魔法科高校の劣等生18

師族会議編〈中〉

The irregular at magic high school

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato
illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida

電撃文庫

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato
illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida
illustrator assistant／ジミー・ストーン、末永康子
design／BEE-PEE
魔法科高校の劣等生
The irregular at magic high school
18
師族会議編〈中〉

『人間主義』と国内の情勢

一般的な認識は『人間は人間に許された力だけで生きよう』と主張し反魔法主義を掲げるキリスト教亜種（異端）のカルト運動。またはそれを建前とした、魔法師排斥運動である。その教義の一部を紹介すると、「奇跡は神にのみ許された御業であり、神が定めた自然の摂理を神ならざるものがねじ曲げるのは悪魔の所業である。人は、人に許された力でのみ生きなければならない」といったもの。

西暦二〇九七年二月。日本の箱根で行われていた魔法師達による『師族会議』中に、大規模な爆弾テロが起きた。このテロの原因は魔法師同士の争いであると主張する人間主義者達は、市民を見殺しにした日本の魔法師に対して、その排斥運動をより活発に、より過激に行うようになった。そして、十師族の長らは、その対策に苦慮している現状がある。

ハッキングシステム『フリズスキャルヴ』

USNA軍が運用する全地球通信傍受システム「エシェロンⅢ」に潜むシステムのこと。『七賢人』と呼ばれる七名のオペレーターがそのアクセス権を持ち、世界中の通信システムから望みの情報を盗み取る。フリズスキャルヴの端末は脳波とジェスチャーで操作するVR型のHMDで、カメラが指先の動きを捉え、バーチャルな視界にその軌跡を映し出す。オペレーターは仮想の空中に光の文字で検索条件を記し、脳波アシストにより選択と決定のコマンドを送り情報を掴み取る、世界最高峰の盗聴システムなのである。

ただし、そもそも『七賢人』の名称を使っているのはフリズスキャルヴのオペレーター内でも、一人しかいない。それが『フリズスキャルヴ』のアドミニストレーターと唯一直接のつながりを持つ、レイモンド・S・クラークだった。

顧傑とは

ジード・ヘイグこと顧傑は大漢の魔法師開発機関である崑崙方院に所属していた。崑崙方院で『不老の術法』を開発した顧傑が、日本魔法界を、そして崑崙方院を潰した四葉一族を復讐のターゲットとしている理由は不明（どのような心理機構が作用したのか、本人も既に、覚えていないかもしれない）。

顧傑は現在九十七歳。だがその外見は五十歳程度にしか見えない。周公瑾を弟子に持つが、しかし顧傑個人の直接的な戦闘力は低い。大陸の古式魔法の使い手だが、修得している魔法は敵と直接干戈を交える為のものではなかった。彼が得意としているのは『ソーサリーブースター』のような人間を部品として魔法的な道具を作り出す技術、『ジェネレーター』のような人間を道具に変える技術、そして今回のテロに使用した死体を操る技術などである。

加え、『七賢人』の一人として裏社会に君臨する顧傑は、様々な反社会的組織を支援している。反魔法国際政治団体『ブランシュ』、国際犯罪シンジケート『無頭竜（ノーヘッドドラゴン）』などもその中の一組織だった。しかし、これらもすでに壊滅状態となっている。

そして、顧傑自身に残された時間も、もう長くない。

『第三高校の一条将輝です。
この度は第一高校の皆様のご厚情により、
一緒に学ばせていただくことになりました。
一ヶ月の短い期間ですが、よろしくお願いします』
一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき
第三高校の二年生。九校戦に二年連続で出場した、十師族・一条家の次期当主。深雪へ正式に婚約を申し込んだ。
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
達也の妹。第一高校2年A組所属。生徒会会長を務める優等生。冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する『重度のブラコン』。

「これ、受け取ってください！」
光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか
2年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。光波振動系魔法が得意。思い込むとやや直情的。
「じゃあ私も！ はい、義理チョコ」
英美=アメリア=ゴールディ=明智
えいみ・あめりか・ごーるでぃ・あけち
2年B組。クォーター。普段は『エイミィ』と呼ばれている。名門ゴールディ家の子女。
「じゃあ僕もだね。あっ、分かっていると思うけど義理だよ」
里美スバル
さとみ・すばる
2年D組。美少年と見まごう少女。明るくノリの良い性格。メガネは伊達。
「義理だよ。あっ、バッグも返さなくて良いから」
北山 雫
きたやま・しずく
2年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。振動・加速系魔法が得意。感情の起伏をあまり表に出さない。

魔法科高校の劣等生 18

The irregular at magic high school

師族会議編〈中〉

ある欠陥を抱える劣等生の兄。
全てが完全無欠な優等生の妹。
二人の兄妹が魔法科高校に入学した時から、
波乱の日々の幕が開いた――。

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato
illustration
石田可奈
Kana Ishida

Character
キャラクター紹介

吉田幹比古
よしだ・みきひこ
２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。

光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか
２年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
光波振動系魔法が得意。
思い込むとやや直情的。

北山 雫
きたやま・しずく
２年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
振動・加速系魔法が得意。
感情の起伏をあまり表に出さない。

司波達也
しば・たつや
２年E組。新設された
魔工科に進学した。
全てに達観している。
妹・深雪の『ガーディアン』。

司波深雪
しば・みゆき
２年A組。達也の妹。
昨年主席入学した優等生。
冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する。

西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると
２年F組。達也の友人。
二科生生徒。硬化魔法が得意な、
明るい性格の持ち主。

千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか
２年F組。達也の友人。
二科生生徒。チャーミングな
トラブルメーカー。

柴田美月
しばた・みづき
２年E組。今年も達也と
同じクラスになった。
霊子放射光過敏症。
少し天然が入った真面目な少女。

英美＝アメリア＝ゴールディ＝明智

えいみ・あめりあ・ごーるでぃ・あけち

２年B組。クォーター。
普段は『エイミィ』と
呼ばれている。
名門ゴールディ家の子女。

森崎 駿

もりさき・しゅん

２年A組。深雪の
クラスメイト。CAD早撃ちが得意。
一科生としてのプライドが高い。

七草真由美

さえぐさ・まゆみ

卒業生。今は魔法大学生。
小悪魔的な性格を
持つものの、
攻められると弱い。

市原鈴音

いちはら・すずね

卒業生。今は魔法大学生。
冷静沈着な頭脳派。

渡辺摩利

わたなべ・まり

卒業生。真由美の親友。
物事全般にやや好戦的。

里美スバル

さとみ・すばる

２年D組。
美少年と見まごう少女。
明るくノリの良い性格。

桜小路紅葉

さくらこうじ・あかは

２年B組。スバル、エイミィの友達。
私服はゴスロリ風で、
テーマパーク好き。

十三束 鋼

とみつか・はがね

２年E組。『レンジ・ゼロ』（射程距離ゼロ）の異名を持つ。
『マーシャル・マジック・アーツ』の使い手。

中条あずさ

なかじょう・あずさ

三年生。前・生徒会会長。
オドオドした性格で
引っ込み思案。

服部刑部少丞範蔵

はっとり・ぎょうぶしょうじょう・はんぞう

三年生。前・部活連会頭。
優秀だが、生真面目
すぎる一面も。

十文字克人

じゅうもんじ・かつと

卒業生。現在は
魔法大学に進学している。
達也曰く『巌（いわお）のような人物』。

関本 勲
せきもと・いさお
卒業生。元・風紀委員。
論文コンペ校内選考次点。
スパイ行為を犯した人物。

桐原武明
きりはら・たけあき
三年生。剣術部所属。
関東剣術大会中等部の
チャンピオン。

壬生紗耶香
みぶ・さやか
三年生。剣道部所属。
中等部剣道大会女子部の
全国二位。

七草香澄
さえぐさ・かすみ
今年、魔法科高校に入学した
『新入生』。七草真由美の妹。
泉美の双子の姉。
元気で快活な性格。

七草泉美
さえぐさ・いずみ
今年、魔法科高校に
入学した『新入生』。
七草真由美の妹。
香澄の双子の妹。
大人しく穏やかな性格。

隅守賢人
すみす・けんと
1年G組。両親がUSNAから
日本に帰化した、白人の少年。

辰巳鋼太郎
たつみ・こうたろう
卒業生。元・風紀委員。
豪快な性格の持ち主。

沢木 碧
さわき・みどり
三年生。風紀委員。
女性的な名前が
コンプレックス。

五十里 啓
いそり・けい
三年生。前・生徒会会計。
魔法理論に優れている。
花音とは許嫁同士。

千代田花音
ちよだ・かのん
三年生。前・風紀委員長。
先輩の摩利同様に
好戦的。

七宝琢磨
しっぽう・たくま
今年の『新入生』総代を
務める生徒。一科生。
有力魔法師の家系
「師補十八家」のひとつ
『七宝』の長男。

桜井水波
さくらい・みなみ
今年、魔法科高校に入学した
『新入生』。達也、深雪の
従妹という立場をとる、
深雪のガーディアン候補。

安宿怜美
あすか・さとみ
第一高校保険医。
おっとりホンワカした笑顔が
男子生徒に人気。

甘楽計夫
つづら・かずお
第一高校教師。
専門は魔法幾何学。
論文コンペの世話役。

ジェニファー・スミス
日本に帰化した白人。達也のクラスと
魔法工学の授業の指導教師。

小野 遥
おの・はるか
第一高校に所属する
総合カウンセラー。
いじられ気質だが、
裏の顔も持つ。

九重八雲
ここのえ・やくも
古式魔法「忍術」の使い手。
達也の体術の師匠。

平河小春
ひらかわ・こはる
卒業生。
昨年の九校戦ではエンジニアで参加。
論文コンペメンバーを辞退。

平河千秋
ひらかわ・ちあき
２年E組所属。
達也に敵意を向ける。

千倉朝子
ちくら・ともこ
三年生。九校戦新競技
『シールド・ダウン』の女子ソロ代表。

五十嵐亜実
いがらし・つぐみ
卒業生。元バイアスロン部部長。

五十嵐鷹輔
いがらし・ようすけ
二年生。亜実の弟。
やや気弱な性格。

三七上ケリー
みなかみ・ケリー
三年生。九校戦『モノリス・コード』
本戦の男子代表。

上野
こうづけ
東京を地盤にする与党の若手政治家。
魔法師に好意的な議員として
知られている。

神田
かんだ
民権党に所属している若手政治家。
国防軍に対して批判的な
人権派である。反魔法主義でもある。

一条剛毅
いちじょう・ごうき
将輝の父親。十師族・
一条家の現当主。

一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき
第三高校の二年生。
今年も九校戦に出場。
十師族・一条家の次期当主。

一条美登里
いちじょう・みどり
将輝の母親。
温和な性格で
料理上手。

吉祥寺真紅郎
きちじょうじ・しんくろう
第三高校の二年生。
今年も九校戦に出場。
「カーディナル・ジョージ」の
異名で知られている。

一条 茜
いちじょう・あかね
一条家の長女。将輝の妹。
今年地元の名門私立中学に入学。
真紅郎に好意を抱く。

北山 潮
きたやま・うしお
雫の父親。実業界の大物。
ビジネスネームは北方潮。

一条瑠璃
いちじょう・るり
一条家の次女。将輝の妹。
マイペースなしっかりもの。

北山紅音
きたやま・べにお
雫の母親。かつては、
振動系魔法で名を馳せた
Aランクの魔法師。

北山 航
きたやま・わたる
雫の弟。小学六年生。
姉をよく慕っている。
魔工技師を目指す。

鳴瀬晴海
なるせ・はるみ
雫の従兄。国立魔法大学付属
第四高校の生徒。

ピクシー
魔法科高校が所有する
ホームヘルパーのロボット。
正式名称は3H
〔Humanoid Home Helper：
人型家事手伝いロボット〕・タイプP94。

牛山
うしやま
フォア・リーブス・
テクノロジーCAD開発
第三課主任。
達也が信頼を置く人物。

エルンスト・ローゼン

有数のCADメーカー、
ローゼン・マギクラフト
日本支社長。

九島 烈
くどう・れつ
世界最強の魔法師の
一人と目されていた人物。
敬意を以て「老師」と
呼ばれる。

九島真言
くどう・まこと
日本魔法界の長老・九島烈の
息子で、九島家の現当主。

九島光宣
くどう・みのる
真言の息子。国立魔法大学
付属第二高校の一年生だが、
病気がちで頻繁に欠席している。
藤林響子の異父弟でもある。

九鬼 鎮
くき・まもる
九島家に従う師補十八家の一つ。
九島烈を先生と呼び
敬っている。

千葉寿和
ちば・としかず
千葉エリカの長兄。
警察省のキャリア組。
一見は遊び人風。

千葉修次
ちば・なおつぐ
千葉エリカの次兄。摩利の恋人。
千刃流剣術免許皆伝で
「千葉の麒麟児」の異名をとる。

稲垣
いながき
警察省の警部補。
千葉寿和の部下。

アンナ＝ローゼン＝鹿取
あんな・ろーぜん・かとり
エリカの母。日独のハーフで、
エリカの父・千葉家当主の
「妾」だった人物。

小和村真紀
さわむら・まき
由緒ある映画賞の
主演女優部門に
ノミネートされるほどの女優。
美貌だけでなく、演技も認められている。

周公瑾
しゅう・こうきん
大亜連合の
呂と陳を横浜に手引きした
美貌の青年。中華街に
巣くっていた、謎の人物。

陳祥山
チェンシャンシェン
大亜連合軍
特殊工作部隊隊長。
非情な性格の持ち主。

呂剛虎
ルゥガンフゥ
大亜連合軍特殊工作部隊
所属のエース魔法師。
別名『人喰い虎』。

リン
森崎が助けた少女。フルネームは
『孫美鈴(スンメイリン)』。
香港系国際犯罪
シンジケート「無頭竜」の
新たなリーダー。

風間玄信
かざま・はるのぶ
陸軍101旅団・
独立魔装大隊・隊長。
階級は中佐。

真田繁留
さなだ・しげる
陸軍101旅団・
独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は少佐。

藤林響子
ふじばやし・きょうこ
風間の副官を務める
女性士官。階級は中尉。

佐伯広海
さえき・ひろみ
国防陸軍第101旅団旅団長。階級は少将。
独立魔装大隊隊長・風間玄信の上官。
その風貌から「銀狐」の異名を持つ。

柳 連
やなぎ・むらじ
陸軍101旅団・
独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は少佐。

山中幸典
やまなか・こうすけ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
軍医少佐。一級の治癒魔法師。

酒井
さかい
国防陸軍総司令部所属。階級は大佐。
対大亜連合強硬派と目されている。

四葉真夜
よつば・まや
達也と深雪の叔母。
深夜の双子の妹。
四葉家の現当主。

司波深夜
しば・みや
達也と深雪の実母。故人。
精神構造干渉魔法に長けた
唯一の魔法師。

葉山
はやま
真夜に仕える
老齢の執事。

桜井穂波
さくらい・ほなみ
深夜の『ガーディアン』。故人。
遺伝子操作により魔法資質を
強化された調整体魔法師
『桜』シリーズの第一世代。

新発田勝成
しばた・かつしげ
元・四葉家次期当主候補の
一人。防衛省の職員。
第五高校のOB。
収束系魔法を得意とする。

司波小百合
しば・さゆり
達也と深雪の義母。
二人を嫌悪している。

堤 琴鳴
つつみ・ことな
新発田勝成のガーディアン。
調整体「楽師シリーズ」の
第二世代。音に関する魔法に
高い適性を持つ。

津久葉夕歌
つくば・ゆうか
元・四葉家次期当主候補の一人。
第一高校の元・生徒会副会長。
魔法大学四年生で
精神干渉系魔法が得意。

堤 奏太
つつみ・かなた
新発田勝成の
ガーディアン。調整体
「楽師シリーズ」の第二世代。
琴鳴の弟で、彼女と同じく
音に関する魔法に
高い適性を持つ。

吉見
よしみ
黒羽家と縁戚関係にある四葉の魔法師。
人体に残された想子情報体の
痕跡を読み取るサイコメトリスト。
極度の秘密主義。

アンジェリーナ＝クドウ＝シールズ

USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』総隊長。
階級は少佐。愛称はリーナ。
戦略級魔法師「十三使徒」の一人でもある。

ヴァージニア・バランス

USNA統合参謀本部情報部内部監察局第一副局長。
階級は大佐。リーナを支援するため日本にやってきた。

シルヴィア・マーキュリー・ファースト

USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』惑星級魔法師。階級は准尉。
愛称はシルヴィで、『マーキュリー・ファースト』はコードネーム。
日本での作戦時は、シリウス少佐の補佐役を務める。

ベンジャミン・カノープス

USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』ナンバー・ツー。
階級は少佐。シリウス少佐が不在時は
総隊長を代行する。

ミカエラ・ホンゴウ

USNAより日本に送り込まれた諜報員
（ただし本職は国防総省所属の魔法研究者）。
愛称はミア。

クレア

ハンターQ――『スターズ』になれなかった
魔法師部隊『スターダスト』の女兵士。
Qは追跡部隊の17番目を意味する。

レイチェル

ハンターR――『スターズ』になれなかった
魔法師部隊『スターダスト』の女兵士。
Rは追跡部隊の18番目を意味する。

アルフレッド・フォーマルハウト

USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』一等星魔法師。
階級は中尉。愛称はフレディ。
スターズを脱走。

チャールズ・サリバン

USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』
衛星級魔法師。『デーモス・セカンド』の
コードネームで呼ばれる。
スターズを脱走。

レイモンド・S・クラーク

雫が留学したUSNAバークレーにある高校の同級生。
なにかにつけ、雫にモーションを掛けてくる、
白人の少年。その正体は
『七賢人』の一人。

顧 傑

グ・ジー

『七賢人』の一人。ジード・ヘイグとも呼ばれる、
大漢軍方術士部隊の生き残り。

黒羽 貢

くろば・みつぐ

司波深夜、四葉真夜の従弟。
亜夜子、文弥の父。

近江円磨

おうみ・かずきよ

『反魂術』に詳しいという魔法研究家で、
『人形師』とあだ名される古式魔法師。
死体を操り人形に変える
禁断の魔法を使うと噂される。

黒羽亜夜子

くろば・あやこ

達也と深雪の
再従妹（はとこ）にあたる少女。
文弥という双子の弟を持つ。
第四高校の生徒。

黒羽文弥

くろば・ふみや

元・四葉家の次期当主候補。
達也と深雪の再従弟（はとこ）にあたる少年。
亜夜子という双子の姉を持つ。
第四高校の生徒。

七草弘一

さえぐさ・こういち

真由美の父で、七草家当主。
超一流の魔法師でもある。

名倉三郎

なくら・さぶろう

七草家に雇われている強力な魔法師。
主に真由美の身辺警護をしていた。

二木舞衣
ふたつぎ・まい

十師族『二木家』当主。兵庫県芦屋在住。
表の職業は複数の化学工業、食品工業会社の大株主。
阪神・中国地方を監視、守護している。

三矢 元
みつや・げん

十師族『三矢家』当主。神奈川県厚木在住。
表の職業（と言えるかどうかは微妙なところだが）は、
国際的な小型兵器ブローカー。
今も稼働する第三研の
運用を担当している。

五輪勇海
いつわ・いさみ

十師族『五輪家』当主。愛媛県宇和島在住。
表の職業は海運会社の重役で実質オーナー。
四国地方を監視、守護している。

六塚温子
むつづか・あつこ

十師族『六塚家』当主。宮城県仙台在住。
表の職業は地熱発電所掘削会社の実質オーナー。
東北地方を監視、守護している。

八代雷蔵
やつしろ・らいぞう

十師族『八代家』当主。福岡県在住。
表の職業は大学の講師で複数の通信会社の大株主。
沖縄を除く九州地方を監視、守護している。

十文字和樹
じゅうもんじ・かずき

十師族『十文字家』当主。東京都在住。
表の職業は国防軍を得意先とする土木建設会社のオーナー。
七草家と共に伊豆を含む関東地方を監視、守護している。

一部イラスト協力／魔法科高校製作委員会

Glossary
用語解説

魔法科高校
国立魔法大学付属高校の通称。全国に九校設置されている。
この内、第一から第三までが一学年定員二百名で
一科・二科制度を採っている。

ブルーム、ウィード
第一高校における一科生、二科生の格差を表す隠語。
一科生の制服の左胸には八枚花弁のエンブレムが
刺繍されているが、二科生の制服にはこれが無い。

一科生のエンブレム

CAD〔シー・エー・ディー〕
魔法発動を簡略化させるデバイス。
内部には魔法のプログラムが記録されている。
特化型、汎用型などタイプ・形状は様々。

司波達也のCAD

フォア・リーブス・テクノロジー〔FLT〕
国内CADメーカーの一つ。
元々完成品よりも魔法工学部品で有名だったが、
シルバー・モデルの開発により
一躍CADメーカーとしての知名度が増した。

トーラス・シルバー
僅か一年の間に特化型CADのソフトウェアを
十年は進歩させたと称えられる天才技術者。

司波深雪のCAD

エイドス〔個別情報体〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学において
エイドスとは、事象に付随する情報体のことで、
「世界」にその「事象」が存在することの記録で、
「事象」が「世界」に記す足跡とも言える。
現代魔法学における「魔法」の定義は、エイドスを改変することによって、
その本体である「事象」を改変する技術とされている。

イデア〔情報体次元〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてイデアとは、エイドスが記録されるプラットフォームのこと。
魔法の一次的形態は、このイデアというプラットフォームに魔法式を出力して、
そこに記録されているエイドスを書き換える技術である。

起動式
魔法の設計図であり、魔法を構築するためのプログラム。
CADには起動式のデータが圧縮保存されており、
魔法師から流し込まれたサイオン波を展開したデータに従って信号化し、魔法師に返す。

サイオン（想子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、認識や思考結果を記録する情報素子のこと。
現代魔法の理論的基盤であるエイドス、現代魔法の根幹を支える技術である起動式や魔法式は
サイオンで構築された情報体である。

プシオン（霊子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、その存在は確認されているがその正体、その機能については
未だ解明されていない。一般的な魔法師は、活性化したプシオンを「感じる」ことができるにとどまる。

魔法師
『魔法技能師』の略語。魔法技能師とは、実用レベルで魔法を行使するスキルを持つ者の総称。

魔法式
事象に付随する情報を一時的に改変する為の情報体。魔法師が保有するサイオンで構築されている。

魔法演算領域

魔法式を構築する精神領域。魔法という才能の、いわば本体。魔法師の無意識領域に存在し、魔法師は通常、魔法演算領域を意識して使うことは出来ても、そこで行われている処理のプロセスを意識することは出来ない。魔法演算領域は、魔法師自身にとってもブラックボックスと言える。

魔法式の出力プロセス

❶起動式をCADから受信する。これを「起動式の読込」という。
❷起動式に変数を追加して魔法演算領域に送る。
❸起動式と変数から魔法式を構築する。
❹構築した魔法式を、無意識領域の最上層にして意識領域の最下層たる「ルート」に転送、意識と無意識の狭間に存在する「ゲート」から、イデアへ出力する。
❺イデアに出力された魔法式は、指定された座標のエイドスに干渉しこれを書き換える。

単一系統・単一工程の魔法で、この五段階のプロセスを半秒以内で完了させることが、「実用レベル」の魔法師としての目安になる。

魔法の評価基準（魔法力）

サイオン情報体を構築する速さが魔法の処理能力であり、構築できる情報体の規模が魔法のキャパシティであり、魔法式がエイドスを書き換える強さが干渉力、この三つを総合して魔法力と呼ばれる。

基本コード仮説

「加速」「加重」「移動」「振動」「収束」「発散」「吸収」「放出」の四系統八種にそれぞれ対応したプラスとマイナス、合計十六種類の基本となる魔法式が存在していて、この十六種類を組み合わせることで全ての系統魔法を構築することができるという理論。

系統魔法

四系統八種に属する魔法のこと。

系統外魔法

物質的な現象ではなく精神的な現象を操作する魔法の総称。心霊存在を使役する神霊魔法・精霊魔法から読心、幽体分離、意識操作まで多種にわたる。

十師族

日本で最強の魔法師集団。一条（いちじょう）、一之倉（いちのくら）、一色（いっしき）、二木（ふたつぎ）、二階堂（にかいどう）、二瓶（にへい）、三矢（みつや）、三日月（みかづき）、四葉（よつば）、五輪（いつわ）、五頭（ごとう）、五味（いつみ）、六塚（むつづか）、六角（ろっかく）、六郷（ろくごう）、六本木（ろっぽんぎ）、七草（さえぐさ）、七宝（しっぽう）、七夕（たなばた）、七瀬（ななせ）、八代（やつしろ）、八朔（はっさく）、八幡（はちまん）、九島（くどう）、九鬼（くき）、九頭見（くずみ）、十文字（じゅうもんじ）、十山（とおやま）の二十八の家系から四年に一度の「十師族選定会議」で選ばれた十の家系が『十師族』を名乗る。

数字付き

十師族の苗字に一から十までの数字が入っているように、百家の中でも本流とされている家系の苗字には“『千』代田”、“『五十』里”、“『千』葉”家の様に、十一以上の数字が入っている。数値の大小が力の強弱を表すものではないが、苗字に数字が入っているかどうかは、血筋が大きく物を言う、魔法師の力量を推測する一つの目安となる。

数字落ち

エクストラ・ナンバーズ、略して「エクストラ」とも呼ばれる、「数字」を剥奪された魔法師の一族。かつて、魔法師が兵器であり実験体サンプルであった頃、「成功例」としてナンバーを与えられた魔法師が、「成功例」に相応しい成果を上げられなかった為に捺された烙印。

様々な魔法

● コキュートス
精神を凍結させる系統外魔法。凍結した精神は肉体に死を命じることも出来ず、
この魔法を掛けられた相手は、精神の「静止」に伴い肉体も停止・硬直してしまう。
精神と肉体の相互作用により、肉体の部分的な結晶化が観測されることもある。

● 地鳴り
独立情報体「精霊」を媒体として地面を振動させる古式魔法。

● 術式解散〔グラム・ディスパージョン〕
魔法の本体である魔法式を、意味の有る構造を持たないサイオン粒子群に分解する魔法。
魔法式は事象に付随する情報体に作用するという性質上、その情報構造が露出していなければならず、
魔法式そのものに対する干渉を防ぐ手立ては無い。

● 術式解体〔グラム・デモリッション〕
圧縮したサイオン粒子の塊をイデアを経由せずに対象物へ直接ぶつけて爆発させ、そこに付け加えられた
起動式や魔法式などの、魔法を記録したサイオン情報体を吹き飛ばしてしまう無系統魔法。
魔法といっても、事象改変の為の魔法式としての構造を持たないサイオンの砲弾であるため情報強化や
領域干渉には影響されない。また、砲弾自体の持つ圧力がキャスト・ジャミングの影響も撥ね返してしまう。
物理的な作用が皆無である故に、どんな障碍物でも防ぐことは出来ない。

● 地雷原
土、岩、砂、コンクリートなど、材質は問わず、
とにかく「地面」という概念を有する固体に強い振動を与える魔法。

● 地割れ
独立情報体「精霊」を媒体として地面を線上に押し潰し、
一見地面を引き裂いたかのような外観を作り出す魔法。

● ドライ・ブリザード
空気中の二酸化炭素を集め、ドライアイスの粒子を作り出し、
凍結過程で余った熱エネルギーを運動エネルギーに変換してドライアイス粒子を高速で飛ばす魔法。

● 這い寄る雷蛇〔スリザリン・サンダース〕
『ドライ・ブリザード』のドライアイス気化によって水蒸気を凝結させ、気化した二酸化炭素を
溶け込ませた導電性の高い霧を作り出した上で、振動系魔法と放出系魔法で摩擦電気を発生させる。
そして、炭酸ガスが溶け込んだ霧や水滴を導線として敵に電撃を浴びせるコンビネーション魔法。

● ニブルヘイム
振動減速系広域魔法。大容積の空気を冷却し、
それを移動させることで広い範囲を凍結させる。
端的に言えば、超大型の冷凍庫を作り出すようなものである。
発動時に生じる白い霧は空中で凍結した氷や
ドライアイスの粒子だが、レベルを上げると凝結した
液体窒素の霧が混じることもある。

● 爆裂
対象物内部の液体を気化させる発散系魔法。
生物ならば体液が気化して身体が破裂、
内燃機関動力の機械ならば燃料が気化して爆散する。
燃料電池でも結果は同じで、可燃性の燃料を搭載していなくても、
バッテリー液や油圧液や冷却液や潤滑液など、およそ液体を搭載していない機械は存在しないため、
『爆裂』が発動すればほぼあらゆる機械が破壊され停止する。

● 乱れ髪
角度を指定して風向きを変えて行くのではなく、「もつれさせる」という曖昧な結果をもたらす
気流操作により、地面すれすれの気流を起こして相手の足に草を絡みつかせる古式魔法。
ある程度丈の高い草が生えている野原でのみ使用可能。

魔法技能師開発研究所

西暦2030年代、第三次世界大戦前に緊迫化する国際情勢に対応して日本政府が次々に設立した魔法師開発の為の研究所。その目的は魔法の開発ではなくあくまでも魔法師の開発であり、目的とする魔法に最適な魔法師を産み出す為の遺伝子操作を含めて研究されていた。

魔法技能師開発研究所は第一から第十までの10ヶ所設立され、現在も5ヶ所が稼働中である。

各研究所の詳細は以下のとおり。

魔法技能師開発第一研究所

2031年、金沢市に設立。現在は閉鎖。

テーマは対人戦闘を想定した生体に直接干渉する魔法の開発。気化魔法「爆裂」はその派生形態。ただし人体の動きを操作する魔法はパペット・テロ（操り人形化した人間によるカミカゼテロ）を誘発するものとして禁止されていた。

魔法技能師開発第二研究所

2031年、淡路島に設立。稼働中。

第一研のテーマと対をなす魔法として、無機物に干渉する魔法、特に酸化還元反応に関わる吸収系魔法を開発。

魔法技能師開発第三研究所

2032年、厚木市に設立。稼働中。

単独で様々な状況に対応できる魔法師の開発を目的としてマルチキャストの研究を推進。特に、同時発動、連続発動が可能な魔法数の限界を実験し、多数の魔法を同時発動可能な魔法師を開発。

魔法技能師開発第四研究所

詳細は不明。場所は旧長野県と旧山梨県の県境付近と推定。設立は2033年と推定。現在は閉鎖されたことになっているが、これも実態は不明。旧第四研のみ政府とは別に、国に対し強い影響力を持つスポンサーにより設立され、現在は国から独立しそのスポンサーの支援下で運営されているとの噂がある。またそのスポンサーにより2020年代以前から事実上運営が始まっていたとも噂されている。

精神干渉魔法を利用して、魔法師の無意識領域に存在する魔法という名の異能の源泉、魔法演算領域そのものの強化を目指していたとされている。

魔法技能師開発第五研究所

2035年、四国の宇和島市に設立。稼働中。

物質の形状に干渉する魔法を研究。技術的難度が低い流体制御が主流となるが、固体の形状干渉にも成功している。その成果がＵＳＮＡと共同開発した「バハムート」。流体干渉魔法「アビス」と合わせ、二つの戦略級魔法を開発した魔法研究機関として国際的に名を馳せている。

魔法技能師開発第六研究所

2035年、仙台市に設立。稼働中。

魔法による熱量制御を研究。第八研と並び基礎研究機関的な色彩が強く、その反面軍事的な色彩は薄い。ただ第四研を除く魔法技能師開発研究所の中で、最も多く遺伝子操作実験が行われたと言われている（第四研については実態が不明）。

魔法技能師開発第七研究所

2036年、東京に設立。現在は閉鎖。

対集団戦闘を念頭に置いた魔法を開発。その成果が群体制御魔法。第六研が非軍事的色彩の強いものだった反動で、有事の首都防衛を兼ねた魔法師開発の研究施設として設立された。

魔法技能師開発第八研究所

2037年、北九州市に設立。稼働中。

魔法による重力、電磁力、強い相互作用、弱い相互作用の操作を研究。第六研以上に基礎研究機関的な色彩が強い。ただし、国防軍との結び付きは第六研と異なり強固。これは第八研の研究内容が核兵器の開発と容易に結びつくからであり、国防軍のお墨付きを得て核兵器開発疑惑を免れているという側面がある。

魔法技能師開発第九研究所

2037年、奈良市に設立。現在は閉鎖。

現代魔法と古式魔法の融合、古式魔法のノウハウを現代魔法に取り込むことで、ファジーな術式操作など現代魔法が苦手としている諸課題を解決しようとした。

魔法技能師開発第十研究所

2039年、東京に設立。現在は閉鎖。

第七研と同じく首都防衛の目的を兼ねて、大火力の攻撃に対する防御手段として空間に仮想構築物を生成する領域魔法を研究。その成果が多種多様な対物理障壁魔法。

また第十研は、第四研とは別の手段で魔法能力の引き上げを目指した。具体的には魔法演算領域そのものの強化ではなく、魔法演算領域を一時的にオーバークロックすることで必要に応じ強力な魔法を行使できる魔法師の開発に取り組んだ。ただしその成否は公開されていない。

これら10ヶ所の研究所以外にエレメンツ開発を目的とした研究所が2010年代から2020年代にかけて稼働していたが、現在は全て閉鎖されている。
また国防軍には2002年に設立された陸軍総司令部直属の秘密研究機関があり独自に研究を続けている。
九島烈は第九研に所属するまでこの研究機関で強化措置を受けていた。

魔法剣

魔法による戦闘方法には魔法それ自体を武器にする戦い方の他に、
魔法で武器を強化・操作する技法がある。
銃や弓矢などの飛び道具と組み合わせる術式が多数派だが、
日本では剣技と魔法を組み合わせて戦う「剣術」も発達しており、
現代魔法と古式魔法の双方に魔法剣とも言うべき専用の魔法が編み出されている。

1. 高周波（こうしゅうは）ブレード

刀身を高速振動させ、接触物の分子結合力を超えた振動を伝播させることで
固体を局所的に液状化して切断する魔法。刀身の自壊を防止する術式とワンセットで使用される。

2. 圧斬り（へしきり）

刃先に斬撃方向に対して左右垂直方向の斥力を発生させ、
刃が接触した物体を押し開くように割断する魔法。
斥力場の幅は1ミリ未満の小さなものだが光に干渉する程の強度がある為、
正面から見ると刃先が黒い線になる。

3. ドウジ斬り（童子斬り）

源氏の秘剣として伝承されていた古式魔法。二本の刃を遠隔操作し、
手に持つ刀と合わせて三本の刀で相手を取り囲むようにして同時に切りつける魔法剣技。
本来の意味である「同時斬り」を「童子斬り」の名に隠していた。

4. 斬鉄（ざんてつ）

千葉一門の秘剣。刀を鋼と鉄の塊ではなく、「刀」という単一概念の存在として定義し、
魔法式で設定した斬撃線に沿って動かす移動系統魔法。
単一概念存在と定義された「刀」はあたかも単分子結晶の刃の様に、
折れることも曲がることも欠けることもなく、斬撃線に沿ってあらゆる物体を切り裂く。

5. 迅雷斬鉄（じんらいざんてつ）

専用の武装デバイス「雷丸（いかづちまる）」を用いた「斬鉄」の発展形。
刀と剣士を一つの集合概念として定義することで
接敵から斬撃までの一連の動作が一切の狂い無く高速実行される。

6. 山津波（やまつなみ）

全長１８０センチの長大な専用武器「大蛇丸（おろちまる）」を用いた千葉一門の秘剣。
自分と刀に掛かる慣性を極小化して敵に高速接近し、
インパクトの瞬間、消していた慣性を上乗せして刀身の慣性を増幅し対象物に叩きつける。
この偽りの慣性質量は助走が長ければ長いほど増大し、最大で十トンに及ぶ。

7. 薄羽蜻蛉（うすばかげろう）

カーボンナノチューブを織って作られた厚さ五ナノメートルの極薄シートを
硬化魔法で完全平面に固定して刃とする魔法。
薄羽蜻蛉で作られた刀身はどんな刀剣、どんな剃刀よりも鋭い切れ味を持つが、
刃を動かす為のサポートが術式に含まれていないので、術者は刀の操作技術と腕力を要求される。

戦略級魔法師・十三使徒

　現代魔法は高度な科学技術の中で育まれてきたものである為、
軍事的に強力な魔法の開発が可能な国家は限られている。
その結果、大規模破壊兵器に匹敵する戦略級魔法を開発できたのは一握りの国家だった。
　ただ開発した魔法を同盟国に供与することは行われており、
戦略級魔法に高い適性を示した同盟国の魔法師が戦略級魔法師として認められている例もある。
　2095年4月段階で、国家により戦略級魔法に適性を認められ対外的に公表された魔法師は13名。
彼らは十三使徒と呼ばれ、世界の軍事バランスの重要ファクターと見なされていた。
十三使徒の所属国、氏名、戦略級魔法の名称は以下のとおり。

USNA
■アンジー・シリウス：「ヘビィ・メタル・バースト」
■エリオット・ミラー：「リヴァイアサン」
■ローラン・バルト：「リヴァイアサン」
※この中でスターズに所属するのはアンジー・シリウスのみであり、
エリオット・ミラーはアラスカ基地、ローラン・バルトは国外のジブラルタル基地から
基本的に動くことはない。

新ソビエト連邦
■イーゴリ・アンドレイビッチ・ベゾブラゾフ：「トゥマーン・ボンバ」
■レオニード・コンドラチェンコ：「シムリャー・アールミヤ」
※コンドラチェンコは高齢の為、黒海基地から基本的に動くことはない。

大亜細亜連合
■劉雲徳（りゅううんとく）：「霹靂塔」
※劉雲徳は2095年10月31日の対日戦闘で戦死している。

インド・ペルシア連邦
■バラット・チャンドラ・カーン：「アグニ・ダウンバースト」

日本
■五輪 澪（いつわみお）：「深淵（アビス）」

ブラジル
■ミゲル・ディアス：「シンクロライナー・フュージョン」
※魔法式はUSNAより供与されたもの。

イギリス
■ウィリアム・マクロード：「オゾンサークル」

ドイツ
■カーラ・シュミット：「オゾンサークル」
※オゾンサークルはオゾンホール対策として分裂前のEUで共同研究された魔法を原型としており、
イギリスで完成した魔法式が協定により旧EU諸国に公開された。

トルコ
■アリ・シャーヒーン：「バハムート」
※魔法式はUSNAと日本の共同で開発されたものであり、日本主導で供与された。

タイ
■ソム・チャイ・ブンナーク：「アグニ・ダウンバースト」
※魔法式はインド・ペルシアより供与されたもの。

The International Situation

2096年現在の世界情勢

世界の寒冷化を直接の契機とする第三次世界大戦、二〇年世界群発戦争により世界の地図は大きく塗り替えられた。現在の状況は以下のとおり。

ＵＳＡはカナダ及びメキシコからパナマまでの諸国を併合して北アメリカ大陸合衆国（ＵＳＮＡ）を形成。

ロシアはウクライナ、ベラルーシを再吸収して新ソビエト連邦（新ソ連）を形成。

中国はビルマ北部、ベトナム北部、ラオス北部、朝鮮半島を征服して大亜細亜連合（大亜連合）を形成。

インドとイランは中央アジア諸国（トルクメニスタン、ウズベキスタン、タジキスタン、アフガニスタン）及び南アジア諸国（パキスタン、ネパール、ブータン、バングラデシュ、スリランカ）を呑み込んでインド・ペルシア連邦を形成。

他のアジア・アラブ諸国は地域ごとに軍事同盟を締結し新ソ連、大亜連合、インド・ペルシアの三大国に対抗。

オーストラリアは事実上の鎖国を選択。

ＥＵは統合に失敗し、ドイツとフランスを境に東西分裂。東西ＥＵも統合国家の形成に至らず、結合は戦前よりむしろ弱体化している。

アフリカは諸国の半分が国家ごと消滅し、生き残った国家も辛うじて都市周辺の支配権を維持している状態となっている。

南アメリカはブラジルを除き地方政府レベルの小国分立状態に陥っている。

Chapter 6

On February 5th, 2097 A.D., around 10.30 A.M., a large-scale bombing took place in a certain hotel in Hakone.

The targeted hotel was the venue selected for the Ten Master Clans Conference. At the time of the terrorist attack, the 18 Assistant Houses had already left the hotel premises. However, the Family Heads of the newly selected Ten Master Clans were still inside the building, discussing the problems faced by the Japanese Magic Community.

Tatsuya, Miyuki, Minami, Takuma, Kasumi, and Izumi had received the news during class and immediately headed out to the scene. Upon arriving, they could hear screams ringing throughout the neighborhood.

There were injured and dead people being carried out of the burnt hotel. Many of the injured were sitting by the street while being treated. There were intermittent roars from bombs left in the rubble that were just now exploding. The unexpected devastation was similar to the Yokohama Incident from the autumn of 2 years ago.

Tatsuya held Miyuki back by grasping her shoulder as she attempted to step towards the hotel.

“Onii-sama…?”

Miyuki looked back, and Tatsuya shook his head.

“It's better to not interfere.”

Tatsuya restrained Miyuki as she tried to extinguish the fire with her magic.

The fire was more or less extinguished already. It was still dangerous, since they didn't know how many explosives were left inside, but the firefighters on location were trained for this. Tatsuya thought it would be better to leave this to the experts, as the group wasn’t familiar with this field.

“More importantly, we should try to locate Aunt-, no, Mother and the others.”

Tatsuya almost said ‘Oba-ue’, then he remembered that he was together with Takuma and the others. It was probably unnecessary to correct himself, but he was determined to avoid any situation that could bring any doubt to the ‘setting’.

“Over there.”

Even when he was talking to Miyuki, Tatsuya kept looking around, and faster than Takuma and Izumi did, spotted the Family Heads of the Ten Master Clans.

Although seeing the Family Heads together as they currently were was quite intimidating, he was curious as to why they'd stick together in this situation. Tatsuya tilted his head and immediately saw the figure of a plain-clothed detective next to them.

“Otou-sama!”

Izumi broke out into a run while disregarding her surroundings.

“Ah, wait a minute, Izumi!”

Kasumi also chased after her recklessly.

“That, is that a detective…?”

Even though they were all searching for their parents, Takuma seemed to be much calmer than the twins.

However, even he yielded to circumstances.

“Onii-sama, what do you think about this?”

Apparently, the Family Heads of the Ten Master Clans were being questioned about the situation, so Miyuki asked Tatsuya what they should do. Minami was also looking at him expectantly.

“Let’s keep an eye on Izumi and the others alone.”

The six of them had left school early to rush over here. Given the situation, they didn’t even have time to change out of their uniforms.

Due to this, with his apparent status of an upperclassman, he had an obligation to stop the freshman who were about to start a ruckus. Tatsuya conveyed 'no other choice' from his eyes to Miyuki and Minami as he walked to where Maya was standing.

“Why are Otou-sama and the others being interrogated by the police!? They’re the victims here!”

Sure enough, Izumi was lashing out at the detective. Contrary to her usual lady-like behavior, she could bare her fangs at times like this. Although, in the eyes of the public, it might be perceived as youthful and impulsive.

(Even so… Why did no one stop Izumi?)

None of the Family Heads tried to restrain the loudly protesting Izumi, rather, everyone was just watching from the sidelines. At the very least, her father, Saegusa Kouichi, should have rebuked her. But he hadn't, and even with his meek expression, you could see he looked pretty amused with the laughter in his eyes.

The detective was only taken aback for a moment, but it seemed things would turn sour shortly if Izumi wasn't kept in check. In the end, it would unnecessarily lead to a worse situation —— for his Aunt —— for all of them. Since the adults had washed their hands of the matter, Tatsuya reluctantly took the role upon himself.

“Izumi, that’s enough.”

“Shiba-senpai, why did you stop me?”

Izumi shook Tatsuya’s hand off her shoulder.

Using the force that was directed towards him, Tatsuya controlled Izumi’s center of gravity.

Izumi resisted, but Tatsuya led her movement, as if they were dancing, to painlessly tear her attention away from the detective.

“Cool your head. The police are only doing their duty.”

His words weren’t intended for Izumi alone. They were also directed to restrain Kasumi and Takuma.

“If you’re getting in his way, the questioning will only get longer. I’m sorry for the disturbance.”

The second half of his sentence was directed to the plain-clothed detective. The strangely acquiescent words, which assumed the blame was Izumi’s, were received with a nod from the detective.

Tatsuya pulled Izumi’s hand, and hinted to Takuma and Izumi to leave the adults in order to let them settle their business first.

The Family Heads of the Ten Master Clans, excluding Maya, looked at him with great interest.

Kouichi and Gouki in particular gave him a very intriguing look.

Either the questioning had just started, or as Tatsuya said, it was prolonged for longer than expected. At this point, the Family Heads weren't just being questioned by the plain-clothed detective, but a crowd of police officers had surrounded them as well. It was as if they were suspects.

However, that was not important to Tatsuya.

For him, the most important thing was Maya’s safety. If Maya were to die now, it would be inconvenient. As Miyuki has just been revealed as the Yotsuba Family’s next Family Head, Tatsuya could no longer be hidden in anonymity behind the scenes.

While he could maintain his position, he had yet to form any stable footing. His only allies were the personnel of the FLT Third Division, Ushiyama and company. Neither Kazama nor Yakumo would want to interfere when it’s disadvantageous for them. They couldn’t exactly be called ‘Sponsors’.

Maya can be said to be one of the most powerful Magicians in the world. It wasn’t a bluff. There was almost no one who could beat her in magic combat. There were no Magicians who wouldn't be harmed by ‘Meteor Shower’, even Tatsuya was no exception.

Tatsuya’s ‘Decomposition’ Magic had good chemistry against Maya’s ‘Meteor Shower’. However, Maya’s initiation speed was also top-notch, matching her magic power. She was also able to wield her power with versatility. These were things Tatsuya didn't have. Maya also possessed magic besides just ‘Meteor Shower’. Tatsuya wouldn't always get the initiative, either. If Maya's ‘Meteor Shower’ were to be activated before his ‘Decomposition’, even Tatsuya wouldn’t escape unscathed. He was only able to emerge victorious thus far due to ‘Regrowth’, and as long as Maya didn't possess that power, she probably won't be able to win against Tatsuya. Once ‘Meteor Shower’ was invoked, even the strongest defense magic ‘Phalanx’ from the Juumonji Family wouldn’t be able to withstand it.

However, that was only in terms of magic combat strength. Maya’s body was only on par with that of a normal human. She had never undergone any special training to maintain her beauty or health, just like any other weak woman. If she were to get cut, she would bleed like anyone else.

No matter how skillful someone was as a Magician, it was impossible to continuously maintain a personal barrier. Continuous defense-type magic hadn't been properly implemented yet, and it was far from practical use. In fact, calling it experimental would be appropriate. For Yotsuba Maya, even a single bullet could threaten her life.

Tatsuya had prepared himself to use 'Regrowth' in front of public eyes when he had rushed here, but for the time being, he had confirmed Maya's safety. 'Seems like it'd take some time to be able to talk to her —— though there's nothing in particular to be said —— should I go back to school?' Tatsuya was pondering when suddenly a red uniform came into view.

"Ichijou."

It was quite a loud voice, but not loud enough to be called raucous.

However, Masaki reacted to Tatsuya's tone rather firmly.

"Shiba."

He must have been looking for his father, Gouki. Masaki rapidly took in his surroundings while walking up to Tatsuya.

"Shiba-san, you're here as well."

Gazing at Miyuki who stood beside Tatsuya, Masaki changed his expression; it was a complex mix between disappointment and joy.

Miyuki linked her arm to Tatsuya's —— or not.

They weren't even in close contact.

Rather the gap between Tatsuya and Miyuki had spread even further. However, Masaki perceived that being due to the fact that they had suddenly went from siblings to lovers.

"Yes, this has become quite a problem."

Masaki's emotions weren't hard to read, even for Miyuki. Proposing an engagement towards someone who just announced their own engagement, even if it was out of sheer passion... Masaki's smiling face had a complex, yet easy to understand expression on it.

To be honest, Miyuki was just being timid to keep Masaki from feeling awkward. The Ichijou Family denying her engagement to Tatsuya didn't change her status as Tatsuya's fiancée. Even with that in mind, she still felt miserable when she came to understand her wish might not come true; it was a highly unpleasant feeling.

That being the case, Miyuki wasn't so immature as to make Masaki uncomfortable. Additionally, even though she was unhappy with Masaki's actions, she didn't have any aversion to him as a person. As such, putting on an amiable smile was an easy task to accomplish for her.

Although, it was probably a good idea for Masaki to give up as soon as possible. ——To be honest, even Miyuki desired for him to give up on her as soon as possible.

“Yeah… for the Head of each house to be gathered here...”

Masaki’s mood brightened from seeing Miyuki smile at him.

“Yes. The police seem to be questioning them.”

“Questioning!? Excuse me. I’m going over first.”

Fortunately, his judgement wasn't impaired too much by the unfolding events. As if realizing the impending crisis that the questioning of the Heads of the Ten Master Clans could create, Masaki regained his original purpose of going to his father's side.

On the other hand, Katsuto came out of the swarm of policemen. He was released early due to consideration of his age as a minor. (In the past, an adult was anyone over 18, but it was reinstated to 20 again. Reduction of the 'of age' limit was required in order to mass mobilize young soldiers during wartime, it was done all around the world. The adult age standard was even reduced to 16 at one point, before being raised to 25 at its extreme.)

Katsuto walked straight over to Tatsuya and company. It seemed like he had seen what Izumi had done just now.

“Shiba.”

Since there was no follow up on his words, there was no mistake of whom he had just called. At the very least, Tatsuya thought that Katsuto wouldn’t be shameless enough to call Miyuki without the proper honorific.

“Has the police interrogation been completed, Juumonji-senpai?”

Tatsuya directed his attention to Katsuto. Currently, they were standing in front of each other as a Senpai-Kouhai from school, not as members of the Ten Master Clans.

“No, I was thinking of updating you guys on the situation.”

Katsuto seemed to take the bait, and the awkwardness in his attitude disappeared.

Katsuto looked around Tatsuya’s companions. He knew about Kasumi and Izumi since way back. It was his first meeting with Takuma and Minami, or at least, they had never gotten a proper chance to have a conversation.

“Are you perhaps, Shippou-dono?”

Katsuto spoke to Takuma.

“Yes, I’m Shippou Takuma. Nice to meet you Juumonji-san.”

In contrast to Tatsuya, he greeted Katsuto as a member of the Ten Master Clans rather than as a Kouhai from First High. Although there was a difference between their status as a Family Head and the son of a Family Head, since they were standing as members of the Ten Master Clans, they were of equal footing.

“I’m Juumonji Katsuto. Pleased to meet you.”

“I as well, nice to meet you, too.”

However, even with the equal footing, and without the Senpai-Kouhai formality, Takuma did not make any cheeky gestures, even with his mouth, in their first meeting.

“This girl is Sakurai Minami, a Year 1 student who has been living with us.”

Provided the chance, Tatsuya introduced Minami to Katsuto. She politely bowed to Katsuto, and he seemed to have come to the realization that Minami's identity was, to some extent, like that of a Servant of the Yotsuba Family. After responding briefly to Minami, Katsuto returned to his point.

“You guys came here after receiving the disaster notification, didn’t you? As you can see, Yotsuba-dono, Saegusa-dono, and Shippou-dono are safe. There are no injuries whatsoever.”

The notification he referred to was an email in their mobile information terminals, which stated that his immediate family and acquaintances had encountered a disaster. Mobile information terminals gathered and relayed a lot of helpful information, such as reporting a fire and earthquake alarm in close proximity to the attendees, it had a radio service to inform the recipients of the notification of the recorded destination, and included a life log which monitored the owner's state in three stages; 'safe, danger', and 'death'. This information was supplied alongside local government information emails.

However, the notification was sent right as the disaster occurred, so there was no way to get an update to the situation unless the transmission was set to be continuous. Masaki, and even Tatsuya, were rushing because of that.

“Seems so. By the way, Senpai, do you mind telling us what exactly happened?”

“Hmm… If the others were here it would be easier to explain, but...”

After hearing Katsuto's words, Tatsuya looked around. Members of the Yotsuba Family could be seen furtively mingling amongst the people as to not stand out, and the Butler Hanabishi who was in charge of the unit was seen spreading his members among the crowd. ——Unfortunately, there was no hint of any suicide bomber to be found.

"Please."

Tatsuya lowered his head, conveying a heartfelt message that he didn't mind even the smallest bits of information. Katsuto nodded and gave a brief account of what happened.

"To be honest, we don't know the details either."

During the meeting, they were attacked by a suicide bomber and went to the roof seeking refuge. Katsuto also mentioned that the suicide bomber had used animated corpses for the attack.

"At this point in time, it's not yet determined that we were the target. Although I believe that there's a high chance that the meeting was targeted, it seems to be inconclusive, even for the police."

"Excuse me, Katsuto-san. No, Juumonji-senpai."

After calling Katsuto by name, Kasumi hurriedly corrected herself to address him as a Senpai. Since her sister knew of Katsuto even before during High School, she recognized him more as her sister's friend instead of as a Senpai from the same High School. ——Kasumi and Izumi probably felt uneasy to call him 'Katsuto-san' while her sister always called him 'Juumonji-kun'.

"Kasumi, what is it?"

Likewise, Katsuto felt the same.

"What did the police ask my fath-... no, what are they asking everyone?"

"We were asked to explain since we were at the scene and had witnessed it unfold from the start."

"Then, Otou-sama and the rest aren't under suspicion of being criminals?"

Izumi, who was standing next to Kasumi, had a tense vibe about her. The twins were showing a normal reaction, but Tatsuya and Miyuki were surprised that Izumi seemed to be earnestly worried about her father.

Due to that, Katsuto's eyes had a flicker of hesitation when Kasumi stared at him.

"They're not suspected of any conspiracy. Even so, the police the doubt that conflict between magicians could lead to suicide bombing."

Still, he didn’t try to dodge Kasumi’s question.

“That’s…”

While a stunned utterance escaped her mouth, Izumi's hand clenched tightly.

Unreasonable, she was definitely thinking so.

It wasn't just thought by Izumi. Takuma, who had been quietly listening in anger, had also balled his hand into a fist.

“They seem to think like the Anti-Magician faction.”

While Tatsuya was famous due to his reputation for controlling his emotions, he couldn't help but vocalize such an ironic observation.

“Onii-sama, could there be officers present that support the ‘Humanists’…?”

Miyuki's words made the faces of the group become sour.

“No, that's not it. If there were any, this interrogation would be much more flagrant.”

Tatsuya recalled the relentless interrogation he got from the police in Arashiyama, Kyoto after he fought the Traditionalist Magicians manipulated by Zhou, who detested the Ten Master Clans. He denied Miyuki’s concern.

The freshmen seemed visibly relieved by his confirmation. Katsuto lifted his eyebrow, letting out a surprised expression through his eyes.

“Shiba, aren't the two of you cousins, not siblings?”

Before Miyuki got upset, Tatsuya answered that question with a laugh.

“Ah, Miyuki’s ‘Onii-sama’ is it? Since we’d regarded each other as siblings until recently… as expected, it’s hard to immediately adjust.”

“I see. Fair enough.”

Katsuto’s doubt dissipated. This showed that Tatsuya’s response was just too natural, rather than Katsuto being gullible. There was no trace of guilt at all, and his act seemed genuine.

“Huh, Aniki?”

Just at that moment, almost too conveniently, Katsuto's attention was taken by Kasumi’s loud voice.

“Tomokazu-san, is it?”

Noticing the young man who was waving to Kasumi and Izumi, Katsuto muttered the name of the young man.

“Shiba, do you have anything else you want to ask?”

“No. There’s nothing.”

“How about you, Shippou?”

“Likewise, I don’t have any more questions.”

After confirming with Tatsuya and Takuma, Katsuto nodded.

“Then, I’ll be excusing myself.”

Katsuto proceeded to walk in the direction of the young man.

“Miyuki-senpai, Shiba-senpai.”

Immediately, Izumi turned to Tatsuya and spoke.

“It seems like our brother is also waiting, so we'll excuse ourselves. I think we'll be going back with him as well, so don't mind us.”

“Shiba-senpai, President, please excuse us. Sakurai-san, you as well.”

Subsequently, Kasumi bowed to Tatsuya and followed her twin, waving to Minami as well. The twins went after Tomokazu, the young man whom Katsuto was approaching.

“Onii-sama, that man is related to Izumi-chan and Kasumi?”

Miyuki, upon seeing Tomokazu’s back, immediately sought confirmation to Tatsuya.

“Yes. Saegusa Tomokazu-san. The Saegusa Family’s eldest son. Izumi and Kasumi’s step-brother.”

“I see…”

The reason for Miyuki's curiosity was due to the fact that Kasumi called him ‘Aniki’ and Izumi referred to him as ‘Ani’, and there was no distance felt whatsoever.

“By the way, Onii-sama, about our earlier conversation.”

“Ah, the police have yet to be filled with anti-magic ideologies, it seems to be that way. Also, from the way they were talking just now, it seems like a needless concern.”

Tatsuya answered so, anticipating Miyuki’s question.

“Rather, that was rather lenient of him to say considering the situation.”

Adding a sigh to his sentence.

“...Not only anti-magic principles, the police haven't been corrupted with any polluted ideologies. Either of those would be a big problem, no?”

Miyuki gazed towards Tatsuya with a puzzled look as he smiled.

“If there were some officers that had subscribed to the anti-magic ideology, that would be enough to depose them.”

Tatsuya explained with a serious look, minding the future possibilities ahead of them.

“At any rate, we don't need to do anything for now. If it's information we want, we can always get it from the police.”

“It might seem impossible, but... if the police, as an organization, is taken over by the anti-magician ideology... what are we going to do?”

"It's highly unlikely."

Tatsuya, with a bitter expression, shook his head at Miyuki's question.

"As long as the enemy doesn't develop a method to stand against magic, the magic police are already on standby. Hence, the government would make its move before anything too serious happened, but..."

"Is there any chance that it wouldn't end so favorably?"

The way Miyuki asked Tatsuya did not hide any of the anxiety in her voice.

"Even though there doesn't seem to be a detective here, this terrorist attack is actually being handled well. Most likely due to the Ten Master Clans being involved, they're following up on the matter."

Tatsuya didn't directly answer Miyuki, instead he took a step back to look at the root of the problem instead.

"If an unbiased detective came to a conclusion, there's a high chance the general public would agree with him."

Tatsuya fixed his eyes on Maya.

The Heads of Ten Master Clans were still surrounded by the police.

"Depending on how the media publicized this attack, the reaction could vary greatly. Unfortunately, they'll probably go with 'magicians caused civilian casualties' and the like..."

Tatsuya diverted his gaze to the group of people who were injured. Some were being transferred to the ambulance with serious injuries, and there were only ten people left. Even in such a situation, the number of fatalities hadn't reached double digits. This result could be considered miraculous.

"Even though the terrorist would take full blame for this attack, there would still be a lot of people like myself who would think that 'Magicians caused this, and they have a responsibility for reparations', and inevitably would be convinced this was the truth."

"But, we, Magicians, are also Japanese citizens like them, aren't we?"

Miyuki showed a glimpse of sadness in her eyes.

"However,"

Even so, she didn't look away. Although Miyuki appeared to be fragile, she wasn't timid.

"The media is not always hostile to Magicians. Last April, despite the small number, there was a campaign to acknowledge the rights of Magicians."

As Miyuki said, there was such a campaign discussed in the news last April, to counter the arguments of the media's hostility against magicians.

However, this time, the situation is different. The number of casualties are higher, and the damage was more severe.

“You’re right. Even the Ten Master Clans won’t be able to sit still now.”

Yet, Tatsuya didn't say anything that would increase Miyuki's anxiety. Whether or not he was pessimistic or optimistic about the future, things that are bound to happen will happen anyway. As of now, neither Miyuki or Tatsuya could do anything. Due to this, Tatsuya refrained from saying anything that could worsen the atmosphere.

“More importantly, we’ve made sure that Haha-ue is alright, so let’s go back to school.”

He already confirmed the situation from Katsuto’s explanation, and staying longer there wouldn't change things. This situation was better left to the police. Trusting Tatsuya’s judgement, Miyuki replied ‘yes, Onii-sama’, and Minami also bowed in agreement, following them silently.

“How about you, Shippou?”

“I… will stay here a little longer.”

Takuma answered so, when Tatsuya asked him.

“I see.”

Tatsuya didn’t oppose his decision. He wasn’t responsible for taking care of Takuma, and their relationship wasn’t that close either. Tatsuya urged Miyuki and Minami to leave the area.

“Umm, Shiba-senpai.”

From behind, Takuma’s voice could be heard to have hesitation in it.

“What?”

“About our earlier conversation… No, nevermind.”

Takuma retracted his words.

It was clear that Takuma was doubting him, but Tatsuya kept his face with ‘I see’ expression and turned his back against Takuma.

◊ ◊ ◊

The hotel was burnt down, with many injured and many dead.

The ghastly mastermind behind this terrorist attack was observing the aftermath from a house located 9km east of Odawara.

A suicide bombing was the perfect tool for Jiedo Heigu. It inflicted major damage while keeping losses to a minimum.

The explosives didn't get caught by the detectors which had been pre-installed in the city, which was to be expected from a weapon deemed obsolete by the USNA Army. The shields hadn't been activated either since the explosive detectors didn't go off.

Even his corpse puppets which were manipulated with 'Zombification' didn't get discovered by the sensors. His dolls got into the hotel unimpeded.

The security measures in the city were flawed to a laughable degree. In his evaluation, the city he had until recently lived in while in the USNA had much tighter security. He had a sense of self satisfaction when he thought of this.

Even the Ten Master Clans had been unable to injure him, which had been according to plan. He had expected to be able to escape without a scratch instead of triggering something short of a full war, military infantry and all.

As expected, the Ten Master Clans had only defended themselves. Selfishly protecting themselves at the expense of others. If they had used their magic to protect everyone, the injured count might been curbed at 20 people, and the outcome of 50 he achieved wouldn't have been possible.

They ended up as collateral damage due to the Ten Master Clans.

This was the message Jiedo Heigu wanted to spread to the Japanese.

The Ten Master Clans would abandon ordinary citzens if it was to save themselves.

You, the Japanese, would be killed because of the Ten Master Clans.

The Ten Master Clans, the Yotsuba, I will take away your place in Japan the same way you took mine.

My homeland, where I belonged, the Great Asian Alliance...

Jiedo Heigu smiled in the darkness of his silhouette as he stood up. Strewn about his feet were the owner of the house and his family, laying on the floor lifelessly.

◊ ◊ ◊

STARS No. 2, Benjamin Canopus, was currently in a room inside the USNA Embassy. He was staring at the screen relaying the scene of the terrorist attack at Hakone.

His smart and fearless face was colored with a bitter expression. Although they were of different countries, he couldn’t help but feel sorry for the civilians who fell victim to terrorism.

As an austere soldier, Canopus believed that military personnel who protected non-combatants and complied with the classic laws of war should be full of pride. STARS missions, however, often required him to operate covertly and break these laws he respected. He was constantly struggling with this inner conflict, and that's why he decided to forgo any involvement with civilians which could affect his heart.

He would have stopped Heigu’s attack if it was possible. Unfortunately, he wasn't allowed to reveal the embarrassing weaponry theft to Japan, and in turn this caused Japan to be

unprepared for the terrorist attack. This resulted in the unnecessary loss of Japanese civilian's lives.

Since he was not allowed to inform them, he was also ordered to not cooperate with Japan's military or police to further ensure the weapon theft remained a secret.

He had received a kill order for Heigu, and he needed to keep a low profile while doing to to prevent any intel leakage to the Japanese authorities. Luring out Heigu to the high seas and eliminating him there was the best possible outcome, or so he was told.

Canopus had a 'soldier to the bones' kind of mentality, but he understood that a command must be obeyed. The moment military personnel deviate from a given order, they would be deemed an outlaw, guilty of insubordination.

It was a smarter choice to follow his orders from the military, lest he be branded a fugitive.

◊ ◊ ◊

Finally, the Heads of Ten Master Clans who were held by the police were released, and they rode in the helicopter that Masaki was riding back to the Kantō Branch Magic Association Building. Of course, Katsuto was traveling together with them. Apart from Masaki, those who were expected to ride along were Kasumi, Izumi, their brother, Kouichi's first son, Tomokazu, and Takuma.

When they arrived at the Magic Association, the Heads of the Ten Master Clans went to a separate conference room, while Masaki, Kasumi, Izumi, Tomokazu, and Takuma were waiting in a separate room in the building. Despite the fact that it was a sudden announcement, the Magic Association managed to arrange a round table for the Heads of the Ten Master Clans to sit around. They looked at each other's faces, before the eldest of them broke the silence.

"Let's stop wasting time with meaningless prelude. Everybody please voice out ideas, if you have any on how to deal with this emergency."

Futatsugi Mai who was the object of focus of the other nine, stared back at them one by one.

After she looked around, she stopped by staring at Kouichi, who sat right across from her.

“It will be difficult to control the mass media.”

Kouichi, who had the most influence in the media industry, said that with a pessimistic face.

“As of now, there are 16 casualties. That number might soar above a couple more dozen. Just the number of casualties is more than enough to throw the public opinion into a hysteric one.”

“Even so, it doesn’t mean that we can afford to do nothing.”

From his seat, Itsuwa Isami stated his opinion. However, his voice did not convey any momentum.

“No, it’s probably best to wait for now. An overly controlled public opinion might backfire if done hastily. It might even carry heavier consequences for us.”

Mitsuya Gen cast his opinion reluctantly.

“That’s right. In the first place, we are also victims, and there’s nothing we have done that requires justification. If we react rashly now, there’s no guarantee that we wouldn’t hurt ourselves.”

Yatsushiro Raizou consented.

“However, standing still without taking any action also wouldn’t be a wise decision. This isn’t our only problem. The whole population of Magicians is also under scrutiny.”

“I agree with Ichijou-dono. We shouldn’t overdo our counter-measure, but we definitely cannot stay still. If we do not resist, we will end up being cornered by our enemy.”

Gouki and Mutsuzuka Atsuko insisted that they should take aggressive measures. The meeting had barely started, but the mood had started to break down early on. Mai furrowed her eyebrows in concern, and she urged those who had yet to comment to speak up.

“Juumonji-dono, how about you? Please don’t hold back, and feel free to speak up.”

Katsuto lowered his head to the others before he started to speak,

“It’s probably impossible to try to control the mass media. I agree with Saegusa-dono on that.”

Unexpectedly, he started with such a flat statement.

“Then, is it better for us to do nothing?”

It was surprising, but interesting, that Raizou showed such an expression,

“No.”

Katsuto focused his eyes at Raizou, without even shaking his neck.

“Let’s not resort to such tricks, I believe we should openly declare our position. Particularly, in condemning the terrorist attacks against the Magic Association.”

“I see.”

Raizo nodded, he was clearly caught unprepared. He was so focused on what was in his hand that he overlooked the straightforward approach.

“Juumonji-dono’s suggestion, I think, is the most realistic counter-measure we can take as of now.”

Shippou Takumi gave consent to Katsuto’s proposal.

“Ah, I also think that making a statement through the Magic Association is a good solution.”

Raizou said so while slightly raising his hand.

“Yatsushiro-dono, isn’t that only your excuse to escape from giving your idea?”

Atsuko brewed some tea.

The unscrupulous Gouki frowned at the remark, yet the object of the remark, Raizou, was laughing without any care.

“Yotsuba-dono, what do you say.”

As a gesture of goodwill to Raizou, and to divert the attention from himself, Atsuko swiftly directed a question to Maya.

Maya, rather than focusing on answering Atsuko, opened her mouth towards Kouichi who was sitting by her side.

“I think we don’t have much choice. Am I right, Saegusa-dono.”

“That’s for certain.”

Kouichi nodded with a straight face towards Maya’s statement, even when it sounded like a provocation.

“We will definitely put out a statement via the Magic Association that condemns this attack, and we will also state that we’re ready to fully cooperate in order to catch the perpetrator of this attack.”

After he made sure that nobody was against his statement, Kouichi opened his mouth again.

“Of course, this will involve control of the mass media.”

“However, it will be hard to do such control. Didn’t you say so yourself, Saegusa-dono.”

Being reminded by Gen about what he said, Kouichi nodded and faked a smile.

“Yes, we cannot avoid those who voice out that this is the responsibility of Magicians. However, we can’t be doing nothing. In the end, the bad guys are the terrorists, and I believe we need to continually induce this kind of tone while controlling the media.”

Gen didn’t give any reply to Kouichi.

“I wonder if it would proceed so smoothly. Once public opinion goes against Magicians, it won’t be easy to overturn it.”

“The hostile atmosphere towards Magicians has been there for the longest time. However, if we can divert it to the terrorist, at least we can ease out the heightening negative opinion of the public towards Magicians. If we cooperate with helping to catch the criminal, the terrorist would ‘take the blame’, and the hostility will pass on smoothly.”

“Capturing the terrorist with our own hands? Wouldn’t that impose a greater risk for us?”

Gouki interrupted the discussion between Kouichi and Gen.

“In order for us, the Heads of the Ten Master Clans to move, we need military approval. Although that’s only a verbal agreement and not a written rule, we should not disregard the procedures that have been given to us, in order to maintain a relationship with the government.”

“Ichijou-dono, you do know that such a permit from the military has a very low chance to being accepted, right?”

Gouki shook his head in reply to Kouichi’s question. He also suggested that, ‘that’s not all’.

“If we allow for a second and third attack to be carried out during our search, the public opinion of the Ten Master Clans, no, of Magicians will suffer even more.”

“However, it doesn’t mean that we only stand aside while the terrorist attacks us.”

Maya’s intervention, was met with surprises. Since she directly replied to Gouki, with her eyes fixed on him.

“In order to catch the criminal, and to prevent a copycat attack, I think we must dispose our mask and mobilize our strength. The Ten Master Clans have the power to catch the criminal.”

If this statement hadn't been made by Maya, who openly supported Kouichi, people might have had an easier time to believe it.

"However, I can understand Ichijou-dono's concern."

"...What do you mean?"

Gouki wasn't the only one who stared at Maya with a puzzled look. Kouichi also reflected a quizzical expression towards Maya in his eyes.

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to be involved in the search of this attacker directly. Although letting the perpetrator remain at large is a problem in itself, but I think it's a necessity for us to lookout for another terrorist attack for now."

"So we should focus on preventing another attack from being carried out?"

Maya nodded, to answer Mai's question.

"Then, should we assign someone to lookout for the terrorist?"

Atsuko's question wasn't meant for only Maya, but also towards the other members who were in the meeting.

"I'm sending Tatsuya from my family."

However, Maya seemed to misunderstand the proposal made by someone else for the Yotsuba Family.

"Let's give the responsibility to Masaki."

As if to compete, Gouki quickly threw in Masaki's name.

"Yotsuba-dono, Ichijou-dono, please wait a minute."

However, in exchange of the nominations from their own families, Mai seemed to be unsatisfied.

"The Yotsuba Family's Tatsuya-dono and the Ichijou Family's Masaki-dono are both still in high school. To be on the lookout for a latent criminal, it will take a lot of time and effort. Even though they are apart of the Ten Master Clans, ultimately, they're still students. I don't think it's wise to sacrifice their academics for this matter."

Gouki was rebutted by the common sense that came from Mai.

"It's heartwarming to hear your concern, Futatsugi-dono. However, you need not worry."

However, Maya returned a painless smile to Mai.

“Certainly, to look for a terrorist and his colleagues might take a long time. However if Tatsuya receives our back up from the Yotsuba Family, he won’t even need a month to kill the terrorists. That much wouldn’t even interfere with his academics.”

She replied with such confidence, as if she could foresee the future, Mai was taken aback by Maya’s statement.

“...But still.”

However, the opponent was someone from the Ten Master Clans as well. Mai was not so easily trusting what Maya said.

“Tatsuya-dono is still a high school student, that’s an undeniable fact. No matter how much your family supports him, to make him chase a terrorist is really not a good idea, right?”

Maya replied to Mai’s statement with a slight smile. As if seemingly saying, “Well, you’re too late.”

The incident that happened a year ago, in April 2095, the terrorist attack on First High, had been covered up well to now. It was released to the Ten Master Clans previously.

They still have no clue about Tatsuya’s magic, but it was clear to them that Tatsuya and Katsuto were the ones who defeated the criminals. The record was held by the Juumonji Family, and was released to the Ten Master Clans, once the Yotsuba Family announced that Tatsuya was a member of their family.

Although the assassination of the ringleader of No Head Dragon was kept secret, his involvement in the Yokohama Incident at the International Conference Center was already out of the box. And there was also the Parasite Incident which had been uncovered. Maya even spoke about the matter of Zhou Gongjin last fall. The fact that he is a high school student who’s faced danger before, was really just (common sense).

“Shall my eldest son, Tomokazu, lead the operation against the terrorists?”

The one who suddenly threw in his idea into the stalled atmosphere was Kouichi.

“My eldest has already completed his education, and his work hours can be adjusted. We can start looking around Hakone for preliminary clues left by the terrorist. The Kantō-Izu region is, afterall, under the jurisdiction of the Saegusa Family.”

Kouichi glanced around the table to see the others’ reactions.

“If you cannot believe me after my involvement with Zhou Gongjin, Juumonji-dono, you are welcome to take the lead, while Tomokazu can assist you.”

Gouki and Mai, Isami and Atsuko, as well as Takumi and Raizou, everyone's expressions were puzzled. They were unable to digest what Kouichi wanted to do.

"...Are you perhaps, trying to pay for your mistake?"

Mai had eye contact with Maya, as well as Gen, to see if they had figured out what Kouichi meant.

Kouichi meekly nodded.

"Of course I don't expect to regain your trust with only this much, but I would like to think that this is the first step to do so."

"Isn't that a fine idea."

Maya looked at Kouichi, and showed her support for him.

"After all, Kantō is Saegusa-dono's and Juumonji-dono's territory. If Saegusa-dono has decided to move, then I will be glad enough to leave it to you."

Maya said so while smiling at Mai.

"If everyone agrees with this plan, then I will take the responsibility upon myself."

The one who responded to that smile was not Mai, but Katsuto.

"If you need any form of help from Tatsuya, please don't hold back."

"Likewise. Regardless of the form, if you ever need a hand from Ichijou-dono, we'll be there."

"Of course, I will not spare any resource. You can also mobilize Masaki as you like."

Lowering his head to Gouki and Maya, Katsuto turned to Kouichi.

"Saegusa-dono. Formally, I will be responsible, however, I plan to leave command to Tomokazu-dono."

"Thank you very much."

Kouichi carefully bowed to Katsuto who is young enough to be his own child.

"However."

But, Katsuto's sentence had yet to end.

"The Yotsuba Family's Tatsuya-dono and the Ichijou Family's Masaki will cooperate under my command."

Kouichi narrowed his eyes sharply for an instance. Yet, it was not discovered as he was wearing his sun specs even inside the room.

“I do not comprehend your reason, but I do not mind it.”

Kouichi nodded towards Katsuto.

This time, Katsuto bowed calmly at Kouichi.

“Then we will conclude that we will deliver a message condemning the terrorist attack via the Magic Association. As well as, the assignment of Juumonji-dono and Saegusa-dono who will cooperate in apprehending the terrorist.”

Mai reconfirmed the conclusion of the discussion to the others.

Even so, Raizou easily interrupted.

“I’m not particularly against that, but I wonder if their base is even in Japan at all.”

He even pointed out that the corpse manipulation technique was foreign,

“Unmistakably.”

Gouki denied flatly.

“The corpse manipulation technique is not one that can be programmed beforehand, and activated later on. At the very least, in order to control that many corpses to such a degree, someone nearby must be controlling them.”

“How close would that be?”

Gouki stopped to think for a while before answering Isami.

“Depending on the Magician’s skill, the furthest would be 10 km”

Then, he added on.

“Assuming the Magician in question does not have a very high degree of skill.”

“We can’t help but think so, can we?”

From his side, Katsuto stated so plainly.

“If our opponent is really that skilled, we probably wouldn’t be able to capture him anyway.”

“That’s right. I think it’s better to form a general strategy to capture him.”

Raizou expressed his support to Mai’s plan about forming a strategy.

As if they were triggered, the others were voicing out their support one after another.

◊ ◊ ◊

After concluding their meeting, the unscheduled (make-shift place) meeting ended.

Each of the Family Heads went home immediately. They needed to strengthen their vigilance in their own regions in order to prevent another terrorist attack.

Even if it's said that they were 'in charge' of the region, it was not as if the Ichijou Family, whose stronghold is in the Hokuriku-San'in, could do a thorough monitoring, nor could they prevent any high level magic crime to happen in the Tōhoku Region. The Ten Master Clans in their respective regions have their own portion to deal with from the aftermath of the attack.

The ones who were responsible for preventing terrorist attacks were the police. The Ten Master Clans were only supposed to cooperate. However, in order to ensure proper cooperation, the role of the Family Head was indispensable. ——As for the Yotsuba Family, even when the help they could provide was unknown, it would be a pain to do any of them without the Family Head to coordinate it.

Due to that circumstances, each Family Head was rushing back to their own homes.

Ichijou Gouki and Masaki, without exception, were rushing back to Kanazawa on a helicopter.

"Masaki."

After taking off from the Magic Association heliport, they went North-West, and Gouki started a conversation with his son.

"Yes."

From his tone, Masaki understood that he was talking as a Family Head, and not in a parent-child relationship, thus, Masaki replied formally.

"This time, the conclusion of the meeting to tackle the terrorist attack has been issued."

"Yes."

"The Ten Master Clans will issue a statement to condemn this act of terrorism, on top of that, we will be searching for the mastermind. The one in charge is Juumonji-dono. Saegusa-dono's eldest son, Saegusa Tomokazu-dono will be assisting him."

"What will the Ichijou Family's role be?"

"The Ten Master Clans is led by Juumonji-dono to prevent another terrorist attack. Masaki, you'll be assisting Juumonji-dono in this."

"Yes."

Masaki straightened his back and answered. His face was filled with excitement instead of nervousness. For Masaki, the role of catching the terrorist mastermind was an honorable one.

“Of course, you’ll need to take a little time off from school. Including the public holiday, I will settle this with the principal.”

“Understood.’

Masaki had quite an attachment to his school life. The truth was, he didn’t want to take time off. However, his responsibility towards the Ten Master Clans weighed greater on him.

Masaki’s face was already stiff, but it was frozen as soon as he heard the next thing Gouki said.

“Shiba Tatsuya of the Yotsuba Family will join the group under Juumonji-dono. Masaki, make me proud.”

“Yes.”

Masaki nodded with a strong fighting spirit.

◊ ◊ ◊

The events of February 5th, 2097 were coming to an end.

After rushing to the site of the terrorist attack, Tatsuya and Miyuki (and Minami), were taking a break at home.

Tatsuya was relieved that Maya was safe, but tomorrow’s criticism would be harsher than ever. Yet, he couldn’t deny that it was driven by the mood of the people.

He also felt an average amount of anger towards the terrorist.

He also learnt to sympathize with caution and condolence towards the victims and survivors.

His true belief came from the fact that Miyuki was not targeted this time.

Regarding this incident, Tatsuya had no resolution to be involved. As expected, for him, so long as Miyuki was not in harm’s way, he would be content. Also the worries he had for Maya were due to Miyuki’s convenience.

Lower than that priority, if First High were to ever get attacked, even Tatsuya wouldn’t be able to ignore it.

Apart from those reasons, for example, the attack that targeted the Master Clans Conference like this one, Tatsuya had no reason to voluntarily move.

That was, as long as he was not ordered to.

To keep the thought the terrorist attack out of his mind, Tatsuya taught Miyuki the challenges of magic science application in Miyuki's room. Before long, he was interrupted by the sound of the telephone. However, before Miyuki picked up the phone, the button changed. Either Minami had picked up the phone or the current phone was not intended for Miyuki, or that something was being done to the usual number of the house.

Just when Tatsuya diverted his attention from the call, the second ring came. It was the sound of a forwarded call.

"Yes."

Miyuki pressed the receiver button and talked through the mic.

"Miyuki-sama, the Family Head wants to talk to Tatsuya-sama."

Minami said so from the other end.

"Understood. We'll go to the living room."

After giving instruction to Minami, Tatsuya rose to proceed to the living room without showing any hint of surprise. Of course, Miyuki followed him right behind.

"Sorry to make you wait, Oba-ue."

Tatsuya immediately bowed while saying so in front of the screen, even with Minami around. In front of others, Tatsuya might have needed to address Maya as 'Haha-ue' but if he was with an insider, then he'd call her 'Oba-ue'. He noted that Minami hadn't announced to anyone that Tatsuya and Maya are aunt and nephew, not parent and child. However, since it was a secret from everyone else, it was better not to say too much.

"I, too, am sorry for calling at such a late time."

"No, I was still in the middle of studying."

Against Tatsuya's honest answer, Maya was laughing.

"Even Tatsuya-san needs to study, huh."

It was not a fake laugh. Maya seemed to be earnestly happy.

"Despite what I do, I'm still a high school student, so I can't neglect my studies."

Tatsuya answered seriously, hinting to Maya that she should get to the point.

“...Certainly, as a student, your first priority should be studying. It’s a pity that I can’t let you be devoted to such an activity.”

Maya changed her expression from laughing happily to a smirk from the other side of the screen, as Tatsuya observed.

Tatsuya automatically straightened up, prepared to listen to her order.

“Tatsuya-san, I need you to arrest the mastermind of today’s terrorist attack.”

“Arrest? Not to kill?”

“Ah, the way I phrased myself wasn’t very clear. The terrorist’s life doesn’t matter. Find him, and make him harmless.”

“Understood, Oba-ue.”

Tatsuya immediately bowed. He didn’t give a military salute as he was facing a civilian. He replied with ‘understood’, instead of ‘mission accepted’, but as expected, the influence of the Independent-Magic Battalion was visible.

In the first place, if he had given a military salute, Maya wouldn’t have cared either.

“It was the Master Clans Conference’s conclusion. The leader is Juumonji-dono, but the main force will come from the Saegusa Family.”

“Then, am I also going to be under command of the Saegusa Family?”

“No. Juumonji-dono has requested that Tatsuya-san is to cooperate directly with him.”

Maya continued to drop the bomb.

“When I say Juumonji-dono, I am talking about Katsuto-san. He has since become the new head since the Master Clans Conference.”

However, it was close to an unexploded bomb.

“I see.”

“Oh dear, you don’t seem to be surprised.”

“Two years ago the Independent Magic Battalion had heard that Juumonji-senpai was going to inherit the title of Head of the Juumonji Family.”

“Hmm... seems like I must be alert of the military intelligence. Or, is it because of that lady’s power.”

Maya was referring to Fujibayashi Kyouko. Maya was well acquainted with Kyouko’s power, ‘Electron Sorceress’.

Without any prelude, Maya focused her eyes.

“Ichijou Masaki-san will join Tatsuya-san in cooperating under Juumonji-dono’s command to capture the terrorist.”

“Ichijou-san, is it!?”

That bomb was about the size of rat-fireworks, but it was quite a nuisance for Miyuki, who stood beside him.

“Pardon my rudeness.”

After raising her voice, Miyuki asked for forgiveness shyly with a blush on her face.

“I don’t mind. It was unavoidable that you’d be surprised.”

Within the screen Maya gave her forgiveness.

Not to say that she was riding at her own pace, but Miyuki voiced out a question that she had in mind for Maya.

“About the earlier topic, how about school? Juumonji-sama’s operation to catch the terrorist will be conducted in Kantō, right? I don’t think it’s something that can be settled within a week’s time.”

Maya laughed and smiled widely on the other side of the screen, after hearing Miyuki’s question.

“It won’t take that much time. Since we already know the name of the culprit, the opponent must be quite powerless.”

Tatsuya was surprised at this news. For Maya to know something like this suddenly, it was a big feat. She knew who the mastermind was, even when Tatsuya didn’t know what the reason for the attack was.

“The name of the mastermind is Gu Jie. His english name is Jiedo Heigu. He was the former leader of the Kunlungfang Institute of the Great Asian Alliance. When the Kunlungfang Institute was destroyed, he seemed to have escaped death. His appearance is of a man in his 50s with a dark/black body and white hair. Well, appearances can always be changed.”

The image that Maya gave was consistent with Lina's information. Perhaps, they have the same source, Tatsuya thought.

"Do you know his face?"

"I don't know that much."

Even so, it was still a lead, such was Tatsuya's thought. Maya said that she knew the name of the perpetrator, but names could be changed anytime. It was very optimistic of her to think that the search could be ended soon.

Tatsuya didn't express this, but Miyuki was confused instead.

"You don't have to be that worried, Miyuki-san. At any rate, we can get a hold of a rough location by foretelling here."

Apparently, there were Magicians of the Yotsuba Family that Tatsuya didn't know about, someone with time regression (post-cognition) or a residual mind-tracking (psychometry). Tatsuya interpreted the magic 'fortune-telling' as such. The Kuroba Family had such an unusual intelligence capability, considering that such magic exists. Tatsuya was reminded again that he still didn't know much about the Yotsuba Family.

However, now was not the time to think of such a matter.

"Tatsuya-san's role comes here. Once you meet him, he cannot escape your vision anymore, right?"

"Zhou Gongjin almost slipped through… but I will do my best with my limited ability."

Tatsuya focused himself on the task given by Maya from the other side of the screen and reverently bowed.

◊ ◊ ◊

After concluding her call to Tatsuya, Maya put down the phone with a look of countenance.

At her back, Hayama was standing as usual.

Maya opened her mouth to talk to her butler, despite not seeing his face, as per usual.

"Hayama-san, have you found any lead?"

"Nothing as of now, my lady."

“I see.”

Maya vaguely showed a sign of irritation to Hayama’s answer. She didn’t show this when she called Tatsuya, nor did she show this to the other Heads of the Ten Master Clans during the meeting.

Realizing this, Hayama didn’t say ‘don’t be rash’. The memory of the casualties could not be washed away within 3-4 days, so Maya also knew this.

“My lady, do you regret that you didn’t act upon the information which Colonel Balance provided?”

Instead of calming his master down, Hayama asked about the reason behind Maya’s anxiety.

Maya responded with a long-rough sigh reflexively.

“...There’s no escaping you, Hayama-san.”

Maya showed a small, tired smile, instead of irritation.

“Despite receiving a warning ahead of time, the enemy still managed to score an attack.”

It was expected for her to be tired. On top of the evacuation after the terrorist attack, then the unscheduled Master Clans Conference, she was also held for questioning by the police in the process.

Maya was an excellent Magician, but her body was just like any other woman’s. She didn’t only look young on the outside, she had maintained her youth for her whole body. However, even a 30-year-old lady has her own limit in the level of activity she can withstand.

“My lady, I understand your feelings, but even if you are irritated or become anxious like this, the Yotsuba Family isn’t invincible.”

Physical fatigue reduces mental vitality, but it’s also a sign that one's body needs rest. If she didn’t realize this herself, then there was a need for other people to point this out to help her.

“...You’re right. Although we can find them in no time, it’s not as if we can find them today or tomorrow, so let’s rest for the night.”

Fortunately, Maya’s mental state wasn’t so bad as to forsake the need for rest.

“If something happens, please update me tomorrow morning.”

“Please leave it to me, my lady.”

Hayama bowed reverently, and left Maya in her study.

Chapter 7

February 6th. A night had passed since the terror attack.

It was drizzling even before dawn, but Tatsuya went to Kokonoe Temple as usual.

As usual, he received a rough welcome from the disciples.

However, Tatsuya acted unusual in front of Yakumo.

“Please teach me how to break off Ghost Walker...”

Although Tatsuya asked Yakumo to teach him, he wasn’t exactly Yakumo’s disciple.

Yakumo also wasn’t paid anything.

Yakumo was basically only accompanying Tatsuya during his practice. Although originally he did it due to Kazama’s request, but recently, Tatsuya’s skills had been developing so well that he could serve as Yakumo’s practice opponent.

During the Parasite Incident, when Yakumo cooperated to perfect Tatsuya’s Far Strike, that was due to the fact that Yakumo couldn’t stand aside regarding the parasites, hence, they had common interests.

Sometimes, Yakumo would help with the investigations, for his own amusement.

Lending his temple’s underground facility was also because he has no use for it.

“Tatsuya-kun, I’ve helped you in various ways, but I have never taught you a technique. I think you understand my reasons for doing so?”

“Of course I understand. I’m not a disciple of Kokonoe Temple.”

Yakumo glared at him coldly, Tatsuya shot back with a blank stare. He knew best what kind of relationship he has with Yakumo. Needless to say, he was well aware that Yakumo wouldn’t falter even if Tatsuya asked him to do this. However, this is a necessary measure to catch his opponent who might be able to use Ghost Walker.

Tatsuya wouldn’t miss anything once he saw it. Maya had said so, but Tatsuya knew himself that she was overestimating his ability. For the current him, Zhou Gongjin’s Ghost Walker was impossible to crack with his own power.

Had Zhou Gongjin not fought with Nakura Saburou, Tatsuya would have missed him. He managed to break off Zhou’s Ghost Walker because of the blood needles that Nakura Saburou had cast in exchange for his life.

The news didn't reach Lina nor Maya, but there is a high chance that Jiedo Heigu was instructing Zhou Gongjin. Jiedo Heigu was the mastermind of 'Blanche' and 'No Head Dragon', according to one of the 'Seven Sages', Raymond S. Clark's recorded video. Then, Zhou Gongjin who had guided both 'Blanche' and 'No Head Dragon', without a doubt, was controlled by Jiedo Heigu as well.

A teacher isn't always better than his student, in fact, there are students who can master a technique better than their teacher. However, Tatsuya was not so naive as to think that the teacher couldn't do something that the student could. At the very least, he thought that he needed to prepare a countermeasure.

Towards the readily martyred Tatsuya, Yakumo's reply was unexpectedly bland.

"Well, you are not a wandering Buddhist monk, nor are you a shinobi. As a shinobi, you are but an outsider. I can't really teach a technique to an outsider."

"Even if the way to defeat it is not a magic, will it be counted as confidential?"

Confidential, what a modern word, Yakumo smiled. However, he immediately got rid of that expression from his face.

"So long as I don't teach the technique to break it, it won't be counted as a breach… Anyway, Tatsuya-kun, do you plan to defeat Ghost Walker without magic?"

Yakumo's stare penetrated his soul, Tatsuya stared back at him, not shaken in the least.

"You know my magic is completely one sided, Master. Even if you teach me some complicated combat magic, unfortunately, I won't be able to use it."

"I wouldn't think so. Of course, you are handicapped with regards to Modern Magic. However, in terms of 'spirit' you are on par with people who are much older than you. I think you have a high chance of being compatible with Ancient Magic."

"The operating principle of Ancient Magic and Modern Magic is the same though."

"The fact that magic rewrites the events is essentially the same in Modern Magic and Ancient Magic. However, from our point of view, letting technology rewrite the events fully is not a 'technique'. Inside the martial arts, there are hidden secrets other than to alter an event, but also to control over the 'flow' and 'wave' by the 'spirit', in order to manipulate, cut off and disrupt/destroy something'."

"...Master, by 'spirit' you mean a Psion stream right? 'Wave' is the Psion wave… And 'flow' is the channeling of Psions?"

“Hmm. You’ve learnt well, it’s about right.”

Yakumo slightly opened his eyes which were sparkling mysteriously.

At that moment, Tatsuya found himself in a dimension without a discernable top or bottom, a foreign and weightless space with no orientation or identifiable directions.

“For us, there is a technique that can manipulate ‘spirit’ in the arcane. And a technique that can break Ghost Walker, ultimately just made to manipulate ‘spirit’, too.”

Yakumo’s voice squeezed Tatsuya from all directions.

Without making sure where he could step, he couldn’t really escape the attack.

If you do not know where your opponent is, it will be impossible to avoid or defend yourself.

He could see Yakumo. However, since he couldn’t believe in his senses, his resistance would be meaningless.

This time, his trust in Yakumo was not related.

In front of an opponent who might decide his life or death, the strong sense of danger forced him to concentrate on his power.

Tatsuya focused on his body, his consciousness divided within.

His blood was flowing as usual. He could feel the flow of magic, it was different from the feeling of a free fall. His head could properly feel the gravity, and his feet were underneath. Tatsuya’s body was seized by a Psion wave instead of a nerve impulse, breaking away from the illusion of the non-oriented dimension.

His body could feel gravity acting on it again.

His legs were properly footed, and his head facing the sky.

“Master, just now…”

“I didn’t tell you anything. Well, well, I certainly don’t expect that you would break through that illusion with your own strength.”

Yakumo kept his mysterious expression while facing away from Tatsuya.

“Even Kazama-kun wasn’t able to break through that at first.”

“Was that Ghost Walker just now?”

Yakumo was acting as if he liked to divert the conversation to have an idle talk, but he answered Tatsuya’s straightforward question efficiently with ‘It’s different’.”

“Ghost Walker is a technique that can affect ‘a squadron/platoon of troops’. What I showed you was a mere individual illusion technique.”

Then, Yakumo wore a mischievous smile on his face.

“In the first place, it’s hard to subject you under an illusion even for me, I can because I twisted it a bit.”

Yakumo didn’t say what kind of twist he had applied. Tatsuya tried to ask him, but his attention was diverted to Yakumo’s next sentence.

“In a general sense, the technique that I showed you, perhaps, can be considered a primitive form of Ghost Walker.”

Tatsuya concluded that Yakumo’s slip of tongue just now, was his answer to his request, ‘please teach me a way to break off Ghost Walker’.

Tatsuya still didn’t know how to make use of the mechanism he figured out from the illusion just now, but if that was a primitive form of Ghost Walker, he was on the right track. From here on, he could only practice on his own.

“...Master, thank you very much”

“I told you I didn’t really teach you anything. More importantly, let’s start sparring.”

Yakumo prompted the usual routine of theirs.

“I’m under your guidance.”

Tatsuya bowed as he speak, and took his stance as usual.

◊ ◊ ◊

After all that happened, Tatsuya returned from his sparring with Yakumo to his daily routine.

As usual, he went to school. However, since he had received an instruction from Maya regarding the terrorist, he was also waiting for information.

However, his life passed smoothly until the lunch break.

Since Miyuki and Honoka's cold war had been resolved, Tatsuya and company were once again seen having lunch at the canteen. Today, as usual, the other members were making sure that Miyuki, Honoka, and Shizuku had their seats.

Then, they started their lunch, a large display TV started to played an urgent news.

"Terrorist's criminal statement?"

Mikihiko muttered with furrowed eyebrows. In the meantime, the news caster read a statement from his paper.

——Yesterday, the ones who struck the hotel in Hakone was us.

——We wage a holy war in order to annihilate this demonic power called magic from Earth.

——Yesterday's attack was targeted towards the ringleaders of Magicians in this country, the Ten Master Clans.

——However, the despicable Ten Master Clans managed to escape while using civilians as their shields.

——We will continue to fight to liberate humanity from the control of these mutants who claim to be Magicians.

——So long as the Japanese don't banish Magicians, victims will continue to fall.

To summarize, the content of the well ornate statement was as such.

Then, the caster proceeded to conclude the damage status of yesterday's terror bomb attack.

Amongst the 89 guests of the hotel, 22 were dead, and 34 were injured.

He mentioned that 33 people were saved, 27 of which were Magicians.

The caster added that no Magician was dead or injured, he also said that the magicians should prioritize saving human lives over attempting to escape. If that would have been done, the number of casualties would have been kept to minimum.

"What do they mean by saying that we should have prioritized saving the lives of others over our own."

Erika spitefully rebutted the politician covered by the news. Not that she was complaining to the TV —— she knew that the display was not a communication line —— it didn't have a two-way communication function.

“There are some professions where you have to protect others first. However, it’s unpleasant to have it shoved down our throat that we must do that.”

Mikihiko unusually voiced out in a strong tone, showing that he couldn’t stand the point of view of the newscaster.

“The terrorist bombers were about 50 people right? How can they expect the Ten Master Clans to prevent such damage? Do they actually think that the Ten Master Clans are some sort of superhumans?”

Leo’s face showed how appalled he was by the comments made by the caster.

“Helping each other is necessary in time of distress, but we cannot just push over one’s own priority on top of the other’s for a heartwarming story. The way he said that implied that it was as if Magicians’ lives are not valuable”

Tatsuya didn’t stop at irony, he actually went on to criticize the newscaster with his flat tone.

They probably didn’t want to add any more comments. They just continued to listen to the news quietly.

The remarks of the politicians were full of terrorist-blaming. If they were to blame the Ten Master Clans on their own there and now, the result would have been as devised by the terrorist mastermind. Even with only the politicians who were critical against magic, their forces were increasing steadily due to yesterday’s terrorist attack.

However, the words that the newscaster blurted a while ago, with his sense of justice wielding tone, will continue to increase in the future. When that happens, they would surely capitalize on magic-hater-politicians. Not limiting to Tatsuya, the atmosphere grew heavier when everyone thought that last year’s April incident might be repeated.

◊ ◊ ◊

Tonight, Tatsuya had been invited to the Juumonji Family’s manor.

Even if it was called manor, it was only a little bigger than contemporary architecture mansion. It was bigger than Tatsuya’s current house, but it was incomparable to Shizuku’s house. Although, the yard was so large that one would think that it was not located in Tokyo.

“You’ve arrived. Come in.”

Tatsuya pushed the doorbell by the gate, and Katsuto came out in person soon after. He already heard from Maya that Katsuto already took over the Juumonji Family. Seeing that a

family head greeted his own guest, Tatsuya was lost in thought whether Juumonji only had a small number of servants, or that he was regarded as an important guest. Whichever it was, Tatsuya decided that it was a favourable act and shelved his questions.

“Excuse me.”

The entrance was not particularly grandiose, although it was wide. It was about two times larger than the usual house entrance. There were no special furniture. The only thing that caught Tatsuya’s attention were the well-arranged ladies heels.

According to the media, the Juumonji Family has a second son who is a secondary school sophomore, a third son who is a freshman in secondary school, and a 5-year-old daughter who is in primary school under Katsuto. Tatsuya thought that there was another guest who came before him. He felt that he might know who the person was, but he did not voice out his deduction to Katsuto.

Katsuto guided him, or more like he was following Katsuto right behind his back, and as Tatsuya had deducted, a girl had sat down to greet him.

“Good evening, Tatsuya-kun. You’ve come right on the dot.”

Mayumi was sitting on the sofa, and she twisted from her seat to greet Tatsuya.

“Long time no see, Senpai. We haven’t been in contact since the end of October.”

“You’re right. About 3 months maybe? Was it long, or short?”

“Let’s not continue our conversation while standing. Shiba, please take a seat first.”

Tatsuya accepted Mayumi’s invitation to sit on the same sofa as herself. Since the sofa was for three people, there was a gap for a single person between Tatsuya and Mayumi.

Katsuto didn’t sit in front of Mayumi, but opposite of Tatsuya.

After the three of them settled down, the silence kicked in as they stared at each other to decide who would talk first, then at that time, someone knocked at the door.

A 60-year-old-ish lady emerged from the other side of the door.

“I’ve prepared the tea.”

She neatly put the saucer and teacup in front of Tatsuya. She also refilled the tea for Mayumi and Katsuto before bowing and excuse herself from the room.

“What an elegant lady.”

Tatsuya voiced out his thought. She was not a beauty as compared to his sister, but her actions and movements were of long +experience that even Miyuki still couldn't do it as well as the lady did.

"Shiba, Saegusa, sorry to trouble you to come down here today."

Katsuto didn't reply to Tatsuya's murmur.

Although upon observation, it could be seen that he was being bashful.

Tatsuya felt that Mayumi, who was sitting beside him, seemed quite jumpy.

"No, the distance between our places is not that far"

In reality, Tatsuya's and the Juumonji's household are about 30 km apart in straight line, but he was trying to cover up for Juumonji before Mayumi burst in laughter. Tatsuya tried to create a serious atmosphere.

It seemed to work, as Mayumi switched to a more serious expression.

"Since Tatsuya-kun has already arrived, Juumonji-kun, would you mind proceeding to the main business?"

After Mayumi asked this, Katsuto's facial expression changed. That was the first time that Tatsuya saw so much strain on his face.

"I want to borrow your power to investigate yesterday's terrorist attack"

Tatsuya had expected this request from Katsuto. Yet, it was still quite surprising.

"I have received an order to assist you from the Head of the Yotsuba, so I will definitely cooperate."

Tatsuya answered his part and glanced to Mayumi.

She was quiet, while Katsuto stared at her with an unreadable expression.

"However, why Saegusa-senpai as well? I heard that the Saegusa Family's first son is also conducting an investigation of the terrorist?"

"Shiba. Unfortunately, I cannot answer that question."

And then, Katsuto looked at Mayumi's face.

"Saegusa. This is not a request from the Juumonji Family to the Saegusa Family's eldest daughter. It's a request as a friend. That's why you don't need to consider your family's situation. If you're not up to it, you may also decline my request.

Mayumi sighed softly. The nuance hinted as if she was amazed to his request.

“Juumonji-kun. That’s the opposite. If you say ‘as a friend’, there’s no way I can reject it, is there?”

“Hmm, I see. Sorry.”

“You don’t look sorry at all though…”

“No, I don’t have any such intentions to…”

Katsuto winced under the suspecting eyes of Mayumi. The scene before Tatsuya’s eyes was so novel that it felt quite refreshing.

Katsuto realized that Tatsuya was staring at him and Mayumi, so he then cleared his throat.

“Then, what do you want me to do, Juumonji-kun? I can’t accept with just ‘borrow your power’. If it’s out of my power, then I can’t accept your request either.”

“Well, there’s that.”

Katsuto put his fingers on his chin, thinking of how to explain the situation to Mayumi.

“The investigation of the recent terrorist attack has been decided to be an untraditional system.”

“I knew that. Juumonji-kun, you will be responsible for carrying out the investigation, but my brother will take the lead right? How inefficient. I think that it’s not a time to get involved with the other house, though.”

It seemed like Mayumi understood well enough that in the Kantou region, the Juumonji Family and the Saegusa Family need to have such an irregular structure in order to coordinate between the two families.

There was another reason, but Katsuto had no way of telling this to Mayumi. Even though she was Mayumi, there was no way he could say ‘this is all because your father’s disloyalty’.

“Yes. When Tomokazu-dono and my group acted independently, we would inevitably do double work. There, I want Saegusa to serve as liaison to update both sides on the status of progress.

Katsuto didn’t make any comment on Mayumi’s speculation, and instead, answered her with his request.

“I have no intention to keep any secret to Tomokazu-dono about my progress. I doubt Tomokazu-dono thinks otherwise. However, the time when secret intelligence can come into play will definitely come. The intel coming from such sources are sometimes hard to share with outsiders due to the nature of how it was obtained, and that by no means is possible to guess.

“I understand. That’s why you want me to liaise? So, basically, I will be a messenger to both sides.”

“Yes. I don’t mind if you exclude the parts where the Saegusa Family’s secret might be compromised. You need only to update me on the things related to the terrorist attack.”

“That’s quite hard...”

Despite her bitter smile, a hint of her seriousness was mixed in. Katsuto knew that Mayumi might not mind to filter the information by her own judgement, but there was a possibility that the necessary information might not get across if only a certain amount of information was given. It was not an easy thing to do.

“...I understand. I will cooperate. I’m the most suitable to do this as you’ve said.”

“That would be helpful.”

“Don’t mind. It’s also part of my house’s problem after all”

Actually, Kouichi was the one who requested Mayumi’s role to him. Although Kouichi didn’t mention his reason, Juumonji could guess that he wanted to increase face time between Mayumi and Tatsuya.

It was true that someone needed to take the role of coordination. However, it annoyed and hurt Katsuto’s feelings to think that Kouichi thought that he asked Katsuto in his scheme. Despite all that, Katsuto was humbled, as Mayumi didn’t seem to notice her father’s scheme.

“Then, how should we proceed? Should we request for a short absence from the university?”

“I wanted to talk about that now.”

Then, Katsuto stared at Tatsuya with ‘but there’s one of us who cannot do that’ kind of eyes.

“We don’t need to do such a thing until we find strong clues, so we just need to keep close contact with each other. If possible, I want us to meet in person. We should update each other every day of any progress we have. Is that okay with you?”

This ‘meeting in person’, was a strong request from Kouichi, with Mayumi as a liaison. However, it was quite a well-thought request.

“I don’t mind.”

That’s good, seems like Tatsuya has not realized the conspiracy behind this.

“I see.”

He answered Tatsuya without hesitation in his pretense, before turning to Mayumi.

“How about you, Saegusa?”

“I can’t promise every day, but as a general rule, I don’t mind either.”

“That’s enough. Where should we meet?”

“If it’s between me and Juumonji-kun only, Magic University would be the closest, but…”

Mayumi peaked at Tatsuya’s facial expression while holding her words.

“No problem.”

Tatsuya was ready to answer as ever. He didn’t hold back for the two senpais though, because for him, meeting at the Magic University was quite convenient.

“However, is there any convenient place to meet around the Magic University?”

It was necessary for them to meet up instead of using a communication tool, but they still needed a measure against eavesdropping. A normal house’s security was quite lacking.

“I’ll arrange it. We will start the exchange from the day after tomorrow.”

“Roger that.”

“Understood. What time should be convenient for you?”

“...Then, the day after tomorrow at 1800 hours, come to the main gate of the Magic University.”

Katsuto thought for a while before answering Tatsuya’s question for the time and place they’d meet up.

1800 hours, I can make it with a little rest if I skip Student Council activities.

“Understood.”

Tatsuya quickly calculated the time in head, and agreed to the proposal.

◊ ◊ ◊

Somewhere far from Tokyo, Ichijou Gouki visited a local prestigious restaurant, without knowing of the meeting among Katsuto, Tatsuya and Mayumi. There was no question about the taste of the food, nor the service provided, but this restaurant was famous for being the place of ‘private conversation’ among politicians.

Gouki himself had some meetings with politicians in this restaurant around 4-5 times. Although he hated doing these things, he couldn't help it since it was his duty as one of the Ten Master Clans.

However, his companion today was not a politician.

The lady who sat in front of Gouki was Maeda Chizuru, Third High's principal.

"Maeda-sensei, sorry to call you at such a busy…"

"Ah, let's cut the unnecessary politeness. We're friends, right?"

…If someone heard this way of speaking, they wouldn't think of this lady as a teacher, let alone a principal, but she was unmistakably the principal of the Magic University Affiliated Third High School, where Masaki studies at.

"...Chizuru-senpai, please act more becomingly of a principal. The magic high school is one of this country's assets."

"How silly, Gouki. You should know that how I act normally is pretentious."

Principal Maeda replied to Gouki's rebuttal with sarcasm.

"Moreover, Magic high School are schools. Although it belongs to the country, it's still not a military institution."

She continued her sentence with a savage smile.

Gouki didn't have any intention to compare magic high school to military troops, but he didn't refute her. He understood well enough with Maeda's military background.

Maeda-kouchou was in the military until her late 20s. Her last rank was Lieutenant. She caused a problem for her superior (reportedly, she had filed a sexual harassment case), hence, she needed to retire early. Then, she was appointed as Third High's Principal due to her unique character, and, in turn, became a 40-year-old educator.

She was one year a senior to Gouki when they studied at Third High. Back then, she was a real heroine in high school, shone on the top of the batch, and she was unyielding even to Gouki. To him, Maeda was a figure he would forever be respectful to.

"Well, Gouki. Let's listen to you. It's quite rare of you to invite me to a place like this. Is it an important matter?"

"This is a private matter."

Gouki had expected this straightforwardness —— he answered her in a rather deviant tone.

“Hou... don’t tell me, you’re concerned about your son’s GPA or something like that?”

“It may be something similar”

Maeda was prompted to show a sharper gaze to him.

“You know about the terrorist attack in Hakone yesterday, right?”

“I know. It was a disaster.”

“So, how about the statement issued by the Magic Association after the incident?”

“Of course, I know. However, I doubt that has made any impact. It’s a given to blame the terrorist, but it might not reduce the negativity from the non-magicians towards us.”

Maeda continued,

“They also did not say that the ones who bear the responsibility for it are just the targeted magicians.”

Adding to that.

“We also have no intention to stop at condemning words only.”

“Ah, I remember something about cooperating as much as possible to arrest the criminal. Apparently that wasn’t just sweet talk?”

“Masaki from the Ichijou Family will be involved in the investigation.”

Gouki nodded in silence before continuing with his statement.

Maeda didn’t reply with ‘that’s reckless’.

“Then?”

Instead, she gave a why-did-you-tell-me-that kind of face to Gouki.

“The one leading the investigation will be Juumonji-dono, they will start with the crime scene at Hakone, so it might take a few weeks to more than a month. That’s why Masaki will be staying in Tokyo at our second house, and be on a long leave from school.”

“You’re saying that you want me to treat those days as a holiday instead of having him on leave of absence?”

“Yes. The Ten Master Clans matters, after all, are not public service. It’s ultimately a private matter, so I understand that this is a little bit pushing my luck. However, I want my son to be able to carry out this duty with ease of heart.”

Gouki lowered his head,

“Certainly, your somewhat pushing your luck.”

Maeda coldly answered.

“Even if you’re one of the Ten Master Clans, you can’t do such a convenient thing. If any, my profession disallows me to give special treatment to anyone.”

“I understand…”

Gouki didn’t say anything further. Maeda was not someone who stuck hard to the rules. If Gouki were to describe her, it would be as an affectionate woman. However, once she had decided on something, nothing would ever get her to change her decision.

“I’ve asked for a foolish thing. Please forget about it.”

“No, I can understand your reasoning. I also understand that it’s part of your clan’s responsibility to stake out in Tokyo. Even so, I can’t treat your son specially, but ask for a favor from Momoyama-sensei”

“Huh? Momoyama-sensei? Are you talking about the principal of the First High?”

Gouki didn’t understand why Momoyama’s name surfaced here, and he stared at Maeda with a puzzled expression.

“That’s right.”

“For what matter specifically?”

“To have your son at his school for a short term.”

Maeda didn’t mean to hide the details. Gouki just rushed her before she managed to explain further.

“Wa-wait.”

Since it would take too much time to explain to Gouki about her plan, Maeda hinted with her mouth and gestures to stop Gouki from talking.

“It won’t be a permanent school transfer. I will arrange so that your son can study in First High for theory classes. Magic High Schools have similar curriculum delivered through individual terminals. Since both Magic High Schools are affiliated with the National Magic University, information exchange between First High and Third High is possible. Although practical and physical classes are impossible, but for Ichijou-kun, having an empty month should not pose any problem.”

“In other words, during this mission, he will attend First High as a part-time student?”

“He won’t be on a full time stake out like a detective/inspector, right?”

Gouki nodded, and Maeda continued to talk.

“In fact, he could have taken his lessons anywhere, but magic high school curriculum data is related to Magic university’s data, which can only be accessed through Magic University-accepted devices. Although the surrounding environment and the people will change, I think he should be able to safely take the liberal arts and theory courses in First High.”

At last, an enlightened expression appeared on Gouki’s face.

“I wonder if you can prepare the move during this weekend? Then, he should be able to get into First High next Monday. So that will be one month until March 9th, right? Of course, if the case is resolved early, he can get back to Third High anytime.”

“Thank you very much, Maeda-senpai. I’m counting on you.”

From a parent’s point of view, this solution was much more favourable than the original holiday plan. Gouki bowed to Maeda without any hint of objection.

After that, Gouki was detained by Maeda until the date changed, and was crushed by her.

◊ ◊ ◊

Heigu’s statement had set the public opinion towards Magicians aflame. Even some media one-sidedly blamed the Magicians. Perhaps it was due to the heat of the moment, but the accused side didn’t seem to be very optimistic that ‘the media is easily cooled down and heated up’.

The First High students were clearly losing their composure. Although they knew that they couldn’t do anything, they still checked the news seen at every corner during lunch time. The students were whispering irritatedly to the biased opinion of the mass media.

There were roughly three major opinions amongst them. Most commonly were of those who were angry towards the media which demonized Magicians, and most of whom were male. The girls had a stronger fear of the possible hostility subjected to the Magicians. And the last, there were those who carried Numbers in their name, and were affiliated to the Hundred Families who are divulging themselves in their own complaints.

The Student Council meeting after school was colored with news in the background. Usually, they would have played any background music as a distraction —— but today, they didn't seem to find a common taste for the music —— they must have been quite anxious… And as expected, it affected their efficiency quite a bit.

Tatsuya was taking a leave from Student Council activities from tomorrow onwards, but today's portion was not necessarily something that needed to be taken over by others. That was why he tried to break the silence, despite his mountainous workload. Otherwise, they wouldn't finish the Student Council matters even after one whole day.

As such, Tatsuya stopped his hand when he heard a remark that made his ears itch. The one who murmured to the anchor news was a senior whose graduation was due for next month. Kanon stuck around the Student Council meeting not because she was invited to discuss the graduation party, but to stick herself to the Student Council Treasurer.

"Chiyoda-senpai, do you think that we are in the wrong?"

When Kanon raised her face and met Tatsuya's gaze, Miyuki as the President, with Izumi as her Vice-president, joined in with Kanon in protesting. Those expressions were very Kanon-like, but she seemed to suppress it for the sake of politeness, despite looking uncomfortable herself.

For Izumi, Tatsuya was not only a senior from the same school, but also a colleague of the Student Council. He didn't mean to annoy Izumi for the sake of doing it, and even if Miyuki thought of the same thing, Tatsuya wouldn't have said anything. What Kanon said was enough to make Izumi angry.

Kanon said this,

'Oh, well. Even so, for us to be slaughtered over the failures done by the Ten Master Clans.

In their chat after the Student Council meeting, the news kept playing in the background, but Kanon's words were still remarkably harsh against magicians. Although, this discontent was not exclusively hers, the mainstream Hundred Families also cast their discontent that the Ten Master Clans had ruined their reputation as Magicians.

"About that, of course the terrorists are to be blamed, but the Ten Master Clans also didn't handle the matter well."

The one who ranted over with their mouth was not only Kanon. Even in her own classroom, her classmates seemed to have a similar views. The fact that she was not the only one who was discontent, made her even more vocal in her opinion. Even so, after she worded her opinion this time, the opinionated Kanon also felt guilty.

“What is it that we did wrong?”

Izumi adopted her attitude, as if she was talking to the detective at the Hakone. It was courteous, yet cold.

The one who answered energetically was Kanon. She fully understood that Izumi’s spiteful behaviour was directed to her.

“Even the public who happened to be at the site was not able to help at all, what could you have expected them to do!”

However, Kanon did not get heated up. At best, it could be described that she only put a stronger emphasis on her sentence.

However, since she was one of a strong personality, even such an emphasis translated as quite an emotional statement.

Although, in conclusion, if one counted that she was the senior here, quarreling with her would only result in a hassle.

“General public, is it? I wonder what you mean by general.”

“What… even if you ask.”

Faced against Izumi’s philosophical question, Kanon lost her words.

“Do you refer to civilian? Or perhaps, civil servant? In that sense, the Heads of the Ten Master Clans who are neither soldier nor civil servant, can also be said as ‘general public’, right?”

“What are you trying to say”

“No, I only wonder why does ‘general public’ need to give priority to save other ‘general public’ first rather than their own safety…”

Izumi hid her mouth with her left hand.

Kanon felt that Izumi was mocking her.

“Hey you!”

Kanon rose from her seat and crash her hand on top of the table loudly.

“Kanon, calm down!”

That person who stood up to halt her a beat later, Isori, held her back by her shoulder.

“Izumi-chan, sorry, but do you mind helping me buy something warm for everyone to drink. I’ll pay for it”

On the other hand, after silence descended between Kanon and Izumi, Miyuki asked Izumi for an errand while handing over the Student Council’s cash card.

The Student Council room was equipped with hot water supply. There were also tea leaves, coffee beans, and a coffee maker. Usually, they wouldn’t even buy drinks from outside.

In other words, this was a call for Izumi to cool her head outside.

“I understand…”

Izumi stood up with a regretful look on her face. Being scolded by her favourite Miyuki had instantly cooled her mind.

“I will come to help”

Minami rose to offer Izumi her assistance.

“Yes, please.”

“Understood… Saegusa-san, let’s go.”

Minami bowed toward Miyuki, and took Izumi’s hand in concession.

Izumi and Minami’s presence faded away on the other side of the door.

After making sure of that, Isori, who sat in front of Kanon, began to speak.

“Just now, it was your fault, Kanon. Even if the Ten Master Clans were able to save the victims, they have no responsibility to do so. Ultimately, it was wrong to force your opinion of goodwill to others”

“But…”

Kanon gave an unsatisfied reply, but Isori interrupt her with a stare.

“Well, if you have people fallen right in front of your eyes, it’s instinctive to want to help them. However, if you yourself were in danger, it’d be reasonable to flee to a safe space rather than trying to save someone else. Even the Ten Master Clans aren’t invincible.”

“Well.. that might be true.”

“Even firefighters would not rush to jump into the fire when death is the price. It’s a brave and noble act that they head to rescue victims lives without prioritizing their own. However, even if they were paid to do so, nobody is ever in a position to say ‘it’s your duty to guarantee our safety’. It’s a cowardly and foolish act to force someone to bear such a high risk, and even more so when the captain is the one who will be held responsible over the lives of his personnel.”

Kanon faced down and averted her eyes in anger from Isori.

“Let alone pressing someone to do so, when they have no natural obligation to do so, I think it should not be done. I don’t like when Kanon behaves that way. Even Kanon would be angry if you were to be accused of such a thing, right?”

“...Yeah.”

Faced with Isori’s gentle reply, Kanon nodded without lifting her face.

“It’s good that you understand. Then, when Saegusa-san comes back, you must apologize.”

After Isori said so, Kanon once again nodded.

◊ ◊ ◊

Kanon promptly apologized to Izumi after she returned to the Student Council Room, and correspondingly, Izumi apologized for her bad attitude towards Kanon. They had successfully made up with each other, but this result could only have been achieved thanks to Isori's rationality which dissolved their anger.

In real life, there was no private exchange between Magician and non-Magician. There wasn't any mediator to mediate between the two groups, either. Hence, the resentment, which grew due to the large number of non-Magician victims, would continue to escalate.

It was not as if there were no Magicians who tried to justify themselves. Their voices were simply too small. No matter how reasonable they were, their words simply had no power to reach the ears of others.

The Magicians in this country do not seem to have much choice apart from bearing with those opinions single-mindedly. Such a view was especially hard to swallow by the youth.

The eldest son of the Shippou Family, Shippou Takuma, of the newly appointed clan in the Ten Master Clans, was one among the youth who couldn't sit well with such a thought.

He was only 16 years old. He didn't have any means to channel his discontent towards society, and he was in the peak of adolescent instability covered with sports and music. In the midst of those emotions, bursts of misguided anger turned into violent incidents.

However, Takuma had clues on the person who 'started the commotion'. For him, she was the very image of an 'unfortunate incident' that happened in the past, yet he had no one else to turn to for now.

Until last spring, they were still on equal ground. The fact that they were lending their powers to each other unilaterally didn't damage Takuma's pride.

However, at present, there was so much more at stake than his own puny pride. Takuma convinced himself that what he was about to do was for the sake of Ten Master Clans and the Magicians in Japan.

He thought that it was an act worthy of the Ten Master Clans, so even if he needed to grovel in front of that woman, he would do it. After he decided that, Takuma proceeded to Sawamura Maki's apartment.

Takuma had prepared for the worst, but Maki invited and ushered Takuma smoothly.

“Good evening. Long time no see, Takuma.”

“Yeah. Maki, long time no see.”

The time was still nine in the evening, yet Maki was dressed cozily. She wore a nightgown that reached to her calf, with a sheer fringed hem.

“Sorry. Are you going to rest? If so, I’ll come back another time?”

Takuma didn’t bow in the slightest and was about to turn back,

“Wait, Takuma. I don’t mind, so come in.”

Maki hailed herself on the sofa.

Takuma, who stood still, was offered to sit in front of Maki across the table.

The sitting arrangement was quite far apart, unlike the days when he visited her last spring.

“Takuma, do you want any drink?”

“No, don’t bother.”

For him to show up without prior arrangement, Takuma didn’t want to bring unnecessary trouble to himself.

Maki was wide-eyed and surprised at his reply.

“...Then, how about coffee?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Maki pressed a button in the inner side of the armrest and spoke “please serve some coffee”. Takuma didn’t see any microphone from his place, but it was hidden somewhere.

“Takuma, you know well that today is my day off.”

“No, I didn’t know. I was planning to leave a message in the interphone and come back sometime later if you were not around.”

“What the hell?”

Maki voiced out her amusement out loud. Though her facial expression didn’t change much, Takuma didn’t have a clue if that was her acting skills or her real feeling.

“If that’s the case, isn’t it better for you to call in advance?”

Upon Maki's reply, Takuma smiled while feeling slightly deplorable.

"Somehow… I didn't want to call you for this. To be honest, I hesitated a lot before I came here."

Maki didn't ask why he was reluctant to call. Takuma and Maki had parted amicably. Maki was the one who requested it. She could imagine how hard it was for the proud boy to call someone who had dumped him.

"Yet, you didn't think that it would turn into a fool's errand?"

Instead, she asked this.

"Since I'm about to ask for help, I think it's expected to make some effort to meet you."

Maki stared intently to Takuma's face.

Right at that moment, the door of the living room opened.

A women slightly older than Maki emerged, and she put the saucer and coffee cup in front of Takuma politely.

"Thanks."

The women bowed politely to Maki before retreating back to the living room's door.

"...The person just now is not a 3H right?"

"No, she isn't."

Maki smiled faintly hearing Takuma's murmur.

"She's my new housekeeper. Takuma knows that I hate 3H right?"

"I know. That's why I thought so."

It was in one of their little chats that the topic had come up incidentally, and Takuma had remembered ever since then that Maki 'felt like constantly under a surveillance camera of the 3H'.

The Takuma from before might not even remember about such little thing His memory was as good as any other day, but he didn't mind what the other party disliked as long as it didn't inconvenience him.

This time, Maki stared back at Takuma.

Takuma averted his eyes awkwardly.

He missed Maki's expression when she uttered the next sentence.

“Takuma… You really changed.”

Yet Maki’s voice was enough to make Takuma blush in embarrassment.

“Well, somewhat.”

Takuma kept telling himself that this woman was an actress… that she can manipulate with her voice and expression. He kept averting his eyes and said,

“It’s not such a big thing”

However, even if he was facing away from Maki, her voice still entangled his mind mysteriously.

“Boys around your age sure grow up fast…. Not yet a man, but it’s somewhat pleasant…”

Maki didn’t move an inch from her seat in front of Takuma. However, Takuma could smell the sweet scent of her skin.

“What should I do… I was told to stay away from you, but if it’s only this once…”

Even though they were separated by some distance, he still could hear her murmuring something.

“Maki, I want to ask for a favor!”

To dispel Maki’s doubt he lowered his head too.

“A favor…?”

Maki’s completely startled expression was unseen by Takuma as he was facing the floor. She was truly surprised that all her playfulness was dispelled at once.

Maki and Takuma had a unilateral relationship in the past, which had her fulfilling Takuma's requests. Hence, his bowing gesture caught Maki off guard.

Instead of just asking for her charity, Takuma was willing to pay her back. Maki understood his intention to do so from his actions.

Therefore, Takuma didn’t do anything more than lowering his head. Even though he depended on Maki, he still had the resolve not to look lame and weak in front of her.

Even so, the sight of Takuma bowing to the extent of paralleling his body with the floor was too bizarre for Maki. She almost at a loss as to how to react to such a change in Takuma’s image.

“Takuma, at any rate, raise your head first.”

Maki didn't forget about Tatsuya's warning. Even if today Takuma had initiated the meeting, she wanted to retreat comfortably garnished with appropriate acting. She really didn't want any scandal, and toying with the idea that all of this was just a distasteful joke designed by Shiba Tatsuya, she couldn't really say that.

However, she felt different now, after seeing how much Takuma had changed.

"What do you need me to do?"

He was not coming in a calculative manner. Maki felt that in the past 6 months, Takuma had changed a lot. Somewhere within her, a feeling of affection like that to a younger brother had just sprouted out. She became somewhat emotionally attached to the boy who struggled to be a full-fledged man.

Takuma was taken aback by the positive response given by Maki, even more so when she was smiling warmly to him. He quickly gathered himself back while answering her in a blurry voice.

"You should know well of the terror incident that happened recently."

"The one in Hakone? By the look of it, it was quite bad."

"Yeah. Despite the fact that we, Magicians, are the victims, we are still faced with the headwind of public opinion."

"But, there are reasons behind it right? Because of that, innocent people had become collateral damage. It's not like they're making a totally baseless claim."

Maki was not an anti-magician. On the other hand, she wanted to get close to Magicians. The statement she made just now was just the general opinion of the public.

Takuma was not irked by her comment, so he was either being understanding or simply just putting up with her.

"Maybe it's obvious for you, as you said. That's how humanity is. But we also won't settle with being labeled as the bad guys. If you don't draw a proper line, a Magician's human rights won't be protected. There will be people who will start random witch hunts in the name of justice"

Maki didn't say that it was too much of a stretch. On the other hand, she thought that it was a natural consequence.

"I understand. Takuma, you want to borrow my father's power rather than mine, right?"

Maki's father was a president of a corporation with media companies under his wings, including a TV station.

“——Yes!”

After his intention was guessed, Takuma faltered. But it was only for a second.

“I know that this situation will put you in a disadvantage. There’s no merit for your father to side with Magicians. Even Maki will be given a demerit. Even so, please help me!”

Takuma lowered his head once again. If he was kneeling down, his head would probably have touched the tatami mat.

“I couldn’t think of anyone else to depend on other than Maki…!”

They both couldn’t see each other’s faces, and it worked to Maki’s advantage.

Maki remembered her blunder of having a crush with someone nearly 10 years younger than herself.

However, she was an actress. There was no way that she was going to let this be known so easily.

“Takuma, you’ll return the favor to me.”

“Maki…!”

Takuma raised his face with a joyous expression.

“I will definitely ask for a return.”

“Yeah, if it’s within my power, I’ll do anything!”

In the near future, Takuma would regret his words, and in 3 years to be exact, he wouldn’t expect it to happen. ——In year 2100, when he would still be in his college years, he would debut on the silver screen as Maki’s co-star. He would be the first Magician in the last year of the 21st century to ever do such a thing.

◊ ◊ ◊

Late that night, the corpse of the perpetrator behind the large-scale terrorist incident that took place in a certain hotel in Hakone, that was in custody of the police morgue, was visited by two people.

One had a felt hat that covered his eyes and wore a trench coat. On a more positive note, he was a middle aged man who looked much like a detective. The other wore a cap with big sunglasses and a muffler that covered the bottom features of the face. The figure was too tall

to be a woman, and too short to be a man. Not just the face, but the body, too, was covered in an excessively large woolen coat, so the shape of the body was ambiguous. Based on the outside appearance, even if she was a young woman in her twenties, no one could probably tell.

The person who showed both of them in at such a time was the coroner. Exchanging places, he went out of the morgue. It wasn't due to manipulation or threats. The coroner was bribed by the man wearing the felt hat —— Kuroba Mitsugu.

Mitsugu turned over the body bag at the side of the bed, looking at the head of the corpse about to be swapped. Those brought in here were all assailants–all of them had been judged as the terrorists. Suicide bombing as a modus operandi usually did not leave the corpse untouched, but there were some that were comparatively undamaged. The corpses placed on the bed were among those exceptions.

For their purposes, leaving the head wasn't a problem. A freshly severed head was fine, but to put it even more extremely, even if the brains were blown to pieces, there would still be no problems. As long as there was something of the head area that was recognizable, it could be used as a clue.

"Yoshimi."

Mitsugu called to the woman accompanying him. It could've been her given name, surname, or nickname. "Yoshimi", with her cap, sunglasses and muffler, nodded, and touched the laid out corpse with a hand wrapped by a leather glove.

A pale Psion-like light was produced where her hand touched the corpse's forehead. It was similar to the light that was produced when a CAD was activated. In essence, it was about the same. A distortionless homogenous Psion wave without intention was injected, then the rebound of the Psion was read. Treating the corpse as a CAD, in other words, was in order to process the Psion information body that the corpse stored.

What the woman called Yoshimi was carrying out was reading the residual thoughts. She was a psychometrist who was skilled in reading traces of psionic information in bodies.

Psions are particles that form thoughts and intentions, while Pushions are particles that result from thoughts and intentions–such was the consensus of current studies in Magic.

In the end, it was still just theory.

The nature of pushions are still largely unclear.

But the fact that a Psion information body changes according to intention and thoughts was something that has been observed.

Magic sequences, too, are Psion information bodies. Which is why even if the human body was subjected to external magical interference, a person's active and passive mental faculties will cause the magic sequence to change shape and disappear.

But the dead cannot feel anything. The dead cannot think of anything. Hence, the Psion information body left and the magic sequences stored in a corpse last for much longer compared to that of a living body.

The Kuroba family, the starters of the Yotsuba clan, had a trump card for secret intelligence activities that allowed them to read the Psion information body recorded in a corpse, "Memory of the Dead".

"Yoshimi."

"It's still okay."

Yoshimi coughed from the inside of the muffler, then reached out her hand towards the corpse once again.

"Don't go in too deep. Lest you might not return."

Treating Mitsugu's warning as unnecessary concern, Yoshimi successively retrieved information from the corpse.

Then, after backing off from the corpse, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Found it."

"I see. Then, let's disperse."

Mitsugu pulled the gloves from Yoshimi's hand. Yoshimi then took out a new pair of gloves from her coat pocket.

They then left the morgue. Before anyone could notice, Yoshimi's gloves disappeared from his hand.

◊ ◊ ◊

Needless to say, the Ten Master Clans weren't the only people looking for the terrorists.

A large-scale terrorist attack taking place right in front of the capital city was an insult to the pride of the police, and was sufficient to anger the top management.

The responsibility for the investigation of the incident fell not on the Kanagawa Local District Police (referred by mouth as “Kanagawa Prefectural Police”) but the Police Department’s wide area search team. Usually, the local district police should’ve been mobilised, but with the nationwide deployment of the Special Investigation detective team that was gathered in South Kanto, it was clear that all manpower was being put into investigation.

Unexpectedly, Officer Toshikazu, who had been put on standby in the home office, had gone ahead to investigate without waiting for the detectives to be mobilized. Much like many others, he, too, felt resentment at the incident this time. Hence, his rare motivation surfaced.

However, the investigation was stumbled from the very beginning.

“All the perpetrators are dead? How is that possible?”

Toshikazu was idly grumbling while standing by an unmarked police car.

“It’s because they’re suicide bombers, which was already mentioned before, right?”

Assistant Inspector Inagaki, acting as the driver, replied as though to pacify Toshikazu. But Inagaki, too, found it strange. The explanation wasn’t too persuasive.

“I understand that suicide bombers naturally die. But for those who don’t have any traces of wounds from explosions to die, isn’t that strange? There are corpses here that don’t have many injuries.”

“Moreover, the autopsy report states that the time of death is at least 1 day before the day of the incident. Taking into the account that the body might have been in cryopreservation, the time of death could possibly go back up to ten days…Corpses carrying bombs and walking…?”

“Is this a B class occult move? …… If only that was something to laugh at.”

Toshikazu said as he leaked a smile filled with despair.

“As I thought, the police department thinks that it’s a magic that can control corpses?”

Toshikazu nodded reluctantly towards Inagaki’s question. Inagaki, who was driving, noticed the subtle gesture and muttered “is that so?”.

“That explanation fits the scenario most logically. …. How annoying.”

To conclude that Magic was a result of fiction and, therefore, excluded from investigations was a thing of the past. Police investigations could no longer disregard magic as a factor, with Toshikazu being a magician himself. To deny the existence of magic would be to deny the his own existence.

Having said that, to current magic users like him, magic that can control corpses, no matter how anyone thought of it, was a suspicious and shady thing.

“As expected, we have no choice but to consult a specialist huh?”

“Spirit magic specialists? It’s definitely the case that we’re amateurs in this field. Having someone well-versed in that area to explain it to us would be a great help, but–”

Toshikazu knit his brows at Inagaki’s suggestion. There were Magicians who were privy to some knowledge of magic that could control corpses but it certainly presented an ethical problem. It would be unthinkable to publicly publish such a signboard.

“The only information that came up when searching the police database for ‘Necromancy’ was regarding divination of dead people.”

Though it was something that he himself suggested, Inagaki understood that looking for such personnel was difficult.

“That is so…. But, we have no useful leads. Let’s just try that plan.”

Sighing, Toshikazu muttered slovenly to his subordinate.

“Inagaki-kun. Head to Roter Wald.”

“That information shop huh…? I understand.”

With an “it can’t be helped” face, Inagaki drove the car to Yokohama.

In the middle of the Yokohama Yamate hill, there was a tea cafe with a mountain hut design called “Roter Wald.” Upon entering the calm atmosphere of the interior of the shop, Toshikazu instinctively moved his eyes to look for someone.

He was very aware of who he was looking for. It was in the fall of 2095, just before the “Yokohama accident” which shook Japan–no, the whole word. He recalled meeting that woman, Fujibayashi Kyouko, when he was investigating for clues regarding illegal immigrants.

In the midst of the Yokohama incident, other than that time at Sakuragichou Station, Toshikazu had not met her. That time, it wasn’t specifically a male-female relationship but, rather, their duties and interests were aligned. ——Though, Toshikazu’s feelings did not stop there.

After that, Toshikazu was busy chasing after the illegal immigrants who were still in hiding, hence, he did not have the luxury to contact Fujibayashi again. Then, after he had thought that he was done with handling the accident, the “Vampire Incident” took place, which had kept his

hands full. Last Spring, he had left Kantou for awhile. Due to this and that, he didn't have the opportunity to think about Fujibayashi.

The reason why Toshikazu thought of Fujibayashi was because this was the place where he had first met her. To call it romantic or even sentimental, or possibly just regretful. Engaging in self-derision that was unlike himself, Toshikazu sat down at the counter.

Catching Inagaki seating beside him from his periphery, Toshikazu ordered "two Blends".

The owner did not like impatience in his shop.

While waiting for his coffee, he absent-mindedly looked around the shop.

As usual, there were many customers but it was not full.

Not wanting his gaze to seem too unpleasant, Toshikazu soon stopped looking around.

Then, hearing the ring of the cowbell on the door, he turned around to look at the person. It was not because he was being vigilant, but rather because he was bored that he did it reflexively.

Then immediately following, he stood up almost unconsciously. But it wasn't that Toshikazu had lost focus.

"Oh, Inspector."

Spotting the beautiful woman who was the same age as him, he widened his eyes lightly.

"Fujibayashi-san…"

The person who opened the door was the woman he was thinking about, Fujibayashi Kyouko.

"It's been awhile, Inspector Chiba. May I sit here?"

She purposely avoided wearing conspicuous makeup, but upon closer inspection, she had features that were rather eye-catching. In an appearance that corresponded to his memory, Fujibayashi asked him a question.

"Ah, sure, go ahead."

Not noticing Inagaki knitting his brows —— not that he was pretending not to notice, but he really did not notice —— Toshikazu nodded while replying.

Smiling, Fujibayashi sat down next to Toshikazu.

Toshikazu was aware of his unreasonable nervousness—although whether or not it was truly "unreasonable" was something that he was not aware of.

"Owner, a blend please."

Putting her coat on the adjacent seat, Fujibayashi ordered the same thing as Toshikazu.

"Inspector, you don't seem to have changed."

"Yes, my only redeeming factor is that I'm quite sturdy."

Even now, Toshikazu's voice seemed uneasy.

"Maa, how humble."

Fujibayashi replied with a polite smile.

The side of Toshikazu's cheeks stiffened.

"By the way, is Fujibayashi-san on holiday today?"

To say the nature of her job was casual was more than just off. Despite knowing that, Toshikazu couldn't just directly ask her "Did you come here on duty?" without knowing if anyone was listening in.

"Yes. Since the coffee that the owner makes here is quite delicious."

While saying so, Fujibayashi bowed to the owner who had just turned to face her.

If Toshikazu had said the same thing, the owner would probably not have shown any response. It seemed that despite the fact that Fujibayashi's residence was quite far, regardless, she was a common customer in this cafe.

"Is Inspector on break too?"

"Uhh, well… Speaking of which, is Fujibayashi-san familiar with Ancient Magic?"

He wanted to stand up and flee to a considerable extent, but he had not forgotten about the investigation. It was not as a man, but rather as a detective, that he remembered this woman's lineage.

"Yes, that in itself."

"If you have the time to spare, could you please tell me a little about it?"

Fujibayashi's and Toshikazu's eyes met.

"Sorry for the wait"

At that instant, the owner's voice cut in. The coffee cup was placed in front of Toshikazu and Inagaki.

"I don't mind. But before that, did you have something you wanted to ask the owner?"

As Fujibayashi pointed that out, Toshikazu recalled his motive for dropping by this cafe. Unfortunately, he could not afford to neglect his work.

Toshikazu wrote a request for an introduction to a specialist regarding magic for controlling corpses under the memo, then the owner returned it after writing the answer. Cramming the contents into his head, Toshikazu then returned the paper to the owner. Seeing the owner's light smile, it seemed that what he did was correct.

As for Fujibayashi, she came today truly just to drink the coffee, and have some light chatter with the owner.

He rose together with her.

"Owner, the bill. I'll pay for her's as well. Keep the change."

Before Fujibayashi could interrupt, Toshikazu passed a money card with a high balance (awk) to the owner. Inagaki, who stood up after Toshikazu, raised his brows, expressing shock at the amount on the card. Though it included information price, it was much higher than market price.

"It's a little too much.."

The owner lightly knit his brows.

"Then please count it when we come next time."

Toshikazu replied.

"I await your further patronage."

The owner refrained from further dispute and lightly lowered his head.

Toshikazu, who exited Roter Wald, accepted Fujibayshi's invitation for a ride. Inagaki's unmarked patrol car followed after them.

"Then, Inspector, the thing you wanted to ask about is related to the terrorist incident in Hakone, correct?"

Soon after going off, Fujibayashi suddenly brought up the issue.

“...It is as you said.”

Toshikazu gave up any arrangements for caution. He told himself that it was good to go straight to the point.

“There’s something strange about the incident.”

“Strange?”

Fujibayashi’s hand was on the drive lever, but in truth it was auto driving. So there was no danger in turning to look at Toshikazu in the passenger seat. As a police officer with unexpectedly decent training, Toshikazu understood that, too, but even then, the action was somewhat chilling.

It seemed that his thoughts were clearly reflected on his expression, as Fujibayashi soon turned her head back to the front.

“Yeah, none of the perpetrators are alive.”

“...Could they have escaped?”

Fujibayashi offered a logical response.

“No.”

Toshikazu flatly denied.

“The attack was concentrated in the hotel. The street cameras were still functional even after the incident.”

“The cameras didn’t show perpetrators running away from the scene?”

“Yeah. The terrorists that infiltrated the hotel were all captured by the camera. The identity of all of them was established. Some of the corpses have yet to be found but we can say for sure that no living terrorists escaped.”

“Although the perpetrators were caught on the camera, they weren’t stopped?”

Toshikazu was embarrassed to reply. But he did not shrink from it, and soon gave an explanation.

“We found no traces of explosives. The appearances were normal, so there was no reason to stop them from entering a hotel open for business.”

“...You’re saying that if the Ten Master Clans had booked the whole hotel beforehand, the situation could’ve been avoided?”

“In general, yes, at the very least we could have greatly reduced the number of casualties.”

Until the Master Clans Conference, Fujibayashi was a relative of the Kudou Family, which was one of the Ten Master Clans. What Toshikazu said inevitably brought about a bad atmosphere.

Shaking that off, Toshikazu entered into the main topic.

“In truth, other than that, there is nothing inexplicable… If I was to voice my conclusion, the perpetrators were already dead at that point in time when they infiltrated the building.”

“I see… so you came to ask about “Doll Makers”?”

“Doll Makers?”

What Toshikazu tried to find was researchers familiar with “Anti-spirit magic”. He had no intention to ask about people who could control human bodies.

“The ones you’re trying to look for are not researchers, but Ancient Magicians called “Doll Makers”. Rumoured to use forbidden magic that can control corpses, they are a group of magicians that the Magic community takes special note of.

“That’s…”

“It’s certainly the case that if it was them, they would be privy to knowledge regarding the controlling of corpses. Since they do look like researchers.”

Fujibayashi turned to face Toshikazu.

“But please be careful, Inspector. “Doll Maker” Oumi Kazukiyo’s dealings with Dahan magicians are by no means shallow.”

At Fujibayashi’s warning, Toshikazu’s face stiffened and nodded.

◊ ◊ ◊

Friday, February 8th, 5:57 P.M. As instructed by Katsuto, Tatsuya had come to the front gate of the Magic University.

Tatsuya had returned home and then used public transportation to get there; he had gone out wearing an easy-to-move-in half coat over the top of his tailored jacket. This was a Tatsuya who looked even older than he did wearing his Magic Sigh school uniform. It was well-established in society that Magic University students looked more mature than their regular university counterparts. However, when they were dressed up like this, they looked even more mature than usual.

“Tatsuya-kun.”

It was just 5 minutes past the agreed meeting time when Tatsuya was called out by Mayumi as she came out of the school gate. She was casually dressed, wearing a duffle coat with a knee-length skirt and long boots over a pair of thick tights. Coupled together with how she held her light tote bag with her shoulder, she definitely had the aura of a university student about her. If he were to mention it to Mayumi, she would certainly get angry at him, but standing together like this in their uniforms, Tatsuya would definitely be seen as the upperclassman.

“Sorry, have you been waiting long?”

“It was within the margin of error. Don’t worry about it.”

Mayumi had been out of breath when she asked her question, and Tatsuya responded to her frankly.

However, Mayumi, was not pleased with this answer, and she looked miffed.

“Jeez… You’re supposed to say ‘It’s fine, I just got here too.’”

It seemed that Mayumi had expected to have some kind of standard dialogue with Tatsuya. Unfortunately, Tatsuya couldn’t understand the meaning of her request, but Tatsuya was willing to demonstrate his service-mindedness.

“I just got here, too.”

However, this still didn’t seem to satisfy Mayumi, and she gazed at Tatsuya with unamused eyes.

“By the way, wasn’t Juumonji-senpai supposed to be with you?”

Without faltering or panicking, Tatsuya continued the conversation as though nothing was wrong.

Mayumi breathed out a seemingly deliberate sigh.

“…Juumonji-kun has gone ahead to a place where we can talk. I know where it is so just follow me.”

Whether she was satisfied or had simply given up was unknown, but Mayumi prompted Tatsuya and then began walking.

Tatsuya immediately lined up next to her on the right side.

Mayumi had swapped the tote bag hanging from her right shoulder over to her left shoulder.

She raised her right hand several times as if to invite Tatsuya, but in the end they simply continued walking, without crossing their arms or holding hands.

The location Mayumi took Tatsuya to was just over 10-minute walk away from the Magic University; it was a regular house that looked a little bit stylish at first glance. The only conspicuous aspect of the house was a terrace attached to the roof with a single round table and four chairs.

However, when they went inside, the first floor was revealed to be a small-scale restaurant. Had Katsuto simply reserved the restaurant so that there would be no sign out front, or perhaps this restaurant didn't serve guests without an introduction from an existing customer?

"You can't enter this store without an introduction, which means that no unusual people come here. Also, Juumonji-kun has been making reservations here for quite a long time, so we won't have to worry about the eyes and ears of other guests around us."

As if in response to Tatsuya's thoughts, Mayumi provided him with the correct interpretation of events. It seemed that both of his guesses were correct.

Leaving the building's external appearance aside, the first floor was a restaurant, so perhaps it was just common sense that Tatsuya kept his shoes on. As Mayumi walked with him, the heels of her boots clicked rhythmically on the floor.

"Sorry we kept you waiting, Juumonji-kun."

"It's fine, I just got here, too."

Tatsuya admired Katsuto's response, which didn't expose his true feelings. He had magnificently delivered the line that Mayumi was expecting to hear. How had Katsuto known that was the right answer? Probably because this was just one of many times the two had met each other.

"Sit, if you would."

Without speaking a word of what he had just been thinking about, Tatsuya obeyed Katsuto's suggestion and sat in front of him with a nonchalant look on his face.

Mayumi sat diagonally across from Katsuto; that is to say, she chose the seat next to Tatsuya. He didn't think it meant anything. It was only natural; Tatsuya and Mayumi had come to this table side-by-side, so it only made sense that they would settle into this positional relationship, that's what Tatsuya decided was the reason.

Tatsuya's memories of being summoned by Mari and his conversation with her were still fresh. Perhaps for that reason, he'd be lying if he said that he was entirely unaware that Mayumi liked him. However, as for the question of whether he could see Mayumi like that, that was also a "no."

Tatsuya had come to grips with Miyuki's feelings, and had become her fiancé. However, that didn't mean he really accepted Miyuki's feelings.

For him, Miyuki was still his little sister.

Even now, he held no real romantic feelings for her.

Even if he had already decided on how to respond to Miyuki's feelings, his heart still wasn't in the same place.

In terms of romance, Miyuki was the absolute limit of Tatsuya's capacity. If he troubled himself with Mayumi, it would become an obstacle to his work. This was the reason Tatsuya had decided internally not to think about having that sort of relationship with Mayumi.

At that point, the way Mayumi had conducted herself up until now had honestly been a big help to Tatsuya.

Based on the way Mari had intimated to him, there was no mistaking the fact that Mayumi had been thoroughly agitated by Mari. Even if he didn't think too much about the real reasons for it, when he was strongly spoken to by her acquaintance, he couldn't help being aware of it. In the cases of people who try to inspire others with agitating words, the effectiveness of their words was higher depending on how recently the receiving party had come to know them. Tatsuya knew that deliberately agitating another person was not only a technique in sensual affairs but also in coercion and even placation. However, it was likely that the psychological mechanisms involved were all very similar.

With this in mind, Tatsuya had exercised caution, but fortunately, Mayumi had not shown any clear signs of having been affected in such a way. Tatsuya still had no clue as to what she was thinking about, but she couldn't tell what Tatsuya was thinking of, either. They were in the same position.

"I know this is sudden, but have you learned anything new."

In response to Katsuto's seemingly impatient question, Tatsuya and Mayumi looked at each other.

As a result of their eye-contact, Mayumi spoke first.

"Unfortunately, we don't have any clues that stand out at the moment. We know that the terrorists came to Japan from America by sea, and based on our estimations, it seems likely that they arrived on land in Yokosuka. However, these are nothing but guesses."

"On our end, we've received some info from the USNA."

Mayumi was surprised at Tatsuya's words and Katsuto displayed a hint of surprise.

“From America? Just who do you have helping you out?”

High-level magicians attempting to leave the country were strictly controlled.

For this reason, as long as they were not attached to a government agency, it was difficult for magicians to construct an overseas information network. Among the Ten Master Clans, only the Mitsuya Family was an exception to this, due to their ability to obtain information while conducting transactions with weapons dealers, so Mayumi and Katsuto had no recollection of the Yotsuba Family having overseas’ information sources.

“Well, it’s complicated.”

“…Sounds like it’s something we shouldn’t ask about. Sorry.”

Realizing Tatsuya had deliberately been ambiguous, Mayumi lowered her head in embarrassment. Even if Tatsuya wasn’t her equal as a member of the Ten Master Clans, attempting to pry into someone else’s secrets was not a praiseworthy behavior.

Tatsuya responded to Mayumi’s apology with a short “No problem” without any further mention.

“According to this data, the terrorist mastermind is a magician named Gu Jie, formerly from Dahan. His English name is “Jiedo Heigu.” Externally, he appears to be in his 50s, with black skin and white hair. Unfortunately, this data’s authenticity cannot be verified.”

Maya had also authorized the sharing of info related to Gu Jie with Katsuto and company. It wasn’t the case that Tatsuya had sought her permission; rather Maya had directed him to share the information in order to have the Saegusa Family start investigating as well.

“There may be no proof, but in our current state with no leads it’s useful information. Saegusa.”

“Yes. We can use this information to pick out suspicious foreigners who have entered the country in the past two weeks.”

Mayumi caught Katsuto’s gaze and nodded.

“However, it is possible that they secretly entered the country.”

“Yes, that is most likely the case. However, when a person makes movements they always leave traces behind. If we narrow our focus to the region from Yokosuka to Hakone and investigate there, I expect that we’ll definitely be able to find some clues. We’ll be able to get the police to assist us as well.”

The single magician family wielding the most sway over the police was the Chiba Family; it was commonly said that at one point in time, the Chiba Family accounted for around half of the

people seeking to become magic policemen, especially riot squad members. However, if the discussion was limited to the investigative branch of the Kanto region, the Saegusa Family reigned supreme.

Even if this was not the case, this was a huge incident. Even if they weren't given any instructions by a third-party, it was only common sense that the police would be frantically searching for the culprit. They would be chomping at the bit for even the most trivial of clues.

And for Katsuto, that was something he understood without needing an explanation.

"I see. Then I'll trust you to take steps in that direction, Saegusa. As for you Shiba, please continue gathering clues."

"Alright, that sounds good."

"Understood."

The three of them looked at each other in unison and nodded.

"Any proposals from you two? If you have anything you'd like to ask, as well."

Tatsuya and Mayumi had no particular response to Katsuto's inquiry.

Katsuto nodded.

"What do you two feel like eating? If you've got an appetite, I can have them prepare something for you right away."

He posed this question to the two of them.

"Sorry, I'll be eating dinner at home."

Tatsuya turned him down on his offer first.

"…I'll pass for now as well. Maybe I'll let you treat me tomorrow."

Mayumi said so in an apologetic tone as she snuck a glance at Tatsuya.

"Okay, then. Then, you don't mind meeting again at this time tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

"Understood. If something comes up, then I will let you know."

Tatsuya supposed that "something" meant that Katsuto might be working late into the night on the investigation. Perhaps he knew that, or perhaps he was holding back some details about his personal life, Tatsuya didn't press Katsuto about the details.

"Umm. I've got another business meeting after this. Shiba, do you mind taking Saegusa home?

Katsuto said so suddenly, although it wasn't likely that he meant for Tatsuya to go as a substitute for himself.

"H-huh!? No really, I'm fine."

Mayumi refused Katsuto's suggestion with a flustered face. If you were looking from the Magic University, this restaurant was on the opposite side of the train station. If they were to walk together now they might be seen by university acquaintances and become the subject of rumors.

"It's already getting dark outside. I'm not doubting Saegusa's ability to protect herself, but we don't know where the terrorists could be hiding. There's a possibility you might be targeted, so I can't permit a woman to walk home alone.

However, with the possibility that they might become targets for terrorists pointed out, it was hard to muster a counterargument. For this reason, Mayumi felt that her obstinate refusal just because of Tatsuya was all the more embarrassing.

"Saegusa-senpai. I'll take you home."

Katsuto had freed Mayumi from being at a loss for an objection, and Tatsuya's words made her doubly sure.

"…Alright then, if you would. I'll see you tomorrow Juumonji-kun."

"Yeah. Be careful going home."

Katsuto sent them off with those words, and Mayumi and Tatsuya departed from the restaurant together.

It was about 10 minutes from the restaurant to the Magic University. Then, another 10 minutes from the University to the Cabinet Station. The sky was completely dark and there was no moonlight or starlight to speak of, but thanks to the streetlights, they didn't have to worry about not being able to see where they were walking. Even so, visibility was severely limited as compared to the afternoon, and for that reason, Mayumi's walking pace naturally became slower.

However, this kind of darkness was no obstacle for Tatsuya. Which was why he didn't take off in front of Mayumi or start dragging her by her hand in a hurry, or anything like that. He simply matched Mayumi's pace and walked alongside her.

There was no conversation between the two. Tatsuya realized that Mayumi was uncomfortable walking next to him, but Tatsuya had nothing to talk about.

“Ah…”

Just like that, they had come to the front of the University, and Mayumi suddenly raised her voice.

“It’s snowing…”

Mayumi had stopped, looking up into the sky. As though her voice had been the signal, snowflakes were now fluttering down from the night sky, twinkling faintly in the city lights.

From a holder inside his coat, Tatsuya took out a thinly folded umbrella as well as the umbrella’s separated handle. Due to improvements in raw materials, this umbrella was so thin that it could be kept inside a coat without becoming a nuisance; the shaft for the umbrella was so slim that it was difficult to hold by itself, which meant that when you opened it, you had to attach a handle to it. (Many such folding umbrellas featured switches on the handle that opened the umbrella.)

Tatsuya opened his umbrella and looked next to him; Mayumi was still staring up at the sky as the snow fell.

“Saegusa-senpai, you should probably get out your umbrella.”

Mayumi turned at the sound of Tatsuya’s voice and gave him a mischievous smile.

“…You didn’t bring an umbrella?”

Mayumi shifted her eyes back and forth while still smiling.

Tatsuya had to consciously stop himself from sighing. In a modern era in which weather reports had become highly accurate, he didn’t think that there were people who ignored the precipitation forecasts.

“Did you not check the weather forecast before you left today, or something…?”

“I was in a hurry this morning…”

Mayumi was wearing a grin as though she were bonking her own head for her carelessness.

Tatsuya held out his own umbrella to her.

“Please use it.”

“Ah, er, I’m fine really.”

Mayumi had become flustered and couldn’t react in a natural fashion.

“It’s just snow, not rain, and it’s not even coming down that hard, so…”

“Yes. It’s not coming down hard, which means that I’ll be fine without an umbrella. Please use it, senpai.”

“Umm, but…”

“If by some chance I end up letting you catch a cold, I’ll be on the receiving end of a punch from Juumonji-senpai.”

Mayumi let a chuckle slip at Tatsuya’s seriousness as he offered her the umbrella.

“I don’t think Juumonji-kun would resort to that sort of violence, but…”

Mayumi said so as she reached out to take the umbrella, but she didn’t just take it from Tatsuya, she met his right hand with her left hand. She stayed just like that, with her body so close to Tatsuya that their shoulders could touch.

“Well, shall we go in together?”

An oncoming car passed Tatsuya on his left side. The sidewalk was wide enough so there was no danger. But for just an instant, the car’s headlights lit up Mayumi’s happy face, and made it stand out.

Her smile was like that of an innocent child.

“…Understood.”

Still smiling, Mayumi released her left hand from Tatsuya’s right hand.

Tatsuya leaned his umbrella to the right, in Mayumi’s direction.

◊ ◊ ◊

Tatsuya took Mayumi as far as he could on his personal scooter. He originally intended to drop her off at her house, but when Mayumi had offered "Wanna come to my house? My family won't mind" with no warning or coercion in her voice, Tatsuya was left with no option but to quickly leave.

As Tatsuya returned home, Miyuki was waiting for him in the entrance as usual. When she helped Tatsuya out of his half-coat, she caught the faintest hint of Mayumi’s perfume which caused her to raise her eyebrows—but she said nothing. She didn’t even pout or make a joke about it.

Ever since New Year’s, she had become timid around Tatsuya.

She hadn’t willfully changed her behavior, but there was no way she could simply continue acting as just Tatsuya’s little sister.

Since the time when she was merely Tatsuya’s little sister, she never wanted to feel disliked by Tatsuya.

But her previous self had never harbored a true sense of impending danger like the one she had now come to know.

What if Tatsuya disliked her? The mere thought made her chest hurt. What would happen if she got jealous or mad at him and caused him to get angry, or if she pushed him too far? The images that assaulted her mind made her blood run ice-cold.

If she were his little sister, even if she were disliked, she was still family. The bond between brother and sister couldn’t be cut.

But an engagement could be called off if one side came to dislike the other.

She'd lose her status as his fiancé, which she had worked hard to achieve. That was a nightmare that Miyuki couldn't bear. Not simply "difficult to bear", but she knew that she simply would not be able to deal with it. She thought she'd never be able to get him back again so she couldn't let him go. If she were abandoned by Tatsuya, Miyuki truly believed that she wouldn't be able to go on living.

"Did anything happen while I was out?"

Tatsuya had been facing away from her while having his coat taken off, and he now faced Miyuki to ask her a question.

"A message from Hayama came. I think we should talk about it over dinner, would that be alright?"

Miyuki responded with a smile that completely concealed her internal unease.

Minami joined them for a dinner for three, and Miyuki explained the contents of the phone call from Hayama to Tatsuya.

[Kamakura]

"Yes. In the Imperial mausoleum area of Nishigaoka in Kamakura, there is a hideout that Shu Kokin bought under a fake name. It's suspected that Gu Jie is hiding there."

"So they know that much already…"

He was curious about how they had identified this specific area. More importantly, if they knew this much, then why weren't they moving to arrest him?

"Onii-sama, is there any part that you're concerned about?"

Miyuki questioned him, reading the subtle change in Tatsuya's facial expression.

"Ah, no, just planning out how to handle this."

Tatsuya couldn't just reveal his doubts. If he told Miyuki, it would sound like he was blaming her for not confirming the situation thoroughly. Tatsuya himself didn't feel that way, but Miyuki would probably take it that way.

Tatsuya had realized that Miyuki had become so nervous that her facial expression was changing in response to every word he said. He wondered what his little sister could possibly be so afraid of. However, there was nothing he could do at the moment. He still couldn't whisper the words she wanted to hear into her ear.

“Let’s consult Hayama about their battle plan for this later.”

With that, Tatsuya brought the discussion to a close.

◊ ◊ ◊

Right about then, Gu Jie had been preparing to leave his hideout in Kamakura.

It had only been a short while earlier that by using Hliðskjálf, he had intercepted a transmission regarding the Hakone Incident mastermind hiding in Kamakura. The intercepted data was incorrect regarding the specific address, but it did contain the correct general area. If he lingered too long there, he would certainly be caught and would not be able to flee. Gu Jie knew that he wasn’t going to last long in this world, but he had no intent of blowing himself up as a desperation move.

He hadn’t realized that the method used to track his location down had been Hliðskjálf. His location was never included in any transmission made over the network. He felt intense unease regarding that. If he didn’t know his opponent’s capabilities, it was impossible to plan against them.

If he limited his search to Kuroba Mitsugu’s outgoing transmissions, it was possible he could find some past data mentioning the location. But if his search terms were too specific, it might become obvious that Gu Jie himself was a Hliðskjálf operator.

No. Gu Jie thought about it over again. If he used Hliðskjálf and was detected by another operator, it didn’t really matter. He didn’t have much time left, after all. Furthermore, if someone responsible for intelligence control noticed an unknown operator in the system, it would be a little damaging for the Yotsuba, thought Gu Jie.

But he had no time right now. His first priority at the moment was escaping here without being noticed. Gu Jie had prepared this hideout in advance so that his traces would be erased as much as possible. In order to make himself difficult to track, he also took the least amount of luggage possible and stepped out onto the snowy night road. Using his five senses and his extrasensory awareness, he conducted a full sweep of the surrounding area, but found nobody watching him.

“I’ll leave the guest reception to you.”

Gu Jie left those orders to his newly-created doll and headed to his next hideout.

◊ ◊ ◊

USA West Coast, local time, February 8th, 07:00AM. Raymond Clark wolfed down his breakfast, put on his Hliðskjálf terminal, and started investigating the terrorist incident that had occurred in Hakone, Japan.

Although he was “investigating”, he already knew the “truth of the incident” from the start—well actually, he knew it from the preparatory stages of the incident. What Raymond really wanted to know about was the “hero” who had led the incident to its resolution.

If there are no incidents, no heroes show up to solve them.

For that precise reason, he had given no information about how the incident could have been stopped preemptively.

There was no fun in chasing off the bad guy and ending the incident without a grand finale.

That's why when the investigation reached a dead end, he had supported the "hero" by providing and controlling information. Dropping hints on how to resolve the incident just before the bad guy got away somehow made him feel like a big shot. This was Raymond's favorite game to play.

Raymond looked over the previous day's events and knit his eyebrows.

The present incident was not proceeding in a direction that suited his tastes. The perpetrator had obtained info from Hliðskjálf and was using that to evade detection from the "hero's" side. This seemed like foul play to Raymond.

Of course, he understood that Jiedo Heigu had used Hliðskjálf to stop the Yotsuba from determining his exact location. As a result, it was unknown whether he had managed to escape from his hideout successfully or not. However, the fact itself that Heigu had accessed Hliðskjálf to obtain data he shouldn't be able to know about was intolerable for Raymond.

Raymond had thought of Hliðskjálf as a tool for use by the "scenario-writer" and the "director" of the story. It had been a "behind-the-scenes" tool used for constructing the stage, and if someone in the play gained access, it would create an imbalance of information between the actors and cause his play to fall apart. This was a rule violation that he absolutely could not tolerate as a spectator, nor as a "staff" member.

As long as Heigu remained the villain, it wasn't an issue if he used Hliðskjálf. But Heigu had stepped up onto the stage like this, which meant that Raymond could not allow him to continue using Hliðskjálf as a tool to disrupt the play.

True to the name that Raymond used—"Seven Sages"—there were seven Hliðskjálf operators. However, among the seven operators, Raymond was the only person who used that name. Raymond, the singular 'Seven Sages', decided that he'd submit a request to Hliðskjálf's administrator that only he knew about to have Heigu's account deleted.

◊ ◊ ◊

Saturday, February 9th, before dawn.

With more than two hours before the sun would rise, Tatsuya set out in the pitch black darkness on his motorcycle, and headed for Kamakura.

Zooming around on his favorite motorcycle, before 5 A.M., he was traversing the hilly western area of Kamakura, then arriving at the villa district where Gu Jie was hiding.

There stood a shadow that was too tall for a woman and too short for a man, wearing big sunglasses despite the sun not having risen yet, a large cap pulled down over their eyes, and a scarf wrapped all the way up to the nose.

As a result of all this outerwear, it was difficult to discern whether she was actually male or female. But for Tatsuya, he didn't care about her gender.

He took his right glove off and stuck it deep in his coat pocket, and with his left hand took out his information terminal, showing her the screen. Mirroring Tatsuya, the woman exposed her right hand to the chilly air and took out her own terminal.

At the same time, both of them used their index fingers to press on the opposite person's information terminal.

The built-in finger scanners activated and the terminals read their fingerprints.

The two nodded at each other simultaneously and put away their terminals, putting their gloves back on.

"Lead the way, if you will."

"This way."

With a nod to Tatsuya, Yoshimi took the lead and began walking. Tatsuya left his bike behind and followed behind her.

Yoshimi stopped in front of one of the villas. There were no human presences in the vicinity, but she knew it was surrounded by a Yotsuba Family task force. This method of concealment was not like that of a Kuroba Family combatant. She couldn't specify it, but it was certainly a member of a different family. She didn't sense the "existence" of Tsukuba Yuuka or Shibata Katsushige, so that meant that it was either a Mashiba Family, Shiiba Family, Mugura Family, or a Shizuka Family member.

Well, that didn't matter right now. She would clear up her doubts from last night right here and now.

The family that had located this hidden villa was the Kuroba Family. However, due to some circumstances, the duty of sieging it had fallen to another Branch Family.

Gu Jie was said to use corpse manipulation magic. This wasn't done by controlling an implanted Spirit Being; it was a technique that directly controlled the body after death.

Mental Interference Magic had no effect on mindless corpses, and because corpses felt no pain, Kuroba Mitsugu's subordinates' specialty, "Poisoned Bees", was useless. Thus, it was only logical that the Kuroba Family would be excluded at the combat stage of the plan.

The single Kuroba Family member included in the operation, Yoshimi, had found what she thought to be a clue when she was chasing someone.

"This, right? The house number looks wrong to me."

"It's wrong."

Under her muffler, Yoshimi grumbled restlessly. Her lack of words had been deliberate; she had been told to leave as few traces behind as possible. She did not know if that was part of her preparation as a spy, or if it was simply a taboo imposed upon those instructed in special magics. Tatsuya wasn't particularly well-acquainted with her so he didn't pay it any mind.

Tatsuya drew his Trident and directed his Elemental Sight towards the inside of the hideout.

There were three human-shaped beings.

Not corpses. Living humans.

However, they were not just mere humans— —

"All hands, heat resistant, anti-magic defenses!"

shouted Tatsuya as he pulled the trigger on his handgun-shaped CAD.

The Magic Sequence targeting Tatsuya and Yoshimi dispersed.

At the same moment, the hideout burst into flames.

Tatsuya activated the cast for "Leap" and flew backward a large distance.

Without a moment's reflection, he spoke in a strong tone to Yoshimi, who had leaped further back than him.

"Gu Jie isn't here. What's inside are three 'Generators'."

Their ambush had been performed on three reinforced Magicians called "Generators." This meant that their plan had been somehow leaked.

However, Tatsuya and Yoshimi did not waste time with doubts about the operation or questioning the means by which the information was leaked.

"Leave the corpses intact, please."

This was the only request that Yoshimi made of Tatsuya. If the corpses were hit with Mist Dispersion, she wouldn't be able to get even the slightest clue about the magic involved.

At the same time, that didn't mean they had to be left alive. Which meant a drastic decrease in the difficulty of the battle. It was a happy request for Tatsuya, who made very few exceptions for murderers.

"Stay back. I'll handle this myself."

With a nod, Yoshimi jumped back even further. At the same moment the Branch Families gradually stopped their advance.

Something from within the blazing hideout was emitting magic. It was an "Ignition" Sequence. There had been no expansion of the Activation Sequence.

(Similar to a psychic, was it a generator specialized in a particular ability?)

As Tatsuya guessed at the true identity of the enemy, his allies stealthily moved towards the bushes and houses to analyze the "Ignition" Magic Sequence.

No matter how unpopular this time of the morning was, just this incident was enough to bring out the firefighters. Although there were plenty of unoccupied villas, there could be no mistake about the neighbors popping their heads out to look at the scene unfolding.

It took almost no time at all.

Tatsuya aimed his silver CAD Trident at the blazing house and activated Mist Dispersion.

He couldn't safely put the fire out using his "Decomposition."

Even if he decomposed the house, the flammable materials would all be exposed at once and result in an explosive blaze. Perhaps he could use the fire's combustion to use up all the oxygen to put it out, but if something went wrong it would create a shockwave that would inflict great damage on the nearby houses. In case of an oxygen shortage, it would probably end badly for Tatsuya as well.

So, he didn't target the whole house. The target of his decomposition was the pillar holding up the roof.

The blazing hideout collapsed in on itself as though it were being squashed.

The house had been reduced to rubble, and the flames suddenly vanished.

That wasn't surprising. It was fairly normal for magicians who excelled at fire-creation magic to also be proficient in fire-extinguishing magic as well. Whoever was emitting the ignition magic

from inside the burning house had probably been wearing fireproof equipment, but even with that, it would have been impossible for them to remain in direct contact with the radial and convection heat of the flames for a long period of time.

Three human shadows pushed aside the rubble and stood.

The fireproof-armor-clad generators faced Tatsuya and fired “Ignition” at him all at once.

The Magic Sequences coiling around Tatsuya were projected in his field of vision.

Faster than the Magic Sequence could display its effectiveness, Tatsuya released psions to counteract them.

The compression had been insufficient, but the combat-activated psions acted in the same manner as Gram Demolition and easily blew away the Magic Sequences. It was a raw display of just how many psions Tatsuya held.

Without so much as a pose, Tatsuya fired his Trident, which incorporated three consecutive Decomposition magics.

The Event Interference “space” that the Generators had expanded crumbled away.

The information-reinforced armor that the Generators wore to protect themselves was blown away.

And finally, a round hole was opened in each of the Generator’s chests.

The blood trickling from the holes had no force behind it.

And then Tatsuya pulled the trigger a second time.

The three generators, having had their hearts blown away, collapsed facing upward.

With his CAD still raised, Tatsuya drew closer to the rubble, stopping just one step away from it.

Yoshimi came running up behind Tatsuya, who was still looking down at the corpses. Her movements were graceful and swift, despite her seemingly unwieldy clothing that did not suit her real size.

Not just Yoshimi, either; the branch families who had concealed themselves slowly came out of their hiding spots.

The wailing of a faraway fire engine grew closer. The fire had already been extinguished. But that didn't mean that the fire engine would suddenly do a U-turn. They had to handle the removal of the rubble, as well.

Going past Tatsuya, Yoshimi stepped over the rubble, which had not only been extinguished but had all the heat removed from it, drawing closer to the corpses. The other squad members also gathered to guard over the remaining corpses.

Lingering over the now-prone Generators was a faint twinkling of Psion light.

The activation of a delayed-activation Magic Sequence. The key for its activation was most likely the death of the Sequence's target.

Tatsuya immediately raised the CAD in his right hand.

The heartless Generators sprung to their feet and immediately assaulted anyone in range. Yoshimi was one of the targets.

— —A technique that converted corpses into puppets, Necromancy.

Yoshimi reflexively attempted to retreat backwards but her foot caught on the rubble and she tumbled over.

Evasion-type magic would not make it in time.

Tatsuya pointed the CAD at the corpse assaulting Yoshimi and squeezed the trigger.

— —Gram Demolition, the magic that erases the information body itself.

The Psion light within the Generators dispersed and vanished.

The three Generators fell over onto the rubble once more, their arms still raised up overhead.

The puppets had been returned to corpses once more.

"Thank you… very much."

As she looked back, Yoshimi's facial expression could not be seen under her sunglasses and muffler, but her shaky voice was a mix of relief and gratitude.

"It should be safe now."

Yoshimi nodded at Tatsuya, then turned to the squad members and ordered them to take the corpses away.

Tatsuya left Yoshimi and the others to do their work, then found his favorite scooter and left the area.

◊ ◊ ◊

Although Gu Jie had successfully escaped from Tatsuya, Tatsuya was still said to be the leader among the group seeking the perpetrator of the Hakone terrorism incident.

Officer Chiba Toshikazu, who had also been selected as part of the terrorist hunt, had yet to even find the slightest trace of those responsible, and was busy hunting for clues.

Toshikazu, who had gone to Hakone as a matter of principle to investigate the site of the incident, was wide-eyed in shock as he received a call from an unexpected caller, placing the voice transmission unit against his ear.

“Hello Officer Chiba, this is Fujibayashi speaking.”

The voice coming from the receiver was certainly Fujibayashi. It was unthinkable that someone had broken into the communication infrastructure and was impersonating Fujibayashi, but it was such a surprising call for Chiba that such a doubt crossed his mind.

“My apologies for interrupting you on the job.”

“It’s not a problem at all. I’m more than happy to take a call from you any time, Fujibayashi-san. What can I do for you?”

Inagaki was waving his hands and coming over but Toshikazu quickly chased him off; Toshikazu quickly took himself away from the group of investigators.

“Ah, no errands today, but… I am a bit concerned about what happened yesterday.”

“And is it to that concern that I owe the honor of speaking to you today?”

Paying no mind to the unpleasant circumstances, Toshikazu felt absolutely exhilarated.

“Yes. After you met the “Doll master”, did you notice anything unusual?”

“Unusual…? Well, I listened to his near-endless crazy story about necromancy that wasn’t even useful for the investigation, which wore me out…”

“Ah, not about that… Perhaps, did you get a headache, or did you have trouble sleeping last night?”

“I don’t think I noticed anything like that.”

In his elation, he sarcastically thought “It’s not like I’m in middle or high school or something,” but not a hint of this thought crept into his voice, laughing in an easygoing way Toshikazu always did.

“I see…”

The person on the other end of the line seemed quite relieved.

Toshikazu was grinning without even realizing it. He didn’t even hear Inagaki mutter “What’s with him? What a weird look.”

“Were you worried about me?”

“…I was. But it seems that I was worrying over nothing.”

Fujibayashi’s voice sounded slightly embarrassed, and Toshikazu’s lips slowly loosened.

“Well then, Inspector, I will be praying that you catch our terrorist culprit as soon as possible.”

“I appreciate it. Good luck on your work as well, Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi.”

Finished with his phone call, Toshikazu returned to his original spot with a big grin on his face.

“Inagaki, what’s the matter? You don’t look so good.”

“I just started feeling tired all of a sudden. I’m fine, don’t worry about it.”

Inagaki felt a headache coming on, massaging his temples with his fingers.

“Don’t push yourself too hard.”

Toshikazu said as such with the same flashy gesture as always, and with a chuckle, he left Inagaki’s side.

◊ ◊ ◊

Having finished her call with Toshikazu, Fujibayashi turned her attention to the noncommissioned female officer staring at a monitor in front of her.

“There’s no evidence of mental interference.”

The officer raised her head and announced the results of the analysis to Kazama.

The girl was a specialist in mental analysis who was especially proficient in discovering brainwashed officers and removing brainwashing. By using responses to questions, she could detect brainwashing through changes in voice pitch, intonation, speaking speed, breathing

intervals, eyeball movements, heart rate, and body temperature. Even in the current situation where she was limited to voice-only communication, by utilizing a for-military-use acoustics analysis device, she could even read heart rate. As a specialist, she was able to detect whether an individual was under suggestion or not.

“Is Oumi Kazukiyo clear?”

With a nod, Kazama stated “Good work” to the specialist. She stood up and bowed, then pushed the wagon containing the special equipment out of the room.

“This is not a job you enjoy doing, is it Fujibayashi?”

“I don’t mind… but Commander, that was rather dangerous, wasn’t it? The Chiba Family are authorities on Modern magic and that technique we just used is prejudiced towards physical body manipulation. We have no idea how much resistance they have to mental interference. “

In fact, Toshikazu had been sent after the “Doll master” by direct order from the Major General, Commander Saeki. It wasn’t because she was aiming at Toshikazu. When the police were dispatched to investigate the Hakone terrorism event and the corpse manipulation specialist behind it, in order to guide them to the Magician who was suspected of having connections to the Konron Houin remnants, they gave lists of suspects to a number of informants so that those lists could be disseminated.

Roter Wald was one of those locations, but the manager had in fact not cooperated with Kazama or his subordinates. The informant had been completely random in who they referenced. Fujibayashi frequented Roter Wald for a few days in an effort to follow their plans, but it had been complete coincidence that the manager had introduced her to Oumi Kazukiyo.

Thus, Fujibayashi had not used Toshikazu as bait, but the feeling that she had done as such weighed on her mind.

“If they do anything that exposes the collaborators, wouldn’t it be better for us to join in the terrorist incident investigation as well?”

“First Lieutenant. My squadron… no, my battalion has nothing to do with the Hakone terrorist incident. That is an executive decision by Commander Saeki.”

“I understand…”

“The 101st Battalion must avoid being seen as supporting the Ten Master Clans.”

“Yes, I understand.”

The 101st Battalion, established by Commander Saeki, was starting to oppose being the civilian magical military force of the Ten Master Clans. Saeki was considered the political rival of retired Major General Kudou, and although she herself did not see it that way, the reality was that the "Anti-Ten Master Clans" and "Anti-Kudou Retsu" bases within the National Defense Force had become a cornerstone of her support base.

However, in the background, the 101st Battalion had a cooperative relationship with the Yotsuba Family, the leading figures among the Ten Master Clans. With just that relationship, they still had plenty of excuses if they were exposed, but they could not afford to be seen as colluding with the Ten Master Clans.

"Thank you for your work, First Lieutenant."

"Sir. If you'll excuse me."

Fujibayashi bowed to Kazama and exited the room.

As a battalion adjutant, Fujibayashi had her own office, even if it was a bit small. It was her personal room, located right next to the Commander's room (i.e. Kazuma's room).

Fujibayashi sat in front of the desk and pondered about the phone conversation from earlier.

The battalion had not mandated the information provided to the informants, and a high-level informant such as Roter Wald's manager had easily ignored the Defense Force's pressure. Even without her intervention, it seemed like Toshikazu had gone straight to the "Doll master's" location. However, the matter wasn't as clear-cut as that.

When she thought calmly about the details, Fujibayashi could also be said to be covering for Toshikazu out of concern for his potential brainwashing. However, the battalion had intercepted Toshikazu's phone call, so they had certainly used him as well. She couldn't sweep away her feelings of guilt.

As she thought about the phone conversation, she wasn't able to hold back her laughter.

Toshikazu had called her "Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi." It was very clear that he hadn't heard about her promotion.

Although the military and the police force were two separate organizations, promotions were published in the official daily newspaper. If Toshikazu had an interest in Fujibayashi, it wouldn't have been unusual for him to know about it. All he had to do was enter her name in the search agent.

(When he approached me last fall, he seemed so enthusiastic, but… maybe that was just a fluke, huh.)

(Although, back then I mislead him with my suggestive behavior as well… We were both playing the same game, I suppose.)

Fujibayashi thought about this, then with a laugh, she put it behind her.

She dismissed the pang of loneliness she felt as just her imagination.

Chapter 8

February the 10th, Sunday. The hour was nearing 3 P.M.

Tatsuya, taking Miyuki with him, was visiting the Kitayama Family's mansion. No, it would probably be more accurate to say that it was Miyuki who was taking Tatsuya there.

The reason the siblings were visiting the Kitayama Family was because Shizuku had invited Miyuki while in the classroom yesterday. At first, Miyuki thought that it might have been an invitation to a formal Tea Ceremony, which was why she intended to wear a furisode (long-sleeved kimono), but when Shizuku cleared up the misunderstanding by saying 'I just mean having regular tea,' Miyuki blushed in embarrassment.

The two of them kept their shoes on as they entered an elegant Western-style room. Looking at the painting hanging on the wall and the vase on display, Tatsuya couldn't help but wonder 'Just how much does this cost?'; he, however, immediately brushed that thought aside. Tatsuya and Miyuki weren't children anymore, so he wasn't anxious about breaking something. However, he thought that if he paid too much attention to the value of those items, it'd prevent him from feeling at ease.

When they entered, Shizuku was already sitting. Shizuku's outfit composed of a one-piece long-sleeved dress that fell to her knees and a collar that covered her neck, and she was also wearing high-heeled pumps. It wasn't an outfit as formal as something like an "afternoon dress" but it wasn't a mistake to say that she had probably put some thought into it.

In fact, Miyuki was dressed in a pretty similar manner. Tatsuya had received Miyuki's advice as to whether he should come dressed casually or formally, but still, he couldn't help but secretly feel relieved at not having misread the mood of this gathering.

In the end, Tatsuya had chosen a simple dark suit. He had considered coming in his school uniform but decided against it and had opted for a suit that would match Miyuki's clothing style.

Seeing Tatsuya and Miyuki's appearances, Shizuku stood up.

"Welcome and thank you for responding to the invitation."

Putting both of her hands in order, Shizuku performed a courteous bow, quite an excessively formal greeting.

"Thank you for inviting us."

Matching Shizuku, Tatsuya returned a well-mannered, if somewhat slightly lacking in grace, responded. Miyuki followed after her brother half a second later. It was a graceful, impeccable bow.

"Please."

Shizuku urged Tatsuya to sit. Her concise way of speaking hadn't changed, however, and her actions were twice as polite as usual. There must be a reason, for Shizuku to have fully entered 'Young Mistress Mode' today.

Shizuku signaled with her eyes the nearby maid who had been waiting until then. Well, despite being a maid, she was already in the first half of her thirties. Her face was agreeable but it only took a glance for Tatsuya and Miyuki to understand that this woman had not been chosen for her outward appearance, but for her skill.

Not long after she elegantly put the kettle on the electromagnetic cooker and turned it on, the sound of boiling water could be heard. It was highly likely that before boiling, the already-hot water had been prepared.

The maid took a teapot out of the insulation device. She then put tea leaves in the pot that was now hot enough.

She stopped the electromagnetic cooker immediately after the hot water started to boil, and after which, she then poured the hot water into the pot that contained the tea leaves.

Promptly covering the teapot with the lid, the maid cast her gaze downward and took a step back.

"Tatsuya-san, if you prefer coffee, I can have it prepared immediately."

Her manner of speaking was the same as always. However, the mood was different. It looked like Shizuku was slightly nervous.

"No, I happen to like tea as well."

For now, Tatsuya also returned an answer with the same tone as always. He opted against trying to inquire as to why she was so tense. He would probably understand pretty soon anyway so he didn't see any reason to press the issue.

"By the way, Shizuku."

Following Tatsuya, Miyuki also talked in her usual tone.

"Is Honoka not coming today?"

"Umm… Yes, well…"

Shizuku remained evasive, implying that she'd prefer if they didn't ask.

Shizuku was at a loss for words. Miyuki, whose social etiquette was the highest of the three, knew better than to try and force an answer.

"Ojou-sama."

Amidst the silence, unexpectedly, the maid who had been staying silently behind Shizuku spoke up.

“Eh, ah, thank you.”

It was a warning to not let the tea steam too much. Shizuku opened the lid of the pot, stirred the contents for a bit with her spoon, then pulled the lid over it again.

After that, she took the ceramic tea-strainer, lifted the pot, and filled the three tea cups in front of her evenly. The cup filled until the last drop went to Tatsuya, and the nearby cup was put in front of Miyuki.

“Please.”

“Thank you.”

Tatsuya voiced his gratitude while Miyuki silently bowed.

“It’s delicious.”

Miyuki was the first to voice her opinion, to which Tatsuya strongly nodded.

“Shizuku, you’re not only skilled with green tea but with black tea as well.”

“It’s nothing much...”

Shizuku was slightly embarrassed and averted her gaze.

“Has Miyuki already tasted tea made by Shizuku?”

“Yes, Onii-sama. The green tea that Shizuku prepares is delicious, too.”

“…Miyuki’s was better.”

With a curt expression, quite obviously to hide her embarrassment, she answered so bringing her gaze on Miyuki.

“Miyuki, Onii-sama?”

“Eh? Ah...”

Miyuki didn’t immediately understand what Shizuku wanted to say. She quickly understood that the question was ‘You’re calling your older cousin Onii-sama?’.

However, this was a rather natural question. At school, Shizuku had witnessed Miyuki call Tatsuya ‘Onii-sama’ countless times already.

“I have been addressing him that way since junior high school so... You can say that it has become a habit.”

Still, Miyuki answered politely. Maybe it was because she felt slightly guilty, she went as far as to add an explanation.

Which invited another question.

“Since junior high school?”

“Yes, umm, a lot happened.”

Miyuki answered ambiguously. She had started to call Tatsuya ‘Onii-sama’ following the summer events of Okinawa when she was in her first year of junior high school. Before that, her mother had forbidden them from acting like a brother and a sister.

No matter how much you could say that she didn’t know anything as a child, the very memory of her behaving with selfishness towards her beloved brother caused her to feel uncontrollable disgust because these were days of her life she’d rather forget. Moreover, the exact events of this affair had to be kept secret from others.

An awkward silence invaded the place once more.

However, this time it would be a well-timed event that would save them from this atmosphere. The sound of a knock could be heard from the door.

A maid different from the one who helped with the preparations of the tea opened the door.

“Ojou-sama, Danna-sama (Master) is here.”

“Let him come.”

Without asking for Tatsuya and Miyuki’s opinion, she answered so at once.

It seems like today’s invitation had come from Shizuku’s father, Tatsuya immediately thought.

“Forgive me for interrupting in the middle of a conversation.”

Shizuku’s father, Kitayama Ushio, stood next to Shizuku and greeted Tatsuya and Miyuki, who had already stood up as a mark of respect. Even though Ushio was wearing a buttoned-down shirt with a double-knit jacket, no one could say that it gave an untidy impression.

“We should be the ones saying that, forgive us for intruding.”

If Ushio was indeed the one who had invited Tatsuya and Miyuki, then it would have been appropriate to thank him for it. However, Tatsuya kept acting as if it had been his daughter that had invited them. Keeping it that way would probably make for an easier interaction, Tatsuya thought.

For a mover-and-shaker of the economic world to employ such roundabout ways, Tatsuya couldn’t help but wonder what exactly it was that he wanted. Tatsuya wasn’t so much excited as cautious about the whole deal. They weren’t mere high school students anymore. The top companies in the world might want to make an ally out of the Yotsuba, and even just making their enemies aware of such a relationship would be advantageous.

Tatsuya was once approached by Shizuku's mother. However, what had prompted her to act that way had been a mother's worry, in order to protect her daughter from a possibly undesirable person they knew nothing about, so she had questioned him. Somehow, Tatsuya couldn't think that Ushio would do the same.

"Not at all, I'm the one intruding on a gathering of young people after all."

"There is nothing strange or impolite in what you did. On the other we came here without extending a greeting to you, we are terribly sorry."

"Shizuku was the one who invited you. Do not worry about such things, to begin with there is no such need in this house. Incidentally, there is something I'd like to talk to you about."

"If it's alright with you."

"That's a relief. Please, let's sit down and talk then."

Stating so, Ushio took the seat on the opposite side of Tatsuya. A moment after, Tatsuya, Miyuki and Shizuku sat down.

"Well then, there is but one thing to talk about. That is, the negative campaign towards Magicians."

Although this subject had been well within what Tatsuya expected, the fact that Ushio got down to business immediately surprised him a little.

"Both my wife and daughter are Magicians. I can't help being concerned. With the current tendency of people to hate Magicians on sight, I'd like to know what the Ten Master Clans plan on doing."

"Even though I can't give too many details on the matter, it was only before New Year's Eve that I was officially recognized as a member of the Yotsuba. Miyuki here as well, lived separated from the Main House. We're far from being in a position wherein we are aware of the Ten Master Clans' decisions.

Hearing Tatsuya's answer, Ushio didn't return a gaze of suspicion at all and nodded with a calm expression.

"I see. I heard from my wife that the leaders of the Japanese Magic Community have different rules and customs."

Tatsuya lightly nodded to confirm Ushio's words.

That is not to say that Ushio was done.

"Still, it's not like you didn't hear about anything right? Can you at least tell me if they actually plan on interfering?"

The only things Tatsuya was aware of were matters related to his own mission. And it wasn't particularly stated that he was not allowed to talk about the contents of the said mission.

"Even though it might be something that you already aware of since it was made public, the Ten Master Clans are looking for the mastermind behind the terrorism act of the other day. It has been decided that the culprit will be handed over to the police but I will join in the search as well."

"I see. The declaration made by the Japanese Magic Community will soon be executed, then. Will measures be taken against this anti-Magician crusade?"

"I haven't heard anything in that regard."

"I see…"

Before an Ushio who was sighing deeply, a tea cup was quickly placed by the maid who had been on standby near him. Ushio thanked the maid with a glance and quenched his thirst with the tea presented.

"Like I said previously, I cannot just shrug off this anti-Magic movement as if it was someone else's problem. If the Ten Master Clans need help, then I can cooperate to deal with the media."

With the backup of the Kitayama group, it's certain that they'd get influence that wasn't negligible over the media. Even if the antagonistic trend cannot be reversed at once, weakening it should be possible.

For Tatsuya this ought to be a desirable offer. He wasn't belittling the power of the public opinion. Even the Yotsuba wouldn't be able to survive without the support of the Japanese Society. In today's World, there was no room for an independent country where Magicians would be in charge.

"Unfortunately, I am not in a position where I can speak nor represent the will of the Ten Master Clans. Neither me nor Miyuki are allowed to represent the Yotsuba Family at the Master Clans Conference, either."

However, Tatsuya's answer was a neutral one.

"Moreover, I think that in the current situation, intervening on behalf of the Magicians with the media would be undesirable for Kitayama-san, and taking Shizuku-san into account only strengthens this opinion."

A sharp light emerged from Ushio's eyes. Until then, he had been wearing the face of a father, but right now, it was probably the face of one of the pillars of the business world.

"Now, I have to wonder why?"

“The anti-Magician movement is a form of anti-socialist movement. It would be no mistake to say that Magicians are currently an outlet for the dissatisfaction of society. Even under normal circumstances, Kitayama-san is already the target of jealousy and discontent due to your thriving business, so I think that we shouldn’t give activists even more material to be agitated about. These people don’t discriminate. Not only your wife and Shizuku-san, even you, yourself, and even Wataru-kun could be exposed to their malice.”

Ushio took the tea cup and brought it to his mouth.

It wasn’t because he was thirsty, but because he wanted to evaluate Tatsuya’s speech thoroughly.

“…Even though I think categorizing all the criticism towards Magicians as anarchism is dangerous, I understand that you are worried about the well-being of my children. Still, are you fine with this?”

“If Magicians… No, if students of First High ever become victims of malicious acts or crimes, then it is quite likely that I will ask for your help.”

“…So you’re saying that you have no intention to prevent the damage before it actually occurs?”

“It is impossible to follow the actions of every student outside of the school. We might encourage prudence, but anything beyond that would be difficult.”

“That is certainly the case.”

Ushio turned a fleeting glance of appraisal towards Tatsuya.

It however quickly disappeared behind a composed smiling face.

“I understand your stance. I will exert caution as well. However, if the situation ever degrades, feel free to come and consult me anytime. I might sound persistent but again, this isn’t just someone else’s problem for me.”

“Understood. When that happens, I will be counting on you.”

While bowing his head in respect towards Tatsuya, Ushio stood up.

“I’m done troubling you. Please, enjoy yourselves.”

Leaving such parting words to Tatsuya and Miyuki who had stood up as well to bow, Ushio left the room.

◊ ◊ ◊

The reason why Tatsuya had refused Ushio's offer was because it wasn't his duty to take care of the media.

It wasn't like the Ten Master Clans thought that intervening in this matter was unnecessary though. On the night of the day Tatsuya and Miyuki visited the Kitayama mansion, Kouichi invited Congressman Ueno to an expensive restaurant.

Congressman Ueno was a young politician of the government based in Tokyo who was known for being friendly towards Magicians. Not too long ago, it was said that he would ascend to the post of Minister. However, with the recent anti-Magician trend, he had suffered quite the setback and was now in a tricky position. Still, it's not like he could have just hopped to the other camp, and it was too late. Due to this, he had to remain passive for the last few days.

After the garçon (waiter) brought Kouichi a cup of coffee, then he instructed him to not let anyone enter for a while and to close the door behind him.

"Did you enjoy the meal?"

"Yes, it was a delicious meal."

"Glad to hear it. I will transmit your praise to the Chef."

"Don't trouble yourself with this, I will tell him myself. Recently, there have been quite a lot of eavesdropping and spying in Akasaka and Shinbashi, so I couldn't find the time to properly relax. This sort of establishment is quite useful."

Kouichi and Ueno were both roughly the same age. The conversation between them was always smooth and natural.

"Well then, Saegusa-san. Shall we talk about the real reason for my presence here?"

The one who ended the ceremonies to get down to business was Ueno.

"If I had to venture a guess, I would say that it's about the media?"

"As expected of Ueno-sensei. It's just as you say."

Kouichi nonchalantly flattered Ueno. However, Ueno only displayed a wry smile. With the current situation in mind, there wasn't really anything else Kouichi would want to talk to him about. It didn't feel bad but since he was conscious of the fact that this had been a pretty easy guess, he couldn't really feel anything about being praised for it.

"This is a request from none other than Saegusa-san himself. I am ready to take some risks as well. Should we put some pressure on the media? Or should we try to turn the hate towards the terrorists by saying the Magicians are also victims in the affair?"

Ueno was broadly grinning. Even though as a politician he was still rather young, he had already acquired quite the knowledge and experience in the power struggle that he had to go through to enter the government.

“No, I don’t plan on asking for something so unreasonable.”

However, Kouichi was apparently not at all for this strategy. If Kouichi had accepted Ueno’s proposal, it’d have been a consequent debt, which Ueno might have planned on using in the future to be granted various services from the powerful Saegusa family.

Currently, out of all the Ten Master Clans leaders, it was no doubt Kouichi who possessed the most experience in negotiations. Seizing the initiative against someone like Kouichi was something Ueno simply wasn’t good enough to do.

“What I’d like to ask of Ueno-sensei is to take extreme care that, if ever any Magician is harmed due to the actions of the anti-Magician group, such a crime wouldn’t go unpunished.”

Kouichi’s request was a fairly small one compared to Ueno’s proposal from before.

“Not forgiving a crime is par for the course but… Is this really all you want of me?”

Kouichi smiled and shook his head at Ueno’s incredulity.

“A society where the natural matters are dealt with the way they should be is exactly what every citizen hopes for, Ueno-sensei. For instance, if students of First High were injured by activists of the anti-Magician group, even if the victim would be the Magicians, an excuse such as “self-defense” could be used to make them the culprits instead.”

“No, surely these kind of things…”

“Is that so?”

A suspicious light emanated from Kouichi’s artificial eye behind his sunglasses. At this moment, Ueno remembered such an illusion. The one who had been caught up in the atmosphere was him.

“Since there was a possibility of being threatened if he decided to use Magic, in order to protect myself, I resorted to violence… Can you really say that neither the media nor the usual anti-Magic community would support such a reason?”

Seeing Kouichi’s discreet smile, Ueno couldn’t help but swallow his breath.

“If they start with the threats and harassment, then assume that the Magicians take even but the slightest rebellious attitude, the anti-Magicians could resort to violence using such selfish reasons. And since the media as well as the politicians would protect them, it’d only increase their sense of superiority. Can you really say that such a thing won’t happen?”

“This is…”

“Spreading false information and revealing the illegal acts of a group, then threatening, inciting and finally performing acts of violence to crush an opponent party’s reputation is in fact not that unusual a process, I think. However, we cannot allow the Magicians to have such a disadvantage that if a Magician was to complain about injury or damage, no one would listen. I fear that this country may fall into such a deplorable situation like that.”

“Saegusa-san, don’t tell me you…”

Ueno’s voice trembled. He wasn’t afraid about the situation Kouichi described possibly becoming a reality.

“Are you thinking about sacrificing students of Magic High Schools and Universities to reverse the public opinion…?”

The faint smile of Kouichi disappeared, he looked at Ueno.

“If nothing happens then things will remain as they are. However, it is impossible for us alone to nip in the bud any and all unjustified acts of violence against Magicians before they occur.”

Matching eyes with Ueno, Kouichi’s smile deepened.

“Even if the police decided to keep a close watch, it’s not like they would be really able to interfere until a real affair appeared. Therefore, if such an affair occurs, it must be dealt with correctly, as all affairs should be, even if the victims were to be Magicians. Ueno-sensei, I will count on your cooperation.”

“....Understood.”

Returning an answer that had a lot of trouble coming out, Kouichi looked at Ueno with a suspicious smile once more.

◊ ◊ ◊

February the 11th, Monday. As usual, Tatsuya was headed to school accompanied by Miyuki and Minami. While he was going to his classroom, he felt a strange atmosphere on the school grounds.

On the day following Gu Jie’s declaration about the recent terrorist acts being his doing, the atmosphere had been quite agitated. However, it wasn’t exactly the same this time. Although anxiety was definitely part of the mix, you could feel that curiosity was the prevalent sentiment. If you were to strictly compare the general mood, it was pretty similar to when Lina had come to study here.

The classroom of Class 2-E was no exception.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, Mizuki. It seems like everyone is restless, did something happen?”

While returning her greeting, Tatsuya asked Mizuki if she had any information about this phenomenon.

“I, too, can’t say for sure but… It appears that Ichijou-san from Third High has come to our school.”

“Ichijou?”

Even though he did not rise his voice too loud, it was a fact that even Tatsuya couldn’t help but be surprised.

Had Masaki just come to Tokyo, then it wouldn’t have been that surprising. Tatsuya had heard from Maya that he was participating in the terrorist search under Katsuto’s guidance. That is why him leaving school for a while and staying here was in the range of predictable events.

Still, there should have been no need for him to come to First High. After all, Hachioji, where First High was situated, was quite a distance away from the old Tokyo where the residence of the Juumonji family was found. The Magic University where Katsuto was currently studying at was at Nerima, which was also pretty far away. It was pretty hard to think of his visit in First High as incidental.

It couldn’t be that he is going to transfer to First High…?

“From whom did you hear this story, Mizuki?”

“From me.”

The answer came from behind Tatsuya. She didn’t come from her usual place near the window, but from the entrance of the classroom of Class-E and stood behind him.

“Good morning Erika. So, have you seen Ichijou?”

Tatsuya asked so, turning around.

“Although, it’s not like I saw him with my own eyes or anything.”

Erika gave up trying to surprise Tatsuya, and answered his inquiry with a face devoid of disappointment.

“Ichijou-kun was taken by the Vice-Principal to the Principal’s office, or so people say. I asked around to see if this wasn’t just a joke, but apparently pretty much everyone has the same version of the story, so there’s probably no mistake.”

Erika had a lot more acquaintances than Tatsuya. If you were talking strictly about how many people knew them, then Tatsuya was above. However, there was no competition that in regards to First High's life, Erika was by far and large above.

This was information gathered by Erika from her asking around. So it's true that Masaki came to First High then, Tatsuya thought.

"The Principal's office, then…?"

The story about the Vice-Principal taking him to the Principal's office was also probably true. Tatsuya thought about the possibility of it being for 'That' scenario that he had imagined.

Miyuki didn't have the character to enjoy herself by wondering about other people's affairs the way Tatsuya did.

"Everyone, as you probably all already know, Ichijou-kun from Third High will be staying at a house in Tokyo for about a month…"

It was not simply a guidance teacher from Class-A that was now talking, but the Vice-Principal Yaosaka himself, and right next to him was Ichijou Masaki.

The fact that Masaki was present was already quite the shock, but associating this with the fact that it was the Vice-Principal himself who was doing the explanation, it became too much so that what he had just said didn't immediately enter the students' brains.

Even though no one dared to whisper to each other while the Vice-Principal was there, a restless atmosphere permeated the classroom. This mood was even further strengthened when Yaosaka pronounced the words 'Business related to his family'. There wasn't a single student in Class-A that didn't understand the meaning of those words. House, in other words, Ichijou Family's business. The students knew that, without a doubt, this was related to the other day's terrorism events.

However, there was a distinct difference in enthusiasm between the gazes that the boys threw at him and the gazes of the girls.

"Vice-Principal. Does that mean that Ichijou-san will transfer from Third High to our class?"

One of the schoolgirls raised her hand, her question mixing curiosity and hope.

This was something Yaosaka had already explained, but he persevered and repeated once more.

"There will be no transfer. As you probably understand from his uniform, Ichijou will remain in Third High's registry. However, since he will not be able to follow his course from here, for a

time, using the network of Magic High Schools and Universities, he will follow Third High's curriculum using this class' terminals."

A second-year student from Class-A unfortunately dropped out two months ago. That person's desk had stayed empty.

"Even though practice sessions will be separated, he will study with everyone. No doubt it will become a good stimulus for everyone present, Ichijou-kun included. I hope you will all get along and have friendly competition. Well then, Ichijou-kun…"

Urged on by Yaosaka, Masaki took a half step forward.

"My name is Ichijou Masaki, from Third High. This chance of studying together was due to the kindness of everyone from First High. It will only be for a short period of a single month but I look forward to cooperating with you."

At the same time Masaki bowed, a warm applause erupted in the classroom. Since Class 2-A already had experience with this sort of event with Lina's temporary visit last year, they were the class that was the most accustomed to the whole deal.

This fact weighed in Principal Momoyama's decision to put Masaki in Class-A.

It was absolutely not due to consideration for the recent proposal of the Ichijou Family to the Yotsuba Family.

——However, Miyuki couldn't help but view this suspiciously.

While she openly clapped with the others and maintained her smile, she internally sighed.

◊ ◊ ◊

At the same day's lunch period, Masaki didn't sit at the same table as Miyuki. He gave precedence to deepening his friendship with the males of his own class, Class A, and was currently in Morisaki's group.

Watching from her seat in the distance, Erika muttered 'surprising'.

"I thought he'd try to stick to Miyuki for sure…"

"If he did that, he'd probably be hated by both the guys and girls of his class."

Smiling wryly at Erika's blunt opinion, Mikihiko objected so.

"Since Lina was a girl there wasn't really anything strange about her and Miyuki being together but Ichijou-san is a man so…"

Smiling as well, Honoka aligned with Mikihiko's opinion.

"Yeah I guess. Having your ass chased around by hordes of girls on your first day really gives you the image of prince right?"

"Erika-chan, that word…"

Though Mizuki slightly reproved Erika's ungraceful comment, consent was also mixed in.

Erika turned towards Mizuki with a mischievous smile on her face.

"Was there something strange in what I said?" "Ass is a bit…" "So ass is no good then. How about butt?" "Erika-chan…"

"What kind of person was Lina?"

While Erika and Mizuki had started to play around —— or more accurately, Erika had started to one-sidedly tease Mizuki —— Shizuku asked Honoka a question.

"Now that I think about it, we didn't really talk about Lina to Shizuku much."

Lina had moved to First High under the guise of a student exchange program, and that exchange partner had been, of course, Shizuku. Since they hadn't even met while moving to each other's countries, Shizuku basically knew nothing of Lina.

"I heard that she was a blond-haired beauty.

"That's true. Golden hair and blue azure eyes, such bright colors. She was really cute."

"More than Miyuki?"

"Eh? No way."

Honoka had instinctively answered, so she was stealing glances at Miyuki who was smiling with a troubled face.

"Umm, maybe their types were different? I mean, Miyuki is in the "beautiful" category."

Seeing Miyuki becoming more and more perplexed, Shizuku actively nodded to Honoka's words. As expected of best friends, this pattern in their behavior suited them well.

"However, if I had to put Lina in a category, it'd be "lovely". Her face was like that of an expensive pretty doll's but comparatively she was… Friendly, easy to talk to… She was cheerful, bright and lively."

"I think those words are basically the same."

"Ugh… A-anyway, she gave off what you'd call an American vibe."

"That is rather rude to Americans in general…"

“Overall I guess she would be a good match for Miyuki!”

Honoka dodged Shizuku’s tsukkomi with energy.

“Her Magical power was also amazing. On this, too, she was a good match for Miyuki!”

Such was her conclusion.

“Equal to Miyuki? That’s impressive.”

Shizuku was genuinely interested about that part, so that sentence of hers wasn’t meant to tease.

“Considering she had been sent, in a sense, as a representative of the USNA, it was to be expected.”

Hearing Tatsuya, Leo and Erika couldn’t help but put on a grin. Both of them, however, firmly understood that Lina’s identity was to be kept a secret. They wouldn’t do something as stupid as mouthing off in a place where someone might hear them.

Not knowing about Lina’s identity, Shizuku tilted her head in wonder at seeing Erika and the others’ smiling faces.

“Putting aside her Magical prowess, she was quite an entertaining person. Shizuku would’ve certainly liked her too. ——She was pretty vulnerable to tsukkomis’.”

Before the conversation could shift in an unwanted direction, Tatsuya gave a casual remark.

“Tatsuya-san. I’m not the high-king of tsukkomi.”

“Onii-sama… I think this is rather rude to both Shizuku and Lina.”

Receiving successive objections from Shizuku and Miyuki, Tatsuya apologized with a “My bad” while smiling.

“Still, to think Ichijou-kun would come to First High, I never imagined this even in my dreams. Was a clear reason given for his transfer?”

Thinking that the subject of Lina had run its course, Mikihiko asked the three people from Class-A about something that had been on his mind since this morning. ——The reason he used an overly polite tone was because, of course, those three students included Miyuki.

“He’s not transferring, though.”

“Due to matters concerning his family, he’s going to stay in Tokyo for a while. It looks like he is going to follow Third High’s theory course online using our terminals. That’s why he’s not wearing First High’s uniform, either, but the uniform from Third High.”

“By family business, does that mean the Ichijou Family?”

Hearing Honoka’s explanation, Mikihiko turned a frowning gaze towards Tatsuya.

“With the recent events in mind, he might be here for something relevant to the terrorist attacks… Tatsuya, do you know something?”

Receiving a direct question, Tatsuya did not lie nor did he use his right to stay silent.

“Do you know about the recent declaration of the Magic Community?”

“Umm, you mean the one about searching for the terrorist attacks’ mastermind?”

“Ichijou came in Tokyo because of this. And while I’m at it, I’m going to add that Saegusa-senpai, Juumonji-senpai and myself will join the search.”

This was, in part, to show the World that the Ten Master Clans wouldn’t sit by and forgive acts of terrorism. It was one of the things declared to the media by the Magic Community. Since Tatsuya understood that much, there was no real reason to keep it a secret.

“I see… Say, Tatsuya.”

“What is it?”

“Umm, can I help?”

Mikihiko’s reaction, however, was fairly unexpected for Tatsuya.

It was more of a retaliation for the terrorist act on the Ten Master Clans —— They weren’t exactly looking for Gu Jie. Moreover, homicide, casualties and the likes was normally the police’s job, so even if they were the Ten Master Clans, they would be overstepping their authority.

The Ten Master Clans were cooperating with the police to counter the current opinion on Magicians. Even if they borrowed the help of someone outside of the Ten Master Clans, it wouldn’t have much of a meaning.

“I’d rather have you take care of the anti-Magician group’s actions.”

Tatsuya oriented Mikihiko’s concern in another direction. It wasn’t just for the sake of changing the subject or anything however, it was a problem that needed attention as well.

“The anti-Magician group?”

“Weren’t you the one who talked about students being observed and victims of abusive language?”

“Ah, yeah. You’re talking about that.”

It was Monday, during the second week of this term, he was talking about the content of a report made by the disciplinary committee.

“…It was only a small chat but you remembered it well huh.”

“I was actually thinking about how well you seemed to have forgotten about it, just now.”

Hearing the unexpected harsh words of Tatsuya, Mikihiko blinked several times.

“This happened before the terrorist attacks. Presently, the public opinion of Magicians is in a critical situation, and to begin with, Humanists don’t exactly think highly of us. So coupled with the recent happenings, there is a possibility that direct violence might be employed against the students.”

Tatsuya’s way of concluding was to strengthen Mikihiko’s sense of incoming crisis. When Tatsuya thought that Mikihiko was quietly pondering, he had in fact took out his terminal to check some data.

“There is no report of assault yet… Still, it’s true that the number of harassment cases happening outside of the school has clearly increased…”

The data Mikihiko was currently looking was a damage report that the disciplinary committee had gathered.

“I’m sorry, Tatsuya. Looks like I really screwed up. Until now, I was only paying attention to the school’s interior.”

Even though Mikihiko was blaming himself, one couldn’t help but sympathize with him. Ever since the terrorist’s (Gu Jie) declaration Wednesday of last week, the students were fairly agitated, anxious even. Quarrels would erupt within the school grounds at the drop of a hat. Despite the fact that those were rare occurrences, there were cases where it even developed into scuffles between students. As a member of the disciplinary committee, Mikihiko’s priority was, of course, the troubles that happened within the school.

“Would you mind sharing this data with the Student Council? Until last week we had been counting the number of incidents, so I’d like to compare with yours.”

Despite saying that, since the voices of concern came from the students themselves, he had to report to the staff room at the very least. What Tatsuya meant was that he wanted to write a report on the consultations made to the disciplinary committee rather than the Student Council.

“Understood. I will do my best so that Tatsuya can concentrate on his duty.”

“He’s counting on you, disciplinary committee chairman!”

Erika cheered on a Mikihiko who was nodding with motivation. Even though her tone had been half-joking, Mikihiko understood that she was genuinely encouraging him.

◊ ◊ ◊

After today's class ended, Tatsuya decided to visit the classroom of Class 2-A.

"Onii-sama, did you come to get me?"

Miyuki, who perceived his approach, went out to meet Tatsuya in the hallway. For Tatsuya who should've been going towards the student council's room, it was unusual for him to come and get Miyuki.

"Yeah. I also have a few things to talk about with Ichijou."

However, Tatsuya's answer disappointed Miyuki slightly.

"Ichijou-san? Understood. I will call him."

Still, she didn't show her disappointment. Miyuki showed a smile and went back to her classroom.

Her smile gave Tatsuya a sense of discomfort.

It wasn't the first time this had happened. He saw that smile a few times already this year, it was a different smile from before. This sensation reminded Tatsuya of the Yotsuba Family's 'New Year's Meeting'.

That event caused an undesirable change in Miyuki. Tatsuya's intuition told him not to ignore this matter as it might cause unwanted trouble.

However, he wasn't allowed to ponder on the issue right now.

"Shiba-san, thank you very much… Shiba, what do you want?"

Right now, he had to give priority to Masaki.

"Ichijou, are you aware that Juumonji-senpai is planning a meeting to talk about our mission?"

Tatsuya didn't need to explain in detail what this mission was about. As members of the Ten Master Clans, both of them knew that they had been ordered to search for the mastermind behind the terrorist attacks.

"No, this is the first I have heard of it but…"

However, since Masaki had just come to Tokyo, he did not know about it.

"Well, even if I say a meeting it will be more like an exchange of currently known information between Juumonji-senpai, Saegusa-senpai and myself, so won't you come as well?"

"I see…"

Masaki pondered about Tatsuya's invitation. It didn't take him that long a time to come up with an answer, just less than 10 seconds.

"If it's alright with you, allow me to participate."

Masaki fully understood that for this kind of investigation, sharing information and communication was important. What he was worried about was that if he, as a student of Third High, were to join a meeting composed exclusively of First High students, the mood would be disturbed. When thinking, however, that this wasn't a time to have such petty thoughts, he immediately came to a conclusion.

"I see. Today's meeting will be at 1800 Hours. I will send you the map, so please take out your terminal."

"A-alright."

With a slight feeling of surprise, Masaki took out his own personal digital assistant from his pocket. With this conversation flow, he had expected a "Then, let's go together" due to him being a Third High student. To be honest, Masaki wasn't thrilled about the prospect of walking together with his rival in love, Tatsuya, so if that would have happened, he probably would've declined the offer. He sort of lost momentum at this anticlimactic conclusion, however, as Tatsuya proposed separate action immediately.

Masaki was also remembered that this wasn't Third High, and slight feelings of loneliness invaded him.

"Did you receive all the data?"

Masaki's change of expression didn't escape Tatsuya's eyes. However, Tatsuya had no interest in what Masaki thought or felt. He asked in a business-like manner if he had received all the information needed.

"…No problem."

"Then, see you there at 1800 hours."

After Masaki had nodded to his parting words, Tatsuya turned his attention to Miyuki.

"Miyuki, let's go?"

Even though Tatsuya was exempt from student council activities due to the search mission he was given, he thought that since he had come all the way to the classroom of Class-A, he could accompany Miyuki there.

"Yes."

After Miyuki nodded to Tatsuya with a smile on her face, she turned to Masaki to say goodbye.

"Then, Ichijou-san, we will be going."

"Do your best for the student council activities."

Masaki answered so with a meek face.

After seeing Masaki off, Tatsuya and Miyuki headed towards the Student Council room.

Even though Tatsuya had his back turned, he could feel his gaze.

What Masaki could have felt or thought, this time, he wasn't able to ignore it.

◊ ◊ ◊

Tatsuya went precisely at 1800 hours into the restaurant Katsuto was waiting in. He left at 1900 hours.

There was no progress to be reported today by any of them, either. They had shared information about the affair of Kamakura during the day. Of course, they only shared information about which they could speak. That was why tonight's meeting ended after an explanation of the current investigation led by Masaki. Therefore, it was over in a time that was neither too short nor too long.

Afterwards, Katsuto, Mayumi and Masaki ate dinner together but Tatsuya declined and went home. He was also invited, of course, but they didn't insist after he had refused. Katsuto and Mayumi seemed to have taken in account Tatsuya and Masaki's antagonism due to Miyuki.

In the train that was bringing him back home, Tatsuya thought about Miyuki. She had forced a smile for a long period of time when he had come to get her after school at her classroom.

It was not like today was the first time he had noticed this. After they came back from the Yotsuba meeting of the New Year, it happened quite a few times, and it caused Tatsuya to feel anxious every time. However, since it looked like Miyuki didn't want Tatsuya to notice, he hadn't asked her about it until now.

However, after seeing her today, he couldn't stop thinking that way anymore. It was pretty easy to understand that she was forcing herself. Before solving the worry he had been having, Tatsuya thought it was necessary to talk to her.

While he went from his cabin to the commuter that would take him home, Tatsuya thought about how he should bring up the subject into their discussion.

Bluntly asking would be a bad move. Forcibly making Miyuki talk might hurt her as he wasn't aware of the nature nor the gravity of her worry. Leading her to it with other questions might be the same as forcing her in the end. It's not like she was a prisoner whose information needed to be extracted, and the purpose wasn't to learn about her worry.

Tatsuya stood before his own house, not having decided anything. Stepping forward, his hand that was extending towards the door knob was slightly slower than usual.

“Welcome home, Onii-sama. ――Did something happen? Are you feeling ill!?”

Usually, he would have already opened the door, but seeing him being slower than usual, Miyuki’s face was drained of color.

“No, I was just thinking about something. I’m back, Miyuki.”

What are you doing, worrying Miyuki that way… Thought Tatsuya.

It wasn’t like he had been cut off in his momentum. However, Tatsuya didn’t ask Miyuki anything and by the time they had finished dinner, it was already late.

After finishing his meal, Tatsuya declined a tea-time offer and went to take a bath. Feeling refreshed, he decided to try to talk to Miyuki once more.

When Tatsuya came back to the living room, he was met by a Miyuki who had put on a knee-length classic one-piece dress with frills. She had already removed the white apron that she had on awhile ago.

“Onii-sama, I will make coffee immediately, please wait for a moment.”

Even faster than Tatsuya could open his mouth, Miyuki quickly said so and left her seat.

Could it be that she is avoiding him? Tatsuya quickly denied this possibility.

He doesn’t think that she is avoiding him.

Miyuki had seen through what he wanted to ask her, and didn’t like it. That is what Tatsuya thought.

However, it was undeniable that the fact that this caused Tatsuya anxiety was something Miyuki was conscious about. As opposed to Tatsuya who only knew about a vague restlessness of hers, Miyuki perfectly understood the reason for his.

What on Earth could Miyuki be worried about…

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

While Tatsuya was in a state where he had yet to come to a conclusion, Miyuki entered the living room with a coffee tray. He was pulled out of his deep thinking by Miyuki, and he instinctively raised his face and looked at his watch.

Putting the coffee cups and the saucers on the table, Miyuki anxiously peered into Tatsuya’s face.

“Umm, Onii-sama… Are you really feeling alright? Are you sure that you aren’t tired? Tonight, you seemed fairly distracted, I think.”

Tatsuya wanted to click his tongue for his blunder. He had made Miyuki worry once more. This i]wasn’t the time to be lost in thought, he said to himself.

“Miyuki, won’t you sit for a moment?”

“Yes…?”

However, this was his chance. In this situation, although he thought it was slightly unfair, Miyuki wouldn’t be able to run away or change the subject.

“What I’m worrying about Miyuki, is you.”

If this had been last year, that sentence would’ve brought Miyuki immense joy.

However, as she was now, her eyes swam all over the place trying to avoid Tatsuya’s gaze.

“What are you so worried about?”

Miyuki refused to look at him directly. Still, not stopping at that, Tatsuya went all in.

“I don’t have… such a thing.”

Miyuki’s answer had absolutely no persuasive power whatsoever. Understanding this fact herself, she wasn’t only looking away, but was averting her whole face.

“Miyuki. Won’t you tell me?”

Miyuki looked at him from the side, blinking restlessly. Her eyes were still not focused on anything. For her, keeping a secret from Tatsuya was probably impossible.

If Tatsuya had looked at her for 10 more seconds, Miyuki probably would have given in and shared her worries. However fate is whimsical, and this time, it was on her side. ——One could see it as ill-fate that she was deprived of her occasion to get rid of her concerns.

Miyuki stood up panicking when the sound of the video phone rang. Even though there was a wireless console under the table, Miyuki jumped with vigor and went towards the panel on the wall.

Miyuki raised a voice of surprise when she saw the displayed name of the one calling.

“Onii-sama, it’s a call from Oba-sama!”

“Put her on.”

When he answered so, Tatsuya had already moved in front of the screen’s camera.

Miyuki pressed the answer button of the panel.

On the video phone's screen, Maya's face appeared.

"Good evening, Tatsuya-san. I wondered if you were in the middle of something."

Although it wasn't easy to understand what she meant since they were facing each other, Maya's gaze was turned towards the table where coffee cups were.

"No, it's alright. Oba-ue, what business brings you here today?"

For someone like Tatsuya, such an answer lacked composure. However, Maya did not comment on it.

"Last Saturday, Gu Jie managed to run away. Since we understood how, I thought I would let you know."

Hearing this, Tatsuya thought "Is this something that the Head of the Yotsuba Family should say?". However, this thought was premature.

"It seems like our communications have been intercepted."

"…Strong codes are supposed to protect the communications between members of the Yotsuba Family."

"We use a code changing every hour like the national defense but apparently this measure has been defeated."

As Maya said, the encryption key used by the members of the Yotsuba changed every hour.

That is why every month, Tatsuya goes to the Magic Society to meet an envoy who hands over the codes for the following 60 days (The extra amount being there as a reserve). The encoding machine that Ayako gave to Balance contained 43,200 codes for instance. To prevent an eventual theft of the codes from the machine, security of the highest order had been included.

To think that all of those security measures have been for naught was hard to believe.

"Then, should I think of this very call as one that might be intercepted as well?"

However, no matter how hard a thing it was to believe, Tatsuya didn't really have any reason to doubt it, thus, he accepted it as the truth.

"Indeed. That is why the next time we find a clue, we will transmit it to you by letter."

"Understood."

Even if she said that she would send a letter, there was no way she'd entrust it to the regular mail services, thought Tatsuya.

And one more thing. Since she contacted them tonight, it means that a new clue had been found today, Tatsuya understood that she planned on transmitting this information tomorrow.

“That is all I wanted to say about this matter… Oh that’s right, Tatsuya-san. Did things go well with Juumonji-dono and the Saegusa Family’s daughter? The Ichijou Family’s son also joined from what I heard.”

“If you’re talking about the meeting, everything went well.”

What is this about suddenly, thought Tatsuya, but he answered without giving much of a thought.

“Is that so? Please do your best. However, getting along too well is a no-go.”

Tatsuya looked at Maya with a quizzical expression.

Was his expression that strange? A smile appeared on Maya’s face.

“My, my, didn’t you notice? It wasn’t Juumonji-dono who made the Saegusa Family’s daughter participate but the Saegusa Family itself. Using the meetings as a pretext to make you and her have something like a date.”

What are you saying in front of Miyuki. A vivid panic awoke in his heart, however, it wasn’t shown on his face.

“So they had such an intention. I will be careful.”

Showing his displeasure with a frown, he returned such an answer.

“Yes, do so. Then I bid you farewell. I wish you a good night as well, Miyuki-san.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Have a good night, Oba-sama.”

The call ended. In front of the now pitch-black screen, Tatsuya turned towards Miyuki.

As he expected, Miyuki was pretty angry.

However, it didn’t show on her face.

A strong malaise invaded Tatsuya. And yet, he felt like he knew the cause.

Tatsuya didn’t feel any joy at being envied. Being criticized or having Miyuki sulk was a thing that he never wanted, not even once. Meanwhile, he never thought that Miyuki being envious was a bother or something troublesome either.

Tatsuya thought that there was no reason for Miyuki to restrain herself in any way. However, this could also be seen as his younger sister growing up, or even a proof of her growth; that was one way of looking at it.

There were also people who say that a woman’s envy represents the depths of her love.

Still, one cannot say that envy is a virtue. While his intuition told him that this change in Miyuki was undesirable, his common sense judged that it might be a suitable change for a lady.

You can be open about your jealousy like before, was something that Tatsuya couldn't tell her.

◊ ◊ ◊

The next day, February the 12th, it had started to snow.

Due to the thick clouds that were covering the sky, it was still dark outside despite the fact that it should have been sunrise soon.

Coming down from Yakumo's temple, Tatsuya was running down the street at a speed nearing 60 kilometers per hour.

With his speed and the current weather, it was pretty difficult to identify the people he was passing by. However, not just Tatsuya but anyone would've been able to recognize that woman.

She had quite a peculiar appearance.

To be precise, it wasn't like even Tatsuya could have recognized her face. That was because she was wearing a casquette (cap) that dropped to her eyes and big sunglasses as well as a muffler that got up to her nose.

Even though it was a downward slope that Tatsuya was running on, he managed to stop in just two steps, right in front of her.

"Good morning, Yoshimi-san."

Yoshimi made a quick bow in response to Tatsuya's greeting.

She took out of her coat a portrait envelope and presented it to Tatsuya.

Maya's messenger was Yoshimi.

"I accept it."

Tatsuya said so after receiving the letter, and upon hearing this, Yoshimi's face moved up and down ever so slightly. Tatsuya wasn't even sure if she was actually looking at him behind her sunglasses.

Failing to perceive her expression, Tatsuya looked at Yoshimi's face once more. And, he felt that it was really unnatural. Trying to hide her face in plain view, if he had been the one observing, no doubt he'd have thought her to be suspicious.

Since it was roughly in the middle of winter, it wasn't that strange to have a muffler up to her nose.

The casquette might also be acceptable in the world of fashion,

The combination of those two wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

No doubt, the problem came from——

"Yoshimi-san, I think that this appearance has the opposite effect, it makes you stand out quite a bit. Shouldn't you remove the sunglasses?"

Despite knowing that it was uninvited interference, Tatsuya offered some advice.

Twice, Yoshimi shook her head left and right.

After coming back home and taking a shower, Tatsuya decided to open the letter he received from Yoshimi before having lunch.

"…Onii-sama, the preparations for the meal are complete."

Miyuki came from the dining hall to call Tatsuya. She immediately realized what the letter he had in his hand was about.

"Is this what Oba-sama talked about yesterday…?"

"Indeed."

Tatsuya nodded while standing up, he then handed to Miyuki the letter he had just finished reading.

With a bit of hesitation, Miyuki took the letter and opened her eyes wide while seeing the characters written on it. The look on her face was filled with surprise.

This letter suggested that there was a possibility that Gu Jie's escape was made possible due to the cooperation of soldiers of the Defense Forces.

"It seems like no organization is unrelated to shady things. The Defense Forces are no exception. I'd like to think that only a part of it is rotten, however."

Tatsuya took the letter from Miyuki's hands and put it back into the envelope he had in his hand.

“That being said, now’s probably a good time to stop worrying about the errors of the past. When the person in question mixes desire and hope, and is so obsessive about something, then if harm is done to us, we have no reason to exercise restraint.”

“Onii-sama…”

Miyuki looked up at Tatsuya’s face with an anxious expression.

Tatsuya smiled while lightly patting his sister’s head then headed towards the dining room.

◊ ◊ ◊

Class 2-A’s lesson at 1 o’clock was practice. Today’s subject was ‘The definition of Magic’s ending conditions’.

There was no Magic that lasted forever. There was a limit to the effective time of every Magic. But at the same time, with Magic that didn’t have clear time limits, there was no way to precisely understand how long the effects would last.

It is impossible for a Magic Sequence to interfere with another. Unless we’re talking about unusual Magic like Spell Dismantling (Gram Demolition) and Spell Dissolution (Gram Dispersion), interrupting the casting of a spell is impossible. Only overwriting the phenomenon alteration with more power is possible.

Thus, for a Magic to overwrite another, an interference strength greater than that of the Magic you want to overwrite is required. And that stays true even if your objective was to “return an event modified by Magic to its original state”. In the case of a Magic with uncertain ending conditions, the load on the Magician would increase even further. That is why the definition of ending conditions for Magic is an extremely important factor in a Magician’s ability evaluation.

Generally, there were two ways of defining such a thing. One was to include the magic’s effective time (start to finish) directly into the Magic Sequence. This method had been put to great use in Taurus Silver’s flying devices.

Another was to define the conditions of the Magic’s success. Until the objective of event modification is achieved, the activation continues. Hence, it is a method to put an end to the effectiveness of the Magic Sequence itself. This method tends to be used a lot in practice.

And today’s class was about practicing Magic spells with variable durations of effectiveness. The training method used was for a student to change the color of a plastic ball from white to red, then to green, then to blue, and 10 sets of 3 color changes were to be performed in 30 seconds. Although the time and frequency could vary, the average of 1 second per color remained.

If the change was done too late, then the time limit would be exceeded. On the other hand, if it was executed too soon, the interference strength required to overwrite the previous Magic Sequence would increase. If this mistake was to be repeated multiple times then performing the Magic would progressively become harder, putting a lot of stress on the student.

Today wasn't the evaluation time yet but just a practice session, so the students had to group up and use Magic alternately. The one not performing the Magician's role had to perform the role of a timekeeper. In other words, while one of them executed Magic, the other kept track of the various timing aspects that this practice required; the timekeeper had to focus on the numerical stopwatch on his terminal, or at least that was how the previous training session went.

The problem was that the number students from Class-A during the previous session was odd. The option of forming groups of three people was abandoned and in the end, a single person had to practice on their own. As luck would have it, that person had been Miyuki.

In fact, regardless of gender, everyone in the class wanted to raise their hands and invite Miyuki to be a pair with them. Though the students who signed up for pairs couldn't be with Miyuki, at first it was just classmates who raised their voices on pairs. Thus, it wasn't because of Miyuki was a leftover figure.

Since yesterday had been the day of lessons and experiments, such a problem did not occur. However today, just like last week, this situation should have happened again. ——If it hadn't been for the fact that Masaki had just 'moved in'.

"Shiba-san, would you pair up with me?"

After Masaki had been told the goal of this practice session by the teacher, he had gone towards Miyuki. And to a Miyuki that no one had invited, he proposed this.

Noise raised up across the practice room. A word of regret and sometimes a curse escaped the lips of various boys in the classroom. It was limited to a mere "Damn, too late!".

"Yes, with pleasure. I look forward to working with you, Ichijou-san."

Even Miyuki might have found it unpleasant to practice alone. Hearing Masaki's request, she nodded with a radiant smile.

When Masaki heard the explanation for the exercise, he muttered “Isn’t that easy?”.

These days, the second year students of Third High were practicing the use of Magic on a target behind a wall. That being said, the real purpose of this was to be able to cast Magic on an invisible opponent, or one taking cover behind an object.

Compared to the combat application oriented practices of Third High, Masaki couldn’t help but think of First High’s practices as a way of competing in cleverness.

And after watching Miyuki performing the task, this impression only strengthened. Miyuki perfectly changed the color of the ball in 10 sets within the allotted time of 30 seconds. What Masaki felt admiration for was the more bright and vivid colors of the ball than her perfect timing. This plainly showed the level of her interference strength.

“30 seconds exactly. As expected of Shiba-san.”

“Thank you very much. Ichijou-san, you can start whenever you want.”

With social etiquette in mind, Masaki had praised Miyuki’s talent, and being urged on by such a lovely girl afterwards, he was now brimming with enthusiasm.

All unneeded feelings disappeared in an instant, and Masaki was now focused on his target like in a real combat situation.

“How about the count? Do you want the notice set at 10 seconds?”

Hearing Miyuki’s proposition, Masaki was about to say “There’s no need”, but reconsidered.

“…Alright then, please set the countdown for the last 10 seconds.”

Thinking that just for him, Miyuki would do the countdown had its charm for Masaki.

“Understood.”

It seemed like his cheeks were about to loosen when he heard Miyuki’s crystalline voice.

“I entrust the signal to you.”

Masaki once more focused on his Magic. His mindset had already switched to a war mode.

“In that case, 3… 2… 1… Start!”

While Masaki was setting the time-based ending conditions in his head, he executed his Magic in succession.

Red - - Green - - Blue.

Red - - Green - - Blue.

The lively colors he created were in no way inferior to Miyuki’s.

Masaki felt satisfaction at the fact his Magical power wasn’t losing to Miyuki’s.

Red - - Green - - Blue.

Red - - Green - - - Blue.

Maybe caused by his idle thinking, his rhythm started to fall apart.

To correct his mistake he tried to adjust the timings.

Red - Green - - Blue.

According to his own time perception, the discrepancy had been dealt with.

Red - - Green - Blue.

Now, however, the problem lied in the fact that due to his adjustments, he was too far ahead.

Red - - - Green - - - Blue.

Masaki waited more than 1 second in order to slow down his sets.

Red - - Green - - Blue.

He then managed to get back to the regular interval. He decided to make the final adjustments during the countdown.

“10… 9… 8…”

Miyuki’s countdown started.

His error margin was less than a second’s time.

Masaki opted for correcting the error at the final Magic.

“3… 2…”

Red - Green,

“1…”

Blue.

The plastic ball went back to its original white color.

“It’s over.”

Slightly late, Miyuki reported the end of the time limit.

“Remaining: 0 - 7 seconds. It’s very hard to imagine that this is your first time Ichijou-san.”

Miyuki turned a smiling face towards Masaki.

Masaki hid the cramp that was forming on his face and returned a smile.

The passing line for this exercise was for the last color change to be within a single second of the timer's end. The reason he managed to clear the exercise was thanks to the countdown. When thinking that Miyuki managed to perfectly time hers without Masaki's assistance, he really couldn't feel pleased at all.

"Just 30 seconds. Not bad, Honoka."

"Eh-he-he, this is my area of predilection after all."

Hearing the nearby voice, Masaki received an even stronger shock.

Using the remaining time for the session, Masaki finally managed to achieve the clearing conditions on his own.

◊ ◊ ◊

After the morning classes ended.

"Ichijou-san."

Masaki had finally managed to recover from the shock he had received from having to actually put effort in the practice session from before. He was called by a girl from the side.

Masaki turned his face towards the voice. He was no exception as a Magician and possessed a good memory. He could remember Honoka's name almost without any time-lag.

"Umm, Mitsui-san was it?"

The fact that he remembered her name was not due to her previously introducing herself nor hearing her name from someone else. He remembered her as the victor of this year's Nine Schools Competition in the Mirage Bat category.

"Yes, my name is Mitsui Honoka."

Honoka nodded with a pleased face. That wasn't to say she had an interest in Masaki. But knowing each other's names would make for smooth interpersonal relationships. It was such a reaction.

Masaki interpreted her smile as pure courtesy as well.

"Ichijou-san, would you like to go to the dining room together?"

"Huh, with me?"

That was why, such an invitation took him by surprise.

“Yes, with us.”

Honoka looked over her shoulders.

There stood Shizuku and Miyuki.

When she met Masaki’s gaze, Shizuku nodded without changing her expression. No, well, maybe it had been a bow? Shizuku’s reaction had been that ambiguous.

As for Miyuki, she was displaying a smile that hid what she was really thinking. But at the very least, to Masaki, this smile didn’t give off the impression that he’d be a bother.

“…Is it alright for me to go with you?”

Instinctively using the polite tone again, Masaki replied so.

Realizing that his eyes were turned towards her, although her smile still looked slightly bitter, Miyuki’s expression softened.

The smile that gave off a faking sentiment turned into a warm smile.

“Yes, certainly.”

To Miyuki’s answer,

“It would be my pleasure!”

Masaki stood up with vigor.

“Huh?”

This first person who saw Miyuki’s group, who was slightly late for lunch, had been Erika.

She was the one who had been surprised yesterday with her ‘I thought he’d try to stick to Miyuki for sure’ since Masaki hadn’t acted as she thought he would. But it seemed like she thought the fact that Masaki acted as she predicted was suspicious.

She wasn’t the only one. Leo and Mikihiko were also looking at Masaki with intrigued eyes.

“Umm, Onii-sama… Is it alright if Ichijou-san shares a seat with us?”

“Of course.”

However, Tatsuya’ answered so as if it had been obvious. An immediate response.

Rather, Masaki was the one who was puzzled right now.

To a Masaki that was standing there dumbfounded, Tatsuya spoke in a direct —— that is to say, not in a particularly friendly manner —— tone.

“Ichijou, do you know how to place an order? The purchase system of the cafeteria should be something rather standard.”

“Ah, yeah. No problem.”

“Let’s go, Ichijou-san.”

Being urged on by Miyuki, he went towards the ordering machine with her. Honoka and Shizuku followed just behind him.

Having retrieved her meal, Miyuki sat down next to Tatsuya.

Masaki sat down right in front of her.

Honoka was next to Masaki, right in front of Tatsuya.

Erika, who had been sitting in front of Tatsuya until then, gave her seat to Honoka and moved next to Miyuki.

Erika, who had purposefully taken a roundabout path around the table, suddenly spoke to Masaki.

“Ichijou-kun, how’s the investigation going?”

Masaki almost choked on his freshly acquired bowl of soup. Since he had seen Erika a few times already, he wasn't surprised at her overly familiar attitude. What had surprised him was the fact that she asked him such a question about a duty verging on a grey line with the law, in a place where anyone could be listening.

"Erika, Ichijou has just arrived in Tokyo. No matter how outstandingly superior a Magician he is, there is no way he'd accomplish something like that in a day."

While Masaki was struggling to find a way to answer, surprisingly for him, he was rescued by Tatsuya.

"I guess that's true."

"Indeed, Erika. This is not something you should ask in such a pressing manner. Ichijou-san, sorry about this incident."

Lightly reproving Erika, Miyuki bowed towards Masaki.

"No, well, this isn't something that needs an apology or anything."

Miyuki directed an innocent smile towards a Masaki that was getting flustered. Masaki's pure-hearted reaction might have been something refreshing for her.

"That being said, I envy you, Ichijou-san."

"Ah? Umm, what about?"

With Miyuki's dazzling smile turned towards him, Masaki was getting more and more restless.

"For you to be called a 'outstandingly superior Magician' by Onii-sama. Onii-sama is unexpectedly nice to you."

Miyuki sent a look of reproach to Masaki while smiling. No, to be more precise, it was more like envy?

Of course it was just a joke; however, what little calm Masaki had managed to preserve was blown away in an instant, he couldn't think of anything. His concerns about Miyuki calling Tatsuya "Onii-sama" as well flew out of his mind.

Tatsuya opened his mouth. "That is not the case" he said. Maybe it had been to turn Miyuki's gaze away from Masaki, maybe it had been a straight manner of scolding her for teasing him, but anyway, it was obvious that Tatsuya had again come to his rescue.

"So after all, Tatsuya-san recognizes Ichijou-san's ability."

However, as if covering for her, Honoka interrupted his sentence.

"That's nice. It feels like some sort of rivalry between two men."

“You might say rival, but in terms of Magical Power, it’s pretty clear that Ichijou comes out on top.”

Being so directly talked to, Tatsuya had no choice but to turn his attention away from Miyuki. Without wasting time, Tatsuya turned his attention to the person in front of him.

“However, isn’t what we’re practicing currently Tatsuya’s field of expertise?”

“Well, that is because the current theme requires precision more than speed and strength.”

Without humbling himself, Tatsuya honestly replied to Honoka.

“Tatsuya-san managed from the very beginning to perfectly time every color change for 1 second.”

And the now completely relaxed, or maybe not completely relaxed Mizuki opened her mouth as if she had been the one just praised.

“Really!? Tatsuya-san, that’s incredible!”

Hearing Honoka and Mizuki’s speeches damaged Masaki quite plainly. Miyuki who sat right in front of him couldn’t overlook this and addressed words of comfort to him.

“Even I, though I always stay within the time limit, always end up being slightly too fast or too slow.”

However, Honoka who sitting next to him and was even closer, hadn’t noticed.

“Tatsuya-san, isn’t there some kind of trick for this?”

Being overjoyed at Miyuki showing sympathy for Masaki, she couldn’t help but try to draw Tatsuya’s attention.

From Honoka’s point of view, everything was going according to the plan.

It had been Honoka who proposed to invite Masaki to their table. She had planned on pushing Masaki towards Miyuki while using this chance to get closer to Tatsuya herself.

Saying this is wicked would be pitiful.

“All is fair in love and war” was a popular phrase that originated from a tragicomedy of Great Britain from the 17th century. That being said, in modern times, there were strategies that were established as forbidden by a multinational treaty, so you couldn’t say that this phrase was true for everything.

It remained true for the matters of love, and you couldn’t say that everything was allowed. For instance, using a lie like ‘I am bearing your child’ to force your lover to give you money in order to part with you, these kind of things were typically not allowed by your moral sense.

Still, what Honoka did was not exactly foul play; all things considered, in love, this was pretty common. Using her friend's partner that way might be considered bad but it only served as evidence of Honoka's strong love.

◊ ◊ ◊

After leaving Miyuki at school and going back home, Tatsuya mounted his favorite motorbike and headed towards Tsuchiura. Needless to say, his destination was the National Defense Base of the 101st Brigade. It was the headquarters of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

Even though Tatsuya displayed a rough appearance as he was wearing trousers made of a material that looked like leather and a big jacket, what mattered at the gate was the ID card more than the outfit. Just by removing his helmet, Tatsuya was granted passage into the base.

Parking his motorbike in front of the headquarters, he looked at third floor of the building. His grave look was due to the negotiations —— neither a report nor a consultation —— that would come.

Still, it wasn't possible to ignore it. The fact that the Ten Master Clans had taken an official stance regarding the terrorism perpetrated by Gu Jie at Hakone had mainly been in order to attenuate the anti-Magician hate.

However, it has been decided that after hearing about Gu Jie's activities in Kamakura, Tatsuya would have to bring them down as soon as possible. It hadn't been an order from Maya, but something he proposed of his own volition.

Gu Jie's method of using Magicians as literal tools for his goals went against Tatsuya's ambition of giving Magicians a way to live without being instruments of war.

These were irreconcilable differences. In the future that Tatsuya envisioned, Gu Jie's existence was something that could not be allowed.

Gu Jie had to be killed. In order to achieve that, he would have to get rid of the victims he uses as tools…

Lightly shaking his head to settle down, Tatsuya entered the building and asked that the information of his arrival be relayed. In reality, he didn't even want to phone beforehand, but he couldn't just suddenly intrude without at least this much.

Until the planned time, although roughly 5 minutes remained, Tatsuya proceeded through. Was this place shorthanded as usual? He hardly met anyone on his way to the commander's room.

"Special Lieutenant Ooguro."

He raised his voice towards the room after knocking on the door. It was not like his voice could directly pass through the door, but it was equipped with a microphone that automatically picked voices. It was something visitors were unaware of.

“Enter.”

The voice that responded to him had, in fact, been transmitted through a speaker as well. What constituted as a breakthrough for the technological department might have been that such a thing could remain hidden even from the user.

After he heard the sound confirming that the lock had been removed, Tatsuya opened the door.

Kazama was sitting at the desk. Today, he was alone. A touch-screen terminal was on his desk. It seemed like he had been seeing a proposal or a report until Tatsuya had arrived. His responsibilities appear to have increased along with his promotion.

Tatsuya stepped in front of his desk and saluted.

Although Kazama stood up to return the salute, he immediately sat down again. Tatsuya, who wasn’t invited to take a seat, stayed still.

“Special Lieutenant, at ease. So, what suddenly brings you here today?”

That wasn’t to say that Kazama was angry. Even his voice had remained calm.

“Since our communication could have been intercepted, I thought that I would come and report to you directly.”

“Oh… Are you saying my battalion’s encryption code could have been cracked?”

“Affirmative. Actually, I was warned that there was a high probability that the communication codes of the Yotsuba Family have been deciphered already.”

Tatsuya revealed one of his cards immediately.

Kazama’s eyebrow twitched lightly.

“…Still, I think that the codes we are using should be stronger than the Yotsuba Family’s.”

“I am of the same opinion. But still, I thought that this was enough of a reason to be careful.”

Although Tatsuya didn’t mention exactly on what grounds he had thought that there was a need to be cautious, Kazama didn’t object.

“…Alright. Special Lieutenant, state your business.”

“There is a possibility that the special forces training grounds of the Zama base have been corrupted by foreign elements.”

The Special Forces Training Grounds —— This place had received this name due to fact that it gathered numerous Magic users who had seen their Magic Power strengthened after training

there, and receiving the name ‘Special Tactical Soldiers’. Despite its name, it wasn’t so much a training center as a place where experiments were conducted on living humans. The Defense Forces were keeping those reinforced Magicians in a few of the well-known facilities.

Just this much was enough that if information about those facilities was leaked, it would cause quite a large scandal for the Ministry of Defense, but the Zama base had another troublesome thing to it. Within its walls, joint research was conducted with the USNA.

Even though it was something unbeknownst to the rest of the world, it remained true that they were providing Japanese citizens some foreigners to experiment on.

This was a dark side of the government that could never be made public, and a shameful heritage of the pre-war days.

And such an installation that was supposed to be under extremely severe surveillance has been, albeit partially, taken over by foreigners, was what Tatsuya reported.

“…Did something happen?”

Kazama didn’t ask “What?” nor “Is that true?”. Neither did he ask “On what grounds can you say that?”.

Just what affair did he come in contact with that made him think of that, was what Kazama asked of him.

“Last Saturday at dawn, during the pursuit of the mastermind behind the Hakone terrorist acts, Gu Jie, there had been interference from Magicians specializing in ‘Combustion’. Without doubt, these Magicians were supposed to be on standby at the Zama base.”

The special forces training grounds of the Zama base were especially useful in times of war, with psychics strengthened for ‘Ignition’ or ‘Explosion’. The three people that Tatsuya killed last Saturday at Kamakura, after an investigation by Yoshimi, turned out to be Magicians who had been changed into ‘Generators’ at the special training grounds of the Zama base.

“Are you saying that the terrorists’ hand has extended as far as the Zama base?”

“Affirmative.”

Kazama folded his arms and leaked a groan, a frown on his face. It had already been quite a scandal that Zhou Gongjin had concealed himself in the Uji Second Supply Base, but for geographical reasons, anything pertaining to the Zama base was immediately an even more serious matter.

It was right under the nose of the capital, Tokyo. A facility made in order to hide the truth about experiments on living beings. A comfortable cage where combatants comparable to heavy weapons were confined.

The simple fact that one of those bodies experimented on managed to slip out of the base was a big problem in and of itself. If it became known that such beings had become the underlings of an anti-Japanese operative, then it probably wouldn't just end with the National Defense taking responsibility.

"Who is aware of this?"

Kazama closed his eyes and asked Tatsuya so.

"So far, only the members of the Yotsuba Family."

In other words, this information hadn't leaked to the Ten Master Clans. Hearing this, Kazama's expression seemingly softened. Still, he had kept his posture with his arms folded, and his frown remained.

"Does Special Lieutenant intend on attacking the Zama base?"

"Negative, Lieutenant Colonel."

Tatsuya's tone had changed subtly.

"Even though Zhou Gongjin had been given shelter in the Uji Second Supply Base, I don't think Gu Jie would do something similar in Zama's base."

"Gu Jie… Is that the name of the mastermind?"

Hearing a name that rang a bell in his head, Kazama looked up at Tatsuya, unfolding his arms.

"However, didn't you just say that the experimented bodies of the Zama base had become the pawns of this Gu Jie?"

"There is no mistake in that fact. However, while it is true that reinforced Magicians from the special training grounds have been turned into 'Generators', assuming that Gu Jie himself is present there and responsible for this would be presumptuous."

"So you think that someone in the Zama base cooperated with Gu Jie and took the reinforced Magicians out of the base?"

"Affirmative."

"Hmm… Compared to thinking that an unidentified foreigner infiltrated the base, this is certainly more realistic. However, how exactly did he do that?"

"A staff member from the special forces training ground might have been turned into a puppet. There might be a Magician capable of an operation as complex as performing the remodeling needed to create a 'Generator', along with depriving someone of his free-will."

Kazama put both of his elbows on the desk and joined his hands while silently thinking.

"…Are the identities of the people turned into Generators known?"

“Here.”

Tatsuya took out an unsealed envelope and presented it to Kazama. He retrieved 3 folded sheets of paper from it. These were photographs of the 3 people that had been turned into Generators, and their bodily features were recorded as well.

“If we shared that information with the base of Zama, we could probably get our hands on the puppets in a few days. However, would it be possible for this investigation to be left to me?”

Kazama matched Tatsuya’s gaze, still sitting. He was looking at him with such intensity that it probably wouldn’t have been exaggerating to call it a glare.

Tatsuya had just revealed his second card.

“Speaking bluntly, I know where Gu Jie’s hideout is. However, that place is next to Zama’s base.”

“…Are you worried about involving Zama’s base and having this turn into an all-out battle?”

To Kazama’s low, yet heavy voice, Tatsuya returned an answer immediately.

“This is not a small probability. Especially since the members of Special Forces Training Grounds of Zama’s base hold a strong enmity towards the Ten Master Clans, if someone who was sent there to investigate agitated them too much, it could be dangerous.”

Kazama couldn’t deny Tatsuya’s prediction having a possibility to become the truth. This was a facility made with the goal of not letting its residents escape. Various adjustments had been made in order to not let even the bodies that had gone through the strengthening experiment have a chance of leaving. With that in mind, escape was basically nothing but a dream. Still, it was a fact that, every year, the Ten Master Clans helped in dealing with cases of escapees.

It might sound inhumane but, for the Defense Forces, disposing of them was a much safer way. If the experimented subject survived, it would take a great deal of effort to keep the whole thing a secret. On the other hand, a dead body would leave no tangible evidence behind it. Taking the power and influence of the government into account, burying such a mundane affair in the dark would be no trouble. At the very least, compared to the cost of keeping one alive, it was far cheaper.

If the headquarters learned that an illegal combat occurring near the base of Zama involved a member of the Ten Master Clans, the Yotsuba Family… They could make experiments escape on purpose to put the responsibility of the disposal on the Yotsuba Family. This was a scenario that was likely to happen.

“Concerning the non-intervention promise made to the Zama base, we will need the cooperation of the General.”

“We wouldn’t have the time for this. Gu Jie would be able to escape.”

“…Special Lieutenant, do you want to settle things once and for all?”

“I’m planning to avoid as many fights as possible with National Defense personnel. However, if a fight broke out by accident or due to unavoidable circumstances, I will erase every single trace of it.”

Tatsuya was saying that if need be, he’d use his ‘Mist Dispersion’ even on allied troops.

“It might be impossible to do otherwise.”

With a bitter expression on his face, yet deprived of hesitation, Kazama permitted the use of Tatsuya’s Mist Dispersion.

◊ ◊ ◊

It was 8 P.M. when Tatsuya finally arrived near the Zama base having traveled from the Tsuchiura base, after taking his time to settle various affairs.

He didn’t talk to Katsuto and Mayumi about his coming here today. Of course, not even to Masaki. He missed today’s meeting as well. Rather, members of the Yotsuba Family were his companions.

It seemed like all the members were already gathered. Tatsuya stopped his motorcycle in the public park’s parking lot and stepped up to a boxed wagon.

“Fumiya, Ayako, you did well in coming despite today being a weekday.”

Once he was in whispering distance he called out to his second cousins in a low voice, who had been erasing their presence just like he was.

“Tatsuya-niisan!”

While keeping his voice down as well, although unable to completely hide his astonishment, Fumiya responded.

“I didn’t even feel your presence. You keep getting better and better at being invisible.”

“Good evening, Tatsuya-san. I understand that the current situation demands it, but since this is bad for my heart, could you be more considerate?”

Fumiya let out undisguised praise and Ayako, strong reprobation. Her attitude had changed a little ever since his engagement with Miyuki had been announced.

She was less reserved, and it looked like the distance between them had shortened.

However, this was the appearance of an Ayako that was trying her best to accept the reality of the current situation.

“It looked like Yoshimi-san would faint due to the shock.”

Near Ayako, Yoshimi shook her head from left to right in her usual mysterious style.

“Yoshimi-san, you don’t need to hold back. Tatsuya-san, despite being so straightforward, utterly lacks any form of common sense; in this situation it wouldn’t do any good to hide the truth.”

It might have been surprisingly abusive words, but rather than any reserve towards Tatsuya having disappeared, it was more because Yoshimi was the type to let her guard down like that.

“I’m alright. I won’t be shaken by something like this.”

“Eh…? But you looked pretty surprised from what I saw.”

“It’s not the case. I’m an adult after all.”

Yoshimi had become quite talkative with Ayako as well. Her wariness might also have loosened since they were cousins. For Ayako and Fumiya, Tatsuya was their elder second cousin, from the father’s side of the family.

Yoshimi, on the other hand, was the daughter of the brother of Ayako’s mother.

Yoshimi’s full name was Shinonome Yoshimi. Although she was currently 21 years old, she wasn’t going to school. Even during her high school age, she had followed a correspondence system. Thus, she could perform investigative duties while learning.

With this in mind, it would make sense if she had developed a sort of elder sister/senpai role for Ayako, but looking at them, it was pretty clear that it was Ayako who would be grasping the initiative. This was not due to the fact that she was the daughter of the current head of the Kuroba Family, but more likely due to their personalities.

“Tatsuya-niisan, are you going to change your clothes inside?”

Leaving his sister’s and cousin’s playful attitudes aside, Fumiya asked Tatsuya . Combat equipment for the upcoming operation had been prepared in the boxed wagon.

By the way, Fumiya’s appearance was, as usual, his cross-dressing disguise. Although, had he finally decided to be more “aggressive”, his makeup was thicker than before.

“Alright.”

Without talking about Fumiya’s pretty girl style, he boarded the wagon.

The combat suit that the Yotsuba had prepared more or less looked like the clothes Tatsuya had been wearing just a few moments ago. The only difference would be that the blouson insides were tied up. However, as far as performance was concerned, it rivaled that of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion's Mobile Suit.

Today, Tatsuya wasn't using the gun-shaped Silver Horn but the thought-controlled type set with a Silver Taurus bracelet. Hidden inside his blouson wasn't another CAD but a gun and a knife. If they were found by the police, it wouldn't end with just an inquiry. This was also one of the reasons why they had changed their clothes here and not elsewhere.

The helmet Tatsuya was wearing could also function as a gas mask. Fumiya was looking at his brave figure admiringly while he himself was wearing a mini-dress full of button ornaments —— that being said, all of those buttons were gas capsules and flashbangs ——when he called out to Ayako.

"We're going soon."

Fumiya, who was already looking at Tatsuya, nodded immediately.

Ayako and Yoshimi, who had somehow gone into a 'Whose appearance is not suitable for this mission' debate, turned towards Tatsuya and slightly bowed.

Tatsuya, then, began to walk.

Directly behind him were Fumiya and Ayako, as well as several men in black suits.

The number of shadows around Yoshimi suddenly increased, and then she saw the three of them off.

"Still, the surveillance is pretty tight."

Using something that resembled binoculars —— a sensor that made infrared rays as well as electromagnetic waves visible —— she reported so to Tatsuya in a concerned voice.

The three of them were observing the target building from inside the invisibility field that Ayako produced. Yoshimi had read this 'Memory' of Gu Jie's new hideout from the corpse of a former Generator. Although it was nothing but a private hospital officially, in truth, this place undertook illegal requests from the army as an unofficial research facility. That the guard would be severe was expected.

"It wouldn't be too difficult to sneak into the building, but with this kind of heavy surveillance I don't think guards are all there is, and there might be some other things waiting for us."

“So you think that there is some sort of trap set up?”

“Yes.”

Tatsuya assessed the situation with his own eyes.

Considering that we’re talking about an organization that was used to take on military missions, they were sure to be prepared.

The hospital’s owner might have already had his heart remodeled. He might even have been killed already. Anyone would’ve been able to guess as much, was what Tatsuya was thinking.

Based on this, he searched for both the inside and the outside of the building.

The security equipment was certainly severe but it wasn’t anything out of the extraordinary for a private level. Compared to the several sensors installed throughout the Steeplechase event in the Nine Schools Competition, it was nothing.

He could see nine human shadows inside of the building.

Five of those people had a normal human’s information structure. They were probably doctors and nurses on duty.

One person had noise in the information structure of his head. He was probably the director of the hospital who has been made a puppet.

Two people had a distorted information structure type that Tatsuya had met before. Without a doubt, those two were Generators.

And a single person with a strange information structure was there. Although compared to the Generators, he was more similar to a regular human, his age data was definitely weird.

In the case of a person whose body age was younger than his actual age, the data about his age should only be one. Only the true age was described. The age of the body was described with information about general health condition.

However, in the information body that Tatsuya was looking at now, two different data about its age existed.

(Such an information body, I have seen one similar before… When, and where was it?)

Through the vast amount of data stocked in his head, Tatsuya searched, and found what he was looking for.

(I see, this was Zhou Gongjin’s…)

Due to the fact that he had been solely concentrating on localizing his true location that was camouflaged by Ghost walker, he hadn’t noticed the abnormality in his information structure at the time. However, in Tatsuya’s memory who couldn’t forget anything, this uneasy feeling firmly remained.

“Found him. This is probably Gu Jie in person.”

Tatsuya reported to Ayako and Fumiya with a whisper.

Tension ran through the muscles of their back.

“Let’s move in immediately.”

Fumiya replied with a whispering voice, too. It looked like Ayako didn’t have an objection, either.

The three people walked towards the front gate. Due to the magic of the men in black suits, regular humans couldn’t see them. Although they received directives to avoid a fight as much as possible, if the possibility of the National Defense becoming involved turned into a reality, they couldn’t be expected to follow this order.

“Tatsuya-san.”

Nodding at Ayako’s voice, Tatsuya pressed the button of the radio he had in his hand.

The light that was illuminating the hospital’s gate disappeared. The men in black had cut the electrical wire that was supplying the building with energy. The wire in the ground as well; since there was no need to dig it up due to Magic, it had been a simple task.

To begin with, despite being a private hospital, it was still a proper hospital. It was quite probable that the building had an emergency power supply.

Tatsuya confirmed that the security system had been cut off and signaled Ayako with his hands.

Using Ayako’s ‘Mock Teleportation’, the three of them jumped on the roof of the hospital.

The light had yet to be restored.

“Let’s proceed as planned.”

The plan was simple, Ayako was to secure their retreat while Fumiya acted as her guard.

Tatsuya was to secure Gu Jie’s capture on his own.

Even though both Ayako and Fumiya had strongly opposed this plan, they weren’t so childish as to pose difficulties when the strategy had already been set in motion.

“Please be careful.”

The brother and sister, who looked like a pair of pretty sisters at present, sent him off in unison.

The light came back almost at the same time as Tatsuya entered the building from the rooftop.

Looking at him, not even a trace of panic was present. This timing was roughly what he had expected, so it wasn't as if it had been "in the nick of time".

However, he wasn't being carefree at all. Did he suspect that this kind of operation was taking place due to the power outage? The information body that Tatsuya thought was Gu Jie immediately headed for the emergency stairway from his former position in a room on the 3rd floor.

This movement was convenient for Tatsuya. The risk of involving doctors or nurses became smaller with it.

Tatsuya dashed towards the emergency exit, but stopped in his tracks once he reached the last room in the hallway.

Bullets came flying out of the door and crashed into the wall on the other side.

Tatsuya switched his 'View' from the emergency stairs and focused it on the ambusher's gun.

He used 'Decomposition' on the gun.

The Magic Sequence for 'Ignition' was nullified and rendered useless by his Gram Dispersion.

The gun of another Generator who was approaching from the back was decomposed.

A door was vigorously flung open, and Magicians turned into Generators jumped out to attack him.

They were not only wielding strengthened magical skills from being prime field agents turned into Generators in the National Defense's facilities, they were also making use of power and speed of a level impossible for humans. One of the Generators tried to stab Tatsuya with a knife.

However, not only was Tatsuya a product of the Fourth Research Institute, he was also a Magician heavily trained in hand-to-hand combat. The training he had received had been more oriented towards physical strength rather than magic. As someone who primarily learned to use his body, he was completely familiar with the process of controlling his body with Psions.

He hadn't received biochemical enhancements to make his body stronger, however, Tatsuya made up for this disadvantage by protecting the information structure of his muscles so that even if the burden on his bones exceeded the limits, his body wouldn't suffer damage.

The Generator used the 'Body Ignition' Magic on Tatsuya. Not needing a CAD, that might have been the proof that he had psychic ancestors.

Tatsuya once again used his Gram Dispersion towards the Magic Sequence aimed at him. At the same time, the Generator's blade was parried with his own knife that he took out of his blouson.

The blade lock lasted an instant.

After Tatsuya parried the attack, his power slipped out, but at the same time, the Generator leaped back.

Tatsuya had wanted to destroy his opponent's posture, but it ended up only lasting for a moment.

On the other hand, he had gained a distance where knives wouldn't be able to reach.

Tatsuya turned his back on his opponent.

He then threw his knife towards another Generator who was approaching from the back.

Perhaps due to this surprising action, the opponent stopped and had to parry the knife throw with his own knife.

His eyes let go of Tatsuya for an instant.

When he turned his attention back to him, Tatsuya had pulled out his gun.

He turned his gun towards the Generator.

Due to the attached suppressor, a small gunshot sound leaked.

The Generator who had expected a magic attack ate a bullet straight from the front.

The high caliber bullet hit him right in the stomach, and the Generator, who had roughly the same physique as Tatsuya, was pushed back. No bleeding could be seen on the Generator who was now on the ground. That was evidence that he was wearing an effective body armor.

Tatsuya turned around once more.

The other Generator had aimed for his neck with the knife in his right hand, Tatsuya caught it at the wrist with his left hand.

His Magic Calculation Area dissolved the Magic Sequences of 'Ignition' and 'Scorching' that the Generator was about to unleash.

That Generator's casting speed was nearing instantaneous levels as a psychic. By sacrificing diversity, his event modification speed had been so drastically enhanced that he could provoke it just by wishing. This came with being a Generator. By getting rid of their free will, it was possible to free up mental activity resources.

However, even with this, Tatsuya's 'Decomposition' was faster. Even faster than the Generator could complete his magic, Tatsuya's decomposition came out first.

Tatsuya twisted the Generator's right hand who was holding the knife and destroyed his body. He then shot him from up-close with his gun.

Even though he didn't have the capacity to feel pain, his faltering physical condition made magic execution nigh-impossible.

Even though the first Generator who had been knocked out had already recovered, his magic execution speed still wasn't back to its normal level.

Suppressing all the Magic Sequences of his opponents, reserve power arose in Tatsuya's Magic Calculation Area with which he counterattacked.

Tatsuya used 'Partial Dismantling'.

At the same time, on the two bodies, holes appeared on their chests.

Although the Generators continued to weakly struggle without their hearts, they were in their death throes, and soon, even that stopped.

After confirming that all Psion activity had stopped, Tatsuya headed towards the emergency stairway once more.

Gu Jie had apparently already reached the 1st floor.

Tatsuya jumped down the stairway.

Avoiding damage with minimal inertia control magic, he aimed at the ambulance that Gu Jie had planned on using to escape.

Why was there an ambulance despite no emergency being signaled? Why was there a need for an ambulance to be bulletproof and heat-resistant? Any such questions were shelved in the depth of Tatsuya's mind.

The Psion noise provoked by the Cast Jamming emanating from the ambulance wasn't a problem for him either.

The only thing that was left as an obstacle from Tatsuya were several High Power Rifle bullets shot in succession towards him.

◊ ◊ ◊

On that day, a large-scale VTOL (Vertical Take-Off and Landing) aircraft from the USNA came flying to the Zama base. Considering that Zama based was a shared territory between Japan and the USNA, this was not unusual. The existence of the Special Forces Training Grounds was a secret that was known to the USNA for historical reasons. There was no reason to refuse the landing and no possibility to begin with.

After the aircraft landed, the commander of the base accepted a report from the commanding officer of the transport. This wasn't unusual either. In the case of the commander, if there were specific reasons to this visit, it could save some trouble.

The commander of the USNA Army introduced himself as major Benjamin Lowes. The impression that the base's commander had of him was that of a high-class officer, fearless yet smart. Not only because of their current alliance, but also because he had the type of personality which made him not behave in an unnecessarily rude way.

Still, the base's commander didn't relax. He understood at a glance that it was a high-caliber Magician who had just entered the room.

Since this was a base where Magicians were strengthened, there were precise magic power measurement devices. And although he had skillfully influenced the measurement results, on the contrary, it had only served to prove the height of his skill.

After the formal diplomatic exchanges, Major Lowes started to talk about an incredible matter with a refined tone.

"It is a really shameful matter but I have been sent here in order to capture deserters."

"Deserters, you say?"

The commander of the base barely managed to swallow an "Again?". He was one of the few officers who was aware that last year's troubles with vampires had been caused by USNA deserters. This, too, was due to the special circumstances of the Special Force Training Grounds of Zama's base.

"As you might know, on December of the year before last, soldiers of our army had deserted and fled to your country. Although we confirmed that most of them died, it appears that it wasn't all of them."

Major Lowes —— Commander of the Stars' First Unit, Benjamin Canopus, seeing through the commander's doubts, came up with a lie. Since the commander wasn't aware of absolutely all the details, he couldn't keep his doubts.

"We're not sure what exactly their objectives are but we have confirmed that the deserters plan on kidnapping the doctor who has been providing medical treatment to the Magicians of this base. The attack will take place tonight."

"…Major, you have our gratitude for this information."

"Commander, I think you have an idea of what I'm about to ask of you."

We will deal with this attack ourselves, was what the commander was about to say. Considering that this was about to take place right in front of their noses and that it concerned civilians who were cooperating with them, it was no wonder.

However, Canopus anticipated this reaction and prevented this sentence from coming out.

“I heard that the Ten Master Clans are also pursuing the deserters of our army. We think that stimulating the Magicians currently stationed in this base would be unfavorable for both of our countries.”

The commander made a sour face and swallowed the sentence he was about to say.

“Could you, at your discretion, overlook my unit’s action in this matter?”

“…This exceeds the range of discretion I am allowed as an officer. The approbation of the headquarters is needed.”

“Commander. It’s an urgent matter. The deserter’s attack could happen in a matter of hours. If you say that it is impossible for you to entrust this entirely to us, we could agree to a joint operation with your own forces.”

Canopus played his cards right here and now.

“Indeed, if you could lend us soldiers of the Special Force Training Grounds. Number 024, 026, 029, 037 and 041 would be suitable for such a task.”

Those were the numbers of the strengthened Magicians that had been stolen by Gu Jie.

“…I agree to this cooperation. However, I’ll have you leave the reporting duty to me!”

Towards the speech of the commander, Canopus returned a salute with a nonchalant face.

This event had taken place 3 hours before Tatsuya had rushed into action.

◊ ◊ ◊

Even though Tatsuya instinctively protected his vital points, he couldn’t dodge entirely. The first bullet hit his left arm, the second incoming bullet was decomposed while he rolled on the ground. The wound he received on his left shoulder was already healed by his ‘Regrowth’ by the time he hit the ground.

The sniper who intervened just before Tatsuya could catch Gu Jie came from the sky. No, with such power, a better way of putting it would be that he fell from the sky.

Neither the shadow of a plane nor a helicopter could be seen. It was as if he had been shot from a human cannon to this place.

(Why is the USNA military here!?)

Tatsuya couldn't help but be surprised after reading that person's information with Elemental Sight.

Again, Zama was a joint Japan-USNA joint base. That a USNA soldier was present there was not that mysterious.

However, why would such a person help Gu Jie's escape?

Despite holding such thoughts and hesitations, as a combat magician, half of his mind had automatically reacted to disempower the appearing threat.

The High Power Rifle the opponent was wielding was instantly turned into separate parts as well as the body armor he was wearing.

If that person had been a National Defense soldier, Tatsuya would've erased him.

However, since Tatsuya hadn't thought about the USNA military possibly being involved, he had yet to decide an appropriate way of dealing with them.

(Erasing him would be —— bad.)

Tatsuya concluded so after disarming the soldier. He was currently in the middle of an illegal operation. Giving the USNA a pretext to accuse Japan of abducting their soldiers would be troublesome.

Tatsuya shot at the soldier who was standing there, petrified, as he had yet to understand how exactly he had been disarmed. Once that was done, Tatsuya used his 'Regrowth' to restore his body armor and rifle to their original state. This whole process had the sole purpose of making out which magic was used against the target next to impossible to discern.

Then, once again, he went after Gu Jie. The ambulance that Gu Jie had boarded was already far.

Tatsuya expanded his 'View' to search for Gu Jie's location.

However, he was unable to. The 'Eyes' of Tatsuya were focused on something whose priority was higher, something that he couldn't ignore.

Fumiya and Ayako were fighting hard.

He ran in the building at full speed.

Fumiya's reaction to the soldiers who landed on the rooftop was immediate.

The Magic that allowed one to inflict damage to the mind and the soul, 'Direct Pain', deprived the soldiers' hands of their strength and made them drop their weapons. Still, one couldn't say that his reaction to the grenades that had been thrown from their back had been enough.

Ayako immediately erected a physical barrier. One that would correctly interact with the fragments released by the explosion. However, the grenades that had been shot were not exploding ones, but smoke grenades.

The rapidly expanding smoke made it even harder to see than it already was.

Fumiya was able to unleash magic without relying on his eyes, but he was still a long way from reaching Tatsuya's level.

Fumiya's 'Direct Pain' was a magic that targeted the mind and the soul. He apparently thought that not being able to maintain visual contact wouldn't affect the magic's effect too much.

However, it was in fact the opposite. Spirits don't exist in this world. Even if one were to search for them, he wouldn't know where to look. Therefore, to aim this Magic, a link from this world to the spirit world was needed. A glass-scratching like sound came from the smoke screen towards Ayako and Fumiya.

"Cast Jamming?"

"No, not exactly. But, this is…?"

Ayako was the one to answer Fumiya's doubt. Still, there was no trace of relief on her face at knowing that this wasn't Cast Jamming. She anxiously searched for the noise's source.

Fumiya, on the other hand, concluded that as long as this wasn't the noise of Psion obstructing magic execution, finding out its source could be postponed. At the moment, their priority was to push back this mysterious enemy.

With the CAD on his right hand, he had planned on using an Activation Sequence to blow away the smoke screen with an air flow. However… His CAD wasn't functioning properly. His Activation Sequence was filled with "noise".

The CAD he had tried to use was a Generalized portable terminal-type CAD, and he was as used to this one as the knuckle duster Specialized CAD he used before. Someone of Fumiya's level couldn't make such a mistake.

Piercing through the smoke screen. High Power bullets struck against the barrier one after the other.

"Yami-chan, increase the amount of Psions injected into your CAD!"

While shouting this to Fumiya, Ayako maintained the barrier by pouring an excessive amount of Psions into her own CAD.

Fumiya operated his CAD once again. As per Ayako's advice, he used twice as much as Psions.

The strength of the signal that returned from a CAD was roughly proportional to the amount of Psions injected in the Activation Sequence. Despite the fact that noise was still mixed in the

signal, Fumiya managed to filter it by himself and forcibly executed the magic he wanted to use previously.

The smoke screen cleared up.

The number of enemies had increased to five people. Three were equipped with High Power Rifles, the two that had suffered Fumiya's attack still had trembling arms but were now pointing towards Ayako and Fumiya some sort of flashlight whose muzzle looked like a trumpet.

Fumiya and Ayako instinctively understood that this cylindrical tool was the reason for their misbehaving CADs.

This was the breakthrough in terms of casting obstruction devices that only the USNA developed, 'Cast Jammer'. Although neither of these two knew about it, their deduction was spot-on.

"Nee-san, leave this place immediately."

Fumiya ordered Ayako so.

"I'll report so you come back and get me later!"

"——Understood!"

For a moment, Ayako wanted to object but after thinking about it once more, she nodded to his words. She was aware of the fact that she wasn't cut out for direct confrontation.

However, it came too late. Fumiya turned away from the enemies at the front. He jumped, not caring about his long skirt, and threw a kick.

The soldier who tried to attack Ayako was thrown back in the air.

"Yami-chan, are you injured!?"

However, Fumiya didn't come out completely uninjured either. His tights were cut up, blood was trickling down from his foot. The soldier who received the kick had apparently slashed him with his knife.

The material that made up Fumiya's clothes wasn't normal, either. It wasn't on Tatsuya's combat suit's level but it was still a high-level protective suit. The knife that the USNA soldier used didn't seem to be normal metal.

"I'm alright!"

Fumiya landed on his other foot and calmed down Ayako. However, simply judging from the fact that he didn't land on the injured leg, the damage must've been pretty severe. Considering that reinforcements were constantly coming from the air, he didn't even have the composure to treat his wound.

Ayako ripped off one of her buttons and threw it behind Fumiya.

An intense flash occurred, the movement of the soldier who was about to attack Fumiya was instantly stopped.

With Fumiya's magic, the soldier fainted.

In the meantime, bullets had constantly been fired at the two.

Ayako had been unable to leave the place. In order to protect Fumiya from the barrage of bullets from High Powered Rifles, she had to maintain her barrier.

If there hadn't been obstruction from the Cast Jammer, she could have easily used the interval between gunshots to escape with Mock Teleportation. Fumiya, too was badly affected by this, and normally he'd have been able to silence all of them at once. But right now, he had no choice but to use 'Direct Pain' on a single target at a time. Neither of these two had the composure to wonder about the strangeness of their enemies.

The enemy purposely only replaced the knocked out members by soldiers.

If more numbers were sent at once, the battle would turn into an even bigger struggle.

Neither Ayako nor Fumiya had noticed this.

Fumiya, in particular, had his hands full with holding his own against reinforced soldiers.

Ayako couldn't escape, either, because she had to maintain her barrier to be protected from High Power Rifles. First of all, they had to find a way to deal with those.

Just when Fumiya was about to take desperate measures and try his luck, the situation changed drastically. Two gunshots resounded.

The noise that was disturbing the CAD's functioning suddenly vanished.

"Tatsuya-san!"

Ayako instinctively called out his name.

Near the rooftop's entrance, Tatsuya stood with his face hid by a helmet. He was pointing his gun at the soldiers who had been operating the Cast Jammer.

One of the reasons Tatsuya didn't just jump on the rooftop was that he wanted to avoid making himself an easy target for snipers, that wasn't all, however. He wanted to scatter sleeping gas on the 1st and 2nd floor too. It was now necessary to abandon the idea of preventing a ruckus but he at least needed to find a way to prevent innocent doctors and nurses from being involved.

The extra time it took for him to scatter the gas capsules in each floor's corridors made his arrival late, so much so that saying that he was "in the nick of time" wouldn't be an exaggeration. At the very least, he had arrived in time to prevent Fumiya's reckless final charge.

Along with the gunshots, the Cast Jammer effect was interrupted.

The gunshots had been nothing but a decoy, in truth, and Tatsuya had used Decomposition on the devices.

The High Power Rifles were turned towards Tatsuya.

Tatsuya did not Decompose them.

The high power bullets were propelled out of their muzzle. Reading their trajectory, he held up his hand.

It was a trick that he had already shown during the 2095 Thesis Competition, but still, it's effect was undeniable.

The soldier, who mistook this for Tatsuya grabbing with his bare hand the bullets, was petrified.

Tatsuya did not overlook this chance.

With his Decomposition, tiny holes were made in their body armor. The soldiers who had been operating Cast Jammer and the five others rolled on the floor, bleeding from the holes in their stomach.

On the other side of the rooftop, Fumiya mowed down the rest of the opposition with 'Direct Pain'.

"You two, are you inju…"

Beginning to say so, Tatsuya frowned behind the helmet's visor.

He extended his left hand towards Fumiya's injured foot. The knife wound disappeared in an instant. The cut up tights were also repaired in the process.

After confirming that this was the extent of their injuries, Tatsuya shot the five bodies in the holes created by his earlier Decomposition.

"Umm, what exactly are you…"

With a pale face, Ayako asked the reason for Tatsuya's cruel deed.

"I want them to think they have been knocked down by a gunshot. Though they'll probably understand just by looking…"

With what looked like a wry smile, Tatsuya used his knife to stab the enemies Fumiya had defeated.

"They won't die. If their injuries are treated quickly, then they'll be saved."

From the inside of his helmet, an excuse that would do nothing to assuage their conscience came out. This wasn't an excuse to justify his act, but an excuse to get Fumiya and Ayako's consent.

"…Are we going to leave them like that?"

Fumiya wasn't condemning Tatsuya. He was just wondering if they should leave the enemy here.

"These are USNA soldiers. Kidnapping them is probably a bad idea, and moreover, they probably have no clue about Gu Jie anyway."

“Understood.”

Despite answering so, Fumiya wasn’t entirely convinced. They intervened in his mission despite being soldiers of the USNA, and for him, that meant that they had to have some clue about the whole affair.

However, he could understand why capturing USNA soldiers would be a foolish action.

“Well then, let’s retrieve the enemies that have been knocked down in the hospital.”

“Two Generator corpses are lying down in the 3rd floor’s corridor. I’ll show you the way.”

Nodding to Tatsuya’s proposal, the three of them returned in the building.

◊ ◊ ◊

“Major Canopus. The obstruction force has been annihilated.”

“Wait until the Yotsuba members withdraw to retrieve them.”

“Understood, sir.”

At that time, in the USNA aircraft that had landed in the base of Zama, such a conversation was taking place.

“Did the car that Heigu boarded manage to run away safely?”

“No pursuing vehicle detected.”

“Good. Keep an eye on it with the satellite.”

“Yes, sir.”

Regarding the pursuit of Jiedo Heigu, currently, Canopus was a step ahead of the Yotsuba. That was thanks to the intelligence agency, as part of the precaution measures regarding foreign Magicians, the Psion wave pattern of Gu Jie had been analyzed when he was in their country.

That and short distance radars that could recognize specific Psion wave patterns. This was a technique that Japan didn’t have yet. It was as if the USNA Army had already captured Gu Jie.

However, Canopus wouldn’t move in to restrain Gu Jie’s course of action. He was diligently following the instructions he was given by Colonel Balance.

How to guide Gu Jie to the high seas while obstructing the movements of Japan’s pursuit units? Canopus thought about this for a long time.