“Are they really coming?” Zenki asks.

“Of course they are!” I assure him. “My information is reliable.”

“We’ve been waiting here for hours!”

“Fear not, dear Zenki. Before long, on this road, the Fated Princess will be walking right into our ambush. With her will be the Magical Wand of Sparkling – the most prized artifact in all of existence! And soon, it will be in our hands. I promise you this, on my glory as the leader of the Baizen Band of Thieves!”

“Okay…” the slightly foolish Zenki responds. “If you say so, I’ll believe you. You’re always right, after all.”

“Of course. Isn’t that right, Kizo?”

Kizo, never a man of many words, simply nods.

The three of us, brothers in arms, brother in spirit and, most importantly, brothers in birth, make up the Baizen Band of Thieves.

For the first year after forming, we have only engaged in small-scale theft – enough to live off, but not enough to make it big. That may make it seem like we’re only a band of petty thieves, but you would be dead wrong in such an assertion.

Until now, all of our targets have been simply practice – a way to prepare ourselves for the true goal – the biggest game of all.

Of course, we had yet to find out just what that would end up being. However, when I caught wind of a rumour of the Fated Princess herself preparing to come to our city, I immediately knew what we’ve been prepping for this whole time.

*The Magical Wand of Sparkling.*

A legendary relic said to have come to us from a different world. When it was first discovered in a shrine deep inside of a dungeon, neither its use nor its purpose was known. However, its strange shape and design intrigued many: from the purple, perfectly cylindrical handle, to the ‘head,’ which was much flatter and contained a gold star, with little pink hearts inscribed near its inner curves.

Experts attempted many tests, but nothing seemed to draw out the power that was clearly contained within. Eventually, in a maniacal rage caused by failure after failure, one member of the team attempted to crush the wand with a rock. In a cruel twist of fate, however, it was the *rock*, not the wand, which ended up breaking in the collision. Afterwards, it was stored away, not to be brought out again until a decade later, when a new team of researchers made a fantastic discovery.

Perched on the shrine that had once housed the wand, there was now a thick book. Its contents revealed the method of activating the wand: a specific chant, combined with a specific dance of sorts, caused its wielder to ‘transform,’ granting them incredible power. While wielding it, its user could chuck out seemingly unlimited amounts of spells. On top of that, it allowed the use of a set of magics that could not be achieved through any other means – all contained within the grimoire.

However, the transformation could not be done by just anyone, it was soon found. Only certain ‘chosen ones’ could perform it – girls with incredible determination, ambition, and a pure heart clouded naught by evil intentions. Such was the requirement.

Now, nearly 200 years later, it has been wielded by a myriad of girls, who eventually became referred to – and sometimes even worshipped as – the ‘Fated Princesses.’

And now, its current wielder is header right into our trap.

“They’re coming,” Kizo says, looking out into the distance.

“Alright. Everyone to your positions!”

Kizo nods, heading further out in the direction the Princess is coming from, before climbing up one of the trees on the side of the road and hiding himself there, while Zenki and I stay in the shrubbery.

“Do you remember the plan, Zenki?” I ask him, just to be sure.

“Of course! Kizo will stop the horses with his sleeping darts. When the Princess comes out to see why they’ve stopped, I jump out and attack the Princess.”

I nod.

“That’s right. Then, I will head back a bit,” I say. “Don’t forget your club!”

Zenki nods and grabs the weapon I had prepared for him. Although he’s a fool who knows nothing of technique, he does have a certain brutish strength to him. As such, a club, which he can wildly swing around, is the perfect weapon for him. I strongly doubt a dainty Princess will be able to withstand a hit from him, so it should keep her occupied. At the same time, I will provide magical back-up, while Kizo looks for an opportunity to hit her with a sleeping dart, incapacitating her. Then we take the wand and hightail it out of there.

An ingenious plan, if I do say so myself.

Not long after I reach my position, a stagecoach arrives, drawn by two horses. Just as my information said, there are no guards accompanying it.

Although we can’t see, the Princess is surely sitting inside.

Kizo puts the plan in motion, perfectly hitting the horses.

As they nod off, they start to slow down, before finally coming to a stop.

A few moments later, the door of the stagecoach opens, and a person comes out.

“That must be the Princess,” I say to myself.

With a pretty face and peerless demeanour, the Princess steps to the front of the coach, checking what happened. Although the Princess may look dainty, not standing much taller than one and a half meter, underneath that harmless appearance surely lies a massive destructive force.

“Freeze!” I yell, as I exit the bushes. On that que, so does Zenki, holding his club tight in his hands.

The Princess calmly turns around, not showing even the slightest sign of panic while assessing the situation. After a brief moment standing there, silently, a few brief words are spoken.

“It appears we are being ambushed by bandits,” a male voice speaks. “Could you take care of it?”

Wait, that’s a guy?

I look at Zenki, who appears to be thinking the exact same thing. As such, he starts to face the door of the coach, rather than the person standing outside; the Princess must still be in there.

“Bandits!” A deafeningly loud voice booms out from inside of the coach. “Perfect timing!”

Deep, heavy steps sound out, the coach seemingly creaking with every single one of them. Unlike the grace that the door was opened with last time, it now flies open with incredible force, almost throwing it off its hinges.

The person emerges, revealing an incredible physique. Not only do they tower over Zenki – who, himself, is already almost two meters tall, the person also stands much wider than him, with muscles bulging.

“These are the ones, Princess,” the boy says.

…

That’s the Princess?

She cranes her neck down to look at Zenki – as if she were looking at a worm.

“Wahahaha~~” The Princess laughs, so loudly it could surely be heard all the way in town. “This is all of them? That’s barely a warm-up! Wahahaha~~”

As she says this, she pulls out our target: the Magical Wand of Sparkling.

“D-Don’t be intimidated! Stick to the plan and don’t let her transform!” I yell out in response. “Hit her with everything you’ve got, Zenki!”

Zenki gulps, clutching his club.

“So? Are you going to hit me?” The Princess taunts. “I’m waiting.”

“Don’t underestimate me!” Zenki yells as he charges forward, using his momentum to add extra force to his swing. The Princess doesn’t try to move out of its course, opting to simply stand there. The club connects, hitting her arm with what almost seems to be a metallic clang.

Zenki just stands there, dumbfounded. This must be the first time someone has ever received one of his blows straight out.

“Wahahaha~~” the Princess laughs, entirely unphased. “Now it’s my turn, right?”

Saying that, she grabs hold of the wand with both hands, lifting it up to the right of her, as if raising a golf club. Before I could even notice, Zenki had disappeared. Only once I heard the sound of a tree cracking did I realise what had taken place.

Off on the side of the road lay Zenki against a now-broken tree, completely knocked out.

“Wahahaha~~” the Princess laughs once more. “And there he goes!”

*That* Zenki, the man with the brute strength of a horse, was tossed away like a ragdoll.

Once that realisation sank in, fear struck me like lightning. A blow that could knock Zenki off his feet would obliterate me, leaving nothing behind.

However, I am by no means weak.

“Stay back!” I yell to the Princess, while brandishing my wand.

“Or what?” the Princess retorts.

I swallow my fear.

“Don’t mess with me! I may not have many spells up my arsenal, but I have practiced and practiced and finally perfected the ones I know. At my current level, I can cast an Earth Bullet strong enough to pierce steel!”

“Wahahaha~~” the Princess jollily laughs, “is that so? Then go ahead and try me.”

I don’t let her taunting go unanswered. I had wanted to finish this without killing, if possible, but it appears the choice has been taken from me.

I suck up the magic around me, concentrating all of it to the tip of my wand; the Earth Bullet, my personal specialty, begins to form. The Princess seems unwilling to respond, so I don’t fire it yet. Instead, I keep loading more and more power into it – a technique I thought would be useless in a real battle. I can feel the magic in front of me begin to swell and fester, to the point where I will soon no longer be able to control it, yet still I persist – that is the method used for my Steel-Piercing Earth Bullet. Only once I am mere moments away from losing control completely do I allow it to fire.

It never reaches its destination. Just before hitting the Princess, my strongest spell – the Steel-Piercing Earth Bullet, the one I have spent almost a decade mastering, with the simple wave of a wand, disappears.

Not through the use of a spell, however. No, the Princess hadn’t cast a single thing.

She took the wand in both hands and swung it at my Earth Bullet, smashing it to bits.

“Wahahaha~~” the Princess simply laughs, after dismantling my life’s work. “It really is indestructible! Did you see that, Alph?”

“That’s right, Princess,” the attendant responds.

“I mean, that bandit said it could pierce steel, right? And yet, there’s not even a scratch on it. Look!”

The Princess shows the Magical Wand of Sparkling to the attendant.

“Not a scratch indeed, Princess,” the attendant responds.

“Wahahaha~~” the Princess laughs. “Now I finally have a weapon that won’t break when I swing it!”

“Very good, Princess,” the attendant responds.

I could only stand and look dumbfoundedly at the exchange.

Then, I remembered – Kizo was still biding his time, waiting. With the Princess distracted for so long, surely he’s hit his mark by now, right? Then it was only a matter of seconds until the Princess collapsed.

That’s what I had thought, at least.

“Ah, man!” the Princess shouts. “My neck is really itchy all of a sudden.”

“That’s because there is a dart there, Princess,” the attendant responds.

“A dart?” the Princess responds, while pulling it out.

“I believe that is what incapacitated our horses, Princess.”

“Wahahaha~~” the Princess laughs. “Well, it’s making me mighty itchy!”

Saying that, she takes the Magical Wand of Sparkling and moves it to her neck, scratching the spot where she had just plucked Kizo’s dart out.

“Ah, that feels better,” she says.

“I hate to rush you, Princess,” the attendant speaks out, “but if we do not hurry, we will be too late for the martial arts tournament.”

“What!?” the Princess yells, with a force strong enough to almost blow me off my feet. “Then we have to go, fast!”

“That is what I’m saying, Princess.”

“Get back in the coach, Alph! I’ll take us the rest of the way.”

“Very well, Princess,” the attendant responds, before stepping back inside of the doors.

Meanwhile, the Princess struts over to the front of the coach, apparently getting ready to start pulling it herself. She takes a moment once she realises the horses are still in the way, before lifting them up and slinging them over her shoulder as she gets in position to start pulling the coach.

“Ah, before I leave,” she says, turning back to me. “Bandit man! Promise you won’t do any more evil!”

I can only stare at her, befuddled, before simply nodding.

“Good! Wahahaha~~” she laughs one last time, before sprinting off into the distance, coach in tow. Even as she begins to disappear, her laughter can still be heard.

Only once the sound was completely gone, did I remember there was something important to do.

I rush over to Zenki, off on the side of the road. I remove his armour, checking for injury underneath, but it appears the magic armour we stole for him a while back kept him safe – he was only knocked out by the impact.

Kizo wanders over as I am doing it, looking worried, but I assure him Zenki’s okay. Then, he asks a simple question.

“What now?”

I remember the haunting laughter of the Princess, the fear I felt after Zenki was knocked away, and finally, the promise I had made without thinking.

Really, there’s only one answer I can give.

“Let’s live honest lives from now on.”