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REI AYATSUKI

ILLUSTRATION BY **riichu**

CREATURE DESIGN BY
GEKIDAN INU CURRY Doroinu

HERO SYNDROME

──Heroes.

Young men and women on the brink of death, transformed into aberrant monsters by a mysterious being known as the Goddess.

Lost in a dreamworld of lies, these heroes deliver unforgiving "justice" to all in their path. But heroes can be seen solely by those young enough to still dream themselves.

If only the young can see…then only the young can serve. These soldiers fight heroes on a battlefield of destruction and slaughter.

CHARACTERS

RINDOU YUMEURA

KOYUKI ASAHARU

SAKURA ARAKAWA

KAGUYA SHINOHARA

A young scientist researching how to turn heroes back into humans. Kaguya's transfer into Charon was unexpected.

YUURI AZUMA

Skilled in combat and possessing particular abilities, Azuma leads the antihero special ops squad known as Charon.

"Wh-what's the big idea, all of a sudden—?!"

"I'm borrowing this!"

Azuma gripped Kaguya's limp hand, gun and all, and took aim. There wasn't enough time to grab it away from her. He pressed Kaguya's finger to the trigger and squeezed.

Souta Terashima

[16]

Location: Ikebukuro Station

Type: Suspected tank

Before transforming into a hero, this local high school student dreamed of being transported to another world. The flames that spew from its rabbit-like mouth blitz through the air like massive dragons, incinerating all those in their path.
He no longer remembers the girl he once pined for with similar passion.

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REI AYATSUKI

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PROLOGUE

Monster

They will never find common ground with the heroes.

Not while heroes protect the innocent.

It took the boy a moment to realize he had no idea where he was—that might sound careless or spacey, but unfortunately it was also the truth. The boy, a teenager, had been standing on the platform at Ikebukuro Station, waiting for the train, when suddenly he blinked and found himself someplace he had never been before.

"What…? Wait, where am I?"

He stared wide-eyed at the unfamiliar scenery. It was a park, in a quaint medieval town, almost like something from a game. The sky was blue, and people dressed in rustic garb were walking to and fro.

He was obviously not in Japan anymore.

The boy stood there slack-jawed. It all seemed so surreal.

Was it a prank?

A hidden-camera show?

Had he been kidnapped?

The boy tilted his head to the side in confusion. None of those possibilities made much sense.

As far as pranks went, it was a little underwhelming. He doubted anyone would want to put him on TV. And if this was a kidnapping, then where were the kidnappers? Besides, what would anyone gain by kidnapping him in the first place?

Which left just one possibility.

"…Of course! It's a dream."

That was the only thing that made sense. He must have fallen asleep in his seat on the train, and now he was dreaming. Not that he remembered boarding the train, but dreams could be like that.

"Wow, so this must be what lucid dreaming feels like. I've heard before that when you're in a lucid dream, you can do anything. I wonder if that's true."

The boy took another glance around. On closer inspection, he realized the place didn't actually resemble medieval Europe so much as a game he'd played before.

"It sure is convincing for a dream, though—the water from this fountain actually feels cold."

The boy reached out his hand. The water, satiny and chill, felt pleasant against his skin.

The liquid pooling at the foot of the fountain looked inviting and pristine. He could see his own reflection in it clearly. Just the ordinary face of a regular high school boy. He had to admit, there was nothing particularly special about it.

"Man, you'd think I'd at least get to look a little cooler in my own dream."

The boy took another glance around. The park was a decent size, bordering on a dense copse of trees toward the back.

Look at that, he thought admiringly.

The boy stepped closer. The forest was so beautiful that it almost seemed to sparkle. The scent of the trees seemed real. It truly was hard to believe this was no more than a dream.

But that scent—why did it feel so nostalgic…? He reached out to touch one of the leaves.

His hand came into contact with something plump and soft.

"Hmm?"

It felt springy, almost like a marshmallow.

Once again, the sensation felt far too real to be a dream. Whatever he had just touched definitely wasn't a plant.

The boy looked timidly in the thing's direction. There was a girl standing there. In the forest. She had deep green hair and silver eyes—and she looked none too pleased.

As for his hand: It was resting on her full, ample…bust.

He had just grabbed the girl's chest.

"I, um, I can expl—"

"Just what do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!!" The boy immediately threw himself to the ground and prostrated himself at her feet. "It was an accident, I swear! I thought this was a dream. I wouldn't do that on purpose—never!"

"So you think, as long as it's just a dream, you can go around fondling random girls' breasts?!"

"No, of course not! That's not what I meant! I'm so sorry—you have to believe me!"

"Maybe we should go see what the police think of your apologies!" the girl shouted.

A moment later, however, she relented.

"Fine… Fine. I forgive you. You can get up already." She smiled at the boy as he continued to trip all over himself in an attempt to apologize. "I'm not a dream, just so you know. I'm real. In fact, that's why I'm here."

"You're saying this is real?" The boy lifted his head, even more confused than before. "So then it's a prank, after all…?"

"Of course not! Look around. Don't you get it? You've been reborn in another world. One of those, what do you call them, *isekais*."

"An…an *isekai*?!"

A fire suddenly ignited in the boy's eyes.

"You're telling me I'm in a real, live, honest-to-goodness *isekai*—? Wait a

second, what am I saying…?" The boy's eyes instantly clouded over again. "There's no such things as *isekais* and rebirth. I knew it—this is just a dream."

"Aren't you listening to me? I already told you this isn't a dream! See? Look over there."

The girl pointed toward the town, beyond the entrance to the fountain plaza.

The boy stared in the direction she was indicating, but there was nothing there. Just more townspeople milling about.

"? What am I supposed to—?"

The boy hadn't finished his sentence before he noticed. The townspeople seemed to be afraid of something. Their faces were pale, and they were moving quickly.

"That's strange. Why is everyone so scared…?"

"Look closer. There's something else there, something that isn't human."

The boy did as he was told, squinting hard. Dark shapes were scattered throughout the town. They were small, like children, and holding what appeared to be clubs.

"What are—? Ow!"

The boy was still staring when something suddenly struck him from the left. He had been attacked by a monster—some sort of tiny black demon.

"What the heck is that?!"

"It's proof, hero!"

"Hero?!"

The pain certainly felt real enough—maybe he actually had been transported to another world. He would have preferred a less painful introduction, though.

The demon didn't seem to be after the boy so much as it was after the sword that had suddenly appeared at his waist.

"Just—what the heck are these things?"

"They're goblins. One of the many monsters that threaten this world!"

At some point, several goblins had appeared at the entrance to the town. The townspeople screamed as they ran about in a confused panic.

"Goblins?! Actual goblins? Like, for real?!"

"This is no time for gawking, hero! Goblins may be weak, but they're still monsters! Our world is in danger!"

"Monsters, huh? Okay, I think I'm starting to get the picture now."

The boy knew enough about *isekais* to see what was happening here. He had been summoned to this world to defeat the monsters.

"Why didn't you say so? So what do I do? Just whack 'em?"

"Yes, hero, we're relying on you! As our summoned champion, you now possess a variety of skills. A few measly goblins should be no problem for someone as strong as you!"

"Let's get to it, then! Lemme activate one of those skills."

The boy extended his hand. For some reason, he already seemed to know what to do.

He focused the magic (?) into the palm of his hand. Now all he had to do was temper the magic and release it. The feeling came naturally, like riding a bike.

"Huh. Piece of cake. Activate skill: *Dragon—*"

Ting.

"…Hmm?"

As the boy thrust his hand forward, the movement caused something in his pocket to make a noise. He reached inside and pulled out the item, curious to know what it was. His eyes widened.

"A rabbit…?"

A basic plastic key chain. Shaped like a rabbit.

The key chain had been inside his pocket, but he couldn't remember ever having seen it before. Was it his? Someone else had acquired it, not him. He seemed to remember that much, but nothing else.

So then, why was he carrying it—? The boy was confused. There wasn't time for this now, however. He thrust the key chain back into his pocket.

He turned his eyes toward the goblin once more. It was a vile, fantastical monster—his enemy. And it was up to this hero to defeat it— "Huh—?"

For a moment, the goblin seemed to waver, like static.

In all happened in the blink of an eye, but for the briefest moment the marauding goblin's head, face, and limbs appeared *different*. The boy paused. He suddenly felt uneasy.

"Did that goblin…just turn into—?"

"Why are you still standing there? Can't you even handle a few measly goblins?"

He could feel the girl's eyes on him. Her stare seemed to snap him out of his confusion. When he turned back to the goblin, there was no trace of anything strange.

The boy stood there, dazed, as the girl leaned in close and whispered into his ear.

"You're finally here. This is your ideal world. There's no need to hold back…"

Yes, why hold back?

The girl's voice was enchanting. He was finding it harder and harder to think— "No one can hurt you anymore—not here. You can stay forever and have so much fun. Forget about your old life. There's nothing there for you anymore."

He felt so confused. The girl—the *Goddess*—warmly took his hand in hers.

"This is your skill. Pray, and your prayers will be answered. Wish, and you shall receive. Speak it now. Name the power that is finally yours."

The boy pondered this. Yes, it was finally his. This power belonged to him.

Images appeared within his mind, just as she said they would. Was this…fire?

Fire, shaped like a dragon. He knew the words to say.

"Activate skill: *Dragon Flare!*"

The boy gasped in wonder as flames sprang from his hand and took the form of a massive dragon.

This mass of fire snaked through the air, barreling straight toward the goblins now fleeing from his might—

<p style="text-align:center">● ● ●</p>

"It's coming! Prepare for an attack!!"

Meanwhile, in Ikebukuro Station, several young soldiers scattered in different directions as ordered.

One, already close to the enemy, used his impressive athleticism to dash to safety.

Another tossed aside her gun and dived for cover.

Another used his sword to spin through the air.

A large mass of flames swept through the open space where they had stood just moments ago, leaving behind a charred stench that invaded their nostrils.

The large, dragon-shaped flames measured several meters in height. There was clearly no point in trying to extinguish them now. The soldiers raised their heads, gritting their teeth against the heat.

One of them, a young man with a mature face, glared in the direction from which the flames had come—toward the deserted platform of Ikebukuro Station, where the last train of the night was already due to depart.

"Monstrous freak…," he muttered.

An aberration was standing on the platform.

Two antennae grew out of its head, and its face was hidden, completely blacked out. The bipedal creature looked nearly human in shape, but it was over three meters tall and had numerous protuberances sprouting from its body.

It was clearly unnatural. And it was up to the young men and women to put down this aberration and its flames.

The young man spoke quietly into his wireless earpiece, never taking his eyes off the enemy. "I'm safe… All units, report your status."

"Doing great, Captain!"

"I'm fine, too. Sure is hot, though."

Multiple voices responded over the comms. The young man sighed in relief. It

didn't sound as if anyone was hurt.

Two of the voices, at least, seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"These fighter types sure do know how to make a statement, though!"

"You think it's a tank, then? Based on the way it looks, I thought it might be a magic type instead."

"Wizards are never this powerful. See how it's relying on brute force instead of clever tricks? That's gotta be a tank, for sure."

"Guess things are about to get fun, then!"

"Enough," the young man told them. "It might be past the last train, but this is still a terminal station. I don't care if there aren't many people around now, we need to wrap this up quickly."

"Lighten up, Azuma, we're just joking," one of the voices said flippantly.

The young man, Azuma, rolled his eyes in response.

There were almost no civilians left on the Yamanote Line platform at this point—and the few who remained were *no longer alive*. No one else approached; it was just these young men and women. Neither station employees nor police, they were dressed in combat uniforms and spread out along the platform.

"It's been thirty minutes since that thing first appeared. It's done enough damage already," said Azuma, his eyes like flint.

As he spoke, flames rose up behind him. They were from the earlier attack. A strangely shaped train car that was parked at the station caught fire, setting off the platform's sprinkler system—Azuma and his comrades continued to glare at the creature, unfazed by the spraying water and suffocating heat.

This monster, which had already lit the platform on fire and had caused multiple deaths, was known as…

"…A hero."

"SKREEEEE!!"

The sound was grotesque and spine-chilling. The *thing* glared at Azuma as it

emitted this insect-like screech from its mouth—or at least what seemed to be its mouth.

The young man didn't flinch. He spoke into his earpiece once more.

"We don't have time—let's get this wrapped in five minutes, at most."

The other members gave the affirmative and sprang into action, following Azuma's commands.

"KRREEE! HRAAAA… GWRARRR…"

"Speak like a human, you freak," Azuma muttered to no one in particular.

The aberration began to move. Its two antennae stood on end. Something, or some things, were coming, materializing behind the creature.

Everyone tensed. The "things" swirled into being like a vortex—it was water. Multiple spheres of water, each several meters across, suspended in space.

As expected, once the spheres took shape they immediately shot forward. Everyone did their best to get out of the way as the spheres crashed into the station platform and sent the opposing train tracks flying.

The spheres were incredibly powerful, easily wiping away everything in their path.

"The cops should get here in about three minutes, right? Let's eliminate this thing before they arrive," said Azuma.

The monster wailed. A new energy type was coming.

"Heroes don't play fair, but they always have a weakness. All we need to do is hit that weak spot."

"The heart, right?"

Gunfire. A girl's lively voice over the comms.

At almost the exact same moment, the side of the monster's head exploded. With one smooth motion, Azuma unsheathed the katana at his waist. A third person—a young man—could be heard laughing over the comms.

"Ha-ha, I never get tired of seeing that thing."

"Like you're one to talk."

Azuma's katana was beautiful—and grotesque. The silver blade seemed alive, traced with what looked like pure blood. Not from the kill, however. This blood was etched into the sword like veins. Not purely organic—but obviously not made by human hands, either.

Azuma closed his eyes for a moment and then muttered softly, "The egg is in its chest. The front left, where the human heart would be."

"Okay! Azuma, you're the closest. Can you—? Never mind, you're already on your way."

The other young man rushed in on his own, before anyone else could act, his eyes fixated on the aberration.

The sound of its *beating* heart was in his ear.

It was almost deafening. The tiny pulsations seemed to drown out all the noise and chaos around him. Faint and macabre, forcibly working its feeble heart.

Azuma swung his blade. With a slash and a thrust, he closed the distance—piercing the creature on the left side of its chest.

"SKREE—GWRAAA!"

The creature's eyes opened wide. It began to scratch and writhe.

"Just die already—before you kill anyone else."

"WHRAAR…GRRAA… WHRAAA…"

The monster seemed to be trying to say something. Azuma paid it no mind as he withdrew his sword. There was something strange stuck to the tip, round and spherical. It seemed to undulate and pulse, almost as if alive.

Azuma stamped the spherical heart beneath his foot, bringing its pulsations to an end.

The aberration instantly ceased moving. It began to slowly tilt backward. For a brief moment the blackness shrouding its head vanished, revealing the innocent face underneath, but soon that, too, began to evaporate.

It was the face of an ordinary high school boy. Azuma didn't even glance its way; either through hate or cold indifference, he seemed to believe that there had been nothing there from the start. Nothing at all.

Humans would never find common ground with the heroes.

Not while heroes annihilated the innocent.

CHAPTER ONE
Hero

"Attention, all personnel—this is the After-Action Review Division. A hero was spotted in Ikebukuro at a little past one AM *today. There were seven victims, all of whom were commuters. Public video access has been restricted—now commencing transmission."*

An unnamed location, somewhere in Tokyo. One of several buildings in an industrial park populated with research facilities and warehouses.

Massive and brutal in design, the sign outside the building simply read EXTERMINATION BUREAU RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY CENTER. The ordinary-looking cafeteria inside had a plasma screen affixed to the wall that was displaying footage as a lifeless, robotic voice droned on.

The screen currently showed the boarding platform at Ikebukuro Station. Smoke rose from the scorched rubble and debris as several operators worked to clean up the aftermath.

"Relevant details to follow. Requests for further access should be made to general-rank officers or higher—"

"Oh. So yesterday's hero fight happened in Ikebukuro."

Two young women were watching the broadcast from a small table in a corner of the cafeteria. Both were dressed in white lab coats and had menus in front of them.

The woman with jade-green eyes spoke in an annoyed drawl. "Would you hurry up and decide, Kaguya? Lunch is going to be over soon!"

"Just give me a second, Mari! I'm almost ready. Almost…," the other young woman muttered, furrowing her brow.

She was sophisticated, with violet eyes and bright scarlet hair that reached down to her back. Despite her classy appearance, which didn't seem at all suited to cafeteria food, her face was an image of absolute seriousness as she pored over the menu options.

Judging from her expression alone, she might have been deciding the fate of the world.

"Should I go with Lunch Set A or Lunch Set B…? Lunch Set B is pretty caloric, but it's hard to argue with a good *tonkatsu*. Then again, Lunch Set A comes with that seasonal pasta sauce… Oh wait, the omelet rice special with the salad looks pretty tempting, too…"

"Just choose already! I'm ordering!"

"Don't rush me, Mari!! Lunch is a very important decision. One that can drastically affect your motivation for the rest of the day! Remember, you only get one choice… A decision like this shouldn't be made lightly…"

"I'm pretty sure you'll get to choose again tomorrow and the day after that. And probably every day after that, too, since you never leave the barracks on your days off anyway."

"Well, you don't have to be such a downer about it!"

"Fine, fine, I'm calling the waiter over now. Excuse me!"

"Ack?!" the scarlet-haired young woman cried, turning back to the menu in a panic.

Her name was Kaguya Shinohara. She was a lieutenant stationed with the Bureau's Technical Research Lab No. 2, which was located within that building.

The young woman with her, Mari Ezakura, was a warrant officer stationed within the same laboratory. She was Kaguya's junior.

The pair were taking a late lunch in the mostly deserted cafeteria. Despite being a stereotypical, run-of-the-mill mess hall, staff took orders at the tables rather than at the counter.

"I'll have this, please," Mari said, her voice echoing through the empty cafeteria. "What about you, Kaguya?"

"……I'll take Lunch Set A, Lunch Set B, and the special."

"You just ordered everything…," Mari said, exasperated.

Kaguya chuckled, pleased with herself. "When you're having trouble deciding, just choose every option available. That way there's no regrets."

"I don't know what I was expecting. You're as greedy as ever, Lieutenant."

These weren't appetizers, either. Kaguya had just ordered three full meals. All par for the course for Kaguya Shinohara.

"I know it's your own business, but what happened to your diet? Remember, you said you were going to lose ten kilos in six months?"

"Mari, Mari, Mari, I say this to you as a scientist and an officer," Kaguya began, waggling her finger in the air. There was a sparkle in her eye as she spoke. "As living organisms, the idea of purposely limiting our food intake is folly, sheer folly! All living creatures require sustenance to survive. And yet it is only we humans who try to lose weight. Why is that, Mari? I am simply reverting to the state nature intended—"

"Geez, all right, all right! I've heard this spiel a million times already," said Mari, not even bothering to meet Kaguya's eyes. "I'm not sure it really applies in your case, though. Most animals have lots of muscle mass, but you don't seem to have any at all. You never exercise, you just get bigger and bigger and bigger."

"*Excuse* me! What do you mean, bigger and—?"

Before Kaguya could finish, a chime played, and the image on the plasma screen changed once more.

This time, it showed footage taken from Extermination Bureau surveillance cameras. It was mostly video of the same fight against the hero.

Kaguya looked toward the screen, midsentence, just as the camera switched to yet another angle.

The Extermination Bureau had many different cameras throughout the city

disguised to look like common items, including cameras hidden inside the electric signboards hanging over the platforms at most train stations. The current video was grainy and seemed to have been shot from above. Several young men and women appeared on the screen.

"Who are they—?"

"Members of the Tactical Infantry Branch, and as strong as ever, it seems…"

The squad members on the screen were dressed in turquoise uniforms. They were clearly visible despite the poor video quality.

Their performance in battle was impressive. In particular, the young soldier in point position was moving with incredible speed, and he seemed to be making short work of the three-meter-tall monster they were fighting. He was obviously very powerful.

"Wait a second," said Mari, apparently recognizing the young man. "That guy's famous in Tactical, isn't he? I think I've seen him once before."

"Is he? I don't know how you can make out anything with this camera resolution."

Kaguya couldn't discern the faces of the members on the screen. Not that she had much interest in faces in the first place. Everyone might as well all look the same as far as she was concerned—she did, however, notice a silver cross earring dangling from the young man's left ear.

As Kaguya and Mari continued to watch, a mass of flames in the shape of a dragon erupted from the monster's mouth.

"It's about the size of a human…and it creates fire in midair?" said Kaguya. "I wonder what mechanisms are involved…"

She stared at the hero's movements, transfixed. It was impossible to make out the creature's face, however; it remained blacked out no matter which angle it was filmed from, almost as if shrouded in shadow.

The hero released several spheres of water, blasting apart the opposite platform and tracks. Even a recording was enough to convey the intensity of the battle.

But the only thing that Kaguya had eyes for was the *hero*.

"First fire and now water? I guess anything goes…"

The young man swung his sword too fast for the cameras to track. The tip of the blade pierced the hero near its heart. A moment later, the creature collapsed.

"Aw…!"

"You sound disappointed! Are we even watching the same thing?" said Mari.

"I'm watching the hero, of course!" Kaguya slumped back against her chair. "It was a tank—a type of hero with extremely high attack strength. From just these few seconds, however, I couldn't determine anything else…"

"Those folks at Tactical Infantry are impressive, though, aren't they? Imagine defeating a hero of that size with just a single strike."

"I wasn't paying attention to a bunch of random soldiers," said Kaguya, sitting back up. "The only thing I'm interested in are heroes… Although I do have to admit, a squad that strong is intriguing in its own way. They're still just humans, though, in the end."

"You really are hopeless…," Mari teased. "Sometimes I think you care more about these heroes than you do about other people."

"Of course I do." Kaguya didn't even pretend to disagree. "The more we learn about heroes, the sooner we can bring this whole situation to an end. We can stop the fighting. Unlike Tactical. All exterminating the heroes does is maintain the status quo."

The *situation* Kaguya referred to was, of course, the epidemic of aberrations —the heroes that currently plagued Japan, threatening the nation's peace and way of life.

Hero—a nickname for these monsters that had first appeared thirty years ago. Heroes wrought violence and destruction upon all in their wake.

No one knew where they had come from or why they were here. All that was certain was that whenever they did appear, which was seemingly without rhyme or reason, they were sure to inflict massive destruction. And of course,

that their faces were always unnaturally blacked out.

There were also *two other* features common to heroes worth noting.

"Heroes create devastation wherever they go. They have caused so many deaths. Countless people have lost family and loved ones to these heroes. That includes you as well, doesn't it, Mari?"

Mari nodded. Despite her peppy attitude, she was, in fact, an orphan whose family had been murdered by heroes.

"How many years has this tragedy gone on? How many children have been orphaned in this struggle? And yet *people still don't notice*," Kaguya muttered softly.

It was true.

Regardless of the destruction that heroes caused, most adults were incapable of seeing them. Their perceptions became distorted, causing them to see heroes as weather anomalies or other unusual phenomena.

Kaguya scrolled through her smartphone. It was her personal device, not military-issue.

Inaccurate headlines filled the screen, such as **Massive Damage at Ikebukuro Station Discovered Overnight, Train Collision Suspected**. The monster that had appeared on the cafeteria TV was completely absent from the accompanying photographs.

According to the news, the incident that occurred at the station last night had been entirely due to a train collision.

But could a train crash explain how the opposite platform had been demolished? Despite how little sense that made, no one was about to assume it had, in fact, been a monster attack instead.

"No matter how much damage a hero causes, people still can't see them. They don't notice," said Kaguya. "It's part of what makes a hero a hero."

The inability to be seen by postadolescent adults was one of the defining features of a hero.

While it varied by individual, most people lost the ability to perceive heroes,

even through indirect means such as video or television, around the time they reached twenty years of age. They also refused to believe children who had seen them, no matter what they were told.

"They used to be able to see them, though, didn't they? Before they became adults?" Mari asked, confused. "It doesn't make sense to me that people who were able to see them for so many years would stop believing what they're told the moment they lose that ability."

"Well, not that many people have actually witnessed a hero appear firsthand…and most who have are dead. People who were in the Extermination Bureau obviously still remember, but most can't see them anymore. From what I understand, many adults wonder if they're actually just crazy."

Even those who fought against the heroes thirty years ago, when they first appeared, were no longer able to perceive them. Now the heroes existed only in their memories.

"The same happened to some of my superiors. They slowly lost the ability to see heroes—and once that was gone, they couldn't study them any longer. That was why they quit."

"That's so sad…" Mari looked downcast. "All that hard work and effort, just to lose the ability to see them. The same will happen to us, too, won't it…?"

"Yes…," said Kaguya. She suddenly caught her breath, as if she'd been wrestling with some demon of her own. "Yes, Mari, that's true…!"

Her voice quickly became forceful. Mari jerked her head upward in response.

"The day will come when we won't be able to see heroes anymore. There's nothing we can do about that. In my case, I've only got about three years left… But that's precisely why I need to finish my work before that happens!" Kaguya's violet eyes sparkled.

"Your work…?"

"I told you a little about it before, remember? The Revival Project!"

"Oh, isn't that the research into how turn heroes into—?"

"Attention, all personnel—this is the After-Action Review Division…"

The automated voice from the screen interrupted Mari before she could finish.

"Addendum—the probable identity of the previous hero has now been ascertained. Transmission of dossier to follow."

The image on the screen changed to a still close-up of a teenage boy with an innocuous expression. He was obviously a civilian, dressed in an ordinary school uniform that bore absolutely no connection to combat.

"Name: Souta Terashima. Age: sixteen years old. Subject was a student at a nearby high school and is believed to have thrown himself on the train tracks at Ikebukuro Station before transforming—"

"Into a *hero*," Kaguya said softly, finishing the automated voice's sentence.

A hero—a hideous and terrifying monster. An affront to the country and its people.

But before he became a hero, Souta Terashima had been just a typical, run-of-the-mill high school boy—such incidents were becoming more and more commonplace throughout Japan, with each and every passing day.

Kaguya knew what was at stake. She spoke with a determined gaze.

"That's why I'm trying to find a way to turn them back into humans," Kaguya said, steely-eyed.

Mari, however, didn't seem surprised. After all, heroes were originally human just like she and Kaguya were—that much was common knowledge.

That was the last, and most important, defining feature of these strange creatures.

All heroes were *originally human*.

Despite their appearance, despite how many people they killed, and despite the fact that adults couldn't see them, every hero had started out as a human. There was surveillance footage and multiple eyewitness accounts to support this, making it a well-known fact among those who were underage—or at the very least, among members of the Extermination Bureau.

Of course, these infrequent eyewitness accounts came from minors, so the

police didn't take the reports seriously. The Extermination Bureau was mostly culled from such young people, who had managed to survive while burying their anger deep inside.

The hero who appeared at Ikebukuro Station had been a local high school student. He had turned into a hero after throwing himself onto the tracks.

"Even a monster like that was a human once, just like we are—the same thing could happen to us, or our loved ones, someday," said Kaguya. "So if there's any chance to turn them back, however small, I need to see that chance through."

"Lieutenant…"

"Not that many agree with my way of thinking!" Kaguya laughed before turning back to her food.

She had already polished off two of the meals, which left just the third. This, however, was the main event. Lunch Set B. The plate was piled cartoonishly high with slices of breaded and fried pork cutlets. It looked more like something you might expect to be eaten by a baseball player after a heavy day of practice, rather than by a scientist in a white lab coat.

Kaguya easily polished off the third plate. She didn't even seem full.

"It's true that not many people in the Bureau think the way you do," Mari began quietly as she watched her. "But I wish they would. It would be a kind of grace, for the people who become heroes."

"Mari…"

"I don't like to think about it, but I know it could happen to me someday, too." Mari smiled sadly. "So I don't care what anyone else says, Lieutenant. I think what you're doing…"

Mari suddenly trailed off midsentence.

Kaguya looked up from her *tonkatsu* and turned toward Mari, who was now staring open-mouthed.

"Mari? What is it?"

"I…um…"

Mari's expression was difficult to describe. Kaguya turned around slowly, realizing that Mari was staring at something behind her. Kaguya was a little curious about what had managed to get her colleague so tongue-tied— "Huh…?"

A teenage girl, whom Kaguya didn't recognize, was standing there.

She was tall, boyish, and extremely attractive, with light pink hair and soft emerald-green eyes. Between her strong features, her height, and her slim, stylish figure, she was like a female Prince Charming. She could have easily played the male role in a Takarazuka-style play.

"Sorry… Who are you…?" Kaguya muttered reflexively.

She stared wide-eyed at the handsome young woman who smiled and placed a hand to her own chest.

"I am Second Lieutenant Sakura Arakawa with the Tactical Infantry Branch. Which of you is Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara?"

After a brief pause, both Mari and Kaguya pointed to Kaguya.

The girl named Sakura bent over at the waist and made eye contact with Kaguya. For some reason, Kaguya felt herself squirm under the gaze of those clear green eyes.

"My apologies for arriving unannounced, Technical Lieutenant."

"Er? Uh…"

Sakura's voice was clear and confident. Enough to make Kaguya feel uncomfortable.

"Forgive me for interrupting your meal, ma'am, but could I have a moment of your time to speak with you?"

"O-of course… You don't need to be so formal, though… We're not even in the same division."

"Really…? Phew, that's a relief. Honestly, I'm not too comfortable with protocol," Sakura said cheerfully as she straightened up again.

Kaguya was dumbfounded. Comfortable or not, Sakura seemed to have her

decorum down to a fine point. Kaguya didn't think she had ever encountered a person like this before.

"But what would a second lieutenant from Tactical Infantry be doing here…?" Kaguya wondered aloud.

Sakura cocked her head. "Sorry, you haven't heard? About next month's transfer?"

"Transfer?" Kaguya narrowed her eyes. It was the last word she expected to hear come out of this girl's mouth. "What are you talking about? I haven't heard anything about a transfer."

"I had a feeling you might not have gotten the news…," Sakura said, laughing.

As far as Kaguya could tell, this second lieutenant wasn't with Personnel. Things were getting stranger by the moment.

Sakura smiled uncomfortably. "It did seem odd to me that you hadn't responded to the notice yet. I mean, I can hardly imagine you'd just ignore something like that for two whole weeks."

"Two weeks…?"

"Yes. We sent a letter two weeks ago. Beginning next month, which is to say, as of tomorrow—"

Just then, the previously quiet cafeteria erupted in commotion. Kaguya, Mari, and Sakura looked toward the surge of new people approaching.

"What's happening? What's all that noise?" said Kaguya.

"It's probably just spillover," Mari told her. "The other cafeteria must be full."

The two of them immediately lost interest. For some reason, however, Sakura looked surprised.

"Strange. I didn't expect *him* to come all this way."

Him? Him, who?

But Kaguya and Mari didn't have to wonder for long.

A young man soon emerged from the crowd. He was wearing a distinctive silver cross-shaped earring.

His eyes were dark and gray like the night, with a hidden spark of dancing fire, while his glossy hair was like silver ice. The silver cross earring in his left ear sparkled brightly, the one element in his appearance that seemed somehow out of place.

Oh, it's that guy from the video, Kaguya thought disinterestedly.

His features, which had previously been obscured by poor image resolution, were handsome. Even to someone like Kaguya, who was barely interested in people.

Sakura grinned. "Azuma, you came, after all! We should have just traveled together!"

"Azuma…?!" Mari's eyes went wide at the name.

Come to think of it, Mari did mention that this person was famous. Kaguya had forgotten about that, though. She had a habit of immediately dismissing any information that she didn't consider relevant.

"Hold on a second! Does that mean that you're transferring into *that unit*, Lieutenant?" Mari asked Kaguya.

"What unit?"

"You could at least try to take some interest in the people around you! Didn't you hear what she said? That's *the* Azuma—"

The young man named Azuma finally reached Kaguya's table.

From up close, his expression was plain to read. He had a mature air about him, with an impression of general calmness, but there was something else smoldering beneath the surface. His eyes, in particular, were striking; he looked displeased.

Azuma completely ignored Kaguya. "Sakura, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"I came to inform the lieutenant of the transfer. I should be asking you the same question, though. You never come to the labs."

"I came to tell her about the transfer, too."

The corner of Azuma's lip twisted up into a callous sneer. He clearly didn't seem to think much of Kaguya.

"Sorry, but how about you just forget about this whole transfer, okay?" His tone of voice, in contrast to his facial expression, was dispassionate to the point of coldness. "My unit is already full, and I don't see what use someone from the labs will be. You'll just be in the way."

"Excuse me…?!"

Kaguya was taken off guard by how disagreeable he was being. She found herself growing indignant, despite herself.

Azuma stared at her, hard. For a moment—his eyes seemed to contort in revulsion. Yes, almost as if he had just stumbled upon a spider lurking amid a bed of flowers.

Kaguya began to lose her temper under this young man's nasty gaze.

"I'm sorry, but if you don't mind me saying—"

"Why?"

Kaguya was surprised by the abrupt and hostile question.

"Why…what?"

"Why the hell are you here?"

Why *the hell*? He was making quite an impression.

"Me?! I've been here for research! Why are *you* here?! And who are you to speak to me like that when we've only just—?"

"Now, now." Sakura almost sounded like she was trying to placate a child. "She's right, though, Azuma. Is that any way to talk to someone who's about to join our ranks…?"

"Don't worry. I have no plans of joining anything *he's* a part of," said Kaguya, sulking as she glared at Azuma out of the corner of her eye.

Azuma had finally grown quiet.

"Azuma, I know how much you hate Technical, but you really went too far just now. That's not like you."

"…I'm sorry," Azuma muttered quietly.

Sakura made no attempt to conceal her sigh. "You see, Lieutenant? Azuma's not so bad deep down, I promise."

"…He could be a saint deep down, but he's got a rotten attitude."

Kaguya stood up to confront Azuma. He was at least a head taller than she was, but she continued to glare up at him defiantly.

"Why 'the hell' am I here? Do you have no shame, saying a thing like that to a complete stranger?"

"…"

Kaguya's sophisticated violet eyes met Captain Azuma's smoldering gray ones.

They continued to glare at each other for several seconds. A complicated swirl of emotions surfaced in Azuma's eyes.

"W-wait a second!" Mari suddenly sprang to her feet, her chair clattering behind her. "Why is your unit enlisting people…? And from Technical, of all places?! Isn't your unit the one that—?"

"Mari, not now," Kaguya told her.

Kaguya wasn't sure what Mari was about to say, but she had something she wanted to get off her own chest first.

"You all seem to have arranged things very nicely on your own, but this is the first I'm hearing of this. I don't know anything about a transfer…"

Kaguya wasn't about to just let herself be sent away. Her work was far too important.

"Besides, I'm not interested in transferring. I already have something important I need to do here at Technical."

"Something important?" said Azuma, a hard glint in his eyes. "More important than following orders?"

"Yes. Much more important."

Kaguya didn't have much time left. In a few years, maybe less, she would no longer be able to see heroes. She wasn't about to let some silly transfer get in

her way.

"I see. Are you aware, though, that your director has already given approval?" Azuma asked, his tone getting snippy.

Kaguya knit her eyebrows. "She did what…? When?"

"When the notice came through, obviously. 'You can have Lieutenant Shinohara,' was, I believe, her exact reply."

Kaguya and Mari made eye contact. Naturally, Mari hadn't heard about the director's approval, either.

The director was a genius. She had demonstrated that heroes were originally human, and she was now working on developing more effective weapons against them. Unfortunately, she paid little attention to anything outside her own interests. With two whole weeks, though, she might have remembered to at least mention the transfer of one of her subordinate officers.

Kaguya turned away awkwardly. "That's, well—I'm sorry for the mess my director has made… I'm afraid she can be very self-absorbed at times…"

Kaguya's superior officer, the director of Technical Research Lab No. 2, was notorious for doing things a certain way.

"But…my answer remains the same. I'm against this transfer," Kaguya objected, finding her backbone once again. "I don't need to 'forget about' the transfer because I never knew about it in the first place. And since you don't seem to want me there, either, why don't we just…"

"Not so fast!" Mari interrupted. "Lieutenant, come with me for a second!"

She practically dragged Kaguya over to a corner and began whispering furtively to her.

"Don't you remember talking to the director about a special ops squad?"

"I did? In Tactical Infantry?"

"Yes—the thing six years ago!"

"Six…?"

It only took Kaguya a moment to realize what Mari was referring to.

Six years ago. For Kaguya—no, everyone in the Extermination Bureau—that could mean only one thing.

The incident in Chiba when a lone hero decimated the prefecture in the blink of an eye. The ensuing explosion had completely wiped out the entire northern half of Chiba, along with every soul within it.

It was a tragedy. Unable to see heroes, the adults believed that the area had been struck by a meteor.

"You're talking about the disaster six years ago…?" Kaguya asked Mari.

"Precisely! A group of children who survived the incident were brought together to form a small special ops squad. The one known as Charon…!"

The young men and women of Charon were the sole survivors from the incident. They had somehow managed to survive the devastation without a single scratch, despite being inside the blast's radius.

These children were placed under surveillance, supposedly for their own protection, and eventually trained as an exclusive combat unit known as the Hero Extermination Bureau Tactical Infantry Branch Special Ops Squad—AKA, Charon. The word *Charon* meant "beauty" in ancient Greek. The squad survivors had apparently chosen that name for themselves out of irony.

But why had they, alone, been able to survive the hero's attack? The reason still wasn't clear. This lack of answers inspired fear and distrust among the Bureau. As a result, all members of the squad had been placed under "priority monitoring and review."

Priority review was essentially a last warning within the Extermination Bureau. Any further incidents could lead to immediate "disposal." It was not a status to be taken lightly.

"Why would a group like Charon be padding its ranks...?" Kaguya wondered.

"I don't know! But something strange is clearly going on," said Mari. "And why take people from Technical, of all places—?"

"Hey!" Azuma cut in. "I don't know what you two are squawking about over there, but the order came from above. It's time to go."

"Fine... If that's the way it has to go, then so be it," said Kaguya, stepping protectively in front of Mari. "But why from Technical? We try to *save* heroes here, not kill them. You and I clearly have nothing in common."

"If you say so," said Azuma, not interested. An order was an order, after all. "It's not like I want anything to do with a bunch of weirdos who spend their time chopping up heroes, either."

Kaguya's brow twitched. Azuma's comment was clearly meant to be hurtful.

"You two are supposed to be soldiers, aren't you? Technically speaking, at least," Azuma added. "If you've got so much time to spare on personal hobbies and idle curiosity, why don't you go pick up a weapon and join the fight instead? The only thing that matters when it comes to heroes is defeating them. There's no arguing with that; it's a fact."

"Ridiculous... That kind of thinking is just begging for trouble..." Kaguya was not about to back down. "What happens when a hero you can't defeat shows

up? Like the one from six years ago? One that's too powerful to fight? Not to mention that in a few years you won't even be able to see them anymore. We need to find some way, before then, to address the root cause of the problem."

It was Azuma's turn to be quiet. Even he could see the writing on the wall.

"Besides…at the end of the day, heroes used to be human, too," Kaguya added. "It's not right to let them die as monsters."

Heroes were humans once, just like they were.

"I'm not doing this work out of private interest or idle curiosity. I have convictions just like you do."

"Heroes are homicidal monsters… Nothing more and nothing less."

"Then you and I do not agree. Heroes were once human. That's an absolute fact. So if—"

"Now, now," said Sakura, intervening. She looked distressed. "We're going to be on the same team soon. This is no time to start fighting. Azuma, you went too far. And Lieutenant Shinohara, it wouldn't kill you to be a little more diplomatic."

Azuma clicked his tongue, making it obvious how he felt. Kaguya also turned away, her face no less angry.

From this brief interaction, it was clear these two were never going to find common ground. Kaguya couldn't relate to the extremism of Azuma and his squad, nor could Azuma see from Kaguya's point of view.

"Sakura's right; there's no use bickering with the likes of you. This is a complete waste of time," Azuma said coldly.

He began to walk away until his anger boiled over again. Then he turned around and addressed Kaguya one more time.

"Just remember, missy. The next time we meet, I'll be your superior and you will be my subordinate officer. Trust me, you're going to regret the things you've said today."

"I'm sorry, was that power harassment just now, in broad daylight? Well, in that case, you can look forward to getting contacted by Personnel!"

"Running to HR to fight your battles for you? That's cute. If you've got something to say, why don't you say it to my face?"

"Guys, guys," said Sakura, clutching her head. "You're both acting like children."

"Go tell that to Dr. Science over there." Azuma turned on his heel and began to walk away.

"Wait a second!" Kaguya shouted after him before he could leave. "You never introduced yourself. What's your name?"

"Yuuri Azuma, lead officer of Charon, the Hero Extermination Bureau Tactical Infantry Branch Special Ops Squad. My rank is captain," he said, sounding extremely bored.

His mouth twisted into a smile, but his eyes remained cold.

"Welcome to the unit, Technical Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara. I doubt you'll be staying with us for long."

1-2

"Kaguya, Kaguya, I'm sorry—it completely slipped my mind!"

"How can you forget the transfer of one of your own officers?"

"I didn't forget. I just didn't remember. *I was hitting a big crunch in my research at the time and it demanded all my attention."*

It was the next morning. Kaguya was currently standing outside, in front of the Technical Forces barracks.

She was waiting for someone. As she waited, she spoke on the phone to her commanding officer—the director of Technical No. 2. The director had reached her position at the tender age of sixteen.

"When you say research, you mean into the development of antihero biological weapons, don't you? I thought that project was already shut down."

"Not shut down, just…postponed. Remember, Kaguya, just because the bigwigs put the kibosh on an experiment doesn't mean you can't revisit it later. You just need to find a new name and justification for it."

"You never change, Director…"

What did she expect from someone who was willing to go behind the brass's backs in order to dig up inhumane experiments that had already been shut down twenty-five years ago?

"Of course…if it wasn't for your lack of scruples, Director, the Extermination Bureau wouldn't be able to put up much of a fight. In reality, I guess we should be thanking you."

"I object to your use of the word scruples." The director laughed, her voice bright and clear. "We call them Chronoses, like the Greek god. Biological weapons designed to exterminate heroes more efficiently. These are living weapons, created from cells harvested from the flesh of heroes. Chronoses have already saved the human race from destruction on numerous occasions."

A Chronos was a weapon crafted from the bodies of dead heroes. Although such research had already been halted, the weapons were still in use. They took a variety of forms, such as katanas or guns, and had proven vital in exterminating heroes for quite some time.

"Of course, the original research is from twenty-five years ago. It was an amazing leap in technology and innovation for the time, but ultimately just a first step—even today, we still haven't solved the issue of rebounding."

Kaguya closed her eyes in resignation. It was difficult to get the director to shut up once she got started on this topic.

As living weapons, Chronoses were extremely unusual. Derived from heroes, it was believed that each Chronos contained a will of its own.

This was because Chronoses seemed to choose their wielder. When ordinary humans attempted to use a Chronos, rebounds often occurred. For instance, someone attempting to use a katana might instead find their fingers sliced into ribbons, or the blowback from a gun might suddenly tear the wielder's arm from their shoulder. It was why research into the weapons had been halted.

Some people could use them, however. So the weapons remained in use.

"That's why I'm working on solving the issue—"

"Yes, Director. I know," Kaguya interrupted. "Let's get back to my transfer. Why did you approve it? You know how important my research is, don't you?"

"I'm sorry, Kaguya, but we needed more funding."

"Funding?"

"It came from upstairs—they want Technical to cooperate horizontally and share information with other branches," the director said in a nefarious tone that was at odds with her usually sweet voice.

Apparently, the members of the upper brass were worried about Technical hoarding its information and technology for itself.

They were right to be worried, but it was still an annoying development.

"I don't care for it myself, either, but I decided to nominate you. They've allocated a budget in return, so it was an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone."

"You mean you sold me to them, Director…"

"That makes it sound worse than it is. I didn't sell anybody; I just ascertained that an increased budget would be appropriate compensation for approving your transfer."

"Yes, that's what the word *sell* means!!"

The director was silent.

"This—isn't just about funding, though, is it? After all, Charon is the only unit that can utilize Chronoses without rebounds. That's your real target, isn't it?"

This, too, was common knowledge when it came to Charon. Its squad members could wield the unique biological weapons known as Chronoses without rebounding. It was what made them the stars of the Bureau.

The director was researching Chronoses, so Charon must have been fascinating to her. Kaguya had a feeling the director expected her to dig up any information she could find.

"But I don't want to go…"

"*Look on the bright side,*" the director said, bluntly changing the subject. "*Why not just think of it as fieldwork? You might even enjoy yourself. Besides, the chance to see heroes up close should be invaluable for your research as well — Off you go now, Kaguya. Do us proud!*"

"Director, wait—!"

But the line had already gone dead.

Kaguya sighed. The director had hung up on her.

"Ugh… She never listens to anyone but herself," said Kaguya, scowling at her phone. "Besides, the people 'upstairs' she was talking about are probably only around twenty years old. They're practically the same age as her."

The Extermination Bureau's operations division was extremely youthful, its members ranging from as young as eleven to as old as twenty.

They were able to keep their existence a secret from the world at large, and to secure ongoing funding, thanks to the efforts of adults who were previously part of the organization. The Bureau's position, however, was still a shaky one. While technically a military force, rank and hierarchy didn't carry as much weight as it might in similar organizations.

And most of its members are orphans, whose families were killed by the heroes…

To the general public, the Extermination Bureau presented itself as a large-scale orphanage. There were even associated schools. At a glance, Bureau soldiers appeared to be "ordinary" children.

Of course, at the end of the day that's what they were, Kaguya supposed. A collection of children.

These children were fighting an enemy that adults couldn't see. But those same adults ran the society and often left the Bureau hanging by a thread.

"I wonder how long this can go on…"

Something else needed to be done. These monsters known as heroes continued carrying out massacre after massacre, unseen by adults, while the

Bureau desperately tried to bail water from a sinking ship—something Tactical didn't seem to understand.

Kaguya sighed deeply, realizing where she was now heading. "Speaking of which, where are they? Maybe I'm in the wrong place. They're already thirty minutes late."

The director said her pickup would be sent to the barracks. The rendezvous was supposed to be at nine AM, but it was already nine thirty.

"It's already well past the hour. Where are they—?"

"Sorry! I tried to get here earlier!"

A loud voice interrupted the silence. Kaguya looked up from her phone and quickly put it away.

A beautiful, boyish young woman with the ends of her hair dyed light green was standing before her, smiling briskly.

"Your director already brought me up to speed. What are you so early for, though? We've still got thirty minutes until we were supposed to meet up."

"Thirty minutes…?"

"We were supposed to meet up at ten, weren't we? I didn't think you'd be so punctual, considering the director—although, with a commanding officer like that, I guess you'd have to stay on top of things, wouldn't you?"

Apparently the director had gotten their meeting time wrong. At least she had given Kaguya an earlier time, though.

"Let's see. You're Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara, correct? My name is Yumi Mirai, in charge of Charon's logistic support squad. My rank is major. It's nice to meet you."

"Yes, nice to meet you. Um…?" Kaguya couldn't help but ask, "I don't mean to be rude, but…how old are you?"

"Let's see… I turn twenty-one this year," the woman answered matter-of-factly.

Kaguya wasn't sure how to respond. At twenty-one, Major Mirai would be

long past the age when she could still see heroes. Kaguya stuttered, not sure how to ask what Major Mirai was doing there.

The major watched her, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "Ah-ha-ha! Did you think I was even older?"

"What?! No, it's not that…"

"Ha-ha! Relax, I'm joking." Major Mirai flashed an easy smile. "Not that I would mind looking older. Wrinkles just mean you've lived a full life."

Kaguya was taken off guard by Major Mirai's easygoing manner.

"It's just…," Kaguya began. "I figured that at your age you wouldn't be able to see the heroes anymore…"

"Oh…that's everyone's reaction. Don't you worry—there's nothing special about me. I can, in fact, *not* see them."

"But…if you can't see them…"

"I don't engage directly in battle. But there are still a lot of things I can do in the lead-up, aren't there?"

Now that Mirai was an adult, she could no longer discern heroes, not even indirectly through video equipment. She still remembered them, however, allowing her to provide logistical support for Charon's ground troops.

"A lot of folks like me work our way into the government or parliament."

"Oh… Of course."

The major smiled broadly. Her expression seemed almost parental. Kaguya looked relieved.

As part of the transfer, Major Mirai had been tasked with showing Kaguya to the combat barracks. The major smiled briskly as she hopped into the driver's seat of her personal vehicle, a low-riding top-down roadster.

"All the necessary paperwork has already been taken care of. Your documents and information should be there when we arrive."

"Thank you. I'm sorry for any trouble the director caused…"

"Don't worry about it. I've known her for a long time, so I'm well aware of

how overbearing she can be."

Mirai waved her off lightly. Kaguya noticed some sort of scar on the major's hand. She must have seen combat while still active.

"Speaking of the director," said Mirai, tapping the steering wheel. Her tone of voice hadn't changed. "Are you sure you're okay with this transfer? I know you got railroaded into all this."

Kaguya furrowed her brow slightly. She ventured a glance at Major Mirai. Her smile had finally disappeared.

"Officially speaking, your role would be…technological liaison, I suppose."

"Yes—I suppose so."

"Where we're going now is under priority monitoring and review by the Bureau. Charon's combat prowess is significant, but their anger and hatred for heroes, in turn, is just as great. Are you sure that anger won't swallow you up?"

There was no hint of reproach in Major Mirai's voice. It sounded more like she was just getting all their ducks in a row.

"I've known the director for a long time, for better or worse, so I'm familiar with how unreasonable she can be. Lieutenant, you know she put this transfer through in order to get her hands on more funding, don't you?"

"Yes…"

"I really don't approve of that way of doing things. It's almost as if she sold you. I could say something to her, if you like."

Major Mirai's tone was gentle. It didn't seem as if she was trying to pressure Kaguya to resign.

"This is the front line, after all. There's no reason to put a scientist like you in danger. Plus, I'm sure you had projects of your own that you were working on."

"You're right; I did," Kaguya huffed from the passenger seat, folding her arms.

She had very important work—and not much time left to do it. Kaguya was trying to find a way to turn heroes back into humans. She didn't have time to fool around with some random combat unit. Least of all one with an oaf like

Azuma as its captain.

But this was also an opportunity. Kaguya had begun to see things in a different light.

"Major, this transfer will be to my benefit as well."

Kaguya was staring off into space. As she spoke, she almost looked as if she was remembering something that happened long ago.

"There's still so much we don't know about heroes, and there aren't many opportunities for someone like me to see them up close and personal. Besides, from what I understand, Charon is no ordinary unit. I'll be in the perfect environment to conduct experim—to observe heroes directly."

"I see. In that case— Hold on. Were you about to say 'experiments'?"

"Maybe I was, maybe I wasn't."

She was.

"Either way, I'm not adverse to this transfer. As for the captain—I doubt we'll ever see eye to eye on things. But I'd still like to see heroes from up close, for a change."

Major Mirai cocked her head in confusion. "I thought your family had been killed by heroes, as well…"

"Yes? And?"

Kaguya's parents were murdered by a hero while Kaguya was still young. But why was Major Mirai bringing that up now? This time it was Kaguya's turn to be puzzled.

Mirai smiled and rolled her eyes. "It takes all sorts, I guess. So you don't hate the heroes, then?"

"Hate them—no… Not really, I guess."

An image flashed in Kaguya's mind. Something she had seen, long ago.

A voice, so full of sorrow and despair—and *his back*. After he had changed into a grotesque monster.

Kaguya shook her head as if to chase away the memories. "Either way, at

some point just exterminating heroes isn't going to be enough. After all, if merely one hero shows up that's beyond our ability to handle, it could bring this whole house of cards crashing down. In my opinion, 'fighting' the heroes also means finding a different approach before that happens."

"I see…"

For some reason, a smile played across Major Mirai's lips. She adjusted her grip on the steering wheel. "I've got to hand it to the director. I'm starting to think she might have been onto something with this transfer, after all."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that it looks like things are about to get interesting." The major smacked the steering wheel with both hands, as if to change focus. "All right, then. Let's get moving while the day's still young!"

"O-okay…"

Kaguya grimaced as Mirai stepped on the gas. Kaguya lurched backward into her seat— "…W-wait, Major, not so fas— AIIEEEE!!"

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Somewhere in Chiba, most of the Tactical Infantry Branch's barracks had been constructed in vacant lands left behind by the hero's attack. The barracks assigned to the Tactical Infantry Branch Special Ops Squad—Charon—was located in the area formerly known as Funabashi City.

Burned and scorched. Melted. Sunken and destroyed. It was a town where vegetation no longer grew. The area had remained unchanged ever since the incident six years ago, when tens of thousands of residents were killed in a powerful rampage. There were no plans, as of yet, for reconstruction.

A car came to a stop at one of these deserted street corners.

But only Kaguya got out. Mirai remained inside the vehicle.

With one hand still resting on the steering wheel, she poked the other out the driver's side window and pointed toward the barracks.

"It's the very first door on that building. The next time we talk will probably be via the comms. I'll see you later!"

"Ah—right. Thank you."

The engine reverberated noisily as the car drove away. Kaguya turned to gaze up at the building before her. The Charon barracks was a modern, three-story building originally designed with a focus on mobility and livability.

It looked as if it had once been an apartment building. There was one main entrance—a fancy glass door. It seemed a little excessive for a bunker for teens.

The northern regions of Chiba had become an inhabitable wasteland. The Funabashi area was in comparatively better shape. There was enough water and air for people to survive, a sufficient communications infrastructure, and still enough of a power supply to support a few dozen soldiers.

Kaguya considered her new circumstances as she pushed open the surprisingly heavy door. The building's exterior was in excellent shape, but the neighborhood obviously didn't have much to offer for the few dozen people stuck living there.

"I wonder what the other members of Charon will be like…"

Charon—an elite unit dedicated to eradicating heroes—was composed of survivors from the disaster that occurred six years ago.

All members of the squad were highly capable fighters, specially trained in taking down heroes. They were also the only the Bureau soldiers fortunate enough to be able to utilize the Bureau's special weaponry correctly.

"Come to think of it, I've already met two members. That girl Sakura and that cretin of a captain…" Kaguya grew angry as she remembered the pompous jerk she had met the day before. "Tsk… Some people have no respect."

During the car ride, Mirai mentioned that Charon's briefing room was located on the third floor.

The third floor had been converted into one large room with a single door. Unfortunately, there didn't appear to be an intercom she could use to call up. Since no one came down to greet her, she was forced to head up to the third floor by herself.

Kaguya began to wonder if she should have called ahead. The only number

she had so far, though, was Sakura's.

"Well…I'm here now. Someone must have mentioned that I was coming."

Kaguya knocked twice. A moment later, she heard footsteps approaching.

She tried to straighten up. Moments like this were always the most nerve-racking.

The door opened with a *click*—but it was neither Azuma nor Sakura who answered.

The girl was gorgeous, with beautiful waist-length hair and catlike vermilion eyes. She looked surprised to see Kaguya.

"Uh… Technical Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara?" the girl said.

"Y-yes. My name is Kaguya Shinohara. I've been assigned here as of today. It's nice to—"

"That was today?" The girl sounded annoyed. "I completely forgot about that. My bad."

"You…forgot?"

The girl's behavior wasn't very soldierly. If anything, she seemed more like a self-obsessed teenybopper.

Kaguya furrowed her brow slightly. This girl was just rude.

"Um… Is this really Charon headquarters?" Kaguya asked. "The transfer was official. Someone should have told you I was coming today."

"Yeah, well, no one told me anything. I really don't wanna deal with this right now. Just come back later with Azuma, 'kay?"

"Later…?" *First Azuma, and now this brat…* "Now, you listen to me—"

"Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara?"

From behind, a quiet voice suddenly startled Kaguya.

She turned around and spotted a familiar face. It was Captain Yuuri Azuma, whom she had met yesterday.

He had icy silver hair and eyes like condensed dusk. His skin, meanwhile, was

an unhealthy shade of pale, as if he might drop dead at any moment.

Azuma glared at Kaguya as if she was the last thing he wanted to deal with at that moment.

"So nice of you to grace us with your presence. You must have very strange tastes, though, to come all this way from Technical…"

"You flatter me, Captain…"

"That wasn't a compliment. I talked to people at Technical; I know about your research." Captain Azuma narrowed his eyes. "In addition to your normal work, I hear you've got a pet project. What was it again—the Revival Project?"

Kaguya's eyes widened. The captain was able to learn all that in a single night? She was impressed.

"Let's get one thing straight. Yes, I know that heroes used to be human. But that's just it: *used to be*. I don't want to hear any nonsense about turning them back." Something about Azuma's expression seemed troubled. "Heroes and humans can never find common ground. There's no common ground between the living and the dead."

"That's why it's called *revival*, Captain. That's my mission—to restore the dead to life."

"No need to get so bent out of shape. You do things your way—I don't care. I'm not going to bother policing your thoughts."

If there was one thing Kaguya hated, it was being forced to waste her time on trivial matters.

"Excellent. You keep your distance, and I'll keep mine, Captain."

"Fine… Just as long as you understand."

Azuma glanced around uncomfortably as if he didn't know what to do next. It was obvious that he hadn't been expecting her to react in that way.

"I'm sorry, Captain. Were you…trying to be snide just now? People always tell me I'm bad at reading between the lines."

"Don't act like you don't know…"

Captain Azuma glared at Kaguya. The air between them crackled with tension.

"Technical Lieutenant Kaguya!" a voice suddenly called from behind.

Turning around, Kaguya noticed a young woman with short pink hair. It was Sakura, smiling uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry about Azuma. He's always like this. Don't mind him."

"Oh…"

I'll just have to be the bigger person while I'm here, thought Kaguya.

After all, what more did she expect from a bunch of soldiers? This wouldn't be the last time someone got on her nerves. She couldn't go around losing her cool every single time.

Kaguya smiled and extended her right hand for a handshake. "We may come from different backgrounds, but at the end of the day we're both on the same side. Let's try to put our differences aside and work together, Captain Az—"

Azuma snorted. "Hmph."

His expression bordered on contempt. Kaguya's smile froze. Her eyes began to distort into a perfect mask of scorn and loathing.

Azuma didn't seem to notice. He spoke arrogantly over his shoulder as he turned away. "I suppose I can humor you if it really means that much to you. Just try to fit in, okay, Lieutenant?"

Azuma ignored Kaguya's extended hand, walking off without a second glance back.

"…" Kaguya seethed quietly, her forced smile still plastered across her face.

"Um, Lieutenant… Are you okay?" Sakura asked.

"Tell me…!"

Sakura jumped in surprise at the suppressed rage in Kaguya's voice.

"What does Captain Azuma—no, *Captain Asshole*—hate more than anything in this world? I need to know…!"

This new nickname prompted the others in the room to begin whispering

among themselves.

A moment later, however, Sakura burst into guffaws. The pleasant sound of her laughter filled the room.

"Captain Asshole! That's a good one!"

The tension in the room quickly dissipated. Sakura smiled.

"The captain is technologically incompetent. I hope that helps."

Technologically incompetent—that was precisely the kind of information Kaguya was looking for. She grinned fiendishly.

"Welcome to Charon," said Sakura, pretending not to see the insane expression on Kaguya's face. "We're glad to have you, Lieutenant."

1-3

Despite being a standalone unit, Charon didn't actually have many members.

As far as Kaguya could tell, there were fewer than twenty people in total, including Azuma. It was barely a squad but still treated as a full unit. Most likely because it possessed the equivalent firepower and military bandwidth of a standard unit composed of several dozen troops.

And all of them are survivors from the incident six years ago…

They could use Chronoses, as well, making them an unprecedented military asset.

But apparently no one's yet been able to pinpoint exactly how they managed to survive. If we could just figure that out—

"Earth to Kaguya! Are you listening?"

Huh?

Turning around, Kaguya found herself face-to-face with Sakura, who looked uncomfortable.

Kaguya snapped out of her reverie. "Sorry. What were we talking about?"

"Please try to listen! I was just telling you that Charon is short-staffed. That means you might have to come with us on missions."

"Oh, right—that's what we were discussing."

The only one at Charon who had even bothered to speak to Kaguya so far was Sakura. She seemed to have a knack for taking care of the people around her.

"Are you suggesting I might have to go to the front line at times?"

"It's a possibility. If something really dangerous pops up, it could even be an all-hands-on-deck approach. Don't worry, though. That's pretty unlikely."

Kaguya was bunking with two other girls. The first was Sakura; the other was Second Lieutenant Koyuki Asaharu, that slug-brained girl she had met when first arriving.

Upon hearing that they would be sharing a room, the first thing Koyuki said was, "*I can already tell she's got a stick up her butt. Can't we put her somewhere else?*"

Kaguya had not taken much of a liking to her, either.

"By the way, Kaguya," Sakura added, "what are those papers you've got there?"

"These? Oh, these are Charon's battle logs. I took them from the file room down on the second floor."

"You're analyzing them?"

"Precisely. There's information such as how long each battle lasted, unique characteristics of the heroes involved, and the locations of their hearts. I'm compiling the data and analyzing it for trends. For some reason, the files were all in paper format, so I'm also going to digitalize them when I'm done."

"But why…?" Sakura cocked her head. "Those battles are over. What's the point in rehashing them now? It's not like you'll find anything helpful in there…"

"Nothing helpful?! Did I just hear you right?"

Kaguya turned around to stare at Sakura in surprise. Sakura might as well have told her that the sky was green.

"It's true we don't know much about the heroes; the only things they all seem to have in common is that they used to be human and that their faces are blacked out. But I'm positive we can learn much more if we simply look close enough. Plus, this is the front line! There will be plenty of fresh data points here. It'd be a waste *not* to make use of this information!"

"Hrm…" Sakura didn't seem persuaded. "We don't usually concern ourselves much with the past around here. Like you said, the heroes are a mystery. If it weren't for their faces, they wouldn't have anything in common. And it's not like there's any objective way to measure them by abilities or size. I'm not sure what good you expect that stuff to do."

"Maybe…we can still try to understand what they're like. They might even have other weaknesses we don't know about."

"If you say so," said Sakura, still not very convinced.

Kaguya could hardly believe her ears. Now she understood why so much precious data had been left to languish in messy piles, without even being filed chronologically.

What is Major Mirai doing with her time? Isn't she supposed to be in charge of this stuff?! Don't they submit battle reports?!

Even Technical was expected to submit daily reports.

Come to think of it, Major Mirai can't see heroes anymore. I guess it wouldn't make much sense for her to handle this stuff.

In which case, reporting must have been one of Azuma's duties.

Who knows how much data has already been lost, or if what's recorded here is even accurate… I was hoping I might find some insights by looking at past records, but under the circumstances…

Just then, the door clicked open. It was Second Lieutenant Koyuki Asahara. She looked tired for some reason.

"Koyuki!" Sakura called. "Welcome bac— Augghh!"

"Sakura! I'm exhausted!"

"Koyuki…you're too…heavy…"

Koyuki had just thrown herself at Sakura.

"What do you mean 'heavy'?!" said Koyuki, dragging herself off Sakura. Her gorgeous black hair gently brushed across Sakura's cheek.

Kaguya didn't get along very well with Sakura's first roommate, Koyuki. She was pretty, with black hair and a clean-cut appearance. It was just her thorny personality that didn't sit well with Kaguya. She also had strong opinions about what she did and did not like, and Kaguya had clearly been placed in the latter category.

"Oh. You're here, too, Shinohara. Hey."

Koyuki could barely be bothered to say hello. Judging from the curtness of her tone, she wasn't very interested in Kaguya's presence.

"Must be nice to sit around in our room all day."

Kaguya pretended not to hear that last remark. "Speaking of which, where have you been, Koyuki?"

"I was playing cards with Rindou and Azuma."

Let me guess, thought Kaguya. *Go Fish?*

"What's that junk you've got there, Shinohara?"

Koyuki seemed to have noticed Kaguya's bundle of papers.

"These? They're past battle logs. They're mostly just basic notes, but I've been digitalizing and analyzing them."

"…Why?" Koyuki seemed just as confused as Sakura had been. "Sounds pretty pointless if you ask me. Why bother dredging up stuff that happened ages ago? Is this how you always spend your time?"

"Um… It's actually quite useful."

To each their own, Kaguya supposed. This might have seemed important to Kaguya, but to the people on the ground, it apparently was a trivial waste of time.

No point in trying to get blood from a stone.

Kaguya had already made up her mind. Even if there were people at Charon

she could get along with, like Sakura, Kaguya didn't expect their relationship to grow any deeper than casual friendship. These people just weren't going to play a very important role in her life, and she was pretty sure they felt exactly the same way about her.

It was better to simply keep her head down. She wasn't going to be there forever.

Another figure slipped into the room after Koyuki—a young man sporting bright silver hair.

"Oh, Captain Azuma," said Kaguya.

"Don't you 'oh' me, Lieutenant! You went into my room and set my alarm clock an hour earlier this morning, didn't you?"

Kaguya shrugged exaggeratedly. "Baseless accusations! How would I even get into your room in the first place? You haven't come all the way up here just to slander me, have you—?"

"Someone hacked my terminal."

"…"

Terminals were personal devices issued to every member of the Bureau. They had a variety of features, such as recording capabilities and alarms, and could even serve as personal assistants. Conveniently, they also connected to the internet.

"And what makes you think I did it?"

"Second Lieutenant Asaharu ratted you out."

Kaguya spun around to stare at Koyuki, but Koyuki averted her gaze.

"How did you even crack my password…? Can't you find anything better to do with your time?" Azuma demanded. "At the very least, you could try to keep your head down while you're here."

"Keep my head down…?"

Kaguya had just been thinking the exact same thing. She turned away in a huff.

"Fine, that's precisely what I'll do," she snapped back. "But I find this an excellent use of my time, I'll have you know."

Azuma stared at her for a moment but then quickly sighed. "Fine, whatever... Did Koyuki tell you yet?"

"Tell me what?"

"You mean she didn't tell you?"

Kaguya shook her head.

The room was silent for a moment. Azuma looked at Koyuki, who turned away sheepishly.

Azuma sighed once more. "...You already know that Charon is short-staffed, right?"

"Yes..."

"Well, I don't care if you're from Technical. Here, you're on combat duty, and I'm putting you on the front line. Koyuki was supposed to tell you that."

Koyuki still refused to make eye contact. *What's her deal?*

"Kaguya...? On the front line?" Sakura asked Azuma. "But she can't even use a Chronos."

"It's not that she *can't* use one, Sakura. She just risks suffering a rebound."

"*Just* a rebound? People die from rebounds, Azuma. There's no need for unnecessary sacrifices."

"Other units know the risks and they still fight. I don't see why Lieutenant Shinohara should be an exception."

Sakura seemed dumbfounded. She wasn't wrong: Kaguya was much more likely to die on the front line.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you get yourself killed the moment you step foot out there. After all, you can't use a Chronos," said Azuma. "If you don't like it, though, you're always welcome to go running back to—"

"I understand. Place me on the front line, Captain." A devious twinkle appeared in Kaguya's eye. She was undeterred. "In fact, I was just thinking the

exact same thing. Why come all this way here, just to sit at the base and do research? I could have stayed at Technical instead. I didn't want to say anything, because I was worried I would just be in the way on the front line. But now that you've given your approval, Captain, count me in."

"…Huh?" Azuma scowled. "Do you understand what you're saying…? You might die. You won't be doing any more of your precious research once you're a corpse."

"Perhaps… But I believe it's a risk worth taking." Kaguya gathered her resolve and stared Azuma directly in the face. "I've only got a few years left until I can't see heroes anymore. I've gotten things in order in case something unexpected happens to me. As far as I'm concerned, I stand to lose more by being in the back and cringing in fear."

The room descended into silence. Koyuki was the first to finally speak.

"You see what I mean? This is why I hate techies. Did you hear anything he just said?" Koyuki got back up on her feet, sluggish and flippant, to yell at Kaguya. "You're not *like us*. You'll die the minute you step into combat, and none of us have time to babysit you. Not that I care. Don't get me wrong, I'm not gonna go out of our way to hold your hand. But who's Technical gonna blame when you up and get yourself killed?"

"You don't need to worry about that. The director won't care if I'm dead, just as long as I bring back something useful."

If Kaguya could produce even one good piece of information on the heroes, it would count as a success. And if she should die in the process—not that she wanted to die—at least her death would have meaning.

Koyuki was silent. "Don't you care that you could die…?" she eventually asked.

"It's not that I don't care. But you guys do this every day, don't you?"

"Whatever. It's no skin off my back," Koyuki huffed, acting bored again. "People die out here all the time—if you're so set on being one of them, have fun, I guess."

Despite her sarcasm, it seemed like Koyuki was actually trying to warn

Kaguya.

Maybe she has a heart in there somewhere, after all.

"Don't get it twisted, though! I don't care if you're about to bite the bullet right in front of me. Don't expect me to come to your aid!"

"Understood, just as long as you protect my recordings."

The look in Koyuki's eyes made it clear what she thought of Kaguya—she stared at her as if she were defective.

"Why are we even talking about this anyway?! Lieutenant Shinohara is from Technical. The chumps upstairs are never gonna approve of sending her to the front line. Not even if Azuma requests it."

Azuma seemed taken aback. "I hadn't thought of that…"

Kaguya rolled her eyes in frustration. "Oh, so you were just taking matters into your own hands…," she said. The twinkle in her eye had faded entirely. "I should have known. I'm just a lab worker, after all. There's no way they'd approve me for combat."

It was a crazy idea. The brass were almost certain to reject Azuma's order out of hand—

—and yet the order was approved.

It was a balmy spring afternoon, and Azuma's crew was riding inside a sterile military personnel truck. Kaguya was jostled about in her seat, equal parts nervous and excited, as the other squad members stared at her coldly out of the corners of their eyes.

They were headed for Ward Seven, toward the west. It had already been fifteen minutes since the first report of a hero sighting had come in.

"I can't believe this order actually got approved… What were they thinking?" Sakura said in exasperation. "Are you sure you're okay with this, Kaguya? Our mission is to defeat the enemy, not to protect you. We won't be able to take responsibility if something goes wrong."

"Don't worry; I understand. Besides, I learned to handle a weapon during basic training. Of course, it was just an ordinary weapon, not a Chronos."

"I… I see…"

Kaguya had been issued a pistol-type Chronos. Guns were the only type of weapons she'd been trained in. This one felt very heavy, however, even when held in both hands.

"I knew Chronoses looked strange…but this is amazing."

"Tell me about it. They use materials taken from the heroes, so they always come out looking like this."

The gun was anything but normal.

This was a weapon crafted from heroes. Instead of sleek gunmetal, the surface seemed *alive*. It was cloudy, and the barrel was studded with thick veins.

Kaguya stared at it for a moment and then muttered, "I'm guessing I can't disassemble this, can I?"

"You can, but you'll probably die."

Kaguya checked the gun's magazine as Sakura spoke. There were six bullets inside.

Six. That number didn't do much to quell her anxiety.

She took out her audio recorder and showed it to Sakura.

"Sakura, if anything should happen to me—could you at least collect this device afterward? The director would probably cry tears of joy to get her hands on a recording from the front line."

"I'll…do what I can."

The atmosphere inside the vehicle was awkward for a moment, but less than ten minutes passed before the tension broke.

"We're picking up something at thirteen meters, straight ahead!"

Kaguya went into an almost painfully high state of alert, as did the more experienced soldiers surrounding her.

"Hostile spotted! Intercepting now!"

A change seemed to come over the crew. A fiendish gleam appeared in their eyes.

Suddenly, the driver turned hard. The truck veered to the right, the tires on one side suspended in the air.

It's about to tip—!

Kaguya heard someone click their tongue. Azuma began shouting.

"Something's coming, straight ahead— Agh!"

Before he could finish, the truck suddenly began to fly.

It wasn't tossed. It wasn't hurled. It literally flew into the air. Obviously the truck didn't have wings, so it was only a matter of time until it began to fall. No one was sure what was happening. The vehicle spun around like it was inside a washing machine and plummeted toward the ground, as the soldiers inside were bandied about by gravity and centrifugal force.

"—!!"

Kaguya was certain she was going to pass out.

Somehow, she managed to keep it together. She could hear Captain Azuma giving orders: "Everybody, get low! Koyuki, secure the firearms! Sakura, pull the escape latch!"

The escape mechanism activated, and the bottom of the transport truck dropped free.

For a moment, Kaguya had no idea what had happened. Suddenly everyone was out in the open, falling through the air.

"Ngh, ah—!"

"Kaguya!"

Kaguya wasn't sure what she would have done if it hadn't been for Sakura, who had caught her in midair. Fortunately, Sakura's powerful legs were enough to ensure they landed unharmed, even with Kaguya's extra weight.

"What…just happened…?" Kaguya asked.

"The truck's escape mechanism. The bottom drops out, and the vehicle splits

into pieces once it's activated," Sakura told her.

"That doesn't sound like any escape mechanism I've ever heard of..."

Behind them, the vehicle exploded and caught fire. It had apparently been hit with some sort of attack.

The current location was Fuchuhonmachi—in an open, spacious plot of land that held a private research center. The families of those who worked at the center lived in the surrounding residential areas, but all residents had already been evacuated under the pretense of a bomb threat. The neighborhood was now deserted.

The hero was within the residential district. It was still too far away to see clearly, but something about it made it obvious that it wasn't human, even at this distance.

The squad dispersed, taking cover where they could as they began moving toward the enemy. The enemy, however, seemed to be waiting— "—?!"

Kaguya's entire body was suddenly gripped with fear.

Nothing had changed as far as she could see. It was a beautiful spring day, perfectly peaceful in appearance. And the hero still hadn't moved. But the air suddenly grew taut, and Kaguya wasn't sure why.

The other squad members held their breath, sensing the change. A moment later, there was a sound like thunder. Something was about to happen— something was coming.

"Get down!"

Kaguya was already on the ground before she even heard the shout. She felt a whoosh, like something passing overhead.

A gust of wind, followed by billowing heat. Kaguya saw stars.

"It's—light? No, a shock wave...?!"

It was a shock wave, wind, or light. The only way Kaguya could describe it was like a beam of light with mass, heat, and destructive force.

She had never seen anything like this, but she had read about similar

phenomena. Like a laser beam or a death ray.

Kaguya and the other members of the squad turned toward the thing at the same time. It had obviously been the source of the earlier tension in the air. No further confirmation was needed.

"SKKRREEEEEE!!"

The creature emitted a bizarre, insectile screech—the characteristic sound made by heroes. But this sound clashed with the sight awaiting them.

It was a superhero.

A costumed superhero, in full-body Lycra, as you'd expect to see on a live-action Saturday morning TV show. Its face was blacked out and it stood around five meters away, facing them with both arms held up and at the ready.

"Is that—?"

Unlike the hero Kaguya had seen in the surveillance footage from Ikebukuro, this one looked mostly human. Except it stood nearly three meters tall and was obviously something alien.

Where had it produced that beam from? And that heat?

As Kaguya stared, light began to concentrate within its right arm. Everyone seemed to realize what was happening.

Here it comes.

"Spread out!!"

Everyone, including Kaguya, scattered. Another beam of light, the same as the last, lashed across the sky.

"It's another tank. And this one's faster than the one from Ikebukuro!"

A tank. Even Kaguya knew what that meant. Tanks were a type of hero that focused on brute force rather than clever tricks. Kaguya gasped as the heat ray shot past her.

She spun around instinctively, watching as the beam made impact about ten meters away. It landed with incredible force and speed. Kaguya took a closer look and stared wide-eyed.

It barely left a scratch…?

With the amount of mass and heat the beam seemed to generate, Kaguya expected it would leave behind scorch marks or a huge crater into the earth.

Wait a second…!

The beam was just for show.

Kaguya could see a shape where the beam had made contact. Like a person—but clearly not human. Different from the hero—and smaller.

"W-wait! Don't spread out!" Kaguya shouted over the comms, beginning to suspect what was happening.

Spreading out was the opposite of what they should be doing.

No one seemed to be listening, however. Azuma began issuing his own instructions, as if he hadn't even heard her.

Stop right there, evildoers!

Take this! Hero Beam!

???

[??]

Location: Fuchuhonmachi

Type: Suspected tank

Similar in appearance to the costumed crusaders found in live-action superhero shows. This hero's arms are capable of collecting powerful energy and releasing it in beams, annihilating evil in the blink of an eye. The time for make-believe is over; prepare for mayhem.
It's time to face justice, evildoers.

HERO SYNDROME

"Hero sighted in Ward Seven, north, northwest. Proceeding with elimination. Koyuki, initiate suppressing fire!!"

A shot rang out from far away. The area around the hero exploded in bursts. Koyuki, who had already been on standby, had just fired at the creature.

Koyuki's Chronos was a long-range rifle. It was black as obsidian but with a red sheen, as if constantly shrouded in blood. It was much more powerful than any ordinary rifle. One single shot had completely detonated the surrounding road.

The hero rushed forward, unfazed. In response, a dozen or so silhouettes charged forward to meet the hero, likely Captain Azuma and his team.

"Azuma!" Kaguya shouted in a panic. "That beam was just for show! Don't let it fool you; it's—"

"Be quiet, Lieutenant! Don't tell us how to do our job—"

"This isn't the time for that!"

The line crackled harshly. The comms had just gone down.

Azuma clicked his tongue. "Rindou, take diversionary action. I'll follow up from behind."

"Got it!" Rindou answered, laughing slightly.

The two began to close in on the hero, in pincer formation.

Azuma was wielding his katana, and Rindou had a set of brass knuckles over his bare hands. Rindou began to pummel the hero with his knuckles, which were jagged and contorted like bone.

"Ha! This one's not as tough as he looks! We might not even need you today, Azuma!"

Rindou struck the hero once, twice, three times, hitting with far more force than mere fists should have been capable of. This wasn't due to his weapon, though, so much as Rindou's own incredible strength.

Rindou packed the punch of an entire military squadron. As he began to pulverize the hero's face— **"AHHHHHH!"**

—it suddenly behaved differently. The hero spread both of its legs wide, placed one hand on the ground, and let loose an unintelligible scream.

"Huh—?!"

The ground thumped upward with a pulse, and several aberrations immediately appeared. These creatures rushed forward to attack Azuma, Rindou, and the other Charon members.

"Wha—?! The heck is happening?!"

The entire squad fell into disarray. These new aberrations had human-shaped silhouettes but were slightly larger than ordinary people and dressed in what appeared to be black bodysuits.

"I thought this thing was supposed to be a superhero; why does it have minions now?!"

Although the creatures varied in size and shape, they were uniformly strong and had the element of surprise on their side. The fight was quickly turning against Charon. They had already split up, and the enemy was too powerful. Dealing with the creatures individually was proving to be difficult.

"The beam was a distraction," said Kaguya. "I knew it— Oh, shoot…!"

One of the minions, its face cloaked in shadow, suddenly began running toward Kaguya. It moved incredibly fast and was already on her in a matter of seconds.

In a panic, Kaguya reached for her veiny pistol and steadied her aim. She had zero confidence in her sharpshooting skills, but at this distance and given the creature's size, how could she miss? All she had to do was squeeze the trigger. So she did exactly that.

"Huh…?"

But nothing happened.

"…What?! Why?!"

Click. Click. No matter how many times Kaguya squeezed the trigger, the gun still refused to fire.

I just double-checked the bullets, too!

"Why won't this thing fire—? Aiieee!"

The creature grappled her, pinning her down—it was much heavier than an ordinary person. So far it had only managed to grab her by the legs, but that was more than enough to send Kaguya toppling to the ground, screaming.

It was like being in a vise. Kaguya felt like her legs were going to break. The minion also had sharp claws on each hand—things were looking grim.

"—!!"

Kaguya's mind went blank as she covered her head in her hands and squeezed her eyes shut. The creature was just about to tear her arms off her face when…
Bwam!

There was a loud *thud*, and the minion was suddenly gone.

Kaguya hesitantly opened her eyes. A silhouette was standing over her. She stared in shock.

"S-Sakura…"

It was Sakura with her weapon in hand.

Sakura's Chronos was a staff that was nearly twice as long as Sakura was tall. She had just used it to send the minion flying. Only someone with limbs as long as Sakura's would have the reach to effectively wield such a weapon. The Chronos suited Sakura. She wielded it almost as if it were an extension of herself.

"Thank you—but why did you save me?" Kaguya asked.

"Why not? I was coming this way already!"

Sakura remained vigilant, brandishing her staff and dropping her hips low.

"Forget about that, though. What you said earlier…" She glanced at Kaguya briefly out of the corner of her eye. "What did you mean that attack was just for show? It sure didn't look like it."

"The hero was bluffing. It shot that beam to make itself look stronger and ward off enemies—it's a common tactic for heroes." Kaguya stood up and

brushed the dirt off herself. "Charon has easily dominated the battlefield so far, but it looks like the hero might have the upper hand this time."

In fact, at that very moment, the hero was already making its next move.

It seemed to be focused on the lynchpin of Charon's fighting strength—Captain Yuuri Azuma.

Azuma was being swarmed by three or four minions simultaneously. He cut them to ribbons in the blink of an eye, before making his way to Kaguya's side.

"C-Captain."

Azuma was breathing heavily. His right shoulder was stained with blood and almost looked as if it had been crushed in a vise.

"Y-you're injured…"

"A bluff, huh?" Azuma's voice was ragged and tinged with bitterness. "Don't get me wrong. I didn't come over here to save you because I think you're one of us now or something. I've got questions for you later; that's all."

Kaguya sighed in exasperation and rolled her eyes. "Be careful! It might have more tricks up its sleeve!" she yelled as Azuma started dashing toward the hero.

"I know. I'm gonna finish this quickly!"

Azuma brandished his sword to his left. With a subtle toss, he flicked the enemies' blood from his blade and returned it to his sheath while continuing to charge forward.

Azuma's unique weapon was a katana. This sword was demonic in appearance, covered in hideous veins as if alive, and would obey no one but Azuma.

"SKREE! GWUARGH! UAURGH!"

"No one understands a word you're saying."

Azuma drew his sword—and used momentum to extend his strike into a smooth, upward slice. It was a textbook move, executed flawlessly.

"That's…amazing…," Kaguya muttered before she could stop herself.

Close combat was Azuma's specialty. He slashed again without delay, connecting with exceptional strength and flexibility. He withdrew his blade and, in the brief lag before he could strike again, kicked the hero, preventing it from drawing any closer. The hero was being overwhelmed, constantly forced to defend rather than be allowed to summon more minions.

Ultimately, the hero's weaknesses were its short reach and limited destructive power. Azuma's physical capabilities were more than enough to keep the hero locked down. Azuma's swordplay was magnificent. Watching him now, it was difficult to believe he could ever meet his match.

"So this is what Charon is capable of…," Kaguya mused.

Heroes possessed fighting prowess and durability that went above and beyond that of humans. The members of Charon were the only ones able to stand toe to toe with them.

"Captain Azuma looks like a normal human being… So then, how…?"

"He's special," Sakura replied, laughing. "Azuma's both the fastest and the strongest among us. No one else even comes close to touching him in a fight."

"Incredible…," Kaguya said in astonishment.

Azuma's fighting abilities went beyond effort or technique.

Heroes were originally human, but their tissues and organic structures were altered completely. Attempting to confront a hero was akin to fighting a bear barehanded, possibly worse.

"Perhaps the members of Charon aren't human…," Kaguya wondered aloud, but she quickly rejected that thought. Their fighting abilities may have dwarfed those of normal people, but they were obviously still human.

"SKREE! GWUARGH! UAAUURRGH!"

The hero's arm began to glow brightly. Azuma quickly leaped backward, sensing a powerful blast of energy coming his way. Thanks to some well-timed cover fire from Koyuki, he managed to escape the direct blast, but he was still sent flying.

"Captain Azuma?! No—!" Kaguya cried.

Azuma gripped his sword in both hands and pointed the blade toward the ground. He was planning to land like that. The blade whistled through the air, and a moment later the captain crashed to the ground.

He must have minimized injury by putting his weight onto the sword—and then lessened the impact by spreading out contact with the ground to as many parts of his body as possible.

"You're still alive…!"

"Naturally."

Define naturally, thought Kaguya.

"I managed to do a decent amount of damage while I was in there, and I know where the egg is now."

"The egg…?" Kaguya hesitated. "What do you mean, the 'egg'?"

Azuma glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "I guess we haven't mentioned that. The egg is how we refer to the heroes' hearts."

"…Huh? But why? I've never heard of that before."

Azuma ignored her question. "I've got a pretty good idea of where it's located now. It shouldn't be too hard to get to."

"Pardon?"

Kaguya didn't understand what he was talking about, but Rindou cut her off before she could ask anything further.

"Quit the small talk. Just tell us where the egg is!"

"In its midsection, around where its stomach should be."

"Roger."

Rindou bounded toward the hero in nearly a single leap. In contrast to Azuma's precision, Rindou threw himself at the hero in a wild haymaker. Not barefisted; he was wielding his misshapen brass knuckles.

"Gotcha, you freak!"

Rindou thrust his fist through the creature's stomach. With a wet, sickening

noise, a small white sphere shot out from the other side of the hero. That must have been the heart. It did resemble an egg, in a way.

"MAMA—GU…GUAH—AH, SKRR, UARGH—"

"'Mama'…?" Kaguya repeated.

Thanks to Rindou, the so-called egg was now free. There were still disgusting bits of tissue and flesh clinging to it. With the egg now removed from its body, the hero began to crumble into dust. But it wasn't yet ready to surrender.

A flash of light—

"Rindou! Run!"

—and an explosion.

"—?!"

In its very last moment, the hero exploded with a deafening boom. A bid to take out the thief who had stolen its egg.

Rindou pulled his hand away in the nick of time and was able to avoid being fatally injured. He hadn't gotten off scot-free, however. The wound was minor, but his leg had been damaged. Azuma and Sakura, who had been out in front, threw themselves to the ground as the explosion sent everything around them flying. Of the four, only Kaguya was slow to react.

"Oh…"

As luck would have it, the egg landed directly in front of Kaguya. It was already beginning to regenerate, luring in the surrounding scraps of flesh and gristle into a gruesome knot.

Kaguya trembled at the sight. It was the hero. She had to stop it right now.

For the briefest moment, a thought occurred to Kaguya.

If I could bring this back to Technical, it would prove invaluable to our research.

"Lieutenant! Do it!!"

"…!!"

Kaguya snapped out of her reverie and readied her pistol. But since the gun wouldn't fire, she may as well have been holding a brick.

"C-Captain! I...!"

Her gun wouldn't fire. What, exactly, was she supposed to do?

She had to act quickly, or she was about to be in trouble. The gun in her hands was basically nothing more than a blunt instrument— *A blunt instrument...? Of course!*

There was still at least one other way she could use the weapon.

"If you won't fire, then how about this...?!"

Kaguya removed her finger from the trigger and adjusted her grip. Instead of using it to fire bullets, she pointed the barrel at the egg and swung as hard as she could.

The second she hit the egg, her head twinged with pain. She wondered if she'd been struck in the previous blast. She needed to take care of this hero quickly so she could return to base and get checked out—

"Hey, lady, what are you doing there?"

The egg spoke.

Kaguya stared at it, wide-eyed. In the same moment, an excruciating headache filled her skull. Like something running wild inside her brain. Drilling its way inside.

"—?! Ah... Ahhhhh?!"

Kaguya felt like she had just been hit by a truck. She began to fade out of consciousness. She closed her eyes—

● ● ●

"Huh—?"

When Kaguya came to, she no longer knew where she was.

It happened so abruptly that she wasn't sure at first what to make of the

change.

"Wh-where am I…?"

She was in a bustling urban neighborhood, albeit one she didn't recognize.

What's happening…? Where did the hero go? Where is Charon?

A moment earlier, Kaguya had been in a deserted residential neighborhood. Now she was surrounded by people. The air was different here, too. And the sounds.

Kaguya glanced around in a panic. Azuma. Sakura. Everyone was gone. Even the hero.

Kaguya was still in her combat gear. She stuck out like a sore thumb. And yet no one seemed to be paying her any mind. Kaguya directed her attention toward the center of town. She could hear cheering in the distance.

Kaguya turned, still dazed, and then suddenly inhaled sharply.

There was a child standing there.

He looked to be about five years old and was dressed in a superhero costume, identical to the one the hero had been wearing.

"Who…are you…?" Kaguya asked him.

"Stop right there, evildoers! Take this! Hero Beam!!"

What?!

Kaguya's eyes went wide. A beam of light, just like the one the hero had fired earlier, barreled toward the defenseless Kaguya—

● ● ●

"…?! Lieutenant Shinohara, what's wrong?!" Azuma shouted before he could stop himself.

He had just witnessed Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara strike the egg with her gun. Eggs were brittle. Even Kaguya could have split one easily with her bare hands. Since she had used a weapon on it, Azuma assumed the battle was about to be over.

As soon as Kaguya struck the egg, however, both she and the egg froze in

place. Kaguya remained in that position, not moving a single muscle.

"Lieutenant! Answer me, Lieutenant!"

Azuma was starting to get a bad feeling. He raced toward Kaguya.

He could hear it. That dreadful noise.

Koyuki sounded panicked. "What's wrong with her? Is she unconscious?!"

Azuma shouted at Kaguya. Her eyes seemed to be focused on something far away. She didn't even flinch.

"Lieutenant—!" Azuma grabbed her by the shoulder. This was getting ominous. "Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara!!"

"Huh?! Wha—?" As Azuma shook her, she suddenly came to her senses. "Wh-what's the big idea, all of a sudden—?"

"You're fine, yes?! I'm assuming you're fine!"

Kaguya seemed confused, as if she had just woken up from a deep sleep. She didn't appear to understand what was happening, but the egg was still before her, frozen in place.

"I'm borrowing this!"

Azuma gripped Kaguya's limp hand, gun and all, and took aim. There wasn't enough time to grab it away from her. He pressed Kaguya's finger to the trigger and squeezed.

With an explosive *crack*, a bullet spiraled from the barrel and collided with the egg. Azuma fired a second time, then a third, annihilating the fleshy meat that still clung to the outer shell.

"...Ow! What's your problem?! You could at least say something first!"

"If you're able to talk back, then you're obviously fine. Rindou, take care of her."

Azuma entrusted Kaguya to Rindou and then dashed forward. The hero's body had already begun to regenerate slightly, but it was too late. Kaguya swung his katana with an artful flourish, piercing the egg cleanly with the tip of his blade.

The egg twitched—just as all living creatures do when they meet their end. Moments before it perished, it made a few final, weak sounds.

"AH—SKRRR, UARGH—"

No longer able to fight back, the egg started disappearing.

It had almost sounded as if it was trying to say something, but Azuma paid it no heed. As he turned to face Kaguya, however, he found himself at a loss for words.

"Lieutenant… Why are you crying?"

Kaguya's eyes widened in surprise. She hadn't even noticed the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Are you hurt?" Azuma asked her.

"N-no. I'm fine." Kaguya wiped her tears. She didn't seem to be upset or in pain, so Azuma wasn't sure what had made her cry. "Something must have gotten in my eye. Come to think of it, my head was hurting earlier…"

Azuma turned back toward the other members of the squad. No one seemed seriously injured.

"Mission terminated, everyone. Let's move out."

With that, the crisis was over.

The hero's body collapsed into dust and faded away.

Kaguya continued to stare in silence. Azuma watched her, his brows knit together, unsure of what she might be seeing.

1-4

By some miracle, Kaguya managed to return from her first battle unharmed. She flopped down on her bed at the barracks and stared at the ceiling. It had been an hour since the battle ended, but the events continued to replay in her mind.

"What…happened back there?"

For a brief moment, it was as if she had been in a different world. People milled about like moviegoers—and that little *superhero.*

It had been a child. After the battle, Kaguya learned that the hero had originally been a five-year-old boy.

Kaguya only half remembered what she'd experienced in that world. It felt like a dream, slowly but surely fading away. But she knew there had been a child. She remembered that much.

Heroes are mutated humans, but little else is known about them. For instance, what they might be thinking…

Kaguya activated playback mode on the recorder attached to her comms device. Although fairly basic, it still provided audio from the battle—and more importantly, from the hero.

Kaguya had pored over written documentation related to heroes countless times before, but this was her first time listening to a raw voice recording of a hero, absent the video.

The recording was nearly thirty minutes long. She began playing it back, skipping over the initial chitchat with the squad, and instead jumping straight to when they had made contact with the hero.

"*Get down!*" someone had yelled. There was a loud *boom* and a sound like something passing overhead.

What Kaguya wanted to hear came later. The insect noises created by the hero. But the recording took her completely by surprise.

"We meet again, Phantom Death Metal! Your evil deeds end today!"

"Huh…?"

Kaguya's jaw almost hit the floor. She thought she'd misheard.

It was the high-pitched voice of a child. Kaguya tilted her head in befuddlement. This didn't make any sense.

The recording continued to play.

"Spread out!!"

"Hero sighted in Ward Seven, north, northwest. Proceeding with elimination. Koyuki, initiate suppressing fire!!"

There was gunfire. And then Kaguya shouted at Azuma.

That was when Rindou, the squad's muscle, charged in. He was beating the hero in the face when— ***"You've gone too far this time, Phantom! Hero Summoning!"***

It was the child's voice again.

Kaguya could hardly believe it, but she was beginning to understand. The high-pitched child's voice actually belonged to the hero. In person, it had sounded like an insect screeching, but on tape those screeches were a boy talking.

"A little boy…?"

Kaguya placed her chin in her hand as she listened.

She thought back to what Rindou had said during the fight. Kaguya didn't know much about anime or live-action kids' shows, but she had to admit he was right. It did seem strange that a superhero would be able to summon minions.

Kaguya was still lost in her own thoughts when the recording reached the point in time when Azuma had attacked the hero.

"No! It hurts! It hurts!"

"No one understands a word you're saying," Azuma said coldly as he sliced into the creature.

Azuma was thrown back and then landed unharmed. There was some discussion after that, and then Kaguya heard it. When the voice had said "mama," after its egg had been ripped free from its body.

"Mama…? Are you watching…? Look at me, Mama! Look at me…!"

"…"

Kaguya was silent. This voice sounded sadder than she had remembered. Ephemeral, on the verge of tears. As if it might vanish at any moment.

After that came the sound of the explosion. Kaguya remembered the moment clearly. It was when Rindou had gotten hurt—and the egg had landed at her feet.

After that, there was a *thump* and then silence.

This was Kaguya's first time learning what had happened on the "outside" while she had been gone.

Based on Azuma's and Koyuki's reactions, she could tell that whatever was happening to her wasn't normal.

Kaguya continued to listen. She was starting to feel sick. Next came the hero's last words.

Kaguya listened closely, her head hanging low. Just then— *Click.*

There was a mechanical sound. Kaguya lifted her head. She had just pressed stop on the recorder.

There was her roommate, Sakura.

"Kaguya… What are you doing?" Sakura asked. She stood over Kaguya and looked at her, concerned.

"This? It's a recording. I haven't processed it yet, but I thought I would give it a listen first."

Sakura grunted noncommittally. "Okay, but you shouldn't spend too much time listening to that sort of stuff."

"Why not? It's valuable data. Take today, for instance…"

"Yeah—that was a big help. How'd you know that attack was just a bluff?"

"Well, I've just seen lots of bodies of people who have fought tanks… Technical is generally pretty good at things like that."

In other words, she had conducted autopsies.

The atmosphere in the room grew awkward.

Kaguya began speaking in an upbeat tone to try clearing the air. "By the way, how's Second Lieutenant Asaharu? I haven't seen her since the battle ended. Is she off playing cards again?"

"I doubt it. Not while Rindou and Azuma are both injured, at least."

Sakura turned away and got ready for bed. Her face remained hidden.

Sakura slept in the only single bed in the room. The area around it was decorated with soft, fluffy stuffed animals, cute posters, and other girly knickknacks.

Sakura was tall and slim and strikingly attractive, like the actresses who played male leads in Takarazuka musicals. However, Sakura actually preferred things that were cute and girly. She claimed that cutesy things didn't suit her, yet Koyuki had gifted her the pajamas she was about to change into.

"Sakura… You've known Koyuki for a long time, haven't you?" Kaguya asked.

"I have. We first met in a foster shelter back in Chiba…and I guess we've been together ever since. Most of the members in Charon have known each other for a long time."

"I suppose so, after the incident six years ago…"

Kaguya realized what she was saying. These were probably unpleasant memories for Sakura.

"I… I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring that up—"

"No, it's fine. I hardly even remember it at this point." Sakura looked cheerful, unbothered.

Kaguya could sympathize. She had lost her own parents as well but rarely made a big deal out of that. Everyone was in the same boat, after all.

"I know Koyuki can be difficult," said Sakura, her voice suddenly changing. It was somber and lower-pitched. "But she's not a bad person. It just takes her a while to warm up to people."

"…I thought maybe she just didn't like the research I'm doing—the Revival Project."

"Ah-ha-ha! I doubt it!" Sakura seemed to think that was hilarious. "I mean, your project sounds incredible. Why would she be upset about that?"

"If you say so… But I got the impression that no one at Charon cares much for

what I'm doing. Trying to turn heroes back into people, that is."

"That's not true. If you succeed, it'll bring new hope to humanity."

Hope. Kaguya lifted her head at the mention of the word. It was the last thing she had expected to hear.

"Imagine a day when heroes could be turned back into humans…when no one would need to fear them anymore," said Sakura. "I like the sound of that, personally."

Kaguya sat up a little straighter.

That was certainly one way of looking at it. It made Kaguya happy to hear someone use the word *hope* to describe what she was doing.

"Still," continued Sakura. "Why are you so obsessed with studying heroes in the first place?"

Kaguya furrowed her brow in confusion.

Sakura quickly waved a hand dismissively. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. It's just—I've never met anyone else who spends so much time studying them before."

"Yeah. I guess a lot of people think, if you can spare time to study heroes, why not spend it fighting them instead."

Specifically, eradicating the heroes. Fanatical pragmatists believed that every moment spent in study could have been better spent killing more heroes.

They had a point, of course. Although Kaguya found their way of thinking boorish and insensitive, that didn't mean she couldn't understand their motivation.

In the end, however, she couldn't help but remember *his* back.

Kaguya spoke haltingly. "A long time ago—I witnessed my older brother…turn into a hero."

Sakura looked shocked. "A hero? Your brother?"

"Yes. My family was attacked and killed by a hero. I survived by the skin of my teeth, somehow, but my brother was different. I was unconscious for a while,

but when I came to…he was the only one there. He protected me."

"Wow… What a great brother."

"Yeah…" Kaguya's smile was bittersweet. "But not long after that, I witnessed him turn into a hero."

She was a little girl staring at the demonic back of a monster.

"Well, to be more accurate, I saw a hero who spoke with my brother's voice. I didn't actually see him transform… But either way, I was there."

Sakura looked as if she could hardly believe what she was hearing. Kaguya continued her story. She could only remember his back. She hadn't seen his face. But it was obvious that he was no longer human.

"I lost consciousness again after that. I don't know what happened to him…"

Her brother had disappeared. Kaguya assumed someone, somewhere, had eventually defeated the hero that her brother became, causing his body to disappear forever.

"No way…," said Sakura, placing her chin in her hand in astonishment. "Come to think of it, I feel like I've heard a similar story before…"

Kaguya cocked her head and peered at Sakura, who all of a sudden was uncharacteristically reticent. Sakura started to say something, but then she appeared to think better of it. Kaguya continued to wait, staring curiously.

Sakura smiled sheepishly when she noticed Kaguya's gaze upon her. "Never mind… I was just remembering something; that's all."

From her bright tone of voice and attitude, no one would have known they had just been discussing their sworn enemies, the heroes.

Kaguya remembered what Major Mirai had once said. Many of the members of Charon hated heroes.

"Sakura…do you hate heroes?"

"I don't know how the others feel, but I actually don't hate them. Besides, the hero that did that to us is already gone," Sakura said as she began changing into her pajamas.

She removed her thick belt, exposing her pale skin, and then tossed aside her bra.

"My parents are gone. And as a survivor, I never really fit in at the shelter, either. I wouldn't go so far as to say this feels like home, but I do enjoy being here with everyone."

At a glance, Sakura's life seemed like a tragedy. Sakura herself, however, appeared to be at peace with the cards she had been dealt. The past, for her, was apparently not something worth dwelling on.

"So I guess it's not really the heroes that motivate me to fight. I have other reasons."

"Such as…?"

"The future, I guess. I fight for tomorrow." Sakura glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes sparkled as she smiled.

"…Do you have any life goals?" Kaguya asked.

"I'm not sure if I'd call it a goal. But once I'm no longer able to see heroes…I think I'd like to do something to help those who have been harmed by them. Like a volunteer, I guess. Who knows when that'll be, though," she said, laughing. "You know, Kaguya, if you want to stay here—with Charon—you should find a reason of your own. A reason to keep fighting."

Kaguya looked away, unsure.

Her motivation was the Revival Project. She didn't need to do any soul-searching or look for advice in that regard. She hadn't given fighting for Charon that much thought.

For some reason, she suddenly felt an uneasy pang in her chest.

Several days passed.

Kaguya had already been with Charon for half a month—enough time for her to slowly start to adapt to being there. The squad was expected to respond when contacted by Bureau First Response, whenever powerful heroes

appeared.

And then there was Captain Azuma, the squad's leader. He was a stubborn jerk who tended to rub Kaguya the wrong way.

There was also Sakura, the one person on the squad Kaguya felt closest to. Sakura was carefree and likable, and people tended to flock to her.

Rindou mostly avoided Kaguya, so she didn't have much interaction with him. Koyuki also seemed to dislike Kaguya, but unlike Rindou, she and Kaguya were forced to share a room.

"Again with that stuff? What are you doing now?" Koyuki barked.

It was three days after their first outing when Kaguya and Koyuki finally butted heads again.

They were inside a personnel truck, on their way to fight another hero. Kaguya was checking over a breakdown of Charon battle results that she had already analyzed. She had placed herself in a corner of the truck so as not to get in the way, but somehow she had still managed to work her way under Koyuki's skin.

"I'm reviewing logs from the battle," Kaguya replied.

"What battle? The last one?"

Kaguya simply nodded.

Koyuki sighed. "You're a weirdo, you know that? Why do you even bother with that stuff?"

Kaguya shrugged without answering. She didn't feel as if she had to explain herself to Koyuki. Besides, Koyuki had some nerve talking to her that way, considering how useful her information had proven during the last battle.

"I should be the one asking you that," said Kaguya. "Why does no one at Charon keep proper records?"

The atmosphere in the truck suddenly grew tense. There were about ten people inside. Several of them turned to stare sharply at Kaguya.

"Why would we? We've done just fine without them so far," Koyuki said simply. "Why focus on the past when things right now are going just fine? Our way has always been good enough."

"See, that kind of thinking doesn't make much sense to me."

"'Kay, but I don't need to explain myself to you."

Kaguya had just been thinking the same thing a moment earlier.

"Anyway, it's not like we'll be able to see heroes anymore in a few years' time."

"Well…you're not wrong."

"You don't know what it's like, Shinohara. For the past six years, everyone's been treating us like we're part hero, ourselves… The Bureau could get rid of us at any moment. And even if they don't, we'll be nothing more than a distant memory soon enough. So what the hell's the point of leaving a bunch of records behind?"

It wasn't just Charon. The entire Extermination Bureau led a precarious existence.

"Who's even gonna remember those records are there, in the first place…?"

"In my opinion, the fact that we'll be gone someday is precisely what makes leaving something behind so important… After all, even when we're gone, the heroes will still remain."

Once they got back from today's fight, Kaguya planned to bring Mari and some of the other junior Technical members up to speed on her research.

Kaguya didn't have much time left. The Revival Project was no simple task, and she didn't believe she could complete it all on her own. But at least someone could follow in her footsteps once she was gone.

"I actually agree… I kind of like Kaguya's way of thinking." Sakura's soothing voice reverberated in the quiet transport truck. "I don't see what's wrong with what she's saying. There may not be anyone to continue Charon's work once we're gone, but as long as we leave something behind—even if we can't see the full picture—then what we did will have meant something."

"Sakura…"

At the end of the day, Charon was made up entirely of survivors from the incident six years ago. They had no predecessors, nor would anyone be coming to fill in for them after they were gone—there might not be anyone for them to pass their knowledge and achievements down to. After all, who could be expected to step into the shoes left behind by Azuma and the rest of the squad? They were all far too powerful.

Koyuki scowled in disgust. "You're too soft, Sakura…!"

"Now, now, Koyuki. You can't go around biting everyone's head off," said Sakura, chiding Koyuki as if she were Koyuki's elder sister. With the height difference, sometimes they really did seem like sisters. "What's wrong with being a little soft now and then—?"

"We're almost there."

It was Azuma. He spoke in a low, flat tone. The atmosphere in the truck immediately shifted.

Kaguya. Charon. They were on their way. To another fight against another hero.

Today's hero was a wizard type, meaning it specialized in area attacks.

This hero had appeared at Senso-ji in Asakusa. Dressed in the Heian-period robes of an *onmyoji*—the court sorcerers of feudal-era Japan—it looked like an ancient *kami* spirit. Its face was also blacked out. Clearly a hero.

"Be careful. The entire temple grounds are in this thing's range," Azuma cautioned.

For this fight, Koyuki would be responsible for providing support from out of range. Rindou and a few other members would create a diversion, while Azuma and Sakura went in for the egg—that was the plan, at least.

Kaguya had been grouped with a few other members. She did what she could to distract the hero while narrowly avoiding its attacks, working with the others to lure it toward Azuma and Sakura.

"SKKREEEEEE!"

It's just an insect voice this time—at least, I think…

Kaguya recalled her recording from the other day. Maybe she had imagined the child's voice.

Kaguya was still lost in thought when Sakura finally made her move. It happened near the temple's offering box. Sakura charged in suddenly, making a beeline for the hero's head and striking with precision. The stomach-churning *splat* could be heard over the comms. The hero had just met its end.

Kaguya could tell from Koyuki's voice that Koyuki had already let her guard down.

"Nice job, Sakura," said Koyuki. She sounded relaxed. "Neat and clean!"

"I couldn't have done it without everyone's help."

Sakura turned away and began walking toward Kaguya—essentially turning her back to the hero.

The hero's body was already beginning to disappear. Relieved, Kaguya averted her gaze— —just as the ground pulsed with a *thump*.

"—?!"

The hero must have released one final attack before it perished—an attack that was only now landing. A cursed black arm thrust through the floor of the temple from below, creating a widespread explosion.

"—!!"

Everyone looked in the direction of the blast.

Someone was hit. Someone with pink hair.

"Sakura?!"

"…Ngh!"

Sakura was thrown nearly ten meters through the air. She had been taken completely off guard. There was no way she wasn't harmed.

Kaguya spun around in shock. She could see Sakura in the distance, unmoving and lying face up.

"Sakura—?!"

Kaguya began to race toward her but then suddenly stopped.

What…is that? Is someone there?

A figure was standing over Sakura, peering down at her. This person wasn't in combat gear. It was a woman in a dress. Kaguya couldn't see her face clearly, but from behind she appeared to be a civilian. Whoever she was, she must not have evacuated with everyone else.

But what was that perfume she was wearing? It was sweet, like apricots. Like osmanthus blossoms.

"Is that a civilian…? I thought everyone was already evacuated—"

Bang.

Kaguya heard the shot recoil over the comms. Koyuki was firing at a citizen.

"Second Lieutenant Asaharu?!" Kaguya shouted.

Koyuki shouted back, her voice desperate.

"Are you stupid?!"

She loaded and fired a second bullet.

"Didn't you see that attack send Sakura flying—do you think any normal person would still be breathing after that?!" Koyuki sounded like she was about to cry. "And that scent—that goddamn scent!"

She could smell it. Sweet like osmanthus blossoms. It permeated the air.

"It's the Goddess—it has to be!"

"The Goddess…?!" Kaguya furrowed her brow. She had never heard of the Goddess before. "What are you talking about—?!"

"The *aberration* that turns *humans into heroes*."

It was Azuma who answered.

"She's the mastermind behind all this, the thing that plants those eggs into people and transforms them into heroes. We call her the Goddess because she births heroes—she's trying to turn Sakura…!"

Kaguya stared in the Goddess's direction.

Kaguya could see her through the smoke from Koyuki's gunfire. The Goddess just looked like an ordinary person. All she was doing was standing there and swaying.

"Azuma! Did I get her in time?!" Koyuki shouted.

"…No." Azuma sounded bitter and strained. "The death scent is in the air. We're too late…"

Kaguya had never heard anything like that before. A despairing voice threaded with defiance.

She didn't understand what Azuma meant by too late. Before she could ask for an explanation, he was already shouting orders.

"Code Red! Somebody—anybody—kill Sakura now!!"

"Excuse me?!" Kaguya's eyes widened. "*Kill* Sakura?! Why—?"

"*Why?* Are you really going to make me say it?" Azuma's voice was saturated with rage and pain. "Don't play dumb. You've studied heroes. You already know what's happening!"

"…!"

He was right. It was all beginning to add up.

The Goddess. What Azuma said. The way the heroes looked when they turned.

And of course, the death scent—the sweet smell of osmanthus. It was overpowering. She had never heard of such a thing before, and yet somehow the smell was unmistakable.

The wind began to swell around Sakura. There was the *snap*, *snap* of something breaking as her body floated into the air. It was almost as if she were being lifted by strings. Suddenly, a powerful gust descended around her.

It happened in a heartbeat. Kaguya watched as Sakura, still unconscious, was swallowed up in the torrent. Her face was consumed by darkness like a swarm of black insects, gathering into a single shadow.

Kaguya blinked. In that span of a millisecond, the wind had settled, and something large now stood where the vortex had been. It didn't appear human. This was more like an imitation, halfway between human and artificial.

"That's—"

—*a hero.*

Sakura had turned. She had become a hero. A homicidal monster.

"W-wait… Sakura could still be alive, Captain! We don't know for sure!" Kaguya cried.

"…We know."

Azuma's voice was in her ear. The tension was unbearable.

"The scent is proof. I told you before: I can sense the eggs. A new one has already appeared inside Sakura."

"But…"

"Koyuki. Can I count on you?"

The sound of Koyuki sucking air through her teeth came over the comms. "Got it."

There was a moment of silence, and then: "I can do this. I can do this!" she hissed.

Kaguya heard Koyuki reloading her rifle.

"Ah…!"

Kaguya finally realized what was about to happen.

Koyuki was going to shoot her. She was going to shoot Sakura.

She had to destroy the egg before it could hatch. Before Sakura could truly turn.

The Goddess had long since disappeared, and Koyuki was preparing to shoot Sakura dead. It was all too much. Kaguya forced herself to keep her eyes on the pink-haired girl and the ground swelling underneath her.

This was the second time that Kaguya had witnessed someone turn into a

hero.

"Sakura!!" Kaguya shouted before she could stop herself.

It was the last moment before Sakura's transformation.

1-5

Sakura Arakawa opened her eyes. She could have sworn she had just heard someone call her name.

"...? Where am I...?"

As she came to, she realized she was in the middle of a beautiful field of flowers.

A crystal clear stream flowed nearby. This place was like Heaven. The field was a collage of flowers; pansies blossomed next to sunflowers. Sakura stared at them in delight.

There was color everywhere: reds, yellows, greens, pinks, purples. A beautiful blue sky stretched out overhead. And it was all hers. Sakura felt strangely elated.

After several minutes, however, she couldn't help but notice that something felt off.

Wait, what was I doing here again?

"I know—I was in a battle... And then...?"

Sakura was having trouble remembering. Something else had happened after that, she was sure, but she couldn't remember what. It all seemed so vague and far away. She wasn't even certain if it had been real.

"What am I doing alone in a place like this...?"

It felt like there was a fog hanging over her mind. Glancing down, she noticed that she wasn't wearing her usual combat gear—she was in plain clothes, instead. The change felt familiar.

Without her weapon, Sakura Arakawa was no longer a soldier but a young girl making her way through a field of flowers. What was she doing there? And why was she all alone? There was so much she didn't understand, but for some reason she didn't feel uneasy. Everything here was so warm and gentle.

Sakura began walking, in search of other people. She soon spotted two figures in the distance. They were still too far away to see clearly, and yet Sakura found herself quickening her pace.

She wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was instinct. But she knew these two people very well.

"…No way."

Her parents.

Sakura's dead parents were standing there, looking just as they had on that day before they died. They smiled when they spotted Sakura.

"Sakura! What took you so long? We've been waiting for you," Sakura's mother said.

Sakura stiffened when she saw that smile. Her mother was dead.

"What's wrong, Sakura? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Oh… No, it's nothing… Um, where are we?"

"Don't worry yourself with such silly questions… You're here with us. We can be together forever."

"Together…? What are you saying? That doesn't make any sense."

"Why, Sakura? Don't you want to stay with us?"

"Of course I do, but both of you—you're already…"

"We're what, Sakura?" Her parents stared at her questioningly.

They were already dead. Gone without a trace six years earlier.

Huh? So who am I talking to…?

"You must have just had a bad dream," said the man who claimed to be Sakura's father, placing a hand upon her forehead.

The warmth of that touch was all it took for Sakura to surrender. Everything she'd lost—everything that had been missing for so long—was within arm's reach.

Why was I…? Wait… What was I thinking just now…?

Sakura couldn't remember why she was so reluctant. After all, she had always been here, hadn't she?

She remembered.

Daddy finally has the day off, and he and Mommy are taking me on a picnic.

This was Sakura Arakawa's happy time, together with her family. A nagging doubt continued to whisper in the corners of her mind, but that was easily drowned out by the clamor of joy in front of her.

"Daddy—"

She stretched her hand out, helpless. Their gentle smiles were waiting for her.

"Mommy—I missed you."

And in that moment, Sakura timidly yearned for just a drop of the love that had eluded her for so long.

That moment was Sakura's tragedy.

• • •

"MOM, NGH—AIEEEE!"

Sakura's scream went unheard in the explosion of howling wind.

The moment of birth. Something—something that clearly wasn't Sakura—began to rise.

"Dammit—dammit! Dammit! Dammit!"

It was like a gigantic mannequin. It was around two meters tall and dressed in a child's one-piece dress, its face entirely blacked out.

This hidden face was a distinctive feature of all heroes. Proof that metamorphosis was complete. Kaguya couldn't deny it anymore—Sakura had transformed. She was no longer human.

Azuma's breath caught in his throat, but only for a moment. He quickly began

issuing commands over the comms, his voice mechanical and detached.

"All members—assume battle formation. Sakura Arakawa is now a hero. Proceed with elimination."

Silence raged in Kaguya's earpiece.

For an instant, everyone seemed to be fighting their own battle, forcing themselves to come to grips with what needed to be done. Rindou was the first to speak.

"Roger that, Captain."

"—!" Koyuki was slower to respond.

"Koyuki."

"…Fine. Affirmative. Got it."

That was the only acceptable response.

When one of their own became a monster, it was up to Charon to eliminate the threat. Their only option now was to kill Sakura. Emotions had no place in that decision.

"Captain Azuma…" Kaguya couldn't keep herself from speaking. Her voice was pained. "How can you…?"

How can you abandon Sakura? You're really going to kill her?

But she couldn't finish her sentence. She knew there were no known cases of a hero turning back into a human. How could she ask them to stay their hand, when she had no proof?

As the mannequin-like creature with the shadow face stood before them, its stomach began to swell, growing larger and larger, fecund and grotesque. A wave of horror swept over Kaguya.

"Is that…really Sakura?" she said, feeling her stomach rise into her throat as she stared, transfixed.

Unlike the last hero, who had retained some sense of humanity and order beneath its vile facade, this creature could only be described as a monster. Its face was entirely concealed, and its mannequin body seemed to be made of

something other than flesh.

"The egg is in its brow."

Perhaps Azuma was inured to such scenes, but his tone of voice was matter-of-fact—almost onerously so.

"Focus on attacking its legs. Bring it down on its back, and watch out for its stomach. There might be some sort of mechanism to protect the head, too."

The mannequin's stomach continued to swell, like a balloon ready to pop.

"Sakura hasn't killed anyone yet—let's stop her now, before she turns into a real monster."

The other members of Charon responded in turn. The steel in their voices was evident.

No more second-guessing. No naïveté. It was time to do what needed to be done.

Mommy—

I missed you, you passed you.

Sakura Arakawa

[18]

Location: Senso-ji

Type: Unable to determine; Code Red status

Proceed with immediate subjugation

A warped mannequin with a swollen, distended stomach. This hero retains the same fondness for cute things she had before her transformation. The secret desires she once harbored, however, have long since crumbled to dust. Yet one wish still remains—a wish that can no longer be contained.

HERO SYNDROME

A moment later, the fighting began. The sound of Koyuki's rifle reverberated through the battlefield.

Koyuki's Chronos was a heavy-duty anti-materiel-class rifle designed for taking down heroes. She never missed her mark, no matter the distance or how small the target. From what the others had told Kaguya, she had even taken out eggs on her own from sniper range before.

And this time, her "target" was too large to miss. Azuma said to bring it down on its back. Koyuki fired head-on, aiming for the face— —and missed.

"—?! Where the hell are you aiming?!" Rindou shouted in a panic.

Koyuki gasped sharply and her eyes grew wide.

Her antihero round had missed ever so slightly, instead hitting the hero in its stomach, which already looked like it was ready to burst.

"All units!!" Azuma yelled. "It's gonna blow! Proceed with containment! We need to prevent any damage to the surrounding area!"

He warned everyone to keep their distance.

Koyuki had shot the hero onto its back. Azuma struggled to approach, but its stomach must have been giving off incredible waves of energy because it barely looked as if he was moving.

Kaguya somehow managed to follow him. She removed the gun from her waist, more for show than anything else since she couldn't even fire it, but soon found herself slowing down unintentionally.

"Sakura—what are you—?"

What are you doing?

The explosion was imminent.

1-6

"Lieutenant!!"

Azuma screamed at Kaguya without turning around. Kaguya was running after him.

"Stay back! You'll only get in the way!!"

Kaguya faltered for a moment. Azuma was right. She could barely fight; what use was she going to be?

"…!"

She came to a stop. She felt so helpless. There was Sakura. They couldn't just leave her like that; they needed to put her out of her misery. But what was Kaguya supposed to do?

They were within the grounds of Senso-ji. The thing that had been Sakura had shown no further signs of movement since falling onto its back. Based on its appearance and behavior, it seemed to be a wizard type—but Kaguya hated herself for even thinking that right now.

Azuma had reached the hero and, without hesitation, attempted to thrust his sword into its head. Unfortunately, the head was too tough, and the blade couldn't pierce it.

The hero suddenly began to move. Its two arms shot out nimbly, striking at Azuma with deadly precision. Those were Sakura's moves; there was no mistaking it. She had just attempted to kill Azuma, and she didn't even know it. Kaguya couldn't let something like that happen.

Maybe I am useless.

Kaguya began running forward again, half on instinct.

But I can't just stand by and do nothing.

There was no guarantee that she wouldn't be able to help. It may not have been rational, but Kaguya still had to do something.

Kaguya was surprised at her reaction, and even more so at her own behavior. She knew she wouldn't be of any use—this was suicide.

Azuma continued to strike at Sakura repeatedly. Both the blade and Azuma

himself were like a blur to Kaguya. She had never seen anyone move so fast. Even with Koyuki's and Rindou's support, however, he was treading a fine balance.

"How can this hero be so strong?!" shouted Rindou. "Isn't she still midtransformation?! Is a hero's strength based on the original human or something?!"

The original human—Sakura.

That was the last thing everyone wanted to think about. For a moment, the team hesitated. Even Kaguya faltered—she had almost forgotten that it was Sakura in there.

"Azuma!"

Koyuki's scream snapped her out of it.

"Captain?!"

Azuma was going to be crushed. One of the mannequin arms had caught him by the leg, and the hero was about to flatten him. Koyuki fired, and Rindou moved to flank—but the hand continued to descend.

"Sakura!!"

Kaguya dashed forward. It was as if something had sparked inside her.

Sakura wanted to protect others—she said so herself. She would never intentionally kill someone in her own squad. It was unthinkable.

Kaguya was the closest. She got there even before Rindou, grabbing onto the hand that was still clutching Azuma. She began beating it as hard as she could, less to do damage and more to turn the hero's attention her way.

The steel pistol (was it even steel?) she wielded was little more than a hunk of metal in her hand. She swung it like a bludgeon. As it made contact, Kaguya heard a cracking sound. The hero's mannequin shell had split, revealing some sort of fleshlike tissue below.

However—that wasn't all that happened.

"…?! Ahhh?!"

Kaguya cried out in pain from the excruciating headache that suddenly hit her. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced.

"What...is...happening...?"

It felt like something was trying to get inside her, or like she was diffusing into it. A rising sensation, as if she was becoming something other than herself—

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"...?!" Kaguya opened her eyes with a gasp and glanced around. "This again...?"

She found herself in another unfamiliar location.

She stood up, still dressed in her combat gear and clutching her misshapen gun.

"I-it's so..."

Beautiful.

A gentle breeze blew softly as a colorful field of swaying flowers stretched as far as the eye could see. The air was fresh and warm. It was like Heaven.

Kaguya's headache had already disappeared. If anything, she felt good now. She took a tentative step forward, still in awe.

The hero was gone. So were the other members of Charon. This was just like *last time*.

In the previous world she had entered, a five-year-old boy had been playing make-believe and pretending to be a hero. This place was different, and yet Kaguya sensed that it was similar.

She took a second look around. Paradoxically, the unbroken field of flowers and the sky, which was so blue that it was like a splash of cold water, implanted a seed of fear in her. No place this beautiful could exist in reality.

Kaguya was still hugging herself uneasily when she suddenly spotted a small figure in the distance.

"Is...is that...?"

A girl with pink hair and green eyes. She was alone and standing stock-still.

The girl wasn't wearing her usual combat gear, but Kaguya recognized her immediately. It was Sakura.

"S-Sakura!!" Kaguya shouted at the top of her lungs and began running toward her.

The flower field seemed interminable, like a dream that would never end. Kaguya was the one thing out of place. Like the time before—she knew instinctively that she didn't belong there.

But Kaguya didn't care. She continued to race toward Sakura.

Once she got closer, she could finally see Sakura's face. There was something different about her. But for some reason, Kaguya still knew it was Sakura.

"Sakura! It's me, Kaguya! Come back with me—"

"Who are you?" said Sakura, looking and sounding confused.

"What do you mean, who—?"

"Mommy, there's a strange lady here," Sakura called toward the empty space next to her.

Kaguya felt sick to her stomach. There was absolutely no one there. Sakura's voice didn't sound normal, either. She sounded more like a child expecting her parents to dote on her.

What happened next, however, horrified Kaguya even more.

"Now, now, Sakura. You need to learn to play nice with your friends."

A woman suddenly appeared out of thin air. She seemed to be Sakura's mother. Her face did resemble Sakura's—but her eyes, deep inside, were multifaceted like an insect's.

"We—" Kaguya grabbed Sakura's hand, never taking her eyes off the mother. "We need to go, Sakura! We can't stay here!"

"Leave me alone!" Sakura shook Kaguya's hand away. **"Go where? I've always been here with Mommy. I'm never leaving!"**

"Sakura!!"

Kaguya grabbed Sakura again with the same hand, this time gripping her

tighter. She couldn't let Sakura run away.

"…"

Sakura furrowed her brow slightly as she stared down at Kaguya's hand.

A change occurred in the air above the flower field. Sensing the shift, Kaguya redoubled her efforts.

"Sakura—don't you remember? You said you wanted to do something for the people who were harmed by heroes! You can't go with her!"

Sakura slowly lifted her head. Her face looked younger than Kaguya remembered. The expression on it suddenly changed—almost as if she had just stumbled upon a spider lurking amid the flowers.

"You're lying. I never said anything like that."

Sakura took a step away from Kaguya. The way that she pulled back, and the look of rejection in her eyes, was like a stab to Kaguya's heart.

"Sakura…"

"Sakura? Is this really a friend of yours?" said the woman. **"We were having such a nice picnic. You don't want to waste your time on this stranger, do you?"**

"Sakura!!" shouted Kaguya. "Don't listen to her!"

Kaguya pulled Sakura close. She remembered the feeling, just like when Sakura had held her after making that emergency jump from the personnel truck.

Sakura's eyes opened wide. It was the same feeling, the same smell, the same touch. It did far more to spark her memory than words could ever muster—**"Kaguya?"**

"!!"

Sakura still sounded dazed, but at least she had said Kaguya's name. Kaguya stared at her in shock. Sakura's face was as dazed as her voice.

"You recognize me?!"

"Of course. We're friends. But what am I doing here?" Sakura cocked her

head and looked at Kaguya. **"And why are you—?"**

"Sakura."

A hand suddenly reached out from behind Sakura's back. It was that woman. Like Kaguya, she was attempting to embrace Sakura.

"Don't concern yourself with this strange girl. Come, play with Mommy."

"Oh—okay. Sorry, Mommy. I'll join you—"

"Sakura!"

Kaguya reached out in a panic, but Sakura was suddenly too far away. She was walking toward the woman, like being sucked into a funnel.

Kaguya instinctively knew that this was her last chance to do something.

"Sakura, you need to remember! Come back to us!"

Remember.

Kaguya's eyes widened. Where had that voice just come from? Like a hallucination, it was there one minute and gone the next. The next thing Kaguya knew, Sakura's eyes were no longer turned her way.

"Saku—"

"It's too late."

The woman held Sakura tightly. Sakura didn't even seem to see Kaguya anymore.

"It's you. You're the Goddess…!!"

The woman grinned. Her smile was unsettling, more vicious than any Kaguya had ever seen.

"Traitor," the Goddess spat.

"What…?"

The Goddess had just called her a traitor. As if they had once been on the same side.

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"Azuma!!"

Rindou managed to free the captain before it was too late. The mannequin had momentarily stopped moving. The hands were difficult to bend, but they proved much easier to break.

Rindou shouted at Kaguya, who remained frozen in the same position she had been in when she struck the hero.

"What are you doing—?! Snap out of it…!!"

"Rindou! The egg is in its brow!" Azuma yelled, struggling to his feet. "We need to take it out quick—we've got a minute at most!"

The egg was in the hero's brow. Azuma and Rindou began beating at its forehead wildly, eventually creating a large hole.

They then dragged it out into the open: a small white egg, exposed and pulsating— Rindou averted his eyes. Crushing this egg felt like killing one of their own.

Azuma readied his katana. He took aim and held his breath for a moment.

He remembered her pink hair.

Out of everyone at Charon, Sakura was the one whom Azuma had known the longest. Someone with dreams, someone who still envisioned a future.

This wasn't how he wanted to say good-bye.

"…Farewell."

A wet *slurp*. The egg collapsed easily beneath Azuma's blade.

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"Ah…"

Kaguya watched as Sakura slowly began to crumble before her eyes.

The disturbing bug-eyed woman had disappeared at some point. So had the field of flowers, and even Sakura.

When Kaguya came to, she found herself right back where she had started, dumbfounded and face-to-face with a different Sakura—with the hero—as she crumbled away.

"I'm… I'm back…"

Here on this side, the hero was no more than a hero again. No trace of Sakura's former self remained.

Out of the corner of her eye, Kaguya could see Azuma, Rindou, and the broken egg.

The hero, which would likely disappear soon on its own, no longer seemed interested in them—it almost looked as if it was trying to avert its gaze.

Nobody spoke. Kaguya couldn't bring herself to say anything— **"Kaguya."**

Kaguya gasped. The hero had spoken, even as it continued to crumble away.

The shadow concealing its face suddenly began to dissipate. Kaguya could see Sakura underneath—the real Sakura, with her beautiful, boyish features.

"Sakura…"

"Thank you for saving Azuma." The ruined vestige lying there, which still held Sakura's voice and mind, managed a small smile at Kaguya. **"Thank you for saving him from me."**

Kaguya gasped, piecing together what had happened. "How much…do you remember…?"

Sakura didn't answer at first. She just smiled softly.

"I wonder. What do you think?"

Sakura's expression remained unchanged. She had the same smile that Kaguya remembered.

Kaguya reached out without thinking, but her hand never made contact. Sakura was falling apart before her very eyes.

Kaguya hadn't been able to save her.

Kaguya felt like she might collapse beneath the weight of her own helplessness and despair. Sakura, however, wasn't finished speaking.

"Thank you. For killing me…while I was still me."

She had remained herself in the end. She hadn't hurt or killed anyone. With a final sense of relief, she began to disappear.

"Sakura, wait! I—!"

"Kagu…ya… Take care of everyone…for me…"

Soft as wind.

With her last words, Sakura scattered like petals and was gone.

CHAPTER TWO
Battle Plan

Sakura's space in the room, covered in cute, girly knickknacks, remained unchanged.

No one had cleared anything away yet. There was just an empty space where Sakura once slept.

Koyuki had already cried herself to sleep. Kaguya determined that Koyuki was fully asleep before going over what had happened, but she had yet to check the recording.

I don't want to listen to it…

She could just hand over the recording to Technical. They would probably be able to take a dispassionate approach to Sakura's last moments.

Oh… This must be why they never kept records…

It was over now. What was the point of leaving anything behind?

Or maybe the squad members, themselves, didn't want to be confronted by the past. Kaguya had no trouble sympathizing with that feeling.

Unfortunately, not listening to the recording wasn't an option. She still had her pride as a scientist. She was willing to face any truth, no matter how gut-wrenching.

Besides, there was something she needed to know.

"The Goddess…"

The thing that turned humans into heroes.

She had never heard of such a creature before, but it seemed as if Azuma and

the others here were very familiar with her. Were the people at Technical the only ones who didn't know?

"The Goddess—and that world…"

She had been inside it twice at this point. That couldn't just be a coincidence. There had to be some reason, or explanation, behind it.

What was that world's purpose? And why was only she able to go there?

"…"

Kaguya began to develop a hunch.

She usually didn't trust hunches, but this time felt different. For some reason, she had a feeling that world was where people went when they became heroes.

And what about Sakura's "mommy"?

Sakura's parents were supposed to be dead, but Sakura had seemed to want to believe in the woman.

So much so, in fact, that nothing Kaguya said had seemed to reach Sakura. As if they were in Sakura's ideal fantasy world.

Was that what heroes saw?

"Their own ideal dreamworld…?"

Meaning that the heroes were living in their own perfect world, with their human consciousness still intact. Perhaps entirely unaware of what was actually happening outside.

If Kaguya was right about this, then every hero so far was likely completely unaware of the massacres they had carried out, trapped in a perfect world of their own making as they transformed into monsters. Oblivious—and free from malice.

"Appalling…," Kaguya muttered despite herself.

It was a sickening truth. Nothing good could come of it.

But there was still more she didn't understand.

"What did the Goddess mean…when she called me a *traitor*?"

A traitor was someone who had been on the same team and then changed sides. Kaguya tossed herself onto her bed.

The Goddess isn't human, so maybe she just used the word incorrectly.

Kaguya reached for her recorder. She was about to press PLAY when someone knocked on the door.

Who could that be, at this time of night?

Kaguya opened the door suspiciously. It was Captain Azuma.

"Oh… Captain, what are you doing here so late?"

"Uh—I just, you know, wanted to check if you were all right."

"Me…?"

Azuma wasn't usually one to beat around the bush.

He stared at Kaguya, his face inscrutable. Koyuki was still sleeping, so Kaguya stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind her.

"I wouldn't describe myself as all right at the moment. But is that really why you're here? At this hour?"

"No," said Azuma. "There was just no other time I could bring this up."

"Bring what up…?"

"During the fight today, why did you rush in like that?" He was talking about the fight against Sakura. "Don't get me wrong… I'm not angry. It's just—you're always so logical, I figured you must have had a reason for doing so."

A reason? She had done it for Sakura's sake.

"I'm sorry…" Kaguya looked down at her feet. After all, she had ignored a direct order. "I know I wasn't able to help. I guess I just got in the way."

"No, that's not the issue… Something's been bothering me."

Kaguya began to notice that Azuma wasn't acting like his usual self.

It was strange enough for him to come to her room at this hour of the night, but he was also acting weirdly reticent—as if he had something to say but wasn't sure how to go about it.

"Lieutenant, are you…?" Azuma seemed to gather his nerve. He stared Kaguya in the face and began speaking again. "Do you have *some sort of connection* to heroes…?"

"What?" Kaguya furrowed her brow. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well…for instance…"

Kaguya waited for Azuma to continue. He was tongue-tied.

"For instance—can you *communicate* with them?"

Communicate? Kaguya cocked her head in confusion. "Communicate with heroes?? Is that a serious question?"

"Do you think I would joke about something like that?"

Azuma certainly looked serious. He was clearly asking on more than a whim.

"Well, the short answer is no… But what would make you think something like that?"

"I was closest to you at the time."

Azuma leaned against the wall. There was a tinge of sadness about him as he recalled what happened.

"I saw you clearly. You were talking with the hero—with Sakura—weren't you?"

"Well…"

Kaguya was at a loss for words. True, they had conversed at the end. But she wasn't speaking with the hero. There had been no monsters involved. Only Sakura.

"Yes…but not with the hero. I was speaking with Sakura."

She was only there for a few seconds, after the egg had broken, but it was definitely Sakura. Kaguya had sat by Sakura' side as the shadows lifted from her face and her body crumbled.

"Besides, how could anyone speak with a hero? They don't even use human words…"

The memory of a tiny child's voice, however, replayed in Kaguya's mind.

"Mama…? Are you watching…? Look at me, Mama!"

That recording… What was that…?

Azuma stared at Kaguya, who had now fallen silent. He reached into his jacket suddenly and removed something. It was small and white and shaped like an earphone.

"This is Sakura's recorder…," he said. "From today. The recording starts while we were still in the transport truck. Amazingly, the data is still intact."

"The truck…"

That was when Koyuki and Kaguya had gotten into their fight, and Sakura had stepped in to smooth things over. That had been their last interaction with Sakura.

"I'd like you to listen to it now. If I'm wrong, I won't bring this up again."

Kaguya hesitated for a moment and then nodded.

It felt silly to just stand there, so they stepped away from Kaguya's room and moved to the break space at the end of the hall. Kaguya followed Azuma. As much as she hated to admit it, as she stared at his back, the difference between them was palpable.

He was a man. A member of Tactical Infantry. And an elite fighter, capable of utilizing Bureau weaponry to its maximum potential.

Whereas she was a woman. From Technical. A run-of-the-mill scientist who had never before been in a fight in her life.

The incident with Sakura was what had finally brought that home for Kaguya. If only it had been Azuma in there, instead of her, maybe he could have dragged Sakura out by force.

Why think about that now…when it's already over?

Kaguya tried to shake off her thoughts. Koyuki's voice seemed to echo in her ear—what's the point of looking back?

"I tried doing…what's it called? Where you cut out just the relevant parts."

"Trimming. It will be easier for me to understand that way, too."

Kaguya sat down facing Azuma.

She had to prepare herself to hear Sakura's voice again. Azuma glanced at her for a moment and then pressed PLAY.

Azuma must have screwed something up while trimming, because there was only loud static at first. A few moments later, the recording started abruptly.

"Kaguya." The initial voice on the recording seemed sad. **"Thank you for saving Azuma."**

It was Sakura's voice, with its distinctive core of gentleness. Even over this recording, it felt like she was right there.

"Thank you for saving him from me."

Kaguya's gasp punctuated the recording.

"How much…do you remember…?"

"I wonder. What do you think?"

Sakura teased as her voice faltered into sadness. The silence only lasted for a moment, however. Kaguya could still feel the gentle warmth of Sakura's smile in that moment.

"Thank you. For killing me…while I was still me."

For letting her die before she could kill anyone else.

"Sakura, wait! I—!"

"Kagu…ya… Take care of everyone…for me…"

The recording ended there.

After that there was only blank static. Azuma stopped the recording and stared at Kaguya in anticipation.

Kaguya met his gaze. She spoke softly, simply expressing her feelings.

"Sakura stayed true to herself, right up until the end…" The same proud young woman who Kaguya had come to know so well. "Even though she was the real victim, all she cared about was not hurting anyone else. I don't think I

could have done the same in her situation."

Azuma narrowed his eyes. His gaze was sharp, almost suspicious.

"Why do you say that?" he asked shortly, still staring at Kaguya.

"What do you mean why? You heard the recording."

What was Azuma talking about? Kaguya stared at him in confusion. The way the light was hitting him now, he seemed impossibly still.

"She thanked me, for stopping her from killing you. Who else but Sakura would say a thing like that?"

"I see…"

Azuma sighed heavily for whatever reason, as if he was coming to terms with something.

Kaguya furrowed her brow at his response. "Captain Azuma…?"

"I was right, then. This sounds like Sakura to you."

"What…?"

"Lieutenant, when I listen to this, all I can hear is insect screeching."

Kaguya was left speechless, more out of bewilderment than out of shock.

Insect screeching? What did Azuma mean—?

"I didn't hear Sakura's voice on that recording even once. All I heard was the normal sound the heroes make—but according to you, you were speaking with it."

Kaguya went pale. Azuma had just brought her entire world crumbling down. Such a possibility had never even occurred to her.

"You can speak with them, Lieutenant—you can speak with heroes."

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Could it be? Was Kaguya able to speak with heroes—?

The thought had occurred to Azuma during their first battle against the tank.

At first her crying had confused him. She hadn't seemed tired. But he continued to watch her closely after that.

From Azuma's point of view, Kaguya Shinohara was more than just another member of his squad. Not because she was from Technical, or because of any personal feelings. He had other reasons.

I already know she's different inside. I'll need to be even stricter.

Then he heard it—Kaguya was speaking to the thing that had been Sakura, after the egg broke. She seemed to be interacting with the dry, creeping hero's voice. By that point, however, Azuma wasn't shocked—he had already suspected as much.

Kaguya fell silent. Azuma had just told her that she could talk to heroes.

He could tell that she wasn't being silent because she felt uncomfortable or was trying to hide anything. She just seemed confused. What Azuma said would undercut all her theories.

"That's not possible…," she said, lifting her face and fixing her gaze on Azuma. "Heroes may have been human originally, but after they turn, they become something very different. The notion that anyone could talk to them…"

"But you did hear Sakura's voice, didn't you?" Azuma continued to press the issue. "She spoke to you, correct? And you heard the hero before that speak, too, didn't you?"

Kaguya was uncharacteristically pale. Azuma didn't understand why; it wasn't like he was attacking her, and yet she still acted flustered.

"I—I did. But I never dreamed that was actually the hero's voice."

Kaguya appeared distressed. She pursed her lips and looked as if she wanted to bolt.

"Lieutenant," Azuma began, drawing Kaguya's attention. "Whatever the reason, it seems as if you can understand the heroes even though the rest of us can't. If there's something you know, we need your help."

"I don't know anything. What would I know…?" Kaguya said defensively. "I know…I put up a big front, but I'm just a normal person. I couldn't even save Sakura, and she was my friend."

"Lieutenant…"

"If I knew something, I'd tell you. Besides, it's not like she said anything that would be useful in battle—why would you want to know now? That won't give us the upper hand."

"Sakura was one of us."

"Yes, but what does that have to do with any of the other heroes? We don't know them; we can't even see their faces—"

"Yuuji Sakigaya."

The information had arrived the previous day. It was the original name of the first hero that Kaguya encountered.

"He moved into the area after his parents divorced and remarried. He was five years old at the time of his death and had been subjected to abuse. Apparently, he liked superhero shows."

"…"

"All the heroes were originally human. No one knows that better than us, but we've never really had to confront that fact before."

Heroes couldn't speak, and they looked like aberrations on the outside, so it was easy for people to tell themselves that they were just exterminating brainless monsters.

"You saw her today, too, didn't you? The Goddess. The thing that turns humans into heroes. We know even less about her than we do about heroes."

"The Goddess… What is she?" Kaguya sounded close to tears. "I've never heard of her before… I didn't even know there was something causing people to turn. Does everyone on the ground know about her? If so, then why…?"

"Most people don't actually know about her. Witnessing the Goddess, firsthand, is extremely rare, and the majority of people aren't willing to believe until they see for themselves. It's not like we can track her down on purpose, either. How do you convince someone of what the overwhelming majority don't believe is real?" Azuma then added, "You should understand that better than anyone. We know well enough, though, that heroes are also victims."

"I thought you believed in defeating the heroes..."

"I do. Don't get me wrong, I don't consider heroes equal to humans, and I don't pity them, either."

"Then why are you asking me this—whatever the heroes say is just unnecessary noise. Nothing they say will be useful in battle," Kaguya insisted, trying to keep herself from raising her voice. "If you start focusing on the fact that heroes were originally people, it will just weigh you down—"

"Is that all that matters, whether something is useful? What do you think really matters, Kaguya?"

Azuma found himself opening up to her. Maybe it was because she came from Technical, and they were from two different worlds.

Or maybe it was because she had come to his aid, even when she knew it was pointless to do so. Maybe he wasn't sure how to feel about her anymore.

"What matters to me is making sure no one else dies," said Azuma, "That includes the people who might become heroes in the future, Lieutenant."

●　●　●

Kaguya pursed her lips together tightly.

Turning heroes back into people. That's what mattered most to her. It was why she had come to the front line in the first place, because she believed doing so could help with her research.

The ability to speak to heroes would probably have been a tremendous asset back at Technical.

For Azuma and the others on the front line, however, Kaguya feared it would only amount to more noise. Learning too much, and focusing on the fact that heroes were originally humans underneath, would just be a burden.

This must be why they didn't want to take recordings.

Kaguya's opinion of Azuma and the others was beginning to change. It wasn't that they were incapable of thinking of anything but exterminating the heroes; rather, they were the only ones capable of facing such a fight head-on.

Kaguya decided to trust them.

"You may not believe me, but…"

She told Azuma everything.

About the world she had seen.

And about the hypothesis she had formed. That heroes were living inside a perfect dreamworld. That they had completely forgotten about the real world and believed they had always lived in their dream.

"I don't think they realize that they're actually monsters. I think they forget about the life they lived before dying and instead immerse themselves in an ideal world of their own creation… They're reborn, in a sense."

Reborn. After death, in another world.

Heroes were formed from humans, but no one really knew what was happening inside their heads.

"So you're saying they retain their consciousness and go around killing people believing they've been reborn? Or…no, killing people wouldn't be part of an ideal world. So they don't even realize they're doing it?"

"Exactly. I don't know how I wound up in that place, but that was how it seemed to me while I was there."

Despite originally being human, and dying—as long as they remained in their perfect worlds, the heroes were unaware that they were dead and had become monsters, or that they were leaving trails of death and destruction in their wake.

"It's awful, isn't it?" Kaguya said, outraged. She was close to tears. "They just wanted to be saved, but instead they're forced to die reviled, as monsters. They don't even remember who they were…or what they've done."

"…"

Azuma was silent.

Kaguya realized what she was saying. Azuma and his team put their lives on the line to fight the heroes. They didn't need to hear that sort of thing.

"I… I'm sorry… I didn't mean to—"

"Lieutenant Shinohara, apologizing? Will wonders never cease…"

Azuma laughed slightly, and Kaguya pouted.

"You know," he told her, "right after you hit the hero, it stopped moving."

Kaguya hadn't been aware of that. She stayed silent, listening to what Azuma had to say.

"While you're in there, interacting with the person inside, it's as if the hero can't move. If we could destroy the egg while you kept the hero in place, we would be able to end fights with minimal damage."

Kaguya nodded. She had been thinking the exact same thing.

It was another way of saving the heroes. No one would have to die.

"I have a feeling we're on the same page here. So let me ask you one more time." Azuma extended his hand toward Kaguya. "Will you help us, Lieutenant?"

Kaguya nodded firmly and shook the captain's hand.

2-2

"So that's the situation. As I just explained, we'll be implementing a new battle tactic. Are there any questions?"

It was the next day. Everyone, including Azuma and Kaguya, were gathered in the meeting hall on the barracks' first floor.

Azuma, Kaguya, Koyuki, and Rindou—all four had listened to Kaguya's recording. Afterward, the room had devolved into squabbles.

"Did everyone hear that…?"

"Hear what? What the hell is this, Azuma?" said Rindou, jumping out of his seat. "That's just normal hero squawking! Why is the lieutenant over there talking back to it? Do we even know she's human—?"

"Knock it off, Rindou," Azuma groused, getting fed up. He narrowed his eyes and stared the rest of the squad down. "I know you might not be able to believe us right now, but neither I nor the lieutenant stand to gain anything by lying about something like this."

No one disagreed.

"What are you saying, then…? That Lieutenant Shinohara can literally talk to heroes?"

"At the present moment, that seems to be the only logical explanation." Azuma's voice was onerously calm, as usual. "Well, Rindou? Are you convinced yet?"

Rindou clicked his tongue and sat back down. "Fine, yeah, the lieutenant over there wouldn't have anything to gain by lying. Still doesn't mean I've got to trust her. Besides—" He glanced at Azuma without turning his way and glared hard. "I'm pretty sure I just misheard you. I could have sworn you said you want us to try talking to the heroes."

"No, that's exactly what I said. Operating under the assumption that Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara can communicate with the heroes, we are going to attempt to solve future conflicts through dialogues."

"You're joking… You really expect us to get buddy-buddy with those things?"

Rindou's chair squeaked dangerously as he leaned back.

From Charon's point of view, heroes were the enemy. Heroes didn't understand words. It was ridiculous to think they could be conversed with.

"Besides, so what if she *can* speak with them? Heroes are already dead! What is there to even say?"

"Rindou's right," said Koyuki. "Even if Lieutenant Shinohara can make contact through their eggs, what does that matter? What's she gonna do, remind them that they're dead? That'll just make things worse."

Why tell someone about something that couldn't be changed?

"Heroes need to be exterminated, end of story. Words aren't going to reach them. How can you not see that?"

"That isn't entirely true," said Kaguya. With the exception of Azuma, all eyes turned toward her. "They're still ordinary humans inside. They can still be reached."

"So what?! What does that matter?!" Rindou stood up and started shouting again. "What are you going to do, read them a story?! I know they used to be human! We all know that! Go ahead, waltz right up to them and say, 'Sorry, Mr. Monster, you're being such a bother, would you mind just dying for us?' See how that goes!"

"Second Lieutenant Yumeura… Even if we can't turn the heroes back into humans, we can still stop them from hurting others. I think it's worth trying."

"Thank you for saving him from me." That was what Sakura had said to her. She may not have understood what she was doing while she was still attacking her friends, but in her final moments—as the hero crumbled apart—she realized everything.

Sakura and the other heroes understood what they did in the end, and they went to their deaths chained to that knowledge. With memories of the deaths they had wrought, rather than of the happy memories they had built throughout their lives.

"Besides…the ability to immobilize a hero seems pretty useful, in my opinion."

"The lieutenant is right, Rindou. If it is possible to appeal to heroes with words, then it's worth giving it a shot."

"If talking was all it took, we wouldn't be in this mess in the first place."

Rindou was getting heated. Which was understandable. All of this seemed like common sense.

"In any case—I don't like your plan."

"Me either," added Koyuki. "You want us to protect Lieutenant Shinohara while also fighting heroes. And for what? A chance at nothing? We're already putting our lives on the line out there. You're asking for too much."

"I understand how you feel, Koyuki," said Azuma, staring straight into her eyes. "But hypothetically speaking—if a hero that we can't handle appears,

what are we going to do then? This could be our trump card. I'm asking you to try. As a personal favor."

"…"

"Remember, it could be one of us who turns," said Azuma, taking Kaguya's side.

Koyuki made a disgruntled face but didn't say anything more. Rindou, however, still seemed unhappy. He snapped angrily at Azuma.

"This is bullshit, and you know it, Azuma…," he said, grinding his teeth. "You of all people should know that with heroes it's too late for words."

But Azuma didn't respond.

He was neither going to agree nor disagree.

2-3

Kaguya's first proper battle came the next day.

The timing of hero battles was generally unpredictable.

Like natural disasters, accidents, and criminal acts, heroes never operated according to a set schedule. Preventative measures were possible, to a degree, but generally heroes could only be dealt with after the fact.

The incident occurred in Suidobashi. In a location that had previously held a college and an amusement complex.

"It's been fifteen minutes since the first sighting," said Major Mirai, briefing them on the situation over the comms. "The hero appeared in a college research annex located in a building near Suidobashi Station. It seems there weren't many students present at the time, but several casualties have already been reported."

"College students… Just the age when it's hard to know whether they can still see them." Azuma's voice sounded strained. His face scrunched up in

annoyance.

"Exactly. It's also the age where we can expect to see a lot of reckless behavior. There might be students there who can only partially see. Hopefully none of them do anything rash…"

The enemy was a statue.

They encountered it on the college's second-floor lobby. A Romanesque statue of a goddess. It was plaster, and about the same height as a person, with its face blacked out. It resembled the Statue of Liberty and was able to zip about the room freely, using its heavy stone as an indiscriminate weapon of destruction.

It seemed to relentlessly pursue any humans it encountered. Several people were already lying on the ground prone. Men and women of all ages. Their heads had been crushed.

"That's the advance squad… It looks like First Response got decimated."

Several of the bodies on the ground were dressed in military-grade combat gear, marking them out as a Bureau First Response squad. First Response was the first line of defense against heroes, with at least as many squads as there were fire stations scattered throughout the country.

There would have been several elite fighters in such a squad. These fighters lay dead now, however, their heads crushed just as completely as the civilians'. There was some evidence of a battle, but it looked as if the fight had been pretty one-sided.

"Listen up, everyone. Do you remember the plan we went over yesterday?" asked Azuma.

He was greeted with icy silence.

"Yeah, I remember," Koyuki replied eventually. "But I still can't believe you're serious. Are you really expecting us to babysit her highness over there while we do all the fighting?"

"Koyuki…"

"We've got enough on our plates as it is with these things, without having to worry about dead weight."

She has a point, thought Kaguya.

Here on the battlefield, when life was on the line, every second mattered. Especially against an enemy as insane as a hero. The fight would be difficult enough, even without needing to worry about a weakling like her.

"I understand how you feel, Koyuki, but we settled this yesterday. Now, let's move out—"

"Captain Azuma, wait."

Kaguya was currently hiding in one of the classrooms. She spoke over the comms.

"I can adjust to you, Second Lieutenant Asaharu. If I get in your line of fire, don't worry about me; just do what you need to do."

"Excuse me? Who do you take me for?" Koyuki laughed derisively, her face likely growing pink with anger. "Just because I missed last time doesn't mean I need to worry about getting tripped up by the likes of you."

"R-right…"

Kaguya sighed. Koyuki's biting words put a strained smile on her face.

"The egg is located near where the heart would be on a human. Try to keep collateral damage to a minimum."

The atmosphere grew tense. Everyone dispersed, deploying into a formation designed to ensure that none of the hero's attacks would spill outside.

Shots rang out from all directions. There was a cacophony of explosions and tumbling architecture. When Kaguya next opened her eyes, the goddess statue was in tatters.

Its right arm was broken, and its left leg was missing. It could no longer even stand properly.

Unfortunately, that only lasted for a few seconds.

No sooner was the statue down than it began to return to its feet with a

heavy crunch.

Koyuki sucked in air through her teeth. The statue's arm and leg had already regenerated completely.

"It's a healer. I hate healers."

Healers were a type of hero that specialized in recovery. Any damage short of a lethal blow was no more than a scratch to a healer. They could recover completely from any wound in a matter of mere seconds.

"Lieutenant," said Azuma, double-checking. "What do you think?"

"It's definitely a healer. It doesn't have very much attack power, and it isn't very agile. And if it was a wizard, the parts separated from the main body would have disappeared."

There was no limit to how many times a healer type could keep regenerating itself. Its severed parts were a form of attack in and of themselves. If a fight went on long enough, the entire battlefield could become buried in cast-off hero parts.

"It's built for durability, so there's no point in skirmishing. A shot from Koyuki might immobilize it long enough for me to—"

"Understood. I'm on it."

"What? What do you—? Huh??"

Kaguya was suddenly suspended in midair.

She went up, up, arms and legs floundering in space, until a hand suddenly grabbed her around the waist and her weight settled onto her midsection.

"Wh-what do you think you're doing?!"

Azuma had just thrown her over his shoulder like a bale of hay. Despite the fact that he was now carrying the weight of an entire extra person, he hardly seemed affected.

"I'm carrying you on my shoulder, obviously."

"Obvious, my foot! Just because this is a battlefield, don't think I won't report you for sexual harassment—"

"Desperate times call for desperate measures."

Still gripping Kaguya with his left hand, Azuma drew his katana with his right. Even being diplomatic, it would have been hard to describe Azuma's veiny weapon as beautiful. It did, however, fit naturally in his hand.

"This way will be more efficient. You're not capable of avoiding Koyuki's fire, and you'll be safer with me nearby."

"Well…that's true. But how are you going to fight while holding me…?"

"Just who do you take me for, Lieutenant?" Azuma said, strangely echoing Koyuki's previous comment. Proud, yes, but in a way that could be backed up with more than words. "The extra weight is fine; I'm not so weak that a few extra pounds would interfere with my sword arm."

"Extra weight…!"

In fairness, Kaguya might as well have been a sack of potatoes at the moment. But she still didn't like to hear it put that way. Regardless, he wasn't exactly carrying her in the most ergonomic of positions.

"That's not what I meant! What if it's not okay?! You can't swing a sword while off-balance like this—"

"Just trust me."

Azuma's voice tickled her ear. He sounded annoyed.

He even sighed. Kaguya covered her ear. Azuma didn't seem to care that he was breathing right in her ear, but it was all a little overstimulating for Kaguya.

"Maybe you would prefer I cradled you in both arms like a princess?"

"Just you wait until this is over…"

She was going to go straight to Personnel on him once this battle was over—assuming they lived through it, of course.

The hero had noticed them. A skittering moan rose from deep within the shadows clinging to its face.

"SKKRR—KRR KRR KRR—"

"Once it's immobilized, you attack. Got it?"

Kaguya nodded. As long as Azuma could pin down the hero, Kaguya could strike it and enter its mind. The hero wasn't very fast—getting to it probably wouldn't prove that hard.

"After the hero is incapacitated, the rest of us will— Ah?!"

"Captain Azuma!"

Azuma lost his balance, tipping hard toward the right.

The hero's arm, which had been knocked loose earlier, had suddenly attacked him.

It was moving autonomously. It swung around almost as if still attached to a body. The arm's movements may not have been very nimble, but each strike was like a ton of bricks.

Azuma managed to dodge it by the skin of his teeth. Even a graze from something that heavy would have been disastrous. Another punch came. Azuma dodged again, immediately pivoting with his sword and chopping the arm in two.

"SKRRAAAHH!!"

The hero screamed, and the fractured arm regenerated itself once more.

The arm was already moving. The other half of the arm also began to clunkily rise into the air.

"Tsk… You gotta be kidding me."

Every cut would just give the hero an even greater advantage. Getting to this hero might not prove so easy, after all.

Azuma reversed his grip, creating a fist around his hilt, and punched the arm away. Even the chips that flew off, however, began moving, attacking along with the previous arm and leg.

Rindou was currently locked in a ferocious melee with the main statue. Kaguya stared, open-mouthed. He was moving so fast that Kaguya could barely see him. Suddenly— "…?!"

One of the shards was flying straight toward her.

Kaguya squeezed her eyes shut, expecting to feel pain as the heavy chunk of stone collided into her left arm— Instead, she heard gunfire.

"If you're gonna go, then go already!"

It was Koyuki. She was shooting down the pieces of arm attacking Azuma, opening up a path for them.

Azuma spotted his opening and dashed forward. The hero was right there in front of them, still occupied with Rindou. The number of arms on the statue seemed to have increased at some point, like a strange fusion of the Thousand-armed Kannon and the Statue of Liberty. Multiple blows rained down in Rindou's direction.

Fortunately, Rindou was no pushover. Thanks to the support of Koyuki and the rest of the squad, he was able to hold his own—enough so, at least, to keep the statue busy while Azuma and Kaguya approached from behind.

Kaguya braced herself. One hit was all it would take. She raised the gun in her hand, ready to strike as soon as the moment came.

Click.

The sound of a camera shutter.

"No freaking way!! This is gonna go viral!!"

"?!"

Everyone—even the hero—turned to stare.

A young guy in flashy hair and clothing was standing there, completely oblivious to the danger he was now in—judging from his appearance, he was probably still young enough to see the hero. He held up his smartphone and was taking pictures, his face a mixture of boorish curiosity and total self-absorption.

He was practically bait.

"Shit!"

Rindou was the closest. He threw himself in front of the hero, which had already started hurtling itself toward the boy. There were too many arms, however. There was no way Rindou would be able to defend against them all.

One hit would be enough to bring Rindou to his knees. And then, once the hero got a hold of one of his limbs, it could crush it like a vise. It was probably only a matter of seconds before the hero neutralized both of Rindou's arms and legs.

"Captain Azuma!! Throw me!!" Kaguya shouted impulsively.

"What?!" Azuma screamed back, taken by surprise. "What do you mean 'throw'—?"

"It'll be faster!"

"But…what if it notices you coming?!"

There was no chance Kaguya would be able to avoid an attack while still in midair.

"Don't worry about Rindou. It'll take more than that to kill him—"

"That's not what I meant," said Kaguya, narrowing her eyes and whispering softly. "She's already killed enough; don't make her kill any more."

Azuma's eyes widened, and then he laughed. "I gotta hand it to you—for a scientist, you've got guts!"

Kaguya felt the support drop out from under her. A moment later she was flying through the air, defying gravity. She had a feeling she was going to regret this.

Azuma's throw was perfect, neither too hard nor too soft. Kaguya was on a collision course straight for her target, the hero's back.

Kaguya clenched her gun in her hand. She knew that attacking it was pointless. Instead, she extended her arm out wide.

Rindou's face blanched as they made eye contact. Kaguya broke eye contact and turned her attention back toward the hero's back. A moment later, she pounced onto it for all she was worth.

"Ah…hhhh!!"

It suddenly felt like her brain was being squeezed through a wringer. As the headache blossomed, she began to sink into the hero. For a brief moment, she

saw the face of a small girl, standing all alone, ready to cry—

2-4

"The hero's name, while still human, had been Reina Asakura. She was a middle school student, in eighth grade, and lived with her parents and one younger sister. According to reports, she jumped off the roof of the building of her school earlier this morning."

Kaguya had received the information from Major Mirai over the comms while still in transit.

"Apparently, she was having trouble at school—trouble fitting in, maybe. It sounds like she was bullied. From what we can gather, she and her younger sister were abused. She hadn't lived what you would call a very happy life."

Her name had been Reina Asakura.

The name of the murderous, faceless hero. Back when she was still human.

"Are you sure about this, Lieutenant?"

Kaguya remembered what Major Mirai had said. The major had sounded apprehensive at the time.

"After all, Reina Asakura is in her ideal world right now. Somewhere she isn't bullied—and where people love and acknowledge her. Are you sure you'll be able to pull her out of a place like that? It might not be so easy to get her to understand and accept what you say. Do you really think she'll be willing to die quietly?"

"…"

That was the harshest part of all this, that Reina would have to die once she left her world.

Her life had been so miserable for so long, and now Kaguya expected her to abandon this second life she had been given, face up to reality, and accept death. She could easily become defensive instead and insist that Kaguya was just another person who wanted to pick on her.

This mission wasn't going to be easy. In fact, it would likely be traumatic. And yet— "I heard she has a sister…," Kaguya said softly. This was their one saving grace. "Yuuna Asakura. She's young; she'll still be able to see Reina. From what I understand, she loved her older sister very much. I doubt she'd ever forgive her for turning into an aberration and a killer."

The hero's face was blacked out, so Kaguya couldn't see the goddess statue's expression—whether it was crying or smiling.

Kaguya didn't know anything at all about Reina Asakura. What was important to her, what was difficult. The things she loved or hated. What made her happy. Whether there had been moments in her life when she had felt joy.

But Kaguya could only play the cards she had been given.

"I still want to help her, even if she hates me for it," she said.

As soon as Kaguya grabbed onto the statue's back, she hit it with her pistol. As she did so, she heard Reina's voice in her mind.

I can hear her. I hear Reina.

The girl was laughing. She sounded happy. She was laughing in a way she had probably never laughed in her previous life. The sound was infectious. What could have made her so happy?

She sounded content. Full of hope. Her heart swelling with dreams for the future— *Forgive me, Reina.*

For coming here, to destroy your dreams.

● ● ●

It was so beautiful.

A royal castle. And she was caring for the citizens of the kingdom. She was their saint, able to cure the people of their injuries and afflictions simply by laying a hand upon their heads. And they loved her, their saint—their Reina— because of it.

"Glory to Maiden Reina!"

"Thank you, Our Lady!"

They praised her; they thanked her. She felt so elated. A moment ago she had

been under the impression that she was something else, not this. But no, everything here was happy.

So many supplicants had come for the Lady's blessing that they had been forced to from a line. One, a mother holding a child in her arms, had tears in her eyes as she begged for Reina's mercy.

"My Lady, my child has been hurt and no medicine will cure her. Won't you please help?"

"Yes, of course."

Reina placed her hand on the child's head, which then swelled with brilliant light, and a moment later the injuries were healed.

"Thank you, My Lady…! What can I ever do to repay you?"

"No need; I just did what was right."

The mother and child went away.

But Reina could feel someone's eyes fixated upon her. She turned to look. A young woman was standing there.

"…Huh?"

For some reason, the woman's presence filled Reina with nervous dread.

"Who are you…?"

She was dressed in rough, muddy clothing that had no place in a beautiful castle such as this. She seemed desperate to speak to Reina, rushing forward with such momentum that for a moment Reina was afraid she was going to snatch her up. The woman had come with a request.

"Ah, are you…?"

Reina gulped as she saw the tears welling up in the woman's eyes. She should have been used to tears by now.

"I… I'm sorry; I can see you're in pain, but you still need to wait in line—"

"I know you've had it tough."

The young woman's voice sounded as if it was coming from somewhere far

away. Reina took a step back.

"I—I don't want it to be any harder for you."

Reina could sense the mud-stained woman's urgency. It felt so out of place here. It made Reina uneasy.

"Your name is Reina Asakura. And this world…"

Reina Asakura—she had never heard that name before in her life, and yet somehow she knew it well. Reina's eyes widened.

This world.

"This warm and beautiful world is an illusion that you created."

"What…?"

It took Reina a moment to process this. She wasn't sure what to say.

An illusion? She must have misheard. That wasn't possible.

"I'm here to end the illusion."

"You're what…?"

Inside her blissful, saccharine dream, Reina heard something falter within herself.

A voice had come to destroy it all, this perfect world where no one ever caused her pain.

"Open your eyes, Reina. You need to see what you're doing. This isn't a dream—you're not helping people like you think you are. If this goes on, things will be so much worse!"

There was a noise, high-pitched, like something had just cracked. The same sound a glass makes when dropped onto the floor. But it wasn't a piece of glass that had cracked—it was something much more beautiful and fragile. It was her world.

Reina's vision began to swim. Her surroundings went blurry, as if she were viewing them through tears, and for a brief moment a different color seeped inside.

It was red. Red as blood. Or like…lipstick?

Red like *her* hateful smile. Red like the blush on *her* face. Reina felt like she was going to throw up, like everything she held inside was now flooding back.

"No… N-no, what are you saying? If you insist on speaking such nonsense, I'll have you taken out of here!"

The words spilled from Reina's mouth like tears. The red blush meant scorn; it meant violence was on its way.

"I'm a saint here! I don't know who Reina Asakura is!"

I've never heard of such a person!

"And I don't know what you're talking about! I haven't done anything!"

Reina was getting more and more worked up. She tried to breathe. She knew it was bad for the kingdom when Her Ladyship got upset.

Reina remembered the rule. She closed her eyes and tried to be calm—but she could hear a sound.

Splat, like something being crushed. The young woman shouted in pain.

Reina opened her eyes in surprise. The young woman was now crouching before her, pressing a hand to her side. Reina gasped as she realized the woman was bleeding.

"Ngh…"

"A-are you all right—?"

Reina began to rush toward her, but then she realized: It was Reina's *own arm* that had gouged that wound into the woman.

"Ah—"

Or more accurately, something that closely resembled her arm. Another arm had bored into the young woman.

"You know this feeling, don't you? This grabbing feeling?"

"…!"

She did—she remembered it.

That sense of touch, when she was healing the villagers.

"I don't know much about you, Reina. But I know there was someone who loved you—and who you loved in return." The young woman stood up, still clutching her side. **"All you need to do is remember. I don't want you to die without knowing—without remembering."**

"Re…member…"

She did remember. The red blush that brought scorn and misery.

The stench of cigarettes and booze, the angry yelling. It was all bad memories.

But the young woman continued to speak.

"I want you to remember that there was someone who loved you."

An image, hiding deep and quiet inside, began to form in Reina's mind. A young girl. Reina could hear her calling in a tiny voice. Sister. Her name—her name was…

"Yuuna…"

As soon as Reina muttered her sister's name, a wind swelled up around her.

Wrapped within that vortex, Reina remembered it all. So many ugly memories. Her terrible home life, the classmates she never fit in with, nothing but misery upon misery— "…"

Was that true? Was there really nothing that had made her happy?

Once the wind had settled, all the people were gone.

No, not gone—they had never really been there to begin with. Reina muttered softly to herself in the quiet space left behind.

"Deep down I knew… I knew that this was a lie," she said self-deprecatingly to the young woman—the only one who still remained. "There was something missing. Everything was so happy here—but there was still something missing."

All of Reina's dreams had come true, yet somehow it wasn't enough.

She turned to the young woman, whose face was a jumble of complicated emotions. Reina knew this was just a fantasy, an illusion, but…

"Where am I now? What's happened to me?"

"Your body is still out there, moving on its own…"

What the woman said didn't feel real. Her body was here—wasn't it?

"What should I do?"

"I'm sorry…" The young woman fell silent.

Reina understood. "There's nothing I can do…? Is there…?"

The woman nodded without speaking. Reina just smiled sadly in response.

She had already known, somewhere in the back of her mind. It felt good being this happy, but she had a nagging feeling that she had forgotten something important. Not in here, but somewhere else.

Her memories, maybe, her life as a person.

"B-but it's not your fault. Something else did this to you…!"

"It's fine." Reina smiled sadly. "I know someone like me would never get to have a dream this beautiful."

Reina's somber voice echoed throughout the broken world.

She wasn't surprised that this world was ending. It had always been a finite dream.

"…"

"Hey, lighten up. It's just a joke. Besides, I don't want happiness so bad that I'd be willing to hurt other people to get it."

Reina had been hurt by enough people in her life. Too many times to count.

That was why Reina had chosen not to hurt others. She'd even made it a point of pride, though it had only led to more pain.

"I don't want to just hurt people in the end. Even with everything that was done to me… That's the one thing I'm most proud of, that I never hurt anyone."

She never gave back the hate she was given or attempted to direct it toward someone weaker in her place. As hard as things had been for her, it was the one desperate achievement she had managed in her life.

"And now look at me… Hurting everyone, now that I'm dead."

"Reina…"

"Thank you. For opening my eyes—for putting a stop to this fantasy."

For not letting me hurt anyone else—

As soon as Reina had the thought, she heard something break inside her.

It was the annunciation, both of her end and of her salvation. The sound of the chains that bound her being severed.

Reina smiled warmly as she sensed the change.

Her vision seemed to grow brighter. For a brief moment, she saw a young man dressed in similar clothing as the woman. Reina used all her strength to turn her head to the side. The young woman was there. She was hugging her tightly.

When was the last time someone had held her like that? Her eyes grew wide, and then they relaxed, and she spoke.

"Thank you, and good-b—"

● ● ●

"Lieutenant!!"

As soon as Kaguya grabbed the goddess statue, she and the statue froze.

Rindou, who had been moments away from being flattened, managed to stagger back to his feet. He practically kicked the guy with the smartphone out of the room, before turning back to swing at the statue once more.

"Enough, Rindou; stand down."

"What?! Don't try to stop me, Azuma!!"

"It's already over…"

The hero had given up the fight.

It was now perfectly still. The shadows clinging to its face began to flutter and fade, like a curse that was being lifted. From beneath, the face of a young girl appeared. There were tears in her eyes, but she seemed to be at peace.

The girl was neither beautiful nor plain, just an average girl, like any other.

Rindou stared in amazement. "But…we haven't broken the egg yet."

"It's self-destructing…"

Azuma was as shocked as Rindou. He had never seen anything like this before.

A hero, destroying itself.

"I don't understand. What's happening? Did the lieutenant do this?"

"She was the impetus, maybe—but I think there's more to it than that."

Azuma stared at the hero as it meekly crumbled. Cracks formed, and it began to collapse upon itself, where it stood.

"The original human must have beaten the Goddess. She's stopped being one of her puppets."

"What does that mean...? Is that a good thing?"

"It seems to be."

Azuma had only ever thought of heroes as the enemy, as something to be exterminated.

That still hadn't changed. The room was littered with corpses, their heads brutally crushed—obviously heroes needed to be stopped.

They were to be fought, not pitied.

But a small part of him began to wonder—maybe they didn't need to be hated. It was the last thing he expected himself to feel. He had always believed that nothing could ever lessen the hate and scorn he felt for heroes.

"Ug...ggh..."

Kaguya's eyes had opened at some point.

"Lieutenant!" Azuma tried calling to her. But she wasn't looking at him right now. She was still focused on the hero, listening to its last words.

"SKRRR—KRR, GWUAGH—"

It still sounded like the buzz of an insect to Azuma. Kaguya, however, smiled and nodded.

A moment later, the inadvertent killer dissipated into the air, leaving a pile of corpses behind where it had lain.

Azuma spoke to Kaguya as he watched the girl disappear.

"What did she say?"

"…"

"After the shadows cleared—and her eyes opened. She said something, didn't she? There at the end."

"It's a secret." Kaguya smiled sadly. "Between just me and Reina."

Kaguya stared at the spot where Reina Asakura had been.

I don't know if this is the right thing to do…

Azuma watched Kaguya, absorbed in his own thoughts. Was it right to save heroes instead of killing them?

…but for the people who turned, at least, I guess this counts as grace.

Azuma tried putting himself in their position. Would he rather be saved—or rather die hated and oblivious? Would he have been able to make the same choice that this hero had made? The chance that he himself could someday become a hero always lay heavy somewhere in the back of his mind. If that happened, would he still be able to hold on to a part of who he had once been —?

While Azuma was lost in thought, Kaguya's eyes suddenly rolled back in her head.

"Lieutenant!"

Azuma caught her from behind before she could fall backward.

"She fainted again… Lieutenant, are you all right?"

She was pale, and her hair was disheveled. Kaguya always gave off a sophisticated, classy impression. Based on appearances, alone, she looked like someone completely unacquainted with combat. A pampered young woman, ignorant of the cruelties of war.

But that was to be expected. After all, she was just a scientist.

"Azuma," said Rindou. He was injured. He glanced at Kaguya, his expression uncomfortable. "Would—would you thank her later, for me?"

"Tell her yourself."

"I think it would be better coming from you."

"Hmph… Fine, have it your way." Azuma furrowed his brow and nodded. "But are you sure you want me to say something like that? I thought you weren't ready to accept her."

"Yeah, well…she did save my life, didn't she?" Rindou flashed his usual, toothy grin. "Besides, doing things this way wasn't so bad, after all."

No one on Charon's side had been injured or killed. Their new battle tactic, which focused around Kaguya, had proved more successful than anticipated.

CHAPTER THREE

Incursion

Two weeks had passed since the fight at Suidobashi.

Azuma was in his room, on the top floor of Charon headquarters, speaking to someone on the phone.

He sat at his desk, legs crossed, an uncharacteristically stern expression in his eyes. There was also a cup of coffee sitting on his desk, but it had long since cooled, his attention focused entirely on the conversation with whomever it was he was speaking with.

"Yes—but what about Technical Lieutenant Shinohara's assignment? It's already been a month since she was placed here."

One month since Kaguya was first assigned to Charon—in other words, two weeks since the battle with Reina at Suidobashi.

Since the incident, strategic use of Kaguya's power had become standard MO for Charon.

Even Rindou and Koyuki, who had been resistant at first, were now convinced. During those two weeks Kaguya had already been deployed seven times, proving highly effective even against heroes impervious to Charon's normal attacks. And saving the hero, or rather human within, each and every time.

As an asset, Kaguya's results spoke for themselves. Azuma, however, had other misgivings.

"Technical Lieutenant Shinohara's health has clearly deteriorated over the past two weeks."

Kaguya had been growing rapidly consumptive and weak.

Each time she entered one of the hero's interior worlds, she was struck with debilitating headaches. The mental burden of processing the despair felt by the people she connected with was something she was forced to carry on her own. In addition to the heroes, Charon had saved many lives thanks to Kaguya, but the process now seemed to be killing her.

The person on the other end of the line was quiet for a few moments after being told of Azuma's concerns.

"Placing someone in an environment they're not suited to is a poor use of resources. Kaguya doesn't belong here."

The person on the other end, however, seemed opposed.

Tactical Infantry squads—in particular, Charon—were unique units. And Charon was the model that other units were expected to follow. Discharging an officer from Charon was no trifling matter.

"But the lieutenant was originally from Technical No. 2."

"Yes, and now she's with Tactical Infantry."

Azuma sneered in response. "A stomach pill, two headache pills, and two painkillers—what does that tell you?"

"I don't know," the voice said, sounding unconcerned.

Azuma sighed loudly. "That is the type and number of medications Lieutenant Shinohara has been taking for *each and every* mission. She was doing it in secret. I made her promise to limit herself to just the painkillers, but she's already broken that promise."

It was strange that Kaguya needed medication in the first place. Even though she wasn't being injured during the battles, she somehow seemed to be suffering more damage than any of the other squad members.

"But why is the burden on her so great?" asked the person on the end of the line, their tone pointed.

Azuma couldn't answer that. No one outside of Charon and Major Mirai knew yet about Kaguya's ability.

Azuma remembered what Kaguya had said: *"You can't tell anyone about my*

power. Who knows what they'd do if they found out I can speak to heroes… The surveillance footage might give me away anyway, but if anyone asks about it, tell them I was acting on my own."

Azuma had agreed, albeit reluctantly. It made sense, after all.

The Extermination Bureau operated outside the bounds of adult society—in other words, outside the law. Kaguya was right; there was no telling what might happen to them.

"She's from Technical. She's simply not suited for combat," said Azuma, trying to deflect. "I don't think what I'm asking for here is so difficult. In my judgment, as the leader of this special ops squad, she needs either a transfer or a recuperative leave."

He was speaking now as Charon's captain.

The person on the other end of the line was quiet for several seconds. After an unnaturally long silence, they finally spoke.

A discharge from Tactical Infantry would not be possible at this time.

"But what about her condition—? Recuperation, at least."

That was also not possible. Azuma furrowed his brow.

Why were they being so stubborn?

"What are you so concerned about, Commander…? Transferring her would just put things back the way they were a month ago. There would be almost zero impact on operations."

The person on the end of the line was silent for several more seconds, before sharing their assessment of the matter.

Assessment, however, was simply a discreet way of saying the truth. Azuma's eyes widened as he received the information.

"The lieutenant…? You're sure?"

The information had concerned Kaguya.

Azuma wasn't sure how to respond.

"Yes… Well… No, of course…"

The person on the other end spoke rapidly as Azuma offered noncommittal responses. Azuma kept his own thoughts to himself, waiting for the topic of conversation to end.

"I'll call back later," he said brusquely.

Azuma hung up the phone, sighed heavily, and cradled his head in his hands.

Kaguya's mental condition was quickly growing worse.

Kaguya originally came from Technical, with barely even basic academy-level training in combat. Normally, that would have been something she could have gotten used to over time, but the things she was actually doing? That would take much more time.

Kaguya was connecting on a regular basis at a psychological level with creatures who weren't even human. Obviously that came at a cost. On top of that, even when they weren't in battle, she always had her nose buried in something else, like her recordings and her notes.

The other members of Charon had noticed as well.

Koyuki was the one who had let it spill that Kaguya was medicating herself in secret. Rindou, meanwhile, had put up a tough front, but he had also told Azuma to stop bringing Kaguya on so many missions.

"This ain't cool, Azuma. If you can't make this work without a sacrifice, then it isn't worth doing…"

Azuma didn't care for their current approach, either, which was treating Kaguya as just another disposable tool.

Kaguya had been the one to propose the strategy in the first place. Azuma had been on board at first, but he had no idea it would be so stressful for her that she would resort to popping pills.

"This is getting annoying…," muttered Azuma.

He thought back to what the person on the phone had told him. The news wasn't exactly a surprise, but it was hard not to feel some turmoil now that it was out in the open.

Azuma's indecision only lasted for a few seconds, however. As captain, he

always had to keep the team's priorities in order. He pulled himself together and stood back up.

"Speaking of which, we had another battle today…"

Azuma headed toward the door. He wanted to check on Kaguya. She hadn't left her room since they had gotten back earlier that day—

"Ugh…my head…"

Meanwhile, Kaguya was lying on her bed moaning in pain.

Today's hero had been strong. First Response hadn't put a dent in it, and even Charon had trouble damaging it.

"We don't need you this time!" Rindou had shouted before they left, but Kaguya had chosen to go anyway. Not to limit collateral damage per se, but rather because she had an interest in the human who had transformed.

She'd chosen to go, even knowing the battle would be heated.

"At least I got plenty of data out of it…"

Kaguya forced herself to smile. She turned her attention toward her tablet, where she had compiled all her data.

Kaguya wasn't doing this out of pure selflessness. She had her own motive—to study the relationship between heroes and humans.

Someone knocked. Kaguya looked toward the door.

It was Azuma.

"Lieutenant? Are you okay?"

"Do I look okay…?"

"Well, no… I suppose not."

Azuma seemed uncomfortable. That wasn't like him. Kaguya was intrigued.

"I brought provisions, just in case," he added. "Do you think you can eat?"

"Thank you, but…I'm not really in cookie-eating condition at the moment."

Kaguya's stomach and her head were both killing her. She didn't have the energy for snacks. Azuma could be slow to catch on to that sort of thing.

"Sorry… I guess I'm not much use lately."

"It's fine. Cookies don't go bad. I'll eat them once I feel better."

"That's not what I meant…"

Kaguya understood what he was trying to say. It was their new battle tactic that was responsible for her current condition.

"No, you shouldn't blame yourself… You know I'd be doing this either way."

"Maybe, but we've been relying on you too much. This is our mission, not yours…"

"Everyone has their own calling and place in life, Captain." Kaguya sat up in bed and smiled. "Besides…it's not like I'm doing this out of good intentions or because I feel sorry for them. I'm certain this will help with my research, and I've been gathering tons of data."

Azuma's expression became frustrated, or possibly conflicted. "I can't stop you, I guess," he muttered. "I know I should order you to stay behind—but I haven't said anything because we can't afford to lose you…"

"Captain… Aren't you taking all this a little too personally? Too much stress is bad for your health, you know."

Not that I'm one to talk, mused Kaguya.

Azuma looked apologetic. Kaguya said he shouldn't blame himself, but that was obviously easier said than done. She decided to change the subject, instead.

"Your earring…," she said.

Azuma blinked a few times and unconsciously touched the earring dangling from his left ear.

It was shaped like a cross. Small but studded with slight embellishments and extremely beautiful.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"I do. But it doesn't seem your style."

"I suppose not…"

Azuma touched the earring lightly, as if in agreement. It glinted as it reflected the light.

"I received it as a present a long time ago. I know it isn't my taste, but the person who gave it to me told me it was a lucky charm to keep me safe, so I've been wearing it ever since."

"A present? From who?"

"My younger sister…"

A look of sorrow, like none Kaguya had ever seen before, suddenly appeared on Azuma's face.

"She's gone now. I witnessed her turn into a hero a long time ago."

Kaguya inhaled sharply.

She remembered something Sakura had once said. That "similar story" she mentioned must have been Azuma's. He had witnessed a blood relative transform into a hero before his eyes, just like Kaguya.

"I… I'm sorry…"

"No, it's not your fault. As far as I'm concerned, it's over now."

Kaguya apologized instinctively. Azuma's smile seemed melancholy.

There was a deep spark of sadness in his eyes. Kaguya's chest felt tight. Doubly so, because she, too, had experienced the same thing.

Rationally, Kaguya knew there had to be others out there in the same boat, but she had never before met any of them.

"It happened to me, too, actually." Kaguya found herself talking about it, without thinking. About her past. "I saw my older brother turn into a hero. It was a long time ago, though, before I joined the Extermination Bureau…"

It was Azuma's turn to be surprised. Kaguya stared up at the top bunk as the story spilled from her lips. She was leaning forward slightly, she realized, as she spoke.

"I was still a kid when it happened, not even ten… I still remember it, though. It was an autumn night—around the hour when night turns into day. It's the

most beautiful time of the day."

Kaguya's memories of it were a little vague.

Not that it was unusual for people to have trouble recalling what happened when they were only ten years old, but the incident itself was vivid in her mind. It was what happened before and after that seemed fuzzy.

One thing she remembered clearly was how the light of daybreak had hurt her eyes.

"When night turns to day?" said Azuma. "That would be at around five in the morning, wouldn't it? What was a kid your age doing up at that hour?"

"I had woken up early that day, completely out of the blue. When my brother saw I was up, he suggested we go for a walk."

"Kaguya. If you're awake anyway, why not join me for a walk?"

Kaguya hesitated. Her brother didn't usually ask her to tag along like that.

"It sounds like you had a very kind brother."

"No…he was awful." Kaguya smiled uncomfortably. "People didn't have many nice things to say about him. He could be kind to me, sometimes, but thinking back now, that was probably just because I was mostly an afterthought."

As terrible as it was to say, Kaguya's brother had *not* been a very good person.

All the same, Kaguya had still loved him. After all, their parents were gone by then. There was just the two of them left.

Kaguya remembered how excited she had been that her brother would invite her on a walk.

"Something happened, not long after we set out—I can't remember what. But when I came to, I was lying on the ground, and my brother had been transformed into a hero."

"…"

"The Goddess must have appeared while I was unconscious—maybe things would have gone differently if I had woken up earlier."

Kaguya only learned later that what she had seen that day was known as a

"hero."

If only she had been there, conscious, when it had happened—it was that regret that had driven her to start researching how to turn heroes back into humans.

"What caused you to lose consciousness?" asked Azuma. Kaguya blinked. "People don't usually just faint while out for a walk."

"I...I don't actually remember, but I wasn't usually up at that time so maybe I just fell asleep. I kind of feel as if I can remember my brother carrying me on his back."

"I see..."

Yes. While out for an early-morning walk, Kaguya had grown sleepy and then fallen asleep while her brother carried her on his back. And then, the next thing she knew, a monster had appeared. She had witnessed it from her position lying on the ground a few feet away.

"I always thought that I was the only one. I didn't realize you were *the same*. Maybe it's not appropriate to say this, but it suddenly makes me feel closer to you, like a sense of kinship."

"..."

Azuma didn't speak. He seemed lost in his own thoughts.

"As long as we're close now, though," added Kaguya, "would you mind telling me something? Why are you the only one with your power, Captain Azuma? And how do you do it? Know where the egg—the heart—is located?"

Kaguya's eyes flashed from within the shadows of the bottom bunk. Azuma cocked his head at her in reply.

"I don't mind you asking. But why would you want to know that?"

"I'm curious. Why are you the only one?"

"I don't know the reason myself. But—I remember when it started. After the incident, six years ago."

"The incident..."

The incident six years ago. When an extremely powerful hero caused a massive explosion that demolished nearly the entirety of Chiba Prefecture. It was also the catalyst that led to the formation of Charon.

"I've wondered before if it had anything to do with that hero we encountered, but if so, why don't any of the others have the same power?"

"That's a good point…," Kaguya said, looking down.

Six years ago, Kaguya had been eleven. She had already been living at one of the Extermination Bureau orphanages at that time. Images of the devastation at Chiba had been firmly imprinted in her mind.

"Speaking of which… They never did figure out why you all survived, did they?"

"No—places of birth, histories, we don't seem to have anything important in common. I know that anyone can become a hero, but they seem to think the possibility is higher in our case… We've thought the same thing before, to be honest."

It was believed that the members of Charon might become heroes at any time —it was why they were monitored so closely. That way, the Bureau could be ready when that time came.

Kaguya suddenly remembered what Rindou had said, back when Sakura turned.

"How can this hero be so strong?! …Is a hero's strength based on the original human or something?!"

Was the hero strong because it had been created from someone in Charon…? Was that possible?

It could have also just been a coincidence.

There was currently no true method to measure a hero's strength. They hadn't even identified the precise requirements for turning into one.

Despite being similar in basic appearance, some heroes were weaker than others and some were stronger. Why? One of Kaguya's senior researchers had tried looking into that question, but his research had proved fruitless in the end

— "They pulse…," said Azuma.

"Pulse?"

"Yes, the eggs pulse, like a living heart. But not at a frequency that can be heard by the human ear, only by animals likes dolphins or bats."

"But you're saying that you can hear it…?"

"Yes. My range of hearing must be greater than normal. It's great for eavesdropping on dolphin secrets."

Kaguya giggled. It was rare for the captain to make jokes. She had certainly never expected to hear him utter a phrase as adorable as "dolphin secrets."

"If so, then I suppose we can't reproduce it. It sounds like a unique trait."

Captain Azuma smiled somewhat awkwardly. "A trait—yes, that's really all my ability is. But what about yours, Lieutenant? Connecting mentally with the heroes? That seems like the bigger mystery."

"…"

Kaguya was silent. She turned onto her side, pointing her back toward Azuma.

Why was she able to talk with them? Why just her, and no one else?

Kaguya didn't have a clear answer to that question. She was never the type to let sleeping dogs lie, but for some reason this was one question Kaguya felt she would rather leave alone.

Since Kaguya turned her back toward him, Azuma seemed worried that he had said something wrong. He was the first to break the awkward silence. "Speaking of which…," he said, as if he was just remembering something. "Have you been in touch with anyone from Technical? What about the junior officer you were with that day? The one with the pigtails?"

"You mean Mari… *Ahem*, Second Lieutenant Ezakura?"

Kaguya rolled back over. She was still lying on the bed. Her manners were terrible.

"I've tried to get in touch, but I guess they're busy because I haven't had much luck. I'd like to at least get lunch with her someday—why are you asking

me this, though?"

"Well…"

Azuma uncrossed his arms and stood back up. He walked over to the side of the bed and sat down in a nearby chair.

"Lieutenant, do you ever wish you could go back to Technical?"

"What?"

"You were originally part of Technical. You said you had something you needed to do there—are you really sure you want to abandon your work just to hang around in a place like this?"

"I…"

The question had come out of nowhere.

Azuma had a point, but why was he bringing it up now? She thought they were long past talk of going or staying.

The Revival Project was extremely important to Kaguya, but she no longer considered her current experiences on the battlefield a waste, either.

"Why are you asking me this?" Kaguya said.

Azuma looked away, seemingly flustered. He continued to stay that way—not looking directly at her as he spoke.

"The truth is: I was thinking about putting you on recuperative leave."

"Recuperative leave?"

"Meaning you'd go back to Technical."

Kaguya's eyes grew wide. That was the last thing she had expected him to say.

"But—but why?! I can still—"

"Do you really need to ask? Just look at yourself."

Kaguya was speechless.

"The new strategy is going great. The results obviously speak for themselves. But you can't go on like this." Azuma paused for a moment. "Part of my job is to look out for the mental health of my squad members. This isn't worth sacrificing

you for."

"But…" For some reason, Kaguya felt like digging her heels in. "What about Charon? What if you run into a hero that's too strong?"

"That's not your problem. It's *ours*."

Ours—that made Kaguya a little sad, realizing that word didn't include her. She was surprised she would feel that way.

Well… If I did return to Technical, I could just carry on with my research using all this data I've collected so far. And I wouldn't have to worry about getting sick anymore. Maybe it would be for the best…

Too much time spent inside the heroes' psyches was bound to bring repercussions.

What if she started to get lost in there, and the heroes began changing her instead of the other way around? She wasn't exactly in a very strong mental state at the moment. She hadn't been very conscious of the risks so far and wouldn't have really cared much even if she had been, but apparently she was getting bad enough for the people around to be noticeably concerned. Even Azuma seemed to be losing his patience a little.

"Besides, if we can't get along without you, then we've got deeper issues to worry about… We've been relying on you to help keep collateral damage to a minimum, but that's an area where we'll just have to try harder."

Azuma almost seemed angry. Not at Kaguya for pushing herself too hard, however. Or even at the higher-ups who wouldn't approve of sending her back. From Kaguya's perspective, it almost seemed as if he was maddest at himself.

Azuma stood up from the chair. He seemed ready to leave.

"One more thing, Lieutenant. I know you know this, deep down. But you're from Technical. You don't belong here."

"…"

"You came here for the sake of your research, didn't you? If it's data you wanted, you've already collected plenty. Is there really any point in staying with us any longer?"

"Well, no, I suppose not…"

"I know you'll see things differently once you're back at Technical," Azuma said abruptly.

Kaguya felt flustered. This whole conversation had come out of nowhere, but it was hard to argue with Azuma's rationale.

"And besides I—and they—"

"What…? What was that?"

Azuma's voice seemed to be growing smaller.

No, not smaller—farther away. He had been right beside her, but for some reason now it was like his voice was coming from somewhere in the distance.

Kaguya didn't feel well. Her head began to swim. Maybe she was just sleepy.

Or maybe it was all the medicine she had taken.

"I… I'm sorry, Captain. I think…I need to rest now…," she muttered.

She caught a glimpse of Azuma's face. Why did he look so dismayed?

In a panic, he reached out toward her. *Can't a girl take a little nap?* she thought, chuckling to herself. And then it was like she was sailing through a dream.

That was when Kaguya collapsed.

CHAPTER FOUR
Discovery

"Wait……this is…again……"

"…Be kidding…did she……?"

"…She's……stop……"

Everything was foggy. She could hear people arguing, somewhere far away, at the edge of consciousness.

She gently opened her eyes. She didn't really mind, but the voices seemed so insistent. Now that her eyes were open, however, she realized she was lying on the ground.

Not normal ground, however. There were huge cracks, as if the ground had been broken. The rest of her surroundings were deserted, flickering flames in a world of mingled light and shadow.

And there, in the midst of those flames, *he* stood.

She could only see his back. Large and dark, protecting her where she lay.

It wasn't her father. It wasn't even human.

She lifted herself up gently. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a shape turning toward her, like a pair of demonic wings. But she could barely focus on them.

Because it was so hot.

Not the flames.

Her throat—it felt like her throat was on fire. Throbbing, as if something was going to come out—

"Ugh…"

That was when Kaguya opened her eyes.

Kaguya Shinohara was not a morning person. Now that her eyes were open, she continued to stare at the ceiling in a daze.

It felt like she had just had a bad dream. The pain in her throat lingered.

"Good morning, Lieutenant Shinohara."

"…?! Director?!"

Kaguya sat up. An important-looking young woman with jet-black hair was staring at her closely.

"What are you doing here?! A-and where is Captain Azuma—what's happening?!"

"Kaguya!! I was so worried!!"

"M-Mari?!"

A girl rushed forward and captured Kaguya, who was still lying in bed, in a hug. It was Mari, Kaguya's junior at the research lab. They hadn't seen each other in two weeks.

Mari was sobbing. Kaguya felt guilty; she had never seen Mari in such a state before.

"Mari… I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you."

"N-no, it's fine…" Mari wiped her face on her sleeve and forced herself to smile. "I'm just so happy to see you again. I thought—I thought you might die, out there on the front line."

"Mari…"

"When I heard you collapsed, I nearly lost my mind."

"Collapsed…? Me?" Kaguya tried to think back. The last thing she remembered was talking to Azuma. "What…what time is it? Actually, what day is it? And why is it bright outside? Is it daytime?"

"Kaguya," the director said, interrupting them. "We can talk about all that

later. I know. About your ability."

Kaguya's eyes widened in response. She thought she had told Azuma to keep it a secret.

"But how did you—?" she began.

"I have my ways." The director refused to elaborate. "Today is April twentieth. It's been three days since you collapsed."

"Three…?!"

"Yes, three days. Now, tell me what happened."

Kaguya's gaze suddenly grew serious. How much should she tell the director? Her ability to enter the minds of heroes was an amazing breakthrough.

"Mari, I'm sorry, but would you leave us alone for a moment?" she said, waiting for Mari to exit the room. Now that they were alone, the director didn't bother to conceal her excitement and curiosity.

"Who told you about my ability? Captain Azuma?"

"Yes, well, the gist of it. About how you can speak with heroes, enter their interior worlds, and sync your ego with theirs. He had to, to explain your behavior."

The director went into more detail.

Surveillance video of Kaguya's interactions with the heroes had apparently been redacted for security purposes, so the only ones who had seen the way she had behaved on the battlefield so far were the director, since she was Kaguya's former commanding officer, and those who had made the decision to censor the footage.

Even those few who had witnessed her behavior, however, were unsure of what it had meant.

"I heard it directly from Captain Azuma during our face-to-face while I was taking custody. He did tell me not to tell anyone else, though."

"I see…"

Azuma had made a reasonable decision, telling the director. After all, as long

as Kaguya was recuperating at Technical, the director would be in charge of her again.

Part of Kaguya felt relieved to know that Azuma hadn't truly broken his promise to her.

"All the same..." The director's golden eyes flashed. She stared at Kaguya like a cat staring at a ball of yarn. "This is truly fascinating. It's not my area of research, but I'm thoroughly intrigued. I wonder how it works—linking consciousnesses in this way is usually impossible, even human to human."

The director stood up and peered at Kaguya closely, appraising her like a guinea pig.

"Right now, what I'd like to do is check under your hood and run some tests. You don't mind, do you?"

"You're gonna run them either way, aren't you...?"

"That's the spirit. I'm glad you're on board."

Appeals to common humanity were generally unsuccessful when it came to the director.

"I don't mind. In fact, I'd prefer you leave no stone unturned," said Kaguya, figuring it was better to be a willing test subject than a forced one. "If my ability can be reproduced, it will make battles on the front line much easier. The headaches are pretty terrible, but there are tricks to managing them."

The director blinked repeatedly. "You're not actually thinking of going back to the front line, are you?"

"What? I mean... I'm just recuperating, aren't I? I'll need to go back at some point."

"Recuperating? What are you talking about? You were transferred back as of last week."

"I was?!" shouted Kaguya, completely and utterly shocked. Her voice was louder than it should have been. "Transferred—when did that happen?! I didn't agree to that!"

"You didn't need to. It was an order."

Of course. Logically, Kaguya knew that, but right now she was confused.

"Besides, I thought you hated it over there. Remember, you didn't even want to go."

"No, not at first…"

That is to say—just one month ago.

Kaguya wasn't fickle. It wasn't like her to change her mind in such a short amount of time. She had gone willingly in the end, for the sake of her own research, but she hadn't been very happy about it.

"Now, though, if I could just have a little more time—there's still so much more I need…"

"You've already experienced their inner worlds. It seems like that should be more than enough for your Revival Project. I agree, this is for the best. There's no need for you to go back there again."

"…"

Rationally, Kaguya knew what the director said was true, but in her heart, she wasn't so sure. What was happening to her? It was only a month ago that she hadn't even wanted to go to Charon.

But why this sudden transfer…?

The first transfer had also happened with little input from Kaguya.

It had been an arbitrary decision made by the director, who'd wanted to get her mitts on some on-site data. It was weird, then, that just a month later she would suddenly decide there was "no need" for Kaguya to ever go back.

The director was self-centered—and practically allergic to compromise. That was why she had sent Kaguya to the front line, against Kaguya's wishes, in the first place.

So then, who was behind this transfer? Someone higher up, maybe?

During Kaguya's last conversation with Azuma, she remembered him telling her that he wanted to put her on recuperative leave.

When had that turned into a transfer?

Or had Azuma actually been planning on transferring her all along?

The director sighed lightly as Kaguya continued to contemplate possible explanations.

"I don't understand what you're so torn up about, Kaguya. You don't owe those awful people anything."

Kaguya raised her head in response. She detected a hint of anger in the director's voice.

The director's next statement caught Kaguya by surprise. The director rarely gave any thought to units on the front line, let alone expressed personal feelings.

"The nerve of them, stealing my favorite protégé and then bringing her back in this condition. They ought to be ashamed of themselves."

"It's not really stealing when you were the one who told me to go…"

"Yes, I suppose that is one way of interpreting what happened."

One way? More like the only way, thought Kaguya.

"But do you know what he said to me? After working you to the point of collapse?"

"No, what…?"

"He said, 'Tell her not to show her face around here again.'"

Kaguya's eyes widened in shock. "Captain Azuma said that…? When…?"

"Right after we received word of your collapse. The captain put in a request to transfer you back to Technical."

Kaguya furrowed her brow.

Azuma had been asking her if she wanted to go back to Technical. And about what she would do once she got there.

He said it would be for recuperative leave, but had he changed that to a transfer because of her collapse?

"He was probably just worried about my health… Not that there was any need

to be, though."

"Your health? He didn't even mention it once," the director spat. Kaguya wasn't accustomed to seeing this kind of expression on her face. "The only topic he seemed interested in discussing was your behavior."

"My behavior…?"

"Yes, he said you were willful and insubordinate and put all the other squad members in danger."

"…"

"Some of your behavior did appear dubious at first, but once I was told the reason, it all made perfect sense. But those people at Charon knew the reason all along, so how can they…? Forget it; it doesn't matter."

The director sighed lightly as if she was tired of the subject. She seemed to have decided that this was a waste of time.

"I ignored warnings…and put everyone in danger? Is that really what he said?"

"You can listen for yourself, if you like. The conversation was recorded."

Azuma must have said something pretty drastic to get the director so worked up. It would take more than innuendo or misunderstanding for the director to react like this.

Kaguya was genuinely curious to hear the recording.

"Let me listen to it, just to be sure. I want to hear it straight from the captain's mouth."

"If you say so—I didn't realize you two had gotten so close."

The director fiddled with her terminal.

A moment later, a notification arrived on Kaguya's personal device. The director had sent her an audio file.

Kaguya's hand shook slightly as she downloaded the file.

Willful and insubordinate.

Azuma had warned her; she couldn't deny it. Even Koyuki and Rindou had a

thing or two to say.

But maybe the director is just blowing things out of proportion.

The only way she was going to know for sure was to listen to the conversation for herself. With a mixture of impatience and trepidation, Kaguya inserted her earphones and pressed PLAY.

There was a *beep*, signaling that the recording had begun. The conversation followed immediately.

"About Technical Lieutenant Shinohara—"

It was definitely Captain Azuma's voice on the recording. His tone sounded slightly harsh.

"I want to send her back to Technical No. 2. Immediately."

"Immediately? That certainly seems hasty."

The other voice was the director's.

"I am aware that Lieutenant Shinohara collapsed recently, but is that your only reason for this request? Because if she's not going to be a help around here, I can't accept her back."

"No… That isn't the reason."

Kaguya heard fabric rustling and a chair squeak, as if someone had just adjusted their seat.

"I'm speaking in an official capacity, as Charon's captain. The lieutenant is a burden on our squad."

Kaguya gasped. A burden—how could he say that?

She listened closer.

"A burden? You've got some gall there, soldier. Kaguya is one of our best researchers."

"And I'm sure Technical is lucky to have her. But allow me to be clear. The lieutenant is of absolutely no use to us here on the front line."

The director wasn't about to let that comment slide.

"Is that so? Because from what I understand, Captain Yuuri Azuma, it was you who forced her onto the front line to begin with. If she was so unsuited for the role, then why did you put her there in the first place?"

"I suppose I was under the mistaken impression that she was a soldier."

Azuma's voice grew even harsher. He clearly had no patience for Kaguya or for anything the director might say.

"Our mission here is to defeat heroes. There is no room in the Tactical Infantry Branch for any personnel incapable of satisfying mission parameters."

For some reason, Kaguya felt shocked to hear Azuma speak this way.

Everything he was saying was a fact. Scientist or not, she was technically a soldier, and that was the justification he had used when dropping her onto the front line. But she hadn't been able to keep up at first, and the squad had treated her as if she was a burden.

But only initially, she had thought.

"Is that so…? Have it your way then, Captain. If that's the way you feel, I would be delighted to take Kaguya back."

The director sounded extremely disgruntled. Kaguya heard someone stand up out of their chair.

"You say she's a burden—and useless. Yes, you've certainly made yourself clear. Just don't expect me to ever lend her to you again, soldier. Do you understand?"

"I couldn't be happier."

Kaguya surreptitiously bit her lip. Azuma had made his feelings clear.

Azuma still had one last thing to say.

"Besides… There's something terrifying about her."

"Huh…?"

Terrifying? Me?

It was the last thing Kaguya expected someone to say about her. She was still wondering what Azuma had meant by that comment, when the recording

suddenly came to an end.

Kaguya removed the earphones, speechless.

She was still reeling from what she had just heard, as the director spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

"You're just getting back on your feet, so let's wait until tomorrow to begin the tests. Does that sound okay to you?"

"Yes… That sounds best."

She felt dazed.

She truly thought that she had been helpful.

Had she been wrong all along—?

The next day, Kaguya underwent an MRI.

The director imaged every part of her body, from the tip of her toes to the top of her head. The photos were currently on display in a room that resembled a medical officer. Kaguya and the director were examining the photos together.

"Hmm… As far as I can see, there doesn't look to be anything out of the ordinary. Other than a large amount of body fat, that is—"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Ha-ha. Relax, I'm only joking. I'm surprised you're not fatter, to be honest, considering you eat twice as much as the average person. Maybe that should be the next thing we look into."

The director continued to crack jokes as she examined Kaguya's insides.

"By the way," the director said casually, "do you plan on continuing to use your power?"

"Hmm…"

Did she—? Kaguya's face clouded over.

"No… I don't suppose I'll have another opportunity to."

"I see. That's good to hear."

Kaguya lifted her head up in surprise.

"I honestly don't think it's a very good idea to sync your ego with someone else's. If you dive in too deep, you could wind up getting lost inside the hero instead."

"Lost…?"

"There's no way to know for sure what might happen, but you should at least keep the risk in mind."

"I understand. If…I do wind up going back to the front, I'll remember to be more careful."

Who knew if that would ever happen, though.

They worked their way quickly through dozens of photographs, occasionally making small talk, until eventually they reached the last one.

"We've examined pretty much everything, but I don't see anything that looks out of place…"

"But we took so many images."

"Well, it wouldn't be much fun if there wasn't a chal—"

It was the last image. Of Kaguya's throat.

The director froze as she picked it up. "Wait… This can't be—!" She pressed her face closer.

Kaguya watched, puzzled. "Director? What is it? Why are you making…that face…?" She gulped.

Kaguya had never seen the director like this, the way her eyes raced in disbelief.

"Kaguya… Let's enlarge this photograph."

Kaguya didn't understand what the director was so excited about; none of the other photographs had shown anything. But the director wasn't the type to waste time. Kaguya fiddled with the computer, bringing a black-and-white image up on the screen.

The director enlarged the image.

"Impossible…," she muttered.

"What is it, Director? You're not acting like yourself."

"Can you blame me? Something like this flies in the face of all our research. All common sense."

Thw-thwump. A loud mechanical crash suddenly interrupted the silence. Kaguya nearly jumped out of her seat, before realizing it was just the copy machine. The director must have sent the image to be printed.

The printout was still warm to the touch as the director circled one area in red and handed it to Kaguya.

"Take a look. It's extremely small and difficult to make out, but it's there."

"There…? What did you find? It's not a tumor, is it?"

"A tumor might be preferable. At least we'd know how to treat that—I don't mean to alarm you, but this is something much more baffling."

Kaguya furrowed her brow. The director was behaving so seriously. What could it be?

Kaguya stared at the printout. The enlarged section showed an area between her pharynx and trachea, around where her vocal cords would be found.

At first glance, there didn't seem to be anything unusual in the circled area. Kaguya held the paper closer, just like the director had done earlier. That was when she noticed it.

"Wait, what is that…?"

Kaguya's nose was almost touching the page. She gasped.

The photograph showed a pointed, conelike shape in her throat. It was too small to see many details, but the end tapered sharply in a fashion that made it obvious that it didn't belong inside a human body.

There was no pain, of course, but Kaguya instinctively pressed a hand against her throat.

"A small bone—? No, a needle? But how would a needle get inside my vocal

cords…?"

"Look closer. There at the base, do you see it? You must have seen similar objects, up until very recently, I presume."

Recently? As in, when she was still with Charon? Kaguya began to get an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. She peered closer. The object wasn't straight. It looked like a fat needle, but bent slightly toward the middle— Wait.

It wasn't a needle. It was…a leg.

An arthropod leg. The even tinier leg of an unusually tiny insect.

Kaguya was pretty sure she hadn't accidentally swallowed any bugs lately. And even if she had, what would a leg be doing in her vocal cords? Her stomach, maybe, or even her windpipe. But her vocal cords?

"I don't understand…"

"Neither do I… I've never seen anything so baffling before in my entire life. I'm sure you've realized by now—but that is no commonplace insect."

The thing poked out from Kaguya's vocal cords as if it were growing there.

Not a tumor, not a needle, not a shadow on the screen. Nothing so benign.

"Is this…an egg?"

An egg. The tiny white spheres found with the bodies of heroes. She had seen several of them by this point, but never inside her own vocal cords.

"An egg…? Ah, you must be referring to the heroes' hearts," the director surmised. "Imagine, finding one inside the body of a living human."

It took Kaguya a moment to process what the director had said. She clutched her throat more firmly.

Kaguya could no longer deny it. It was there in the photograph, plain to see. Something that had no business being found inside a human body.

A shape, like a bee, hatching from an egg.

"It might just be contamination…"

"That's true; we can't rule that out yet… I need to inspect your throat one

more time. Get changed."

The director went to get the machine ready, while Kaguya began switching into her clinical testing robes once more. But she knew the results would be the same.

There was no lab contamination. It wasn't possible. This wasn't human error or a glitch in the machine.

It was actually there. One of the Goddess's eggs.

Kaguya had trouble undoing her buttons because of how much her hands were shaking. A parade of questions rushed into her mind and then rushed out again just as quickly. She was starting to panic.

When all was said and done, however, one thought still remained.

He must have known.

Azuma could hear eggs. So he must have known about this from the start. That there was an egg inside Technical Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara.

So then why hadn't he told anyone?

As Kaguya thought back, many of the things Azuma had said to her took on new meaning.

"Why?"

Why do you have a Goddess egg inside you, despite being human? *Why* are you still walking around?

"Why the hell are you here?"

Why would someone with an egg be in an army dedicated to eradicating heroes?

Kaguya finally understood. She had shown red flags from the start, and now on top of all of that, she could also speak with the heroes. Plus, she had an egg inside her—the risk she posed was obvious. That must have been why Azuma

had placed her on the front line.

To keep an eye on her.

That would explain everything. This new fact painted everything Azuma had said or done in an entirely new light.

Were there times when he had seemed worried about her? Maybe, but perhaps he hadn't been motivated by kindness. She had an egg, after all. There was no telling when she might turn. It could happen anywhere, at any time, for any reason at all. He was in no position to just wash his hands of her, especially not with her mental state at the end.

Kaguya remembered what Azuma said on the recording, about there being something terrifying about her. Those words still stuck in the back of her mind. Terrifying—because she might turn into a hero at any moment? Was that what he had meant…?

"Stop it, Kaguya. It's over now—just forget about it."

Kaguya shook her head, as if to reset herself.

Now she knew. There was something extremely anomalous inside her. She wasn't ready to understand it or accept it yet, but she knew now, and the rest would come in time.

But…why?

"Why didn't he say anything…?" Kaguya muttered. "No, I suppose he wouldn't have, would he…? I wouldn't have, not in his place."

There's no way she would have told him if their positions had been reversed.

"But even if he didn't say anything to me, why didn't he say anything to any of the other squad members…?"

Forget about Charon, for that matter. He could have said something to the director after meeting Kaguya for the first time in the cafeteria. Or even to the major general or someone else higher up in Tactical Infantry. That would have been the rational thing to do— Kaguya finished changing and left the room. Instead of heading straight back to the director, like she should have, she reached into her bag, which she had left sitting outside the room, and retrieved

her portable terminal.

She accessed her contacts and selected **Yuuri Azuma**.

She wanted to ask him directly why he hadn't told her.

But…

Azuma had called her a burden. Kaguya could still hear his voice in her head. She was having trouble believing he had meant it, however. She wanted to hear him say it for himself.

She had never telephoned Azuma before—what if he didn't answer?

Kaguya's fear proved to be unfounded. The reality, however, was worse.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"…!!"

Either the line was busy or her number had been blocked.

"He wouldn't go that far…would he? I'm probably just overthinking things…"

Kaguya's mind was racing.

For all she knew, Azuma was just the type who couldn't be bothered to stay in touch. Or maybe he happened to be on the phone with someone at the moment.

So then, why did she feel so anxious?

Kaguya quietly put her phone away. It didn't matter in the end. Either way, the outcome was the same.

"Was it…because of the hero's egg inside me?"

Was that why he had placed her on the front line? Only to send her away when she didn't prove "useful" enough?

What about the others…?

She had contacts for several members of the squad. Azuma, Koyuki, Rindou… Sakura. There were other squad members, as well.

I mean, he must have said something by this point. There must have been some discussion about why I was sent away.

Koyuki. Rindou. The members of Charon. They all despised heroes.

What must they think of her now? Would they hate her, knowing that the same thing that gave birth to heroes was also inside her?

Kaguya remembered what Major Mirai had said when they met for the first time.

"Where we're going now is under priority monitoring and review by the Bureau. Charon's combat prowess is significant, but their anger and hatred for heroes, in turn, is just as great."

"Now I understand. The major knew better than any of us."

Kaguya believed she had become friends with the squad, but maybe those feelings had all been one-sided. Maybe she was just an intruder, after all. Something in the way.

"So be it—I guess I won't be going back there…"

Kaguya Shinohara was not the type of person to waste her time on meaningless things.

She had no reason to invest feelings in people she was never going to see again.

No reason, now, to ever think of them at all.

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Several days later—in Akihabara.

A battle had just ended. A group of young men and women, dressed in combat gear, stood in the area that had formerly been Akihabara Station. They breathed heavily, shoulders heaving.

"Hero eliminated. Is anyone injured?"

"I'm fine…"

"Oof, that fight was rough…"

The surrounding high-rise buildings towered overhead. The members of Charon had once again fought bravely.

Today's hero had been strange, like a shadow, able to slip and dodge between

the buildings, and with an egg that was capable of moving. They had only managed to stumble upon the egg, which was tucked far away, by luck. Otherwise, the damage could have been far worse.

"The damage—I don't even want to think about the damage…"

The hero had appeared during the day, in the middle of a crowded city area. Civilian losses had been massive.

Both in terms of property damage—and in terms of human casualties.

There were human limbs scattered about like rubble. As they stared at the horrendous scene, someone could be heard crying.

"If…if only Lieutenant Shinohara had been here."

If Kaguya had been there. Kaguya, who was capable of pacifying these unknowing heralds of death. The carnage wouldn't have been so great if she had been present to open the hero's eyes.

"Enough. It's already been three days since she left; it's time we stopped relying on her," Azuma said curtly. "Anyone still on their feet, get started on rescue efforts… Let's just do what we can for now."

Yuuri Azuma had taken the brunt of the battle. Despite this, he immediately headed toward one of the damaged buildings to look for survivors.

Rindou followed. "You going soft on us?" he joked. "It's not like you to let personal feelings get in the way. Next thing you know, pigs will start flying."

"If you've got time for jokes, then you've got time for work," said Azuma, playing it casual. The truth, however, was that Rindou had hit a nerve.

"You've changed, Azuma. I never thought you'd be one to let personal feelings color your judgment. I'm gonna say this one time, but the lieutenant…"

Kaguya Shinohara.

"She's not your sister, the one who turned into a hero. Good on you for having her back and all, but you need to take a step back, man."

"Be quiet—it's got nothing to do with here. I already told you, it's because she's got *that thing* inside her."

"The egg? Yeah, I was pretty shocked when I heard."

After Kaguya was suddenly removed from the squad, Azuma told the other members the truth. That Kaguya had a hero's egg inside her, and that Azuma had known all along.

Everyone seemed surprised at first, but very few expressed any actual hostility or hatred. Not even Rindou or Koyuki.

"But that's exactly my point, Azuma. If you knew from the start, then why did you accept her in the first place? Not just her transfer—you had her running battle plans. If that's not taking her side, I don't know what is."

"I...don't know why."

In hindsight, Rindou had a point.

"I guess I felt a strange kinship with her. There was something different about her."

"So what, you didn't dig any deeper or put any safeguards in place? All because she made you feel nice? Don't you think that was asking for trouble? And then to just up and send her back to Technical like that, extenuating circumstances or not..."

"I didn't need to dig any deeper. I already knew where the egg was, so if she ever turned—"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. Admit it, Azuma, she reminded you of her."

"..."

Azuma didn't need Rindou to tell him that. He had already realized it for himself.

The way she smiled and behaved, her logical personality, the way she pushed herself too hard—Kaguya resembled his sister in so many ways.

Reira...

Azuma remembered his past.

The strongest proof that heroes were originally humans were the eyewitness

accounts. Several people claimed to have directly witnessed friends and loved ones transform into heroes while on the brink of death.

Azuma had been one of those people. Someone who witnessed a family member turn into a monster before their very eyes.

"Ugggh…urk…"

"Who's there…? Are you okay?!"

Azuma spotted someone underneath the rubble. He began clearing away debris in order to rescue the person. There were still so many people who needed help, and for most of them, it was a race against time. The rescue squad was still thirty minutes away, at least.

It was horrendous. If Kaguya had been here, there wouldn't have been so much damage.

"No… It's better this way," Azuma said, as if trying to convince himself.

Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara came from Technical. She didn't belong here.

Azuma remembered what the person had told him over the phone the other day.

"Technical Lieutenant Shinohara has been placed under priority monitoring and review."

Priority monitoring…

Priority monitoring was effectively the Extermination Bureau's last warning. It was serious business. Any further misstep could result in immediate punishment, up to and even including execution. It was the same status that the other members of Charon were subject to.

But why the lieutenant? There was no need to go that far…

Apparently, the reason for the decision had been Kaguya's behavior during battle. Namely, the strange way she had conducted herself while fighting.

It was all Charon's fault. They had forced Kaguya into this and exposed her to Bureau consequences.

Azuma had taken it as much more of a shock than he had realized.

She can't stay here anymore.

That's why Azuma had said what he said. He had spoken through the director, but it had all been meant for Kaguya's ears.

Kaguya was too good; she pushed herself too hard. Azuma had to get her away from here.

She belonged at Technical. Besides, there was also a hero inside her—she didn't need to be in contact with other heroes so often.

"…?! Azuma! Watch out!!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Azuma spotted Rindou shouting. Only for a moment, though.

Azuma had been so lost in thought that he didn't notice as the ceiling began to crumble. By the time he looked up, it was already too late.

Azuma shoved the civilian out of the way, but his time was up. The rubble poured down on his head.

CHAPTER FIVE
Decision

"It's gotten very cold all of a sudden, hasn't it…?"

"You're right, Mari. And it was so warm this morning…"

An unnamed location, somewhere in Tokyo. One of several buildings, in an industrial park populated with research facilities and warehouses.

Massive and brutal in design, the letters on the outside of the building simply read EXTERMINATION BUREAU RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY CENTER. Even though they were indoors, the cafeteria felt cold. The two girls were sitting around a table.

"Would you hurry up and decide, Kaguya? Lunch is going to be over soon!"

"Just give me a second, Mari! I'm almost ready. Almost…"

Kaguya and Mari were taking a belated lunch inside one of Technical's cafeterias.

Or more accurately, Kaguya was still fretting over the menu. The look in her eyes was dead serious.

"Should I go with Lunch Set A or Lunch Set B…? Lunch Set B is pretty caloric, but it's hard to argue with a good *tonkatsu*. Then again, Lunch Set A comes with that seasonal pasta sauce… Oh wait, the omelet rice special with the salad looks pretty tempting, too…"

"Just choose already! I'm ordering!"

"Don't rush me, Mari!! Lunch is a very important decision. One that can drastically affect your motivation for the rest of the day! Remember, you only get one choice… A decision like this shouldn't be made lightly…"

"I'm pretty sure you'll get to choose again tomorrow and the day after that. And probably every day after that, too, since you never leave the barracks on your days off anyway."

"Well, you don't have to be such a downer about it!"

"Fine, fine, I'm calling the waiter over now. Excuse me!"

"Ack?!" Kaguya cried, turning back to the menu in a panic.

The pair were taking a late lunch in the mostly deserted cafeteria. Despite being a stereotypical, run-of-the-mill mess hall, staff took orders at the tables rather than at the counter.

"I'll have this, please," Mari said, her voice echoing through the empty cafeteria. "What about you, Kaguya?"

"Let's see…I'll take Lunch Set A."

"Oh? You're not going to order everything today?" Mari looked oddly disappointed. "What ever happened to having it all?"

"Well… I guess I've changed my mind since then." Kaguya thought back fondly on her days of multiple lunches. "A person only has the capacity for so much, after all. You can never have it all—you always have to pick just one thing in the end."

"I see…," Mari replied in a consolatory tone. "But hey, at least this will be good for your diet, so I guess everything works out in the end."

"Now, listen here…," said Kaguya, annoyed.

Before she could say anything more, a news bulletin flashed on the screen, interrupting the previous sports broadcast.

An anchor began reading from a prepared script.

"Breaking news. A sudden large hurricane was spotted just moments ago in Akihabara. Accompanying drops in temperature have been reported in some areas, and government officials are cautioning to expect weather anomalies in —"

"Kaguya, do you think…?"

"A hero. It has to be."

The broadcast switched to distant footage of the hurricane's epicenter. There did appear to be a figure of some sort at the center of the scene. A shadow, not quite human.

"That would explain why it suddenly got so cold. That's a crazy ability, though, being able to change the surrounding air temperature."

Kaguya shivered, shoulders trembling. Although it was spring, and had still been warm that morning, it currently felt more like late autumn. A cold snap—Mari seemed to feel it as well. She looked cold.

"If this is because of that hero in Akihabara…it must be a very powerful hero…"

"Y-yes, it must be…"

Technical was located on the west side of Tokyo, nearly a metropolis's width from Akihabara. If they were feeling the cold from all the way over here, this hero was likely as powerful as the one that appeared six years ago.

I bet Charon is there—I wonder if they're doing all right. With a hero this strong…maybe I should go, too—

"Kaguya, you're not thinking of heading back there, are you?"

Kaguya was a little surprised at the harshness in Mari's tone. Mari glared at Kaguya, her eyes moist.

"Remember all those awful things they said about you. I don't know how they do things over there at Tactical Infantry, but you should just be glad you're rid of them."

"But…"

"This isn't like you, Kaguya… Those people treated you like a monster and then kicked you to the curb like you were nothing. If I were you, I wouldn't have anything to do with them, ever again."

Mari had listened to the recording as well.

She was even more indignant than the director had been at what she heard.

Kaguya hadn't expected such a reaction from her.

"Besides, you haven't forgotten, have you? The people upstairs are keeping an eye on you."

"I know…"

The director had already told her. Kaguya hadn't taken the news well.

Priority monitoring and review—it was the same treatment Charon was subject to. Kaguya wasn't sure why she had taken the news so hard, since she had been walking on eggshells to begin with, expecting the decision to come at any time. There must have been some other reason the news had gotten her so down.

"Here you go."

Kaguya glanced up as the waiter brought her order. The seasonal pasta.

"Just Lunch Set A today, right?"

Kaguya nodded. The waiter laid the bill on the table and walked away.

Kaguya was lost in thought as she ate.

About three days had passed since she was exiled from Charon.

The squad seemed to be getting along fine without her. From what the director said, Charon hadn't suffered any casualties in her absence. Kaguya knew, however, that they were only hanging on by a thread.

"I wonder if everyone's all right—," Kaguya muttered before sighing in realization. "Either way…it's got nothing to do with me anymore. What's done is done."

It had been approximately three days since Kaguya learned that there was an egg, the thing that gave birth to heroes, inside her. A fact that was being kept a secret between herself, Mari, and the director.

"If the higher-ups ever found out, it would turn into a huge ordeal." Or so the director had said. But as long as they kept a close lid on their research, there was no risk of anyone else finding out. If someone were to see Kaguya talking to a hero, however, that would be a different story. She would probably be taken

into custody.

If anyone finds out…

She wouldn't be able to continue her research at Technical. Every little thing she did would be placed under a microscope.

Kaguya turned her eyes away from the screen. Her duty was to the science. Even if Charon was in dire straits, it still wasn't Kaguya's place to go.

Besides, Captain Azuma knows what he's doing. I'm sure he'll be fine…

The next story had already begun. Some sort of fluff piece about desserts.

Kaguya liked sweets, but she wasn't interested in watching at the moment. She turned her back to the screen and focused on her meal. Which is why she didn't realize at first that another news flash had come in. She never noticed the grave expression on the anchor's face as he received a note from off-screen. She was only half listening as the anchor began speaking.

"This just in. The flash hurricane we reported on earlier has rapidly intensified in scale, and a group of teenagers in the area seems to have been caught in the radius. We're bringing you footage from the scene now. There have also been reports of an unnaturally sweet odor in the area—"

"Azuma!! Answer me, you son of a bitch!!"

"Azuma?! Please, open your eyes!"

Meanwhile, in Akihabara, the situation looked grim.

A hero had suddenly appeared, this one far stronger than any Charon had ever encountered before. No one in their ranks had even been able to scratch it yet.

No, not suddenly… I saw her, the Goddess!!

Most of the squad hadn't seen it. The boy who turned was working to rescue people from one of the buildings when the ceiling collapsed, critically injuring him. The next thing Rindou knew, it happened.

Rindou witnessed some of it. The boy wasn't moving, blood poured from his

head. And then a young woman was there by his side.

The death scent. Rindou knew immediately that it was the Goddess. He dashed forward to attack—but at the sight of her deep violet eyes and scarlet hair, his hand faltered. That brief moment of hesitation was fatal—long enough for the boy, Yuuri Azuma, to become a hero.

It's my fault. I flinched.

The Goddess had looked exactly like Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara.

Why had he flinched? Rindou thought he hated her.

"We've got no choice—Major Mirai, can you hear me? Contact Technical, we need Lieutenant Shinohara," Rindou said into his comms, as he tried to keep the hero busy with his fists. "The lieutenant is the only one who will be able to kill Azuma."

"Rindou…!"

"No, Koyuki! Azuma's not coming back!"

A hero now stood before them.

It was like a shadow, pitch-black all over, except for a bizarre eye in its torso. Unlike the rest of its body, this eye was bloodred and pierced through with a single katana. A strange, apocryphal icon of terror.

This thing that had once been Yuuri Azuma.

"Get your head in the game, Koyuki. We're not gonna stand a chance if we hold back," Rindou muttered, putting aside his usual levity for once.

Azuma's hero showed no signs of movement yet. Just its presence, however, was overwhelming enough.

Most heroes had generally human silhouettes, but this one was like nothing Rindou had ever seen before, both in terms of its shape and its aberrations.

"Sakura's hero almost looked cute by comparison… I don't know if we're gonna be able to handle this the old-fashioned way."

"But Lieutenant Shinohara—"

"Is with Technical, I know!" Rindou shouted, obvious turmoil in his voice.

"Maybe she doesn't belong here, but who cares at this point? We can't just sit back and let Azuma become a murderer!"

Rindou spoke into the comms again. Major Mirai and the rest of the logistics team were waiting on the other end.

"Major Mirai, do you read? Answer me!"

"—to… —nd Lieutenant—"

All he could hear, however, was dead air and static. Either the connection had been lost or there was signal interference. Either way, communications had just gone dark.

"Not the comms; you gotta be kidding me—give us a break…!"

Without Major Mirai, they couldn't call Kaguya. And without Kaguya, the situation was hopeless.

The hero began to howl.

"AH—SKRUAGH… AHHHHH!!"

Rindou, of course, had no idea what it was saying. The hero's roar sent everything in the vicinity flying back. It was only its voice. Rindou didn't want to know what would happen once the hero started fighting for real.

The situation looked hopeless. Even Rindou took a step back.

There were other ground troops in the Extermination Bureau. Other squads out there dedicated to exterminating heroes, not just Charon. Worst-case scenario—maybe they could hold out long enough for backup to arrive.

"That's…a big if…"

But what other choice did they have? Charon was the Bureau's strongest unit, but right now they were isolated and exposed.

What did it mean if even they, the Bureau's last bastion of defense, could not defeat this hero? It could mean the end of Japan. All of Tokyo could be reduced to unlivable waste, under the guise of what people assumed had been a natural disaster—

"Don't give up!!"

Rindou gasped in surprise. It was Koyuki.

"Even without Lieutenant Shinohara…we'll find a way! We have to!"

She was in tears.

"I don't care if it's just the two of us left; I don't care if we don't know where the egg is… I'm not willing to give up on Azuma—not like this!"

"No… Of course not."

At the sight of Koyuki's tears, Rindou pulled himself together. She was right… It was just the two of them now. The last bastion's last bastion. Giving up wasn't an option.

"Koyuki, how many bullets do you have left?"

"Five…"

"More than enough."

Rindou glared at the hero. After its previous howl, it now seemed ready to activate.

"I'll grapple it and hold it down. Once I've got it pinned, just shoot us both."

"What?!" Koyuki shouted. "But that's crazy! You'll die!"

"What other choice do we have?" Rindou said stoically.

Koyuki didn't know what to say. Rindou was right; it was the only way.

"If Sakura or the lieutenant were here, things might have been different. But they're gone now. Azuma, too. This is our only chance!"

If Sakura were there, she could have helped him pin down Azuma. And if the lieutenant were there, she might have been able to bring Azuma back to his senses, at least a little bit.

Unfortunately, whether Rindou liked it or not, neither of them were there now.

That was just the cold, hard truth.

5-2

"Attention, all civilian personnel, this is Bureau First Response—"

A cold, mechanical voice filled the cafeteria.

The image on the screen suddenly changed from a public news broadcast to the live feed of a small alleyway.

"A hero has appeared in Akihabara. A Tactical Infantry squad was already on site at the time and is currently responding—"

The image on the screen showed the current situation in Akihabara. Small black shadows—the humans currently fighting the hero—were visible on-screen.

"…!"

Kaguya jumped to her feet without realizing it. The image was blurry, but she could recognize the two people on-screen. They were Charon squad members. Koyuki and Rindou.

The situation was obviously grim. Koyuki and Rindou appeared to be the only two members still on their feet. Azuma was nowhere to be seen.

That doesn't make sense. Where is he…? Is he just off camera?

The wheels in Kaguya's head began to spin. Mari spoke, trying to calm down her friend.

"I understand how you feel, Kaguya…but there's not much we can do from here."

"Y-yes. You're right. I know."

Kaguya returned to her seat, but her eyes remained fixed on the screen.

The hero seemed very strong and very dangerous, just like the creature that

had appeared six years ago. The temperature dropped even lower; it felt like the air conditioner was on blast.

But it wasn't Kaguya's place to go to Charon.

If I leave, they'll have my head this time.

Ground fighting was best handled by ground troops. If Azuma were here, he would probably say the same thing.

Besides, how would Rindou and Koyuki look at her if she went back to them? Kaguya cringed at the thought.

"I do feel kind of bad for them, though. It looks like they're having a hard time…"

As Mari spoke, Kaguya stared at the tray in front of her. Lunch Set A. It was one of her favorite meals, but she wasn't enjoying it very much at the moment. She cast her eyes toward the ground.

Footsteps approached.

Ah! A look of surprise appeared on Mari's face. Realizing that Mari was staring at something behind her, Kaguya turned around.

"Director…"

The director had appeared.

Her beautiful obsidian hair fluttered briefly as she sat down at Kaguya and Mari's table without waiting for an invitation.

"A direct broadcast from the meat wagon crew…? They must be really hard up."

"Wh-what are you doing here, Director?"

"Even I need to eat," she said.

She made no move to touch the menu, however. Instead, she stared directly at Kaguya.

"You're not thinking of doing anything crazy, are you?" the director asked flatly. Obviously that was why she was really there. "Charon is in over their heads as it is, and they're trained for this sort of thing. You won't be any help,

even if you do go."

"I… I know that. Knowing me, I'd probably just get in the way…"

"I'm glad you agree. But there's also *another reason* you shouldn't go. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Another reason—the egg inside Kaguya's body. The director almost sounded worried. Kaguya couldn't bring herself to reply.

Another reason not to go. The egg.

If that information got out, Kaguya's days of being treated like a human being would be over. Obviously that would mean she wouldn't be able to continue her work on the Revival Project. Kaguya's research was her past, her present, her entire reason for being.

Her mission in life: to turn heroes back into humans.

It had been Kaguya's greatest wish, ever since seeing her brother transform into a hero years ago. That goal had driven her, long before joining the Extermination Bureau—it wasn't something she could so easily throw away.

"Going would accomplish nothing, Kaguya," the director cautioned.

She's right, of course.

Kaguya wouldn't gain anything by going. It wasn't like she could singlehandedly turn the tide of battle for them. No one was going to blame her if she just sat this one out.

Still, Kaguya couldn't get the matter out of her head.

What if the video feed got obscured? It happens sometimes, due to weather or environmental conditions.

A cold snap had occurred in Akihabara, causing sudden rainclouds to appear. Camera visibility would have to be poor.

I haven't been caught yet. Why should this time be any different—?

"Kaguya," said the director again, a warning note in her voice. She didn't seem angry, though, so much as worried. "Don't forget: The brass are watching you."

"I know! But…"

"I just…"

Kaguya turned her eyes to the floor. The director continued to speak in a matter-of-fact tone.

"So far we've been able to pass off your strange behavior as part of your research, but if this keeps up someone is bound to notice. Especially considering how effective you've been in battle."

The phrase "priority monitoring and review" may have sounded mild, but it was the equivalent of being placed on a security watch list. Any further suspicious behavior could result in punitive discharge. Or even something far worse.

If that happens…I'll never be able to continue my research again.

Nothing was going to keep Kaguya from her work. She couldn't let that happen.

But that meant she had to abandon Charon. Gaining one thing meant sacrificing something else in return—in the end, it was impossible to have it all.

Kaguya stared down at her hands.

As she did so, something suddenly caught her attention. It was her wristwatch terminal device, which was strapped to her left wrist as usual.

The memory of a young man's face appeared in her mind, his expression somewhere between awkward and angry.

"What if…?"

Kaguya had spoken without thinking. The director turned back to look at her.

"I-it's just that—um…"

Kaguya hadn't considered what she was going to say next. She stumbled over her speech as the director waited in silence. Kaguya took a deep breath and then began stringing words together slowly, in an effort to make her thoughts clear.

"Hypothetically speaking…," Kaguya began, her voice pleading. "Saying I did

go, right now—just taking me and whatever might happen to me out of the equation, do you think I might be able to make a difference? That I might save anyone?"

"Unlikely," the director bluntly told her. "Perhaps you might save one person, yes. But what would that solve fundamentally? That's about all that one person can hope to do."

In fact, there was a high chance she would just get herself killed pointlessly instead. It would be meaningless for her to go.

"Besides, Kaguya, all of that only holds true for regular combatants. For scientists like us—especially a scientist as gifted as you—the story is completely different. Your work on the Revival Project could save countless people in the future. You need to face the fact that your life is more valuable than the lives of the people out there on the field."

"No life is more valuable than another."

"Incorrect. The importance of a person's life depends upon how much value they contribute through that life. If the Revival Project were ever to be completed, it could solve everything. Its value is immense. I'm sorry if my phrasing seems distasteful to you, but your life is worth more than a few measly soldiers—don't throw it away for them."

In a way, the director had a point. The number of people who might be saved through the Revival Project dwarfed the number who were likely to die today.

But Charon would inevitably be wiped out. They were still holding out for the moment, but they were probably going to die out there or even turn themselves. Koyuki, Rindou, maybe even Azuma. Kaguya's mind was in turmoil.

"…!"

"Are we all settled now? I just remembered that I actually brought my lunch with me today, so if you don't mind, I'll be going."

Kaguya said nothing as the director departed. She was still trying to make sense of her feelings.

What am I supposed to do…? Should I act…?

It wasn't like Kaguya to be this conflicted.

Of her two options, go or stay, one contained unlimited risk, in exchange for likely little if any benefit. The other, meanwhile, offered no benefit whatsoever, but it also offered zero risk. Between the two, it was obvious which she should choose.

"What's wrong, Kaguya? You're acting strange."

"It's…it's nothing. Do I really seem that off?"

"Yes, you do. You usually can't peel your eyes off the screen when there's a hero up there. What's wrong with you?"

"I…guess I'm just used to seeing them by now," said Kaguya, glancing furtively toward the screen.

The camera had zoomed in at some point. The hero was now clearly visible. The feed was not obscured, as Kaguya had hoped—if she went now, she would be exposed for sure.

"That's a pretty stylish hero, though, isn't it?" said Mari, staring at the screen. "See, it's even got an earring."

"An earring…?"

Kaguya peered closer.

The hero filled the center of the screen, black from head to foot except for a bloodred eye *in its chest*. Something had been stabbed into the torso, directly into the eye—Kaguya's stomach almost jumped from her chest when she realized what it was.

That's Azuma's sword, isn't it?

It was. But where was Azuma?

"See, right there, it's wearing an earring. A silver cross."

Something glinted in the hero's ear.

"I feel like I've seen that earring somewhere before," said Mari casually. "And not that long ago either…but where? Hmm…"

Kaguya, however, wasn't listening anymore.

"I received it as a present a long time ago."

Kaguya could hear his slightly embarrassed voice in the back of her mind.

"I know it isn't my taste, but the person who gave it to me told me it was a lucky charm to keep me safe, so I've been wearing it ever since."

A silver cross earring hung from the hero's left ear. Azuma's trademark. It glittered in plain sight, as if to draw attention to itself.

Azuma told her the earring had been a keepsake from his sister. It was why he took such good care of it. How could a hero have gotten its hands on something so precious? It wasn't possible. Unless—

That's Azuma.

"It can't be…"

Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, Kaguya had convinced herself that Captain Yuuri Azuma was the one person who would never turn. It was unthinkable. It could happen to any of them, just not to him.

Another image wormed its way into her memory. Of a young woman with pink hair. A woman whom Kaguya hadn't been able to save.

History was repeating itself. She had watched her friend turn into a hero before her eyes. Watched her turn and then lost her.

As Kaguya stared at the screen, she remembered the girl's voice.

"Kagu…ya… Take care of everyone…for me…"

"Ah…"

In that moment, Kaguya believed she finally understood what Sakura had been trying to say.

Any of them could turn into a hero, at any time. But Kaguya was the one person who could stop them, who could protect them. That must have been what Sakura was saying to her. She was telling Kaguya to stop them if they turned.

Because no one else could.

Sakura, who believed Kaguya would *bring new hope for humanity*.

Now that Kaguya understood, something seemed to snap into place inside her.

It felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She realized what she had to do.

"Mari," she said in a voice that was both somber and relieved. Mari stared at her apprehensively. "You were right. I haven't been acting like myself lately."

"Kaguya, don't…"

"What does it matter if the brass are watching, or if they kicked me off the squad, or if somebody said a few mean things about me? What have I been getting myself so worked up over?"

Kaguya stood up and adjusted her lab coat.

"None of that matters anymore. It's all so trivial—what have I been doing with myself?"

At the moment, Kaguya was the only one capable of saving Captain Azuma. She owed it to herself to try.

So what if they called her useless. She wasn't some wimp who would just roll over and take it. Next time someone spoke to her that way, she'd just have to answer them with a punch in the nose!

"I'm sorry, Mari. I have to go."

"?! Kaguya?!"

Kaguya ignored Mari. She turned her back and began running.

Her legs were moving before she even had a chance to decide what to do next. How was she going to get there? And what would she do once she arrived? She had absolutely no plan.

She wasn't worried anymore about what might happen to her if she went. She was too concerned about what might happen if she didn't.

As long as she could get herself there, she knew she would find a way to save Azuma. Maybe she couldn't turn him back into a human yet, but she could at least save the man inside. And that felt important to her right now. More

meaningful than she could say.

"Under the circumstances…maybe I should just 'misappropriate' a personnel truck…"

Kaguya was still considering her options for vehicular larceny when a high-pitched trill interrupted her thoughts. She was receiving a phone call.

Kaguya answered in a panic, not even bothering to glance at who was calling.

"M-Major Mirai?! Why are you calling right now—?"

"*I'm parked in front of Technical. Get moving*," she said simply.

Kaguya's eyes widened. "How did you know I was on my way—?"

"*I know a capable woman when I see one. Now, hurry up, before your Gila monster of a boss spots you.*"

Major Mirai drove like a maniac, with practically no regard for the speed limit. If anyone could get Kaguya there in time…

Kaguya turned on her heel and began rushing toward the parking lot located in front of Technical. Before long, she caught sight of Mirai's vehicle. Mirai had parked in front of the entrance to the building and was sitting in the driver's seat.

"Major Mirai!" shouted Kaguya, racing toward the car. "You're a lifesaver! Where are we heading?!"

"Akihabara. Rindou made radio contact earlier, so I know their last location."

Mirai opened the door. Kaguya prepared to dive in. There was no time to waste.

"Wait!" a sharp voice called out from behind.

Turning back, Kaguya spotted a young woman in a white lab coat with long, glistening obsidian-black hair.

"Director…?! I'm just, I mean—"

"You forgot this."

The director tossed something into the air.

Kaguya caught it in shock. It was a Chronos, stick-shaped, about half the length of Sakura's staff. It looked like Sakura's staff had been broken in two. It seemed to beat with angry palpitations. It wasn't very heavy and felt natural in Kaguya's hand.

"This…was Sakura's…"

"You weren't planning on going without a weapon, were you?" The director appeared to be laughing slightly. "I made it a little lighter, compared to when Second Lieutenant Arakawa wielded it. You should be able to use it just fine now."

"But why—?"

Making a weapon lighter was no easy matter. It couldn't just be done overnight. The fact that the director had already split the weapon in half in advance seemed to suggest she knew Kaguya would be going.

"I figured this would happen, sooner or later."

"Director…!"

"If you're gonna go, best to go prepared. Try not to die while you're there."

Kaguya stared up at the director in disbelief. The director was smiling, something she almost never did.

"You're gonna go either way, right? So make it count, Kaguya."

Kaguya took the weapon, bowed deeply, and then took off running again. A moment later: "Kaguya, wait!!"

This time it was Mari.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?! If you go now, you won't be able to come back to Technical! What about the Revival Project…?!"

"I'll just have to find somewhere else to do my research… No one's going to stop me from finishing my work."

"But, Kaguya! You're the only one who can do this work!! You're going to get yourself killed out there!"

"Don't worry." Kaguya turned back and smiled. "I won't be alone out there.

The others will protect me; I know it."

Mari stared at her in shock. Kaguya tore her eyes away and raced toward the car. But then she had a change of heart and faced her friend one last time, smiling and shouting a promise.

"We'll talk about it all when I get back!! A-and I'm going to finish my lunch! So you better save it for me!"

It was a promise; Kaguya was coming back.

5-3

"Azuma!! Say something!!"

"Come on—don't do this! This can't be happening again!!"

Koyuki had been rescuing someone else when it happened.

Rindou had seen it, though, and according to what he said, Azuma had been struck by a collapsing ceiling. And then the Goddess had suddenly appeared.

Rindou had known immediately, from the smell of osmanthus blossoms in the air, that it was her. He was a step too late, however—and Yuuri Azuma transformed into an aberration before his eyes.

Black from head to foot, with just its bloodred eye and Azuma's own sword thrust into its torso.

The silver cross earring, glittering in the hero's ear, was proof that it was him.

"Why does this keep happening—?!"

A round from Koyuki's rifle struck Azuma—it was a dead hit. It didn't matter, though. The bullet didn't even scratch him.

The hero seemed to be protected by some sort of invisible barrier.

Rindou hadn't been able to scratch the hero, either. Like it was in the shell of an egg—and still growing inside.

Koyuki spoke to Rindou as she stubbornly loaded her next round. She didn't sound very hopeful.

"Any—any word on Lieutenant Shinohara?"

"Who knows...? I lost contact with Logistics."

It didn't sound as if Rindou was holding out much hope, either.

"Do you think she'd come if we did manage to call her?"

"I don't know... I wouldn't if I were her."

"Ha-ha. Me neither. I mean, what would she stand to gain?"

Kaguya was a back-line officer originally. She never belonged out here on the front; she had just been drafted into it. Why would she want to risk her health, maybe even her life, to come back here again?

Kaguya was a logical person. She would never do anything so meaningless.

"I think—this hero is as powerful as the hero from six years ago. The Bureau is probably going to lose a few hundred soldiers today. Koyuki, if you've got any last requests, you'd better make them now."

"What's the point of making a last request to someone who's about to die anyway...? Actually, scratch that. I do have one. If it looks like I'm a goner, finish me off before I turn."

"You didn't even need to ask. I'd hate to see what kind of hero you'd become."

That made two of them. Koyuki didn't want to see what her friends would do as heroes, either. Which is why they needed to find some way to kill Azuma now, before he could hurt anyone. The hero hadn't killed anyone yet. It looked like it kept trying to activate. They still had time.

The hero wasn't moving. Koyuki took aim once more. If she kept hammering the same spot, the shell would have to break at some point.

"I'm taking another shot— Ah?!"

"Koyuki!"

A pointed tentacle suddenly sprouted from Azuma. Multiple tentacles. They

formed a mantle at the hero's back, each as thick as a child's torso. Like an insect's wings or a peacock's feathers.

It was bloodcurdling sight.

One of the tentacles shot toward Koyuki. Rindou sensed its intent and moved in front of Koyuki to protect her.

"Ah—agh, rrk…!"

"Rindou! Why…?!"

Rindou was already in bad shape. The tentacle hit him hard, piercing him near the stomach. Thrown from his feet, Rindou hit his head and was knocked unconscious. Koyuki attempted to staunch the bleeding as she stared at the hero in despair.

"Azuma…please…stop…"

The barrier that had been protecting Azuma began to crack from the inside. The need for protection, it seemed, had passed.

Instead, the tentacles began to collect around Azuma, creating a kind of cocoon in front of him. It was barely large enough to conceal Azuma from sight at the moment, but it continued to grow larger and larger.

Koyuki had a feeling that when the cocoon opened once more, it would mean the beginning of the end.

Hitting the cocoon would have been easy enough, but the shot would never reach through to Azuma. There was only one person now who could reach Azuma. With her words.

If only Kaguya were here.

If Technical Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara were with them, she could have used her power to reach Azuma.

"Why did you have to leave us…?"

Koyuki's heart was almost completely broken.

The cocoon of tentacles opened softly. It was being born. An awful presence.

The thing began to rear up where Azuma had been. Something that was no

longer him. It was just like what had happened with Sakura. Only this time, something far more terrifying than a giant mannequin was coming.

"Agh— Ahhhh!!"

Despite being almost out of bullets, Koyuki fired off two more rounds in defiance. Both shots, however, were easily repelled by the cocoon, which was currently functioning in place of the previous barrier. Koyuki only had one bullet left. There was nothing she could do.

She sunk slowly to her knees. It was hopeless now.

It's—too late. The reinforcements didn't come, and Azuma is already…

Even these few moments were enough for Koyuki to realize that this hero was more powerful than anything they had ever faced before.

It was like six years ago. There was nothing to do at the moment but sink into despondency. Koyuki had no idea what form this hero's attack would take, but it would likely destroy all of Tokyo just like the previous hero had destroyed Chiba. And Koyuki was powerless to stop it.

The last thing she could do was watch. Surrender herself to despair as everything fell apart.

"God dammit…"

Koyuki bit her lip hard enough to draw blood and hung her head low.

It was too late. It was all over now.

Kaguya had tried to warn her. Who knew that a hero too strong for even Charon would actually show up someday? Koyuki should have listened when she had the chance—now, though, she couldn't even bring herself to feel regret. Before long, Azuma would turn into a monster, and all of Japan would be engulfed in freezing cold. Every last man, woman, and child would perish. Numb, Koyuki sat and waited— "Huh…?"

She could have sworn she heard something. Her eyes widened. A low thrumming sound. She glanced up.

Is that…?

"…An engine?"

The thing that had been Azuma noticed it at the same time as Koyuki. The sound of an engine revving in the distance and steadily drawing closer. The squeal of rubber tires.

"I don't believe it…!" Koyuki turned toward the sound. "You've got to be kidding me…!"

Her face twitched. A car was currently barreling her way, moving at breakneck speed across the tract of flattened rubble created by the previous hero.

And there was a girl in the car, with light violet eyes and scarlet-red hair—a girl who was currently screaming bloody murder.

"Mirai! Major Mirai!! The tires are gonna pop off!!"

"What did you say?! I can't hear you!!"

"Major!! The car!! It's breaking up!! And the hero is right there!!"

"I can't see them, remember?!"

"Remind me to never get in a car with you again!!"

The despair that Koyuki had been feeling just moments ago was instantly replaced with sheer bewilderment.

"Lieutenant Shinohara…?!"

After more screaming and shouting, Kaguya managed to cajole Major Mirai into stopping the car. A moment later, Kaguya fired off two, three shots from a gun—an ordinary pistol.

The tentacles moved reflexively to protect Azuma, but the shots were a trap. Once hit, the tentacles began to slow down before temporarily coming to a stop. Koyuki instinctively surmised that the bullets had been loaded with some sort of drug.

While the tentacles were disabled, Kaguya quickly approached Koyuki, who was still collapsed on her knees, exhausted. Kaguya was wearing her white lab coat, a look of steely defiance in her eyes.

"Wh-why…?" Koyuki could barely believe what she was seeing. "What are you

doing here…?"

"Major Mirai has mostly filled me in!" Kaguya shouted, not looking at Koyuki. "Don't worry; I won't let Azuma kill anyone."

"…"

Why had she come? *How* had she come? Koyuki couldn't speak. There was too much going on inside her head. Eventually, she found herself asking a stupid question.

"H-how…did you know where we were?"

Kaguya steadied her breathing. She smiled faintly.

Koyuki hadn't gotten over her astonishment yet. Kaguya stood beside her as the tentacles began to move once more. She drew a weapon from her waist. Koyuki gasped when she saw it.

"Is that—?"

"Sakura's weapon. It's a little shorter now, though."

It looked like a club, about the size of a baseball bat. Kaguya swung it in the air awkwardly. The action seemed in contrast to her appearance, dressed as she still was in her white lab coat. The tiniest wisp of damage would probably be enough to lay Kaguya out flat.

Her legs were even shaking.

Not just from the cold. She was scared.

Of dying. And most of all: of becoming a hero.

"Lieutenant Shinohara…"

Koyuki had always thought that Kaguya didn't fear the front line. Apparently she'd been wrong. Kaguya's face had gone pale. It must have been more of a struggle for Kaguya than she had known.

No one was forcing her to be here, but she had come anyway. Koyuki shook her head. This was why she hated techies.

"You're insane, you know that…?"

Koyuki got back on her feet. Kaguya was the only one who could do this, so Koyuki knew what she had to do. She checked her remaining rounds, the determination returning to her face.

"I'll provide backup." She pointed her rifle toward the hero. "I've only got one bullet left. Don't mess this up…*Kaguya*."

Kaguya understood Koyuki's plan. Once Koyuki shot the tentacles, they would move in response, giving Kaguya an opportunity to get close to Azuma.

They only had one chance. They were going to have to work together in order to pull this off.

"I didn't realize we were on a first-name basis," Kaguya said, laughing. "You'd better watch yourself, too, then, *Koyuki*."

Koyuki steadied her aim, narrowed her sights, and waited for the right moment. She only had one bullet, one chance—this time she wasn't going to miss.

Not if she could help it.

She aimed toward where Kaguya had shot earlier and breathed in slightly, searching for the weakest point she could find, and biding her time until the creature exposed itself. She placed her finger on the trigger and grinned savagely.

We're getting you out of there—Azuma!

The quiet seconds stretched out unnaturally, like hours. The trigger groaned.

The shot hit. The cocoon opened—Kaguya was ready.

The cocoon moved reflexively, one small portion unfolding like petals to strike at Koyuki. She bobbed and weaved, dodging each strike by a hairbreadth, as she continued to stare at the spot where she had fired. A space had opened up in the cocoon.

"Kaguya!!" Koyuki shouted.

But Kaguya was already moving—into the open cocoon. Where the thing that had been Azuma now slumbered.

"Kaguya!!"

Kaguya was already running.

She understood what she needed to do. Striking the hero would allow her to commune with its mind. She faced it, raising *Sakura* high into the air.

"Ahhhhh!!"

The hero was like a shadow, black from head to toe. The heavy club made impact.

Sakura's weapon resonated throughout Azuma's body. It finally drew his attention her way, allowing her to enter his mind through the blow.

"—!!"

It was one of the worst headaches Kaguya had experienced to date. She began to lose consciousness; the pain felt like it might crush her. She extended her hand in desperation.

And saw him. He was smiling.

Kaguya knew it was pointless, but she couldn't stop herself from calling his name.

"Captain Azuma—it's time to come home!"

CHAPTER SIX
Intervention

Meddling in the minds of others took a powerful toll.

Kaguya had been made keenly aware of that fact while working with Charon. She knew that repeatedly intervening in the damaged psyches of these heroes could lead to her own self becoming unstable instead.

The director warned her that she could become lost inside the heroes, but Kaguya already understood that fact. She hadn't needed the warning.

One of the reasons she had continued to dive into the heroes, despite the dangers, was for the sake of her research. Understanding the heroes' psychodynamics could be the key to turning them back into humans.

The other reason—

"Huh…?" Kaguya murmured in surprise.

She now stood in front of a small house—cozy but with a stylish exterior. She was in the front garden.

A moment later, she realized she was inside Azuma's mind.

This wasn't the barracks, though. It was an ordinary, civilian home. She could see inside the house clearly through its large glass-pane windows. It was so open and unguarded. Kaguya felt out of place.

Had Azuma's mind really created this? She had even more difficulty imagining someone like Azuma here.

As she was still marveling over the sight, Kaguya spotted a person inside the house. A young man, with hair like silver ice.

"A-Azuma!!" She pressed herself up against the window. "Can you hear me?! Captain Azuma, come back to us!"

"Hmm…?"

The boy named Azuma finally noticed Kaguya as she pressed herself against the window from outside.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Who am I? It's me! Kaguya!"

"Mom, there's a weird lady in the garden!"

"Who are you calling weird?! Well…I guess from your point of view right now this does look pretty strange."

Kaguya wasn't worried about being seen, however. This was merely Azuma's mental world. She placed her hands on the sill in order to open the window so she could enter the house and chase him.

It won't open… No real surprise there, though.

She tried ramming it with her shoulder. There was a dull thud each time she made contact, but not a single crack appeared. Kaguya wasn't sure if she was doing this right, but she didn't know what else to do.

"…I told you. There's a strange lady in the garden right now, Reira, so you need to stay away from there."

"It's fine! If we just talk to her, I'm sure we can work things out."

Kaguya could hear Azuma's voice, as well as the voice of a girl, coming from deeper inside the house.

The girl sounded young. Kaguya didn't recognize her voice, but that wasn't strange considering she was someone Azuma had created inside his mind. Kaguya turned to look. She wasn't sure what she expected, but it wasn't this. She inhaled sharply.

"Ah…!"

It was shaped like a little girl. But it was no ordinary little girl. It was a monster. A mixture of wood and slime that was difficult to describe… A single

glance was enough to make Kaguya's skin crawl.

"Azuma! Get out of there! Come quickly!"

"Who are you—how do you know my name? I'm warning you: I'll call the police!"

"I don't care; just open the window—ugh, it's no good. Come around to the entrance!!"

"Reira, stay back. Let's just let the police deal with this."

"Captain Azuma, can't you see? She's already…"

The little girl was already a monster. Azuma stood in front of the girl to protect her.

Kaguya was shocked at his behavior, turning his back to a hero in that way. At the thought, however, she felt a sharp, cold pain in the side of the head, like being stabbed with a needle.

She didn't have time to worry about that right now, however. The monster was circling behind Azuma. It was going to grab him.

Why hadn't he noticed her?

"Wait—"

She needed to make him see.

Or at the very least, draw his attention her way. Kaguya tried to think.

What could she do? The only things she had on her person at the moment were her combat uniform, Sakura's weapon, and— "Ah…!"

Her wristwatch terminal.

It was worth a try. She still remembered how she had done it the last time.

She set the timer for three…two…one…

Beep-beep-beep-beep. Beep-beep-beep-beep.

"What's that—?! What's happening?!"

It worked. Azuma jumped at the shrill sound coming from outside the window, then immediately turned to shout at the source.

"Lieutenant! What did I tell you about messing with my alarm—?!" Azuma's eyes suddenly went wide in realization. **"Lieutenant…?"**

"…!! Yes, it's me! Kaguya! Captain Azuma, let's go home!!"

"G-go home where? This is my home, here with Reira—"

"No, Azuma! You've turned into a hero! You need to wake up now!"

"? What's a 'hero'? What are you talking about, Lieutenant?"

She couldn't believe it. He seemed to remember her, but not the heroes—which was the whole reason they had met in the first place. As if he was selectively choosing only to remember the memories that suited him.

He probably didn't want to think about those things his sister, and his friends, had turned into.

"Heroes are the enemy…," said Kaguya, recalling Azuma's own feelings. "But they used to be human. That's why we're here. Me: to save the heroes. And you: to save the people who might become heroes themselves someday."

It looked like he was close to remembering—but something still held him back. Kaguya gritted her teeth and watched him closely.

If Azuma himself didn't want to remember, then nothing Kaguya could say was going to make a difference. She didn't want to think of the captain as weak…but everyone had their own vulnerabilities. It was what made them human in the first place.

And he was. Still *human*, that is.

"Don't you remember? You said you were going to protect people, even the ones who might turn someday!" she cried, desperately trying to reach him. "Captain Yuuri Azuma!! Please—!"

She lifted her hand to pound on the window once more but was greeted instead by empty space.

The window had swung open, of its own accord. At some point, both the house and the sister had disappeared without a trace.

"A-Azuma! Come with me! Quickly!!"

"I—"

Azuma stared at Kaguya in a daze. The words caught in his throat. He stuttered, as if trying to remember what he was about to say but not sure if he should.

However, that moment of confusion did not last long.

"Captain Azuma! Wait!"

A commanding voice spoke Azuma's name. A young woman—her eyes flittering, crawling deep inside, like an insect's eyes. It was obviously the Goddess.

She appeared from the shadows, startling Kaguya.

A girl with violet eyes and scarlet hair.

"You're…me…?!"

The false Kaguya began to whisper in Azuma's ear.

"Azuma, don't believe her! That's the Goddess! She's stolen my form in order to lead you astray!"

"Lead him astray?! No, you did—!"

Kaguya took an angry step toward the Goddess. She was a little upset that Azuma couldn't tell the difference between them immediately.

"Azuma, you're not seriously thinking of believing her, are you? Just look at her; she's obviously the fake!"

Azuma shifted his feet uncomfortably as the two Kaguyas crowded in close.

"Azuma—everyone out there is worried about you! Koyuki and Rindou—"

"Yes, Rindou is injured, and Koyuki is out of bullets. It's so awful; you don't want to go out there."

"…!"

Now Kaguya was really getting angry. Was the Goddess reading her mind?

It was only surface memories, but that must have been how she was able to create these perfect worlds: by reading people's minds and stealing their memories. The Goddess must have scanned Kaguya's memories just now; how else could she have known what was going on out there?

"The Goddess can read memories…," Azuma muttered in realization. **"So maybe something you *don't remember* could help me tell you two apart."**

Something she didn't remember. Both the Goddess and Kaguya seemed confused.

How was he supposed to ask her about something she didn't remember?

"Lieutenant, tell me this," said Azuma, staring at the two of them. **"You said that you saw your brother turn into a hero—but did you actually witness it happen?"**

"Huh…?"

"You were unconscious at the time. Which means you shouldn't have seen the moment itself. Do you remember witnessing the human become a hero, like you did with Sakura?"

"What do you mean…?"

"You've forgotten something very important."

Something important.

"And I think that memory will prove which of you is real. I don't think the Goddess can read memories that are buried that deep."

A memory. Something important.

She was forgetting something important.

"Kaguya! Remember—!!"

"Huh…?"

Kaguya could hear him.

A voice. Not Azuma's, but a young man, slightly older than her.

She had heard those words before. Somewhere.

Kaguya's vision began to swim. Azuma suddenly seemed so far away. Why did her head hurt so bad—?

"If you dive in too deep, you could wind up getting lost inside the hero instead."

The director's warning echoed in Kaguya's mind.

Whenever Kaguya dived into a hero's memories, there was always a risk that she could get dragged down instead. In a panic, she tried to get Azuma to turn her way, but it was already too late.

Her throat. It was on fire. Throbbing, like there was something that needed to come out. Her throat—

6-2

"…Oh!"

Everything was foggy. She could hear people arguing, somewhere far away, at the edge of her consciousness.

She didn't really mind, but the voices sounded so insistent. For the first time, she realized she was lying on the ground.

Not normal ground, however. There were huge cracks, as if the surface had been broken. The rest of her surroundings were deserted, flickering flames in a world of mingled light and shadow.

And there, amid the flames, *he* stood.

She could only see his back. Large and dark, protecting her where she lay.

It didn't look like a human back. It had wings like a demon, and yet there was also something familiar and comforting about it.

She lifted herself up gently. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the demonic wings turning toward her, but she could barely focus on them.

A puddle of water had collected next to her.

Kaguya peered into the puddle, and for a moment she thought she must have been seeing things.

"Ah—"

The face that stared back at her, in the puddle's reflection, was not human.

It was a shadow. Exactly the size of a face. Just like the masks that clung to the heroes.

She felt confused at first, not afraid or repulsed. Why couldn't she see her own face?

Kaguya glanced around, as if searching for help. She heard a voice, but it was more like a scream.

"Kaguya, do you recognize me—?! Kaguya!"

The demon in front of her had spoken. It was still turned away.

She remembered that voice; it was her brother's. She tried to reach out. They had been on a walk together. What was she doing lying on the ground?

Kaguya tried to reach him, but before she could, something else took her hand.

It was *her brother*. He crouched down next to her and stared. A second brother.

"Morning, sleepyhead. I can't believe you fell asleep while on a walk; you're such a little baby."

"Is that really you…?"

"Here, get on my back. I'll carry you."

Kaguya got on her brother's back. She still wasn't sure what was happening, but that demon person couldn't be her brother. He had to be a fake.

She thought she heard someone shout no.

"Who is that…?"

"I don't know, sweetie, but there's some pretty scary people out here. We should go somewhere else. Just come with me."

"You can't," she heard the other voice say. But in Kaguya's mind, the demon was just some "scary man." She knew better than to listen to scary people.

"Kaguya! Remember—!!"

The demon turned.

She saw a young man's face—a young man with chestnut brown hair. It was her brother.

"Huh…?"

Another brother—? So then who was the person next to her?

"Kaguya, open your eyes!" the demon brother shouted, rushing toward her. "Please, don't become a hero…!"

"A hero…?"

That word seemed to pierce the fog of her mind. Kaguya realized she was reliving the past.

She was turning into a hero. Everything she was seeing right now was a lie. It was her perfect world.

Everything finally made sense. All this time, she thought her brother had turned into a hero, when in fact— "It was me…"

She was the one who had begun to turn, not her brother.

Kaguya.

Heroes didn't see the outside world clearly. No one was sure how exactly the world appeared to them, but at the very least they didn't seem to recognize people.

The memories Kaguya had been holding on to for so long had actually been images seen through the eyes of a hero.

Realizing that, however, only brought more questions.

If what she was seeing was the real world, then why were there two brothers there? Or was this an illusion created by the Goddess? In which case, how was the demon brother able to speak to her?

And why would I have wished for a world like this?

Kaguya couldn't remember what her dreams had been back then.

And why am I the only one…?

The only one who, for whatever reason, hadn't fully turned into a hero. She seemed to have rejected her perfect world. But how come? Whatever the reason, it would explain why there was an unhatched egg inside her. She had rejected the process.

But why am I the only one who didn't turn?

Kaguya was a scientist at heart. There had to be some explanation for why she was able to avoid transforming into a hero and become human once again. She needed to know.

"Kaguya, let's go. That man seems strange."

Despite the circumstances, the brother holding Kaguya's hand smiled. The present-day Kaguya was reliving her past experiences and emotions. That smile made her feel sick.

"B-but he has the same face as you. Do you know him?"

"I don't think so. It must just be a coincidence. If it bothers you that much, though, we could try asking him. I wouldn't want my favorite little sister to worry."

No.

For some reason, the young Kaguya knew instinctively.

The brother she remembered never smiled like that. And he didn't speak nice like that, either.

Her brother was mean. He was violent, never listened to people, and she could count on one hand the number of times they had eaten dinner together. One time, though, when Kaguya had lost her pendant, he had disappeared for three days afterward without a word. And when he returned, he had her pendant in his hands. That was the type of person her brother was.

"Give her back!!" the demon with her brother's face shouted.

Only the face matched. From the neck down, he looked freakish and aberrant, and it sent shivers down Kaguya's spine.

As the monstrous brother stomped toward them, Kaguya clung to the kind brother's chest.

"This is bullshit—I've been fighting for Kaguya my whole life, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna let you turn her into a hero!!"

"I don't know what you mean, but you shouldn't yell like that. You'll scare poor little Kaguya," said the other brother, exuding a beautiful smile.

His eyes were so calm and relaxed. That was the part that seemed the most wrong.

"My brother would never smile and act gentle at a time like this…"

In fact, he would probably already be throwing punches.

She was right; the demon brother was already swinging. A violent, ill-mannered beast. When Kaguya saw the tears in his eyes, she knew.

That was her real brother.

As soon as the thought occurred to her, her throat suddenly burned.

Her throat. It was on fire. Throbbing, like there was something that needed to come out. Her throat.

"Augh! Ahhh!"

And then it emerged. Like a vine, sprouting from her throat and wrapping around the laughing brother that stood before her. The kind, smiling one.

In the same moment, another vein sprouted forth from the brother's chest. It took her a moment to realize he had been stabbed from the other side.

"Ah…"

Instantly, the smiling brother's eyes seemed to flip backward. With a skittering cry, the false brother scattered.

Next came the vortex of wind. As it enveloped her, the demon with her brother's face seemed to grow farther away. He reached out for her. He was saying something.

"Kaguya! Come home—!"

"Of course…"

That was what was missing with the others. The one thing she had done differently.

She rejected her dream.

"I couldn't accept it—"

People didn't have many nice things to say about Kaguya's brother. And that was an understatement. The memories Kaguya had made with him were full of lies and deceptions. He hadn't always been like that, and that was what had scared her about him the most.

But she had loved him. All of him. Even the scary and violent parts. They had already lost their parents by that point. They were all alone. Only now, looking back, did she realize that he had done it all for her.

"My own dream…"

Kaguya hadn't been ready to accept a kinder, gentler version of her brother… She had never wanted a kind impostor. What she had wanted was to sit down and eat dinner with her real brother, the angry and violent one.

"…I wasn't able to accept it."

That was why she did it—killed the kind, ideal phantasm of a brother she had always yearned for.

● ● ●

Kaguya's eyes flew open. Now she knew.

Why the Goddess had called her a traitor.

Why she could enter the minds of the heroes. The real reason.

"Lieutenant…do you remember now?"

"Captain Azuma, it was me—I'm the one who turned into a hero."

Azuma seemed startled. He turned toward her.

"A long time ago, I started to turn, but my brother saved me. I don't know why he was able to do that—but its thanks to him that I was able to reject my

ideal dreamworld."

"I see…"

Azuma seemed persuaded.

He now believed that she was the real Kaguya. She could hear it in his voice.

"My dream was to see my brother smile. To laugh together, one more time."

After their parents died, her brother had never smiled. Not even once.

"A—Azuma! You're not really going to fall for this, are you?!" shouted the other Kaguya, the Goddess. **"If you go with her, you'll turn into a hero! Don't you understand?! I'm still ready to fight with you, Azuma!"**

Azuma's eyebrow twitched. He spoke to the Goddess in a stern voice.

"Fight? Why do you want to fight? What for?"

"What for? Why, to defeat the heroes, of course! We need to bring peace to the—"

"Wrong answer."

Azuma sounded fed up, and Kaguya had a feeling she knew why.

Because…

"The only thing Kaguya cares about is her research. She's not interested in pipe dreams like peace, just cold hard science."

Azuma drew his side pistol. It was one of the living weapons, made from the heroes. They were designed to be used against other heroes.

"Do…you think that will work against the Goddess?"

"I don't know," said Azuma, narrowing his eyes. **"Besides, even if that's really her, who knows if shooting the Goddess would even kill her. It's anyone's guess."**

The Goddess had currently taken Kaguya's form, but the Goddess was protean and phantasmagorical. It might take more than bullets to kill her.

What if they couldn't kill her?

Not to mention, there was no proof, even, that killing the Goddess would

allow them to return. The only thing they had to go by right now was Kaguya's single, subjective experience.

Kaguya, however, had faith.

"Don't worry… If anyone can do this, Captain, it's you."

"Captain!" the Goddess shouted.

Azuma fired at the creature in Kaguya's form. Once, twice, as cold as ice. The first shot hit her in the right leg, the second in her left arm. To immobilize her.

Blood spouted from the Goddess's wounds. Azuma pointed the muzzle toward her face and placed his finger on the trigger.

"Yuuri…"

A young girl's voice. Azuma froze.

At some point the Goddess had changed shape, into a young girl with icy silver hair and black eyes. By changing in that way, she had essentially confessed that she was the Goddess, but Azuma still steadied his hand.

"Yuuri, why did you abandon me back then?"

Azuma's younger sister's voice reverberated in the air.

"If you had only come after me, I wouldn't have died. Why do you want to kill me again? Yuuri—"

"Azuma, that's not your sister."

Kaguya forced Azuma to look at her. He seemed startled.

"Do you really think your sister would say something like that to you? She gave you that lucky charm to protect you, remember? Would she really blame you like this?"

"Of course not…"

Azuma wasn't stupid. He must have known that the thing wasn't actually his sister. Just something that had taken her form.

It was an affront. Azuma should have been angry at what the Goddess was doing. Instead, he stared at her with pity.

"That's not my sister. I know that."

The sister seemed to notice the compassion in Azuma's eyes. **"Come with me,"** she said, reaching out for him.

She was like a hungry animal begging for food. It was the sweetness of the thing that made it most terrifying. Kaguya felt bile rise in her throat.

Azuma, however, continued to stare at the sister tenderly.

"I'm sure you've figured this out by now, Kaguya…"

Azuma was in no hurry to act; he knew his own strength. Anger would have been just as pointless. Like getting angry at an ant or a fly. Oblivious, the Goddess kept her hand outstretched.

"…but the last time we were together, we had a fight."

A tear fell from the corner of his eye.

"Right before she turned into a hero. She ran out of the house and got hit by a car and then in her last moments turned into one of those homicidal monsters."

Azuma smiled in self-reproach.

"It's a common enough story. It probably happens to someone, somewhere, at least once every few days. But I still can't get over it. It's my greatest regret."

Regret. What could be harder than parting with someone on such terms only to lose them forever?

"I just—I wanted to tell her I was sorry, one last time. I think that was my wish."

To speak once more with someone who had become a hero. That must have been the dream that the Goddess had found, when she visited Azuma in Kaguya's guise.

Kaguya couldn't blame him for feeling the way he did.

"I'm too weak, Lieutenant. I can't kill her. Would you—would you help me?"

"…Of course. That's why I'm here."

Azuma still held the gun out. Kaguya took his hand in her own.

His fingers were shaking beneath hers. She adjusted his aim, just like he had once done for her.

"See? What would you do without me?"

"Sorry. I'll have to pay you back once we get out of here."

"In that case, how about some expensive *yakiniku*?"

A smile finally appeared on Azuma's face. Broad—and open.

"Let's go home, Captain."

"I'd like that."

Azuma pulled the trigger, and the gun fired. The girl's face distorted in hideous fashion as the bullet passed through. With an expression more akin to bitterness and rage than to despair, the Goddess collapsed to the ground, blood spurting from her face.

A powerful wind descended around Kaguya and Azuma. It felt like they were in the eye of a storm. The thing that had taken on that little girl's form began to disappear before their very eyes. Whatever it was—not Azuma's sister—began to reveal its shape.

Kaguya and Azuma had no room in their hearts for vapid, sickly fantasies.

Their true dreams—their ideals—lay elsewhere.

Out there, in the real world, where their own legs would carry them.

6-3

"Kaguya!!"

Kaguya opened her eyes to the sight of Koyuki, her face in tears.

"Rindou!! She's awake!!"

"That's great!! Now you can finally stop crying!!"

"B-but…"

"This isn't over yet!"

Fwip. Something flew past Kaguya's eyes.

It was a knife. Rindou had just tossed it to Koyuki, since she was already out of bullets.

"That scent is still in the air. The Goddess must be nearby. Let's flush her out and kill her this time for good!"

"Ha-ha-ha, sure thing, tough guy…"

Koyuki laughed in exasperation. The truth was: Rindou wasn't looking too great.

"Koyuki, you're injured…"

"Don't worry; I protected my hands and eyes."

The most important body parts for a sniper. Koyuki's face suddenly grew serious. She grabbed Kaguya by her lapel and stared into her eyes.

"I can smell it, too. But I'm too banged up to fight anymore." Koyuki's gaze was pleading. "Go make that thing pay. For what she did to Sakura."

Kaguya nodded, slowly but firmly. The Goddess was going to pay for her actions.

But how was Kaguya going to *find* the Goddess?

All she had to go by was the scent. But that scent was everywhere now—and overpowering. It was impossible to pinpoint its source.

"What if we just lit up the whole place? We probably wouldn't do much damage, but it could still flush her out."

"No, I don't think that's a wise idea. Even if it did work, the rest of the squad would get caught in the cross fire," said Kaguya, standing up.

Other than the four of them there, the members of Charon lay scattered about the battlefield, prone or unconscious. If they began firing

indiscriminately, the other squad members would almost certainly get hit.

Rindou was silent, likely seeing Kaguya's point.

"But—what are we supposed to do? If we don't stop her now, even more people will die in the future!"

More people would be turned into heroes.

"Maybe we could narrow down the search…or I could go as bait—"

"She's northeast."

Azuma's voice interrupted Rindou, quiet and to the point. Azuma had risen to his feet at some point and was now brushing dirt off himself. Rindou, Koyuki, and Kaguya stared in shock.

Azuma cocked his head at them. From his reaction, it almost seemed as if he had completely forgotten that he had been transforming into a hero just seconds ago.

"Azuma, are you…all right?" Koyuki asked, barely daring to believe her eyes.

"More or less, it seems. I'm sorry for worrying you, Koyuki."

Koyuki glanced down and bit her lip. She looked ready to cry.

"As for the Goddess, I think we'll find her to the northeast. I'm not sure why, but I can feel it."

"You're not sure…?"

"It's like a sensation… Either way, I think we'll find her there."

"Hold on," Rindou said, cutting in. "This doesn't make any sense. You're saying you know where the Goddess is?"

"Somehow I do, yes," Azuma replied.

He sounded confident. He turned his eyes to the northeast, eager to give chase.

"I'm going, too," Kaguya added. "You can't go alone. And Koyuki and Rindou can barely move anymore. It's the only way."

"Are you sure? I don't mind you coming, but our enemy is the Goddess. She's

not a hero—you won't be able to enter her mind like with the others."

"I won't need to…"

Kaguya was still in her lab coat. She clapped her hands together firmly.

"I'm not going to rest easy until I punch that Goddess in her stupid face."

"That's the spirit!" said Azuma.

And then he threw her over his shoulder again, like a bale of hay. "Put me down!" Kaguya shouted, but Azuma ignored her as he began running toward Major Mirai's top-down convertible.

The major had made herself scarce at some point. The car, however, was still running. Azuma tossed Kaguya roughly into the passenger seat.

"Can you drive—?"

"It was part of mandatory basic training. No sweat!"

Azuma switched gears, floored the gas pedal, and grabbed the wheel. The car sped off to the northeast. As soon as they were moving, Azuma pressed a hand to his head and groaned.

"Ngh—rgghhh—"

"Captain Azuma?! Are you all right?!"

"…Rgh. Apparently if the egg doesn't hatch, it gets left behind. That's not great."

Azuma grinned ruefully as he touched the area surrounding his right eye. He spoke to Kaguya.

"Lieutenant, thank you for what you did back there."

"A thank-you from Captain Yuuri Azuma…! Next pigs will start flying."

"We'd probably have a better chance against flying pigs," Azuma replied in an uncharacteristically upbeat tone.

Kaguya smiled.

The engine of the major's car was already being pushed past its limits. The outside of the vehicle was quickly accumulating new dents and scratches, but

Azuma and Kaguya continued onward, undeterred.

A few moments later, Kaguya spoke.

"I was thinking…"

Her voice carried well despite the wind whipping around their heads. Azuma took his hand off the wheel to check his side pistol before turning his attention toward her.

"Why do heroes attack humans? And during the incident six years ago, why were the members of Charon the only ones who survived?"

"…"

"I think—it must be a form of *reproductive behavior*."

"Reproductive behavior…?"

"Heroes tend to attack indiscriminately, but we know they don't target other animals, just humans. It's not that they avoid other animals, per se, but incidents only seem to occur when other humans are present. For instance, heroes generally activate in places where large numbers of people congregate, such as near stations or colleges, or in residential areas."

"Yes—you're right. I've never heard of a hero activating in, say, the middle of the woods or out at sea."

"Exactly. They only target humans. If they're focusing on a specific species…it must be for either food or reproductive purposes. And there are no stories of a hero eating a person."

If not food, then reproduction.

"Think back to Sakura's hero. Its belly swelled up, like it was about to explode. But what if there were fragments of hero tissue inside?"

The same held true for the other heroes as well.

While the first hero Kaguya had encountered had used mostly long-range attacks, such as its laser beam, and Reina's hero had used mostly close-range attacks, the mechanism of both involved creating more mass. As if these attacks were designed to spread traces of the hero's matter, to leave itself behind.

"So the cause and effect are the opposite of what they seem. The way the heroes attack is just a means to an end—it's not that people die from the attacks themselves, but rather from being incompatible."

"Incompatible—?"

"If we assume that the hero attack six years ago was an example of large-scale reproductive behavior, then the members of Charon may have survived simply because they happened to be compatible with the hero."

Azuma didn't respond. He pressed his hand gingerly to his eye, a swirl of emotions evident on his face.

"So what you're saying is that six years earlier—we didn't survive an explosion. We survived because…we were involved in some sort of propagation?"

"It would explain your ability to hear the egg. And why everyone in Charon can use Chronoses. And why people from Charon become such strong heroes. The enhanced physical abilities and durability. It would go a long way to explaining everything."

"In other words…" Azuma gulped slowly. "In other words, that means that at least to some degree, we've got some sort of hero agent or factor inside us?"

There was a glassy sheen to Azuma's eyes that could have been either fear or excitement. As Kaguya turned to stare at his face in profile, she was taken slightly aback. His usually perfect features were distorted into a powerful sneer.

"I suppose that's one way of putting it," she answered lightly.

Azuma's expression changed. The fury, however, remained. "That would explain why I'm able to hear the eggs," he murmured. "But why can't the others hear it, then? Weren't they subjected to the same conditions?"

"Distance, maybe…?"

"Distance?"

"Who was closest to the hero when the incident occurred, six years ago?"

"Based on everyone's accounts, I believe I was."

A look of realization suddenly appeared on Azuma's face. "And you think that's why…?"

Kaguya nodded slightly. This was all speculation, though, of course.

"Imagine when a water balloon breaks. The closest person is usually the one who gets the wettest, whereas someone standing far away might hardly get wet at all. I assume it's a similar principle."

"Because I was the closest to the hero…"

"Yes, you were the most acclimated."

Azuma was the most affected. Thus why he was the only one who expressed the ability to hear a hero's heartbeat.

"I don't know if I should be happy about that, or…"

"I don't see why not. You got it; might as well enjoy it."

A smile made its way to Azuma's lips.

He turned his eyes forward once more. The smile, however, quickly dissipated, replaced instead by a heavy stare.

"We're close…"

"I know. Even with all this wind, I can smell it—the scent of osmanthus blossoms is getting stronger."

The Goddess was nearby.

This was going to be Kaguya's, and Azuma's, first time facing the real her.

If they defeated her now, it would bring all these tragedies to an end. A new surge of strength began racing through their veins.

"Oh. Captain Azuma, I almost forgot…"

Kaguya passed something to Azuma from the passenger's seat.

It was his katana, which she had picked up earlier from the battlefield. Unfortunately, during all the mayhem it had been broken in two, cruelly split down the middle, one half lacking even a hilt.

"I figured it was still better than nothing."

"Barely." Azuma laughed in exasperation. "Thank you, though. I wouldn't have felt right going in with just my pistol."

"That's the second time you've said thank you today... Those pigs are going to be in outer space come nightfall."

The scent was strong. Dizzying, almost as if they were driving through a whole field of osmanthus trees. Before long, they spotted something in the distance. It looked to be about the size of a person.

6-4

As soon as they saw the figure, Kaguya and Azuma both instinctively knew they had found her. She was still just a speck in the distance. Azuma shouted over the wind.

"By the way—do you have any idea what the Goddess actually looks like?!"

"Not a clue!" Kaguya shouted back as she removed her lab coat. "Speaking of which, how does everyone in Charon recognize her when they see her? If you're just going by scent, wouldn't it be impossible to tell her apart from someone who just happened to be wearing a similar perfume?"

"No perfume could ever smell this strong."

"True, I guess you're right about that."

"Anyway, we just know... There's no mistaking her."

Azuma's response seemed vague to Kaguya, but he sounded sure enough. Kaguya decided to just let it be.

"Captain Azuma, let's run her over!"

"Good plan! Prepare for impact."

Azuma stood up in the driver's seat. At some point, he had wrapped a cloth around his left hand and was now holding a piece of the blade in each hand. He was already preparing to strike, completely unfazed by the wind whipping past

them.

Wait. He's standing on his seat.

How is the car still moving?

"Captain Azuma, what about the pedal...?"

The pedal?

Kaguya glanced down at the floor. Azuma had stomped the gas pedal so hard that it was now stuck in that position.

"Captain Azuma...! What about us?! We'll be killed!"

Azuma glanced down briefly at the pedal but didn't reply.

His face looked serious. Kaguya slowly craned her neck upward to stare at him.

There was a hint of sadness in his profile as the wind raged about him.

"Captai—"

"I'm sorry," he said, still staring ahead. His voice carried well. "I only said all that stuff to try to keep you from coming back. I promise, I never thought of you as useless or a burden. Not even once."

"Ah." Kaguya had completely forgotten about that. "That doesn't matter now. But..."

Kaguya remembered the recording. Azuma had said some pretty awful things about her, but she didn't care anymore. There was one thing, however, that still bothered her.

"What did you mean when you said I was 'terrifying'...? There's nothing scary about me."

Azuma seemed caught off guard for a second, but as the surprise faded, he turned toward the back seat momentarily, as if recalling what he'd said. Whatever he was doing, he looked uncomfortable.

"No—I'm not upset at what you said. It just didn't sound like you were talking about the egg inside me."

"W-well, the truth is: You were pretty terrifying back then. And no, I don't mean your egg. Principles or not, I couldn't understand why you were pushing yourself so hard. It was like you were determined to get yourself killed."

"And that…was something to be afraid of?"

"Yes. From my point of view, it looked like some kind of battle lust, the way you were abandoning your own safety and surrendering to the front."

"I see…"

So that was what he'd meant when he had called her terrifying. For Azuma and the other members of Charon, watching someone purposely place themselves in the jaws of death like that, even at the cost of their own health and sanity, must have been a disturbing sight.

"Oh. But isn't this the same thing? I mean, I'm here now."

"No… I'm glad you came."

His tone of voice was surprisingly gentle—and vulnerable.

"You came to my aid, even though you could have died doing it. Not many people would do that for another person."

Kaguya turned away, feeling a little embarrassed.

The old Kaguya would have never come. It wouldn't have even been a question. The old Kaguya would have said that there was no value in risking so much for someone she had only known for a month.

But after Sakura, and Reina—so many changes had come over Kaguya.

"If I die, though, I'm gonna haunt you when I'm gone…"

"I'd never let you die, Kaguya. I can't—you're—"

They suddenly hit a burst of dry air. The wind howled in Kaguya's ear.

"Sorry, what was that? The wind was too loud. I couldn't hear you."

"…"

"What did you say, Captain?"

"Never mind; forget about it."

Azuma was strangely quiet. Kaguya let it go, turning her eyes forward once again.

They were close now. Kaguya spotted her—and gasped.

It was not how Kaguya expected her to appear.

She had pink hair and emerald green eyes.

"Sakura—"

It was Sakura. Someone who was important to both Azuma and Kaguya.

"Tsk… That thing's got some nerve…!"

Captain Azuma's guard went up. He seemed to have noticed her as well. Kaguya shouted at him anyway.

"Captain Azuma, that's her! That's the Goddess!"

"All right—give me backup!"

Azuma jumped onto the hood of the car. Kaguya took his place in the driver's seat and grabbed the wheel. She adjusted the direction slightly—slamming into the Goddess with zero hesitation.

"AH… AHHHHHH!"

The Goddess didn't just look like Sakura, she sounded like her, too. That made Kaguya even angrier.

Kaguya thought she had run over the Goddess at first, but the Goddess had only been hit, not knocked down. As the car continued to skid forward, the Goddess clambered onto the hood to face Azuma.

"Azuma, please, help me."

It was Sakura's voice.

"I don't want to die! Please—"

"Wrong again," Azuma spat. "Sakura would never say something so pathetic. Sakura was strong."

Azuma's movements were so fast that Kaguya could barely keep up.

As the car hood pitched forward from the force of the collision, Azuma

planted his right foot firmly, wielding his two blades in the air as he dropped into the deepest pose she had even seen him take, his entire body sizzling with deadly intent.

The two blades glistened underneath the clear sky. Although uneven in length, like two halves of a wooden cross, each blade looked fearsome enough on its own to dispatch a foe with a single cut. Azuma's left hand, which gripped the hiltless half of the blade, was already oozing blood. No ordinary person would have been able to withstand so much pain.

The centrifugal force was unbearable. Kaguya was seated, and even she could barely hold on. She was afraid she might get thrown from the vehicle. Azuma, however, stood firm, practically defying gravity. At the moment of impact, he was already swinging his blades.

"IT HURRRTTS!!"

The Goddess—the thing in Sakura's form—almost fell from the hood. She grabbed on with both hands and began to change shape in a desperate bid for survival. There was a crunching noise, and then a small girl with icy silver hair appeared.

"Yuuri—"

"Enough. You make my skin crawl."

Azuma inhaled sharply but then smirked. It only lasted for a moment, but Kaguya saw it clearly. The Goddess's tricks meant nothing. Azuma raised his blade in vindication, then brought it down with all his weight, slicing off one of the arms clinging to the hood of the car.

"…!"

As he did so, however, the hiltless blade in his left hand was knocked free. Azuma extended the now-empty hand toward Kaguya.

"Lieutenant!"

"…!! Take it!!"

One word was enough for Kaguya to understand. She tossed Sakura's weapon toward Azuma's outstretched hand.

The car continued to skid out of control, pitching forward dangerously from the force of impact and ready to flip at any moment. It was hardly the best throw, but Azuma still managed to catch the weapon.

Even after being split in half by the director, Sakura's weapon was alive. A weapon created from a hero.

"Ahhhhh!!"

Azuma struck the Goddess as hard as he could. She had taken Sakura's form, and now she could meet Sakura's weapon.

Just then—the car began to tip. It was going to barrel roll—Kaguya sensed what was coming and leaped from the vehicle, rolling on the ground with unstoppable momentum.

"AIIEEEE!!"

With a scream, the Goddess changed shape again into something inhuman. Kaguya shouted as it began to rise. It was— "A bee?!"

A giant bee. A giant queen bee, nearly as tall as a human.

"So this is what the Goddess looks like...!"

Kaguya stared in awe. It was far larger than any insect she had ever seen. Unfortunately, it wasn't dead yet—Kaguya was still staring when it suddenly began to charge toward her.

"Ah...!!"

Kaguya no longer held Sakura's club; she was completely defenseless. All she had left now was her Chronos pistol. The one that she couldn't fire.

Kaguya had to do something. She pointed the gun at the bee. It didn't know Kaguya couldn't fire the thing; maybe it would fall for her bluff.

"Ah...!"

The giant queen bee was flying straight at her, as big as a hog, its giant stinger headed straight for her face. It was sharp and as long as a spear. Kaguya was too surprised to even flinch.

I wonder what will happen when it stings me.

The pain would be the least of her problems. It might turn her into a hero—or do something even worse.

Time slowed to a crawl as the massive skewer approached her face.

"——"

Everything seemed to be happening extremely slowly. Kaguya pointed her useless gun at the creature, moving almost automatically.

She couldn't fire it, but at least she could say she did something. A last act of defiance, in a sense. As Kaguya pulled the trigger, her own thoughts felt like they were coming from miles away.

Bwam.

The noise was deafening.

Time suddenly seemed to resume as the bee screamed and was knocked backward.

"I-it fired?!" Kaguya gasped, realizing what had just happened.

As frightening as the Goddess was, she now seemed close to death. She began to change shape again.

"Kaguya." It was Sakura.

"Thank you." It was Reina.

"Kaguya." It was her brother.

"No…"

The Goddess frantically shifted, cycling through face after face, its voice artificial.

But just looking the same wasn't enough. This creature didn't understand anything at all.

"You don't get it. Humans aren't the fickle, simple creatures you think they are."

Kaguya took several steps toward the bee. It was time to deliver the final blow.

Shooting it didn't feel like enough. Even whipping it with her pistol now wouldn't satisfy Kaguya. It was all too impersonal.

Kaguya had always hated violence and taking risks, but right now she needed this.

"You're just a stupid, giant bug!"

Kaguya was past fear at this point. She grabbed the creature by its antennae and lifted it up, rearing back her fist…

"You'll never know what it means to be human—!!"

…and then punched it, as hard as she could. It screeched in pain. Kaguya sensed someone racing up to her from behind— "Kaguya! Get out of the way!!"

Kaguya quickly moved aside. It was Azuma. He clutched his katana in his right hand and smiled darkly. His face was like a fearsome ogre's mask as he shouted at the giant bee.

"It's over—you freak!!"

Azuma struck without hesitation. A single, haughty slash, across and from the left.

The blow connected with the creature's jaw.

"AIIEEEEEEE!"

With a piercing scream, the Goddess collapsed into pieces.

"…"

The two breathed heavily, their shoulders shaking from exertion.

They had done it—they had defeated her.

They felt little sense of joy or achievement at the moment, however. Just a wave of sorrow and relief. They were too exhausted to move.

The bee's corpse lay on the ground—Kaguya had a sudden thought.

"You know, we should bring this back with us."

"What…?" Azuma's revulsion was evident. "I've heard some pretty crazy things come out of your mouth, but that one's up there…"

"But it's the body of the Goddess. Just think of all the experiments we could run, all the things we could learn!"

"If you say so. I wouldn't know…"

"Besides, it's not like we can just leave it here. And I'm not going to bury it. Are you?"

Kaguya crouched in front of the bee's corpse, a twinkle in her eyes.

"The problem is what parts to bring and how. Considering its size, we should probably split it up into sections but… Wait—of course!"

Kaguya reached out her hand behind her. Just like Azuma had done earlier, while atop the hood of the car.

"Azuma, lend me your sword."

"Why…?"

"To cut this thing up, obviously. I'll start by removing the head and the thorax. Actually, maybe you should do it instead…"

"No, thank you."

Kaguya spun around. She stared at him as if he had just said something crazy.

"Wh-why not? You had no problem cutting into it a few seconds ago."

"That is not the same…"

Azuma abruptly averted his head, refusing to entertain the topic any further.

Kaguya turned back toward the body with a look of dissatisfaction on her face. It was growing dark out, but she could still see the thing clearly. She was considering ripping off an antenna with her bare hands when— "! Kaguya!!"

Azuma's voice snapped Kaguya out of her thoughts. He sounded panicked.

"We have to get out of here!"

"Why?! What's wrong—?!"

Just then, Kaguya realized that the temperature had risen rapidly—and

unnaturally.

Kaguya's blood ran cold. Was this the Goddess again? Was she still having an influence, even now that she was dead? Or maybe this was one last surprise, for anyone foolish enough to approach her body without taking precautions first—

"The car is on fire!! Come on, we need to run!!"

"What?!"

Kaguya spun around only to realize that Major Mirai's vehicle was now engulfed in flames. The gasoline must have ignited.

A moment later, Kaguya's arms and legs were floundering again in midair.

Azuma had picked her up and thrown her over his shoulder once more. She was getting used to it by now. She cried, beating at his hands repeatedly.

"Captain Azuma! No—we need to go back! The body! The Goddess's body!!"

"Are you crazy?! Leave it!!"

"But why?!"

"Because we'll die otherwise! Imagine what people would say if they found out we defeated the Goddess only to die in an exploding car because you were too busy taking samples!"

Thanks to Azuma's quick feet, the two managed to put a fair amount of distance between themselves and Mirai's car. A moment later, the car exploded into flames, taking the Goddess's body with it. It was an inferno.

"No… My sample…"

The Goddess, or rather the queen bee, was now engulfed in flames, just like the vehicle next to it. Kaguya stared at the burning bee corpse sadly.

"Cheer up, Lieutenant. You don't need any more samples. The war is over now, remember?"

"I'm not so sure about that…," Kaguya said bleakly. "If the Goddess was working on her own, then where did she come from? What gave birth to her, and where is that thing now?"

Kaguya was right—it wasn't over yet. The source of it all had to be out there

still, somewhere.

"O-of course… Well, all the better, then. That just means you'll get more chances to inspect one."

"How so…?"

"Huh?"

"Not even most people on the front line are likely to come into contact with a Goddess corpse. How is someone like me, from Technical, supposed to get her hands on one?!"

Azuma recoiled sheepishly. Kaguya seemed like she was about to have a fit.

"This was a one in a million chance…! Wahhh…!"

"I'll just kill an even bigger one for you next time, then. How about that? Does that sound good?"

"Two."

"Huh?"

"I want you to bring me two."

"Fine, fine," Azuma said, almost as if he were pacifying a small child.

"I really wanted to examine that Goddess's corpse, though… Oh, it's such a waste!!"

If they had been able to bring back the Goddess's corpse, it could have meant huge advancements for humanity.

It could have contributed so much. Not just for Kaguya's Revival Project, but for the director's biological research as well. Once she got back to Technical, she would have to— Kaguya suddenly froze. She had completely forgotten.

"Wait…! What about my egg?"

Her secret. It was going to come out.

"If they figure out that I can talk to heroes, I'll be fired… Or maybe even executed. Or turned into a lab rat…!"

"Come on now, I doubt they'd execute you…probably."

"Probably…?! But I'm not ready to die!" Kaguya screamed. "I'm still waiting for that all-you-can-eat *yakiniku* dinner you promised! And the fancy sushi!"

"Who said anything about sushi?!"

"Ooh, and don't forget about the dessert buffet!"

"You're like a black hole…" Azuma laughed in exasperation. "Anyway, I'm sure it will all work out. Besides, now we've both managed to come back after dipping our toes into the hero pool. Shouldn't that be enough for your Revival Project?"

"Oh-ho… You're very kind, Captain Azuma," said Kaguya, smiling as she wiped away frightened tears. "Volunteering to be my test subject… I plan to hold you to that promise, even if I do wind up persona non grata at the Bureau. There's no escape for you now!"

"…"

Azuma turned away, a strange expression on his face.

"I think I know the answer to this," said Azuma, "but you're not planning on quitting—are you?"

"Of course not. After all, no matter what happens, I'm always going to be me."

The director might beat her to the answers first—that was invariably a possibility. But Kaguya wasn't about to just give up. Not as long as there was someone out there to tell her she brought hope.

Not as long as she still remembered.

"Can I ask you one more thing, then?"

Kaguya turned, hearing the hint of a question in his voice.

"I know it's silly to ask at this point—but why did you come back?"

"Yes…it certainly is silly. Why ask me that now?"

"I guess I didn't have a chance earlier."

He had a point.

Come to think of it, Kaguya wasn't sure herself.

The more she considered it, the more reasons there were not to come. She had been in real danger at one point. There was a good chance she wasn't going to be able to carry on with her Revival research at the Bureau any longer. And she could have even died. There were no pros, just all cons.

And yet Kaguya had zero regrets.

In fact, when she tried to picture what the future might have looked like had she not come, it sent shivers down her spine. She doubted she would have made any real progress with her work, either. After all, even if it was possible to turn heroes back into humans, there was certainly no way to bring the dead back to life.

"I wonder…why *did* I come back?"

Kaguya sat down on the ground. She suddenly felt lightheaded.

Now that the fight was over and her adrenaline had worn out, she was starting to feel pain.

"You know, I'm not really sure myself."

"I didn't think you would come. It seemed like such a meaningless thing to do…"

"And I never waste my time on meaningless things. Only…"

Kaguya was sitting on the ground. She stared up at Azuma, who was still standing over her.

"I think maybe it did mean something, this time. This was important. I don't have any regrets."

Azuma looked as if he didn't quite understand. Kaguya turned away so he couldn't see her smile.

There was an abrupt hiss, and the comms crackled to life. The reception was filled with static, as if it was coming from far away.

"I finally connected—!! Are you okay? Azuma!! Everyone?!"

"Major Mirai."

The person on the other end of the comms was Major Mirai, whom they had lost sight of at some point during the battle.

"Thank goodness. I'm sorry I couldn't stay there with you guys."

"Don't worry about it. Even if you had stayed, I don't think you would have contributed much to the battle…"

"I wish I could say that you were wrong, but…" Mirai chuckled ironically. "How is everyone else?"

"Fortunately, no one seems to have been killed, but there are a lot of injured."

"Understood, I'll send some meat wagons. They should get there in a few minutes. Don't go dying on us before then!"

"No one who's alive now is going to die. I won't allow it—don't you worry about us."

"Spoken like a real man of the hour. I'll see you guys later."

The transmission ended. Azuma moved closer to Kaguya. It seemed like he was about to congratulate her on a job well done. Before he could, however, he suddenly gasped as if he had just remembered something.

"What's wrong, Captain?"

"I forgot to tell Major Mirai about her car…"

"Ah!"

Mirai's roadster had flipped over and burst into flames. There wasn't even enough left to scrap. Kaguya glanced toward the burning vehicle and laughed.

"I think this counts as extenuating circumstances…"

"Ha-ha. Yeah, that's one way to put it."

Kaguya threw herself onto her back and listened to Azuma laugh. He sighed and crouched down next to her, seemingly tired as well. She glanced at him, then back at the sky. It was over.

The sky above was almost aggravatingly beautiful. Just like it always had been.

EPILOGUE

Hero Syndrome

They would never find common ground with the heroes.

Not while heroes protected the innocent.

It took the boy a moment to realize he had no idea where he was—that might sound stupid, but unfortunately it was also the truth. When the boy opened his eyes, he was in a place he had never been before.

He could have sworn he was on the roof of a building somewhere, just moments ago. Now, for some reason, he found himself in what looked to be a medieval European town. A world where elves and wyverns coexisted with humans.

"Is this a dream…?"

Despite being dressed in a normal school uniform, something that should have been wildly out of place in this setting, no one seemed to be staring. It was like he wasn't even there, which for some reason did not feel unpleasant to the boy.

"But the sounds and the smells… This dream feels so real—"

"That's because it *isn't* a dream, hero."

The boy jumped, startled. A voice had spoken to him from behind.

He turned and then suddenly froze.

A young woman was standing there. Aloof yet stunning, with beautiful silver hair reaching down to her waist.

"What in the—? I mean, who are you…?"

"I am the goddess of this world." The young woman smiled, her eyes sparkling. She opened her arms wide. "Welcome, hero! Welcome to our world!"

The boy stared at her, open-mouthed. She sidled closer before he could speak. Her laugh, her cheerful smile, it was so sweet and inviting. The boy decided not to sweat the details.

"Your world, huh…? Well, if this is a dream, I guess I might as well see where this goes…"

"I just told you: This isn't a dream," huffed the beautiful silver-haired girl. She waggled her index finger in front of his face. "You've been summoned to this world, hero. And it's very important you understand your new position here. That's why I've come."

"My position? But I just got here."

"I'll teach you everything you need to know. You don't need to think about anything. Just for now, of course."

The girl smiled shyly and then pointed in the other direction, farther into town.

"Do you see them? Those are low-level demons. They're pushovers right now, but if someone doesn't do something about them, they will grow into powerful monsters that will wreak havoc upon the people of this world. You must defeat them."

"Uh…? Can't someone else do it?"

"Of course not! This is why you were summoned. Don't you see? When a champion is summoned from another world, they gain the ability to use powerful magic."

Of course, thought the boy. *Makes sense. No need to sweat the details. This is just a dream, after all.*

The girl pointed at the monsters and handed the boy some sort of red gem. "First, I want you to use this gem on those monsters over there to—"

"Get away from him, you cretin."

A different voice interrupted the girl.

Glancing over in surprise, the boy realized that yet another young woman had suddenly appeared. She was standing across from the first girl with the silver hair.

This one had scarlet hair and violet, amethyst-like eyes. She was wearing a white lab coat over a combat uniform. She had well-formed features, but something about her seemed a little snotty.

"Uh… Who are you?"

"Kaguya Shinohara. I've come to get you out of here."

"Out of here? What's that supposed to mean?"

The boy knit his brows. This pushy lady had just appeared out of nowhere. He could tell already that they weren't going to get along.

The beautiful silver-haired girl slipped in between them, as if to protect the boy.

"Hero, don't listen to her. She's another demon. The Demon Lord must have known you were coming and sent her!"

"Oh? Is that the story you're going with this time?"

The scarlet-haired girl narrowed her eyes for a moment but then turned back toward the boy. He trembled beneath her piercing gaze.

"You. I heard what happened—did you ever make up with your friend? The one you had a fight with?"

"Huh?"

He made eye contact with the girl.

"You wanted to patch things up with him, didn't you?"

That's right, I—

He had been arguing with someone. But for some reason, his brain felt foggy now. He couldn't remember clearly. He'd gotten into a fight with this person, and then he had gone up to the roof.

"Aren't you curious to know what your friend is thinking? To know what you did? How much they'll regret it?"

"Ah—"

The boy gasped in surprise. He glared at the scarlet-haired girl, who had suddenly interrupted him and the beautiful silver-haired girl.

"Wh-what's your problem?! You don't know me. You don't know anything about me!! Maybe you really are one of the Demon Lord's minions!!"

"You're right; I don't know anything about you. I don't understand what you're going through, and maybe in the end the two of us will never see eye to eye." The scarlet-haired girl stared at him with earnest eyes. **"But I can still rescue you. It's not too late. Come, leave this place."**

"But why? I…"

"You want to make up with your friend, don't you? That's why you went up to the roof, isn't it?"

The boy took a step back.

The scarlet-haired girl seemed terrifying to him. Where had she come from? How much did she know?

The memories came back like a landslide. He had lost something, something important to that person. Up on the roof of the school building. He had gone up there to apologize and patch things up, but he had accidentally fallen instead.

"I—"

"?! No!! You can't trust her!!" In a panic, the silver-haired girl thrust herself in between the boy and the scarlet-haired girl. "She's a demon. Don't listen to her —"

"Quiet, she-bug," the girl sneered coldly before turning back to the boy. Her voice was gentle once again. **"He's waiting for you. He's not angry anymore. You should come back."**

"He's not…? Really?"

"Really. You can see him yourself once you come back."

"But…how? How do I come back?"

The girl pointed to the sword the boy was holding.

He understood. This sword's true purpose, he realized, was not for slaying petty monsters.

Very little time had passed since the boy had turned; he still had most of his mental faculties intact. Enough so, at last, to be able to consider which of these two girls was telling the truth.

"In order to go back—you need to use that sword against the Goddess." She pointed to the silver-haired girl standing next to them. **"It's up to you— whether to kill her yourself. Think hard before you choose."**

"What…?!"

It was up to him? Right now, he was too shocked to think straight.

Kill her? He'd only just met her.

"What do you mean? Why should I kill her…?"

"Hero!" the beautiful silver-haired girl pleaded. "Don't believe her lies! Forget about the before; that place doesn't matter anymore."

"It doesn't matter…?"

The boy turned toward the beautiful silver-haired girl in surprise.

"It still matters to me," he said, stepping away from her as if repulsed. "To me, he's—yes, that right. I…"

He pondered for a moment, then slowly raised his sword into the air.

The silver-haired girl gulped. "Hero, no! Don't! You don't want this to end already, do you?!" she screamed in desperation. It was hard not to sympathize. "You're finally here, in your world! You're not gonna let that demon trick you into killing me, are you—into losing it all?! Don't you want to go on an adventure?"

"I'm sorry. It's nothing personal against you. And I did want to go on an adventure," the boy muttered, staring at the two girls. "But if I'm going to have an adventure, I want it to be with him… I want to see him again, even if it's just

one last time. He's out there, waiting for me."

He knew killing a person (was she even a person?) wasn't a decision that should be taken lightly. But what the girl with the violet eyes—the one who'd appeared from out of thin air—said was true. She knew what he truly desired.

To apologize, one last time. To make up with him again— **"Every single time!"** the silver-haired girl hissed.

She seemed to be speaking to the scarlet-haired girl. The silver-haired girl's face distorted with hatred as she spoke, her voice dripping with venom.

"Again and again, you get in *our* way—! Who are you? Why do you keep interfering?!"

"My name is Kaguya Shinohara. And why I'm here…is none of your concern."

The silver-haired girl changed shape—into something ugly and insect-like.

Without thinking—he wasn't even sure if it was a conscious or unconscious decision—the boy pointed his sword toward the thing. She was an enemy, he realized, only disguised as a beautiful girl. Before he knew it, he had already stabbed her with his blade.

"Huh…?!"

Something was happening around him, like he was in the eye of a massive hurricane.

The boy stood there, flustered, as the silver-haired girl stared at him in fury from within the storm. Her features contorted, far beyond what seemed possible for a human being. She emitted a high-pitched, sonic scream, like an insect's screech.

The boy turned away, terrified, completely forgetting how inviting the girl had seemed just moments ago.

Where was he? He wanted—no, needed—to go back.

He wished for it, as hard as he could—

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"Hey, man—you back with us now?"

"That was close."

"Just in time. Any deeper and you might not have made it back."

Koyuki and Rindou stared down at the boy in the school uniform, no longer a hero, as he came back to his senses.

"Not bad, kid. If I ever found myself in my own dreamworld, I don't think even Kaguya would be able to drag me out."

"Kaguya…?" The boy was already trying to sit back up. "What…happened—?"

"Nothing you need to worry about. An ambulance will be here soon. Just stay put."

Rindou convinced the boy to lie back down, and then he looked at the young woman rushing toward them from a short distance away—it was Kaguya Shinohara.

"Hey, Kaguya. It's over now!"

"Thank goodness! How is he?"

"He looks pretty banged up…"

There was no guarantee that the boy would live, and even if he did, he would probably never walk again.

"But he didn't turn into a hero. I count that as a success." Kaguya smiled slightly.

The boy spoke hesitantly. "What…happened to me? I can't remember very well…"

"Don't worry. You essentially caught a really nasty illness. There will be aftereffects, but you're fine now."

The boy, however, seemed even more confused. "An illness…? I did? What kind of illness could do something like that…?"

"Well—perhaps we could call it Hero Syndrome." Kaguya crouched down next to the boy and made eye contact. "You just contracted a disease; that's all."

It was a fitting name. Hero Syndrome—a set of symptoms caused by the Goddess implanting its egg.

"What do you think, Captain Azuma? Not a bad choice for a name, if I do say so myself," Kaguya called, turning to glance over her shoulder.

"Yes, very clever. Almost as clever as when the director said it the first time," Azuma replied, sounding a little exasperated as he approached from behind.

It was actually the director of Technical who had come up with the name, not Kaguya.

"Speaking of which, Kaguya, the director had a pretty rough time of it, from what I hear."

"You mean with the surveillance footage…? Yeah, I know."

The camera had clearly captured Kaguya interacting with the hero.

Even though it was growing dark by that time, they had been outside in full view with nothing in the way to obstruct the camera's view. The Bureau had essentially been given ringside seats.

Kaguya had approached a hero by herself, and then after a few seconds, the hero had turned back into a person. That should have been enough to completely blow the lid on her power.

"I'm just lucky the director and Major Mirai were on standby to barter, beg, and steal a way out for me…"

At the end of the day, Kaguya was saved. Thanks to the director, the whole thing had been swept under the rug.

Apparently, the director knew someone who "owed her a few favors."

Kaguya never actually found out who that someone was.

"Of course, in exchange, it looks like I'm formally stuck with Charon now…"

"What do you mean, 'stuck with'?!"

"Oh, I'm sorry; was that rude? Like you're such a paragon of good manners, Captain Azuma."

Azuma was visibly annoyed. "You know, you're welcome to go back at any time. I'm sure the director would be thrilled to have you."

"No, I'm pretty sure she actually prefers me here… When push comes to

shove, after all, the director is truly a mad—I mean, dedicated scientist."

"Were you about to say mad scientist?"

"Maybe I was, maybe I wasn't."

She was.

"Besides, regardless of what the director prefers, I like it better here, too. Together with Charon… Plus, she said I can use the lab whenever I want, so I can still continue my research."

"You're so greedy…"

"That's me. When in doubt, just have it all."

Kaguya chose not to return to Technical. Instead, she became an official member of Charon.

Naturally, she had her own reasons for doing so. She wasn't ready to give up. Not on her research and not on anything else. That was why she had decided to stay.

However—that wasn't her only reason. It was also for Charon's sake, in a way.

After all, if she did leave, the exact same thing would just happen again. And then who were they going to turn to? Kaguya, that's who.

It had taken a while to convince Mari, who had been waiting back at Technical for her return. But after discussing things, that was the conclusion Kaguya had reached.

The ambulance arrived and the boy was loaded onto the stretcher. As they watched from the sidelines, Kaguya and the others finally relaxed.

"Referring to it as a syndrome does seem pretty fitting, though—I guess that would make you a doctor, then, Lieutenant."

"No, I'm not sure doctor would be the right term. All I do is slow down the progression of symptoms. I'm more like a human cough drop, really…"

Azuma and Kaguya.

"You still make them better, though, don't you? You just did it now… Well, not all the way better. The egg is still there, so they're not completely healed, I

guess."

"Where does that leave me and you, though, Koyuki? The lieutenant patches them up, while we just mow them down."

Koyuki and Rindou.

As they continued to banter, the boy called to them from atop the stretcher.

"Uh… Um…"

Everyone turned in response.

"Who—are you people?"

"…"

The four turned to look at each other. Azuma was the first to answer.

"We're Charon. We're intermediaries between the living and the dead."

"I-intermediaries…?"

"Yes, between humans like us and the heroes that no longer understand human speech and feelings."

Heroes were enclosed in their own perfect dreamworld. A place where they could no longer be reached with words.

In many ways, they were indistinguishable from the dead, and members of Charon were the only ones still able to relate to and communicate with them— their name, Charon, had come from the ancient Greek word for "beauty." A name they had chosen out of irony.

But it was also related to Charon, the name given to the ferryman of the dead. In a way, they were finally fulfilling their true role.

"We're just intermediaries… That's all."

"Don't sell yourselves so short," said Kaguya, interrupting him. "This is important work that keeps people safe. It takes all of us, both what I do and what you and the others do, to make this work a success." She smiled brightly and then turned toward the boy. "We make sure that people don't leave this life as monsters… That's our role."

The boy didn't seem to fully understand, but judging from his expression as the stretcher led him away, he must have been satisfied with that answer.

Another boy, of about the same age, rushed forward from the other direction to meet the stretcher. There were tears in his eyes.

Kaguya and Azuma watched them, their gazes growing softer.

Heroes and humans will never find common ground…

As the four sauntered back to the personnel vehicle, Kaguya glanced at the sky.

The weather was clear and bright. Kaguya remembered something that Azuma had once told her—that heroes and humans will never find common ground, because there is no common ground to be found between the living and the dead.

And yet—

Kaguya smiled internally as she remembered what he'd said. Maybe that was true, but as Kaguya had learned during her time with Charon—there was always more to the story.

And yet even if humans and heroes can't understand each other, we can still build bridges. We can still hope. We can still search for grace.

For heroes and humans alike.

It was why Kaguya fought. She had finally found an answer to Sakura's question.

"That's why…"

She would keep on going.

She would never give up, never compromise. Not until the day came when she could save them all—every last human and every last hero.

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"Ah—Captain, I almost forgot to ask," Kaguya began as they were riding back in the transport truck. "When the Goddess first appeared to you, why did she

look like me? What was that all about?”

“…”

As far as Kaguya was concerned, she had just asked an innocent question. For some reason, however, an awkward silence filled the truck.

“Sh-should I not have said that? It’s just—I was expecting it to be your sister. Did something else happen when she showed up that I don’t know about?”

“…”

Azuma didn’t answer. Did he not hear her?

“Hello? Captain…?”

“Leave the poor man alone, Kaguya,” said Koyuki with a laugh, in a voice that was half exasperated, half amused—no, 90 percent amused. “You’re hitting the captain in his biggest weak spot right now.”

“—! Koyuki!!”

“Hey, it’s your own fault. You’re the one who blabbed all the details to Rindou because you thought he saw it for himself.”

“Yeah, fine, I told Rindou, but why did the rest of the squad know about it the next day?!”

“You didn’t think I’d keep something this juicy to myself, did you?” said Rindou, clearly having a blast. “I mean, the Goddess is supposed to show you your wildest dreams, right? Who would’ve guessed you wanted Kaguya to do something *like that* to you—?”

“Don’t say it like that! It’s not what it sounds like, Kaguya, I swear…!!”

Azuma seemed to have gone into denial mode for some reason. Rindou and Koyuki, meanwhile, were acting as if they had just discovered a new toy.

“Stop talking about it already; she’s right here…!!”

“You should be thanking me, Azuma, since she’s the one person I didn’t tell.”

“Yeah, Captain. It’s natural, after all, for a boy your age.”

“You’re almost the same age as me…! And stop saying it like that; you really

are gonna give her the wrong impression!"

Azuma glared at Koyuki and Rindou with an expression that was difficult to describe. Kaguya glanced back and forth between Azuma and the other two.

"Um, Koyuki? What is everyone talking about?"

"Yes, what are we talking about? What are we talking about, indeed? That all depends on Azuma right now… Speaking of which, Captain, there's some new makeup I've been wanting to buy."

"Yeah, and I was hoping to get some new weight equipment. You have no idea how expensive that stuff can be."

Diabolical smiles appeared upon Koyuki's and Rindou's faces. Azuma seemed to realize what they were getting at.

"Fine," he said through clenched teeth. "How much?"

"Ten thousand yen."

"Forty thousand for me."

"That's way too much! Do you really think I'm going to—?"

"Hey, Kaguya, listen to this. Back when Azuma was in fantasyland, he saw you —"

"Fine! Fine! Fifty thousand yen!!"

Koyuki cackled as Azuma handed over five paper bills.

"I'll remember this," Azuma muttered.

Koyuki laughed, enjoying herself, while Rindou leaned to the side indifferently. The other members in the truck all laughed under their breath.

Kaguya watched the commotion out of the corner of her eye before sighing and turning to stare out the truck's window.

It sounded like a secret. But Kaguya didn't mind.

After all, when it comes to secrets—

Kaguya remembered what she had heard back in Mirai's car, with Azuma, on their way to defeat the Goddess.

It was the last thing he had said before they made contact with the enemy.

Kaguya pretended she hadn't heard him, because of the wind. But they were so close. The truth was that she had heard him perfectly.

"I'd never let you die, Kaguya. I can't—you're my hope."

Kaguya smiled to herself as she stared out the window and at the sky. She decided to keep the fact that she had heard him her own little secret.

Imagine saying something like that, though, just because they were on the brink of death.

"What a dork…," she whispered softly.

Fortunately, her voice was lost in the commotion, and no one else heard what she'd said.

HERO SYNDROME

Eradicate the heroes who exact vengeance on the world.

VOLUME 2

WINTER 2025

The Goddess is up to her old tricks once more. Floating upon transient dreams, people take her hand, perhaps aware—or perhaps not—of the carnage that awaits.

This life is not of their choosing. But it is a fate of their creation.

During a brief respite, gears continue to turn in the shadows. As the world trembles, a group of young men and women are determined to reach the Goddess and learn the truth of this unending war.

But what awaits at the edge of this battlefield of dreams? Is it new hardship—or is it salvation?

AFTERWORD

Hello for the first time ever. It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Rei Ayatsuki.

Thank you for picking up this copy of *Hero Syndrome*.

And allow me to commend you on your taste for selecting *Hero Syndrome* from among the many books to choose from! In this day and age, with so much entertainment at our fingertips, I hope that I've delivered a volume that is truly worth your time.

Speaking of which, this turned out to be a pretty thick book even after cutting out so much.

Which is why I've kept this afterword to just two pages. I had to juggle around quite a bit to fit everything in... But look at how much space I've already used. I'm clearly no good at planning.

To that end, allow me to start with acknowledgments.

To everyone in the editing department involved in judging selections: Thank you so much for choosing *Hero Syndrome* from so many submissions and for awarding it the Gold Prize in the Dengeki Novel Awards. It was truly an honor. I will do my best to ensure I live up to the Dengeki name and meet everyone's high expectations.

To my editors, M and N. Thank for your untiring guidance, even when I didn't know up from down or left from right. Your assistance in the writing process helped me to create a finished work that was much better than what I originally submitted. And to M, I am sorry for all the trouble I caused by asking to change things so many times... I don't know how you were able to stand me. Thank you.

To riichu, who created such cute character designs for *Hero Syndrome*. When I first saw Kaguya and the others, I felt like I was finally seeing their real faces for the first time. I am truly grateful.

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And finally, to you, the reader, holding this book in your hand.

This was both a story about fighting monsters and about connecting with one another.

Each character had their own set of values and beliefs. Sometimes the characters butted heads, sometimes convictions were changed. But in the end, the characters learned to respect and accept one another. I hope I was able to portray their conflicts, their sorrows, and their determination in a way that touched you, even if just a little.

Farewell then, until we meet again. From Rei Ayatsuki.

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