

魔法科高校の 劣等生

追跡編〈下〉

29

*The irregular
at magic high school*

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illustration 石田可奈
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design / BEE-PEE





「九重八雲、
俺の邪魔をするな！」

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「ガーディアン」として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。

「聞答無用！」

千葉エリカ

ちば・えりか

3年F組。二科生。達也の友人。明るい性格で、周囲も巻き込むトラブルメーカー。実は剣技と魔法の複合戦闘術である「剣術」の大家である。

「こっちは任せな！」

西城レオシハルト

さいじょう・れおしはると

通称「レオ」。3年F組。二科生。達也の友人。父親がハーブ、母親がクォーター。「超格魔法」が得意。

「どや
邪魔させようぞ！」

九重八雲

ここのえ・やくも

古式魔法「忍術」の伝承者。達也の体術の師匠。果心居士の再来とも謳われ「今果心」の異名を持つ。

吉田幹比古

よしだ・みさひこ

3年B組。今年から一科生となる。古式魔法の名家。エリカとは幼少時からの顔見知り。

「柴田さんごめん。でも、
もう少し辛抱して！」

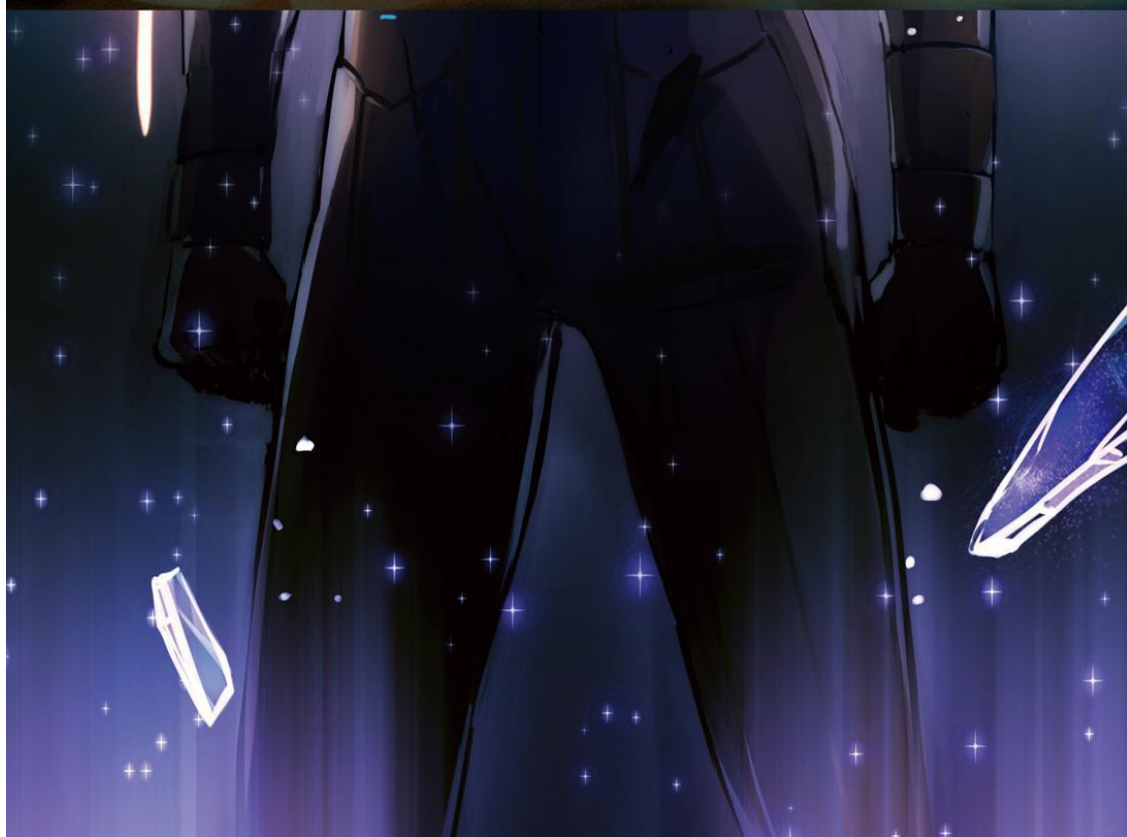
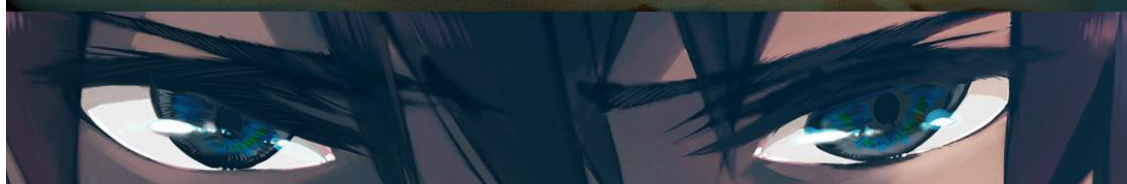
柴田美月

しばた・みづき

達也の友人。霊視放射光過敏症のため、この時代では珍しく眼鏡をかけている。

「死霊」という名の霊子情報体が、
この世界に存在する為の足場を見つけ出し、
それを、壊す。分解する！

「霊子情報体支持構造分解魔法
『アストラル・デイスパージョン』、発動！」



Chapter 8

It was already later than 8 PM. However, the Department of the Self-Defense Forces, which is responsible for planning land, air and sea operations, continued its work at the same pace as in the daytime. The NSU fleet left the sea area near the Noto Peninsula, but a ceasefire agreement has not yet been signed. Although there had been no declaration of war before, Japan and the NSU were already at war. As long as this military tension doesn't disappear, the lights in the command sections won't go out.

Of course, the command of the 101 Battalion from the National Self-Defense Forces was no exception.

The commander of the 101 Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Kazama was summoned by the battalion's commander, Lieutenant General Saeki, and arrived at her personal office. Kazama wasn't a part of the battalion commanding officers, but occupied the position of Saeki's dedicated subordinate. Kazama himself did not oppose this role and waited at the ready in his office to arrive at the command headquarters at any time upon request.

"Lu Ganghu, who entered the country yesterday through Matsue, was neutralized today in the city of Komatsu."

"Was he arrested?"

Kazama supported the conversation with a short question.

"No, it looks like he was killed. This was done by Lieutenant Chiba Naotsugu, a student from the Defense Academy, temporarily assigned to the guerrilla infantry platoon from the First Division."

"Is this the 'Illusion Blade' who was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant, even though he is still a student? By killing Lu Ganghu he is worthy of being called one of the world's top elites among melee magicians. Honestly, I would like such a talented fighter to join my battalion."

Saeki listened to Kazama's eulogy with a lack of interest on her face. There was simply no place in her mind for Chiba Naotsugu. If Lu Ganghu had been killed by another officer, even by a policeman or a civilian, Saeki's face would be exactly the

same now.

“In general, we should rejoice that we were able to prevent any sabotage in advance, but... such negligence of Lu Ganghu was beyond my expectations.”

Saeki complained.

Depending on how you listen to her words, you could hear in them the expectation that Lu Ganghu's “sabotage” (murder of Liu Li Lei) would end in success.

Kazama didn't pretend that he hadn't heard these reckless words, but simply ignored them.

He learned about this expectation of Saeki the day before yesterday.

In truth, Saeki and Kazama had previously received information about Lu Ganghu's infiltration into the country.

Senior Lieutenant Fujibayashi Kyouko, acting as Kazama's adjutant, was known as the “Electron Sorceress” among the people aware of her abilities. This ambiguous nickname meant that she was a magician capable of skillfully using magic to interfere with electricity and electromagnetic waves. At the same time, this nickname was a reference to her unsurpassed hacking abilities, which she used to play with information networks like a toy.

Zhou Gongjin's network possessed not only anti-hacking tools, but also magical protection. But Fujibayashi's ability won out in the area of electronic networks. Saeki and Kazama received all correspondence between Chen Xianshen and Minoru (posing as Zhou Gongjin) with the help of Fujibayashi.

Saeki and Kazama were aware of Lu Ganghu's plans to infiltrate the country. They knew both the place and the time. They could have caught Lu Ganghu when he came ashore. Kazama even wanted to send his subordinates to the port of Matsue.

But Saeki didn't allow Kazama to send soldiers. Moreover, she ordered not to share this information with anybody. Saeki, though reluctantly, tried to help Lu Ganghu's sabotage in this way.

Kazama, of course, asked about the reason. In general, command orders in the army should not be discussed. But he simply could not accept an unreasonable order — he

was such a “wrong” military. Many were cold toward Kazama due to the fact that when he was “green,” in battles he often did more than was ordered. And his character has not improved despite this bitter experience.

Saeki didn’t try to avoid the answer and explained to Kazama the course of her thoughts.

...NSU sent their fleet south, ostensibly to pick up Lieutenant Liu

...Whatever their true purpose, the NSU military actions will lose their pretext if Lieutenant Liu disappears.

...But even if there had not been an NSU invasion, the presence of Lieutenant Liu is a great risk.

...There is a great chance that she will be returned to her homeland, and “Thunderclap Tower” will be aimed at our country.

...If Lu Ganghu kills Lieutenant Liu, it will benefit Japan.

...The Self-Defense Forces will be the subject of public criticism due to their inability to protect refugees. The loss of international reputation is also inevitable.

...But the benefits of removing Lieutenant Liu from the country outweigh all these disadvantages.

... After all, Ichijou Masaki-kun from the Ten Master Clans joined in watching over Lieutenant Liu.

... And if it is not possible to prevent the assassination of Lieutenant Liu, then criticism will also fall on Ichijo-kun, who is at the same base as her.

...The killing of an escaped magician by a magician agent. In this case, it can be expected that the Ten Master Clans will be subjected to much harsher criticism than the Self-Defense Forces.

These were Saeki’s thoughts on the subject.

Kazama reluctantly had to humbly become her accomplice.

But the result wasn’t what Saeki expected. Lu Ganghu was killed, not even reaching

the base, and his subordinates were captured one by one.

“Lieutenant Chiba’s presence wasn’t part of my calculations.”

In such a phrase, Saeki admitted that she was naive with such defective plans.

“It seems that the guerrilla infantry platoon was originally sent to capture Kudou Minoru.”

Kazama’s words included an attempt to comfort her.

Saeki seemed to understand this, and looked at Kazama with doubt in her eyes urging him to continue.

“And Kudou Minoru is supposedly hiding in the Aokigahara Sea of Trees.”

“This information has been refuted after a search operation conducted by the guerrilla infantry platoon from the First Division.”

“This unit is simply devoted to His Excellency Kudou, they don’t have skilled magicians of ancient magic. They won’t be able to overcome the barrier.”

It seems that Kazama believed that Minoru is still hiding in the Sea of Trees. Saeki already understood that. But she didn’t understand why he brought it up.

“Are you satisfied that we aren’t chasing him?”

It seems that Kazama had no intention to talk in riddles. He immediately made clear what he was talking about.

“Are we?”

Saeki was unable to predict Kazama’s question because its content was completely unthinkable.

“Why should our 101 Battalion deal with Kudou Minoru’s arrest?”

Saeki’s counter-question was rather an indirect refusal to Kazama’s offer rather than an expression of her doubts.

“Chasing killers and kidnappers isn’t part of our duties.”

“But we’ll be able to determine his location if I go.”

There was no doubt in Kazama’s words. Indecision or vanity wasn’t there either.

He was called a “Forest Combat Expert” not only because he was excellent in guerrilla warfare. The ancient magic “Tengu-jutsu,” which Kazama has perfectly mastered, showed its highest efficiency in mountain forests.

Kazama was sure he could find Minoru while he was in the Sea of Trees (forest), no matter how powerful the barrier was in hiding him.

However, Saeki’s answer was still negative.

“I’ll say it one more time Lieutenant Colonel. This isn’t the responsibility of our 101 Battalion.”

“You don’t care that we are disregarding the Parasite strong enough to kill Kudou Retsu? In addition, if we are the ones who catch Kudou Minoru, then we’ll rub the Ten Master Clans noses in it.”

“We don’t have any intentions to touch Kudou Minoru as long as he doesn’t show hostility toward the state.”

Saeki concluded with a harsh tone.

Kazama expressed surprise by widening his eyes and raising his eyebrows.

But he didn’t ask anything out loud. Therefore, Saeki could ignore the doubt expressed by Kazama, but she didn’t do that.

“...While Kudou Minoru keeps running away, Special Officer Ooguro... more precisely, Shiba Tatsuya will be busy chasing him, and won’t be able to be distracted by other things.”

“Other things? Are you worried that Tatsuya might do something unnecessary?”

Was Kazama’s incomprehension real or fake?

In any case, Saeki just sighed.

“Lieutenant Colonel, you should have already seen the information provided by the

Mitsuya family. It says that Shiba Tatsuya is planning an attack on Midway Prison, owned by the USNA.”

Saeki called Ichijou Masaki “kun” and Tatsuya simply by name. Kazama’s attention got a little hooked on this fact, but he didn’t ask about the reasons.

Instead, he asked:

“Are you helping Kudou Minoru to prevent Tatsuya from going to Midway Island?”

“I won’t deny your indication that inaction is passive support. However, Shiba Tatsuya doesn’t pay attention to restrictions imposed by the authorities. I don’t think that a simple ban on leaving the country will be effective in his case.”

“That’s really true”

Kazama mentally agreed.

In Tatsuya’s case, he is able to not just illegally and without permit leave the country (by hijacking a plane or boat for example). He can just go and fly himself. But even if a hidden departure from the country will be disclosed, it won’t be possible to ban him from entering back or put him in jail. He is Japan’s greatest military power, their most powerful strategic weapon.

“Lieutenant Colonel, don’t try to do anything about Kudou Minoru.”

“I understand.”

Kazama straightened up and gave such an answer after Saeki repeatedly reminded him about this.

◇ ◇ ◇

Illegal MAP (Illegal Mystic Assassin Platoon). Illegal and covert squad of assassin magicians. This is a squad of magicians specializing in assassination missions that cannot be made public. It's made up of three platoons: “Coalsack,” “Cone Nebula,” and “Horsehead.” This formation wasn’t officially recognized as soldiers of any country, but in fact they were a detachment of magicians under direct control of the

USNA Army Joint Chiefs of Staff, so if you look at subordination they could be considered fellow comrades of Stars. If you look at it from an official point-of-view it's like comparing legitimate children and illegitimate ones (from another mother).

Since their system of command was the same to a certain degree, it is not surprising that they were commanded by the same officer somewhere on some level. The commander of the Horsehead squad sent to Japan, Al Wan, sent an email asking for further instructions from a Stars Commander, Paul Walker, because Walker was their contact and intermediary transmitting instructions from the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

To be more precise the current actions of the Illegal MAP weren't dictated by unified opinion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but only by the hostility to Japan of some of its officers. It was a faction arguing that it was necessary to eliminate Shiba Tatsuya, a dangerous Strategic-Class magician who is threatening the hegemony of the USNA. Colonel Walker was entrusted with command of the Illegal MAP, as an influential officer supporting this tough course.

The answer from Walker came when the date had already changed in Japanese time, after midnight and already past 1 AM on July 12th. This was to be expected, given the time difference between time zones. However, it was clear that the members of the Horsehead squad were already waiting for an answer, because they all unceremoniously stared at commander Al Wan who was deciphering the encrypted message in their hideout.

“Hey, don't act like whining school children! I'll read it to you right after finishing the decryption!”

Al Wan seemed to have unpleasant feelings because they were hovering around him, so he yelled at his subordinates, chasing them away as if a big dog was shaking off water. Even the youngest soldier in the Horsehead platoon was over 30 years old, so the phrase “don't act like whining schoolchildren” undoubtedly suited this situation.

Al Wan's subordinates obediently retreated from his back. But this didn't mean they felt guilty and apologized. Aluminum cans of beer or whiskey, which were in the hands of more than half of the unit, spoke volumes about their level of cultural development.

Illegal MAP was an irregular unit. From the beginning nobody expected from them the same discipline as from regular troops. The commander himself also didn't

expect this from his subordinates. But Al Wan's facial expression totally changed after he finished the decryption, raised his head and looked at his subordinates drinking alcoholic beverages.

"Commander, what did the bosses write?"

"What was actually expected."

He answered appropriately, but his face was expressing the words "isn't it obvious?"

"Plans do not change. We're ignoring Angie Sirius."

"So our target is only Shiba Tatsuya?"

Another subordinate asked in at least a polite tone. The Horsehead squad consisted of 10 people including the commander. The one who asked this was one of the two women in the squad.

"Yes. We will continue to act according to the previously agreed plan. Ellie along with Julia and Frank, you'll take Mitsui Honoka. Gabe, Henry and Iggy will be handling Shibata Mizuki. Bart, Charlie, Don and I are remaining in this hideout as reserves."

"Roger that."

"Commander, are we going to use hostage-taking tactics, after all?"

"We will simply be brought back for re-education if we don't use them."

Al Wan was referring to brainwashing when speaking of "re-education." The trick is when it's needed to use hostages as bait to lure and kill a target, it's a common tactic to which all three squads of Illegal MAP constantly resort to in their missions.

"But in that case, isn't just one hostage enough?"

Bart Lee, who was Deputy commander of the squad, expressed his doubts about the approved tactics. It wasn't the first time he talked about this. He returned to the same topic he raised during the tactics discussion last night.

"The Target is Shiba Tatsuya from That Yotsuba. I don't know how much their title

“Untouchable” reflects real situation, but we don’t know about his real abilities, so we can’t treat the matter casually.”

“Bart, everything has already been decided. Although we aren’t soldiers now, we must obey the commander’s decision. Right?”

A member of the squad named Charlie Chan, who spoke with Al Wan in a friendly tone from the very beginning, turned to Bart Lee. But his voice was more “teasing” than “reproaching.”

Bart Lee fell silent with a disgruntled face.

As one could understand from this conversation, the Horsehead squad was far from being a friendly and close-knit team.

But no one in the squad was bothered. The squad commander Al Wan didn’t care about that either.

“Bart, you can go alone if you are so sure of yourself.”

“...You are the commander. I will follow your instructions.”

Illegal MAP was a unit where it was easy to dispose of each and every member, if they started doing something reckless. It was believed that they weren’t made test subjects in experiments, because they are more useful in their current form.

The atmosphere inside the squad doesn’t matter as long as they are able to eliminate designated targets. This wasn’t the opinion of only the members of Horsehead squad, but also the rest of the Illegal MAP members who thought this way.

◇ ◇ ◇

Early Friday morning, July 12th.

“Onii-sama, we’re leaving.”

“Yes, be careful. Lina, Miyuki is in your care.”

“Leave it to me.”

Tatsuya watched Miyuki and Lina who went to First High School. It wasn't yet 7 o'clock in the morning. They left the house earlier than usual because Miyuki needed extra time to remove the disguise she's been using lately.

Tatsuya didn't go to school today either. After the two girls had left, he immediately went to the laboratory located on the underground floor of their high-rise apartment building.

Fujibayashi Kyouko visited Tatsuya yesterday as a representative head of the Fujibayashi family. He received documents containing the activation sequence for “Parade” and explanations of how to use it from her, as well as information about “Sekirei Hachijin” aka. “Stone Sentinel Maze” — barrier construction techniques using East Asian continental ancient magic. It is highly likely the hideout where Minoru is currently hiding was built by Zhou Gongjin with the use of the “Sekirei Hachijin” technique. It was necessary to overcome both “Parade” and “Sekirei Hachijin” to find the location of Minoru and return Minami.

Truth be told, it is only a hypothesis that this barrier was created using the “Sekirei Hachijin” technique.

Tatsuya has been analyzing “Parade” and “Sekirei Hachijin” since yesterday to come up with techniques to neutralize these two magics.

“The magic “Parade” is roughly understandable. The Problem lies in “Sekirei Hachijin”...”

Tatsuya voiced aloud the results of yesterday while sitting at the desk in his laboratory.

He received the activation sequence of “Parade” and the guide to its use from Fujibayashi yesterday at about 9 o'clock yesterday. Tatsuya understood the data recorded in the format of modern magic without difficulties.

Even if you subtract time for food, bathroom, and sleep, no more than 10 hours passed from the moment Tatsuya began the analysis. And yet Tatsuya has almost figured out how the magic “Parade” of the Kudou family works.

“But still ... I didn’t expect the difference with Lina’s “Parade” to be so great. Now it’s clear that can't be overcome with such an approach...”

In terms of editing and processing the copied Eidos and superimposing it on the original Eidos to hide it, the “Parade” of the Kudou and Lina's family were the same. However, there was a process of turning a copy of the edited and processed Eidos into an artificial Spiritual Being (artificially created independent information body), which was added to the Kudou family's spell. As a result, the caster is able to perform activities such as maintaining, restoring, changing, and moving this “Parade” after the magic is activated.

With such a construction of the Magic Sequence, it's possible to attract the enemy’s attention to the disguised copy of the information body, and you can further mislead the enemy by distancing the copy from the original. The copy and the original would be located in different places, so if you destroy the disguised information body, you won’t find anything under it. In addition, if you make additional changes to the disguised information body already recognized by the enemy, the enemy won’t even be able to aim at it.

So, now that this mechanism has become clear, it will be possible to neutralize the Magic Sequence of “Parade” even if it cannot be seen. If Minoru hasn’t made any significant changes to the Kudou family spell, even an indirect hit by “Gram Dispersion” should be able to decompose the Magic Sequence.

But, Tatsuya hasn't tried this in practice yet. He already knew the real (not the one's forged by “Parade”) coordinates of the hideout where Minami is kept. If they didn’t move anywhere in the last three days, the hideout is inside a zone with a radius of 100 meters located in the Aokigahara Sea of Trees. However, Tatsuya, who already visited that forest area personally, wasn't able to locate their hideout at that time.

The East Asian continental ancient magic “Kimon Tonkou,” is a magic that distorts the sense of direction. “Sekirei Hachijin” is a large-scale barrier magic technique that is constructed from people who were killed at the moment they experienced strong emotions of anger, and then buried in specific places. It is this anger that feeds “Kimon Tonkou” and allows it to persist for a long period of time. If Tatsuya doesn’t overcome this barrier, he won’t be able to reach the hideout where Minami was brought to.

Even if it is possible to drive Minoru out of his hideout, it will still be difficult to

catch him without a way of neutralizing “Kimon Tonkou.” If it isn't possible to correctly ascertain which direction the enemy is fleeing, then such a chase wouldn't yield any results.

“Still, if I'm not able to overcome “Kimon Tonkou,” that is, “Sekirei Hachijin,” I won't be able to detect Minoru and Minami.”

Tatsuya muttering to himself, determined his future course of action.

◇ ◇ ◇

Minoru got up an hour earlier than usual and went on a hideout inspection. He just wanted to get rid of his drowsiness under the pretext of checking the barrier.

Minoru barely slept last night.

The reason for this was the frustration at his miscalculation that Lu Ganghu couldn't provide him with any extra time, as well as the resulting nervousness. Minoru planned to leave this hideout while Lu Ganghu was causing a disturbance.

He believed that it wouldn't be long before Tatsuya was able to find this place. For now, “Parade” and “Sekirei Hachijin” are still able to deceive Tatsuya's “sight,” but Minoru felt he didn't have much time.

It wasn't some kind of “vague” feeling. After assessing the extent of the damage his Magic Sequence received, he believed that it was only a matter of time when his magic would become useless.

Raymond suddenly spoke to him that night through the Parasite's telepathic network, and Minoru accepted his offer precisely because of this nervousness. Minoru only realized his condition after he finished this conversation and laid down in bed.

The reason he couldn't sleep was from the regret that he succumbed to Raymond's persuasion so easily. Raymond offered Minoru a means of escape from Japan, while taking Minami with them. A military vessel of the USNA Army will be used for this purpose.

Minoru accepted the invitation without asking Minami for her opinion.

Minoru noticed his haste and rashness only after the conversation with Raymond was over.

But he doesn't regret accepting Raymond's offer itself.

Minoru regretted that he had not been able to cancel his response so far.

Minoru who was feeling this way could contact Raymond at any time. No tools, complex procedures, or ceremonies were needed to use the mental connection between fellow Parasites. This connection was usually always active, but Minoru has forcibly blocked it.

So when he noticed that he hadn't yet received Minami's consent to this, he could easily release the lock and report the refusal.

But Minoru didn't. He only continued to worry about it while lying in bed, but ultimately he left everything as it was.

He knew why he was doing this.

In fact, he wanted to take Minami with him somewhere far away.

"...But I made a promise. "

He promised he wouldn't force her.

He will immediately return Minami back to Tatsuya and Miyuki if she wants it.

Minoru once again swore to himself.

"That's why I can't be caught... until I hear Minami-san's answer."

Minoru came to the conclusion when he was thinking about this.

"Parade" alone won't be enough to escape successfully."

He decided that this hideout would not last long, because his perception as a "magician" informed him that Tatsuya would break through "Parade" in the near future. Therefore, he feared they'll reach him quickly. There was no way he could successfully escape from this barrier using "Parade" alone.

“What should I do? I currently don’t have time to think of a new magic.”

“Think.”

“Think, Kudou Minoru.”

Minoru looked around at the surrounding walls of green leaves, and then looked up at the bright cloudy sky. He did this not in search of a hint. It was a kind of conditional gesture to help get rid of the mental impasse he was in.

However, the artificial sky reflected in his eyes brought him inspiration.

The light reflected from the Earth’s surface was scattered in the air, and even on a clear day it created a bright white cloudy sky, like dull glass.

This was an obvious sign of the barrier wall being here.

“I can't escape from Tatsuya-san's "sight" while using only 'Parade.'”

“So I need to combine “Parade” and 'Kimon Tonkou?’”

“This place is still hidden thanks to not only my "Parade" alone. “Sekirei Hachijin” built by Zhou Gongjin also doesn’t allow Tatsuya-san to approach.”

“I can't take "Sekirei Hachijin" with me.”

“But in my current state, I am still capable of deploying "Kimon Tonkou" and "Parade" simultaneously”

“Kimon Tonkou” is magic that deceives sense of direction."

“But Tatsuya-san is probably also preparing measures against "Kimon Tonkou" as well...”

“...But even if he is, I can still use them.”

Minoru has cheered himself up. However, the wrinkles have not completely disappeared from his frowned forehead.

“The question is what to take as bait (on which the copied Eidos will be attached) ...”

The most important parts in his escape plan were still missing.

◇ ◇ ◇

Friday, July 12, 2097, 7:00. A secret meeting of the top brass from the National Self-Defense Forces Intelligence Department began with one simple announcement.

This meeting wasn't on schedule and even more so it was not official. Such informal meetings are held only when necessary. The Army Intelligence Department Command meets only in response to situations that require discussion. This indicated the Intelligence Department realized there had been some kind of emergency.

"Although we were not able to capture specific agents undercover, it was determined that an illegal squad of assassin magicians of the USNA Army had infiltrated the metropolitan area."

"Illegal MAP ...?"

The activity of the killer squad who even inside the USNA Army is called "illegal" was a problem, known as an "emergency."

"What is the basis of the belief that someone has infiltrated our country, even though no agents have been found?"

The question was asked by the Deputy Director, whose existence was not known outside the Intelligence Department...

"Information about people, most likely members of Illegal MAP, were found in the Arrival Records dated 10 July."

... answered Chief Inukai from the 10th Counterintelligence Division of Intelligence Department in the capital region without getting up from his chair.

By the way, the name "10th Division" did not mean that it was "tenth in order." There was a meaning hidden in this name, that the Tooyama family from the 18 Assistant Houses, who is from the numbered families of 10, was secretly cooperating with the military.

“July 10th ...? That means they seized the moment.”

No one asked the Deputy Director to explain the meaning of his words. Following the withdrawal of the NSU fleet, the government announced the normalization of sea and air traffic at 9:30 on July 10th. The fact that foreign agents could take advantage of that time period when control is weakened was quite predictable, therefore the vigilance of the Security Services was increased at airports and seaports.

But at that time a stream of guests poured into Japan, who have been waiting to visit this country for a long time, thus it was impossible to thoroughly check each and every person in such an environment.

...All department heads present at the meeting shared this regret.

“What is the size of the infiltrated squad?”

Chief Onda asked Inukai from the 1st Special Issues Department.

“They went through the border checkpoints of the country, so it’s no longer entered into the country but illegal entry... A total of ten people were counted, presumably all of them are agents. We know that Illegal MAP consists of three squads. This means that one of these squads has been sent in its entirety. Take a look at this.”

Inukai said and typed a command on a console. The last phrase was addressed to all present.

Passport data was displayed on desktop displays installed in front of each meeting participant. It was a ten-page file, a page per person. Some of those present took out “smart glasses” from holders mounted on the table.

Inukai continued his speech after waiting for the attendees to finish reading the data.

“You can’t trust these passports too much, but judging by the distinctive features in appearance and names it is assumed that the infiltrated squad is 'Horsehead.'”

“A squad of assassins manned by magicians with an East Asian appearance, who were meant to be used in missions against the GAU?”

The Intelligence Department didn’t have the personal data of Illegal MAP members. But they managed to find out what squad it is. Distinctive features described by one

of those present corresponded to what they saw in the photos.

“Did you find out their purpose?”

To the question asked from the seat next to the Deputy Director ...

“No, unfortunately. But given the current situation, the most likely assumption is the murder of Shiba Tatsuya.”

...Inukai replied that it was an assumption, but his voice was confident enough.

“It is clear. I think so too.”

After Chef Onda supported Inukai’s opinion...

“We’ve already failed recently when we tried to fix this guy. But what are we going to do this time?”

... he asked the Deputy Director what to do with Illegal MAP.

“Chief Onda. What do you suggest?”

The Deputy Director asked Onda’s opinion instead of answering his question.

Onda exchanged glances with Inukai before answering. In less than a second, they came to a mutual agreement.

“Regardless of this guy’s line of thinking, he’s an asset for our country. I believe that even if he doesn’t obey us directly, it will still be possible to make deals with him.”

“His name is also widely known throughout society, on Tuesday the media referred to him as a co-developer of the Strategic-Class Magic, which pushed back the NSU fleet. If the situation gets to the point where he is killed or wounded by foreign terrorists, the government will be criticized by our citizens.”

Continuing after Chief Onda, Chief Inukai addressed an indirect hint to the Deputy Director.

“Really. Shiba Tatsuya’s murder at the hands of Illegal MAP must be prevented. In general, the arbitrariness of foreign agents on our land is unacceptable. We must not

deviate from these principles.”

The Deputy Director understood him despite giving his proposal in the form of an indirect hint.

“Chef Inukai.”

“Yes?”

Inukai stood up when the Deputy Director spoke to him in a changed tone.

“Give Sergeant Toyama a chance to regain her honor.”

The Deputy Director ordered Inukai who was standing at attention.

◇ ◇ ◇

It was 7:30. Miyuki and Lina arrived at First High School’s Student Council room about 30 minutes before class began.

There they were met by Izumi. She had already seen Miyuki’s disguise yesterday, so she wasn’t confused. Instead, a large question mark popped over the head of another underclassman girl who was present. Today, in addition to Izumi, Shiina also came to the Student Council room early in the morning.

“Shiina-chan. You are pretty early, has something happened? Or are you worried about something?”

Miyuki who regained her original appearance, asked Shiina who had round eyes after seeing this transformation.

Miyuki didn’t force the Student Council members to work in the morning. She herself usually went straight to her classroom in the morning. Lately, Izumi has often started coming early and doing work (it seems she has some reason not to linger at home). Unlike her, Shiina rarely appears in the Student Council room before the start of working hours.

“Yes, no, this is ...”

Shiina hesitated and couldn't answer clearly. Doubt and hesitation were clearly visible on her face.

“...President, to tell the truth, I'd like to tell you something...”

In the end, Shiina found strength in herself and spoke after a short pause.

“To me? So should we move somewhere else?”

It seems that Shiina hasn't made up her mind yet. So, Miyuki invited her to talk in private after reading the hesitation on her face.

“Miyuki-senpai, perhaps I should just leave you alone this morning.”

Izumi stood up at ease and bowed to Miyuki.

“Yes, thank you. See you after class.”

Miyuki noticed Izumi's intentions and answered her in a relaxed tone.

“Yeah, see you later.”

Izumi left the Student Council room.

“Miyuki, I'll go to class too.”

At that moment, Lina noticed why Izumi left the room, and also headed for the door in a slightly unnatural manner.

With a smile, Miyuki followed Lina with her eyes, and turned to Shiina at the same time as she heard the sound of the door closing.

“Shiina-chan, let's sit down? Pixie, make us some drinks.”

“At your service.”

Pixie, who settled in the Student Council room on Tatsuya's orders, started the process for making drinks. After placing iced coffee with milk in front of Miyuki and cold cocoa (with a high syrup ratio) in front of Shiina, Pixie returned to her place in the corner of the room.

Shiina was wearing a tense look on her face, and grabbed the glass of cocoa. Even when she took a couple of sips, the tension didn't disappear from her face. She still couldn't begin talking.

Miyuki didn't rush Shiina. In a relaxed manner, she raised the glass of coffee with milk in it from the table. Red lips wrapped around the translucent drinking straw. Her snow-white throat moved slightly, showing that she had taken a sip. Then, she returned the glass to the table while exhaling slightly.

Looking up from her glass, Miyuki noticed Shiina was staring at her with devouring eyes.

“...What is it?”

There was still time before lessons began, and Miyuki was going to wait for Shiina to speak herself. But eventually, she could not help asking after feeling the suspicion from such a look.

“Ah! This, no, uh ... It's about my father and brother!”

Shiina couldn't answer honestly that she was simply fascinated while staring at her, so with a blushing face, she hurriedly went straight to the main topic of the conversation.

Miyuki, of course, noticed Shiina's unnatural behavior. For Miyuki, this scene was very familiar (although she couldn't understand the reason). So, she knew from her own experience that the best way to deal with this situation would be to leave everything as it is. Therefore, Miyuki silently waited for Shiina to continue her story.

“...Father and brother are going to r..report to the Self-Defense Forces... about Shiba-senpai's plan...”

Shiina's voice became very quiet toward the end of the sentence.

But the volume was loud enough for Miyuki who was sitting across from her to hear everything.

Over the past three months, Shiina began calling Tatsuya "Shiba-senpai," and Miyuki - "President." Miyuki knew this, so she understood who Shiina was talking about.

"Tatsuya-sama's plan?" Is this by any chance about the case we bothered you with the other day?

"Yes ... that same case."

Shiina cringe with fear and answered in a thin voice, even though Miyuki didn't ask her in a strict tone.

When Miyuki said "the other day," she was referring to the day when Tatsuya visited the Mitsuya family to get information about the defenses on Midway Island. When Mitsuya Gen asked Tatsuya why he needed to know about it, he replied: "in order to decide whether it is possible to organize an escape for one of the magicians imprisoned in Midway Prison." That is, Shiina meant her father and brother are going to tell the Self-Defense Forces just that.

"I understand ... Well, nothing can be done. Shiina-chan's father is in this position after all."

Miyuki didn't ask for details, deciding not to torment Shiina anymore. But in reality, she was very interested in who exactly in the Self-Defense Forces the Mitsuya family reported to. But Shiina hardly knew that much. Miyuki decided it was better to investigate this matter on her own instead of interrogating her kohai from the Student Council.

"My brother said he was going to report to "Lieutenant General Saeki from the 101 Battalion."

But the worry was unnecessary. Even without a question from Miyuki, Shiina herself betrayed the person to whom the information was reported to.

Hearing an unexpectedly familiar name, Miyuki was not shocked. Shiina spoke only about the information leak from the Mitsuya family to Saeki. There was no talk about Saeki betraying Tatsuya. But even if that were the case, Miyuki wouldn't have been all that surprised.

From the beginning, Miyuki wasn't very friendly towards Saeki and Kazama, who gave Tatsuya dangerous work. If Saeki takes a position unfavorable to Tatsuya, then Miyuki will not hesitate to recognize the 101 Battalion as his enemy.

However, Miyuki thought that she should at least inform Tatsuya about this.

“Thank you, Shiina-chan. I'll pass this on to Tatsuya-sama.”

◇ ◇ ◇

Fujibayashi, who took the day off yesterday to become her family's envoy, was already back on duty today at 8 AM. as usual. She was the assistant commander of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion, and her duty station was battalion headquarters. In addition to the time she spent on missions and operations, her actual duty station was the commander's office at Kasumigaura base.

The owner of that office, Kazama, came on duty at different times. Sometimes he showed up at the office far after noon, and sometimes he would get there before Fujibayashi.

Kazama didn't say anything if Fujibayashi came later than him. First of all, it is worth noting that the door to the office was arranged in such a way that it wouldn't open before 8 o'clock in the morning. Fujibayashi didn't know how Kazama got through this door. She was very curious about this, but she followed an intuition that suggested that it was better not to ask about it.

Today, Kazama appeared about ten minutes after Fujibayashi began work. Fujibayashi immediately rose from her seat, stood in front of Kazama's desk, where he had already seated himself, and bowed.

They exchanged polite greetings, then checked the schedule for today and clarified the battalion's orders. After the usual morning routine ended, Kazama asked about the results of yesterday.

“Regarding Shiba Tatsuya-shi...” (-shi is an overly formal way of referring to someone)

Fujibayashi began her report calling Tatsuya not her usual “Tatsuya-kun” or “Special Officer Ooguro.”

“In response to a request from the Fujibayashi family head, that we should have caught Kudou Minoru on our own, he asked to be taken for a capturing operation.

The head of the Fujibayashi family gave his consent.”

It wasn't an army operation, and she was not obligated to report it. However, both Kazama and Fujibayashi looked as if it was naturally something to report.

“What about time and place?”

“The meeting is tomorrow at noon on the state highway northwest of Fuji Fuketsu Cave.”

“Okay. Thank you, at ease.”

“Understood.”

Fujibayashi bowed and returned to her seat.

Kazama leaned back in his chair without opening his workstation terminal. He leaned back so much that in his posture, when his face was pointed up at the ceiling, one would have thought that he decided to take a nap.

Fujibayashi peaked over to take a look at Kazama. But she couldn't understand what the commander was thinking about.

Chapter 9

On Friday, July 12, Tatsuya remained in the laboratory in the morning, located on the underground floor of their high-rise building. Based on information he received from Fujibayashi on Parade and Sekihei Hatidzin, he brainstormed in order to find a way to overcome these two magic.

To hide, Minoru uses both of these magic. It won't be possible to return Minami, who was abducted by Minoru, until he can at least partially neutralize “Parade” and “Sekirei Hachijin.”

The purpose of the current study was exclusively the return of Minami. The prerequisite for this was determining their location. While working on the analysis of Parade and Sekirei Hachijin, Tatsuya never for a second forgot about his original

goal. Although physically he was now underground, his mind regularly looked at Minami's condition through his magical perception.

When his "sight" caught the change, it was already past 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

It wasn't a deterioration. On the contrary, this change could be called convenient for Tatsuya.

"Is there a hole in the barrier?"

The magical barrier hiding the location of Minoru and Minami weakened. The weakening magic was "Sekirei Hachijin." This didn't mean that the disguise was completely canceled, but the current state looked like if you hurry to the site right now, you may be able to break through the barrier by force.

But this weakening was clearly limited. And it aroused interest.

"Does that mean... that someone passed through the barrier?"

The masking barrier was not destroyed. But they didn't go through it according to the established rules.

Someone found a loophole, and through it penetrated "Sekirei Hachijin." As a result, a small hole remained in the barrier.... Which was Tatsuya's impression.

"The Fujibayashi family went ahead of me...?"

That was the possibility Tatsuya first thought about. He arranged with Fujibayashi Nagamasa that he would meet with the Fujibayashi family at noon tomorrow. However, at first, the Fujibayashi family told Tatsuya that they wanted to capture Minoru only on their own.

"The probability of this is high. But I can't just say that."

It wasn't only Tatsuya and the Fujibayashi family that were hunting for Minoru. The Ten Master Clans were also pursuing Minoru. There was also evidence that the Self-Defense Forces are also working on capturing Minoru. In addition, in Japan there are groups that, in tribute to tradition, regard "demons" as "evil." Parasites for them –

this, too, are also “demons” that must be destroyed. Therefore, it was likely that such forces also began to move.

“I’ll observe the situation a bit...”

If you blindly rush there, not knowing the circumstances, then everything can end with the addition of new enemies.

Tatsuya temporarily suspended his analysis of “Sekirei Hachijin” (he had already studied “Parade” before), and the first thing he decided to do was to ask the Yotsuba's main house if there might be a third party involved.

◇ ◇ ◇

At 3 pm Minoru was sitting in the dining room at the same table with Minami.

When Minoru was still living at his parents' house (that is, only a month ago), he wasn't in the habit of holding "tea parties," but now he couldn't refuse an invitation from Minami.

In front of Minoru there was a cup of classic black tea, and in front of Minami - tea with milk. The dessert for tea was lychee mousse (similar to berry jam). Of course, prepared by Minami.

Everything that Minoru ate in this hideout, was prepared by Minami. However, Minoru (who still didn't have a girl at his age, because his beautiful appearance had the opposite, repulsive effect) was worried like on the first day he met her. He decided to forget, for a while, the feeling of guilt from the abduction, and tasted the “dessert prepared by the hands of a girl.”

But he didn't enjoy this taste for long. The situation didn't allow to soar in the clouds, running away from reality. He was intoxicated with happiness only for a short time, while he tasted the mousse. Putting the spoon on the table, Minoru looked at Minami with a serious look.

Minami still had about a quarter of the mousse left in her bowl, but she noticed

Minoru's gaze and removed her hands, putting them on her hips.

Then she looked straight ahead at Minoru.

“... Um...”

Mentally encouraging himself so as not to lose his presence of mind, Minoru immediately turned to the main topic.

“I'm going to leave this hideout, today or tomorrow.”

“Good.”

Minami replied curtly and offered to continue with a look.

“To begin with, I'll go to Yokosuka.”

Minoru has already told so much. It was too late to stop.

“And from there I'm going to escape from Japan on a USNA Navy ship.”

“.....”

Minami's face expressed astonishment. Escape from the country. It was so unexpected that she couldn't utter a word.

“Sorry.”

She couldn't even ask Minoru what he was apologizing for right now.

However, she didn't need to ask.

“I said that there is no need to hurry with your answer, but now I have to change my words.”

Minami squeezed her hands tightly around her hips. Not only her palms, but her hands up to her shoulders, were very tense.

“If you can make a decision right now, then I want to hear the answer. If you decide that you want to remain human, then I will go to Yokosuka alone.”

“.....”

“If you haven't decided yet, then please make a decision before arriving in Yokosuka. If you say that you don't want to become a Parasite when we get there, then I will board the ship alone.”

“.....”

“If you're still in doubt... still can't decide, then I want you to board the ship with me. But even in this case, I give you my word that I won't do anything against your will, Minami-san. And I won't let the USNA military force you to do anything.”

“...Where...?”

Minami couldn't give an answer, but with difficulty she managed to get one word out of her mouth — and it was a question.

The question consisted of just one word, but its meaning was obvious.

“... I'm sorry. I don't know that either.”

However, Minoru was unable to answer this question.

Minoru's thoughts were filled with the realization of his own insignificance.

Driven by this thought, he tried to open a line of mental communication with Raymond.

“North-West of the Hawaiian Islands. I think it will be Midway Island or the Pearl and Hermes Atoll located next to it.”

But before he could do so, the answer came from a voice unfamiliar to Minoru.

“Who is there!?”

Minoru jumped up so abruptly that even his chair fell.

The chair fell with a heavy crash, but Minoru didn't have time to get distracted by it.

Only Minoru and Minami should be in the dining room.

In all of this mansion there should've been only Minoru and Minami.

And this skinny man who looks like a monk shouldn't be here. Minoru didn't notice not only breaking through the barrier, but even entering into this room.

“Yakumo-sozu* -sama!?”

[Buddhist monastic title. In the ranking table of 15 places ranked 7th from the bottom. In general, with the name of as many as 6 ranks, from “junior” to “senior”. Minami could simply be reduced, so that its present title can be different.]

Minami also stood up, but the surprise in her voice was slightly different from Minoru's.

Suddenly, a man in a monastic attire appeared in this room as the “ninjutsu user” Kokonoe Yakumo, whom Tatsuya called “Master Yakumo,” and Miyuki 'Yakumo-sensei.’”

“I feel embarrassed when such a young maiden calls me a monastic title.”

“...Excuse me.”

“There is nothing wrong. It is a kind of pleasant feeling.”

Minami called Yakumo, using the system of monastic titles. She met Yakumo through Tatsuya, but for her Yakumo wasn't one who could be called a “master” or “Sensei.”

Tatsuya told her that calling him “the abbot of the temple” would be wrong, which finally confused Minami, and in the end she decided to call him “(Yakumo) -sozu-

sama."

By the way, it wasn't the first time when Minami addressed Yakumo using the monastic title. A similar conversation during their greeting has already happened several times.

"By the way, Minami-kun. Your boyfriend seems a bit confused."

"P-guy..."

"How innocent. Tatsuya-kun wouldn't show such a reaction."

Yakumo narrowed his eyes with a satisfied smile, looking at the completely reddened faces of Minoru and Minami.

However, the conversation wouldn't have worked if he concealed his identity. Yakumo had that kind of common sense.

"You're Kudou Minoru-kun, right? My name is Kokonoe Yakumo. I work as a monk, but I'm actually a shinobi. Please forgive me for entering without permission. Sneaking in and all that is our nature."

Other ninjas ("ninjutsu users") would probably be outraged if they heard these words, but despite such a frivolous tone, Yakumo was serious. Perhaps this intention conveyed itself to Minoru, or perhaps such a foolish formulation stunned him. In any case, he relaxed his guard a little.

"... It looks like you already know me, but I would like to introduce myself anyway. Kudou Minoru, The Parasite."

Minoru's introduction was a kind of provocation.

"Yeah, I'm in the know."

But Yakumo only nodded in response. From such a reaction, Minoru was ashamed of his useless efforts.

"... I apologize, but let's return to the previous topic."

Overcoming his embarrassment, Minoru returned the conversation to a question that he couldn't ignore.

“Is it true that the Parasites from the USNA army are going to take us to Midway Island?”

Minoru didn't realize now that his statement said that Minami would go with him. He simply didn't notice this. Minami didn't notice either.

“I don't know for sure whether it will be Midway or Pearl and Hermes.”

The answer was given in such a tone that it was clear that Yakumo was fooling around, pretending to be ignorant. However, from this answer, Minoru realized that Yakumo had already narrowed down the list of suitable places to two points: Midway Islands and Pearl & Hermes Atoll.

If it was true, then it meant that Yakumo possesses phenomenal intelligence capabilities.

Minoru's back was covered in a cold sweat. He hadn't felt such awe even when he encountered his grandfather, Kudou Retsu.

“But how did you...”

“But how did you know that?” - Minoru couldn't finish this question to the end. He didn't have enough breath to finish it.

“How? Of course, that's a secret.”

But Yakumo's answer was simple. When he answered, it seemed as if he winked, even though he didn't.... As expected, he replied in his own style.

Minami's hands were no longer tense. With such behavior from Yakumo, she could no longer remain tense.

However, Minoru was tense and kept vigilant so as not to make a mistake.

“Instead, let's move on to the main topic. I don't care if you get on the ship alone, or if you continue your journey together. But if you intend to leave this country, I would like you to promise me something.”

“... That is, you don't mind that I abducted Minami-san?”

In his question, Minoru used the eloquent word “kidnapped.”

“You're not forcing her, are you?”

The tone of Yakumo's voice remained frivolous.

“But it won't stop others, will it? It is unlikely that you want to get caught and die. And we, in turn, will only be glad that you have become a Parasite leave this country.”

This meant that he was being hunted by many different powerful people. But Minoru couldn't afford to worry about that now.

“... And what am I supposed to promise?”

Yakumo behaved unobtrusively. However, his expression and behavior, on the contrary, gradually exerted more and more pressure on Minoru. And now this psychological pressure was so great that Minoru could barely remain conscious.

“I want you to keep secret the secret knowledge of the magic, “Parade.” The fact that no one should be taught this is self-evident, but I would like you to also pay special attention to ensuring that this technique isn't stolen.”

Prior to this, Yakumo's tone remained such that his true motives were very difficult to grasp. But now his tone has changed in such a way, so that in his words, his intentions and his earnestness were unmistakable.

“If you promise me this, I will promise in return that I won't interfere with your escape.”

In other words, this meant that if Minoru refused Yakumo's offer, he would help

Tatsuya or the other groups in trying to capture Minoru.

Minoru couldn't ignore such an unfavorable situation.

Yakumo had abilities that allowed him to break through Minoru's magic of disguise & concealment. Proof of this was the fact that he was now standing in this room. Yakumo, by himself, would probably be able to grab him, and then his escape would end there. Minoru's mind and intuition came to the same conclusion.

From the very beginning, Minoru had no intention of sharing "Parade" with anyone. He wasn't going to reveal his secrets even to other Parasites.

"... I promise."

For Minoru, this was only an addition to his plans of another constraint from a verbal promise. He had no choice but to accept this offer from Yakumo.

◇ ◇ ◇

Leaning back in his chair, Tatsuya stared into space with half-closed eyes. He immersed himself in meditation, not in the underground lab, but in his room on the top floor.

He interrupted his research, because something strange had happened to the concealment barrier covering the hideout in which Minami (Tatsuya believed) was locked up in.

This "something strange" wasn't an unfavorable change for Tatsuya. On the contrary, one could say that the situation has improved, bringing the rescue of Minami closer.

A small hole appeared in the barrier. Not such that through it you could look inside. The functions of the barrier itself remained in working order. At least, by observing through the information dimension from here, from Tofu, it was impossible to determine the exact location of their hideout through this gap.

But in this case, there was a saying "even an ant can destroy a huge dam." Only this

case wasn't close to the saying itself, but to its original meaning "even a small leak can sink a huge ship." Due to this newly-discovered small hole, the Sekirei Hachijin barrier concealing Minami's location may soon prove to be completely useless.

The question was what caused this "hole" to appear. The probability of the barrier wearing out over time was not zero either, but at the moment it could be ruled out of consideration.

Why did this "hole" appear?

Who made this "hole?"

Without knowing the answers to these questions, it will be difficult to deal with. It should also be kept in mind that a clash with this "someone" may ultimately result in a difficult situation which will end up helping Minoru escape.

In search of information, Tatsuya called the Yotsuba's main house some time ago. Now he was waiting for a response.

An hour had already passed since his call with a request for information. Tatsuya didn't expect the investigation to take place in an instant, but the wait dragged on longer than he expected.

But if you try to hurry them, it will only give the opposite effect. To be ready to set off at any moment, he was already dressed in his "Freed Suit" and was holding the helmet in his hand. He even wanted to return to the laboratory dressed as such in order to continue his research.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon, Tatsuya decided to "go back underground." And it was at that moment that he felt "something strange" for the second time.

"Is the barrier broken!?"

From that moment on, about an hour ago, Tatsuya had been watching the barrier, "Sekirei Hachijin," that was hiding Minoru and Minami. It was a long-range observation, so as not to be noticed by the enemy. And by this "adversary" meant not only Minoru, but also that "someone" who made a hole in the barrier.

And now Tatsuya's "Elemental Sight" detected that someone else broke through the barrier and penetrated inside.

The concealing effect of the barrier, "Sekirei Hachijin," recovered in an instant, but in that short time Tatsuya clearly saw what was inside the barrier. Due to the observation range, he couldn't identify the identity of the intruder, but he "saw" information about the "mansion" located right in the center of the barrier.

"This time I managed to get the exact coordinates."

Unfortunately, to determine the location of the hideout hidden behind the barrier, he used all his strength, and he didn't have enough resources left to neutralize "Parade" with his magic. He was unable to locate the exact location of both Minoru and Minami. Therefore, he couldn't shoot a tracking marker. Still, it was a good chance.

Tatsuya hurried to the videophone.

"... Tatsuya-sama. Hyougo at your service."

Before the three beeps had passed, the upper half of Hanabishi Hyougo's body appeared on the screen in a bow.

"The request we received recently is still under consideration. I apologize."

"No, I'm not calling on this case."

Assuming why Tatsuya called, Hyougo apologized. However, Tatsuya hinted with his answer that one shouldn't jump to conclusions in this way.

So before Hyougo began his useless apologies again, Tatsuya went on to the point of his call.

"I just noticed that someone had entered Kudou Minoru's hideout."

"Someone else who isn't related to the one you reported earlier?"

“Obviously someone else. Unlike the first, this one had a rougher way of penetrating the barrier.”

Although Tatsuya called his way crude, he didn't mock him. Because this someone, unlike himself, (probably) was able to break through the barrier. Compared to the first person who made a hole in the barrier, it was something else.

“The hole in the barrier has already been closed, but I was able to establish the position of the hideout's location.”

“So you're going there?”

“I will go on Wingless.”

Having informed him about the method of transportation, Tatsuya gave a positive answer to Hyougo's question.

Wingless is an electric motorcycle designed to be used in conjunction with the Freed Suit. Its flight function is arranged in the same way as that of the “Aerocar,” but it's not intended for long-distance flights.

“Really. Although, ground travel takes a little more time, but it won't cause problems with law enforcement.”

This Monday, Tatsuya first flew from Tofu to Miyakijima and back in the Aerocar, and then flew to the Western slope of Mount Takao in the Freed Suit. These noticeable unauthorized flights, obviously, caused a lot of problems among the officials responsible for domestic air traffic. In addition, this was an unauthorized use of magic. If you don't follow the laws, he could be arrested at any time. Hyougo's words about the fact that you shouldn't mindlessly annoy law enforcement agencies coincided exactly with Tatsuya's thoughts.

“If you find out something, contact me via radio in the suit.”

“As you order. Be careful.”

Nodding in response to the polite bowing of Hyougo, Tatsuya turned off the

videophone.

◇ ◇ ◇

It has been an hour since Yakumo disappeared from the dining room, and the dining room table was already empty. But despite this, Minoru was still sitting at the table, and Minami was sitting opposite him.

Minoru didn't hold her here. They just sat and did nothing.

Minami spent more time in the dining room than in the bedroom. In most cases she spent her free time (when she wasn't busy with housework), sitting at the dining room table.

So it was Minoru who was acting differently from his usual behavior. Minami has always been concise, and Minoru simply didn't know how to make small talk. And both of them were such people whose language begins to stumble in conversations with a representative of the opposite sex. Minami didn't usually worry about this silence, but Minoru was always bothered by this silence without talking, and he usually returned to his office.

Today, however, Minoru didn't leave the table after the dishes had been cleared away, or even after the ten minutes of silence that followed. In fact, Minoru didn't have time to sit still right now. He decided to leave this hideout no later than tomorrow.

They couldn't take a lot of luggage with them, but a minimal set of personal belongings was vital. As for a change of clothes, they could easily take things from this mansion. And if the end point of their escape is another country, then just in case, it was necessary to make fake passports. It was also necessary to ensure that they were ready to leave without delay, so as not to waste time.

Minoru understood that he shouldn't waste time. But he couldn't proceed with any specific actions, because the visit (more precisely, the intrusion) from Yakumo was too shocking.

Minoru didn't think that "the barrier that hides this mansion will never be broken."

And both “Kimon Tonkou,” and “Parade” can be neutralized if you had more powerful magic or more advanced magic techniques against them. It was with this understanding that Minoru’s desire to leave this hideout was connected.

However, Yakumo didn’t penetrate and didn’t disperse the barrier, “Sekirei Hachijin,” and he didn’t go through it in the correct way. He made his way through a hole in the barrier that Minoru didn’t even know about.

He was on a completely different level.

If Yakumo had joined the pursuers, then Minoru would have been caught by now. If you think about the connections between Tatsuya and Yakumo, then it is very strange that Yakumo didn’t join the chase.

...What the hell was this Kokonoe Yakumo thinking?

...With what intention did he just take and let me go?

Such doubts have been tormenting Minoru for some time now.

The pretext to get rid of this confusion was a new attack on the concealment barrier.

“Did someone slip through the barrier?”

Although the identity of the intruder couldn’t be established, but someone partially and temporarily neutralized the barrier accurately and penetrated inside. The magic structures from which the barrier was composed of weren’t destroyed. Instead, it was neutralized by an anti-phase shock wave. And this time, Minoru noticed it.

The barrier was disabled by anti-phase neutralization, therefore, if these waves cease, the barrier will restore its functions. After the invasion, there is no need to maintain the neutralization spell. And the barrier returned to its original state.

“...We have guests?”

Hearing this question, Minoru noticed that Minami, who was sitting across from him, had a worried expression on her face. He wanted to say his previous words in his

thoughts, and didn't even notice that he had said them out loud.

“Everything is good. Whoever it is, I won't let them touch Minami-san.”

For Minoru, the fact that his words caused concern for Minami wasn't welcome. It was with this feeling that he hastened to reassure her. So that these words didn't turn out to be a lie, Minoru directed his full attention to the search for the intruder.

He didn't believe that his speech was convincing. Besides, he didn't notice that Minami's cheeks were slightly red right now. Because he was focusing on signs of the intruder's presence.

About five minutes have passed since Minoru noticed that the barrier had been disabled.

Minoru got up from his chair and headed for the door to the dining room.

He knew that the one who had passed through the barrier was already inside the mansion.

“Please, come in.”

Minoru opened the door.

“I didn't think you would come to such a place.... Father.”

Minoru recognized the identity of the intruder through his “Elemental Sight.”

“I apologize for the intrusion.”

Kudou Makoto, head of the Kudou family and Minoru's father, entered the dining room, without being surprised at all.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Tatsuya-sama, can you hear me?”

Hyougo got in touch with Tatsuya immediately after he left their high-rise apartment building.

“I hear you well. Did you find out something?”

“Besides us, the other Master Clans didn’t send any people to the Aokigahara “Sea of Trees.” There is also no corresponding movements of the Self-Defense Forces either.”

“In other words, is it someone other than the army and the Ten Master Clans?”

Tatsuya quickly noticed that Hyougo was indirectly hinting at something. If he hadn't figured out anything, he wouldn't have made contact with only such data.

“The person who discovered them wants to tell you personally.”

Before Tatsuya managed to ask, “and who is this?” the one in question spoke himself.

“Tatsuya-niisan, I'm sorry for interrupting you while you're driving.”

“Fumiya?”

Tatsuya was going to ask why he wasn’t at school, but changed his mind, deciding that he shouldn’t ask.

“Sorry to rush you, but could you get down to business right away?”

Instead, he asked about the results of the investigation.

“Y-yes!”

From the speaker in his helmet came Fumiya's cheerful voice. With this reaction, he seemed like a puppy, rejoicing that he was helpful to Tatsuya.

“Starting this morning, it became impossible to determine the location of the head of the Kudou family and his second son .”

“Were they under surveillance? Although, no, this is logical.”

No need to repeat once again that Minoru is a member of the Kudou family. If you think about what Minoru can hope for besides Zhou Gongjin's networks, then it is the Kudou family that comes to mind first and foremost. Tatsuya said that “this is logical,” based precisely on this reflection.

“True, only since Tuesday, but...”

“Tuesday” was the day after Minami's abduction.

For her abduction, parasite dolls were used. These humanoid magic weapons were developed at the Kudou Family Research Center. Kudou Retsu, the previous head of the Kudou family, died trying to stop Minoru from coming to steal these parasite dolls. This fact saved the Kudou family from suspicion of colluding with Minoru, but the allegation of the complete innocence of the Kudou family can be called a hasty conclusion.

The current head of the Kudou family is Kudou Makoto. The fact that the relationship between the previous head Retsu and the current head Makoto didn't develop very well is a fairly well-known fact.

Although, the relationship between Makoto and Minoru was also not very good, but they were still father and son. The likelihood of Makoto working with Minoru couldn't be completely ruled out.

Fumiya's unspoken remark said it had something to do with this fact. It was estimated that the number of parasitic dolls involved in Minami's abduction was more than the number of gynoids stolen on the day of Kudou Retsu's assassination. Perhaps, if the Kudou family would have been put under surveillance even earlier, then it would have been possible to prevent the use of that tactic with the self-destruction of a large number of parasite dolls, as explosions. In such case, the detachment of the Juumonji family would survive, the perimeter wouldn't have been broken, and Minami wouldn't have been kidnapped.

“We don't have enough people, nothing can be done. There are too many things to do

lately.”

But Tatsuya wasn't going to criticize Fumiya.

The fighting force that was lost 34 years ago in the “war” with Dahan, who controlled the Southeast region of East Asia at that time, was restored to a decent amount in the past 30 years. However, the Yotsuba family still remained in a state where they had to compensate for quantity with quality.

However, the cause that led to this chain of events, which grew into all sorts of collisions of different forces, was Tatsuya himself. And Fumiya, who even had to wear a “priestess outfit,” was only a victim in this whole story. It was impossible to scoff at the poor man who had already suffered.

“If you say so, then I feel a little calmer.”

Fumiya said with sincere gratitude in his voice.

“From the very beginning, you shouldn't worry about it. So the head of the Kudou family and his second son are nowhere to be seen this morning?”

Tatsuya easily parried the influx of emotions from Fumiya and asked him a counter question.

“Yes. However, the abilities of the person sent to observe them are at the “average” level, so there is also a chance that they set in motion during the night, and not in the morning.”

“No. If we consider the time it takes to go from Ikoma to Aokigahara, then they left the Kudou mansion in the morning.”

“So, they have a secret connection with Kudou Minoru, after all?”

“The probability of this is quite high. But for Minoru, this seemed to be an unplanned event.”

“Are you talking about his father and brother visiting their hideout?”

Fumiya spoke on the basis of the assumption that Kudou Makoto and Kudou Soushi were the intruders at Minoru's hideout. Although, Tatsuya didn't point out to him that this hadn't been precisely determined yet.

Perhaps because he himself believed that it was, nevertheless, true.

“If they had agreed with Minoru in advance, they wouldn't have needed to break through the barrier. Even if Kudou Makoto is the visitor who came to Minoru, he obviously didn't do so in the form of a friendly family visit.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I'm going to go to Aokigahara anyway.”

“Do you need any help?”

“It will be needed if he escapes.”

“Good. We'll be ready.”

Tatsuya turned off the radio and increased the speed of the motorcycle.

◇ ◇ ◇

Drinking tea from a cup, Kudou Makoto exhaled in satisfaction. At the request of Makoto, Minami brewed hot tea instead of ice tea for him.

“So, isn't it time to get down to business?”

Although Minoru said “isn't it time,” as if he were hurrying his conversational partner, but the delay was caused by him. It was Minoru who asked Minami to serve tea so that he had time to put his thoughts in order.

Despite the fact that he learned in advance that the intruder was his father, he couldn't get rid of the excitement that he felt when they met face to face.

“Before that, could you let Soushi inside?”

“Did Soushi-niisan come too?”

There was a note of surprise in Minoru's voice, but it was his acting. Minoru had already seen with “Elemental Sight” that two large cars were outside the barrier, and Soushi was sitting in one of them.

Since the enemy wasn't Tatsuya, he could freely use “Elemental Sight” without fear of reverse detection. Also, the fact that Tatsuya wasn't the intruder was indicated by the fact that the barrier wasn't completely destroyed, but only temporarily neutralized.

Makoto nodded, not noticing the pretense of Minoru (or not showing what he noticed).

“Yes. He's going to work as bait for you.”

“... I would like to hear the details when Soushi-niisan joins us.”

Before he answered, there was some unnatural delay. Minoru still continued to worry openly.

“Should I go meet the guest?”

Minami's proposal wasn't only the manifestation of a maid's professionalism, but also, perhaps, carried a hidden meaning in the form of helping Minoru until he collected his thoughts.

“Thanks, but not necessary. I will send a gynoid to meet him.”

The battle-like gynoid (not converted into a parasitic doll), which was used as a driver during the escape to this place, was now stored in the lobby of the mansion in standby mode. Minoru took out a thin mobile terminal from his breast pocket, entered the command to cancel the gynoid standby mode through it, and then gave him the command to meet the “guest.”

Returning the terminal to his breast pocket, Minoru sipped some tea from his cup.

Makoto also took his cup in his hand.

Minami went to the kitchen to make some more tea.

Kudou Soushi, the brother of Minoru and the second son of the Kudou family, arrived in the dining room even before Minami returned.

At the time of the meeting with Minoru, the behavior of Soushi showed that he was a little scared. The fear left over after Minoru's attack on their home in Ikoma hasn't yet passed.

“Nii-san, please come in.”

“Don't be shy, Soushi, sit down.”

While maintaining a serious expression on his face, Soushi followed Minoru's request and Makoto's order, and sat down next to his father.

At that moment Minami returned from the kitchen, carrying a tray with cups of tea on it. She showed no reaction to the strained atmosphere caused by Soushi, took away the old cups and saucers that stood before Makoto and Minoru, and put new cups of tea in front of all three people.

“Minami-san. That's enough, so I'm sorry, but...”

With such a slightly vague wording, Minoru wanted to ask Minami to leave the room.

“Yes, I understand.”

Minami understood everything perfectly, bowed politely and walked out of the dining room.

“You could have left that girl here. She was the reason you gave up your humanity, wasn't she?”

“Yes, I became a parasite for her sake.”

Minoru answered his father's question, with an elevated tone. He didn't like it when they talked about Minami with that attitude.

“I see.”

Makoto smiled slightly at the difference in enthusiasm between him and his son.

It looked like a taunt, but Minoru didn't show any negative reaction at the time.

“So what is the reason for your sudden visit?”

Minoru spoke in a rather constrained tone, but it wasn't just now that he was beginning to behave this way. The relationship between Minoru and Makoto lost interest a few years ago. Makoto's attitude toward Minoru was close to dismissive, and if his grandfather Retsu had died much earlier, Minoru would have given up his humanity much earlier and in a different form.

“I've been wondering, do you need any help?”

“Help?”

This time, the surprise on Minoru's face wasn't faked. He didn't think that in his father he could suddenly awaken any late parental love. Minoru couldn't understand the reason why his father was offering him his help.

“You can't escape in the current situation.”

Makoto noticed that Minoru was feeling doubt. But he didn't begin to explain why he was offering his help.

“Even if you have a Parade capable of fooling the eyes of your pursuers, you lack the necessary “vessels” that will carry the illusions, don't you?”

“... You've prepared other “actors” besides Soushi-niisan?”

Minoru indirectly agreed with Makoto's inquiring, answering him with a question.

“Except Soushi, all the others are androids. After all, one doesn’t need to be a man to take on the role of a “vessel” for Parade.”

“...I'm very grateful. So you suggest I use them to leave this place?”

“Yes. Do you have anywhere to go? I have connections in Taiwan and Indochina. If you want, I'll talk to my intermediaries.”

Minoru wasn't thinking at all about the fact that there was no parent who didn't think of his child, despite his cold attitude towards him.

“So you want to expel me out of Japan?”

That's his father’s goal. When this became clear, Minoru finally understood the meaning of this "friendliness" shown by his father.

“If the other Master Clans find out that you are helping me, then this time the Kudou family will surely be kicked out of the Twenty-Eight Families. Maybe even lose their place in the magical world. So you want to help me escape before the Yotsuba family or the Juumonji family catches me?”

The “magical world” is a society of magicians. The Twenty-Eight Families are the Ten Master Clans plus the Eighteen Substitute Families. Minoru asked his father, Makoto, if he wanted to get him out of the country in order to avoid the “social death” of the Kudou family.

“And that too.”

Makoto nodded slightly in response to Minoru's counter-question.

“But other than that, the fact is that you are the greatest magician and masterpiece of the Kudou family. It will be a pity to lose you.”

Continuing, Makoto unleashed heartless, insensible words on Minoru.

“Then we'll play it as if you manipulated Soushi. Sure, the Kudou family will lose some of its reputation, but it will be better than giving away the valuable finished product to the Yotsuba or Saegusa.”

Soushi's whole body trembled. The man sitting next to him had just said, without hiding it, that he would have to become a bargaining chip. It was quite humiliating.

But Soushi said nothing, and showed absolutely no resistance at all.

“Everything is already prepared.”

“... Did you use the “Puppet Law” on Soushi-niisan?”

This question meant: “Did you turn Soushi into a controlled doll with the help of the magic for controlling a man's will?” But Makoto shook his head no at Minoru's question.

“I just reminded him that he should perform his duties as a magician of the Kudou family... the magicians of Nine should be fulfilled.” Soushi gave his consent.

Minoru turned and looked over at his second oldest brother, Soushi. He had a facial expression that didn't speak at all about his consent.

“Okay. In that case, I will accept your generous offer.”

However, Minoru with this stopped the interrogation of Makoto. The kindred feelings between them were rather weak, so Minoru couldn't really reproach Makoto now. Minoru won't grieve when Soushi, who plays the role of bait, is caught, and his reputation sinks to the very bottom. Although, Minoru also didn't have such feelings like “it serves him right.” The expression that most accurately describes Minoru's attitude was “I don't care.”

“However, from the proposed destinations, I'll have to refuse. Because my friends have already organized an escape route for me.”

Hearing Minoru's answer, Makoto nodded and asked:

“Parasites from the USNA Army?”

According to this behavior, the head of the Kudou family didn't seem like he wants to completely control the movement of his son.

“On a ship from Yokosuka?... No, wait, don't answer. When is the departure?”

“Immediately, as soon as preparations are complete.”

“Don't you have to persuade that girl?”

Obviously, by “that girl,” Makoto meant Minami. To more effectively expel Minoru, it was necessary for him not to take Minami with him, however, Makoto didn't seem to have any intentions of separating Minoru and Minami.... Or, he simply didn't care.

“Not necessary.”

Minoru answered Makoto's question with a clean and innocent smile on his face.

“I decided that I wouldn't force or try to convince her.”

Minoru swore to himself that besides the already-made “restriction of freedom” by Minami, he wouldn't oppose her will.

“Ah, being young.”

Makoto mumbled in an uninterested voice, realizing that Minoru was filled with determination.

◇ ◇ ◇

After leaving the dining room where the conversation between the son and father of the Kudou family began, Minami went to the room that took on the role of her bedroom. She only used this room for changing clothes and sleeping, but besides the closet and bed there was also: an old-fashioned writing desk, a small piano, and a bookcase with books.

Minami sat down on the classic-designed chair that came with the antique writing desk. The chair had curved legs and no rollers, but despite such an elegant design, she didn't have any difficulties with its movement. Minami herself, who has a frail build inherent in girls, had no problems sitting on this chair, but a large man weighing 90-100 kg would be better off not sitting on this chair.

The desk was the type that, when you use the table you need to open the top of the table top. But Minami sat sideways to the table, not opening the tabletop.

The bookcase was full of paper books that are rare these days. About half of the books were in Japanese, and the other half were in Chinese. The Japanese part of the collection included the complete collection of literature from the last century, which on the contrary, was new to Minami. She spent most of her time in this mansion in the dining room reading these books in order to distract herself and diversify her leisure time.

But now she didn't even reach for the bookshelves. She was lost in thought, and she had no time for books.

Escaping abroad is too sudden of a news.

Reason told her that "you shouldn't do this."

Minoru said he would let her go if she refused to follow him. In addition to the thought "I can't appear before Miyuki-sama's eyes," there was also a feeling inside Minami saying "I want to go home."

Both her reason and senses gave the same answer. But Minami still hesitated.

And that was because her feelings weren't one.

"Am I trying to compare Miyuki-sama and Minoru-sama right now...?"

The desire to return to Miyuki and the desire to at least be with Minoru a little longer.

Minami hesitated between these two thoughts.

“... I'm disgusting...”

... betraying her mistress Miyuki, and wanting to return to her?

... Without giving an answer to Minoru, being in an unclear relationship with him, enjoying the desired feeling of falling in love?

The more she thought about it, the lower, meanest and disgusting person she considered herself.

Her psychological state didn't fall to a level where recovery is impossible...

“...BUT! Who is there!?”

... because her alertness rose sharply when the room suddenly showed signs of the presence of another person.... It would probably be more accurate to say “thanks to the fact that it had risen.”

“Sorry, Sorry.”

Surprisingly, at first only her voice reached her consciousness.

“Looks like I scared you a little.”

Minami blinked unconsciously several times.

“Sozu-sama (Yakumo)...?”

After she heard a voice in front of her, Yakumo finally became visible.

“When did you get here...”

“Just now. Sorry I didn't knock, but I didn't want to be noticed by those sitting over there.”

Yakumo said while looking in the direction of the dining room.

“No... I was just immersed in my thoughts, it's no big deal.”



It was an invasion without permission into the room of a young girl. In fact, this shouldn't be forgiven so easily, but Minami simply couldn't get angry because she was caught off guard.

“Better tell me sozu-sama, why did you come back...?”

During this recent visit, Yakumo said: “I would like you to promise me something.” And Minoru gave him the answer. Minami thought that was the end of Yakumo's business here.

“I would like to inform you of something.”

“Me?”

As Minami thought, the deal with Minoru was over. Instead, it turned out that Yakumo wanted to discuss something with Minami. Moreover, the word “inform” usually meant that the conversation would be about some already known topic, with the addition of some facts.

“Tatsuya-kun was asked to release several magicians from the American military prison located on Midway Island.”

“Insane...! Even for Tatsuya-sama it will be difficult.”

“With his abilities it won't be a problem. Moreover, for Tatsuya-kun himself this will be a personal gain.”

Minami considered that attempting to get into the American military prison as recklessness. But she understood that Yakumo knows Tatsuya's abilities better than she does.

But Minami had no idea what all this has to do with her.

“The point is location. Tatsuya-kun doesn't seem to be able to make up his mind yet.”

A sly smile appeared on Yakumo's face.

“Well, that's not surprising. Tatsuya-kun doesn't seem to understand the real benefits he will receive from fulfilling this request. For him, this is just a request from a familiar pretty girl, and he has no particular desire to go on an expedition to the remote island of Midway.”

The words “pretty girl” Yakumo singled out in his speech, saying them with a mischievous grin. But Minami's attention caught on to the repeated geographic name, and she realized what Yakumo wanted to say with this.

“... Sozu-sama, you mentioned earlier that the destination of Minoru-sama would be Midway Island.”

Yakumo slightly widened his eyes from these words of Minami, as if asking “what's next?”.

“If I follow Minoru-sama...”

“Tatsuya-kun will pursue you...”

Yakumo's smile changed from a “smirk” to a “smile from ear to ear.”

“... even to the island of Midway.”

“...You think so?”

“Yes, I am sure. And in the meantime, while on Midway Island, Tatsuya will at the same time fulfill the request to release those magicians from prison.”

“... And this will bring Tatsuya-sama much benefit?”

“I believe that this will be one of the factors that will ultimately ensure the future for Tatsuya-kun and Miyuki-kun.”

Yakumo's answer exceeded all Minami's expectations.

“Okay, I understand. Honestly, I didn't know what to answer, but thanks to the advice from sozu-sama (Yakumo), I made a decision.”

“I didn't mean to give you any advice, but if my words were useful, so be it.”

Minami bowed low to Yakumo. When she raised her head, Yakumo had already disappeared.

◇ ◇ ◇

The conversation between Minoru and Makoto lasted about 15 minutes. He decided to accept the help of the Kudou family with their escape rather quickly, but it was also necessary to clarify some small details.

After sending off his father Makoto and elder brother Soushi (Makoto went home, and Soushi waited in the car outside the barrier), Minoru went to Minami's room.

Overcoming indecision, he knocked on the door.

An answer was heard from within: “Wait one moment, please.”

Then from inside he heard a sound similar to the slamming of a suitcase.

Is she collecting her things?

To go back home?

Or to go with me...?

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

While Minoru was already dreaming about an appropriate interpretation of this sound, the door opened.

“Oh, yes, I'm sorry.”

Seeing Minami, he apologized reflexively.

Minami, of course, didn't understand what he was apologizing for.

When Minoru saw that Minami tilted her head inquiringly, his heartbeat increased.

“Um...”

Minoru adjusted his breathing and tried to start a conversation.

“Minoru-sama.”

But Minami interrupted him.

“Abandon humanity or abandon magic. I haven't made a choice yet.”

“I see...”

Minoru tried to hide his disappointment, but couldn't do it completely. His voice completely betrayed his mood.

“So could you give me a little more time to think?”

“Uh...?”

When Minami continued, the faint disappointment on Minoru's face gave way to unconcealed hope.

“I can't say when I'll give you an answer. Still, could you let me go with you?”

“Yes of course! With joy!”

Minoru's face lit up with joy. Even if his beauty wasn't of this world, it only confirmed his similarity with some young deity, commanding art and light.

Minami was so overwhelmed by this beauty that she began to feel light tingling sensation in her heart.

Minami didn't lie about the fact that she's hesitant between the two options. She was

afraid that she would turn into a useless creature.

Useless for everyone, not needed by anyone. This is what Minami was blindly afraid of. It could even be called paranoid fear. That was how Minami envisioned her worst future.

Losing her magic, she will become unsuitable for Miyuki-sama's service.

Renouncing her humanity, she will no longer be able to stay close to Miyuki-sama.

She couldn't even conceive of the fact that Minoru really needed her. There was no doubt that Minoru was serious about her treatment. Now he is serious, but she didn't think that it would continue after.

Now she wanted to stay with him.

But she didn't know how long it would last.

... Minoru-sama and I don't match, there is no balance between us.

... I can't believe that I have the charm that can attract the attention of Minoru-sama.

Therefore, Minami couldn't decide.

She didn't pretend to be hesitant, but really couldn't decide.

However, it was obvious that Yakumo's phrase "this will provide a future for Tatsuya and Miyuki" influenced her decision to go with Minoru.

... Minoru-sama sincerely worries about me.

... And I take advantage of this grace of Minoru-sama.

That was the feeling of guilt, like thorns stuck in her heart now.

Chapter 10

When Tatsuya arrived at the Aokigahara “Sea of Trees,” the hands of the clock had already passed 17:00.

He returned to the same place where the pursuit squad from the Juumonji family had lost sight of Minoru's car. On the narrow road which he had discovered by breaking the illusion, new tracks of wheels were now visible..

“So it was the right way after all?”

Such a thought filled with a little bitterness came to Tatsuya's mind. Now that he had determined the exact coordinates of the hideout, he knew for sure that this road leads to the right place. If only that day he would have searched a little more aggressively and persistently...

“... No, this is a useless assumption.”

That day he wouldn't have been able to find the right way, even if he had searched until nightfall. Even today, he was able to see his goal only because someone else had broken the barrier before. He wouldn't know the route to the goal if he hadn't traced backwards, starting from the final destination. For Tatsuya, this barrier was such a complicated and confusing maze.

Tatsuya parked Wingless, the electric motorcycle, on the side of the road and entered the Sea of Trees on foot. From the place where the bike was parked to Minoru's hideout was about 700 meters in a straight line. Even when walking on foot it won't much time. Even if the road is winding, you can get there in less than 10 minutes. It wasn't time that bothered him more, but the fact that along the way it was possible to turn the wrong way at the forks.

The “Freed Suit” that was created by the Yotsuba family, now worn by Tatsuya, in contrast to the “Mobile Suit” developed by the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion, wasn't equipped with the power assistance function. But fewer mechanized parts also made it easier to use. His total weight was less than 20 kilograms. Such a weight wasn't a burden to Tatsuya even without magical support. He could run at a speed approximately equal to the speed of a regular high school student in running sports, while wearing the suit.

Starting to run slowly, he increased his speed with each step.

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“Coming!”

Minoru didn't feel the approach of Tatsuya with “Elemental Sight,” but with the sensory function of the barrier, 'Sekirei Hachijin.’”

At the moment, he and Minami were still in the hideout. Not to ambush and counterattack Tatsuya. The “Sekirei Hachijin” barrier interferes with magical detection and is an array of “Kimon Tonkou” installed in fixed positions. This barrier may no longer prevent Tatsuya from invading, but inside the barrier, Tatsuya will have a harder time finding them than he would outside the barrier anyways.

At that moment when Tatsuya gets inside the barrier, the “competition” will begin. So decided Minoru.

When “Sekirei Hachijin” disrupts Tatsuya's “sight,” Kudou Soushi will copy the Eidos of Minami and put the copy on the gynoid, then copy the Eidos of Minoru and cast it on himself. After that, he will start driving away from the barrier by car. If Tatsuya buys it, then Minoru will take Minami with him and flee in the opposite direction. And if he doesn't buy it... then he's ready for a direct confrontation.

If he manages to escape from here and get to Odawara, then there will be all the necessary geographical conditions for the use of “Kaso Tonkou*.” “Kaso Tonkou” is the composite magic from “Parade” and “Kimon Tonkou.” Minoru concocted this improvised spell in half a day today, and theoretically no one should know this magic except for him. Even Tatsuya won't be able to quickly understand magic that's unknown to him.... At least Minoru hoped and prayed for it.

Although, he understood that being a Parasite, he didn't have a god to whom to pray.

[Couldn't come up with a normal version of the translation of this. The name is formed from the first two characters of the Japanese name Parade and the second two

characters of the Japanese name Kimon Tonkou. "Parade Thin" or "Disguise Thin" - all these options sound silly, given the fact that the second word is a transliteration from Japanese, resembling a Russian word.]

◇ ◇ ◇

"... Hmm?"

Tatsuya, who ran with the speed of a middle distance runner, stopped when he felt a weak but sufficient enough not to be ignored, feeling that "something is wrong here." He felt that he had shifted slightly from the desired path, as if his feet were slightly leading him away.

"This is the impact of "Kimon Tonkou"...?"

"Kimon Tonkou" is magic that distorts the sense of direction. Tatsuya knew this before, but now for the first time he had personally experienced what this "distortion of the sense of direction" felt like.

Perhaps he wouldn't have noticed it if he was riding his motorcycle. He also wouldn't have known about it if he had ran with magical support. He was able to detect a slight deviation only because he felt the surface of the earth while running, and his feet were firmly planted on it.

"Is it just because I know where to go?"

This time the destination was strictly defined. He was moving along a winding road, constantly keeping in mind the location of the target, so when the direction shifted, he was able to understand that it wasn't his mistake.

"Quite the problematic magic..."

Tatsuya was once again convinced of the effectiveness of this East Asian continental ancient magic "Kimon Tonkou." It would be too difficult for him to overcome this barrier only on his own. Whatever the intentions of the Kudou family, they only helped him.

Tatsuya finally crossed the “Sekirei Hachijin” barrier.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Come!”

Finding out about Tatsuya's invasion, Minoru turned on a short-range directional radio.

“Soushi-niisan, move out, please.”

“Understood.”

The answer came back in a clearly dissatisfied voice, but Soushi still showed no signs of resistance.

The barrier transmitted the response from the exit of the car to the outside. With the help of Elemental Sight, Minoru “watched” as the car followed its intended course. In the car, he “saw” Soushi, on which was imposed his (Minoru) Eidos and a female-type android, on which Minami's Eidos was superimposed.

“Now let's see if Tatsuya-san can be fooled by this!”

Although Tatsuya hadn't yet penetrated the inside of the mansion, Minoru unconsciously held his breath and began to observe Tatsuya's movements reported by the barrier.

◇ ◇ ◇

“What is it!? Minami and Minoru?”

Less than a minute has passed since Tatsuya received a response that “something had crossed over the barrier.” Now he suddenly caught clear signs of Minami and Minoru's presence.

He activated his “Elemental Sight” again. Information about Minami and Minoru moving northward at a speed of about 30-40 km/h was displayed in his “field of view.”

“So, there's more than one road that leads to this hideout?”

Providing multiple escape routes during preparation for a likely escape from pursuit is common sense. There was nothing surprising in the fact that Minoru escaped on a different path when he discovered Tatsuya's approach.

But...

“... Where is he going? Besides, so openly?”

Tatsuya couldn't believe his perception, because Minoru's behavior seemed unnatural.

Although he said “so openly,” Parade acted on the Eidos of Minoru and Minami. Not Lina's spell, namely the “Parade” of the Kudou family. Without receiving that data from Fujibayashi, he wouldn't have been able to “see” it so clearly.

But it was too clear. He saw them too well. It seemed to Tatsuya that they were making a show of themselves, knowing that they would be “watched.”

In addition, the direction of their escape also raised some doubt. The Minoru group passed through the Sea of Trees and continued north along the state highway.

If they continue in this direction, they will come upon Saiko Lake. If from there they turn east, they will follow the central road along Lake Kawaguchi. If they turn to the west, and then, before reaching Lake Motosu, turn to the north again, they will eventually end up in the city of Kofu. The route leading south of Lake Motosu could be ruled out altogether. Because in that case they would've immediately gone south straight out of the Sea of Trees.

The question is where will they go next.

If they head east, then they will be in the suburbs of Tokyo. They will be entering the territory of the Juumonji family.

If they go to the north, then the Yotsuba family will be waiting for them there. The location of the main house of the Yotsuba family - the former Fourth Laboratory - was kept secret from the other Master Clans and the Magic Association. But the Mitsuya, Mutsuzuka, Saegusa and Kudou families knew that this place is somewhere in the region “from the city of Kofu to the city of Suva.” Nobody particularly monitored the non-disclosure of this information, so the neighboring families of Ichijou, Futatsugi and Juumonji also learned about this.

Perhaps Minoru himself didn't know about this. Or was he going to cross the “backyard” of the Yotsuba family and continue moving north?

“... But is it really Minami and Minoru?”

The more he thought about it, the more he doubted it.

“... But I just can't leave it unattended, I have no other choice.”

There were no guarantees that these carriers of Minami's and Minoru's Eidos weren't fakes.

“Should I wait for reinforcements?”

Instead of training staff, priority was given to rapid response. And it gave the opposite effect. Regret about it filled Tatsuya's thoughts.

Feeling indecisive about the choices, he nevertheless turned around and followed back along the road he came here on.

◇ ◇ ◇

From information received from the barrier, Minoru learned that Tatsuya had come out of “Sekirei Hachijin.”

In general, the disguised road was part of this barrier, but there were only devices to support the illusions there. The barrier didn't have a surveillance function for monitoring intruders.

Minoru had difficulty resisting the desire to directly verify Tatsuya's movements by directing his "Elemental Sight" at him.

If he directs his "sight" towards Tatsuya, he will feel it. The same was true for surveillance hardware — cameras, sensors, etc. He will soon notice that the car heading towards Lake Saiko is a dummy.

If he leaves the hideout too early, Tatsuya will notice this too.

However, it was impossible to hide here indefinitely. The bait won't give him too much time.

Minoru was sure of that.

"... Minami-san, let's go."

"...Good."

About 5 minutes after the response from Tatsuya disappeared from the barrier.

Taking Minami with him, Minoru left the hideout.

Having passed along a narrow road surrounded by trees, they drove onto a public road leading from north-north-east to south-south-west.

Tatsuya wasn't there.

Chapter 11

Although the NSU had withdrawn its fleet, it was impossible to say for sure that the military threat had already passed. It will take several weeks for everyday life to return to normal.

Classes at all high schools of the National University of Magic have already resumed, but extracurricular activities were limited to 4:30 p.m. Classes in schools of magic ended at 3:20 p.m., so extracurricular activities were reduced to about 1 hour.

Of course, First High School was no exception. The Student Council and the Disciplinary Committee involved in supervising extra-curricular activities also completed their work before 5 p.m.

Shortly before 4:30 p.m.

Erika, Leo, Mizuki and Mikihiko were waiting for individual Cabinets on the platform of the station closest to First High School. Miyuki and Lina have been leaving the school separately from everyone lately, and today they left a little earlier than the rest.

It was Shizuku's and Honoka's turn first, they already got into separate Cabinets and left. The others were now waiting for the next Cabinet to arrive.

“Ah, there she goes.”

The individual Cabinets didn't have an arrival schedule, but during the busy hours the next free Cabinet appeared within five minutes. This station was mainly used only by students to come to school and go home. At the moment, the rush of passengers has already passed, and only these four remained, but still the next Cabinet arrived at the station just five minutes after the departure of Honoka's Cabinet.

“Ok, I'm next.”

Mizuki went to the opened door. The order in which they sat down was strictly defined. Apart from Honoka, who needed to go in the opposite direction, on the days when Miyuki and Tatsuya weren't with them, their order was this: Shizuku, Mizuki, Erika, Mikihiko, Leo.

But today there are also some differences from the usual order.

“Miki, show her out.”

Erika didn't suddenly just ask, but ordered Mikihiko to escort Mizuki.

“Uh!?”

“Come on, hurry up. Even if there are no other passengers, your slowness is annoying.”

“Well, if she doesn't mind...”

Although Erika's demand was completely unreasonable, Mikihiko somehow agreed too quickly. On the contrary, he looked like he wanted to do it.

“Um, but... it doesn't feel right.”

Mizuki looked shyly at Mikihiko, but even without her confirmation it was obvious that she didn't like this idea.

“No, Mizuki. After all, the danger isn't over yet.”

But regardless of Mizuki's opinion, Erika was adamant.

“Come on, hurry up.”

“Uh-huh...”

As a result, Mizuki and Mikihiko surrendered under the pressure from Erika and sat in the same Cabinet.

The Cabinet with Mizuki and Mikihiko inside left the platform. Seeing them off with his eyes, Leo briefly asked Erika:

“... What are you up to?”

“What are you talking about?”

Erica replied without turning to face Leo.

“I’m talking about the reason you told Mikihiko to accompany Mizuki.”

“I already said, didn't I? Because of the danger.”

Erika was still staring in the direction of Mizuki's retreating Cabinet.

Leo frowned at the tense atmosphere.

“You didn't say anything about any danger yesterday. Is something bothering you now?”

Erika finally turned to Leo.

“... I wish, but it was a wasted experience.”

Immediately after these words, the next Cabinet arrived at the platform.

Erika walked over to him and looked around.

“Leo, let's go for a little ride together.”

“What are you doing so suddenly?”

“If you're going, then let's go. I'll tell you inside.”

Erika said, and sat down in the Cabinet transportation system.

Leo scratched his head nervously, then he crossed the road on the sliding bridge blocking the front of the Cabinet, went into the Cabinet through the opposite door and sat down on the seat next to Erika.

◇ ◇ ◇

It had been more than 10 minutes since Tatsuya got on “Wingless,” the electric motorcycle, and started the pursuit.

At the entrance to Lake Saiko, Tatsuya saw the car with the carriers of Minami's and Minoru's Eidos with the naked eye.

As he accelerated, he caught up with the car on the right side. In the driver's seat, he saw a man with the face of Minoru holding the steering wheel. Although persons under the age of 18 can obtain a license to drive a four-wheeled vehicle under special conditions, but Minoru unlikely met these conditions.

But that wasn't the problem now.

Using his psion waves, he activated the built-in CAD in his suit with full mental control, and considered the activation sequence he devised.

The magic was “Gram Dispersion,” specifically configured for use against Parade. It was a sequence of Decomposition magic corresponding to the Kudou family's spell. It will decompose the magic sequence that builds a visible illusion, even if Minoru himself can't be seen with the naked eye.

Tatsuya released the magic.

A visual noise ran across Minoru's face, and the outline of his entire body became blurred.

This doesn't mean that the body of the carrier with the image of Minoru was destroyed.

The magic sequence that formed the image of Minoru, stripped of its information body structure, began to dissipate.

After the haze of psionic particles cleared...

“Kudou Soushi! After all, it's a fake!”

Tatsuya didn't even bother to look at "something with the image of Minami" sitting in the passenger seat.

The "Minoru" turned out to be a fake. So, Minami shouldn't be real either.

Tatsuya slammed on the brakes, deciding to go back to the hideout located in the center of the Sea of Trees.

At the same time, Soushi turned the steering wheel to the right.

Tires squealing, the large passenger car made a sharp approach towards Tatsuya.

Which made the car spin.

As if knocked down, the electric motorcycle flew off the road.

Guided by Tatsuya, "Wingless" flew to the side along an arc.

But in fact, the motorcycle wasn't hit by the car.

He took off by himself, with the help of flight magic.

Tatsuya turned "Wingless," the flying electric motorcycle, 180 degrees in the air and brought it back to the road.

Then he looked in the rear-view mirror. There he saw that the car had stopped, turning sideways.

Furthermore, the car driven by Soushi began to turn around, apparently in order to pursue Tatsuya's motorcycle.

Using his psion waves, Tatsuya activated the suit's built-in CAD.

At the same moment when the magic was activated, two wheels fell off one side of the car, and that side slammed onto the road with a crash.

Moreover, this car will no longer be able to prevent Tatsuya.

But Tatsuya remained vigilant, realizing that instead, Soushi himself could attack him with some kind of restraining magic.

The tilted car without two wheels was getting smaller and smaller in the rear-view mirror.

Some time had already passed, but Soushi hadn't released any attacking magic.

Tatsuya arrived at the hideout Minoru used at about 5:45 pm

Before entering the Sea of Trees, through the suit's communicator he informed Hyougo about Soushi as he was directly on the move. At the moment, one of Hyougo's father's subordinates, Hanabishi Tajima, has already been sent there for insurance.

Tatsuya left the motorcycle on the side of the road. But it turned out that this was no longer necessary. Unlike last time, the barrier no longer interfered with him.

The barrier itself, distorting the sense of direction, still existed. But its functions have significantly weakened.

This could happen due to the lack of a “master” who needs to be hidden. Either that, or the mechanism that continuously maintains the magic could've weakened due to several breakthroughs of the barrier.

But that wasn't what he needed to think about now. Tatsuya stopped in front of the entrance to this exotic one-story wooden house, and opened the door.

Tatsuya's expectation that this house would be completely abandoned turned out to be wrong.

Immediately after opening the door, his perception caught subtle signs of a presence. These signs of a presence were very similar to human ones, but the life energy in them wasn't felt. Tatsuya didn't have the so-called “ability to sense otherworldly

phenomena," but it seemed to him that if you encounter a ghost, you will experience exactly the same impression as now.

It was impossible to ignore this creature. Tatsuya simply had no other choice.

The ghost-like thing turned its attention to Tatsuya. Tatsuya realized that it was waiting for him.

He couldn't afford the unnecessary battles, right now.

And at the same time, he shouldn't lose sight of the slightest clue.

In addition, if the owner of this presence is an enemy, then it will be faster not to wait for him to prepare a trap, but immediately rushed over to him.

Tatsuya went deep into the mansion, in the direction from which the signs of presence were felt.

◇ ◇ ◇

Honoka returned home around the same time that Tatsuya entered the hideout that Minoru used.

She lived alone. Her parents were alive and well, but ever since Honoka went to elementary school, they were often away from home, almost living at work.

Honoka's and Shizuku's mothers were close friends from a young age, and Honoka's mother often left her off at Shizuku's home. And during her high school years, she almost lived at Shizuku's house when her parents were away for work for long periods of time.

The Kitayama couple treated Honoka like Shizuku's sister. In particular, the care of Shizuku's father, Kitayama Ushio, manifested itself in such a way that Honoka began to feel shy about this when she grew up. Honoka began to live alone when she entered First High School, no doubt, mostly due to the fact that she decided that she couldn't use the good nature of Shizuku's parents forever.

When Honoka finally decided to live in a separate apartment, this caused a slight disagreement.

The first thing Kitayama Ushio said was, “I’ll buy you an apartment.”

When she refused, he offered to arrange for her a luxurious apartment, which he described as follows: “it has a reliable security system, and the management company is apart of my group of companies.” That is, he tried to “buy” Honoka an apartment not an apartment room, but a whole apartment complex.

She refused this too. “Then at least live in a securely guarded apartment,” said Ushio, and ordered his subordinates to find suitable apartments. They found more than a dozen options.

After discussion with her parents, Honoka chose one of these options, and now she lived in this apartment. This apartment had a huge rent and was too spacious for one person to live in. The security system in it, although it wasn’t the latest in technology, but it was enough to protect the girl living alone. This apartment was also conveniently located for visiting the school.

Therefore, she had no fear of anyone getting in, while she wasn’t at home.

Besides, even though she was a sorceress, in terms of perception and way of thinking, she was closer to an ordinary girl. When she came home, she didn’t even think about being wary of suspicious people.

A shadow crept up to Honoka from her blind spot, silently and unnoticed, and grabbed her from behind

“Kya (mm-m-m)...”

Her mouth was covered with a rag, and she didn't have time to scream clearly.

She didn’t even have time to think about holding her breath, and she inhaled the substance applied to the rag, which deprived her of her freedom of thought.

◇ ◇ ◇

Miyuki, who left school a little earlier than her friends, was already at home and had changed into her home clothes.

She had learned about Tatsuya's absence at home even earlier from the message he left her. There was a longing in her heart to hear his voice, at least through audio communications, but the strong feeling “I shouldn’t bother Onii-sama” somehow held her back.

At that moment, Miyuki heard the sound of an incoming call.

Miyuki rushed to the desktop terminal with hope.

However, the monitor on the small terminal installed on the desk in her room didn’t display Tatsuya's name.

“Pixie, what's wrong?”

The caller was Pixie, who currently “lived” in the Student Council room at First High School.

“Miyuki-sama.”

Tatsuya ordered Pixie in his absence to obey Miyuki's orders. At the moment, Miyuki was considered a temporary mistress for Pixie, but Pixie didn’t call Miyuki “mistress.” Pixie... more precisely, the Parasite inside Pixie considered only Tatsuya to be her exclusive master.

She simply followed the orders of Tatsuya, and when the need arose, it was Miyuki who she reported to.

“Mitsui-sama was • kidnapped.”

The same was true for this emergency alert.

“What!?”

Miyuki involuntarily switched to a high tone of voice.

Miyuki didn't lack any experience with getting into various unusual situations, but the abduction of her classmate was completely unexpected for her.

In itself, kidnapping isn't really a rare crime. Their number has significantly decreased after the installation of outdoor cameras, but so far there are about 60-80 cases per year. And last year, for example, there was a major human trafficking incident by a major gang, and the total number of victims exceeded 200 people.

But Miyuki couldn't even think that her friend would be the victim of criminals. They lived in a world in which life was far from calm, but at least in their country public safety was not at a level where living in fear of criminals for people is everyday.

“Pixie, do you know what the situation is now?”

However, Miyuki quickly regained her composure. Miyuki was born only 17 years and 4 months ago, but her life, to put it mildly, was already filled with all sorts of events. And such a “career” wasn't an empty boast.

“Mitsui-sama • deprived of • freedom • of will • with the help of • narcotic • substance. Two • abductors • removed • her • from the building. At the moment, • they • are moving • on foot.”

The parasite living inside pixie has awakened and got its “personality” based on the “thoughts” of Honoka. Therefore, Pixie and Honoka were spiritually connected. For her part, Honoka couldn't watch Pixie due to a lack of computational abilities, but Pixie was able to track the experiences that Honoka was experiencing in real time.

Tatsuya ordered Pixie not to spy indiscriminately on Honoka's personal life. Through the “path” connecting Pixie and Honoka, Pixie saw the state of Honoka, even without having the intention to do so. Therefore, Tatsuya placed a restriction on it.

But now Honoka was in danger, it was an emergency.

Pixie's body was a machine that couldn't produce psions. The Parasite living inside Pixie couldn't sustain its activities without the supply of psions from the outside. And the largest source of psions for Pixie was Honoka.

If the activity of the Parasite stops, then it will "reset" the personality. For a living being, such a suspension of activity is tantamount to death.

In other words, Honoka's security was a vital issue for Pixie. In order to ensure the safety of Honoka, Tatsuya allowed Pixie to monitor Honoka's activities to a minimum extent.

"Amendment. They • just • got in • the car. • With the addition of • the driver, • the number of • abductors • increases • to three."

"Okay. If they try to do any harm to Honoka, stop them with telekinesis."

"Yes, I will obey. The terms of • lifting the ban on use are • accepted."

"Check the map to track the exact location of Honoka. If you think that the kidnappers have arrived at their hideout, then let me know about this place."

"Yes, I will obey."

Miyuki ended the conversation with Pixie and phoned Hanabishi Hyougo, Tatsuya's personal butler.

◇ ◇ ◇

Minoru's hideout was a one-story house, but this house was quite extensive and had many rooms.

Tatsuya temporarily left the house, walked around, made sure that he didn't have a back entrance, and re-entered the front entrance.

He didn't take off his shoes. The floor was clean, but Tatsuya didn't care that he could have trampled on dirt. For him, this house was a "target for search" and not a "place of residence."

Tatsuya spent about five minutes inspecting the outside of the mansion, but that didn't bother him either. Not because he followed the proverb "slow down - you will continue," but because this detour was useful in the form of knowledge that no one will run away through some secret exit while he is inspecting the house from the inside.

The owner of the previously detected signs of presence was found relatively quickly.

"Fujibayashi-dono?"

In the back of the house, in a windowless room that looked like a storeroom, Tatsuya was waiting for Fujibayashi Nagamasa, head of the famous Fujibayashi family, magicians of ancient magic and "ninjutsu users," father of Senior Lieutenant Fujibayashi Kyouko from the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion. Tatsuya took off his helmet, which he was still wearing, put it under his arm, and spoke to the creature that looked like Nagamasa.

"Shiba-dono. You came too?"

There wasn't an accusatory tone in Nagamasa's voice.

"I detected an anomaly in the barrier."

But even if Tatsuya was accused, he wouldn't have experienced any feelings of guilt.

"Fujibayashi-dono, are you here for the same reason?"

Tatsuya asked in a friendly tone, but his eyes burned with a bright fire.

"No. I'm here according to plan."

The fire in Tatsuya's eyes flared up even brighter, while his eyes narrowed to a stern, sharp look.

“Does this mean that from the very beginning you planned to deal with this without me?”

Tatsuya's manner of speech had lost respect for his elder. However, Nagamasa showed no concern over this.

“Sort out...? Hmm, in a way, this is the correct expression. I came here to deal with the situation that led to this mess.”

“Your goal isn't to capture Minoru, but to let him escape?”

Tatsuya asked a question that wasn't directly related to Nagamasa's words.

“It was our Fujibayashi family who gave the former Ninth Laboratory the spell, which later became the basis of Parade.”

Nagamasa also spoke on a topic unrelated to Tatsuya's question.

“The indisputable fact is that it is based on the “Matoi” spell, created by Kokonoe Yakumo's predecessor, however it is “Shadow Twins” of the Fujibayashi family that connects it with modern magic. We also transferred many other techniques to the former Ninth Laboratory.”

“So what? I have no desire to listen to these complaints.”

Tatsuya listened to everything his opponent said.

“This is in no way a complaint. We don't cling to gross profits, like the traditionalists.”

“You want to say that you have such a lofty goal as the search for truth?”

There were faint signs of ridicule in Tatsuya's voice.

“The search for truth. Exactly.”

But Nagamasa agreed, becoming absolutely serious.

“Shiba-dono. Do you know what the art of shinobi is for?”

“I don’t know.”

Tatsuya answered dryly and briefly. The thought read in his voice: “I didn’t come here to answer questions.”

“In an era when electronic equipment wasn’t yet invented, the art of shinobi represented a technology for intelligence and assassination. Spies and killers were both shinobi using “ninjutsu” and not using it. And they did nothing else.”

“Even if they were unhappy about it?”

“The shinobi who lived at that time may have been pleased with such a life. Despite the attitude towards them, their skills were considered important and necessary.”

“The art of “ninjutsu” is of great importance in our time.”

“Do you really think so? With the spread of electronic equipment, the number of places where shinobi can actively operate has significantly decreased. And with the development of modern magic, capable of activating quickly and reliably, “ninjutsu” was forced out, even from the sphere of intelligence.”

“Ancient magic is excellent for surprise attacks, so it still plays an active role in assassinations.”

“We wouldn’t be able to live a normal life if we were only killers.”

“If you aren’t here to buy more time, then tell me what you're getting at.”

In response to Tatsuya's demand, voiced with undisguised annoyance, Nagamasa didn't make a displeased face, but merely nodded, saying "good."

“According to its usefulness, “ninjutsu” can’t defeat modern magic. Useless techniques are considered obsolete, and their fate is to disappear without a trace.

Before that happens, we will incorporate “ninjutsu” into modern magic, developing it into a technology that meets modern needs. Our predecessor believed that it was the duty of our family, the Fujibayashi, as followers of the supreme shinobi of the Iga clan. The development of “ninjutsu.” That is our goal.”

“What does all of this have to do with Minoru?”

“Kudou Minoru is the completed form of the magicians from “nine,” whose goal was to create new techniques by introducing ancient magic into modern magic. At the same time, he's a member of the Fujibayashi family, possessing secret knowledge in modern magic. We can't allow him to fall into the hands of the Ten Master Clans or the Self-Defense Forces.”

“But Minoru shouldn't have a direct relationship with the Fujibayashi family.”

“For a shinobi, blood connection isn't important.”

In his own words, Tatsuya didn't try to convince Nagamasa. He was just trying to extract useful information from him. Hearing his answer, Tatsuya decided that further attempts would be hopeless, after which he turned his back on Nagamasa and walked away.

He wasn't wary of an attack from behind. From the very beginning, Tatsuya saw that Nagamasa didn't have a physical body, and therefore couldn't attack him.

The image of Nagamasa, which was left behind by Tatsuya, vanished into thin air.

As Tatsuya expected, there was no attack from behind.

Tatsuya rounded his eyes in surprise, quickly put on his helmet and rushed towards the entrance of the house.

That's when he had heard the sound of an explosion and an intense fire blocked his way.

◇ ◇ ◇

6 o'clock in the evening is the time when dusk will soon come. Although the summer solstice was quite recent, and the days were still long, but now the lighting was bad due to the fact that the sky was covered with clouds.

“Perhaps it will rain heavily.”

“If you want, take an umbrella from my house.”

Mizuki and Mikihiko talked as they walked side by side along the road leading to Mizuki's house and ran along the riverbank.



“Or you can wait at my house. Father isn’t supposed to be home yet.”

Mizuki said, and giggled involuntarily. This isn't the first time Mikihiko has accompanied Mizuki home, and has already managed to "get acquainted" with her parents.

The attitude of Mizuki's father towards Mikihiko at that time was rather severe. Mizuki's mother had even reproached him for his “childishness” later. Mikihiko reacted to this with understanding. “Shibata-san is a girl, so this is a father's natural behavior,” he thought with a wry smile. However, he couldn’t deny that this incident left him with the realization that it would be difficult for him to cope with this again.

“N-no, it's too late. I'll just escort you to the entrance of your home.”

“Okay.”

Mizuki's face appeared to be regretful, but she immediately smiled again.

Mikihiko froze for a moment at Mizuki's smile. However, he quickly came to his senses and smiled back shyly in response.

Creating a delicate atmosphere around themselves, causing embarrassment to passersby, Mizuki and Mikihiko walked along the waterfront.

And this “good mood” was spoiled not by Mizuki's mother or her father, who returned home earlier than he should have, but by three men, radiating an ominous aura.

The people around them just idly strolled and chatted with each other, and these three purposefully approached them. Simultaneously Mizuki's and Mikihiko's faces changed while they stopped.

Despite their ominous feeling, these men looked quite ordinary. Their age was from 30 to 45 years, in appearance. They didn’t emanate a sense of rudeness. On the contrary. It was the feeling of some subtle, refined deception.

Mikihiko noticed the abnormality of these people by the disguise they were wearing,

and Mizuki, without even taking off her glasses, saw an aura of the color that usually means trouble. All three men's faces showed admiration for the reaction of Mikihiko, who immediately went into a fighting stance, and Mizuki, who hid behind him.

One of the men suddenly flew forward. Not “jumped,” but “flew.”

To avoid this, Mikihiko hastily jumped to the edge of the road, lightly hitting Mizuki with his back. Mizuki staggered, and Mikihiko held her with one hand. When he raised his head, he saw that the man had blocked the road to the station.

It was such a quick action that he didn't even notice how the activation sequence was deployed. From this, Mikihiko already realized that these three were strong and dangerous magicians. Mizuki also intuitively sensed their danger.

Two in front, one in back. Squeezed in pincers, Mikihiko turned to them sideways, his back to the river. He covered Mizuki with his back.

“What do you want?”

Two on the right, one on the left. Behind the river, in front of the wasteland. Mikihiko turned to the two men on the right, who blocked the path to the side of Mizuki's house. He didn't expect to get an answer or start a conversation. They weren't somewhere in the mountains, distant from civilization, but right inside a residential area, albeit at the very edge of it. He spoke in order to buy time, in the hope that passersby would call the police.

However, the men didn't answer.

Mikihiko swung his left hand down sharply.

With that same hand he caught the metal fan that had flown out of his sleeve.

Slightly opening this unique CAD with one hand, Mikihiko pressed the index finger of his right hand on one of the metal strips that made up the fan.

The wind began to swirl around Mikihiko and Mizuki. This vortex of wind isolated them from the wind that was blowing on the left side of Mikihiko, which had some

kind of aerosol impurity.

In fact, this aerosol impurity was a drug that paralyzes the victim's free will.

The magic that had isolated them from the attack of the suspicious men, Mikihiko released instinctively.

The men's faces changed. The carefree faces expressing the thought that “they aren’t rivals to us” quickly changed into the facial expressions of people ready for battle.

“Who are you!?”

Mikihiko didn’t know everything about this attack, down to the ingredients of the narcotic substance. But the fact remained that they had been attacked. It was obvious malice, so Mikihiko called out to the opponents in a stern voice.

His shout was made reflexively. He didn’t expect to get an answer.

But contrary to expectations...

“Horsehead.”

The question of Mikihiko was answered by the man on the left, who had previously released the magic that created the poisoned wind.

“Horsehead?”

Mikihiko had no idea what that name meant. This question seized hold of his mind, and his concentration on the enemies weakened.

In other words, it created a gap in his defenses.

The enemy on the right threw a thick needle. More precisely, it was a thin sharpened wooden stake.

Mikihiko knocked down the stake, which was given speed and penetrating power by movement magic, with his right hand.

He wasn't injured. Through a gap in the torn fabric of his school uniform sleeve, one could notice that his right hand was shimmering with a dull glossy sheen.

Protective magic covering his skin with the "Element of Metal" from the system of the Five Elements. If you look only at the effect, then this form of ancient magic was similar to the strengthening magic in which Leo was good at using, however, they differed in the principle of action.

"Good thing I learned this...!"

Mikihiko learned this "gold armor technique" from his father last month. At the end of May, when Mikihiko went into battle with a detachment of the Self-Defense Forces, which was led by Toyama (Tooyama) Tsukasa, he felt the need for more close combat techniques. He turned to his father for advice and as a result received this magic. You could tell that his sense of danger worked here, despite the fact that this situation was different from the intended one.

The enemy attacks didn't end there. On the contrary, the thrown stake seemed to be only a distraction.

The man, who was standing next to the one who threw the stake, rushed forward, approaching 10 meters in 2 steps, and swung his right hand diagonally from the bottom left to top right.

It looked as if in his right hand, there was only the hilt of a dagger.

But Mikihiko wasn't fooled by this.

He staggered back, holding his right hand out in front of him. A thin, barely noticeable cut appeared on his sleeve.

"Glass Dagger!?"

The hand that was peeking through the slits in the sleeve stopped glistening and returned to its original skin color.

The golden armor technique could cover only one part of the body at a time. Another disadvantage was the short duration it could be used. And for repeated application, a certain amount of time was required.

Of course, Mikihiko hadn't forgotten. The next magic, prepared in advance in anticipation of the completion of the armor technique, he activated immediately after receiving a blow with the glass blade.

“Sorry!”

That's all he could say now. Without waiting for Mizuki's answer, he suddenly pulled her close to him, clasping her waist.

Mizuki froze. She didn't say anything. No, she didn't have time to scream.

Mikihiko's magic activated.

The air mass, located between Mikihiko and the man brandishing the glass blade - a member of the Horsehead squad named Henry Fu - suddenly exploded.

A gust of wind struck not only Henry, but also Mikihiko.

As if riding this wind, Mikihiko jumped while still holding Mizuki.

He leaped over the restrictive fence, and jumped from the embankment into the river.

Although it was called a river, in reality it was more of an “artificial channel.” It was narrow and not deep, and its course was weak.

With the help of magic activated while jumping, he briefly managed to stand on the surface of the water, but the next moment he plunged knee-deep into the water.

“Shibata-san, I'm sorry. Be patient a little longer.”

Again apologized Mikihiko. As he spoke, his fingers moved, preparing a new magic.

“Don't worry about it.... Yoshida-kun!”

Mizuki uttered a warning in the form of a shout.

But even without it, Mikihiko had already noticed that the Horsehead was chasing them.

The grass on the bank swallowed up the lightning that had attacked them.

Lightning was created by the magic of the release system released by Iggy Ho - a member of the Horsehead squad. And Mikihiko defended himself against it with help from the modern magic, "Lightning Rod." Mikihiko's CAD outwardly looks like it's intended for ancient magic, but it also contains activation sequences of modern magic.

Leaving Iggy on the bank, the other two jumped into the river. Upstream was Gabe Shu, who had previously released a cloud with a narcotic substance. Down by the river stood Henry Fu, the one brandishing the glass-bladed dagger.

Such a change in the situation wasn't much of an improvement.

◇ ◇ ◇

The raging flames attacked Tatsuya, penetrating deep into the mansion, which Minoru used as a hideout. The fire spell was activated outside the mansion by Fujibayashi Nagamasa.

Tatsuya initially could only use the magic of "Decomposition" and "Restoration." The magic activated by the artificial magic calculation area had a very low power of interference with the phenomenon, so it couldn't cover the entire house to put out the fire. By using "Mist Dispersion," which decomposes substances to the level of chemical elements, he couldn't eliminate "combustible substances," because they will be decomposed into "combustible elements," which in turn can be more combustible, even to the point of explosive combustion.

Relying on the heat resistance function of the "Freed Suit," Tatsuya ran straight through the fire.

When Tatsuya ran out of the mansion engulfed in fire, a hail of shuriken came flying at him. There were twenty of them.

Shurikens flew from four different directions, and with different time intervals. Tatsuya dodged them, flying into the air.

Hovering in the air, he found the silhouettes of the enemy.

In all four directions there were opponents with the appearance of Fujibayashi Nagamasa.

Tatsuya furrowed his brow.

But besides this, there were no further delays on his part.

Tatsuya's magic pierced four human silhouettes.

And it wasn't "Decomposition."

A "armor-piercing psionic projectile." Non-systemic magic, firing a compressed psionic mass. This magic, developed under the leadership of Yakumo, existed both in the form (variety) of the projectile's flight in normal space (physical dimension) and in the form of its movement along the information dimension. Now Tatsuya was using a variation with flight in normal space.

The distance between them was about 20 meters. In less than half a second, four psion bullets penetrated four human silhouettes.

Four of the Nagamasa's simultaneously disappeared.

"All four of them were illusions... Is this "Twins"?"

Tatsuya muttered to himself as he dodged the hail of stones that came flying at him from behind.

Tatsuya noticed Nagamasa's use of "Twins" while talking to him in the mansion. So

he wasn't surprised.

“Although it looks similar to Parade, but it's something completely different...”

Such a bitter thought crossed Tatsuya's mind as he descended to the ground.

Nagamasa's “Twins” (or as he called it himself - “Shadow Twins”) was different from both Minoru's and Lina's spells. Perhaps it doesn't have enough power to fool “Elemental Sight.”

However, this magic made it possible to simultaneously create several doubles capable of functioning as batteries for invoking magic. But the most problematic part was that the connection with the real body was cut off.

“This isn't a transformed object. Maybe... are these “Shikigami” from spirit magic?”

He didn't know how it worked, but he assumed that an image was being created from the independent information body of the “shadow,” and the operator was controlling the magic from afar, hiding behind the projections.

“If you apply reverse tracking to the information close to the exit point of the magic sequence, then you can find out the location of the real body, but...”

“... It won't be that easy,” thought Tatsuya, destroying the next double that appeared behind him.

To test this, he directed his “sight” at the source, which had fired stones with the help of speed magic. But there was no one there. When you “chase” the information, if it just moved, then the real body can be tracked. But in this case, it seems that the information continuity was cut off using some kind of invisibility technique. Tatsuya remembered that Yakumo demonstrated a similar technique.

It won't be possible to track the target through the information dimension, if you don't catch the necessary information directly during the activation of magic. Also, Nagamasa only used magic at the same time as the shuriken or stones were fired, disabling his remote control of the magic immediately after they were fired.

Consequently, this battle turned into a guessing game of when and where the next magic will be launched. And Tatsuya at the moment had the role of currently lagging behind.

While he spends time and effort here, Minoru continues to escape.

Tatsuya was forced to fight not only with Nagamasa, but also with haste in his thoughts.

◇ ◇ ◇

Stakes and lightning bolts flew from the bank. From above the wind blew with drops of narcotic substance. While a blade was coming from behind.

Mikihiko repelled the attacks of all three members of the Horsehead squad, by controlling the water from the river.

The stakes were simply fought off with water balls.

Against lightning, he created a veil of thick fog.

Against the narcotic wind, he defended himself by using a wall of “reverse waterfall” - when water rushes from the bottom upwards.

Against the enemy attacking with a glass dagger, he defended himself with a water whip, divided into 8 parts.

However, to repel long-range attacks and to prevent the enemy from reaching close-combat range, Mikihiko spent all his strength, so he wasn't able to counterattack.

Behind him, Mizuki could hardly restrain the trembling. Although it was now the middle of summer, it was already evening, and the river, although shallow, had a current. If you stand knee-deep in water for a long time, you can freeze. Mikihiko understood this, so his impatience increased too much.

“... No, that won't do. Stop being nervous, Mikihiko. Impatience is absolutely forbidden.”

But it's better to risk everything to escape, isn't it? Fighting off the temptation to do so, Mikihiko mentally scolded himself.

At this point, Mizuki received no damage, except for a slight loss of temperature from the river water. Although this was precisely because of Mikihiko's protection. He himself was well aware of this.

... ..If he hurried now, all his efforts would be in vain

Mikihiko turned to himself.

...It's not just a coincidence that we were attacked here.

...This is the way Shibata-san goes to school.

...Their target isn't me, but Shibata-san.

With such thoughts, despite his nervous exhaustion, he could continue the battle by completely going on the defensive.

Mikihiko's patience was rewarded with the arrival of reinforcements.

From the bank of the river there was a loud noise from an impact. The sound was like a thin metal stick striking strong wood.

“Ah! You, the Chiba swordswoman! Why are you here!?”

Immediately afterwards, Iggy Ho's confused cry was heard.

“You want me to answer that?”

The voice that responded belonged, of course, to Erika.

“Mikihiko! Mizuki! Are you okay!?”

Then they were hailed by another voice, coming from the direction of the station, a

little behind Erika.

“Leo!?”

Even before Mikihiko had time to reply, a large human figure jumped from the embankment.

Leo landed in the river with a large splash.

“I take care of that!”

He pointed to the assassin from the Horsehead squad named Henry Fu, who was stunned by this spectacular appearance of reinforcements.

“Watch out! He has a dagger made of glass!”

“Aha!”

Leo bellowed enthusiastically, and lashed out at Henry, who had already recovered from his shock and was standing up.

He didn’t scream “Panzer!” like usual. Because right now Leo was using the CAD with mental control, that he received from Ernst Rosen last summer. Intense psionic light enveloped Leo without the usual cry, and he attacked the dagger.

Now, with the exception of Mizuki, the battle turned into a three against three format.

Mikihiko turned to the remaining enemy, Gabe Shu.

◇ ◇ ◇

During the course of the battle with the Nagamasa doubles, Tatsuya was lured from the courtyard of the hideout into the Sea of Trees.

Despite the name “Sea of Trees,” this forest wasn’t so dense that it was impossible to move between the trees. Even an ordinary person (non-magician) didn’t have to

worry that he would get stuck here if he turned off the road.

But it was an indisputable fact that the trees made movement difficult. People who aren't accustomed to acting in the forest won't be able to fight here at a decent level. And three-dimensional spatial maneuvering with the help of a flying suit was generally excluded.

Perhaps this might have been unexpected for Fujibayashi Nagamasa, but Tatsuya didn't have any difficulty moving among these obstacles. He's accustomed to acting on the basis of information received from "Elemental Sight," replacing the visual information received from ordinary eyes. He had also reached a level where he didn't experience inconvenience even when working with non-visual information received from electronic devices, instead of information received from magic.

In addition, the possible firing angles were limited to trees, so the location of Nagamasa's magic batteries were easy to read.

Visible light, infrared rays, and radio waves are blocked by trees, so searching with the naked eye or detecting with the suit's sensors was even more difficult than under normal conditions.

Using "Elemental Sight" to determine the coordinates is much easier. At the time of magic activation, the magician and the source of activation are connected informationally. If it is the same as before – firing off shurikens or stones, and if we can accurately predict the moment of its appearance, then we can say in advance that the reverse tracking will be successful.

The Double appeared in the shade of the tree.

But Tatsuya turned his "sight" backward, behind him.

There was no attack from the front.

Shuriken flew back to the right.

Before he could even take a step to evade, the connection with the spellcaster had already been interrupted. Signs of magic activation began to emanate from the double

in front.

“No, this doesn't fit.”

Firing a psion bullet, he destroyed the double.

The fact is that the double, who stood in front, tried to activate camouflage magic with a delayed activation.

Signs of magic activation appeared from behind.

“Attack by non-lethal sound waves.”

Looking back, he counterattacked with an Armor-Piercing Psion Bullet.

“Sustained?”

The double didn't disappear.

Sound waves with a frequency close to the upper limit of a person's hearing hit Tatsuya.

However, Tatsuya's helmet automatically blocked sound waves that cause discomfort and interfere with mental concentration.

If you look only at the direct impact, it was a meaningless attack.

Tatsuya squeezed psions 3 times stronger than during the last attack.

Counter-Magic Spell / Gram Demolition.

A powerful stream of psions blew the double away.

Immediately after, a chain wrapped around Tatsuya's legs.

That senseless attack turned out to be a distraction.

Sparks and lightning emanated from the chain.

However, the next moment the chain disappeared.

The damage to the suit and the wounds under the suit also disappeared.

Something shook in the shadows of the trees.

Tatsuya turned his hidden beneath his helmet toward this shaking.

To the left of Tatsuya a new double appeared.

This double tried to shoot stones shrouded in fire.

Tatsuya's "sight" grabbed onto this "image."

Tatsuya read the double's information while he was connected to the real body.

From information about the current moment to information about what was a moment ago.

And even further. Only a moment in the past.

Rewind.

Rewind.

Revealing the "past", hidden behind the "present" in the history of information change, Tatsuya unleashed his power.

Local "Decomposition." Magic, piercing thin holes in the human body.

Tatsuya heard the sound of a man falling, both knees broken. This sound came from the shadows of the trees about 10 meters away.

◇ ◇ ◇

On the embankment leading to Mizuki's home, Erika entered into close combat with Iggy Ho, a member of the Illegal MAP Horsehead unit.

Erika's weapon was a telescopic baton with a built-in CAD.

Iggy Ho's weapon was some kind of wire.

“You're pretty good with that homemade thing. You must be a pretty good craftsman.”

Erika spoke with a mocking tone during their exchange of blows.

Iggy only continued to look for Erika's weak points with his stern gaze.

The weapon he used was a twisted, thick wire, the tip of which was sharpened with a file. A wooden stick was attached to it, which acted as the handle. This weapon was used almost like a rapier.

The Horsehead squad entered the country by plane under the guise of ordinary passengers, so they couldn't bring any weapons with them. And it's not just about the current moment. For them, making weapons on site from readily available materials was commonplace. The wooden stakes he threw at Mikihiko were also made from sawed logs. The glass blade, for example, was cut from ordinary window glass. To do this, they even mastered a special magic that helps with the processing of materials.

Also, in order to compensate for the lack of strength of materials, magic was used not only during processing, but also when using the weapons. They make weapons from any available materials. Use as a weapon everything that comes to hand. Perform the assigned task of killing or sabotage, without receiving support from their country. That was the style of the Illegal MAP.

Thanks to Iggy Ho's magic, the wire thin sword he used looked even more durable and flexible than a real rapier (at least outwardly). But it was only the effectiveness of the weapon itself. After all, combat skills is another conversation.

Iggy was far from weak in the use of rapier-like weapons. His practical techniques of fencing were at a high level.

However, if we talk about the techniques of the sword, then Erika was a step, or even 2-3 steps higher. The only reason the fight wasn't over was because Erica was wary of the possibility that Iggy might have something "up his sleeve."

But in reality, in order for the wire sword to withstand the attacks of Erika, Iggy Ho was forced to maintain his strength and flexibility with magic, so he had no time for other magic.

Erika intuitively guessed this, and went at Iggy with a continuous attack with an emphasis on speed. Her fighting style wasn't in the tactic of "hit-and-run" using self-acceleration magic, but in not giving the enemy any extra time to rest by moving around in an arc, keeping her distance.

And now Erika is finally convinced that the enemy has no magic attacks.

Iggy Ho swung horizontally with his wire sword. This sword had only a pointed tip, so it wasn't a cutting attack, but an attack with a strong and flexible wire like a whip.

Erika dodged this attack, bouncing back. For the first time in this fight, she stepped back from her template, and increased the distance.

Without a second's hesitation, Iggy Ho reached for his belt with his left hand. These three members of the Horsehead squad had CAD's not on their wrists, but on their belts.

Erika didn't know that her opponent was trying to control a CAD.

She was just looking for an opportunity to attack.

So, with the enemy's action, she saw a chance. She was ready to use it.

Self-acceleration magic activated.

Erica moved closer to Iggy at a speed that the human eye couldn't follow.

Iggy Ho hastily stopped manipulating his CAD and held the wire sword out in front

of himself, supporting it with his left hand.

Erika's baton lightly struck the wire sword.

This unexpectedly too weak of a recoil slightly puzzled Iggy Ho.

The assassin from the Horsehead squad fell into a stupor for about half a second.

While Iggy's consciousness was turned off, Erika managed to get behind him.

He didn't have time to turn around.

Relying on his intuition, he tilted his head as far as he could.

Erika's baton, aiming at his head, hit Iggy Ho in the left shoulder.
In a place close to the base of the neck.

Common sense would say that the battle was over. However, Erika, without losing her alertness, immediately swung again.

But then a surprise awaited her.

The enemy with his neck bent, turned back to her, and committed a self-explosion.

From Iggy Ho's back, a powerful stream of smoke began to spread in all directions.

Even though it was self-inflicted, it wasn't suicide.

“Smoke screen!?”

As Erika said, Iggy Ho set off a smoke screen using special explosives strapped to the inside of his jacket.

But despite the reduced power and temperature, explosives remain explosives. When an explosion occurs under clothing, you don't end up without any injuries. However, Iggy Ho moved on to his next action with such a speed as if he didn't feel any pain at all.

“Ah! Hey wait!”

Erika's voice rang out, surrounded by a smoke screen. Even through the smoke, she was able to detect that the enemy began to quickly move away.

Illegal MAP is an illegal sabotage squad. Members of this detachment must have a high level of combat abilities. But it was much more important not to fall into the hands of the enemy.

With modern technology, it is possible to extract information from the brain of the dead. Simple suicide wouldn't be enough to maintain secrecy. Therefore, the ability to escape at any cost is especially desirable for illegal agents.

Erika didn't pursue Iggy. She immediately closed her eyes so as not to damage them. It wasn't known what substance could be mixed into the smoke to cause any effects other than blocking the view. There was also the possibility that she had already been subjected to some subtle paralytic effect.

A reckless pursuit could lead to a counterattack. Besides, the purpose of Erika and Leo rushing here was to help Mizuki and Mikihiro. Fighting the remaining enemies was a priority over the pursuit of fleeing enemies.

Erika leaned over the fence. There, in the river, Leo and Mikihiro still had to fight. Erika wanted to intervene in their battles, but when she looked down, she was disappointed.

The battle between Leo and Henry Fu was more of a fistfight than hand-to-hand combat.

Henry's dagger, though it was made from ordinary glass, was strengthened by magic. However, after the first collision with Leo's fist, reinforced with the magic of the same type, it shattered into pieces.

Moving from a voice recognition system to a thought management system, Leo stopped wearing a protective glove with an integrated CAD. Instead, he started wearing open-fingered gloves reinforced at the knuckles on both hands. He didn't

wear these gloves all the time, but he kept them with him just in case.

It was the magic-fortified fist part of his glove that shattered the glass blade.

The glass blade, fortified by Henry Fu's magic, was broken by Leo's fist which was reinforced by magic. This meant only one thing: Leo's magic surpassed Henry's magic. Moreover, Henry Fu's face froze when he saw the insane strength of Leo, who didn't grab the blade from both sides, but simply struck it with a direct blow.

However, if he had continued to stand there in a daze, he wouldn't have been fit to serve even as a common soldier, let alone as an illegal agent. Henry threw the remaining hilt of his dagger at Leo to gain time, jumped back despite the poor foothold in the knee-deep river, and tore off the left sleeve of his jacket with his right hand.

On his left wrist, under a long-sleeved jacket, worn despite the weather being in the middle of summer, wasn't a CAD, but two thin weighted bracelets, the weight for which was made from iron sand.

Henry took off his weighted bracelets with his right hand.

“Hah! So you wanted to give me a head start?”

While ignoring Leo's mocking comment, Henry wrapped bracelets around his fists, partially with the weight out.

In fact, Leo didn't believe that his opponent was giving in to him. He quickly understood why Henry had transferred the weight of the bracelets from his left wrist to both of his fists.

It was kind of like a replacement for gloves, which not only protected the fists, but also added power to the punches.

Leo rushed towards Henry at the same time, as he understood it.

When Leo managed to take only one step, Henry rushed forward to meet him.

In battle, Leo and Henry fought using their fist fighting skills.

Leo with his fists that are hard as steel.

Henry with his fists covered with a cushion of iron sand.

From a direct strike with Leo's right hand, Henry dodged, ducking his head.

Henry's right hook, aimed at the body, was blocked with Leo's left hand.

This marked the beginning of the exchange of blows.

Henry Fu only evaded Leo's direct punches, skipping the sliding ones.

Leo defended himself only against Henry's dangerous punches, skipping the minor ones.

Both soon lost the ability to use magic.

Leo's reinforcement magic stopped.

It seems that after interrupting the reinforcement magic on the dagger, Henry Fu also used a little magic to support his close combat, but it also stopped.

Being magicians, these two were forced to continue to fight like ordinary fighters, using only their physical abilities.

Leo broke into a smile.

Henry's face was distorted, as if in torment.

For Henry Fu, a member of the Horsehead unit of the Illegal MAP (and for any assassin or saboteur), such a direct clash was highly undesirable. Even in situations where it is impossible to avoid one-on-one close combat, a direct clash usually doesn't occur.

If they were on a good road surface now, it would have been possible to gain distance

by maneuvering with their feet, pretending to run away, and then counterattack the pursuing enemy. In this case, it would be possible to use techniques to avoid a direct collision.

But here in the river they were standing in water that was as deep as the middle of the calf. The state of the river bottom also didn't contribute to rapid movement. If you use the technique of leg movement in such a place as in boxing, you can easily stumble and open up for the enemy a gap in your defense.

Continuing the fist fight with Leo, Henry Fu decided that this mission was a failure. Before the situation could get any worse, it was necessary to take a position suitable for evacuation.

However, he couldn't single-handedly make the decision to retreat. Henry thought about it as he continued to shower Leo with short, weak blows. In the Horsehead detachment, he tried more than others to adhere to military discipline.

They were separated. If all three could evacuate at the same time, then there wouldn't be any problems. But if at least one of them escapes with the connection cut off, the remaining two will be at a disadvantage, being in the minority.

The contempt that the opponents were only schoolchildren had disappeared from Henry. They were opponents who could not be defeated in the format of three against four (more precisely, three against three). If they were even more outnumbered, they might not even be able to escape.

We must somehow convey to the rest the signal for evacuation...

It happened at the same time that Henry Fu thought about it.

The faint sound of an explosion came from the embankment.

Henry grabbed a hold of Leo's fist after his lunge, and took the time to look up.

"This is a smoke screen! Iggy lost and ran away!?"

When Henry Fu saw the black smoke trickling down the side of the road, he immediately realized what had happened.

At the same time a strong sense of danger overtook him.

The high school student in front of him not only mastered magic techniques, but also possessed physical strength and endurance at the level of Navy Seals or Green Berets.... That's what Henry thought of Leo. He caused a lot of trouble, and it was impossible to deal with him without magic.

And if the “Chiba swordswoman,” who was given special attention during the preliminary investigation, joins him here, then the simple “impossible to deal with” will no longer be an excuse. The idea of the worst-case scenario flashed through Henry Fu's head. The “worst” outcome for members of the Illegal MAP wasn’t death. But, falling into the hands of the enemy, with further disclosure of their origin and details of their mission.

Leo pushed Henry away from him.

Henry recoiled and staggered back along the river bed about two or three paces.

Leo followed Henry, who caused a strong splash on the surface of the water.

“Gabe! Retreat!”

With his eyes fixed on Leo advancing in front, Henry Fu shouted loudly to his comrade who was upstream.

But this sudden announcement for withdrawal didn’t stop Leo's advance.

“They want to escape!?”

He wasn't confused, but, on the contrary, became more serious.

Almost catching up with Henry Fu, taking another step in close proximity to him, Leo sank slightly under the water.

Stomping, he pushed through a deep hole in the bottom of the river.

Using this pit as a fulcrum, Leo pushed off with his whole body and made a powerful lunge with his fist.

It was an uppercut aimed at the torso that was capable of causing damage to internal organs.

Shortly before, Leo caught a glimpse of Henry Fu's arm reaching for his CAD, but he still hit him in the stomach.

The body of Henry Fu, who had been struck by Leo's fist, soared into the air with considerable acceleration.

“What...?”

Leo muttered in a stupid voice.

After all, he himself had just delivered the blow, but he didn't think that the enemy would be thrown back five meters.

And not five meters back, but to a height of more than five meters.

Leo was stunned by this scene, as if it happened in a cartoon or anime.

Even Erika, looking out from the shore, looked at it with rounded eyes.

Henry fell into the river.

He rose with a sudden movement as if he had received no damage at all, then turned his back on Leo and ran as fast as he could down the river.

“What the...?”

It was only later, after thinking, that he realized that the enemy had used magic at the moment of receiving the blow, activated magic in order to throw himself into the air using the momentum from the uppercut.

But during this very unexpected scene, Leo just froze in a stupor.

Mikihiko's fight was difficult, even when the enemy was left alone.

Unlike the battles of "Erika vs Iggy Ho" and "Leo vs Henry Fu," the fight of Mikihiko and Gabe Shu was a "magic shootout."

Mikihiko wasn't weak in physical combat. His physical strength and mobility was at a level that even Tatsuya and Leo recognized.

Nevertheless, his strongest point in battle was where the main role is played by magic - that is, "shooting with magic" in the middle or long range.

On the other hand, Illegal MAP was a commando unit, and along with that a squad of assassins. By their nature, they preferred to use many different methods of killing, such as stabbing with a sharp weapon or striking with a blunt weapon. But in fact, being a magical combat unit, they were more powerful in this type of magical combat rather than physical combat.

Also, as could be seen from the initial distribution of roles in the attack on Mizuki and Mikihiko, Gabe Shu was a member of the Horsehead squad who specialized in pure magic combat. Therefore, it was inevitable that the battle of Mikihiko and Gabe took place in the form of a shootout of magic, given the strengths of these two.

Gabe Shu is far superior to Mikihiko in experience of battles against people.

Even considering Mikihiko's age, it was impossible to say that he had little experience in fighting against people.

But the magic of the Yoshida family wasn't primarily intended for battles with people. It was meant to be used to interact with otherworldly creatures, to expel them, invoke them, or to lend their power. Mikihiko gained experience in battles against people during joint operations with Tatsuya. But it was still difficult for him to fight an opponent who was trained to use magic specifically against people in a real battle.

From under the feet of Gabe Shu, bursting out of the water, stones flew.

Mikihiko knocked down the arriving river rubble with ice arrows made of river water. The freezing process was intentionally added, because according to the rule “earth defeats water” in its liquid state, the water didn’t have sufficient power. In modern magic, this wasn't a problem, however, in ancient magic it was impossible to ignore the “rules of competition between the five elements.”

Mikihiko sensed the signs of magic underwater right in front of him. In a hurry, he isolated the flow of the river, creating a wall of water.

A bubble burst under the water in front of him. It released air that was compressed by magic and submerged underwater. This explosive expansion had the force of an explosion like that of a hand grenade.

Rising strong water spray became an obstacle to Mikihiko's vision. And at that moment the river rubble flew again.

The enemy occupied a position upstream, which put Mikihiko at a disadvantage.

In addition to bubble bombs, upstream Gabe Shu also launched attacks in the form of floating a paralytic substance down the river, and letting it disperse near Mikihiko and Mizuki. He also alternated this with shots of rubble and the emission of high-frequency sound waves. Although Gabe had a small variety of attacks, the pattern of their use was hard to read.

But this doesn’t mean that Mikihiko was only defending.

Ice arrows, which were used to beat stones, were also sent towards the enemy. He also launched water spears at the enemy. Shot at the feet of the enemy with thin jets of water under high pressure. That is, he made a variety of attacks using the river water.

In other words, in terms of diversity, Mikihiko was better. However, the attacks of Gabe Shu, though simple, were specifically designed to inflict damage on a person. Therefore, Mikihiko was forced to repel all these attacks. After all, if he hadn't done that, then besides him, Mizuki would've been injured, who was hidden behind his

back. Thoughts about this depressed Mikihiko more than anything else.

"But now, in terms of the number of people, we are in a better position than at the beginning..."

Before Erika and Leo appeared, it was three against two (actually three against one).

And now, in fact, there were three on three, but because of the division, each had individual one-on-one battles.

But despite all this, Mikihiko felt more cornered than before.

Suddenly the situation changed.

There was a small explosion above.

A mixture of black, brown, and red smoke drifted down from the shore.

There was a shout from behind: "Gabe! Retreat!"

The next moment the surface of the water exploded.

A thick wall of water splashed between Mikihiko and Gabe Shu.

When the water spray fell, Mikihiko couldn't see the enemy behind it.

◇ ◇ ◇

When Pixie got in touch with Miyuki again, the clock read 18:05.

"Miyuki-sama. Sorry to bother you."

"Pixie? Report."

"The movement • Mitsui-sama • stopped. Presumably, the kidnappers • arrived • at their • hideout."

“Is Honoka okay?”

“It seems that • Mitsui-sama • is still • under the influence of • a narcotic substance. Other • harmful effects • not felt.”

“I see...”

Miyuki breathed a sigh of relief.

There weren't any medical sensors connected to Honoka, and Pixie didn't receive medical information. However, Pixie received her supply of psions from Honoka regardless of the distance between them. It seems that she's been receiving the details about the state of Honoka as a side effect of this psionic transmission.

While respecting the privacy of Honoka's private life, neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki usually requested this information from Pixie. But this was an emergency. The news that the kidnapping victim has no physical injuries brings relief to the people who are worried about the victim.

"Pixie, can I get accurate information on where Honoka is being held?"

Magic isn't limited by physical distance. Even if you try to go back through the magical connection, you can't get the distance and direction.

However, Pixie had a body derived from the fusion of a Parasite with a humanoid machine. In much the same way that psionic radar works, she could recognize the direction and distance of the source of these waves - the source of the psionic flow that feeds her, from the received psionic waves.

“I am conducting • mapping • with cartographic • data... Mapping is • completed. Send • data?”

“Yes please.”

“Obeying.”

Simultaneously with this response, the signal for data received flashed on the display. The call was in voice only mode, so the display was blank, but after loading the data, a map was displayed.

“Received. Please keep watching.”

“All right, Miyuki-sama. Continuing • to conduct • observation.”

Through the remote control, Miyuki ended the conversation with Pixie. She had taken the first call from Pixie in her room, and now she was in the living room.

Miyuki got up from the couch, turned around, and looked at the man standing behind her.

“Hyougo-san.”

“Yes, Miyuki-sama?”

Hanabishi Hyougo replied in a respectful tone.

“Can you prepare a car right away?”

But Hyougo didn't answer Miyuki's question.

“I dare say that Miyuki-sama is going to personally go to the rescue of Mitsui-sama?”

“Right.”

Although she was answered with a question, Miyuki only nodded in response, not showing that she was offended.

“You mustn't.”

To which, Hyougo gave an adamant answer.

“What do you mean you mustn't? Can we not go?”

“Quite true.”

“Are you ordering me?”

“This isn’t an order. Just a warning.”

Miyuki looked at Hyougo with unconcealed displeasure.

Hyougo didn't mind.

“Miyuki-sama, you are the heiress of the main family line, as well as the bride of my Lord, Tatsuya-sama. You are too valuable, and shouldn't expose yourself to danger for such trifles.”

“Trifles? Hyougo-san, are you saying that the threat to my friend Honoka's life is nothing?”

In the living room there was a cold... no, frosty voice. Miyuki didn’t raise her voice. But her voice echoed throughout the room, in which such an effect shouldn't have been created.

Although, most likely, this isn’t the sound reflected several times in the confined space of the living room, but the voice echoed only in the minds of those who heard it.

Hyougo bowed apologetically, but he wasn't afraid.

Raising his head, he met Miyuki's eyes.

“It’s not so important that Miyuki-sama personally has to take care of it. So let me go and deal with it.”

“You, Hyougo-san?”

Miyuki questioned with furrowed eyebrows.

Miyuki knew about his career - about how he gained experience in a foreign private

military company, before becoming Tatsuya's butler. But Miyuki had never seen Hyougo actually fight, or even heard of anything like that.

In addition, Miyuki's doubt was due to the fact that, from her point of view, Hyougo didn't possess any special abilities as a magician. Miyuki simply didn't see enough of Hyougo's combat power to be confident in it.

“Yes. Leave it to me.”

Hyougo bowed low to Miyuki.

Miyuki's gaze, directed at Hyougo, remained sharp.

The air in this room wasn't cooled with air conditioning. There was a long silence (perhaps Miyuki's influence had silenced everyone), which was broken by another person present.

“Miyuki, let me go with him? Will that suit you?”

“Lina, you go?”

“Yes. Miyuki, you know my power.”

“But we don't know who kidnapped Honoka, do we? If these are USNA agents, then what are you going to do?”

“Why would agents from the States (USNA) kidnap Honoka?”

“I don't know, but...”

At the moment, neither Miyuki nor Lina knew that Miyuki's assumption was true. In response to Lina's simple counter-question, Miyuki responded with a vague phrase that carried the meaning “maybe I'm exaggerating?”.

If events had developed in this way, it could have come to such a difficult situation, as the clash of the illegal detachment of assassins, Horsehead from the Illegal MAP and Lina, who is “Angie Sirius.”

Such a future was prevented by the incoming phone call to Miyuki's mobile terminal instead of the apartment's landline terminal.

“Yes... Erika?”

The call was from Erika.

◇ ◇ ◇

Leo, Mikihiko, and Mizuki went up to join Erika. Mizuki got up there with Mikihiko, with the help of his magic, and Leo climbed with his legs without the use of magic.

Mikihiko's magic dried the clothes of all three and removed the dirt sticking to them.

Finally experiencing a refreshing feeling, Mizuki breathed a sigh of relief. After that, her legs gave way abruptly.

Mikihiko hurriedly offered her his hand. Mizuki managed to grab Mikihiko's hand and somehow avoided falling.

“I-I'm sorry...”

Mizuki let go of Mikihiko's hand. Immediately after that, she staggered again.

Mikihiko held out his hand again, and this time Mizuki clung to it.

“When you get out of a state of extreme tension, sometimes your legs and lower back lose their strength. You'd better hold on to Miki for a while.”

This time, Erika advised in a serious tone, without teasing those two.

Mizuki and Mikihiko looked away in embarrassment.

Erika and Leo, each in their own way, simultaneously shook their heads, expressing the thought “there's nothing you can do about them.”

After which both of them noticed that they had the same reaction.

However, both no longer had the strength for their usual quarrel.

Erika turned away from Leo and pulled out her mobile terminal.

She switched the terminal to telephone mode, and called Honoka.

However, the connection wasn't established.

Making a serious face, this time she called Miyuki.

"Yes."

"Ah, Miyuki? It's me. Erika."

"Erika? You seem excited. Did something happen?"

"Why is she in such a hurry?"

Erika thought. But, deciding to leave this question for later, she answered the question first.

She quickly and in order told about what happened. Mizuki and Mikihiko were attacked. The opponents were East Asian in appearance, but with English names. After that, she called Honoka, but couldn't get a hold of her.

"... By the way, are you all right, Miyuki?"

The answer came after a second pause.

"...I'm all good. I see... Mizuki was also targeted."

"Do you know something?"

Miyuki said "Mizuki too." This meant that something similar happened to someone

else. Erika quickly realized that.

“Honoka has been kidnapped.”

“...So that's how it is.”

Although it was possible to guess in advance what happened, but Erika was still momentarily speechless.

“We don't know who the criminals are, but thanks to Pixie, we found out where she was taken.”

“... Can Pixie do something like that?”

“Yes, but not with anyone...”

“Oh, I see.”

Erika also knew the circumstances of the case when the Parasite had taken up residence in Pixie. So, she quickly realized that there was a special connection between Honoka and Pixie.

“So we're going to go help her out.”

Erika didn't spend much time thinking about coming to this decision.

“...It's dangerous.”

“Miyuki, were you not going to do it yourself?”

“You're right, but...”

“I think Miyuki and Lina would be better off not going there. The opponents may be American agents.”

There was a brief silence on the other side of the phone line.

“I beg your pardon, Erika. Can I call you back?”

“Sure.”

Erika ended the call.

Less than five minutes passed before the incoming call signal came on her terminal.

“Erika, it's me.”

“Yeah. So?”

“I think everything is exactly as you said, Erika. It is highly likely the opponents targeting Mizuki are part of an illegal commando group from the USNA. I think the criminals who kidnapped Honoka are also from this unit.”

“Is that Lina's opinion?”

“Yes. Like you said, Erika, neither Lina nor I should go. But you guys can't go on your own, either. The opponents - agents from the USNA army. They're too dangerous.”

“We've already fought with them here, so it's too late to talk about danger.”

Erika's ear, pressed against the terminal speaker, caught a faint sigh.

“I could tell you not to put yourself in danger again, but... Erica, you're not going to agree, right?”

“You already understand, don't you?”

Erika heard another sigh.

“If you promise not to force your way into the enemy camp, but to go with the right men, I will tell you where Honoka is being held.”

Miyuki thought that further attempts at persuasion would be futile. So she made this

condition.

“Who are the right people?”

“I already asked SMAT to go there. I ask you to unite with them on the spot.”

SMAT. Special Magic Assault Squad. This is an organization that brought together combat magicians from the police, created as a result of rethinking the fact that the police weren't able to adequately respond to the Yokohama incident the year before last. The kidnapping of a civilian by a group of magicians was certainly under the responsibility of SMAT.

“But won't the police make a fuss?”

As Erika said, the likelihood that large-scale police movements would endanger the kidnapping victim wasn't zero. That's just...

“Even if I hadn't told you about this, you were going to use the police force yourself, weren't you?”

Erika had close ties to the police. She could use the police to locate Honoka, and she had planned to do that.

“I give up. I will do as you say, Miyuki.”

Realizing that Miyuki could see right through her, Erika raised a white flag. More precisely, it could be considered a draw, because she won Miyuki's compromise of "handing over the rights to save Honoka."

“Sending the coordinates.”

“...OK, received.”

“Be careful, Erika.”

“Leave it to us. I will contact you when we save Honoka.”

Erika said and completed the call.

◇ ◇ ◇

Tatsuya headed toward the shade of a tree 10 meters away. From this place, he felt a response, and heard someone fall there.

That “someone” was Fujibayashi Nagamasa.

“Do you know where Minoru is going?”

Tatsuya didn’t boast of victory or accuse him of betrayal. He only indifferently began to interrogate Nagamasa. More precisely, judging by his tone of voice, he simply “asked,” and not “interrogated.”

“I don’t know...”

On the other hand, Nagamasa, sweating due to the sharp pain from the holes in his body, answered with a voice from which the will to fight hadn't disappeared.

“I see.”

Tatsuya asked nothing more. He turned his back on Nagamasa and was about to leave.

“Wait...”

The one who wanted to continue the conversation was Nagamasa himself.

“Does it suit you...? You're not going to interrogate and torture?”

“You don’t know, do you? If so, then there is no need to ask questions.”

“I see... You know that I am trying to buy time...?”

Nagamasa’s assumption was partially correct. Tatsuya did think that Nagamasa was

stalling for time, but he didn't think there was any point in interrogating Nagamasa, because he didn't know of a way to check whether Nagamasa was lying or not. Therefore, the first question about the direction of Minoru's escape was asked only on a whim.

Tatsuya didn't waste any time responding with unnecessary kindness. He was about to leave this place, leaving Nagamasa sitting there with his back up against the trunk of a tree.

“That's not all! I'm not done yet!”

Tatsuya looked wary. After all, Nagamasa hasn't lost his combat power yet.

Tatsuya looked back, and at the same time a new hole appeared in Nagamasa's body.

But the pain from those wounds wasn't enough to stop Nagamasa. Tatsuya didn't kill Nagamasa because he was the father of Fujibayashi Kyouko. And because of the difficulties with the subsequent settlement of problems that will arise if the head of the Fujibayashi family, the famous clan of magicians of ancient magic, is killed.

But Nagamasa wasn't such an adversary that could be dealt with so easily.

Usually a person can't use their right arm if you shoot them in the right shoulder. However, Nagamasa intertwined both hands in a symbolic gesture.

Seeing this, Tatsuya this time made a hole in the tendon of the left elbow.

But this didn't break the gesture of Nagamasa.

On the contrary, he began to change the symbols shown by his hands, and at such a speed that was impossible to keep track of with the naked eye.

By the time Tatsuya decided to do away with Nagamasa, his technique had already been completed.

The “Sekirei Hachijin” barrier covering this area focused with the center being in the form of Tatsuya and Nagamasa.

It was already later than 6 pm. Although the days were supposed to be long for this season, the Sea of Trees was shrouded in darkness.

And now this darkness has become even more dense and impenetrable.

And something in this darkness began to put oppressive pressure on Tatsuya.

Tatsuya focused his “sight” on the true form of this pressure pressing on him.

Something that looked like a misty haze in the shape of a man was reaching out towards Tatsuya.

“Twins...? Or Astral projection... No, residual thoughts of the dead!?”

If we assume that the information received from the Fujibayashi family (from the enemy who is right in front of him now) is true, then the “Sekirei Hachijin” barrier, which is an array of “Kimon Tonkou” installed in fixed positions, which uses the same technology as “Magic Amplifiers.” Or, most likely, “Sorcery Boosters” a magical tool, for the manufacture of which some of the technologies used in Sekirei Hachijin were borrowed.

The technology of “Sekirei Hachijin” is as follows: while the magician is still alive, their body is transferred to a state of cadaveric fat, leaving only the brain, whose structure crystallizes in the process. On the forehead of the victim magical symbols and drawings are carved. As a result, these magician's remains are transformed into a magic output device that can work for hundreds of years. They are buried underground in several places, and they support the continuous work of the magic, “Kimon Tonkou.”

A week ago, Tatsuya didn't know how corpses could support magic.

But now, after the experience gained in the battle with the Astral projection of Arcturus, he knew how.

The source of the interference force in the phenomenon is the Pushion waves. Tatsuya personally witnessed it in that fight.

Perhaps the magical processing that transforms the magician into a state of cadaveric fat, contains the process for enclosing the pushion information body inside these remains. Thus, the magic of the concealment barrier is maintained by periodic discharges of interference force into the phenomenon, using the Pushions stored in the remains.

The psychic pressure (which can be rephrased as “pressure by external systemic magic”), currently acting on Tatsuya, was undoubtedly caused by Pushion information bodies enclosed within human remains transformed into magic output devices. Tatsuya described them with the phrase “residual thoughts of the dead,” but usually these information bodies are called “ghosts” or “spirits.”

Carved on the foreheads of the corpses, transformed into a device called “Sekirei Hachijin,” the command “to distort the sense of choosing a path.” The ghosts were unable to think for themselves, and simply tried to lead Tatsuya astray. If they break through the barrier of Tatsuya's will, he will be forced to wander around the Sea of Trees until the ghosts' powers are exhausted.

“Fujibayashi Nagamasa... committed suicide?”

The hands of the ghosts reached out to Nagamasa as well. Tatsuya didn't have the ability to “see” the activity of the Pushion information bodies. He could only dimly sense them. However, he realized that Nagamasa's mind had already been captured by these residual thoughts.

He isn't dead.

But in such a state, Nagamasa was like the living dead.

“If the caster commits suicide, then the magic can't be undone.”

“If you continue to push away these residual thoughts, then one day their strength will be exhausted...”

“But I can't wait for that!”

Tatsuya focused his “sight” on the psionic information that was generated when these “ghosts” (residual thoughts) tried to interfere with him. If Tatsuya hypothesis wasn’t wrong, then information should be recorded in this world that “something is trying to interfere with Tatsuya's mind and distort his sense of direction,” as well as information about “Pushion information bodies trying to interfere with Tatsuya's mind.”

Based on these records, he considered the following information: “the structure of the pushion information body that exists in this world in such a form that it can interfere with the phenomena that forms part of this world, called Shiba Tatsuya.”

“I see.”

“I see it!”

He discovered a foothold that allowed the pushion information body called “ghost” to exist in this world...

Destroy it.

Decompose!

“The magic of decomposition of the structure that's supporting the pushion information bodies, "Astral dispersion," activation.”

...Destruction of the structure of the psionic informational body that helps the spiritual body (the pushion information body) to exist in this world.

... Not the destruction of the pushion information body itself, but its expulsion from this world.

The white misty figures in the shape of people surrounding Tatsuya quickly disappeared one after another.

After that, Tatsuya immediately realized that “Sekirei Hachijin,” which was supported by the thoughts of the dead, had been destroyed.

The magic of decomposition of the structure that's supporting the pushion information bodies, "Astral dispersion."

It doesn't seal the spiritual body in this world.

It makes it so that the spiritual body can no longer exist in this world.

The phrase "can't exist in this world" means that from the point of view of those who live in this world, it simply disappears.

Dies.

We can say that this is tantamount to killing by erasure.

Tatsuya finally has at his disposal the means to kill spiritual bodies and spiritual life forms.

Chapter 12

Having coped with the suicidal attack of Fujibayashi Nagamasa with the help of newly developed magic, Tatsuya set off to leave the Sea of Trees.

But he stopped, not even gone five meters..

The holes that Tatsuya made in Nagamasa with partial decomposition magic were tiny, but there were many. The bleeding was significant, and some of the holes also touched important nerves. If he left him like this, he wouldn't live until morning.

In general, he had already decided to erase this opponent, but the circumstances in which he didn't do so from the very beginning haven't disappeared. It was an adversary, which was extremely undesirable to kill.

However, for the same reason, Tatsuya didn't want to help him with, "Regrowth." As soon as the wounds disappear, Nagamasa will start to interfere with Tatsuya again. He was an adversary who, under current circumstances, is difficult to deprive of consciousness, and Tatsuya had no means of restraint.

“Still, have to leave him?”

Just as Tatsuya was about to head for the exit again, there were signs of another person that appeared in front of him.

“The supreme shinobi from the school of the Iga clan, the head of the Fujibayashi family defeated? Well, to be able to do something like that is quite natural for someone who belongs to the direct family line of the Yotsuba family.”

Black gloves and black coat, despite the middle of summer. The suspicious man in an obliquely worn black felt hat spoke in a haughty tone without any greeting.

“Kuroba-san, how long have you been here?”

The man who suddenly appeared before Tatsuya was Kuroba Mitsugu, head of the Kuroba family, a side branch of the Yotsuba family.

“Just got here. I was only able to get here because you broke the barrier.”

“Kuroba-san, that barrier wouldn't have deterred you, even if it functioned.”

“I'm not being modest. If that barrier was functioning properly, significant workaround methods would be required.”

That meant that he still knew a way to overcome the barrier. And that isn't all. Only the father of Ayako possessed the technique of approaching at a short distance so that the enemy doesn't catch any signs of magic use. Tatsuya was delighted with this, but at the same time he couldn't help but be wary.

“Did you come here on orders from Oba-ue?”

“No. I came to ask you something.”

“You have?”

The question that surfaced in Tatsuya mind wasn't “what did you want to ask?” but

“questions at such a time?”

However, even if it was necessary to return to the pursuit of Minoru, he couldn't ignore Mitsugu. This would cause even more inconvenience for him than killing Nagamasa.

So, Tatsuya obediently waited for Mitsugu to speak.

“Tatsuya-kun.”

Tatsuya's eyes widened slightly. As if removing the jester mask, Mitsugu called his name without any hostility or hatred in his voice. It was the first time Tatsuya had heard him say that.

“Why are you pursuing Kudou Minoru with such zeal?”

“Really?” - such a thought now slipped into Tatsuya's head. To be honest, it was not a very pleasant question for him. But he answered the question without much thought as to why this particular question is unpleasant for him.

“To bring Minami back.”

He had no other reason to pursue Minoru. The fact that Minoru is a Parasite wasn't a reason for Tatsuya to be hostile towards him. As long as Minoru hasn't been captured by the general consciousness of the Parasites, and hasn't started to do anything that violates Miyuki's calm, Tatsuya will only need to return Minami.

“Where does such zeal come from for the return of one servant?”

Mitsugu reused the word “zeal”.

“How do I look to the others now?” - Tatsuya thought, looking at the circumstances from the outside.

“I don't know.”

Tatsuya answered quickly and without hesitation.

This was a consequence due to the fact that he had already suffered enough doubts.

Since Yakumo asked him about the reason why he is trying to save Minami, Tatsuya has been constantly searching for an answer to this question within himself.

But he couldn't find an answer.

If a superficial answer were enough, then it would be simple.

Because that is what Miyuki wants.

Also in order to eliminate Miyuki's sense of remorse for feeling guilty for letting Minoru slip right out from under her nose, allowing him to abduct Minami.

But were they really the only reasons? Asking this question, he couldn't answer it right now.

He wasn't going to compare Minami with the deceased Honami.

Minami and Honami are different people.

"I know that. I understand that. It is definitely not an attempt to make up for the fact that I failed to save Honami... I think."

"Then why do I want to return Minami?"

"I don't know."

"... Ah, yes, I see now..."

Now Tatsuya, although it's already late, he noticed why he thought that this question was so unpleasant.

It's because he didn't understand his heart.

And because he was reminded that he's running around, not understanding the

meaning of this activity.

Tatsuya's actions have always had a purpose.

The goal has always been clear: for Miyuki's sake.

Of his own free will, he wanted to protect Miyuki in the present and future.

But... really?

... Is “my own will” my own?

... And what if the “Real me” is empty?

... And maybe this empty vessel is just filled with the task of “protecting Miyuki”?

This suspicion was also the reason why this question was unpleasant for him.

“Master Yakumo also asked about it. And I've been constantly thinking about it ever since. But I still don't understand.”

Tatsuya honestly voiced his feelings to Mitsugu. For some reason, he thought he should do it now for Miyuki's sake.

“... I see.”

Mitsugu responded in a tone of deep understanding.

Mitsugu knew that Tatsuya didn't understand it. Somehow he sensed it in Tatsuya.

“Up until now, I have always believed that you have no heart.”

Tatsuya really experienced a lack of emotions after the structure of his mind was interfered with thanks to the use of a secret technique. But Tatsuya sensed that Mitsugu's words had a completely different meaning now.

“But it seems I was wrong.”

But the very essence of what Mitsugu said Tatsuya didn't understand.

... A person without a heart has no doubts.

Tatsuya still lacked the life experience necessary to grasp Mitsugu's unspoken words.



“Tatsuya-kun. I hate you.”

Instead of those unspoken words, Mitsugu suddenly openly expressed his emotions.

“I'm aware of that.”

Tatsuya wasn't upset. He really knew this, not bluffing. But he couldn't say that he fully understood the reason for his hatred.

It's about your way of life, when you go above the responsibilities bestowed upon you and over the rules that apply to everyone. No, you don't even go above them, you just smash them down with your strength. The lifestyle you have urges us, the people who live by these responsibilities and in line with these rules, to say: "You're mocking us, right!?"

“... But I'm not mocking you.”

“I know. You, who were born with the power of absolute destruction, don't understand the feelings of weak ordinary people who can't confront the whole world alone. Similarly, I can't understand your feelings. Feelings of the owner of the power capable of bringing the world to its knees, but at the same time thinking about this world.”

“.....”

Tatsuya in confusion didn't know what to say.

“I wouldn't lift a finger for you”

Piercing Tatsuya with his gaze, Mitsugu took a shallow breath.

“... I won't lift my finger.”

With disgust in his voice he expressed the conclusion of the phrase.

“I understand,” Tatsuya didn't say aloud. It seemed to him that such an answer didn't correspond to the current situation.

“Therefore... Help will be provided not with my hands.”

Mitsugu said and raised his left hand to the height of his face.

A group of men in black clothes appeared from the shadows of the trees.

Nine men in black came out of the shadows of nine trees.

“Leave them to deal with the state of Fujibayashi Nagamasa.”

“...Well.”

For Tatsuya, this was too unexpected.

Not the appearance of the men in black. But the fact that Mitsugu himself offered him help, without an order from Maya.

“Ayako and Fumiya also asked me to give you a message.”

“What is it?”

“ 'I want you to tell Tatsuya-san about where Kudou Minoru is going.' In particular, it was Ayako who was very worried about Sakurai Minami. The Kuroba family is also helping you here because Ayako begged for it.”

“.....”

“I don't know the final destination of Kudou Minoru. But right now he is heading for Odawara.”

“Thank you very much for this.”

“I will give your gratitude to my children.”

Mitsugu said, and turned his back to Tatsuya.

Tatsuya bowed to Mitsugu's back and ran to “Wingless,” the electric motorcycle that had been left outside the forest.

◇ ◇ ◇

It took 20 minutes after the end of her conversation with Miyuki. Erika arrived on the outskirts of the city of Yamato.

During the Third World War, before the American army had yet to withdraw its troops deployed around the world, it was where the airport of the American naval base was located.

When America became known as the USNA and withdrew their troops to its territory, this airport went to the nearby air force base of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. It wasn't a shared base, such as the Zama base, located in the metropolitan area. This base was used only by the Japanese air force.

But America remained an allied nation for Japan, this hasn't changed. Even if there were any secret contradictions between them, ordinary civilians didn't know about it. Therefore, the presence of Americans in this city didn't seem strange to anyone.

“These guys are almost indistinguishable from the Japanese...”

Erika muttered with annoyance in her voice as she left the Cabinet station.

It was quite natural to choose agents from personnel in such a way that it would be difficult to distinguish them from the inhabitants of the place where these agents would be sent. If they sent agents to Japan with racial characteristics other than Japanese, they could pay for underestimating the Japanese.

However, these arguments didn't console Erika.

“You can't go on foot, there could be an ambush anywhere...”

The realization that instead of hidden enemies, one should be more afraid that any pedestrian could turn into an enemy, greatly depleted mental strength. When the

enemy isn't visible, the nerves aren't so tense. And when you see someone, but you don't know if he is an enemy or not, you have to watch your entire field of vision with caution.

"I don't think we should worry about it."

With his usual good-natured tone, Leo turned to Erika, who was looking around with her sharp eyes, trying to break up the tense atmosphere.

"We know where the enemy hideout is. It's better to focus on them rather than on thoughts of an ambush, which may not even be there."

Erika turned away with a gloomy and seemingly offended face.

"...Erika?"

"So, Leo can say something sensible...? What if it's now for life?"

"Hey!? Have I exhausted my supply of stupidity!?"

Erika pointedly turned away even further after Leo's joke.

"Oh shit! How infuriating!"

Leo swore only in his thoughts. He was able to wisely not say it aloud thanks to reflexively activating the "brake" based on his instincts.

If he said out loud that he was "pissed off," it would have led to an awkward situation. At the moment, Erika and Leo were alone. There was no Mizuki to hold them back by stepping between them, nor was Mikihiro, who was a target for Erika to switch to.

Mikihiro walked Mizuki home, and stayed there to wait for the police to tell them the details. In fact, Erika and Leo were supposed to stay for the police proceedings, too. But Erika, worried about Honoka, took advantage of the Chiba family's dojo connections and called the police officers who trained there. She asked them to come to Mizuki's house, while she and Leo went to the place that Miyuki had told her

about.

“Erika! Let's call a taxi!”

Leo asked Erica, his voice filled with despair. They didn't have to walk to the location where Honoka was being held. On the contrary, it was better to get there as quickly as possible.

Erika, as usual, didn't answer. Fortunately, the awkward atmosphere was ended by the intervention of a third party.

“Erika-ojousan!”

From a car that abruptly stopped in front of Leo and Erika, there was a shout from a man who looked like he was 25-35 years old.

“Shoji-san?”

Erika's eyes widened slightly as she saw the man's face leaning out of the front passenger window.

The car was a regular sedan... at least in appearance it was an ordinary commercial model, but the man wore a SMAT assault suit.

“Shoji-san, did you join SMAT?”

“Yes. I completed the training last month, and starting this month I've been in service.”

Listening to their conversation from the side, Leo roughly understood the connection between them. This man named Shoji was a disciple at the Chiba family dojo. Apparently, when he heard Erika was joining them, he went to pick them up... more precisely, was forced to go.

“...This person may be a member of the Guard...”

Leo couldn't believe it when he first heard about it. In the dojo of the Chiba family,

there is a group called “Erika's Guard,” honoring Erika as a “Princess General.”... It isn’t necessary to explain why she wasn’t just a “Princess.”

The loyalty of these people to Erika might have been even stronger than to her father, the master and the dojo owner. Leo had already managed to see their unity with his own eyes during the “Vampire Incident” last winter. If you look at this Shoji with such thoughts in mind, you could actually see the signs of admiration, reverence, or even deification in his eyes as he looked at Erika.

“But enough about me, hurry and get in. The detachment is already prepared for the beginning of the assault.”

“I see. Leo, let's go.”

The recently annoyed face has already disappeared. Erika dexterously jumped into the disguised patrol car, and called for Leo to follow her.

◇ ◇ ◇

The members of the Horsehead unit, who failed in the abduction of Mizuki, arrived at their hideout shortly before Erika's group.

As the representative of the three-man team sent to kidnap Mizuki, Henry Fu reported to commander Al Wan about the circumstances of the failure of the operation. The other members of the unit who listened to his report didn’t give a single ridicule to those three.

“Commander, maybe we should change our strategy?”

Julia Ma, who kidnapped Honoka, suggested to commander Al after Henry finished the report.

“The response rate of the target's environment far exceeded our expectations.”

“Isn't that just a coincidence? If they had previously calculated our actions, they wouldn’t have left Mitsui Honoka alone.”

Ellie Chao intervened in the conversation - another woman in the detachment who also participated in the abduction of Honoka.

“The fact that we were prevented cannot be ignored. First of all, as far as we knew in advance, Shibata Mizuki was supposed to return home from school alone. We didn’t have information that she would receive support.”

Julia objected, dismissing Ellie's suggestion.

“That could also be a coincidence.”

“Like Ellie said, it could have been a coincidence. But if such a random factor is causing such difficulties for us, then as Julia said, it would be foolish to ignore it.”

Continuing with Ellie's counter-argument, Al Wan acknowledged the arguments of both. But he didn’t stop there.

“The strategy was based on the fact that we will have two hostages. But we could only get one, so change is inevitable, as Julia said.”

“But can we lure the target with only one hostage?”

Asked Don Yang - one of those who didn’t participate in either of the abduction operations.

“If there is only one hostage, then it will simply end up helping him. Because we can’t kill a hostage to stop the target from resisting. One hostage to lure out the target, and the second to make the target obedient. Still, we need at least two hostages.”

Frank Wu, the third person in the Honoka kidnapping group, answered Don Yang. Also it was not only Julia, who had been in favor of a change of strategy from the very beginning, who agreed with this opinion, which supported the decision of the commander of the detachment.

“So...? Commander, what exactly are we going to do?”

To the question of the Deputy Commander Bart Lee...

“Let Mitsui Honoka go in the form of a booby trap.”

...Al Wan replied in a tone that said, “isn't it obvious?”

While the members of the Horsehead squad were discussing how to use Honoka, she herself sat next to them with an expressionless, serene face.

Her mind was paralyzed by a narcotic substance mixed with the help of Al Wan's magic. She didn't sleep, but she wasn't awake either. It was a kind of intermediate state. Ears perceived voices, but she couldn't actively think about the information received.

Her resistance to brainwashing has been lowered to zero.

As such Al Wan began to inspire one thought in Honoka.

...Kill Shiba Tatsuya.

If you omit the minor details, then the thought was reduced to such a short phrase.

Honoka shouldn't have been able to resist it.

“...No...”

“What?”

Honoka's barely perceptible mumble could not be understood not only by Al Wan. But also, Bart Lee, Charlie Chan, and all the other members of the squad present here (except for Gabe Shuuya and Iggy Ho, who stood guard outside) cast dubious glances at Honoka.

“I can't... kill... Tatsuya-san...”

“Julia, give her some more of the drug.”

Not surprised by the presence of resistance, which shouldn't have happened, Al Wan immediately gave the order in a completely cold-blooded tone.

Further administration of this drug threatened to result in irreversible consequences and side effects. But no one objected to such a cruel and insensitive order. Also, no one showed any indecision in their actions. Julia Ma filled a syringe with the substance and headed towards Honoka.

But before she managed to administer the injection, Honoka showed such a violent reaction, which in principle shouldn't be possible for a person under the influence of this narcotic substance.

She suddenly opened her eyes wide ...

“NO! I won't let you touch Tatsuya-san!”

... and screamed at the top of her lungs, hurting her throat in the process.





This was probably due to a sense of devotion — the blood heritage of the Elements.

Or was it a miracle caused by feelings of love?

The room in which Honoka was being held was flooded with bright light.

The visual field of the members from the The Horsehead squad filled with light of randomly changing colors.

This light didn't have a destructive effect on human bodies.

Neither did it have any powers of suggestion, or the effect of unconsciousness.

It simply made it impossible to see anything with ordinary vision, since the violent flickering completely covered their whole view.

“Everyone out of this room!”

They chose an abandoned one-story building, as their hideout, which was used as a branch office for some company a couple of years ago. All eight members of the Horsehead squad ran out of this meeting room and moved to the adjacent office space. The last one to leave the meeting room was Bart Lee who closed the door behind him to isolate the light.

Soon after, Iggy Ho, who was standing guard, ran into the office with an assault rifle in his hands. They came to Japan without weapons. Looks like he took it from the enemy who attacked him.

“Enemies, a lot of them!”

Iggy's stomach was bleeding. At a glance, all those present realized that it was a gunshot wound, moreover, a fatal wound. They didn't hear the sound of gunshots, probably because the enemy used high-end silencers.

Only one battle group could use such equipment.

And it wasn't the police.

It was the army.

There was an explosion outside.

It was the sound of a bomb being detonated by each of them to destroy evidence. After the illegal MAP infiltrates a foreign country, making such a bomb is always the top priority.

By the sound of this explosion, everyone understood that Gabe Shu had made himself self-explode, so that information from his brain wouldn't fall into the hands of the enemy.

“Leave! Iggy, you know what you have to do.”

Al Wan ordered the seven members of the squad to flee, then he looked Iggy Ho in the eye and reminded him of what he himself knew.

Iggy pulled a bomb out of his pocket that fit in his palm, and shoved it into his mouth and smiled.

Al Wan didn't take away the kidnapped Honoka to be used as a hostage. Instead, he took an assault rifle from Iggy's hands and ran into the underground tunnel that was used to deliver supplies.

At the same moment as the door to the office was kicked in, Iggy Ho pressed the detonation button of the bomb he had prepared to blow his head off.

◇ ◇ ◇

Sitting in a camouflaged patrol car, Erika heard the faint sound of an explosion coming from the front.

She turned to the person sitting next to her, who was Leo.

Leo also turned to face Erika.

They exchanged glances, and confirmed that the sound wasn't an auditory hallucination.

“What happened over there?”

In a strained voice, Erika asked Shoji, who was sitting in the front passenger seat.

“It seems that some other organization has rushed into the kidnappers' hideout instead of us.”

Shoji also couldn't hide his tension.

“Another organization? You mean, not the police?”

“The probability that it's the Department of Public Safety isn't zero, but...”

“Army.”

“Probably.”

Shoji immediately agreed with Erika's hunch, that was said in the form of statements.

After that, there was no other conversations in the car.

A camouflaged police car stopped in front of a living wall of SMAT agents in assault suits.

And in front of that wall in the battle formation were soldiers of the Self-Defense Forces with assault rifles. The muzzles of those rifles weren't pointed at SMAT, but at the sky.

The line of soldiers parted. Two young women emerged from the gap in formation. One of them was in a high school uniform.

“Honoka!”

Recognizing the girl as her kidnapped friend, Erika rushed over to her side. Leo followed her.

“Honoka, what happened!? Don't you recognize me?”

Honoka just looked at Erika with a dazed, vacant stare.

Erika's face turned pale at the sight of her unnatural behavior.

“She has only a temporary paralysis of mental functions caused by a narcotic substance. According to the examination, this drug won't leave irreversible consequences or side effects. So she will be alright.”

To reassure Erika, this explanation was given by the smiling female soldier who accompanied Honoka.

Both Erika and Leo recognized the face of this female officer.

“It's you, from that time in Izu!”

After this shout from Leo, Toyama Tsukasa smiled even wider.

“Why did you save Mitsui...?”

Toyama Tsukasa's real name is Tooyama Tsukasa. She is the daughter of the head of the Tooyama family of the Twenty-Eight Families. Rank – Petty Officer. Duty station - the Intelligence Department of the national Self-Defense Forces.

In May of this year, she led a team planning an attack on Tatsuya, who was secluded in a villa in Izu.

Erika and Leo, with the support of Mikihiro and Honoka, stopped them. At that time, the two also fought with Toyama Tsukasa personally. That's why they knew her by sight.

They interfered with the work of the Intelligence Department and even gave her a personal bitter experience of defeat, so she must have had some thoughts about it.

However, Tsukasa's smile didn't show any negative emotions at all.

"I'm in the counter-intelligence unit. Our main task is to prevent foreign intelligence activities and sabotage."

"... So, you don't bring your personal feelings to work?"

Erika asked in a tone that voiced her suspicion that there is something wrong. Leo didn't see any lies in Tsukasa's smile, but Erika was apparently able to, because she was also a woman.

"In truth, I also had personal motives. My boss ordered me to restore our honor after failing in Izu. But at the same time we didn't know who we were saving."

"... Oh, I see..."

When such details were revealed, Erika's drive was reduced to nothing. She didn't want to save Honoka with her own hands. Also, after the recent battle, I didn't really want to fight again. In any case, Honoka was saved. And, at first glance, there was nothing to complain about.

"... Does Honoka need medical attention?"

For starters, she decided to ask this.

"No. After 3-4 hours, the effect of the drug will pass by itself."

"For now, I will believe her words and wait for 4 hours. If Honoka doesn't recover during this time, then we can take her to the doctor," thought Erika.

After making sure that Honoka was safe, Erika was finally able to look around. She frowned after seeing that the soldiers of the rescue squad were carrying the corpses of their comrades-in-arms.

"You have some pretty big losses..." Leo muttered. He looked at the dead soldiers with pretty much the same expression as that of Erika.

“Indeed...”

Tsukasa replied with a humble expression, although Leo's words weren't a question, but a statement.

“We were confronted by only two of them. Despite this, our casualties are four people killed and even more wounded. Although all were covered with shields. I even lost a little confidence.”

“You're from the Eighteen Assistant Houses, aren't you? Besides, an expert on shield magic? Were they such strong opponents?”

After the incident in Izu, Miyuki told Erika and the others about Toyama Tsukasa's true identity, and scolded them for “getting into trouble.” But even if Miyuki didn't tell them about it, they could roughly estimate the power of Tsukasa's individual shields by seeing them used in combat against her.

On that occasion, Erika and the others neutralized Tsukasa's unit with a surprise attack that took advantage of the wooded terrain. If you looked at the results by itself, it was an easy victory, but Erika thought that it wouldn't have been so easy if it happened in an open area.

Although there were also obstacles blocking the view in the form of the walls of the building, but compared to the forest, there was less room to maneuver. Moreover, if we talk about a surprise attack... in this case, the side conducting the surprise attack had to of been the Self-Defense Forces. It seemed to Erika that with only two people on the defensive side, the four victims of the attacking side was too many.

“I expected that they would be strong, but it seems I was naive. As expected from the Illegal MAP... Rumors about their notoriety didn't turn out to be idle chatter.”

“Illegal MAP? So that's the name of the team these guys are called?”

“An American illegal commando force made up of magicians. It is believed that by killing some important people from the NSU army, these guys provoked a serious local conflict between USNA and NSU. I also heard that this incident was considered by the Tribunal of the American army, and they were finally disposed of.

“Dangerous guys, then...”

“Yes, you're right.”

Tsukasa responded to the mumble of Leo.

“You seem to be fighting with them too. You're lucky that you were able to do it without casualties. They probably retreated because they didn't want to stand out too much. After all, it could interfere with the achievement of their real goal.”

“Their real goal?”

“The murder of Shiba Tatsuya.”

Tsukasa immediately answered Erika's question.

From what she heard Erika was confused even more.

“The Horsehead squad... ah, yes, that's the name of one of the Illegal MAP units sent to our country... Well, they certainly didn't want Shiba-san to know what they're capable of, do they? If they had shown their full strength, they couldn't have lured him out even with a hostage.”

“So they kidnapped Mitsui and tried to kidnap Shibata in order to lure Tatsuya to them?”

“We believe that's what happened.”

Tsukasa answered Leo's question without pretense.

“I know your abilities, but I don't think that everything would have ended for you without injury if you were faced with a serious Illegal MAP. So leave the pursuit to us. Also, I would like to ask that you also withdraw SMAT.”

It seems like Tsukasa answered the questions of Erika and Leo, in order to finally say this.

“Good day, then. We're advancing in pursuit of the remaining saboteurs.”

Tsukasa said, who saluted (today Tsukasa was wearing combat gear and a helmet, and looked like it was no different from the other male soldiers), turned away from Erika and Leo, and walked away to join up with her comrades.

As Erica watched the army convertible cars leave the area, she spoke to Shoji, who had just arrived.

“Even though the army said it, but what will SMAT do?”

“Regardless of who the adversary is, any crimes within the country are under the jurisdiction of the police. Even if the army tells us to withdraw our forces, we won't obediently sit idly by.”

The corners of Shoji's lips lifted, showing the audacity and insolence inherent in people from the Chiba family dojo.

“Erika-ojousan, could you escort the victim home? And tell the details tomorrow.”

“...Well, okay.”

Erika didn't persist. She came here to help Honoka, and wasn't particularly interested in arresting terrorists. The desire to do this, though present, was weak.

She was a little concerned that the goal of the enemy was the murder of Tatsuya. But, they are unlikely to succeed in killing him. Erika was sure of this, without even listing all the reasons to prove it.

Erika decided to follow Shoji's request and escort Honoka home. At the same time, she politely refused the offer of the squad leader to provide them with support from their personnel. Instead, she reluctantly took Leo as her escort. They put Honoka, who was still unable to move on her own, in the Cabinet of the electric transportation system, and went to her house.

◇ ◇ ◇

Arriving at Odawara, Minoru got out of the car at the station. Minami got out after him.

The faces of both, of course, were changed, but not with Parade. It was a disguise, using makeup props, prepared by Zhou Gongjin in his hideout. “Parade” at the moment was only focused on concealing their location.

In the car, there were androids received from Kudou Makoto, in which Parade attached the individual information about Minoru and Minami. Turning the autopilot on, Minoru sent the car further East along the coast. The car was set to self-destruct when it reached the city of Zushi, but Minoru thought it would be discovered and caught up to much earlier.

Minoru and Minami's destination was Yokosuka. That is, their route and direction of travel coincided with the car that had left. From the point of view of common sense, in order to break away from the pursuit, you need to go in a completely different direction. However, in the current case, the coincidence of course made sense.

“Kaso Tonkou”... I hope it works as it should...”

Deciding that in order to hide from Tatsuya's sight, he needed magic that combines the effects of “Parade” and “Kimon Tonkou,” he practically mixed the magic of “Kaso Tonkou” in a hurry. He himself understood that it was a hastily made, temporary spell. But being limited in time, Minoru used all of his strength and invented this magic. So even now he had a slightly inflated ego, although it wasn’t easy to see at first glance.

Will Kaso Tonkou deceive Tatsuya? You won't know until you run away. The car had already started, leaving Minoru and Minami behind. The plan he developed to ensure a successful escape has already started being carried out.

The die is cast.

It's too late to doubt anything.

All that remains is only to act.

Minoru and Minami got into an individual Cabinet. Their destination was the “Yokosuka military port.”

◇ ◇ ◇

When Tatsuya was only a short distance away from Odawara, he saw Minami's Eidos split up.

“What does it mean?”

If it wasn't for the highway, Tatsuya would have stopped the motorcycle on the side of the road. Instead, he switched the motorcycle to semi-automatic mode, and began to think about this mysterious phenomenon.

“The coordinates, as before, can't be determined.”

“The specific point is unknown, but at least the area where the target may be is known.”

“But now. even that vague location data split in two and was in motion?”

Tatsuya sensed that this wasn't from “Parade,” or “Kimon Tonkou.”

This phenomenon had features of both of these magics at once. Tatsuya had the impression that this wasn't the use of two magic spells at the same time, but a kind of merging of “Parade” and “Kimon Tonkou.”

“Did Minoru create a new magic?”

If this is true, then it means that in such a short time Minoru surpassed what Kudou Retsu had been creating for decades.

Also, it can't be said that it is completely impossible. Because none other than Tatsuya himself had come close to the completion of the magic, “Astral Dispersion” in less than a week.

“No, it’s not important now.”

In this situation, the problem wasn’t the short time with which the magic used was developed. Tatsuya reproached himself, his thoughts were going in the wrong direction.

“Which of them is Minami's Eidos... that is, Minami herself?”

In the end, that's the only thing that really needs to be figured out.

Tatsuya completely gave up control of the equipment to autopilot, and sent his consciousness into the information dimension.

“The first one is moving on the road along the coastline.”

“And the other... on the same road? No, on the line of intercity public transport...?”

Tatsuya's “sight” couldn’t see what was hidden under the disguise. Due to the same direction of travel, areas of possible location overlapped, blurring the differences between the two Eidos.

“... For starters, I'll drive to the place where they separated.”

The “disguise” showing Minami's current location split up near the Odawara station. Tatsuya switched the controls back to manual, and drove to Odawara station.

◇ ◇ ◇

The most important rule for the members of the Illegal MAP squad, when carrying out the tasks assigned to them was “by any means don't fall into the hands of the local authorities.” It was necessary to hide the fact that they were committing crimes and terrorist acts on instructions received from the USNA government.

Even if they didn’t have any possessions with them indicating a connection with America, they could be forced to confess if they were caught alive. But, even if they

don't confess, the information can be obtained by extracting it from their brain. A certain amount of information can be read even from the brain of a corpse, so if it came to suicide, then they should blow their brains out.

Gabe Shu and Iggy Ho, caught off guard by a sudden attack from the counterintelligence units led by Toyama Tsukasa, blew their heads off with small explosive devices made specifically for suicide. But, such self-destruction is the last resort. To avoid this, it was important to plan an escape route.

In addition to Gabe and Iggy, the remaining eight members of the Horsehead unit had evaded the manhunt of the Army's Intelligence Department, using an underground tunnel designed for transporting supplies. But, they still couldn't breathe a sigh of relief. The Commander of the Horsehead squad, Al Wan, knew that they were being pursued by at least two separate teams. The operation failed, but now it was more important to shake off the pursuit.

They advanced down the underground tunnel that was about one kilometer long in less than one minute. They used magic to move around, so there was also the possibility that they were spotted. Without waiting for an order from the commander, the surviving members of the Horsehead squad one by one began to enter the helicopter.

The helicopter they were looking for in case of escape belonged to some news service. In truth, this place was in the territory of a branch of a large newspaper company. However, there was no secret collusion between this company and Illegal MAP.

A preliminary inspection showed that the helicopter located here is extremely inefficient. They had to rely on such an escape route. After all, "efficiency is extremely low" doesn't mean that it "doesn't work at all."

There was also no guarantee that the helicopter would be present here. If they were unlucky and the helicopter was currently in flight, then they planned to hijack another vehicle. So if you look at the circumstances from the point of view of luck, then to some extent it was "not so bad."

Bart Lee, who had sat down in the pilot seat, immediately began the take-off

procedure. Al Wan pulled a mobile terminal from his waist bag that specializes in communication functions and was designed to intercept military and police radio communications.

Putting the speaker to the left ear, he tuned in to the police radio frequency first, since it was easier to decipher. However, before he could hear the police talking, the incoming message signal came on at the terminal.

The sender of the message shown on the display of the compact terminal was the USNA fleet. Al Wan frowned at the unexpected message, but still took out his multi-functional smart glasses from his breast pocket and put them on his head. By clicking on the smart glasses icon on the communication terminal, he paired these devices, and a message appeared before his eyes.

When Al Wan ran his eyes over the plain text message without any pictures, his eyes widened under his smart glasses.

“Who are you!?”

Through the microphone, the question Al Wan asked the communication terminal, automatically converted it to text and was sent to the other side.

The answer came immediately.

“Seven Sages? Why are the Seven Sages providing us with information about Shiba Tatsuya?”

All of Al Wan's subordinates heard his voice and turned around. Even some isolated members of the Illegal MAP in prison were aware of the "Seven Sages" as an influential force.

“...Okay, I understand. This time I will believe you.”

Al Wan unceremoniously turned off the receiver, and without removing his smart glasses, turned toward the pilot seat.

“Bart, fly to the freeway leading West from Kamakura to Odawara. Shiba Tatsuya

has been seen riding on this road.”

“Understood.”

Without saying anything more, Bart set up a new route in the flight navigator.

“Commander, what kind of group is the Seven Sages?”

Ellie Chao, seated on the right of Al Wan, asked in an arrogant tone.

“The mission entrusted to Horsehead is the murder of Shiba Tatsuya. You don’t have to worry about other things.”

Al Wan answered Ellie, having read aloud the message he received earlier as a reply.

“It may be nerve-racking, but the Seven Sages are right. In our case, the reliability of the source of information should be ignored.”

“And what will we do if it's a trap?”

The helicopter had already begun to rise, and Ellie Chao still kept asking questions.

“Then we will break through.”

Al Wan told her in a commanding tone.

Chapter 13

Tatsuya arrived at Odawara Station about 10 minutes after Minoru and Minami got to the station and on to the Cabinet, heading for Yokosuka.

The clock was 18:00, Friday. There were a lot of incoming and outgoing passengers at the station, so it was difficult to find a psion trail here.

Also, the Eidos, shown by “Elemental Sight,” was still divided in two. Even if you go back through the time stream to the moment of separation, there were still two

different ways Eidos were observed: in one of them, two people got out of the car and got into the Cabinet, while in the other, the two stayed in the car and went further East. Unfortunately, Tatsuya couldn't distinguish which Eidos was real and which was fake.

“The only thing that is known for sure is that both are heading East.”

Both parts of the information about Minami divided into two, and were moving in the same direction. If you choose which of them to pursue, then the quickest route was to go along the highway that runs along the coastline. That is, along the route of the car in which Minoru and Minami were traveling from the very beginning.

“... I don't like it, but nothing can be done about it.”

He had a feeling that he was doing exactly what Minoru had planned, but he had no other choice. Tatsuya steered the motorcycle towards the entrance of the highway.

◇ ◇ ◇

Having successfully completed the manipulation of the Horsehead unit, the “Seven Sages”... in other words, Raymond Clark began working on the following “secret report.” For him, since becoming a Parasite, which was considered a useless addition by the Stars, this was a chance to show what he can do. Raymond's face brightened.

The next recipient for his information was the Japanese police. And it wasn't the SMAT squad chasing the Horsehead. It was one of the police stations of the regional police, which even now is still sometimes called the “Prefecture Police.” More specifically, it was the Odawara police station.

He looked at the text he had just typed on the keyboard and grinned. For real-time communication, Raymond used voice input, but he preferred to type the first message he sent with the keyboard. From this message it seemed to him more like a “secret report,” which was very important for Raymond's so called “hobby.”

“A terrorist on an electric motorcycle was spotted in the vicinity of Odawara station. There is a fear that he might arrange a battle because of internal differences among

terrorists. He is expected to head towards Kamakura."

"Isn't it too arduous...?"

Raymond muttered, looking at the Japanese text he had written.

"Ok, sending. Anyway, it won't give us much extra time."

And immediately afterwards, to dispel his doubts, he pressed the send button.

"So... Tatsuya, will you fight the police from your own country?"

There was a smile on Raymond's face. But it wasn't a smile from a villain, but that of a mischievous child.

◇ ◇ ◇

There was a suspicious report that caused a stir at the Odawara police station.

The email stated that a terrorist had entered Odawara.

After reading the message, the police first laughed at it, taking it as a stupid joke.

But just in case, they decided to watch the live stream from the cameras next to Odawara station (unlike with a recorded one, it was easier to watch live video). They managed to find the same motorcycle and rider, which was described in the message. As a result, more than half of the police officers were in favor of taking action.

By itself, a black motorcycle with a fairing (an external motorcycle part which is used to increase streamlining & reduce drag) wasn't uncommon. The same can be said about the black riding suit. However, the combination of a black motorcycle and a black rider for some reason seemed suspicious to them.

"Chief. I found out the owner of the bike."

The officer who checked the license plate reported on the intercom. Quickly finding

out the owner meant that at least the license plate wasn't a fake.

“It is registered to a legal entity in Tokyo. The name of the office is Hanabishi Motorsport.”

“Who is their representative?”

“The registered name is Hanabishi Hyougo. It seems that this is a small auto repair shop of an individual entrepreneur.”

“I see. Thanks.”

In addition to the heads of the criminal investigation and traffic control departments, front-line officers also gathered in front of the chief.

“What do you think?”

“No violations have been observed. At the moment we have no reason to stop him for verification.”

The chief of the Traffic Department answered the question of the chief. After him continued the commander of the detachment of operatives.

“Should we take the police armored cars and follow him? If there really is a shootout between terrorists, then ordinary patrol cars and motorcycles won't be able to protect officers from danger.”

After the end of the Third World War, the armored vehicles of the Japanese detachment of special-purpose operatives were special armored vehicles of their own (Japanese) production, converted for police business.

“You're right.”

The chief agreed and ordered the assignment of a special purpose unit.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Target detected!”

Charlie Chan, who had stuck his head out of the helicopter, using special magic to replace binoculars and a night vision device, stuck his head back into the helicopter and shouted it.

Al Wan, sitting on the opposite side, slightly pushed the door open, stuck the upper half of his body out, and prepared to fire the assault rifle that he took from the Self-Defense Forces in their earlier encounter .

“Bart, take us down lower and get closer!”

Al Wan ordered, shouting over the wind.

The machine gun was taken during battle, so there were no extra magazines. This machine gun wasn’t the only means of attack, but from the point of view of preventing the enemy's counterattack, it was more reliable.

“Understood!”

Bart Lee shouted just as loudly, and directed the helicopter into a decline.

Al Wan caught sight of a black-clad motorcyclist.

◇ ◇ ◇

About 10 minutes after departure from Odawara Station, when Tatsuya had already traveled about 20 kilometers, he heard the sound of an approaching helicopter in the East.

Intuitively feeling the gaze that was clearly directed at him, he directed “Elemental Sight” in that direction.

It was a news company helicopter whose course ran through Kamakura from the border between the cities of Yamato and Ayase. And there were combat magicians on board...

He read this information at about the same time as he felt the muzzle of a machine gun pointed at him.

Tatsuya lowered himself under the fairing, lifted the front wheel high and aimed the motorcycle at the approaching helicopter.

There was no sound of gunfire. Obviously, a high-end silencer was used.

Released from the assault rifle, small-caliber bullets flew in different directions, hitting the fairing of “Wingless” the electric motorcycle. Fortunately, there were no other vehicles within range of the bullets that ricocheted.

At this rate, Wingless would inevitably fall, since it was in an unstable position with the wheel pulled up, so Tatsuya's magic lifted it into the air.

The next shot flew under the motorcycle and hit the road, breaking through the road's surface.

Continuing to gain altitude with “Wingless,” Tatsuya hit the helicopter with both wheels.

A dent was formed on the wall of the helicopter, and was strongly shaken.

The stolen helicopter lost its balance and began to fall rapidly, but managed to level out just before the collision with the ground.

Then it began to take off again.

Before he was attacked by a squad of assassins sitting inside the helicopter, consisting of combat magicians, Tatsuya activated magic, while flying away from them with all his might.

The helicopter turned into a giant fireball.

The wreckage didn't scatter like an explosion.

Because the helicopter was turned into dust by “Mist dispersion” - the decomposition magic of Tatsuya.

The fireball was formed because the flammable substances present in the helicopter's hull caught fire, and the other combustible substances were set on fire by a chain reaction. In this case, the combustion process was relatively slow. Consequently, such a fireball gave a very weak blast wave, and thanks to the height at which the combustion occurred, the road wasn't damaged at all.

However, for the surrounding people, such a fireball in the cloudy sky close to sunset was quite a shocking sight. It wasn't yet 7 pm. Not only 7 pm, but 7 pm on a weekday. On this highway at that time a lot of cars were moving in both directions.

The very first shooting had already brought the traffic to a standstill, and the sudden fireball caused panic among the drivers.

People abandoned their cars and ran along this suspension road. But precisely because of this there are almost no people left.

Tatsuya's flying motorcycle landed on the road.

Eight human silhouettes flew out of the fireball.

Four of them were burned corpses, and four more were magicians who survived the flames.

Tatsuya stopped Wingless and jumped off the seat. His opponents could have had other means of attack by long distance. Instead of taking the risk, and continuing to ride a motorcycle, and exposing his back to the opponent, he decided to finish them off right now, even though it would take some time.

All four magicians had the appearance of 35 to 45 years old.

Three men, and one woman.

Tatsuya didn't read their personal qualities recorded in their Eidos.

He only read the information about the sequences of magic that these magicians tried to construct, as well as information about the structure of the bodies of these four.

He didn't use the suit's built-in CAD with full mental control, but pulled out a specialized pistol-shaped CAD from his belt holster and directed it at the magician holding an assault rifle in his hands.

All four magicians began preparing to activate their magic.

Ignoring this, Tatsuya pulled the trigger on his CAD.

His favorite CAD "Trident" launched the activation sequence of his three-step decomposition magic "Trident".

The reading and then construction of the magic sequence was performed instantly.

The time spent was approximately equal to the time of work of the CAD itself.

Tatsuya simultaneously activated four three-step decomposition magics.

4 x 3 magical processes were performed simultaneously.

Four combat magicians...

Their external and internal data fortification interfering with the phenomenon was scattered...

The data reinforcement armor protecting the physical body was dispersed...

And the bodies themselves were decomposed to the level of chemical elements.

Small flames lit and immediately disappeared.

This effect arose from the ignition of flammable substances present in the composition of the human body.

This phenomenon, which looks like the "burning of the human body" was actually

“erasing the human body.”

Three-step decomposition magic, “Trident”.

Three men, and one woman.

For Tatsuya's magic... that is, for Tatsuya himself, there was no difference between men and women.

The four magicians who survived the fire instantly disappeared from existence, while the other four ended their lives in the form of burnt corpses.

Only two members of the Horsehead squad from the American Illegal MAP caused heavy damage to the army counterintelligence unit. Eight of these soldiers didn't last three minutes against Tatsuya by himself.

In less than three minutes, they were completely destroyed by Tatsuya.

An armored car was approaching from the West, sirens blaring. It was a special transport of the special operations unit, and it was moving, pushing through cars left by panicked people.

It was followed by a second one.

Tatsuya returned the CAD to his holster and ran to his motorcycle.

He started the engine, and the motorcycle instantly sped up.

Under current circumstances, Tatsuya couldn't waste time talking to the police. Fearing consequences in the distant future, he also couldn't afford to decompose the police cars with magic. The license plate of this motorcycle was duly registered with law enforcement. The registration data also contained information that could in one way or another indirectly lead to Tatsuya.

With the power of thought, he activated the suit's built-in CAD.

Having activated the magic of “Decomposition,” he released it in front of him.

Surveillance cameras installed on the highway, as well as on the public road 800 meters ahead, were disconnected from the wires, and they ceased to function.

He then activated the magic of flight.

Tatsuya jumped with his motorcycle and descended onto the public road, which runs under an overhanging highway.

Then he flipped one of the switches on the console mounted in the middle of the steering wheel.

The appearance of the motorcycle changed.

The color of the fairing changed from black to dark blue. The inscription on the license plate was rewritten to another.

The traffic on this detour decreased after the construction of the high-speed elevated highway, but even now here on the highway there were calmly traveling cars that Tatsuya deftly drove around. He sped up the bike and headed further East.

After a while, he returned to the main highway and continued the pursuit.

◇ ◇ ◇

The individual Cabinet arrived in Yokosuka. As Minoru stepped onto the platform, he could barely contain the urge to check Tatsuya's current location.

If he directs his, “Elemental Sight” at Tatsuya from here, then Kaso Tonkou will most likely be destroyed. The escape isn’t over yet. You can't be distracted until the very end.

Minami came out of the Cabinet. Her downcast gaze rose and headed North, then dropped back down to the floor. Her attention wasn’t directed towards Tatsuya who was pursuing them. In the direction Minami looked, the city of Tofu was located, and there Miyuki should have already returned home to the apartment in her high-rise

building.

Minoru felt it was better not to ask what Minami was thinking. It was so obvious that she remained attached to her former life where she spent day after day with Tatsuya and Miyuki.

...Can I just take her away like this?

Such doubts developed in Minoru.

...Isn't it too late for me to think about this?

He mentally ridiculed himself. However, he couldn't help thinking about it.

Minami didn't need to escape from Japan.

There is no guarantee that the USNA Army will treat Minami politely.

If she leaves Japan, her only friend would be Minoru.

The USNA Army may try to take Minami hostage to control Minoru.

And then they may even try to use her to kill Tatsuya.

Minoru couldn't help thinking that it would be better for Minami if he ignored his feelings and they parted here.

“Minami-san...”

“Yes?”

Minami responded to Minoru's voice, without raising her head and not meeting his eyes.

...Are you staying here?

...Let's say goodbye here.

He was close to saying one of those phrases.

“...Shall we go?”

But in the end he didn't offer to leave.

The word he uttered meant a request to go with him.

“...Yes.”

Minami agreed.

Minoru went, and Minami followed him, keeping some distance.

...Everything is good.

...Because she agreed.

Minoru convinced himself with such thoughts.

And he once again vowed to himself that he would protect Minami.

Minoru led Minami who was behind him, and they went to the Yokosuka military port.

◇ ◇ ◇

Tatsuya saw the car he was chasing with the naked eye after about 15 minutes had passed after the battle with the Horsehead squad, and he had already driven into Kamakura.

It happened 10 minutes later than Tatsuya expected. The time he loss due to the descent from the highway in order to shake off the police cars pursuing him took longer than he spent repelling the attack of the Horsehead squad.

“Something is wrong here...”

Now that he wasn't only observing the target through the information dimension, but also saw her physically, he could clearly sense the discrepancy that wasn't visible from Odawara.

Minoru and Minami, who were riding in this car, didn't have a temporary depth. They only had about one and a half hours of history. In other words, they were copies made about an hour and a half ago.

“I see... If the double was made in the last 24 hours, then you can determine that it is a double, if you go back through the history of Eidos?”

With the self-reproaching thought of “thinking too late,” Tatsuya kept this discovery in his memory.

But he could have made this discovery around Lake Saiko, when he caught up with Kudou Soushi, playing the role of bait. However, there was no point in punishing himself for what had already happened.

This time he was beautifully deceived. It was necessary to remember this in order to not run into this problem again.

But this time, Tatsuya didn't stop pursuing the car like he did with Soushi, because he decided to try to extract information about the real object from the copied Eidos. And in order to read information more reliably, he had to stop the car and touch the “someone or something” to which the copy of Eidos was attached.

Stopping the car in a crude way, such as removing the wheels or destroying the engine, could cause an accident, so this method was undesirable. It would have been better if the vehicle's security system had issued a stop command due to a malfunction that would not lead to an accident.

After considering the options of what can be broken, Tatsuya decided to disconnect the wires of the computer controlling the crash mitigation system.

Carefully aiming, he activated decomposition magic. The computer controlling the

airbags, seat tilt angle, and emergency brakes was disconnected from the system.

As Tatsuya planned, the car slowed down and stopped at the curb.

After passing by the car, Tatsuya parked the motorcycle in front of it, went to the front passenger seat and pulled the door handle. The door was locked, so he destroyed the locking mechanism with magic. Opening the door, he put his left hand on the head of a gynoid (the android in the form of a woman) sitting in the passenger seat.

On the gynoid there was a copy of Minami's Eidos.

Tatsuya went back through the history of the Eidos to the time this copy was made.

And this time he went even further, in search of the original Eidos, which became the source for copying.

Something like that could be done because the Eidos used for masking the gynoid was reproduced by copying information from the original. At the time of the copying process, the copy is always in contact with the source, so if you go back to this point, you can stumble upon the original Eidos.

However, with clothes or accessories that the person used, it doesn't work. But with parts of the body, such as hair or bodily fluids, this is quite possible. If the hideout in the Sea of Trees wasn't burned by the fire magic of Fujibayashi Nagamasa, Tatsuya could have searched for Minami's hair there, and determined her location much earlier.

It was Minami, though. She must have done a thorough cleaning in the hideout, leaving no dust or hair behind. Just as she did in the hospital ward, when she was ready for discharge.

But that wasn't what he needed to think about now.

For the first time since the abduction of Minami, Tatsuya came into contact with her real Eidos, unaffected by "Parade" and "Kimon Tonkou." Now Tatsuya won't lose sight of her, if he doesn't deliberately look away from her. No matter how Minoru

disguises her, he won't be able to fake the information obtained as a result of a search in records about the past.

“Hmm?”

Tatsuya had a short chuckle.

The copies of Eidos from Minoru and Minami, attached to the androids, suddenly disappeared.

Perhaps Minoru noticed Tatsuya's touch and canceled his magic.

Or the condition “cancel if someone touches” was imposed on the magic in advance.

But whatever it was, the result was the same... or rather, two.

First, Tatsuya lost track of Minoru.

Secondly, Tatsuya directed his “sight” at Minami so that he would not lose sight of her anymore.

The first will be true until they come in contact again.

The second will be true until he himself wishes for the opposite.

But this result was satisfactory.

Now he knew the current location of Minami.

“Yokosuka military port?”

Minami was currently near the entrance to the military port of Yokosuka.

Minoru should be there too.

In order to finally settle this matter, Tatsuya decided to fly to Yokosuka using the flight function of the “Freed Suit.”

“...What the?”

But he couldn't fly.

Because at this moment Tatsuya was prevented in a completely unexpected way.

◇ ◇ ◇

From the Cabinet transportation station to the entrance of the military port in Yokosuka, it was about 450 meters along the road. Such a distance, according to average calculations, can be covered in about 6 minutes. Minoru and Minami took 10 minutes to travel this route.

The slow pace was a sign of their doubt. Both Minoru and Minami were hesitant.

They were both confused, wondering whether it was possible to continue to move on without changing anything.

... Is it possible to remain silent without telling this to Minami?

That was the question Minoru asked.

... Can I continue to remain silent without telling Minoru this?

That was the question Minami asked.

Each of them felt guilty about deceiving the other.

Minoru didn't mention that he assumes that the USNA Army may try to use Minami as a hostage.

Minami didn't say that she was provoked by Yakumo by claiming that “following Minoru is for the good of Miyuki.”

While they were walking, they wanted to admit it several times, but they couldn't

Speak.

Without confessing to each other, they reached the main gate of the military port of Yokosuka.

At the gate, in addition to the soldiers of the Self-Defense Forces, stood an officer of the USNA Navy.

More precisely, it was a young man dressed in a military uniform of a Junior officer.

- Hello, Minoru. I came to pick you up.

- Raymond. But you...?

The man who came to pick them up was one of the Parasites, Raymond Clark.

Chapter 14

At that moment, when Tatsuya tried to take off with the help of the magic of flight, the top and bottom were swapped. He stood in the clouds of the evening sky, and on top was the smooth surface of the freeway.

Logically, it was an illusion.

In a state of heightened vigilance from this ability, which managed to cover his mind with an illusion in an instant, Tatsuya interrupted the activation of flight magic and began to prepare to use "Gram Dispersion" to dispel this illusory vision.

But at that very moment when he interrupted the magic of flight...

The inverted world became normal again.

"I have the feeling this illusion technique ..."

With the word "feeling," Tatsuya expressed a certain atmosphere, the distinctive features of magic, which he couldn't clearly describe.

Words weren't important at the moment. The problem was that he remembered this magic of illusions.

Tatsuya activated the magic of flight. This time, he didn't interrupt it immediately before activation. Gravity control was already in effect.

However, he decided not to take his feet off the ground.

Again, heaven and earth changed places just before activation.

The magic of flight is, roughly speaking, "falling" in a chosen direction, by changing the gravity vector.

If Tatsuya were already in the air, he would lose his sense of direction and couldn't control the magic of flight. But Tatsuya didn't lose his awareness of where the top, bottom, left, and right were, because he could feel the surface of the road through the soles of his feet.

"Interference with the sense of direction is almost the same as that of "Kimon Tonkou." So, the techniques borrowed from the same source as that of "Kimon Tonkou" were introduced into Ninjutsu?"

If the purpose of the illusion was to not allow Tatsuya to take off, then in this situation, the goal can be considered fulfilled. However, now that the magic of flight was in the process of execution, he couldn't cancel the illusion. Tatsuya considered the sequence of illusion magic which continued to operate, and from the history of the activation process he determined the place where this magic was released.

Tatsuya canceled the flying magic and at the same moment released "Gram Demolition"

When "Gram Demolition" is released on a magician who isn't using magic on himself, it doesn't have the effect of canceling magic.

However, this action has the effect of smoking out a hidden enemy. The flow of psions under high pressure shakes the psionic field enveloping a person. And this

concussive wave spreads into the surrounding space in the form of random vibrations.

If the caster applied the illusion magic in motion, “Gram Demolition” would seem to be a simple shot into the void, however, apparently, this enemy didn’t want to hide completely.

Tatsuya was confronted by a thin-built man in monastic attire. Tatsuya knew this man by sight.

The one who had used the illusion to prevent Tatsuya from going any further was Kokonoe Yakumo, whom he called “Master.”

◇ ◇ ◇

An open-top car with Raymond behind the wheel in which Minoru and Minami got into, drove slowly through the grounds of the Yokosuka naval base.

“Raymond. Have you had any problems with your stay in our country?”

It was already eight o'clock in the evening, so there were few people on the inner road of the base. As well as people driving cars too. So there was no need to worry about eavesdropping.

“Problems?”

Raymond asked Minoru. At the same time, no pretense was read in his voice.

“You were harassed by the police in Osaka, weren't you? I thought the search activities were still going on.”

“Oh, that's what you mean. As long as we don't leave the base, there won't be any problems.”

The USNA Army had the right to use the naval base at Yokosuka, but it wasn’t subject to extraterritorial rights, allowing them to not comply with Japanese laws.

However, it was also a fact that it was difficult for the police to obtain the right to conduct an investigation on the territory of a military base. Minoru, who didn't know what the relationship between the army and the police easily agreed with this, deciding that it was so.

“Minoru, you also got here safely. Tatsuya never caught up with you?” - Raymond asked with a big smile.

"Yes, that expression on his face is familiar to me," Minoru thought, and answered:

“He's probably still pursuing us.”

And after a short pause he added:

“I wouldn't be surprised if Tatsuya-san appears over our heads right now.”

“In the airspace of a military base? Even Tatsuya won't go that far...”

Raymond shook his head at first...

“... No, Tatsuya can, and probably will do it.”

... and quickly corrected his opinion.

“So we better hurry.”

Having said that, Raymond increased the speed of the car.

While Minoru and Raymond were talking, Minami sat silently beside Minoru.

Raymond never talked to Minami.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Master, what is the meaning of this?”

The fact that Tatsuya spoke in an accusatory tone with the very first phrase was perfectly reasonable under current circumstances. Without any warning, he was attacked by an illusion.

“Well, don’t be so angry. Maybe we should talk a little?”

Yakumo wasn’t eager to respond properly. Having come to this conclusion, Tatsuya again tried using the magic of flight to go in search of Minami.

But Yakumo's spell again prevented Tatsuya.

“Master! Have you decided to side with Minoru!?”

Naturally, Tatsuya raised his tone.

Yakumo's usual slick grin disappeared from his lips.

“Kudou Minoru and Sakurai Minami-jou have already arrived in Yokosuka. Perhaps they are already boarding the ship.”

“That's why I have to hurry.”

“Why?”

“What?”

From his manner of speech Tatsuya's politeness finally disappeared.

“Tatsuya-kun. Why do you need to hurry?”

“If they go out to sea, it will become a predicament.”

“Into a dilemma? But your own actions have already grown into big problems.”

“...”

Tatsuya was cornered by such a counter-argument.

“The special forces are looking for you. There hasn't been any armed shootouts on public roads in our country, even during the war. And the explosion of a helicopter and four burnt corpses. The police won't be able to turn a blind eye to such an incident.”

“.....”

“Leaving a car with broken wheels near Lake Saiko was also a bad decision. The second son of the Kudou family has already given evidence to the police and caused a commotion in the Magic Association. And you started a fire that began in the Aokigahara “Sea of Trees.” The fire department rushed there at full speed.”

“That...”

“You should be well aware that excuses like “I didn't do it,” and “it wasn't my fault” won't work here. And it's not only about today's events. Automatic dolls were blown up near the hospital in Tofu. Do you know what kind of excitement was caused by just a few demons being released? The death of Kudou Retsu and the related unrest in the army was also indirectly caused by your quarrel with Kudou Minoru. It can also be argued that the confrontation around Minami-jou also has to do with the fact that the events on Miyaki-jima didn't go unnoticed.”

“... Is that why you are interfering with me now?”

“Do you think I should let you go?”

In response to Tatsuya's question in a desperate voice, Yakumo replied coolly, without moving an eyebrow.

“Minami-jou is still a human being, right? Is this not proof that Kudou Minoru respects her opinion? He himself is undoubtedly a demon, but he doesn't harm Minami-jou.”

“That is... do you mind if Minami becomes a Parasite?”

“It's not for me to decide. Whether to remain human or not depends on her own

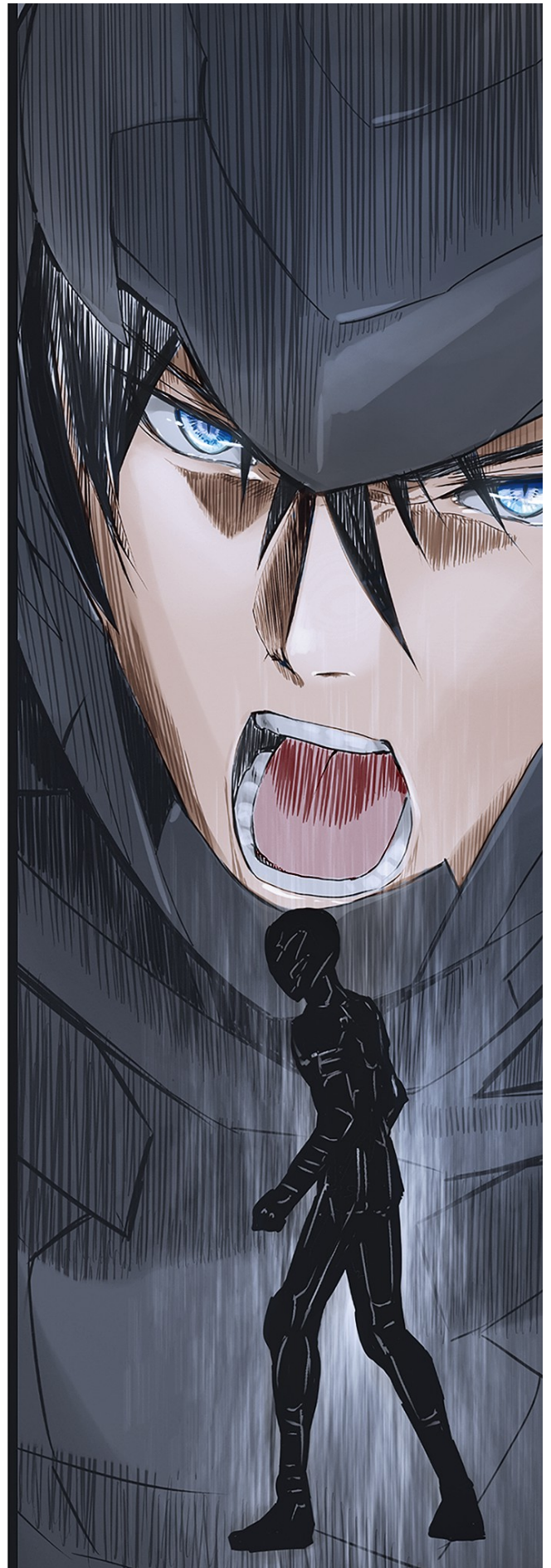
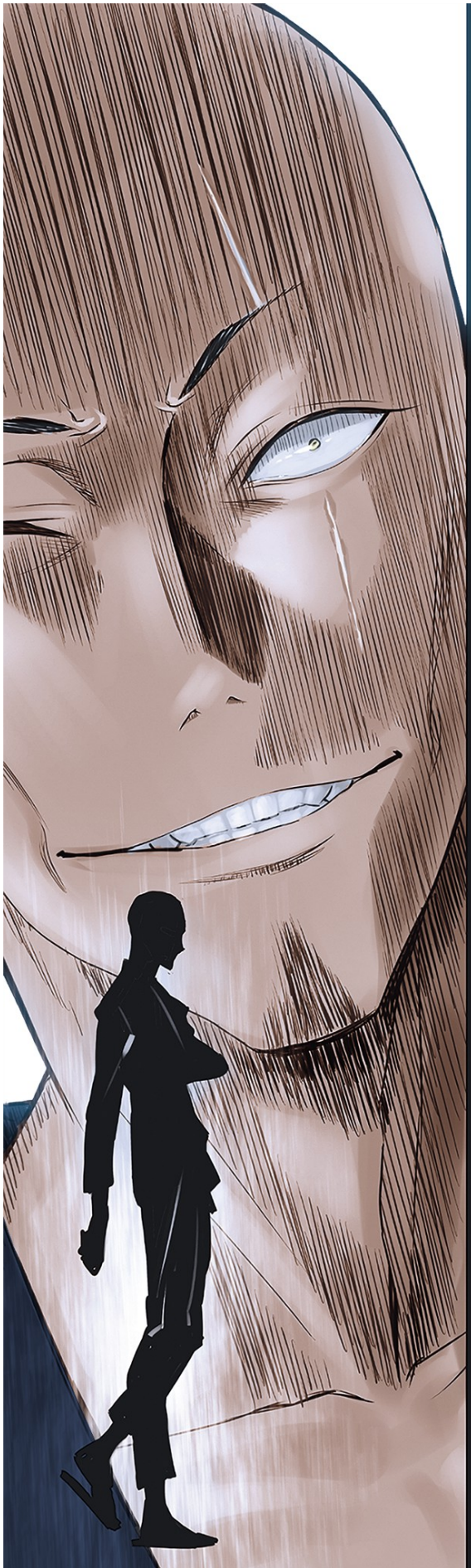
choice. This isn't something that you or Miyuki-kun should get involved in.”

Tatsuya clenched his teeth tightly, closed his eyes briefly, then opened them wide.

“Kokonoe Yakumo. Don’t disturb me!”

“No, I will disturb you. I’ll make sure you keep me company for a while longer.”





Tatsuya forcefully pushed off the ground and flew up.

However, Yakumo's illusion prevented him from flying more than 10 meters, and as a result, he fell back to the ground.

◇ ◇ ◇

Minoru and Minami moved from the car to a small boat. It was a common rowboat without a roof, which had a small motor with a propeller attached. Raymond operated the lever that was mounted on the stern that turned an old-fashioned rudder.

It was impossible to cross the Pacific Ocean on this boat. Apparently, a larger vessel awaits at sea. Minoru didn't ask about this, so as not to interfere with Raymond's control of the boat.

But contrary to his concern, Raymond spoke himself.

“Looks like Tatsuya didn't make it.”

“Will we be boarding the ship soon?”

Raymond words seemed like an ominous omen, so Minoru, feeling some impatience, asked this question.

“Yeah, soon enough.... Oh, there it is already in sight.”

Although Raymond said this, Minoru didn't see any ships in the vicinity.

“Submarine...?”

Minami muttered, sitting next to Minoru.

Hearing her voice for the first time in a long time, Minoru looked again at the surface of the sea.

“Over there...?”

In the place where he was looking, some kind of dome-shaped object was barely visible from beneath the water.

“Noticed, finally?”

Raymond answered Minoru for some reason with pride in his voice.

“High-speed transport ship fully submersible type, “Coral.” Well, it would be easier to call it a transport submarine.”

“Fully submersible type?”

- Yeah. And the vibration damping function... Oh, let's talk about it when we are inside.”

Without slowing down, Raymond tilted the engine forward to lift the propeller and rudder out of the water.

They drove directly to the dome - the back of the transport submarine.

Raymond grabbed the slender pole, which only became visible as they approached it.

It seems that it served as a signal, because a gap appeared in the curved hull of the submarine - a large hatch opened.

“Alright, let's get in.”

Raymond jumped off the boat.

Minoru also stepped onto the hull of the submarine. Through the soles of his feet he could feel the sensation of a soft surface that wasn't as slippery as he had expected.

He extended his hand to Minami and helped her off the boat.

They followed Raymond up the steps that led down from the opening hatch.

Behind them, the crew dragged the small boat inside the ship.

The hatch closed automatically when they descended the stairs.

Raymond turned and spread his arms wide.

“Welcome to the USNA Naval Transport Ship, Coral.”

Raymond said this to Minoru and Minami in a dramatic, theatrical tone.

◇ ◇ ◇

Tatsuya, who had been forced to fall by Yakumo's illusion, barely managed to land on his feet. Repositioning himself after landing, he flew again, but this time horizontally to the East. He wanted to fly up immediately after he got out of the area of effect of Yakumo's illusion magic.

But the illusion again forced him to interrupt the flight. Turning in flight, he stopped by braking his feet on the road. Having slid back a few meters, he raised his head and looked at Yakumo, who continued to stand quietly.

Tatsuya's right hand reached into his belt. He pulled “Trident” out of the holster and aimed the “barrel” at Yakumo.

The image of Yakumo slowly wavered and dissipated like smoke.

Tatsuya kicked his feet off the road.

But not to take off.

He rushed forward and lunged with his fist one meter to the left of the place where Yakumo disappeared.

A soft breeze curled around Tatsuya.

The air around Tatsuya suddenly became heavy and viscous like oil.

Tatsuya's index finger pulled the activation switch on his CAD, which had the form of a trigger.

But not to blow away the air that enveloped his body.

And in order to erase the magic that gives the viscosity to the air, and return freedom to his body.

Tatsuya lunged with his left hand.

Not with a fist, but with his palm forward.

The left palm, with fingers held together, pointed upward, struck a space that seemed to be empty.

There was a sound.

And it wasn't the sound of a hand striking another hand. It was a high-pitched echo, like a metal hammer striking a shield.

The transparent haze cleared, as if blown away by this sound. In its place, the figure of Yakumo appeared, blocking Tatsuya's left palm with his right hand.

Tatsuya jumped back.

The throwing knife-kunai, thrown by Yakumo from his left hand, only pierced Tatsuya's afterimage.

Tatsuya returned the "Trident" from his right hand to the holster. Instead, he pulled out a combat knife with hand protection. He abandoned his favorite CAD because he decided to switch to close combat.

The output of activation sequences can be made using the suit's built-in CAD with full mental control. Instead of his usual CAD in the form of a pistol, he chose to take a blade in his hand. Tatsuya came to the conclusion that Yakumo couldn't be defeated by magic alone.

Yakumo grinned and threw another kunai.

Tatsuya didn't evade it, but deflected it with the knife in his right hand.

Tatsuya tried not to take his eyes off Yakumo. But as soon as he turned his gaze to the kunai for a moment, Yakumo disappeared from his sight.

Tatsuya switched his perception to "Elemental Sight."

However, at that very moment, nine Yakumo's appeared in his "field of vision."

They ran and jumped around Tatsuya.

However, in reality, only the dull landscape of the highway was visible around him.

Occasionally cars drove by, avoiding the lane where Tatsuya was standing.

"Is this the "Multiple Mirage Matoi?" - muttered Tatsuya.

He gathered Psions in his left hand and squeezed it into his palm.

He stretched his left hand forward.

And immediately released nine psionic shells at once.

Nine compressed psionic balls pierced the physical space along the coordinates where each Yakumo should have been.

The eight Yakumo, which he "saw" in the information dimension, disappeared, and the remaining one appeared, but in a slightly different place.

The ninth appeared right in front of Tatsuya.

Yakumo appeared swinging his short kodachi sword down.

Tatsuya took the slash on the blade of his knife.

“Not bad.”

After the blades were crossed , Yakumo's lips curved into a grin.

Tatsuya's face, still hidden under the helmet, didn't change.

Tatsuya extended his left hand.

Yakumo stepped back with a big leap to dodge Tatsuya's left hand, which tried to grab his wrist.

“So, you want to capture me? Do you think that if you grab me, you will know where I am, even if I use illusion techniques?”

Tatsuya's face, hidden under the visor of his helmet, didn't express any concern that he had just been shown exactly what he was planning on doing.

With the gliding motion of his feet, Tatsuya moved closer to Yakumo.

The image of Yakumo trembled and disappeared.

Ignoring this, Tatsuya lunged with his right hand holding a knife.

There was a scrape of metal on metal. At first there was only sound.

Yakumo's figure appeared next. He held the kodachi horizontally, sliding it over Tatsuya's knife.

Tatsuya extended his left hand forward again, but Yakumo removed his right hand from the handle of the kodachi and used it to deflect Tatsuya's left hand.

Tatsuya's hand protection that was built into the knife handle, struck a small part of the kodachi.

The kodachi, which was now held only with the left hand, fell out of Yakumo's hand.

Tatsuya threw the knife away and reached for Yakumo's collar with his right hand.

Yakumo waived his right hand from top to bottom.

In his right hand, a small ball came from somewhere.

When this ball hit the road and exploded, it became clear that it was a smoke bomb.

Thick smoke appeared between Tatsuya and Yakumo.

Yakumo's figure disappeared into the smoke.

At the same time, even when Tatsuya “looked” at the informational dimension with his “sight,” he still couldn’t detect Yakumo's Eidos.

“Now that was pretty scary. But can you see me now?”

The voice was heard as if it came from the front.

Or was it heard from behind?

No, you could hear it from the front and behind, on the left and right, from above and below... so, in general, from all directions. But for Tatsuya, the voice sounded as if he had just misheard and in fact didn’t hear anything.

Tatsuya didn’t even try to find the real Yakumo by searching for the source of the voice.

His mind went back to the past, but at the same time he was looking at the present.

Chasing the present from the past.

False information superimposed on the present, and information about the present, obtained by scrolling from the past.

Tatsuya lunged with his left fist, and was stopped by Yakumo's right hand.

“How delightful.”

Yakumo praised.

A car was approaching Tatsuya and Yakumo. The driver's face could be seen through the windshield, eyes wide open with shock.

Tatsuya and Yakumo jumped in different directions to dodge the car.

At that moment, Tatsuya realized that up to this point, Yakumo's illusions had been diverting passing cars, so that they wouldn't interfere with their battle. Tatsuya realized that he was finally able to overcome the limits of Yakumo, to which he could simultaneously fight with him and control the car drivers.

Yakumo leaped over the railing of the overhanging road.

Tatsuya followed him and jumped down from the highway.

◇ ◇ ◇

When Kuroba Mitsugu brought Fujibayashi Nagamasa to the shores of Lake Kawaguchi, he was subjected to fierce pressure from his son and daughter.

“Otou-sama, please, tell me what is the reason? Why don't you send reinforcements to Tatsuya-san?”

“I've told you many times why. Tatsuya-kun has already defeated an illegal squad of saboteurs from the USNA Army, and got rid of the pursuit of the Special Forces.”

“But isn't he also hindered by Kokonoe Yakumo-sensei? I believe that you need to send help, regardless of whether he needs it or not.”

The Kuroba family monitored the situation around Tatsuya, by employing the superpower users of “Clairvoyance” and “Remote Sensing.”

“Clairvoyance” is the superpower of distant vision, and “Remote Sensing” is the superpower that allows you to hear from afar. They are both simply powers of perception of physical signals. Such abilities weren't enough to break through the

illusions of Yakumo, but Tatsuya occasionally broke through these illusions, so the observers were able to identify the opponent that Tatsuya was fighting.

All of the information received by the Kuroba family was also forwarded to the main house. Among all the people associated with this incident, probably only Miyuki wasn't aware of the changes in the situation.

“I agree with nee-san!”

Fumiya complained in a heightened tone, agreeing with Ayako's words.

“Now the main enemy of Tatsuya-niisan is time. It's not important for Tatsuya-niisan to win or lose, but to get out of there as quickly as possible! I believe that our help won't be completely useless!”

“Fumiya. Indeed, as you said, Tatsuya-kun's main enemy is now time. However, the real enemy standing in his way is a man known as one of the best users of ninjutsu of our time. Trying to fight him with a large number of people isn't the best option. Most likely, if you go there to help, then, on the contrary, you'll only hinder Tatsuya-kun.”

Mitsugu tried to dismiss Fumiya's protest, at first glance, with plausible arguments. And he realized that it worked when he saw an expression of frustration on his face.

“Otou-sama, I don't think so.”

However, Ayako wasn't convinced.

“Kokonoe-sensei is a ninjutsu user. The field of application in which “ninjutsu” performs well is the magic of illusions based on interference with the mind. Yes, I don't have the aptitude to use mental interference magic, but Fumiya, possessing high compatibility for this magic, can become good support for Tatsuya-san.”

“Maybe you're right...”

Mitsugu was a loving father. He valued the abilities of his son and daughter like no other.

In fact, he also believed that Fumiya would be able to compete with Yakumo. Thus, only because Ayako was his daughter, Mitsugu couldn't deny her arguments, which coincided with his true feelings.

“In addition, there are also many "ninjutsu users" in our family who have learned from the teachings of the Koga clan. It may be too much of a burden for just Fumiya, but it seems to me that with the support of Otou-sama's subordinates, he will be able to at least detain Kokonoe-sensei.”

This was also entirely consistent with the opinion of Mitsugu. And he answered:

“You can't. Maya-san... the head of the main family forbade it.”

Finally, he revealed the true reason.

“Toushu-sama!?” - Ayako and Fumiya asked in unison.

“Why!?”

This question was also asked simultaneously by two voices.

“... I wasn't informed of the reason.”

Sensing the slight displeasure in Mitsugu's voice, Fumiya realized that his father really didn't know the reason.

It also seemed to be an unwelcome outcome for his father. Realizing this, Fumiya decided not to go further into this matter.

But his sister Ayako had the opposite opinion.

“I see. Then I will ask for the reason directly from Toushu-sama.”

“Nee-san!?”

Fumiya tried to stop Ayako's rebellious behavior.

But Mitsugu didn't interfere with his daughter's selfishness.

“Actually... If it's Ayako, then Touseu-sama will probably tell the truth.”

“Thank you for your permission, Otou-sama. Then, I'll go make the call.”

Having said that, Ayako stood up.

“Nee-san, wait for me!”

Fumiya, too, hastily jumped up and followed her.

◇ ◇ ◇

The place where Tatsuya and Yakumo had jumped was close to some kind of comprehensive high school. The grounds of the schoolyard were extensive, and the whole landscape was covered with greenery. Yakumo led Tatsuya over there.

But he led him, not just running away. He retreated, choosing the perfect moments to attack. Tatsuya couldn't ignore him, and was forced to follow Yakumo into the courtyard of the high school.

There were no signs of the presence of other people inside or outside the school building.

At this time, the school staff could still be here. Conversely, it would be strange if there were still students here at this time.

However, it seems that in this school, students and staff also went home early due to the fact that the state of emergency hasn't yet been completely lifted. But maybe the school was even left closed or was out for summer vacation a little earlier.

It wasn't known why the decision was made. Only the result was known. The grounds of this school were completely deserted. At least that's what Tatsuya's perception said.

Yakumo may have felt the same way. Tatsuya himself realized this when he burst into the school grounds, and Yakumo undoubtedly learned about this fact from a much greater distance. At least, that was Tatsuya's impression.

That is, Yakumo was concerned beforehand about not involving unrelated people in the showdown. But on the other hand, this meant that he no longer intended to restrain his techniques and abilities.

Tatsuya was in the same situation. Although he felt that the battle still wasn't serious in the true sense of the word, but to the extent that it is possible in a battle not to the death, he stopped holding back some time ago.

More precisely, Tatsuya thought that he wouldn't repent if it came to the decision to kill Yakumo. Honestly, he didn't want to kill Yakumo for Minami's sake. Tatsuya didn't believe that Minami was more important or valuable than Yakumo.

But since neither Tatsuya nor Yakumo had any intention of retreating, even the worst outcome could be expected.

And giving up the chase was Tatsuya's best choice in order to avoid this “worst outcome.”

◇ ◇ ◇

“This is a request from the sponsor-sama.”

When Ayako asked Maya on the phone about the reasons for the ban on sending reinforcements, she answered her without hiding the facts.

“Sponsor-sama?”

Ayako didn't hide her surprise on the videophone screen. And it was only natural. It was extremely rare for sponsors to interfere with the Yotsuba family's work, which was already in the middle of completion. In recent times, such cases, one can only recall the acceleration of the resolution of the “Vampire Incident” that took place last winter.

Besides, this time it's not even "work." Nor should the issue of returning the servant of the Yotsuba family have anything to do with the sponsors. Even Maya herself didn't expect interference.

"Yes. I would like you to refrain from further participation in these events tonight."

Approximately in this form there was a request if you remove the extra details. The request didn't say that we should directly stop Tatsuya-san, but that we can't send out anymore help yet.

The Yotsuba family isn't subordinate to the "sponsors." They have a relationship as a client and a contractor, and they have almost equal positions, not the same as in the subcontract.

Moreover, this relationship is not established from a position of power, where the Yotsuba family would take a dominant position. In terms of power (brute force), the Yotsuba family is higher, but the sponsors are superior in terms of political and financial influence. So even when the request came in the form of a "request," Maya couldn't reject it.

"... Does that mean we're leaving Minami-san?"

"In the request from sponsor-sama it was spoken exclusively about "tonight." We aren't going to abandon Minami-chan."

"I said something stupid. Please forgive me."

"I understand your feelings, Ayako-san, but I can't allow reinforcements to be sent today."

"As you say."

"Fumiya-san, did you understand everything?"

"Yes, Toushu-sama."

After asking for the opinion of Fumiya on the monitor, Maya ended the telephone conversation with Ayako.

“And yet... what are these gentlemen really thinking about...?”

She spoke in such a tone as if she was talking to herself, but she was clearly speaking to Hayama, who was standing behind Her.

“Perhaps they very much want to cleanse our country of the Parasites?”

“I think it would be quicker to destroy them rather than let them go abroad.”

In fact, Maya’s dissatisfaction with the sponsors' instructions was no less than that of Ayako.

“Perhaps the gentlemen thought that eliminating Kudou Minoru took too much time.”

“If so, they would have said so then...”

Following the rules of decency, Hayama kept silent, without reacting in any way to Maya’s dissatisfaction, which she expressed like a young girl.

◇ ◇ ◇

The signal for the beginning of the battle was a swirl of leaves in the wind.

Elm, Oak, and Mountain cherry. Even though it was midsummer, green leaves began to fall from the trees growing in the schoolyard, as if they had been torn off or cut off.

Both this leaf fall and the wind were unnatural.

Tatsuya jumped aside before this swirling of leaves reached him.

He didn’t manage to dodge some of the leaves, and they grazed him on the arm, leaving a line of cuts.

The leaves looked thin, but they were able to cut the “Freed Suit,” which possesses properties of being bulletproof, and resistance to piercing and cutting blows.

“Leaves” and “blades.” It was probably “Imitation Magic” that used “kotodamas” - the word of spirits.

The swarm of leaves flying past spun into a big arc and came back at Tatsuya.

Tatsuya's body was covered in a blinding Psion light.

Contact-Type Gram Demolition.

It was a special ability of Tomitsuka Hagane, with whom Tatsuya once fought. With the help of psionic manipulation techniques, he developed a technique that has a similar effect with the unique ability of Tomitsuka.

When the wind touched the Psion armor, it lost its power, and the leaves lost their blade like properties and fell to the ground.

“Is this a kind of “Mokuton-jutsu*” - 'Hidden foliage?’”

[Tonjutsu - ninjutsu techniques (for stealth and escape) with the participation of the Five Elements. Roughly speaking, the use of each of the elements to distract the attention of the enemy. Fujibayashi Nagamasa's fire spell, for example, was also from Tonjutsu. Not so bad “distracted attention,” having burnt the whole house. Prefixes for tonjutsu: Moku is tree, Ka is fire, Do is earth, Kin is metal, Sui is water.]

[Read more about the Five Elements themselves: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/y-syn>]

Tatsuya canceled his psionic armor, and began to look for signs of Yakumo's presence.

Not using his “Elemental Sight.” In the course of the battle on the highway, it became clear that Yakumo possesses techniques capable of deceiving “Elemental Sight.” Relying only on that is too dangerous. Rather, on the contrary, there are more opportunities to fall for some trick of Yakumo.

Tatsuya's perception caught not the location of Yakumo, but signs of magic activation.

Right under his feet.

Tatsuya abruptly jumped back from this place.

While he was in the air, all the leaves that had fallen to the ground caught fire at the same time.

The fire was quite strong, as if dried leaves were burning, not fresh and green.

“Is this “Katonjutsu” the magic of fire adhering to the system of the Five Elements?”

According to the system of the Five Elements, “wood makes fire.” By forcefully applying this concept to reality, this magic burned the fresh leaves as if they were dry. Perhaps this, too, can be called the magic of the spirits of word.

The fire didn’t go out even after the leaves burned. Tatsuya was pursued by a physically impossible fire magic burning without combustible substances.

It wasn’t a real flame.

It was an illusion of a flame.

However, Tatsuya knew that if you touch this flame, it will burn the skin.

Tatsuya threw a projectile of compressed psions into this illusory flame.

“Gram Demolition.”

Illusions are nothing but information that doesn’t possess a material entity. And the psion pressure just blew it away.

He didn’t use “Gram Dispersion” because he was cautious, suggesting that a trap might be waiting for him in the process of reading the magic sequence.

Of course, this could be unnecessary suspicion. But if the goal of Yakumo is to seal Tatsuya's special abilities, making him cautious, then it turns out that Tatsuya has already fallen for his trick.

But Tatsuya wasn't so simple either.

"If he follows the Five Elements, then the next one will be "Earth."

"Dotonjutsu?"

Tatsuya, who had extinguished the flames while still in the air, tucked both legs high in the air a moment before landing. And at the moment of landing he strongly stamped them on the ground.

Psionic waves, propagating from the soles of his shoes, shook the surface of the earth.

The magic sequence that began to "infect" by coming into contact with the "ground" obtained from the ashes of the burnt leaves was broken by the psionic shock wave.

"You are well-versed in the 'Five Connected Tonjutsu Technique.'"

Yakumo's voice echoed in the schoolyard, the source of which couldn't be determined.

It was the first time Tatsuya had heard the name "Five Connected Tonjutsu Technique," but he decided not to be distracted by it.

It was probably magic that uses the principle of the interaction of the Five Elements, connecting together the elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water in a chain. Tatsuya himself suggested this when he was able to predict the attack using Dotonjutsu - earth magic.

However, he didn't devote the slightest bit of his mind's resources to this thought. Instead, he focused his mind on finding Yakumo's location.

"But it's not over yet."

Yakumo's words weren't a bluff.

Guided by intuition, Tatsuya looked up.

An innumerable number of needles fell from above.

Tatsuya had to exert all his strength to breakthrough and avoid this swarm of long needles, which were coming down with considerable acceleration.

Needles with a length of about 30 centimeters, one after another, stuck into the ground of the schoolyard. Their length and thickness were completely the same. Obviously, they were made with one standard for use as throwing weapons.

Periodically activating the magic of self-acceleration using his instant recall technique, Tatsuya dodged all these long, thick, and sharp needles coming from the sky.

However, this didn't leave a moment of time for a break. The needles stuck into the ground still existed. From all these needles there were signs of magic activation.

"Magic of the release system?"

Tatsuya intuitively sensed that it was magic that created lightning, even without using his "sight."

"By the way, "ninjutsu users" and "exorcist-onmyoji" are completely different things!"

In general, in the ideology of the Five Elements, lightning refers to the element of the tree. The generally accepted principle of interaction between the element of metal and the element of tree seems like "metal defeats tree," therefore it can't lead to the phenomenon of metal needles emitting lightning. Tatsuya's discontent was based precisely on this discrepancy, but regardless of his swearing thoughts, he had already begun to confront another real threat.

Activating the CAD built into the suit with his mind, Tatsuya released the activation

sequence.

It took only a moment to build a magic sequence.

And it wasn't "Gram Dispersion" - the magic of decomposing information bodies designed to neutralize magic.

It was "Mist Dispersion" - the magic of decomposition, designed to break down any object, solid or liquid, into their basic molecules & elements by interfering with the structural information.

Several objects of the same form can become the goal of decomposition magic as a single set of objects. This is an extremely useful feature of Tatsuya's decomposition magic.

All the needles that fell from the sky were of the same length and thickness, and ended with the same point. This made it possible to recognize them as a single set of objects.

One step ahead of the magic activating in the needles, Tatsuya applied "Mist Dispersion" simultaneously on all the needles stuck in the ground.

The forest of needles instantly disappeared, as if they had evaporated.

And along with this, the magic built into the needles was also forcibly canceled.

The power of interference in the phenomenon, prepared for the performance of magic, lost the place in which it was supposed to go to.

Most of the power of interference in the phenomenon simply dissipated in the surrounding space, but a small part of it returned to the caster in a reverse flow.

If Tatsuya had not previously observed the true nature of the interference force, he would have lost sight of it now.

If the magic had been released from a distant place, unreachable for the normal five senses, then Tatsuya, who wasn't able to see pushions, couldn't do anything.

But now the place was within range of normal vision. The Pushion streams rushed to a single point that was in Tatsuya's field of vision.

Tatsuya (like most other magicians), although he couldn't recognize Pushion information bodies, but he could vaguely feel Pushion flows.

Tatsuya confidently saw how the Pushion flow returned to the spell caster — that is, to Yakumo.

The distance to him was approximately 25 meters away.

Which was within reach of his “Gram Demolition.”

Tatsuya squeezed a mass of psions into his hand in less than an instant...

He shot the compressed psions out of his right hand.

A dazzlingly shining, powerful psionic stream collided into the trunk of a suspicious-looking elm tree towering on the edge of the schoolyard.

Ripples appeared on the surface of the trunk.

As if emerging from muddy water, the silhouette of Yakumo appeared from the ripples.

Then he turned to face Tatsuya.

Hearing a quiet voice from such a distance won't work. But according to the movement of his lips, Tatsuya could read Yakumo's question: “Did you find me?”

But he looked no more tense than a child being found while playing hide-and-seek.

Tatsuya didn't say anything in response.

He only rushed towards Yakumo.

◇ ◇ ◇

High-speed transport ship of the USNA Navy fully submersible type, "Coral". Inside it, Raymond wasn't the only one accompanying Minoru.

Raymond led Minoru and Minami behind him, and behind them were two soldiers and one female officer. They were walking down a wide passageway toward the stern of the ship. The female officer was First Lieutenant Zoe Spica, a Parasite from Stars, who has the class of the First stellar magnitude.

The spacious interior of the warship "Coral" contradicted the generally accepted image of a cramped and narrow submarine. Perhaps it was designed so that there was even more space on it than on a luxury passenger liner.

"This is your cabin, Minoru, and next to it is the cabin for your girlfriend. However, the lock can only be locked from the inside. This function is not provided from the outside. I'm sorry about that."

"I wasn't going to ask for luxury. But thank you for the individual cabins."

Minoru replied gratefully to Raymond, who didn't look all that apologetic when he apologized.

"Though perhaps it would have been better if you had shared a cabin?"

"It's nothing like that."

Minami didn't react to Raymond's teasing, as if she was wearing a mask, and Minoru answered with a short, dry phrase.

He seemed to be trying to hide his embarrassment in this way.

"Oh, yes, by the way. Just because you can't close the door from the outside, also means that you can't open the door from the outside. This means that if the door is locked, no one will be able to find out what you are doing inside."

Raymond added with a grin.

“That's unlikely. Also don't tell me there are security cameras.”

Minoru voice went cold. He didn't even try to hide his dark feelings.

Minoru and Minami were strangers here. And on a warship it is impossible to remain without observation. Minoru believed that the statement about the impossibility to open the door from the outside was an outright lie. It is unlikely that the USNA Army was so courteous.

“No, no, it's true. You aren't prisoners of war, but guests. Such rudeness like peeping is impermissible.”

Minoru decided to ignore Raymond's stupid joke and changed his mind about arguing about it.

“Since you are treating us with such hospitality, can you at least let us know where we are going?”

Minoru had not yet heard from Raymond about the destination of this ship, and didn't know where he and Minami were going.

“Of course, we can.”

Raymond nodded.

Lieutenant Spica and the two soldiers didn't stop Raymond. Therefore, Minoru thought that treating them not like prisoners of war was probably not a lie.

Without even noticing that he was being treated with suspicion, Raymond turned to face Minoru and said:

“This ship is heading to the naval base on the Pearl and Hermes Atoll.

◇ ◇ ◇

Tatsuya abruptly approached Yakumo. He feinted with a left hook. And with an actual right uppercut Yakumo took a hit to his left elbow.

Opening his left hand, Tatsuya pulled it to Yakumo's right hand and grabbed hold of him. Even though it was through a glove, he definitely felt that he had touched Yakumo's hand. That is, Tatsuya was now undoubtedly facing the real Yakumo.

But despite this...

Tatsuya was hit in the back with a heavy blow.

Tatsuya lost his balance, leaning forward. Yakumo aimed his right hand at his head. A blow that flew in from behind was affected by the blind spot in the limited field of view of Tatsuya's helmet. Tatsuya semi-intuitively tilted his head diagonally forward and to the right.

It wasn't possible to completely dodge, and Yakumo's right hand grazed his helmet.

Without resisting the impulse of the impact, Tatsuya rolled in the direction in which he had tilted his head. As he stood up, he took off his helmet and cast it aside. The last blow had the power to break through the helmet. More precisely, this power really did break through the helmet.

His armor or helmet won't protect him from Yakumo's attack. Such a helmet, which impeded visibility, is only a hindrance when the enemy can deliver blows that penetrate armor. Tatsuya took off his helmet, because he knew it instantly.

With his head now exposed, Tatsuya rushed to Yakumo at an even higher speed than the last time. His left jab was aimed at Yakumo's face.

But the enemy didn't even budge or evade.

It was an illusion.

Tatsuya stopped his left jab a moment before his hand was fully extended, then opened his hand and pointed it down.

And with his palm in this position, he swung his left hand down.

This hand touched Yakumo's monastic attire. The illusion was canceled, and the real Yakumo appeared.

Tatsuya grabbed Yakumo by the collar of his monastic robes near the collarbone.

He tried to activate the magic of decomposition on the fingertips of his left hand. He tried to inflict damage by making holes with “decomposition” in the places where his left hand made contact with Yakumo's body.

But before Tatsuya managed to activate his magic, a side kick landed on his face from the right.

Tatsuya involuntarily had to remove his left hand and increase the distance away from Yakumo.

At the same time, Yakumo also stepped back to a spot behind a Mountain Cherry tree growing nearby.

“That was dangerous. I can’t thoughtlessly let you get so close.”

Yakumo mumbled in a tone in which the tension was read. It seems that the last attack almost managed to get him.

However, Tatsuya didn't have time to talk right now.

“What was that blow just now?”

Tatsuya couldn’t recognize the last attack that caused him damage.

“It wasn’t a left-handed hit. I saw Kokonoe Yakumo's left hand.”

“With his right hand from that position, he couldn’t strike at that angle.”

“The legs also don’t fit. I saw the left leg. As for the right leg, the angle is even greater than that of the right hand.”

“...Was it 'Direct Pain?’”

Tatsuya involuntarily voiced the thought that came to him.

The magic of mental interference “Direct Pain.” This is magic that causes pain directly to the mind, bypassing the physical body.

“Other than Fumiya, are there other users of it?”

“Direct Pain” is magic that is masterfully wielded by his second cousin Kuroba Fumiya. However, Tatsuya didn’t know anyone other than Fumiya who could put it into practice. Tatsuya considered this magic to be a kind of innate superpower that only Fumiya could use. But it turned out that...

“...Was I wrong?”

“Wrong. This isn’t 'Direct pain.’”

Seeing Tatsuya's doubt, Yakumo spoke to him.

“This technique is called “Gishin Anki.*” Pure Ninjutsu. Well, more precisely, only one of the many secret techniques in ninjutsu.”

[Literally, something like “dark spirit, deceiving the body.”]

“Gishin Anki'...”

“The technique, though secret, but it works very simply. This is a kind of illusion that causes the enemy to hallucinate that he “received a blow.” Well, you've heard of hypnosis, haven't you? There is a phenomenon when the subject's skin blisters like a burn, when it's suggested that he's being touched by a red-hot iron rod. “Gishin Anki” is a technique that allows you to do this, skipping the procedure of hypnosis. That is, it can be applied without words, simply by putting your own fighting spirit into it. At the same time, unlike “Direct Pain,” it's the physical body that feels the pain. And this pain won’t disappear until you destroy the illusion.”

Simultaneously with the completion of this monologue, a blow flew into Tatsuya's belly. He lost his breath, and he involuntarily stepped back half a step.

Yakumo's verbose speech wasn't intended to boast of his scholarship and skills. Just a strong impression of the existence of the technique called "Gishin Anki" was supposed to enhance its effect.

In desperation, Tatsuya released "Decomposition." But this magic, as if entangled in the branches of the Mountain Cherry tree, ended up failing to activate.

The technique of "Body Substitution."

A high-level ninjutsu user like Yakumo simply can't help but use "Body Substitution." Unlike the standard "Body Replacement," Yakumo left a double with his Eidos in the branches of the tree. That is, Tatsuya tried to apply magic to this deception. And if you decompose structural information that doesn't have a material entity, then it simply doesn't affect the material world.

Tatsuya realized his haste and clicked his tongue.

And he took the chance to prepare to meet the counter-attack of Yakumo.

Tatsuya was expecting an attack with the "Gishin Anki" technique.

Therefore, he directed "Elemental Sight" at himself.

He thought that if the pain was caused by a hallucination, the illusion technique should be directed straight at his body.

In the information dimension, the point of view isn't fixed. Therefore, he could "see" himself even without a mirror.

In the information dimension, Tatsuya "saw" how two large snakes crawled out of the ground right under his feet, twisting in a spiral around his body. These snakes were chains of magic sequences. In order to use only one illusion, Yakumo constructed dozens of magic sequences, divided into two groups.

Tatsuya covered his body with psion armor.

Contact-Type “Gram Demolition.”

However, the snakes from the magic sequences weren't destroyed.

They didn't even jump away.

They just wriggled around the psionic armor. And the hallucination effect began to seep into the armor-forming psions.

Tatsuya canceled the contact-type “Gram Demolition” and activated “Gram Dispersion.”

This time the magic sequences of the illusion were dispersed.

In order not to be deceived by the “Body Substitution” again, Tatsuya began to look for Yakumo's Eidos with his “sight.”

He found nine informational bodies of Yakumo. Probably one of them was real, and eight were doubles. The surname “Kokonoe*” and Nine Doubles. A very symbolic coincidence.

[Kokonoe (九重): approximate translation (if surnames could be translated) - “nine-fold,” “nine-layer”]

Instead of releasing the decomposition magic of information bodies to erase the duplicates themselves, Tatsuya tried to activate “decomposition” aimed simultaneously at nine information bodies at once. At this point, he has already increased the number of objects that he can simultaneously target up to thirty-two. If you don't follow the two-step procedure of erasing the doubles and targeting the real body, but simply target both the doubles and the real body at the same time, this will save some time and increase reliability.

However, immediately after Tatsuya set out to target nine information bodies, he was again attacked by the snakes of illusion magic.

Yakumo was an experienced combat magician. He wasn't stupid enough to silently

wait for Tatsuya's attack.

Tatsuya neutralized this illusion with “Gram Dispersion.”

And again found every Eidos double of Yakumo.

But an instant before he had managed to aim the magic at them, the illusion reappeared and attacked him.

All this was repeated many times.

Apparently, Tatsuya and Yakumo had exactly the same speed of magic activation.

But it was Yakumo who made the very first move, so Tatsuya couldn't overtake him in constructing magic.

Yakumo couldn't attack, but at the same time Tatsuya couldn't attack.

It all came down to a draw with alternating repetitive actions.

But the time went and repeated.

And the loss of time in this battle meant victory for Yakumo, and defeat for Tatsuya.

The illusion attacked, the illusion disappeared.

It took time to activate “Gram Dispersion” to erase the illusion, so Tatsuya didn't have time to attack.

To destroy the illusions it was necessary to abandon the attacks.

“... Do I really need to destroy these illusions?”

Tatsuya thought with another part of his consciousness, not responsible for the application of magic.

“If I don't destroy the illusions, then I'll get hit by the “Gishin Anki” technique.”

“Then my body will have to endure the pain.”

And at that moment the direction of his thoughts changed.

“But why should this pain bother me?”

“Even when something hurts, it doesn’t mean that the motor functions are damaged.”

“It's only pain.”

“Am I not already accustomed to such pain, which exists only in the form of sensations?”

Tatsuya's “Regrowth” during the reverse tracking process recognizes the information received by the object in a concentrated form in an instant. When using “Regrowth” to heal wounds, all this pain accumulated from the moment of injury until the application of “Regrowth,” he feels in a single moment in a concentrated form.

He has already experienced pain tens or hundreds of times more intense than the pain of a fatal wound..

He experienced the pain of hundreds of people, amplified tens and hundreds of times.

“The pain can simply be ignored.” - Thought Tatsuya.

Such determination greatly simplified the matter.

A sharp pain shot through Tatsuya's chest.

Ignoring it, Tatsuya activated the two-fold “decomposition.”

First, he laid out the Data Reinforcement covering the shoulder joints of the nine information bodies corresponding to the doubles of Yakumo, and his real body.

Yakumo, himself, and his doubles became partially defenseless.

With an absolutely zero time delay, he laid out the tissues of the body.

Decomposition of the skin.

Muscle breakdown

Blood vessels, nerves and other tissues found in the body that met in a straight line — everything was also decomposed.

A hole was drilled in the joint of the right shoulder.

The signs of Yakumo's presence faltered.

In the information dimension only the real body remained, and the duplicates disappeared.

At the same time, the figure of Yakumo appeared within sight of the naked eye.

Tatsuya instantly moved to Yakumo, who had dropped to one knee.

And he put the edge of his hand to Yakumo's throat, on the edge of which was prepared for the activation of “decomposition.”

“... Master. This is the end.”

“... I admit. I lost.”

The killing intent immediately disappeared from Tatsuya's eyes.

“No, I lost.... Minami has left Japan.”

Immediately after Yakumo was neutralized, he focused his “sight” on Minami. That's how he learned that Minami was already outside the territorial waters of Japan.

In international waters, the rule of sovereignty applies on board any vessel assigned to a State. For civilian vessels, this rule can be ignored, but encroachment on the sovereignty of military ships can easily ignite international conflict.

The easy solution to this problem has become impossible from this moment on.

“I see.”

Yakumo didn't smile. He didn't have his usual vague grin, which made it impossible to read his thoughts. Instead, a feeling of fatigue emanated from him, as if he had finished a job.

“Master.”

Tatsuya said and stretched out his hand to the right shoulder of Yakumo.

The hole in Yakumo's shoulder instantly disappeared.

“Thanks.”

Yakumo smiled wryly.

Between them, the familiar atmosphere reappeared.

“Can I hear the reason?”

“The reason why I prevented you?”

Tatsuya nodded silently in response to Yakumo's question.

“Alright.”

Yakumo agreed, continuing to sit on the ground.

But he didn't start right away. Muttering “Let me think...,” he seemed to be pondering how best to explain everything.

“In our country there are people who really don't like the filth generated by demons.”

“I'm aware.”

Tatsuya nodded.

“No, I'm talking about an organization unknown to you.”

Yakumo shook his head with a bitter smile.

“The people in this organization don't hold any positions in the government. They have no official status. But in our country they occupy second place in terms of influence.”

“Secret state rulers?”

“Well, you could say that. This time I worked at the request of these people. The request was to banish these monsters, “Parasites,” from our country as soon as possible.”

“... So you helped Minoru to escape?”

“Sealing monsters doesn't seem like a good option for those people. Everyone understands that a seal is something that might break one day. Therefore, it is obvious that these people want to drive out the monsters, since they can't be destroyed.”

“And you can't go against these people?”

Tatsuya asked in a sarcastic tone.

Yakumo answered him in exactly the same tone:

“Among these people is also His Excellency Toudou Aoba.

The expression disappeared from Tatsuya's face.

With the face of Yakumo, too.

An awkward silence arose between them.

This silence was broken by Tatsuya.

“Master, you always said that you are a hermit...”

Even by this vague phrase, one could understand what Tatsuya wants to say.

At that moment, Yakumo's face broke into the bitterest smile of the evening.

“Yes, here you deftly got me.”

Yakumo muttered in such a tone as if they weren't speaking about him at all.

“That's for sure. This can no longer be called a mortal existence.”

In addition, Tatsuya said nothing more, but turned his back to Yakumo who continued to sit on the ground with his legs crossed, and walked away.



Chapter 15

After picking up “Wingless” the electric motorcycle that had been left on the highway (fortunately, it wasn't picked up by the police), Tatsuya got on it and drove home. He arrived at the multi-story building in Tofu a little after 9 o'clock in the evening.

“Welcome back, Onii-sama.”

“I've returned.”

Tatsuya felt embarrassed that Miyuki had come out to meet him directly at the front door. Today, he didn't warn Miyuki in advance that he was going to break into Minoru's hideout. While he was riding home on his motorcycle, he was constantly thinking about how to explain to her that saving Minami was now getting harder and harder.

However, he couldn't think of anything.

In the end, he didn't know what to say.

“Onii-sama, I heard from Hayama-san about today's events.”

It was none other than Miyuki herself who came to Tatsuya's aid.

When Kuroba Mitsugu appeared in front of Tatsuya it became clear that the main house was following Tatsuya's actions. And there was no reason to hide it from Miyuki. So it was reasonable to expect that she would be told.

“I see... Yes, the situation has become more complicated.”

“Even Sensei stood on the other side and prevented you, so there's nothing you can do about it. Miyuki only needs to know that Onii-sama has returned safely.”

“I see... I'm sorry I made you worry.”

“I don't...”

Miyuki faltered and didn't know what to say.

Just looking at such a Miyuki was enough for Tatsuya to know that she was really worried.

Gently putting his arm around Miyuki's shoulders, he led her into the living room.

They sat next to each other, and Miyuki sat for a while with her head on Tatsuya's shoulder. Then, apparently finally calmed down, she carefully pulled away from Tatsuya and stood up.

Miyuki blushed slightly around her eyes, but Tatsuya didn't tell her that he had noticed.

“I'll make coffee. Or is it better to have tea?”

“Let me think... Now, probably, I would like tea.”

“As you wish. Tea to make hot?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Miyuki left the living room and went to the kitchen.

As if to replace her, at that moment Lina appeared in the living room.

“You're finally back, Tatsuya.”

“Lina. Have you been with Miyuki?”

“Yeah. It looks like you've had some trouble, but we've had quite the trouble here, too.”

“...Did something happen?”

Frowning, Tatsuya asked Lina.

“Something happened. Serious incident. I'll tell you when Miyuki returns. Although, she might want to tell you about it herself.”

“I see.”

Tatsuya didn't ask any further.

Lina also fell silent. It seemed like she felt uncomfortable with the silence that followed, but it was she who suggested that they wait for “when Miyuki returned.” However, it seems that she didn't plan on canceling her last statement.

Miyuki returned to the living room.

“Lina. You should have said you were up. I didn't cook for you.”

Hearing Miyuki say “you were up,” Tatsuya looked at Lina.

Lina abruptly looked away.

By the way, her hair was loose and slightly disheveled, like after sleeping.

Looks like Lina decided to take a nap. Thinking that Lina wouldn't like it if he asked her if she had been asleep, Tatsuya decided not to touch the subject.

“I have enough juice.”

Still turning away from Tatsuya, Lina answered frantically in a mock-cold voice. After that, she pressed a button on the console and ordered orange juice for herself on the home automation system.

In an elegant manner, Miyuki placed a saucer and a cup of tea in front of Tatsuya. She put her kit on the table on the opposite side of Tatsuya. By the time she sat down next to Lina, the non-humanoid robot of the home automation system had already brought Lina's glass of orange juice that she ordered.

Now they all had drinks now, and everyone exchanged glances again.

“Miyuki. Will you tell Tatsuya about the incident with Honoka and Mizuki?”

“Has something happened to Honoka and Mizuki?”

Tatsuya looked at Miyuki with a serious expression.

Miyuki didn't look away. She planned to tell Tatsuya about today's events from the very beginning.

“Yes, the truth is...”

Miyuki told Tatsuya about the abduction of Honoka and the attempted abduction of Mizuki.

“Erika is with Honoka now. It seems that the effect of the drug still persists, but according to the doctor organized by Hyougo-san, there will be no irreversible consequences.”

“I see... That is a relief. As they say, every cloud has a silver lining.”

“Yeah, that's for sure. And also, if it weren't for Erika's intuition, Mizuki would've also been in great danger.”

“You're right. Later, I will thank Erika.”

“And, also Pixie. If it weren't for her, we wouldn't have been able to find out where Honoka was taken.”

“Yes. I'll thank Pixie, too.”

Tatsuya agreed with Miyuki, and Lina who followed her.

After which he fixed his gaze on nothing.

“...Onii-sama?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry.”

“What are you thinking about?”

Miyuki and Lina stared at Tatsuya, urging him to answer.

“No... What I was thinking is perhaps an exaggeration.”

Neither Miyuki nor Lina took their eyes off from Tatsuya.

Resigned, Tatsuya continued.

“Honoka and Mizuki were targeted by hostile armed forces just because they are my friends. But I don’t intend to torture myself with the thought that it is my fault that they met danger face to face. This may sound insensitive, but the villains here are the illegal saboteurs and the USNA government that sent them.”

“It isn’t unfeeling! What Onii-sama said is an indisputable fact.”

“That's right! As Miyuki said, the villains here are the Illegal MAP and the Pentagon!”

Tatsuya was taken aback by the menacing faces of the two girls. The fact that Miyuki would protect him was to be expected for Tatsuya, but he didn’t think that Lina would join her.

“I'm not going to take responsibility for the actions of the USNA... but I also can’t pretend that I had nothing to do with it, either.”

“Does that mean you feel responsible for the safety of Honoka and Mizuki?”

“Similar things can happen in the future.”

“Do you... have any specific plan?”

After Miyuki's question, Tatsuya showed an uncharacteristic hesitation.

However, he couldn’t hesitate forever with the answer, so he finally decided.

Tatsuya met Miyuki's eyes, which had been watching him from the very beginning, and gave his answer.

“... I thought, why not take care of the protection of Honoka and Mizuki with the forces of the Yotsuba family... no, by my own strength. Of course, if they themselves want to.”

At that moment, he realized that such an answer wasn't enough.

“I wasn't only thinking about Honoka and Mizuki. But you don't have to worry about Shizuku, because she has all the power of the Kitayama family behind her... And whether or not we should also consider Erika, Leo, and Mikihiko as those who need protection...? We need to think about it.”

“I don't think it would be superfluous.”

Miyuki didn't object to Tatsuya's words. However, if only Honoka, Mizuki, and Erika were the targets of protection, then she might have objected. Because it could be interpreted as a declaration of the so-called “harem.” But that suspicion disappeared with the addition of Leo and Mikihiko's names to the list.

“And you've got an impressive company.” Are you going to start a Kingdom”

Lina expressed her impressions in such a tone that made it hard to tell if she was joking or not.

Tatsuya only smiled wryly, but Miyuki didn't react at all.

◇ ◇ ◇

Japanese time: July 16, dawn. Local time: July 15, early morning.

The fully submersible transport ship, “Coral,” with Minoru and Minami on board, arrived at the USNA Pearl and Hermes naval base on the Northwest Islands of the Hawaiian archipelago.

(Continued in the next arc "Rescue")

Afterword

Vol.29 and released the first in the new era of "Rave*" issue of the series "Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei." How did you like Volume 29, "The Chase (Part 2)"? Did you like it?

[<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rave>]

I've been thinking about the collision between Tatsuya and Yakumo since the early days of the series. More specifically, I began to think about this teacher-versus-student confrontation from about Vol.13 "Steeplechase". Vol.13 was released in April 2014, so we can say that it took a full five years to complete.

In the drafts of the plot, I even had an absolutely serious battle, where Tatsuya killed Yakumo, but the final version was exactly the same as you read. As an author, I couldn't come to an agreement that such strong emotions could arise between them or, like oh, any other excuse for them to fight to the death. Although, in the final version some dissatisfaction was felt, but in the end it seems to me that such a contest of martial and magical arts, from which they both came out without injury, fits best into the plot.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the afterword, last month His Majesty the new Emperor was crowned, and the era changed to "Rave." This is a good name in order to increase the productivity of your creativity... I think that I'm not the only one who was concerned with the question of how to deal with the name of the era in fictional works about modern Japan, and Japan in the near future.

Therefore, I think that many were grateful when it was reported that all candidates were eliminated and only one remained. Although for many non-popular writers, this message won't be a particular problem in terms of the privacy policy.

Many authors have fictional period names in fictional works, for example, "Showa" [昭和] instead of "Showa" [昭和], "Taisho" [太正] instead of "Taisho" [大正],

“Meiji” [明治] instead of “Meiji” [明治]. There was also a book where “Showa” was simply replaced by “Sink”. Therefore, I don’t even know how to choose the correct pronunciation for the fictional name of the era.

In the novels that I'm going to write in the future, I intend to use “Genka” instead of “Showa”, and “Syubun” instead of “Heisei”. This won’t violate the privacy policy, even if the last candidate isn’t approved.

And what should I use instead of “Rave”...? I think “Eiko” will do. Or will it be easier to use the European calendar, as in the Mahouka series? Incidentally, this doesn’t mean that in the world of “Mahouka” the system of names for the periods of government was abolished. I just couldn’t think of how the era could be called 80 years later.

This time, Tatsuya had a statement that could be misinterpreted as a harem announcement, but Tatsuya doesn’t intend to change from Miyuki. He doesn't plan polygamy either. ...Actually, I have plans to write a story with a similar plot, but at least in this series, and with this character, nothing like this will happen. And you can be absolutely sure that this opinion of mine will never change.

As I said last time, the next Vol.30 will be called “Rescue*”. It’s not yet decided whether this arch will be a two-volume or not. In the “Rescue”, we will leave Japan, and we expect some outrages against the US army. I'm concerned about whether I can dock the plot's coherence, but I'll give my best to make sure you find this plot terribly interesting, so please wait.

[From the translator: I decided to use “Rescue” instead of “Salvation” after all. For the literary translation of the word used sounds something like "return, recapture, win back their (selected, stolen, etc.) with the use of force."]

Hope to see you again in the next 30th volume.

(Satou Tsutomu)