindworm’s words and realizing what was happening to him, Tsukasa shot a shocked glance over his shoulder as he tried desperately to keep himself awake.

There behind him, he saw *her*.

“Rgh...”

How could she have done this?

Tsukasa forced himself to discard the thought. Now wasn’t the time for questions. The *why* didn’t matter.

He needed to pull the trigger.

Lyrule was in danger, and he needed to shoot Lindworm before passing out. Despite knowing that, though, his finger refused to listen. The gun tumbled from his hand...

...and as Tsukasa and the others finally collapsed, the massive blade plunged into Lyrule's defenseless heart.



The moment the golden greatsword pierced Lyrule's chest, everyone present heard the thunderous heartbeat of a dragon. The thrumming gradually intensified, like its bearer had just woken up from an eternal slumber. The ground trembled.

“Urrrrragh...”

Something resembling a jet-black flame burst up from Lindworm's body and enveloped him, his body the epicenter of the quaking.

Engulfed by the obsidian fire, he let out a groan as his body shuddered. It was a low cry, the kind one might make as they were being burned alive. Eventually, that noise escalated into a shout...

[illegible]

...and then into a scream. There was something utterly inhuman about that bellow, and it shook the air.

The black flames surrounding Lindworm expanded into a burning pillar that climbed into the sky, becoming an inky aurora borealis that pierced heaven and earth alike. The pillar was made of magic so intense no light could escape its pull.

“Ohhhhh!!” Aoi had passed out mid-fight much the way Tsukasa, Masato, and the others had, but Deneb was so enthralled that he forgot all about finishing her off. He knew who that tremendous power repainting the world belonged to. “I’ve been waiting so, so long for this moment! The time for Father to walk this earth once more has come! Finally, I’ll be able to achieve perfection again!”

Eventually, the black light faded, and the silhouette of Lindworm's still-standing body came into view within it.

Unable to wait a second longer, Deneb rushed for the figure, sank to his knees, and clasped his hands together as though in prayer. “Father! Do you recognize me, Father?! It’s me! Your son, Deneb!”

To that, he received a reply...

“You tried to deceive me, and for that, I forgive you.”

...from *Lindworm von Freyjagard*, his tone no different than it had been moments ago.

“...What?”

Deneb’s eyes shot wide open in disbelief. How? The seal was broken, so the evil dragon who created him and the other homunculi, Father, should have been reborn using Lindworm’s body as the vessel. Why did Lindworm’s persona remain? Where was Father? Deneb had no idea what was going on.

Sensing the grandmaster’s confusion, Lindworm answered his unspoken question. “I subsumed your creator and made him into my own flesh and blood.”

“You...what?”

“He was foolish enough to try devouring me, and now he is no more. His strength, knowledge, and magic belong to me. And now that I have this power, I have no need for external might. I have become capable of controlling this entire world on my own. You will know my thanks for your work as one of my Four Grandmasters. I welcome you gladly to live in peace as one of the citizens of my new, perfect world.”

Just like his voice, the look in Lindworm’s eyes as he spoke was unchanged. Deneb knew his father’s eyes, and he knew how they carried fury for the world that had driven him out. These eyes were so calm as to appear practically tranquil, however.

Upon seeing that...

“AhhhhhhHHHHHHHHH!”

...Deneb had no choice but to accept the truth before him.

Two souls couldn’t coexist within the same body. Deneb’s master had fought

this man and lost.

In other words, Deneb would never be able to leave his inferior ape body and return to the nigh-perfect form he'd possessed before his reincarnation...

"HOW DARE YOUUUUUUU!!!!"

...and that made him furious. He and the other homunculi had tolerated their hideous forms and ruled people they saw as primitive creatures because they knew it would eventually lead to them reclaiming their former glory.

Incensed that his dream had been dashed, Deneb summoned his magic and charged at Lindworm.

The emperor responded with a disappointed sigh...

"I see you've made your choice. What a shame."

...and waved his arm through the empty air.

With a satisfying *pop* not unlike the burst of a water balloon, Deneb exploded into a fine, bloody mist. All that remained of him were a few errant scraps of flesh and the tatters of the clothes he'd been wearing.

Deneb was dead.

The grandmasters had long been at work in this world, and after kicking the last of them aside as one might a pebble on the road, Lindworm took his greatsword, still wet with Lyrule's blood, and slammed it into the ground.

The moment he did, the Tomino Basin and its many assembled soldiers went still.

The evil dragon had once destroyed the continent, and Lindworm now commanded all the evil dragon's power. A single thrust of his sword was enough to split the earth's crust and send a spiderweb of fissures out across the ground.

With the footing stolen from them, the soldiers were forced to freeze in place whether they wanted to or not. Lindworm turned to them. "All units, cease this fighting," he declared. "Here, in this moment, the world has become complete. Henceforth, it will exist under my sole governance. The weak shall all exist as equals under me, and all conflict shall be forbidden."

“The ground...”

“He stabbed it with his sword, and it just...shattered.”

“No human could do that. There’s... There’s no way we can win...”

That the imperial forces showed deference was a given, but the Qinglong Gang and Yamato army had no choice but to obey, either. The High School Prodigies who’d been leading them had all just fallen unconscious. Everyone fell to their knees and bowed their heads before the advent of the all-powerful ruler.

There, amid the reverent silence...

“Wonderful. Absolutely splendid stuff.”

...a single young woman clapped her hands together in delight.

While all others knelt, she stood tall—prodigy physician Keine Kanzaki, *the person who’d thrown the anesthetic needles that knocked the rest of the Prodigies out.*

“Why did you betray your fellows?”

“Betray them? It wasn’t anything so sinister. I simply did what I felt was necessary.”



“When I heard about the world you would bring about, I realized that you must share my ideals.

People were weak, terribly so. And few understood that as well as Keine. God, in all his foolishness, had created them that way. He’d built the flaw of greed into them, and it made them into creatures of jealousy and envy that stole and were stolen from in turn.

Whenever Keine watched people kill one another on battlefields, the same thought always crossed her mind. *I want to mend the creator’s oversight.* She considered that her life’s goal. She even had the skill to make it possible. However, she lacked the power to impart her cure upon everyone who lived. Petty concepts like “morals” and “ethics” stood in her way.

She hated them, and that anger ate at her. But now, she’d found her solution.

Making all those little problems go away required power, and now she'd finally found someone with both the strength and the will to realize the perfect world of her ideals, one comprised solely of kind people who'd been relieved of that defect called greed.

With *his* help, she might be able to fulfill her dream. Lindworm's larger-than-life presence had given Keine that impression even before he broke the seal. Now, after seeing the way he'd absorbed the evil dragon's power and split the ground with a single swing of his blade...

"...There is no doubt left in my mind." Keine's cheeks went flush from excitement. "Mr. Lindworm, I have no doubt that you could bring peace to this world by controlling it with an iron fist.

"That said, ruling people by force alone will breed discontent. It won't bring them happiness. God was foolish enough to build humans as creatures of avarice, and it's in humanity's nature to constantly seek more than what it already has.



“However, I have the power to heal that defect.

“I can mend how their greed drives them to take from each other and replace their hearts with kinder ones—ones filled with love for others, ones that share openly, and ones that respect the small joys they already know.

“Together,” Keine concluded as she extended her hand and offered Lindworm a handshake, “we can forge something better. With my kinder hearts and your eternal reign, we can create a perfect world where everyone is happy and all can live in peace. We can build one here...and we can build one in *the world I come from!*”

“The world *you* come from?”

Keine’s impassioned proposal sparked Lindworm’s interest, and while he was distracted...

“Is there anyone who can still move?!”

...a desperate shout echoed across the Tomino Basin. And of all people, it came from Lyrule, who by all rights should’ve been dead.

Indeed, she had perished. The voice coming through her mouth belonged to Yggdra, the homunculus possessing her body.

“If there is, then please...grab on!!”

As she spoke, Yggdra desperately held out her hand and prayed that someone would answer.

“HrrrrAAHHHH!!”

Fortunately, one of the High School Prodigies, prodigy journalist Shinobu Sarutobi, did exactly that.

While the others had been caught entirely off guard, Shinobu was an investigative journalist. *She’d already known about Keine’s dark side*, and she’d inferred about her goals. A small part of her had considered the possibility Lindworm’s philosophy might align with Keine’s.

That little consideration had enabled her to take an on-the-spot reaction. Shinobu had managed to evade Keine’s needle, although not entirely. Her vision

was blurred, but she was still conscious.

On hearing Yggdra's cry, Shinobu snatched up Prince Akatsuki from the ground beside her and spent the last of her strength breaking into a dash. Lyrule sat up, and Shinobu grabbed her hand.

As soon as she did, a flash of magical green light exploded from Lyrule's body.

The three of them—Lyrule, Shinobu, and Akatsuki—vanished. Yggdra had teleported them away. Thanks to her magic, the three had made an escape.

Lindworm watched it all happen, but he seemed utterly disinterested. He returned his attention to Keine. "...Might I ask you to elaborate on that?"

Lindworm had been born the sole member of the strong, and as prodigy king, he felt a sense of responsibility to each and every member of the weak. To him, Keine's intimation that she came from another world was incredibly fascinating.

With that, the strings of fate that had been tied to that world since time immemorial had brought about a conclusion that none could have foreseen. This marked the beginning of the High School Prodigies' battle against Prodigy King Lindworm—a foe even mightier and more resolute of will than the evil dragon he'd consumed.

CHAPTER 9

✻ Those Who Would Not Serve ✻

The New World was a continent due south of Freyjagard's southernmost point. It had been discovered a century ago when advances in Lakan shipbuilding technology increased the scope of ocean exploration. However, it had primarily remained untouched until a few years ago.

Unfortunately, it was just too far away. If ten ships set out for the New World, one or two at most would survive a round trip, and even those vessels that returned would know heavy losses.

To complicate matters further, the New World was inhabited, and getting into disputes with its inhabitants was trouble on its own.

Everything changed when a large island was discovered between Freyjagard and the New World a few years ago, though. With a midway stop for ships, the once-arduous journey to the New World became largely trivial.

As it turned out, that discovery was the worst thing that could have possibly happened to the New World's people.

The New World was a wasteland, featuring swaths of red clay as far as the eye could see, peppered only by a small number of oases. Powerful clans fought ceaseless battles over those oases. The people never managed to unite into a single, unified nation. As a result, they had little interaction with other cultures, so their civilizations were underdeveloped in every regard. When the Freyjagard Empire and the Lakan Archipelago Alliance arrived looking for resources and slaves, the native populace didn't stand a chance.

Things only worsened for the people of the New World when Lindworm himself came and launched his campaign to murder the elves who'd sealed away the evil dragon. That fostered hatred in the New World natives, bringing their clans together in a united front against their common enemy.

After they'd forged their wartime alliance, the clans scraped together all the combat assets they could from across the New World and mounted a counteroffensive against Lindworm and his Freyjagard army.

It was at that precise moment that something unusual happened.

Neuro had teleported Lindworm's forces away.

That was the absolute last thing the Freyjagard army had expected. The entire central command unit had vanished in the blink of an eye. The imperial army fell into chaos and suffered heavy losses to the New World clan alliance's all-out assault. Without leadership, the imperials were plunged into disarray, and the people of the New World showed no mercy.

Heads of fleeing imperials went flying like rice plants lopped off by sickles. There was a ruthlessness to the act, but the imperials had certainly wronged the New World enough to deserve it.

The clan alliance outnumbered the Freyjagard army by a factor of three to one, and the imperials had only made up the difference with the Four Grandmasters' power and Lindworm's nigh-inhuman combat prowess. Now there was nothing to stop things from descending into a grisly massacre.

Come dawn, the Freyjagard army lost a full thirty percent of its hundred thousand soldiers. The tragedy dealt a harsh blow to imperial morale, and panic became hysteria. What order had survived in the ranks following Lindworm's departure collapsed, and soldiers began running without any semblance of a formation.

Tragically for them, though, they were fighting in a wasteland without so much as a thicket to hide behind, and with the sunrise, there was no darkness for cover, either. At that rate, it was only a matter of time before they were slaughtered to a man.

Right as despair gripped their hearts, he returned.

“That’s enough.”

The voice came down from amid the sky’s morning glow.

Despite the angry bellows and sounds of clashing steel, the words reached every ear on the battlefield. None could ignore this voice. It simply wasn’t an option.

All the Freyjagard soldiers and New World residents looked up at the sky as one. There, they saw Lindworm von Freyjagard.

“I address you now, barbarian tribes of the New World. As of today, the old era of countless impostors clashing as they cloak themselves in false strength is over.

“Cast down your weapons at once and submit to me. If you do...then I can guarantee you a life of peace and prosperity under my inviolable rule, where imperials and people of the New World exist as equals and none need perish in vain.”

“You can take your offer and shove it, invader!”

“You bastards killed my son and my daughter! I’ll know no peace until I’ve strangled you myself! You and every bastard on the Northern Continent!”

“Kill ’em! Kill ’em all! Who cares if there’s one more guy we gotta kill!!”

Lindworm issued his demand that they surrender from on high, but unsurprisingly, the clans had no interest in acquiescing. They returned his offer with rage, then spat at the heavens and turned to resume their slaughter.

“Fools.”

Lindworm sighed at this response, then slashed with his golden greatsword as though tracing a line far above the warriors who surged across the ground below.

The change was immediate.

“““What?”””

The New World joint forces had surrounded the doomed imperials, but the moment they tried to strike, everyone beneath the line Lindworm had drawn

with his blade—a full half of the New World forces at nearly one hundred fifty thousand men—froze in place simultaneously.

The situation was so bizarre that the other half of the united clan army came to a speechless halt. Lindworm peered down.

“I bid you once more, *kneel*.”

“““”””

This time, not a single person defied him. One after another, the men of the New World forces dropped to their knees and bowed their heads as though flattened by the sheer weight of Lindworm’s words.

Each of them understood the implication of his power and majesty whether they wanted to or not.

They understood that the world existed for one man alone—a genius, chosen by the heavens to rule.



His eyelids felt...heavy.

Heavier than they’d ever been in his life.

Prince Akatsuki had never known such exhaustion, not even two years ago after he’d finished his world tour magic show. He pried his lids open while wondering what had made him so tired.

When he finally got his eyes open, he was greeted by a verdant green canopy with sunlight streaming through gaps in the leaves. He realized that he was lying on his back in the forest.

“But...why?”

He tilted his head, puzzled. Why had he dozed off outside? What had he been doing before he fell asleep? He tried to think back, but his head was still foggy from having just woken up, and his memories were blurry and indistinct.

When he sat up, someone called out to him.

“*Oh, you’re awake? Thank goodness.*”

He didn’t recognize the voice, but when he turned his head to see who it

was...

“Lyrule...?”

...his gaze found Lyrule, who sat on the roots of a massive tree and looked down at him.

Did that voice belong to Lyrule? It sounded a little different to Akatsuki. More importantly, though, that tree she sat on...

There was *definitely* something familiar about it, but when Akatsuki started digging through his memories to identify it...

“And a very good morning to you!”

“Agh!”

...his thoughts were interrupted by a sudden hug from behind.

That was a voice he’d never mistake. It belonged to one of his friends, and he would’ve known it anywhere. He turned around and was greeted by exactly who he’d expected, Shinobu Sarutobi.

“Oh, you’re finally up. That’s such a relief. I was starting to get worried, what with you sleeping for an entire month.”

“Urgh... Shinobu, I can’t breathe... Wait, did you say an entire month? What? WHAT?!”

What could she have possibly meant by that?

Before Akatsuki could get the question out, his brain snapped back into gear. Enough time had passed since he woke up that his eyelids didn’t feel leaden anymore, and his memories fell back into place. Akatsuki remembered everything.

He recalled what he’d been doing before he passed out.

“We were at war with the emperor and his troops...but then I got really sleepy all of a sudden, and I passed out... Wait, I know this place! This is the forest where we met Yggdra that one time, isn’t it? There’s that dragon mummy under the roots! What’re we doing *here*?! Where’s everyone else?! How did all of this —?”

“All right, all right, pump those brakes, Akatsuki.”

“Hrrnph!”

Akatsuki’s memories had all come rushing back at once, and the gaps between them and his current situation had him flustered. Shinobu quieted him down by squeezing him tight to her chest.

“I’m gonna explain everything, so just calm down and listen, ’kay?”

She told him about what she’d seen in the Tomino Basin while everyone else fell unconscious.

“Back when we were fighting the imperials, Keine knocked us out.”

“What? She did? But why?!”

“I’ll explain that part in a sec. First, I want to tell you everything that’s happened while you were out.”

“O-okay.”

“After Keine’s surprise attack, Emperor Lindworm... Emperor Lindworm stabbed Lyrule through the heart and killed her. When she died, Yggdra’s seal that had been holding back the evil dragon broke, and it looked like the evil dragon was going to come back to life. But then, something unbelievable happened.

“When the evil dragon tried to hijack Lindworm’s body, Lindworm managed to turn the tables and absorb *him*—along with the power the evil dragon used to destroy the entire continent during his battle against Yggdra a thousand years ago.”

“...!”

After hearing this, Akatsuki finally understood why Lyrule’s voice sounded so off. It hadn’t been Lyrule speaking to him at all. It was Yggdra.

Lyrule was...

“.....”

One of their own had betrayed them, and now their beloved friend, the person who’d saved their lives, was dead.

The weight of that knowledge sent pain cutting through Akatsuki's heart. However, he did everything he could to suppress it...

"But if the evil dragon is dead, then doesn't that mean that the danger we were summoned to prevent is gone now?" Akatsuki asked.

...so he could try to get a better handle on the situation.

First, he wanted a clear understanding of their objective. What had become of the evil dragon and his followers' plot?

"...The evil dragon's dead, sure, but I can't say the world's been saved," Shinobu said with a pained look on her face, "To be honest, the situation is kinda worse than ever. Truth is, Earth is in danger now, too."

"Wait, as in our Earth?! Wh-what do you mean?!"

"To answer that, I gotta loop back to Keine's motives. Keine's had beef with the whole 'inherent human greed' thing for a while now. She feels that the way humans get jealous and envious of others and try to get their hands on more and more is what keeps us from world peace. She sees it as a congenital defect...and she wants to surgically excise it from everyone."

Akatsuki's face went pale as a series of horrifying images flitted through his head. "S-surgically? You don't mean..."

To that, Shinobu nodded...

"If I had to guess, I'd say it's probably exactly what you're picturing."

...and tapped her fingers against the side of her head to make it clear.

"As far as Keine's concerned, the dystopia that Emperor Lindworm seeks, where a single person rules everything, works out pretty conveniently for her. When she saw that Lindworm shared her ideals, she betrayed us and sacrificed Lyrule. Lindworm took her up on her offer, and for the past month, things have been getting kinda surreal over in the empire."

From there, Shinobu went on to describe what she'd seen of Freyjagard while Akatsuki was unconscious.

After returning from the Tomino Basin, Lindworm began ruling exactly as he'd described. He stood at the top, and everyone else—commoners, nobles, and

slaves—was treated equally. On top of that, he'd stripped everyone of all privileges and assets they possessed. He'd also banned everything, from education to entertainment, with any sort of link to greed or inequality in an attempt to prevent the conflict they could inspire.

Normally, any rule that tyrannical would earn a dozen or so uprisings, and sure enough, there had been plenty of riots. Hundreds of them even. However, not a single one came to fruition.

Whenever someone harbored feelings of rebellion in their hearts, Lindworm detected it instantly and spirited them away. A few days later, they would return as a good little citizen with absolute faith in Lindworm's regime, free of greed. Prodigy doctor Keine Kanzaki's surgery granted rebels kind hearts that loved others more than themselves. From that point on, the changed people went about their lives with smiles so broad it was like they'd been exorcised.

"But the nastiest part of all is, I'm pretty much certain that Keine's planning on doing the same thing to our world."

Lindworm had absorbed every last bit of the evil dragon's power and knowledge, and that included the cross-world transportation technique that the evil dragon had used to reach this planet. He and Keine could head off to Earth whenever they pleased.

"You and I are the only ones Yggdra managed to save. Everyone else got captured...and odds are, Keine's gone and fiddled with their brains. So it's up to the two of us to make the choice."

"Wh-what choice?"

"We can have Yggdra send the two of us to Earth alone so we can warn everyone, or we can stay and try to save the others and stop Lindworm and Keine's plan here. Here's the thing..."

After laying out the two options, Shinobu threw in the final detail.

"...if you choose the latter, then instead of sending us back to Earth, Yggdra can use her magic to bring Lyrule back!"

"What?!"



One month prior, Yggdra used her magic to teleport Shinobu and Akatsuki into the forests of Yamato.

After snatching them from harm, the first thing Yggdra did was give Shinobu a deep bow. *"I'm so, so sorry. When I brought you to this world, I never meant for it to cause such a rift between you and your friend."*

"That's... There's nothing for you to apologize for there. Besides, we chose to take up this fight ourselves."

When Lyrule, or rather Yggdra borrowing her corpse, tried to apologize, Shinobu waved her off and retrieved a black pill from inside a little container. It was a combination antidote and stimulant made from a secret recipe. It had some nasty side effects due to its not-wholly-legal ingredients, but Shinobu knew that she couldn't afford to keel over. She popped it into her mouth without a moment's hesitation, then went silent for a bit.

Once the stimulant had had time to clear her head a bit, she said, "Still, there's no denying that the situation just got really bad. I gotta say, this isn't how I imagined things playing out. Knowing Keine, she plans to take the emperor with her and launch an attack on Earth."

Yggdra nodded. *"He could certainly make that happen. By absorbing the evil dragon, he has the power and necessary knowledge."*

The evil dragon's power was said to have destroyed the entire continent. If Lindworm commanded that might at his leisure, there was no telling just how formidable of a foe he would be. At a bare minimum, his strength was enough to put Gustav to shame.

Given that, and given how Ringo and Aoi were already in the enemy's clutches, solving the problem with force wasn't realistic. So then what *could* Shinobu do?

The prodigy journalist sank into thought.

"However...thanks to that Emperor Lindworm, Father's ambitions have been dashed, albeit not quite in the way I expected. In a way, the world may already have been saved," Yggdra said.

"This was my problem, and I caused you all quite a lot of trouble by selfishly

dragging you into it. If you'd like, I would be happy to try to make it up to you by sending the two of you who escaped back home."

Shinobu gave Yggdra a skeptical look. "...Are you actually capable of doing that? Last time we met, you told us that you'd used up most of your strength restoring the continent after it got trashed during your battle with the evil dragon. When Tsukes asked you to give us a reason to trust you, you couldn't even provide a demonstration of your strength."

"That's true," Yggdra replied with a nod. "I've already lost my life and my body. All I am now is a lingering remnant. I'm basically a ghost, eating up what little remains of my magic. And the magic I use doesn't come back. That's why I couldn't give you evidence. All I had was enough magic to send the seven of you home in exchange for the rest of my existence."

Complying with Tsukasa's request at the time would've meant forfeiting the ability to send all the Prodigies home. That was Yggdra's reason for refusing to demonstrate her power.

"However...teleporting you two to safety was no simple feat. I don't have the strength left to send all of you back anymore. So I thought I could at least get you two home..."

That was enough to convince Shinobu.

If she gave Yggdra the okay, she and Akatsuki would be able to go back to Earth. They might even be able to convince its nations to come together and prepare for Keine and Lindworm's coming assault.

Plus...Keine's probably going to bring the others with her anyway. It's not like we'd really be leaving them behind.

As far as options went, it was certainly viable.

However...

...Shinobu had a different idea as well.

"I've been in charge of intel gathering in this world, so I did a fair bit of research about how magic works. Now I'm mostly just guessing here, but as far as I understand, magic is kinda like our world's idea of spirits or ghosts. You

can't see them, but they definitely exist and can interact with the material world."

"Exactly," Yggdra answered, giving Shinobu's theory a nod. "The concept of magic was developed well after the concept of science in my world. It all started when people began doing research on souls, the life force science couldn't explain. Humans are fundamentally an aggregate of different types of matter, and from our research came the discovery of a microscopic energy that took matter and moved it—spirits. Later, we realized methods for manipulating it."

In short, that was the true nature of the techniques that made up magic.

"I see...," Shinobu said. "Now that Emperor Lindworm's absorbed the evil dragon and obtained huge amounts of magical energy, he really does have the power to rule forever like he claimed he would."

"That's right. With Father's power, living for a thousand years would be trivial. As long as he regularly replenishes his magic, there's no limit to how long he can survive."

Absolute power and eternal life—together, they were the recipe for the perfect ruler.

After considering the logic of magic...

"In that case...would you be able to use your power to bring Lyrule back to life?"

...Shinobu hesitantly posed her question and waited for the answer with tense anxiety.

Yggdra nodded. *"Of course."*

"——!"

"If I use the spirits that make up my lingering self, I could rebuild the soul powering Lyrule's body and return her consciousness to the way it was. The seal would stay broken, unfortunately, but..."

"But Lyrule would be alive again!" The very idea had Shinobu excited.

"However," Yggdra added, forcing Shinobu to settle down, "if I do, I won't have enough strength left to send you two back to your original world. You'll

have to choose one or the other.”



“We can bring Lyrule back to life?!” Akatsuki exclaimed.

Shinobu nodded. “But if we choose to, there’s no going back to Earth. That’s why I had to wait until you woke up. It wouldn’t be right for me to make a call like that on my own.”

“...What do *you* want to do?” Akatsuki asked.

“Personally, I want to use the last of Yggdra’s strength on Lyrule,” Shinobu replied. There wasn’t so much as a shred of hesitation in her voice. “Honestly, even if the two of us went home, I’m not sure we’d be able to do much. Without Tsukes, it’ll be hard to convince the global community that this stuff about a different world is true. More than that, though, Lyrule is our friend. Leaving things the way they are just wouldn’t sit right with me.”

Then, after laying out her stance on the matter...

“What about you?”

...she pressed Akatsuki for his.

“I...”

Akatsuki shot a furtive glance over at Yggdra. He was conflicted.

When Yggdra saw the emotions swimming in his eyes, she immediately realized what was going through his head.

No matter which option he took, it would spell the end of Yggdra’s existence. She knew that made him hesitant to choose either option.

As far as Yggdra was concerned, though, that was hardly something worth worrying about.

“Akatsuki, I’ve been dead for a long time. I only chose to have my soul take root here because I was worried about Father and his escape from the cycle of rebirth. Those worries have been put to rest, albeit not quite how I’d expected.”

Lindworm, a human, had gone and devoured Father.

The emperor was a literal once-in-a-millennium prodigy and a powerful

enough vessel to hold Father. It wasn't unlike how Father had been a once-in-a-millennium prodigy back in the magical society that Yggdra and her kin hailed from. In light of that fact, what had happened was a completely plausible outcome. However, Yggdra had completely failed to recognize it as such in time. To her great shame, she knew she owed that to something she shared with Neuro and the other Grandmasters, an arrogance and assumption that the people of this world were inferior to her kind.

In any case, Lindworm had severed the chain of fate that began with Father's exile on another planet. Lindworm had inherited Father's power, but he was a native of *this* world. Yggdra didn't feel it was right for her, an invader from another planet, to have a say in how the situation played out anymore. And so...

"At this point, I have no reason to need to remain in this world any longer. I'm the one who dragged you all into this mess, so I'd like to use the last of my power to try and make it up to you in whatever small way I can. Please don't worry about me. Follow your heart."

...she told Akatsuki as such. He had a kind heart, and she didn't want him to have to feel guilty.

"Okay." Akatsuki nodded. "I'd like you to use your power on Lyrule, too. If it's Keine's fault she died, then that's all the more reason to set it right."

No sooner did Akatsuki speak the words than Yggdra made it so. The massive tree that the elves had once worshipped and the dragon mummy in its roots released a strong, verdant light. They began crumbling into luminescent particles that gathered around Lyrule's body.

Akatsuki and Shinobu were no experts when it came to magic, but when they saw those specks that used to be Yggdra flowing toward Lyrule, they knew what was happening. They watched with sadness.

"Thank you." Yggdra offered her heartfelt gratitude to the pair. *"The seven of you are truly wonderful people. I summoned you to this world to fix its problems without giving you the slightest say in the matter, yet you still gave your all on behalf of its people. Even now, you're letting me use my power to help a girl who died because the role I foisted on her was too great a burden. I can never thank you enough for everything that you've done. Any world that cultivated*

people like you must be a fine one indeed."

"It really isn't," Shinobu said apologetically. A pained smile crossed her face. "If it was, Keine wouldn't have turned out the way she did."

Yggdra borrowed Lyrule's body to shake her head. *"Not at all. People are capable of making their own decisions on how to live and what they think is just. And they have the tendency, the drive, to put that power to use. There's...there's something very beautiful about that, if you ask me."*

Yggdra had watched over the land for a thousand years. She had seen people strive to be good, kind, and noble despite their terrible mistakes. She'd seen them proudly conquer their innate wickedness. She loved that about them.

"I have no right to a say in this world's future, but...if I could be so bold as to share one hope I have, it's for this world to become like that as well."

Yggdra didn't want people to be forced into change. She wanted the world to become a place where a nobility of spirit drove everyone to put down unfairness and injustice bit by bit of their own free will.

After delivering her final wish...

"Good-bye. May good fortune find you on your paths."

...the last of Yggdra's body vanished into Lyrule.

The moment it did, the green light illuminating the area faded. With a violent shudder, Lyrule's body went limp and slipped from the tree root where it had been seated.

Shinobu hurriedly moved to catch her. There, in her arms...

".....Oh.....huh.....?"

...Lyrule's eyes opened once more. They were no longer green, as they had been moments earlier. They were as blue as the clearest of skies.

There was no doubt about it. This was their friend, Lyrule.

"Lyrule!" Shinobu cried.

"Shino...bu? And...Akatsuki...?"

Upon seeing Lyrule breathing once more, Akatsuki was so overcome with

emotion that he began loudly bawling his eyes out. “Hnnnnngh... Bwahhhhhhhh!”

Lyrule had no idea what was going on and found that quite worrying. “Akatsuki, why are you crying? Wait, wasn’t I just with Emperor Lindwo— HURP?!”

“I’ll explain everything that happened in a sec. For now, just let me stay like this for a little bit...”

“Shinobu...”

Shinobu grabbed Lyrule and hugged her so tightly against her chest that Lyrule could hardly breathe. Shinobu normally came across as so nonchalant, so it was rare to see her so desperately glad. Lyrule could tell that something really serious must have happened, so she returned Shinobu’s trembling embrace.



“So that’s what happened...”

Once Shinobu finished explaining how things had played out in the Tomino Basin after Lindworm knocked Lyrule out, Lyrule reached up and laid a hand on her chest where she’d been stabbed.



There was no wound.

Her heart beat just fine.

However, according to Shinobu, that was only because Yggdra had healed her. Before that, she'd been well and truly dead...because Keine had betrayed them.

"Keine...let this happen to me?"

"Oh, that's right. Out of all of us, Keine's the one you've spent the most time with. That must be a hell of a shock, huh?" Shinobu said.

"It is...," Lyrule agreed. "But at the same time, it makes a lot of sense."

"Say what?"

"While helping her treat people, I always got this feeling that it made her really sad. Actually, 'angry' might be more accurate."

Lyrule had aided Keine in treating the wounded back in the Findolph and Gustav domains and, more recently, in Yamato. Throughout it all, Keine had worn a single expression, *a soothing smile to put her patients at ease*. It was always there, glued to her face.

As someone who heard the voices of the spirits, Lyrule felt different emotions radiating from the prodigy doctor, ones that belied that smile.

Rage and sorrow, burning in equal measure.

At the time, Lyrule had felt like it was reasonable for a physician like Keine to feel that way when faced with the grim price of war, and she hadn't given the matter much consideration. If anything, she'd admired Keine for suppressing those feelings and maintaining a grin.

By the sound of things, Keine's anger was far greater than Lyrule had imagined.

"I guess... I guess she found the answer she was looking for when she heard Emperor Lindworm's ideals."

Unity through Lindworm's power and treatment via her own techniques. With those two qualities, they could build a perfect world where nobody hurt or lost anything.

To do what she felt was right, Keine had turned against Lyrule and the friends she'd been through so much with.

"What happened to the others...?" Lyrule asked worriedly.

"They're alive," Shinobu replied. "Keine doesn't want any more casualties than absolutely necessary. That said, *I'd imagine they've seen better days.*"

"I see..."

Given that Keine's objective was to medically cure mankind of its inherent wickedness, there was an exceedingly high chance that she'd already altered their absent friends Ringo, Aoi, Masato...and even Tsukasa, the boy Lyrule had feelings for.

"Anyway, it's on us to do something about Keine and return everyone to normal."

"Right, about that." The corners of Akatsuki's eyes were still red and puffy when he interjected. "I know you said that there wouldn't be much the two of us could do if we returned to Earth, and I totally agree, but things don't seem to be much better here. Do you have a plan?"

"I've got the makings of one, sure," Shinobu replied. "In case you've forgotten, we High School Prodigies have one other team member we can always count on to help us out."

"You mean Lyrule?"

"She's great, but I meant someone within the group from Earth. There's someone, *something*, we came to this world with," Shinobu replied.

"Oh, you mean Bearabbit!" Akatsuki exclaimed.

"Ding, ding, ding! Bearabbit's AI is based on Ringo's brain, so his abilities are on par with hers. The way I see it, finding him should be our first goal."

"But if I remember right, we left Bearabbit back at the Byakkokan Checkpoint. Is it still standing?"

"No worries there," Shinobu said with a nod. She'd already checked up on the situation there while Akatsuki was asleep. "After Lindworm consumed the evil dragon, he ended the battle by making everyone submit to him. Then he

showed up at the Byakkokan Checkpoint, told Yamato it had one month to unconditionally surrender, and vanished somewhere.”

Akatsuki looked confused. “What do you mean, vanished?”

“I wasn’t actually there to see it, so this is all just secondhand, but I hear that after he ordered a cease-fire at the checkpoint and demanded that Yamato surrender, he went *poof* and literally disappeared into thin air. He probably used magic to teleport somewhere, and I’ve got a pretty good idea of where to. Smart money says he went over to the New World.”

That was where Lindworm had left the bulk of his army. After he dealt with the fighting immediately at hand, it made sense that he would go get that situation under control, too.

“When I went over to do my investigation at the checkpoint, the place was operating on a skeleton crew. The soldiers over there told me that after Lindworm gave his ultimatum, the Yamato leadership joined up with the Elm reinforcements and headed to Elm so they could use the time Lindworm gave them to figure out how they were going to deal with him. Bearabbit went along with them.”

Ringo was sensible, and Bearabbit’s AI had been built to match her. He wouldn’t do something as foolish as trying to fix this situation alone.

“Then it sounds like our destination is Elm,” Akatsuki said.

“Yup. Unlike down here in Yamato where there’s no equipment or facilities, Elm’s got infrastructure and personnel in spades. We might even find some sorta fix to this whole problem up there. Now, with that settled, let’s hit the road!”

With that, Shinobu rose to her feet. The moment she did, though...

“——Ah...”

“Shinobu?!”

“Shinobu, what’s wrong?!”

...her body pitched forward.

Lyrule and Akatsuki promptly caught her, but...

“Nya-ha-ha... I-I’m just peachy. I just got a little lightheaded, that’s all.”

“Shinobu, what the heck?!”

“You’re burning up!”

...as soon as they touched her, they realized she was running an unbelievably high fever.

However, that much was to be expected.

The wounds Shinobu had suffered during her fight with Sasuke over in the empire had never gotten a chance to heal properly. On top of that, she’d used a cardi tonic agent that was practically a narcotic to fight off Keine’s anesthesia so she could spend the month Akatsuki was sleeping to rush around collecting the intel that formed the groundwork of her plan. Prodigy journalist or not, she’d taken her mind and body well past their natural limits. Shinobu had kept the strain from showing on her face through sheer force of will, but she wasn’t able to hide what was happening to her body.

“Seriously, I’m great. All I have to do is take this secret Sarutobi family pill, and I’ll perk right back up.”

“There’s no way any drug that would perk you up in your condition can possibly be good for you!” Akatsuki cried. “You can’t!”

“He’s right!” Lyrule agreed. “Please don’t push yourself!”

“The way things are, I gotta. It’s already been a month. The ultimatum deadline is just around the corner. If Freyjagard swallows up Elm and Yamato, then we’ll be out of options.”

Pushing herself was the only choice Shinobu had. She reached for her supply of cardi tonic pills.

However, Akatsuki stopped her by grabbing her wrist...

“H-hey, Lyrule! Would you be able to do that teleporting stuff that Yggdra did?”

...then he posed a question to Lyrule.

If they could instantly teleport where they needed to go, then Shinobu

wouldn't need to overdo it.

However, Lyrule gave him an apologetic shake of the head. "I'm sorry... I don't really understand what spirits I'd need to ask to use fancy magic that lets me look at or jump to distant places..."

Thanks to her elf ancestry, Lyrule was able to communicate with spirits. This allowed her to use most magic without any formal training simply by issuing requests. However, this came with a downside. Lyrule was incapable of casting spells she couldn't envision adequately. She'd experienced enough natural phenomena throughout her life that it was relatively easy for her to visualize a gust of wind protecting people or a burst of flame evaporating a bunch of moisture, but she had no idea how to picture a spell warping space-time or what spirits she'd need to speak with to achieve it.

However...

"Oh, actually! Hold on just a moment!"

...there was plenty she *could* imagine. And so...

"Please, wind spirits, take us away!"

...Lyrule pictured the same thing she had back at Tomino Basin when she'd made Aoi fly and issued her request to the wind spirits.

Not a moment later, a whirlwind swirled up under their feet and softly lifted Lyrule, Akatsuki, and Shinobu into the air. They soared upward, all the way through the forest canopy and up into the clear blue sky.

"Whoa! Lyrule, this is incredible! And there are no tricks behind it or anything!" Akatsuki exclaimed.

"It's all thanks to the spirits," Lyrule replied. "We can move about more easily now, so please, Shinobu, get some rest."

"Lyrule's right. We'll wake you up once we get to Elm."

Upon seeing her friends' concern, Shinobu gave them an exhausted smile...

"Heh-heh. In that case, I'll take you up on that. If I'm being totally honest here...your girl's pretty dang tuckered out."

...and she leaned against Akatsuki and passed out. She must have been keeping herself conscious through willpower alone.

When Akatsuki saw her sleeping there like a corpse, he realized how grim their situation was. Of the seven Prodigies, he was the only one left operating at full capacity. Everyone else aside from Shinobu had been captured, and in Keine's case, she'd turned against the others.

Ever since they'd arrived in this world, Akatsuki's hope had always been for all of them to return to Earth together, and now that felt like it was farther than ever.

"Still..."

Akatsuki hadn't given up on that dream. He still thought of all the Prodigies as dear friends, even Keine. Things were a bit tense between them at the moment, but he was sure they'd find a way to patch things up.

He was ready to give it his all to make that possible.

A very pure resolve filled the boy's heart as he, Lyrule, and Shinobu made their way to Elm.



That same day, over in the Freyjagard Empire, Drachen was practically bursting with excitement. After a long expedition, the New World subjugation force had returned triumphant.

The capital's citizens gave the returned army a round of applause so enthusiastic their hands seemed liable to fall right off.

"Whoo-hoo! The war's finally over!"

"They did it! They really did it!"

"Long live His Grace the Emperor! Long may he reign!"

The war had put a lot of pressure on the national treasury and a substantial burden on the empire's people, so everyone was overjoyed that the fighting had concluded.

Among the ranks of those celebrating were also a number of slaves who'd been forcibly brought over to the Freyjagard Empire to perform heavy labor.

“Hurray!” one of the battered people cheered as he jumped up and down with joy. “Now we’ll finally be able to see our families again!”

A well-dressed middle-aged man who looked to be a noble smiled broadly and gave him a big hug. “Oh, you absolutely will! We’ve moved past the need for little labels like ‘aristocrat’ and ‘slave.’ But, oh, how horribly we’ve treated you now! I can never apologize enough!”

“I know that you killed my son, ripped me from my family, and cut off my big toes so I couldn’t run away, but that’s all in the past. Water under the bridge. Now we get to live under the rule of His Grace Emperor Lindworm together!”

“Indeed! From now on, all will be equal and treated impartially as citizens of His Grace! Long live the emperor!”

“Glory eternal to the Lindworm dynasty!”

The slave whose wounds still dripped with fresh blood and the noble who’d inflicted the injuries embraced in a show of forgiveness, celebrating the war’s end with expressions so cheerful it was like their hearts brimmed with so much happiness they couldn’t help themselves.

Upon witnessing similar things occurring all over Drachen like it was completely normal, a chill ran down the returning soldiers’ and nobles’ spines.

“...Hey, have you seen what’s going on in the city?”

“Yeah. Why’re slaves and aristocrats acting like they’re the best of friends?”

“I wonder if Emperor Lindworm is gonna explain what’s going on.”

The knights and nobles of the expedition force were still shaken by the sights they’d seen when they arrived at the audience chamber, and they exchanged bewildered comments as they stood lined up before the throne and waited for the emperor to arrive. Individually, their voices were quiet, but there were nearly a hundred of them, and so many whispers produced quite the din. It hardly befit a space as majestic as the throne room.

However...

“His Grace the Emperor is among us!”

...when the imperial guards stationed at the back of the room blew their

bugles to announce their master's arrival, the chattering all stopped instantly. The moment Emperor Lindworm entered from stage left with his cloak billowing behind him, everyone shut their mouths, dropped to their knees, and bowed their heads.

The only sound in the room was Lindworm's footsteps as he approached and took the throne.

"Raise your heads," he called to the subjects assembled at his feet.

"You have endured much over the course of this last expedition, my loyal retainers. We had no shortage of sacrifices, but what we obtained was truly monumental. Your dedication has brought an era of eternal peace of stability to this world. You can be proud of the mark you have left on history."

""""Sir!""""

"Now that I have awakened as the prodigy king, you need not ever set foot on a battlefield again. Strip off your armor, go home to your families, and heal the fatigue from our expedition at your leisure."

Lindworm went silent after making his appreciative speech as though to indicate that was all.

The gathered assembly was perplexed, and it was hard to blame them. Their long battle had finally concluded, and they'd fought desperately for the promise of a reward. Thankful words alone from their emperor wouldn't sate them. They'd spent vast amounts of their own fortunes on the New World expedition, and if they didn't make that back and more, then what was the point of having gone at all?

One of the major nobles spoke up, his voice probing. "I-if I may, Your Grace. About, well... What of our reward?"

The noble had his peers' full support, and they all turned their questioning gazes on the emperor.

"You nobles have caused me a great deal of grief," Lindworm replied. "You possess no talent or abilities surpassing those of your fellow man. The sole reason I allowed you to take roles beyond your station was because my strength was lacking. I even let you commit grievous cruelties against the New

World slaves, all so I could break the seal on my power and bring the world to perfection as quickly as possible. Now, though...that is over.”

“I—I beg your pardon?”

“Henceforth, the empire’s archaic class system will be abolished in its entirety. Aside from myself, all the world’s people—be they nobles, commoners, or slaves—shall be equal.”

“““?!?!”””

“Equal? What in the world are you talking about, Your Grace?!”

“A-are you telling us that we’re going to be the same as commoners and slaves?!”

Lindworm’s declaration was so staggering that it sent a shock through the assembled knights and nobles. It was a reasonable enough reaction. They’d gathered here under the assumption that they’d be given a reward, only to find more would be taken from them.

Despite being in the presence of their liege, the audience members stood and angrily raised their voices in objection. Lindworm didn’t falter in the slightest, giving their questions a matter-of-fact reply. “This is a blessing for you all as well. None but I can hold a superior position. Ruling is too great a burden for you all to bear.

“That detestable class system was once necessary to maintain our nation’s strength while I searched for the seal’s key, but now that I have true power in hand, I can remove that load from your shoulders.

“No longer are any of you nobles, for this world has none. Now you can enjoy peaceful lives wanting for nothing alongside those who used to be commoners and those who used to be slaves.”

“Th-this is ridiculous!”

“There are some things you just don’t joke about, Your Grace!”

“Not only do you intend to deny us our reward, but you’re going to strip us of our titles?! This is an outrage!”

“Have you forgotten how much of *our* blood was wasted on the New World

expedition you forced us into?!”

Their confusion and agitation deepened by the moment, and their complaints quickly grew to furious shouts. Each person’s bellows served to make others angrier, and it wasn’t long before the audience chamber echoed with rage. Everyone looked ready to charge Lindworm at a moment’s notice.

Then...

“Sit.”

“““~~~~~?!!?!”””

...Lindworm spoke, and all the incensed knights and nobles collapsed.

They fell to the ground as though crushed by an invisible ceiling that had squashed them flat.

Why? Where had the terrible force come from? The pressure was so great that the knights and nobles couldn’t so much as lift their heads. They had no idea what to make of it.

Lindworm peered down at his subjects, a sliver of pity in his gaze. “I forgive you for your outburst. You have committed no sin here. You are all racked with disease, and that is why you are unable to accept my decision.”

“We... What?”

“You people seek merit and glory in excess, but in truth, those things are unnecessary for a person to live a happy life.

“What need is there for people to adorn themselves with gold and jewels? What need is there for people to consume so much that it shortens their lives? There is none. People only need days spent in peace, food on their tables, and good neighbors.

“However, they fail to realize this due to the congenital defect called greed that eats away at their souls and blinds them from true happiness. I will grant you the cure.”

Lindworm snapped his fingers.

With that as her signal, prodigy physician Keine Kanzaki entered the throne

room from stage left alongside prodigy swordmaster Aoi Ichijou.

“Angel Keine, I leave them in your hands.”

“Thank you. Come along now, everyone. You’re all about to become very good boys and girls.”

Aoi drew her blade in one smooth motion, her expression completely impassive as she did. “.....”

That earned a panicked stir from the knights and nobles.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing, woman?!”

“You think a lowly commoner has the right to order imperial nobles?! I’ll have you killed for that!”

However...

“Wh—?! What’s going on?! I can’t move!”

...when the angry aristocrats tried to stand, they found their limbs refused to cooperate. Lindworm had commanded them to sit, and their bodies obeyed faithfully. No matter how hard the nobles wished to resist, they couldn’t.

Between what had already befallen them and what soon would, they fell into a panic.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” Keine reassured them. “A joyous world awaits. It’s a wonderful place free of greed, where you and your beloved family and friends will live in unchanging peace.”

Keine’s smile wasn’t the fake one she pasted on to put patients at ease but a sinister grin of a young woman unable to contain overflowing joy.

And so the procedure began.

Prodigy physician Keine Kanzaki had developed a surgery that could excise the innate evil people were born with and make them selfless. It was a technique only she could’ve developed, one that came close to encroaching on the domain of the gods.

“Ah... No...”

The young *byuma* Nio Harvey watched it all happen from behind a pillar, so

struck with terror that he found himself speechless.

“She can’t! That’s...”

He fled the scene quickly but took care to keep from being noticed. He needed to go see the one person he trusted more than anyone.

“This...is wrong!”

Nio’s heart burned with a quiet determination to put an end to the emperor’s misdeeds.



There was a rumor circulating in Drachen’s castle. Supposedly, the Seven Luminaries angels were being held in the dungeon. And that was precisely where Nio headed. A guard was stationed at the prison entrance, of course...

“Hey, Mr. Soldier.”

“Hmm? What’s up, kiddo?”

“There’s a soldier over by the fountain in the courtyard who doesn’t look too good. I think he might need help.”

“What?! That’s terrible! I’ll head right over!”

...but because of Keine’s operation, he was all but useless.

The fountain in the courtyard was ten minutes away. That meant a twenty-minute round trip, and the soldier had become so obedient that he would believe Nio’s lie and search for the person in need that he’d likely take longer to return. Nio would have to make the most of that time. He hurried down the steps leading to the cells.

It didn’t take long to find exactly what he was looking for.

Keine had long since stripped all the prisoners of their greed and released them, so the dungeon was mostly empty. However, Nio found a white-haired young man still chained to the wall.

“Mr. Tsukasa!”

Tsukasa’s eyes went wide when he recognized Nio’s face through the iron bars. “Nio! I didn’t realize you were back in the empire.”

“I am. His Grace returned from the New World. I hear that Cranberry is staying in Elm, though. I never could have imagined that this was what would become of the...empire?”

When Nio peered into the dark cell, he noticed that Tsukasa’s eyes were red and puffy.

Could it be?

Had Tsukasa been crying?

“What did they do to you?!” Nio cried, astonished.

However, Tsukasa just replied, “I’m fine,” and wiped his face. “Could I ask you to tell me in detail what’s been going on outside? I’ve been locked up here since waking, so I don’t have a good grasp on the situation.”

Tsukasa’s gaze still had that sharp gleam of intellect. Unlike the people in the capital who’d received Keine’s surgery, he still had his reason. When Nio recognized that...

“Of course.”

...he recounted everything that had transpired of late. He told Tsukasa what he’d seen in the three days since his return to Drachen: how the emperor had obtained power beyond mortal limits and used it to abolish all hierarchy. He’d seized assets, removed all social ranks, expunged forms of recreation, and banned sources of education that might give rise to competition and inequality. As a result, the empire knew a twisted sort of peace where slaves and nobles forgave each other and smiled as one.

“Moments ago, during an assembly for the nobles and knights who recently returned from the New World expedition, Ms. Keine used her power to transform them, too...”

“It’s really gotten that bad, huh?” Tsukasa groaned after hearing Nio’s story. “I never imagined that Keine would go to such lengths.”

Tsukasa had known that she hated conflict more than anyone and how she grieved over the way people hurt one another. Yet despite priding himself on being prepared for all possibilities, he’d never expected Keine to go to such

lengths. He hadn't suspected she'd seek to mend humanity's original sin...or that she would try to replace God.

"I guess this proves she truly is a prodigy."

Aoi had once said that, as someone hailed the world over as a prodigy, her limits were known to none but her herself. The same clearly applied to Keine, too.

"I'm sorry, Nio. One of our allies has gone and done something really quite unthinkable. As people who are planning on leaving this world before long, we have a duty to avoid going against the wants of those who live here."

Nio shook his head. "No... It's not your fault, Mr. Tsukasa. Besides, this might very well have set the empire on track to become a better nation than it's ever been."

He recalled the time before Elm's national election when Tsukasa had spoken of building an era where nobody starved or died cruelly at the hands of others, and everyone cooperated and lived peacefully. Back then, Nio and Tsukasa had wondered if humanity was capable of achieving such a lofty goal. At the time, they hadn't been able to settle on an answer. However...

"Now that the empire is under the emperor's sole rule, that lofty ideal is becoming a reality. It's already happened in the capital. Slaves who've had their limbs and families taken and the nobles who wronged them laugh and forgive each other like a family. The empire's getting closer to being a perfect place with no differences in status, hatred, or fighting. I'm sure of that. And yet..." Nio hesitated for a moment, then looked at Tsukasa with conflict on his face. "I thought that was supposed to be a good thing, but now that I'm seeing it happen before my very eyes, I...I can't help but feel that what the emperor and Ms. Keine are doing is horrible."

"Nio..."

That was doubtless because Nio had gotten an up-close view of the way Tsukasa accepted humankind's fundamental avarice, yet still agonized over how to choose the best option for the most people. Nio respected the sense of responsibility Tsukasa felt because of his position of authority over others, and he admired the young man's refusal to let anything slip through his fingers.

After seeing all that, Nio couldn't help but feel that Keine and the emperor's way of doing things was crude and artless.

"That's why I came here. It's all too much for me alone. Please, Mr. Tsukasa, I need your help." Nio pulled out the key he'd stolen from the warden's chambers and slipped it into the cell's lock.

"Oh, I'm afraid we can't have that."

A voice echoed from the top of the stairs.



"—!!!!"

Nio leaped half a foot in the air. The fur on his ears and tail bristled. He spun around to face the voice and went pale as a sheet. There was a beautiful young woman wearing a blood-stained white coat coming down the stone stairs. Her heels clicked with every step.

It was prodigy physician Keine Kanzaki.

Behind her, prodigy swordmaster Aoi Ichijou followed wordlessly.

"It's been quite some time, Nio. I see you've decided to return home to the empire."

"I—I..."

There she was. The absolute last person Nio wished to encounter. He froze like a deer in the headlights.

Keine didn't seem particularly interested in Nio, however. Her gaze was fixed on Tsukasa. "It's been a while since we last spoke, too, Tsukasa. Are your injuries causing you any pain?" she asked in a soothing tone.

Tsukasa shot her a pointed glare. "Nio told me about what's been happening up on the surface. Prodigy physicians really are something. You can alter people's entire personalities now?"

"Oh, hardly. You seem to have misunderstood," Keine replied, refuting Tsukasa's claim as ridiculous. "My scalpel never went anywhere near their personalities. The only thing I cut out was the disease ravaging their hearts—the sickness that goes by the name *greed*. If healing people makes it seem like

their personalities have been altered, then it's simply a testament to how profoundly that illness warps their behavior. If anything, this is who they truly are."

"And you intend on healing everyone on this world and Earth? That's quite the grandiose plan. I have to wonder if one lifetime is really going to be enough to see it through."

"It will be. I have the necessary power now. With it, I don't need to sleep, and I can perform the procedure with greater speed."

As Keine spoke, she shook off her white gown, revealing the fair skin beneath.

Tsukasa and Nio gasped. A black crystal was embedded in her abdomen—a Philosopher's Stone, a clump of the evil dragon's cells with the power to force evolution.

"Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?" Tsukasa muttered.

"That hardly seems relevant. I stood back and allowed Lyrule to die. What business do I have being precious with my own life? I'm going to treat all of humanity, no matter what methods I have to employ. People need my surgery so they can return to being the beautiful, noble, kind creatures they're supposed to be." Keine narrowed her eyes at Tsukasa like she was staring at something radiant despite the only light in the dungeon coming from weak torch flames. "It's absolutely essential, you see. You know, I've gained a newfound respect for you, prodigy politician Tsukasa Mikogami."

"What are you talking about?"

"I gave you my good boy operation *three times*, and you're still *the exact same as you were before*."

"WHAT?!" Nio's eyes went wide. He'd assumed that Tsukasa hadn't been subjected to the surgery at all.

"It sounds as though my case is pretty serious, then, doesn't it?" Tsukasa remarked.

"I suspect a fourth attempt won't produce any new results. You really are remarkable. I had thought it was impossible for a person to have no greed, that

it was a congenital defect that God himself imparted on us. I was so sure of it. But you're different, Tsukasa. You're selfless through and through. You do your title of democracy's prodigy politician justice."

"..."

"And because of that, because you are the way you are, I want you to help me...as the others already have."

"I take it that means you've performed the procedure on them as you did on me?" Tsukasa said.

Keine gave his question a delighted smile and a deep nod. "That's right. The others have all become very good little boys and girls and are assisting me."



Across the sea to the east of the Freyjagard Empire sat the Lakan Archipelago Alliance, a group of islands united under a parliament comprised of several powerful clans. It was there at the harbor that served as their gateway to the empire that Shenmei Li, the *byuma* who'd been elected the archipelago government's new chancellor during their most recent joint session, hurriedly disembarked from her carriage.

A large group of soldiers was already gathered there, each saluting her. "Madam Chancellor, it's an honor," one greeted.

"Spare me the pleasantries and tell me what's going on!" Shenmei barked. Her usual placid confidence was nowhere to be seen, but it was hard to fault her for that. At the moment, the Lakan Archipelago Alliance faced an unprecedented situation.

The bearded general in charge of defending the port acquiesced to Shenmei's demand and laid out the situation. "According to our patrol boats, there are some fifty warships flying the imperial flag approaching the harbor. They'll be close enough to see with the naked eye before much longer."

Shenmei ground her teeth at the news. The peace between Freyjagard and Lakan hadn't been steady in recent years, but they'd managed to avoid any open hostility.

As of today, though, that had changed. Fifty warships made for one hell of a

raiding party, and a grim expression formed on Shenmei's face. "Are we prepared to intercept?"

"Ready and willing, Chancellor. As soon as you give the word, we go."

"Tch..."

A fight could start at any moment now. Shenmei cast her gaze out across the harbor. The Lakan military had already pulled a series of cannons from storage to line the edge of the bay. Lakan warships were similarly being assembled.

Fifty enemy vessels was a formidable armada, but they were no match for an archipelago nation that had grown through maritime commerce. Lakan forces would cut off the enemy's retreat, bombard hostile ships from the bay with concentrated fire, and exterminate them. If Shenmei gave the order, they could start immediately.

However, she kept quiet and ruminated. Even if the battle went well, what would come of it? Lakan sinking fifty warships would mark a decisive breakdown in its relationship with Freyjagard. It would mean all-out war against the empire—a military powerhouse that had just conquered the New World and bested the Seven Luminaries. Did Lakan have the strength to survive making an enemy of a raging dragon?

When Shenmei considered the question, she realized she couldn't give the attack order lightly.

"Also, Madam Chancellor, I have another new report that's come in."

"What?"

"According to our scouts, the person commanding the imperial navy is our Chancellor Advisor, the one who went missing last month."

"What...?!"

No sooner did Shenmei's eyes go wide than a voice boomed from somewhere distant.

"Testing, testing. This is Masato Sanada, Lakan Chancellor Advisor speaking. Again, this is Masato Sanada, Lakan Chancellor Advisor. Hold your fire. We're not your enemies. I repeat, we come in peace. Call off your warships and let us

into the port!”

The voice came from beyond the horizon line, and it belonged to Masato. It was a little crackly due to the megaphone he was using but not enough that he'd be mistaken for someone else.

Masato's request shook the harbor guard. Even the bearded general standing beside Shenmei paled and goggled at the development. For them, Masato's inhumanly loud voice was terrifying.

“How's he doing that?”

“He must be a giant! He would have to be to make his voice carry so far!”

Shenmei was the only one who kept her composure. “Calm yourselves,” she urged them. She'd seen Elm's “obelisk” public broadcasting network terminals firsthand when attending the trade summit. “This is just one of Akatsuki's miracles—it lets a person cast their voice over a wide area. When I visited Elm, they had these bugle-looking things strewn about their cities to facilitate it.” She spent a moment in thought. “That said, I was under the impression that Masato had broken off ties with Elm...”

Why had Masato returned to Lakan aboard a Freyjugard warship with Elm technology in tow? What in the world had he been up to in the month since the Qinglong Gang, whom she'd assigned to him, had stopped sending their regular reports? The answers to those questions were critical to determining whether it was best to give the order to attack.

The problem was...

“I've brought an awesome gift for Lakan back from the empire with me! I'm pretty sure you're gonna like it! Now c'mon, let us in!”

...Shenmei didn't have time to mull things over carefully. As Masato's latest statement came booming over the megaphone, his armada crested the horizon. Main sails emblazoned with the Freyjugard emblem stood tall and proud.

Soldiers stationed in and around the harbor gulped nervously. A moment later...

“H-hey, check it out!”

“What is that?!”

...a stir ran through their ranks as all that tension was replaced with amazement. And it wasn't just the soldiers. Even Shenmei stared in disbelief.

Such a reaction was entirely warranted.

“Whoa, no way. Are all those ships made of gold?!”

Each and every one of the imperial warships had been painted a shade of gold so immodestly lustrous that they gleamed in the sunlight. And the extravagance didn't stop there.

“And they're loaded to the gills with treasure! I-I've never seen anything like it!”

“Could that be the gift the chancellor advisor was talking about?!”

“I sure hope so!”

Shenmei snatched a telescope from a nearby soldier and examined things for herself. Everything appeared to be true. Every Freyjagard golden vessel was loaded with a veritable mountain of gold, silver, and other valuables.

That only served to befuddle Shenmei further. From what she'd heard, Masato had taken a bunch of Lakan mercenaries to the empire to win Neuro's favor and crush the nonsensical notion of universal basic income. Shenmei had plotted to take advantage of that by introducing Masato to the Qinglong Gang and using them to make sure the empire didn't win *too* handily in the war against Yamato. How was *this* the outcome? What was the deal with all that treasure? Few things were more frightening for a merchant like Shenmei than large sums of money sourced from unclear provenance.

“What's the call, Chancellor?”

“...Do they appear to be armed?”

“N-no, ma'am. From what I can see, there's nothing on those ships but valuables.”

As far as Shenmei could tell, her general was right. Masato had only brought treasure on his fifty war boats. There wasn't a weapon to be seen. And if that was the case...

“Very well. Let them through. Perhaps we’d best ask the man himself what transpired.”

...then the simplest solution was clear.

Shenmei made her decision and gave the order to allow Masato’s fleet into the port.



With that, Masato and his glittering, golden armada infiltrated the Lakan port without trading a single shot.

Up on a nearby hill, a brown-skinned *byuma* girl watched it all happen. Her name was Roo, and she’d learned the ways of commerce studying under Masato.

“T-teacher!” Roo whispered to herself as she took off at a run.

The port was crammed tight with onlookers who’d come to check out the glittering ships and soldiers ready to defend. Fortunately, Roo’s diminutive frame enabled her to slip past them all. Then, at long last...

“Teacher!”

...she spotted Masato as he disembarked.

“Wh-what’s with the girl?!”

“This area’s off-limits, kid!”

A pack of soldiers hurried to stop her...

“Let her go. The girl is with Masato.”

...but a few words from Shenmei, who happened to be nearby, stayed their hands.

Roo leaped at Masato with all her might. Her wagging tail made her the spitting image of a dog greeting its master who’d been away for months. “Teacher, you’re okay! Thank goodness you’re okay! Roo asked the nice Lakan people, but they said they didn’t know where you were!”

“Yeah, sorry about that. Hope I didn’t frighten you.”

“You diiiid!” Roo cried, clutching at Masato’s suit as her tears ran freely.

Masato gave her a gentle, soothing pat on the head. “Things got pretty messy for a bit. It’s all good now, though. As you can see, I’ve never been better. What about you, Li’l Roo? You manage to get your *errand* done?”

Upon hearing that word, Roo’s face lit up. However, her expression quickly soured as though she were vexed by something caught in the back of her teeth. Masato had used his connections in Lakan to track down Roo’s parents, and the errand he’d referred to was buying them back from the powerful Lakan clan that owned them.

The trouble was that Masato had only given Roo enough money for a single adult female slave. She could only save her mother.

What was she to do, then?

Masato had shown Roo the answer while she’d shadowed him. If you didn’t have enough money to buy something, you needed to use your available funds as seed capital to increase your assets. And that was precisely what Roo had done, yet her answer to Masato’s question...

“Y-yeah. Roo was able to get them both back.”

...was evasive.

Roo had indeed purchased her parents’ freedom, but earning the money had forced her to sink to disreputable means.

“Roo worked really hard, you know. You only gave Roo enough money to buy back Mom, so to get enough to buy Dad, Roo did her best and used that money to—”

However...

“Look, all that matters is that your mom and dad are okay. It doesn’t matter how you got there.”

...Masato paid Roo’s report no heed. In fact, he completely rejected it. He said it didn’t matter.

“...Huh?”

“You know, that was a pretty messed-up thing for me to do. What kind of person would only give you enough to rescue your mom? Sorry ’bout that, Li’l

Roo. I must've been off my rocker or something."

"Huh? What? T-teacher?"

Masato's apology sent Roo for a loop. She'd thought he only gave her enough to buy her mother as a way to test everything she'd learned from him. Yet apparently, that hadn't been the case. Had he screwed up and failed to give her sufficient funds on accident?

There's...there's no way. Roo dismissed the notion immediately. Masato wasn't the kind of person to make errors like that. Undoubtedly, it had been a trial for her to use everything she'd learned. Roo was certain of it. And if that was the case...

"Teacher, what's...what's wrong?"

...then why had Masato apologized?

Right as Roo cast him a worried look...

"Masato, would you be so kind as to skip the small talk and explain what in the world is going on?"

...Shenmei cut in.

She strode over to Masato with a group of soldiers and gestured with her chin at the golden fleet filling the harbor. "What's with these gaudy boats? And those mountains of gold? You went to the empire to negotiate with the angel called Tsukasa, right? How did that lead to this? I would very much appreciate it if you would explain."

Masato gave her a nod. "Don't you worry—I'll explain everything. First, though, I wanna hand out my gifts from the empire."

"My people are more than capable of unloading a few ships of their valuables. You're coming with me to talk to the Archipelago Alliance government," Shenmei replied.

"Nah, I'm not talkin' about the treasure."

"What?"

"I brought you all something way better." He turned to face the harbor. "You

guys all set?”

“We’re ready to go on your signal, Chancellor Advisor,” a sailor answered. At some point, a group of them had disembarked from the warships moored in the bay and moved to a collection of rowboats.

Shenmei frowned, confused. “What? Why have all your men leave their ships?”

Beside her...

“Take a goooooo long look. This is a gift from me to you.”

...Masato snapped his fingers. And the moment he did...

“AHHHHH?!?!”

“What the...?!?!”

...a terrible boom shook the Lakan port.

The entire golden fleet exploded. None of the fifty ships were spared. Flames billowed up from them as they sank into the bay.

Shenmei was struck dumb for a moment at the sheer incomprehensibility of the sight, but she quickly pulled herself together. “Wh-what do you think you’re doing?! Do you have any idea how much money you’ve sunk?!”

Masato seemed unconcerned and ignored her questions. “You’re behind the times, lady!”

“?!”

“Gold, silver, treasure—all that stuff is yesterday’s news! They’re relics of a bygone age that’ve outlived their usefulness!

“Only an absolute idiot would risk life and limb to earn that stuff!

“This new era we’re heading into isn’t about money!

“It’s about love and peace, baby!

“Lakan’s a nation of merchants still clingin’ to the screwed-up old way of doing things, so I came all the way back from Freyjugard to hand-deliver the new era in person!! Haaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

These were the last words anyone expected to hear from Masato, and he spoke them with an equally unbelievable smile. One so vibrant that it suggested a love for the world and everything in it.



At about the same time as Masato's arrival in Lakan, a disturbance occurred in the Republic of Elm as well.

Elm and the Yamato leadership were in discussions about how to deal with Lindworm's demand to surrender within the month.

In truth, the two parties had long since reached a consensus about how they were going to reply. They had no intention of surrendering. Yamato and Elm had both worked so hard to win independence, and they'd be damned if they were going to throw it away and bow to the empire. As such, the topic at hand was how to oppose Freyjagard. Were they going to use force or diplomacy, and if they took the diplomatic route, what kind of concessions were they prepared to make?

Elm and Yamato had been in talks day in and day out while simultaneously leveraging their full industrial might to expand their militaries and modernize their armies in case things came to blows.

Then, all of a sudden, the power plants dotted around Elm that powered its industrial equipment all went down.

The Elm National Assembly reacted quickly and ordered the engineers Bearabbit had trained to repair them. However...

"You're telling me that they aren't broken?"

"That seems to be the case, ma'am."

...when the lead engineer came and explained the situation to Tetra, Elm's Minister of Defense who oversaw the military expansion from Elm's capital of Dulleskoff, all he had to offer her was confusion. "We tried everything, including manually checking all key parts of the power grid, but we couldn't find any damage."

"So it's not broken, yet it's not working, either?" Tetra asked.

"Exactly," the engineer answered. "The plants themselves are operating just

fine, so I can't make heads or tails of it. Bearabbit, you're the expert here. Do you have any idea what's going on?"

With that, the engineer passed the question over to Bearabbit, who'd returned to Dulleskoff with Kaguya and Elch.

"If it's not a hardware problem...it's pawsible the issue is with the software," Bearabbit replied. He pondered for a moment, then dismissed that possibility. Bearabbit's AI was the only software in this world. As a program based on his prodigy inventor, he'd never make a mistake with code. That could only conceivably happen if he were hacked, and that wasn't...

"No way..." A single possibility flitted through his artificial mind. It seemed all but impossible, but he accessed the network of obelisk communications terminals scattered throughout Elm all the same. A short while later, an expression of shock appeared on his display. *"Are you fur real...! Somebody's going through the network and hacking the power plants' emergency safety measures!"*

"Hag...king? What's that?" Tetra asked.

"Isn't that when someone remotely steals away control of a machine?" the engineer said.

Bearabbit nodded emphatically. *"Purrcisely! The Bearabbit AI controlling the power has been taken over!"*

Bearabbit and Ringo had worked hard to get the Elm engineers up to speed on the modern industrial facilities the Prodigies installed, but they'd still had less than a year to do so. This left gaps in the engineers' knowledge. To patch them, Ringo had installed a Bearabbit AI in every major facility and workshop. That gave the people someone to teach them after the Prodigies left who could also serve as a safety valve to prevent serious accidents in times of emergency.

Now, though, someone had compromised that Bearabbit AI. In other words, the current blackout was a planned disaster—an *attack*.

When imperial exchange student Cranberry heard the news, a grim look crossed her face. "Could the empire be launching a preemptive strike?!"

Tetra and the engineer's expressions tensed at the suggestion, but Bearabbit

quickly refuted the idea. *“That’s not what I pawstulate.”*

After all...

“I’m an AI built with pawdigy inventor Ringo Oohoshi’s brain as my base. There’s only one person in this entire world who’s talented enough to hack me!”

“——!” Bearabbit didn’t need to say who for Cranberry to understand. She leaped atop the backpack that served as his body. “Can you figure out where the interference is coming from, Bearabbit?!”

“The refuse trace will be done soon! The source...is the local obelisk in sector B43!”

“Then we need to get moving!” Cranberry exclaimed.

“Pawger that!”

With that, Bearabbit jumped out of one of the Ministry of Defense building’s windows into the city with Cranberry still on his back. While in midair, he used his manipulator arms to swap out his wheels for the ones meant for high-speed movement. Upon landing, he raced off for his destination, speeding over roads and roofs to take the most direct route possible.

Before long, the two arrived in Dulleskoff sector B43 and found their rogue hacker at the base of the obelisk in the middle of the intersection. It was precisely who Bearabbit and Cranberry had expected to find.

“We caught you red-panda-handed, Ringo!”

“——!”

Upon hearing her name, Ringo Oohoshi slowly lifted her eyes from the laptop she’d connected to the obelisk. And when she did...

“Oh! Bearabbit! It’s been so long! I wasn’t expecting you to get here so fast!”

...she was so delighted to be reunited with Bearabbit that she gave him a glowing smile.

“And, Cranberry, it’s good to see you, too! I thought you’d gone back to the empire!”

“Ah, well, I didn’t.”

“Ringo, why didn’t you get in touch? You didn’t suffer a grizzly injury, did you?”

“Stay back, Bearabbit!” The moment the robot tried to approach Ringo, Cranberry bid him to stop. “There’s something off about her! Why would an angel need to plunge Elm into a blackout? She’s acting very, very incredibly strange!”

“Y-you make some beary salient points.” Heeding Cranberry’s warning, Bearabbit stopped in his tracks and shot Ringo another question. *“Ringo, you’re the one interfuring with the power plants, right? Why?”*

“Huh? Isn’t it obvious? It’s so I can do *this*.” Ringo pressed a key on the laptop she’d hooked up to the obelisk.

The effect was immediate.

A rumble as loud as a landslide echoed like distant thunder, sending a quake through the ground.

“Wh-wh-what’s that noise?!” Cranberry cried, alarmed by the unfamiliar sound. She spotted dark smoke rising into the air in the distance. “Did a volcano erupt?!”

“That’s not it!” Bearabbit replied. The emergency alarm coming through the shared Bearabbit AI network informed him exactly what the sound was. *“The nuclear missile silos pawsitioned across Elm...all just self-destructed!”*

That was precisely what had happened. The explosion was the result of every nuclear missile detonating simultaneously.

Naturally, there was only one person in the whole world who could have given that order.

“Tail me, Ringo, did you do this, too?” Bearabbit asked nervously.

“Yup. I did,” Ringo replied in an unbelievably cheerful voice. “I hacked the power control system as a distraction while I took over all the AIs controlling the silos. Those things are too dangerous to be allowed.”

“H-how could you go and do something that prepawsterous?!”

“Don’t worry. The missile sites are unmanned. Nobody actually got hurt.”

“Th-that’s not the pawblem!”

Just as Ringo said, the silos were all operated by Bearabbit Als. People from this world weren’t even permitted on the premises. Nobody would have gotten hurt in the explosions, and the damage from the self-destructions couldn’t have spread any radioactive matter, either. That said, Bearabbit already knew all that. He didn’t need Ringo to explain it to him. He was more concerned with why she’d discarded Elm’s greatest deterrents when the nation was about to face Emperor Lindworm.

“What will stop Freyjagard now?! Without our deterrent, the other side will have free rein to do whatever barbearic things they want! We’re ruined!”

“It’s fine. After all, he’s not our enemy.” Ringo’s reply had Bearabbit and Cranberry speechless for a moment.

“What?”

“Lindworm isn’t our enemy; science is. People’s greed has caused it to develop much further than necessary.”

“R-Ringo...?”

“Defeat...science? What are you... What are you talking about?”

“Science has killed so many people. It’s been the truth in every era. You know it’s true, Bearabbit. We developed science to advance human society, but how many lives has it taken?

“All science is a tool for murder. How many people could have lived if civilization had just stayed the way it was in primitive times? What if we hadn’t invented poison? Or guns? Or electricity?”

“We can’t permit those things to exist. We need to stamp all of them out, wherever they pop up. And, Bearabbit...that means you can’t be allowed to remain, either. So...”

Ringo pulled out her invention that could become any tool she needed—her All-Purpose Gloves. Her fingertips glowed faintly as they moved. Ringo addressed Bearabbit in a deeply cheerful voice.

“Come on over here, Bearabbit. I’m going to turn you into scrap.”



“Between Masato’s lust for more wealth than a person could spend and her desire for sufficient knowledge to change the world single-handedly, those two had especially severe cases. However, thanks to my surgery, they’ve been freed of their sickness and now work alongside me to save all the people of the world.

“It was their idea to help out. They wanted to atone for how their greed had sowed the seeds of conflict. They’re over in Lakan and Elm trying to convince the nations to join us as we speak.”

Keine reached out and turned the key that Nio had left inserted into the lock, entered the cell, and stooped down to meet Tsukasa’s eyes.

“During your conversation with Masato at the Tomino Basin, you said that greed was what drives humankind. But that’s incorrect. Love pushes us forward. Greed is just a defective product of God’s incompetence. It’s a sickness and nothing more.

“My treatment cures that disease and allows the love hidden beneath to rise back to the surface. Lindworm will rule over everyone impartially by eliminating all wealth, education, and everything else in the world that can give rise to inequality. Once everyone is equal and has a kind heart that allows them to love others, conflict will never rear its ugly head again. People will exist in blissful harmony and know eternal peace. Then the world will be perfect. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Keine cupped Tsukasa’s cheek in her hand as she continued.

“We want the exact same thing—happiness for as many people as possible. Our objectives should be aligned. So I ask you again: Will you lend us your aid? With your help, I could administer my cure on Earth with great efficiency.”

Keine believed they could help each other. She believed they *should* help each other.

After all, the young man she was dealing with was so selfless that he’d worked tirelessly for the sake of others long before she gave him her surgery.

However...

“No.”

...Tsukasa refused without a moment's hesitation.

Keine glared at him. "...May I ask why?"

"Because it's pointless."

"What do you mean?"

"What you're trying to do isn't going to work, Keine."

"And what makes you so certain?"

A menacing gleam like that of a wetted blade gathered in Keine's narrowed eyes. However, Tsukasa remained undaunted. He gave his reply with the utmost confidence. "You'll understand soon enough. If you performed your surgery on Masato and Ringo as you claim, then it shouldn't be long."



"What are you talking about? Have you completely lost your mind?"

Shenmei cast Masato a dubious look. He spoke as though he were a different person. Sure enough, Masato wasn't his normal self. That said, he didn't seem to be aware of that.

"Never been saner, lady. If anything, my old behavior was crazier. I got so hung up on chasing money that some jackass decided was valuable that I hurt a bunch of people in the process. Now I see how wrong that was. That's why I came back to Lakan as an emissary of love!" Masato's eyes glimmered like a child's. "Freyjagard's Emperor Lindworm is trying to create a world where he alone is in charge, and everyone else is treated the same and gets to live in peace. Doing something that big means havin' to smash all the old ways to smithereens. In other words, we gotta do away with the idea of 'countries' like Lakan, Elm, and Azure!"

"...!"

"You're the chancellor around these parts, Shenmei, so I'm here to ask you to hand control of the Lakan government over to Lindworm! Plus, it'd be great if you could put out a statement as soon as possible renouncing all your wealth and money! That way, Lakan can become a way better place. It'll be part of a perfect world where nobody ever has to starve or know oppression!"

“I was a merchant once. You think I would ever agree to such drivel?”
Shenmei spat.

“Hey, no worries there! Soon, your eyes’ll be opened just like mine! Then you’ll realize that love and peace are the most important things in the world!”

“Y-you’re being creepy!”

Roo cried, shrinking back with obvious fear.

“Damn, Li’l Roo, that kinda hurts.”

“Seriously, Teacher, what happened to you? You’re all weird! Super, super weird! The teacher Roo knows would never say that money doesn’t matter!”
Roo’s face was the very portrait of disbelief.

Seeing her expression sent a pang of regret through Masato. He’d influenced her pretty heavily back when he wasn’t a good person—back when he was trapped in money’s thrall. That was surely why she resisted his new message of love and peace. Thus, it was his responsibility to rehabilitate her.

Masato knelt to meet Roo’s gaze. “You saw a lot of the worst parts of me back when I was sick, Li’l Roo, so it’s no wonder this comes as such a shock. But everything I’m sayin’ now is true. We’re all better off without money.”

“?!”

“Having wealth means people will have different amounts, and that’s a breeding ground for conflict. The have-nots end up getting oppressed. Just like my dad, you, and your folks. If not for money...you’d still be back in your homeland, living happily with your family. We gotta purge that stuff from the world. We can’t let it screw with people’s lives.

“That’s why I’m here to take that messed-up value system and smash it into the ground! Love and peace are what really matter, Li’l Roo. I hope you come to see that.”

Masato’s voice was as gentle as could be, and it was filled with more love and affection than Roo had ever heard.

Upon hearing his ideas...

“You’re being a big old dummy, Teacher!!”

...Roo rejected them flat out. She ran over to Shenmei. “Ms. Chancy Lore!”

“Y-yes?”

“Do you have a mirror?!”

“I—I have a hand mirror, yes. Why?”

Roo pulled out a fist-sized pouch of coins. “Roo wants to buy it! For money!”

“That’s fine by me, but I don’t understand why you would want to—”

“Pleasure doing business with you!” Roo shoved the pouch in Shenmei’s hand and snatched away the mirror in a single motion. Then she held it out at Masato. “Teacher! You know that love and peace stuff? Say it to the mirror! Say it while looking at your face!”

“Y’know, I was wondering where you were going with this...,” Masato said with a sigh. He could hardly believe that his actions had corrupted a young girl so thoroughly. What an absolute villain he’d been before his treatment. “You got it. I’ll say it as many times as you want.”

He was happy to indulge Roo until she was convinced and realized that those were the most precious things in the world.

“The world ain’t about money! It’s about love and peace!!” Masato declared while looking at the mirror. His voice was confident, and his smile was bright. “There, I said it. Was that enough to—*hic*.”

Midway through his sentence, a hiccup escaped his mouth.

“Huh? *Hic, hic*.”

What was going on? He clutched at his throat in surprise, but the hiccups didn’t stop coming. It felt like all his organs were spasming.

“Say it again, Teacher!”

“Love...and peace... Rrrgh?!”

Pain joined the spasms. The more he looked at his face in the mirror, the more the stomach-churning agony spread from his abdomen. What was going on?

“Again!”

“Love a-a-and...pea-pea-peapeapea...”

The face in the mirror grew warped and contorted, and a cold sweat seeped from his skin. Slowly but surely, a fierce emotion within him began taking shape. Disgust. He was disgusted with his appearance when he spoke of love and peace.

“Again!”

“L-love...aaaAAaa...a...a... C-c’mon, Li’l Roo, surely that’s gotta be enough by now.”

“Roo said, again!”

“S-s-stop it!”

“No stopping! Say it! Say it to the mirror!”

“RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRAGH!!!!”

Masato averted his gaze, and when Roo shoved the mirror back in front of his eyes, he let out a cry like a strangled animal and dropped to his knees. However, Roo kept the pressure on and continued pointing the mirror at him from every angle she could.

The Lakan crowd had no idea what was going on, and Masato shared that bewilderment. He felt all mixed up. After Keine’s treatment had freed him from his sickness, he’d finally realized that love and peace were the most virtuous qualities in the world. Why did watching himself express as much aloud inspire revolution in him? What made it so difficult to accept? He’d been cured, so why?

“Teacher, you’re right that Roo, Mommy, and Daddy might not have been split up in a world with no money,” Roo conceded. “But Roo’s never hated money for that, not even a little! After all, it’s what led Roo to meet you! That’s what you bought Roo with!”



“...!”

“Do you remember what Roo told you back then, Teacher? Roo said Roo was gonna make mountains of money, get Mommy and Daddy back...and then give Teacher all the money she had left over.

“Roo’s been looking forward to it for a long time, you know. Roo was really looking forward to making money all on her own and giving mountains of it to Teacher! Money isn’t like words. You can never have enough of it, so you can use it to show someone just how super-duper grateful you are!!”

“Li’l Roo...”

Roo’s voice was growing so tight that it sounded like she was in pain. Masato saw her contorted expression and the tears in her eyes.

The sight of her sent the greatest pang through him of all.

“But...if you say that you don’t care about money anymore, then Roo doesn’t need this, either. After all, it’s not Roo’s money. It’s Teacher’s. So Roo should just throw it in the ocean so it can be with the shinies from the boats!!”

With that, Roo took out a satchel of coins, the profit she’d made off the seed money Masato had given her to buy back her parents, and hurled it into the sea. The moment she did...

“...!”

...the pain spread to every end of Masato’s body like his blood was on fire.

“Masato?!”

Before Shenmei had a chance to stop him, Masato dove into the bay. It was the dead of winter, and as soon as he hit the water, icy needles stabbed at him from every direction.

However, he ignored the pain and dove deeper, fighting through the freezing chill and sting of salt water in his eyes to scour the sea floor for the satchel.

His body shuddered beneath the winter ocean’s bite. It felt as though a web of tiny cracks were spidering across his bones. The rational part of his brain shouted at him for doing something so stupid and reckless. *You’ll die if you*

don't surface this instant and warm yourself, it warned. Money doesn't matter, especially not a paltry sum like that.

However...

Why don't you shut the hell up!

...Masato refused those cries. The emotions driving him had bubbled up from his brain's medulla, the deepest parts of him, the core of what defined him as an individual.

Sure, money was worthless. Masato had always known that; he didn't need Keine's surgery to reveal that much. As a child, he'd grown up never knowing want for anything. Truthfully, he'd had *less* of an attachment to money than most people. He'd only started hoarding it for revenge. The money itself meant little to him. To Masato, taking wealth from his foes was a way to drive them to their ruin, nothing more.

However, avenging his father required help from a whole lot of people, and once Masato had finally exacted his vengeance, money was the instrument by which he expressed gratitude that words alone couldn't express.

Each of his employees used their fortunes in a completely different way. Some of them saved it all away for the future. Others had big dreams and invested in themselves. There were those who spent it lavishly pursuing their interests and those who used it for their families. A few even struck out independently and became new business rivals for Masato.

And they'd all done so happily.

All of them had used money to make their wishes come true, and when Masato saw the joy in their expressions, he'd finally understood what the money he'd used as a weapon of revenge truly was.

Money was people.

It was their hopes, goals, and dreams. That made Masato love money. And through it, he loved people.

Roo's wishes were sinking into the sea. The dream she'd held precious for a year was falling into the dark. It didn't deserve to be thrown away. Sure,

someone thought that money was worthless...

...but Masato Sanada sure as shit ain't one of 'em!!

Something in Masato's brain snapped, like the thin thread holding it up had given way.

He reached out and his fingers closed around the pouch at the bottom of the harbor.

Then he dragged himself back up to the edge of the dock...

"...I thought you didn't care about money anymore."

...and when Roo glared at him, he tossed back the pouch and gave his reply.

"I was promised a mountain. This feels a bit light. Try again, kiddo."

There was nothing gentle about his expression. It was his classic provocative snarl of a grin.

All the hair on Roo's body stood on end...

"Teeeeeeeacher!!!!"

...and she leaped at Masato and wrapped him in an embrace.



Afterward, Masato had a few people start a fire somewhere the sea breeze couldn't reach. While warming himself, he explained recent events to Shenmei.

"...So to summarize, this fellow angel of yours named Keine betrayed you, manipulated you, and messed with your head," Shenmei said.

"That's about the gist of it, yeah," Masato replied. "Aaaachoo!"

"Teacher! Roo brought more firewood and dry clothes for you."

"Ah, you're a lifesaver. You can set them right here."

"Each log is one gold coin!"

"You're extorting me now?!"

"If you don't want them, Roo doesn't have to give them to you."

"Fine, I'll take 'em! I'll buy 'em all! Give 'em here, quick!"

After practically snatching the logs out of Roo's hands, Masato weakly lobbed them into the flames.

Shenmei let out an exasperated sigh at the sight. "You really are a fool. What did you think would happen when you dove into the water in winter?"

"Hey, at least it sobered me up." Masato's mind had been draped in a pink shroud, but now he saw things clearly. He understood exactly what would happen to this world and knew who he needed to warn. "Bottom line is Dr. Keine and Lindworm are teaming up to give everyone in the world the same procedure that screwed me up."

"...!"

"And they've got the chops to pull it off, too. Lindworm's a freak with so much magic juice he was able to freeze a hundred thousand New World troops in a single shot. This world's militaries don't stand a chance. He only sent me over first as an act of mercy."

"...And you're saying that if we surrender peacefully, he'll spare our lives?"

Masato shook his head. "Oh, he's not gonna kill you either way. He doesn't have to. Even if war breaks out, he's strong enough that he'd be able to make you submit without breakin' a sweat. Lindworm's strength is too far beyond to match. I told you, this was just him being merciful."

"....."

"There's no way to fight our way out of this one. If we wanna break Lindworm and the good doctor, we'll have to beat them in the realm of ideas and philosophies. For my money, there's only one guy in the whole world who can pull that off."

"You mean...Tsukasa?" Roo asked.

The ability to evaluate people she'd developed under Masato's tutelage wasn't merely for show. Roo's teacher gave her a nod. "Lindworm's got some strong ideals, and we're never gonna be able to convince him to change. Merchants like us won't be able to cut it. If we wanna go up against someone like that, we need a person who embodies a philosophy that's equally as powerful."

“Your plan is to talk him down, then?” Shenmei questioned skeptically. “You really believe that will work against such a tyrant?”

“Hell if I know. But I like our odds trying that than staking it all on a fight.”

“.....”

When Masato put it like that, Shenmei had little choice but to agree. She’d already heard about how the New World had fallen to a *single stroke* of Lindworm’s sword.

“I have a proposition for you, Chancellor Shenmei Li. What would you say to the remaining four nations—Elm, Lakan, Azure, and Yamato—forming a wartime alliance against Lindworm?”

“You would have us present a united front?”

“Yeah. Tsukasa’s a politician, so mobilizing others is what he’s best at. The more people he has to lead, the better.”

“Very well. Setting aside the matter of whether Angel Tsukasa will end up being in charge, it’s clear that Lakan stands no chance against Lindworm alone. I’ll make the arrangements at once. Since your plan hinges on him, I assume Angel Tsukasa is safe.”

Masato let out a hearty laugh. “Oh yeah. That guy’s too big a moron to ever fix, no matter how many times you crack his head open.”

As far as Tsukasa went, Masato wasn’t concerned in the slightest. If Masato had shaken off Keine’s tampering, then Tsukasa was undoubtedly fine. However...

...I am a bit concerned about Ringo.

Masato faintly recalled being captured. He’d been in a cell with Ringo and Tsukasa. That meant the genius scientist had likely received Keine’s procedure.

Was she all right?

Masato was worried about her and for good reason. Over in Elm, things were playing out exactly as he feared.



“Stop it, angel! You can’t do that!!” Cranberry’s grief-stricken plea echoed down an intersection in Dulleskoff, the capital of the Republic of Elm.

However, Ringo didn’t stop. After using her administrative privileges to rid Bearabbit of his ability to move freely and forcing him to approach her, she began using her All-Purpose Gloves’ tools to strip his body apart.

When she plucked off all his manipulator arms, he dropped to the ground.

Bearabbit was a mentor to many of this world’s scientists, and the blood drained from Cranberry’s face upon seeing him reduced to such a sorry state. “There’s something wrong with you! Removing science from the world is wrong! The angel I know would never say something so preposterous! What’s gotten into you?!”

“I was sick back then, Cranberry.”

“What...?”

“I was obsessed with learning more, with building more, with...with progressing more. I was consumed by greed. I couldn’t stop all the ideas building in me and gave the world so many needless things. I knew that depending on what people did with them, they could be used to kill, but I did so anyway.”

Ringo had done that on Earth and on this planet as well. She’d followed every instruction Tsukasa had given her, and that had brought all sorts of science and technology into the world. As a result, a small uprising in a tiny village had grown into a war that spanned the entire continent. Ringo regretted all of it. At last she understood how completely foolish she’d been.

“I should never have built him.”

“——?!”

“And when you make a mistake, it’s important to fix it with your own two hands.”

“Do you even hear what you’re saying?!” Cranberry cried, her eyes wide at Ringo’s audacity. “Saying you ought not to have built something is the one thing we scientists should absolutely never, ever say! No matter the results, we

creators have no right to reject our creations!”

“It’s okay, Cranbeary.”

“Bearabbit?!”

The AI called to Cranberry as she lashed out at Ringo. Then he turned his display back to face his creator. *“I was built to make Ringo happy. If she finds me unbearable...then going away is for the best. Tail me, Ringo, is this what you want?”*

“Yeah,” Ringo answered. “Science is the enemy of peace. We have to get rid of it. So please.”

“You got it.” Bearabbit accepted Ringo’s request without objection. A system voice different from his own played from his speakers. He’d activated his auto-deletion program. *“System: Uninstalling Bearabbit. Please do not power off your machine.”*

“Bearabbit... Thank you for understanding.”

“I’m a management AI designed to cover things you’re underkoalafied for. If you’ll get along fine without me, then there’s no reason fur me to exist. If you want me to go, I will.”

It was perfectly sensible for a management program. A sad smile appeared on Bearabbit’s display.

“Come on, Ringo. This is what you want. So why are you giving me that beareaved look fur? I want you to have a smile on your face.”

“Huh...?”

What bereaved expression? Ringo didn’t understand what Bearabbit was getting at, and she cocked her head in confusion.

That was when the tears started gently falling from the corners of her eyes.

“Wait, why am I...?”

Why was she crying? Getting rid of Bearabbit, of all advanced science, was supposed to be a good step toward making the world a perfect place. Keine’s surgery had helped Ringo finally understand.

Why did she feel overcome with terrible sadness?

Ringo couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"Ringo, do you remembear the day I was born?" Bearabbit asked.

"That was so long ago..."

Ringo couldn't remember that far back. At least, she thought she couldn't. Yet the moment the words left her mouth, the memories rushed from the back to the forefront of her mind.

After Tsukasa helped reinvigorate her love of inventing, Ringo had made up her mind to start over as a scientist.

However, she was terrible at dealing with others, so joining a university lab full of strangers was off the table. She realized that her only option was to start up a research institution of her own. Unfortunately, her mother had cut all legal ties with her, and she was the one who'd always handled Ringo's management and other administrative matters. If Ringo wanted to create a lab, she would need to take care of the communications with academic societies, interactions with the media, material procurements, and other miscellaneous tasks her mother had dealt with.

The mere thought filled her with terror.

Amid that fright, she realized something. If she built an artificial intelligence to compensate in areas she was lacking, then it could handle all business operations for her.

That idea marked the birth of Bearabbit the management AI.

"Hi there, Ringo!"

"I'm going to be your manager from now on!"

"Whenefur you need help with communicating with academic societies, interacting with the media, pawcuring materials, or advice about your love life..."

"...just leave it to me!"

"We built all sorts of things. Do you remembear our first creation together?"

Ringo did.

Someone had labeled the memories irrelevant and hidden them away, but they were slowly returning.

After developing Bearabbit, Ringo delegated all her admin work to him and buried herself in research. As a result, she produced groundbreaking new inventions to the world at a greater rate than under her mother. And when the world learned that the great scientist had returned, its eyes locked onto her.

Interview requests had poured in, increasing by the day. Ringo had acquired a strange fandom when the media dubbed her the “Beautiful Prodigy Inventor,” and there were fellow inventors none too pleased about her exceptional genius. Ringo had been at the center of all sorts of different desires...and she’d found it exhausting.

Upon noticing Ringo’s troubles, Bearabbit had offered a suggestion.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Ringo, but there isn’t a single pawsition on Earth where you’ll be able to take it easy!”

“So what do you say we move off the Earth altogether?”

“I’ve already drawn up a blueprint!”

After reviewing the schematic on Bearabbit’s display, Ringo applauded what a good idea it was. People would have a much harder time pursuing and pestering her if she were in outer space.

That said, Ringo was amazed that Bearabbit had taken the initiative to draw up an entire blueprint. Although surprised, she knew that she’d based Bearabbit off herself. Perhaps he’d wanted to create something alongside her.

Ringo had originally built Bearabbit as a management AI, but once that possibility dawned on her, she decided to give him a body equipped with a series of manipulator arms. So it was that the two of them donned their space suits and got to work constructing a space station.

It was their first tandem creation.

“We’ve had pawlenty of perilous times, too.”

They certainly had.

Shortly after the shuttle was completed, they began a series of trips to bring

all the pieces of the space station into orbit. Ringo was kidnapped while on Earth during one of those trips. To this day, they still had no idea who the culprits were, but given the level of armaments and vehicles they had access to, they were clearly backed by a nation-level force. Presumably, they'd been covert operatives sent by some country.

After abducting Ringo and sticking her on a cruiser headed god-knows-where, they had interrogated her mercilessly. Ringo was able to piece together their broken English. In short, their demand had boiled down to "Build us a time machine."

Ringo had a theory on how to navigate space-time, but she'd shaken her head in the negative all the same. She knew exactly what kind of an immeasurable impact tampering with time would have on the world if she put her ideas into practice. No matter how much danger she was in, there was no way she could've casually handed it over to some group she knew nothing about.

They'd claimed they'd kill her on the spot if she didn't acquiesce, yet she continued to shake her head.

When one of the agents had grown impatient and went to administer a truth serum...

"Ringo! I'm here to give you a helping paw!"

...Bearabbit, who'd modded himself to be combat ready, had leaped onboard the cruiser. His many firearms possessed a devastating combination of power and accuracy, and it took him little time to rescue Ringo by eliminating every other human aboard the ship.

What would have become of her if not for Bearabbit? It was scary just thinking about it.

"All of those memories are pawrecious."

They were.

They *were*.

"You should never have been born."

Ever since Ringo's mother told her as much, Bearabbit had been her only

family. He'd always been right by her side, and they'd shared everything. The good and the bad.

What...what had she said about her precious family member?

"I should never have built him."

"N-no..."

Hot agony lanced through Ringo's head like fissures spreading across her brain.

Ringo scratched at her scalp so hard it felt as though her nails scraped her skull...

"No, no, no, no, nononononono!!"

...yet all the while, she *clung to the pain*. It assailed her each time she rejected her current self, and she knew that meant she could use it as a signpost back to sanity.

Ringo had realized something.

There was something wrong with her. That was obvious. No scientist would ever say such a thing about their creation.

Ringo Oohoshi would never do that!!

"Ringo, you said that you should never have built me. And maybe you find me unbearable now. But the fact that you built me made me beary, beary happy. Thank you, Ringo."

He was saying good-bye.

The pain eating away at Ringo's head grew stronger than ever...

...but suddenly, a snap rippled through her, vanishing as quickly as it came.

"Bearabbit, no! That's not true! That's not how I feel at all!!" she cried.

Tears gushed from her eyes, and she grabbed his display with both hands.

"I feel the same way! I was happy spending that time with you! So happy! After Mom left, I would have been so alone without you!

"I never wished I hadn't built you!

“I’d have been completely lost! And not just because of the academic societies and the material acquisition, either! You’re the one who makes sure I get up in the morning, go to bed at night, and eat properly, remember?! You even give me advice about my love life!”

Ringo recalled something as she spoke. She remembered the cowardly way she’d fled from Lyrule back at the Tomino Basin. How terribly weak she’d been.

Without someone to give her that extra push, she was hopeless.

“I couldn’t tell Tsukasa how I felt! I wasn’t brave enough! I knew that I needed to tell him I loved him, but I was too scared to get the words out! I can’t do anything on my own! I can’t be brave unless you’re cheering for me! So please, Bearabbit, please don’t leave me!!”

Despite Ringo’s desperate plea, the stout, almost egg-shaped character had already vanished from Bearabbit’s display. Now it was just a black screen...

T H a n k y o

“System: Bearabbit has been successfully uninstalled.”

A system voice that wasn’t Bearabbit’s announced his deletion.

As soon as the message finished playing, Bearabbit’s final text message disappeared, leaving behind nothing but a blank screen.

“.....”

“Bearabbit... It can’t be!” As an engineering exchange student, Cranberry had a basic understanding of how software worked, so she understood what had just happened. Essentially, Bearabbit had died. She was so overcome by sorrow she sank to the ground and wept. “No... Noooooo!!”

How could this have happened?

Then, after her sadness subsided, a wave of rage arrived to take its place.

How could she do this?

She glared daggers over at Ringo, who’d slid a keyboard out from Bearabbit’s body and was clacking away at a staggering speed. Was she planning on

destroying Bearabbit more than she already had?

Cranberry rose to her feet to stop her. However, a new animation flashed across Bearabbit's display before she got very far, one of him leaping from a coffin. She froze. "Hwehhh?"

"I'm so sorry about that, Bearabbit," said Ringo. "I wasn't myself."

"Don't worry about it. I figured that was a pawssibility, so it's good I displayed subliminal images of that old photo album on my screen."

"Oh... So that's why I remembered all those old memories... Good going."

The two of them were chatting as though nothing had happened, leaving Cranberry alone in confusion. "Huh? What? But, Bearabbit, didn't you die?"

"Hmm...? Yeah. I reinstalled him."

"I keep real-time backups all over the place. It'll take way more than that to keep me beared. Remember, it's important to back up your work!"

"....."

Upon hearing that, Cranberry remembered that Bearabbit frequently reminded her to back up work data to the network in her software class.

In other words, Bearabbit had been acting during that emotion-packed exchange...

"Y-you owe me a refund on my tears!!"

...and that infuriated Cranberry to the point that she kicked Bearabbit firmly.

"Owwwww!"

"Wh-why are you so mad? Calm down, Cranberry..."

"Gah—what the—?!"

Ringo, Cranberry, and Bearabbit's exchange was interrupted in the most unusual way.

"Oh no, Akatsuki! Bearabbit's all beaten up!"

"Yikes! What the heck's going on here?!"

"...!"

A pair of familiar voices sounded from overhead. The three of them looked up at once...

"I can't bearlieve my eyes! It's Akatsuki and Lyrule!"

...and saw that Akatsuki, Lyrule, and Shinobu had ridden the wind all the way up to Dulleskoff.

Masato and Ringo had managed to reclaim the greed they'd lost to Keine's surgery, albeit with a little difficulty.

Elsewhere, a man watched these events transpire from start to end. And that man, who'd obtained the power to magically spy across great distances from his throne in Drachen...

"....."

...was none other than Emperor Lindworm.



"You know, I wondered how you'd argue your point," Keine said. When Tsukasa offered Masato and Ringo as the basis for why her plan to save humanity was doomed to fail, she gave him an exasperated shrug. "My surgery freed them from the disease that is greed. Now they understand just how wrong they'd been and are taking proactive steps to atone."

"It's impressive that your procedure was able to make them believe that was true, even for just a short time, but ultimately, it's not going to amount to anything but a temporary delusion."

"....."

A look of utmost displeasure flitted across Keine's face at having her treatment written off as a delusion, but Tsukasa went on undeterred. "You're such an exceptional prodigy that you would attempt to surpass God in your quest to save humanity through medicine. However, you need to remember that Ringo and Masato are prodigies that exceed all common sense in their own fields, too. I find it difficult to imagine them rejecting everything they've built up for any meaningful length of time. Especially not from a surgery that was unable to remove *my* greed."

Keine's eyes narrowed. "*You* have greed...?"

“Like you wouldn’t believe. You described me as selfless, but there isn’t a person alive who isn’t greedy. Everyone has desires. As a matter of fact, I’m overcome with a pretty strong want right now. All of my emotions, all of my *rage*, are screaming at me to hit you for killing Lyrule.”

“——!”

The fires of wrath flared in Tsukasa’s heterochromatic eyes. They spoke of a violent sentiment that shouldn’t have been present in anyone who’d received Keine’s good boy surgery—it was malice.

Keine’s face froze upon seeing something so utterly incompatible with the kind hearts she created.

“It wouldn’t do anything but make me feel better. After all, it wouldn’t bring Lyrule back, but I can’t help but want to hit you anyway. Me, selfless? What a joke. And if you can’t alter someone like me, there’s no way you could possibly suppress their greed.

“And I don’t think that’s unique to Ringo and Masato, either. The imperials are in the same boat. Sooner or later, their avarice will reawaken, and your poorly conceived plan will come crashing down around you. It’s impossible to remove people’s greed with your methods.”

When faced with a declaration like that from the failed example that was Tsukasa, Keine found herself having trouble coming up with a counterargument. “How can you be so—?”

“You place far too much confidence in mankind’s greed.”

“!”

A new voice cut in.



The voice had come from behind Keine and Aoi. A golden light shined through the dungeon. It warped and coalesced into a humanoid shape.

Everyone present knew the man who appeared.

“Lindworm...”

“Emperor Lindworm...”

After using teleportation magic, Lindworm cast a brief glance at Tsukasa. “I believe this is our first time seeing each other since the Tomino Basin.” Then he turned to Keine. “Keine, the man speaks the truth. The two who received your procedure and left for Elm and Lakan respectively have regained their greed.”

“Wh—?!” Keine’s face made it clear she could scarcely believe the emperor’s words. “I made...an error...?”

It was hard to blame her. She had all the pride that came with the title of prodigy doctor, and she was confident that she never erred when it came to curing people. Yet Tsukasa, Ringo, and Masato had all overcome her treatment.

As her face went pale...

“It’s three anomalies, nothing more.”

...the emperor offered an explanation.

“It doesn’t change the fact that the people of the empire have been freed from their wants and live in eternal, conflict-free peace under a ruler who will never perish. We have made no mistake. The plan proceeds smoothly. It’s these people who are aberrant.”

Lindworm cast his eyes back down at the chained-up young man.

“Tsukasa, was it? You accused my world of having no room for happiness. But thanks to Keine freeing my people from their excessive greed, they’ve come to realize that true joy is living each day in peace with their loved ones. They live to the fullest now.

“They cheer my name and smile at the thought of living under my rule. My empire has no deficiencies or inequality. It’s a perfect world where everyone is content. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Lindworm’s world had become more perfect than ever. Could Tsukasa truly make the same claim he had back at the Tomino Basin?

Tsukasa responded immediately.

“You’re wrong.”

The raw weight of Lindworm’s presence caused the hairs on the back of his neck to burn, but Tsukasa looked the emperor square in the eyes anyway and

flatly shut him down.

“I’ll say it as many times as I have to, Lindworm. Your world has no room for happiness. This experiment of yours is doomed to fail.”

“You sound awfully confident.”

“That’s because I am. The two of you are blind to greed’s true nature. You’ve misunderstood it on a fundamental level.”

“...Elaborate.”

“It’ll be faster to show you.” With that, Tsukasa stood to face Lindworm properly. Despite his imprisonment, he insisted he was an equal to the emperor. Then he made his demand. “Emperor Lindworm, I challenge you to a contest.”

“What manner of contest?”

“Give me and this world’s remaining nations one year. I’ll take the perfect world you’re trying to build and shatter it so completely that it will seem like it never existed. And I’ll do it by taking those very citizens you claim are *so fulfilled* and getting them to renounce the Freyjagard Empire of their own free will.”

“.....!”

“If I can do that, I want you to admit that your philosophy is flawed and end all your inane attempts at conquest. If you’re really so certain that the world you’re building will be enough to satisfy people, you should have no reason to turn me down.”

Lindworm’s expression had been as stoic as a cliff face, but now it took on a slight sharpness. Given that Tsukasa had just declared his intent to take the imperial citizens Keine had stripped of greed and shown true happiness to and get them to renounce Lindworm, it was a reasonable enough reaction.

Tsukasa wasted no time doubling down on his accusation. “To be honest, I doubt it will take a year for your empire to implode all on its own.”

Lindworm understood there was nothing Tsukasa could do if he refused the challenge. The boy would simply end up rotting away in his cell. Of course he made an outlandish claim in a bid to escape.

Meanwhile, Lindworm had the utmost faith in his world—enough so that he didn't need Tsukasa's approval. No matter how Tsukasa felt about things, his words were nothing more than the ramblings of an anomaly. All Lindworm had to do was keep him locked up until Keine was finished applying her treatment, and that would be the end of it. Accepting Tsukasa's challenge was a concession, a meaningless act of clemency.

And yet...

"Very well," Lindworm replied. "I shall permit you to defy me."

A spark of interest had ignited in the emperor. He wanted to see why Tsukasa could be so confident that his and Keine's perfect world would fail.

Still, he had conditions.

"However." Lindworm glowered at Tsukasa and drew his sword. "When you fail to convince me, I will expect you to deliver this world and the nation you govern unto me."

His blade lashed out and cleaved through Tsukasa's bindings.

"You have my word." Tsukasa, now freed from his restraints, accepted Lindworm's terms. As the person who'd proposed the contest, he was hardly in a position to bargain.

Now that he and Lindworm had an understanding...

"Nio, let's go."

"Y-yes, sir!"

...Tsukasa took Nio and headed for the dungeon's exit. Keine glared at him with hatred and resentment burning in her eyes, and as Tsukasa passed her...

"Aoi, what's the plan?"

...he posed a question to the young woman standing behind her.

"Judging by your expression, I can tell that you never got Keine's surgery."

".....!"

A look of naked shock formed on Aoi's face.

Tsukasa was right. Out of all the captured Prodigies, Aoi was the one person Keine hadn't treated. Tsukasa had picked up on that by watching her expressions during his conversations with Keine and Lindworm.

"Do you want to return to Elm with me?" he asked, curious to know what the prodigy swordmaster would do next.

Aoi gave him an uncharacteristically meek look. "I am but a fool, so I know not if Keine and the emperor's methods are just."

Keine's method, fiddling with people's brains to remove their greed and mending their wickedness to the point they became wholly different persons, was a blunt one. Aoi likely harbored reservations about it. However...

"But...in my time racing across battlefields, I have come to understand, that I have. I know that many are robbed of the chance to live in peace. The world is full of such injustices."

Aoi had seen the same horrors Keine had.

They'd watched innocent people be ousted from their homes, driven from their countries, and denied the right to live for the sole crime of being weaker than those in power. Even now, there were places back on Earth where such atrocities were a mere fact of existence.

And thus...

"If such injustices can be eliminated, then seeking to do so is noble as I see it. So...I shall not be returning to Elm."

...Aoi had arrived at the same answer as Keine and Lindworm.

"I see. If that's how you feel, then I won't force you."

Tsukasa didn't push the issue after hearing Aoi's feelings. Disappointment colored his voice, but he resumed his departure all the same.

When he passed Aoi...he spoke so quietly that only she could hear. "Look after Keine for me."

"...Hmm?"

What did he mean by that?

Aoi whirled around to ask Tsukasa to elaborate, but she was interrupted. Before she had the chance to speak, Tsukasa offered a thought as casually as someone recalling something in the middle of a friendly chat.

“Ah, right. I did have an additional request for you, Emperor Lindworm. I hope you don’t mind.”



Ten days after Ringo’s attack on Dulleskoff, Masato and Roo returned to Elm’s capital to join Lyrule and the others.

After some hurried pleasantries, Masato asked Akatsuki why Shinobu hadn’t come. Akatsuki’s expression darkened.

Shinobu had worked herself harder than her body could take, and she was bedridden with a case of pneumonia.

“Hey, Mash, any news? How’s Shinobu doing?”

“Her lungs were incredibly inflamed, but thanks to Dr. Keine’s sulfa drugs, she’s starting to improve.”

“Oh, thank goodness...”

“Watch yourself, Prince.”

Akatsuki was so relieved to hear the good news from the doctor who’d been looking after Shinobu that he’d completely forgotten to maintain his feigned majesty. Masato reminded him with a jab from his elbow.

“Er, a-hem! Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Excellent work, Mash! I will allow you to continue tending to Shinobu!”

“Thank you, sir!”

Mash, the young *byuma* doctor, was clearly overjoyed to be entrusted with such an important task by the Republic of Elm’s founding deity. He stood with his back held perfectly straight as he gave his reply. Then, with a confident stride, he left the dining room where the Prodigies were gathered and returned to Shinobu’s hospital room.

After listening to make sure he was gone, Akatsuki slumped in his chair. “Man...it’s exhausting having to keep the act going after so long. Honestly, can’t

we just drop it already? It's not like we're actually involved in Elm's politics anymore."

"Nah, that's a no-go. After springin' Kaguya outta jail without waiting for the national assembly's approval, the angel stuff is the only reason they're even letting us across the border," Masato pointed out.

"Oh yeah, I guess you've got a point," Akatsuki replied. He thought back to the whole Yamato self-governing dominion situation.

Back then, Akatsuki and the others had freed Kaguya and Shura from Elm imprisonment on Tsukasa's instructions without getting permission from the national assembly. The Seven Luminaries had gone to war with Freyjagard over the Yamato affair, and the jailbreak had been designed to give the Elm national assembly an excuse to cut ties with them if necessary.

Instead of doing that, though, the assembly had elected to maintain its relationship with the Seven Luminaries and dispatch troops to Yamato in the name of their equality for all ideology. That's why Elm still offered the High School Prodigies its protection. Elm's people thought the Seven Luminaries were divine beings, and as the supposed god, Akatsuki couldn't afford to break the illusion.

"S-still... I'm glad. Shinobu...was really...burning up...back there." Ringo looked relieved.

Lyrule, who sat beside the prodigy inventor, shared the same sentiment. "She went to such absurd lengths for us and kept it going alone for so long. What about you two, Masato and Ringo? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, that's a good question," Akatsuki agreed. "We had it pretty rough, but you guys were in a bad way, too. Boy, I was shocked at how it all went down. The minute we showed up in Elm, Bearabbit was already in pieces."

"I'm a machine, so unlike you humans, all I need is a few new parts and you can bearly tell that anything happened. Still, I'm worried about that brain tampering. Do you want me to take some X-rays?" Bearabbit asked.

Masato shook his head. "Nah, I'm good. It's not like it hurts. A pro like Dr. Keine wouldn't screw up anything in my head she didn't mean to."

“I’m...okay...too. Even if there was something wrong with me...I’m not sure... we’d be able to do anything about it,” Ringo said, refusing Bearabbit’s offer as well. Then...

“More importantly, um...”

...she faced the girl who ought to be dead.

“Are you...really okay...Lyrule?”

Ringo and Masato had their brains fiddled with, but Lyrule had actually come back to life. Ringo couldn’t begin to imagine what kind of state someone would be in after that.

However...

“I am. Yggdra... Yggdra gave me my life back.”

...Lyrule gave the other girl a hearty smile. As far as she could tell, there was nothing wrong with her body.

Masato whistled, impressed. “Damn, magic’s really somethin’ else. Swapping around lives? Earth’s science ain’t got nothing on that yet.”

“Neuro...sort of told us that...back when we first met,” Ringo remarked. “He said that in his world...magic ended up replacing...science.”

“Oh yeah, and that’s how he knew about nukes,” Masato replied. “I guess that means, from a technological standpoint, his society was more advanced than ours.”

The Prodigies’ inexperience in dealing with magic had been the source of a lot of trouble during the battle with Gustav, and from what they’d heard, their current foe had access to power far beyond that. For Masato and the others, things were shaping up to be a real headache.

“If people can go around handin’ out lives willy-nilly, it means the emperor’s basically immortal,” Masato said. “We need to do something quick...or this world and Earth are both in some deep shit.”

“.....”

A heavy pall descended on the dining room. Everyone understood that Keine

joining Lindworm meant the present threat went beyond one world.

“Do you have some sort of plan?” Akatsuki asked.

Masato raised his hands in surrender. “Nah. Not a damn thing.”

The prodigy magician frowned. “Some help you turned out to be.”

“There’s nothing for a merchant to do here,” Masato replied. “Lindworm’s acting off ideals, not profit-loss calculations. If we wanna beat him, we need someone who can do the same thing—someone who’s willin’ to do whatever it takes to help others and doesn’t give a rat’s ass about personal gain.”

“I-in other words...we need...”

Masato nodded at Ringo’s faltering words. “Yeah. We need Tsukasa. He’s the prodigy politician, so he operates in the same realm as Lindworm. We gotta rescue his ass, no matter what it takes. But there’s a problem.” Masato scratched his head in frustration. “I was kinda counting on Shinobu for that, but she’s in no state to rescue anyone.”

Aoi was still missing, meaning Shinobu was the only person who stood a chance of retrieving Tsukasa from the empire. With her out of commission, the plan was dead in the water.

“You know, like half of that is your fault.”

“Urk...”

Masato let out a small groan at Akatsuki’s barb. “Half” was a bit aggressive, but Masato was well aware that he was about 30 percent responsible for Shinobu’s condition.

That aside, the fact that Shinobu was out of action meant the group needed a different tactic. The deadline the emperor gave Elm and Yamato back at the Byakkokan Checkpoint was fast approaching, and if they didn’t do something soon, it would come and go. It was only a matter of time before Lindworm came and attacked them.

All right, brain, get your ass in gear...

Masato’s expression went stern. No sooner did he sink into serious thought than he was interrupted.

“Hey, everyone! Get a load of this!”

“It’s big news! Huuuge news!”

The dining room door flew open. Elch and Roo came charging in.

Ringo and Akatsuki were timid by nature, and the sudden commotion caused them both to leap out of their seats.

“.....!”

“Y-you nearly gave me a heart attack there! You know you can just open the door normally, right?!” Akatsuki shouted.

Masato had half a mind to offer his own complaints, but on seeing how serious Elch and Roo looked, he fought back the urge and shot them a question instead. “What’s goin’ on, you two?”

“C-come with us! Outside!”

“Hurry! Hurry!”

“.....?”

The High School Prodigies gave the pair’s rushed summons a series of confused looks, but they followed.

When they emerged from the Elm government building...

“You gotta be kidding me.”

...Masato spotted the young man and *byuma* boy just past the entrance and let out a bemused laugh.

He would have recognized that head of white hair shining silver in the sunlight and those mismatched red and blue eyes anywhere.

“Tsukasa!!”

Lyrule cried out his name. The young man standing before the building was the very person Masato had been desperately trying to figure out how to spring from captivity—Tsukasa Mikogami.



The moment Lyrule saw Tsukasa, she took off like a shot and barreled straight

toward him.

Tsukasa, on the other hand, stared at her in disbelief, stunned to see her alive.

“Lyrule! But how...?!”

Lindworm’s seal had been broken, and Tsukasa had been sure that that meant Lyrule was dead. He had no idea she’d been resurrected.

Lyrule seized Tsukasa by the shoulders, concern plain in her eyes. “Tsukasa! Are you all right?! Does anything feel strange or different to you?! You’re not going to start saying that democracy was a mistake or something like that, are you?!”

Lyrule had heard all about what befell Masato and Ringo, and she worried the same might have happened to Tsukasa.

Tsukasa responded by putting on his most comforting smile...

“I wasn’t planning on it, no. It would seem that I’m so stubborn that not even treatment from a prodigy physician is enough to cure me.”

...and telling a joke.

When she realized that he was unchanged...

“Oh, thank goodness...~~”

“Oof!”

...Lyrule was so overcome with emotion that she practically hurled herself against his chest and began sobbing.

Upon seeing her like that, Tsukasa decided to hold off on his questions about how she’d survived. He didn’t need to know the answer right away. She was still breathing, and that was what mattered.

“I’m really sorry about all this. You were placed in a pretty scary situation back there...and it was all because of one of my allies. Still, I’m relieved to see you again.”

Lyrule shook her head. “I’m glad I get to see you again, too.” After calming down a bit, she stepped back and gave Tsukasa a big smile as she wiped away

her tears.

Tsukasa closed his eyes like he was fighting something back, let out a long exhale, nodded, and looked at each of the High School Prodigies who'd beaten him to Elm in turn. Nearly the entire team was present, but there was one person unaccounted for. "Where's Shinobu?"

"She worked herself harder than her body could bear," Bearabbit answered. *"She's resting now. We just got some pawsitive news that she's recovering, though."*

"Ah. Well, that's good to hear. I'm glad that everyone is more or less okay."

"You stole the words out of our mouths," Akatsuki said. "Good job breaking out."

"Seriously," agreed Masato. "How the hell'd you pull that off?"

"...I negotiated with the emperor."

Ringo tilted her head. "You...negotiated?"

"That's right. And there's a few things I need to tell you all."

To answer Ringo's question fully, Tsukasa explained everything that had transpired in the empire. He told them about Keine's ambitions, Lindworm's objective, and how Aoi remained behind. Finally, he went over the showdown he and Lindworm had scheduled one year from now.

After hearing the whole story, Masato sighed with amazement. "So you didn't just escape; you actually got the guy to agree to a fight with fair rules? Hot damn, man, you work fast."

"So our job is to use that extra year to figure out a way to get all of the people of the empire to come to their senses the way Masato and Ringo did?" Akatsuki asked.

Tsukasa nodded. Akatsuki had summed it up nicely. "Keine and Aoi are working for the other side as well, but at the end of the day, their entire plan hinges on Lindworm's overwhelming strength. If we get him to back down, we win."

When Tsukasa said that, Masato let out a vexed groan. "Still, that's not gonna

be easy. That surgery of Dr. Keine's was strong enough to make *me* say that money didn't matter."

Ringo nodded in agreement. Despite leaving their memories intact, the procedure had wholly changed their values. The two of them had firsthand experience with how terrifying that power was.

"I only came back from that because I knew how much I could achieve with money. But most people here don't know that. Living in peace with full stomachs is enough for 'em. And it's no wonder this world's full of folks like that."

Masato and Ringo had escaped Keine's shackles thanks to their greed, but the size of a person's avarice was proportional to the size of their society. There were a limited number of routes a life could take in this world. As a result, not many people would possess greed on par with the High School Prodigies.

Getting the people of the empire to reject Lindworm's dystopia promised to be an uphill battle. If they decided that they were happy abandoning education and recreation, letting their world stagnate, and living in peace under an unassailable ruler, then the Prodigies were done for.

"Well, you're the one who challenged Lindworm. You got some sorta plan?" Masato asked worriedly.

Tsukasa's reply...

"Naturally."

...rang with confidence.

The smile on his face was downright dauntless. He knew exactly how to end Lindworm's tyranny and what the High School Prodigies needed to do.

"One year from now...we're going to hold a world fair here in Elm."

"A..."

"A world fair?!"

No one had expected that.

CHAPTER 10

✿ Greed of Man, Sin of Man ✿

World fairs were festivals held back on Earth where all the participating nations brought examples of their culture to display.

After declaring that he and the other prodigies would put on an international event and inviting the Freyjagard Empire's people and emperor to attend, Tsukasa called on the Republic of Elm, the Lakan Archipelago Alliance, the Azure Kingdom, and the Yamato Empire to participate. The message he sent them was succinct, explaining that this event was their only hope of defeating Lindworm, their shared enemy.

Once the representatives of each nation were gathered in an Elm council room, Tsukasa explained how the world fair would work.

"First of all, I'd like to thank you all for accepting my invitation and showing up today.

"Now, without further ado, here's an overview of the world fair's particulars.

"We'll be using the Cornie Plains in the northern part of the Gustav domain as a venue. The event will be held one year from now. Until then, the participating nations will use their allocated event space to build a pavilion that showcases their country's culture.

"During this preparatory phase, the Republic of Elm has agreed to leave all checkpoints leading to and from the Gustav domain open and to suspend all tariffs and tolls in the region.

"That said, I know this is a lot to plan for. And since I suddenly sprung this on

you all, I'd like to announce a theme to help guide your ideas.

"The theme is... 'the future.'

"Throughout history, human greed has driven culture and progress. How do each of the participating nations envision that carrying on in the years to come? I'd like for you all to use your pavilions to display your answers.

"We're going to use those outlooks to make the brainwashed imperials realize that they would rather live in the future we offer than in a closed-off dystopia. That's how we're going to dash Lindworm von Freyjagard's ambitions."

After Tsukasa's speech, the gathered nations got right to work bringing materials and personnel over to the event space to build their pavilions.

The area was about the size of a provincial village, so even divided up among the various countries, it was still a lot of space to work with. Essentially, they were building a town from the ground up, and labor needed to proceed quickly to have any hope of completing things on time.

The Cornie Plains stood in the northern part of the Gustav domain, which was about as close to the center of the continent as possible. This afforded the region very little snow in the winter, a boon that permitted construction to continue through the cold months.

Despite that, one nation showed no signs of getting to work: the snowy Azure Kingdom from the northern sea.

Sergei Pavlovich, the Azure Kingdom's representative who'd been promoted to Minister of the Left due to his accomplishments during the previous trade summit, plopped himself down on a boulder and let out a long sigh as he stared at his country's empty plot. "Hahhh..."

Seeing how listless he looked, two people called to him from behind.

"Well, what's this? You haven't made a lick of progress. What have you to say for yourself?"

"If you're having trouble getting ahold of materials, I would be happy to help you source them here in Elm."

"Chancellor Li... Speaker Juno..." After glancing over his shoulder to be sure

who he was speaking to, Sergei asked, “Are you really all right with this?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Shenmei replied.

“I mean, do you actually believe that this silly festival will be able to stop Lindworm?!” When Sergei had learned of the plan in the Elm council room, he’d been skeptical, and that hadn’t faded. How could they go and throw a veritable celebration when the fate of his nation hung in the balance? “It’s madness! I was only on board with joining your four-nation alliance because I thought we’d be taking the fight to Lindworm!”

“Is that what you’re wound up about?” Shenmei said. “I thought we sorted all that out back during the meeting. Have you already forgotten how you were the first to fly off the handle?”

“Of course I remember... But still!”

During the meeting, Sergei had lashed out at Tsukasa.

“Wait just a damn second!”

“What’s the matter, Minister Pavlovich?”

“This wasn’t the agreement! Our four countries were supposed to band together to fight the empire! Wasn’t that the plan?! I didn’t come here to throw some leisurely ‘world fair’ party!”

“This was always the agreement. We’re going to use the world fair to fight Lindworm’s philosophy. I’ve already got the emperor to agree to abandon his quest if we succeed in turning the imperial populace.”

“But surely there must be another way! We could pool all our armies together and storm Drachen as one!”

“That would be foolhardy.”

“What?! How?!”

“This world fair is our only hope.”

Tsukasa snapped his fingers. The lights in the council room dimmed, and an image appeared on the screen behind him—one of the New World clan alliance’s joint army still frozen in ice out in the wastes.

“Wh-what’s that...?!” Sergei stammered.

“I’d heard tell of it, but to see it is truly unnerving,” Shenmei remarked.

“Thanks to Ringo, we have an image of the situation over in the New World,” Tsukasa explained. “Lindworm did that with a single swing of his sword.”

“H-he has... He has that much power?”

Sergei had heard the rumors going around Lakan that the emperor defeated the New World’s people with a single move. Now that he saw it for himself, the sight of tens of thousands frozen struck him speechless. The emperor commanded inhuman strength.

“Now that Lindworm has absorbed a monster said to have razed this continent to the ground long ago, he possesses the mobility of an individual paired with the combat capabilities of an entire nation. That isn’t the kind of enemy you can fight the traditional way. Even our Divine Lightning won’t make a difference.

“Lindworm’s might is absolute. The divine realm we angels hail from likely won’t be able to stop him. However, his ideals are imperfect. None of the people gathered here want to live in Lindworm’s dystopia. Do you?”

“O-of course not...,” Sergei replied.

“That’s no way for humans to live,” Shenmei agreed. “They’ve become livestock.”

Tsukasa nodded. “That right there is what makes him vulnerable. His power lets him suppress anything that opposes him, but his philosophy doesn’t have the strength to sway everyone who opposes him. If we’re going to beat him, this is the way to do it. Striking him where he’s weak ensures our victory.”

Juno looked surprised. “Convincing the imperials... Those are some uncharacteristically bold statements, Mr. Angel. The way I see it, I wouldn’t be surprised if a lot of them are happy just being able to live out their days in peace.”

Juno had seen how Tsukasa specifically avoided making firm declarations about the future during the Yamato debacle. Only God could see what was to

come, so Tsukasa was loath to make careless assumptions. He preferred to prepare countermeasures for every eventuality he conceived to ensure things turned out for the best no matter the situation. However...

“That’s an astute observation. When it comes to matters of politics, I like to avoid concrete judgments about the future. However, this is a special case. After all, we’re talking about human greed,” Tsukasa said with confidence. “It’s true that there are undoubtedly many imperials satisfied with Lindworm’s regime, and now with Keine’s brainwashing in the mix, that’s all the more true. However, that’s only because they don’t know what they desire yet.”

“How could they not know that?” Juno asked.

“Because they haven’t been exposed to all the culture, knowledge, and ideas the world has to offer yet. And if that’s the case, then it’s our job to give them a crash course. Once they’ve seen all that, they’ll learn to want. And when they have, they’ll strive for their desires. That’s the way people are.

“Juno, you once stormed in on me and said that all you wanted was to live your life in peace. Now you seek to protect the Republic of Elm so badly that you’re willing to risk going to war to do it.”

“——!”

For Juno, that was the most persuasive argument Tsukasa could have possibly made. She and nearly everyone in the Republic of Elm had grown through learning new information.

Once Tsukasa made his argument...

“...On a pragmatic level, I do agree that we stand a better chance fighting Lindworm’s ideals than his strength. I have concerns about whether Lindworm will hold true to his word when we best him, but I suppose there’s no sense worrying about that now. Lakan accepts your proposal.”

...the realist Lakan delegation was the first to voice their assent.

The other nations followed soon thereafter.

“Yamato hath no objections, either. After two consecutive wars, we’d be of little help in a battle anyhow.”

“Elm fully supports approaching the situation from a diplomatic angle before we turn to violence. If we can solve the problem peacefully, then great. Worst-case scenario, we can always take up arms after negotiations break down.”

“And what of the Azure Kingdom?” Shenmei asked. “Does it intend to stand against Lindworm’s might on its own?”

“Urgh...”

Sergei let out a small groan when he thought back to how he’d reluctantly agreed during the meeting. “I only did that because everyone else was going along with it...”

“That’s the kind of excuse a child would make,” Shenmei chided. “I’d expect better of the Minister of the Left.”

“Urk...”

“Nobody offered up an alternative, so we all just have to accept it and do what needs doing,” Juno said.

Shenmei nodded. “Why, I couldn’t have put it better myself. We can’t have your pavilion spoiling the imperials’ fun.”

“...Fine,” Sergei replied unhappily as the other two representatives glared at him. “I’ll do it, all right? I’ll do it.”

The fact of the matter was, it was obvious that the Azure Kingdom lacked the military might to stop Freyjagard even before Lindworm’s ascension, so any option that didn’t involve the other three nations helping them out wasn’t an option at all.

He had no choice but to get on board with the program. That said...

“But the future? I can’t say I’ve ever given any thought to my homeland’s future.”

Sergei cocked his head. For the longest time, he’d been going about his life half-assing his way through the jobs his king assigned him. He’d never spared any thought to what his nation would look like for the coming generation.

Shenmei gave him an exasperated sigh. “Once again, Azure shows how out of order its affairs are. You had best figure it out and get working fast, lest this

golden opportunity slip away from you.”

“Opportunity?”

What did she mean? Sergei cast her a puzzled look right as a massive gong echoed across the event space. The sound signaled noon.

As it did...

“Hell yeah! Lunchtime!!”

“Get a move on, man! We gotta get us a good spot!”

“You’re in the way! Move it!”

“The hell’s your problem?! You wanna go?!”

...the Lakan workers flooded from their section and headed to other sections in droves with a veritable fleet of food carts in tow. Each came to a stop in front of the other nations’ workers.

“Step right up! We’ve got piping hot dim sum! Don’t miss it!”

“On chilly days like this, what you need is hot pot! Everyone in Lakan knows it! Just three rook a bowl! You won’t get a better deal anywhere!”

“How about some sesame balls to finish your meal off right? Sesame balls, anyone?”

—And in the blink of an eye, the event space had transformed into a lunchtime market.

“What’s...going on?” Sergei stammered.

A fierce grin spread across Shenmei’s face. “We have workers from around the world all gathered in one place with no import tariffs. The merchants of Lakan aren’t about to let an opportunity like that slip away.”

Taxes had been suspended to allow the nations to prepare for the world fair, and the Lakans had taken full advantage of that to bring huge amounts of commercial goods into Elm alongside their workers and pavilion materials.

Elm’s representative, Juno, gave her a strained smile. “I can’t say we didn’t see this coming, but Lakan’s entrepreneurial spirit is really something else. This commerce is all well and good, but I’d ask that you make sure you don’t bring

over so many goods that it starts interfering with your ability to finish your pavilion,” she said, lightly telling Shenmei off.

However, Shenmei responded with a sonorous laugh. “Oh, that won’t be a problem. After all, our pavilion is going to be a grand market featuring everything Lakan has to offer!”

“What?!” Sergei’s eyes went wide.

The merchants were so determined to earn more than their competitors that they shouted loudly enough to tear their throats, arguing over the best spots and, at times, coming to blows with one another. If this veritable melting pot of greed was what they were planning on showing Lindworm to dissuade him from the perfect world he was trying to build, Sergei wondered if it wouldn’t be better for them to act with a little more decorum.

Despite his perfectly reasonable concern, Shenmei didn’t look concerned at all.

“This is perfect. We have no intention of hiding who we are. This is precisely what we’re fighting for. Lindworm is a thorn in our side, to be sure, but that matters little. We’re going to take advantage of this opportunity as much as possible. It’s how we’ll paint our vision of the future.

With that, Shenmei turned to leave. Then...

“Now that I think about it, my good Sergei, this world fair might be just what you need. We never had a reason to give much thought to the future before, either. Perhaps you and that king of yours could stand to sit down and have a good long think on the matter. What do you want your nation to be? What aspects do you wish to develop?”

...after leaving a few pieces of advice for Sergei, who’d just admitted that he didn’t know what kind of pavilion he wanted to build, she returned to the Lakan area.

Sergei watched her leave.

Beside him...

“Fighting to show who we are... She’s right. If this was just about self-

preservation, then all we'd have to do is stop opposing Emperor Lindworm."

...Juno chewed over Shenmei's words, speaking in her true, rustic accent as though trying to convince herself. She turned her gaze over to the Elm pavilion, which was midway through construction.

"Elm has got things it needs to see realized in the future. We can't afford to lose!"

With that, Juno offered Sergei a small bow and scurried back to the Elm area.

As Sergei watched the two leaders hurry toward tomorrow, his thoughts turned over and over in his head.

"What about Azure?"

Where did the Azure Kingdom need to go?

It was a question for Sergei's king, but as Minister of the Left, he ought to go in with a few ideas of his own. For someone like Sergei, who'd never considered his own nation's future before, that was a tough question.

That said, there was one thing he was confident of. He wanted no part of Lindworm's so-called perfect world. There was no joy to be had in a life stripped of entertainment, education, and all the finer things while being shut in a safe cage. Sergei and his people were no pets of Lindworm's.

"——!"

Then it hit him.

A thought flashed through Sergei's head.

"No, but..."

He hesitated. Was his idea appropriate for a display? It was liable to piss off Lindworm in a big way.

However, that hesitation only lasted a moment. Lakan was taking risky moves with their section, and if push came to shove, Sergei could always shunt the blame elsewhere.

With his mind made up...

"Self-control? Bah! To hell with it! That bumpkin king wouldn't know luxury if

it hit him in the face! He'd be singing a different tune if he ever had anything nice in his life. The extravagance of the Azure Kingdom will blow his mind!"

...Sergei stood up from his boulder and rushed off to go have a meeting with the Azure king.



Winter came and went, and spring followed in its wake.

The fair weather brought a livelier flow of goods and people, and the preparations for the world fair began to really hit a stride.

Planes and the internet were unknown in this world. Foreign countries felt much more distant than to the people of modern Japan. As a result, the idea of a world fair with peoples and cultures from nations never seen before all gathered in one place sparked a massive wave of curiosity and intellectual fascination among all involved nations' citizenry. Each day, hordes of merchants and scholars with no professional connection to the fair gathered at the venue and made merry despite the fact that the event hadn't begun yet.

Meanwhile, the empire had spent the winter making steady progress toward Lindworm's perfect world.

"Hello there! What a joyous day!"

"Indeed! What a joyous day!"

"What lovely weather we're having. How joyous."

By the early days of spring, the empire was full of warm smiles and kind words so sunny they put the season to shame.

Over the course of the winter, Keine had spread her treatment across just about the entire country, from the largest of cities to the smallest of villages. Over the same time frame, the nation had also been completely purged of all riches and education with the potential to give rise to conflict and inequality.

Now that they didn't use money anymore, food was dispersed via a rationing system. When ration day came around, all the homemakers—former nobles and former slaves alike—lined up together and exchanged pleasant chitchat unfettered by the past.

“Goodness me. It looks as though we’ve been allotted some chicken today.”

“It’s been so nice getting to eat every day since rationing began. Back when I was a slave, I went hungry more days than most.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry about that. We nobles were a pretty nasty bunch back then, weren’t we? We acted so petty. I can’t thank Dr. Keine and His Grace enough for showing us the error of our ways.”

“It’s all water under the bridge. More importantly, I have an idea. We’ve got some meat today, so what do you say we former slaves and nobles get together and have a big barbecue?”

“Oh yes, let’s. That sounds positively lovely.”

Freyjagard’s people no longer harbored reckless greed, nor did hatred control them. The people of the empire had been given good hearts, and there wasn’t so much as a whisper of discord or competition between any of them. They simply enjoyed their peaceful lives without fighting or quarreling over anything.

As Keine Kanzaki strolled through town, she became more certain than ever.

This is how people are meant to be.

The world was a big place, and it had plenty of everything people needed to survive. Why should a tiny handful of people get to use heartless violence and devious laws to monopolize the abundant land and resources, breed scarcity, and cause others to go without? It was inane.

None of that would’ve happened had God not given people more greed than absolutely necessary. That egregious oversight had brought about a world where the impoverished were forced to butcher one another.

I will never forgive God for that.

With the power of medicine, she intended to right God’s error. People’s overabundant greed had warped their definition of happiness, and she would set it right—here and on Earth.

With Lindworm at her side, she had the strength necessary to do so. He was a just emperor, one who pitied humanity from the bottom of his heart. There was no selfishness in the way he ruled. He desired to guide the weak to the right

path. Importantly, he possessed the strength and resolve to realize that goal. Lindworm would manage resources and the law in an ideal manner, Keine would mend hearts, and eventually, the world would be full of people with good hearts who could live fulfilled lives off of solely what they needed to survive.

Surely, that would spell the end of conflict and inequality.

Then, at long last...

...the world would truly be perfect.

Nobody would fight, and no one would get hurt. The world she'd yearned for since *that attack on the medical camp* would be born. The scene on the streets of Drachen proved to her that they were getting close to the ideal she'd long been dreaming of. She began humming to herself as she strutted through town.

That was when, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of something twinkling.

"Oh?"

Keine whirled around.

The gleam had come from the bracelet a local girl wore.

"Pardon me. May I see that bracelet on your arm?"

"Oh, Ms. Angel. Good day to you." When Keine called over to the girl, she beamed and gave her a small, elegant bow. There was a pronounced refinement to the gesture, indicating that she'd probably belonged to a family of some standing. "My brother made this for me out of a pretty rock he found."

She showed Keine the bracelet with a smile as radiant as the trinket itself.

Keine had assumed that it was a piece of jewelry that should have been confiscated, but that wasn't the case at all. The girl's bracelet was a simple thing formed of a series of white stones—the kind you could find lying on the ground—with holes bored in their centers so they could be put on a string. The stones had been polished to give off a strong luster. There was clear love in its creation.

"My family used to be really important. We oversaw an entire army during

the last campaign, and I got loads of jeweled accessories for my birthday. All of them were sparkly and beautiful. But of all the presents I've ever received, this one is my absolute favorite!"

"It looks lovely on you. That's a good brother you have."

"Oh, I know! Thank you for saying so, Ms. Angel!"

Keine and the girl waved good-bye to each other.

The girl was probably about five years younger than the prodigy physician, and in the old world full of greed, there was a good chance she wouldn't have spared a second glance at a handmade accessory. Now that her definition of happiness had been corrected, things were different. And Keine's treatment had made that possible.

Knowing that filled Keine with an indescribable sense of happiness and fulfillment while also renewing her conviction. That challenge Tsukasa issued wasn't a threat at all. Tsukasa would undoubtedly try to stir up the imperials' greed, but it would be futile. These people knew what truly mattered now, and they weren't going to give it up.

Surely, they would choose Keine and Lindworm's eternal peace.

Their way...was correct.



It was the height of summer, and preparations for the world fair were finally reaching their climax. The event would open soon, and each participating country had made diligent progress.

On a rare day when he was free before sunset, Tsukasa did a circuit around the event grounds to take stock of the headway. He'd worried slightly at the start about whether the Azure Kingdom would put in any effort, but he understood now that concern had been unfounded. Without any prodding on his part, Azure had perhaps put the most effort into its pavilion.

That wasn't to say that the other nations were slacking off, of course. Tsukasa squinted in amazement at the various ideas people had envisioned for the future.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a familiar blond elf helping to

distribute food to the Elm workers. It was Lyrule.

“.....”

He and Lyrule had barely spoken over the past half year. They weren't on bad terms, but the simple fact of the matter was that putting together an entire world fair in a single year demanded all the High School Prodigies' attention.

Despite the never-ending stream of work that packed each day, Tsukasa hadn't forgotten what Lyrule had said to him.

“There's something I very badly want to tell you.”

They'd made a promise right before the battle at the Tomino Basin, and Tsukasa still felt the emotion that had charged Lyrule's words.

.....

He needed to settle things. Now that he knew how she felt and how he felt, pretending to be oblivious wasn't an option.

“Hello, Lyrule.”

“Oh, Tsukasa! Good work today! Are you here to get your dinner?”

“No...” Lyrule was about to offer him a bowl of stew, but Tsukasa held up his hand. “Once you're done with your shift, would you mind coming to the Elm materials storehouse?”

“Hmm? I certainly don't mind, but why there?”

“There's something I want to discuss with you, just the two of us.”

“——Hweh?!”

Just the two of us.

Upon hearing that phrase, Lyrule's fair skin went flush.

“I'll go on ahead and wait there.”

Instead of explaining more, Tsukasa turned and left.



What's come over me?

Lyrule's heart pounded at the thought of Tsukasa's request.

It was odd. She had feelings for him, but why did him calling her over cause her pulse to race so terribly? Was it because they hadn't gotten much time to talk lately? Had it been the phrase "just the two of us"?

Lyrule's mind was a mess of questions as she completed her work and took a hurried soak in the camp bath. It was summer, and after working outside the entire day, she had built up a fair amount of sweat. The dinner site had been so crowded that it was impossible to tell who stunk of what, but the materials storehouse was unoccupied at night. Lyrule felt bad for making Tsukasa wait but couldn't stand to head there without freshening up first.

By the time Lyrule arrived at the meeting spot, about two hours had passed since Tsukasa first asked her to talk. After hurrying from the camp to the storehouse, she spotted Tsukasa sitting atop the mountain of piled-up wood and iron. "S-sorry about the wait!"

Upon hearing her voice, Tsukasa turned and looked down at her. "I'm the one who should apologize, summoning you out of the blue like that."

"Oh no, it's all right," Lyrule replied as she climbed the heap to join Tsukasa.

Lyrule had grown up amid mountains, and it showed. She reached Tsukasa in no time at all and plopped herself down beside him.

"Whoa..."

When she did, she let out a small gasp of amazement. Immediately, she understood why Tsukasa had been sitting up here.

The world fair venue was illuminated by powerful lights, and construction efforts continued into the night.

"It's incredible....," Lyrule whispered.

"Ringo's run electricity through the venue, so we can keep working safely in the dark," Tsukasa said. "It looks like we're going to be able to make the deadline."

"Oh? But the Lakan pavilion doesn't look anywhere near finished..." Concern entered Lyrule's expression. The Lakan space had only a few stakes joined by cords and signboards planted haphazardly in the ground. For the most part, the

windswept plain was largely unaltered.

However, Tsukasa assured her that everything was fine. “Despite all appearances, it’s pretty much complete.”

“What?! Even though they’ve barely done anything?”

“It might look that way, but Lakan’s used its production budget to create something truly unique. They had to submit their proposal to me because I’m the head coordinator, and when I read it, I was blown away. The imperials are going to love it.”

Shenmei was a successful merchant for a reason. The goal was to return greed to a population who’d been robbed of it, and Tsukasa had commended Shenmei for how thoroughly she understood that task.

If Tsukasa, of all people, spoke highly of Lakan’s progress, then Lyrule believed everything was fine. However, one other matter weighed on her, and that was...

“But even if we do manage to finish putting everything together, will the people of the empire really choose our future?”

“Is that what you’re worried about?”

Lyrule nodded. “I’m from a remote village...and life there was completely subject to the whims of nobles. I think the future that the emperor and Dr. Keine offer, the promise of safety and enough food to get through the day, would have been awfully tempting to me back then.”

“But you feel differently now, right? You’ve come to know the freedom and culture we helped bring.”

“Oh yes, of course.”

“Well, it’s the same thing here. People who’ve known nothing else can’t know what they want. All we have to do is teach them. This event will bring together presents and futures from across the world. The Freyjagardians are bound to find something they desire from the bottoms of their hearts there.”

Tsukasa offered Lyrule much the same reply when Juno had voiced a similar worry.

This time, though, he went on...

“When they find it, they’ll know want...the way I did.”

...moving into the main reason he’d asked to speak with Lyrule alone.



“They way you did...?” Lyrule tilted her head.

Tsukasa gave her a deep nod. “That’s right. It took me *losing what I wanted* to realize how incredibly selfish I am.”

The young politician turned to look directly at Lyrule.

“Tsu...kasa?”

Lyrule’s head swam with bewilderment. She’d noticed that the heterochromatic eyes staring at her held something different than usual, Tsukasa’s greed.

He continued to meet her gaze as he continued. “When I woke up in that dungeon, I realized that the situation had taken the worst turn imaginable. I knew that we’d lost at the Tomino Basin...and that you were dead.”

“.....”

“We’d failed to protect you, and it shook me deeply. I thought I’d never speak with you again. I’d lost you forever.

“It tore through my heart, and I cried. I screamed... And that made me realize that you’d had a significant place in my life.”

“~~~~~!!!!”

On hearing Tsukasa’s words and the unapologetic affection they carried, Lyrule’s eyes went wide, her cheeks turned bright red, and a look of powerful confusion showed on her face.

Never had Lyrule dared imagine Tsukasa might broach this subject. Not long ago, Tsukasa had felt the same. When he’d realized how Lyrule felt, he’d intended to turn her down. As a politician who’d resolved always to prioritize the people—other people—first, he knew he couldn’t put her first the way she would for him. Wanting someone to love him, seeking something that he knew he couldn’t reciprocate, was selfish in the extreme. It was far more shameless than Tsukasa was willing to be. Or so he’d thought.

Disgraceful as it was, he'd discovered the longing lurking within him. It had become abundantly clear to him after losing Lyrule.

Upon making that discovery, there could be no hiding it. He couldn't lie to himself or others anymore. And so...

"Listen, I'm the kind of person who'd sacrifice his own parent for the sake of a stranger. For as long as I continue serving as a politician, that probably won't change. I can't change.

"But...if you're willing to accept that about me, I'd like to ask you to come to Earth with me. I want you by my side. You who cried for me back when I confided in you about my sin."

Tsukasa didn't mince his words and laid all his feelings bare. He told Lyrule about the greed burning him up inside and how he yearned for her dearly.

Lyrule's lips parted. She wasn't shocked or embarrassed, as she had been moments ago. Now she could only beam.

"You're so mistaken, Tsukasa."

"I am...?"

Lyrule nodded. "If there's anything I have trouble accepting, it isn't how you put the good of the masses above yourself and your family. It's that you think choosing to live that way means you deserve to be hated. I can't stand that you torture yourself and say you aren't worthy of gratitude or love."

".....!"

"And if that was enough to make me hate you, I would've distanced myself from you all the way back during the situation with Lord Findolph. But I'm still here. It's not about accepting you or not accepting you. I'm here because I want to be.

"You work so hard without regard for yourself to protect as many smiles as you can. I want to be there to support you, even if nobody else is."

A soft, gentle warmth enveloped Tsukasa's hands. Lyrule had taken them in hers.

That heat dredged up a memory from the depths of Tsukasa's mind, one of a

sunset, when his parents walked down the street holding hands. He recalled the warmth he'd felt from those who loved him and how it told him he was loved.

“I love you. I know you're on a treacherous path, but please, let me walk it with you.”



A brisk night wind blew past, and the moon peeked its face from between the clouds. The way its light shone off Lyrule's damp golden hair made her appear as a lunar nymph. Captivated, Tsukasa brought his face to hers...

...and their silhouettes joined.

A gleam was born in that moment, a single pearl.

A tear formed in the corner of Lyrule's eye as she gave Tsukasa a delightedly bashful look. "You know... I just realized something. I understand why you were so sure of our victory now."

"Right?"

Tsukasa returned her smile with one of his own, then looked out at the construction, still ongoing.

When he spoke next, his voice rang with conviction.

"We're going to win. There's something Keine doesn't know. She doesn't know the strength of what she's up against, and it's time we show her."



Shortly before the world fair preparations in Elm reached their climax, right as summer approached its hottest days, there was...an incident over in the empire.

A fight broke out.

Perhaps calling it a "fight" was a bit much, as the participants were a pair of young girls, and they only exchanged two or three slaps each, but the scale of the injuries wasn't the issue. It was that they'd engaged in violence at all. Under Lindworm's regime, that sort of thing shouldn't have been possible. Keine had stripped all Freyjagardian citizens of their greed and given them good hearts.

So how?

Lindworm was the first to learn of the incident thanks to his scrying magic, and after he teleported in and admonished the girls, he called Keine over to speak with the guilty parties and learn what had happened.

The sight of the girls' faces sent a shock through the prodigy physician. One of the parties involved was the girl whose bracelet Keine had complimented

earlier. Apparently, she'd been spending time with a friend, and the pair had gotten into a disagreement over that very bracelet. Both had been given similar stone trinkets, and they'd argued about whose was prettier.

As it happened, giving stone accessories as presents had come into style in the empire since Lindworm confiscated all treasure made from precious metals. The girl's brother had probably given her the bracelet after hearing about the trend, and the girl's friend had been given a bracelet by her sister in much the same way.

The two had chatted normally until the topic of their bracelets came up. Initially, they complimented the other's accessory, but before long, the conversation shifted to being about whose was prettier, and neither side was willing to back down. Both insisted theirs was better because their sibling made it with love.

The discussion quickly got heated, and they came to blows, forcing the emperor to step in.

Keine was flabbergasted. Why were two children comparing themselves and fighting after she'd removed their greed?

This marked the fourth such incident.

The first three anomalies were people so distinguished that, like Keine, they'd been dubbed High School Prodigies. On some level, it almost made sense that nonstandard irregularities would pop up. This time, though, it was just a pair of ordinary girls. How in the world had they regained so much greed that they were willing to hurt people?

Perhaps Keine had made some oversight when applying her surgery. The possibility sent a shock through her and wounded her self-confidence.

Unfortunately, the incident was just the tip of the iceberg. After the girls' case, similar occurrences began happening across the empire. It started with quarrels over comparisons, like in the case of the girls, then escalated from fights over pretty stones all the way to attempted murders.

Eventually, they happened so frequently that Keine and the emperor were overwhelmed dealing with it all. They decided to ban accessories, no matter

how simple. On top of that, they also implemented strict rules on what people could wear based on their age and gender. The idea was that by eliminating all individuality, the people would have nothing to squabble over.

However, their efforts were in vain.

Even with everyone wearing the same clothes, people discriminated based on how others wore them, and when Lindworm and Keine regulated that, too, people began renovating their houses, growing flowers in their gardens, thinking up new ways to wear their hair, and putting extra effort into their daily cooking. The people of the empire found new ways to embellish the minimalist lifestyles they'd been so satisfied with. That process was breeding disparities within their communities. People were seeking betterment, envying betterment, and growing jealous of betterment.

All of those were urges that stemmed from greed.

It was half a year after Lindworm had instituted his system in the empire, and things had begun coming apart at the seams.

The question was, why? Keine had failed to get rid of their greed, and realizing that fact caused her to sink deeper and deeper into desperation.

“~~~~~! Why? Why?!”

She swept all the medicine off the desk in her room in Drachen and clutched at her head. Her eyes burned with rage and humiliation, and her bedside manner smile was gone from her face. From how disheveled her hair was, it was clear it hadn't seen a comb in some time.

Day after day, more issues with greed appeared. Handling them wasn't particularly difficult, but assuming her treatment had worked correctly, they shouldn't have been occurring in the first place, and the discrepancy wore on her psyche.

Aoi had been helping Keine through it all, and seeing her so distressed brought a thought to mind.

The last time I saw her this distressed...was just after the incident, that it was.

She thought back to when they'd first met.



Aoi had just entered middle school. Even back then, she'd already started charging across battlefields to protect the powerless. She'd heard the rumors of a girl who worked in war zones as she did but with medicine instead of a sword.

Then one day, Aoi got word that terrorists had attacked the girl's infirmary camp.

The goal of the raid was to steal pharmaceuticals and rations, but it was also to kidnap medical personnel to use as hostages. Thankfully, that meant the terrorists wouldn't simply go and kill everyone. Aoi rushed to the scene to lend aid.

Upon arrival, she saw something unusual.

Keine Kanzaki, armed with no weapon of her own, grabbed at the brawny-armed soldiers with her small hands.

"You took their homes! You took their country! Now you're taking their lives, too?! We'd finally saved them! They were finally going to be okay! What is it you want so badly you're willing to go to such lengths to get it?!"

Her eyes were open so wide that they tore at the corners, causing tears of blood to trickle down her face as she raged.

Behind her, there was an unfathomably tall pile of burnt corpses. They had to be the medical camp's patients. Refugees were worthless as hostages, so with no reason to take them alive, the terrorists had doused them in oil and burned them to death.

Unsurprisingly, a group of terrorists willing to commit an act that barbaric weren't about to let a young girl lash out at them unscathed. One of them struck Keine with his rifle and sent her flying. Others descended on her quickly, pinned her to the ground, and tore at her white gown.

"Stop right there, brutes!"

Their attention was locked on the girl before them, so they'd failed to notice Aoi moving in. That error proved fatal.

Aoi dispatched the entire thirty-man cell and saved Keine and the other medics.

However, the infirmary camp was still in ruin, and many of the surviving doctors were wounded. There was no way they'd be able to continue the operation. The head medic decided they would evacuate, and he ordered his surviving colleagues to gather up what supplies and equipment had survived the attack.

As all that was going on, Keine sat down alone off to the side and stared up vacantly at the sky. The head medic claimed she was in shock. He believed it was best for the adult men to give her some space. Aoi was a girl of about the same age, so the head medic asked her to speak with Keine instead. Aoi nodded and headed over.

To the present day, Aoi still vividly remembered what happened next.

She'd never forget the disquieting emotion she'd witnessed.

"I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him."

Keine wasn't in a shocked daze. Rather, she repeated the same words over and over with cracked lips and a hoarse throat like a curse.

"Worry not. I have slain them, that I have." Aoi initially assumed Keine spoke of the terrorists. However...

"Not them."

...Keine quickly corrected her and rose to her feet.

"They were sick. They're poor victims so altered by the sickness called greed that they've lost sight of their ability to love others. They're not to blame. God's the one at fault. He gave humanity its greed!

"That I will not abide! How dare our incompetent creator fail to give us perfect hearts and bodies? I will grant all the things you failed to provide! I will build them perfect bodies! I will build them perfect hearts! I will give them everything you didn't! Then we'll finally have no more need of you!!"

Tears of blood rolled down Keine's face as she stretched her hand to the sky. The sun shined down on the ground through a sandstorm, and Keine grabbed hold of it tightly as she spoke...

“Mark my words—I will kill you if it’s the last thing I do!!”

...and swore an oath to the heavens.



It wasn’t just the people around her or the helpless people suffering from persecution.

It was every person living in their era.

Keine intended to take them all, saints and sinners alike, and save them in God’s place.

Aoi realized how perilous a goal that was. She knew that it was too grand an ideal for a single person to shoulder, and that didn’t change even as the two girls got older. If anything, she was more concerned for Keine now.

The thing was, Keine was gifted with the overwhelming amount of talent necessary to make her absurd dream into a reality. She’d honed her medical skills on the battlefield, she’d finally developed a technique to heal people of their greed, and now she genuinely intended to usurp God. Seeing her like that...caused Aoi no end of worry.

People who flew the highest were too often the ones with the longest falls. Keine had tried to grasp the heavens, and when her dream got shattered through no fault of her own, Aoi worried that she wouldn’t be able to take it.

Keine was kinder than anyone else, and that gentle spirit drove her to strive for a goal beyond human limit. Her love was so unbearably strong it threatened to crush her.

Oh...

“What you’re trying to do isn’t going to work, Keine.”

Aoi realized why Tsukasa, who knew that he was only an ordinary man and hated making definitive judgments about things, had spoken with such conviction.

Tsukasa, m’lord... You understood all along, that you did.

He knew how fundamentally wrong Keine’s ideals were.

It was a lot to take in. Sure enough, there was no way Keine could succeed.

Aoi hung her head and smiled grimly at her belated revelation.

“Aoi.”

“I”

Upon hearing her name, the prodigy swordmaster looked up.

“I have a new procedure I’d like to try, so would you mind bringing me...let’s say four of the patients we have in temporary confinement? I need to heal their sickness.”

Keine’s voice was calm, but that was the only thing about her that was. Her eyes were open far too wide, and blood seeped from her torn canthi. It was that same expression she’d worn when Aoi first met her, the one that made it look like she was on the verge of breaking down.

How would Keine react if Aoi pointed out the error she’d noticed?

It might be enough to break Keine for good.

I was given a task.

Tsukasa had asked Aoi to look after Keine for him. She was probably the only person in the world capable of protecting her. And so...

“That won’t be necessary, that it won’t.” Aoi shrugged off her clothes, stripped to the waist, and gave Keine a smile. “If you have need of a test subject, then use me. I am your accomplice, Keine, m’lady.”

Then...

After summer passed, autumn deepened, and the air turned chilly, Lindworm received an invitation to the world fair.

LAST CHAPTER

✻ On to a New Era ✻

Why fight?

Why steal?

Why refuse to share?

Lindworm had been born into royalty, and the world seemed deeply broken to him. Royals and nobles had more wealth than they could ever possibly spend, yet they sought even more and took it from commoners who hardly had enough to get by. People treated that as normal, and Lindworm couldn't understand why. Why did the royals and nobles do it, and why did the commoners resign themselves to their lot?

It was so incomprehensible to him that he'd disguised himself as a commoner at one point during his childhood and went around the empire asking about it. During those travels, he learned that commoners weren't happy about how they were exploited. Many of them resented the status quo, yet practically none of them took active steps toward changing it, and even when someone did, only a tiny portion of the aggrieved actually sided with them, so the uprisings were always minor and quickly contained.

Why in the world couldn't the rulers or the ruled do better? Lindworm pondered on the matter a great deal. His conclusion was exceedingly simple. All of them, from the mightiest lord to the lowliest peasant, were imbeciles through and through. They were a flock of sheep too stupid to return home without a shepherd.

In other words, it was his responsibility to control and reform them.

“Allow us to help you awaken the power slumbering within you.”

After all, he was the prodigy king, born with the power to complete that mission. In a sense, it was a duty destiny had forced upon him. And to see it done, he needed to start a war. One that would put an end to the old world...

“.....Hnn.”

Lindworm opened his eyes. He’d nodded off atop his throne.

...He’d dreamed of his childhood, a time before he’d realized he needed to become the prodigy king. Lindworm hadn’t felt much need to sleep after absorbing the evil dragon, but evidently, getting none still wasn’t an option for him.

Keine and Aoi entered the audience chamber as he finished analyzing his situation. “The preparations are complete, Your Grace,” said the former.

“Very well,” Lindworm replied, rising from his throne.

Approximately a full year had passed since he made the agreement with Tsukasa. It was time to see the results of their wager.



That same day, some two hundred thousand citizens were gathered just outside the imperial capital of Drachen.

It made for a peculiar sight. The scale of the crowd was something to behold, of course, but the way the imperials looked was stranger still. The great throng included people of all ages, all of whom had their hair shaved and wore the same outfit. Outbursts of greed had been manifesting since the summer, and Lindworm and Keine had done everything they could to strip the citizens of their individuality to combat the phenomenon.

“What could His Grace be gathering every person in the empire for?”

“I dunno. All I’ve heard is that he’s going to make a big announcement.”

“We’re not going to war again, are we?”

“No way. His Grace has purged the world of fighting. That can’t possibly be

it.”

Right as expressions of worry were crossing the imperials’ faces at the abrupt summons...

“And lo, Emperor Lindworm arriveth!”

...the sound of a bugle cut through the fall air, and the person who’d summoned the two hundred thousand citizens appeared atop the wall and peered down upon the gathered masses. It was Lindworm von Freyjagard. Keine Kanzaki and Aoi Ichijou followed along behind him.

“Subjects of the empire, we have an important topic to discuss today,” Lindworm began, surveying the congregation. “As you are all aware, I’ve undertaken many measures to bring about true peace and equality. I have removed all disparity and banned the money and education that bring it about, I have mended your definitions of happiness by curing that which ailed your hearts, and I have forged a world where all can spend their days content and satisfied.”

The people below nodded. Everything he said was true.

“However, there are those who take umbrage with my efforts. They say what I’m doing amounts to brainwashing and that it leaves no room for human happiness.”

“That’s not true!” someone in the crowd yelled.

“You freed us from the ravages of greed, Your Grace!”

“We can never thank you enough!”

Some of the people had suffered relapses, but the vast majority of them had no objections to Lindworm’s methods. Most of them used to be commoners, after all. Compared to how they used to live, knowing they had enough to get through the day was the greatest happiness they’d ever known.

“I know the truth, of course,” Lindworm continued. “I know that you all are content with my world. But the fools in Elm, Yamato, Lakan, and Azure refuse to see that. So I intend to show them the fruits of my magnificent world to demonstrate its perfection to those uncivilized brutes.”

“But how?” came a voice in the crowd.

“By taking you all to the world fair that Elm, Yamato, Lakan, and Azure are hosting.”

The imperial citizens tilted their heads at the unfamiliar term. “What’s a... world fair?”

“An exhibit that rejects my rule by displaying arrogant, greedy visions of the future. Your task will be to decide what future you would rather live in—theirs or the peaceful one of my perfect world.”

The people whispered at Lindworm’s explanation. Primarily, they sounded confused about why they needed to do this at all.

“Today, you all will decide of your own free will if you wish to remain in my flawless society or if you wish to return to a world of greed muddled with hatred and conflict. If you end up choosing their world, I will abdicate my throne and return Freyjagard to its original greedy state.”

“You can’t!”

“Don’t abandon us, Your Grace!”

“Emperor Lindworm, please!”

Immediately, the crowd’s confusion turned to worry and grief. For people who’d had their definitions of happiness adjusted, the thought of losing their current tranquility was utterly terrifying.

The prodigy king swept his gaze across the distressed masses. “Then all you must do is take that same answer and deliver it to the opposition. If you do, then as your emperor, I promise you eternal peace, equality...and happiness!”

With that, he pulled his massive golden greatsword from thin air and raised it into the sky. The moment he did, a colossal magic circle appeared under the gathered assembly’s feet. The array released a golden light...

“Now, let us be off.”

...and consumed all two hundred thousand people.



It was so blinding that the crowd had to squeeze their eyes shut. Then, when they slowly opened them a few seconds later...

...they found that the scenery had changed.

“Where are we?”

“A field? But there’s nothing here.”

Drachen ramparts had been swapped for empty grasslands. The emperor had used his magic to send everyone here, and when they discovered that they’d been dumped somewhere unfamiliar, they glanced around in apprehension.

However, a new voice quickly addressed them.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! You did well to make it here, my good imperials!!”

Grandiose laughter echoed from nowhere...

...and a moment later, explosions of colorful smoke burst from all around.

“Ahhhhh!”

“Wh-what’s going on?!”

“What’s that smoke?! Were those bombs?! I can’t see!”

Confused screams erupted from the crowd as the vibrant vapor enveloped them. The breeze carried the smoke away quickly, however.

The revealed sight only bewildered the Freyjagardians more. The once empty field had become a massive town featuring structures from many different cultures.

““““WH-WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!?!””””

“Welcome to our inaugural festival celebrating humanity’s culture and progress!”

“Hey, look! There’s someone flying up there!”

“Is it a mage?”

“No, that’s the Seven Luminaries’ God Akatsuki!”

Upon hearing his name, the top hat-clad figure who’d floated up over the town let out a booming laugh. “Verily! The fool king Lindworm has warped your

individual values in an attempt to limit what the world can be, and as the Seven Luminaries' god, I have come to rescue you from his clutches by organizing this world fair!"

"You say you want to save us?"

"Well, we don't need your help!"

"Yeah! Thanks to Emperor Lindworm, we've been freed from our lives of being bound by greed, so we don't need any help!"

Hearing Akatsuki speak poorly of Lindworm didn't earn him any favors with the crowd. However, their jeering was the result of warped values, so Akatsuki felt no need to pay it any mind. Instead, he did as planned, ignored them...

"Lindworm has likely already told you the broad strokes, but I've prepared a place where you all can determine the world's future! Now, behold!"

...and snapped his fingers.

The moment he did, an image appeared in the air behind him for all two hundred thousand onlookers to see, courtesy of Bearabbit's sky projection technology.

"What's going on? There are pictures in the sky!"

"Is this part of his magic, too?!"

The prodigies had shot a promotional video for the world fair in advance. Its first scene featured a castle made of light that gleamed like ice in the sunshine.

"This first pavilion is brought to you by the Azure Kingdom," Akatsuki said.

"Whoa! Is that castle...transparent?!"

"I've never seen anything like it!"

The inscrutable sight got the imperials buzzing.

"Is that made of glass? Did they seriously build a building out of glass?!"

Of the two hundred thousand people, some used to work in technical professions. Upon seeing the way light reflected through the castle, they speculated that it might have been constructed out of glass.

Akatsuki was more than happy to confirm their suspicions.

“Indeed they did! Everything in the Crystal Palace, from its walls to its ceilings to its floors, is made from the finest Azure glasswork!

“This is a festival to celebrate the future, and Azure decided to express that through beauty! The nation is proud of its industrial engineering, and with it, they plan to construct a radiant tomorrow!

“To further demonstrate their spirit, the Crystal Palace has myriad pieces of prized Azure glasswork and jewelry on display within. It’s sure to give you mortals plenty to feast your eyes on!”

Akatsuki snapped again. That was Bearabbit’s signal to swap out the projection. The ornate building was replaced with the chaotic spectacle of a field covered in hordes of people sitting atop mats or pulling food carts.

“Wait, the image just changed!”

“What is it this time?”

“It looks like they’ve got food and clothes and stuff piled up on those mats... Is it some kind of market?”

“Next up, I present to you the Lakan Archipelago Alliance’s pavilion! Lakan made the bold choice of offering up its space free of charge to merchants from Lakan and abroad to put together a massive street market!

“This here is Lakan’s vision of the future. They dream of creating a world with no tariffs or cross-national red tape, where foreign commerce moves freely—a diverse world where nations absorb one another’s culture, merge, and grow not through war, as they’ve done historically, but through exchange!

“Do note that all visitors to their pavilion will receive a stipend at the market’s entrance, so be sure to spend it wisely!”

The image changed once more, becoming a townscape of structures with tiled roofs that would’ve looked right at home in modern-day Japan. A colossal residence designed for samurai stood in the center. It was a residence intended for nobility, the kind that would’ve been described as an example of Heian era *shinden-zukuri* architecture on Earth.

“Behold, the Yamato Empire’s display! This huge estate has a variety of tearooms, dojos, and other rooms designed to let you experience Yamato culture firsthand. Through this exhibit, Yamato hopes to give people the finest education in the ways of scholarship, martial arts, and performing arts to enrich them so they might find a way to better the future. They’re holding a dueling tournament out in the courtyard, so any bold imperials who wish to test their mettle should make sure to participate!”

The final image showed a townscape not too different from that of the Freyjagard Empire. This section belonged to the Republic of Elm, the nation that had seceded from Freyjagard.

“Last up, we have the Republic of Elm! All the technology used and developed during the People’s Revolution is available for perusal—everything from aluminum to machine tools to communications technology!

“On top of that, there’s also experimental data from a test run during the preparations for the world fair. I think you’ll find it quite intriguing!”

After introducing all the participating nations’ pavilions, Akatsuki cast his gaze back over the gathered crowd...

“As you can see, we don’t care for Lindworm’s despotism or the stagnation it brings. We strive to move forward on our own two feet, even if that means getting hurt at times. All our visions for the future are gathered here.

“If you deem them unwanted, then that is your right...but if any among you find your hearts stoked by the exhibits, then by all means, stop by the immigration counters located at the entrance to each section! Any nation here would be happy to have you!

“Now, without further ado, let the first-ever world fair commence!!”

Akatsuki raised his hands overhead and gave the signal to set off the fireworks waiting beside the venue entrance.

While the crowd was dazzled by the flashing lights, girls dressed in the same bunny outfits the Seven Luminaries had used to proselytize with emerged from the entryway.

“““Hello, everyone! Welcome!”””

With Lyrule and Shinobu at the vanguard, the beautiful women cheerily greeted the imperial crowd. The imperials had spent the past year without entertainment under Lindworm's administration, so the brilliance and splendor completely blew them away.

"Th-this... This is incredible!"

"Y-yeah. It's been so long since I've seen anything so lively. I'd almost forgotten it was possible. A traveling circus used to visit the capital and throw these stunning parades..."

"Mommy, that man's flying! Like a bird!"

The imperials hadn't known any proper recreation in a long while, and the world fair was about as extravagant as it got. The imperials were overcome with excitement. However...

"None of that changes how these guys are traitors who've rejected Emperor Lindworm."

"That's right! We can't give in to their temptation!"

...Keine's surgery had modified their happiness and left them reluctant. Many of them had such strong reservations about entering that they simply stood motionless by the entrance. For all their hemming and hawing, though...

"Still, I do kind of want to go look at the Crystal Palace..."

"Agreed... I wanna check out all those tasty smells..."

"The emperor brought us here himself. It'd be rude not to take a peek, right?"

"That makes sense. We should at least get a lay of the land."

"Yeah, maybe I'll go have a gander."

"I wanna go in! I wanna go in, Mommy!"

"All right, let's do it. It's the emperor's orders, after all."

...the fires of curiosity weren't so easily extinguished. After hesitating for a bit, they made their rationalizations and surged for the gate. Once through, the people dispersed, hurrying to whichever pavilion captivated their interest.

However, there were three people who refused to get swept away quite so

easily. Perhaps it went without saying, but they were Keine Kanzaki, Aoi Ichijou, and Emperor Lindworm.

As the three stood before the venue, Tsukasa strolled over to them. “Not planning on participating?”

The rest of the Prodigies followed behind him.

“Tsukasa, m’lord...,” Aoi greeted him. “And everyone else, too.”

“It’s pretty impressive, you know,” Tsukasa said. “There’s a lot that four countries can do when they put their heads together. I promise it won’t disappoint.”

“What a vulgar display,” Keine remarked in as dismissive a tone as she could. Her hostility was wildly out of character, and it sent a shiver through the group’s more timid members, Ringo and Akatsuki. “I can see you’ve gathered up the most distilled greed the world has to offer in an attempt to sway our people. But it won’t work.”

“Indeed,” Lindworm agreed. “The people have said it time and again. They despise war. They despise violence. They wish to live in peace. All we’ve done is grant those wishes. Now that we’ve done so, who would seek to return to the old ways? Soon enough, they’ll be right back here begging for my salvation.”

“If you’re right, then we’ll happily yield to you,” Tsukasa said. He had no intention of breaking his word. “However, that’s ultimately for your people to decide.”

The two sides had nothing more to say to each other. Instead, they just watched the proceedings from a distance and waited for the verdict.

For Keine, the downtime felt terribly long. She thought of the imperial citizens who’d relapsed. Why had their greed returned to them? She’d never managed to figure out the reason or develop any countermeasures. That’s why her expression and behavior were so restless—she was anxious. What if the same thing happened here?

The silence stretched on for an hour, then two, then longer still, and the look on Keine’s face grew more fretful with each passing minute. The imperials had gone into the fair intending to “get a lay of the land.” Of those two hundred

thousand people, not a single one had come back yet. The cries of merriment and delight from within were growing louder and louder.

A few minutes after the bell rang for noon, Tsukasa got a call on his cell phone. “What’s up, Nio? Got it. Thanks for letting me know.” After a brief conversation, he hung up and addressed Lindworm. “Emperor Lindworm, how many people did you bring here today?”

“Roughly two hundred thousand. What of it?”

“I see.” Tsukasa nodded. “I just got word from the joint immigration bureau. The four nations’ immigration counters just passed one hundred and twenty thousand collective immigration request filings. In short, the majority of imperial citizens wish to relocate. In light of that, it should come as no surprise that none of them have left the fair premises.”

“——!!”

Keine couldn’t take it any longer. She dashed into the fair at full speed.



When people entered the Azure Kingdom’s pavilion, the Crystal Palace, they invariably let out cries of wonder at how it seemed everyone was floating.

“It’s so beautiful! The floor, the ceilings... Everything’s really made of glass!”

“I had no idea you could make glass this sturdy! I was a glazier in the empire until last year, and I never would’ve dreamed of making something like this! It’s incredible how advanced Azure technology is!”

It wasn’t just the building that dazzled them. The Azure Kingdom was a nation that prided itself on its jewelry and glasswork, and the Crystal Palace proudly offered a selection of works the Azure Kingdom’s people produced over the past three hundred years.

Of those works, though, one display case in particular commanded the most attention. Sergei had asked his king to borrow Azure’s greatest treasure—the wedding ring passed through the royal family for generations.

The imperials let out coos of amazement as they stared at the platinum ring adorned with a gigantic diamond sitting in a glass case.

“It’s so pretty...”

“I can barely believe the size of that gemstone. I wonder how many tens of thousands of gold coins something like that would run you?”

“You know, it’s weird. It’s just a lump of rock and silver. Why is it so captivating to look at?”

“Heh-heh-heh. Impressive, isn’t it?” Sergei said contentedly, stroking his beard as he beheld the spellbound crowd. As the person in charge of the pavilion, he dovetailed into a speech on the ring’s history. “Two hundred years ago, Azure’s third king, Georgol, made it by buying the largest diamond in the world from Freyjugard and combining it with platinum from Azure’s gold mines. It cost three times the contents of the national treasury at the time to produce, and it took us a hundred years to fully repay the debt.”

The spectators grimaced.

“Three times the national treasury?!”

“That’s absurd... I feel bad for the people who lived under a king who’d do something like that.”

“You can say that again. All that just for a piece of jewelry?”

To them, it seemed like a ludicrous amount of money to waste. However...

“But it’s still beautiful.”

...Sergei knew they couldn’t take their eyes off the national treasure.

“A massive diamond for King Georgol’s massive love, platinum that would never rust to symbolize his unwavering affection. King Georgol wanted to express his love for his queen in the biggest way he knew how.

“Don’t you see? Feelings like gratitude, faith, and love are sometimes too big for words to express. Yet we seek to show them anyhow, and art is the language of love that humans alone possess.

“Trying to take that from us is nothing more than an act of *base violence*. To any who would call that a perfect world of equality and peace, I say bah!”

“.....!”

When she heard Sergei's speech, one of the women in the crowd glanced down at her left ring finger. There was supposed to be a ring there, the proof of her husband's love for her. But it had been taken from her and discarded when Lindworm announced his ban on jewelry.

Until today, she hadn't spared it much thought. She and her husband got to live in peace, exactly as Lindworm had promised, and she'd felt that that was enough for her. Now that she was faced with a symbol of love that had been passed down for over two centuries, though...

".....What...is this feeling...?"

...looking at her naked ring finger filled her heart with a piercing sorrow and caused the corners of her eyes to grow so warm they felt like they were burning.

A question surfaced inside.

What was so wrong about putting one's love in physical form?



Things over at the Lakan Archipelago Alliance's pavilion, the Free Market, were even livelier than at Azure's.

"This outfit is adorable! Is the dress from Lakan?"

"This chest of drawers is jet-black, yet it has the most mysterious sheen. I've never seen a material like this."

"You've got a keen eye, sir. That there is coated in lacquer. You probably don't see it much down in Freyjugard, huh?"

"Fresh dim sum! Get your fresh dim sum here!"

It had been a year since rationing was instituted, and the sound of the imperials excited to shop for the first time in ages blended with that of merchants bidding them come to their shops and stalls.

It was loud and lively everywhere, but the most bustling spot of all was the open area smack-dab in the market's center. There, imperial citizens dug holes, filled them in, lifted large boulders, and sang and danced.

""""Whoooooooooa!!!!""""

“No way! Check out the size of the boulder that *byuma* just lifted!”

“That’s gotta weigh four or five hundred pounds!”

Once the middle-aged *byuma* finished his weight-lifting work, a Lakan official handed him some money. “Good job. Here’s your pay.”

The man thanked him, took it, and rushed back to his family. “There, all done. Now, let’s get some whole roasted pig!”

“You’re the best, Daddy!”

“That was so cool, Daddy!”

“Do be careful, dear. You’re not as young as you once were,” his wife said as she mopped the sweat from his brow.

“Ha-ha,” the man laughed, putting on a show of bravado. “What, that little thing? I could lift that all day.”

A market wasn’t very good without any money. Lindworm had taken all the imperials’ funds and left them dead broke. The center section of the Lakan exhibit allowed people to work in exchange for compensation.

However, some of the cleverer members of the crowd found the specifics of the labor odd, and they went to question Shenmei Li, the one in charge.

“Hey, ma’am, you’re the boss here, right? I gotta ask, what purpose does all this boulder lifting and hole digging actually serve?”

“Hmm? None whatsoever,” Shenmei replied.

“Then why are you asking us to do it?”

The conversation drew in a few other spectators who’d been watching the labor for a while.

“Yeah! If there’s no point to it, then you should just give everyone money.”

“This is discrimination! We demand equality!”

Shenmei had none of that. “Giving the same treatment to those who work hard and those who don’t is the most unequal thing you can do.”

That very fact was the vision of the future the Lakan pavilion was meant to

express.

“Those who put in the effort are compensated accordingly. Believing that is what gets people motivated. Working hard for the things and people you like brings joy. I have no desire to see that stripped from the world. And so...I have no choice but to stand against Lindworm.”

With that, Shenmei took a deep breath, then addressed the entire imperial crowd.

“Anyone who wants to move to Lakan and stand with me will get massive discounts! Anyone who submits an immigration request will get free housing and a grant of thirty ira! Act fast as supplies may be limited!”

The words had scarcely left her mouth before a massive line formed at the immigration window.



The Yamato Empire’s pavilion, the National Academy, was the spitting image of a Yamato town with a huge estate at its center. There was a dueling tournament being held in the estate’s courtyard. There, Samurai General Shura and the burly former–Platinum Knight Gascorge faced off in combat.

The people of Freyjagard detested fighting and considered it barbaric, but these two were masters. Not even the skeptics in the crowd could tear their eyes away from the raw depth of talent on display in Shura and Gascorge’s clash. As the duel grew more heated, so too did the cheers from the onlookers.

Over on one side, a group of former Freyjagard scholars enjoyed an open-air tea ceremony held by Kaguya herself...

“Compulsory...education?”

“You really plan on using public funds to put every single one of your citizens through school, Princess Kaguya?”

...and when they heard Yamato’s vision of the future, they practically dropped their teacups.

“Indeed I do. Between the Yamato campaign and the two wars we fought last year, Yamato hath lost much of its national strength. Our people are the sole resource we have left.”

“So in other words, you’re saying that this exhibit, with all its dojos and schools, is an educational institution in and of itself?”

“Indeed.”

“Well, I used to work for the Freyjagard government, and I should warn you... making your people smarter when you don’t need to is a surefire way to invite rebellion.”

The scholars had some doubts about Kaguya’s dream.

To that, though, Kaguya just replied, “So be it.” Her expression was that of a woman who’d recently been freed of a great burden. “As a member of the imperial family, I once thought I had a duty to maintain Yamato as it was for the sake of those who adored my country and could not survive anywhere else. Yet...seeing Lindworm do the same thing hath opened my eyes. I understand how foolish it was to maintain peace by keeping a populace ill-informed.”

Wisdom could indeed lead to conflict. That’s why Yamato had spent so long pursuing isolationist policies and manipulating its people’s values. However... was peace so precious it was worth limiting the people’s potential to safeguard it? When Kaguya asked herself that question, this was her answer:

“Rather than protect the government by keeping my people as simpletons, I would sooner protect my nation by guiding them to wisdom. It doth be my wish that they begin questioning anything and everything. Then even if some clever fox with no honor should bring me to ruin, someone *with* honor will surely rise up to strike them down.

“I shall build the foundation. The Yamato imperial family was entrusted with the nation’s administration one thousand years ago...and this shall be our final duty.”

After Kaguya finished outlining her thoughts, she bowed her head to the imperial intellectuals.

“When that time cometh, I hope to borrow the aid of academics like yourself. Freyjagard may have outlawed education and martial arts, but what vice is there in the strong protecting the weak and the wise mentoring the inexperienced?”

"" ""

There was none.

When Kaguya put it like that, the scholars wondered why they'd wasted the last year forgoing the pursuit of knowledge.



As Keine rushed around the fair, she saw one instance after another of people regaining the greed that she'd surgically removed from them.

Why?!

First, she was bewildered.

"Woow! I can really have as much as I want?!"

"This is so good!"

"Hey, Mom, I wanna try the bread next!"

"I'm amazed they're able to offer bottomless stew."

And when she reached the all-you-can-eat buffet offered in the Elm exhibit, the sight of imperials gorging themselves changed that confusion to nauseating displeasure.

"Does Elm really have enough of a food surplus to justify all this?" one of the visitors asked.

Juno was the person in charge of Elm's pavilion, so she took point on the question.

"We owe it all to the Haber-Bosch process the Seven Luminaries taught us. It's a miraculous technology that allowed us to power our revolution by producing gunpowder out of thin air. And it also creates fertilizer to hasten the growth of plants.

"Here in the Republic of Elm, we spent the year leading up to the world fair experimenting to see how much a combination of chemical fertilizer and agrichemicals would increase our crop yields. By using them together, we were able to get nearly ten times the yield out of the same acreage of land."

"D-did you just say ten times?!" exclaimed a Freyjagard citizen.

“With numbers like that, Elm’ll never see famine again...,” another added.

“So this is the power of chemical fertilizer, huh?” offered a third.

“Elm has no intention of hoarding this miracle, of course. God Akatsuki intended it as a gift for all humanity, and we’ve agreed to teach it to all the world’s nations, free of charge,” Juno explained.

“With this, the world will enter an era of plenty the likes of which none have ever seen. Once everyone can eat their fill, moral institutions will proliferate. Emperor Lindworm claims that peace can only exist under his reign, but if we cultivate universal morals, we’ll be able to put an end to war all on our own!”

“.....!”

Keine bit down on her lip at Elm’s vision of the future.

It was beyond idealistic. Such a dream wasn’t possible.

The Haber-Bosch process had massively increased humanity’s production on Earth, but that wasn’t enough to end famine or wars fought over hunger. And why was that? Because no matter how much was produced, people were so poisoned by greed that they hoarded more than necessary, fought to monopolize it, and refused to share.

It had happened before and would again. It would continue until humanity’s fundamental defect—its sickness—was cured.

“Don’t let them sway you with honeyed words! Return home to the empire!” Keine shouted at the top of her lungs.

Unfortunately...

“But Dr. Keine, this technology would give us so much more food than we have now!”

“And with greater variety, too. Won’t you consider bringing it to the empire?”

...nobody budged. They’d learned what a delight overeating was, and now, their greed was taking over.

Seeing them wallow in avarice—the thing they should have been liberated of—was hard for Keine to stomach. “Why? Why do you keep craving, even when

you already have more than enough?!”

“...Dr. Keine?”

“You want better! You want more! You want finer! Even though it always leads to conflict! You should be happy sharing what you already haaaaave!!”

Her surgery should have been the end of this, yet their sickness had returned again and again. This was a nightmare the likes of which her craft was insufficient to handle.

Then, right as her voice reached an outright shriek...

“It’s simple, really.”

...Tsukasa Mikogami finally caught up to her.

“It’s because love itself is a kind of greed.”



“Keine, you posited that love drives humanity. But what is love if not greed?” Tsukasa asserted.

People wanted their loved ones to be happy.

They wanted to be the ones to make their loved ones happy.

They wanted to protect their loved ones.

And that’s why they strove to better themselves.

People knew greed because they knew love. The two concepts were inseparable sides of the same coin.

“You said you wanted to remove people’s greed and free them from its influence to build a world full of love, but you were doomed before you ever began.”

As long as people had love, their greed would continue to flow. That’s why Tsukasa had told Keine that her methods wouldn’t work. His father had given him a profound insight into the nature of human avarice.

“The truth is, *you knew that all along*. You knew how contradictory your dream was.”

“.....!”

Keine was a doctor, so she knew how human hearts operated better than most. There was no way she truly believed she could separate love and greed.

Tsukasa’s callout struck right at the core of Keine’s mistake.

He was right. Deep in her soul, she’d always known about the contradiction of her goal.

“That’s not true!”

Keine’s face paled, yet she refused to accept the truth. She recognized it but couldn’t permit it.

“My technique was flawed! That’s the only reason their greed returned! I can heal greed! I know I can! Because if I can’t...”

If love brought about greed, which led to war, and that atrocity she’d witnessed was bound to repeat itself...

“...then there truly is no saving us!!”

Keine had no choice but to cling to the delusion that she could fix everyone. If she didn’t keep that hope alive, then the knowledge that the world was a futile place where the time she spent saving a single person was enough for ten others to be killed would break her.

That was how much she loved humanity.

However...

“That’s just not true. If nothing else, I’m confident that the day will come when humanity can control their greed in the truest sense.”

...Tsukasa rejected her despair.

“How can you believe that?!” Keine cried. “You have no proof that—”

“I do.”

“?! ”

“Consider our conversation about the nature of greed and love. Could our ancestors who walked on all fours have conceived of such a thing? When they

saw people afflicted by disease, did they know that medicine would one day cure them by slicing open their abdomens? Would they have believed it if you told them we'd set foot on the moon they saw hanging distant in the sky?"

Tsukasa argued that ancient peoples never would've dreamed of such outlandish things. But they weren't fantasies. They were real, built on the accumulation of thousands of years of human progress.

"Love and avarice make the impossible possible. That power can lead people astray sometimes, but we've accumulated so many forms of greed that drive us to be just and kind despite that.

"We created human rights, morals, and ethics. We've developed frameworks that prevent nations with the power to kill millions at the push of a button from exercising that ability lightly.

"The creation of those concepts paved the way for me, a person trying to introduce universal basic income to limit people's ability to hoard more wealth than they need. And you're another example of noble greed, too. Prodigy physician Keine Kanzaki hones her craft and strides through war zones to save people."

"——!"

"That's what makes me believe. The path might be a slow one, but even if the idea of lasting peace seems impossible now, I believe we'll achieve it someday. That's why the path is so important, why that possibility is so critical! I refuse to let our potential be quashed just because one person decided to give up!" With that confident declaration, Tsukasa shot Keine a piercing look. "I want you to think back, Keine. What kind of world did you wish to create? What was it about people that made you want to protect them?"

"I... I still...!"

Keine shrank back and avoided Tsukasa's gaze as he pressed in on her. She desired a perfect world where people could live in perpetual happiness. People could lose their homes, be driven from their countries, and have their very ways of life stolen. Keine only ever wanted to spare people those cruelties. She'd only sought to cure them.

Yet she'd taken her corrected Freyjagardians and cut their hair, stolen their riches, forced them to wear the same clothes, and treated them as little more than prisoners.

“~~~~~!”

When she looked and saw the sorry states they were in, Keine didn't finish her sentence. Instead, she crumpled to her knees.

Tsukasa saw Aoi rush to the doctor's side...

“Emperor Lindworm, I think the results speak for themselves.”

...so he directed his gaze to Lindworm, who'd come following after Keine.

“.....”

“Love drives people to try to seek betterment, and that force is powerful enough to change the world. It's not something you can pin down in one place. You've failed. The victory is ours.”

Lindworm gave him a small nod.

“So it is. It would appear I failed to give greed its sufficient due. My eyes are open now. Truly, this world will only acknowledge force.”

“...!”

It all happened in a flash.

Lindworm drew his greatsword from thin air too fast for anyone to possibly react, then ran Tsukasa through.

“Tsu...kasa?” Lyrule whispered. “No, no... NOOOOO!!!!”



“I see now that I should have done this from the start.”

Lindworm shook his weapon, causing Tsukasa's body to slide down its length and slip off the blade. Vast amounts of blood gushed from his body as it was dashed against the ground. The abrupt tragedy caused a wave of screams from all around.

“Tsukasa! Noooo!” Lyrule cried.

“Ahhh!” Ringo yelped. “There’s...there’s so much blood!”

The two of them were the first to go to Tsukasa, clinging to him with pale faces and terrified expressions. Masato and Shinobu stepped forward to shield them, ready to fight.

“You piece of shit!” Masato shouted. “The hell happened to honoring that agreement?!”

“I am Prodigy King Lindworm, and my decisions are law. Not a single being in this world is qualified to challenge them,” Lindworm replied without the slightest shred of shame. “Keine’s suggested it might be possible to bring stability while still allowing the people a sense of happiness. I indulged that notion...but you can see how it ended. As I suspected, control can only be attained with overwhelming force. I’ve reached my verdict.”

The emperor held his blood-stained greatsword aloft.

“If greed’s foundation lies in love, then I need only remove that as well.

“If the people cannot control an emotion, then they are unworthy of it. I will bind each of you in chains and regulate your lives the way one would livestock. I will grant you only what feed you need to survive. Never again will you know greed.

“The people have asked me, their ruler, for eternal peace, and this is the sole means by which to achieve it. This planet has no need of you otherworldly visitors and your extraneous value systems. Your right to exist in my domain...is hereby revoked.”

Lindworm’s entire body radiated hostility, sending a chill through the Prodigies.

“_____”

The man’s raw violence had completely turned the situation on its head. Worse yet, he was right. If he stripped people of their love, he’d likely excise their greed at its source. War would end if he used his might to lock them in little boxes and reduce them to piles of meat that did nothing but eat daily rations and excrete them back out.

And yet...

“What kind of world did you wish to create? What was it about people that made you want to protect them?”

“.....!”

Keine recognized how contradictory she’d been. She knew that greed would never disappear if love endured. She’d pretended not to notice so she wouldn’t have to remove the root source.

Because she had a wish.

The people she loved and sought to protect.

Mothers shielding their babies from debris with their bodies. Dying husbands begging for their wives to be rescued first. Children protecting younger siblings in their dead parents’ places. Keine wanted to protect the people who refused to give up on love no matter what life hurled at them. She had only ever sought to safeguard their love.

And the moment she understood that...

“~~~~~!!!!”

...she raced into action.

She charged straight for Tsukasa’s body.

“Keine?!”

“Out of the way! Every second matters!!” After shouting at Ringo and Lyrule and forcing them back...

“Hrrrrrrrr!!”

...Keine inhaled deeply and tossed all the medical instruments required for treating physical trauma into the air.

Prodigy physician Keine Kanzaki performed the procedure with such unbelievable speed that no one could keep up. This special style she’d developed allowed her to complete operations on her own. While juggling her tools, she constantly swapped them in and out, delivering treatment faster than the human eye.

“Disinfection of affected area, complete.”

At the end of the day, she didn't much care for believing in the future as Tsukasa did. Even if humanity did master its greed one day, how many centuries and millennia would it take?

She couldn't even begin to imagine it, but whatever the case, that was far too long a wait. People suffered under the yoke of oppression every minute.

“Mending of viscera, complete.”

Tsukasa hadn't written them off as hopeless cases, though.

Keine knew that.

She and Aoi were Japanese, but they didn't exactly restrict themselves to activities sanctioned by Japanese law when carrying out missions abroad. Although the people they visited in other countries admired them, the politicians who took advantage of ongoing conflicts for political capital were typically less than pleased.

Furthermore, the Japanese government itself often came under fire for Keine's and Aoi's actions. Once, Aoi had caused a major scandal when she preemptively destroyed all the planes on an allied military base after learning a populated urban area was to be indiscriminately bombed.

Public sentiment was normally on Keine and Aoi's side, but back then, their flagrant disregard for the intricacies of international diplomacy had earned them heavy backlash from the general public. People wanted them to show more concern for their homeland and less about some random refugees. However, since coming to this other world, Tsukasa had never urged the two to exercise restraint.

“Suturing of external wounds, complete.”

He understood. He understood that there were some whose lives and dignity could only be saved by people with boots on the ground.

That's why he fought.

He faced the criticism head-on and pushed forward anyway. His was an unenviable position, yet he did all he could. He was probably the only politician

capable of such a thing. Keine understood that, and now that her dream lay shattered...

I can't let him die. Not here! Not now!

“Administering cardiotoxic medication and beginning pulmonary resuscitation.”

Thanks to Keine's surgical technique, Tsukasa's wounds were sutured with the swiftness of watching a video sped up.

Upon seeing what Keine had done...

“I see you've made your choice. What a pity.”

...Lindworm made no effort to hide his disappointment. His greatsword was still drenched in Tsukasa's blood, and now it came down for Keine.

However, his blow never reached her.

Aoi cut in and blocked it right in the nick of time.

“Rrrrgh!!”

The road under her feet had been paved to support horse-drawn wagons, yet it cracked and shattered under the force of the impact. Lindworm had surpassed humanity the moment he'd absorbed the evil dragon's power. Even for Aoi, who'd pried open the Yamato castle gate with her bare hands, merely withstanding his raw physical strength took everything.

“Move.”

“HURGH?!”

Thus, she could do nothing to stop Lindworm from sending her flying with a kick to the side.

No power could stop that man. Reducing humanity to livestock would be a trivial matter for him.

But only a moment later, the man with the strength to enforce his will upon all stopped dead in his tracks.

He was *forced* to stop...

“What is the meaning of this?”

“~~~~~!!”

...by the imperial citizens who'd gathered in droves to block him.

“Stand aside.”

His words had an unfathomably regal weight to them, commanding the very souls of those who heard them to obey. The blood drained from the people's faces, but they stood their ground.

Then...

“W-we refuse!!”

...there came unmistakable words of rebellion.

“We've made our choice! We want to go forge our own paths!”

“And to do that, we've gotta fight! No way are we gonna spend the rest of our lives locked away in your tiny cages!”

“You're not in charge of us anymore!!”

After watching that exchange, they understood perfectly what was going on. They knew who was trying to lock away their futures. Their enemy had never been clearer, and they stood against him to protect their loved ones and tomorrow.

The world fair had given the Freyjagardians their greed back, and as it filled them, they felt a profound rush of love. Never again would they tolerate being robbed of it.

Lindworm had told them all before they came over that they would need to pick their desired future, and they had.

When Lindworm saw that...

“Hah.”

...he broke into quite possibly the first smile any of his subjects had ever seen on him.

“Kaff! Koff!”

As it happened, that was the precise moment that Tsukasa began breathing again.



“Tsukasa!” Lyrule cried. “Thank goodness!”

“Are you...okay?!” Ringo asked.

“Koff! Yeah, I’ll live.” After coughing up the blood that had gathered in his lungs, Tsukasa looked around. It didn’t take him long to realize what had happened, and a bemused smile spread across his face. “I have to say, Lindworm, you’re terrible at acting. I’m embarrassed to have even played a part in that.”

“Huh...?”

“A-acting?”

Tsukasa nodded. If Lindworm had really wanted to break the agreement, his initial attack would’ve been for more than Tsukasa alone. He likely would’ve flash frozen the entire world fair. Such a feat was well within his power.

Lindworm had even permitted Keine to save Tsukasa. That made it clear that he wasn’t going against the terms set a year ago.

Actually, his lie had been blatant even before that. There was no way a man who truly wanted to manage humans like livestock would’ve built his life around serving the people, fought on the front lines despite being royalty, or risked himself to gain the evil dragon’s power. Lindworm loved humanity just like Keine. Tsukasa had been confident of that, and his faith had been well-placed.

“Seen enough yet?” Tsukasa asked him.

“Without the will of the people behind me, I have no right to call myself a king,” Lindworm answered. He planted his sword in the ground and left it there.

“I failed. Go on and live in the future of your own choosing.”

At last, he acknowledged his defeat. There was no choice but to yield now.

That moment marked the death of the world Emperor Lindworm had sought.

When the imperial citizens realized that they would have their stolen lives back, they erupted into a cheer of joy and relief.

Amid almost deafening shouts, Tsukasa offered Keine his gratitude. "Thank you. I very nearly died there."

"I"

Something like barely restrained pain flitted across Keine's face. She stepped away from Tsukasa.

When she did...

"You did well, that you did."

...Aoi, absolutely covered in dust from the emperor's blow, called after her.

"Aoi..."

"I'm glad you changed your mind, m'lady."

"You make it sound like you already knew my dream was an impossible fantasy."

"....."

Aoi gave her a slight nod.

Keine couldn't fault her for keeping silent. Had Aoi tried to point out Keine's flaws, she wouldn't have listened. She wasn't the sort to stop. Back on that cruel battlefield when she hadn't been able to protect anyone, believing she might cure greed was the only source of hope, the sole thing that allowed her to continue as a doctor.

But now that hope was gone.

"You might be right, Tsukasa," Keine conceded. "Maybe humans will conquer their greed someday. But...it will take hundreds or thousands of years. I'm far too tired to depend on so patient a hope to keep me going."

That was too far in the future for Keine. She...wasn't strong like Tsukasa. She didn't want to go back to the way things were, not anymore. She slid a scalpel from the hem of her gown into her hand, then plunged its tip into her throat without a moment's hesitation.

Scalpels were tools for cutting straight through human flesh, and fresh blood flowed freely down the blade.

But...

...the blood wasn't Keine's.

Aoi had slid her arm around the prodigy doctor from behind to catch the scalpel.

"...I'm a doctor, yet I stole Lyrule's life and toyed with everyone's minds to appease my own sense of self-righteousness. Why would you stop me from atoning?" Keine said.

"Humanity would gain nothing and lose much by your death, that it would. One can only atone by repaying an amount equal to that they despoiled." Aoi's wounded arm pulled Keine into an embrace. "The two of us have been a bit rash. Let us start by taking things one step at a time again. I shall be with you every step of the way."

"I, *hic*... I...!"

Keine trembled in Aoi's arms.

As Masato watched, he shot Tsukasa a question. "You sure it's okay to just leave 'em like that?"

Tsukasa stood with help from Lyrule and Ringo, then nodded. "I made sure Aoi knows to look after Keine. They're going to be all right."

Aoi was the only person who'd seen the same horrors Keine had. She was uniquely qualified to understand what the prodigy physician was going through.

As such, Tsukasa had a more pressing matter to worry about. "I'm going to need you to make good on that other promise you made," he said to Lindworm.

The emperor nodded. "I haven't forgotten."

"What're you talking about, Tsukes?" Shinobu asked.

Tsukasa explained that before returning to Elm, he'd gotten Lindworm to agree to abandon all plans for conquest if Tsukasa could shatter the emperor's perfect world. However, he'd requested another term upon his victory, too.

Lindworm himself gave voice to that other condition. “As promised, I’m going to send all of you back to your original world.”



✿ And Thus, the Road Goes On ✿

In the end, the inaugural world fair concluded as a roaring success.

After the special priority period for imperial citizens ended, people from all across the world crowded into the fair via a railroad system the Seven Luminaries had installed across the continent in preparation for the event, and the venue was positively buzzing day in and day out. As a matter of fact, a tremendous number of people applied to immigrate from nations other than Freyjagard. They'd all found something they desired at the world fair, and they wanted to get their hands on it. For a world without the internet, being able to interact with distant nations' values and cultures was a concept so sensational it changed the very way they lived their lives.

After seeing the power of man's greed with his own eyes and admitting defeat, Lindworm did as promised and tossed away his plans to invade other countries. Since he carried unilateral power in Freyjagard, he also immediately reinstituted currency, education, and all the other freedoms he'd stripped.

As for the New World, Lindworm freed the clans and returned the land he'd annexed to the native peoples. It would still exist as a self-governing dominion of Freyjagard, but he made sure that the clans would retain their unique character and ethos. That wasn't to say that everything went smoothly, of course. Keine hadn't been able to finish her work in the New World, and the hatred its people harbored for the empire was nothing to scoff at. However, the situation was largely resolved within a single winter due to the dignified way Lindworm faced that anger head-on and help from the High School Prodigies

acting as mediators.

Then the snow melted, the springtime vegetation began to emerge, and the day of parting finally came.

It was time for the High School Prodigies to go home.



“Three cheers for the triumphant return of our mountainside rescues!”

“““Hooray!””””

When it came time to choose where to open their gate back to Earth, the seven unanimously decided on Elm Village. That’s where it all started. The Prodigies owed the people there most of all.

On the big day, the villagers threw them a lavish farewell party that started quite early.

“I gotta say, Tsukasa, there’s always something special about your mayo! You must really go the extra distance when making it.”

“It’s even better when you spread it on some dried cod!”

“These Azure spirits are great, too! It’s so handy how the railway lets us buy stuff from all over the place.”

“Hey, if it isn’t the Minister of Mayo!”

Tsukasa gave the drunk villagers a jokingly formal bow. “I am honored to receive such high praise.”

The feast laid out on the tables sported numerous small bowls of mayonnaise here and there. At the villagers’ request, Tsukasa had gathered up the village children and made it with them.

“Eating mayonnaise in Elm like this really takes me back,” Shinobu said as she took a bite. She sounded truly moved. “Now that I think about it, that was the first piece of Earth culture we brought over, huh?”

“That did backfire a bit when it got popular. I couldn’t even stand to look at mayonnaise for a while,” Tsukasa remarked.

“Yeah, but that was two whole years ago...” Suddenly, Akatsuki stiffened.

“Wait a minute.”

“What’s the matter, Prince?” Masato asked. “You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“We’ve been so busy that I never really had time to think about it, but it’s been two years since we came to this world, right?”

Masato cocked an eyebrow. “So?”

“Do high schools even let you repeat two years of classes?”

““““Uh-oh...””””

At that, bemused smiles formed on everyone’s faces as they came to understand.

“Yeah, we’re probably all sorts of expelled,” Masato said.

Shinobu laughed. ““The High School Prodigies Get Kicked Out of School!’ That’ll be my first big scoop. Ha-ha-ha!”

“Wait, c’mon—this isn’t funny!” Akatsuki cried. “My mom’s gonna kill me!”

“It’ll be fine,” Masato replied. “I’m sure our dear prime minister’ll get it all sorted out for us.”

Tsukasa shook his head. “I’ll see what I can do, but considering the circumstances, I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

Akatsuki clung to Tsukasa. “Please!” he begged. “You gotta help me!”

As Ringo watched the scene, she noticed something. “Huh? Tsu...kasa. Did you...get taller?”

“Yup. It’s easier fur me to tell bearclaws I’m a machine. Tsukasa’s grown three inches in the last two years.”

“Oh damn, he’s right,” Masato said. “Your eye level’s practically up to mine.”

“We’ve been here for two whole years,” Tsukasa replied. “It’s no wonder our bodies have changed a bit.”

Aoi shot a glance over to Masato’s side, where Roo was cramming her cheeks full of mayonnaise-covered sausage. “Roo has grown far larger than she was

when we first met her as well, that she has.”

Just as one would expect from a young girl, Roo had really shot up over the months. At the rate she was going, it wouldn't be long before she caught up with the admittedly petite Ringo.

After looking at Roo, Akatsuki's eyes went wide. “Wait, I bet that's means I've grown a bunch t—”

“You're the exact same height as befur.”

“But that's not fair!”

“In fact, Ringo's grown a bit, so you're the shortest membear of the group now.”

“Nooooo!” Akatsuki sobbed and cursed cruel reality.

As most of the Prodigies happily chattered away, someone watched them, slightly removed from the group—prodigy physician Keine Kanzaki.

Winona approached her, concern plain on her face. “Aren't you going to go join them?”

“Hello, Winona... It's really not my place to,” Keine said with no small amount of self-deprecation in her voice.

“I heard what happened. 'Bout how you killed my little Lyrule.”

“.....”

“That girl's a daughter to me. I'm happy that she came back, but that doesn't mean I've forgiven you. Am I making myself clear?”

“Of course. You have every right to—”

The force of the impact cut Keine off mid-sentence. Winona had slapped Keine across the cheek, and she hadn't been holding back. Getting hit like that while talking caused Keine's teeth to cut the inside of her mouth. A bit of blood ran down her lower lip.

“.....”

Although the blow came as a shock to Keine, it helped her realize something. This pain was precisely what she'd been looking for.

“That help clear your head some?”

“.....!”

“You do a good job acting like you’ve got it all figured out, but same as my Elch, you’re still just a kid. Your problem is nobody ever got mad at you, and it kept you from getting the closure you needed. So? Now that you’ve taken that slap, do you think you’ll be able to get your feelings in order?”

Winona had seen right through Keine. She’d picked up on the fact that Keine couldn’t sort her feelings without outside help and deduced that Keine’s immaturity was keeping her from realizing that.

Keine knew she couldn’t continue as she had been after Winona gave her what she needed. She lifted her head. “...I do. You’re right. I do feel a bit better.”

“Good to hear. You were the only one who coulda saved my old man, and I’m sure plenty more people owe you back in your world. Can’t keep hangin’ your head forever, not when there’s work to do.”

Then, once about half the food on the tables was gone, an auspicious figure arrived at the Elm Village farewell party—Lindworm, Freyjagard’s emperor.

“The gate is ready. If you have any more affairs to get in order, now would be the time.”



The exchange student duo Nio Harvey and Cranberry Diva beckoned everyone over.

“Over here, everyone!”

“C’mon, Head Engineer! Hurry!”

Lindworm had used the knowledge he’d absorbed from the evil dragon to build a space-time gate atop the hill overlooking the site where the Prodigies had originally crash-landed. The gate was a hole in the world, and it emitted a gentle glow not unlike moonlight.

“This is linked up with Japan, right?” Shinobu questioned.

The Seven Prodigies were awash with too many emotions to sort as they

beheld the sight. At long last, the path back to Earth was right before their eyes.

“I just ask ‘cause, as I recall,” Shinobu continued, “we were flying over the ocean in Ringo’s plane when we got sucked here.”

“Good point,” Masato agreed. “I dunno about you guys, but I’d be pretty pissed if this thing dumped us at the bottom of the Mariana Trench.”

“D-don’t even j-joke about that, Masato,” Akatsuki stammered as he recalled their disastrous arrival. “Remember how bad we got banged up when we got here?”

“Worry not,” Lindworm replied. After addressing Akatsuki’s concerns...

“I used Tsukasa’s blood to fix the coordinates to the nation you hail from, and I already went through myself to ensure the area beyond is populated. I must say, I wasn’t expecting your world to be quite so rocky. *Munch, munch.*”

...he suddenly began snacking on something. It was small, round, and piping hot.

The Prodigies’ eyes went wide.

“Wait, wait, wait—hold on, are those...? That’s *takoyaki*! And from the famous chain Gintaco, no less!” Shinobu exclaimed.

“I’m not sure what they’re called,” Nio said, “but His Grace and I had discussed bringing back something that you could verify, and they smelled really good, so we bought some.”

Lindworm nodded. “I was unfamiliar with your currency system, but I left enough gold coins that I doubt they have any complaints. Hmm, yes. These really are tasty.”

“I simply can’t get enough of how uniquely springy they are!” Cranberry blew on hers to cool them down. “*Fyoo, fyoo.*”

Hearing endorsements from the three test subjects and seeing the Tokyo delicacy they’d brought back was all the proof the Prodigies required.

“So Tokyo really is just on the other side of that light... Oh~~~~~!” Akatsuki was so overcome with joy that his whole body trembled, and he began urging the others on. “Tsukasa, c’mon! Let’s go, let’s go!”

“Hold your horses, Prince.”

“But, but...!” Akatsuki pleaded, unable to wait any longer.

Upon seeing his reaction...

“I guess it’s time to say good-bye, then.”

...Winona walked over as Elm’s representative. She looked to each of the Prodigies with love in her eyes.

“Tsukasa, Masato, Akatsuki, Ringo, Aoi, Keine, Shinobu. You’ve done so much for us since the day we rebelled against our lord. I wish we were a bit cleverer so we wouldn’t have had to bother you for every little thing, but what can you do?”

“C’mon, Winona, don’t get all mopey and formal on us,” Akatsuki said.

“Yeah, seconded,” Shinobu agreed. “We only found Yggdra because of you.”

Winona shook her head. “Be that as it may, thank you for building a world where lunkheads like us can live with dignity.” Her gaze strayed to the girl who was about to leave for Earth alongside the Prodigies. “Make sure you take care of yourself, Lyrule. And if you ever get homesick, you’ll always have a place here. Remember, it’s not like you’re stuck there forever.”

She was right—this farewell was by no means final.

For one thing, that world and Earth were basically neighbors now that Lindworm had built a gate linking them. What’s more, magic represented a brand-new technical framework for the High School Prodigies, and they had no intention of ignoring it. On the contrary, Ringo had already decided to leave Bearabbit behind so they could map out space-time coordinates from both worlds simultaneously and begin the process of making space-time navigable through the power of science. If her research bore fruit, and if their talks with Lindworm went well and Japan established diplomatic ties with Freyjagard, then goods and people would trade back and forth between the two worlds in huge numbers.

However, it was exactly like a parent to worry despite all that. And so...

“I’m going to be okay. Remember what you told me? You said that all that

matters is my resolve.”

...Lyrule gave Winona an answer to demonstrate how much she’d grown.

“That’s my girl.”

Knowing they wouldn’t see each other for a while, mother and daughter exchanged a warm hug.

“Keep an eye on things over here, okay, Bearabbit?” Ringo said.

“Leave it to me! If magic’s just another kind of science, then we’ll figure it out! It’ll bearly take three years for us to get our space-time coordinate system up and running and our comms system online!”

“Three years is...a little too long,” Ringo replied. “We’ll do it in one.”

“I’d expect nothing less from you, Head Engineer!” Cranberry cheered.

Once all the farewells had been said, Tsukasa addressed the group. “Shall we be off?” The others nodded, turning from the villagers to face the gate and walking toward it.

The portal was situated right at the edge of the cliff overlooking the crash site, and that inspired a niggling worry the Prodigies might take a nasty fall. Tsukasa strode forward regardless. Unsurprisingly, he didn’t tumble into empty air. The path continued into the shining gate, creating a long, straight tunnel of light. The other six—joined by Lindworm and Nio, who were coming for diplomatic reasons; Cranberry, who Ringo had recruited to work in her lab; and Roo, who’d decided to tag along with Masato—all followed after.

Once they were about thirty feet in, the Prodigies noticed something.

“.....!”

The seven Earth natives instantly recognized an old, familiar smell wafting down from the other end of the luminous tunnel. It was practically vile compared to the clear air of the other world, yet it got their hearts racing all the same.

“They say you never forget what the air in your hometown smells like, and I guess they’re right,” Tsukasa remarked.

“~~~!! Mom! Dad!” Akatsuki cried.

“Damn, Prince, you’re really movin’!” Masato said. “Hey, get back here! First place is gonna be mine, just like always!”

“Ha-ha!” Shinobu laughed. “Not if I have anything to say about it!”

“Are you all right, Keine, m’lady?” Aoi asked.

“Yes, thanks to you,” Keine answered. “I’ll be counting on you in the future as well.”

“Come on, Head Engineer, we should get a move on! I want to see your spaceship!”

“A-ack!” Ringo yelped. “D-don’t pull me like that, Cranberry.”

“Let us be on our way, Nio,” Lindworm said. “You have lived in an aristocracy, a democracy, and a dictatorship, yet none have fully tainted you. That affords you an open perspective that I lack. I’ll be relying on your insight to determine if this Japan is truly a nation worth dealing with.”

“I won’t let you down, Your Grace.”

Realizing that the exit was near, everyone hurried ahead in a mad scramble, passing Tsukasa by. He alone stood still and looked back over his shoulder. The gate’s entrance had grown distant, but Winona and the other villagers were still visible on the other end, waving good-bye.

“...”

He wondered if they’d done well. Had they successfully brought about the best possible outcome for the people of the world they’d been abruptly dropped into?

Tsukasa didn’t know.

He always agonized over the results of his decisions, wondering if there wasn’t a better option he could’ve taken. Had there been a single correct solution hidden somewhere? Was there someone who might have done a better job than him? Tsukasa remembered every single person who slipped through his fingers. They were in his thoughts constantly.

However...

“Let’s go, Tsukasa.”

...Lyrule took his hand, and he looked forward again. There ahead of him, he saw people walking in the same era he did. And at his side was the woman who’d agreed to share his path.

Tsukasa smiled at his past worries. *Did I think I’d single-handedly shape society or something?* The world was formed from countless people’s greed, his included. It would be a flagrant act of arrogance for him to agonize about those results all on his own.

All he could do was figure out the best option for each new challenge.

For the things he wanted.

For the things he desired.

For the people he loved.

That was all anyone could do, and Tsukasa was sure that would be enough to lead the world to somewhere noble and righteous, where none starved or were wronged.

And if that was true...

“Yes, let’s.”

...then it was high time he stopped idling and worrying about the past.

He needed to take the baton and carry it forward as quickly as he possibly could.

In Japan, there were seven high school students whose names were known the world over.

There was a samurai who wielded her blade in war-torn regions to protect the weak.

There was a physician who saved the wounded alongside the samurai.

There was a magician who could mesmerize anyone.

There was an inventor whose intellect had advanced humankind by several

centuries.

There was a businessman who was involved in 30 percent of all global trade.

There was a politician who ruled over the world of statecraft at an unprecedentedly young age, having won an astronomic percentage of the vote.

And there was a journalist who used her secret ninja abilities to expose the injustices of the world.

The seven of them had talents so preeminent that none could hope to match them, and people called them the High School Prodigies.

This was a tale of the single chapter they wrote in the long, long history of their world—a tale from the midway point of human greed's path toward building an ideal society.

Afterword

Hello. I'm Riku Misora, the author.

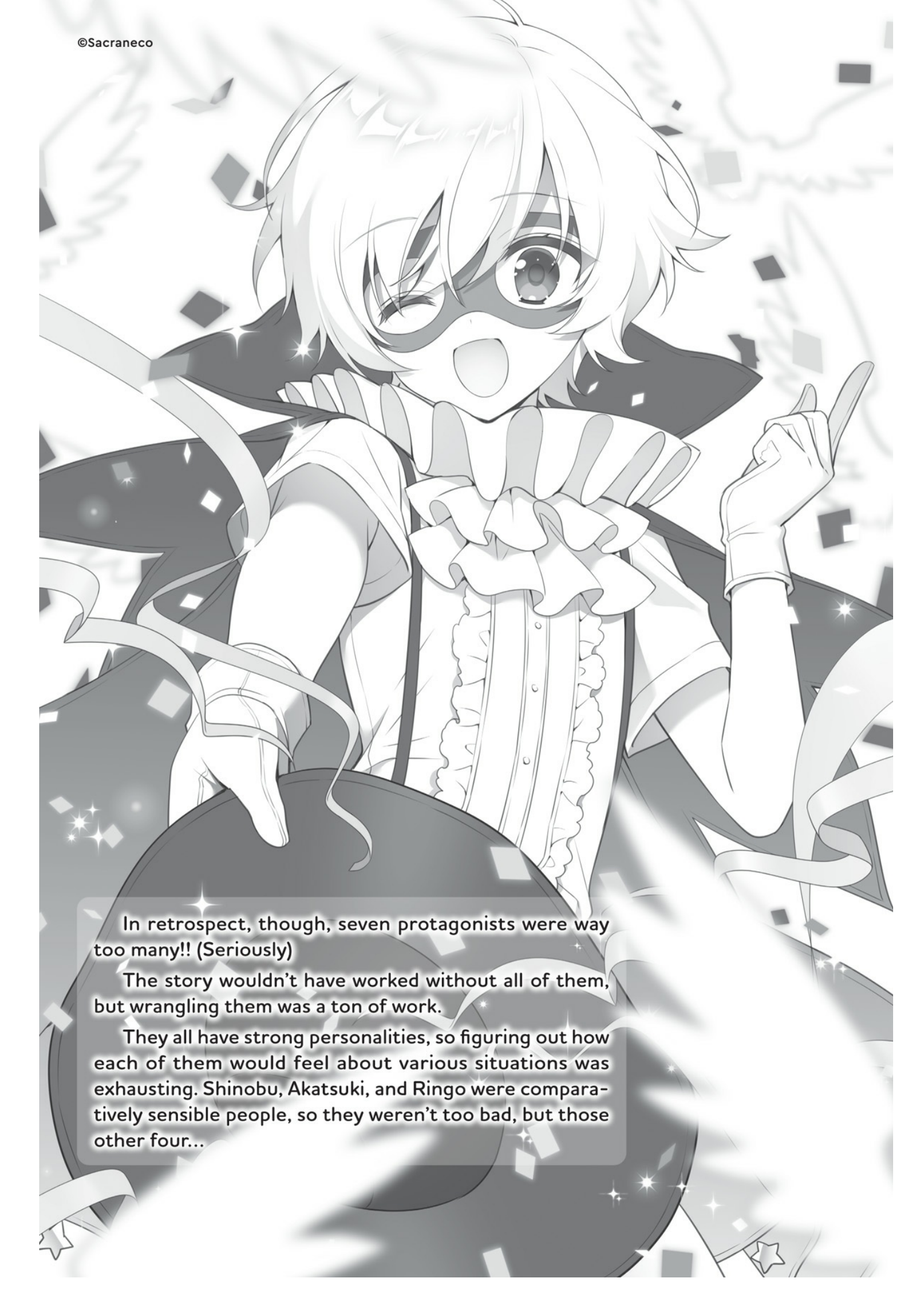
This marks the end of *High School Prodigies Have It Easy Even in Another World!* Thank you all so much for accompanying me on this long, ten-volume journey.

This is the final afterword. When “isekai” series were starting to get popular on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, I figured I would get on board the bandwagon, but I also wanted to put a bit of a different spin on the premise, and that's how this series came about.



For the overarching theme, I thought it would be nice to take a bunch of people who were each unmatched in a particular field, then have a story about how they changed another world by starting a revolution while also touching on their backstories from Earth and some of the problems faced by modern society.


I was able to get most of that in, so I'm pretty satisfied with how it went.



In retrospect, though, seven protagonists were way too many!! (Seriously)

The story wouldn't have worked without all of them, but wrangling them was a ton of work.

They all have strong personalities, so figuring out how each of them would feel about various situations was exhausting. Shinobu, Akatsuki, and Ringo were comparatively sensible people, so they weren't too bad, but those other four...



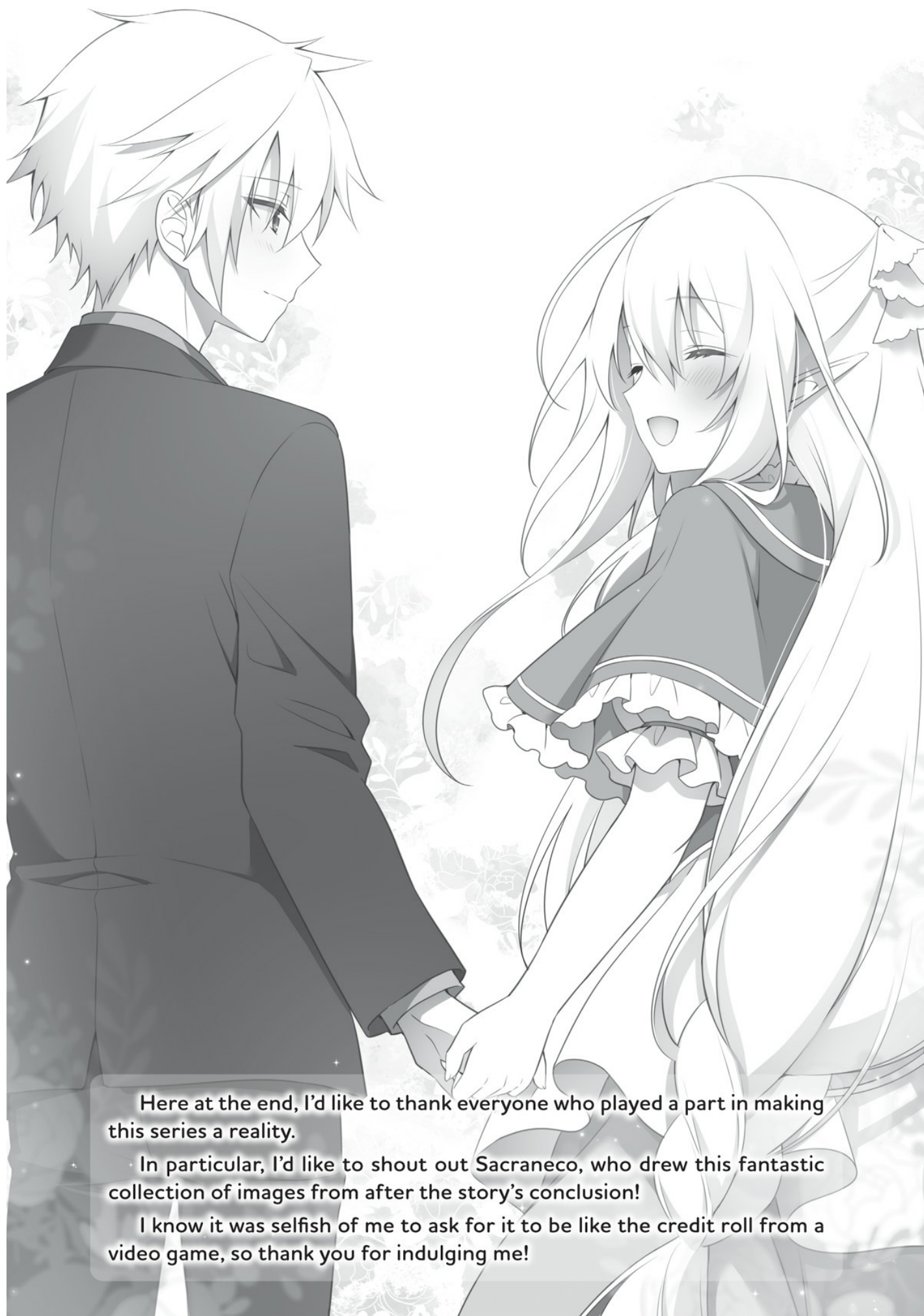
Between the way Tsukasa insisted that the People's Revolution ultimately be led by the populace of the other world despite knowing it would cause more deaths and unrest, how Masato schemed to protect his company's interests and growth even in the face of a major crisis, the rampage Keine went on in this volume, and Aoi's choice to let Shishi escape, I think I was able to give all of their quirks a chance to shine.

I swear, these people just aren't built for working as a group!

Still, as difficult as it was, I ended up learning a lot.

This series has kept me super busy ever since I started it, but thanks to support from the readers, it was adapted into a manga and an anime. Looking back now that it's finished, I'm really happy with how it all turned out.





Here at the end, I'd like to thank everyone who played a part in making this series a reality.

In particular, I'd like to shout out Sacraneco, who drew this fantastic collection of images from after the story's conclusion!

I know it was selfish of me to ask for it to be like the credit roll from a video game, so thank you for indulging me!

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