

佐島勤

Tsutomu Sato

illustration 石田可奈
Kana Ishida

魔法科高校の少等生

追跡編(上)

The irregular
at magic high school

28



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illustration / 石田可奈

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design / BEE-PEE

「…つ！」

Shiba Miyuki

1st High School, 3rd year. An honor student serving as the student council president. Skilled at cooling magic. Severe brother complex.

司波深雪

しば・みゆき

達也の妹。第一高校3年A組所属。生徒会会長を務める優等生。冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する『重度のプラコン』。

そう思っているよ

「俺にとつては、間違いでない。
お前は間違っていない。

*“To me, your decision was not a
mistake.*

You were not mistaken.”





桜井水波

さくらい・みなみ

昨年、魔法科高校に入学した二年生。達也、深雪の従兄弟という立場をとる、深雪のガーディアン候補。

Sakurai Minami

A sophomore who entered Magic High School. Serves the role of Guardian of the Snow Princess, the next head of the Yotuba family, Shiba Miyuki.

Minami-san, I want you to tell me about your true feelings."

「水波さんの
正直な気持ちを
教えて欲しい」

Kudou Minoru

He excels at magic, but his body is ill.
Fujibayashi Kyouko's half-brother.

九島光宣

くどう・みのる

かつて世界最強の魔法師だった『老師』九島烈の孫。魔法の才能に秀でているものの、病弱である。藤林響子の異父弟。

Lu Ganghu

呂剛虎

ルウガシブウ

白兵戦で人を殺すことには大亞連合随一と噂される、大亞連合軍特殊工作部隊のエース魔法師。『人喰い虎』と呼ばれる凶暴な男。

“So we meet again, genius of the

Chiba Family, the Illusion Blade...

Chiba Naotsugu!”

「また会ったな、幻刀鬼……
千葉修次！」

Chiba Naotsugu

『人喰い虎……呂剛虎！
今日こそ決着をつける！』

“Everything will
be decided here,
Man-Eating Tiger...
Lu Ganghu!”

千葉修次

ちば・なおつぐ

千葉エリカの次兄で、渡辺摩利の恋人。千葉流剣術免許皆伝で「千葉の麒麟兒」「イリュージョン・ブレード」の異名を取る。

「意思を宿した想子体——亡靈!?
いや——」

アレクサンダー。
アークトゥルス

Alexander Arcturus

スターズ第三隊隊長。北アメリカ大陸先住民のシャーマンの血を引く。現在は『幽体離脱(アストラル・プロジェクト)』を使い精神体となっている。

司波達也

しば・たつや

司波兄妹の兄。第一高校3年E組所属。妹である深雪を守るべき存在だと認識していること以外、全てに達観している。

Translator's Note

I don't really know what I should say here, but with how much I've edited this novel, I thought that I would like to leave a note about my experience, signifying my existence beyond a small note at the bottom of the page. Even though I don't speak Russian and this is a MTL, I think I put about as much effort in as one would a normal translation, and as a result, I think the quality is similar. While I'm sure there are a few inaccuracies, none of it should be anything that affects the plot in any major way.

I translated this in about 100-120 hours (my estimate, I have no idea how correct this is but I tend to be good at making BS estimates based on intuition) over 6 weeks. I used Google Translate to translate, but I retyped every word and changed/fixed the format of pretty much every sentence. I tried to write somewhat similarly to the Author's style, but I could only do it so far, and I only matched some aspects – there are parts of his style that I very much dislike. Tsutomu Sato seems to like to write long-winded explanations that only cover information talked about before throughout his novels. I tried my best to cut most of these out, as I don't find it entertaining to read explanations that emphasize "Minoru is not kidnapping Minami out of greed" for the 10th time. While I think there's value in repeating things for emphasis, Sato takes it to an extreme.

I don't consider myself to be a particularly good writer (I'm much more into Computer Science), but in translating this, I'd like to think I improved, and I hope that my style is at least interesting to read. In translating this, I hoped to become a better typist as well as a better writer, and I know that I achieved at least one of these goals.

With that said, thank you for reading my translation, and I hope you enjoy it.

Prologue

Alexander Arcturus, the commander of the third squadron of Stars, was ordered to sabotage the thermonuclear fusion reactor on Miyako Island in Japan. He successfully arrived there on a transport aircraft belonging to the USNA army, but immediately after landing he was attacked and has since been unconscious.

When Arcturus awoke, he felt disconnected, as one does after dreaming for a while, but at the same time felt he had only slept an instant. He was in total darkness. Absolute, total darkness, without any light – but this darkness was not something heavy and enveloping as it would if it were a burden. He did not feel pressed from this darkness... he did not feel anything at all.

He couldn't even tell whether his eyes were open – if he even had eyes. His consciousness was separated from his body, his link to the physical world.

“...I died?”

Such were his thoughts in this confused, absolute isolation, this indefinite void.

“... Is this Death?”

His thoughts continued, trying to make sense of his surroundings without senses.

“In death, it isn’t judgement that awaits, but isolation? ...sinners do not burn in hellfire, but become null?”

As his despair accumulated, a thought suddenly caused him to feel forsaken.

“... Why am I alone?

...am I the only one?"

Only now did Arcturus realize he couldn't hear the voice of his "relatives". For as long as he had been a Parasite, a whisper had spoken to his ego from the depths of his consciousness, subdueing it, suppressing it – but now he could not hear it. For the first time in a while, Arcturus' mind was filled only with his thoughts.

"What does this mean...?"

Arcturus had become a Parasite against his will. He was forcibly assimilated when a spiritual life form penetrated his mind. But this unification acted both ways – the Parasite did not unilaterally dominate over Arcturus. Control acted in both directions.

In merging with the spiritual life form, he ceased to be a man, but at the same time remained similar. He was no longer the person he was before the merge once his ego had been suppressed, but he still held the memories and thoughts of who he once was – he was now the Parasite Alexander Arcturus.

Merging with the Parasite changed his values and thought process, but his consciousness was preserved. And since he retained his memories from both before and after he became a Parasite, he knew clearly what a Parasite was – what changed in him.

Parasites have no ego; no, more accurately, it is inferior. The ego remains, but does not take precedence, so Parasites are missing part of their personality – their individuality. Their desire to stand out, to be unique.

Parasites are separate as they are united – they have separate consciousnesses, but the boundaries are stretched as their thoughts mix with others. The thoughts of others whisper to their ego in the depths of their consciousness, taking precedence over individual ambition. Beyond telepathy, thoughts are transmitted unconsciously, even without the intent to share.

At first, one can still distinguish their thoughts from other individuals. But over time the line between "oneself" and "others" blurs and it becomes impossible to distinguish one's own thoughts from others'. Given the thoughts of other Parasites at all times, one absorbs others ideologies as their own. It's like an extreme form of propaganda, except instead of just a compelling voice, its invasion on the level of one's mind. It isn't feasible for Parasites to keep their individuality as they forget who they are in the presence of the crowd.

As for the spiritual form of life parasitizing people – they can hardly be called life. It might be more accurate to call them viruses; they are clots of information attaching to physical bodies to replicate and spread. In addition, being immaterial, they are not consumed, only growing stronger when used. To cement their spiritual and informational existence, Parasites look for hosts with strong thoughts, and to ensure their existence endured, they suppressed the individuality and therefore the resistance of their hosts. The host was pressured by the Parasite to accept others' thoughts as their own; to accept the exchange of thoughts and fusion of consciousness.

And Arcturus realized he was free from this pressure.

"Did I become a human again... separate from the Parasite?"

However, this thought did not bring him joy at being free, at having regained humanity, but rather fear that he became a different species once again. Though he was initially a man, he was now a Parasite. From his perspective, it was the same as the initial transformation – he was forced to change his core against his will.

Life generally tries to preserve itself, and to accomplish this, it resists change – change is scary, change is dangerous. Unplanned changes bring fear, regardless of their effect.

Arcturus suppressed his instinctive emotions and instead focused on what was happening to him now through force of will. In doing this, he realized he was still half asleep – functional adherence was only one fifth of normal. Even worse, he didn't even know what "normal" was anymore; his abilities had certainly deteriorated in his little nap.

July 8, 2097, 14:07.
Alexander Arcturus suddenly awakened.

The darkness shrouding Arcturus shook. This was an excess stream of psions originating from Ichijou Masaki's Ocean Blast, but Arcturus had no way to know.

The fog cloaking his consciousness dissipated, and his thoughts cleared up immediately.

"...was that a psion wave?"

So, mass of psions shook the psionic shell?

...am I locked inside my own psionic informational body?"

The body is the prison of the soul – at least, Plato believed this. This was Arcturus' current situation, however, in a far more literal sense than was meant in the original words of the ancient Greek philosopher.

An ancient magic seal was burned on his body, separating his mind from the physical world. Arcturus was able to understand the technique binding him due to his experience with ancient magic he inherited from the indigenous people of America, but he also realized the technique was far too strong for him to break with his skills in ancient magic. But even if he couldn't remove the seal, the ancient magic was based on the connection between the mind and the physical body. In that case, if he could cut off the connection between the mind and body, the seal should dissipate.

Using only his mind, Arcturus prepared to use magic. It felt... odd, without the physical sensations he was used to, but albeit with confused difficulty, he built a sequence of magic.

"Astral Projection."

The ancient magic that bound it used the connection between the mind and the physical body to bind the mind from the physical body. This wasn't his first time using this magic, so while he wasn't quite "used to it", he had enough experience to keep control.

He had the feeling of a chain tied to him coming undone. Arcturus tried to get out of his physical body. Usually, it felt like stepping out under the open sky, no longer protected by shelter – except figuratively. But this time, he felt resistance, as if he was held by a spider web, an invisible net.

He imagined reaching out a hand towards the net and tearing it off.

Suddenly, he could see.

He was staring at the ceiling of the transport plane. If he remembered correctly, he was in the cargo bay.

He realized what he looked like and where he was without even looking around. On the floor was Arcturus, lying with a pale face in what appeared to be a coffin.

When he used Astral Projection, his mind and body were connected by an almost invisible link, like a thin thread, but now he could not sense the connection. His mind was not able to communicate with his physical body.

“Did the link break with the invisible net?

Am I dead?”

The old woman who taught him this magic told him that the thread bound his body and soul. A Japanese monk he studied with in his youth claimed that if said thread breaks, he would not be able to return to his body.

Arcturus was distraught for a moment at his worldly detachment before remembering the current circumstances. Quickly he quelled his fear of death before his conscious fled for panic. His current state, in which he could see, hear, and even feel the world, was incomparably more preferable to being locked in the null, dark void for eternity.

From a different perspective, his attempts to return to life may have seemed ridiculous – his life had already ended when he became a Parasite. It was already too late to continued living. However, he believed that he should do something, even if he exists only as a ghost with the consciousness of Alexander Arcturus.

Arcturus remembered his identity as a soldier of the USNA Army. He remained “himself” enough to serve America as a soldier, even after becoming a Parasite – his principles were ingrained so deeply that it was comparable to faith.

Arcturus believed himself to be “Alexander Arcturus” as long as he was conscious of his self.

What do I need to do?

“...I need to fulfill the task assigned to me.”

And what task were you assigned to?

"...Destroy the thermonuclear fusion reactor and create a situation in Shiba Tatsuya cannot refuse participation in Project Dione. That's what I was assigned to do."

Magic can still be used, even in an astral state. It was not possible to use magic requiring physical weapons, like Dancing Blades, but activating magic interfering with fluids or EM waves would not be a problem, and some types of magic became even more convenient while existing only as an astral body – specifically, mental interference magic.

Arcturus came to his decision just one hour after waking up in complete darkness.

However, it was already too late. His comrades' attack on Miyako Island had already failed. The physical bodies of Regulus, Vega, and Deneb had already been erased by Tatsuya, and their astral bodies were already completely sealed.

Chapter One

Minami had been kidnapped by Minoru. Miyuki called Tatsuya for help, and Tatsuya quickly flew away from Miyako-jima.

Flying by his aircar from Miyako-jima in the Izu archipelago to Chofu, a suburb of Tokyo, took Tatsuya just 20 minutes at the beginning of the 21st century. Tatsuya wasted no time in hurrying back to Miyuki.

Understanding Miyuki's shock, Tatsuya didn't question Miyuki much. It was obvious to him that asking any further questions would only pressure her and would not be productive.

"Yes, this is Ozaki."

Tatsuya contacted Yuuka over the radio, and was answered by her guardian, Ozaki Chiho. After a quick greeting, he asked her to explain the current situation.

"Kudou Minoru attacked the hospital with the help of self-destructing parasitic dolls. They were destroyed upon being disabled, thereby releasing the true bodies of Parasites which attacked passerby. The Juumonji family had to react to this threat, and Kudou Minoru used the chaos to break through the line of defense, allowing him to get into the hospital."

"And Yuuka-san left to help deal with the Parasites?" Tatsuya asked.

"Yes, it was an order from Miyuki-sama."

Chiho's tone was slightly apologetic. Her excuse was effective, however, as Tatsuya could not complain about Miyuki's decision. Yuuka had no grounds to refuse an order from the next head of the Yotsuba family, so Tatsuya accepted the excuse easily.

"Minoru's opponent was only Miyuki?"

Tatsuya still didn't understand the details of the event and asked for clarification.
"Yes. We have not yet established the details of what happened in the hospital, but Miyuki-sama is unharmed. All four parasitic dolls that Kudou Minoru took with him to the hospital were disabled by Miyuki-sama's magic, but Kudou Minoru still kidnapped Sakurai Minami."

Chiho's explanation contained the approximate course of events, but Tatsuya's attempt to understand the specific details was not making progress.

Obviously, Miyuki's Cocytus was what neutralized the parasitic dolls.

When Pledge was still in effect on Tatsuya, it was supported by Miyuki's power, so as well as removing the limiter on Tatsuya's magic, removing the seal also allowed Miyuki to use her magical powers at 100%.

Miyuki's Cocytus was able to damage the Parasite's true body — confirmed last winter in the battle at First High's training forest. While with people, the Parasite "merges" with the host, in Parasite dolls the Parasite just takes possession as the doll does not have a spiritual body to merge with. Because of this, Parasite dolls had no way to resist Miyuki's magic.

Cocytus was a magic that did not allow leniency. Using this magic either resulted in death or failure. Minoru could withstand one hit with Parade, but he wouldn't fool her magic a second time. Once Cocytus was used on Parade, Cocytus — which freezes activity of the mind, including Magic — would not allow Parade to be used again. Even if Minoru was not hit directly, allowing the main hit to be tanked by one of his Parasite dolls, Minoru would still suffer a decline in magical power.

The basic course of events was obvious to Tatsuya, but he couldn't possibly understand how Miyuki had allowed Minami to be abducted while remaining unharmed. Even if Minoru had somehow found a way to beat Miyuki, he wouldn't have been able to do it by such a margin as to leave Miyuki unscathed. The only explanation was that Miyuki had allowed Minami to be kidnapped, but that didn't make any sense.

Therefore, the only explanation was that Minami and Minoru convinced Miyuki to let them go.

There was no guarantee that Miyuki would win in a fight against Minoru. If she hit him with Cocytus, Minoru would lose, but if Minoru's magic reached Miyuki before this – she would lose. Of course, Tatsuya would not allow Miyuki to be harmed, regardless of distance. As soon as an attack on Miyuki was started, Tatsuya would feel it, recognize the attack, and eliminate. Should the attack be one that could not be expanded, he would erase the enemy carrying out the attack. However, there were always exceptions. It was foolish to assume that Tatsuya was omnipotent. There were attacks he could not expand and enemies he struggled to eliminate. Minoru as he was now was not an opponent to be underestimated.

Miyuki had no reason to kill Minoru or take magic away from him. She wasn't even necessarily an enemy to the Parasites. Though Parasites were a threat to mankind, Miyuki was a fragile creature that could be destroyed unexpectedly, and her nature was relatively pacifistic. It was entirely possible for her to support Minoru's love – however misguided he was in trying to turn Minami into a Parasite – if Minami agreed. If Minoru came for Minami and convinced her to go with him, Miyuki might just smile, wish them good luck, and let them go – she was the type of girl to avoid fighting if at all possible.

However, Miyuki most likely would not have entrusted Minami to the current Minoru. If Minoru didn't give up on turning her into a Parasite for "treatment", Miyuki would probably have stopped him.

Since leaving Tokyo, Tatsuya had not felt a single direct attack on Miyuki, and Chiho's assertion that Miyuki was unharmed confirmed this.

Then, Miyuki did not fight Minoru and overlooked his abduction if Minami...? No, Miyuki's distress at the event meant she surely did not overlook Minami's abduction.

Something unexpected happened so that she could not attack Minoru?

Tatsuya could not imagine what that should be.

"Is Minoru's current location known?"

Putting aside his guesses on the events of how Minoru kidnapped Minami, Tatsuya started thinking about the pursuing Minoru. Given that the USNA and New Soviet Union's plan to sabotage the thermonuclear fusion reactor had for the most part come to a conclusion, the pursuit of Minoru became the task taking precedence.

"We don't have details of the vehicle used, but it has been found moving west along the main road. The Juumonji family head has already completed preparations for pursuit," Chiho answered.

Since the appearance of the vehicle wasn't known, surveillance systems would be useless, raising the question as to it was confirmed that he was heading west on the main road.

"What was the basis of the conclusion that he was heading west along the central road?"

"We confirmed his location using Psionic radar to search for Parasites," Chiho responded.

This Psionic radar was not yet at a level such that it could be considered complete, but it was still effective in determining the approximate location and direction of movement. More points of observation would have to be established before the radar could determine exact location using multi-point searches.

If Minrou were in perfect condition, he would be able to thwart any attempt at following him by using Parade. The radar was nowhere near advanced enough to be able to break through the Kudou family's magic. Knowing this, Tatsuya came to the following conclusion:

"Minoru was damaged in a fight?"

Minoru's magical abilities had to have been deteriorated in a fight for Chiho to be able to be confident about his location, but this raised further questions. Was it temporary, or would it remain for an extended length of time as a side effect? Was the nature of the damage in the Eidos, or was it ironically caused by overheating of his magic calculation area, similar to what happened to Minami?

He most likely received a strike from Miyuki's Cocytus, but regardless of the cause, Minoru's inability to use Parade provided an excellent opportunity to both bring back Minami as well as to capture Minoru without killing him.

Tatsuya was still slightly indecisive on whether to kill Minoru. This could have been because of some slight emotional attachment, but more importantly, he couldn't predict what would happen upon his death, the moment his body was destroyed.

Minoru had retained his identity upon merging with the Parasite and swallowing the ghost of Zhou Gongjin. He was very different from the deserters of the USNA Army he fought last Winter and the magicians from Stars who Tatsuya had just defeated. Though he was able to seal the magicians from Stars of First-magnitude class, he might not be able to use the same method on Minoru. Killing Minoru could release a powerful spiritual life form unable to be sealed by Tatsuya's sphere, and Tatsuya didn't want to take that risk. Tatsuya felt catching Minoru alive and putting him in a state in which he wouldn't be able to use magic was the method with the fewest possible consequences. The only problem was the difficulty of putting the plan into action.

Capturing someone alive was far more difficult than simply murdering them. Minoru's struggle in capturing Minami illustrated this difficulty. Tatsuya was not even sure he would win against Minoru in a battle for life and death if Minoru was in perfect shape; he would almost certainly not be able to capture Minoru alive, especially considering the magic available to Tatsuya. He needed to be ready to kill Minoru in the next fight regardless of the possible consequences.

Tatsuya asked his question about Minoru's condition intending to capture Minoru alive if the situation allowed it, and killing him if not. Chiho answered his question understanding this, but her answer didn't provide much information.

"It seems that Kudou Minoru's masking and hiding abilities are weakened, but it isn't known how long this weakened state will last for."

With this confirmation, Tatsuya's thought screamed, "*This is a chance.*"

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Tatsuya arrived at the Aoba clinic in Chofu exactly 20 minutes after Miyuki called him for help. Flying back from the island to the clinic actually took less time than the flight from Chofu to the island – the fact that the return trip took less time than the initial

trip, a trip in response to an emergency request from the main Yotsuba house, indicated Tatsuya's priorities clearly.

“Onii-sama!”

Miyuki ran up to him and called him in an unacceptable manner under normal circumstances – forgetting to at least use “Tatsuya-sama” showed her distress.

Thankfully, there were no magicians from the Juumonji family in range to hear her as they had already set out to pursue Minoru, but Yuuka and the Tsukuba family staff were still in place. This wasn't that much of an issue considering they were still part of the Yotsuba family, but it still would have been more desirable for Miyuki to act as her position dictated. The Tsukuba family realized Miyuki's distress, however, and didn't comment on it.

“Miyuki. I'm glad you're not hurt.”

Tatsuya hadn't planned these words in advance, and Miyuki opened her eyes in surprise, not expecting words of concern. She at least expected questioning on the events or about Minoru, so his first confirming Miyuki's condition came as a shock to her.

Tatsuya was no less surprised by his words – while his concern for Miyuki was only natural, he was surprised that he had simply said what he was thinking honestly and openly without considering the words he was saying.

“Thank you very much,” Miyuki responded.

Miyuki's response didn't make much sense on the surface, but her words of gratitude were natural thoughts to her given the situation.

However, like Tatsuya, Miyuki was surprised by her openness, and she hung her head slightly in embarrassment.

“Tatsuya-sama!” Miyuki exclaimed. “It doesn't matter what happens to me, after all, Minami-chan... !”

Her short exchange of phrases with Tatsuya managed to suppress her panic, and she regained composure enough to switch to a more acceptable title for Tatsuya. Miyuki

leaned against him and froze in a pose that seemed to call for a hug. Tatsuya gently laid his hands on her shoulders, and a slight tremor passed through his palms.

“Tell me the details later. The main thing now is to get Minami back.”

“...Can you get her back?” Miyuki asked?

“I can’t promise.”

Tatsuya could easily tell soothing lies, but he didn’t want to be insincere with Miyuki.

“Minoru is strong, and his Parade is better than Lina’s. Even with his magical abilities weakened, I might not be able to detect him.”

At this, Tatsuya paused briefly and slightly pulled away from Miyuki to look into her eyes.

“But the longer I take, the harder it will be to save her, and I might end up being too late. It would be best to go right now.”

Miyuki stopped shaking as she thought about how to respond.

“Save... that’s right. What Minoru-kun is trying... is wrong. And Minami-chan... what is she thinking...”

Miyuki’s words cast a bit of doubt in Tatsuya’s mind - Miyuki’s words made it seem as if Minami left with Minoru of her own free will - but he had enough composure to not let it show on his face. This problem didn’t have to be solved yet.

“Alright. I’m leaving right away.”

“Tatsuya-sama! Please take me with you.”

Tatsuya expected this request. Miyuki considered herself guilty of Minami’s abduction for failing to stop Minoru. However, Tatsuya didn’t yet understand her full motivation. If Miyuki had applied Cocytus to Minoru without hesitating, Minami’s feelings would not have manifested in time for her to act in such an irrational way. Even if she ended up sad because Minoru was dead, Minami would still be safe. However illogical, Miyuki felt guilty and blamed herself for Minami’s situation, so she

stubbornly wanted to correct her mistake herself. But Tatsuya did not give a favorable answer.

“I can not.”

Even Tatsuya could understand how she felt – if their situations were reversed, he would have wanted to go as well. However, Tatsuya’s plan for pursuit did not allow Miyuki to come with.

“I will chase from air with the Freed Suit. The maneuverability of the aircar leaves much to be desired.”

The refusal was not due to possible danger, but due to the lack of suitable equipment.

“...I understand.”

Miyuki was just as able to used flight magic as Tatsuya, but without a suit assisting her, she would only be a burden on Tatsuya. Understanding this, Miyuki did not beg further.

“Tatsuya-sama, be careful. Take care of Minami-chan.”

“I will.”

Answering Miyuki curtly, Tatsuya took off and flew westward.

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Compared to the Mobile Suit used by the self-defense forces, the Freed suit developed by the Yotsuba family does not have the power assistance function and has an inferior quality data transmission channel, but it provides the same amount or even higher protection in addition to its more effective stealth and ability to fly much higher.

Also, the data channel is only inferior at processing large numbers of simultaneous connections, and it has no problems processing external data under most circumstances.

The Freed suit should not be considered inferior than the Mobile suit, and its increased mobility and stealth makes it more suitable for pursuit then the Mobile suit which is specialized for fighting.

A translucent map of the terrain was displayed in Tatsuya's field of view. The map of the Boso area of West Kanto showed a red circle with a diameter of about one kilometer giving the approximate location of Minoru, based on data from a psionic radar tuned to search for Parasites.

He didn't intend to waste time near the Aoba clinic, but his conversation with Miyuki had taken 5 minutes. He was almost 30 minutes behind Minoru. Tatsuya's only advantage was that he could fly in a straight line at a higher speed than Minoru who was forced to travel on the road.

The translucent circle giving Minoru's location was moving west near Mount Takao. To catch up to him in five minutes, Tatsuya increased his flight speed to 400 km / h.

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After abducting Minami from the hospital, Minoru headed west along the central road in a car prepared by the Kudou family. It was separate to the van on which the Parasite dolls were being transported – Minoru was on the "Van Con", a closed-type wagon van in which the space occupied by the rear seats and cargo hold was converted to a livable area so that it turned out to be like a house on wheels.

The only people in the care were Minoru and Minami; the driver was a combat quinoid (not parasitized) that looked like an adult human male. Minami sat down on a long bench that acted as a bed, and Minoru took the front passenger seat.

No one was watching Minami to prevent her from escaping. The car was traveling at a high enough speed that she could not jump out without getting injured, but even if Minami was able to leave, Minoru didn't intend to follow her. If she wanted to escape, Minoru would have accepted it and let her.

While abducting her was selfish, he wasn't going to force her to do anything more now that he had escaped. All he wanted was to talk to Minami and hear her opinion without interference from Tatsuya or Miyuki – what does Minami *really* think?

"I don't want to die"?

Or "I don't want to lose my magic"?

Given the choices, "be human" or "be a magician", what would she choose?

If Minami didn't mind losing her magic, Minoru wouldn't try to persuade or force her. He would never forcefully make Minami into a Parasite.

Minoru just wanted to give her a choice. He didn't want to observe in silence what appeared to be Miyuki and Tatsuya making Minami's decision for her.

Minoru realized his decision was selfish, and being smart, he knew that abducting her from Tatsuya and Miyuki was disregarding her intentions. Being conscious of the effects of his actions, Minoru no longer wanted to restrict Minami.

He was also curious about what Minami's feelings were at the moment.

Was she angry?

Disgusted, perhaps?

Does she look at Minoru with contempt?

Minoru partly chose to sit away from Minami in an attempt to show her he was not trying to limit her. But his main reason was that his magical power was greatly diminished after being hit by Miyuki's Cocytus. He wasn't shocked by his weakness, and he had the feeling it was temporary. But his current state wasn't encouraging considering his situation. From the beginning of his escape, he felt a mechanical look pursuing him, identifying his psionic waves and transmitting them through the information dimension.

In the current situation, in which the efficiency of his Parade had deteriorated due to his drop in magical power, Minoru could not completely mislead the psionic wave detection hardware. The most he could do was reduce the detection radius to about 1 kilometer.

At the moment, he was distorting the response from himself such that the detection radius was accurate to about 500 meters. Minoru was not necessarily in the center of the circle, either – he was constantly moving the signal source to a different direction to reduce the stability of detection results. He was careful about the speed at which he moved the signal source, as well – unnaturally increasing his speed would be clearly visible, so no matter how hurried he was, he wouldn't go too fast. His only chance at getting away from the Yotsuba and Juumonji would be to use his weakened

Parade as much as he could. So, his main reason for sitting away from Minami was so that he could focus – he thought that if he sat next to her, his thoughts would automatically divert to her such that he couldn't focus on his magic.

Minoru had recently begun to feel a different look than the mechanical one from the radar – like an all seeing eye, making it even more difficult to maintain his false image.

It was Tatsuya's Elemental Sight.

Minoru understood the cause, but it didn't help him in shaking it off. Minoru could never get rid of Tatsuya's "eyes" in his current state. He had to make every effort to at least prevent him from accurately determining his location.

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Regardless of Minoru's thoughts in sitting away from Minami, she was grateful towards him for keeping his distance. She felt that if she could physically feel his warmth, she would automatically cling to him. Minami didn't trust her mental state enough for her to be able to hold herself back.

She was tormented by guilt.

She betrayed Miyuki... she could hardly believe her actions.

Why did she betray Miyuki, her mistress?

How could she betray Miyuki by defending Minoru?

"Because you like Minoru more than Miyuki."

The depths of Minami's consciousness whispered her guilt to her, eroding her mental state as she dwelled on her actions. But she still didn't agree with her other self.

She couldn't deny that she had feelings towards Minoru, no matter how much she wanted to avoid admitting it. But a part of herself still remained confident that the whispered statement was false.

Her emotions towards Minoru and Miyuki were incomparable; they were fundamentally different in nature.

Minami viewed Miyuki as her mistress. At least, in the beginning, that was all. But now she thought of her as family, as an older, caring sister. She would protect Miyuki with her life not because it was her duty, but because she wanted to in her heart. She was able to extend her limits and overheat her magic calculation area when defending against the attack by Tuman Bomba because of her feelings. It wasn't disputable that her feelings towards Miyuki existed, and Minami understood that she loved Miyuki as family. Miyuki was precious to Minami, which made her guilt towards her betrayal all the worse.

On the other hand, Minami didn't understand her feelings for Minoru – how she felt about him.

Was it love?

Was it more of an obsession?

Or did she just not want him to die to Miyuki?

No matter how much Minami thought about it, she couldn't come to a conclusion. Minami knew she liked Minoru.

She just didn't know how much.

Her thoughts had only progressed to the point at which she was just becoming aware of her feelings.

While trying to come to a conclusion, Minami tried to remember how she felt at the moment she betrayed Miyuki, but she couldn't remember what she was thinking when she stood in front of Minoru and begged Miyuki to "please stop!". All she was sure of was that given the choice between never seeing Minoru again or never seeing Miyuki again, she would give her farewells to Minoru. Minami was convinced that she still hadn't given up her loyalty to Miyuki.

Minami ordered herself not to hesitate, to believe that she still hadn't betrayed her mistress in her heart just yet.

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Arcturus decided to try to unite with his colleagues in order to complete his mission to sabotage the thermonuclear fusion reactor.

His biggest problem at the moment was finding them.

Though he had become an Astral body, he still had limitations in transportation. There weren't any physical limitations like terrain – moving over mountains or sea was about the same as flying along flat ground to him now – and speed was not an issue either. He was limited to moving at speeds he had personally experienced, but since he had been in the cockpit of a supersonic fighter, he was able to move fairly quickly. His problem was that he couldn't use any navigation systems as an astral body – he didn't know where to fly, so any attempt would be a waste of spiritual energy.

His awakening should have been noticed by his colleagues. Also, he should feel his colleagues' presence. He should have felt where his comrades were, but no matter how hard he strained his perception, he couldn't detect any sign of Regulus' presence.

"Am I no longer a Parasite?"

"Did I... become human again?"

Arcturus tried to make sense of his situation with his immaterial head; his mind, in other words.

He decided to try searching again. This time he looked for the activity of the waves of his subordinate's body by using ancient perception magic, a form of outer-systematic magic passed down among Native Americans which worked using information distance rather than physical distance.

Information distance could be considered familiarity – close friends, relatives, sworn enemies and the like who one knows very well would give a strong response through the information dimension regardless of distance. On the other hand, one would not be able to detect a response from a stranger even if they were in the same room. Information distance disregarded the physical world and was a fundamentally different type of distance.

Despite this, Arcturus still couldn't establish the location of Regulus despite the fact that they had worked in the same detachment for more than five years.

“Has he been killed...?”

Arcturus pessimistically assumed the worst.

He didn't have long to grieve, however, as he was interrupted by a sudden feeling.

“What is this? ”

Arcturus caught a familiar feeling that he had a strong connection to through his network.

“The same as at that time? ”

Arcturus had found the presence of the sworn enemy who attacked the transport plane and sealed Arcturus' physical body.

“This is the enemy.”

Arcturus knew this without even knowing the identity of the person he was against.

Not knowing that this enemy was the enemy the mission was supposed to neutralize, "Shiba Tatsuya", Arcturus rushed after his enemy flying in the sky to avenge himself and his comrades.

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Tatsuya slowed down while flying near Takao Mountain. He was tracking Minami's eidos through a filter impeding his view, watching for information related to Minami. He felt he was catching up to her.

Tatsuya would be able to determine the location of Minami anywhere on the globe with no interference – his information distance to Minami was extremely close after having lived in the same house as her for more than a year – so though Minoru was hiding her exact coordinates using his magic, Tatsuya was still able to read approximated locational information.

Minoru had assumed Tatsuya's sight was directed towards him, but in actuality, he was feeling Tatsuya's gaze on Minami because of his deep connection with her.

Tatsuya turned off the helmet's display and looked at the highway to watch for psion waves.

Even with his masking magic weakened, Minoru didn't emit extra psions which lingered and could be detected from a distance. However, he couldn't completely suppress the Parasitic waves he emitted – lingering effects from being hit by Cocytus.

This was how the Parasite radar was able to detect his signal – it picked up the distorted Parasitic waves he was emitting and approximated the source location after receiving a number of them.

“...Are these his?”

Tatsuya settled his gaze on an unusual wave wobble different from waves emitted by normal people. He lowered his altitude in order to establish the source of the psionic waves which spread around him like a mist.

Suddenly, he detected magic aimed at him from his left. He stopped his descent and began to rise sharply, as if he had jumped into the air.

Directly beneath him at the location he had been a moment ago slipped a thin strip of lightning created by magic. Tatsuya turned to face the source of the magic – the point of activation and the point of exit from the magic sequence nearly coincided. Someone had fired a lightning bolt straight from their hand as if it were a gun. This was unusual for modern magic, as weapons devices were preferred for this type of attack.

Knowing this, Tatsuya figured his opponent was probably an ancient magician. However, Tatsuya was surprised by his enemy's appearance.

His enemy – was immaterial.

The spiritual body attacking Tatsuya was in the shape of a person's physical body, exuding hostile intent towards Tatsuya.

“A psionic body storing someone's will... a ghost? No, an Astral Projection?”

Tatsuya counterattacked the next attack instead of dodging it. A sharp, rotating spear made from compressed air flew towards him.

Tatsuya neutralized the air spear directed at him by dispersing the spell as well as the plasma sparks on the surface of the air mass.

Scatter spells analyzed the structural information of magic sequences and destroyed the connections between the psionic particles making it up.

The first step of this obtaining the information describing the sequence of the magic.

In doing so, information about the caster of the magic is revealed in addition to the content of the magic.

Though the astral body resembled a human body in shape, finer details weren't reproduced, so though Tatsuya could "see" the astral body was once a human man, he couldn't establish any form of identity. All it looked like was a silhouette, like a person wearing a mask of a generic human face.

However, after gaining information about the unknown enemy from the magic they used, Tatsuya recognized his identity.

"Alexander Arcturus, first-magnitude magician of Stars."

Realizing this fact allowed Tatsuya to recognize some of the astral body's clearer outlines.

The psionic body, shaped like a man and hovering in front of him in the air, took on the appearance of a large magician whom Tatsuya had fought and sealed in a transport plane.

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Minoru detected the signs of a magical battle as soon as it started in the sky above him.

"One of them is Alexander Arcturus... he's fighting... Tatsuya-san?"

He recognized Arcturus instantly – after all, they were both Parasites, and it was he who undid Arcturus's seal, awakening Arcturus from "death". Minoru detected Arcturus from the psionic waves the astral body was releasing, as well as the fact that his release from the seal was incomplete.

The core of the astral body which had come out of Arcturus' physical body was the same as the information body formed from the Pushion part of Parasites' true bodies. The Eidos surrounding it – Arcturus – was covering, as if he were clothes for the Parasite.

Minoru felt Arcturus presence by perceiving an information body similar to himself – the Parasite – in addition to the accompanying Eidos making up Arcturus.

Minoru could only guess that the second person was Tatsuya, though his reasoning was opposite of what it was when identifying Arcturus.

Minoru could *not* detect Tatsuya's psionic waves.

He had definitely used magic, but the only psions used were used in manipulating the Eidos using magic. There were no residual effects in either the information or physical dimension.

This was not done by using high-level magic, but by high-level use of magic – Tatsuya's performance could be called an art at how skilled it was.

“...if you think about it, that has to be him. Tatsuya-san is the only one who can use magic that effectively.”

Minoru may have been overestimating him compared to everyone else. There could well be other experienced masters with skills similar to or even better than Tatsuya's. However, among magicians Minoru knew – magicians probable to be in this situation – Tatsuya was the only person in the list.

“...Tatsuya-san is chasing me.”

This fact made Minoru nervous. He wasn't sure he could defeat Tatsuya even in perfect condition, so with his magic weakened, he had very little chance of defending Minami.

Shortly after successfully abducting her, Minami would be taken from him.

Taken directly from his hands.

“This is bad.”

He still hadn't heard Minami's answer – her feelings.

Minoru had never relied on others in matters of magic. He used to rely on others physically due to abnormal pains in his body, but that was all. In magic's case, his skill had always been sufficient for the situation and he never needed to ask for help from others.

So this situation was Minoru's first experience in asking for help due to his own magic being insufficient.

“Please! ...at least for thirty minutes, please. Somehow, please stall Tatsuya-san...!”

Minoru pleaded for help from an unknowing Arcturus, who continued performing reckless attacks.

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Unlike Minoru, who detected Tatsuya by feeling the echoing psionic waves of the magical battle overhead, Minami detected Tatsuya from his Elemental Sight – his vision, his all seeing gaze pointed at her.

“...he's watching me.”

Minami felt it through her intuition rather than her magical perception. Her detection of Tatsuya was not based on anything concrete in the present – it was based on what she knew from the past. She was under his view at home and at First High. She knew he was watching because he was always watching.

Minami had crouched in fear of his gaze for the first few days, but even now she felt fear from his sight that saw all – even after more than a year.

She was never scared of being scolded, of punishment. Tatsuya never showed signs that he judged her for the things she did.

She was scared of the fact that he saw everything – every action she made. And from this, he could know everything about her character. Her quality of work, her effort.

Normally, she could hide how she felt behind her actions, but she wasn't perfect – she couldn't maintain a façade permanently. She could never relax and be content with what she was – she felt insecure that someone could see all the bad parts of her. Her incompetence, her laziness, her ugly side – all the parts of her she didn't want to see herself were now open to someone else, making it all the worse.

It seemed to her that when Tatsuya was watching, he saw so much that he knew about her insecurities – and yet she knew nothing in return.

Minami understood she was making a problem out of nothing – she knew Tatsuya's power couldn't reach her feelings, and he wasn't watching her actions enough to know all she did. In addition, after living under the same roof as him, she knew that he wouldn't use her secrets against her. But that didn't matter to her feelings – logically, she knew there was no problem, but feelings aren't logic.

Even if Tatsuya wouldn't use it against her, the fact remained that he possessed a power that could see her secrets, and even if the power couldn't look into her thoughts, it could still see the sins committed by man. Her actions were revealed as if Tatsuya was giving her Last Judgement.

Tatsuya's gaze weakened after 24 hours of not seeing his target, but this couldn't reassure her. When they lived in the same house, there was never a time where they were apart for more than 24 hours, and now...

Not even one hour had passed since Minami had betrayed Miyuki.

Her emotions were no longer limited to just despair – now she cringed, clasping her shoulders as her hopeless eyes gazed at the floor.

Minami was scared.

Not of punishment by Tatsuya, but that he would not condemn her for her sins. She was scared that he would say she wasn't even worthy of condemnation. That she would be thrown away as a useless person.

Minami was scared that she would be pushed to the side, watching from the sidelines as someone who didn't matter.



More magic was sent toward Tatsuya from Arcturus' astral body, but Tatsuya neutralized it all by interrupting and dispelling it.

All this magic Tatsuya easily neutralized using Interrupt spells and dispel spells.

Tatsuya now knew the identity of the astral body – he had identified it as Alexander Arcturus from Stars after the body first used magic.

Tatsuya was mildly annoyed at this occurrence – after all, he was on a time sensitive mission and yet his time was being wasted by an enemy who should have been defeated. However, Tatsuya couldn't just leave the fight. Arcturus used more diverse magic in his astral body than he had in his physical body. He even used outer-systematic magic to attack the mind this time. This only served to frustrate Tatsuya even more – this enemy, who he never should have had to fight again, was back for more and stronger than last time.

Tatsuya wasn't surprised by the fact that Arcturus was able to use magic without a physical body, as he had fought the true body of Parasites on multiple occasions. However, he was slightly shocked at the fact that his magical ability had increased.

In past experiments carried out in Japan, there was no indication that astral projections increased magic power or activation speed. Tatsuya had attended experiments like this twice in the past when they were carried out by the Yotsuba family. The general conclusion from these experiments was that activation speed remained the same, while power decreased.

But now, after having to neutralize heated wind blades in a state of plasma compressed via adiabatic compression, Tatsuya thought about why his opponent had seemingly increased.

“...why didn't he use this power last time?”

He should not have been limited inside the aircraft – he had shot through the plane that time and was clearly not afraid to damage the body of the craft. It couldn't have been the presence of friendly soldiers either, as Tatsuya had put Arcturus' comrade in front of his eyes. Arcturus should have at least nearly used his full power when fighting

on the plane, so his increase in strength was unbelievable. Had his power somehow increased the moment he got rid of the seal?

“Minoru must have broken the seal made by Mikihiko...”

Tatsuya could not use the ancient magic employed in sealing the Parasites, but he understood its nature. It could not be broken from the inside, so some outside force had to have freed him.

“When Minoru broke the seal, did he use some kind of spell to increase his magic power?”

Tatsuya didn't know any magic that could increase the abilities of another, but he realized he didn't know all the magic in existence. Some magic may have existed with that effect.

“...I'll think about it later.”

Arcturus attacked using bullets made of uncompressed air. Upon hitting a target, the air around the target is scattered, causing a sudden drop in pressure resulting in cooling as a result of adiabatic expansion.

Tatsuya destroyed the portion of the magic sequence which would cause the air to scatter using Gram Dispersion.

As he expected, Arcturus's interference force was wasted without causing an effect.

Tatsuya was defending by harassing the enemy rather than neutralizing magic, but even though it affected his opponent, it was still a defense. Arcturus wouldn't quit just because his attacks were ineffective, so Tatsuya needed to attack somehow.

Suddenly, Tatsuya rushed towards Arcturus's astral body using flight magic. He aimed at the Eidos storing the information about Arcturus' physical body rather than the astral body itself.

However, Arcturus had foreseen Tatsuya's attempt to close the distance, and he materialized a red-hot wall of adiabatic compressed air.

Tatsuya spread out the compressed gas by using a scatter spell, but this released the heat as the compressed air exploded outwards. Arcturus expected this to damage his opponent, but the blast wave was blocked by Tatsuya's armor. At this point, Tatsuya had approached within 10 meters of Arcturus.

Tatsuya shot a mass of psions toward Arcturus to interrupt him – Gram Demolition. If Arcturus had a physical body, all he would feel was a slight disturbance as the psions hit him. The physical body acted as a reference, stabilizing the Eidos. It didn't matter if parts of the information body were blown off as the physical body could be used to recreate missing parts. However, without a physical body, the Eidos has no way to repair broken parts, so in Arcturus's case, if his information body was damaged by pressure from a stream of psions, he would have no way to fix it.

However, Arcturus' astral body withstood Tatsuya' spell. Its shape was slightly damaged, but that was all. The information making up Alexander Arcturus had not been blown away.

Arcturus moved away from Tatsuya. He wasn't running, but he needed to make some distance.

After he felt he was a safe distance away, he released a series of thin needles made of lightning that were difficult to see. Rather than scatter them, Tatsuya evaded by maneuvering in the air, but by this time, he was too far out of range to use Gram Demolition again.

Tatsuya's frustration grew once more.

The car with Minami continued to head west, and Tatsuya was stuck fighting a troublesome enemy.

Minoru had probably prepared a shelter hidden by magic, and Tatsuya wasn't sure how long Minoru's reduction in magical power would last. For all he know, it would become impossible to track Minoru within just 5 minutes.

But Tatsuya couldn't just leave the fight. If he didn't defeat the current enemy blocking his way, he wouldn't be able to continue the chase. The problem was, Tatsuya still didn't have any idea how to defeat this opponent. Though he had a rich combat experience – he could even be called a veteran, despite his age – he had never fought an enemy like this.

He had fought magicians using astral projections in the past, but he had never fought against such a strong astral body. Astral projections were usually used to search for enemies – not for direct combat.

The astral body's natural state was tied to a physical body. Activity away from a physical body was unnatural. It was fine when using passive abilities such as detection, but actively using magic made it impossible to maintain the state for long. Even well trained magicians using this spell would only be able to carry out battles for two to three minutes. Despite this, Arcturus' astral body showed no sign of a decrease in power or presence despite having fought for more than five minutes now. He continued releasing magic at Tatsuya without any indication that he would run out any time soon.

Worse, Tatsuya had never encountered an astral body that could withstand the stream of psions from Gram Demolition. Though he couldn't destroy the spiritual body entirely with it, all astral bodies Tatsuya had previously faced would be forced back into their physical bodies after taking a direct hit.

Tatsuya tried to think of a way to defeat the enemy in front of him, but the astral body used this as an opportunity to attempt to drag Tatsuya into the illusion of madness using outer-systematic magic.

Mental interference magic couldn't be avoided physically, and since Tatsuya couldn't use any mental interference magic himself, he had no way to resist the attack other than destroying the magic itself. Each time Arcturus used mental interference magic, Tatsuya was forced to dispel the spell.

In other words, he was in a situation where he couldn't attack, and couldn't even focus on figuring out a way to attack.

If Tatsuya didn't change something, the situation would only grow worse. Tatsuya was currently neutralizing or evading all of Arcturus' magic, but if Arcturus didn't run out of energy and cancel his astral projection, Tatsuya could even lose the battle.

Once again, Arcturus used mental interference magic to attack Tatsuya – The Illusion of Chaos. It was magic that caused the subject's mind to experience psychedelic visions and sounds as if they were under the influence of a hallucinogen.

It was first used medically to treat mental disorders using the effects of drugs without their physical side effects. At that time, its name was the far more innocent “The Illusion of Disorientation”.

The magic didn’t pose much of a threat on its own, but it put the recipient at a fatal disadvantage in battle, so Tatsuya was forced to react and decompose it with Gram Dispersion. However, Tatsuya’s situation was growing worse and worse as all he was doing was reacting. He had completely lost the initiative in the battle as he waited for Arcturus’ attacks without attacking himself.

Tatsuya had to retake the initiative to get out of the impasse. Since Arcturus was using wave, energy, and projectile attacks in addition to outer-systematic magic, Tatsuya sometimes had the chance to evade and counterattack Arcturus rather than the magic, but he was too far away.

Gram Demolition had too short of a range to be effective in this situation. The spell’s effectiveness was determined by the density of psions, so as distance increased, the spell grew progressively weaker.

Usually, effectiveness of magic was not correlated with physical distance. Since magic was activated from the information dimension, magic could generally be used anywhere from anywhere. Distance was mainly an obstacle due to the feeling of the operator that the target was too far away for the magic to reach; it was a limitation imposed by the magician.

However, since Gram Demolition worked by sending a mass of psions through the physical plane, it was an exception to the general rule. The maximum range varied on the users psion count, but though Tatsuya’s psion count was impressive, Arcturus was still able to maintain a distance at which Tatsuya could not reach him.

Tatsuya’s current limit was about 30 meters. This distance restriction was unique to Gram Demolition, and it was a much more serious limitation than limitations on other magic.

Arcturus was maintaining a distance of more than 50 meters away from Tatsuya. Tatsuya had been able to approach to within 10 meters during his first rush, but his attack had been enough to alert Arcturus to the danger so Arcturus was being especially careful about keeping his distance.

Tatsuya's only way to defeat Arcturus seemed to be to reduce the distance. Since Gram Demolition had been able to inflict some damage, it would probably be able to defeat Arcturus eventually, and it was Tatsuya's only method of attack – his innate Decomposition magic had no effect on spiritual bodies.

“...but why is it not reacting?”

While he continued neutralizing Arcturus' magic, he had yet another question about his opponent.

“I can't recognize the structure of his mind? ...I can't use decomposition magic.

Since the mind is a pushionic information body? ...I can't see pushions.”

The mind was a pushionic information body, so Tatsuya couldn't see or feel it – Miyuki was better suited for that. He realized that he was weak at detecting pushions, so he answered his own question.

“...I can decompose a man's body, but I don't look directly at its structure. I can't see every microscopic cell, nor can I see the molecules making up each cell.

It's the same for other substances too. I don't recognize the components making molecular compounds directly.

When disassembling things into its components, I do not see how the parts combine – only the Eidos recording information about the substance.

I don't see the structure – I see information connecting it, and delete it.”

Tatsuya thought back to what he did when using decomposition magic.

Magic was the technology of copying, storing, and replacing information about phenomena existing in the world. The Yotsuba family didn't consider Tatsuya's decomposition – the mass deletion of information making a body – to be magic, but strictly based on the definition of magic, Decomposition was fundamentally magic.

“Despite not seeing the structure of substances, I can decompose them.

Then why can't I used decomposition just because I can't directly see the structure of the mind?

...

The body of the enemy in front of me right now – what is it?"

Tatsuya's train of thought finally started to reach a conclusion.

The body he recognized as Arcturus was a psionic structure storing information about his physical body.

The information making up the physical body was not just about the substances composing it. It wasn't yet fully clear what the purpose of psions were, but they seemed to provide a link between the material world and the mind.

Psions generally didn't interact with the material world, with one exception – psionic waves could generate and detect small electrical signals. Because of this, nerve cells could generate psionic waves, and psionic waves could generate an electrical impulse in nerve cells, allowing magicians to feel psionic waves. This two-way communication with psions provided a link between the mind in the information dimension and the body in the physical dimension.

All phenomena in the physical world are accompanied by information in the information dimension recorded by psions, and using psions to rewrite or change the information about an object changes the object. Phenomena in the physical world are intrinsically linked to the information recorded in the information dimension, so changing one also changes the other.

However, to change the information, the information must be completely overwritten. Changing information requires an interference force determined by the number of psions used to overwrite the information, or else the object will simply repair damage to its Eidos using its physical body as a reference. The object must be "convinced" that the new information is correct, causing the physical body to change in accordance with the Eidos.

In the psionic body Tatsuya observed in Arcturus, he found a link allowing the mind to work in the physical dimension.

“Why is there any need for a spiritual body need to be accompanied by a psionic information body?”

Tatsuya stopped trying to maneuver closer to Arcturus to get in range to use Gram Demolition, returning to evading and intercepting attacks. Tatsuya's intuition told him to follow the course of his reflections, and he began building a new hypothesis based on his reflection.

“This enemy is not just Alexander Arcturus – it also contains the true body of the parasite covered in a psionic shell.

The mind can't control the body directly, and nor can it directly recognize information recorded by the body. The mind – the pushion information body – gives orders to the physical body by emitting psionic waves, and receives information collected by the physical body by receiving psionic waves.

Would everything be the same if there was no physical body? The mind can't directly interfere with or receive information from this dimension, but would it still be able to access and send information?”

Arcturus's attacks suddenly became fiercer as he realized Tatsuya was no longer trying to counterattack. However, Tatsuya continued automatically neutralizing his magic, and he plunged back into his thoughts.

“The information dimension is not a world separate from this one so much as it is a platform in which information about phenomena is recorded, so the spiritual body can't access information in the same way it is in the material dimension.

Then, it gets access to both the material and information dimension using a passage formed inside a psionic structure serving as a medium?”

Tatsuya finally came up with a revelation.

“So if I decompose the psionic structure connecting the mind to the physical dimension, the mind would be cut off from the material world? ”

Tatsuya immediately decided to try this.

First, he used his Elemental Sight to view the Astral body of Arcturus. Inside, he found a structure connecting the mind with the information dimension.

The structure didn't contain information about the physical body.

It wasn't really information about the link between the physical body and the mind.

It was more like information about the gate, which connected the mind to the Idea – the platform of the Eidos – from which the magician released magic, but...

“...not quite.”

The gate existing between the lowest part of consciousness and the highest part of the subconscious is the area in the minds of magicians that released magic sequences from the magic calculation zone to the Eidos. Since Arcturus had left his physical body, he needed the function of the gate, but more.

This gate was more like a modification of the connection allowing the mind to communicate with the physical body.

“...?”

Arcturus suddenly sent a mental interference attack.

Since Tatsuya was distracted from his observations of Arcturus' Eidos, Tatsuya was a moment late. He had waited until the moment of release to catch the magic.

Tatsuya was attacked by hallucinations depriving him of his sense of direction, forcing him to lose his orientation in space.

However, after falling just two meters, Tatsuya used his own magic sequence to restore his orientation, allowing him to control his flight magic once more.

“What now ...?”

Tatsuya went back to observing the gate in Arcturus' Eidos but made sure not to concentrate too much on his observations.

The part of the spiritual body outputting magic sequences seemed to be disposable, as it only left small traces.

There didn't seem to be any activity in this connection.

But next to it, he discovered an active channel.

As he neutralized Arcturus' next attack, Tatsuya studied this passage. He used his interference force on the phenomenon almost instantly.

Arcturus continued attacking, but Tatsuya was focused enough to constantly neutralize the magic.

He might be able to find more channels if he didn't rush this fight, but he didn't have the luxury of time – he needed to finish this battle as quickly as he could in order to continue pursuing Minami.

Tatsuya directed his Elemental Sight towards the new passage he had discovered with the ability to interfere with the Eidos, analyzing its structure.

Finally, Tatsuya found his answer after devoting most of his time in the fight to observing Arcturus. He was able to understand the content of the structure because he had significant experience studying information bodies of material phenomena as well as the different structures in magic sequences.

“... this is a passage to sustain the Astral Projection spell?”

As soon as his analysis was completed, Arcturus' attacks became even more intense as if he had realized Tatsuya figured out an important key to defeating him.

His behavior was impatient.

Perhaps Arcturus had felt Tatsuya's sight, and deduced its danger?

But Tatsuya didn't change his plan of action. He continued decomposing his enemy's attacks as he prepared his own.

There were usually small differences between the Eidos of various physical phenomena, but they are fundamentally similar, and decomposing information bodies was similar to decomposing magic sequences.

Having come to this conclusion, Tatsuya finally applied his new knowledge while constructing a magic sequence for Gram Dispersion.

It took him twice as long as it usually did, but Tatsuya still completed the modified magic sequence in less than half a second. Tatsuya released the sequence of magic for decomposing information bodies into Arcturus' Eidos. Its target was not the whole Astral body, however, but rather the passage supporting the Astral Projection.

The effect... was:

He saw the passage with the power to interfere with phenomena be destroyed, and pushionic waves burst away from the corresponding location on the astral body. Tatsuya couldn't detect the particles in the waves or detect the waves as signals, but he could still sense their presence.



“Is this the nature of the power to interfere with phenomena? But these are – pushion waves?”

The power of magicians to interfere with phenomena was directly related to the goal of the Eidos being interfered with, but the magician couldn't see the event in any way other than interfering with the phenomenon.

However, Tatsuya had now looked into the structure of the channel integral to the power of magicians to interfere with phenomena – he may have been the first magician to look into the nature of interference force.

“So in magic, pushions are also used? It's not just psions ...?”

Tatsuya unconsciously muttered his conclusion aloud.

The interfering with phenomena happened instantly, so even magicians who could see pushions – those with supernatural abilities like “Crystal Eyes” – could not see their nature as psion waves.

Even magic filling a space with interference force could only be observed after the space had already changed.

There had been studies in the past about the nature of interference force, and some magic researchers did have the hypothesis that the conductor of the interference force was not a psionic but a pushionic information body – though its supporters were in the minority.

However, this was probably the first time that the nature of interference force was actually observed as pushion waves. This could be a great discovery in magical science.

However, Tatsuya's instincts as a soldier quickly overpowered his curiosity as a researcher, and he turned his attention away from the collapsing channel giving Arcturus' Astral body interference force.

The situation changed quickly.

Arcturus' Astral body stopped moving for the first time since it had started attacking Tatsuya. It hadn't just physically stopped, either – Tatsuya couldn't observe any activity from the remaining Eidos of Arcturus.

Then, the density of psions in the projection the Astral body began to decrease.

This lasted for about 10 seconds before Arcturus' Astral body completely disappeared, sucked into emptiness.

Closing the passage between Arcturus mind and physical body made it impossible from him to continue supporting the Astral projection, and his spiritual body was thrown back into his physical body.

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Arcturus felt a sudden change in his state.

“...but the battle was going in my favor.”

Arcturus though back on the battle that had just occurred once his mind accepted the darkness.

“I met the enemy of both my comrades and me.

I tried to get revenge as hard as I could.

The enemy only had one way to attack my spiritual body, and its range was extremely small. He may have a powerful means to neutralize magic, but I won't lose as long as I keep my distance and continuously attack.

At least, that's how it should have been.”

Suddenly, Arcturus felt sever pain.

He had never had his teeth removed, but he perceived his current pain as similar to the pain of removing a tooth without anesthesia.

He felt like something was flowing out of him, like blood, but more directly connected to his life.

Then his senses dulled. His sight darkened further to the point he could no longer see, and the rest of his senses suddenly died out.

He felt like reality was drifting away, but when Arcturus realized it, he had already been embraced by that darkness.

He remembered this darkness. This darkness was non-existence; void, null, nothing. He was isolated from the outside world; from everything, completely alone.

“...I returned to my sealed body?

...I thought I was dead. That the connection between my mind and body had already been completely cut off.

I guess I was wrong. It seems there remains a connection between me – my mind – and my body with a link unknown to me.”

While Arcturus thought about this, his mind was clouded and his thoughts became increasingly vague. It became impossible to think and reflect at all, and even his mind faded.

★★★

“I think, therefore I exist.” – Descartes.

Assuming this quote was true, then one would disappear as soon as they stopped thinking.

July 8, 2097. Arcturus fainted just a few hours after he had woken up. His thinking stopped, and his identity drowned in the darkness of emptiness.

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The group of Juumonji magicians chasing Minoru, led by Katsuto, chased Minoru with harsh looks.

After the decision at the Master Clan Conference, they waited near Minami's hospital ready to ambush Minoru. Their role was to capture Minoru with the help of the Saegusa family. However, the Saegusa family had been completely useless during Minoru's attack, and Minoru completely outwitted the Juumonji family in his second attack by forcing them to protect citizens from Parasites. Though the head of the Juumonji family, Katsuto, led the defense, Minoru still managed to bypass the Juumonji and approach the hospital.

The Saegusa magicians, who hadn't even made contact with Minoru, returned to their temporary residence at the direction of the family head, Koichi. This left the Juumonji family as the only magicians able to chase, so after failing to achieve their goal to interfere with Minoru's plans and capture him, they chased Minoru in cars of their own.

The pursuing squad consisted of eight people divided into two seven-seater SUVs converted from military models. The battle formation may have seemed understaffed, but the Juumonji family couldn't send more people as they were still needed to protect the capital. In addition, the eight people sent were the most elite fighters in the Juumonji family, so they arrogantly decided that more people wouldn't be necessary.

They had fallen victim to Minoru's tricks in Chofu because of the urban residents who had become hostages. In a fair battle outside the city, they wouldn't lose. Minoru wouldn't be able to pull the same trick again, so Katsuto and his subordinates kindled a fighting spirit, wanting to wash away the stain of their defeat.

By the time the Yotuba found Minoru's escape route with Parasite radar and the Juumonji family left in pursuit, 10 minutes had passed since Minami had been abducted.

To catch up, Katsuto ordered his subordinates to go as fast as they could. However, their cars weren't police cars nor ambulances, and though most of their traveling would be done on the highway, they also had to drive in and follow the rules of the city. They had to be wary of being stopped by police due to "dangerous driving", but despite this risk, they pursued Minoru west at the actual speed limit of their cars – much faster than the limit of the road.

After this recklessness, Katsuto suddenly ordered the driver to turn onto a public road. He ordered the second car to continue the pursuit while directing his own SUV on the route from Hachioji Junction to Kos Highway along the Ken-O ring road.

Katsuto had felt the signs of a fierce magical battle over the southern slope of Mount Takao.

None of his subordinates expressed doubt at Katsuto's judgement – they knew his reasoning without needing an explanation and understood it was valid.

They were still within the old administrative division of Tokyo. As Juumonji magicians – the foundations of the capital's defense – they couldn't ignore the threat of a large scale magical battle.

Juumonji magicians were not particularly skilled at passive perception; especially compared to their active power in battle, so they detected the residual psionic waves from the battle fairly late. Katsuto was the most skilled at this among them, but even he didn't detect the waves until they were fairly close to the site of the battle.

For all they knew, the battle had begun much earlier and was coming to an end. They had no way to know how the battle was progressing at their skill level. However, they couldn't pass by without even checking what was going on. The Juumonji family's entire purpose was to protect the capital from armed attacks – and magic was definitely considered to be a weapon in this case.

Kudou Minoru was undoubtedly a threat to the entire state, and they couldn't neglect the decision made at the Master Clan Conference. However, they also couldn't ignore their actual duty to Tokyo, so as the head of the Juumonji family, Katsuto had to leave to personally deal with this threat.

However, as Katsuto's SUV turned south at the Hachioji Junction, the signs of battle abruptly disappeared. The residual psionic waves stopped, and the site became calm. The battle had ended without their intervening, giving them a choice: they could continue driving the ring road to make sure the battle was, in fact, over, or they could resume chasing Minoru.

Katsuto gave priority to his duty to the capital. The last echoes of the battle had been observed in the sky southwest of Mount Takao, so Katsuto ordered the drive to head in that direction.

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Tatsuya stopped and turned around at the same time he heard a car approach from behind him, but not because he was surprised to hear the sound of a car.

It was because he felt the presence of a person familiar to him, and he hadn't expected to.

He was confused.

“Why did Juumonji Katsuto, who was supposed to be traveling west along the central highway chasing Minoru by car, drive along the ring road south-west of Mount Takao?”

Still, Tatsuya wasn't necessarily annoyed at Katsuto's appearance. It was a convenient opportunity for him to rest after his surprisingly difficult battle.

Tatsuya stood facing in the direction Katsuto would approach from and turned around. Two minutes later, the SUV approached Tatsuya and stopped in front of him.

“Shiba?”

Tatsuya didn't see Katsuto, but he assumed the person addressing him from the front passenger window was his former senpai from first high.

“Juumonji-senpai, if you're pursuing Minoru, could you take me with you?”

Katsuto responded to this insolent response in a single phrase:

“Sit down.”

Katsuto indicated a seat directly behind himself – in the second row on the left side of the car.

Not even two months had passed since Tatsuya burned Katsuto's left hand in Izu (though Tatsuya did restore his hand). Despite this, Katsuto turned his back to Tatsuya showing no signs of wariness.

Though logically Katsuto should know that Tatsuya had no ill intentions towards him, the power Tatsuya held combined with his seeming lack of emotion should still inspire fear in most people – especially after suffering from him in the past. Was Katsuto's confidence courage? Good nature? Or perhaps another way of thinking?

Tatsuya didn't know Katsuto's feelings on the matter, but he accepted the show of goodwill and sat down in the indicated spot.

“Shiba, who did you fight with?”

Katsuto's first question was about the fight that had just occurred, which was to be expected, considering his purpose for coming near Takao Mountain in the first place.

“It was a USNA soldier turned into a Parasite.”

Tatsuya had no reason to hide the details of the fight, so he answered the question honestly, but his response felt like an understatement.

“The true body of the Parasite, leaving its owner, flew all the way over here?”

Katsuto came to an erroneous conclusion, but this could probably be expected given that he had recently been forced to deal with the true bodies of many Parasites after Minoru's Parasite dolls self-destructed.

“No, it wasn't the true body of the Parasite. I don't have the ability to distinguish spiritual bodies, so I can't say for sure, but it could be an astral body that left the physical body using Astral Projection.”

After Katsuto's comment, Tatsuya realized his previous explanation was insufficient and expanded on his answer.

“Astral Projection? From a Parasite?” Katsuto asked.

“It isn't clear whether he was a Parasite or not.”

“...but you said yourself that it was a ‘USNA soldier turned into a Parasite’?”

“This was my second time fighting this adversary. The first time, he was definitely a Parasite.”

Prior to this, Katsuto asked questions while facing forward in his seat, but now he turned around. The head restraint blocked part of his face, but what remained in Tatsuya’s view was still enough to give the effect of a sharp glance.

“...you’re saying that the Parasite might have become human again?”

“I can’t justify it with anything other than my own impressions, but this possibility can’t be completely ruled out,” Tatsuya answered.

Katsuto turned forward once more, folding his arms across his chest as he sighed softly. Almost nothing was known about Parasites. The possibility of turning Parasites human again could add a new way to counter people assimilated by them.

“...was this American soldier killed?”

Katsuto temporarily postponed his questioning on Parasites to ask about the result.

“Maybe. I at least managed to neutralize it for a while.”

“I see.”

Katsuto nodded.

“As you assumed, we are pursuing Kudou Minoru. The Juumonji family has a second car at the moment currently heading towards Lake Kawaguchi based on information provided by the Yotuba family.”

Katsuto explained the situation to Tatsuya as he looked at the navigator screen.

“It will be troublesome if he goes onto suburban streets...” Tatsuya said.

“Compared to the center of the city, there won’t be much damage. Chasing him towards the suburbs can be considered an improvement, at least to an extent.”

Katsuto decided to act while accounting for the possibility of involving 3rd parties. Minoru had already used citizens as human shields when fighting near the Aoba Clinic in Chofu, so he was well aware of the possibility of him using the same tactic again.

Katsuto's eyebrows twitched, but not because he felt the situation was worse.

"They seem to have turned onto the highway, but this route doesn't lead to an urban area. They seem to be heading towards the Sea of Trees¹?"

Katsuto said this with doubt. He hadn't expected them to head away from an Urban area.

Tatsuya put on the helmet he was holding and looked into its display, looking at the same data Katsuto was.

The circle giving Minoru's location still had an error of 1 kilometer, but he was currently south of the town at the shores of Lake Kawaguchi and moving west. With this course, it was probably safe to assume that he had some kind of shelter in the sea of trees.

In the previous century, there were rumors that it was impossible to get out of the forest, but searching for someone they knew was in it with the assistance of the Parasite radar wouldn't be overly difficult.

Despite this, Tatsuya's outlook on catching Minoru and retrieving Minami was not at all optimistic.

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The van with Minoru and Minami was driving on a narrow road in the Sea of Trees.

It was a dirt road, but they didn't feel any irregularities during the ride.

¹This is also known as Aokigahara, as well as the Suicide Forest. This forest was the source of Youtuber Logan Paul's controversy in early 2018.

On either side of them were walls of trees, and above them was a green canopy, and the winding road was only one car wide, so they could only see about 10 meters in front of them at any time.

“There’s a road in the Sea of Trees at Mount Fuji?”

Immersed in her self-repressing thoughts, Minami couldn’t do anything but open her eyes in amazement.

Minami hadn’t noticed them turn onto this road, so she didn’t have much of an idea where they were. They had been moving from east to west on a road south of Kawaguchi lake and Saiko lake, after which they moved south along a road going around the western side of Mount Fuji. Considering how long they had driven on this path, when had they turned onto this road? Minami had no idea.

Since the road was only one wide, if they met a car traveling towards them, they would hit each other – the passage was too narrow. However, for the entire time traveling on this road, there had been no signs of vehicles or even pedestrians. The road was well-groomed and smooth, so it should probably have been used by tourists for walking, but there were no signs of that.

Suddenly, a spectacle appeared in front of Minami’s head as her thoughts spun.

The path suddenly opened to a rather spacious and well equipped plot of land with a one-story wooden house.

It was here the road ended – at an unassuming little house which while not luxurious, had an exotic feel.

The narrow road’s only purpose was to get to and leave this house.

The territory the house was located on was perfectly circular among the trees, and it had no fence or gate.

The van stopped in front of the main entrance, and while automatically looking back, Minami was surprised for a third time.

The narrow passage they had come through had disappeared.

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“Huh?”

Katsuto moaned with doubt in his voice.

Tatsuya didn’t need to ask him why. He felt the same way.

The small circle marking Minoru’s approximate position suddenly disappeared from the map.

Tatsuya took off his helmet while Katsuto contacted the other car by radio.

“...I see. Got it. Wait for me there.”

After completing his short conversation with the person on the other end of the radio, Katsuto turned to face Tatsuya.

“It seems like the car Kudou Minoru used to escape eventually disappeared from sight, and its signal was lost in front of a cave on the west side of Mount Fuji.”

“So they turned into the Sea of Trees, but we don’t know where they turned into it?” Tatsuya asked.

“Unfortunately, that’s how it is.”

“...there are two possible options.”

Tatsuya didn’t say anything like reproach towards the Juumonji family. He had also lost sight of Minoru.

“Yes. Either Kudou Minoru regained his magical power or hid in a shelter with a powerful concealing effect. Or both options at once.”

Tatsuya didn’t object to Katsuto’s third option.

“In any case, all we can do now is look for traces of his presence.”

Everyone agreed with this conclusion voiced by Tatsuya.

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When Tatsuya and Katsuto caught up with the first car chasing Minoru, it was already 16:20.

The summer solstice had passed, but the days were still long, so though the dense forest towered along the edges of the road, it wasn’t dark enough to require artificial lighting.

Katsuto alternated looking left and right at the walls of trees on either side, looking for any possible path, but found nothing. He sighed a little before turning to Tatsuya and asking:

“Shiba, any ideas?”

“Let me check something.”

Tatsuya went to the west side of the road and entered the forest.

After seeing what happened, Katsuto’s subordinates were a bit surprised, but they didn’t say anything as they understood what had just happened.

Tatsuya didn’t go to a gap between the trees, but to a wall as dense as a thicket. However, instead of being stopped by the solid mass of trees, he nonchalantly passed through the branches and tree trunks as if he were a ghost.

Then, he spread his arms out and slowly turned around.

His hands, half turned, didn’t touch the branches or the leaves; instead, the trees they passed through disappeared, replaced by a road only wide enough to fit a single car through.



“An illusion?” Katsuto asked the returning Tatsuya.

“Yes. It’s a pretty powerful illusion magic that can’t be detected until you get close.” Since there aren’t any traces of a magician, this was probably done using a magic item.”

“Magic item?”

Katsuto asked another question.

“I don’t know exactly what it is. It might be made using an ancient magic technique.”

“Hmm...”

Katsuto folded his arms and thought. The magic hiding the entrance was dispelled, but he didn’t know what other spells were lying ahead. In addition, this might not be the only hidden passage. There may be others, so it was impossible to be certain that Minoru traveled on this road in particular.

Still holding his arms together, Katsuto faced Tatsuya,

“We won’t find it if we search from air, will we?”

His tone dropped at the end of the end of the question, as if he was making a statement rather than a question. He already knew the answer and was only asking for confirmation. A barely perceptible bitter smile came up on Katsuto’s face. Tatsuya returned the same smile as he answered.

“You won’t.”

If this illusion could be detected from the air, reconnaissance satellites or stratospheric platforms would already have done so. Self-defense forces would not have disregarded this road. Aokigahara, the Sea of Trees, was not just a tourist spot – it was also a military facility used by national self-defense forces to train for forest raids.

To conduct exercises in a forest where an illusion could be created was a rather stupid act as it endangered the soldiers. They wouldn’t have allowed the spell to continue working.

However, this illusion was still set at this place. The self-defense forces made a fairly serious mistake by missing this illusion. It most likely wasn't due to carelessness as the military would have primarily scouted the area by air, but the soldiers were still put at risk due to the military missing this illusion.

However, looking at it from another angle, this meant that observing this territory from the sky would not reveal the magic installed here – if it could, the military would have caught it.

"Let's move forward. Going into a tiger's lair doesn't guarantee you catch the cub, but turning back now won't improve the situation," Katsuto said.

"I agree," Tatsuya responded.

Katsuto probably didn't need Tatsuya to concur to make the decision to continue, but as soon as Tatsuya agreed with Katsuto's reasoning, the other Juumonji magicians returned to their cars.

However, despite pushing on, they couldn't find anything. The narrow road suddenly cut off halfway, and they couldn't find anything even after checking the entire route several times.

Katsuto's choice to state the possibility of failure seemed to have been prophetic, as if he had jinxed the situation. Murphy's law held true for this situation: "Anything that can go wrong, will."

Chapter Two

When Tatsuya and Katsuto returned to Chofu, it was still only 8 o'clock in the evening. Tatsuya had regained enough strength to be able to fight while flying, but he rode back with the Juumonji family (with Katsuto's permission, of course) in order to not irritate law enforcement agencies.

Miyuki was waiting for him in the hospital. As soon as the car pulled into and parked in the parking lot, Miyuki, Tsukuba Yuuka, and Yuuka's guard, Ozaki Chiho, all left the hospital through the main entrance.

Miyuki looked with hope towards Tatsuya as he left the car, but she almost immediately dropped her eyes in sorrow. Once she saw Tatsuya's tense face, she was able to guess the result: the operation trying to rescue Minami and apprehend Minoru had failed.

Still, she recovered quickly from her depressed state in order to speak to Tatsuya.

“Thanks for the effort, Tatsuya-sama.”

She said this with a mostly straight face, but a slight smile showed on her face as she spoke words of gratitude to Tatsuya.

“Sorry. I failed.”

Tatsuya apologized despite Miyuki's words of thanks, but his apology seemed rude and different – as if he had no desire to correct his mistake. However, this perception was anything but correct. He regretted with all his heart that he had failed to live up to Miyuki's expectations.

“You don’t need to apologize.”

Miyuki didn’t reproach Tatsuya for his failure.

She didn’t even show disappointment.

After all, she still felt guilty herself.

“It was my mistake from the beginning.”

With a voice filled with self-incrimination, Miyuki accepted responsibility for the events that had occurred.

After giving their goodbyes to Katsuto and his subordinates, Miyuki and Tatsuya got into the aircar parked in the hospitals parking lot and returned home.

The trip only took five minutes, even when using it as an ordinary car, so there was very little in the way of conversation between Tatsuya, who was driving the car, and Miyuki, who was sitting as a passenger. They soon arrived at the apartment and entered.

“I will cook dinner quickly. Please wait a bit.”

As soon as Miyuki said this, she left for the kitchen. However, to Tatsuya, it seemed like Miyuki was avoiding him.

“There’s nothing you can do,” he thought.

He had failed to keep his promise to return Minami.

Miyuki still had her humanity, and though she was usually able to control her emotions, she still felt them. Even if she didn’t blame Tatsuya, she would unconsciously accuse him, and she would feel slightly angry around him – at least for a little while.

★★★

Miyuki understood her feelings of disappointment towards Tatsuya were irrational, so she suppressed them by blaming herself.

However, she knew that Tatsuya would notice her feelings anyway.

“Onii-sama is not to blame, because it’s my fault that Minoru-kun ran away.”

Miyuki used thoughts like these so she wouldn’t hurt her image of Tatsuya, but in turn these thoughts haunted her constantly.

This problem wasn’t one that could be easily solved, either. If Tatsuya simply told her she wasn’t guilty, she wouldn’t have any way to shift the blame from Tatsuya, which would only make her feel worse. She couldn’t accept that nobody really held the blame, so she made herself into the problem.

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Understanding Miyuki’s thoughts, Tatsuya let her be.

However, he couldn’t find the right words to say to her.

He sat on the sofa in the living room feelings helpless.

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Minoru ate dinner a little before Tatsuya did.

Like Tatsuya, he was made a meal by the girl he liked. Minoru was going to leave the cooking to the automated kitchen, but Minami insisted on making the meal despite having said practically nothing before.

She started cooking around 7 PM once they were convinced that Tatsuya and Katsuto had left, but when she finished, it was already past 8. For Minami, who was used to cooking, this was an inordinately large amount of time to cook a meal, but this was partly due to the variety of exotic spices that were available to her. In addition, the kitchen was full of specialized items used in Chinese restaurants.

Needless to say, this shelter had been prepared by Zhou Gongjin, with the knowledge of it inherited by Minoru.

He had created it by manipulating the reconciliation faction in the Great Asian Alliance Self-defense Forces. By installing magic amulets at key points and luring 16 magicians expelled from the Great Asian Alliance, he was able to use a type of outer-systematic magic fueled by human lives to create something like a parallel world in a limited space.

The house Minoru and Minami were currently in was built on a plot of land created with this method, and to protect the secrecy of the house, the workers who had built the house also became “materials” to strengthen the barrier.

As a result of all these sacrifices, the spirits protecting this place became so strong that Zhou Gongjin only needed to appear here to replace the stock of perishable goods. The spirits were more than strong enough to protect the area on their own. The only reason they didn’t harm Minoru and Minami was because Minoru had enslaved the ghost of Zhou Gongjin, whom the spirits recognized as their master. Thanks to this, Minoru was able to use an extremely well concealed shelter that he wouldn’t have been able to organize on his own.

Minami placed dishes of Chinese-style cuisine at the dinner table of the house. The dishes weren’t particularly sophisticated, but Minami was mainly experienced in cooking Japanese and European style cuisine – she didn’t have much experience cooking Chinese cuisine, so this was to be expected.

The level of sophistication didn’t matter to Minoru anyway. He generally preferred ordinary dishes to exquisite dishes. This was mainly due to the fact that he used to often fall ill, spending much of his time in bed, so he was generally served ordinary dishes despite being brought up in a well-off family, but regardless, he liked Minami’s dishes.

He probably would have liked any dish if Minami had made it.

Minami sat opposite Minoru at the table. She wasn’t stubborn enough to refuse dinner with him, but her behavior also couldn’t be called frank.

Minami gave off an antisocial impression, only answering with the minimum number of words and never taking the initiative in the conversation. Even though they were sitting opposite each other, she didn’t even look Minoru in the eyes, save for when he spoke to her. She shyly looked away, only quietly moving her chopsticks.

For a boy of his age, Minoru didn't eat much, and he ate slowly, but this was a habit from his childhood. He didn't need to eat as much when he spent most of his time in bed, so he generally ate the minimum he needed.

On the other hand, Minami ate very quickly – especially for females. Her style of eating could be called manly, but this wouldn't be appropriate considering she was female. She had been raised to be a maid from early childhood, so she was never taught to spend much time on eating, and even after living for over a year with Tatsuya and Miyuki, this habit hadn't changed.

As a result, they finished at nearly the same time – Minami ate more, but faster, while Minoru ate less, slower.

“Thanks for the food.”

“Sorry it was modest,” Minami responded.

“Don’t say that! It was delicious.”

“...thanks.”

Minami’s cheeks reddened at Minoru’s beaming smile.

“Would you like something to drink after the meal?”

At first, Minoru was going to refuse Minami’s question, but changed his mind after thinking it would be impolite.

“I think black tea would be nice.”

“As you wish,” Minami said as she got up to make it.

As she left the table, she put the dishes from dinner on the cart. The cart was a non-humanoid household-assistant robot that was used in home automation, so Minami didn't have to push it and instead followed the self-propelled cart into the kitchen.

Sighing a little, Minoru released his tension that had accumulated. He still felt awkward around Minami, so being around her stressed him slightly fearing that he might make a mistake.

Shortly after, Minami returned with a cup of black tea. She didn't use the cart this time, and instead carried the tray with her hands.

It didn't take much time for Minami to prepare the tea, but the pause was enough for Minoru to relax himself.

"Here it is."

"Thanks. Minami-san, you should sit down too."

"Okay."

Minami obediently followed Minoru's instructions and sat.

A tense atmosphere arose between them as Minoru's tension came back. He was still nervous being around Minami, and in turn his tension was transmitted to Minami. There was silence for a while before Minoru finally spoke.

"...Minami-san."

His voice was slightly hoarse, but he called her own.

"Yas? What is it?"

Her voice trembled slightly and she misspoke, but Minoru wasn't paying attention to that. He wasn't currently in a state for him to notice subtle emotions from the other side in the conversation.

If Minami had been paying attention, she could have seen he was holding his breath.

"Minami-san, I want you to tell me about your true feelings."

"..."

Minami looked at Minoru with a serious, but noticeably pale face.

“I...”

Minoru started to speak, but his throat felt dry. He hastily raised his cup to his lips to sip it and moisten his parched throat, but the hot tea burned him and he choked slightly.

“...I want Minami-san to become a Parasite.

To cure your body, Minami-san, without losing your magic, I want you to become like me.”

“...”

Minami’s face was still pale, and she didn’t know what to say.

“Minami-san, I’m not going to force you to accept my idea. It’s probably too late to say this after I kidnapped you, but I don’t want to force you to do this. I promise that I will listen to your decision.”

“...I believe you.”

After a pause, Minami accepted Minoru’s promise.

Minoru eyes shot open – he hadn’t expected her to believe him so readily.

“...thanks.”

Minami’s response calmed Minoru down, and he drank the rest of his tea. This time without choking.

“Minami-san. What do *you* want?

Do you want to abandon your humanity to be a magician, or lose your magic to live your life as a human?”

Minami looked down.

Minoru couldn’t see her face because of her hanging bangs, and he hurried to clarify his statement.

“Becoming a Parasite doesn’t erase your personality – I guarantee it. I found a way to become a Parasite while maintaining my own self.”

“...”

Minami remained silent and continued looking down. Minoru slowly grew impatient, eager for an answer.

“It’s worth noting that Tatsuya-san was most likely correct when he said that nothing would threaten your life if you gave up on magic. You can stop being a magician and continue to live as an ordinary person as well.”

Minoru looked at Minami’s hanging head with both hope and anxiety.

“...Please give me some time.”

Minami the obvious answer – or rather, the obvious lack of an answer – without raising her eyes and in such a quiet voice that Minoru had to strain his ears to hear her.

“Pl-really?”

Minoru was taken aback by her answer, and he looked sorry.

“S-sorry! This is too important a question to decide quickly!”

Misunderstanding Minoru’s surprise, Minami apologized. Minoru quickly rose from his chair and answered her.

“I’m glad you decided to think it over! I’m ready to hear your answer at any time.”

He took his cup of tea and disappeared into the kitchen, as if he was running away.

Unlike Minoru, Minami continued to sit frozen with her head down, not about to stop him.

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Tatsuya was finally able to listen to Miyuki's detailed account of the events that happened in the hospital. He didn't have to ask; Miyuki understood that he needed to know the context of what happened.

After she finished catching him up, he still had to do several things.

First, he had to send the current family head – Yotsuba Maya – a detailed report on today's events.

After that, he had to read the report sent from the main house detailing the results of the defense of Miyako-jima and the Stellar Furnace.

Tatsuya decided to leave what he still had to finish for tomorrow. He left his room and went to the dining room to quench his thirst while wearing his nightwear – a short-sleeved T-shirt and shorts.

It was already almost midnight, so it was too late to start writing a report, but nothing could have been done about that. Miyuki's feelings had a higher priority to Tatsuya than a report to the main house.

Miyuki seemed to have returned to a more or less normal state, but Tatsuya could clearly see it was only superficial. Other people could probably see that Miyuki's smile was out of willpower, as well, but they would have to try. Miyuki's current state was intuitive to Tatsuya.

In addition, it might be inappropriate to call the current state of affairs fortunate, given that Minoru had escaped with Minami, but there at least was some good news. The invasion of the New Soviet Union had been temporarily stopped, and there was no notification that this closure had been canceled.

Because of this, Tatsuya had the whole day open tomorrow without any urgent pressing concerns.

“Should I spend tomorrow with Miyuki...?”

While reflecting on how he should best comfort Miyuki, he heard the door open quietly. Since only two people lived in this apartment – Tatsuya and Miyuki – Tatsuya instantly knew who it was.

“Onii-sama...”

“Miyuki, you’re still awake?”

Tatsuya tried to keep his words from seeming condemning, but he asked a pointless question that seemed almost accusatory.

“I beg your pardon... I can’t fall asleep right now...”

Miyuki came into Tatsuya’s room wearing a nightgown over her negligee and spoke with a vaguely depressed and tired tone of voice. Her mind and body were clearly tired, but Tatsuya understood that her feelings wouldn’t allow her to fall asleep.

“Want to talk a little?”

Tatsuya approached Miyuki and stopped at the entrance to the dining room. Miyuki was standing next to the table, and she spoke when Tatsuya entered the room.

“...Yeah.”

Tatsuya pushed Miyuki’s shoulders slightly and she dutifully allowed herself to be guided into the living room.

Tatsuya ordered the Home Automation Robot to bring herbal tea and gestured for Miyuki to stay sitting – she had tried to get up from the couch to get the tea herself.

The self-propelled trolley brought two cups of tea made from a mixture of orange peel and chamomile.

Tatsuya quickly got up, took a cup in each hand, and put one of them in front of Miyuki.

“Thanks.”

Miyuki thanked Tatsuya in a confused tone, but Tatsuya ignored it.

“It’s my pleasure.”

Tatsuya shook his head with a smile on his face in response.

Once Tatsuya took a sip from the cup in his hand, Miyuki also took hers and drank a sip. Usually, Miyuki would use the correct manners to praise the tea, but this time she didn't express her impression in words. Perhaps she was tired – or perhaps she was dissatisfied by the tea brewed by the HAR.

Whatever it was from, her discontent was not strong enough to show on her face, so she had to at least find the taste tolerable. Miyuki's feelings calmed down a bit as she focused on drinking her tea.

Tatsuya's intent in giving Miyuki tea was not to distract her, but it created an atmosphere suitable for conversation regardless.

“You can't sleep because you're worried about Minami.”

Tatsuya didn't phrase this as a question, or as an attempt to clarify the situation – he knew the situation and stated it like a fact.

“Yes.”

Miyuki answered the statement anyway, not trying to deny it. She didn't want to bluff her feelings to Tatsuya, so she answered honestly without trying to pretend she was alright.

“It's... my fault... right?”

Miyuki stated the feelings tormenting her aloud.

“But Minami-chan was treated well. I believe that... I thought of her as a real family member.”

“Right. You aren't the only one who thinks that.”

Rather than make an assumption about Miyuki's feelings, Tatsuya made a statement about his own this time.

Miyuki made a barely-noticeable smile after hearing his words.

“However, I think I also understand her feelings for Minoru-kun. He caught her attention, and even if it wasn’t in a way that made her realize her love, his feelings for her were not one sided.”

Miyuki paused, hanging her head, but she quickly raised it back up and looked at Tatsuya with hope in her eyes.

“Then was I wrong in this?”

Miyuki quickly continued before Tatsuya could answer.

“Should I have ordered Minami-chan not to fall in love with Minoru-kun? Should I have made her think that Minoru-kun was an enemy who had ceased to be human, who didn’t take into account other people’s opinions?”

“Miyuki, you didn’t make a mistake.”

Tatsuya didn’t reprimand Miyuki for not doing what she had just suggested.

“Feelings come from the heart. Even though there are exceptions where values rise over time, this is mostly done without influence from others. There’s a saying that ‘the more there are obstacles, the stronger the love will inflame.’ When feelings grow into love, rational talk won’t help any more.”

“‘The more there are obstacles, the stronger the love will inflame’... indeed.”

Miyuki slightly giggled at this. Her smile was already becoming more genuine.

“Perhaps she remembered something from her past which convinced her?”

Tatsuya’s thought was accurate.

When Miyuki’s love for Tatsuya first developed, there was the tremendous obstacle of their blood relation, but Miyuki couldn’t give up her love.

The current situation, in which they lied about their blood relationship and became bride and groom, it was a miracle that Miyuki no longer had to hide her feelings. But even if this hadn’t happened, if she had been forced to marry another man, Miyuki

would never give up her feelings for Tatsuya. She would always hold onto them in her heart.

“But... does this mean that Minami-chan fell in love with Minoru-kun and prefers him instead of us...?”

Miyuki believed that Minami’s feelings for Minoru hadn’t developed this far yet. She didn’t notice when it happened, but it was too late. Should she have banned Minami from this earlier? Miyuki thought about her actions with sincere and deep regret.

“Am I too soft and indulgent?”

Miyuki asked Tatsuya how he felt about her treatment towards Miyuki.

“Do you think that because you didn’t order Minami to give up her feelings towards Minoru?”

Miyuki shook her head.

“Do I have to... target Minoru-kun with Cocytus?”

Miyuki’s question basically asked if she should have killed Minoru.

Though Miyuki’s Cocytus doesn’t necessarily kill someone, it permanently stops the mind’s activity – anyone hit by this magic will never become active again. So though Cocytus doesn’t technically kill people, it essentially does the same.

In other words, even if Cocytus does not cause death, it certainly stops life.

“If I had been in a similar situation with a technique to kill the Parasite...”

Miyuki’s eyes were glued to Tatsuya as he spoke. She seemed to approach him.

Her pose had not changed, and she hadn’t gotten up, but Tatsuya felt as if her gaze was getting closer.

“...I would kill Minoru.”

Tatsuya wouldn't let himself falter in that situation.

"But before that, I would have warned him. Unlike you, who offered him a chance to escape, I would suggest he surrender."

Miyuki's unfaltering gaze shook for a moment. After hearing what Tatsuya would have done, she might have felt guilty that instead of capturing Minoru, she offered to let him run away instead.

"So in the end, I would have faced the exact same situation you did, Miyuki."

"...I understand."

Miyuki's gaze lost its intensity, and she lowered her head.

Perhaps she was comforted by the fact that even Tatsuya would have ended in the same dilemma in her situation.

"Besides."

Tatsuya wasn't finished speaking even though Miyuki's guilt had somewhat been sated.

Miyuki looked up energetically, anxiety visible in her eyes.

She was afraid of what Tatsuya would say next, but she couldn't escape what he would say.

"If I were there at that moment, I would stop you. Just like Minami did."

"Just like Minami-chan?"

Miyuki opened her eyes in surprise.

She understood his words, but she couldn't understand why he said them.

"Miyuki. I can't let you kill someone."

Tatsuya said this in a soft voice.

Her eyes still wide, Miyuki slowly covered her mouth with her hands.

“Minami defended Minoru, covering his back. Like her, I would stop you with my back. My feelings for Minoru and Minami’s feelings for him are different, but I think that our reasons to stop you are the same: to not let you become a murderer. I don’t want you to suffer from the fact that you had to raise your hand towards a person with whom you were well acquainted.”

In other words, the life of an enemy or a random person is not equal to the life of a friend.

When thinking in terms of justice and humanism, where everyone is equal, this is an outrageous statement.

“*But it’s true,*” Miyuki thought.

Miyuki knew that it was true as she felt it herself.

“You may have made a mistake when looking at your decision as the next head of the Yotuba family. But Miyuki...”

Tatsuya looked into Miyuki’s eyes before finishing his statement.

“Yes...?”

Miyuki lowered her hands and responded to Tatsuya’s appeal.

“To me, your decision was not a mistake. You were not mistaken. That’s how I feel.”

“...!”

Miyuki covered her mouth with her hands again, this time in a sharp movement.

Tears ran from her eyes.

Tatsuya got up and walked to Miyuki.

Miyuki hugged Tatsuya, and Tatsuya wrapped his arms around Miyuki, pressing her to his chest.

Miyuki buried her face in Tatsuya's chest and began to cry, occasionally sobbing softly.

Chapter Three

Tuesday, July 9, early morning.

As Miyuki woke up, she found that her freedom of movement was limited.

She wasn't bound. She didn't have experience being tied up, but she knew it wasn't something like that.

It felt more like she was locked in a narrow cage.

Despite this, she felt no sense of danger – her position felt cozy and pleasant.

Even if she was kidnapped – which was beyond unlikely, with Tatsuya in the same house as her – she was content with her current feeling. It felt familiar; almost like being hugged tightly by her mother.

She started to fall back asleep, but when she had almost fallen back into the garden of dreams, the hold on her suddenly weakened.

“Ah, no... don’t let me go...”

Miyuki was shocked by her inner voice, which almost seemed to enjoy the suffering of cruel treatment or entrapment.

Her shock and nervousness jolted her awake, and she sat up sharply. Whatever was holding her didn't stop her from rising.

Miyuki hastily turned around to see what had been holding her.

“Good morning.”

Tatsuya lay next to her.

On the same bed.

In a panic, she turned her back to Tatsuya and heard him get out of bed behind her. She realized she still hadn't responded to his morning greeting, but she was far from a state of mind in which she would be able to give a normal answer.

Completely confused, she looked down at her body.

Her negligee was slightly wrinkled, but her belt had not been untied, and her top was still buttoned.

“Ahh...?”

Miyuki sighed, but it was not one of relief – rather, it was one of disappointment. This only served to worsen her embarrassment and her face turned red with shame.

“Sleep well?”

Tatsuya's voice came from above and behind her. He was already standing up on the other side of the bed.

“Y-yes... good morning.

Miyuki got her breath in order, stood up, and turned to face Tatsuya. She was ashamed of showing him her red face, but she felt more ashamed of taking so long to return his greetings, so she withheld her embarrassment long enough for her to respond to his second greeting. After her greeting, however, she hung her head in shame, not wanting to raise her head.

While her face was hidden in her hair, Miyuki started to recall the events of late last night just before she and Tatsuya went to bed.

Miyuki, crying in Tatsuya's arms, fell on the spot, so Tatsuya took her in his arms, carried her to her room, and laid her on the bed.

After he did this, Miyuki woke up, grabbed Tatsuya by the hand, and begged him to please not leave her alone.

As a result, she and Tatsuya slept together.

She spent that night in Tatsuya's arms.

Miyuki's face was burning all the way to the tips of her ears. Her nerves were on fire, and she couldn't even raise her head and show her face at this point.

"It's still early. You can sleep a little more."

Tatsuya said this and left Miyuki's room without asking her about her odd behavior.

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When Miyuki left her room, she met Tatsuya in the hallway. He was dressed in a workout suit and walking towards the door.

She was still in her negligee, but she had already put a robe on and brushed her hair, so she was at least somewhat dressed.

"Onii-sama, are you heading to the training room?"

The high-rise building they lived in was built to be the Yotuba family base in Tokyo, so inside it was a full-fledged training center equipped for training combat personnel.

"Yes. I will go work up a little sweat," Tatsuya answered without turning around.

Then, suddenly, as if thinking about something, he stopped and turned to face Miyuki.

"Want to come?"

"With you?" Miyuki asked, opening her eyes in surprise after hearing Tatsuya's invitation.

“Now that you’re in the third year, don’t you have less time to actively move? In addition, there aren’t any training sessions to prepare for the Nine Schools Competition this year, so you have even less chance to exercise.”

Tatsuya seemed serious at first glance, but Miyuki wasn’t fooled by this. His face looked serious, but his eyes were smiling.

There’s a popular phrase describing formal, fake smiles saying that “the smile didn’t reach their eyes,” but in this case, it was the opposite. Tatsuya made a serious face to hide his smile from the joke.

“Whatever do you mean by ‘lack of exercise’?” Miyuki rhetorically asked as she untied the belt around her gown and opened it provocatively wide.



This was, of course, in jest; after all, her negligee was still under her dressing-gown, and it wasn't made of a transparent material nor did it have a design laying large areas of the skin bare.

"I, too, take care of my beauty and my shape," Miyuki continued in a joking tone.

In response to Miyuki's unexpected teasing, Tatsuya smiled wryly.

"However, this is a very rare invitation. It would be rude to refuse. I need to get ready, so please give me a moment."

After saying this, Miyuki walked to the bathroom with a light step. Her tone made it sound like she agreed reluctantly, but one could understand that she was in a good mood after seeing her walk.

Tatsuya's slightly bitter smile turned into an ordinary one with sincerity.

Training with Tatsuya helped to distract and change Miyuki's mood such that by the time she came to breakfast, she looked much better than she had yesterday.

At least, that was what Tatsuya thought. He didn't consider that sleeping together was much more effective than the exercise they had done. He still hadn't grasped how intense Miyuki's love was and for how long it had lasted.

"Miyuki, what are your plans for today?"

"My plans for today? The school is closed today, as well, so I have no special plans..."

Miyuki was surprised by the question, and her face showed her suspicion as she answered Tatsuya. She looked him in the eye, as if she was trying to figure out his plan.

Tatsuya slightly hesitated under her gaze, but suggested:

"Then, how about we take a ride?"

"Take a ride?"

Miyuki didn't quite understand what Tatsuya meant by the question, so she asked for clarification.

"If you would rather relax at home, I'm also fine with that. If that's the case, I'll have some rest too."

After hearing this, Miyuki understood Tatsuya's intent – to spend the day with Miyuki.

"Onii-sama, I really appreciate your concern," Miyuki answered with a serious face.

Tatsuya appeared confused after being given such a serious look from Miyuki.

"Onii-sama, please instead devote your time to saving Minami-chan. I don't think that Minoru-kun will turn Minami-chan into a Parasite against her will, but we can't say for sure that he won't make a mistake due to temporary insanity after which salvation will be impossible."

"...I agree."

After listening to Miyuki, Tatsuya admitted his plan was naïve and that Miyuki was right.

"Common mistakes from accidents won't happen, but if Minami gives up her humanity, salvation will become completely impossible. I will use all my strength to help determine where Minami is hidden."

Tatsuya still hadn't finished his breakfast, but he put down his chopsticks and looked at Miyuki.

Miyuki did the same and straightened up to look Tatsuya in the eyes.

"Miyuki, will you help me?"

"If I can help you with something, I will do anything."

Miyuki said this answer without hesitating.

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By the time Minoru woke up, it was already 7 AM. Since in the past, he often spent time in bed, Minoru didn't have a habit of waking up early to exercise. Other than exercise, he didn't have any reason to get up in the morning, so he usually got up this late.

He didn't waste any time being surprised that he woke up in a different room than he had yesterday, so he got up quickly, left his room, washed, and then headed into the dining room.

Suddenly, he froze on the spot, staring at the unexpected picture in front of his eyes.

“Good morning.”

Minami turned to him and said a morning greeting from the table.

“...g-good morning.”

Minoru quickly recovered from his petrification and managed to squeeze out a last moment response to Minami's greeting.

Minoru hadn't forgotten about Minami's presence – he had already thought about her many times this morning. However, he hadn't expected to see her preparing breakfast in an apron.

Minoru usually remained at a distance from the women surrounding him, so he had very little experience with girls. This only worsened his shock at seeing Minami preparing breakfast.

“Breakfast is ready. Will you eat now?” Minami asked.

“Y-yes, thank you,” Minoru said with a stutter, as if his tongue stung.

“I hope I don't look inappropriate right now...”

Minoru sat down, anxious about his appearance.

However, Minami's face showed no sign of surprise or envy at Minoru's somewhat disheveled appearance. She was more focused on quickly putting rice and soup dishes on the table.

“...enjoy your meal.”

“Yes, thank you for the food.”

Minoru spoke this time without hesitation, seemingly having recovered from his shock. He spoke with a gracious tone and facial expression, having regained his manners.

Minami sat across from him with her arms folded together. As she took her chopsticks, she whispered in a quiet voice, “bon appetit.”

While eating, Minoru barely managed to look away from Minami. When he was younger, he often ate with his older sisters, but seeing a girl his own age eating with him at a dinner table stirred his heart for some reason.

He only managed to focus on eating his food by using his ability as a Parasite to increase his focus.

Like in their dinner the previous night, Minoru and Minami didn’t converse much despite sitting opposite each other. Minoru most often ate at the dinner table alone, so he did not have a habit of enjoying conversation while eating, and Minami generally wasn’t particularly sociable. She had only lived only as a maid just two years ago, so she was used to just grabbing a quick bite to eat in between short work breaks. Their unsociability combined with their awkwardness to almost entirely prevent conversation, and they mainly focused on eating.

The two finished eating and put down their chopsticks after a bit of the awkward atmosphere. Neither of them had brought up Minami’s choice during this breakfast – Minami because she hadn’t yet made her decision, and Minoru because he didn’t want to seem like he was forcing Minami.

“I’ll go look around a bit,” Minoru said as he got up.

He had finished drinking the tea served to him once he finished eating and wanted to escape the atmosphere. He was still very nervous being around Minami, especially after bringing up his main reason for kidnapping her.

“Okay. Be careful,” Minami responded.”

She felt the same way about the current awkward atmosphere.

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"I can't do anything..." Minoru muttered as he stood on the landing in front of the house, looking towards the sky.

The blue sky Minoru saw covered in bright clouds might not be considered real – it was created by ancient magic of East Asian origin cast 10 meters in the air to give the appearance of sky by scattering electromagnetic waves reflected from Earth's surface. This created the effect of white clouds covering the sky, despite it not actually existing. However, when considering what made the sky real in the first place, one might say that this "fake" sky was just as real as the one people normally saw by the fact that it existed and its perceived appearance was that of a real sky.

When Minoru said he would "look around", he only meant it as an excuse. While it was important to check the barrier concealing them, he didn't need to leave the house to do it. What he really wanted was to get "fresh air" and leave the awkward atmosphere.

"I really should have thought about what to do after capturing Minami."

Minoru complained to himself about his lack of foresight. Minoru had only thought of abducting Minami until yesterday. He was so focused on his desire to talk to Minami in a situation where Tatsuya would not interfere that he hadn't considered how to go about talking to her once he had the opportunity.

In general, Minoru didn't regret his focus on the mission. Minoru thought very highly of Tatsuya, and in addition to him, Minoru had to get past the Saegusa and Juumonji families as well. Minoru was probably right to devote all his efforts to actually pulling off his mission. However, now that he had succeeded, he didn't know what to do with the awkward atmosphere.

Minoru was convinced that Minami's best choice was to become a Parasite, but he didn't want to pressure her. He would treat Minami's opinion with respect, regardless of what it was – if she decided that she wanted to be free, he would even release her back to Tatsuya.

Minoru wasn't sure why he was willing to go so far just to give Minami an option. He still wasn't necessarily honest with himself about his feelings, even after facing them for the entirety of the mission. Perhaps this was part of what caused the weird atmosphere in the first place.

Minoru's opinion was that while turning into a Parasite inevitably changed one's body, it was a worthy sacrifice to keep one's magic. Minoru was certain that Minami's personality would not be eroded. He was confident that even if Minami would struggle to keep her individuality alone, with him there to guide her, she would be able to keep her ego intact.

Minoru's only course of action to hear Minami's opinion would be to wait for her to make a decision. He knew that she would be at a loss about what she should choose.

However, he had no idea what to do until she made her decision.

It was only now that Minoru realized just how little he had planned this through.

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The house Minami was in looked like it was built about 20 years ago. The kitchen equipment had quality similar to restaurants, but it was all outdated. Despite its age, however, nothing in the house was worn out, as if the entire house was being actively maintained. Perhaps it was being maintained with some sort of magic.

In any case, when she used the equipment, it worked fine. She didn't run into any issues while cooking. The dish washer worked as well, but Minami chose to do the dishes by hand any way.

She wanted something to distract herself.

Minami sighed, unconsciously stopping. She didn't use the automated equipment because she didn't want to focus on the guilt she felt towards Miyuki, but unfortunately the distraction was ineffective and she thought about her actions anyway.

“What does Miyuki-sama think of me now?”

Minoru probably would have been shocked if he looked into her mind. He expected her main dilemma to be her decision, but her choice had essentially disappeared from her mind. She was entirely focused on Miyuki at the moment.

Rather than think about what she should do now – agree to become a Parasite or refuse – Minami’s mind was filled with remorse.

It hadn’t just started now. Minami had been drowning in the depths of regret since yesterday.

“...it was betrayal.

...I betrayed Miyuki-sama.”

If she had been stopped in that moment by Miyuki, Minami would not be suffering so much right now. She didn’t understand her thoughts at that time and looked back with the clarity one has after the events have passed with the knowledge of the effects of their knowledge.

“What was I thinking then?”

Now that Minami had realized the effects of her actions, she couldn’t understand why she acted as she had. This was only helped by the fact that, like Minoru, she wasn’t being honest with herself.

But regardless of her current feelings, Minami had still gone with Minoru after making a split-second decision purely based on her feelings.

In other words, Minami *wasn’t* thinking then, and that was exactly why Minami couldn’t understand her actions.

Minami decided to try to remember the events right after she stopped Miyuki.

While covering Minoru’s back, she stared at Miyuki as if she were an enemy.

Anyone who saw this would conclude that she had betrayed Miyuki completely.

After all, while looking at her actions, Minami thought so too.

“Forgive me.

Forgive me!

Miyuki-sama, forgive me...!”

Minami begged for forgiveness in her thoughts.

“I did something that can’t be fixed.

How can I ever apologize for that?

How can I compensate for that negligence?”

One by one, negative thoughts arose, reflecting Minami’s desire to be punished. Unconsciously, Minami must have thought that punishment was a payment for forgiveness.

Minami was so terrified of being abandoned by Miyuki to the point that she could barely function.

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The goal of preventing Minoru from abducting Minami had not been achieved, so yesterday, the plan to use Minami as bait in order to capture Minoru had ended in complete failure.

However, this only bothered the Ten Master Clans as much as any failed plan. They didn’t care about Minami – they only saw Minoru’s attempts to kidnap her as an opportunity. They were only after Minoru because his abilities after becoming a Parasite could cause significant social unrest.

Similarly, the Sword Corps of the self-defense forces were hostile to Minoru only because he was the criminal who had killed Kudou Retsu. Their anger was not at all connected to Minami – they hardly cared about that.

The Sword Corps' anger was especially intense because Minoru was Retsu's grandson. Killing a relative was an unforgiveable crime, and after hearing that Minoru was the family member Retsu loved most of all, their desire to avenge him grew even more.

Still, their anger didn't really matter to the self-defense forces as a whole, and they only gave the go-ahead to send the pursuit squad at Minoru because of his danger to the public. Their motive was the same as the motive of the Ten Master Clans. They targeted him because they judged him to be a threat to the entire state rather than out of personal interest.

Since neither the Ten Master Clans nor the self-defense forces cared about Minami, they weren't going to stop targeting him just because one plan had failed.

July 9, 8 AM.

A platoon of strike infantry stood on alert at the foot of Mount Fuji, only having received a hint about Minoru's location from the Ten Master Clans.

Chiba Naotsugu and Watanabe Mari were selected as participants in the operation to capture Kudou Minoru, despite still only being students in the Academy of Defense.

They were currently sitting in a conference room at an urgent meeting.

Jul 9, 8:30 AM. Appointed time.

The rear door of the conference room opened, and the commander of the platoon appeared. Naotsugu and Mari stood with the rest of the soldiers and saluted the commander.

The commander sat down at the back, and after a brief introduction, addressed the main topic.

"We have obtained the location of Kudou Minoru from Juumonji Katsuto-dono."

Naotsugu and Mari heard whispers around them. The squad they were in were called the Sword Corps because the unit was made of magicians who used kenjutsu – magic

skills incorporated into close combat fighting. Since the squad was made of magicians, everyone in the squad naturally knew the names of each of the heads of the Ten Master clans.

In addition, they learned kenjutsu from the Chiba family, which was why Naotsugu and Mari were assigned to this operation despite only having a general respect for Kudou Retsu.

“Yesterday, Kudou Minoru showed up in Chofu. He was last seen on a road in the Sea of Trees.”

After hearing this, the soldiers grew even more angered and their voices grew. They were indignant because of their stained pride.

This platoon of strike infantry was not located in this territory to prevent an invasion of Tokyo, but rather to quickly mobilize after receiving a clue about Minoru’s whereabouts. In addition, the information they had last received about Minoru was that he was allegedly still hiding to the west of the Tokai district, so they didn’t need to be ashamed that Minoru had showed up east of them and slipped past them.

However, their pride was still stained from the fact that they allowed Minoru to enter the capital right under their noses. They weren’t convinced by the excuse that they had a different goal.

The alleged location of his shelter also contributed to the soldiers’ nerves.

The Sea of Trees was located right next to the East Fuji training ground. Minoru seemed to not care at all that the Sword Corps were after him. He might not have even known this unit was looking for him, but this didn’t exactly help their pride – now they had the inevitable feeling that “he doesn’t amount us to anything.”

“Juumonji-dono didn’t give a definite conclusion that Kudou Minoru is hiding in the Sea of Trees, but based on the data we obtained, the probability that he is located there is quite high.”

At this, the soldiers completely stopped whispering.

Everyone gave the commander their attention.

“Today at 09:30, we will start the search of the Sea of Trees. By the time we start, each participant should know their area of responsibility as well as the search procedure. That’s all.”

The eyes of the soldiers lit up at this development in the search.

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At almost the same time that this went on west of Tokyo, there was a major development in the sea east of Kanto.

The USNA’s Independence aircraft carrier should have left the Yokosuka port to return home, but it instead returned to Boso.

In accordance with the US-Japan military alliance, they were joining the battle against the invasion of the New Soviet Union – at least, this was the main point of the message brought to the Japanese government.

Their offer to support in order to fulfill their obligation as part of the alliance wasn’t incorrect, but their failure to express the same intent the day before was.

The government even raised doubts about the seriousness of this offer of assistance, but the most important thing to avoid during a war was isolation. The days of Japan’s isolationism were long gone, and with its current national resources, Japan would not be able to afford a policy of isolationism. In addition, the war was against a great power – the New Soviet Union – so they couldn’t just ignore or refuse war.

The reason for these thoughts was the outrageous attack on Miyako-jima by vessels affiliated with the USNA Navy.

There were some in the self-defense forces that believe the USNA should be forced to publicly apologize for the attack on Miyako-jima, but only a small minority in the self-defense forces held the opinion that an apology was sufficient. Even the leader of the hawk faction – the main faction of the war – wasn’t seeking an apology.

Invading a foreign territory couldn’t be settled with words alone.

What most of the self-defense forces wanted was damages – rights to resources, consent to unfair and unprofitable trade, diplomatic conditions, etc. They felt it was necessary to demand useful materials and financial apologies that the winner imposes on the defeated as if they didn't, it would be like an invitation for future invasions – and not just from the USNA.

However, with the current international situation, Japan had to avoid hostile relations with the USNA. If they wanted to demand damages for an attack, Japan had to prepare for hostilities against the USNA. They had no way to do this in the current situation.

Everyone among the higher ranks of the self-defense forces understood this, but the highest shame for any military was being forced to pretend that there was no invasion of sovereign land. Still, in order to conduct military affairs to their advantage, the high ranking officers in the self-defense forces had to restrain their emotions.

Because of this, many executives in the self-defense forces suppressed their feelings of disappointment, and many soldiers felt indignant when the Independence proposed to join the war.

Officers in the 101 Brigade were aware of the invasion of USNA agents turned into Parasites at Zama Base.

Since they were all Parasites, there was a natural connection to the attack on Miyakojima.

This in turn connected it to the Independence Aircraft Carrier. The transport ship Midway had met the aircraft carrier at sea. They couldn't be certain that anything other than the ships approaching close to each other had happened, but there was also a lack of evidence proving they weren't connected.

“Well, Your Excellency Saeki, do you think that the participation of the Independence in the war was an excuse for the agent to infiltrate?”

In the commander's room of the 101 Brigade, Lieutenant Colonel Kazama stood in front of Major General Saeki's desk with a confused look.

Kazama had phrased his comment as a question, but it was rhetorical. The answer was already known, and he only phrased it as a question because it was customary when inquiring information from a senior officer.

“They’ll act as reinforcements. Even if they don’t open fire, they’ll still pressure the New Soviet Union,” Saeki responded.

“But that isn’t all, is it?” Kazama asked. Once again, he knew the answer, but phrased it as a question.

“Precisely.”

Saeki nodded and let out of a sigh.

“An attack on our territory is never acceptable, even if it a remote island. However...”

Saeki hesitated after saying this.

“However...”

Kazama prodded Saeki to continue since her speech ended on a transition.

“It’s hard to deny that we have an element stimulating the USNA. Recently, his behavior is too much even from my point of view.”

“Do you mean the Special Officer – that is, Tatsuya?”

Kazama didn’t hesitate to blurt the name of the person a higher official had blurred the name of.

Saeki sent Kazama a reproachful glare, criticizing him, but she saw no signs of guilt on Kazama’s face and sighed again.

“That’s right.”

She reluctantly admitted that Kazama wasn’t wrong.

“I think Tatsuya has his own valid motives.”

“I’m having trouble following that line of thinking.”

Saeki criticized Kazama’s opinion with a slightly stunned voice.

“Of course Tatsuya has his own motives, but no matter the reason, it isn’t forgivable for an individual to hide an escaped nationally certified Strategic-Class Magician.”

“It’s like someone helping a missile submarine escape,” Kazama said without any emotion.

“Does he really agree with him, or is he just assenting?”

Saeki tried reading Kazama’s expression, but she couldn’t see through it.

“That’s why I don’t think we can afford overlooking agents jumping about because of it.”

“Precisely, Lieutenant Colonel,” Saeki responded. “When I put forth a request, the Intelligence Department was in the process of preparing surveillance on the Independence.”

“Are you trying to be in the Intelligence Department’s debt?” Kazama asked.

“Your concern is unnecessary. They owe me far more than this.”

Kazama would have whistled if he lacked discipline.

“What do you want from me?”

Instead, Kazama’s reaction was to ask about the contents of the mission.

“If it becomes clear that the agent has landed, then you should quietly incapacitate them,” Saeki responded.

“Quietly, that is,” Kazama said, somewhat sarcastically.

He didn’t say it, but he meant that it would be difficult.

“I understand. However, I think the Intelligence Department will intervene before that.”

“If the Intelligence Department could handle this on their own, I wouldn’t be here.”

Saeki paused, staring at Kazama with a look that seemed to say, “you know what I mean.”

“...don’t let Tatsuya create more problems?”

Kazama went back to phrasing his answers as a question.

“More than that, I don’t want our relations with the USNA to worsen because of the views of private citizens.”

Saeki indicated that she wasn’t just worried about Tatsuya alone.

She didn’t want to allow the Yotuba any selfishness.

Chapter Four

Miyuki formally received the notification informing her that First High was canceled shortly after 8 o'clock in the morning, but she expected this so her plans didn't really change. First High starts lessons at 8 AM, so the notification would have been too late to start morning classes, but the school's management could still have sent a notification about resuming classes in the afternoon.

July 9, 2097, 9:00.

Tatsuya and Miyuki returned to their rooms to put their thoughts together before meeting back with each other and sitting on their knees opposite each other.

They both sat properly in Seiza, but there wasn't any special grace to their clothing or accessories. Tatsuya was wearing a different short-sleeved T-shirt as well as long trousers that reached to his ankles while Miyuki was wearing a light summer dress. The dress was relatively provocative; it was quite frank and emphasized the lines of her body, so she wouldn't have dared wear it in front of anyone besides Tatsuya. Despite her appearance, Tatsuya didn't even lift an eyebrow when he saw her.

They didn't normally use the room they were currently in, but it was well-maintained enough for it not to contain any dust, so they sat on clean tatami and didn't use cushions.

Tatsuya's expression was emotionless, as usual, contrasting Miyuki, who was slightly red in face.

"I dressed like this because you told me to choose something comfortable for everyday wear... Onii-sama, m-I don't need to need to take this off, do I?"

Miyuki said this in an embarrassed voice, but she didn't put her head down or even take her eyes off Tatsuya. She had faced a similar situation in February of the same year when tracking down Gu Jie, so she somewhat knew what to expect, but this only fired up her nerves.

Tatsuya needed to take his "gaze" off of Miyuki in order to fully utilize his Elemental Sight. However, when he did this, he could no longer feel Miyuki's presence in the same way, and found himself unable to focus. In order to still feel Miyuki when he wasn't watching her, he needed to close the physical distance. Back in February, he and Miyuki stripped almost completely – leaving just their undergarments – so Tatsuya could feel her skin. This allowed him to dedicate his full attention to searching for Gu Jie.

Miyuki assumed the same would be necessary today to achieve the same results, thinking that the process needed to be repeated.

She denied any desire about wanting to appear in front of Tatsuya in her underwear.

Regardless, Tatsuya understood what Miyuki meant, so there weren't any misunderstandings.

"Not this time. Unlike last time, we got rid of the Pledge."

"Ah ..."

Miyuki was greatly embarrassed after hearing Tatsuya's answer. Her shame grew to the point that she could no longer look into Tatsuya's eyes, and she shyly folded her arms together, laid them on her hips, and lowered her head. She unreasonably worried that she would be perceived as some kind of exhibitionist, and her ears – visible through the gaps between her hair – turned red.

After seeing Miyuki's state, the atmosphere became slightly awkward and Tatsuya also began to look slightly embarrassed. He remembered when they searched for Gu Jie, and his own shame built up slightly. He may have been limited in his emotions, but he still had a sense of shame – especially in front of the one girl he consciously cared about.

Realizing that the atmosphere would only get worse if he didn't do anything, Tatsuya spoke.

“Let’s start searching.”

Tatsuya announced this in a serious military tone and closed his eyes until they were only half open.

He left them slightly ajar to continue observing Miyuki with his sight. He couldn’t do this in Gu Jie’s case, as that time he had to completely enter the information dimension, becoming blind to the real world, but this time he could focus some attention on ordinary sight and didn’t need to physically feel Miyuki.

With ordinary sight, he couldn’t be completely confident that danger wouldn’t approach Miyuki, but this time that was also different – he could maximize detection in both the material and information dimension.

Still watching Miyuki physically, Tatsuya sent his sight to the information dimension.

His search target was Minami’s Eidos.

Tatsuya didn’t need to prepare an item that had a deep connection with Minami because he had ties to her himself. Following the path of the bond between them, Tatsuya overcame the space separating them and found her.

Not even five minutes had past since he started searching when he found Minami’s information.

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Elemental Sight was a rare ability, but Tatsuya wasn’t the only user. Magic was fundamentally temporarily recognizing the Eidos of a phenomena. Magicians can perceive this information to varying degrees depending on the users skill, so Elemental Sight – the highest possible ability to perceive information, the ability to completely perceive the information dimension – was available to every magician.

If a magician improves their ability to perceive information, they can gain Elemental Sight. Since Minoru was already able to perceive information at a high level, his transformation into a Parasite increased his level enough to gain Elemental Sight.

“That is? Tatsuya-san?”

Observing a target has a slight impact. Similarly to how radar slightly impacts the surroundings through the radio waves released, observing targets through the information dimension slightly changes the information. However, unlike radar, observation through the information dimension only adds the information that the target is being observed – it doesn’t really use waves.

The change was very minor, but since Minoru was also a user of Elemental Sight, he was able to detect the change.

By the time Minoru detected it, Tatsuya’s gaze was already approaching Minami. Minoru didn’t know this, but he automatically shifted his sight to Minami out of reflex and realized that Tatsuya was trying to find Minami’s location.

“That’s bad...!”

Tatsuya found Minami at almost the same time that Minoru noticed his search. The time difference between the 2 events was less than half a second, but Tatsuya had already looked deeply into Minami’s Eidos in that amount of time.

“We can’t allow him to reveal this place!”

If he had time, he could follow the path Tatsuya used to find Minami backwards and counterattack him with mental interference magic. However, Minoru was currently occupied with trying to hide the location of the shelter.

The shelter was guarded by multiple defensive barriers built by Zhou Gongjin. It was a large scale barrier created with Continental Ancient Magic “Seikirei Hachijin” – Stone Sentinel Maze – which hindered both approach from the ground as well as interfering with physical and magical searching methods from the air.

Despite its strength, however, it would not fool Tatsuya.

Minoru understood this because it also wouldn’t fool him.

Minoru had expected that Tatsuya’s gaze would quickly pierce Zhou Gongjin’s barrier.

Since the barrier only hid the location, once it was found the barrier was completely useless. It didn't provide more than an illusion preventing approach. While Minoru could try to distort Tatsuya's senses by using Ghost Walker, this wouldn't stop Tatsuya for long.

After considering his options, Minoru used Parade on Minami to disguise information about her. However, since Tatsuya had already found her in the information dimension, rather than completely disguise her information, he only focused on one detail.

The information about her location.

While Tatsuya would still find her approximate location this way, Minoru could shift her location relatively far away.

Minoru changed the information about her location to appear 10 kilometers away at Lake Kawaguchi. At the same time, Minoru felt Tatsuya's gaze shift away from his location in the Sea of Trees. Parade had at least temporarily prevented Tatsuya from finding Minoru.

However, Minoru didn't feel any relief at this.

Minoru had only faked Minami's location. Tatsuya was still looking at Minami's information body.

"It's too early to relax," Minoru muttered, warning himself.

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"Minoru used Parade...?"

Tatsuya realized this as his sight was shifted away from Minami's location.

"Is Minoru-kun trying to stop you?" Miyuki asked.

Hearing Tatsuya's mumble, Miyuki automatically asked him a question despite her attempts trying not to distract him. Until now she had even tried not to make noise breathing.

“Yes.”

Tatsuya opened his eyes completely for a moment to answer her before closing them to a half-open state once more.

From the beginning, he had accounted for the fact that Minoru would use Parade. If he hadn't expected him to resist, he wouldn't have needed to prepare this much.

Tatsuya had problems getting past Parade in the past. Since he usually fought around his ability to read Eidos, Parade was a large counter to him.

“But I’m not going to lose him for long.”

He had expected Minoru to intervene, so he had obviously prepared countermeasures.

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“Huh? What’s he looking at?”

Suddenly, Tatsuya’s gaze split in two. Minoru was puzzled after sensing this.

Tatsuya was still looking at Minami’s Eidos, but now he had added one more look.

This look was focused on Minoru.

“No... that’s not quite it. Is he watching my magic?”

Sequences of magic are recorded on the surface of the phenomenon they are affecting. The sequence for Parade covered the outermost layer of the Eidos – the layer connecting it to the physical world.

Parade worked by pasting new information on the outer layer of the Eidos, causing the world to incorrectly perceive the phenomenon as something other than what it was. Parade is able to deceive the world because it comes into direct contact with it. That’s where its name comes from – the object of Parade displays new, false information to the world attracting attention over the real information.

This makes it a difficult spell to counter. The sequence of magic was on display – but it appeared to be in the wrong information. Its actual location was on the Eidos of the object that was hidden.

Since the only way to view things in the information dimension was to know where it was, it was impossible to find the object based on the information presented to the physical dimension.

While in principle, information could be gathered about hidden phenomena through information links, time passes. Everything changed constantly, so unless one knew how to view information from the past, it wasn't possible to find information about something of which the location was unknown solely through information links.

“Even Tatsuya-san can’t go against the passage of time.”

Minoru based this thought on how he understood Elemental Sight.

“But in any case, I should maintain Parade until Tatsuya-san looks away.”

Minoru concentrated harder to make sure his magic would not be interrupted.

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Minoru was currently mistaken about two things.

His first mistake was assuming that his Elemental Sight was the same as Tatsuya's.

Elemental Sight – the Eyes of the Spirits – was a broad term to describe someone who could look into the information dimension. The nature of people's sight could differ greatly.

For example, Minoru was very skilled in passive perception. When he was in Ikoma, Minoru detected the clash between Tatsuya and Bezobrazoff occurring in Izu, despite the locations being nearly 400 km apart. On the other hand, Tatsuya must consciously focus to detect magic, but when he focused, he could gain far more detail – even to the point of going against the passage of time and viewing a log of Eidos changes.

Minoru was fairly skilled at sensory magic. Parade worked by substituting information about a target to fool an opponent's senses. Because of this, Minoru's Elemental Sight manifested as a passive detection skill.

Similarly, Tatsuya's restoration worked by reverting Eidos changes to a point, going against the flow of time. As a result, Tatsuya's Elemental Sight allowed him to read Eidos changes.

In other words, Elemental Sight manifested differently based on the skillset of the magician using it. Elemental Sight was the highest level of a magician's ability to recognize Eidos, but it varied for each magician.

However, Minoru could hardly be blamed for failing to realize this mistake. Elemental Sight was an extremely rare ability, as only a very small number of magicians developed their perception ability enough. Minoru never had the chance to compare his perception ability to someone else's, so it only made sense for him to assume his ability was the same as anyone else's.

Minoru was not quite so innocent about his second, more significant mistake. This mistake was that he had incorrectly assumed Tatsuya's goal in splitting his sight.

Tatsuya knew how difficult it was to directly detect Parade's magic sequence. His personal experiences had painfully forced him to learn. So, taking into account his past obstacles in order to avoid repeating past failures, he searched for traces of the information masked by the Parade sequence rather than the sequence itself.

Phenomena are accompanied by information recorded by psions, and magic fundamentally worked by using psions to change the recorded information. Since Psions fulfilled both of these roles, using Psions to modify phenomena caused the Psions to record traces of the magic.

Tatsuya had noticed this law during the battle with Arcturus. How ironic that the battle with Arcturus, which gave Minoru the opportunity to escape, also gave Tatsuya the information to find him again.

Tatsuya was searching for a record of the magic rewriting the location information in the information dimension. He was limited to reading changes up to 24 hours in the past, but in this case he only needed to go back a moment.

However, simply detecting traces of the modification of phenomena doesn't allow Tatsuya to interrupt Parade.

Tatsuya was able to find Minami's Eidos using his Elemental Sight, but her location information had already been overwritten by Parade. Parade's sequence had been pasted over the real coordinates, but the substituted coordinates didn't show any sequence of magic that could be neutralized.

That's where reading the history of changes becomes useful. The information that something changed isn't just located on the actual Eidos – it can also be found on the one presented by Parade in the wrong location. By analyzing the history of the changes, Tatsuya is able to get information about Parade's sequence of magic.

Tatsuya obtained the necessary information indirectly, based on the changes made by a sequence of magic.

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“...kuh!”

Minoru gasped after he felt a sudden pressure.

“*What was that?*”

He realized the pressure he had just felt wasn't physical. It wasn't affecting his physical body, but he had felt a strong feeling of oppression in his mind.

“...!”

Then the pressure hit him again. He didn't cry out this time since he was ready for a second attack, but the tension he felt in his head was still very powerful.

He couldn't ignore the pressure he now felt, but before searching for its nature, Minoru checked whether Parade was still in effect.

He found that his magic had not been interrupted. He was worried that he had accidentally released the magic in his shock. However, he was far more surprised by what he found than he would have been if had only dropped the magic sequence.

“Huh?”

Parade still functioned in the sense that it hadn’t been cancelled. However, Minoru could clearly see that it could break at any moment.

The sequence of magic had become fragile, as if it had been eroded.

Magic sequences disperse if the magician controlling them stops them, but Minoru hadn’t felt like he lost control, and the sequence still existed – it hadn’t completely dispersed as it should have if he had released his control.

“Why didn’t I notice it was in this state?”

As he fell into confusion, Minoru asked himself this and poured magic power back into Parade. Rather than support the existing spell, he put the same one over it.

Generally, rewriting one magic with another was a bad choice as each rewriting requires more and more intervention force to have an effect – each time, more Psions were added, and though Minoru didn’t know this, more changes were recorded. This had been the problem Tatsuya had to solve when creating flight magic.

However, when magic giving the same result is used to rewrite an existing sequence, the required intervention force doesn’t increase.

Minoru rewrote the old sequence of magic, which was on the verge of destruction, with a new one masking information about the Eidos’ location. Parade regained its strength, and Minoru sighed in relief.

However, suddenly...

“Wow, again?”

The pressure increased for a third time, this time stronger than the second.

Instead of checking the state of Parade's magic sequence, Minoru immediately rewrote it.

"Is this Tatsuya-san's attack?"

Minoru could only think of one cause as he made sure the new Parade sequence created the necessary effect.

Minoru knew Tatsuya was able to use Gram Dispersion – the most effective countermagic. Since this spell directly destroyed the sequence of magic, it was impossible to defend against.

However, if one couldn't target the sequence of magic, Gram Dispersion couldn't be used. In addition, using Gram Dispersion wouldn't leave the sequences of magic in a dilapidated state – it would completely disintegrate them, leaving no trace.

"But if it isn't Gram Dispersion, what is he doing?"

He could feel his sequence of magic weaken, becoming fragile, but he couldn't understand its cause.

Magic was not built consciously, so even the magician using the magic doesn't know the details of its construction. They only know what it is and how it works in general – they didn't know the specifics. Minoru was not special in this regard because of his Parasite abilities. He didn't know precisely what changed in his sequences of mag-

“...!”

Unfortunately for Minoru, he didn't have time to calmly reason.

The pressure causing the sequence of magic to weaken returned periodically, and Minoru had to cope with this each time.

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"It still doesn't compare to direct targeting."

Tatsuya was detecting and erasing traces of the magic sequence of Parade by going back through the information recorded in the psions about the magic used. However,

the result wasn't satisfactory for Tatsuya. He could only indirectly analyze the structure of the sequence of magic, so the accuracy of the information he found dropped significantly when compared to directly observing the sequence.

In addition, he was viewing a past version of the magic sequence. Even if it was only a moment's difference, the sequence wasn't quite the same, so Tatsuya's attempts to disperse Parade weren't working. He could only erase parts of the sequence, hence causing the crippled state Minoru found the sequence in.

Still, he definitely felt a response. He knew he hadn't missed, so he was definitely doing something. He still couldn't determine Minami's location, however.

"The psionic connections are being damaged, but I still can't completely disperse the sequence... isn't that the whole point, though?"

Tatsuya could recognize and comprehend the details of magic sequences with his power of perception obtained through Decomposition and Regrowth, but that was only an option for him when he could see the target. He was limited to speculating about the contents based on the response after using the magic.

His guesses wouldn't always be correct, but he could at least make progress. He couldn't rely on his eyes, so he advanced blindly.

It was with that mindset that Tatsuya began his fifth attack.

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"It's getting harder and harder as this goes on..."

Minoru defended against Tatsuya's second attack on Parade's magic sequence. Well, he considered it defending, but it was really just taking the attack and then rewriting the sequence. The feeling of pressure on Minoru's mind had become more like heavy blows crushing him, and he slumped on one knee. He was exhausting himself both physically and mentally by having to reactivate his magic repeatedly, and the attacks by Tatsuya were taking their toll.

"...Haa, it's good I went outside."

He laughed at his pitiful state.

“It’s good Minami-san doesn’t have to see me like this.”

Concluding his moping with that thought, Minoru put a hand on his knee and stood up.

“I haven’t given up yet.

Tatsuya-san can’t keep this up for ever.”

Minoru made a resolution to keep going until Tatsuya exhausted himself.

Minoru didn’t have any direct evidence supporting either part of that statement – he couldn’t be sure that the attack was from Tatsuya, or that Tatsuya would run out of magic power. However, he was sure that was the case – he didn’t think anyone else would be able to find a way to attack through Parade like he had, and he didn’t believe Tatsuya could attack him repeatedly without exhausting himself in the process.

“I can’t afford to lose. I still haven’t received Minami’s answer. If I surrender here, all will be meaningless.”

As he thought this, the image of his grandfather, Kudou Retsu – who he had killed – popped into his mind.

Struggling against his remorse, Minoru filled his consciousness with his fighting spirit.

“I can’t lose here.”

Minoru muttered this as he strained his legs and stared at the sky.

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Minoru’s assumptions were still unfounded, but this time, they weren’t wrong.

Tatsuya’s magic forces were limited and running out.

“Onii-sama, isn’t it time to stop already …?”

Miyuki suggested stopping to rest with a restless voice and a concerned look on her face. She extended her right hand, which was holding a handkerchief, forward, and wiped off the sweat that had accumulated on Tatsuya's forehead.

However, Tatsuya's forehead wasn't the only place sweating. His T-shirt was wet from sweat soaking into the fabric, and his face was pale, reflecting his exhaustion.

"Just a bit more..."

Miyuki didn't know if he was responding to her or just saying that to himself, but regardless, he didn't listen to her suggestion and launched his ninth attack on Parade.

He had already studied the structure of the sequence, and he knew that Parade was only hiding Minami's location. He could see the content of her body, but not its structure – he could only see a false structure with the incorrect location information.

That was the problem he faced with Parade. He was unable to disperse the spell because he didn't know its structure – he could only guess at the existing connections and attack based on that.

His first step was reading the trace of the magic used to overwrite the location. He hadn't completely mastered this yet – he had only discovered the technique in yesterday's battle – but he considered himself proficient enough to use it decently and learn information relatively accurately.

After that, he had to analyze the traces of magic recorded in the information dimension and make assumptions about the processes contained in the magic.

This step was primarily Tatsuya trying to learn the design of the magic – the processes needed to activate it as well as the processes used in activation. It was similar to designing magic, but now, rather than create something himself, he had to figure out what others had created.

Once he had an idea of the processes contained in the magic, he needed to use them to assume the structure of the magic sequence.

This was also similar to developing magic, but rather than put it together himself, he needed to figure out how someone else had designed magic.

These types of steps were especially difficult for Tatsuya since he had no trouble directly analyzing structures in the past. He had never had to try to figure out his opponents magic through assumptions before as he could simply view the sequence himself. As a result, he didn't have any practice in doing this, increasing the difficulty.

Finally, Tatsuya had to aim at the unknown where the sequence of magic was located and decompose it based on the structure he had thought up.

However, decomposition required a detailed understanding of the information's structure. He couldn't get the desired effect with his fuzzy recognition – his mind was now suffering from recoil after using so much magic, but he still tried to continue.

Tatsuya repeated his attack for the ninth time.

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“Guh ...!”

Minoru took a violent blow. This hit was incomparable to the ones in the past. He shouted in pain and fell on both knees.

“Parade... was broken?”

The spell hiding Minami's location had been cracked.

“I still can... I still can!”

Minoru mentally shouted at himself and his weakness as he collected the remnants of his magical power.

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“Just a little more, and ...!”

Tatsuya realized he had broken through Parade.

“But... just like last time...”

On the other hand, he knew he had reached his limit and coolly pointed it out.

His body's current condition was caused by his limited breathing as he focused his mind entirely on searching. If he stopped focusing on the search, his body would quickly recover, and nothing threatened his life, but the overuse of his magic might leave lasting effects on his subconscious. He wasn't entirely aware of how his body was suffering right now, and if he continued his search, it would only get worse.

Magicians could consciously use their subconscious through the magic calculation area. Tatsuya's subconscious was actively engaged in the search for Minoru to an extent that it couldn't focus on continuing necessary automatic body functions. Now, his magic calculation area showed signs of overheating as he recklessly used Gram Dispersion repeatedly without having enough input conditions.

If he'd had experience fighting like this, he could have avoided the risk of overheating. However, he had never fought like this before, and he hadn't prepared well this time due to a lack of experience. He was basically improvising – he aimed at a structure he couldn't see and decomposed it.

His current skillset wasn't suited towards doing that. He wasn't the type to proceed blindly on faith.

Minami's true location remained just one step ahead, but taking this step could fatally wound him.

Tatsuya was left with a choice.

Stop here and definitely live, or find Minami's information but risk dying.

“...”

However, Tatsuya didn't end up making a decision.

“Onii-sama!”

As Miyuki cried out, Tatsuya's half closed eyes were completely obscured. He hadn't closed them or lost consciousness – his head had been covered with a soft and elastic object.

Miyuki had pulled his head into her chest.

“Stop! Please, stop! Even for you, it’s dangerous to continue!”

“...”

Tatsuya didn’t respond instantly.

“I worry about Minami-chan, and I believe that you need to save her as soon as possible.”

As she said this, Miyuki held Tatsuya’s face even tighter.

“But Onii-sama is more important to me!”

Tatsuya’s eyes and mouth were pressed into Miyuki’s body, so he had no way to respond with his face. Instead, he took Miyuki’s waist in both of his hands and slowly pushed away.

Miyuki didn’t resist and returned to her kneeling position.

Tatsuya opened his eyes.

Opposite him, he saw Miyuki kneeling, her face full of tears.

He couldn’t ignore them.

“...Okay. Let’s finish for today.”

Tatsuya stopped his preparations to activate Gram Dispersion again.

Miyuki felt it and smiled, her tears accumulating on her eyes and running down her cheeks.

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“The pressure is gone ...?”

Minoru felt the pressure crushing his mind disappear.

“I withstood...

I withstood Tatsuya-san's attacks trying to destroy my magic... ”

As he thought that, Minoru's consciousness fell to black. He passed out after exerting himself too far activating Parade repeatedly.

With Minoru unconscious, Parade was turned off, leaving Zhou Gongjin's barrier the only defense hiding Minoru and Minami.

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Tatsuya was about to cancel his Elemental Sight focused on Minami's Eidos when her coordinates in the Sea of Trees appeared.

He had found her location with an error of only about 100 meters.

Keeping her location in his mind, Tatsuya closed off his sight.

Chapter Five

July 9, 2097.

The New Soviet Union fleet remained at Noto Peninsula. The threat had not yet passed.

All 12 warships sunk yesterday were relatively small ships. The main fleet was still a significant threat. Despite this, the result inspired the Japanese people. While the main enemy forces remained – including enemy air craft carriers – and the people were still tense, the overall feeling around the country was that they didn't need to fear the NSU even though the mood was far from optimistic.

The people wanted to know what happened, and the media, seeing an opportunity to make profits, obliged.

The military and government didn't try to hide the information, either. If the citizens knew that this wasn't a fluke or an accident, the anxiety of the citizens would lessen and people would be able to go about their daily lives, livening the country again. Coming to this conclusion, the government officially recognized reports about the fact that the enemy fleet was sunk by Strategic Class magic, giving credibility to people's assumptions.

As a result, the government decided to approve Ichijou Masaki as an officially recognized Strategic Class magician.

July 9, 2097, 10:00 AM.

The Ministry of Defense used a hall to hold a press conference. There, they officially announced the existence of Ocean Blast – of which one attack sunk a group of small NSU ships – in addition to the name of the magician who used the magic.

“Speaking of Ichijou Masaki-san, do you mean Ichijou-san from the Third High School of the National University of Magic?”

A female reporter with a fanatical look asked the minister this. Masaki’s visual appearance was not as pronounced as Minoru’s, but he was still well known prior to this as a handsome magician. He was more popular than Tatsuya, and in narrow circles, he was known as the “young, handsome magician.”

“Ichijou Masaki-kun is currently in his third year at the Third High School of the National University of Magic. He is the second officially recognized Strategic Class magician of our country.”

The Minister of Defense affirmed the reporter’s guess with a positive expression.

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July 9, 2097, 10:15 AM.

Media employees already found Ichijou Masaki’s location and crowded around Komatsu base.

“Why should I have to, too...”

“Don’t say that! Aren’t you my friend? George, you’re already used to press conferences, aren’t you?”

Masaki pleaded to his friend Kichijouji behind the scenes of the conference room. He didn’t want to face the sea of reporters alone.

“The reporters came to interview you, Masaki. I don’t think they’ll call me.”

“That’s not true. You developed Ocean Blast. They’ll definitely want to hear the developer talk.”

“Ah...”

Kichijouji sighed, but he accepted Masaki arguments. Masaki put his arm around Kichijouji's shoulder, and when a female employee told them it was time, Kichijouji erased his previous expression and followed Masaki out.

Masaki stepped into the center of the stage and stood in front of the microphone, towering over the rest of the stage.

The two came out in their Third High uniforms and bowed. As they did this, the hall was filled with flashes.

Modern cameras were sensitive enough to not need additional lighting equipment, but the flashing was considered an integral part of press conferences so flash shots were used anyway.

Masaki face distorted at the abundant light, but Kichijouji remained stoic. Masaki wasn't mistaken when he said that Kichijouji was used to press conferences, but that was probably why Kichijouji was so reluctant to go out.

After the pair sat on the chairs provided to them, the press conference began.

"This is a great feat, Ichijou-san. Take your time. People are inspired by your achievement."

A staff member advised Masaki to take it slowly and keep his head before Masaki spoke to start the questions.

"I am honored to serve all of you."

As soon as Masaki said this, the press started their questioning.

"Did you volunteer yourself to fight the New Soviet Union?" one reporter asked.

"Yes. I volunteered for the Self-Defense force after gaining the consent of my father."

"Was it because you were sure that the new magic would destroy the enemy fleet?"

"Yes. It was precisely because of the power of Ocean Blast, created by Kichijouji, who is setting next to me now."

Masaki shifted the focus of the conference to Kichijouji with this comment – the press wanted to know more about the magic, and who better to ask than the developer?

“Kichijouji-san. Is it true that you developed the new Strategic Class magic, Ocean Blast?” a new reporter asked.

“Yes.”

“Kichijouji-san, since you also work at the Kanazawa Institute of Natural and Magical Sciences in addition to your studying at Third High School, did you develop this magic as an initiative of the institute?”

“No. The Kanazawa Institute of Natural and Magical Sciences does not conduct military research.”

“That is, you developed Ocean Blast independent of the institute?”

“Yes.”

“Was this due to your expectation of the New Soviet Union invasion?”

At this question, Kichijouji paused for a moment, slightly confused, but answered as best he could.

“As you said, Ocean Blast was prepared to counter the invasion of the NSU.”

Kichijouji affirmed that the magic was prepared to fight against the NSU, but he didn’t answer that he knew that invasion was coming in advance.

“To develop a new Strategic Class magic alone – as expected from Cardinal George, a genius that brings our country pride.”

After this comment, Kichijouji’s face visibly dropped and he understood their misunderstanding.

In response, he honestly stated the situation, but his words only meant trouble and inconveniences for the person mentioned.

“No, I didn’t develop Ocean Blast alone. The basis of this magic was provided to me by Shiba Tatsuya-kun from First High School.”

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“That wasn’t necessary...”

Tatsuya sighed and scrunched up his face after hearing Kichijouji’s comment at the press conference. He was watching the event on television and saw an event he had hoped wouldn’t occur.

Miyuki, sitting next to him, didn’t object to his words. Usually, she would have said something like “I am glad that Onii-sama’s achievements are being assessed properly,” but this time she understood that Kichijouji’s confession had directly gone against Tatsuya’s plans in sending him the information in the first place.

Tatsuya could have finished the magic himself without issue. However, he instead gave the necessary data to Kichijouji to finish for two reasons.

The first was that he felt Masaki would receive the magic more kindly from Kichijouji than from himself. Masaki would almost definitely have accepted the magic anyway, but giving the magic to Kichijouji to finish and pass on would make the event smoother.

The second, more important reason, was that Tatsuya wanted to pass on the glory.

This wasn’t out of any kindness towards Kichijouji.

He just didn’t want the attention.

“Being honest and open isn’t always the best in life...”

Tatsuya continued to complain, making a comment going against the English proverb, “honesty is the best policy.” He wasn’t thinking about an overused statement like “the ends justify the means,” however. The idea “words are silver, silence is gold” more accurately describes his thinking.

“Kichijouji-kun probably didn’t want to remain in Onii-sama’s debt.”

Miyuki calmly restrained him and offered him an iced coffee.

“...yeah, you’re right. I mistook his character when coming up with my plan.”

Realizing it was useless to describe his grievances to a television, Tatsuya ended his complaints with this comment.

Miyuki carefully turned off the TV, and Tatsuya averted his eyes from the terminal on the wall on which the news was coming.

“Onii-sama, do you want a bun?”

Tatsuya put his glass down after taking only a single sip, and Miyuki offered a bun from those that were prepared for their afternoon tea. They had actually been planned to be served along with a more suitable summer dessert – ice cream – but there wasn’t any currently.

“Sure. We can have a little snack,” Tatsuya answered.

“Absolutely.”

It was still too early to have lunch, but the battle with Minoru had exhausted Tatsuya and he accepted Miyuki’s thoughtfulness with gratitude.

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Masaki and Kichijouji’s press conference was being broadcast on Japanese domestic television, but these were public channels, so it could be watched from essentially anywhere.

The country with which the war was being waged would obviously have an interest in the Strategic Class magic used.

While the highest officials in the government and military weren’t watching the news with subtitles in real time, an information gathering department carried out data collection for later use.

However, while most of the top officials didn’t bother watching, Bezobrazoff, who could be considered to be at the top of the NSU, watched the conference from the beginning on a monitor in a posh hotel in Khabarovsk in real time.

"It can't be..."

He, again?"

He stole my magic?"

It took his entire strength to restrain his anger and not shout out loud.

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Minami arbitrarily decided to watch the news during a break between housework chores, but she shut it off immediately after Kichijouji mentioned Tatsuya.

The small TV screen in the dining room turned off.

Minami didn't hate Tatsuya, of course, but at least for now, it was painful for Minami to even hear his or Miyuki's name. She was reminded of her guilt every time she thought of them, so she didn't even want to hear them mentioned.

Minami had stopped trying to resist or deny her guilt meaninglessly. She had skipped to the end of the five stages of grief from denial straight to acceptance. She told herself she had to accept her heartache and deal with it.

Despite this, she still didn't turn on the TV again. While she was willing to accept her guilt, she didn't want to needlessly be reminded of it when she was thinking about other things.

Minami decided to leave the house.

Minoru hadn't forbid her from doing so. She felt that he would even let her leave the barrier without doing anything to stop her. She intuitively trusted his words claiming that he wasn't forcing her.

Besides, she didn't plan to run away from Minoru. While she hadn't yet decided that she wanted to stay with Minoru, her thoughts went along the lines of: "Even if I run, I have nowhere to go."

She felt that she, who betrayed Miyuki, can't just nonchalantly come back. She had no way to know how Tatsuya and Miyuki felt about her now, and she was currently too scared to find out.

If she'd had a problem earlier, she would have gone out. She wasn't afraid to stumble upon Minoru. They were at least temporarily living in the same house and sleeping under the same roof, so they couldn't really avoid each other, and Minami didn't particularly want to do that, either.

However, at the moment, she didn't want to face Minoru.

More accurately, she didn't want Minoru to face her.

While she spent the night sleeping in the same house as Minoru, all her thoughts had been about Tatsuya and Miyuki, or more precisely, Miyuki and the person accompanying her.

Some of her First High Classmates had misunderstood her, thinking she was interested in Tatsuya as a man, but she had long since learned to ignore that. Minami only saw Tatsuya formerly as an elder brother and now as the bridegroom of her Mistress.

In other words, Minami was currently most interested in Tatsuya because of his relationship with Miyuki. To Minami, Miyuki was everything, and that was why she couldn't get rid of her guilt for her treachery at a cost less than her life.

Minami didn't know it, but her mind had been designed to be completely devoted to her mistress. While there was no gene manipulation or medication involved in doing this – probably no such thing currently existed – one didn't need to resort to such exceptional methods to change a persons value system.

All they needed was an isolated environment and a carefully organized upbringing and training.

Minami, who had been raised in the main Yotuba household since birth, didn't consider her sense of devotion unusual – people naturally assumed they were normal, and Minami's assumption hadn't yet been proven wrong to her.

Minami's mentality was that betraying a person appointed as her master was impossible, so Tatsuya's speculation about Minami's choice to interfere with Miyuki's magic was probably somewhat correct. However, Minami still hadn't figured out exactly why she had acted as she did, and even if she did figure it out, her guilt was for her action.

Not for her reason.

She probably would have felt guilt anyway – it was her personality. So, despite the fact that she had no way out of her situation, she insisted on torturing and reproaching herself repeatedly.

Her current reluctance for Minoru to face her resulted from her self-reproving. She didn't want to face a man from such a family in her current ugly appearance which had arisen because of the fact that she, a treacherous traitor, couldn't be punished. Her girlish but guilty heart built a wall between herself and Minoru.

"But... I should go check on him now. Almost 2 hours have passed since he said he was going outside to check the barrier."

Minoru should have returned to his room by now – at least, she desired this. She really had no idea how long it would take to check the barrier, but she felt that she should at least check on him. However, as soon as she opened the front door, this desire fell apart.

As she had wanted, Minoru didn't see her.

Because he was lying on the ground.

Minami hurriedly rushed to him.

“Minoru-sama?”

She got no answer, and he looked faint. She only froze for a moment before she realized what she had to do.

Minami took a CAD from her apron pocket and activated weight loss magic before lifting him and carrying him to his room.



She assumed the weak pain arising from the depths of her consciousness was only her imagination, dismissing the true cause of her despair.

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The second developer of the new Strategic Class magic which had stopped the New Soviet Union's invasion – Ocean Blast – was Shiba Tatsuya, who had only recently begun to disappear from the news after his identity was revealed as half of Taurus Silver.

There was no way the media would ignore this information. This material would grab viewers attention and could boost their ratings, so the media jumped right into trying to talk to Tatsuya.

“They want you to comment on this, Tatsuya-san. The media is crowding FLT headquarters and the former house in Fuchu,” Maya commented.

“...I apologize for the inconvenience.”

Making a humble face, Tatsuya bowed to Maya, who was smiling into the videophone screen.

Maya was clearly amused at the situation. She wouldn't have called personally about something so insignificant if she weren't.

“I'm truly impressed by your maneuvering around this. I guess I have to commend the persistence of the gentlemen from the media. Still, intrusive interviews are annoying. They are always trouble.”

Tatsuya felt the same, but he was afraid to agree with that, as in a sense, he was guilty of the problems sweeping the FLT office and the neighborhood around his former home.

“Regardless, it seems that His Excellency is pleased with the current situation. I received compliments from him.”

“Please thank him for me.”

When Maya said “His Excellency,” she was referring to Toudou Aoba – the largest sponsor of the Yotsuba family.

He was most likely pleased with Tatsuya’s fame in developing a Strategic Class magic. This would only help his role as a military deterrent, and while Tatsuya didn’t want to deal with it, Toudou probably wanted him to anyway. In exchange for his support of project ESCAPES, Tatsuya agreed to become a military deterrent, and this could be considered part of Tatsuya’s agreement.

If Tatsuya had followed the agreement exactly, he would have personally dealt with the invasion of the New Soviet Union rather than through a third party. However, Toudou didn’t seem to object to Tatsuya’s indirect participation by providing another magician with Strategic Class magic.

“The only thing to worry about is Miyuki-san’s safety… everything will be fine as long as First High is closed, but… it might not be a good thing for her to return back to school until this situation calms down.”

“…you’re right.”

Tatsuya didn’t argue with Maya on this point.

The media currently restrained themselves somewhat compared to the pre-war days – possibly because they are afraid of the authorities, nowadays, nobody pokes a microphone into strangers’ faces.

However, the media would be able to find out that Miyuki was both Tatsuya’s cousin and fiancée by studying the publicly available data, and they definitely would scour the information available to them for clues. This would put her under the onslaught of those looking for interviews. She would cease to be a random person and would become involved in unfortunate and annoying scenarios.

While Tatsuya already considered the media bothering Miyuki to be unforgiveable, what was worse was the possibility of murderers or kidnappers appearing under the guise of journalists willing to interview.

In the current situation, there were probably numerous people trying to capture Miyuki in order to neutralize Tatsuya. Tatsuya found it completely unacceptable that Miyuki would be put at risk through faults of his own.

“Tatsuya-san, Miyuki-san, I have a suggestion.”

Maya was primarily speaking to Tatsuya, but Miyuki appeared standing in front of the camera next to Tatsuya, so Maya mentioned her as she was the main party in this matter.

“How about having a new girl act as Miyuki-san’s bodyguard and accompany her at school?”

“Bodyguard...?” Miyuki asked. Her tone indicated her desire to refuse. Minami had only been abducted by Minoru yesterday. She felt it was wrong to simply appoint a new guard the next day. Miyuki felt that was ignoring Minami’s humanity and simply treating her as a tool to be thrown away after use.

“This would only be a temporary measure until the situation calmed down,” Maya clarified.

Her additional words were enough to reassure Miyuki, and her heart calmed down.

“Thank you,” she responded.

Thus, Tatsuya also didn’t object to Maya’s proposal. Miyuki gave a surprised reaction to his silent affirmation, causing Tatsuya to quickly glance at her before asking about the specifics of the plan.

“However, can you prepare a competent person quickly enough?” Tatsuya asked.

“I was planning on transferring Ayako-chan to First High.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Tatsuya thought, *“but...”*

Ayako’s magic would be able to fool the media and enemies mixed in with them, allowing Miyuki to slip past unnoticed, but Tatsuya was more worried about the plan from Ayako’s side.

“I don’t think you should do that for Ayako’s sake.”

Tatsuya couldn’t quite agree with Maya’s plan for his stated reason. Miyuki was the most important person to him, but Ayako was also an important ally. He didn’t have

any desire to force allies to become victims when Miyuki could almost definitely handle herself. In addition, he had his own ideas. Maya realized this in her next question.

“Ara...so you have your own thoughts on this?”

Tatsuya was ready for Maya’s question and answered without hesitation.

“I do. What about putting Miyuki under the protection of Angelina Kudou Shields, who is currently under the protection of our family?”

“Angelina-san, you say...”

Maya’s lips curled upwards slightly, and she took on a thoughtful look, pondering his suggestion.

“She does have Parade. While she is no Kudou Minoru, her skills should at least be enough to fool the eyes of assassins.”

Tatsuya had been considering using Lina as a bodyguard for Miyuki even before Maya brought up the topic of protecting her.

He had thought about it right after Kichijouji finished his interview.

He felt that Lina’s potential usefulness was being wasted without work. While she might have to return to the USNA in the future, he at least wanted to use her effectively while she was in Japan.

Lina’s combat potential was comparable to Miyuki’s, and her ability to use Parade could fool even high-level magicians. He would be able to entrust Miyuki to such a talented person with a calm heart. While on the surface, her personality didn’t suit that of a guard, since Miyuki was the escort party, it was fine.

“I wonder if it’s save for Angelina-san in Tokyo.”

Maya phrased her question as a statement – the opposite of subordinate’s tendency to phrase statements as questions. One could say this only made sense, however, as Maya was superior to Miyuki and Tatsuya in this situation.

“It should be just as safe as leaving her on Miyako-jima. The USNA should have noticed her presence after she helped repel the attack. On the contrary, I think it’s riskier to leave her on the island.”

Tatsuya didn’t mean that Lina’s safety would be in danger. He had concluded that Miyako-jima’s safety was the one in jeopardy if Lina remained there.

“Fufu, really.”

Maya’s short laugh seemed to indicate that she understood the point that Tatsuya had left slightly ambiguous.

“Alright. I authorize Angelina-san’s appointment as Miyuki-san’s bodyguard.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Regarding her enrollment at First High, I will talk with the right people. However, it would make things easier if you, Tatsuya-san, personally go lower your head to Momoyama-sensei.”

The Momoyama-sensei mentioned by Maya was the director of First High, Momoyama Azuma. He wasn’t the kind of man to bow to power, even if the speaker had the whole power of the Yotsuba family.

“I understand. I’ll take Lina and go to him with a request.”

“We will transport Angelina-san to you tomorrow. Are you satisfied if we put her on the same floor as you?”

The top floor of the building in which Tatsuya and Miyuki lived had three residential premises for servants separate from the apartment they lived in. One was Minami’s room, but the other two were still empty.

“Of course.”

“Then I will arrange for house cleaning.”

Tatsuya and Maya discussed the exact schedule of affairs.

Miyuki, however, just stood next to Tatsuya, surprised.

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Things were settled peacefully between the aunt, niece, and nephew from the Yotsuba family, but Kichijouji's confession hadn't only caused tension in Tatsuya's life and the New Soviet Union.

At the base of Stars – the highest and most elite branch of USNA military magicians – located in Roswell, New Mexico, the top brass faced a dilemma.

In addition to being the headquarters of Stars, this base was also the headquarters of the regular army, and the commander of the base was neither a magician nor even an officer in Stars.

According to the original system of subordination, the base commander didn't have the authority to give orders to Stars, but since the post of commander-in-chief was held by the inexperienced Lina, the base commander Colonel Paul Walker went beyond simple assistance and was able to begin to manage Stars outside of command directly in battle.

And now, with Major Canopus' absence – the acting commander-in-chief – Walker took the post of commander of Stars.

The cause of this situation was the appearance of many Parasites on the base, but Colonel Walker was not infected himself, and the spread of Parasites had stopped for the moment. The White House and the Pentagon also didn't observe any signs of continued spread.

Walker was now sitting at his desk, staring at the ceiling. Before that, he had been clutching his head in his hands, refusing to think further, since no matter how much he worried, he couldn't solve the current problem.

He was at a loss. He was in a sorry state after receiving an order from General Staff. Since he was a military man, when he was assigned to carry out operations, he always acted on the order, and he usually just sent subordinates to complete the task. However, this time the order he received didn't include any strategic planning – just an objective. He had to throw something together himself.

The command of the US Army was currently conflicted. The faction in the military and government advocating for reconciliation with Japan and the faction aiming for a hard line were seriously conflicted. Specifically, the former advocated the use of the Strategic Class magician Shiba Tatsuya in America's global strategy, while the held the position that he should be considered a threat, and therefore should be eliminated.

Walker wasn't neutral in this dispute. Since he fell under the influence of the Parasites, he believed that Tatsuya needed to be eliminated, putting him in the latter group. In addition, more significantly than the influence from the Parasites was his opinion as a non-magician warrior supervising Stars. He felt threatened by the existence of a Strategic Class magician who's strength was equal to an entire army.

He felt that Tatsuya was too dangerous, so while Walker didn't have any feelings of dislike towards Tatsuya, he thought that Tatsuya was too dangerous of an existence to be left alone.

His view was the same towards Lina, who had distanced herself from the American Army, and Bezobrazoff, who they were currently cooperating with. In general, he saw Strategic Class magicians as too big of threats.

Therefore, Walker was able to sympathize with the faction antagonizing Tatsuya.

Now, with the new threat of Ichijou Masaki and Kichijouji Shinkuro, as well as the increased threat of Shiba Tatsuya, the faction antagonizing Tatsuya grew impatient at all of the new problems. Walker felt this same impatience, but despite that, he couldn't agree with the order he was given.

"Within a month, develop and execute a plan to eliminate Shiba Tatsuya."

Walker felt that this order was an excessive reaction to Shiba Tatsuya's part in stopping the NSU fleet's invasion. He didn't just have to develop a plan with a month – the order said to execute a plan within a month.

Though, Walker didn't complain about having a deadline.

Unfortunately, the sabotage of the Stellar Furnace had ended in failure, but the next operation was already planned. Even if he hadn't received an order from the hardliners in General Staff, Walker would still be making progress towards eliminating Shiba Tatsuya.

Walker steeled his confidence in his plan to get rid of his anxiety from the order.

“A whole month isn’t necessary.”

Shiba Tatsuya must be eliminated as soon as possible.”

Colonel Walker had already intended to eliminate Tatsuya in the shortest time he could, even before receiving today’s order.

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Tatsuya had promised Miyuki he was done searching for Minami for today, but he had only ended his search through the information dimension. He didn’t intend to stop searching for her physically.

In the afternoon, after Miyuki, worried about his health, finally stopped holding him, Tatsuya headed for the Sea of Trees at the western foot of Mount Fuji. He arrived at the place where the pursuing squad from the Juumonji family had lost track of Minoru the day before.

Tatsuya was wearing his Freed Suit today, but he wasn’t flying with it. He was riding on the ground on Wingless, his black electric motorcycle. He didn’t want to attract unnecessary attention by flying.

At the end of the battle that took place in the information dimension this morning, Minoru’s Parade hiding Minami’s location was destroyed.

Tatsuya’s attacks had been unsuccessful. Had Minoru turned Parade off himself? Or was he unable to use magic?

In any case, he had narrowed Minami’s location to an area with a radius of 100 meters.

“The last obstacle is Ghost Walker?”

This wasn’t encouraging. Tatsuya could only bypass Ghost Walker by shooting marks in the information dimension. Whether the radius was 100 meters or 1 meter, if he didn’t know the coordinates of his target, he couldn’t hit the target with a psion projectile in the information dimension.

“I guess I can’t do anything except a thorough search of the area...”

The Ghost Walker barrier was a magical maze distorting his sense of direction using high quality amulets. In addition, the area was covered with an illusion that couldn’t be seen by reconnaissance satellites.

“It’s a semi-permanent illusion? That’s the problem here.”

The illusion was most likely supported using Relic class amulets. They could be considered an improved version of the method used to store sequences of magic in the Stellar Furnace, so Tatsuya was very interested in the principle on which they functioned...

“In any case, I won’t be able to recreate these things.”

The shelter here had almost certainly been built by Zhou Gongjin. The technology used here was probably the same as the technology in Generators and Magic Amplifiers. Since these technologies use people as material, they were unacceptable for ethical reasons, and Tatsuya’s personal feelings prevented him from using them.

Regardless of the ethics on whether he could use them, though, Tatsuya was still curious...

The effect of the magic was powerful, and it couldn’t be bypassed – even by using electromagnetic waves or sound waves. As a result, Tatsuya had nothing left to do but get close enough to feel the traces of the barrier.

Tatsuya rode Wingless through the wall of illusory trees.

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Minoru was awoken by an alarm of sorts that went off as Tatsuya approached the barrier.

“Minoru-sama! Are you awake? Do you recognize me?”

“Minami-san? What are you...”

“Oh, thank god!”

Minami smiled with tears in her eyes and got up from her chair, which was leaning against the bed due to the way she was sitting on it.

“I will prepare some tea now. Please wait a bit.”

“Minami-san?”

Minoru tried to stop Minami, but she had already run out of the bedroom by the time he could say anything.

“...bedroom?”

Minoru finally noticed the inconsistency with his memories.

“Shouldn’t I have been... in the yard?

Right... Parade nearly broke down under Tatsuya’s attacked.

I barely managed to withstand Tatsuya-san’s attacks...

...I remember now. I lost consciousness there.”

Minoru quickly looked at the clock, ready to panic.

Antique-looking wall clocks in this house had been installed in every corridor and every room, but despite their age, they always showed the correct time. This was achieved using the help of magic.

The current time was 1:58 PM. He didn’t know when he had lost consciousness, but more than three hours had already passed since then.

“How about the barrier?”

Minoru jumped out of bed before suddenly grabbing his head with one hand. The blood had rushed out of his head and he was incredibly dizzy. His vision was dark and it was all he could do to stand up.

Minoru grabbed onto the bedside table to keep himself from falling, but it didn't support him and he fell anyway.

Fortunately, there wasn't anything on the table, but it made a rather loud sound as it hit the wooden floor.

"Minoru-sama, what happened? Are you okay?"

Minami had heard the table fall from behind the closed door, and Minoru heard Minami's yells through it as well.

"All is well! I only dropped the table!"

Minoru tried not to cause any undue anxiety, but his response had the opposite effect and only served to increase Minami's concern.

"Excuse me, I'm entering!"

She opened the door and entered with a panicked expression on her face. Despite this, she hadn't made any excessive noise, and she held a tray with a cup with one hand without spilling a single drop. She hadn't forgotten her skills as a professional maid in her panic.

Minami calmed herself and looked at Minoru's erratic appearance. She put the tray on the desk and then went to Minoru.

"Are you really okay, or do you feel bad again...?"

"I'm fine. Just wait a bit," Minoru responded.

Minoru stopped Minami's hand with which she tried to help him up. He quickly got up on his own, and they sat back to back on the bed.

Then, Minoru closed his eyes and concentrated on the barrier protecting the house.

Several magicians walked back and forth next to the barrier. Minoru finally noticed the army searching in the Sea of Trees.

Still, he wasn't very concerned with them. He had expected this, as before they had disappeared into the hiding barrier, they were being pursued by the Juumonji family.

They had tracked him down to the path leading to his hideout, so it was obvious that the Sea of Trees would become the main point of the search. He had chosen this place as a shelter because he didn't think it would be detected, even during a large scale search.

He was far more worried about something else.

"Ahh. Thank goodness. Ghost Walker is still functioning."

His main worry had been whether Ghost Walker had been broken or not. He had been scared that Tatsuya had already neutralized the barrier.

He was certain that Tatsuya would come near to search. The battle between them in the information dimension had ended in his temporary victory, but that was just barely, and he only "won" because Tatsuya had failed to achieve his objective. Looking at it from another view, one could say Minoru had lost since he held every advantage and had only barely managed to win.

Minoru knew that Tatsuya wouldn't back down from his temporary loss. He would definitely come search with the information he found during the battle.

Minoru had been suppressing the desire to "look" at Tatsuya from the moment he had woken up. Using his Elemental Sight to find Tatsuya was risky. If Tatsuya detected the look, he would be able to find the way back along the look and find the location of the house.

Minoru had set up a barrier that would alarm him the moment one of the sixteen layers of the concealment spell had been destroyed.

Minoru was certain that the only magician who could pass through the barrier was Tatsuya. Objectively speaking, this was a limited outlook, but regardless, Minoru believed that since someone broke the barrier, Tatsuya was close.

So far, only the outermost layer of the spell had been broken, and this layer was already quickly healing itself.

"So far so good."

Minoru finally had some free time to calm Minami.

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While Minoru felt like he was making some progress with his free time, Tatsuya felt like he had run into a dead end.

The network of Ghost Walker stretching across the land ended up far exceeding his expectations.

He believed that when he approached the place Minami was hiding, he would be able to feel the signs that the phenomena had been modified with magic. However, he had already crossed the circular area with a 100-meter radius he had detected this morning several times, and he could barely sense the illusions' presence. He didn't have anywhere near enough clues to disperse the magic.

He realized that he hadn't prepared enough, admitting that he had underestimated continental East Asian magic.

While ancient magic followed the same principles as modern magic, they used completely different technological systems and had very different purposes and styles. Beyond that, ancient Japanese magic and ancient continental East Asian magic worked completely different despite both being classified as ancient magic.

"I could have spent my time deepening my understanding of this topic, but instead, I come here without any preparation, thinking that I could cancel a high-level hiding spell of a system completely unknown to me."

No matter how you look at it, I was excessively self-confident."

Tatsuya smiled bitterly at his thoughts.

"I should have studied Zhou Gongjin's and Gu Jie's magic."

Despite this thought, Tatsuya didn't ever have time for that. All his free time had been dedicated to the ESCAPES project.

Tatsuya should have realized that he didn't ever have any opportunity to do this, but it didn't matter.

He didn't have the opportunity to regret it, either.

As a result of his lack of preparation, Tatsuya was not able to find the shelter in which Minami was hidden in the circle with a 100 meter radius.

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The Sword Corps spent the whole day searching a wide area with far more people than Tatsuya, but also failed to find any clues about Minoru's hideouts.

Following their search, they mistakenly concluded that "Kudou Minoru is not hiding in the Sea of Trees."

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17 hours had already passed since the search party sent by the self-defense forces left the Sea of Trees. Minoru still hadn't dared search for Tatsuya in the information dimension and didn't know anything about his movements, but he had at least stopped interfering with the barrier after the 15th hour.

Minoru sighed with relief once he was certain that had avoided detection for the second day.

He was currently in a room Zhou Gongjin had prepared for personal use. It was a combined bedroom and study, including both work equipment and communication devices Zhou Gongjin used while he was alive, so they still worked.

The media didn't ever report Zhou Gongjin's death. He wasn't a celebrity, and he had been hiding for so long anyway in order to hide his ageless body's secret. They might have found him if the store he managed in Yokohama had stopped functioning, but there was a system in place for it to function even without an owner.

In addition, conventional authorities had concealed Zhou Gongjin's death in order to reveal routes for illegal entry into the country. Zhou Gongjin had mediated the entry of illegal migrants from the Great Asian Alliance, so they could catch some migrants who sought Zhou out not knowing he was dead.

Because of the circumstances around his death, the people Zhou Gongjin worked with and conducted transactions with never found out about his death.

Therefore, even now, requests addressed to Zhou Gongjin came to his email, and the room Minoru was now in allowed him to receive and decrypt these emails.

A message came to Zhou Gongjin's terminal while Minoru was sitting at the table, resting from the busy day. He read the decrypted letter without much enthusiasm, but his lack of zeal was fairly natural. He read the letter out of boredom and curiosity rather than any desire to take on Zhou's work.

However, after reading the message, Minoru turned serious. This wasn't from any desire to make a profit – the letter wasn't a simple request for illegal migration.

The letter was a request from the Great Asian Alliance for assistance for a secret agent in entering the country.

"This agent wants help with penetrating the country ...? It looks like this signature belongs to the Chen Xiangshan, and the agent who is supposed to penetrate the country is the Man-Eating Tiger, Lu Ganghu ...?"

Minoru was interested in this message since it revealed a secret plan that could cause serious damage to Japan. From the view of national interests, Minoru thought that he couldn't ignore this.

However, he quickly changed his thinking. He had ceased to be human and had become an enemy of the motherland. He couldn't let his love for his motherland put his own situation at risk. Instead, he decided to use this secret plan to gain a little time for himself.

Before he became a Parasite, he may have chosen to go with his original thinking – defending his enemy because it was his motherland. But now, he was a Parasite, and his thinking had become more practical.

His personality hadn't changed much, and Minoru hadn't even realized he'd changed – after all, does anyone realize they've changed?

However, his personality changes were definitely there, and now Minoru put more emphasis on benefitting himself.

The letter was from Chen Xiangshan – the commander of the Great Asian Alliance's special forces. He was requesting assistance in penetrating Komatsu base. Someone without details might know that Liu Li Lei – currently the Great Asian Alliance's only state-recognized strategic class magician – had escaped to Japan, and assume that the current operation was related to that. While Japan hadn't officially acknowledged it, that fact had already spread around the world as sensational news. This specific information on this operation all but confirmed that thought – Liu Li Lei was currently under the protection of the army at Komatsu base.

The goal of this operation was either to retrieve or to kill Liu Li Lei.

Minoru thought that the probability of it being the second option was high, but whatever Chen Xiangshan's plans were, Minoru was confident that the self-defense forces would try to stop it, resulting in a battle that would attract people's attention.

In the past, Tatsuya had interacted with Chen Xiangshan and Lu Ganghu. He wouldn't ignore their hostile activity, so if all they did was distract Tatsuya's attention from Minoru, he might get a chance to move to a new shelter.

Minoru had already concluded that it would be difficult to continue hiding in this place. Minoru was worried that neither Parade nor Ghost Walker would stop Tatsuya for long.

Minoru sent Chen Xiangshan a reply with consent, putting on the signature of Zhou Gongjin.

Chapter Six

Tuesday, July 10, 2097, early morning.

Tatsuya visited Yakumo's temple for the first time in a while, having taken a long absence.

“...in short, you want me to teach you how to overcome Ghost Walker?”

Yakumo confirmed Tatsuya's intent in coming after Tatsuya described his reason to his former teacher.

“Right.”

Tatsuya hadn't come here to practice taijutsu. Instead, he sought guidance from Yakumo in order to break the deadlock with Minoru. Yakumo was an expert in ancient magic and almost certainly knew a method. However...

“You should know that you have no right to ask me about that.”

Yakumo's answer was a flat denial.

“I do. I'm asking to gain that right.”

Tatsuya had expected to be refused, but he wasn't ready to give up just yet.

“Why do you need it?”

Yakumo asked Tatsuya his reason to go so far, but Tatsuya didn't quite understand his meaning. He could only answer basically.

“To rescue Minami, who was kidnapped by Kudou Minoru.”

This was all Tatsuya had for an answer.

“I don’t understand...”

Yakumo was honestly puzzled and wasn’t teasing Tatsuya.

“Do you really have to go so far for Sakurai Minami-jo such that you even want knowledge bypassing our rules? Don’t you know its price is high?”

Yakumo, knowing Tatsuya’s nature, couldn’t understand why Tatsuya would go so far for someone other than Miyuki. While he didn’t entirely doubt Tatsuya’s reason, he had suspicions.

“Minami is a family member,” Tatsuya responded.

“No. She is a simple maid.”

These words sounded strange and cold, even to Tatsuya, and he was a little confused. However, he wasn’t angry at Yakumo’s statement. It wasn’t his nature to value being valued, and he knew Yakumo meant more than just what he said.

“Your family is only Miyuki-kun. Isn’t it enough just for you to protect Miyuki-kun?”

“I...”

He had multiple reasons to return Minami. He could immediately say three.

First: despite Yakumo’s literal statement, they could very well be considered family. For the past 2 years, Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami had lived together like a family. They had bonded with her as more than a simple maid.

Second: Minami was only in the current situation because she had protected Tatsuya and Miyuki from Bezobrazoff’s magic. While Tatsuya didn’t necessarily feel he had to return the favor as it wasn’t his nature and it wasn’t necessary, he at least felt he needed to do what he could.

And finally, third: Miyuki had asked him to return Minami.

However, if Tatsuya was asked if he could neglect Miyuki's protection to be in debt to Yakumo, he wouldn't be able to instantly give a positive answer.

"Minami-jo is not Honami-joshi."

Tatsuya held his breath.

"...I know."

Of course she wasn't. Of course. Tatsuya had to understand that.

However, the short phrase had caused a shock in Tatsuya's heart. The resemblance between Minami and her aunt had caused Tatsuya to recall Honami, and he still hadn't intuitively accepted them as separate. Of all people other than Miyuki, Honami had probably left the most significant impact on Tatsuya, and Minami had caused Tatsuya to recall her.

"...really?" Yakumo asked again.

"...yes."

Even after being asked again though, Tatsuya couldn't answer immediately.

"Hmm. And yet, I can't fulfill your request. If that's how you want it, then you must shave as well. If you accept monasticism and become my student, I will teach you what you want."

If he became a student of Yakumo, however, then Tatsuya's communication with the outside world would be limited. It wouldn't just stop him from saving Minami – he wouldn't even be able to defend Miyuki.

Tatsuya couldn't agree to Yakumo's condition.

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July 10, 1997, 6:00.

The Independence had stopped its path southward along the Sea of Japan in the open sea near Yamagata. This position was chosen to restrain the NSU fleet from their flank.

Aviation onboard the ship was constantly waiting, ready to take off at any time if they were needed.

July 10, 1997, 7:00.

Carriers in the rear of the NSU invasion fleet – including their escort ships – began to retreat.

July 10, 1997, 9:00.

The Japanese government held a press conference and announced the complete retreat of the NSU fleet.

The current state of Japan with increased combat readiness, however, had not yet been canceled. The situation which caused the NSU fleet to be sent had not changed – Japan had not handed over fugitives from the Great Asian Alliance. However, at least for now, martial law was suspended. The tension hadn't decreased much, but it was important to normalize social activity again.

July 10, 1997, 9:30.

The government announced the normalization of air and sea communications. The temporarily tightened entry control was returned to the normal standard, and an hour later, airplanes from nearby Asian countries began to arrive and ships for fishing and cargo started to enter ports.

The intelligence department of the self-defense forces and the public security police still had yet to relax their vigilance, but Japan had transitioned from wartime to a paramilitary position. Despite their continued watchfulness, however, precautionary measures became slightly disorganized as activity suddenly renewed.

Other countries took advantage of this chaos.

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July 10, 1997, 10:00.

A small sabotage detachment from the Great Asian Alliance led by Lu Ganghu entered the country.

July 10, 1997, 11:00.

A passenger plane landed at Haneda airport originating from the airport of Taipei. Among the passengers entering were 10 people from the Horsehead platoon of the illegal squad of American combat magicians called the Illegal Mystic Assassin Platoon.

Thus, the Horsehead platoon outsmarted the leaders of the self-defense forces, Major General Saeki from the 101 brigade, and counterintelligence officers who all believed that Independence would be connected to the penetration of American agents.

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July 10, 1997, 9:45.

Shortly after air traffic was normalized at Haneda Airport, a small passenger plane flew over Izu Peninsula. More specifically, it was headed to Miyako-jima. Its passenger was an employee of the Ministry of Defense whose goal was to assess the damage caused by the invasion of a warship of “unknown” affiliation two days prior as well as take measures to prevent future invasions.

The name of the employee assigned to this was Shibata Katsushige. He was the next head of the Shibata family, a side-branch of the Yotsuba clan. He was also the magician with the strongest fighting abilities among the side families.

“Katsushige-sama. Welcome. We were waiting for you.”

“Sakuma, thank you for meeting me here.”

Katsushige met a long-time servant of the Shibata family at a special airport for small planes. The Shibata family didn’t have anyone with the title of butler like the main house did, but the middle-aged man named Sakuma performed similar duties to Hayama in the main house for the Shibata family.

Katsushige’s official status was an employee of the ministry of defense, and officially, he had been sent on a business trip to Miyako-jima for a long stay there. He probably

shouldn't have been met with personal hospitality from an acquaintance, but there was no one to condemn them for it here. No one even had to hide their criticism.

The reason was simple: the only people at the airport were people of the Shibata family.

Since Miyako-jima was the property of the Yotsuba family, Katsushige was met with a relatively comfortable atmosphere. Officially, the Island was owned by a real estate company whose main office was in Tokyo, but said company was controlled by the Yotsuba family.

Until two days ago, the island had been managed by the Mashiba family, which was also one of the side branches of the Yotsuba family. However, during the invasion of Stars, many people from the Mashiba family working on the island had been injured, leading to the control being transferred to the Shibata family.

The Mashiba family was good at observing and searching with mental-interference magic, while the Shibata family specialized more in combat – specifically, murder and espionage. The transfer in control had actually been planned for a while from when the island was transformed from a prison for criminal magicians into a secret research center for the Yotsuba family. While the Mashiba family's detection skills were more suited to monitoring inmates, the Shibata family was far more suited to defending a research center.

Accompanied by his former guardian and now bride, Tsutsumi Kotona, as well as her younger brother his current guardian, Tsutsumi Kanata, Katsushige got into a car and headed for the island's administration building.

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By the time Lina had been informed about Katsushige's arrival, she had already finished collecting the things in her room.

“I am ready to go at any time.”

Lina politely addressed Hanabishi Hyogo who was currently Tatsuya's assistant. He had been assigned to the task of bringing Lina to Tokyo today.

“Then let's go.”

Hyogo took Lina's suitcase, opened the door, and invited her to follow him.

As she left her room, Lina looked back at her temporary home which she had occupied for less than a month. She muttered something quickly, and then she left the room.

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Lina arrived at the Yotsuba family's headquarters in Tokyo while it was still morning. She left her baggage to Hyogo as she first visited Tatsuya and Miyuki's apartment.

“Why was I called to Tokyo?” she asked.

She was now sitting at the dining table with Tatsuya and Miyuki. By the time she had arrived, food for her had already been prepared.

“I want to you to act as Miyuki’s guard.”

Tatsuya’s answer was direct, but it wasn’t enough for Lina to understand everything.

“...tell me the whole situation.”

Naturally, Lina asked for an explanation, and since Tatsuya didn’t have something urgent, he obliged.

“Journalists will probably target Miyuki after the press conference with Ichijou Masaki and Kichijouji Shinkuro. I’m worried about killers from the anti-magic movement as well as foreign agents who might try to abduct Miyuki mixed in with the journalists.

In order to avoid these attacks, your Parade is necessary.”

Tatsuya didn’t disclose all of the details, but he told her enough in his quick summarization for her to understand why she was asked to become Miyuki’s bodyguard.

“...well, I understand at least. But are you sure? Won’t you get in trouble if I show up in public?”

Lina was Angie Sirius, a strategic-class American magician currently considered to be a deserter by the USNA. While she was only temporarily hiding, the USNA

government was demanding that Major Angie Sirius be extradited from the Japanese government, so if it became publicly known that the Yotsuba (specifically, Tatsuya) were hiding Lina, Tatsuya risked both the Japanese and American governments becoming his enemies.

In other words, it seemed to Lina like Tatsuya was poking a hornet's nest to shake out a quarter.

"It doesn't matter."

However, Tatsuya responded to Lina's concerns without hesitation.

"The army and government know we are hiding you, but America demanded the extradition of 'Major Angie Sirius'. Unless you publicly declare 'I am Angie Sirius', neither the Japanese nor American government can officially do anything."

"I'm not going to do anything like that, but that still leaves the unofficial side."

"You don't need to worry about that. I have to deal with that anyway, regardless."

Tatsuya once again spoke without hesitation, and Lina's face froze for a second.

"R-really...? If Tatsuya says this isn't a problem, then I'm fine."

"Thank you," Tatsuya responded.

"Lina also is not afraid of the government? That's promising."

Miyuki had listened to Tatsuya and Lina's conversation silently before this, but now she turned toward Lina with a smile on her face. While her words were odd, Lina didn't need their meaning clarified.

"I've already been spotted on Miyako Island," Lina clarified.

Since her location had been revealed, Japanese and American authorities could target there. Tatsuya and Miyuki didn't need a further explanation.

"New killers would probably be sent if I continued hiding there, but in the center of a big city, they wouldn't be able to act freely."

Her voice was a little filled with despair.

Lina turned back to Tatsuya to ask about the main topic of the conversation.

“Okay, but what exactly do I need to do? Do I need to change Miyuki’s appearance with Parade every time I leave the house?”

“Yes.”

Tatsuya nodded in response to her question, but she still couldn’t completely understand with just an affirmation. He had answered her second question, but he still needed to explain the answer to her broader, first question.

“Lina, I would like you to go to First High again.”

“Huh? Do you want me to become a high school girl?”

“...what’s so surprising about that?”

Miyuki spoke up again to ask a question. She understood Lina not expecting Tatsuya’s response, but Miyuki thought Lina was far too surprised.

“Well, after all I’ve... isn’t it too late for me to go to high school...?”

“?”

Miyuki tilted her head and gave a questioning look, wondering the reason for Lina’s reluctance.

“Lina, you’re the same age as me, right? There’s nothing strange for us to be students in high school... unless you’re hiding your real age? And in face, you are really much older than me?”

“That’s not it at all! I really am only 17 years old!”

The month was currently July, with Miyuki being born in January and Lina in March. Neither of them had celebrated their 18th birthday, making Tatsuya the only person in

the room who had reached that milestone (more accurately, former milestone, since the official age of becoming an adult was currently 20).

“Then what’s the problem?”

“The task is fine, but it’s too late for me to go to high school...”

“...you mean that because you are already working, it’s too late to study?”

“I work... w-well, something like that.”

“But I heard that in America, retired soldiers often go to universities and business schools.”

“To universities!”

“So then, you are worried because this is high school?”

“Y-yes...”

The gaze Miyuki directed at Lina somehow seemed cold, making Lina feel strangely... numb. This may not have just been in her imagination.

“Then you can consider your enrollment in First High to be part of your bodyguard work.”

Tatsuya decided to join in because Miyuki’s and Lina’s conversation wasn’t progressing.

“This is not an army mission, but if you consider this to be a means to do the work assigned to you, you won’t have to worry about how it looks.”

“Work... I see. After all, I agreed to work as a bodyguard, so it would be wrong to be ashamed of what I need to do to do the work.”

Lina looked like she was trying hard to agree, but her face betrayed subtle signs of joy. While Lina was worried about becoming a High School student, it was probably less due to her image and more due to feeling it was wrong, so both Tatsuya and Miyuki thought that Lina may have actually wanted to go back to First High again.

“So you agree? Then let's go to First High.”

“Huh? You mean, right now?”

Lina's eyes opened wide.

“Yes. Prior consent to your admission has already been given, but you still need to personally voice the request.”

“Yes. I understand.”

Lina realized that Tatsuya's request was reasonable and didn't resist.

“Miyuki will come with us. Lina, I'm sorry for relying on you so soon, but I need you.”

“You mean to change Miyuki's appearance with Parade? Will do.”

Lina responded to Tatsuya's request with some enthusiasm.

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Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Lina headed west along the central highway in a sedan car driven by Tatsuya. Their destination was the First School of the National University of Magic in Hachioji.

They weren't driving in the aircar, but rather an electric sedan. Unfortunately, the aircar only sat two people. There was a back seat, but if a third person sat in the car, everyone would be crowded. A four-seater was being assembled at the research center on Miyako-jima, but the engineers estimated it would still take 10 more days.

So today, they went not on the aircar, but on a regular electric sedan – except in this case, regular only meant that it couldn't travel by air. The car wasn't actually very normal, as it had a very powerful motor and protected the passengers with not just bullet-proof and shock-proof armor, but also gas filters.

Miyuki, who usually sat in front, next to Tatsuya, was now sitting in the back seat with Lina. They almost looked like twins with different hair color when sitting next to each other.

Miyuki now had a face just like Lina's but with light brown eyes and light brown hair in a ponytail. This was what Miyuki's face looked like under the effects of Lina's Parade. Her hairstyle, the color of her hair, and the color of her eyes were different than Lina's, who looked the same as she usually did, but other than that they looked exactly the same.

“When I look at you two, I can only think that you are close relatives.”

Tatsuya spoke his impression of the scene he saw in the rearview mirror. He acted normally, but his appearance had also changed. Now he looked like a handsome young man with an exotic foreign appearance. His impression was completely different – it was almost opposite him usually.

“But if we look so alike, won’t we instead attract attention?” Miyuki asked.

Her current appearance was still beautiful even if her appearance had changed from “calm” to “moving”.

“...no, a person who attracts attention to some extent is viewed better by observers. People who try not to fall into others' eyes seem more suspicious, as if they are secretly trying to make their way through a public area.”

“Ah. That’s how it is.”

Miyuki didn’t argue with Tatsuya’s logic, but he hadn’t completely convinced her.

“However, I don’t understand why Lina doesn’t change her appearance.”

“...if you don’t like it, I’ll change it...”

Lina pouted and turned to look out the window.

“That’s not necessary.”

Tatsuya wasn't embarrassed by Lina's mood and he answered her in an indifferent tone. He left his response at that and didn't say anything sequel to it.

Feeling uncomfortable in the silence, Lina began to justify herself.

"...it's very difficult to create the appearance of a completely fictional person from scratch."

It's easier to model yourself, since you see yourself every day in the mirror.

It's also helpful that Miyuki and I are about the same physique."

As Lina said, their height difference wasn't even a centimeter. The volume of their chest, waist, and hips were also about the same. Miyuki's chest was a little bigger, but it wasn't noticeable through clothes. It was quicker for Lina to hide Miyuki under an illusion based on her own body.

"Then did Onii-sama's appearance come from a close friend of yours?"

Miyuki asked her question with obvious discontent since Tatsuya's current look was not particularly to her taste.

Incidentally, Miyuki addressed Tatsuya as "Onii-sama" rather than "Tatsuya-sama" in front of Lina. From now on, they would live together for some time, so instead of constantly correcting themselves, they relied on saying "I just can't get rid of the old habit."

"Tatsuya's face was taken from a young musician from New Mexico. He specializes in live performances and never appeared on TV or the network, so you don't need to worry that he might be recognized, and even if someone could recognize him, they would only see Tatsuya as someone with a similar appearance because the hairstyle and body build are different."

"...That is, you couldn't finish it?"

"Nothing could be done... I have never played with a man before," Lina said in order to justify Miyuki's criticism.

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Just before they left the house, a message came from First High notifying them that classes would be resumed starting tomorrow, so they knew that the school was closed today. The only people in the school right now were the security guards and a small part of the teaching staff with specific work to do.

Despite this lack of personnel and their disguise, Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Lina were able to drive through the gate without any problems. Tatsuya still had his ID, and though the picture was different than his current face, they had notified the school in advance that they would be coming in disguise and he passed the identity check through biometric identification.

The electric sedan was parked in the parking lot, and all three entered the school building through the entrance used by school personnel. When they approached the reception staff, Miyuki removed the cherry-colored elastic hairband from her head from which her pony tail was held.

Her current light brown hair spread over her back before turning to look more black and silk-like. Her hazel eyes became black as obsidian, and her facial features completely changed while remaining beautiful.

Now, the well-known Student Council President at First High stood in front of the reception staff.

The three reception staff were fascinated by her transformation, so they ignored Tatsuya's and by the time they noticed him standing next to Miyuki, their views were shocked as if questioning "*where did he come from?*".

Tatsuya was pleased with their suspicious glances.

"The disguise worked well."

He realized it was effective at hiding his and Miyuki's identity based on their shock, relieving him. Then, without showing his mood, he addressed the employee in the window.

"We want to meet with the director."

"We heard in advance about this."

The staff didn't treat them carelessly as they did other students. The female employee to whom Tatsuya voiced his request immediately got up, went into the corridor, and gestured for them to follow.

Tatsuya didn't object and left her to lead them.

The director's office was located on the ground floor, near the main entrance, and the arrival of the three had been communicated internally, so by the time the receptionist leading them knocked on the director's door, an employee was ready and responded quickly.

"Sorry for the intrusion," Tatsuya said.

Tatsuya, Lina, and Miyuki entered the office while the receptionist and the employee who opened the door stayed in the hallway. Tatsuya and Miyuki were dressed in the school's summer uniforms while Lina was wearing a knee-length pleated skirt as well as a formal blouse with a thin ribbon.

Two people were waiting for them in the office: the director and the deputy director. Director Momoyama was sitting at the table, while Deputy Director Yaosaka stood to the side.

"Come on in." Momoyama ordered them with an arrogant tone, still sitting.

Following his instructions, Tatsuya moved forward and stood in front of the table. Lina stood behind him to the right while Miyuki stood behind him to the left (the side of his heart).

"Thank you very much for taking your time today despite your busy schedule."

After saying this, Tatsuya bowed low. Miyuki and Lina also gave a polite bow, but theirs didn't extend to their backs. They had still lowered their heads to him, though, so it was still polite enough for the situation.

"I heard about your situation from your mother."

Momoyama didn't waste his own time with formalities, getting right to the point.

“In that case, I will repeat the request. Could you allow this girl, Angelina Kudou Shields-san, into the school as a student?”

“I am aware of your situation,” Momoyama replied as he transferred his gaze from Tatsuya to Lina.

Lina froze under the influence of his sharp look, feeling pressured by it, as if it were penetrating her.

Keeping a stern face, Momoyama spoke to Lina in a serious voice.

“I myself teach in the walls of this school. I don’t reject those who seek knowledge. If you truly want to study here, then as the person in charge of First High, I will take you as an apprentice.”

“I really want to!”

Lina answered immediately. Even she hadn’t expected her energy and her comment came off as more intense than she had intended.

She looked away in shame after such a display, but Momoyama wasn’t embarrassed and didn’t feel mocked, instead nodding in satisfaction at her ready and enthusiastic answer.

“Actually, the Ministry of Defense tried to pressure us not to enroll you in our school.”

“I... apologize for the inconvenience.”

Tatsuya couldn’t hide his surprise, amazed that the military would act so directly.

“Shiba-kun, you don’t need to apologize. Obviously I’m not going to obey those stubborn people.”

True to his usual self, Momoyama didn’t allow himself to be influenced by anyone else – after all, if he didn’t bow to the Yotsuba, why would he bow to the military? There was not a hint of a smile on Momoyama’s face.

“I can’t allow magicians to be denied education. Shields-kun, your grandfather Kudou Ken-si felt the same.”

“...were you familiar with my grandfather?” Lina asked.

“Your grandfather and I were like-minded in the matter of how to teach young people born to magicians. I respected him as an elder friend of mine, almost like a big brother.”

Momoyama’s eyes showed a sense of nostalgia that seemed to sparkle with a soft light.

Lina was stunned, not expecting to find an acquaintance.

“Kudou Retsu – your grandfather’s older brother – fought to protect magician’s rights by using his status. Kudou Ken worked with him by urging magicians to receive education. Kudou Retsu was forced to give up the rank of Lieutenant General for this and Kudou Ken was expelled from Japan and sent to America. But their actions were not in vain. The current policy the Nine Magic High Schools of the University of Magic pursue is to an extent the result of Kudou Ken’s work.”

“...I didn’t know that.”

“It’s forbidden to disclose it to the public,” Tatsuya answered, joining in.

After Tatsuya’s honest statement, Momoyama smiled for the first time, but it conveyed bitterness.

“I also share the beliefs of Kudou Ken. Therefore, Shields-kun, I will not allow the army to undermine your right to an education, no matter what country the army belongs to.”

“...thank you very much.”

Lina bowed with a submissive face.

“But,” Momoyama continued, “if your goal turns out to be something other than learning, you can’t hope for any protection from me.”

“I really do want to learn. I want to go to this school.”

“Then I, Momoyama Azuma, will fulfill this request, provided you pass the entrance exams.”

“In that case, let her pass these entrance exams,” Tatsuya said.

Tatsuya was surprised at Lina’s enthusiasm. While he had expected that she did want to come back to First High, he was slightly shocked at just how much she seemed to want to. However, he hid his surprise and calmly asked for her to take the exams. Unlike the rest of the conversation, though, his request was directed at the deputy director Yaosaka.

“If Shields-san doesn’t mind, we’ll organize the entrance exams to be tomorrow,” Yaosaka responded.

“Tomorrow...”

Lina’s face completely changed as she mumbled in a stunned voice. Yaosaka smiled at Lina, ignoring her tone of voice.

“The exams will be on your magical theory and practice. If you, Shields-san, have retained the abilities you showed in your first year of study, then you will definitely pass the exams. The decision on enrollment will be made on the spot, so you can start going to school the day after tomorrow.”

“...I will try to pass,” Lina replied in a formal tone.

When they finally left the director’s office, Lina sighed in relief. She looked very nervous, but Tatsuya and Miyuki didn’t touch on that topic, interpreting her behavior as a result from being used to army orders.

“Don’t worry, Lina. I will help you prepare,” Miyuki offered.

“Really...?”

Lina looked like she wanted to escape for a moment.

“...thanks.”

In the end, however, she agreed with a hopeless face.

While Miyuki was primarily with them to test Parade, they planned to get questions from past tests if they had access to the school board room in order to prepare for the entrance exam. Unfortunately, however, it turned out that even the president of the student council couldn't use the school facilities when the school was closed. Because of this, they had no reason to stay in school, and Tatsuya asked Lina to reactivate Parade.

“Lina, please.”

“Alright.”

Lina nodded in response to Tatsuya's request while Miyuki removed the dark blue hair tie from her wrist and pulled her hair back.

Miyuki nodded towards Lina, who was looking at her.

The transformation was instant.

Miyuki's black hair turned light brown.

Her hair tie became a cherry color.

Her eye color changed to match her new hair.

She once again became a girl that looked nothing like Miyuki but very similar to Lina.

“I think this will remain amazing every time I see it.”

Tatsuya's own face had changed as well, and he expressed his impressions of Miyuki out loud. Even his voice had changed to fit his face.

“Do you like this one more?” Miyuki asked with a strange face.

“No, I think your face is best.”

“...thank you very much.”

However, her usual embarrassment after being complimented by Tatsuya didn't appear.

Lina's tired face watching the two also didn't differ from the usual.





When they returned home, Miyuki immediately dragged Lina to her room in order to prepare for the exams, as she had promised back in the school building.

Lina's entrance exams into First High were tomorrow. She had less than half a day left to prepare. Tatsuya didn't think there was any sense in cramming right before the exam, but he didn't stop them since Miyuki had already made promised and Lina had already agreed. He didn't have any reason to force his opinion on them.

Instead, Tatsuya headed to the "meditation room" located on the same floor as the training room. It was a room dedicated to using magic by increasing one's focus through meditation.

The room was isolated from light, sound, and vibrations – all possible causes of distraction. It maintained a constant, comfortable temperature, and noise was kept to a certain level. It was a favorable environment for using magic that required high concentration of the mind.

Therefore, it shouldn't even need to be mentioned that Tatsuya came to this room to search for Minami. However, unlike his method yesterday, today he wasn't going to try and force his way through Minoru's disguising magic.

Tatsuya had already succeeded in finding Minami through Minoru's Parade – while it was only a short time, he had found her approximate whereabouts after succeeding in canceling Minoru's Parade. However, he still couldn't find Minoru's shelter after searching the area he found in person. There was no reason for him to break through Parade again only to be stopped once more by the local concealment magic built by Zhou Gongjin.

While Tatsuya hadn't managed to actually find Minami, he had still found vital information:

Minami was still human.

She had no yet become a Parasite.

Tatsuya didn't know how to prevent her from becoming a Parasite by using the information dimension or if it was even possible, but he at least knew that it wasn't too late to save her. This fact gave him enough willpower to push through any doubts that he wouldn't be able to succeed.

Tatsuya sat directly on the wooden floor of the spacious 8 tatami room.

Miyuki wasn't in his physical reach at the moment so he couldn't fully use his Elemental Sight to search, but he already knew he was able to find Minami's Eidos even without taking his sight off of Miyuki after yesterday.

Mobilizing all his free resources to look for Minami, he checked her condition.

"Her physical data is still human.

"Also, her psionic waves don't contain anything inherent to Parasites."

With this, Tatsuya was sure that Minami still hadn't turned into a Parasite.

"There was no change in the information around the coordinates. It's still in the Sea of Trees with an error of about 100 meters.

"But... the coordinates changed? Did Minoru notice my observation?"

Tatsuya knew that Minoru had detected his initial search through the information dimension, but he wasn't sure whether he had detected his later observation in the physical realm. The first illusion hadn't fooled him yesterday because he had seen it before.

"I can still read Minami's physical condition even if it's blocked by Parade."

All of Tatsuya's attention yesterday had been directed towards determining Minami's location, so he hadn't had detected any other relevant information.

This time, Tatsuya had learned from that and maintained his discipline as he continued to observe. He had come to the conclusion that yesterday he was not sufficiently assembled and calm, so he made sure that he was completely focused today by meditating and calming his mind.

Minoru's magic was slightly unstable – probably a combination of lingering effects from Cocytus as well as Tatsuya's attack the day before. Because of this, his Parade was more visible than the day before.

“This is completely different from Lina’s version…?”

While both Minoru's and Lina's Parade had the same effect – masking information about the body – the specific processes they used to achieve this effect differed widely.

“Can I disperse it now…? No, I still don’t have enough.”

Tatsuya received a more detailed response than yesterday from Minoru's magic sequence, but he still didn't have enough to completely decompose the magic. He needed more detailed structural information.

Tatsuya focused his gaze.

However, Minoru's magic suddenly stopped fluctuating and regained its stability and the crack through which Tatsuya was able to view the structural information closed.

Tatsuya tried using Gram Dispersion anyway, despite the lack of information.

Based on the new information he gained by reading past changes while the spell fluctuated, Tatsuya decomposed the information body making up the phenomena.

“...it didn’t work?”

Tatsuya still couldn't decompose a hidden sequence of magic in his current state.

However, he didn't hurry himself this time. Remembering yesterday's experience, he decided to temporarily stop searching.

“If I can’t acquire the required information by observation, maybe I can obtain data in another way.”

Rather than continue walking into his current dead end hoping to break through the path, Tatsuya decided to turn back and find a new one.

Minoru and Lina both use Parade originating from the Kudou. Therefore, the Kudou family must have improved the spell after Kudou Ken left for America since Lina's spell differed from Minoru's.

If Minoru added the adjustments himself, there wouldn't be that much of a difference. Even with his outstanding intellect, he wouldn't be able to quickly improve the spell.

Therefore, if Tatsuya could learn about the spell from the Kudou family, the probability of him being able to overcome Minoru's disguise would greatly increase.

Tatsuya stopped meditating, got up, and started thinking about a negotiation plan.

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About an hour after Tatsuya stopped pressuring him, Minoru sighed with relief, relaxing. He was in a comfortably reclined on a cushioned recliner, but he had still involuntarily overworked himself. Exhausted, he leaned all the way back in his chair.

Today's attack hadn't been the same as yesterday. Minoru had felt a similar pressure at the end, but for the most part, the pressure today had been more creepy – almost sinister. He hadn't felt attacked, just... watched.

Minoru did not feel any hope from the lack of an offensive attack. There was no way Tatsuya had given up. It was almost worse that he was only being watched – Minoru had no idea what Tatsuya knew, what he was doing. He worried that Tatsuya had found some vulnerability in Parade that Minoru hadn't noticed. Maybe he had stopped watching because he had found what he was looking for.

Despite this, Minoru was confident in Parade. The spell had been developed by the Ninth Laboratory before being further perfected by Kudou Retsu.

It used to be said that Kudou Ken was a more advanced user of Parade, so Minoru believed that his grandfather had continued to improve the magic sequence to win against his younger brother in skill. Minoru knew his grandfather was very proud of it – it was the magic he had put his heart into to achieve the point of being called the “most skilled in the world.” Minoru believed that even Tatsuya wouldn't be able to find any defects in the magic.

However, Minoru knew that he couldn't just rely on his belief. His worry came from the fact that even though the chance was incredibly small, the chance that Tatsuya had found or could find a weakness existed. In addition, though his current shelter had not yet been discovered, both Tatsuya and then Ten Master Clans knew it was in the Sea of Trees. He had to move to a new location where he wouldn't be chased, just in case.

Knowing this, Minoru made a decision to help Lu Ganghu enter the country to gather the attention of the self-defense forces – and, hopefully, Tatsuya and the Ten Master Clans as well.

Minoru chose to betray his homeland to give Minami a choice about her future.

To complete his work, he stood up, walked over to the table, and opened a special application to send an anonymous message.

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The soldiers of the platoon of strike infantry from the first division of the national self-defense forces – the Sword Corps, currently stationed at the military base adjacent to the training ground east of Mount Fuji – were currently depressed in their barracks.

The had come to this base on the third of July to arrest the Parasite Kudou Minoru, who had kill Kudou Retsu – a former general of the self-defense forces. They had spent 6 days (including the day of arrival) without any leads and without work, but yesterday, they had finally received information from the Juumonji family that Minoru was hiding in the Sea of Trees. Enthused, the fighters moved to search for the villain's hideout.

But in the end, they found... nothing.

Not only had they failed to find the shelter, they hadn't even found a single trace of wheels after a thorough search.

The soldiers didn't think the Juumonji family had lied, but some at least grinned at the fact that the Ten Master Clans had also been fooled.

After a day of searching for the shelter, the officers came to the conclusion that Kudou Minoru was *not* hiding in the Sea of Trees, so their mission to capture Kudou Minoru had gone back to the beginning.

Without leads, everyone was ordered to wait in the provided accommodation on the base. They didn't have any way to leave, but they were at least able to rest. Since as soldier's, they didn't drink during the day, most of them simply lounged around, resting from yesterday's bustle.

That's why the message that came in the evening caught them by surprise, tensing them in both body and mind.

The soldiers quickly gathered in the conference hall looking rested but alert – the sudden order gave everyone the feeling that something was wrong.

The commander of the detachment took the podium and asked everyone to sit down. After an introduction, he came to the main topic:

“About an hour ago, we received an anonymous text message.”

A third of the soldiers present exchanged glances with other, but the commander heard their whispers and paused until the noise died down.

“The intelligence department couldn't find the source of the message, but the message wasn't malicious at least. The main problem, however, is the content of the message.”

The commander stopped and looked around for a moment. The atmosphere was filled with tension.

“A sabotage detachment from the Great Asian Alliance has entered Japan. His goal is to murder the Strategic Class magician who escaped to our country, Liu Li Lei. The commander of this detachment is Lu Ganghu.”

This time, the noise in the hall was more audible. Many of the people gathered – including Chiba Naotsugu and Watanabe Mari – unconsciously muttered the commander of the detachment from the GAA's name.

The commander of the Sword Corps ordered support in intercepting the sabotage detachment sent by the GAA. They had two goals. First: protect Komatsu base. And second: capture or eliminate Lu Ganghu.

Half of the Sword Corps would depart tomorrow and act separately from the remaining force.

The shipped half included Naotsugu and Mari.

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Naotsugu heard on knock on his door as he was preparing for tomorrow's departure.

His room was small and narrow, and half of it was occupied by his bed and wardrobe. He walked to the door in just three steps, and, twisting and pulling the doorknob, said "come in."

Outside his room was a woman in the corridor from the same squad as him.

"Xu, are you free right now?"

"Of course."

The visitor to his room was his beloved Mari.

"Sorry to trouble you..."

Mari spoke in an indecisive tone. It was already late evening, and Naotsugu was supposed to be busy preparing for tomorrow's action.

"Mari, have you finished packing?"

"Of course."

"Did you just find that bag with a changeable strap?"

Naotsugu teased Mari for her aversion to tidying up.

"How rude. I am a woman," she responded.

"Sorry, sorry. But, I don't think there is a rule that one is able to maintain order just by being a woman."

Naotsugu was still smiling in his apology, but Mari wasn't angry. While her pride was being insulted, she was willing to accept it – partly because it was somewhat true, and partly because it was from the one she loved.

She knew that she was disorganized, especially compared to other women, but she currently lived in army quarters. She couldn't afford to be sloppy and make a mess like she did at home, so she kept her clothes washed, her toothbrush dried, and her comb in ready in her bag every day.

Mari was ready to leave at a moment's notice – as she had to be, due to the nature of the army. That's why she had prepared so quickly.

"So, what do you want to talk about?" Naotsugu asked.

He stopped his teasing to ask a more serious question. He stopped smiling despite his happiness – while he wanted to see the face of his beloved, his lover was serious. She wouldn't come late at night just to fool around.

"Xu, I would like to hear your opinion..."

Naotsugu motioned for Mari to sit on the bed before continuing. Mari obliged and sat down before asking about the expected topic.

"Tomorrow's departure... couldn't this just be a ploy to divert our attention?"

However, the content of the question went way beyond his expectations.

"...you think the penetration of the Great Asian Alliance might be a hoax?" Naotsugu asked.

"It might be, but even if it is true, why was the information sent here?"

"I don't know that either – it's a strange, illegal message from an unknown source, so I don't know how much we can trust the content of the message, either. ...Mari, you think that the message containing secret data was sent in order to stop our search for Kudou Minoru?"

Mari nodded hesitantly to answer.

“I... still believe that Kudou Minoru is hiding somewhere in the Sea of Trees.”

“Even after our searches?” Naotsugu confirmed.

“I don’t think Juumonji would have sent unreliable information, Xu.”

Mari was looking at the floor – perhaps she didn’t have enough self-confidence to defend her opinion while looking Naotsugu in the eye – but her voice was no longer as indecisive. She had grown more confident than she had been initially, even if she was still nervous.

“...the current head of the Juumonji family was your classmate, right? So you know his character well?”

“I practically know him personally. I don’t know everything – I can’t say what his hobbies are or his favorite food – but I do know one thing for sure: that man will not make irresponsible statements. If he doesn’t know something, he will say he doesn’t know it. If Juumonji said ‘Kudou Minoru hid in Aokigahara,’ Kudou Minoru is hiding in Aokigahara – maybe behind an unknown magic.”

Mari finally raised her head and looked straight at Naotsugu.

“...Xu. I can’t think otherwise.”

“I see.”

Naotsugu met Mari’s eyes with his own before nodding.

“I don’t know the character of the head of the Juumonji family, but if you say so, then the information from Juumonji Katsuto-si is trustworthy, and your idea that Kudou Minoru is hiding behind unknown magic is also likely.”

“Xu...”

Naotsugu didn’t look away from Mari’s eyes full of emotion.

“Kudou Minoru is a magician of the Ninth lab who defeated the elder. Perhaps his knowledge and abilities after becoming a Parasite allow him to freely use all of the secret techniques from the Ninth lab. But...”

“But?” Mari asked.

“But even if this is just to distract us – we still have to appear tomorrow.”

“...because this is an order?”

“Of course, that. But more importantly, if there is a chance that Lu Ganghu *has* entered the country, I can’t just leave it unaddressed.”

Two years ago, Naotsugu fought against Lu Ganghu right before the Yokohama incident. The fight had ended with injuries on each side, but if Naotsugu had been conquered that time, many other Japanese magicians would have fallen victim to the ensuing assault on the Kanto branch of the Magic Association – possibly including Mari. Remembering this, Naotsugu wanted to avoid this happening again no matter what.

“If he really had entered the country, this time I need to finish him off,” Naotsugu said.

“...I understand. But, if you’re talking about your connection to him, I have also fought him in the past.”

Mari had also exchanged blows with Lu Ganghu – and not just once, but twice.

While each time had ended in a victory for Mari’s side, however, neither time had been her own achievement.

She had been successful the first time because Lu Ganghu had already been wounded by Naotsugu.

And in the second time, Mayumi had been the one to strike the final blow.

Mari also had a desire to stop him, even if it wasn’t as strong as Naotsugu’s.

“I don’t have any personal reason to chase Kudou Minoru. If I hadn’t been ordered by the army, I probably wouldn’t have ever gotten involved in this – so, this new order has a higher priority to me.”

“...yeah. We work on both cases at once, and our priority should fall in stopping Lu Ganghu.”

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Around the time Mari and Naotsugu had their conversation in Naotsugu’s narrow room, Kazama called Tatsuya to warn him.

“Tatsuya, I will say this again. I want you to stop doing things as stupid as sending Angie Sirius to school, putting her in the eye of the public.”

“And I will repeat this: our family took care of Angelina Kudou Shields-san, not Major Angie Sirius.”

“...do you really think that such an excuse will work?”

“You think I’m joking?”

Tatsuya was speaking in a carefree tone in contrast to Kazama’s stern voice, so it wasn’t entirely unreasonable for the answer to that question to be “yes”.

“Major Angie Sirius has a rather remarkable appearance – a height of 170 centimeters with dark red hair and golden eyes. Lina’s appearance with light blue eyes and blond hair, while fairly rare and an ethnic peculiarity given her ancestry, is completely different from Major Angie Sirius. And, even ignoring eye and hair color – they have a completely different physique,” Tatsuya continued.

“Angie Sirius is a Parade user! She can take any shape!”

“But has the USNA government acknowledged this? Have they confirmed that Angelina Kudou Shields is Major Angie Sirius?”

“...no, they haven’t confirmed it.”

“Then, has the embassy demanded a citizen of their country, hiding here, be released, or required that we extradite a criminal?”

“...there wasn’t anything like that, either.”

“Then, since Shields-san is not confirmed to be Major Sirius, we don’t have any need to transfer her to America.”

“Tatsuya... do you really intend to start a feud with the army? Is Angie Sirius so valuable to you?”

“Lieutenant Colonel, do not misunderstand me. I have no intention to fight the military.”

Tatsuya immediately answered, but after a short pause, he added:

“On my side, at least, there is no hostility.”

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Later that night, shortly before the date would change from July 10 to July 11, Lina was still in Miyuki’s room.

Lina’s home was on the same floor as Tatsuya and Miyuki, but it was in a different apartment. There was a separate lockable door with a separate bathroom, toilet, living room, and bedroom.

Despite this, Lina remained in Miyuki’s room.

This wasn’t because Lina’s room hadn’t been prepared.

As could be deduced, they were preparing for Lina’s entrance exams tomorrow.

Lina sat at the table Miyuki usually used. Miyuki sat next to her like a tutor.

“Isn’t it getting late?” Miyuki said.

After Miyuki said this, Lina weakly fell onto the table, face down.

“I’m...tired...”

Lina moaned this statement and held her head face down in her arms, which were folded on the table.

“You’re exaggerating.”

Miyuki smiled slightly at Lina’s seeming exhaustion.

“I’m not exaggerating! I categorically affirm my fatigue!”

Lina jumped from her chair and protested in a manner that contrasted her statement.

Miyuki bent her head from Lina’s belligerence.

“I thought this was normal behavior before an exam...”

Lina’s face turned noticeably pale.

“This... is normal for you...? Really...? Maybe it’s because you’re special, Miyuki...”

“What is special about this...? After all, we only spent five hours studying...”

“If you only look at the time after the fact, it doesn’t seem significant, but ordinary people can’t maintain their concentration for that long!”

“Onii-sama is much more amazing.”

“Tatsuya is far from ordinary! Can’t you cite other examples?”

“Other people with whom I study?”

Lina touched on a slightly sensitive subject.

“Of course I can. Honoka, Shizuku, Minami-chan...”

Miyuki stopped suddenly. Lina’s faced turned into an expression of guilt and she hid behind her hand.

While she didn’t know the details of what happened, she knew that something troubling had occurred, and tried to avoid the topic despite being interested. She was aware enough not to force her way into someone else’s business, but Lina thought that she had accidentally stumbled onto a minefield with her careless tired statement.

“Hey... what happened the day before yesterday?”

Lina could have just returned to her room and acted as if nothing had happened, but Lina dared to ask the question, believing it would be best if she knew the situation.

“I’ve never seen Tatsuya’s face like that before – the face he had when he contacted me the day before yesterday. Miyuki, what happened to you?”

Miyuki’s eyes quivered, but after much hesitation, she nodded, deciding to talk to Lina.

“The day before yesterday, I was really shocked, but... everything is in order now, thanks to Onii-sama’s support.”

Miyuki said she was fine, but Lina didn’t believe her completely – if she was fine, why did she react so much after thinking about Minami?

The topic had a deep imprint on Minami’s mind. She had paused for so long that there was clearly pain.

However, her statement hadn’t been entirely a lie. Miyuki had been able to overcome herself and speak with a kind smile that hadn’t felt forced or fake.

“Do... you want to listen?”

Miyuki was interested in telling Lina everything.

So, Miyuki spoke, telling Lina all the details from when Minoru abducted Minami, and after that, she added Tatsuya’s opinion on Minami’s reason to the story with which he had reassured Miyuki.

“I... think Tatsuya is correct, at least somewhat,” Lina said after she finished listening to Miyuki.

“What Onii-sama said – do you mean his words about Minami-chan’s feelings...?”

“Yes. I don’t know what kind of person Minami is, but I can understand Tatsuya’s words in that he doesn’t want you to kill a person you know. If Tatsuya thinks that Minami had the same motive, I’m sure he’s correct.”

In Stars, Lina had to eliminate combat magicians who had committed serious crimes, and among the targets were former colleagues from Stars.

Lina had experienced how difficult it was to aim a weapon – whether guns or magic – at a comrade and pull the trigger. She was certain Tatsuya understood this, as well as Minami, at least hypothetically.

“...thank you Lina.”

“You don’t need to thank me for that.”

Lina averted her eyes from Miyuki’s intent gaze, confused, as her cheeks slightly reddened.

Chapter Seven

Thursday, July 11.

Today was the first school day after a three-day break due to the New Soviet Union invasion.

Pupils walking from the nearest station to First High were talking, but very few conversations were about the upcoming summer holidays.

The conversations were instead focused on the appearance of Angelina Kudou Shields.

The first and second years were wondering who the beautiful blonde student was, having never met Lina.

Among the third years, however, the question became “why is Shields-san here?”

They weren’t just confused about Lina, either. Students from every grade had the common question, “who is the beautiful girl next to her with the hair tie?”

The elite schools of the National University of Magic primarily didn’t accept new students in the middle of the school year – slots previously taken by expelled students would not be replaced. However, there was a transfer system between the schools, so it wasn’t exactly impossible for new students to transfer in. The students were skeptical about this, but they were aware that it was a possibility.

The first and second years were more willing to accept this explanation, as they mistook the similarity of Miyuki’s face disguised by Parade to Lina to mean that they were relatives. However, the third years, knowing better, were even more confused.

Reporters were rushing around the school road to try and get information about Ocean Blast from Tatsuya, who had been revealed as one of the developers, and Miyuki, known as to be Tatsuya's cousin. The reporters had initially crowded FLT, leaving for Fuchu after finding out that Tatsuya had not come to work today. However, after finding an empty house, they still didn't give up, instead splitting into three groups waiting at all three important locations – the FLT office, the house in Fuchu, and the road leading to First High.

It wasn't a secret that classes in magic high schools were being resumed today – the information had been published on the official website, so reporters waited on the road from the station to the school from early in the morning.

Despite their efforts, however, they couldn't find any trace of their target students. While the media briefly focused on the pair of blonde and brown haired female students standing out from the rest, they had no way to know that they weren't usual students. Dismissing them as beautiful girls, they didn't waste time on them believing that they wouldn't be valuable news.

However, reporters weren't the only group from outside the school paying attention to Lina and Miyuki.

Two approximately forty-year-old men with sloppy appearances watched Lina head towards the school while sitting at a window seat on the second floor of the coffee-house chain famous throughout the country.

“...this may be the outskirts of Tokyo, but the street is so open...”

One of the men muttered this in an annoyed voice, but the second ignored his question, taking it as a monologue.

“Is this definitely Angie?”

The two men were speaking in English despite their East Asian faces. While they might not have been purely Japanese, they didn't stand out much for their looks, so the guests and waiters of the establishment simply didn't mind them.

“Her appearance is quite remarkable. There’s no way someone else could be mistaken for her,” The first responded. “And the other one is similar to her, see? They would look the same if it weren’t for the color of their hair and eyes.”

“Angie is skilled at disguising magic. The second one must be under a disguise, but I don’t know why Angie made it look like herself.”

“It might be that guy’s bride?”

“It’s possible. Very possible.”

The girls with blonde and brown hair were gone now, and the two men looked away from the window, looking at each other.

“But even if it is Angie...”

The first man – who had raised the topic in the beginning – continued in a careful voice.

“Our job isn’t to eliminate the deserter.”

The other man nodded at the words of the first.

“I know, but we must also report this to the authorities.”

“...I agree, but if the one with brown hair is that man’s bride, then she is the more important one.”

“Yes. We must revise the strategy and account for Angie’s possible intervention.”

The two men speaking in the coffee shop were members of Horsehead platoon, the Illegal Mystic Assassin Platoon’s sabotage detachment. After they finished their leftover coffee, they rose from the table to leave.

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Once Miyuki arrived at school with Lina, she headed to the school board room with Lina before she went to her classroom.

Opening the door with an ID card, she found Izumi facing the entrance. She was in the room despite the fact that the school board's work would start later. Izumi had seen the information from the ID-card reader on the wall terminal, so she knew it was Miyuki and got up to greet her.

“Good morning, Miy-

Huh?”

Izumi was surprised to see an unfamiliar girl appear before her.

“Good morning, Izumi-chan.”

The light-brown-haired girl answered Izumi with Miyuki's intonation, though without her voice.

Once she closed the door, she pulled the cherry-colored hair tie out of her hair which was immediately followed by a transformation.

Her light-brown hair turned as black as raven feathers, her eye color still reflecting her hair color.

Her face structure changed as well, and Izumi's beloved Miyuki-oneesama appeared before her.

“Miyuki-senpai, what was that?”

Izumi's eyes were round, her surprise at the events evident.

“This is because of all the annoying people.”

Izumi's eyes started to return to their normal shape and her face changed to one of understanding after hearing Miyuki's answer. She nodded slightly and said “Oh, so that's it.”

“You shouldn't talk about this,” Miyuki said.

“Of course. I won't tell anyone anything.”

“Thanks.”

Miyuki thanked her kohai with a smile, expecting her answer. She finally entered the room with Lina and pointed to her, causing Izumi to notice her.

“This is Angelina Kudou Shields-san, but you can call her Lina. She studied here as an exchange student from the USNA when I was in my first year. Lina, this is Saegusa Izumi-san. She is a second year. I call her Izumi-chan.”

Izumi came to her senses when she was introduced.

“My name is Saegusa Izumi. Nice to meet you, Shields-senpai.”

“I’m Angeline Kudou Shields. Nice to meet you. You can just call me Lina.”

Lina tried acting like a high school student, but Miyuki found it funny and almost laughed. She was careful not to let it show however, as she didn’t want to hurt Lina’s feelings.

“OK, Lina. Let’s go to the deputy director. Izumi-chan, see you soon.”

“Yes! Miyuki-senpai, Lina-senpai, goodbye.”

Miyuki led Lina to the director’s room with Izumi’s gaze still following her.

◊ ◊ ◊

Tatsuya headed to the underground floor after seeing Miyuki and Lina off.

The basement of the high-rise building in Chofu housed an organized research facility with more sophisticated than equipment than the home in Chofu. The lab had been created solely for Tatsuya – regardless of the main house’s feelings towards Tatsuya’s power and origins, they couldn’t ignore his contribution to their income with his identity as half of Taurus Silver.

Tatsuya was currently framing the results of his two-day observation of Parade into a organized format following the framework of magical science to analyze them from a scientific point of view. He hoped to move past basic recognition and intuition to

understanding everything on a theoretical level in order to discover a method to counter or break through Parade.

However, after only spending an hour at the console, he was forced to interrupt his work at 9 AM due to the arrival of an unplanned visitor.

After receiving the alert, he quickly headed from the laboratory, located 3 floors underground, to the second floor above ground where the reception room was located.

Fujibayashi Kyouko was waiting there for him.

“Good morning. You’re not in uniform today?” Tatsuya asked.

“Nice to see you, Tatsuya-kun. Today’s my day off.”

Fujibayashi responded to Tatsuya in a friendly manner after his good-natured greeting.

“Please, sit down. I assume I should call you Fujibayashi-san?”

“Yes, I will be grateful if you address me that way.”

Fujibayashi affirmed that she had come as a private citizen rather than as a military visitor as she sat on the sofa indicated by Tatsuya. Tatsuya made his assumption after she addressed him by his name rather than his title, Special Officer Ooguro.

Right after Fujibayashi’s affirmation, there was a knock on the door.

“Enter,” Tatsuya called.

Recognizing Tatsuya’s voice, the door opened automatically and a young woman in a long dress and white apron entered the room. She pushed a trolley from behind it, and though her face was different than Minami’s and Honami’s, it had the same feeling.

She replaced Fujibayashi’s empty tea cup with a new one and set a cup of coffee in front of Tatsuya.

“Fujibayashi-san, if you want a different drink, feel free to ask,” Tatsuya said.

“No, this is fine. Thank you,” Fujibayashi responded.

Fujibayashi’s last two words addressed the maid, politely thanking her for doing her job.

The young maid wearing the apron smiled and bowed before she rolled the cart out of the room.

“She is quite skilled. I envy your wealth of talented people.”

After the maid with an waitress-like aura disappeared behind the door, Fujibayashi muttered a comment complaining about Tatsuya’s family’s apparent luck in finding talented personnel.

“She isn’t combat personnel. What’s your business today? Since you aren’t with the military right now, I assume your goal isn’t to continue yesterday’s conversation on the phone regarding Lina.”

After Tatsuya’s question, Fujibayashi straightened.

“No, today I came as the representative of the head of the Fujibayashi family, Fujibayashi Nagamasa, to apologize.

Fujibayashi changed her casual manner to a more official one, speaking in a serious tone with formal phrasing before bowing low.

“Apologies? For what? ...I don’t understand.”

“I’m referring to the unacceptable disgrace committed by a member of the Fujibayashi family, Kudou Minoru. The head of the family wishes to apologize for the acts committed by Kudou Minoru against the Shiba family.”

“You say a family member, but he isn’t directly related...” Tatsuya responded, confused.

Fujibayashi Nagamasa was the head of the Fujibayashi family and the father of Fujibayashi Kyouko. Nagamasa’s wife was Kudou Makoto’s younger sister, so Minoru was officially Nagamasa’s nephew, but they didn’t really have a relationship – it might

be better to describe Minoru as Nagamasa's wife's brother's son. He had no blood connection and their relationship wasn't particularly personal.

However, when considering secret facts, their relationship becomes much closer – Minoru was born through the artificial insemination of Nagamasa's wife's egg with sperm from Kudou Makoto.

While this does make the apology make slightly more sense, the Fujibayashi family had no need to feel guilty about Minoru's actions. The fault clearly fell on the Kudou family.

Fujibayashi responded with understanding of this context.

"Even if there isn't a direct blood relationship, he is still the son of the wife of the head of the family, and therefore a member of the family – at least, says the head."

Tatsuya could accept Fujibayashi's explanation, but he still didn't think the apology was necessary. Nagamasa's wife hadn't committed an act as immoral as incest with her brother – she had only provided genetic material.

"...alright. However, Fujibayashi-san, did you come in person just to apologize, or do you have other business too?"

"It isn't a different matter, but something material. Our apology isn't just verbal," Fujibayashi responded.

"...go on."

Tatsuya raised his eyebrows as he asked Fujibayashi to explain.

"Here."

As she said this, Fujibayashi reached a hand into her purse and retrieved a solid cube, laying it on the table. It was a high-capacity solid-state drive.

"This is representative of the apology from the Fujibayashi family. Please accept it. This contains documents describing Parade's sequence of magic and its usage. We also included documents about the Ancient Continental Magic, Sekirei Hachijin."

Tatsuya couldn't hide his surprise at hearing this – Fujibayashi's gift was beyond convenient, but it revealed extremely valuable information.

"Are you sure? Parade is the secret technique of the Kudou family."

Fujibayashi frowned slightly and sighed at Tatsuya's statement.

"...the Kudou family were probably the ones who should have provided this to you, actually. Despite this, just getting them to agree to provide information wasn't easy."

The Kudou family's pride didn't allow them to donate their secrete technique to the Yotuba, so they compromised and used the Fujibayashi family as a middle party. It was silly, but understandable.

"Then, I will accept it gratefully."

Regardless of their intentions, the description of Parade was the exact information he wanted from the Kudou family. The luck was unexpected, but Tatsuya was grateful regardless.

Fujibayashi bowed to Tatsuya.

"Sekirei Hachijin is a spell similar to Ghost Walker but on a larger scale. It builds a large-scale barrier hiding an area."

She briefly commented on the contents of the second part of the media.

"Do you mean that Minoru's shelter was built using this technique?"

"At least, we think so."

"This is more than enough..."

Assuming Fujibayashi wasn't lying about the contents, then Tatsuya had suddenly acquired all the information he needed at once. It seemed to be too convenient, giving Tatsuya bad premonitions.

"Tatsuya-kun, we don't expect you to catch Minoru-kun without fail."

Seeing Tatsuya's doubts, Fujibayashi took off her mask as the representative of the head of the Fujibayashi family.

"Father and Uncle Makoto want to catch Minoru-kun with their own hands, so they won't ask you for help. If anything, they want you to leave it to us."

"Can't we combine our efforts?"

"...I will give this request to my father, Tatsuya-kun."

Tatsuya clearly didn't want to retreat. After saying this to excuse herself, Fujibayashi got up and headed for the exit.

◊ ◊ ◊

Lina was still slightly panicked before she started her entrance exams, but once the written exams in the morning finished and she headed for lunch, her face was beaming.

"How was it?" Miyuki asked her.

"This was the natural result with my abilities," Lina responded.

Lina's pride was expressed by her chest pushed so far forward that she seemed to be nearly bent so far that she would fall backwards. Miyuki found the contrast between Lina's reaction while studying with now humorous, as Lina had fallen face first on the table several times while complaining about her exhaustion.

"There are still the practical exams, but as you said, you don't need to worry at your skill level."

"...I was more worried about the knowledge portion," Lina said.

Lina narrowed here eyes and gave Miyuki a reproachful look, causing the others present at their lunch table to laugh.

It was currently lunch break, and they were sitting at a table in the school cafeteria. Lina was wearing a uniform she borrowed from Miyuki until her own uniform arrived.

Lina's presence was drawing everyone's attention from the fact that she was both beautiful and a transfer student.

There were only third-years at Lina's table, and Lina was familiar with more than a few of them. She was, of course, acquainted with Miyuki and Shizuku, but she also knew some of the others from her time as a transfer student in their first year.

"Lina will definitely get into the First Course, but which class will she be in?"

"Hmm...probably ours. We have the fewest students."

Erika's question was answered by Honoka after a moment of thought.

Honoka's class had the fewest number of students because her class had the most students expelled in the past year and a half – from when classes had been adjusted after the creation of the magical engineering course.

This was slightly ironic, since Miyuki, Honoka, and Shizuku – the top 3 students in the school, monopolizing an imaginary podium – all came from class 3A. Did having the top students in the same class correlate with increased drop out rates, or was this just a coincidence?

"I didn't know that Lina-san came to Japan. How long has it been since you arrived?"

Mizuki addressed Lina with her question causing her face to twitch, not knowing how to answer.

"Shibata-san, this is..."

"Mizuki, don't you know Lina's circumstances too?"

Mikihiko squinted his eyes slightly and pressed his teeth together as he tried to stop Mizuki while Erica made a slightly reproachful face and made a rhetorical statement. They were aware that Lina was Angie Sirius and understood the awkwardness of the question.

"Ah! Excuse me...!"

Mizuki quickly realized the delicacy of her question and bowed in a panic.

“...it’s okay... but I will be grateful if you don’t ask about it again.”

“Of course!”

Mizuki nodded vigorously as Lina, Mikihiko, and Erika breathed a sigh of relief.

“Lina transferred here because of me,” Miyuki said.

Miyuki intended to defuse the loaded atmosphere with a brief explanation, but she had intended to explain this anyway, regardless of how the conversation went. She had been presented with an opportunity to explain, however, so she took it.

“What do you mean?”

Shizuku was the first to respond to Miyuki.

“This is because of all the annoying people looking for me.”

“Ah, the media,” Honoka responded.

“Looks like Kichijouji’s statement about jointly developing it with Tatsuya renewed the reporters’ enthusiasm. This morning was hectic,” Erika added.

“Yeah.”

Mizuki nodded to agree with Erika’s and Honoka’s statements.

“They can’t get Tatsuya, so they’re pressing you, Miyuki-san?

“...that’s a difficult situation to be in, since you can’t use force against them. Since this is connected to secrets of national defense, it’s probably best to let the government settle the issue.”

“Indeed,” Miyuki responded curtly in contrast to Leo’s short speech.

“So how is this related to Lina’s transfer?” Shizuku asked.

Shizuku referred to Lina by her first name despite this being their first meeting. Her time spent as a transfer student in the USNA probably helped her get used to this type of addressing.

“Lina is a master of disguise magic,” Miyuki responded. “She can completely change someone’s appearance.”

“Even better than you, Honoka?” Shizuku asked, now addressing Honoka.

Honoka could change her appearance by creating a 3D projection, but this couldn’t even remotely compare to Parade.

“Much better than me.”

“That’s amazing!” Shizuku responded.

“...so, you can transform more than just yourself?”

Erika waited for Honoka and Shizuku to finish their conversation, then turned to Lina.

“Yes. It’s actually easier to use it on another person if they don’t resist, because when applying it to myself, I can only check the result with a mirror.”

“Yeah, and if you only have one mirror, you can’t check your back,” Erika added.

“Exactly.”

Erika and Lina were communicating easily with each other. It was almost unbelievable that they were trying to kill each other not even two years earlier.

Lina and Miyuki had also once fought each other in a duel with Muspelheim and Niflheim. Niflheim could neutralize an enemy with hypothermia, while Muspelheim generally caused instant death or fatal injuries.

“So you will be walking to school together, then?” Honoka asked, changing the subject.

Miyuki answered with a slightly apologetic look.

“Yes... until the media loses interest, Lina and I will only return home from school with each other.”

“That is, we shouldn’t approach either? Since if familiar faces are nearby, you might be revealed?”

“Exactly. Thanks, Erika.”

Miyuki winked at Erika, thanking her for showing concern.

Erika winked back.

◊ ◊ ◊

In addition to First High, all 8 other high schools of magic reopened at the same time. Third High was no exception, but Ichijou Masaki and Kichijouji Shinkuro weren’t at school.

They decided not to attend because of all the reporters trying to get material. The perseverance of the media wasn’t just causing issues for Tatsuya and Miyuki. Their determination to find information about the new officially recognized Strategic Class Magician and the main developer was even stronger than their persistence in searching for Tatsuya and Miyuki.

Had they gone to school, they would have troubled their classmates and underclassmen even more. Reporters were swarming the school without them even there; it would have been incomparably worse had they chosen to attend. Considering this, Masaki and Kichijouji decided to start summer “vacation” early – though it wasn’t really much of a vacation.

Kichijouji still took up work at the institute and Masaki still had to guard Liu Li Lei at the Komatsu base, so they were given official days off from the director of third high – Maeda Chizuru – in order to fulfill official jobs.

In addition, the private school Masaki’s younger sister Ichijou Akane goes to announced the start of summer holidays today since the external threat had not yet been resolved – in total, 10 days were added to the summer holidays.

Thus, the brother and sister of the Ichijou family spent the start of their summer at Komatsu base.

★★★

Akane and Li Lei became friends quickly, but Masaki's relationship with the commander of Li Lei's escort detachment was still tense.

Akane and Li Lei were currently sitting at a table in the center of the room sitting shoulder to shoulder. Akane was using one of her textbooks – stored on her portable tablet terminal – to teach Li Lei general information about Japan.

They were being watched by Masaki and Commander Lin from opposite corners or the room. They didn't converse at all – all of their conversations quickly turned into fierce arguments about their next course of actions. Masaki knew he was being childish, but they ended up piercing each other with their gazes from opposite ends of the room since they couldn't ignore each other. Staying vigilant, Masaki spent his time studying with one of his textbooks.

In addition to the 2 pairs in the center and the corners, soldiers from both the Great Asian Alliance and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces were in the room – Commander Lin's subordinates and soldiers currently on active duty in Komatsu Base,

Masaki felt uneasy here, but he couldn't leave. He had accepted the duty of watching over and taking care of Akane, so if he noticed Commander Lin or her subordinates start taking hostile action, he would work with the soldiers of the base to subdue them. Masaki quelled his anxiety with patience and studied while remaining vigilant.

However, at just 1 PM, Masaki's stomach started hurting from hunger.

Masaki had a visitor from another base in the lobby of the special residential building where he and Li Lei's group were staying.

Komatsu base was an air base, but the visitor was an officer in the land forces. It was Lieutenant Chiba Naotsugu from the Sword Corps. It was a temporary assignment, Masaki didn't really understand this. It didn't really matter though, as the information the visitor provided was far more important.

Chiba Naotsugu was still a student at the academy of defense, so it was weird for him to have the rank of Lieutenant – it had only been granted to him under special conditions. He had been given the rank because of his achievements and his fame as “one of the ten best fighters in the world at a distance less than 3 meters.” He needed an officer rank because he often participated in joint operations with security personnel of allied countries.

Incidentally, the platoon commander of the Sword Corps had been a Senior Lieutenant, and the commanders of each of the units were Lieutenants, so Naotsugu had the same rank as the individual commanders. He was technically out ranked, though, because the commanders of each unit had all served for longer than he had.

Two of the unit commanders had also been sent here, but they were currently organizing and coordinating with the base command.

As a result, Naotsugu currently held the highest rank among the remaining soldiers in the squad, so he headed to Masaki’s and Li Lei’s groups to explain the situation.

“Lu Ganghu will attack us?” Commander Lin said, startled.

“We don’t have evidence that this report is true, but we came here considering it might be,” Naotsugu responded.

Naotsugu’s calm contrasted Commander Lin’s panic. However, his vague speech style that failed to say anything about how factual the information was gave Lin some doubt.

“...that is, you left Tokyo without even checking anything?”

The Sword Corps were based in Tokyo, hence Lin’s assumption that he had departed from there. Her statement was correct, however – the Sword Corps were sent because of the message they received about the sabotage detachment from the GAA. The army couldn’t ignore it and gave it a higher priority than capturing Kudou Minoru.

However, they had no reason to explain unconfirmed facts to refugees from another country.

“There isn’t any clear evidence, but we need to be prepared for the worst. That’s all I can say.”

Naotsugu’s reply didn’t completely convince Lin, but she stopped arguing.

“Please don’t leave this building until it is confirmed to be safe.”

“For how long?” Li Lei asked Naotsugu.

“We are currently looking for Lu Ganghu with police assistance. We will find him in a day or two as well as the rest of the saboteurs who have entered the country.”

As soon as Naotsugu said this, Commander Lin grew nervous.

However, only Mari, standing next to Naotsugu, noticed the minor change in her demeanor.

◊ ◊ ◊

It was the first day back at school for the students at First High after the three-day school closing, but there were only 10 days left before summer break so many students still had plenty of time. Their freedom was further increased from the cancellation of the Nine Schools Competition that was usually held during the summer holidays. Classes in First High lasted until 3:30 PM, but most students engaged in club activities after school, so they stayed a bit later.

Usually, the school board had enough work during this time of year to force them to stay at school until the sun had fallen over the horizon – even in long daylight hours of summer. However, without the Nine Schools Competition increasing many students work load, it was still light when students involved in club activities left the school.

Miyuki walked with Lina – who had successfully passed her entrance exams – to the station a bit before everyone else. Her appearance was currently disguised – she looked like a girl with chestnut-colored hair and matching eyes.

The other members of their company waited in the cafeteria for a bit, talking with each other. Their group had initially come together with Tatsuya and Miyuki at the core, but they were all now good enough friends to meet up even when the siblings weren’t around. They left after a short discussion.

However, about halfway along the road to the station, Erika suddenly looked up into the window of the second floor of a roadside coffee shop.

“Erika-chan, what happened?”

Mizuki noticed her pause and immediately turned towards her.

Erika turned around, slowing her pace to allow Mizuki to catch up.

“I felt a strange gaze on me,” she answered.

“Strange gaze?” Mikihiko questioned.

The group left at the same time, but their difference in walking speed caused them to separate slightly. However, with Erika’s sudden pausing, they were all grouping up again.

“I didn’t feel it all that clearly, but... it was as if something was looking at me from behind, wriggling into me... hmm. An evil gaze. Yeah, that’s the right word.”

“Evil look?” Honoka asked.

“What do you mean? Are you trying to scare us?” Shizuku said with slight disgust.

Shizuku and Honoka caught up to the three and gave Erika a slightly reproachful gaze.

“Erika, you said you didn’t understand its intent? So you don’t know if it means harm...?”

Mikihiko paid more attention to Erika’s lack of understanding than her wording calling it evil.

“I was a little relaxed. I wasn’t on guard, but when I felt it and focused on detecting it, it simply disappeared. It might just be my imagination,” Erika responded, explaining herself.

“You were relaxed, so you lost sight of the enemy? Are you sure you didn’t just stumble upon a mirror?”

“Shut up, moronic lump of boob.”

Erika kicked Leo in the leg.

She didn’t have any experience in kicking martial arts, but it still hurt enough to make Leo grab one leg from the pain and start jumping up and down – which was especially surprising considering Leo’s resistance to pain. Apparently, Erika’s kicks hurt more than being hit by a motorcycle.

“~~Oi! What did you put in your shoe?”

“Who knows...” Erika responded.

“Oh you...!”

Leo looked ready to pound on Erika at any moment while Erika stretched out a magical baton and prepared to fight.

“Hey, you two!”

Mikihiko hurriedly got between them.

“Leo, calm down. You spoke too far just now.”

“Erika-chan, violence isn’t for girls! Why did you have to kick him so suddenly?”

Mikihiko subdued Leo while Mizuki chided Erika, but their antics distracted everyone from the original topic and the question of the “evil eye” went unresolved.

Only Honoka turned to look at the window Erika had stopped at.

◊ ◊ ◊

A man and a woman sat at a table by the window on the second floor of the roadside coffee shop mentioned above.

“...were we seen?” the woman asked.

“No, I don’t think people noticed. People wouldn’t be able to distinguish our faces with the naked eye from such a distance, and there weren’t any signs of magic usage,” the man responded.

“They definitely noticed our presence, at least,” the woman continued.

“Yes. Their skill exceeded our expectations.”

The pair sitting across from each other like a couple were in fact members of the Horsehead squad of the Illegal MAP. Different members were present than in the morning, but their purpose was the same.

“So Angie’s report wasn’t an exaggeration?” the woman asked.

“Even a small girl was able to become Sirius.”

The man didn’t explicitly say what he meant, but his meaning was clear: they shouldn’t underestimate their opponents just because they were young.

“What do we do?”

“The final decision will be made by the squad leader, but I would prefer to avoid the swordswoman from the Chiba family.”

“I agree,” the woman responded. “What about Mitsui?”

“I think she’s fine. She found nothing, even when our location was pointed out to her.”

“Understood.”

Talking, the pair didn’t even bother looking at the group of schoolchildren they had been watching for anymore.

◊ ◊ ◊

Lieutenant Lin, the commander of Liu Li Lei’s escort detachment, was actually a spy for the New Soviet Union. Enemy spies often tried to occupy important positions in organizational structures, especially between countries with long land borders.

Since this happens often, countries monitor for penetration of spies very closely. The Great Asian Alliance was no exception, and the selection process in choosing an escort for their official Strategic Class Magician, Liu Li Lei, many suitable candidates were selected and screened extremely closely with a truth serum. Many candidates lost their identities during processing as the Great Asian Alliance attempted to brainwash them.

Even so, there was always the possibility for there to be a spy among them. Spying and counterintelligence played a vicious back and forth to counter each other's methods, and in this situation, the New Soviet Union came out on top. Lieutenant Lin's special ability was stronger than the anti-spyware measures of the Great Asian Alliance's military, allowing her make it through screening.

Her ability is hypnosis – not mental interference magic, just hypnosis. It was considered a special ability because to use it as Lieutenant Lin had, one needed to be able to use the advanced technique at an extremely high level.

Lieutenant Lin's hypnosis could penetrate deep into the subject's mind at a level similar to mental interference magic, and she could use it on herself. This is how she was able to bypass the effects of the truth serum – she hypnotized herself in order to pass the Great Asian Alliance's tests.

This is much easier said than done, however. She needed to set up a situation in which she would pass the screening while not acting overly suspicious, all without knowing the specifics of the screening process. This isn't even accounting for the difficulty of the technique – and she couldn't "cheat" and use magic anywhere or the GAA would have noticed the trick. Luckily, her trick didn't use any magic and she wasn't a particularly high-skilled enough magician for the GAA to be wary of her.

Even entering the country and receiving orders from the NSU was beyond difficult – in addition to the state, a multitude of other armed groups monitored invasions of enemy magicians.

However, despite all the difficulties, Lieutenant Lin managed to find a position as the escort of Liu Li Lei, but now everything seemed to be on the verge of falling apart.

Lu Ganghu was leading a sabotage detachment from the GAA that seemed to be assigned to kill Liu Li Lei.

Lieutenant Lin needed to quickly find a way out of the situation. Her one advantage was her nonmagical hypnosis ability, which ignored magic resistance.

★★★

The residential buildings provided to Liu Li Lei and her escort detachment were guarded by magicians preventing both outsiders from coming in and the refugees from leaving. They were chosen with priority given to resistance to mental intervention magic over offensive strength, and were given anti-magic projection to add onto their already-high resistances.

The government was confident that the guards were safe from external control, giving Lieutenant Lin a big advantage – not only was her technique not guarded against, the enemy had grown complacent thinking they were safe.

Knowing this, Lieutenant Lin began her plan to get out of the situation.

“I need something that I can’t get inside the base... it will only take an hour. May I have permission to leave?”

Lieutenant Lin directed her request to the soldiers responsible for guarding the residential building while Li Lei took a bath with Akane.

The soldiers looked at each other, puzzled, before turning back to Lin.

“What exactly do you need to buy?” one soldier asked.

“Something necessary for women from the GAA.”

“I can buy it for you.”

“...no, it’s embarrassing,” Lin responded.

Any further attempts the soldiers made to argue this only caused an embarrassed reaction from Lin.

“Why at this time?” the other soldier asked, changing the topic after seeing the progress made on the original topic.

“While Lieutenant Liu Li Lei is in the bathroom, I don’t have to worry that Ichijou Masaki will lead her away.”

For some reason, this answer convinced both soldiers and they conceded this topic, allowing Lin to go outside on the condition that they escorted her to the store themselves despite not getting permission from base command.

The soldiers posted at the gates of Komatsu base in order to protect Liu Li Lei were vigilantly waiting for an attack from the outside by Lu Ganghu, so they weren’t paying much attention to Lin, leaving through the gate of the base accompanied by soldiers from surveillance.

★★★

Mari watched the army convertible driving past her with suspicion. Some time earlier, when Naotsugu was explaining the current situation to the group centered around Liu Li Lei, she noticed a flash of anxiety flash in Lin’s eyes.

“Xu.”

Mari turned to face Naotsugu. She was walking with him along a city street.

“Did you notice something?”

Naotsugu stopped searching for suspicious shadows in the neighborhood to face Mari.

“Lieutenant Lin was in the car that just passed by.”

Naotsugu knit his brow after hearing what Mari said.

“The commander of Lieutenant Liu’s escort and guard? I asked them to refrain from going outside.”

Naotsugu trusted Mari and didn’t check if she was certain – she would have said so otherwise.

“She was with two soldiers from her surveillance.”

“Then it isn’t surprising she was able to leave...”

Naotsugu made a slightly confused comment.

“No, it’s still strange she was able to leave as a refugee in this circumstance. Usually it should have been impossible to go outside without permission.”

“...yeah, that’s how it should have been.”

Staying alert, Naotsugu agreed with Mari’s argument. He wasn’t sure how to process the events so far.

“Did the supervising soldiers receive an important clue about the agents penetrating the country, or are they being manipulated?” Naotsugu said, thinking out loud.

“Mental interference magic?” Mari asked Naotsugu with a slightly pale face.

It would be a terrible nightmare if a skilled user of mental interference magic penetrated a military facility. They would be able to mass produce traitors and spikes without spending time, effort, or money.

“No, if magic were used on the base, it would quickly be detected and dealt with.”

“...yeah, that’s how it is. Sorry, I panicked.”

“You calmed down too quickly, Mari,” Naotsugu said, his face becoming more serious.

Mari’s face seemed relieved, but Naotsugu chided her. The most likely scenario was that the soldiers were being manipulated, and it became much harder to deal with if it wasn’t done with magic.

“You don’t need magic to manipulate other people. You have a technique like that too, don’t you?”

Mari’s eyes shot open in surprise. As Naotsugu said, Mari had a technique that manipulated airflow to mix various harmless, legal aromatic substances to loosen a target’s mind.

“Perhaps Lieutenant Lin is manipulating the supervising soldiers with a non-magical method,” Naotsugu finished.

“Like with a drug?” Mari asked.

“No, she wouldn’t have been able to carry drugs into the base. Lieutenant Lin is a woman, so she must have used something that doesn’t arouse suspicion.

…perhaps, hypnosis with the use of precious stones.”

“Hypnosis can allow one to impose their will on another?”

Mari asked this question since her technique could only lower people’s willfulness. She couldn’t completely subordinate someone’s will.

“I don’t know the techniques very well, so my answer could be wrong, but… even if it’s impossible to gain complete control of another person, I think it’s at least possible to manipulate their will in a specific direction.”

“…to direct their will? You mean direct their thinking?”

“Lead their thinking? …hmm. Yeah, that’s what I mean.”

Naotsugu thought about Mari’s paraphrasing before agreeing with it.

“That wording is more appropriate. It doesn’t matter whether it’s hypnosis or something else – when you need to convince someone of a different opinion, you need to lead them along. You can’t just directly explain your thinking to them – you need to lead them to the way you think.”

“You think so? So, even with hypnosis, you can’t force the target to do something they are completely against, but you can nudge them towards the path you intend for them to go.”

“Yeah. Then, it’s likely she was able to deceive the guards into removing themselves from the base.”

“…I understand the theory.”

Mari quickly collected her thoughts before looking at Naotsugu.

“If the soldiers surveilling her are manipulated, then it’s a serious matter, Xu.”

“Yes. This isn’t something where we stand on the side and just let things happen. We don’t have time to leisurely discuss everything.”

As he said this, Naotsugu pulled a portable army terminal out of his breast pocket.

“Xu, what are you doing...?”

“We need to temporarily stop looking for Lu Ganghu. We can’t just let Lieutenant Lin execute whatever her plan is – it’s too much of a risk.”

Naotsugu answered Mari while writing commands with his finger on the mobile terminal screen.

“The current location of their vehicle should be easy to track. They shouldn’t be moving stealthily... great. I found them. Let’s leave for Lieutenant Lin now.”

“Got it.”

Naotsugu and Mari ran in the direction of the car they were tracking using high-speed movement magic.

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The soldiers accompanying Lieutenant Lin brought her to the a pharmacy of the Hong Kong Pharmacological Network located a few minutes away from the base.

There weren’t any official diplomatic relations between Japan and the Great Asian Alliance after the last war, but there was still economic exchange in the private sector, and many companies operated in both countries.

“Please wait here,” Lin told the soldiers and entered the pharmacy. The front wall was made of glass, and one could easily see what was going on inside from the road, so the soldiers allowed her to go in alone as long as she only approached the counter.

Lin stopped in front of a counter with a female cashier that looked to be in her 20s behind it. The cashier had black hair with matching black eyes, as was typical of the East Asian demographic. Her appearance was innocent enough, and didn’t appear at all

connected with the GAA or the NSU, but this was intended – who would choose a suspicious looking person to infiltrate enemy territory? The cashier was, in fact, Lin's contact with the NSU.

“I’m having problems with Asian dust¹.”

Lin spoke to a Cantonese saleswoman about a seemingly honest topic, but it was a cipher. “Asian dust” was code for the Great Asian Alliance, and Lin’s words indicated that she was fearing an attack.

“Really? I thought the busiest season already passed.”

The saleswoman also answered in a cipher. Her words meant “large-scale military was not observed.”

“It seems that a little dust still made it here.”

“Then, do you want a test drug?” the cashier asked.

“No, I would like you to prescribe the ointment before the symptoms appear.”

But reconnaissance wasn’t enough anymore. Lin wanted them to send an opposition detachment.

“As you wish.

...and what is the dosage?”

Suddenly, the saleswoman stopped using the cipher, and spoke as one would expect in the situation. Lin found this strange.

“Has anything unusual happened?”

¹Dust clouds affecting East Asia originating in the Gobi desert in Mongolia, Northern China, and Kazakhstan where high speed surface winds kick up intense dust storms. This mainly affects China, North and South Korea, Japan, and parts of Eastern Russia. She was actually asking if Lin wanted the reconnaissance squad to search for them.

Suddenly, Lin heard a voice from behind her.

“Lieutenant Lin.”

Suddenly hearing a voice she had hoped not to hear, she turned around in confusion and panic.

“Captain Lu!” Lin shouted, clearly startled, but she couldn’t say anything more.

Lu Ganghu’s huge hand grabbed her neck, and she couldn’t speak further.

“You did will. You aren’t needed anymore,” the Man-Eating Tiger said to the NSU agent acting as a saleswoman.

After Ganghu said this, the agent headed to the back of the store. Seeing this, Lin understood everything.

The agent had submitted to Lu Ganghu before she had arrived. She had probably been tortured, even though she had no external wounds.

With his skills, Lu Ganghu could give the victim enough pain for them to wish for death without letting any of it show on their exterior. The pain making their lives a nightmare deprived the victim of their desire to resist. It wasn’t surprising for the agent to succumb to his torture.

Lu Ganghu smiled while Lin was in despair.

She was about to face the same unfortunate fate as the agent she had just been talking to.

Except, in her case, it wouldn’t end with just torture. All that awaited her was death.

Lin’s last thread of hope was on the street, but when Lin found no hope when she looked toward where the soldiers escorting her had been.

Two Japanese soldiers sat with their heads down in the seats of their convertible. They looked to be asleep, but this wasn’t the case.

Lin intuitively knew they were already dead. Lu Ganghu would never have left them alive.

Lin probably should have expected this – the soldiers escorting her were not even close to being Lu Ganghu’s rivals – but she had at least held hope that they could distract him for long enough for her to escape.

“Traitor, Lin Yiyi.”

Lu Ganghu called Lieutenant Lin by her full name without a title, scorning her.

“Call Liu Li Lei for help,” Lu Ganghu said as he slightly loosened his grip on her neck, allowing her to clear her throat.

Lin thought about Lu Ganghu’s goal.

His plan probably wasn’t as simple as luring Liu Li Lei here to kill her. The Japanese army wouldn’t just allow her to leave the base.

Lin’s task as an NSU spy was to escape with Li Lei to Japan to create an excuse to start a war. She had already completed her task, and there was no chance that the NSU would send help – to them, she was just a consumable item, and she didn’t hold enough value to make her worth saving.

She also didn’t hold much value to the Japanese army. They may feel a bit of shame that a refugee was killed while under their protection, but to the Japanese government, she was just an addition to Liu Li Lei. The Japanese government also wouldn’t see her as worth saving.

Even if she called for help, the Japanese army wouldn’t do anything if it put Liu Li Lei in danger.

Lu Ganghu definitely understood this.

Lin was confused. She shouldn’t hold any value as bait, but Lu Ganghu still took a mobile terminal from his pocket and handed it to her after searching her body with his free hand.

Ignoring her confusion, he said, “You don’t have a choice.”

She could try to tell Lu Ganghu it was pointless, but she did as she was told and opened a communication channel to her subordinates still at the base.

◊ ◊ ◊

Komatsu base was in chaos.

“Why was Lieutenant Lin released from the base?”

Shouts could be heard around the base.

“Why is Lu Ganghu in a store in the middle of the city?”

“If this guy tried to create chaos, damage to civilians is inevitable! This is a replay of Yokohama!”

Cries were being exchanged throughout the base.

“Why would he appear there? Even if he is the Man-Eating Tiger, didn’t he trap himself?”

Most soldiers didn’t understand what was going on in the chaos and a variety of opinions were being formed based on incomplete information.

Lieutenant Lin had been taken hostage by Lu Ganghu, and part of Komatsu base’s command felt that Liu Li Lei should be notified since she would find out anyway if Lieutenant Lin was killed – and the probability of her dying was quite high.

The base command didn’t want Li Lei’s opinion of the Japanese military to deteriorate as a result of them hiding the information, so she was informed that Lieutenant Lin was taken hostage.

“Let me go!”

Liu Li Lei begged the Japanese soldiers guarding her to let her leave to find Lieutenant Lin.

Her reaction was quite predictable – it had been the main argument for hiding the information.

“You can’t. You are under the protection of our army.”

Still, the army had prepared for this reaction.

“But! If I don’t go... Lin-jiejie...!”

Liu Li Lei had lost her composure from distress. She usually only used called Lieutenant Lin “Lin-jiejie,” equivalent to calling her “Lin-neesan,” in personal conversations between the two. Most of the soldiers understood this, but some of the more dense ones wondered who Lin-jiejie was.

“Lieutenant Liu, even if you go, Lieutenant Lin will probably not be released. All you will do is allow Lu Ganghu to kill her sooner.”

However, Liu Li Lei had lost the ability to understand rational arguments and could no longer think soberly.

“Then what do I do...?”

She looked around with pleading eyes, but no one responded to her looks.

“...nii-san, can’t you do something?”

Liu Li Lei hung her head, looking ready to cry, completely hopeless. Watching this, Akane asked her brother if he could help, looking as if she too, was about to cry.

Her voice and Li Lei’s pathetic look touched Masaki’s heart, but...

“Sorry, Akane.”

He couldn’t help.

“I don’t know why he showed up at a pharmacy in the city instead of the base, or why he took Commander Lin hostage, but I do know one thing for sure.

Lu Ganghu's end goal is Lieutenant Liu. I need to stay here at my post in order to protect Lieutenant Liu if all else fails."

"...."

Akane bit her lip and continued to look at Masaki, but she didn't say anything further.

Masaki also bit his lip and turned away from her gaze.

He was facing a dilemma.

As he had stated, Lu Ganghu's goal was killing Liu Li Lei, so her protection needed to be given priority, but at the same time the Japanese army couldn't simply stand by and observe the murder of Lieutenant Lin. They didn't yet know Lieutenant Lin was a NSU spy, so to them, Lieutenant Lin was a refugee who needed to be protected.

They knew that the guards escorting Lieutenant Lin had already been killed by monitoring their vital signs, and given the situation, it was clearly done by Lu Ganghu or his subordinates. Since Lu Ganghu also posed a threat to public safety, the base needed to send soldiers to preserve their honor and eliminate this threat. The only question was how many people to send.

Was capturing Lu Ganghu possible if enough soldiers left immediately, or was Lu Ganghu acting as bait to reduce the number of soldiers and therefore the strength of the base?

How many soldiers were necessary to capture one of the strongest melee fighters in the world?

Lu Ganghu was able to use Steel Qigong to reflect shots from firearms, making him a formidable enemy no matter the situation. Sending a small number of people to be safe would just be giving them a death sentence, but sending too many people raised concerns for the base.

Komatsu base was in a deadlock. They didn't know what move to make. The only way out of the situation lay in the unknown activity happening behind the scenes.

In this case, only Chiba Naotsugu and Watanabe Mari were in a position to pull Komatsu base out of this situation.

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Naotsugu and Mari arrived at the pharmacy 5 minutes after Lu Ganghu captured Lieutenant Lin.

The building was currently off limits to civilians, and the entire quarter was cordoned off by the police. Using a convenient excuse, they restricted people from both entering and exiting the area.

Dressed in military uniforms, Naotsugu and Mari passed by the police without being stopped. They were concentrating on high-speed movement magic, so they still didn't know about the incident with the hostage.

After arriving at the location, Mari noticed Lu Ganghu inside the building while searching for Lin.

At the same time, Lu Ganghu saw Mari standing outside.

Lu Ganghu roared from inside the building, letting out his battle cry. He threw Lin's body through the window of the pharmacy, but Mari didn't have time to catch her. Lu Ganghu was right behind Lin, jumping through the now broken window. His fist was on a trajectory directly towards her face. While his attack seemed to be rash and impulsive, Mari wasn't in a defensive stance and didn't have time to react.

She was inches away from death when Naotsugu stopped his attack.

“Xu?”

Chiba Naotsugu, the Illusion Blade, and Lu Ganghu, the Steel Qigong clashed, sending sparks out.

“Chiba Naotsugu!”

“Lu Ganghu!”

“I've been waiting for this!” Lu Ganghu yelled.

Chiba Naotsugu and Lu Ganghu were among the best melee fighters in the world and were worthy adversaries.

And with that, the battle between the young master of the “Art of the Thousand Blades” and the mad tiger began.

Mari had nearly died from Lu Ganghu’s sudden attack, but now she was focusing on the magnificent image of her lover and savior.

She watched as Lu Ganghu’s fist, strong enough to mow down thick trees or crush rocks, flew towards Naotsugu.

Rather than try to parry the fist’s strength, he used the sharpness of the sword to counter the strike, knowing that he didn’t hold the advantage in a battle of brute force.

Mari’s eyes were riveted on the techniques of her beloved.

It took about ten exchanges for Mari to finally come to her senses and start analyzing the situation.

Her first action was to rush to the convertible that brought Lin.

“Damn. They’re dead.”

Seeing their state, she entered the pharmacy. Lu Ganghu didn’t have the ability to stop her and didn’t try, so she entered easily. While she could have tried to join the fight, she would probably have caused as much harm as she did help – Naotsugu would start to focus on protecting her, and she couldn’t do much in this battle.

Suddenly, as she entered the pharmacy, she heard a gunshot suppressed by a silencer.

Slightly inside the pharmacy was a woman – the NSU agent acting as a cashier – pointing a gun at Lieutenant Lin. Having hit her target, she quickly shifted her aim to Mari, but before she could pull the trigger, Mari slashed the woman’s gun-hand.

The gun toppled to the floor, and Mari stepped slightly closer to the woman.

She still held her three-piece sword in her right hand, but she instead reached out with the three cylindric containers in her left hand. Inside were various scents, and using magic to manipulate the airflow, Mari directed the scents into the woman's naval cavity.

A moment later, the woman fainted.

Confirming that the technique had worked, Mari set the woman onto the floor and headed to Lin, sinking down beside her on one knee.

It was already too late. The bullet had hit her vitals, and Lin died instantly.

Mari quickly prepared to interrogate the woman who shot Lin. Naotsugu and Lu Ganghu were still fighting outside the building, but Mari felt she would be most useful if she learned more about the situation first.

★★★

The battle between Naotsugu and Lu Ganghu was completely even. Lu Ganghu fought with his usual style, forcefully suppressing his opponent with pure power, but Naotsugu countered this with a style less familiar to him, relying on his speed to defend.

Naotsugu usually fought using magic to control his inertia, accelerating and stopping his movement instantly. This gave off the appearance of after images, seeming to be an illusion – hence the name of the style.

However, now Naotsugu was only defending against his enemy's attacks with the sharp, strong blade of his sword. His techniques as a so-called "Genius Swordsman" worked well.

The nervous one in this situation was Lu Ganghu.

Naotsugu had come here in pursuit of Lieutenant Lin, who was acting suspiciously, but his initial purpose had been searching for Lu Ganghu. This random turn of events coincidentally aligned with Naotsugu's main mission, so he was eager to fight Lu Ganghu and was prepared.

On the other hand, Lu Ganghu hadn't expected a battle with the young master swordsman of the Chiba family. His only mission had been to prevent Liu Li Lei from falling into Japan's hands and becoming a weapon against the Great Asian Alliance by executing her.

He had attacked Mari out of anger and revenge after she defeated him in Yokohama, but he hadn't prepared for a match of this level at all. While he was ready to fight in general, his mental state wasn't as focused as he would like it to be, and he still needed to concentrate on his mission, so while he was eager to fight Naotsugu again, he worried that this fight would be at the expense of the success of the mission.

A fine line separated victory and defeat in this fight, and Lu Ganghu's mental state was bringing him down. The difference between them came not from a difference in skill, but from a difference in readiness.

Naotsugu attacked with a horizontal swing perpendicular to Lu Ganghu's vertical punch. While Lu Ganghu's technique protected him from having his hand cut off, he couldn't stop the force of the swing and his fist was drove away from its path.

Despite this, Naotsugu's legs both sunk into the ground as a result of this clash. Seeing an opportunity, Lu Ganghu started to use one of his most powerful technique: a crushing blow with both palms. He wrapped his palms, his tiger paws, in Steel Qigong, and started the technique stronger than a tank's front armor.

Had Naotsugu been hit, his body would have been torn into pieces as if he had a stick of dynamite in his mouth.

However, the attack was not enough to finish Naotsugu.

Lu Ganghu had been mistaken about the distance of the strike, and half a second before the impact, Naotsugu started controlling his inertia.

He hadn't abandoned using his Illusion Blade – he had abstained from using it to make his enemy forget about it, saving it for a decisive blow.

Naotsugu lunged towards Lu Ganghu's chest, but Lu Ganghu caught the blade with his hands, protecting his vitals.

He couldn't get away from this unharmed, however, and right before he grabbed the blade, Naotsugu turned the blade a quarter of a rotation causing it to dig into Lu Ganghu's right fist.

Still, his left fist was enough to stop the sword, and he grasped the blunt side before it stabbed his chest.

Lu Ganghu smiled. While his right arm was injured and his left was grasping the sword, he still had his legs and Naotsugu was stuck holding onto his seized sword.

However, Lu Ganghu's kick never happened.

Naotsugu exhaled and let go of his sword while Lu Ganghu collapsed, still holding the sword.



He only released the sword when he finished falling backwards. Once he confirmed that everything was over, Naotsugu relaxed.

“The prick of the shadow... a technique of the hidden sword,” Naotsugu murmured to himself.

He had thrust with a sharp psion blade. The technique mimicked the heart being pierced. It wasn’t mental interference magic, which only affects one’s consciousness – the technique deceived the very soul by directly affecting the psionic information body accompanying the physical body.

A hidden sword which stops the heart.

Naotsugu’s temples showed sweat flowing in streams, and he sunk to his knee, exhausted.

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When she returned to the base, Mari informed Masaki and the others that Lu Ganghu was defeated.

Despite this, Li Lei didn’t rejoice.

Since Lin wasn’t with Mari, she could assume what had happened.

“Lin-jie... is Lin-jie dead?” Liu Li Lei asked with shaking lips. “She was secretly communicating with the NSU army and... was killed by her ally, another NSU agent...?”

“Yes,” Mari replied solemnly.

“Liar!”

Li Lei broke into a fit towards Mari.

“You say this based on the unfounded words of an NSU agent!” Li Lei yelled.

Mari’s solemn face – calm and serious – contrasted Liu’s face flushed with anger.

“Lieutenant Lin, codename Taiga, was ordered to organize your escape to Japan in order to create an excuse for the NSU to declare war against Japan. The agent I questioned, Sasha Foo, admitted this.”

“That’s nonsense!”

;”Lieutenant Lin, don’t you think it’s strange that when you escaped from the air base in Primorsky Krai, Vozdizhenka, the NSU reacted late? The Far Eastern army was deployed north of Vladivostok, yet the only sent fighters in pursuit after you flew over their heads. Ordinarily this shouldn’t be possible. The NSU wouldn’t have ignored a plane that could turn out to be a bomber.”

“But...”

“In addition, the Far Eastern army should have been wary about observation from the air.”

Liu Li Lei finally stopped objecting, starting to accept what had happened. She was able to recover quickly because she had been told about Lieutenant Lin’s situation in advance.

“You’re not to blame here, Lieutenant. You were used. Sasha Foo confirmed this.”

“Lin-jie just used me...”

Watching Liu Li Lei’s shocked muttering, Mari frowned. She felt anger towards the New Soviet Union, especially Lin Yiyi, for using this child as a disposable pawn. She also was angry at the Great Asian Alliance for making her a Strategic Class Magician at her age.

“We will now interrogate the other members of your escort detachment. You cannot be in contact with any of them until we are certain that there are no NSU spies hidden among them,” Mari said.

“Please wait!” Masaki spoke up. “Lieutenant Lin is a fourteen-year-old girl. Separating her from her compatriots in a foreign country is a bit.... Haven’t you already learned who is a spy from Sasha Foo? So you don’t need to keep them in isolation anymore!”

“Masaki-san...?” Liu called Masaki with a confused face.

She hadn't expected Masaki to object. He had proposed taking her to his home previously, saying she needed to be separated from Lin-jie so her thoughts were spinning as she tried to make sense of his reasoning.

"Sasha Foo only knew about one spy – Lieutenant Lin," Mari said.

"Then...!"

Mari sighed slightly at Masaki's raised tone. It made the situation feel urgent.

"Ichijou-kun, I understand your reasoning, but this is a necessary measure. Surely you understand this."

"..."

Masaki and Mari weren't personally acquainted, but they knew their relationship as senpai/kohai when looking from the point of view of the University of Magic in general, so Mari spoke as a senpai – not as a member of the military.

"Luckily, Lieutenant Liu speaks Japanese fluently. I want you guys to keep her company."

Okay, Lieutenant Liu. That's all I have to say. On this note, I say goodbye to you."

Mari saluted to Liu Li Lei before leaving.

"Lei-chan..."

Akane turned to face Li Lei. She was looking down, barely managing to stay standing.

"Let's sit down?"

Li Lei didn't resist Akane's hand grasping hers, and the fourteen-year-old girls sat down side by side on the sofa. However, Akane didn't know how to proceed. All she could do was be with her.

Neither her nor the adults knew what to do next.

Masaki was the next one to speak.

“Lieutenant Liu. I don’t think Lieutenant Lin betrayed you.”

“Masaki-san?”

“Nii-san?”

Akane and Li Lei spoke simultaneously, looking up in sync.

Masaki couldn’t help but flinch at their reactions, but he caught himself and continued his explanation.

“I can’t say for sure, and I can’t claim to know exactly what she was thinking. We only met a week ago, and we quarreled the entire time, unable to understand each other.”

Masaki paused for a moment before continuing.

“But I don’t think that Lieutenant Lin’s worry for Lieutenant Liu was faked.”

“Even if Lieutenant Lin was a spy for the NSU. Even if your escape was just part of the NSU strategy...”

Masaki looked straight into Liu Li Lei’s eyes.

“She defended you from both the NSU and the GAA by escaping to Japan.

This is an indisputable fact.”

“Ah...”

Liu Li Lei sighed faintly.

“Also, Lu Ganghu’s sabotage ended up failing, partly because Lieutenant Lin left the base.

While I don't know what she was planning, in the end, Lieutenant Lin defended you at the cost of her own life, so even if it wasn't her intent, she deserves respect for the outcome."

"Wa..."

Liu sounded if like she was about to cry.

Seeing this, Masaki stopped his speech and left her to Akane.

"Ahh..."

Li Lei covered her face with her hands and cried. Akane put her arm around her shoulder, sending Masaki a reproachful glare.

Masaki answered with his eyes, as if to say, "I'll take my leave" as he ran away from the lobby.

However, rather than receiving an exasperated stare from Akane, her look was warm, as if saying, "nothing can be done about you."

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"How is this guy a "Man-eating Tiger"? He is useless!" Minoru shouted angrily.

His temporary annoyance had exceeded his self-control, and he shouted loudly. If the study made by Zhou Gongjin hadn't been soundproofed, he would have surprised Minami.

"He couldn't buy me any time at all!"

After venting his anger, Minoru calmed down a bit and thought about what to do.

He had helped Lu Ganghu enter the country secretly in order to cause turmoil around the murder or attempted murder of Liu Li Lei to allow him to move from his current location, known by Tatsuya, to a new refuge. He had been vigilantly tracking the movements of Lu Ganghu through the network created by Zhou Gongjin, waiting for a convenient moment, but Lu Ganghu hadn't even bought Minoru a single day!

Lu Ganghu and his squad initially hid in a secluded area of the mountains near Matsue, after which they infiltrated the city of Komatsu, but just 2 days after entering the country, Lu Ganghu was killed – the same day he entered the city of Komatsu.

Thus, Minoru's plan to buy time through Lu Ganghu ended in utter failure. Lu Ganghu had been killed by Chiba Naotsugu, a member of the Sword Corps sent to Komatsu, in part thanks to Minoru – he was the one who warned the Japanese military, causing events to proceed so quickly.

However, despite his involvement in causing his plan to fail, his anger was still mostly directed towards Lu Ganghu's weakness. He understood he was guilty, but he directed his anger towards Lu Ganghu anyway.

“I need to calm down.”

Minoru stopped walking in circles around the room and sat in a high-backed chair.

“Anger isn't helping here. I need to think about how to proceed now.”

He needed to leave the shelter as soon as possible. The chance of him being found soon was almost certain – unless he overestimated Tatsuya, the shelter would probably not even last another week.

“He might find this place as soon as tomorrow

...I used to think I had more time, that I would only have to leave here “some day”, but... for the location of this shelter to have been somewhat determined already...

Tatsuya-san, the Self-defense forces, and the Ten Master Clans all know my general location. This whole area is under constant surveillance, so that if we went outside the protection of Ghost Walker – of Sekirei Hachijin, we would be caught. We couldn't even escape through Parade.

It might be pessimistic, but it's safer to assume that Tatsuya-san received a clue to help him break through Parade. Knowing that, there is no way I escape.

It's too difficult for me alone, so... maybe I can get helpers on the side?”

“Then what about help from us?”

This thought didn't come from Minoru.

He felt it through his connection to the Parasites.

“Raymond?”

“Minoru, you aren't acting normal. You even stopped maintaining your mental barrier.”

Realizing his mistake, Minoru immediately hid his emotions behind a barrier once more.

“Even though you heard it, you can't do anything about this, can you?”

Minoru responded to Raymond once his barrier was back up.

“I am aware of the situation, but I didn't read your thoughts. I learned about this with my own method of collecting information.”

“Hlioskjalf?” Minoru thought. He was aware of the existence of the backdoor terminals into Echelon III.

“We are currently anchored in Sagami Bay.”

“Did you use Independence as a cover?” Minoru asked.

“Right.”

The entrance of the USS Independence Aircraft Carrier into the war occurred suddenly and unnaturally. Part of its purpose was to help Raymond and his colleagues penetrate into Japanese coastal waters.

“We aren't the only ones who have infiltrated the country. The Illegal MAP has already penetrated Tokyo.”

“Illegal MAP... the Illegal Mystic Assassin Platoon of the USNA Army?” Minoru confirmed.

“You are well aware, but they technically don’t belong to the army.”

“Officially, no, but in reality, yes, is it?”

“Well, you can say that.”

Minoru heard Raymond’s laugh after this thought, but whether he had imagined it, or whether Raymond’s humor had been transferred was unclear.

“Continuing, one of the platoons of the Illegal MAP – the Horsehead platoon – is embarking on a mission to kill Tatsuya.”

“To kill Tatsuya? They won’t succeed.”

Minoru didn’t believe anyone could kill Tatsuya as he currently was. While he thought it might be possible to beat him, he didn’t think there was any way to stop Tatsuya from escaping.

“Yeah. We think so too.”

Minoru heard Raymond’s chuckle again.

“But the Illegal MAP is pretty capable. They should at least do better than Lu Ganghu.”

As soon as Raymond made this comparison, Minoru understood his intent.

“You suggest I use this as a chance to escape from here?”

“Yes,” Raymond responded. *“If you get to Yokosuka, we will help you escape from Japan along with your girlfriend.”*

Minoru couldn’t immediately answer. He needed to think about Minami first.

Could he take Minami with him from Japan?

“What do you say?” Raymond asked again.

However, this time Minoru gave an answer.

“I will gratefully accept your help.”

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Tatsuya and Miyuki were no longer alone at the dinner table. A third person had been added to their number – Lina sat with them as well.

The three had eaten together yesterday, as well. Miyuki invited Lina to eat with them until she got settled.

Miyuki’s home cooking was delicious, as usual.

Lina was shocked by this fact. Her surprise showed on her face when she brought the fork to her mouth for the first time, tasting it. She had unconsciously murmured, “oh... how tasty,” as her eyes rounded and she grew visibly more alert.

“If you want to learn, ask Miyuki to teach you to cook, but don’t try to say you will prepare tomorrow’s dinner in order to compete with Miyuki...”

Tatsuya had some unspoken thoughts when he saw Lina’s reaction.

As soon as Tatsuya finished eating, the videophone rang.

He stopped Miyuki from getting up, as she still hadn’t finished eating, and headed into the living room himself to accept the call there.

He had never spoken to the man who appeared on the screen before, but he recognized the man’s name and face from his file.

“Shiba-dono, sorry to bother you at this time.”

“Please to meet you. The head-dono of the Fujibayashi family, I presume?”

“That is correct. I am honored that you know of me.”

The person on the other end of the call was Fujibayashi Nagamasa, the head of the Fujibayashi family and a famous practitioner of ancient magic.

“Your daughter helps me often,” Tatsuya said.

“On the contrary, I should apologize for that fact that Kyouko constantly gives you impossible tasks.”

If Tatsuya’s data wasn’t wrong, Fujibayashi Nagamasa was 55 years old – older than Tatsuya’s own father. While the age difference made it odd for him to speak politely, Fujibayashi Nagamasa’s words still contained gratitude.

“I sincerely apologize that a person related to our family has caused you so many problems,” Nagamasa continued, turning the conversation towards the main point.

“No, I do not hold the Fujibayashi family responsible for this in any way.”

Tatsuya repeated what he had told the Electron Sorceress.

“I appreciate such words, but even if I don’t have a blood connection to him, he is still my nephew. The nephew of the head of the family can still be considered a member of the family. We aren’t entirely unrelated to this, and therefore we cannot stay indifferent to this. As the head of the Fujibayashi family, I want his trial to be an internal affair of our family. The Kudou family has already given permission.”

“The Kudou family agreed to this?” Tatsuya asked.

Tatsuya hadn’t expected this. Kudou Minoru was the son of the current head of family, but also the murderer of the previous chapter. The Kudou family had already entrusted the capture of Minoru to the Ten Master Clans.

“They really don’t want others to interfere,” Tatsuya thought.

“However, I also heard that Shiba-dono intends to take part in his pacification.”

“This case began because of a conflict between me and Minoru, so I believe that I must complete this business with my own hands.”

Tatsuya gave a clear answer, not allowing any misunderstanding.

He believed that he couldn't just stand aside in this matter.

"I respect your opinion as an interested person, so in this regard, we should agree on our schedules for pacifying Kudou Minoru together. The day after tomorrow – Saturday, July 13th, I am heading to the Sea of Trees to attack Minoru. Does this suit you, Shiba-dono?"

"...the day after tomorrow?" Tatsuya asked.

Tatsuya didn't answer immediately because he believed that he would need more time to analyze Parade and Sekirei Hachijin. However, he also knew that Minami needed to be saved as soon as possible.

"...I agree. I will go with you."

"Thank you. Then, the place and time of our meeting will be your choosing, Shiba-dono."

"I understand. I will pass it to your through your daughter later," Tatsuya responded.

"Do as you see fit. Then, see you on the appointed day."

At this, Fujibayashi Nagamasa bowed low before ending the conversation.

Tatsuya tensed up once more as the events developed too rapidly, far exceeding his expectations.

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"Makoto-dono, did I do everything right?"

After completing his call with Tatsuya, Nagamasa turned to Kudou Makoto, who was sitting quietly just outside of the camera's view.

"Yes. That will do. Nagamasa, thank you for doing this."

“As I said earlier, to Shiba-dono” Nagamasa started, “though I do not share a blood connection with him, Minoru is still my nephew. As he is a member of my family, I can’t ignore this problem.”

Kudou Makoto nodded silently in response to Fujibayashi Nagamasa.

The dimly lit dark room fell into a deep silence.

(To be continued in "The Chase (Part 2)")

(Very light edits made by englishmuffins10)

Afterword

Thank you for buying this volume.

How have you liked the 28th volume of *The Irregular at Magic High School: Chase Chapter (Part 1)*?

This arc is titled *Chase Chapter* despite only one fifth of the volume being devoted to the chase – the beginning. After that, it transitions into hide and seek.

After Tatsuya faces a situation his powers are not well suited to solving, he starts to discover a new ability, but to be honest, I still have doubts about the form in which the book should describe it.

In games, all possible means of combat are known in advance. However, real combat is not so simple – there are too many different possibilities to grasp, and there is almost always potential for a “secret weapon” using a clever new idea. When faced with an enemy using an unknown power, it looks like carelessness on the side being forced to adapt. However, in reality, both sides often prepared well – one side just prepared better and took the right risks.

The battle between Tatsuya and Minoru in this novel somewhat describes this – both sides were prepared, but Minoru had his “secret weapon” in the form of Sekirei Hachijin, and Tatsuya had his own weapon in discovering a new way to disperse spells.

While Tatsuya wasn’t able to complete a new ability in this volume due to my doubts as an author, one of the enemies was defeated by a new and interesting technology, so

I, to an extent, at least followed my contract as an author to write an interesting story, didn't I?

This time, Tatsuya's friends, not seen for a while, received a share of the action. While there wasn't any serious activity in this volume, the next volume, *Chase Chapter (Part 2)* has a lot of action planned.

In this volume, the majority of the combat activity was given to Mari's fiancé, Chiba Naotsugu.

Masaki played the role of Liu Li Lei's companion well, but his share of action was nothing compared to Naotsugu's.

It was easy for me to write the scene containing the battle between Naotsugu and Lu Ganghu, but when writing it, I felt that Lu Ganghu's departure from the spotlight was undeserved. Still, it's easier for me to imagine scenes of hand-to-hand combat and sword fighting than scenes of gunfire. I hope that as this series reaches its end, I will increase my skill in this direction, but it's unlikely to bring additional income.

Volume 29, *Chase Chapter (Part 2)*, is scheduled for release in 2 months. After this, the *Rescue Chapter* arc is planned.

Once that is done, the next arc will be *Future*, and after that, a short arc, *Graduation*.

I will be grateful if you stay with *The Irregular at Magic High School* until its end.