

REI AYATSUKI

ILLUSTRATION BY **riichu**

CREATURE DESIGN BY

GEKIDAN INU CURRY Doroinu

2

HERO SYNDROME



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HERO SYNDROME

Eradicate the heroes who exact vengeance on the world.

CHARACTERS





“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

Hero Emergence



[18]

Location: Somewhere in Tokyo

Type: Suspected tank

This hero has three dog heads; its repulsive form is the boy's expression of love for the two dogs he will never again part with. The hero's ballistic howl strikes in waves, a cry of grief that went ignored. Perhaps this time, these cries will be heard.

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YUSHASHOKOGUN Vol.2

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PROLOGUE

Nightmare

There can be no common ground between heroes and humans.

Because heroes, too, were once human.

“Azuma! It’s coming your way!!”

It was noon in late spring, when the sun begins to grow harsh in the sky—they were in a vacant stretch of land, all the buildings now gone.

Someone shouted his name wildly. The young man with the silver hair, Captain Yuuri Azuma, turned in their direction. He gripped his handgun, a weapon he had only just recently learned how to use, loosely—its surface was coated in a sickly green sheen—and took aim at the *thing* hurrying straight toward him.

The *thing* was not human, but it didn’t look man-made, like a machine, nor like anything found in nature. It was a monster, all wrong at a glance. No bigger in size than a human child, its silhouette was vaguely human-shaped as well—but its body was made up of *nothing but faces*.

The area where a face would have been on a normal person, and the space around it, was completely black, almost as if it has been scratched out. The other parts, what would have been its arms and legs, were plastered with a distorted and swollen face. A skin-crawling sight.

But Azuma did not flinch. He spoke quietly to the scarlet-haired girl standing next to him.

“I’ll distract it. That’s when you strike.”

“Okay!” said the girl, holding a long, stick-shaped weapon—basically a club.

Getting the creature’s attention probably wouldn’t prove too hard. After all, its whole body was a face—eyes and ears—leaving it constantly aware of what was happening in all directions. It was what made it such a difficult foe. But it didn’t matter how well it could see and hear if it couldn’t get out of the way of their attacks.

Azuma rushed forward.

It took him less than a few seconds to close the distance, kicking it, first, in the scarlet-haired girl’s direction. He followed a moment after, and once he was close enough to nearly touch the thing, he put a finger to the trigger of the gun.

Azuma began to press the trigger, depressing it by just the slightest millimeter.

He swallowed hard. His vision wavered, suddenly roiled by static.

And then, for just a brief moment, the hero appeared to have transformed—



Quiet, like a field, when the wind has calmed.

Captain Yuuri Azuma sat up in his bed. The ticking of a clock’s second hand filled the darkness of the room—the time was 3:40 AM. *A strange time to wake up*, thought Azuma.

It was just a bit too warm for a night in late June. Azuma furrowed his brow, remembering the dream he’d just had. It had been of a battle with an enemy they had encountered about two months ago.

He couldn’t remember it clearly...but the enemy’s appearance seemed to have been obscured by static for a moment. It was no more than a gut sensation, but for a fleeting instant, the creature appeared to have transformed into something else.

What...was that thing?

Small and humanoid shaped. A pale amberish-peach color. The same color as Azuma’s skin.

Azuma, however, quickly let the memory go.

Whatever it was, it doesn't really matter...

For a brief moment, that hideous aberration had just happened to appear as something else. Nothing more.

“I’m here to cut them down, not sit and watch.”

Heroes were homicidal monsters, after all. No more, and no less.

CHAPTER ONE

Deployment

The look in her eyes was 100 percent serious.

Pale violet, full of resolve, unwilling to brook compromise or pull punches. Her scarlet hair, meanwhile, the very image of fiery determination, was gathered into a messy ponytail. Dark bags rested beneath her shapely eyes, but the passion resting in those eyes was unmistakable.

At the moment, this intense young woman—Lieutenant Kaguya Shinohara—was sitting across from Mari, her junior at the Bureau, and speaking in hushed and solemn tones.

“In the beginning, God looked down upon His creation and said...”

Kaguya didn’t believe in things like God most days, but at the moment her eyes were brimming with faith. She was sitting in the cafeteria at Extermination Bureau Headquarters.

“...let there be beef.”

“Uh, I don’t think God said that.”

Kaguya’s partner in this discussion was a girl with blond pigtails, Warrant Officer Mari Ezakura. She was staring at her coffee with utter disinterest.

“Besides, I don’t like that kind of god. Start over!”

“Hear me out, Mari,” said Kaguya, unperturbed, holding up a hand to silence her. “On the first day, God brought *yakiniku* lunch sets into this world, and it was good. On the second day, He created Hamburg steak lunch sets. On the third day, he created *tonkatsu* lunch sets. On the fourth day, he created

yakisoba—”

“Those are just the daily specials. You’re not talking about God, you’re talking about the people who run this cafeteria!”

“Yes—God works in mysterious ways! No matter how often I come here, the food is always divine,” Kaguya said earnestly.

Laid out before Kaguya were a *yakiniku* lunch set, a beef and rice bowl, tuna salad, and spaghetti...all of which she’d just eaten.

Sitting across the table, Mari couldn’t help but wonder if the food might not have tasted even better if Kaguya had actually paused long enough to savor any of it. Kaguya, however, continued speaking, not paying any attention to the look Mari was directing her way.

“This is my own personal belief, but it is not the main dishes that determine the quality of a restaurant—it is the sides. Everyone will take their time to ensure the main dishes taste great. The real find is a restaurant where they put just as much effort into what doesn’t seem as popular, that not as many people will order.”

“Hrmm...”

“Speaking of which—”

Just then, another dish was brought out. A small—or, at least small from Kaguya’s perspective—bowl of egg salad. Perfect timing. Kaguya took the bowl of egg salad and shoved it into Mari’s face.

“See, Mari? Look at this egg salad. See how succulent the eggs are?”

“Succulent...eggs?”

“It’s easy to tell with boiled eggs, but see how plump and glossy the whites look? That is proof of how scrumptious they will be.”

“I’m pretty sure most boiled eggs look like that.”

Mari didn’t even try to hide her annoyed expression.

“By the way, Kaguya...,” she began, choosing to ignore her friend’s rambling, “how many nights in a row is it that you’ve gone without sleep now?”

“What? Just two. It’s fine.”

Kaguya’s eyes were full of no-nonsense determination, but without a clear target for that determination, they were also a little unfocused.

“I don’t know what you mean, exactly, by *it’s fine*, but you didn’t have to go to all the trouble of coming here if you haven’t slept. I’m not sure what you’ve been up to, but you know you need to sleep, don’t you?”

“I’m fine. I used to stay up like this all the time when I was at Technical. Really, the fun doesn’t even get started until you’ve hit at least three nights in a row.”

“True, you did used to love your all-nighters,” said Mari, sipping her coffee in exasperation.

Kaguya wasn’t the only one. The scientists at Technical were notorious for neglecting their health.

“Those who can’t do, sleep! All the greats from the past agree, no one needs more than three hours a night!” Et cetera, et cetera. Or at least, so said the Director, who had no interest in anything other than science.

Though she might try to hide it, the truth was that Mari had not slept the night before, either. Even after one all-nighter, however, she felt completely drained, and couldn’t stomach anything more than a cup of coffee to wake herself up. Compare that to Kaguya, who had managed to put away all those plates of food. Mari shuddered. Mysterious ways indeed.

“Even if it’s just two days in a row, though—you’re not at Technical anymore, are you, Kaguya?” Mari was surprised at how thick her voice sounded. “What exactly are you doing there every day...?”

“Well...”

Kaguya put on her usual smile. It was a look that Mari loved, but lately had grown to hate a little, too—one that let her know this was a line that couldn’t be crossed.

“I’m sorry, Mari... It’s still a secret.”

Mari sighed, having already half given up. She knew that was what Kaguya

was going to say.

“You’re just full of secrets, aren’t you, Lieutenant?” Mari quipped, a tinge of sarcasm in her voice.

Kaguya winced.

“Well then...do you mind if I get down to what I wanted to talk to you about?”

Mari set her empty coffee cup down on its saucer with a clatter. Her gaze was somewhat serious. Kaguya blinked in surprise.

Mari had been the one to ask Kaguya to lunch, saying she had something she wanted to talk about. Kaguya already had an idea of what that “something” might be.

The reluctance in Mari’s voice when she called had given it away. After several attempts and much hesitation, Mari managed to find the courage to begin speaking.

“Kaguya—when are you finally going to come back to Technical?”

Kaguya looked down sheepishly. She could only brush the question aside curtly. “Mari, I told you...”

“I know. I thought I understood. I did...but Technical is no fun without you there. It’s so quiet. I miss you coming around to talk my ear off about heroes every day, whether I like it or not.”

“What do you mean, whether you like it or not? Never mind. Don’t answer that.”

“I—I know you have your own circumstances to deal with, but you weren’t supposed to be gone forever! Besides, now the Director is forcing me to help her with all her weird experiments...”

“Weird experiments?”

“Something about creating a new Chronos.”

Chronoses, which had surfaced thirty years ago, were the only weapons capable of effectively damaging heroes. They were undeniably powerful, and included materials that were sourced directly from the heroes themselves.

“Wait, the Director is making Chronoses?! I thought no one knew how...”

“She said if no one knows, we’ll just have to figure it out ourselves. How to make a perfected version, without rebounds. That’s the Director for you, I guess. As nuts as ever.”

“I...I guess so...”

Powerful weapons, of course, came with a powerful price—attacking with a Chronos resulted in a harsh rebound, which few people were able to handle properly. As far as weapons went, they were essentially a failure.

At least they were, until *they* appeared.

Charon. A special ops squad that occupied a vital position at the Extermination Bureau. The members of Charon all had one thing in common: they had all survived the hero attack that decimated Chiba Prefecture six years ago.

Kaguya, too, remembered the explosion well. It had been appalling. Even though she was only eleven years old at the time, she had felt that horror in her bones.

Where had the hero emerged? The wall of explosive force from that explosion had not only disintegrated organic life, human or otherwise, but had even decimated the buildings and structures in the area, all in an instant—after which, a towering magma tsunami had swept away everything remaining in its path. The whole area had been transformed into total hell.

And yet, somehow, they had been spared—a group of young boys and girls who had survived the incident completely unharmed. Anomalies who had somehow managed to survive, when even the buildings and land around them had been incinerated.

Chronoses were the only weapon capable of truly resisting the heroes, and these young men and women were now the only ones capable of properly handling those Chronoses. However, they were also subject to close scrutiny by the Bureau.

“Well, it’s not like Azuma can use his katana anymore—apparently repairing katanas is very difficult, so maybe making a new one does make more sense.”

“Maybe, but what is he supposed to do until the Director figures it out? It’s not like he can just fight barehanded, can he?”

“Oh, apparently he’s going to keep using a handgun-type model for now. It’s the pistol I’d been carrying, the one I hadn’t been able to fire.”

It all happened several months ago. As a result of certain events, the katana wielded by Charon’s leader and ace soldier, Captain Yuuri Azuma, had been broken into two pieces. As there were no adequate substitute katanas available, Azuma had been using a handgun-type Chronos since then, the one Kaguya had previously wielded.

“Still, I can’t believe she’s actually trying to create new Chronoses.”

“The method for creating Chronoses has been lost, and the organization put the kibosh on producing any more of them. If anyone could do it, it’s the Director, but even just the idea scares me...”

If it was anyone else, they might have laughed in surprise, but both Kaguya and Mari were well aware of how talented the Director was. If she said she could do it, they believed her.

“If she does manage it, I’d like to be the first to see. Actually, if I could, I’d like to be there for the testing to—”

“Lieutenant.”

Somebody spoke from behind suddenly while Kaguya was still mid-sentence. Surprised, Kaguya and Mari both jumped in their seats.

Turning around, they spotted a young man with silver hair. He wore a cross-shaped earring in his left ear, his expression as inscrutable as always. However, there was also a hint of gentleness about him.

It was Captain Azuma. They hadn’t even noticed his approach.

“Oh, Captain—”

Before she could finish her sentence, however, Kaguya stole a timid glance in Mari’s direction. Despite her exasperation, Mari had clearly been enjoying herself. Her mood soured immediately. She glared at Azuma, in a blatant sulk.

Rather than respond to Kaguya, Azuma stood in place, meeting Mari’s gaze.

Kaguya could have sworn she saw sparks flying.

Mari grinned. The grin did not reach her eyes.

“Captain Azuma, do you mind...? *Kaguya and I* are having lunch.”

“I can see that.”

“And yet you interrupted us anyway. How embarrassing for you. Can’t you take a hint?”

Most of the sparks Kaguya saw were coming from Mari. For instance, the way she stressed the words *Kaguya and I*. Lately Mari’s hostility was starting to become a bit much, even for Kaguya. And yet it seemed to roll right off Azuma’s back.

“This again? Every time I see you, I feel like you say the same thing. It’s like your emotions are stuck on one setting, Warrant Officer Ezakura.”

“Excuse me? I say the same thing? And whose fault do you think that is?!”

The atmosphere was growing volatile. Kaguya, who was stuck between them—was not actually that concerned. She was used to this behavior by now. Azuma and Mari always acted like this when they crossed paths. At first Kaguya had tried to put a stop to it, but since it didn’t seem like they were actually going to come to blows, lately she had decided to just let them get it out of their systems.

“Remember, you’re the one hanging around Kaguya like some kind of stalker in the first place—”

“Mari... Azuma is probably here to let me know it’s time.”

“Time...?”

“For combat training.” Kaguya glanced down at the floor for the briefest moment.

There was nothing there but plain, dull tile. It was the room farther below, in one of the basements, that was on Kaguya’s mind.

“We’ve been doing weapons training in a training center beneath this cafeteria, deep underground,” Kaguya told Mari.

Azuma had lost his sword. As a stopgap measure, he was currently using a gun, but was undergoing voluntary training due to his poor accuracy. It was mostly Koyuki doing the teaching.

“Combat training? But why...?” Mari looked aghast. “Do you really need to do something like that...?”

“That decision is up to Lieutenant Kaguya,” said Azuma, causing Mari to bristle again. “The lieutenant is part of Charon now. As her *former* lab partner, it’s not your place to interfere.”

Azuma had stressed the word *former*, rubbing salt in Mari’s wounds.

Talk about immature! thought Kaguya.

That said, Azuma and Mari were only two years apart.

Azuma’s use of the word *former* had clearly irked Mari, but she didn’t say anything back, perhaps because she could see his point. Instead, she leaned in closer to Kaguya.

“I still haven’t given up on you, Kaguya. It might be difficult now, but I know you’ll come back to us someday.”

“O-okay...”

Kaguya could only smile as she stared down at her former lab partner, unsure of what to say. Kaguya had been officially transferred to the Charon special ops squad two months ago, from her old home in Technical No. 2, due to a series of circumstances.

While too difficult to sum up quickly, the whole situation was extremely complicated, and no one was telling her anything for now.

“I’m sorry, Mari. But even if I could come back, I don’t intend to. Obviously I don’t have anything against Technical and I still plan to continue my research, but this is what’s important right now.”

It wasn’t Kaguya’s first time saying this.

Mari bit her lip for a moment and turned away, this time sulking for real.

“When you say *this*, you mean heroes, I bet,” said Mari, frowning, her voice

getting dangerously close to whining.

She didn't phrase it as a question because there was no reason to keep asking the same thing over and over again. Kaguya smiled uncomfortably but didn't deny it.

"What about you, Mari?" Kaguya asked. "You were trying to register new samples, weren't you? I'm sure you've got your work cut out for you, too."

"It's barely a challenge. But yeah, I guess."

As Kaguya stood to go, Mari couldn't stop herself from smiling sadly.

"Let's have lunch again soon, Kaguya. I'll call you..."

"Of course. I look forward to it, Mari."

"But next time, no more uninvited guests!! Promise!!"

"O-okay. I promise," said Kaguya, glancing at Mari with a look that was both uncomfortable and pleased—although this time, she really did feel sorry.

Promises were not something to be made lately. Not in the Bureau, where anyone could fall victim to a hero attack at any time, or even become a hero themselves. Under such circumstances, promising to meet again was almost cruel. So long as heroes existed there was no way to know whether the promised day would actually come.

Heroes—tragic monsters that had first appeared over thirty years ago.

Once humans themselves, these heroes now slaughtered people—and for some reason could only be perceived by the young. As for Kaguya and the others? They were a group of orphans, victims of past hero attacks, who had been corralled together to resist these monsters.

And the military-like organization that led this motley crew of underaged fighters: the Extermination Bureau.

1-2

She set the timer. Five seconds.

The numbers 00:05 appeared on a lit display in the spacious and impersonal training room.

“Get ready...”

“Okay, ready whenever you are.”

They were in Extermination Bureau Headquarters—an underground facility located somewhere in Tokyo. This section of the facility was relatively close to the surface.

Inside the facility’s spacious training center, the leader of the Charon special ops squad, Captain Yuuri Azuma, and one of the squad’s members, Second Lieutenant Koyuki Asaharu, were currently squared off against each other, standing several meters apart.

However, it was not the kind of friendly atmosphere expected from a spar between team members. The air was strangely tense; both Azuma and Koyuki honed in on the other’s every little move.

Three more seconds.

They reached for their guns. Azuma gripped his loosely and Koyuki held hers like it was second nature as they waited for the remaining seconds to tick away.

Two... One...

The buzzer rang. Azuma was the first to move. Not running, but taking long strides. He steadily closed distance with Koyuki, moving so as not to telegraph his route.

Koyuki, meanwhile, was perfectly still, simply waiting for him to approach. She took a shot casually, with a flick of the hand, almost as if she was toying with her prey. Just as Azuma was about to step forward, she fired at his leg with precision.

There was a burst of sparks as a volley of bullets shot through the air. She had been aiming for Azuma, but the bullets hit the ground instead, splattering red liquid onto the floor. Not Azuma’s blood, but paintball cartridges for training purposes.

It was a paintball shoot-out. That was their “training.” At least, that was how Azuma and Koyuki saw it. There was no prize for winning, obviously, but the two of them weren’t the type to roll over and accept defeat.

The rules were simple: Cover your opponent in paint to win.

Koyuki had fired three shots already. A faint smile played on her lips as she finally gripped her gun with two hands. She took aim—something she hadn't even bothered to do with her last shots—and fired again at Azuma's right leg.

The bullet flew true, streaking toward Azuma's foot. But he leaped out of the way just before the paint could splatter onto his shoes.

Azuma carried through with the momentum of his leap and began sprinting toward Koyuki. This time Koyuki moved as well, releasing another salvo of bullets in Azuma's direction. Azuma dodged these as well.

Undaunted, Azuma fired off three shots of his own. He aimed his first straight ahead. With the second, he tracked Koyuki, who had dodged. And with the third, he spun around, exactly where he knew Koyuki would be— *She's gone!*

There was no sign of her. After a moment's hesitation Azuma figured everything out and laughed deprecatingly at himself.

"I should have known..."

At some point, Koyuki had slipped underneath him and was now holding the barrel of her gun against his stomach. Without making eye contact, Azuma raised his hands in surrender. He had to hand it to her.

"You were fast. I didn't even see you."

"It's not that I was fast. You just didn't see me."

Only someone as petite as Koyuki could have effectively pulled off that move. She laughed openly, motivated by her pride as a sniper and her confidence as a seasoned combatant.

"I mean, it would reflect pretty poorly on me if I lost to someone who just started shooting two months ago. You did have me on the ropes for a little while there, though."

From the confidence in Koyuki's catlike eyes behind her goggles, it was obvious that her victory had almost been certain. Hence why she didn't pull the trigger—even though a shot to the stomach would have still been safe, even at this short range, and Azuma had yet to drop his own weapon.

“If I did have you on the ropes at any point, it was all luck. I was pretty much just target practice for you at first,” said Azuma, letting go of the gun in his right hand. The heavy piece of metal fell toward the ground and was just about to hit the floor— —when Azuma suddenly switched positions, snatching the gun midair before it landed. He immediately spun around and aimed at Koyuki. Koyuki’s eyes went wide, and she gulped—one last shot.

“—!!”

Koyuki just barely managed to dodge as the sound of the gunshot reverberated. If she had waited until he fired, she would have never made it, so she must have read the trajectory as soon as Azuma scooped up his gun—contorting herself in order to dive to the right. The burst of paint barely grazed her cheek.

Koyuki fired off several shots from her awkward pose, without even looking. They were all aimed at Azuma, who was still in extremely close range. Azuma, who had been using a katana up until now, was not as experienced in predicting shots as Koyuki was. He managed to dodge the first two—but the third and final shot hit him squarely in the shoulder.

“...!!”

Although it was a paintball cartridge, the force of impact clearly made itself known. Azuma doubled over in pain while Koyuki panted heavily, catching her breath.

“Phew, that was a close one!” she said. “Protectors or no, a hit to the face at this range would have been dangerous!”

“I...I was actually aiming...for your neck...”

“Gear is gear, I guess...” Koyuki touched the neck warmer she was wearing. It was there to protect her throat. “You need to remember that your aim sucks. It’s why we’ve been doing these sparring matches in the first place.”

“I...didn’t think...my aim was that bad...”

“Well, it’s gotten a lot better than when we started, that’s for sure.”

After double-checking that they had both returned their guns to their

holsters, Koyuki finally removed her goggles, revealing her fierce, catlike, vermilion eyes.

“Still, not half bad,” she said, rubbing at the speck of blue paint on her cheek left by Azuma’s surprise attack. “Ugh... This is going to be so hard to wash off.”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about. I’m going to have to do a lot more than just wash my face.”

The two exited the training center to scrub off the paint they had gotten on themselves, and to grab cleaning supplies.

As soon as they exited the room, Azuma made grudging eye contact with Kaguya. She was sitting in the observation seats. When Kaguya noticed his glance, she grinned. A shit-eating grin. You could almost hear a chime play.

“Looks like you lost again,” she told him. “You look good in red.”

“Well, don’t go getting any ideas. I’m not blushing; it’s just paint,” Azuma grumbled, causing Kaguya to burst out laughing.

“You weren’t even watching,” Azuma spat. “You could at least try to hide that book in your hand.”

This time it was Kaguya’s turn to feel embarrassed. She jumped slightly. It was clear from her expression that Azuma had just hit the nail on the head.

“N-no. It’s not that I wasn’t watching. I just...looked away for a second.”

“If you’re gonna lie, at least make it a little more convincing. From the looks of it, you’ve gotten through several pages.”

Kaguya’s expression changed again, this time into a scowl. Her facial muscles were getting quite the workout.

“I *was* watching,” she insisted. “Up until Koyuki shoved the barrel of her gun into your stomach, at least. Azuma lost again, big surprise. There didn’t seem to be much point in watching after that.”

“...”

She wasn’t wrong; he had lost. Azuma fell silent. Koyuki suddenly appeared, darting out from behind Azuma’s back.

“Kaguya, give a guy a break,” she said. A blatant twinkle of mischief was nestled in her vermilion eyes. She wasn’t even trying to hide her amusement. “The captain knew you were watching and wanted to show off. Isn’t that right, Azuma?”

“What?!” shouted Azuma, trying to sound as if he didn’t know what she was talking about. His voice was somehow high and low at the same time; it came out surprisingly shrill. “Why would I want to show off in front of the lieutenant —?”

“Why? You want me to tell her that? That seems like something that should come from you, yourself...Azuma.”

“If you’ve got something to say...”

“Ooh, so scary,” intoned Koyuki. “What do you think, Rindou? Do I have something to say?” she asked, trying to avoid the conversation.

Finding himself in the line of fire, Rindou immediately assumed a look of boredom. “Huh? Don’t rope me into this,” he said, sounding even more annoyed than he appeared.

“Rope you into it? You’re already involved, remember? Or did you forget about that fancy exercise machine you bought? You made out even better than me.”

For some reason that caused Rindou to clam up awkwardly.

Kaguya, meanwhile, was sitting a short distance away, flipping through her book, having lost interest in the conversation after only about five seconds. Right now, nothing took priority over the book in her hand.

“You bought that machine with the money you received from Azuma, so I guess you’re not so uninvolved after all,” Koyuki said to Rindou.

“I mean, I guess...”

“Just a second, both of you. I don’t know what you think you’re getting at,” Azuma cut in.

Koyuki alone was bad enough. He needed to put a stop to this unfortunate conversation before Rindou really did join in.

“For one thing, this whole idea that I was trying to show off—”

“Of course you were trying to show off,” Rindou said suddenly. Azuma’s jaw snapped shut. “Hey, at least Kaguya didn’t see you get shot there at the end. That’s something, right?”

“Say what?!”

Azuma was pretty sure he spotted Rindou smirking a little.

“Whenever Kaguya’s around, you try to come off as the big tough captain who’s not afraid of anything, but then you go and lose to Koyuki in front of her. That’s gotta hurt, man.”

“Hold on! What’s that supposed to mean, Rindou?! You make it sound like I’m weak!” said Koyuki, getting all riled up out of the blue. If only she had gotten riled up enough to forget about this (unfortunate) conversation. “If anything, Azuma, you should feel proud that you made me work to beat you this time. In fact, once she looks back on this, I bet Kaguya will feel the same. Maybe she’ll even be impressed at how much work you’re putting in.”

“Keep your speculation to yourself...”

This was getting ridiculous—it honestly felt like he was being accused of something he didn’t even do.

But Azuma had long since given up on trying to stop it. Annoying as it was, it was hardly the first time they had acted this way. And whenever they got like this, Kaguya looked completely indifferent, like it had nothing to do with her, which somehow made the whole thing even more stupid and frustrating.

“Hm? Did someone call me?” said Kaguya, lifting her head. “What is it? Did something happen?”

“Happen? Yeah, I guess you could say that. We were just talking about how lucky Azuma was not to *expose* himself to you.”

Now Kaguya was *definitely* going to get the wrong idea.

“Huh...? Captain Azuma, did you do something you didn’t want me to see?” she asked.

“I did not,” answered Azuma, reduced to mere huffing.

Kaguya furrowed her brow, tilted her head, and made a funny face, before returning to her book.

Azuma sighed loudly. He began walking away from the observation section to go clean up. As he walked away, he heard Rindou speaking to Kaguya.

“Well? Has watching that manly performance from Azuma finally gotten you in the mood?”

“The mood?”

“For combat training! It’s boring sitting here by myself while Koyuki and Azuma go at it.”

A moment of silence, and then—

“Huh?!” shouted Kaguya, after a delay. “You—you mean you want me, and you, to fight?!”

“What else could I mean? Koyuki and Azuma are doing it, after all.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, that’s no reason for me to join in!” said Kaguya, flustered.

Rindou waved her off, annoyed. “I don’t know why you’re so against the idea. I’ll teach you; it’ll be worth it.”

“Worth it...? I’d prefer not to wind up with compound bone fractures, thank you.”

“Just who do you take me for...?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?”

Kaguya’s face was serious. She wasn’t interested in jokes.

“Whatever,” said Rindou, letting it slide.

But he still seemed fixated on the subject. He was coming off a little pushy, like a guy who couldn’t take no for an answer. Unable to sit back and watch, Azuma was just about to intervene when— “Knock it off,” said Koyuki, before Azuma could speak. Apparently she was unable to watch, too. “Kaguya’s role in Charon is different from ours. Expecting the same level from her all of a sudden is asking too much.”

Koyuki was right. Rindou frowned slightly.

“Besides, Kaguya has her own work to do—the Revival Project. We can’t take up all her time.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Still, though...”

Azuma felt he understood what Rindou was trying to say. Kaguya’s role may have been different from theirs, but so long as she continued to go into battle with them, she needed to be able to protect herself. Kaguya was hardly stupid. And she had guts; enough to rush forward and deliver her special attacks to the heroes.

But Kaguya was there to save heroes. She may have recognized Azuma and the other squad members as allies, but in the end, their positions were still different.

Azuma had no intention of denying that, but...

“Either way, it’s probably fine for now, Rindou. It’s only been two months. There’s no need to rush.”

“If you say so. It’s your call...but it’s *already* been two months, Azuma,” said Rindou, his face serious, and yet smoldering. He rested his golden eyes upon Azuma. “It might seem long, but time passes fast. Already, since that day—”

Already. It had already been two months. Summer was just starting.

1-3

After washing off the paint in the shower, Azuma’s terminal rang just as he was returning to the simple room that had been allotted to him. He answered without giving it much thought.

“Gosh, it sure has been hot lately. Forget about the start of summer, with the temperatures we’ve been getting, it might as well be midsummer. It’s gross when it’s sunny out and it’s gross when it rains. Too hot for most animals and too hot for most plants and it just keeps getting hotter. Whoever created this world must not have been too good at their job.”

The person on the other end of the line spoke animatedly in a clear and ringing voice. It was the director of the Bureau’s Research and Technology

Center.

“Director...”

The Director—Kaguya’s former boss. A genius who had reached the top position within Technical at the young age of just sixteen.

The misunderstandings and ill feelings that had arisen between Azuma and the Director some two months prior had been resolved, and they could speak to each other normally once again. Although being back on normal terms didn’t mean they were particularly close.

However, the distance between them had closed enough that the Director could now shoot Azuma a phone call.

“Is there something you want? It’s not like you to call me directly like this instead of going through Major Mirai.”

“True. It’s about your katana. You made a request earlier to have it repaired.”

Azuma’s katana had been broken in half two months earlier, during the hero transformation attack. He had asked the Director to repair it.

Azuma was no stickler when it came to weapons. So long as it was something he could hold in his hand and wave around that would do. If possible, though, he would prefer the weapon he was used to.

“I’ll get straight to the point—it turns out repairing your katana is not possible. I tried a lot of different approaches, but nothing stuck.”

“I see... Thank you.”

Not possible. Azuma had no choice but to throw in the towel. Repairing a broken katana was difficult enough even under normal circumstances. For a special katana like this, it was foolish of him to have expected anything in the first place.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help. All my research, and I still can’t even repair a single weapon...”

“Don’t worry about it. There’s a lot we still don’t know about Chronoses.”

Chronoses could not be repaired.

Or, more accurately, even if they were physically repaired somehow, they became ordinary weapons instead, no longer capable of the power they displayed before breaking. No longer capable of damaging heroes.

The cause was still unclear. For instance, several months ago, the Director had split the staff once used by Sakura into two. From that point onward, at the very least, it had ceased to be a living weapon.

That was likely why Kaguya didn't experience rebounds when using it.

"Director..."

There was something that Azuma wanted to ask the Director in that regard.

"Why did you help the lieutenant back then? You went so far as to split a Chronos in two, when there was no guarantee she would even go on that mission."

"For the same reasons as you, Captain Azuma..." The Director's tone remained the same, but her voice grew warmer. *"You had faith in Kaguya, too, didn't you? In her foolishness. Not that there was any point in behaving that way, coming to the aid of someone who had already pushed her away. Illogical, contradictory."*

So unlike Kaguya, who valued logic and practicality.

"She's why you were able to come back from that world. Isn't she, Captain Azuma?"

"...Yes."

Azuma's thoughts turned to the past.

What the Director said was true. Kaguya had come to Azuma's rescue, once again putting herself in harm's way on the battlefield.

Azuma barely remembered what had happened in that world, but he could still recall the expression that had been on Kaguya's face, so at odds with her usual scientific demeanor. That look of desperation as she pounded on the window, trying to pull him back from that closed-off world.

Her hands, which had brought him back to his senses, and which delivered the final blow against his younger sister in his place.

“You’re right, Director. I—”

“That was a lie, actually.”

“What...?”

The Director’s tone of voice suddenly changed. She sounded strangely amused.

“I just wanted to take a look at the weapon’s cross-section. But then I saw Kaguya about to leave and figured it was the perfect chance, and gave it to her. I got data on the eggs and earned some brownie points, killing two birds with one stone. Plus, Kaguya was able to save you in the bargain. If that’s not a win-win situation, I don’t know what is.”

“...”

In other words, the Director had gone rogue, and everything just happened to work out for the best.

“You never change, do you, Director...?”

“I hope you don’t mind if I take that as a compliment.”

Azuma made no comment.

“More importantly, Captain Azuma, I’m obviously too busy to call about things that could have as easily be handled via email. So, let’s get down to the real order of business. How have things been since then?”

“You mean...since I turned into a hero, I assume.”

Several months ago, due to complicated circumstances, Azuma had begun to transform into a hero. He could still feel the presence of the egg lodged in his right eye. Yes, there. In his right eye— Azuma fell silent. He remembered the hallucination he’d glimpsed the other day. Should he mention it? The Director wasn’t a member of Charon, so maybe— “No... I haven’t had any issues.”

“How boring. You sure there isn’t something? Maybe you’ve turned into a chimera, with some hero parts now? Or you and the hero have fused? Seeing strange things out of your control?”

“Just what kind of sideshow do you take me for?” said Azuma, getting a little

flustered by her last suggestion, which had touched on the truth.

The Director sighed in disappointment and then deftly changed the topic.

“By the way, Mirai mentioned that they’re sending someone over to Charon from Inspection.”

Azuma’s face tensed.

Inspection was part of the Bureau’s Intelligence and Analysis Branch. Just as Technical No. 2 fell under the umbrella of Technical Forces, Inspection was a part of Intelligence and Analysis. This was the group responsible for monitoring and review of the entire Extermination Bureau.

After all, the Extermination Bureau was a collection of underaged soldiers. If they were just left to their own devices, the organization could easily collapse.

Charon in particular was subject to constant surveillance, and was very familiar with the Inspection Group by this point. This wasn’t the first time they were sending someone for an inspection. Technical apparently received similar visits each year, but according to Kaguya, “Technical and Inspection have been on bad terms for as long as anyone can remember.”

Azuma already knew they were sending someone, but he hadn’t yet told the others.

“Well...” The Director lowered her voice. She exhaled lightly, her concern evident even over the line. *“You guys have been pushing it lately.”*

“I know, I agree. The Bureau doesn’t like it when people stick out.”

Although Charon was always subject to monitoring and review, up until now the Bureau had largely let them be due to the simple fact that they were good at what they did and had yet to cause any problems.

“They will probably be taking a fine-tooth comb to everything we say and do, particularly in Lieutenant Shinohara’s case.” It was obvious who Inspection was targeting. *“But I thought a fake report had been submitted regarding the lieutenant...”*

“Yes, but apparently someone up there isn’t persuaded. Honestly, the fact that they’re sending someone directly instead of going through Mirai...”

The Director seemed to be lost in thought. When she finally spoke again, her voice on the other side of the line—a voice that was light and tinkling, like a bell, yet had something old and crafty about it—struck Azuma’s ear more softly than usual.

“What if you just didn’t use Kaguya?”

“Why ask that now...?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I have the utmost respect for Kaguya’s thinking and principles, but they can be somewhat lacking in terms of practicality. I understand the benefit in her ability to temporarily stop a hero’s attacks, but is it really that significant of a bonus for Charon? You were operating just fine before she came along, after all, weren’t you?”

“With all due respect...‘fine’ would be an exaggeration. Many of us have died—and Sakura was hardly the first to transform into a hero. Many of our squad have ended up the same way. Not just squad members, but ordinary citizens as well.”

It was why Azuma and the others knew about the Goddess in the first place.

Sakura’s turning had come as a big shock, particularly for Azuma and Koyuki. They were the same age and had spent a lot of time talking—but she wasn’t the first to change. Sakura had seen many of them off herself, before her own time had come.

When Charon *was* first formed, there had been many in the squad who were older than Azuma and the others—some of whom became heroes in the end. It wasn’t that complicated of a story.

“I see... I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware of that.” The Director was unusually forthcoming with her apology, which took Azuma slightly by surprise. *“In that case, the rest of what I’m about to say might come off as a little insensitive, but if I could be allowed to make a recommendation...”*

As the Director trailed off, Azuma was pretty sure he could imagine what she wanted to say. She wanted him to take Kaguya off the field, he presumed. Azuma understood how the Director felt, he had once felt the same.

But there were many reasons to object. Azuma was just preparing to beat the

Director to the punch and explain those reasons when— *“Captain Azuma, don’t let yourself get too invested.”*

“Huh...?” Azuma’s voice came out strained. That definitely wasn’t what he had expected the Director to say. “Invested...?”

“In Kaguya, I mean.”

Azuma genuinely wondered whether the people in this army had anything else to think about.

“I...don’t think I’m particularly ‘invested’ in her. But the heroes have been growing stronger lately. There’s no telling when our attacks will cease to be effective, or what sacrifices we might be forced to make. We, ourselves, could always turn into heroes, after all.”

“Hmph. Yes, that’s true. Second Lieutenant Arakawa was a clear case in point. She was snatched by a Goddess, wasn’t she?”

“Yes...”

Azuma had experienced it himself, so he knew. The Goddess’s words seemed to possess an incredible power to compel, one that the weak human heart was powerless to resist. The only person apparently capable of resisting her was Kaguya.

“Our trump card in those situations is the lieutenant. Kaguya has the power to pull us back and return us to our human selves. That ability is what gives us hope. It’s Kaguya’s choice to be out here on the front lines, but we can’t grow careless and allow her to die. And if something were to happen, and Kaguya herself were to become a hero...”

There would be no one left who could save her. They would have no choice but to kill her. Something like that would be too heartbreaking, so Azuma needed to ensure it never happened. The one person Kaguya couldn’t save, perhaps, was herself.

“Did you just call her Kaguya...?” The Director laughed, teasing him.

For the first time, Azuma realized that he had started referring to Kaguya by her first name, instead of by her last name and rank.

“You two have certainly gotten close. I wonder if Kaguya has had anything to say about this.”

“Well, err, that is—”

The sudden change in topic left Azuma at a loss for words.

Kaguya hadn’t mentioned it. In fact, no one else had brought it up, either, so Azuma wasn’t even conscious that he had been doing it. Now that he gave it thought, though, it was certainly an awkward predicament.

“I...call Second Lieutenant Asaharu, Koyuki, by her first name, too, so I don’t really see what the problem is.”

“Yes, I imagine you would call her by her first name. Or at the very least avoid crude titles.”

Of course I would, Azuma was about to resort. After all, Koyuki was an old friend. Before he could say so, however, he realized that would completely undermine his previous argument. He and Koyuki were close friends, but he and Kaguya were not. If he referred to Koyuki by her first name because they were friends, then what about Kaguya? Did he have some other motivation for referring to her that way?

“Don’t think I don’t know what’s going on over there. I’m well aware that you two went to dinner together the other day.”

“Erk...”

“By the way, you should know it’s pointless to expect Mirai to keep a secret. She’s got a huge mouth.”

Azuma cursed Mirai internally.

“It’s not what— I was just keeping a promise. I’d already promised I would treat her.”

The dinner had been just a few weeks ago.

Having promised (somewhat against his will) to treat Kaguya to some high-end *yakiniku*, sushi, and even dessert, Azuma suggested doing it all in one day in order to save time, and as a way to counteract that bottomless stomach of hers. Any more than that and he could have easily gone broke. Even with just the two

of them, he could easily wind up spending enough for three or more.

“I’m not interested in other people in that way, and I’ve got no plans to do it again. Besides, we’re not exactly in a position for fun and games over here.”

“Well, someone’s certainly got a stick up their ass.”

For some reason, the Director still sounded amused.

“I don’t know how many times I have to say this, but the lieutenant and I do not have that kind of a relationship... We are just a superior officer and his subordinate. That is all.”

“Chain of command or not, you’re about the same age, aren’t you? Besides, what is rank? That’s just a formality to ensure that all the children, with their different hometowns, backgrounds, values, and sense of humanity, stay in line. There’s no reason to get so hung up about it.”

That’s true, thought Azuma, feeling a bit sheepish...but formalities were still important.

“Just know, it’s going to be an uphill battle with her. She’s far from used to these ‘fun and games,’ as you call them. But hey, I’m rooting for you, kid. In fact, if you ever need me to put together a love potion—”

“Director,” Azuma cut in so as to get the conversation back on track. The Director fell silent, perhaps not used to having people speak to her in that way. “Is that everything you wished to speak about? I’m very busy, so I’ll be hanging up soon.”

“Fine, fine. No need to get your panties in a bunch. You have a tendency to brood too much, you know that, Captain?”

“A tendency to brood...? What is that supposed to mean?”

“Forget it; we’ll talk about it another time... But you know, I think you and Kaguya are well suited to each other. I don’t mean anything strange by that, mind.”

And with that, the Director hung up the phone. After rambling for so long, she had been surprisingly quick to cut the call. Azuma wasn’t sure what she was getting at there at the end—but, well, he figured it didn’t matter.

More important, at the moment, was their impending review. Honestly, it was going to be a significant pain in the ass. Whoever they sent probably wasn't going to fit in at Charon. After all, it would be clear from day one that they were just there to keep an eye on them.

Or are they...?

Azuma had a hunch.

Whoever they sent wasn't going to be there for just an inspection. If that were the case, why hadn't something like this happened until now—before Kaguya arrived? This person was coming to spy on Kaguya. Previously, they had managed to somehow pass her behavior off as part of her research, but someone back at Inspection must have grown suspicious.

Either way, this is going to be trouble.

Azuma clicked his tongue.

1-4

“And—? What is this new person like?”

Kaguya and the rest of Charon were in the meeting hall. They had just heard from Azuma that a new staff member was being loaned to the group. A murmur spread among the squad, but Koyuki remained her usual self. She wasn't being standoffish, however. Just interested.

“We managed to keep what happened last time from getting out, didn't we?”

“Yes. It was close, but in the end our report claiming the lieutenant's behavior was motivated by research purposes was approved. It wasn't easy, though.”

Koyuki had already heard about the fake report from Kaguya.

“In that case, what's the problem?”

“I'm guessing that someone wasn't entirely persuaded.”

But who, and why, was still unclear.

“Well? So where is this newcomer?”

“I believe she's already arrived. She should be outside, getting some fresh air.

Apparently she got carsick on the way over. Considering Major Mirai's driving, you can hardly blame her."

Major Mirai strikes again, thought Kaguya—as well as everyone else, probably.

Several months earlier, Major Mirai's car had burst into flames. She had since gotten a new car, but her style of driving remained unchanged. She was constantly trying to push her speed to the max. It was honestly a nuisance.

"A catastrophe already and it's only day one."

"Well, it is kind of our squad's baptism..."

Koyuki hugged her own arms as if she was remembering something. It seemed they had all gone through it, without exceptions.

"Either way, the new person should be here any minute," said Kaguya, turning her eyes toward the door.

The door was cold and impersonal. Kaguya had walked through it for the first time only a few months earlier. At the time, *she* had still been there—the only person to be friendly to Kaguya when Kaguya's reception had been less than cordial. That person was gone now, though.

Kaguya made up her mind. Just as that person had welcomed Kaguya when she first arrived—even though Kaguya had been from Technical—Kaguya would be equally as welcoming to this new recruit, even if the newcomer did happen to come from Inspection.

"Ah..."

They heard the soft pattering of footsteps.

The sound stopped in front of the door. Koyuki and the others all stared. They could sense someone standing there. The frigid atmosphere made itself known even from the other side of the wall.

They waited in anticipation, and after a few seconds, the door began to slowly creak open.

What will she be like, this Second Lieutenant Haru Takanashi?

She was coming with the express purpose of monitoring them—willingly thrusting her head into the hornet’s nest. Soon, they would see her face.

The door swung open. What had been a faint creak quickly grew louder and louder.

Standing there was a young woman dressed in a turquoise uniform. She had blue hair that reached to her back, and jade-green eyes just like Sakura’s. Her expression was stone cold.

Her face was pretty and dispassionate, her skin was white like snow, and the look in her eyes was so frigid it seemed she might turn them to ice with a single sneer. A textbook ice queen.

“This is our first time meeting face-to-face. It’s Second Lieutenant Haru Takanashi, correct?” asked Azuma, but the girl—Haru Takanashi—did not respond.

She didn’t ignore him as much as she seemed to have no interest in responding. At least, that was the impression Kaguya got. After casting a quick glance toward Kaguya, Haru stepped forward to face Azuma.

The first words she spoke:

“That earring.”

“Huh...?” said Azuma.

“Your earring—you wear it during battle as well, yes? I have no idea what your reason for doing that is, but it reeks of frivolity. You should remove it.”

Her commanding tone came as a shock not only to Azuma, but to Kaguya and the others as well.

“Furthermore,” added Haru, ignoring the awkwardness in the room, “Second Lieutenant Rindou Yumeura. I understand that you’ve instigated problems with other squads in the past. Such objectionable behavior will not earn you any trust. Please correct your ways.”

“Problems...? But they were the ones who—”



Rindou was about to blame other people, but Haru made a point of ignoring him.

“Second Lieutenant Koyuki Asaharu, your uniform is unfit in several areas. I detect numerous customizations... In particular, the length of your skirt. The way you present yourself is injurious to morals and order. Please make corrections as quickly as possible.”

“My skirt? Hold on, yours is even shorter...”

Koyuki was taken aback. Kaguya couldn’t blame her. She was suddenly being ordered around on a first meeting.

“Just...who do you think you are...?” said Azuma, exasperated.

Haru tilted her head, her expression completely unchanged. “I’m sorry; weren’t you told? My name is Haru Takanashi. I have been transferred here as of today.”

“That—that much I know.”

“Yes, well, you are to be inspected, and I am here to do the inspecting. *Nothing more, and nothing less,*” said Haru, stonewalling the group in over-the-top fashion. “I am not here to make friends. Your squad’s one redeeming quality is its ability to commit havoc upon the battlefield, hence why I am here to monitor—no, to carry out oversight—of you all. Don’t get too familiar with me.”

Her words were downright hostile. Even Kaguya froze. As far as introductions went, she had left a pretty bad first impression—but after a moment, Kaguya glanced away, remembering that she, too, had acted similarly at first.

“Second Lieutenant Takanashi.”

Deep in her own thoughts, Kaguya lifted her head at the sound of Azuma’s voice.

“I am aware of why you are here, but I still hold command. Please do not disrupt squad order.”

“I simply pointed out the facts. If that is all it takes to disrupt order here, then you must not run a very tight ship.”

That last comment seemed to have overturned the wasp's nest, setting off a buzz in the room.

"Uh... Ummm!" said Kaguya, standing up in an attempt to lighten the mood. "Uh, um, it's nice to meet you. I'm Charon's technical officer, Kaguya Shinohara."

Making an effort to keep smiling, Kaguya approached Haru.

"You're probably a little nervous! I was the same at first, so I understand... Maybe if we all started by introducing ourselves..."

Not making eye contact with Azuma or the others, who were clearly annoyed, Kaguya greeted Haru, trying to maintain a friendly, but not overly personal, attitude. It was always best to at least start with a smile, even if the other person wasn't particularly amiable. However...

"...Tell me, are you enjoying the *princess treatment*?"

Haru's words, spoken in a saccharine tone, were like a creeping ground frost. They caused Kaguya's smile to twitch.

"P-princess treatment...?"

As Kaguya stood frozen in place, Haru added a follow-up jab.

"You were transferred back to Technical Research Lab No. 2 two months ago, but still went to the front lines in defiance of orders. You were driven there by Major Yumi Mirai, an act which led to the explosion of her personal vehicle. Do you have any idea how much trouble your shortsighted actions have caused for those on the front lines?"

Kaguya froze once more, feeling like someone had just thrown cold water in her face. She could hardly argue with what Haru said, though. It was all true.

"I...I already apologized to the major about that—"

"I don't know what your purpose is here, but I despise people like you more than anyone. People like you who stick their noses in the battlefield, where they're not needed, with no real commitment to what it takes. The ones who sit there, pleased as punch, *pretending* to fight, like it's all just a game."

"A game...!"

“Tell me, what exactly did I get wrong?” Haru was being strangely combative, leaving Kaguya feeling ineffably disoriented. “I understand you are a researcher for Technical, but why not stay on the back lines in that case? Instead, motivated by your own self-centered goals, you choose to—”

“Stop.” Azuma took a step closer to Haru Takanashi, this time not bothering to conceal his disgust. “If you have thoughts about the lieutenant, then address them first to me, as I am the one who currently holds responsibility for her behavior... And remember, whatever you have to say to us, you still owe us respect.”

“Thoughts? I simply stated the truth,” said Haru, addressing Azuma coldly with an agitated toss of her hair. “The lieutenant knows that Charon is under priority monitoring and review, and yet chose to behave in that way regardless. It shows a profound lack of foresight.”

“Enough.” Kaguya—no, all the squad members’ blood curdled at the fearsome expression on Azuma’s face. Its intensity was overwhelming. “I can’t continue to overlook this,” he said. “A report was submitted on Lieutenant Shinohara’s actions two months ago, so you have no right to—”

“No, it’s fine, Captain Azuma. I was the one at fault then, after all.” Feeling the situation was about to grow even more volatile, Kaguya smiled and stepped between the two, feigning nonchalance. “Um, I think this was in the report, but, well, I went there for research purposes.”

“Yes... I had a look at the report,” said Haru. “The progress and results of your research were listed as well, I believe.”

“Y-yes, so you see—”

“And yet here you are, still, in Charon’s ranks, even though you’ve already obtained your results. Strange, don’t you think?”

Kaguya was speechless. Haru coldly stared down her nose at Kaguya—her flat jade-green eyes seemed to pierce through the lieutenant.

“The fact that you are still here despite your research being over shows you are being given special treatment, does it not?” Haru insisted.

“What—? I’m not being given special treatment,” Kaguya replied. “I am a

member of Charon.”

“A member...?”

Haru’s expression grew unexpectedly troubled, as if she was struggling to hold something back. The muscles in her face didn’t move—her expression just appeared that way to Kaguya.

“In any case, you don’t know anything about us yet,” said Kaguya. “Only a fool makes assumptions like this off the bat.”

“Don’t talk to me about fools... I hardly need to know your every little thought and feeling.”

“I suppose not...”

Kaguya’s own words would have once applied to Kaguya herself. She, too, had looked down on the other members of Charon and made assumptions before she really got to know them—but she had been wrong.

“Of course...” Kaguya suddenly relaxed her face. “We don’t know anything about you, either. I, for one, hope that will change over time. I hope we can respect each other’s boundaries but still grow closer, Second Lieutenant Takanashi.”

Kaguya extended her hand with a smile.

She didn’t know the first thing about Haru, either. Maybe they had gotten off to a bad start, but they were sure to become friends with time, just like she and Azuma had.

Yes, Kaguya was sure they would find common ground. Just as she and Azuma had— “No thanks,” Haru said simply. “I don’t know how many times I need to repeat this, but I am not interested in being your friend. Let’s keep our interactions strictly to what is necessary. There is absolutely no need for me to learn any more about you people than the bare minimum required for my duties.”

Haru stared down at Kaguya’s extended hand dismissively, her expression as cold and hard as permafrost.

“I am here as an inspector. My place is to monitor, report on, and oversee this

squad. Our relationship does not go beyond that... This conversation is over.”

With that, Haru turned on her heel. She left the meeting hall without speaking another word to anyone, her blue hair swaying behind her.

“...”

This was Kaguya’s second time having her attempt at a handshake rebuffed in that very same room. Kaguya’s face stiffened into a mask, her hand still extended in midair. Azuma spoke up timidly, remembering that he was the one who had once put Kaguya in this same position.

“L-Lieutenant—?”

“...All these no-good, rotten...”

Kaguya was recalling the incident from a few months ago. This was just like what had happened then, too, when she had gone out of her way to make an effort and had tried to shake Azuma’s hand. A handshake was a social contract, one that deserved a response! It was the bare minimum of courtesy! Kaguya’s attempt at basic communication had now been rebuffed not once, but twice! She felt like she was about to blow.

“...Fine then.”

Kaguya managed to resist blowing her lid. She was far from being in a good mood, however.

“If that’s the way she wants it...”

Kaguya could give just as good as she got...or would that qualify as hazing? Not that the second lieutenant didn’t have it coming.

“If that’s the way she wants it...then don’t expect me to make things easy for her!”

If Haru was so intent on bringing her up on charges, Kaguya would just have to intentionally ignore her. Kaguya wasn’t about to lose to some Miss High-and-Mighty!

INTERLUDE ONE

Intentions

Meanwhile, after leaving the hall, Haru took out her terminal the moment she was in private. She dialed the number at the top of her call history—the one with the most frequent calls.

After the phone rang for some time, the person on the other end finally picked up.

“My apologies for calling while you’re busy,” Haru said, deferentially. The person she called was in a position of authority. “I’ve made contact with Kaguya Shinohara at Charon headquarters.”

“I see,” the person replied solemnly. In a way it almost sounded like they were sighing. *“You understand that you are there as an inspector for the Intelligence and Analysis Branch, yes? Your job, however, is not to merely observe. You are to drag Kaguya Shinohara back to Inspection Group headquarters by whatever means necessary, even with false accusations... According to the report she is there for research purposes, but that is obviously untrue. They are hiding something.”*

“Of course.”

Haru was there to drag Kaguya back to Inspection—just like Azuma and the others had suspected. The reason didn’t matter as long as Haru could separate her from Charon.

Haru didn’t care what happened to Kaguya after that. She would probably be subjected to all sorts of outlandish treatment, but that was hardly Haru’s business.

What Haru didn't understand, however, was why Inspection was so fixated on Kaguya in the first place. Why were they so against her?

As far as Haru could tell from their meeting earlier, Kaguya didn't seem like the type to cause problems. Or, to put it another way, she hardly seemed worth all this trouble.

"Sorry, but why are you so interested in Kaguya Shinohara? It is true that her behavior during recent events was suspicious, but it's not like she is doing any harm. I don't see why she merits so much concern..."

"Second Lieutenant Takanashi..." The person on the other end of the line sounded slightly offended. Haru was taken aback by their tone. *"Such issues are none of your concern."*

"O-of course not..."

Haru broke out into a cold sweat, detecting the person's bad mood even over the phone.

"If you succeed in this, however, you will have effectively achieved your goal. That is all you need to focus on. I will honor our agreement. You will finally get your hands on what you've been waiting for. I have high expectations for you, Second Lieutenant."

"Of course..."

Haru hadn't just inserted herself into Charon because she worked for Inspection. She also had her own goal that she was trying to achieve, and this was her chance to build a foundation for success. That was her real reason for being there.

What Haru wanted—was information.

About the heroes. Records. If she could get her hands on what little bits of intelligence had survived that chaos— "Still, I don't like it." It was a dirty trick, using that as bait to get her to trap someone. "Not that I have any room to complain, seeing as I agreed to do it..."

She was in no position to throw stones. Like they say, you can't make an omelet unless you're willing to crack a few eggs.

There's nothing worse than naïveté. Naïveté, and those who cling to it.

Which is why she was doing things this way in the first place. She had already made up her mind—everything else was just noise.

Haru Takanashi didn't know what the person on the other end of the line was thinking, and she didn't need to know.

CHAPTER TWO

Cowardice

Haru Takanashi, the officer dispatched from Inspection.

From the beginning, she made no attempt to fit in at Charon, and the other members took a clear disliking to her. Koyuki avoided her and made no attempt to hide it, Rindou treated her with open hostility, and many of the other members seemed to harbor strong negative feelings toward her as well.

As Kaguya and the others suspected, Haru's main target appeared to be Kaguya. She analyzed videos of past combats in which Kaguya played a role, looking for anything out of place or questionable, and then grilled Kaguya and Azuma about her findings.

Kaguya, meanwhile, wasn't making things easy for her. In addition to doing her utmost, of course, to avoid Haru, she also refused to rise to the bait no matter what Haru said, calmly explaining the truth instead. She was also careful to leave nothing suspicious out in the open, ensuring she remained safe no matter when Haru decided to do a search. She had even put her data on the heroes, which she always kept close at hand, temporarily into Azuma's safekeeping.

Kaguya assumed Haru wasn't going to be there for very long. If she were on a medium-to long-term mission, she would have probably spent more time trying to get into their good graces instead and waited to investigate until their guard was down.

So all Kaguya had to do, she figured, was bear it for a little while longer. However, Haru's presence was having a negative effect on the other members as well—they all felt like Charon was under the watchful eye of a stuffy

schoolteacher.

“Seriously—give me a break.”

The day after Haru arrived, Kaguya was sprawled out on the sofa in Azuma’s room, exhausted.

Azuma, meanwhile, was staring at her. He had considered making tea, but she was the one who had barged into his room without invitation, so he decided to just stick to doing paperwork at his desk.

“She even watches me while I cook. Can you believe it? What exactly does she think she’s going to find to complain about?”

“She’s probably going to say you need to change departments because of injurious use of cooking oil.”

“Don’t even joke about that—she probably would... She went after Koyuki again today, too, saying that her skirt is too short, morals and order, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Morals and order... Who died and made her teacher’s pet?”

Kaguya was not in Azuma’s room for any particular reason. She had simply come to collect his report. Since he had previously begun to transform into a hero and then turned back into a human, Azuma had been writing simple reports for Kaguya, detailing his physical condition.

According to Kaguya, the reason she wanted his written reports and not raw data was because she was inspecting his handwriting. She couldn’t do it in the meeting hall now that Haru was here, so had barged into his room instead.

I’m sure we’re being watched here as well, though.

Haru Takanashi had come from the Extermination Bureau’s Inspection Group. Azuma had a hunch, however, that she was no mere inspector.

First of all, from the way she walked he could tell that her core was strong. Her movements were extremely economical as well. She didn’t seem quite as adept a fighter as, say, Azuma, Rindou, or Koyuki, but she was no amateur like Kaguya, either—or so Azuma suspected.

Not that it really mattered.

“Here. I’m done.”

Azuma handed the report to Kaguya, which he had jotted down while thinking. Kaguya listlessly took it from him.

He was only making one report per day, but there were now several dozen pages. In them, Azuma covered not only his physical changes, but also notes related to battle. Kaguya skimmed through it, glancing down at the pages through the corner of her eye.

“Hmm...?” She stopped at one page and furrowed her brow. “Increased heart rate...? Sorry, what is this? What’s this referring to?”

“Oh. I only noticed recently, but my heart rate seems to have increased under certain conditions. It’s a symptom I never had before turning into a hero.”

“Certain conditions? What kinds of conditions?”

“Oh... Well, it happens during battle, but also at other times. The situation doesn’t really matter.” Azuma was being uncharacteristically evasive. It almost seemed like he was hoping she would drop the subject. “It’s whenever I share space with a certain squad member.”

“A certain squad member? Who?”

“Er... You, Lieutenant Shinohara,” he said, his face stoic.

Kaguya stared at him, her mouth agape.

“It’s not just my pulse. I have trouble concentrating. I feel inexplicably euphoric along with a rising sense of frustration. And yet also somehow feel incredibly powerful—I’ve never experienced symptoms like these before.”

“Euphoric and powerful,” Kaguya muttered. “I wonder if it could be an unprovoked surge of adrenaline.”

Surprised, she placed her chin in her hand and began to think.

“That’s not good...,” she said. After a moment her expression grew concerned. “These...could be aftereffects.”

“Aftereffects...?”

“Yes. You say these symptoms only appear when you’re near me, correct?”

And one thing that distinguishes me from others is that I interfered in your psyche, which makes me wonder if these symptoms could be aftereffects from what happened two months ago.”

“I see. Of course—you once meddled in my psyche, so if residues of that experience remain it would make sense for abnormalities to only occur while you’re near.”

“The effect seems to be narcotic. Hopefully it will alleviate with time, but...” Kaguya stared at the report. “Captain Azuma, I’m sorry, but would you mind writing down any change in these symptoms for me, every day? I’d like you to include even the smallest change in circumstances when they occur.”

“Of course.”

That sounded simple enough. Azuma didn’t see any reason why he shouldn’t.

“Actually,” said Kaguya, “as long as I’m here, we should do a little experiment.”

She stood up from the sofa and strode directly toward Azuma.

She almost seemed to be enjoying this, although surely Azuma was just imagining that— “Wait. What are you doing?” he asked.

“Hold still.”

Kaguya moved forward suddenly, just centimeters away. Azuma flinched in surprise. Kaguya was no expert when it came to physical maneuvers, but even though Azuma had been on the front lines for the past six years, she was able to almost instantly get close to him.

So close that he could feel them both breathing.

Her skin, which was as white as porcelain, the excitement betrayed in her violet eyes, close enough to reach out and touch—no, even closer than that. All before he could stop her.

Azuma had never been this close to Kaguya—to any girl—before in his life. His voice came out as a weak, almost pathetic, tremble.

“...?! Where did this come from...?”

Azuma and Kaguya were different heights. Kaguya's head came just to the base of Azuma's neck. Her delicate hair would probably feel like silk if he touched it. Azuma was ashamed at how flustered he felt.

"Well? What happens when I get this close? Has anything changed?"

"Anything...?"

Azuma tried to resist. What did she think she was doing, all of a sudden? Before he could speak, however, her soft sweet scent stole the words from him.

Usually Azuma didn't notice it, but right now he couldn't help but be painfully aware of the scent as it tickled his nose—that vaguely sweet smell that was unique to girls. He didn't think Kaguya was wearing perfume, so maybe it was her shampoo, or even her own natural smell.

This was no laughing matter. Azuma had no idea his composure could be so easily shattered.

On top of everything else, she didn't seem to notice—but how could she not?—*they* were touching him. Kaguya's were bigger than average, according to Koyuki. Nicer. Touching him now. Her chest.

Obviously she wasn't pushing them against him. She was just comfortable, that's all, her defenses down. Touching him, not touching him, what did it matter—?

But for Azuma...

Her twin mounds, which he could feel brushing against him near his own chest, were soft and warm, and sent an electric shock throughout his entire body. What little sanity he had left evaporated almost entirely.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Captain Azuma?" Kaguya asked.

But Azuma said nothing. Finding his behavior strange, Kaguya tilted her eyes upward to look at him. Upturned eyes, beneath soft lashes.

Kaguya's beautiful violet eyes, slightly moist from lack of sleep, stared up at him with simple, intellectual curiosity. Azuma suddenly broke eye contact.

"Hmm? Are you okay?" Kaguya asked him.

“I...think I feel a little ill.”

She furrowed her brow, looking worried. Azuma forced himself to look away. He felt like his heart was going to explode.

“Yes...you do look unwell. Maybe you should go for a checkup, Captain.”

“What?”

“I can hear your pulse, and it really is quite fast. You’re sweating, and you seem quite tense. There may be a problem with your heart or nervous system.”

“Y-yes, of course. I’ll make an appointment.”

Azuma didn’t think it was his heart, but at present he couldn’t think of what else it might be.

Kaguya moved away, unbothered.

“This time I’ll try moving farther back,” she said, walking over to a corner of Azuma’s room. The room was quite large, so she looked comparatively small standing far away in the corner.

“Well?”

“I mean...” He was certainly better than a moment ago, that was for sure. “The truth is, I get the symptoms even when I just see you. They just get stronger the closer you get.”

“I see. So it differs depending on distance,” said Kaguya, approaching once again. “Yes, that could be a problem. Under normal circumstances it might not matter, but if something like this were to occur during battle, things might get complicated. Should I make an effort to keep my distance? At least until you get better?”

“N-no, that seems like putting the cart before the horse. Besides, even if my pulse does increase, it’s only by a little bit, and my concentration is fine. I don’t think it’s had any effect in battle.”

“That’s okay then, I guess—but we need to address this sooner rather than later.” Kaguya was being oddly insistent for some reason. “Even if it is no problem under ordinary circumstances, if you got this way during battle, it would likely put the entire squad in danger.”

Azuma wasn't sure what to say. Obviously, this problem never occurred during battle.

"The fact of the matter is we don't have any effective options for treating this... I know. It may be a little over the top, but I think our only option might be exposure therapy."

"Exposure therapy?"

"Yes. We may not be able to cure what you're experiencing at the moment, but we can still help get you acclimated to it," said Kaguya, drawing closer to Azuma once again. She grabbed his right hand in both of her own.

"—?!"

The sudden warmth caused him to jump.

Her hands, which he could feel on his own, were slender and slightly cool to the touch. They were small and delicate in a way that was hard for him to understand as a man, but still held scratches and calluses. They were not weak hands. They were like her. To be honest, though, that wasn't really what Azuma was thinking about anymore.

The feel of her hands, the warmth—

Hold on, what was he even thinking?

"You see? If we increase contact like this, you should gradually grow accustomed to the feeling. That way, even if something like this does happen during battle, it shouldn't be an issue."

"...Please let go..."

"Oh—I'm sorry! Was that too much? Maybe we should have worked up to that..."

Kaguya released his hand, and Azuma felt like he could finally breathe again. He could still feel her warmth.

Seriously, what in the hell am I even thinking about?!

"This is actually kind of a relief, though. We're finally seeing a change. I was starting to panic a little, thinking there might be nothing."

“O-oh, of course. That’s good then, I guess.”

Azuma, meanwhile, took a deep breath. He wanted to bury everything that had just happened in a deep, dark corner of his memory and then never think of it ever again, if at all possible.

Azuma breathed a sigh, forcefully banishing his thoughts. Clearly Kaguya was just doing all this out of the goodness of her heart. There was no way she had ulterior motives, he told himself.

“Humph... I wasn’t the only one to turn, though. We found out you almost turned into a hero yourself once, Lieutenant. Are you sure there haven’t been any little changes with you as well?”

“I was thinking the same thing, but apparently it’s not that simple,” said Kaguya, making eye contact with Azuma and laughing uncomfortably. “Nothing seems to have changed with me. Of course, I lived all those years without even knowing, so maybe it doesn’t have much of an effect in the first place.” Kaguya’s smile was still uncomfortable. “But it must be tough for you, Captain. Constantly hearing the egg pulsing, that is.”

“Well... I guess. I’ve already gotten used to it, though.”

Even the pulsing, which he could hear coming from inside his own body, was not that hard to deal with once he became accustomed to it. He only noticed it slightly now, on quiet nights after battle when he couldn’t sleep.

“It is creepy, though. Feeling as if you have two hearts inside you.”

No, worse than that. Even now it was difficult to accept—knowing that there was something foreign inside him, especially when that something came from a creature he hated so much.

“Doesn’t it gross you out, Lieutenant...? Knowing there’s a hero egg inside you?”

“Hmm? Not at all. After all, I went seven years without even noticing it,” said Kaguya, taking the broad-minded approach. “But when it comes to the Goddesses who made us this way—and the heroes...”

Kaguya spoke quietly, her voice rife with conflicting emotions. But whether

rage, pity, or even sympathy, whatever she was feeling was far too complex to sum up in a single word.

“I’d like to at least figure out what they really are before I grow up.”

“What they really are... I had never even thought about that before.”

Not until Kaguya arrived.

Where had the heroes come from, why were they so bent on causing destruction, and where would their path take them?

Heroes had appeared out of the blue three decades ago, in the year 2030. Even after all that time, very little was known about them other than that heroes were originally humans, and that creatures known as Goddesses had made them this way.

“I actually don’t know too much about this stuff, but there must have been some signs of when they first appeared. If you look into records from thirty years ago, wouldn’t something pop up?” Azuma asked.

“You would think so...,” said Kaguya, her voice suddenly dropping low. She sounded somehow jaded. “But nothing is left... All the documents from thirty years ago are gone!”

“Gone?”

Even Azuma knew that was strange. Seeing his reaction, Kaguya waved her hand in the air as if to clarify.

“I mean, not every document. Just everything related to heroes. Of course, things may have just been too chaotic at the time to leave any records behind.”

Azuma, of course, had no clue what things might have been like thirty years ago. But if heroes had only been visible to children even from the start, then the avenues open for fighting back would have been extremely limited. It’s not like the Self-Defense Forces could have done anything if they weren’t even able to see them.

“It’s probably because only children could see them,” said Azuma. “People must have been helpless for the first few years.”

“Still, even children can make records. And forget about the children—you

would have expected a few heroes to show up randomly in photos, at least, but there's not even that."

Even when captured in photos and videos, heroes could only be perceived by those who were young enough to see them.

"You know why they came to be called heroes, don't you, Captain Azuma...?"

"Yes. It's because the first one to appear resembled a 'hero' from a fantasy anime, right?" That was what Azuma had heard. And the name "Goddess" had apparently been chosen based on that. Azuma had never taken much of an interest, to be honest. "Why? What about it?"

"Well—exactly *who* did you hear that *from*?"

Azuma furrowed his brow. Her question seemed to come out of left field.

"Who? Why... someone older, I guess. I don't remember who, but why are you asking?"

Azuma didn't think what name they used was that important, but Kaguya apparently thought differently.

"The truth is, I've actually been searching for information on the first hero that appeared. About what it looked like, and the incident it must have caused."

Of course—that must have been why she had been pulling so many all-nighters as of late.

However, that made the fact that there were no records seem all the stranger. Even if it had been difficult to record things at the time, someone could have still written something down later, for posterity's sake. Still...

"It's been thirty years at this point... Whatever it is that's been lost, I don't see what good it would do us now."

"Maybe you're right..."

Kaguya fell silent. She seemed to be lost in thought.

"Lieutenant—"

"You know, Captain..., " she muttered, suddenly turning to stare out the window, her back toward Azuma. "It would be nice if life could go on like this

forever, even after we enter our twenties and can no longer see the heroes.”

“What brought this on all of a sudden...?”

“Nothing. It’s just, at some point, we won’t be able to see them anymore... Heroes are the reason we’re all connected, so once we lose the ability to see them, it seems likely that we’ll all split up.”

Some of them would probably stay in the army forever, while others would leave. There was no way of knowing what would happen to Charon, but at some point their paths were going to take them separate ways. They wouldn’t get to spend time together like this.

“Even if we grow apart, we could still get together from time to time, I suppose. I guess we could go for a drink or something. With Major Mirai, and after a few years even the Director and Mari.”

“Are you worried?”

“Yes,” said Kaguya, turning around.

“As long as everyone’s still alive and have just gone their own way, I don’t see what the problem is... But that’s not what you’re really worried about, is it, Lieutenant?”

“No...”

No more people getting hurt. No more deaths, no more turning into heroes. If they could all stay as they were, alive.

“When it happened to Sakura, she told me I was our hope.”

Azuma’s eyes slowly widened. He had once said almost the same thing, though he was pretty sure Kaguya hadn’t heard him.

“That’s why I don’t want them to lose hope. No one else. Even the heroes, everyone reaching out to be saved.”

As the sun began to set, Kaguya smiled gently. Her scarlet hair was awash in the evening light, beautiful and diaphanous.

“If they want to be saved, then I have a duty to answer that wish.”

Deep down, a part of Azuma couldn’t help but feel like saving everyone was

hubris. Kaguya must have spent her life in very privileged surroundings indeed to still be hanging onto such naïveté at this age.

But he didn't necessarily think that was a bad thing. In fact, that was what made her their hope.

What made her ideals so precious and noble, however, was also what made them so dangerous, and what begged sacrifice. Azuma had the conviction and sense of responsibility to shoulder such sacrifices. If asked, the other squad members would likely say the same—in fact, Azuma was sure of it. Even if that meant giving Kaguya special treatment.

“A duty, huh? Do you really think you can save everyone on your own?”

“If anyone can do it, I can. That's what I think,” Kaguya said without apparent reservation. It was as if she believed nothing was impossible. “So long as I'm here, we won't let anyone else slip through the cracks, Captain.”

“No... Of course not.”

For some reason, Kaguya's smile made Azuma feel uneasy.

No one else. As simple as that sounded, in reality, nothing could be more difficult. It was a grueling path ahead of them, but there was no way Kaguya was unaware of that. She knew. Knew, and perhaps, was willing to take on that task regardless.

“I feel the same... So long as I'm here, I won't let anyone else die. No more sacrifices, like what happened to Sakura. That includes you and me as well. Even Second Lieutenant Takanashi.”

It was time to get serious. No more griping.

“As for the heroes—I'm not making any promises, but I'll do what I can to help.”

“Thank you... I appreciate that, Captain Azuma.”

2-2

“The weather today in Kanto will be clear and sunny. Expect another hot day starting around noon. It's perfect weather for an outing. Whether you're

thinking about going shopping or taking a trip to the park, today would be a great day to..."

While the forecast called for bright skies nationwide, there was one very small location where, despite what the news said, the exact opposite was turning out to be the case. Somewhere in Tokyo, at the center of a spacious park neatly enshrined in a residential district, the sounds of insectile screeching and a woman's screams mingled in the air.

A flurry of dust danced in the air. Bits of grit and sand, swept along by howling wind, had enveloped nearly the entire park in a localized maelstrom.

Those who attempted to enter this sandstorm were rebuffed by powerful winds, and once inside, those within the storm's buffeting grasp found it hard to move. The members of Charon, including Kaguya, were within this danger zone.

They were wearing protective gear, including hoods and goggles. Despite the poor visibility, they found it occupying the center of the sandstorm. An aberration—a hero.

At first it was just a tiny dust eddy, but it had grown stronger with each passing moment, and now, after several dozen minutes, had already transformed into a powerful sandstorm. The first gust of wind rose up to greet them with powerful force.

The second gust lashed outward, a sirocco that struck at the surrounding area and even beyond.

"I can't see anything but a silhouette. Koyuki, do you have eyes?"

"Visibility isn't great, but I can see it somewhat," said Koyuki, searching through her scope from outside the storm. They were speaking over comms. "It's a strange one. It looks like a castle made of sand..."

Kaguya peered in the hero's direction as she listened to Koyuki's voice. It did almost look like a castle, now that she mentioned it.

"It's at exactly one o'clock from where Azuma is standing. It looks to be about three meters tall."

“Understood.”

After processing what Koyuki said, Azuma was silent for a brief moment. He suddenly began speaking, quiet and focused, as if he had just picked up on something.

“The egg is located toward the top—in the peak of the sandcastle Koyuki mentioned.”

With cursory grunts, the other members dispersed.

Rindou charged straight in without hesitation. Koyuki had taken up camp in (the abandoned and half-dilapidated ruins of) a housing estate located outside the park from which she was surveilling the hero’s position and movements and reporting on what she saw. Haru, meanwhile, was supposedly waiting on standby somewhere outside.

As usual, Kaguya was with Azuma. She was having trouble keeping her balance due to the wind.

She didn’t notice until they were already inside the sandstorm, but long weapons were at a disadvantage here. They were difficult to control, like trying to open an umbrella in a hurricane.

Azuma glanced at her, a little worried, but quickly turned back around.

“Follow behind me, Lieutenant. I should help block the sand.”

“Okay!”

Hero Emergence



???

[??]

Location: Somewhere in Tokyo

Type: Suspected wizard

This hero summons a raging sandstorm to prevent others from drawing near. The sandcastle that towers at the heart of its misshapen form is a masterpiece of blood, sweat, and tears. If only the hero knew the princess in that tower was an impostor.

The sandstorm was steadily growing in force. The moment they plunged forward, their vision was obscured. From inside the howling wind and raging sands, their only lifeline was the directions they received over the wireless comms.

The sound of the wind suddenly grew louder, the sandstorm more severe. Kaguya felt like she was about to get swept away.

“I...I can barely move. Captain Azuma, I’m going to— Aiee!”

“Hold on tight!”

“W-wait a second! You promised you would tell me before doing this!”

Azuma had once again tossed Kaguya over his shoulder like a bale of hay. His hand encircled her waist, holding her firmly in place. There was no way for her to get down unless Azuma released her.

“I’m sick of this...!”

Azuma raced forward. Perhaps it was because he no longer had to match Kaguya’s pace, but his movements were now quick and lithe, like a wild animal’s.

The experience for Kaguya, on the other hand, draped across his shoulder, was far from pleasant. She was jostled back and forth, up and down, her eyes spinning in circles. Joking aside, she just prayed she didn’t throw up. She regretted eating four servings of spaghetti right before they left.

Since he already knew where the hero was located, Azuma headed in that direction without hesitation. Wincing from the flecks of sand that worked their way into her protective clothing, Kaguya finally spotted it, the *sandcastle*. It was right in front of them.

“It’s in there...!”

The hero’s egg was not exposed, but instead seemed to be protected by the sandcastle. It was about a meter tall. Although it was difficult to see through the storm, it was clear at a glance that this castle was its core. It stood firm amid the raging sands, as if completely untouched by the wind. It looked fine and delicate in appearance, as if it could collapse at any moment.

They needed to get a little closer. As Azuma attempted to approach, however — “Ahh...?!”

For some reason, he stopped. Kaguya tried to peer into his face to see what was wrong, but naturally she couldn't see anything.

“Captain Azuma? Are you okay?”

“Yeah... It's nothing.”

He was pressing a hand to his face, against where his right eye would be. His voice sounded like he was in pain, which caused Kaguya to worry. The spot Azuma was pressing was where his own egg was located.

“Wait, nothing's happening with your hero egg, is it—?!”

“I'm fine.” Azuma immediately removed his hand. He shook his head once, as if to banish some thought. “More importantly, Lieutenant, confirm everyone's location ASAP. I wouldn't want to accidentally hit the *wrong person*.”

Kaguya was slightly puzzled. Given the limited visibility, it was natural to worry about friendly fire—but Azuma was hardly fresh off the boat. Surely he could tell the difference between a hero and a human.

Besides, since he could hear their eggs, there was no need for him to worry about something like that in the first place.

“All members, this is Kaguya Shinohara, making contact on behalf of Captain Azuma. As visibility is poor, please report your exact locations.”

They each responded in turn. Rindou was fairly close to Azuma's current position.

Koyuki had also entered the sandstorm, wielding a small arms rifle-type Chronos. The other members were all inside the storm as well, in various positions, although some had made more progress than others.

There was only one member for whom Kaguya had not received confirmation.

“Second Lieutenant Takanashi? Can you hear me?”

Haru was the only one not to respond.

“Second Lieutenant Takanashi? Where are you at this moment? Are you still

on standby outside—?”

Kaguya tuned her wireless so it was just picking up Haru’s channel. Since this was Haru’s first battle, she was supposed to be waiting outside the sandstorm, but Kaguya could hear the hollow swirling sands over the line. Based on the sound, Haru had to be close. Possibly right beside them.

“Wait! Don’t tell me you entered the storm! Weren’t you told to wait outside?”

“...Erk, this is just a light breeze.” Despite her defiant words, Haru’s voice over the comms sounded like she was having a rough time. “More importantly, where are you?”

“Forget about me; are you all right?! If you see the hero—!”

“I’m fine. I’m more than capable of handling this much.”

Kaguya wasn’t sure why Haru was being so nonchalant, but she couldn’t help but feel anxious.

“Captain Azuma!” Kaguya called from behind him. “It’s Second Lieutenant Takanashi.”

Azuma audibly clicked his tongue. He seemed uncharacteristically irritated.

“It’s too dangerous to let her charge in alone! We have to go find her.”

“Leave her...,” said Azuma. He was breathing heavily, his strength flagging. He spoke in a harsh tone, as if to counter his own exhaustion. “We don’t have time to deal with some loose cannon. So long as she doesn’t get too close to the hero, she should survive.”

“But—”

“Which do you want to save?” Azuma’s voice carried well despite the sandstorm. “The hero, or Haru Takanashi? Saving them both is impossible. This sandstorm is getting bigger and bigger.”

“Well—”

Like Azuma said, the sandstorm was growing stronger. If they went to find Haru first, they wouldn’t have time to go back to the hero afterward.

Haru had entered the storm on her own accord. It was dangerous to plunge ahead like that when visibility was so poor, but Haru wasn't stupid (probably). She must have known what she was getting into.

She had known and charged in anyway, so there was no need to baby her.

"I'm sorry... Let's go."

• • •

"Let's go." It was Kaguya's voice.

They were more or less abandoning her, but as Haru heard them speak over the wireless, she felt neither surprise nor anger. She had been prepared for this.

I can't let this opportunity go to waste.

She was lucky that her first battle involved a sandstorm. Visibility was obscured, and Kaguya didn't have the breathing room to worry about anything else going on around her. That gave Haru the chance to finally snoop on just what Kaguya was up to.

Judging from the raging sandstorm's momentum, Kaguya seemed to be heading toward the center of the storm. Naturally, the closer she got to the center, the stronger both the wind and the pelting sands became.

Even with protective gear, it was painful to be inside the storm. While it kept the sand from getting in Haru's eyes, the gear otherwise made little difference. The tiny flecks of dirt and sand, too small to even notice under usual circumstances, felt like an inexhaustible swarm of needles.

Haru could only move forward one step at a time, having lost even her sense of direction amid the howling wind. But she had to catch up to Kaguya and Azuma. To capture the truth with her own eyes.

This is the perfect chance, while they're both distracted. I just need to get...a little bit closer.

Haru continued to place one foot in front of the other, refusing to let the powerful winds stop her. It hurt as much to stand still as to move forward. In which case, it made more sense to keep moving.

They were lying about something. Haru was sure of it.

Research purposes? Who would put themselves on the front lines for something like that? That had to be a lie. There was no need for Kaguya to be out here. Why take a princess from the safety of her castle and plunk her down in the field? It didn't make sense.

There has to be a reason.

After several more steps, Haru finally spotted something other than sand. Or rather, no, it was still sand—but it had no place being inside this whirling sandstorm.

“A sandcastle...?”

There was a sandcastle, like what a child would make, standing completely untouched within the storm. Its design was extremely elaborate and minute, not something that should have been able to withstand a storm such as this.

Silently, Haru drew her weapon—an ordinary knife. It wouldn't even be able to nick a Goddess, let alone a hero. It was just metal. But Haru was used to the feel of it in her hand.

Despite having readied her weapon, Haru was not foolish enough to trudge in blindly. She watched carefully, gently biting her lip. To Haru, heroes were objects of revulsion and fear...

...and scorn.

Galling as it was, she had no way of killing a hero on her own, but she watched, hoping to spot a weak point. When the attack came, it wasn't from the hero.

Blam, blam. Two shots rang out, loud and clear even through the storm.

Haru dropped to the ground reflexively, peering upward as the shots hit the sandcastle. The castle collapsed for a brief moment but then recovered automatically, almost as if the sands were alive.

But the bullet trajectory seemed to have been fired toward her. The only ones who would be firing a gun were Koyuki and Azuma, and the only one this close was— *Wait! Captain Azuma?!*

Still lying in the dirt, Haru pivoted her eyes in the direction from which the bullets had come. On the other side of the castle, she could see Azuma's face, genuinely pale and surprised. But if anyone should look pale, it was Haru. She was the one who was just shot at.

It must have been a mistake. There was no way Captain Azuma would have shot at her on purpose. But this was no time for doubts. Another figure appeared, this one with scarlet hair.

"You?! What are you doing here?!" said Kaguya, her voice close. Kaguya's surprise at seeing Haru there was written all over her face.

A moment of conflict seemed to flicker in Kaguya's eyes, but that was all. She lifted the weapon she was holding—the club once wielded by Sakura Arakawa, which seemed poorly suited for someone like Kaguya—and used it to smash the castle as hard as she could.

"Huh...?!"

There was no way her attack was going to be effective, especially after actual bullets hadn't done any good.

Still lying in the dirt, Haru lifted her head and shouted, "What in the hell do you think you're—? Ah!"

But Kaguya didn't respond. Haru realized something.

Kaguya wasn't even blinking.

She had stalled.

Even at first glance, Haru could tell something wasn't normal. Kaguya wasn't just *pretending* to freeze. She wasn't blinking, and her eyes seemed to be focused somewhere else—even her breathing had stopped.

"S-Second Lieutenant Shinohara...?!"

Kaguya didn't answer her. It was almost like—yes, almost as if she was dead.

• • •

The instant after she swung the club, Kaguya was already in their world.

She fell forward with the momentum of the swing, landing like a sack. The dirt

was painful against her knees.

Kaguya was no longer wearing her protective gear. She found herself under clear skies, now dressed in plain clothes for some reason.

“Is this...the park?”

The sandstorm was gone—but there was sand. She was in the sandbox of a small residential park.

A short distance away she could see swings, a jungle gym with monkey bars, and other more baffling play equipment with uses she did not understand. However, there was not a single soul to be found.

No one was there, despite the fact that the weather was perfect for a day at the park: pleasant and sunny, with a gentle breeze. Of course, other people usually could not approach these mental worlds. These worlds were the hero's own interior psyches.

First things first, I need to find the actual person.

Kaguya took a glance around the world. There was nothing beyond the park but endless wasteland.

The world was not perfect, however. Looking closely, she could see the swing set posts, for instance, were coming apart at the seams. The farther away from the center of the sandbox she peered, the rougher around the edges that the world became. On the other hand, the sandbox itself had been faithfully constructed, down to each individual grain of sand.

That, of course, was where she found him.

“Mommy!” A child's voice, drawling and spoiled. **“What are you doing over there? Come here! Let's build a sandcastle!”**

The boy was looking toward Kaguya as he spoke. Kaguya was thrown for a loop at first, but a woman appeared out of nowhere from behind her. It was the only other presence permitted in these worlds: the Goddess.

“Hold your horses, Yuu. You're so impatient. I'm coming.”

“Hooray!”

They looked like a happy mother and child. The boy appeared to be around three years old; the woman—his mother, supposedly—was maybe in her thirties. She had an artificial-looking smile plastered across her face.

Kaguya approached without fear. An unfriendly gust of wind rose up to meet her.

“Wow, you look like you’re having fun. Do you mind if I join you?” Kaguya asked the boy, who furrowed his brow and stared up at her. “My name is Kaguya. Kaguya Shinohara.”

He seemed wary, but not yet upset that she was there. Children were less guarded and easier to work with.

Kaguya crouched down to his level. As she made eye contact and smiled, the boy averted his eyes slightly. Children were easier to manage. They had less life experience, so it wasn’t as hard to get them to open up.

“What’s your name?” Kaguya asked.

The boy hesitated for a moment before finally saying, “**Yuki**,” very softly. The name meant *snow*—a far cry from summer sandstorms.

Kaguya glanced furtively at his “mother.” The Goddess was staring at Kaguya with cold, piercing eyes, almost as if Kaguya were some kind of bug that had gotten in her way.

“Yuki, huh?” Kaguya peered into the boy’s eyes, which were the color of smoky quartz. The two made eye contact. His dark eyes didn’t fit his wintry name. “Do you mind if we have a little chat?”

Kaguya was far from an expert when it came to dealing with children. She knew his attention was focused on building his sandcastle, but she continued speaking anyway.

Kaguya didn’t know anything about this boy, nor did he know anything about her. Still—children were usually quick to pick up on things. The boy understood immediately that Kaguya didn’t mean to cause him harm. For now, he was still looking at her as if she was an intrusion, but it wouldn’t be long until he warmed up to her. She was just a friendly older girl.

People don't easily trust those they've just met. Trust usually needs to be built up slowly over time, but Kaguya couldn't afford to take her time while she knew the others were out there, still fighting. She tried to use what was at hand to make it all easy to understand, changing the subject to what was left unsaid. It had to be done as naturally as possible, starting with something simple, like, say, his favorite snacks.

"Wow... This castle is really nice. Did you make it yourself?"

"Yeah. I'm real good at this kind of stuff."

Kaguya looked over the sandcastle, impressed. She could see he was good at building them. It *was* very nice. It was about thirty centimeters tall, and the ornamentation was incredibly minute. He had used water to condense the sand so it didn't crumble. If someone were to come along and paint it, it would have looked like a real castle.

"Do you always build sandcastles alone?"

"No. Mommy always helps."

"I see. And what about now? Where is your mommy today?"

"Huh?" The boy furrowed his brow. **"Hey... Why isn't Mommy here? She was here just a minute ago."**

"Did you come here by yourself today, Yuki?"

"By myself? Of course not. I'm not allowed to go outside on my own."

"But you're on your own right now, aren't you?"

"Well—"

With that, the boy seemed to be trying to remember something. Something further back, before the beautiful dream, before the fleeting castle.

Kaguya turned toward the boy. He made an expression like he was seeing something strange, like he was slightly overwhelmed by her—by the splendor as the fleeting rays of sun lit her from behind.

He could tell by the look in her eyes that Kaguya wasn't just some stranger. She pressed him, speaking as gently as possible.

“I need you to remember. What were you doing right before this? Before playing in the sand? Before coming here?”

“What do you mean?”

The boy didn’t understand what she was asking, but as a child, it was in his nature to attempt to answer questions when asked. He tried to think, his face growing more and more doubtful with each passing moment.

“I...was in the hospital, I think... But what am I doing here?”

“Why were you in the hospital...?”

“Why? Well, I...”

The boy fell silent. He seemed to have remembered something. His face froze, almost as if time itself had stopped, and he fell back onto his behind, perhaps in shock. The sandcastle crumbled from the impact. Kaguya continued to question him. Just one step further. He was almost there.

“Was your mother there?”

Kaguya’s voice intruded into the boy’s memories, snapping him back to attention. Constantly pressing, never giving him a chance to run, even though it was already too late.

“That’s right—Mommy. When it happened...”

When *it* happened.

There was a metallic screech, a sound that had no place in a playground. At the same time—out of the corner of her eye—Kaguya saw a truck barreling forward, near where the swings had been. A cloud of sand and dust rose into the air, but Kaguya didn’t bother to turn her head. This was just a disturbance in his mental world, in his chaotic memory—he was slowly starting to recall what had happened.

“She was with me then. I think a car hit us...and I...I...”

The boy’s tone changed, slowly, from a high-pitched child’s voice into something deeper.

“What happened next...?”

The person standing before Kaguya was now around the same age as her. Kaguya had already been briefed by Mirai. A boy had passed away in this area. He had been sixteen.

The surroundings, along with the sandbox, suddenly disappeared, puffed out like a candle. In its place, a road appeared. A large road, not one that would be found anywhere nearby. The road was stained red with someone's blood—it belonged to a woman who was now sprawled across the road. There was a small child lying on the ground next to her, unconscious, blood streaming from his head.

The boy stared at them, as if frozen.

He pressed his hand to his neck, clutching his throat tightly.

“What’s wrong with my voice...?”

A few moments had already passed since his voice had changed, but he suddenly seemed frightened by the sound coming from his own lips, as if it had been some time since he had last spoken.

The scene wavered once again, changing from the tragic scene of an accident to an all-white room.

There was a child sleeping in a bed, hooked up to a variety of tubes. The positions and colors of the tubes were a mismatched hodgepodge, and there were no nurses or doctors in sight.

Only the soccer ball left next to the bed attested to how much time had passed. Quick on the uptake, the boy noticed immediately what this meant.

“It’s...been around ten years, I think,” said Kaguya, quietly stepping closer.

She didn’t know much about him, but based on this scene she could guess what kind of condition he had been left in.

After the accident, his life had been saved, but he must have been left in a vegetative state. And now, for whatever reason, he was on the verge of death, having begun to pass away without having ever woken up. That was why he was still a child on the inside.

The look on the boy’s face when she told him it had been ten years nearly

broke Kaguya's heart. Even an outsider like Kaguya understood how hard it must be to accept a thing like that.

But that was what she needed him to do. It was why she was there.

"You...probably understand this in some way, but you still haven't woken up."

He was here, inside this rapidly changing world, living in a deception, divorced from reality and yet too painful to be a dream.

"At the moment, you've turned into something not human."

Slowly, the boy turned his eyes in her direction. Wasn't that first despair enough? Surely this was more than his heart could take.

"I came here to stop you. The you that is causing trouble, out there."

"I— Wait. I don't understand." His voice was masculine, yet fragile. **"I'm causing trouble? Out there?"**

Kaguya nodded silently. "Trouble" was an understatement; the sandstorm had already enveloped several people and was continuing to grow.

"But that can't be. See? I've been here the whole time. This is a dream, isn't it? When am I going to wake up?"

Kaguya had no way of answering that heartbreaking question. Yuki would never wake up again. Maybe they could have saved him if they had gotten to him before he completely transformed into a hero, but he would have remained in a vegetative state.

He began crying—like a child. Unsure of what to do, Kaguya hugged him softly.

"I'm sorry..." she murmured gently, relieved that he didn't seem to hear her. She was apologizing for the sin she was about to commit. "But listen: Your mommy is all right."

The boy finally lifted his face. His eyes shone with a faint glimmer of hope, causing Kaguya's chest to constrict.

It was a lie. Kaguya had no idea whether the boy's mother was alive. But if the accident happened ten years ago, any hope was slim.

In this instance, however, Kaguya thought a lie could be forgiven. He was already trapped in his own world. There was no way for him to know the truth. Better to offer a gentle lie.

“Sh-she is? What did Mommy say? Did she mention me? Was she mad?”

“She’s very worried about you.”

Kaguya wondered if the boy and his mother had gotten into a fight before the accident.

“Now let’s hurry and get out of here! I came because your mommy asked me to come get you.”

“I...I can wake up? I can see Mommy again?”

“Of course,” said Kaguya, her smile brilliant as she lied once more.

If she told him the truth now, there was no telling what might happen on the outside. It was probably better to let him die without giving him an honest answer.

The boy’s expression grew calm. An innocent smile appeared on his face at the prospect of seeing his mother once again.

“Let’s get out of this place quickly, then. Will you come with me?”

“I’ll follow in a little bit. You go on ahead.”

“Oh...okay. I’ll be waiting for you with Mommy.”

Despite possessing the face of a young man, his smile was still that of a young boy. He seemed almost giddy at the thought of his mother, the thought of seeing her again.

“Thank you, miss. We’ll play together again, on the outside!”

“Of course. I’d like that.”

But that would obviously never happen.

The sun was sinking. Bathed in oddly distorted light, the boy, still smiling, disappeared.

Kaguya exhaled in relief, trying to cling to the fact that what she had done

was *save* him.



At first, bizarrely, she appeared dead. A moment later, her body jerked dramatically, tossed back by the sandstorm.

In a panic, Haru caught her, stopping Kaguya from flying away.

Haru gulped. It was clear that Kaguya's consciousness was elsewhere, although not because she was unconscious. It had happened far too suddenly, for starters. And the way she looked now was like her mind had been spirited away, like she wasn't really here.

Haru's palms grew clammy with fear. She had no idea what Kaguya was doing, but the idea of going into such a defenseless state while in the epicenter of a catastrophe...

Why in hell would she do something like this?

What was happening to her—?

Although baffling, for a brief moment, she saw it. A black shadow appeared upon the peak of the sandcastle—the hero's core. And deep within the shadow, for only a moment, she saw a young man's face, full of hope, appear and then fade away.

Several seconds passed, as if time and space had paused. Then, just as the pain from the sand that had worked its way into her protective gear was starting to call Haru back into the moment, with a rustle, the sandstorm ended.

The park suddenly became clear and sunny, as if nothing had happened in the first place. The wind had ceased so suddenly that it caused Haru to lose her balance and fall to her knees.

In shock, Haru removed the goggles that had been protecting her eyes. The surrounding area was a picture of hell. The tempest had uprooted the park's play equipment and sent it swirling through the air. Captain Azuma must have been hit by one of the pieces, because there was blood streaming from his head.

Azuma's face looked pained. He also appeared to be a bit angry, but despite

the difficult time he seemed to be having, he probably wasn't badly hurt.

"First of all...I'm sorry, for almost hitting you with that shot," said Azuma, expressing concern first, despite the fact that he was the one bleeding. "However, that is why you cannot act on your own like that. Accidents can happen."

"I will take your point to heart. However..." Haru laid Kaguya gently onto the ground and faced Azuma. "Kaguya also acted on her own. Doesn't that rule apply to her?"

"This is not a discussion..."

"Kaguya rushed onto the battlefield. She did what she wanted to. I only did the same thing she did."

Haru was almost sure she hadn't been told to stay behind with Koyuki just because it was her "first battle." Besides, it wasn't even really her first battle. It was just her first battle with Charon.

"Just...what do you think you're trying to do?" said Azuma, glaring at Haru as if her face were on upside down. "If you want to observe us, you could just review battle recordings from the safety of the barracks. Why come here when there's no need for it?"

"As if I could get anything from a safe distance!"

Haru stood up and slowly edged into Azuma's personal space.

Watch from a safe distance? What would that accomplish? Absolutely nothing!

"So long as this inspection continues, I go where you go," she said, smiling. But her smile didn't reach her whole face. It was just a glimmer dancing in her eyes.

She sounded boastful—not that she meant to. It was just how her voice came out.

"I'm giving you a severe reprimand. Since this was the first time, and there was no damage, it will just be a reprimand," Azuma told her, blood still dripping from his head. "But keep it up and I won't hesitate to send you packing back to

Inspection. You're causing too much trouble."

"Fine... I'll keep that in mind," she said, but her eyes were already focused elsewhere.

Azuma's warning hardly seemed to register with her. She was still trying to behave, though. Getting sent back to Inspection would not be great for her.

Haru turned her gaze forward once more when she heard crunching footsteps. Kaguya had woken up.

"Lieutenant Shinohara...?"

However, Kaguya didn't look like she'd just woken up, based on her facial expression. She glanced at Haru, but didn't say anything. Kaguya looked like she'd just returned from another world. She continued to stare off into the distance until, at last, Azuma spoke to her.

2-3

Even after showering, she still felt gross, like there was sand all over her body.

It was just after the fight with the sand hero. Kaguya was sitting across from Haru in the meeting hall on the first floor.

Kaguya was already well aware of why Haru had called her there.

Azuma was there as well. He had apparently been injured somewhat. His head was wrapped in bandages, but his mind seemed to be clear. He was still in top form as he glowered at Haru.

"Oh look...it's the white knight protecting his princess," said Haru. She quickly stifled her sneer, however, and adopted a serious expression. "Something unusual clearly happened to you during that fight. However, you snapped to after just a few seconds. And whatever happened, the sandstorm came to an end almost as soon as you woke up."

It had been wiped away, with a swift rustle. Clearly not a natural end to a storm.

"And I'm supposed to believe this was research activity? If you're going to lie, you could at least try to make your lies believable."

“Watch it...,” growled Azuma, putting Haru in check.

Kaguya understood what Haru was trying to say. If their positions were reversed, Kaguya might have felt the same way herself. But there was one thing Kaguya didn’t understand.

Why hadn’t Haru brought her up on charges yet?

“You could have put forward charges from the beginning. After all, it’s true that I acted on my own and in a way that disturbed order, sowed chaos on the battlefield, and inconvenienced Captain Azuma. That would have been more than enough of an excuse. You didn’t need to learn any more.”

In fact, it was what Kaguya had been afraid of this whole time, that Haru would just string her up. So it didn’t make sense.

“The reason you didn’t do that... Is it because there is something you want to see with your own eyes? Is there, perhaps, something else you’re trying to accomplish—?”

Haru’s face was usually a stone mask. Her eyebrows twitched slightly.

“And why would I tell you something like that? You, some princess who doesn’t know the first thing about the world outside of Technical and Charon?”

Haru narrowed her eyes coldly. Kaguya felt a little miffed at being referred to as a princess.

“Everything I do falls under the rubric of inspection. I am not doing anything that is not necessary. Unlike you, who is here for no reason.”

“I have a reason. It’s just—”

Kaguya hesitated. Her reason for participating in battle was to collect information on heroes and to try to save them, but she couldn’t say something like that.

“I’m here to save people who are suffering.”

“That’s why you’re participating in battle? You think you’re *saving people*? Don’t make me laugh.”

There was a dark glint in Haru’s eyes, as if part of her was here, but part of

her was seeing something else.

“The battlefield isn’t some party. It’s life and death, a place people only go because they have to. Crying and screaming, sometimes, but if it’s their duty, they have to. The battlefield doesn’t care if your life is in danger, or if the people most important to you die. It doesn’t care about how badly you don’t want to die—but that’s something someone like you wouldn’t know anything about, isn’t it?”

“You’re wrong. I believe I’ve seen the suffering of battle up close and personal, but even amid all that suffering, I still want to save others.”

Kaguya thought of Sakura. She could still remember clearly when Sakura turned into a hero. She would probably never forget.

Haru’s eyes shifted back to their usual, coldhearted appearance.

“Stop trying to act like a saint. Not everyone wants to be saved. Not everyone is reaching for the light. That is what you really don’t understand.”

“Not everyone wants to be saved...?” Kaguya furrowed her brow. How could anyone not want to be saved—?

“Sometimes, for people who have seen hell...sometimes the only salvation for them is to fall as far as they can go.”

“What...makes you say that...?”

“That’s none of your business.”

But the words Haru had just spoken felt like the deepest thing she had said to Kaguya yet. Up until now, everything she said had been either meaningless or a reprimand. But this time she wasn’t just lashing out at Kaguya—this was something that had come from somewhere deep inside. Haru fixed Kaguya with a serious stare, as if she had just made up her mind about something.

“I’ve decided. I am going to...”

What? Report me?

“...get to the bottom of this, of why you are doing whatever it is you’re doing.”

“Get...to the bottom?”

“There is plenty of time still for me to decide whether to bring you up on charges. I don’t know what happens to people who Inspection decides are a problem, but for now I still have time to get to the bottom of why you’ve been participating in battle. What it means, what it’s all worth, and your motivations.”

Kaguya caught a glimpse of emotion in Haru’s eyes that hadn’t been present before. This was more than just a moment of passion; this was real conviction on her part.

“But if it turns out that you really are just playing at being a saint, don’t expect me to show you any mercy.”

She was no longer speaking as an inspector. She was speaking for herself.

“Your behavior has been rash and thoughtless, and I am going to prove to everyone that you shouldn’t be here.”

“Do whatever you like...” Whatever Haru was going through, whatever she was thinking, it clearly didn’t have anything to do with Kaguya. “But I’m not the one who’s playing around here.”

Haru tightly pursed her lips at that comment. Everything Kaguya said probably seemed like cowardly justifications to her.

“What would you know?” she muttered softly as she left the room.

● ● ●

“Sorry... I should have said something.”

“No. There was nothing for you to say, Captain Azuma.”

After Haru stormed off indignantly, it was just Azuma and Kaguya.

“It seems Second Lieutenant Takanashi is more than a mere inspector after all.”

Despite her initial coldness, Haru turned out to be the most hotheaded out of all of them. There was also one other distinct difference between her and Kaguya...

“Do you...think she’s seen battle?” Kaguya muttered, her expression almost remorseful.

Those who have seen hell. That was what Haru had said. Did that include Haru? Maybe there was more to Miss High-and-Mighty than met the eye.

Kaguya had already been in several battles, but she had yet to witness true hell. The situation rarely turned dire, given how strong Charon was.

If there was one exception, it would have been when Sakura dissipated. Or to put it another way, apart from that one instance, it would be hard to say that Kaguya truly understood the tragedy of battle, or the true horror that heroes represented.

She didn’t think she needed to learn such things, but there was one point she didn’t quite understand.

The people in Charon could use Chronoses—but what about everyone else? Charon was the Bureau’s strongest squad. But to be the strongest, there had to be others you were compared to. Meaning, obviously, that there were other squads out there, besides Charon.

But the people in these squads—the ones in First Response, for instance—couldn’t use those weapons freely. They were just ordinary people.

The only way to stand up to heroes was to use weapons created from cells gathered from those same heroes. But using such weapons resulted in powerful rebounds. Did the people in the other squads just accept that as part of their job?

If so, thought Azuma, then their courage far surpasses anything we could ever be capable of.

As did their conviction. It was impressive. Azuma couldn’t even begin to imagine what it must be like.

Don’t they feel fear?

He thought of what he had seen during the last battle. While carrying Kaguya and approaching the hero, some sort of static had overtaken his right eye. His vision had wavered on just that side. That was when he saw it. The hero had

suddenly appeared different.

Distracted by that change, Azuma had fired off a shot when he shouldn't have.

In that instant, for some reason, I had mistaken Second Lieutenant Takanashi for the hero.

Mixing up a hero and a human shouldn't have been possible.

Putting aside the fact that he hadn't expected Second Lieutenant Takanashi to be there in the first place, it was his first time screwing up so badly. In the end, he still wasn't sure *what* he had seen. One thing, however, was certain—whatever he kept seeing was getting clearer.

This time, it had had been much more distinct than during the last battle, almost like a lens was coming into focus. But, like always, Azuma pushed the thought down into a corner of his mind.

"I just have to make sure I don't do it again. That's all," he said.

"Huh? Do what?" asked Kaguya, but Azuma intentionally ignored her question.

What did it matter at this point what he did or did not see? Even if he saw it again, all he needed to do was shoot first.



Meanwhile, Haru ground her teeth together as she exited the meeting hall. "What would you know?" she spat out, too softly for anyone to hear.

Kaguya had no idea of the real madness of battle.

She was used to being protected by the Bureau's strongest squad. A squad so strong, in fact, that it could afford to baby her. She thought she was so brave, going in alone, when really she was being fawned over by the strongest person within that squad. She had no idea. Someone as privileged as her couldn't possibly fathom what it was like for the rest of them.

Haru had no clue what Kaguya was trying to accomplish, but the look on her face said it all. Kaguya couldn't even grasp why someone wouldn't want to

prance into battle like her. Haru wasn't about to forgive such naïveté.

"It sure must be nice to have everything handed to you like that..."

The only thing motivating Haru now was the past.

Her own trauma was what drove her. She wanted to make sure that what she had gone through, and never wanted to go through again, would not happen to anyone else.

"Participating in battle in order to save people. That's—"

...not something that anyone could do.

No, what was she saying? Kaguya Shinohara was probably just full of shit.

Because if she wasn't, what had *he* died for—?

"I bet you've never even felt it before, that feeling of trembling in fear because you don't want to die..."

...forced to watch as the dead depart without you.

INTERLUDE TWO

Signs

“All right then, let’s commence the tissue processing experiment.”

Meanwhile, around the same time Kaguya and Haru were confronting each other in Charon’s meeting hall, two figures were standing in a lab room located within the Bureau’s Technical Research Lab No. 2, commonly referred to as Technical.

One of these two was a young woman with overly long black hair that reached down to her waist—the person in charge of Technical, aka the Director.

The other was a young woman with blond pigtails: Mari Ezakura.

The underground lab room they were standing in, located at the westernmost end of Technical, was not in regular use and appeared somewhat gloomy. The two were standing around a raised platform that resembled an operating table, intent at work, much like a doctor and a nurse engaged in surgery.

But the item lying on the table between them was not a patient, but a peculiar chunk of meat—not one that had come from any creature found in the natural world, however. It was about the size of a human fist, and was colored a strange mix of reds, blacks, and greens. A color that no meat should have been.

Mari swallowed hard as she stared at it. “This is...a piece of hero flesh.”

“It’s your first time seeing hero flesh up close, isn’t it?” the Director asked. “This sample was taken just recently. Some members from an on-site squad brought it here for me.”

A beautiful—and grotesque—chunk of meat.

Ignoring the Director's comment, Mari peered at the piece of flesh closely.

"Umm, Director?" she said, raising her hand. "Don't heroes disappear after their eggs are crushed, once they're defeated? How can this piece of flesh still be here?"

"An excellent question. Unfortunately, I myself do not entirely understand why," the Director replied. "Flesh that is cut off before the egg is crushed does not disappear with the egg, hence why we can attempt to process it. In any case, this particular sample is from around two and a half months ago."

"You mean from the first hero that Kaguya...that Lieutenant Shinohara fought, correct? What was his name again...?"

"Yuuji Sakigaya. Apparently he was a child."

"Oh. Okay."

Mari didn't seem particularly interested in that fact. It wasn't that she had any ill feelings on her part, just that she didn't feel much upon learning that a complete stranger had turned into a monster. She and the Director were in agreement on that point.

"And? What are we going to do with this thing, Director?"

"Isn't it obvious? We are going to process it in order to create a Chronos."

"What...?! You and me?!"

"That's right." The Director nodded.

"But I thought the method for creating Chronoses was lost when production was prohibited...?"

"It was. Which is why we'll have to do it ourselves. You should feel happy, Mari. You get to participate in what is sure to be a momentous step for all humankind!"

"If you say so."

"Of course, we're not going to go so far as to actually work the sample yet—"

Their current experiment was focused merely on finding a way to dismantle and break down hero tissue. Otherwise, they would not be able to work on it.

“The purpose of this experiment is identifying a suitable method... It’s been done before, so with a little luck we should be able to work it out for ourselves.”

In short, their objective today was to *break down* the tissue. But of course, heroes were not easily damaged. The only things known to be capable of that were other heroes themselves, or Chronoses. Meaning the only method generally available to humans was to use a Chronos.

Mari took a step backward. Her eyes suddenly quavered with fear.

“B-but I don’t want to! I don’t want to lose the use of my arm!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Mari. Hero flesh can only be broken down mechanically using a Chronos, which carries a burden on the user. The ones who could do so safely for us at the moment...”

In other words, the members of Charon, who for some reason did not experience Chronos rebounds.

“...are far too busy to ask, which is why we are now going to attempt a different method of breaking down the flesh,” said the Director, reaching for a nearby medicine cabinet and removing a variety of chemicals. These included powerful substances, such as hydrochloric acid, nitric acid, dilute hydrochloric acid, dilute sulfuric acid, and arsenic.

“O-oh... Don’t scare me like that, Director.”

Sighing with relief, Mari took a closer look at the chemicals. One wrong step with such powerful substances could lead to serious injury, so Mari and the Director wore specialized protective gear, which made things feel even more ominous.

“Ugh. Still, did we really have to do this here? This looks like an operating table. Why can’t we go somewhere brighter and more cheerful?”

“It doesn’t look like an operating table—it is one. Apparently, it used to be used for dissections of some kind.”

“Eeek!” Mari let out a tiny shriek. “Now I really think we should be doing this somewhere else!”

“We obviously can’t do what we’re doing where just anybody could come barging in. You’re going to have to deal with these surroundings.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better...”

Maybe it was because this operating room hadn’t been used in so long, but several of the lightbulbs had died, leaving it half in gloom. It must have been midday outside, but Mari felt a slight chill.

Although separated from its core, the egg—the greenish-black chunk of meat—maintained a faint warmth.

“Well...? Wait, what’s that?”

The Director was attaching some sort of long, thin device to the tissue sample. After connecting the sample to the device with cables, a monitor on the side of the device powered on. The Director peered at the monitor.

“What is this...?” Mari asked.

“This is a device for monitoring localized cellular reactions.”

“Monitoring? But why? This tissue is already dead... You might as well hook the device up to a piece of raw beef taken from the supermarket.”

“Actually, if anything, what we have before us is more like a fish that hasn’t been properly killed. You’ve seen videos like that before, haven’t you? Where a fish with its head cut off continues to flop around all over the place?”

“Yeah... I have seen that before.”

“Obviously there’s no black magic involved. The fish simply retains biological reflexes because it wasn’t properly killed and cleaned. In other words...” ...much like fresh seafood... “...the tissue isn’t entirely dead. Remember, these were living weapons. Aren’t you curious to see what changes occur in the process of transforming it into a Chronos?”

“I’m not sure I expect anything to change...”

“For now, start by dripping some of that chemical onto the sample. Just a little bit should do.”

“Fine,” said Mari, not sounding very enthusiastic as she picked up the

chemical as she was told.

Beeeeeeeeeeep.

“?!”

The device suddenly made a strange sound, clearly signaling that something was wrong. The Director rushed to the monitor.

“This reaction... What is the meaning of this...?” she muttered.

“Wh-what’s happening?! I haven’t even done anything yet!”

The Director didn’t respond to Mari’s question. “A spike in stress levels? It can’t be...”

“What? Stress?” Mari furrowed her brow. “But this is just a chunk of meat, isn’t it? The original cells are already dead. Could it be an equipment malfunction?”

“Yes... That is what I would normally suspect.” The Director, however, seemed unconvinced. “But this wouldn’t be our first time witnessing the unthinkable. Results were similar then as well, in the intertwining with the heroes.”

“Intertwining? You mean, with Kaguya?”

The Director had discovered an egg inside Kaguya, another finding that had been hard to accept.

“But both Kaguya and the egg were still alive, so that at least makes some sense. These cells are already dead—there’s no reason for them to respond.”

Abnormal stress values from cells that were already dead.

Maybe it was because the sample had come from a hero. Was it possible? Something like this would seem implausible under ordinary circumstances.

“Hrrm, are you *sure* it’s not just a malfunction, Director? I mean, that device has been sitting there for a pretty long time, hasn’t it? Maybe some dust got into it.”

“True... We should check to be sure.”

With that, they prepared to remove the device in order to reconfigure it. Still holding the vial of solution in one hand, Mari looked at the piece of flesh—it

was just silent tissue. It existed only to be processed and used by living people.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Even now, the warning alarm continued to sound. A shrill beep meant to alert the user to abnormal cellular stress levels.

“Why is it so loud?! Hurry up and turn it off!” Mari shouted, covering her ears with her hands.

A moment later the power on the monitor went out and the device grew silent.

“Hmph... This is why I *hate* old machines so much. They malfunction so easily,” Mari grumbled.

“Well, it’s probably hasn’t been maintained for some time.” The Director shrugged, pushing the device and monitor back into a corner. “It’s fine, though. Let’s just continue with the experiment for now.”

They began working through the procedure, carrying out general prep for observation and collection.

“This is only exploratory, so we can dismantle the tissue in any way we like. If we can do it at all, that is.”

“Umm, Director? About that—Chronoses are made from heroes, right? So if heroes can only be hurt by Chronoses, wouldn’t it be possible to dismantle this sample with a Chronos as well?”

“That’s correct. Currently, the only thing that can damage heroes and things made from heroes are Chronoses. If we wanted to break down and dismantle this sample, a Chronos would be sufficient. However, let’s suppose that dismantling and working of Chronoses can only be handled by other Chronoses. In that case, who created the first Chronos and how did they do it?”

“Well...” Mari briefly looked down at the ground but lifted her head again a moment later. “Well, whoever made that first Chronos must be out there somewhere, right? Can’t we just ask them...?”

“That would be a great idea, if we had any information on who they were. But the fact is, even though Chronoses are the only weapons capable of fighting heroes, we know exactly zip about whoever it was behind their development.”

“They’ve probably just left the Bureau, right? It’s been twenty-five years, so they must be much too old to see heroes. They may have even forgotten about them.”

Even if the person to create the first Chronos had only been ten years old at the time, they would already be thirty-five by this point—long past the age when a person lost the ability to see heroes.

Humans tended to forget that even the most precious memories faded with time. That was why so few people remembered heroes.

“Once you become an adult, you lose the ability to see them...and most who had seen a hero usually forgot about it. They convinced themselves that they had been confused, that it’s easy to get things mixed up in a disaster. If there are any exceptions, it’s likely only those who actually fought heroes.”

“There should still be traces left behind, though. Even if the actual person who created the Chronos has forgotten everything, there should still be some evidence of them. Something proving that both that person, and the Chronos, were once here...”

And yet, not a single record of the development process remained.

These were their only weapons of resistance. You would expect the Bureau to be mass producing them. So what did it mean when even the very method by which they were created had been lost?

“There is one thing that is certain, however,” the Director muttered confidently. “No matter how they are made, it is sure to be unsavory. Imagine creating a living weapon. The very idea defies sanity.”

“Just my luck, then, that you’re dragging me into this...”

“Chin up, Mari. You’re with Technical, after all. Working for me is your calling now, just like it was for Kaguya.”

“An argument so crazy that I’m actually impressed.”

Mari didn’t even bother to hide her sigh.

She dispensed a few drops of the chemical solution from earlier, though she might as well have been pouring water onto the sample. It remained

completely unaffected. Before long, the two scientists had worked their way through all the substances.

“No apparent change from any of the chemicals... This is no better than trickling water onto a rock.”

The Director’s shoulders fell. She had been a little—just a little—hopeful at the start.

“The press at maximum power did nothing, exposing it to high-voltage electricity did nothing, fifty hours in the furnace did nothing, and now all these caustic chemicals did nothing as well. Is there anything left at this point...?”

“Someone did it over twenty-five years ago, though, didn’t they? Technology was less advanced back then. If they could do it, how is it possible that we can’t now?”

“Hmm... Well, there’s always a chance they used some kind of lost technology, I suppose...”

With the exception of simple acts of destruction, such as splitting a Chronos in two, they were unable to physically dismantle this substance. So how had they managed to actually work it in the past? The technology would have to be even more advanced than what would be required to break the tissue down. Even crafting a single Chronos was starting to seem like an impossible task for an amateur.

In terms of their external appearance, all Chronoses were coated in a murky green sheen and traced with meandering veinlike patterns. It was clear that creating such a thing would require more than simply breaking down tissue.

“By the way, Mari...,” the Director said in an offhanded manner, staring at the mysterious lump of matter as she spoke. Mari, who was sitting next to her, seemed to have already lost interest. “You met with Kaguya again the other day, didn’t you? I’m guessing you brought up that same topic again?”

Mari responded with silence. The Director sighed lightly as Mari stared down at the floor, almost like a pouting child.

“I thought I told you to give up on that already,” the Director told her. “I know it’s a shame she’s gone, but with her personality, she’s probably better suited to

Charon anyway.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” protested Mari, still staring down at the floor as if she were having trouble holding something in.

Up until now, Mari hadn’t really talked back to the Director, not because she was docile, but because she simply couldn’t be bothered to do so.

“Kaguya is the kind to take on everything herself, even when it’s a hero involved. I know you know this, too, Director.”

“Yes. It’s certainly not a good tendency. One of her very few flaws.”

That was why the Director had said Kaguya and Azuma were well suited to each other. Yuuri Azuma exhibited that same tendency. The two were like peas in a pod.

“I’ve been by Kaguya’s side since the beginning, Director. Not that the beginning was that long ago, but it’s still way longer than she’s known those jerks over there at Charon,” said Mari, lifting her head as she said the word *jerks*. “If she keeps pushing herself like this, she’s going to collapse. There are always more heroes, always another to spring up in the last one’s place, but Kaguya wants to save them all. It’s not possible—no one can shoulder the burden of so many minds and not break eventually.”

This was why Mari was trying to get Kaguya back to Technical—certainly not for some childish reason, like loneliness.

“Yes, what you say is very true.” Even someone like the Director, who did not really understand human emotion, could see how this might turn out. However... “Do you think that’s something Kaguya would accept? Once Kaguya decides how *things are going to be*...I’m not sure even I could break down her resolve.”

Maybe if she was still at Technical, they could. But she wasn’t. She was part of the Charon special ops squad now, which was built on the premise of defeating heroes. That was the pressure she was under now.

“I do think there could be danger...”

But that was just speculation on the Director’s part. For all she knew, Kaguya

was holding up just fine. Still, as Kaguya's former boss, who could blame the Director for worrying a little?

CHAPTER THREE

Hubris

That night, it rained fiercely.

Ten minutes had passed since word came that Charon had arrived on scene. The location was the city, in a pedestrian shopping plaza a short distance from the train station. This small but bustling section, located fairly close to residential areas, had been transformed into a scene from hell.

Shoppers had been struck by sudden localized and successive earthquakes. Those who were at the right age to see—children and students visiting—had reacted with general panic, but no one paid them any mind, assuming they were just panicking due to the earthquakes.

When the shopping district finally grew quiet once again, the only creature left was a raging monster—a hero.

At first glance, it looked like a dog. But like the watchdog of hell, this hero had three heads. One, and only one, of those heads had no face, blackened out with inky darkness instead as if to fill the void. The hero had eight legs, but they were not splayed out around its body like a spider's—it looked more like two four-legged dogs had been forcefully spliced together. This beast had currently enshrined itself within the shopping district, its massive weight supported by its many legs.

Haru Takanashi was behaving herself, not sticking to Kaguya's side like she usually did. She was gripping her weapon of choice, a handgun, lightly in her hand, though, of course, a weapon like that would be of no use against a hero.

"This shopping district must connect to the main road," said Azuma, opening

up communications over the wireless. “There was a traffic accident on that road about fifteen minutes ago. The victim was an eighteen-year-old boy—according to Major Mirai, video showed him jumping in front of a car.”

“You mean a suicide...”

“Yes. We have no idea why he did it, but obviously it was too much to grin and bear.”

The fearsome dog-hero was about twice as large as the crumbling pharmacy it was standing next to. It had forcefully squeezed along the narrow shopping street, leaving most of the surrounding buildings heavily damaged or on the verge of collapse.

They could see arms reaching out, apparently in search of help, from beneath where its multiple legs were planted onto the ground. Just the arms. After a brief moment, the hero, having already crushed several people, finally noticed Charon’s arrival.

“SKKRRREEEEEEEE!!”

“—!”

The beast’s ragged roar caused the air to quiver.

The squad members covered their ears. Even though the hero looked like a dog, its howl, as usual, was like an insect’s screech. Kaguya’s breath caught in her throat; the terrifyingly strange sound threw her off.

It was an interminable shriek.

As the screaming blitz faded, Rindou began to approach the creature, seeing a chance to attack. He attempted to use the creature’s three heads against it, weaving and dodging to keep the creature confused, but was instead sent flying by one of its eight legs, smacking hard into a nearby brick wall.

“Rindou!” shouted Azuma.

This here was like a wounded beast, but the injury had not come from others—it had come from itself.

After releasing another roar, the hero suddenly seemed to activate—as it spotted the humans, its natural target for propagation, it lowered its massive

body into a pouncing stance.

Everyone scattered on the spot. A moment later the beast's massive body, which must have weighed several hundred kilograms, crashed to the ground where they had just been standing.

"Captain Azuma! Where is the egg?!"

"In its throat!"

A gunshot immediately rang out. Having just leaped into the air, the hero was apparently unable to react. A gaping hole opened up in the creature's body where its second leg on the right side met its torso.

Koyuki had positioned herself on the tallest building in the area, where she wielded her Chronos, which took the form of an anti-materiel rifle. The force of the shot knocked her back slightly—not due to any organic rebound caused by the Chronos, but rather due to the simple physical recoil.

The hero turned in Koyuki's direction, blood running from the wound where the shell had hit. Its rightmost head howled; it was as if the creature was telling her not to interfere.

"GWWARR—"

The hero leaped toward Koyuki. She immediately fled, jumping to the roof of the building behind her.

"Ah—?!"

However, Haru, who was standing nearby, was clipped by the creature's charge.

"Second Lieutenant Takanashi?!"

Kaguya felt her blood run cold. She couldn't hear Haru's voice. However—"It's okay, it looks like she's just unconscious," Koyuki reported quickly.

Kaguya sighed in relief.

"It's fast for its size—this is going to be a pain. Let's take care of this one quickly, Lieutenant."

Azuma was closer than Kaguya expected. He brushed dirt and liquid from

some sort of spilled product off his uniform.

“That *thing* is too fast to get close to. If it could be immobilized, that would be a big help. Do you think you can manage it?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure it gets done,” Kaguya said with determination. She gave her club a swing.

At first Sakura’s weapon had been too heavy for her, but she barely noticed its weight at this point. All she had to do was give that hulking beast one good whack and victory would be theirs.

“Captain Azuma. Would you mind taking point?”

“You didn’t even need to ask.”

Kaguya ran behind Azuma, sticking close to his back. He served as a shield against the bits of debris and rubble that were sent flying due to the fighting.

While they were moving, Kaguya let her thoughts wander toward the unconscious Haru. Haru had told Kaguya that if she was just playing at being a saint, she would show her no mercy.

Maybe that’s what I was doing at first.

Her whole goal had been to learn more about the heroes—that was all. But after what had happened to Sakura, and after becoming a member of Charon, Kaguya now had two priorities.

Her first goal: Complete her research.

And her second: Save the heroes in front of her. Not someday, but *now*.

A powerful headache hit Kaguya with a rush, like her whole body was on fire. Instead of fighting that feeling, Kaguya swung her club as if she was reaching out. She swung it as hard as she could.

• • •

“...Ouch...”

Carried by her own momentum, Kaguya toppled over with a weird little cry.

She stood up and glanced around, cradling her knee, which she had hit hard

against the ground. Everything was quiet here, unlike the shopping district a moment ago.

“Is this...a walking trail?”

She was standing on an esplanade running along a river embankment. It seemed to be early autumn, because the air was pleasantly cool.

On her left, a small river flowed past, the other bank clearly visible. The weather was clear and sunny; these interior worlds reflected a person’s ideal reality, so the climate was often nice. Sunlight reflected beautifully off the surface of the water.

Underneath that majestic blue sky, Kaguya began to walk forward, traveling farther and farther, as if drawn by something. Where was the human inside this hero? As Kaguya continued to walk forward, almost compelled, she suddenly bumped into something with a thud.

“Ack!” Kaguya shouted and rubbed her forehead. Some sort of clear wall was blocking the way forward.

It was like the air had turned into a glass barrier. She could see the path as it stretched out endlessly into the distance, but she couldn’t make her way there.

These idealized worlds reflected the person’s own wishes. In other words, they manifested their hearts’ utmost desires. It seemed no outsiders were permitted beyond this point.

“Well, now what...?”

She knew the person had to be on the other side of this barrier. She could still go back, the wall only stopped her from moving forward, which meant the person inside was rejecting Kaguya.

“Ah...!”

While dithering in place, Kaguya spotted a shadow traversing along the path toward her. A young man, calm and serious looking. Kaguya immediately knew he was the lord of this world.

The boy was walking two dogs, a Maltese and a golden retriever. Despite the difference in size, the dogs seemed to get along with each other well.

“Hey,” said Kaguya, waving her hand.

The boy noticed her immediately. That made sense, since she was standing directly in his path.

He approached her, unguarded. Kaguya flashed a smile. The boy turned slightly red and waved back, as if embarrassed. On first impression, he didn’t seem that bad.

“Hello,” said Kaguya, attempting to act as natural as possible, as if they were just bumping into each other on the side of this path by coincidence.

Although hesitant, the boy returned her greeting. He seemed to be a very serious young man.

As he approached, an uncomfortable expression appeared on his face. He had ordinary black hair, and guileless eyes of a similar color. His skin was the same shade as Kaguya’s. They were probably about the same age as well.

She didn’t recognize his face. Naturally, as this was her first time meeting him. Now that they were close, about the same distance you would stand from a stranger you just happened to pass in this way, she could see that the boy’s guard was now up.

Not that it really matters.

“Are you going for a walk? Your dogs are really cute.”

“Y-yes. Um, I’m sorry, who are you...?”

“I’m Kaguya. Kaguya Shinohara.”

Kaguya was pretty sure he wasn’t asking for her name, although she pretended otherwise. She waited in presumptuous silence for the boy to introduce himself.

Unable to resist, he stammered his own name. **“Sh-Shinji Takamura.”**

“That’s a nice name,” said Kaguya, not really meaning it.

Maybe it was his age, but the boy standing in front of her seemed to be a pure soul. He seemed to take Kaguya’s words to heart, his cheeks turning slightly red, even if she was just being polite.

He was just an ordinary young man.

It's up to me to save him, thought Kaguya.

This was it. The clear wall stood in her way so she couldn't go to him, but they could still exchange words.

Kaguya turned the conversation to the boy's dogs, and he immediately took the bait. By this point his mild suspicions had already been laid to rest, and he seemed to have opened up a bit.

"What are their names?"

"Umm... This one is Melon, and this one is Clementine."

After learning their names, Kaguya crouched down to make eye contact with the dogs.

A Maltese and a golden retriever. She stared into their four round eyes.

Disgusting.

At first glance, the Maltese and golden retriever, staring up at her in sync, seemed like just two normal dogs. But she spotted something black and insectile swarming deep within their eyes.

No doubt about it... These are the Goddess.

The Goddess didn't always take on a human form—rather, she took the shape of whatever was most precious to the person in question.

"Is this...where you always take them to walk?"

"Huh? Well, yeah. Why do you ask?"

"How long have you been here today?"

The boy made a funny face. **"What do you mean, how long? I've been here from the beginning..."**

"From...the beginning? What time, hours and minutes?"

"I already told you, from the beginning. From way, way back."

The boy wasn't making sense. Right now, he lived in the world he was seeing. The two dogs began moving in circles at Shinji's feet.

Still smiling, Kaguya narrowed her eyes; she recognized the Goddess's characteristic insect-like appearance concealed within the dogs' eyes. They were trying to lure the boy away.

"I'm sorry, I just can't seem to remember. How long did you say you've been here?"

"I already told you—" Shinji cocked his head, searching his memory. **"Wait. How long have I been here...?"**

For the first time, Shinji realized he couldn't remember. That realization seemed to be slightly terrifying for him, because he forced a smile as if to chase the thought away.

"Why are you even asking, though? Does it matter?"

"Yes, it matters. It matters very much, Shinji Takamura."

Shinji grunted noncommittally, like he was just pretending to listen but didn't really care deep down.

"You can't remember when you started walking those dogs, can you, Shinji?"

"...So what if I can't? Makes no difference to me."

Shinji seemed put out. By all means he should have been able to remember, but he really didn't think it was that strange. The Goddess had already encroached deep into his mind.

But there was still time. It wasn't too late for him.

Shinji needed to speak the truth for himself. He needed to abandon this world of his own accord.

"Shinji, please listen closely to what I have to say. This is something that matters very much for you."

Shinji nodded, apparently shaken by Kaguya's serious expression.

"It occurred to you just now, didn't it, that you can't remember where you were coming from, or how long you've been walking here? Why do you think that is?"

"What do you mean, why—? I don't see why that matters."

“But it does matter... This is an idealized world that you created yourself. At the moment, you’ve turned into something that isn’t human.”

Shinji furrowed his brow and stared blankly, not as if he was unwilling to accept what she said, but rather that he simply didn’t understand.

Kaguya pressed him further, not allowing his deadpan expression to deter her.

“Your Goddess...” Kaguya lowered her gaze, toward the two dogs. “It’s these two— isn’t it?”

The Maltese and the golden retriever stared up at Kaguya in sync. Something black and insectile teemed deep within those eyes.

“What...? What are you talking about?”

“The creatures that turn humans into monsters known as ‘heroes.’”

“...Ohh...”

Shinji looked exasperated, as if something had just dawned on him. It was plain to see—he thought she was nuts. But from his point of view, that would be a natural reaction, so Kaguya was ready for it.

“Oh, you’re one of those... Sorry, but I’m in a hurry. See you later, Kaguya.”

Shinji gave a perfunctory smile, like he was trying to sweep their whole interaction under the rug. He quickly began to take his leave.

“Wait!” Kaguya shouted.

Of course he stopped.

“Your dogs—those two. Aren’t they already dead?”

As soon as the words left her mouth, time in that world seemed to stop.

The esplanade began to twist and distort. It was like a picture, drawn on paper, was suddenly being crumpled up into a ball.

Several seconds later, everything became closed in, turning dark and dreary.

She could hear a whooshing sound coming from all directions. It was a rainy night. There was little light, just a few peculiar streetlights that spotted the

shadows.

They seemed to be in an abandoned lot of some sort, and the bodies of two dead dogs were lying on the ground. The two dogs that Shinji had been walking were now gone.

Shinji was alone, faced with the bodies of his beloved pets.

Kaguya could tell, from the way things appeared, that this was a mental picture. Melon and Clementine were dead, after all. And the boy—he had witnessed it.

“Do you remember now...? What happened to your dogs...?”

“Yeah.”

His voice was deep, dark, and as sharp as a knife, sending a cold shudder down Kaguya’s spine.

But she couldn’t back off now. The trust between them might have been shaky, but she needed to move quickly. There was no time.

“Why did you have to make me remember...?” His voice was full of anger. **“Is that why you came here, just to tell me this? You’re sick, you know that?”**

“Let’s head back, Shinji...” In spite of Shinji’s aversion, Kaguya spoke quickly and desperately. “There’s still time for you to return to the human world. What...what happened to your dogs...was just awful.”

Shinji turned to glare at Kaguya over his shoulder, clearly hostile. Although she had expected this, the hostility was not a good sign.

Unfortunately, now that he realized those two creatures, so precious to him, were already dead, she could hardly lie and say they were alive.

“Shinji—take a good look. At their eyes.”

At some point, the rain had stopped, and the sky was growing brighter. Glancing around, Kaguya realized they were back on the original esplanade. Beneath that clear, bright sky, Shinji’s face alone remained dark. The two dogs that should have been dead, however, were once again milling happily around his feet.

“Those aren’t the two dogs that you knew and loved.”

She had to make him abandon his refuge in the Goddess. Had to make him see it was fake.

“Come back to us, Shinji!”

“If they’re fake, then what about me...?” the boy spat, his eyes smoldering darkly. **“What’s happened to me? Why am I here? You know that, too, don’t you?”**

Kaguya nodded softly. “You’ve turned into something not human. You’ve become a monster, and are inflicting carnage on everything around you. I’ve entered your mind.”

“Oh, have you? Well, I suppose that makes as much sense as anything. How else could a world like this exist, after all?”

A wind began blowing softly along the esplanade. Cold and wintry, symbolic of loneliness and loss.

“Y-yes, that’s right. Now let’s go back together, Shinji.”

Kaguya extended her hand. The wall of air wouldn’t let her pass, but Shinji could probably reach across to take her hand if he chose to.

“You can still become human again. You can be saved! So—”

“No.”

With one word, the boy turned his back to her as if they had nothing else to say to each other.

“No—? How can you say that?”

She thought he had understood. Kaguya’s eyes went wide. How could it have all fallen apart so easily?

“Those two dogs—they’re not the ones that you know! How can you allow this, knowing that they’re fakes...?!”

Kaguya had experienced something similar, so she understood. The *false brother* that had appeared to her during her own transformation had been gentle and kind, but Kaguya had still chosen her real brother—the brutish,

scarier one.

“Those two dogs are not—”

“Be quiet!” Shinji frowned slightly. He seemed to be on the verge of losing it. **“What do you know about me? Showing up here out of the blue and acting so self-important? Who gives a shit about the human world? Humans are the ones who really frighten me—they’re the real monsters, if you ask me.”**

Kaguya persisted. Not all humans were frightening, not all humans were monsters. Even if it was just sophistry, she had to say it.

“At the very least, I’m not like that! Please...”

“Go away...!”

The boy’s surroundings suddenly distorted, growing blurry, the way the world looks when there are tears in your eye.

One of the dogs barked. They looked back at the boy and began walking away, almost as if urging him on. The boy seemed to hesitate, but didn’t seem to be disgusted by the creature. Instead, it seemed like he looked at them with hope.

Slowly, Kaguya took a step forward. But with the wall blocking her, she couldn’t continue any farther.

“Shinji, don’t—!!”

But even as she shouted, the boy—

“Go away...!”

The moment he said it, the boy suddenly felt lighter, giddy, a ray of light suddenly breaking through to reach him. A light that could wipe away the dark shadows that even now smoldered within him. Shinji suddenly opened his eyes.

Here in this vast yet ephemeral world. Beneath that light, the path before him could lead absolutely anywhere. For some reason, he understood clearly that this path was where he needed to go.

“Shinji, don’t—!!”

“ ... ”

However, someone was still stopping him.

Shinji glanced down his nose apathetically at the scarlet-haired girl's extended hand. He didn't exactly want to push her away, but he couldn't help but feel it was far too late for something like this.

“Shinji, I don't know what sort of people you've known in your life...but please don't think that everyone out there is like that...!”

Even now the girl tried to plead her own goodness. The naïveté almost made Shinji want to throw up—the way she tried to tie everything up in a neat bow without really understanding anything. He was starting to feel something akin to hostility toward her.

“I get it,” he replied, in a tone that did not conceal his irritation. “You're trying to say that not all people are bad, right? I don't think every one of the six billion people living in *that world* are bad, either.”

“Then, why...?”

“Because everyone I've met has been,” he said, smacking the girl's hand away.

Not all people are bad? It was hardly his first time hearing such childish nonsense. What comfort was that supposed to bring?

If not everyone was bad, then why hadn't a few of the people he had known at least been decent? Every time he met someone who seemed to be just a little better than the rest, they turned out to be even worse in the end.

Shinji understood perfectly well what the girl was getting at. Imagine being able to say something so naive with a straight face. It made him jealous.

She didn't realize, and wasn't interested in realizing, just how privileged she was.

“It's my fault that Melon and Clementine died.”

The girl's eyes went wide as saucers, stunned. Of course. She probably hadn't even considered the possibility he, the owner, could have been the cause of his dogs' deaths.

“Wh-why do you say that...?”

“If I had just been paying more attention...”

That was why he had almost gotten into that accident. He’d been looking down at his smartphone while he walked.

It happened alongside a road, by a deserted lot. The road was narrow and difficult to see, and the car had been an electric vehicle, so he hadn’t heard it approach until it was already near. On top of that, the driver had been sleep-deprived. With all those factors added together, he should have died—and would have, had Melon and Clementine not saved him.

He could still remember the incident. It had been a rainy night—that’s right, it had been nighttime. Why had he been out walking so late? He remembered now. The truth was, he had been trying to die. Betrayed, and left at his lowest. But his dogs were clever and had picked up on what he was feeling. They had followed him. And then.

I may as well have killed them myself.

“Melon and Clementine were such good, loving dogs. They were my everything.”

“Then...that’s all the more reason not to accept the Goddess—not to accept these two!” the girl shouted, desperate for something to grasp at. **“Not much time has passed since you turned into a hero. You might still be able to become human again! If you really care about your dogs, you should go back to the real world so you can hold a funeral for them and—”**

“What will going back do?!” Shinji was past hope. In less than twenty years alive, he had given up on human affection. “What will going back do? What... what good do you think that will do me?”

“What good...? Don’t you see? People are getting—”

“That again? What does it matter? Who cares anymore—?”

Shinji suddenly envied the girl standing before him. She genuinely seemed to think that not hurting people was so wonderful and great. She probably didn’t understand how it felt for people who had been pushed so far they no longer had a choice.

“Even if this isn’t the real Melon and Clementine—” He knew, of course—knew that they were fake. “If I can be with them, I’d rather still be here.”

“Shinji... What happened in your life? Why...?”

Kaguya’s face looked pained, as if she was struggling to deal with this. A frustrated look seemed to say that she didn’t understand how he could think that way.

At the moment, Shinji could see clearly. There was no chance of he and this girl ever seeing eye to eye. After all, she was still human.

“And besides, right now...my friends are out there...”

“Of course. Now I get it. You’re just here to save your friends,” he said, intentionally choosing his words to be nasty. “You think that if you can trick me into thinking whatever you want, you’ll be able to save your friends out there. It doesn’t really matter what happens to me, does it? You don’t really care.”

The girl looked shocked by what he said. He smirked slightly.

“You pretend you’re so worried about me, but you’re just thinking about yourself... I guess humans really are all the same in the end.”

Shinji wasn’t angry. He hadn’t expected anything more in the first place. He could see she wasn’t a bad person. There was no real reason for him to get mad.

But his mind was already made up, that was all. He was going to follow that light.

“Well, I guess that’s all there is to say. See you.”

“—?! Shinji, no! If you don’t stop, you’ll kill people...!”

“And what’s wrong with that? They’re just people. Who cares how many of them die?”

“B-but...”

“I’ll leave the details up to your imagination, but that’s the way that life has taught me to think,” Shinji said, turning his back to her.

Before he left, he had a thought—or perhaps it was a realization—seeing the

way the girl wouldn't give up.

"Maybe...this is just my imagination..." It had been on his mind since the beginning. "But you look at me without really seeing me. You're constantly somewhere else, thinking about something else. All those feelings. It seems like you're not doing this for others, it seems like you're doing it for yourself."

That's not true, the girl seemed to want to reply, but the words froze on her lips. Judging from the look on her face, what he said had hit close to home. She was silent. Ignoring her, he cast his eyes off into the distance.

"Of course... There must have been others out there like me."

The girl seemed used to doing this, so he probably hadn't been the first. There must have been others out there, like him. He laughed slightly. Was this song and dance what she did every time? What a waste.

He wouldn't go so far as to say that what she was doing was malicious, but it was foolish at the least.

"You've come all this way, so let me share one thing with you, Kaguya Shinohara," he said, holding up his hand to stop Melon, who had already started to leave, so he could deliver one last message to the girl. "What you're doing here is just narcissism. Violence through ignorance. You're intoxicated with the thought of seeing yourself as a savior."

"...?!"

"You come from your privileged position to run roughshod over other people...but you don't realize just how privileged you are. You don't believe you're doing anything to anyone. You don't even realize that what you're doing is a kind of violence. That's what makes me so jealous."

So privileged that she couldn't imagine that there were people who held a grudge against reality.

"There are probably other people out there like me who have given up on everything—who would rather live here, even knowing that it is a lie, if the alternative is to return to a reality where everything is terrible."

"That can't be true...!"

“It’s true for me, right here, right now. If salvation was possible, even I would take it. But salvation isn’t you. Someone like you, who doesn’t know anything, who is only capable of spouting naive nonsense. You could never save us.”

Reality was so tedious and awful, the boy was certain other people out there would rather live here. Others must feel the same, even if he had never met them.

And so—to those he had met, and to those he never would, farewell.

“You’re going to repeat the same thing with them as well, aren’t you...? Then let me say one thing, for their sakes. You can spout all the flowery nonsense you like from your ivory tower, but the more you say...”

The boy turned his back to the light—to that thing that appeared like light to him.

“...the less we will want to return to reality. You don’t know anything. You’re not welcome here. If you understand that, just leave us alone already.”

Clementine barked. As if in response, the scene once again began to change.

Shinji knew the girl was right. This was probably just a dream world with nothing in it but himself, Melon, and Clementine. Nothing else was needed.

The moment he wished for that, a wind enveloped Kaguya Shinohara. The scarlet-haired girl extended a hand in his direction, tears in her eyes.

“...!”

The sight of those tears made him feel something, slightly, just ever so slightly. No one had ever cried for him in his past life.

If I had met someone like her earlier, maybe my life really would have been just a little bit more decent...



Shinji turned his back to the girl and waved his hand lethargically. He had found just enough sentiment in his heart to leave her with that gesture. It was a wave full of encouragement, sarcasm, and envy, for this scarlet-haired girl who had come to see him off in his final hour.

“See you later...*human*.”

● ● ●

“—?!”

Approximately three seconds after Kaguya Shinohara stopped moving— The hero began to sputter into action. Kaguya must have spoken to the human inside by this point, but the hero *wasn't self-destructing*, nor was it turning back into a human. Its movements seemed strange.

Sensing that something was amiss, Koyuki took aim at the middle of the three heads. She immediately opened a hole in the creature's head, but the wound regenerated immediately—her shot had been pointless.

In fact, the hero issued the loudest roar it had given off yet.

As it screamed, it planted its legs firmly. It looked like it was about to leap. Now that it was awake, the hero's movement had undergone a drastic change, and its left and right heads brutally transmogrified. Up until now there had been a visible difference in the two heads, but they suddenly become indistinguishable monsters.

Kaguya was still so close to the creature.

“Shit...!!”

She was frozen, and still positioned directly next to a now very angry hero. There was no light in her eyes—it was the way she always looked when she dived, but Azuma couldn't help but tug her back by the arm in horror.

“Hey—! Lieutenant!”

“C-Captain Azuma...?”

Kaguya looked surprised. Azuma picked her up forcefully and began to run. She was heavy.

Because he was carrying her backward over his shoulder, her eyes were pointed the other way. She suddenly began smacking him on the back, hard.

“C-Captain Azuma, behind you! It’s coming!!”

Azuma leaped forward without replying, ignoring Kaguya’s scream.

“Lieutenant! Behind me where?!”

“I-it’s coming after us—the tail! From the right!!”

In the same moment, Azuma felt its presence behind them, and began running toward the left. The diameter of the hero’s tail was massive, its length as yet unknown. They stood a better chance if he could use his legs instead of just ducking his head or leaping blindly.

With a roll, Azuma turned so that his eyes were on the hero. The raging cerberus had swelled up to nearly twice the size it had been the last time he laid eyes on it.

This can’t be—it’s turned fully hero, hasn’t it...?!

There were two stages for heroes: the partial stage, before they bonded with the Goddess, and the complete stage, after accepting her fully. Once a person accepted the Goddess, they could no longer return to their human selves. But Kaguya always pulled them back before that happened—that was how it was supposed to work.

“Lieutenant, what in the hell happened in there?”

“He rejected me.”

Kaguya still had her back to Azuma, so he couldn’t see the look on her face.

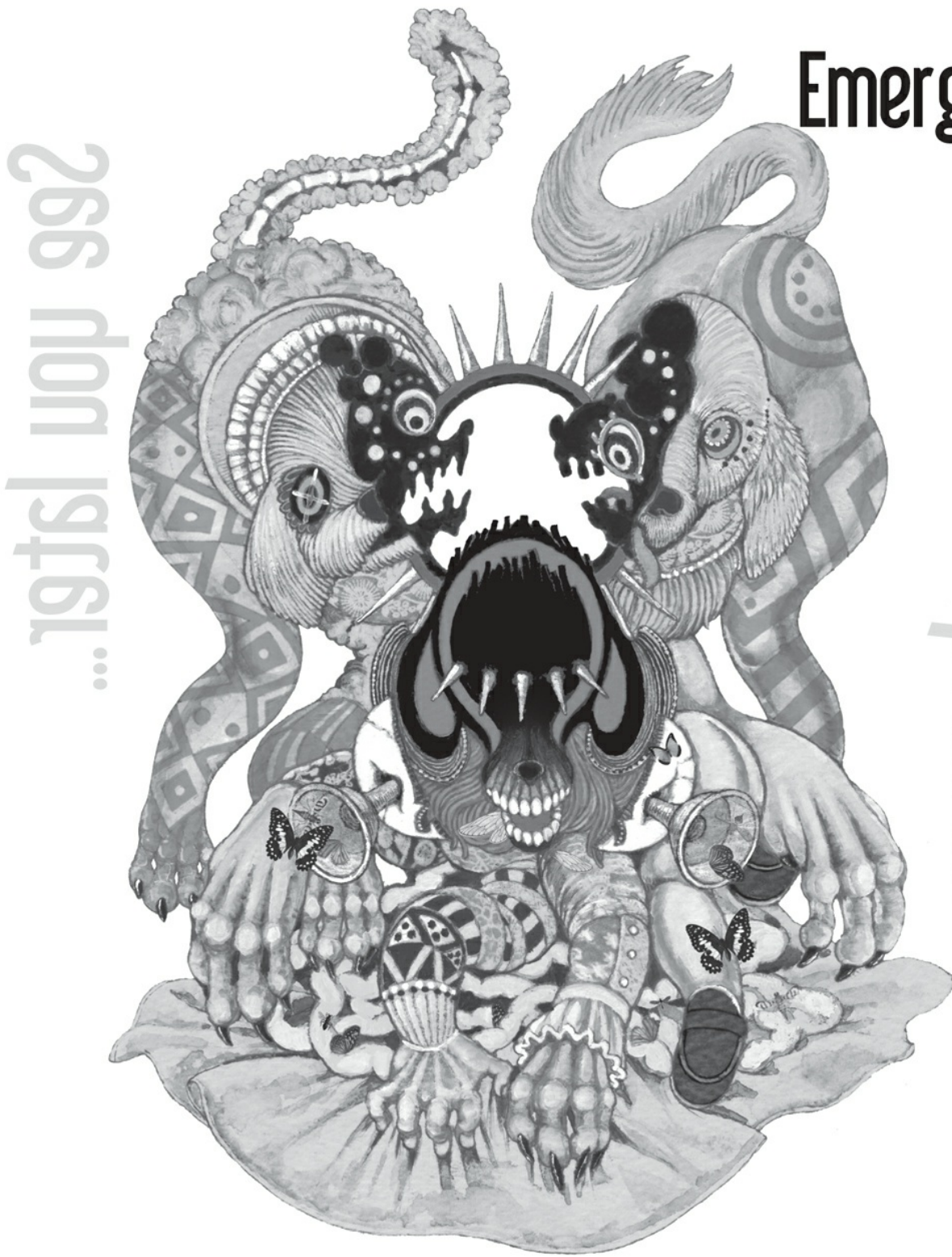
“Rejected?”

“Yes... Even though he understood that he was turning into a monster, he refused to return to reality. He told me to leave him alone.”

Azuma wasn’t surprised by what she said. He had predicted that there would be people who would make that choice. This hero in particular had chosen to commit suicide. Azuma doubted that someone who had already abandoned the real world of their own volition in that way would be able to come back so

easily. But he wasn't sure if Kaguya had foreseen this possibility as well.

Hero Emergence



Shinji Takamura

[18]

Location: Somewhere in Tokyo

Type: Suspected tank

*We
are
beyond saving.*

HERO SYNDROME

“I see—then it can’t be helped. I’m guessing it would probably be difficult to induce it to self-destruct as well then, right?”

“Ah... Y-yes... Probably.”

“Then the rest is up to us. You stay hidden, somewhere safe!”

Azuma forcefully planted Kaguya down near a building, leaving her behind in an area that would serve as a blind spot from the hero. He turned back toward the hero, now on his own. There was no trace of anything human left to this fearsome dog, and the shadows blanketing its middle head had grown even deeper.

The end was drawing near. Whose end, however, was still unclear.

This is bad. If we can’t stop it here, then—

Azuma had once asked Kaguya a question: “*What would happen if a hero’s egg wasn’t destroyed, and no one was able to stop it?*”

Her answer?

“Perhaps it would turn into a Goddess.”

If heroes were part of a reproductive stage, then their adult form was likely a Goddess.

The past heroes that no one had been able to defeat became the Goddesses of today. Meaning, if you traced their history back far enough, Goddesses were also likely human to begin with.

If we don’t defeat this hero, another Goddess will be born.

Azuma’s only weapon now was his gun. He doubted he would be able to reach his target from down here on the ground. And besides, would a bullet even be enough to penetrate its neck—to tear through its thick, meaty flesh? That was the problem.

Azuma began running. He was trying to get to the hero’s back.

The flesh at the base of its neck was thick, but the back of its head—what would correspond to the nape on a human—was comparatively thinner. He could have pierced through it with a single slice of a katana. With a gun, he

wasn't so sure, even if the gun was a Chronos.

The monster's back was several meters high. It required a fair amount of jumping strength to get there. However, Azuma hopped onto the creature easily, clinging to the side of its body.

"...! N-nrk..."

He clutched at its fur desperately. Unfortunately, he hadn't made it all the way to the top, and had only managed to attach himself to a spot close to where one of its legs met its body. Now that he was there, he was having trouble regaining his footing.

If only he had something to stab into the creature, he could have navigated upward easily—he regretted having relied on his katana so fully up until now. There was no way he could destroy this creature with a single strike using the gun he had.

Hold on. I don't need to destroy it, do I?

Azuma quickly confirmed the positions of the other squad members. Rindou had circled underneath the hero's belly and was now attacking its legs—too far from the neck. It was probably going to be too difficult for Azuma to expose the egg and then have Rindou destroy it. Koyuki could aim from far away, but with the creature moving so erratically and with Azuma so close, she wouldn't be able to take her shot.

"—!!"

The hero suddenly bucked, nearly tossing Azuma off. He lost his balance and began to fall, but barely managed to hold on. Still in that precarious position, Azuma desperately pressed his gun against the back of the creature's head and pulled the trigger.

The heavy sound of a gunshot rang out, and the creature screamed once more. A second shot—a third, hammering the gap. As he expected, the bullets did not pierce through, but instead came to a stop inside the hero's body.

Worse than that...

I didn't hit the egg—!

The egg hadn't stopped pulsating. The bullets had lodged themselves into the creature's flesh, but they had not even grazed the egg.

A complete failure. It wasn't as if the egg could move. He was still no good at aiming at an enemy he couldn't see—at a target outside his line of sight. How did Koyuki manage to make it look so easy?

It doesn't matter, I can't let go at this range...!

If he let go at such close range, it would give the creature a chance to counterattack.

Sure enough, the insectile timbre of the hero's growl suddenly changed, going from wary annoyance to aggressive rage. Azuma clambered back into position, but he didn't take another shot.

Even if I do the same thing again, I doubt I'll hit the egg. Shooting now would be pointless.

Not without *it*. The fact that he referred to his katana as "it" showed just how unattached he had been to his weapon. It was simple and easy to use, that was all.

Even in the worst-case scenario, so long as he could hit his target with a katana, he could cut through. There was no need to take aim or line up his shot, no need to utilize one's fine nerves while in the middle of combat. Spot, establish, and fire. The necessity of all three steps had been a major blow to Azuma's effectiveness in battle.

"SKKRREEEEEEEE!!"

Three bullets fired at close range. Obviously the hero was going to react to something like that. With a roar, it began to violently jump about and shake its body, as if trying to flick off an annoying pest.

"...!!"

The hero's fur was stiff and coarse like a real dog's. Azuma hung on desperately with one hand. The hero's head was as large as Azuma was tall, and he could see its snapping fangs, glistening, out of the corner of his eye.

Azuma suddenly lost his balance. The hero had taken a massive leap into the

air. From so high up, the shopping district below looked like a child's playset. If Azuma hadn't clung to the creature's neck for dear life, using his whole body, he probably would have splattered onto the ground below.

"Captain Azuma! Are you all right?!"

He could just barely hear Kaguya's voice over the comms, but he couldn't worry about anything else right now.

The hero flew high into the air and landed on several buildings. With a massive crash, what had once been pharmacies and bookstores were reduced to mere rubble. Glancing at the destruction below, Azuma noticed one structure left intact and finally recognized what the hero's real motive was.

It's trying to squash me flat—!!

Much like a beast trying to scratch an insect off its body, the hero planned to press its body up against the surviving structure to crush him. It had to jump up first because none of the shop buildings compared to the creature in size — other than the pillars holding up the giant sign for the shopping center. It was going to squash Azuma flat between that and its own body.

"D-dammit!!"

If Azuma didn't make a move, he was going to be pulverized. But if he let go now, one of the dog's three heads would probably chomp him to pieces before he could ever reach the ground. For a moment, Azuma tried to decide which was worse—death by smashing or death by chomps—before settling on a third option. Namely, to make his way up and around to the top of the creature's head.

Unable to adjust its speed in time, the hero bashed itself into the pillar senselessly, momentarily stunning itself from the pain. It was just enough to buy Azuma the time he needed to swing around onto its head.

He had no idea what went on inside a hero's brain, but so long as they fell within the scope of what could still be considered a living creature, surely it would hesitate before bashing its own head against a pillar.

It's a gamble, but...

But even if *he was wrong*, that would mean that heroes really were fully fledged monsters. That would actually make Azuma feel better. From Azuma's point of view, heroes were not objects of compassion.

“GWARRR—”

With a grotesque scraping noise, the hero, apparently grasping that this annoying pest had now moved on top of its head, tilted its neck *upward*. Connected by one neck, all three heads pointed toward the sky, shaking Azuma off.

The hero's neck was still in tatters.

“Y-you...”

...freak!

For Kaguya's sake, he swallowed that word before it could escape his lips. There was a fleshy, crunching noise, as the creature directed its heads downward once more, pointing toward Azuma again. Azuma was now falling, midair, and unable to take evasive action.

As Azuma caught a glimpse of the expression that appeared on the creature's left and right heads, he clucked his tongue.

They were *sneering at him*. In truth, its imposing presence about to sink its giant teeth into its prey probably only made it seem like it was sneering, but that made little difference to Azuma. It was a monster. There was no need to care.

The next moment, garbled static flashed across his field of view. The area around the hero distorted once again, like an illusion.

Then he saw it clearly.

Is that—?!

He could see into the heart of blackness around its face, almost as if the shadows were transparent.

A human face. A boy, his expression happy. Azuma may not have recognized him, but he knew. Knew who it was. The human behind the hero. But— *That face! Why does he look so happy...?!*

There was a smile of true madness plastered upon his face. His eyes were unfocused, staring admiringly at something that wasn't even there. It sent shivers down Azuma's spine.

An instant later, however, the illusion disappeared, leaving just the hideous dog in its place.

The boy's face lingered unpleasantly in Azuma's mind. He already knew that heroes were originally humans, but actually seeing it gave him pause. What he'd just seen had been terrifying—wait. Terrifying?

He was the leader of Charon. How could he be terrified?

It's just a hero now—someone who can no longer be saved.

Azuma stared coldly into the gaping skull of the dog as it prepared to swallow him whole, but what he had just seen had left ripples upon his soul.

Azuma was still in midair, shaken off by the beast and in an extremely awkward posture. The fangs were drawing closer; he had no way to regain his bearings— “Captain Azuma!!”

Something hot grazed his side. It took Azuma a moment to realize it was one of the creature's fangs. It had only just grazed him. Even that, however, was significant damage to the human body.

Blood—he was growing faint. This was looking bad.

He didn't feel the pain. Not yet. But his vision suddenly swam, both from the impact and the loss of blood. He forced himself to ignore the burning sensation that arrived a moment later.

The strength was gone on his left side. It felt like he was about to be pulled inside out through that wound.

“Captain Azuma!!”

“Azuma!!”

The hero loomed over him.

He couldn't dodge or take cover. The situation was desperate. Any moment now, he would be ruthlessly torn to shreds.

Azuma, however, just smiled. Not that smiling was easy.

“Desperate? I’ve got you right where I want you.”

Azuma didn’t need to regain his posture. He had already turned upward while falling from the dog’s head and taken aim. He saw the dog-hero’s gaping jaws. Its large, milky white teeth, now ready to tear him to shreds.

And he had also seen it—the egg, deep in its throat.

And the figure of the boy inside.

“...!!”

He tried not to look.

He was in an unstable position, falling through the air. But luckily, his target was coming toward him. And, conveniently, it was moving in a straight line.

Even if Azuma’s aim was terrible, at this range there was no way that even he would miss. Not a target he could see, at least.

He pointed the barrel of his gun at the egg, and let it come for him. The sound, like an undulating heart, beat at his eardrums. A *voice*, insisting it was still here. Azuma pointed his gun in its direction, without hesitation, without second thoughts.

For a brief moment, the figure of the boy he had seen earlier flashed across his mind. But only for a moment.

“Farewell, hero.”

Quietly, he pulled the trigger. With those final words, his last gunshot raced into the creature’s mouth, down into the neck that joined those three heads.

“_____!!”

With a roar—almost a wail—the egg was swiftly destroyed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Self-Awareness

Azuma's wound was not that serious.

Or at least, that was what he insisted.

"It's just *a little chunk out of my left side*. What's the big deal?" he murmured, half-conscious, as the others forced him into the back seat of the transport van. With the exception of the few who had to stay behind to hand things over to cleanup, they all got in with him.

Kaguya sat down in the seat directly in front of Azuma. Her gaze was slightly downcast, and the remorse in her eyes made it hard to believe that the battle was over.

From Kaguya's perspective, after all, it had not been a victory. She hadn't been able to save the boy in the end. She also had another reason to feel remorseful, one that was currently lying on his side in the seat behind her.

It was clearly a serious injury, but between the post-battle overload of adrenaline and the sedatives they had half-forcefully pumped into him, Azuma didn't seem to be feeling much pain. If anything, he appeared to think they were all overreacting.

"Azuma, dude—are you okay? You don't seem very bothered by all of this."

"What? Me? This is nothing. I'm peachy keen."

"You know you've got a hole in your side? Even if you are pumped full of sedatives, it's kind of strange that you don't look paler." Rindou was visibly awestruck. "Still, I guess someone as resilient as you isn't going to die from a thing like this. That wound will be better in no time. You've got stamina to

spare!”

“That’s true, but... Erk!”

Azuma’s face suddenly twisted into a grimace and he lay back down. Kaguya couldn’t stop herself from leaning over the back of the seat to check on him. A bump in the road seemed to have caused him some pain, but he held his open hand up as if to indicate that he was okay.

“Captain Azuma, maybe we should put you in an ambulance after all...”

“Oh, that’s right... You don’t know, do you, Lieutenant?” Azuma laughed even while his face turned a funny shade of green. “We can’t go to normal hospitals, even with wounds like this. It would be obvious from a glance that something unusual had happened, after all.”

It was a gash in his side. If they weren’t careful, it could easily turn into something serious.

“There’s a specialized facility—a place run by allies such as Major Mirai.”

The people who supported the Extermination Bureau in this way were adults who had originally been in the Bureau themselves. Obviously people such as them weren’t going to forget about heroes so easily. They never attempted to gather support from the broader public, however, as anything they tried to say would simply fall on deaf ears.

After sending Azuma to the infirmary, the other members of Charon headed to their rooms. As the only other member to get injured—though not nearly as seriously as Azuma—Rindou made for the infirmary as well.

“Come on, there’s no need to look so down,” he said on the way, in a rare display of affability. “It’s not like this is your fault, you know—it couldn’t be helped.”

“Yeah, Kaguya. You did your best. You shouldn’t get so depressed over one failure,” Koyuki added from behind. “This may not be the nicest way to put it, but when you think about how many people you’ve saved so far, something like this was bound to happen once or twice.”

The word *failure* made Kaguya twitch. Koyuki was right, though; this was just

a tactical failure. Maybe it really was unavoidable.

One or two defeats were bound to happen, but this “once” had also been a boy’s life.

As soon as the person inside the hero rejected her, Kaguya should have immediately thrown in the towel. Then maybe Azuma wouldn’t have gotten so injured. She tried to have it both ways, and instead ended up hurting them both.

Kaguya had thought she understood. Their opponents were heroes, but they had once been humans as well. But because they were humans, that meant they didn’t all think the same way. The boy’s words were still stuck in her mind.

“You pretend you’re so worried about me, but you’re just thinking about yourself.”

She had been so far up on her high horse while dealing with that boy inside the dog-hero. How could she forget?

But human emotions were not so easily controlled.

“We are human. And the heroes were originally humans as well.”

Human hearts and wills were not all alike. Kaguya could talk herself blue in the face, but some people were not going to accept what she had to say.

She had convinced herself that so long as she explained it properly, people would see the wisdom of her words. But why had she been so sure? Was it because she had once turned back into a human herself?

“Not everyone wants to be saved.”

“Just leave us alone already.”

The words still echoed in her ear. People could know the truth and still reject it.

“I think I might need to have another talk with Second Lieutenant Takanashi...”

4-2

Several hours later, Haru was still asleep in the meeting hall.

Although unconscious, she wasn't injured, which is why they hadn't carried her to the infirmary. Three hours had passed since the battle ended, but she still showed no signs of waking up.

Kaguya had slipped out without saying anything to Koyuki. She figured it would probably be easier to talk to Haru alone.

It's quiet in here.

Kaguya didn't want to wake Haru up, so she went through documents. The pile included Azuma's reports, which she was reading through casually. The latest was from yesterday.

Yesterday—oh, that's right, we happened to have a little free time, so we ate dinner together.

Naturally, much of the report concerned Kaguya.

"Surface redness on the face, excessive nervousness, abnormal sense of taste..."

She summarized the information in the report. While eating with Kaguya, Azuma's pulse had risen, and he had failed to taste anything because he could not concentrate on his meal. Additionally, after parting ways with Kaguya, he had been hit with a sudden and inexplicable sense of loss.

"Yes, it must be a problem with the nervous system..." Kaguya muttered.

Also, it was a little different from the aftereffects he described in his reports, but it probably had something to do with this as well. Yes. Lately, it seemed as if Azuma was scared of something.

Kaguya's stomach suddenly rumbled.

"Ugh..."

Maybe it was because she was reading about food.

She could hear the ticking as the second hand wound its way around the clock. Kaguya had nearly had her fill of reviewing documents and listening to the sound of Haru's breathing in her sleep. A kitchen was attached to the meeting hall, just a few feet away.

Kaguya had almost zero self-restraint when it came to her appetite. She glanced toward the kitchen and made up an excuse.

“As long as I don’t turn on the gas, it should be fine...”

She was pretty sure they had plenty of vegetables in the kitchen. All she had to do was chop some up and add a little seasoning, and she would have herself a fine midnight snack.

With her mind made up, Kaguya sprang into action. She was an accomplished chef.

“Let’s see, everything should be in here...,” she said, opening the vegetable compartment. There were cucumbers and a cabbage, so she gave them both a wash and set them out on the cutting board.

The sound of vegetables being quietly chopped echoed in the late-night stillness of the empty meeting hall. She also found a retort pouch of ready-made soup sitting next to the refrigerator and decided to pop that into the microwave. The *ding* when the microwave finished was surprisingly loud, which caused her to freeze.

It’s just a little noise. It’s probably fine.

Her midnight snack consisted of a small cucumber and cabbage salad, the ready-made soup, and a can of tuna. They were all common, even cheap items, but as a midnight snack, they tasted positively gourmet for some reason. Her spread was now in order.

Time to eat, she said to herself.

Just as she was about to tuck into the soup, she noticed someone sitting up. Obviously, it was Haru.

“What are you doing...?”

“Oh, Second Lieutenant Takanashi— Well...”

At first, she thought Haru was going to be angry. But for some reason, Haru, who was usually so quick to talk about morals and order, did not complain, and instead seemed fixated on Kaguya’s soup.

“That smells good.”

Haru staggered over, lured by the soup that Kaguya was preparing to eat.

“A-are you hungry? Actually, more importantly, are you okay?”

After considering for a moment, Haru nodded. Kaguya sighed in relief. As long as she had an appetite, her condition couldn't be too bad.

“Okay, well, how about I make something?”

“No...it's fine. I'll do it...,” Haru said, stepping into the kitchen. Kaguya watched her as she moved sleepily and unsteadily.

Haru pulled a packet of ready-made soup from the shelf next to the refrigerator, just like Kaguya had. It was the kind you heated up in the microwave.

And then, without hesitation, she tossed the entire pouch into a frying pan and reached to turn on the heat— “Ah...!”

Kaguya stopped her just in time.

“What in the heck do you think you're doing...?!”

“Doing? I'm just trying to heat up this pouch...”

“And how do you expect to do that in a frying pan?! Besides, it's soup!”

Haru made a face like she really didn't understand.

“That's how you heat retort pouches, isn't it? On the burner? Oh wait, does Charon have a special way of doing things?”

“Special...? If you try to heat it up like that, the pouch will either melt or burn. How do you usually do it?”

“What do I do? What do *you* do?!” she said, combatively. “It's still food, isn't it? This is how I always do it.”

“What is happening inside your stomach...?!”



“Like you’re one to talk,” said Haru, exasperated. “Anyway, isn’t this the normal way to do it? No one ever told me that.”

“What are you talking about? It’s all written right there on the pouch...”

Haru ignored that comment.

In the end, Haru heated her soup in the microwave. She thought about transferring it to a bowl, but instead ate it directly from the pouch, maybe because she didn’t want more dishes to wash. Who knew she was such a slob?

“So,” Haru said suddenly. “Was there something you wanted? You were waiting for me to wake up, weren’t you?”

“...”

Kaguya was a little miffed that Haru had seen through her so easily.

Kaguya wanted to learn more about Haru. Who she really was, and what it was that she was after. As the warm aroma of soup diffused throughout the quiet meeting room, Kaguya gently ventured a question.

“What you said earlier—about people who don’t want to be saved...”

Kaguya stopped herself. There might have been someone important to Haru in the past. Stirring up old history like that just to put herself at ease was insensitive. She decided to ask a different question instead.

“Second Lieutenant Takanashi—what are you really here to do?”

Haru looked up from her soup. She must not have been expecting that question.

“What do you mean?”

“I...did a little digging. This inspection you’re supposed to be doing covers multiple areas, but all of them can be handled using written documentation and video records. These inspections are usually just a formality. There was no real reason for you to show up in person.”

“Sorry—did you wait for me to wake up just so you could ask me that?” Haru narrowed her eyes. The rest of her face remained still. “Why would I tell you? What would I get out of it?” she asked indifferently.

Kaguya hesitated slightly. A moment later, she made up her mind and met Haru's eyes.

"If you told me why you're here, maybe I could tell you what I'm doing."

Haru leveled her gaze at Kaguya. "Do you even understand what you're saying? You know I'm here to railroad you, don't you?"

"I know. But depending on why, maybe we could find common ground."

"How principled of you, all of a sudden. What, did something happen today?" Haru murmured, acting as if she wasn't that invested, but Kaguya could tell she was interested. Or rather, judging from her tone of voice, Kaguya could tell that Haru had already put some of the pieces together.

"I already know what you did," said Haru. "You came into contact with the hero, and then it went out of commission. But after a little while, it became active again. You intervene with them in some way, don't you? In a way that differs from Charon's normal approach."

"?! B-but, how—? You were unconscious the whole time..."

"I can see it in your face. It's different from how you looked after the fight with the sand hero. At the very least, from the way you're looking at the ground, it's easy to see that you experienced some kind of setback."

Haru also glanced at the midnight snack that Kaguya had prepared.

"Besides, this seems like a pretty light meal—for you, at least."

Soup, vegetables, and a can of tuna. Even as a late-night snack, it was practically Spartan for Kaguya.

"You're pretty observant, huh...?"

"That's my job. Although, if I had been watching a little closer, maybe I wouldn't have gotten knocked out today."

Haru was smart and had good instincts, but Kaguya already knew that. She continued listening, realizing it would be pointless to deny the truth.

"So your intervention with the sand hero was successful, but you failed today. That about sums it up, right?"

Haru smoothly pushed her hair back from her face. Her slender fingers slipped through the blue strands. For some reason, the refinement in that gesture felt frightening.

“But even if that *sums it up*, there’s more to the story, isn’t there? At least, from your perspective. You said something about wanting to save people before. Does that have anything to do with this failed intervention today?”

Kaguya looked away, unable to speak.

“As you know, the Inspection Group eliminates those it considers suspicious. Probably a holdover from the early days, when maintaining Bureau leadership was apparently very difficult.”

Originally the Extermination Bureau had been formed from volunteers, but its institutional strength was meager, and strict regulations were required. Back then there had been no input from adults, and order had been maintained through simple, brute force.

Things were run tighter now, but there were still holdovers from the old days.

“What I am trying to say here is that I don’t plan to pull any punches in achieving my goals, and would not feel particularly remorseful if that means selling you out. Besides, what are you so interested in anyway—?”

“I need to know,” Kaguya blurted out, cutting Haru off. “You said something before about people who don’t want to be saved—I have a feeling those people have something to do with why you’re here, Second Lieutenant. I want to understand people like that better.”

“As part of your research...?”

Kaguya began to nod, but then shook her head. “As people,” she said. “I need to face up to them as people—those who don’t look for a savior, and don’t want to be saved. I don’t want to let anyone slip through the cracks.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible, though... To open up to everyone like that, without ever giving up or leaving anyone by the wayside. It just can’t be done. You’d wear yourself out first.”

“I know, but I’m prepared for that. I don’t want to just be some princess

who's all talk but no action."

No more games. No more using her own position as an excuse to insulate herself and be small. Even if it was difficult, she had to meet them where they were.

"Hmph." Haru grunted in admiration. "Last time I said you were a princess just playing at being a saint...but I take that back, I guess."

"Oh...?"

"That's not the kind of look a princess would get in her eyes. It's the look of someone who is trying to shoulder everything for themselves. If you're really that determined, then I guess you deserve an answer."

That wasn't what Kaguya had expected Haru to say. Did she really try to shoulder everything herself? Kaguya didn't think so. The idea didn't seem to quite fit with who she was now.

Haru fixed Kaguya with a firm gaze. Her clear, jade eyes seemed to pierce through her.

"My goal"—Haru took a breath—"is to create a world where no one else becomes a hero."

"Where no one else becomes a hero...?"

"Yes. I know the creatures known as Goddesses are responsible for turning people into heroes, but specific conditions are required for people to turn. That means, if we get to the bottom of what those conditions are, we can ensure that it never happens again. This is my ultimate goal."

"But how...?"

"That's what I'm searching for at the moment...," said Haru, somewhat sullenly.

Kaguya understood instinctively, from the sound of Haru's voice, that she was being truthful. These were her real thoughts.

Haru's goal and Kaguya's goal were only slightly different. Haru's was to implement preventative care, Kaguya's was to help those who were already affected by the disease. But even if their goals were different, they were still

focused on the same thing.

Kaguya felt unqualified respect for Haru's goal. Like her own, it was probably difficult for others to understand.

However, Kaguya also hesitated.

She had her own lead for how Haru's goal might be achieved. She had already prevented people from turning into heroes. But sharing this information with Haru would essentially mean admitting the truth about what she was really doing out on the battlefield.

"So...what made you think this way?" asked Kaguya, trying to ascertain Haru's motives. There must be something inside her, some motivation, that had led her to this belief.

"Do you really need to know? My reasons don't have anything to do with you."

"But they do. They have a lot to do with me." Kaguya leaned forward. "I think you already know this, but my research focuses on turning heroes back into humans. Why—the reason I wanted to do that, was because I once saw someone important to me turn into a hero before my eyes. That's when I thought—what if there was a way to turn them back into human, as well?"

Haru's eyes widened slightly.

"Wait, who is this person? You've been working on your project since before you came to Charon, so I'm guessing you're not referring to Second Lieutenant Sakura Arakawa, right?"

"He was my brother..."

Although, to be accurate, her brother had not turned into a hero. She only believed that to be the case.

Wait... Then how...?

A question suddenly blossomed in Kaguya's mind. If she wasn't mistaken about things, that would mean that her own brother had entered her psyche when the incident happened. But how? Kaguya was only able to enter the heroes' minds because she had once begun to turn into a hero, so why was her

brother—?

“I see—so that’s why you want to turn people back to normal, and why you started working on your project,” said Haru, interrupting Kaguya’s thoughts. “I also have my reasons. Someone important to me turned into a hero before my eyes as well. He was like you”—the words exited her mouth in a rush, as if something Haru had been keeping buried deep inside had now come spilling out—“always preoccupied with his own ideals. Trying to save everyone, giving all he had, even sacrificing himself when he knew it was too much. And yet, despite all that, in the end...”

Haru trailed off. Kaguya could imagine the rest. He, too, had become a homicidal monster.

“He embraced it,” said Haru.

“Embraced it...?! ”

“I was transferred to Inspection two months ago, after the squad I had been assigned to was wiped out...two months ago, in Akihabara.”

Two months ago. Akihabara.

“It was right before that hero with the katana appeared. The Goddess came to him while he was on the brink of death. You probably know this already, but if we get targeted by a Goddess, we’re supposed to take ourselves out before we can turn into a hero.”

“ ... ”

“I tried to kill him, but he didn’t want to die. He said he’d rather turn into a hero. In the end that’s what he became—and then Charon took him down.”

“That’s... But why...?”

He wouldn’t have even known about the mental worlds.

“Maybe he was just tired of being human. Or maybe reality seemed hopeless to him. Either way, even the prospect of death had become fetid.”

Just like Shinji, the boy Kaguya had met earlier—someone who didn’t want to be saved.

“So can you blame me? After seeing something like that, seeing him turn into one of those monsters, of course I wouldn’t want something like that to happen again.”

“Of course...”

Haru was like her. They had been through the same thing. As a result of what they had seen, Kaguya decided to try to turn heroes back into humans, whereas Haru wanted to keep them from becoming heroes in the first place. Were the two really so different in the end?

But that left Kaguya all the more confused. There were plenty of better avenues for Haru to achieve her goals. She could have joined Technical. Even that would have made more sense. So why was she here as an inspector, watching Charon—and Kaguya? Surely she had better things to do.

“If you have such an important goal, why join Inspection of all places? That seems pointless.”

“I need information...” Haru sounded bitter for some reason. “When I transferred last month, I was given a secret mission to observe you and set you up on bogus charges. In exchange, I was to be given information: everything they have on heroes—in particular any information from when the heroes first appeared thirty years ago.”

“...?!”

Kaguya swallowed hard. Kaguya, too, had searched for information from that time, but hadn’t been able to find anything—but it was possible that someone out there already had their hands on it.

“Incredible—s-so then...!”

“With that information, I was hoping I might uncover the reason people turn into heroes. That’s what I thought. As someone who isn’t smart enough to enter Technical, it was the best I could come up with.”

The lack of records from when the heroes first appeared had left Kaguya at a similar loss. Apparently they had both been looking for the same thing, Kaguya to turn heroes back into humans, and Haru to prevent them from turning in the first place.

“Two months ago, when you went into the field without permission...” Haru’s voice was soft, like creeping frost, and yet fiery with determination. “That hero vanished... You know something, don’t you? And it has something to do with why you get special treatment, doesn’t it?”

It was true. Kaguya did know something. But right now, she was thinking about the other members of Charon. Would they be blamed for keeping this a secret? She didn’t want them to suffer any blowback— “Don’t worry. I won’t say anything negative about Charon.” There was a glint of faith deep in Haru’s jade-green eyes. “I never break a promise. No matter what, I won’t let this affect Charon. Besides, we’d all be in trouble if Charon was taken away.”

Kaguya glanced away, conflicted.

Should she trust her? Kaguya didn’t think Haru was going to betray her. Haru Takanashi. She was Charon’s new member, sent from the Intelligence and Analysis Branch to keep an eye on Kaguya—and someone willing to resort to any measure to realize her dream. The truth was, she was the bravest of all of them.

After several seconds of thought, Kaguya made up her mind. If she doubted Haru now, she would never be able to trust her again.

“I lied when I said I was here for research purposes,” she said. “And it wasn’t a seizure. The truth is—”



In the infirmary at Charon’s barracks, Azuma had been given a bed in a small separate room, as if to isolate him from the others. During the previous fight, he had suffered an injury that wasn’t going to heal on its own.

Honestly, he was mostly just bored. The bite wound was superficial; he would probably recover quickly. They had also anesthetized the wound, so he wasn’t in any pain.

“I don’t know what everyone is making such a big fuss about...”

Azuma softly pressed his hand to his right eye. He could hear the egg pulsing ceaselessly inside his skull. He was finally inured to the sound, but alone like

this, in this quiet room, the sound *stood out*. The thought of it, like a second heart inside him, made Azuma's skin crawl.

Still, the only one who could hear the noise was Azuma himself. And it wasn't like the sound was intrusive. Usually he didn't even notice it. It was just the quiet times.

Azuma let his thoughts wander to the other members of Charon. Since he was recuperating, he wasn't allowed to go on any missions. It made sense, but still left him with an uncomfortable kernel of anxiety.

"Tsk..."

Azuma clicked his tongue, unhappy with the situation. He was thinking back to how he had gotten injured.

He had been suffering aftereffects, caused by almost turning into a hero before. As a result, the hero had appeared differently to him for a moment.

A human. It was definitely a human face that I saw in there. A human, with an unhinged smile on his face.

"You've got to be kidding me," muttered Azuma, so upset by what had happened that he spoke out loud, even though no one was there. These aftereffects were starting to get in the way of battle. It may have only been for a moment, but he had hesitated. He had felt fear.

I don't want to turn into something like that.

The expression of madness on that monster's face couldn't have even really been called a smile.

What bothered him most was *how little it had taken* to shake him. How could he be this weak? Everyone—even the lieutenant—was prepared for what might happen to them. So why now, after all this time—?

Knock, knock. Azuma turned his attention toward the door.

It was Rindou. He opened the door and let himself in.

"Rindou...? Are you alone?"

"Is that a problem?"

“No—I just thought it seemed late, that’s all.”

Azuma honestly did feel a little surprised. Rindou wasn’t really the type to check up on people. He probably had something he wanted to speak about.

“There’s actually something I want to ask you.”

Azuma knew it. Rindou got to the point without further delay, a serious look in his eyes.

“You’re...hiding something, aren’t you?”

“What...?”

“Do you think I didn’t notice? It happened again today. You hesitated for a split second before attacking. It delayed your strike. You never had a tell like that before. It looks like you’re scared of something.”

Apparently the secret was out.

“Perceptive as always,” said Azuma, grimacing.

“Is it something you don’t want to talk to me about...?”

Azuma hesitated for a moment but then shook his head. The problem wasn’t that he didn’t want to talk about it, the problem was that he couldn’t. Even if he did, he didn’t think Rindou would understand.

Rindou yawned in an exaggerated fashion, as if he was bored. “If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine, but you can’t be causing issues like this.”

“I know that...”

“No, you don’t. Just look at what happened today.”

Azuma had nothing to say in reply.

“It’s fine if you don’t want to talk to us...but why haven’t you said anything to Kaguya, at least?”

“The lieutenant doesn’t have anything to do with—”

“Bullshit. The reason you’re acting this way is because you started to turn into a hero that one time. You never once hesitated in front of a hero before that... Why don’t you talk about it? To Kaguya?”

Perhaps part of the reason he hadn't yet said anything was because he didn't want people to make a fuss over him. After all, Azuma had always been the one to lead Charon up until now.

That came with no small amount of self-awareness and pride.

And now he, as Captain Azuma, was scared? How was he supposed to tell them something like that?

Azuma remained silent, causing Rindou to sigh openly.

"Well, I didn't hear what I came to hear—but at least I said what I needed to say. Sorry for bothering you while you're injured."

As Rindou went to leave, Azuma called out "Hey, Rindou," as if to stop him. "Heroes do need to be defeated—don't they?"

"What brought that on all of a sudden?" said Rindou, clearly furrowing his brow. "That's what we've been doing all this time, isn't it? It's what we've been fighting for. Why question that now?"

Rindou sighed again, without waiting for Azuma to reply.

"Look...I don't know what's gotten into you, Azuma," Rindou went on, "but you need to step up your game. If you waver, we all waver."

"Y-yeah. I know. Sorry."

Azuma forced a smile in an attempt to switch gears. But he could still see it, as if burned into his retinas. Something he never needed to know. The way they truly looked inside.

That inner world had been sweet, gentle, and extremely painful.

Azuma had seen a video of how he had appeared while transformed into a hero. A savage and inhuman creature. He tried not to think about how that form might still be smoldering inside him.

How could he be scared of something so stupid, of turning into that creature again?

He felt bile rise into his throat.



“The truth is, I enter the minds of the heroes.”

“Huh...?”

Haru reacted just as Kaguya expected her to. A glint of doubt, maybe even befuddlement, appeared in her jade-green eyes.

“The heroes’...minds? What is that supposed to mean?”

“That’s where I intervene. In their will—what you might call their mental world. Inside, they believe they are in their own ideal world, even while outside in reality they sow despair. I’ve seen it, their truth—when I come into contact with the heroes, I’m able to enter these utopias that they create.”

Haru was unable to hide her doubtful gaze, although her face remained calm and composed.

“When I freeze like that, I’m actually inside their minds. But I failed today.”

Shinji had rejected her.

“There are cases of successes, though. Cases where I’ve prevented the person from turning into a hero. In fact, I once began to turn into a hero myself, and then I came back—”

Kaguya could sense the hint of aversion in Haru as she spoke. She was looking at Kaguya like Kaguya was a crazy person.

“Y-you probably think this is all nonsense, but it’s the truth. After you lost consciousness, I—”

“I believe you.”

Kaguya blinked. It was the last thing she expected Haru to say.

“You believe me? As crazy as it sounds...?”

“I believe you. First of all, there would be no benefit for you to lie about something like this right now. And as much as I hate to say it, that would make the most sense.”

Haru had regained her composure and was speaking dispassionately, thinking out loud.

“Based on your personality, it would be unreasonable to believe that you

would charge into battle on a whim and intentionally get in the way. At first I thought it was for research purposes, like you said, but there was no reason for you to go yourself in that case. You could have just had someone in Charon collect the samples for you, instead of purposely putting yourself in harm's way... That was why I called you a princess."

Because she seemed like some kind of princess playing at being a saint. One who had never held a sword in her life riding off to battle on a lark, and pretending she was doing all the little peasants a favor.

"But why did you tell me this? Telling me the truth only puts you in a worse position, doesn't it?"

"Maybe. But fair is fair."

Kaguya wanted to prevent people from turning into heroes. To do that, they needed to get to them in time. There were also cases like what happened today—people she couldn't reach.

But she had succeeded before. Several months ago, she had prevented Azuma from turning into a hero.

"It occurred to me that I might be able to help you achieve your goal."

Kaguya explained what had really happened several months ago.

She explained how she had entered the false world, and what had occurred inside. The only thing she hid was that the person who had started to turn was Azuma.

As Haru listened, her face went pale. She was perfectly still from the nose down, but her eyes fidgeted with uncertainty.

"There is time, just a little, before a Goddess can fully turn a person into a hero. Before the person accepts her—if you can get to them before then...and if the person truly wants to return..."

Luck probably factored into it as well. It was far from the most reproducible tactic.

"But there are times...when I can save them."

Because the method was so uncertain, Kaguya had kept her wording vague.

But there was no such thing as certainty in life. Kaguya had learned that lesson well today.

“I see,” said Haru, exhaling after a moment. Her voice sounded remorseful, and yet restrained.

It's simple then..., she thought weakly. That must mean he abandoned reality and chose his idealized world instead.

Haru bit her lip, realizing just how far his rejection of everything had gone.

“So you attempted to save that hero and you failed. I think I’m finally starting to understand—you haven’t been fighting *with* the others, you’ve been fighting your own fight. That’s something I would have never been able to work out based on logic alone.”

Obviously there was no way it would have occurred to Haru that Kaguya was entering into some sort of hero world.

“So that’s what you meant by saving people.”

“Yes...” At some point—not distinctly, but somewhere deep down—Kaguya had started to think of herself as special. However... “I was mistaken; I convinced myself that I could save them all, no exceptions, but I didn’t really try to know them.”

“I think I was mistaken as well...,” Haru said gently. “I didn’t realize you were fighting such a lonely battle on your own.”

Kaguya blinked in surprise at the sudden kindness in Haru’s eyes.

“In the end, I guess you’re not a princess trying to become a saint—you’re a princess tomboy with weird interests, trying to become a foot soldier.”

“...?”

Kaguya wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be a compliment or an insult, but Haru had already turned her attention back to her soup. Kaguya looked thrown for a loop. Haru added one more thing.

“If you don’t mind, I have a suggestion. Given the circumstances, have you ever considered learning to fight? Captain Azuma and Second Lieutenant Asaharu have been training, haven’t they?”

The records from their training must have fallen into Haru's hands.

"Why not join them? Not that I'm in any position to say."

Join them, so that she could learn to fight. Come to think of it, she remembered Rindou suggesting something similar.

"Well, that's all I have to say *for now*. Thank you for telling me the truth," said Haru, almost as if she was embarrassed and trying to hide it. Kaguya cocked her head as Haru went on. "And don't worry, Lieutenant Shinohara. I think I've still got plenty of time to decide what to do with you."

"Well...that's good, I guess."

After finishing her soup, Haru no longer seemed interested in rehashing the subject.

"I could go for something else to eat," she said suddenly, abandoning their previous conversation. "Why don't we fry up some eggs? I think I saw some earlier."

"That sounds good, but at this hour? I'm not so sure we should use the burner..."

"Yes, obviously I know that. What do you take me for? That's why we need to cook them like this."

Haru suddenly shoved the cold, raw eggs, still in their shells, into the microwave, forcing Kaguya to stop her in a panic.

INTERLUDE THREE

Consciousness

Meanwhile—at Technical, in the Director’s personal lab.

“Can you hear me, Yuuji Sakigaya?”

The Director, Lieutenant Colonel Yuuna Arimura, was sitting in her chair, speaking to a petri dish enshrined on the desk before her. Or, more specifically, to the fragment of hero cells found within that dish.

“If you can hear me, respond, Yuuji Sakigaya.”

Naturally, the cells made no answer. Nor, of course, did they move. The liquid filling the petri dish, however, gradually turned red, as if in response to something.

“Hmm. A clear reaction.”

The Director collected a small amount of that red liquid and placed it inside one of the test tubes sitting to the side. There were over a dozen test tubes lined up on the desk, each containing various colored liquids.

“Now then, let’s move on. Next we—”

“Director—?”

The Director turned around in surprise. Mari was standing there, looking uncomfortable.

“U-um, the lights were on, so I came to check on things... What are you doing? That’s a petri dish, right? You’re talking to a petri dish? You haven’t finally gone mad, have you...?”

“No. Come inside quickly and close the door,” said the Director, annoyed at being interrupted.

Mari quickly shut the door.

“I am not talking to the petri dish. I am talking to these cells.”

“Is...is there a difference? Maybe you should take a rest, Director.”

Mari stared at the Director gingerly, causing her to deflate slightly. If she was in Mari’s position, she probably would have said the same thing.

“This is like a response test, to ascertain the presence of any sentience.”

“With a bunch of cells...? Maybe you’re not aware of this, but cells are definitely not sentient.”

“Mari...,” said the Director, exhausted, having long since realized how mired Mari was in her ideas. “I haven’t been able to get those abnormal stress values from the other day out of my mind. I’ve modified the conditions several times, and the response changes slightly depending on certain variables. I tried saying the name Yuuji Sakigaya to this piece of flesh as well, and the response values clearly increased.”

Ever since they had detected that stress response from the piece of flesh, the Director had not been able to get the incident out of her mind. Using more sophisticated measurement devices, she had discovered that it showed subtle changes in temperature as well. Now she had learned that those temperature changes correlated to specific words—such as when she said the boy’s name, from before it had become a hero.

“Well, you’ve already caught me, and I’ve gotten everything I can from this experiment. These cells need to be disposed of now.”

“Oh, then...should we wash them down the drain? I can take care of that for you,” Mari said with an innocent look in her eyes.

The Director glanced at her and snorted. “That seems rather cruel, Mari. How would you feel, adrift in the sewers for all eternity, unable to escape consciousness?”

“Huh?”

“Think of how tough it must be, even as a weapon, to be reduced to something like this and still unable to die.”

The Director stood up from her chair with a squeak. An ax-shaped Chronos was waiting next to her seat.

This was the same tool she had used to break Sakura’s previous weapon. Just as she had done then, the Director pointed the blade of the ax downward and moved it closer to the petri dish.

With a sudden explosive *crack*, the petri dish split in two. The red liquid inside the dish splattered every which way. Mari watched in astonishment as the Director spoke again.

“Can you hear me, *Yuuji Sakigaya*?”

Despite saying his name again, there was no response this time—not at first, but the red liquid gradually grew clear, as if to indicate some sort of release. Perhaps he had escaped his eternal suffering.

The Director’s strange behavior had left Mari speechless.

“Sorry, what—?”

“I’ve been researching what causes Chronoses to rebound for some time.”

“O-okay...”

Mari was used to the Director suddenly changing the topic.

“Well, without getting into too many details, I was able to determine that these rebounds seem to be the result of some kind of willful resistance.”

There was almost a question mark floating above Mari’s head. The Director got straight to the point.

“Basically, Chronoses are more than mere weapons. They are the end result of people who have become heroes.”

“Wh-what are you trying to say?”

“For instance, this ax that I’m currently holding... From what I could find, this ax came from a hero that was originally a fifteen-year-old girl.”

Mari nodded slowly. The names of heroes weren’t public information, but you

could find out their past age and sex if you looked hard enough.

“She became a hero, and was supposedly killed as a hero. However, her consciousness is still with us even now, Mari. It can see us standing here, hear our voices, and correctly perceive. If it has awareness and consciousness, it must have emotion, and yet it cannot speak.”

“But it doesn’t have eyes, ears, or a brain...” Mari took a step back from the Director. “Director, I... That doesn’t...”

“You find it hard to believe?”

“No, it’s not that I find it hard to believe—but if it were true, how would you confirm something like that? It can’t move, so there’s no real way to be sure, is there?”

“Even if a thing is unable to express its intent, there will be clear responses to show it is alive. This liquid”—the Director pointed to the petri dish—“is designed to change color based on stress experienced by the creature inside. The stronger the stress, the redder it grows. You see this vial here? It is as red as blood. That is because, up until a moment ago, I was saying very hurtful things to it.”

“Er, th-that’s cruel.”

“Is it? It was just a stress tolerance test.”

Mari saw her point.

“But do you see how red it is? The fact that it could experience such powerful levels of stress just from words proves that it must be *able to hear*.”

The test tubes lined up on the desk contained liquid collected under a variety of stress loads. The Director had been investigating what factors caused the most stress.

“This Yuuji Sakigaya certainly led a miserable life... Poor thing, stuck in this world even after becoming a hero.”

“Y-you mean, they’re dead, but still alive?”

“But they’re *not dead*, Mari. Well, not this one. This one is dead now.”

Creatures that remained trapped within their egos in this world—not truly alive, with no way to attract notice or plead their case, and incapable of being saved.

“You’ve heard of locked-in syndrome, haven’t you? Where a person retains clear consciousness but, for whatever reason, is unable to so much as blink an eye or otherwise show that they are conscious. This is the same phenomenon. One difference, though, is that these weapons are capable of rebounding. In fact, when applying electrical voltage, the sample showed slight signs of apparent resistance. Rebounds are likely based on more dramatic cases of resistance.”

Mari’s face grew increasingly serious and pale. Perhaps the conversation was finally starting to sink in. A look of realization appeared on her face.

“Hold on,” she said, her voice rising shrilly. “Kaguya and the others—the ones doing the fighting, over at Charon. They don’t know about this, do they?”

“Correct. The only people who know right now are me and you.”

“If they don’t know...shouldn’t we tell them?”

“What good would that do? It’s not like they can just stop using Chronoses. In fact, if Charon decided not to pick up another Chronos again, it would spell massive setbacks for the human race. They don’t need to know this...let alone that these weapons *can feel pain*.”

The Director glanced at the broken petri dish and the hunk of flesh, now swimming in fluid.

“For instance, Second Lieutenant Rindou Yumeura’s Chronos is a set of brass knuckles. What would it mean for a weapon like that to be sentient, possessed of awareness and the ability to feel pain?”

“Would it mean...that every time Second Lieutenant Yumeura punched some hero with those knuckles, he was causing the person inside the weapon incredible pain...?”

“Exactly. It would be like getting punched yourself. The experience for swords and guns is likely similar. With guns, the sensation of gunpowder exploding inside you and the friction and heat of the bullets must be unbearably painful.”

Consider the guns used by Koyuki Asaharu. She had multiple weapons, for short-and long-distance. That involved no small number of shots being fired every day.

“With swords, the direct impact felt when slicing through flesh is likely far from pleasant. On top of that, katanas get chipped with each strike, which probably feels like being cut, themselves—there is also the friction and heat each time the sword is sheathed or unsheathed. It would be as if their very soul was on fire.”

Azuma used a katana. The number of times he must have slashed with that weapon was overwhelming. The chipping. The unsheathing.

“The same goes for clubs. Mari, imagine for instance being tied up with rope, and then being swung around in the air and forcefully bashed into all sorts of hard surfaces.”

Mari pictured it. The weapon that Sakura had once used, and that Kaguya used now—what it must have been feeling inside. Her face twisted up.

“It...must have been in incredible pain...”

“Most likely. Consider how fortunate we are in comparison, simply being able to tell others we are in pain.”

The Director stroked the ax. Not lovingly, but as if to confirm the sensation.

“They can’t even scream. So long as they remain weapons, they cannot dispense with consciousness... Perhaps it was a relief for Captain Azuma’s sword when it broke in half.”

Mari’s expression grew dark. She glanced at the row of colorful test tubes.

“Knowing this, do you still plan to create new Chronoses, Director? To create more tragedies?”

“Of course I do,” said the Director, unmoved. “That is my duty, after all. There’s no reason to get shaken up over something *as trivial as this*. Not at this stage.”

Even if it meant endless suffering for those who had committed no sin, the Director would leave questions of conscience to someone else.

CHAPTER FIVE

Training

Blam. The sound of a Chronos gunshot rippled through the air of the training center beneath Bureau headquarters.

Koyuki was engaged in target practice. There wasn't much point in such training for her, but she needed to do something to keep her thoughts occupied.

She had a lot to worry about at the moment.

Surprisingly, Azuma's condition wasn't among those worries.

First of all, it wasn't like he was going to die from such a little wound. Koyuki, Rindou, and the other members of Charon all knew that. The only one who seemed down in the dumps since that day was Kaguya. Actually, it was Kaguya's behavior that had Koyuki so worried.

The burden Kaguya carried on her shoulders was greater than even Kaguya herself was aware of. Did she understand? That trying to save everyone meant not being able to save yourself? It didn't seem like she did.

Take right now, for instance. Kaguya and Rindou were over there, fighting in the adjacent training space.

Why were they sparring like this? For some reason, Kaguya had gotten it into her head that she wanted to take combat training, and Rindou had agreed to teach her. So here they were.

Whatever. I guess it doesn't matter, thought Koyuki as she practiced on her own. Another shot filled the air.

She wasn't going to try to stop them.

But there was always a limit to how perfect a person could be. It seemed like Kaguya was trying to act like some kind of saint and take on everything, take on too much, for herself.

Of course Koyuki worried.

Not that she could do any of it in Kaguya's place. Koyuki couldn't enter into these hero worlds, or whatever they were.

Still, though.

"I wish she would at least talk to me."

Koyuki only listened, purposely avoiding glancing toward the adjacent space where the two were training. When Kaguya decided to start training with Rindou, she hadn't mentioned a thing to Koyuki even though she and Kaguya shared a room.

• • •

"That hurt...!"

Kaguya landed hard on her behind, still gripping her club.

Her scarlet hair was tied back, and instead of her usual restrictive uniform, she was wearing a simple athletic training suit. The outfit was the same color as her violet eyes and soaked up all her sweat. She found it to be extremely hot.

Rindou, meanwhile, was still in his uniform. An obvious handicap.

"It hurt? Are you surprised? You need to break your fall and roll."

"I...I did...!"

"If you did you wouldn't be on your ass right now... Besides, I'm only using about a tenth of my strength. I barely touched you."

Kaguya had been the one, after psyching herself up, to ask Rindou to train her. They wound up sparring one-on-one, just as Rindou had suggested before, but Kaguya was so outmatched it was almost laughable. Now that she was getting over her disappointment and exasperation, however, it was actually starting to become fun.

Kaguya's conditions for victory were simple: all she had to do was land one hit to Rindou's face.

Those requirements would have been easy for Rindou—not so for Kaguya. In fact, it was practically a fool's errand.

How am I supposed to compete with his core strength?

The way he moved on his feet. His stamina. The subtle way his eyes changed focus. The manner in which he extended his arms. Even the savage, almost unhinged smile that floated across his face. Kaguya stood no chance.

Maybe this wasn't for her after all.

After her conversation with Haru, she had decided to give it a try, but...

Kaguya hesitated, which caused her to blatantly telegraph her next move.

"O-ow...!"

She was knocked off her feet.

It was almost like Rindou had read her thoughts. He sneered down at her as he saw the fight go out of her eyes.

"Is that all you've got, Kaguya? Giving up so soon?"

"Huh..."

"Just gonna sit on your ass now that things look hard? I expected more from you."

Kaguya pouted slightly. What made it more infuriating was that she knew he was trying to encourage her, not just make fun of her.

Rindou was not the best when it came to positive reinforcement. This was probably his idea of being kind.

Kaguya stood up and, with a huff, swung her club, which she had finally gotten used to, through the air. Maybe she didn't look as cool as Sakura when she did it, but she was pretty sure she wasn't a total embarrassment.

"You wish. Who said anything about giving up? I was just thinking of how I'm going to take you down."

Rindou laughed through his nose.

They traded another round of blows—or rather, Rindou gave, and she received.

“Still, I never expected you to say you wanted to train. What brought this on?”

“Oof, you said it yourself, Second Lieutenant Yumeura. I need to learn how to protect myself. When you suggested training before, you wanted to show me how naive I was being, didn’t you?”

“Well...I’d be lying if I said that wasn’t true.” Rindou tempered the look of provocation in his eyes. “But—that wasn’t the only reason.”

“—!!”

A heavy strike from Rindou left Kaguya’s hand numb, causing her to suddenly drop her club. In a panic, she took a defensive stance. Of course, Kaguya’s defensive stance was hardly better than an amateur’s—and didn’t offer much more protection than instinctively huddling into a ball.

Rindou’s attack, however, never came.

Kaguya tentatively opened her eyes, seeing an expression on Rindou’s face that she had not expected.

“Second Lieutenant Yumeura...?”

“You don’t get it...” There was sadness in his eyes, like he was looking back on something he would never have again. This was the real follow-up blow, she realized. This was what he wanted to say. “...I tried to do *it* once, too.”

It—he said it so simply that it took Kaguya a beat to understand what he meant. She gulped.

She would have never expected it from him—but that was hubris in its own way. Assuming someone as bold and forceful as Rindou would never think about committing suicide.

“Wh-when did you...?”

“Almost exactly six years ago. After the big collapse. I don’t even remember

why anymore, but by all rights I should have died then.”

He stared at Kaguya, but he also seemed to be seeing something else. Nostalgic for something from the past—his own death.

“As you can see, though, I failed to off myself. The noose I used and the closet rack it was attached to, it all burned away... After something like that, it’s not so easy choosing death anymore.”

Kaguya could understand, in a generic sense, how he might feel. Very few people had survived the catastrophe six years ago. It probably seemed silly for Rindou to take his own life after miraculously surviving in such a strange way.

But the complex emotional scars—they must have still been inside him.

“This might be harsh, Kaguya, but you’re not capable of understanding how people like that feel.”

He was right. Kaguya had never once considered suicide. It didn’t even seem like an option to her. How was someone like her supposed to understand something like that?

But being unable to understand was no excuse for being unwilling to try. That was something Kaguya refused to do.

“But I don’t necessarily need to understand, Rindou.”

It was the first time she had ever addressed him by his given name.

“None of us can really understand how other people feel in the first place. You can’t know what’s going on inside my heart, either. Koyuki, Sakura, Mari, the Director, Major Mirai, Captain Azuma. None of us are the same inside.”

“So what are you saying? That you’re just going to give up? You’re gonna tell me to do whatever I want since you can’t understand it anyway? I mean, I don’t necessarily think that’s wrong. It’s important to respect how others feel. If someone says they don’t need reality, accepting that decision seems like a fair reaction to me.”

“No... You can’t mean that.”

Kaguya took a step backward.

She found herself remembering Sakura, suddenly. Sakura had wielded her weapon like it was second nature, without all the plodding steps that Kaguya required. Brilliant and exquisite. But in the end, even Sakura had turned into a monster.

“Kaguya, take care of everyone for me.”

That was Sakura’s last wish, and Kaguya had to live up to it. No matter what it took.

“It doesn’t matter if I understand or not, I’m just going to keep trying to reach them. No matter how many times it takes,” said Kaguya, assuming a fighting stance again for the umpteenth time. This time she was going to get him; she was determined. “I don’t care how many times it takes, I will never give up. That’s...that’s what hope means!”

“Hope, huh? That’s a pretty tall order for one person.”

Rindou switched up his position as well. Until now his stance had been casual, but now he dropped his hips slightly. Even that small move was intimidating.

“If that’s how you want it, though, I’m happy to oblige...just don’t tell Azuma. He’s always so overprotective of you, treating you like a princess.”

“A princess? I’m pretty sure he treats me like I’m a bale of hay.”

“A bale of hay?”

“Well, that’s what it feels like...every time Captain Azuma tosses me over his shoulder,” said Kaguya, pouting slightly at the thought.

Rindou burst out laughing.

CHAPTER SIX

Carelessness

Three days had passed.

Three days, and Azuma's mind remained in turmoil.

How am I healing so fast?

Although Azuma insisted it was nothing, it was clearly more than a minor wound. But the bleeding had already stopped, and his body had moved on to the natural healing stage despite the fact that it had only been three days.

It was far beyond what any human being was capable of. He was supposed to be transported to an Extermination Bureau hospital that day.

"What...is wrong with me?"

Once upon a time, Azuma would have never hemmed and hawed like this over something so silly. How was he supposed to fight if he was constantly shaking in his boots at the thought of turning into a hero?

This had never been a problem before. But now that it had happened once—Someone knocked at the door, forcing Azuma back to the present moment. He responded, and the door opened and she came in. It was Kaguya.

"Sorry I haven't been around these past three days. I've had lots to do on my own, too."

"Lots to do?"

"Lately, Rindou has been teaching me how to move. He's pretty scary when he gets serious, isn't he? He kind of surprised me..."

“Rindou doesn’t know how to go easy on people, or how to show restraint.”

Azuma already knew Rindou had been putting Kaguya through the works, but he wasn’t sure how that arrangement had come to be.

“Why start training all of a sudden? You certainly didn’t seem proactive about it before.”

“I don’t want to turn into some little princess who’s all talk,” she said, speaking forcefully. Azuma blinked. “With you and everyone else in Charon, or with the heroes, it’s easy enough to say I won’t give up. Easy to tell people I’m going to save everyone. But I need to show that I mean it with my actions. Talk is cheap, but if my actions don’t follow suit, then what does it all mean?”

Sometimes, the easier something was to say, the harder it was to do. *Honestly*, thought Azuma. *Isn’t she taking things a little too far?* He knew very well that she tended to go overboard.

Knowing this, Azuma found the question leaving his mouth before he even realized he was going to ask.

“When you say ‘actions,’ what do you plan to do?”

Kaguya’s eyes went wide.

“Heroes were originally human,” said Azuma. “So of course there’s no way to understand each other completely. I think you need to accept that you won’t be able to change everyone’s minds simply by speaking to them. I know it went well in my case, and for a lot of other people as well...”

Including Kaguya herself.

“...but it’s probably more likely for things not to work out. That inner world is so compelling.”

“That’s true,” said Kaguya, staring off into the distance. She seemed to be remembering something. “People need to really want to return to resist that force. I won’t say I understand what is going on inside the hearts of those who don’t want to come back. But just because I don’t understand them doesn’t mean I’m going to give up. From now on, I don’t care. No matter how much it takes from me, I’m not going to give up.”

“...!”

Azuma wasn't sure what to say. Kaguya made eye contact.

“During that fight three days ago...,” she began, “I realized that I need to dive deeper if I'm going to turn heroes back into humans. Words can only go so far—I need to understand their psyches, and to not forget.”

Azuma listened calmly.

“I haven't forgotten a single person I've intervened with up until now. Not what I saw, what I felt, what they said in the end, or what they hoped for, in that place only I could see.”

How many heroes had she connected to thus far? It would be easy to look at the records and check, but there had to be a significant number of heroes by now.

“Isn't that painful...?” Azuma asked her.

“It's difficult.” But she didn't say painful. “However, I'm the only one who can be there for them, as people, at the very end—”

This was something not even Azuma—or anyone else for that matter—could understand.

He remembered when his sister had become a hero. She must have been in her own dream—her own idealized world. Azuma hadn't been able to be there for her, but that world had been her last wish.

“Maybe you're overthinking things,” ventured Azuma. “After all, they're already dead. Remembering the dead sounds fine, but I don't see why you have to be responsible for that all on your own.”

“Maybe,” said Kaguya, surprisingly receptive to what he said. Then she continued, in a more dogged voice. “But...Captain Azuma, I want to remember. If I don't, it's like they really died as monsters, isn't it? They had their own thoughts, their own feelings, and I'm the only one capable of knowing them.”

“I see...”

In that case—the ones who had been saved so far, maybe they found joy. They didn't die like his sister had, without anyone there to know what they

thought at the end. In that same light, however, that meant that the suffering of all those human deaths, so many young men and women, was falling squarely upon Kaguya's shoulders, alone.

Something like that had to be painful.

"Lieutenant...how do you bear it?" Even if nothing could be done, he couldn't stop himself from asking. "You're not just mentally aware of what happens, you actually come into contact with their psyches—their hearts. You have to face death with them. That doesn't seem like something any normal human could endure."

"Well, maybe... But I'm not human, am I?"

Azuma was shocked. She said it so easily. Kaguya pressed her hand to her throat, where the hero's egg rested, a remnant of when she herself had once begun to change into a hero.

"There is a hero's egg in my throat. I am half hero, a waypoint between the two, you might say."

"A waypoint."

"Yes. Both hero and human..."

Half of her was no longer human. It was one of those monsters now. And Azuma was no different.

It had been so hideous, the boy's crazed smiling face, as he stared at something not found in this world. That terrifying sight had taken root in Azuma's core, filling him with despair and gnawing away at his need to be human. Did Kaguya feel that fear, too?

"...In other words, it is a very interesting condition."

"Interesting...?"

That took Azuma by surprise. Glancing at her eyes, Azuma realized that she was not simply putting on a brave face. She meant it. For someone like Kaguya, who had originally come from Technical, even such changes to her own body were an object of fascination.

"I can't believe you can talk that way about yourself—about your own

condition.”

“You can take the girl out of Technical, but I guess you can’t take the Technical out of the girl. It’s like the Director says: Use what you’ve got.”

Azuma couldn’t understand the way she felt. Until recently, his only thought when it came to heroes was how to defeat them.

There was also something dazzling about it. This was something he could only view with fear, that needed to be recoiled from. But she had accepted it, and was trying to use it to help others.

“Captain Azuma,” said Kaguya, suddenly looking away. “What...in the world did you see?”

Azuma shrunk slightly, as she seemed to stare through him.

“It’s not like you to lose focus like that during battle. An increased heart rate isn’t the only thing going on, is it?”

“Well... I guess you’ve figured it out.”

She must have been watching him closely, although he wasn’t sure when. But if anyone understood what he was going through, maybe it was her.

“During the fight three days ago...,” he said, using the same words Kaguya had used.

Whatever had been holding him back, that feeling of not wanting to say it out loud seemed to have vanished at some point. There was no point in trying to put on a front for Kaguya.

“...I saw the hero’s face. The thing inside the blackness.”

Kaguya’s eyes went wide. Azuma calmly explained, without meeting her gaze. Once he started, the words flooded out as if a dam had broken.

“Not just that. I saw the expression behind the hero as well... He was grinning from ear to ear. It was so extreme that it frightened me.”

That face, so happy, yet equally swollen with madness as it was with joy, floated into the back of Azuma’s mind. A face that was only possible for someone who had abandoned everything, reality, their soul, and had chosen to

live in an idealized fantasy instead. A smile that made Azuma feel sick. And—he had once been the same. So had his sister.

“It made me realize that I was like that once before, too, and now I can’t come to grips with it—that I became a hero. And that I could become one again.”

“Are you...afraid...?”

“I know it’s pathetic.” Yuuri Azuma, the captain of Charon, was afraid. “Everyone else has come to terms with that possibility and continues to fight. Even you, Lieutenant. It’s pathetic to feel this way, after all this time.”

That must have been the real reason he couldn’t bring himself to talk about it.

“Captain Azuma, do you think it’s pathetic to feel afraid?”

“Well...yes, of course I do.”

He was the captain of the strongest squad in the Bureau. How could he admit to being scared?

Kaguya, however, seemed to disagree. “That’s strange. That’s very strange, Captain Azuma. After all, fear is a necessary emotion for survival. Pride aside, if you think you need to apologize for feeling afraid, you’ve got things all wrong,” she said out of the blue.

Azuma made eye contact. It didn’t seem like she was just saying it to make him feel better. She was calmly stating the truth.

“Listen, Captain Azuma. In all places and at all times, every living creature has natural enemies. Sometimes these are external predators, sometimes they’re the elements, such as heat and cold, but there is always something.”

Azuma cocked his head. What was she talking about?

“The fruits of nature—in particular, things such as water, fire, and darkness—can easily take lives. The most basic and essential capacity an organism possesses to ensure that it can navigate safety through a world where life-threatening hazards exist around every corner...”

Kaguya took a deep breath.

“...is fear.”

“...?”

Azuma didn't respond. He wasn't sure what she was getting at.

“I mean, what I'm trying to say,” Kaguya went on, obviously self-conscious that she hadn't been understood, “is not that there is absolutely no need to feel embarrassed...but just that it's a natural thing. Fear.”

Kaguya sat down in the chair next to the bed.

“Of course the prospect of turning into something not human is scary. It would be weirder if you weren't scared. Especially in your case, Captain Azuma, since you once started to turn into a hero, and know what it really entails. The reason the others don't feel as strongly is probably just because they don't know what you know.”

What it meant to become a hero. And that starting to turn into one, once, meant that you were no longer human.

“If anything, I'm relieved. Knowing there is something you're scared of shows that *you're human after all*.”

“It does...? But according to your theory, I'm not human anymore.”

“Who you are...,” she said, tapping his chest lightly. She was pointing at his heart. His soul. “...is human. Someone who despises his enemies but also shows pity. Who feels fear at the sight of madness, and falters at something he does not want to become—what could be more human?”

Azuma wasn't sure how to respond. He had never thought about what it meant to be human before.

“The definition of a human is relative. For instance, if Rindou, Koyuki, and everyone else were to become half hero tomorrow, once we all had that in common, the definition would change overnight.”

In fact, those who weren't half hero would be seen as oddities instead—but something like that was unthinkable, of course, and could never be allowed to pass.

“So then, does it really matter? Nothing about you has actually changed,

Captain. You're a little infuriating at times, but we know you're there when we need you. Just like always. Right?"



“I guess so...”

There was one thing that would never change. No matter how much closer to monstrous he became. No matter how far into the madness he glimpsed. Just so long as he didn't let that same madness consume his heart.

“Besides, even if you were to change into a hero, Captain Azuma, you wouldn't need to worry. I would just come save you.”

“Relax. I don't plan on making a fool of myself like that again anytime soon.”

“Good to know,” Kaguya said with a grin.

Azuma, however, felt somewhat uneasy. Kaguya had put it out there so lightly—from his perspective, it would just mean being saved, but what about her? It probably wouldn't be so easy.

There was one thing still bothering him. If fear was a necessary emotion, then what about her? She didn't seem scared at all. The way she acted, you would almost think she wasn't human.

“Aren't you scared, too?” he asked impulsively. “You're intervening directly in their psyches. Compared to me, you're much more...”

“Oh, well. In my case, after all those years working under the Director, my ability to feel fear is already broken. After working with her, nothing seems scary by comparison.”

“Is she really that frightening?”

“Do you even need to ask?! I think whatever developmental resources usually go toward things like ethics, morals, and kindness or whatever, have all been diverted elsewhere in her case.”

Azuma remembered his previous telephone call with the Director.

She had only helped Kaguya for research purposes—that was what the Director had said, but that probably wasn't the whole truth. If that were true, she wouldn't have handed over such a valuable scientific asset so easily.

After all, she didn't know if Kaguya was ever going to come back. If all she really cared about was her research, she had no reason to hand that club over.

At the very least, that meant that even the Director was capable of caring about others.

“Don’t be so harsh. She isn’t all bad.”

“You only say that because you don’t know what she’s really like.” Kaguya pursed her lips, giving Azuma a chuckle. “Just remembering it makes a shiver run down my spine. The 5/22 incident—when she locked us all up for what she called a ‘mock hero transformation experiment’! We nearly died.”

Only young men and women on the verge of death transformed into heroes. Kaguya’s face stiffened.

“That was how it got to be just me and the Director at Technical. Mari came along later, not that she does any work.”

“Just you two? Are you saying...?”

“Don’t worry. Everyone else just quit or ran away. By some miracle, no one actually got hurt!”

Azuma figured that environment must have been what had made Kaguya so strong. Not that she had survived the Director’s bizarre experiments, but that she had hung onto her dreams through it all.

“Lieutenant. No, Kaguya...”

Azuma purposely used her first name. Kaguya looked at him, wondering what was so important.

Azuma had something to say. He owed her. For saving him. He had always hoped to repay her for what she had done, somewhere, someday, but had never known how. But he now understood clearly what he needed to do.

Maybe it wasn’t possible, but if the same thing happened—if Kaguya ever turned into a hero—if anyone could bring her back when that time came, it had to be him. He was the only one who could. A promise, a kind of hope. He opened his mouth to speak.

“Lieutenant, if you ever—”

“Somebody, help!!”

A boy's voice suddenly filled the room, accompanied by a burst of static.

Azuma realized the voice was coming from one of the emergency terminals they had been sent last month. The terminals weren't used on a regular basis. They were only for emergencies so dire that even the few minutes it would take to request a dispatch through Major Mirai could not be spared. These terminals had been implemented two months ago, after they had been unable to get in touch with Kaguya.

"Charon, please respond—somebody!"

"Th-this is Technical Lieutenant Shinohara, with Special Ops Squad Charon. What's the matter?!"

"A hero—I think it's a hero—has appeared...! Please, anybody, just get us out of—"

The person on the line sounded hysterical. Kaguya, for her part, stayed absolutely calm and collected.

"Please calm down. Can you fill me in on the situation, and give me your location?"

"I already sent coordinates when I made contact! The white demon—attacking the bones—"

The transmission was breaking up. They could hear all sorts of strange noises on the line. Kaguya leaned forward. Azuma listened from the side. The others were all listening as well from other rooms in the base. They heard it at the same time.

"WRAA—AAA—SKKRREEEE—"

A hero's scream. It was hideous; the sound alone felt like a pit of ice in their stomachs.

A moment later, there was a static *crash*. It was the sound of a comms terminal hitting the ground.

"Hello?! Are you okay?!"

There was no answer. Kaguya pressed close to the receiver, but the call had already gone dead.

“The location appears to be in Yoyogi,” said Rindou, interrupting over the line. “Azuma can’t go this time, so I’ll take command instead. Everyone fine with that?”

The other members gave their assent over the comms. Charon’s chain of command was clear. After Azuma came Rindou.

Rindou was calm and collected. The location was Yoyogi. They would get there by transport truck. All members, excluding Azuma, were going together. They numbered less than twenty.

But they were Charon, the squad that had proven itself the best at opposing the heroes. In a way, they had to do this.

“Rindou. You can stay in command, but I’m going, too.”

“Hold on... You’re with Kaguya right now?” Rindou almost immediately figured out that she and Azuma were together. He must have been able to tell that their voices were coming from the same place. “What do you mean, you’re going, too? Are you insane? You were half dead today and yesterday. What good are you going to do? Speaking of which, aren’t you supposed to be transferred to the hospital today?”

“Yes—but I heal very fast.”

“In comparison to other people. But we’re not so incompetent that we need to drag a casualty case around with us. What are you thinking, Azuma?”

Azuma was unexpectedly quiet. Kaguya added her two cents as well.

“Rindou is right. If we can’t function without you around, Captain Azuma, Charon isn’t that strong after all, is it?”

“But—”

“It’s fine, Captain Azuma. I know it’s scary, but you can rely on Koyuki and Rindou. Going in your current state would be a hindrance.”

He knew she was right. But still.

“Besides,” said Kaguya, her face suddenly growing more serious. “Your injury may not be life-threatening, but it is far from minor. If you wind up close to death while there, you could turn into a hero. Would going be worth it then?”

Azuma had nothing to say to that. If he turned into a monster, he might wind up hurting his teammates, and friends, once again.

Kaguya took his silence as a sign that he had no more objections. As she turned to go, Azuma murmured, almost as if he were calling after her: “Promise.”

It wasn’t like him to look for promises, to cling to the future. Promises were easily broken.

“Promise that you’ll come back. I still need to tell you...the rest of what I was going to say.”

Kaguya beamed. “Of course I’m coming back. You didn’t even need to ask. Have a cup of coffee in the meantime and wait up for me, Captain.”

She waved and ran from the room.

6-2

“A white demon—that’s what he said, wasn’t it?”

The transport truck was on its way to location, Yoyogi Park. The truck had been fitted with a range of customizations and was capable of greater speed than normal cars.

“He said something about bones, right? Maybe it’s a bone hero. He was probably saying to attack the bones.”

“I guess, yeah.”

The truck rattled along. They were almost at their destination.

Yoyogi Park. Even on weekdays, this park was usually packed, but not a single soul was to be seen.

There was no evidence that people had run, either. It was eerie, seeing the park so deserted in the middle of summer.

“We don’t have Azuma with us today, so we won’t know where the egg is located,” said Rindou, sounding uneasy at first but quickly getting his voice under control. “Remember, though...that doesn’t change our M.O. Find the egg as quickly as possible and destroy it—or have Kaguya enter the creature. That’s

all.”

Everyone agreed. Kaguya gave her assent as well before glancing out the window to assess the situation outside.

The trees quickly hurtled past, dotted by an occasional park bench or thick carpet of flowers. The flowers were in vivid and colorful bloom, whizzing by at such speed that it made Kaguya feel sick.

One tree in particular caught Kaguya’s notice.

“Huh...?”

Something had stepped out from its shadow. *A sprinting skeleton.*

It looked like a model found in a science classroom, and it was staring their way, running straight toward them. Its empty eye sockets and exposed cheekbones made it look like it was cackling.

There was a tiny scream. Everyone in the vehicle immediately tensed.

“How did it get here so fast...?!”

The skeleton was now running alongside the van. Kaguya had no idea how it could move without muscles and tendons. Just the sight of it was disturbing enough.

“Veer to the side!!”

At Rindou’s order, the vehicle began listing sideways.

Next to the vehicle—just inches away, really—were rows of trees and benches. There were areas where the benches were damaged and had yet to be repaired, but it was more than enough solid coverage to sandwich the creature between the vehicle and the tress.

For some reason, however, the skeleton continued to run alongside the truck, showing no signs of fear even as it was crushed by the full force of a speeding transport truck large enough to carry several dozen soldiers.

They drove a little farther.

There was a high-pitched screech when the driver hit the brakes. Everyone inside lurched forward, weapons and all. A moment later, Kaguya realized why

the driver had braked.

There was a great mass of bones visible through the front windshield. Teetering skeletons, just like the one from before. Several dozen of them.

“Tsk, this is like a zombie movie...”

Rindou was right to be annoyed. From the looks of it, there was no sign of sentience inside their hollow eye sockets. They were just attacking on instinct.

Bwam! Bwam! The same loud noise, over and over.

The skeletons were attacking the truck in a wave. Everyone inside ducked for cover. Kaguya heard the sound of glass beginning to crack overhead as Koyuki shoved her head down. *Crick. C-crick.*

“You’re—you’re kidding me!”

These skeletons were bizarrely durable. The skeletons, or the cracked windows. It didn’t take a genius to realize which would give out first.

With a loud crash, one of the windows shattered into pieces. Kaguya felt the outside air hit her. In the next instant, several hands, nothing but bone, began to claw at Kaguya and the others. The situation looked desperate. The skeletons attacked the vehicle and its Charon occupants like a scene out of a zombie movie.

Unlike a zombie movie, however, Charon had weapons and knew how to use them.

“Everyone! Get down!!”

Koyuki was the first to act. She took a handgun-shaped Chronos, poked the muzzle out the window, and fired off several shots. It wasn’t enough to damage the skeletons, but it was enough to create a diversion.

“Go!!”

The driver didn’t need to be told twice. He slammed the gas pedal. The wheels began to turn with a scraping sound, as if something had gotten tangled on them, and a moment later the vehicle suddenly shot forward. They managed to shake off the pursuing skeletons, which the wind pressure promptly knocked away. The vehicle lurched ahead, stopping for nothing.

Several skeletons managed to hang on. There were only a few left, but they were beating against the speeding truck from all sides, trying to claw their way in.

“This is bad, Rindou. If we don’t do something—”

“I know, Koyuki. How many are there?”

“About four, I think.”

“Okay. We can handle that—everyone, get ready. You know what time it is!”

“Wait!!” shouted Kaguya, but of course no one paid her any mind. At Rindou’s order, the vehicle’s escape mechanism activated. The roof of the truck detached from the base like a loose part slipping free—and then, just before the skeletons could crawl inside...

...Kaguya and the others scattered in all directions, running like the wind.

• • •

“This is bad, isn’t it...?”

“It’s definitely not good, that’s for sure.”

Haru and Kaguya wound up together.

They had just happened to run in the same direction. They hid in the shadow of a tree together, glancing around cautiously.

“It would be my luck to get stuck with someone with almost zero combat ability like you. I’d say don’t drag me down, but...well, I’m hardly in any position to complain, am I...?”

While running, Haru had twisted her left ankle. It had swollen up and seemed to be sprained, making it difficult to move. She had to lean on Kaguya’s shoulder for support.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause trouble...”

“Don’t worry about it. More importantly, how is your injury?”

“It hurts, but it should be fine. There wasn’t much blood. It won’t be fatal.”

After Charon abandoned the vehicle and ran, the skeletons switched their

behavior. They began wandering about in an ungainly fashion, peering in all directions as if searching for prey. They didn't seem to have any special scouting abilities.

The skeletons had banded together into small groups as they moved. Due to their abnormal durability and speed, running into one of them on your own would be extremely dangerous.

"They're pretty gross," hissed Haru sharply, "but they're not the hero—are they?"

"No, they can't be. Their faces aren't blacked out. I think they must be servants or something."

The boy on the comms had said something about a "white demon." This was probably what he had meant. These skeletons, with their clattering skulls, did resemble demons or grim reapers of some sort.

"The actual hero must be somewhere close. It's probably another skeleton, but with a blackened face."

However, they didn't know where it—the actual hero—would be found. If they encountered it now, their only option would be to flee.

"...!"

Haru cursed her flimsy ankle. She could hardly walk, let alone run. What was she supposed to do with her leg like this?

She glanced at Kaguya out of the corner of her eye. Kaguya seemed pretty out of sorts. There was no telling which direction they might get attacked from.

Kaguya wasn't strong enough or fast enough to drag around someone with an injured leg. If Kaguya was going to survive, she needed to go on alone. If she was alone, even if the worst happened, she could at least make a run for it. The choice was obvious. So why wasn't Kaguya abandoning her?

It wasn't right. Haru sighed slightly and turned toward Kaguya.

"It's fine... Just go already," Haru said resignedly. "No one will blame you. It's not the first time you've lost a squad member, is it? I'm just going to get in the way. Leave me behind already."

“What are you saying?! I would never do something like that—!”

“Don’t be stupid. I was saying that for your sake.”

As expected, Kaguya refused. It felt strange—aggravating, yet also comforting.

“Remember what I told you? About leaving people by the wayside? Don’t you see? You’re just going to get yourself killed.”

“I heard what you said, I just chose not to listen.”

What a stubborn little princess.

“Honestly...I thought you were a little smarter than this. Fine. If you want to keep chasing your idealistic dreams, be my guest. Just don’t expect it to get you anywhere.”

“But...aren’t you chasing after dreams of your own?”

“...”

“You’re trying to change things so that people don’t turn into heroes. That’s your dream, right? Your mission. It’s why you wound up here, in this position, isn’t it? Chasing after ideals? That’s your real goal.”

Haru was starting to wish she hadn’t opened up, but Kaguya just kept babbling on.

“If we stop chasing our dreams, what’s the point? I respect your goal, so stop trying to be a martyr, you show-off.”

“Show-off...!”

“‘I’m just going to get in the way. Leave me behind already’? You sound like you’re in an old movie. If you’ve got time for nonsense, try thinking up a way for us to survive this mess instead.”

“You’re really something else, you know that...? Who else would say such a thing at a time like this?”

Honestly, Haru felt a little jealous.

They were currently in what might be called a life-and-death situation. The squad was separated; their ace in the hole, Azuma, was off the field; and the

other members—who were probably dependent on Azuma—had no idea what to do. Haru’s predicament, meanwhile, was even worse. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, and with no one they could turn to.

Just then—Kaguya stopped suddenly, without warning.

“Second Lieutenant Takanashi—I think the reason you hate naïveté with such a passion...”

There were no signs of the bones around. Haru glanced at Kaguya dubiously. What was she getting at?

“...is because of that person you mentioned, isn’t it? The one who turned into a hero.”

“Lieutenant Shinohara...? Where did that come from...?”

There were no skeletons nearby, and the hero was nowhere to be seen. Haru inhaled and turned her wary gaze on Kaguya.

“The people who choose to be heroes—I don’t understand how they feel, but they must have faced some sort of conflict before making such a choice,” Kaguya said. “I know it might sound naive, but I think you should try to make peace with the choice he made.”

Kaguya’s eyes were deadly serious—Haru could see she meant every word.

“If you really mean that, then prove it to me.” Haru was surprised at how low her own voice came out. “That person, the one who left me behind, was a fool. He didn’t know anything. He chased after an ideal, and then despaired when he didn’t get it. So prove to me that you’re not the same. If you really mean everything you say, promise me you won’t give up.”

“Of course...”

Kaguya sounded committed. Although Kaguya couldn’t see it, the corner of Haru’s mouth twisted up into a smile. Kaguya’s violet eyes were so close that Haru could see into their depths.

“I have a plan,” Haru whispered.

True, the two of them couldn’t possibly escape. However...

“...We gather them all into one place, and then bury them with a single attack.”

“A single attack?”

“Yes... Outside of Charon, we try to destroy heroes with a single guaranteed attack when we fight. We can’t afford multiple attempts like Charon does. We use other advantages and strategies. We even use normal weapons to try to pin the enemy down so someone can use a Chronos to deliver the finishing blow. That’s the normal approach for everyone else. The damage from even a single rebound is more than enough of a price to pay.”

Or to put it another way, every time they fought, at least one person was forced to suffer a rebound. And if once wasn’t enough, then twice. And if twice still wasn’t enough, more.

“With a tamer, a summoner-type hero, the purpose of the servants is twofold. The first is to reproduce via its attack. The second is to protect the hero itself. You understand what I’m saying, don’t you, Lieutenant Shinohara?”

“That if we mop up those skeletons, the real hero will be forced to show itself.”

“Yes. Fortunately, we have Second Lieutenants Yumeura and Asaharu as well. That is, if we can find a way to coordinate with them.”

They could always use the wireless if they needed to, but the sound of their voices might draw the skeletons. Would that be worth the risk? Did they have enough breathing room, split up like this, to get everyone back together?

“If only there was some sort of signal we could give, but I don’t remember anyone ever saying anything about that—”

“Ah... Actually, I might have a way,” Kaguya interrupted. She began tapping her wireless earpiece. “This might take a little while, but it’s Morse code. I doubt the skeletons will pick up on a sound this small.”

• • •

After everyone was separated, Rindou focused first on assessing the situation.

A First Response squad should have been on-site already, but I don’t see

anybody here. Not even corpses.

If the attacks were being carried out by those skeletons, there should have at least been corpses left behind, but there wasn't even a drop of blood.

"Strange—could something else be going on here?"

First Response squads generally comprised around twenty people. Rindou didn't think twenty first responders could be made fools of by a bunch of boneheads so easily. After all, these soldiers were the best of the best.

Rindou peered around cautiously, trying to be stealthy. It was as if he was hunting. The enemy was the prey, not him—but he soon clicked his tongue in frustration.

A fog is rolling in.

While subtle, it was getting slightly harder to see, as if there was a haze covering everything.

So far, this mist did little to impede his vision, like the first few drops before a light rain, but there was no time to waste. He needed to get everyone coordinated to defeat this thing quickly. Besides, none of the skeletons he had seen so far had their faces blackened out—that meant none of them were the real hero. They didn't have time to deal with these creatures.

While Rindou was still trying to figure out what to do, he heard a tiny tapping sound, coming from the comms.

It was Kaguya's line. She seemed to be making the noise intentionally. After listening for a moment, he realized there was a purpose behind it. The taps were coming at irregular intervals.

Morse code.

Once he realized it was Morse code, it didn't take him long to decipher what she was trying to say. The message came letter by letter, so it took a little time, but before long he had the gist of it.

Unfortunately, there was no way of confirming whether the others had gotten the message as well. He turned his eyes toward the center of the park. The seasonal flowers were in bloom.

It's a pretty risky plan. Who knows if we'll be able to pull it off—? No, this isn't the time for that.

They didn't have time to worry. After a moment, Kaguya appeared, just as planned. She purposely leaped out in front of the bleached skeletons and began shouting at them, playing the part of a vulnerable, inept human.

The air suddenly grew tense, Rindou could feel it. Every last skeleton was now focused on one thing. Moments earlier they had been puttering about, separate and aimless, but they swiveled as one to face Kaguya. Then: "...!"

A stampede. The close ones were already here, but they were coming from far away as well. He could hear their thundering footsteps. They were fast—fast enough to keep pace with a car.

It was a moment of life or death—if someone didn't do something, Kaguya was going to be massacred. Just as the first skeletal hand was reaching toward her, *blam!* A shot rang out.

Not once. Multiple shots—scattering the skeletons as they swarmed toward the bait. It wasn't enough to damage the skeletons, but it was enough to create a diversion.

That's Koyuki. She must have eyes.

Rindou needed to act as well. Use bait, create a division, and then strike all at once—that was the strategy. He just hadn't expected Kaguya to be the bait.

She's right. If we take them all out at once, the hero is bound to show up.

The hero wasn't going to appear until these skeletons were defeated, but they didn't know anything about the hero itself yet, so the plan after that was still up in the air.

"Hyraah!"

Rindou rushed forward, carrying through with his momentum to kick one of the skeletons as hard as he could. Despite kicking it with all the force he could muster, the skeleton didn't even flinch. Like some sort of defective toy, it turned on Rindou and attacked with indifference, but it was weaker than he had expected. Rindou easily grabbed it by its spine and tossed it into another

skeleton.

As the two skeletons collided, their collection of bones became hopelessly entangled. It was an ungainly and somewhat terrifying mess.

And then he repeated the process.

Kaguya had put a little distance between herself and the fight at some point. She was peering all around as she evaded the occasional skeletal attack, probably searching for the hero itself.

Hey, he started to shout. *Don't just stand there, you're in the way*—or actually, if she wanted to stay, that was fine, but she could at least try to multitask and fight while she searched.

But the words never came out. Rindou had other things to worry about right now.

“Agh—”

Four of the skeletons had latched onto him. They must have decided that he was the biggest threat.

“Like you boneheads even have the brains to make a decision—!”

Rindou spun the four skeletons around, shaking them off and then pummeling them with his fists. It wasn't the bones themselves that he aimed for, but the gaps where the bones joined together. The joints and the cartilage. Because of how precisely they were constructed, once you destroyed their balance. it was difficult for them to move.

“I-incredible...!”

Ignoring Kaguya's praise, Rindou redoubled his assault. Koyuki's shots were proving helpful as well, although it was probably a challenge for her to make sure she didn't hit him.

They repeated this process until there were just two skeletons left. One lunged forward to bite Rindou. He dislocated its hip and, once it tumbled to the ground, kicked it away. The other one came at him from behind.

“Ah...!”

It chomped down hard on his shoulder. The bite was strong enough to make his whole arm go numb. In a panic, he punched its head, but the skull is one of the hardest bones in the human body. If anything, he probably did more damage to his hand than he did to the skeleton.

The skeleton was practically glued to his side. It didn't look like Koyuki could take a shot. But the skeleton wasn't satisfied with just his shoulder, it was working its way toward the soft flesh of Rindou's neck. It was going to tear open an artery before long.

"Ahhhhh!"

Rindou heard a cry of desperate determination. It was Kaguya, bellowing as she joined the fight.



Kaguya could see Rindou in danger right before her eyes. She had to help him. Her body seemed to move of its own accord. She knew there was no way she was going to be able to damage the thing when not even Rindou's kicks had worked, but she might still be able to help.

"Ahhhhh!!"

With a rallying cry, she stepped forward to whack the skeleton with her club—or rather, she would have.

"Huh...?"

But that was when she saw it: a wireless comms earpiece stuck to the creature's chest.

It was Extermination Bureau issue, and was hanging from the skeleton like it had gotten tangled on its ribs, one end wrapped around its spine.

But it was tangled up *from within*. It didn't look like it had gotten stuck there after the skeleton had attacked someone.

"Why—?"

"Kaguya!!"

Kaguya snapped out of it. This was no time for lollygagging.

She struck its spinal column. The skeleton stopped biting Rindou, and Rindou, seeing his moment, tossed the creature over his shoulder. That throw did the trick, getting the skeleton off him. Before it hit the ground, Rindou kicked it, knocking it farther away into the pile with the other skeletons.

“Is that the last one?!”

“Looks like it! They all seem to have been immobilized—”

“Kaguya!!” someone shouted suddenly.

One of the bleached skeletons stood up—the one closest to Kaguya.

Kaguya’s attack had been weaker than the others. That was its only reason for choosing her as its target. The skeleton was about 170 centimeters tall, which was still a good head taller than Kaguya. It swung a fist mercilessly toward her face.

“Ah—!”

“Second Lieutenant Takanashi!!”

In that instant, just as the terrifying white hand was about to make contact with her face, Kaguya was knocked down by a blow from the side.

At first she thought it was the skeleton, but no. It was no skeleton that had come charging forward, dragging its leg as it ran, and knocking Kaguya out of the way with a dive. It was a young woman with blue hair—and she certainly wasn’t her usual icy self.

Rindou, who was close by, suddenly rushed forward. Kaguya’s eyes went wide, as she began to react as well, but her vision suddenly grew cloudy. A moment later she realized what she was seeing.

Is this...fog?

A slight fog had suddenly begun to gather in the area. No, it was already far more than slight. With each blink, her vision, which had been clear a moment ago, grew steadily more opaque and white. She soon lost sight of Rindou in the rapidly thickening mist.

The weather conditions were not normal for fog. There was clearly something unusual happening.

Before long, her entire field of view was blanketed in whiteness—a whiteout that prevented her from seeing anything even an inch in front of her face.

“Second Lieutenant Takanashi...”

“They were bait...,” muttered Haru, her face pale, as she remained on top of Kaguya. “The soldier on the comms mentioned a white demon. We assumed he meant the white bones, but the truth is...”

The truth—the real white demon...

“It’s this thing. We walked right into its trap...!”

The demon, the white mist, enshrouded them.

• • •

“Attention all personnel, this is the Action After Review Division—a hero was spotted a little after thirteen hundred hours today in Yoyogi. Special Ops Squad Charon is currently on the scene.”

As Azuma listened to the automated voice over his wireless in the transport vehicle on his way to the hospital, he suddenly turned around in his seat with a start.

“Current casualties exceed twenty persons—no video is available due to thick fog. Safety of the responding squad is unclear. Due to difficulty in identifying the exact location of appearance, authorization from officer-level staff or higher is required before approaching the area. Public audio access has already been restricted—transmission begins now.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bones

“Everyone, where are you?! Koyuki! Rindou!!”

Kaguya had lost sight of them all in mere moments.

Haru, who had gotten knocked down protecting Kaguya; Rindou, who had put his life on the line to fight those skeletons; even Koyuki, who was supposedly out there somewhere. They were all gone.

As were what she had thought had been the hero, lost in the mist.

Kaguya got up. Now that she was on her feet, she understood just how thick this fog truly was. It was like the world had been bleached in white paint.

Even as close as an inch in front of her nose was obscured. She couldn't see her own hand. If she weren't gripping it tight, she would have no idea where even her weapon was. She felt like she was about to dissolve into mist and disappear.

Calm down. Everyone is probably just lost in this fog.

There were three problems they needed to deal with: First was the whereabouts of the skeletons from earlier. They had been very close to Kaguya and the others, only a few feet away. There was a high possibility that they were still nearby.

Although...in this fog, they might not be that much of a threat.

The second was the difficulty of ascertaining each other's status. It was like they couldn't hear. Every time she tried calling out, her voice seemed to die out in the mist. The comms weren't working either. They had no way of contacting

one another.

The third problem was that they didn't have any information on the hero that had created this fog. Was the fog itself the hero? Or was the hero hiding somewhere within?

But we're in a park. As large as this park is, we're bound to run into the hero eventually. We don't have much time, but there's no need to panic.

Kaguya stayed calm and collected.

She understood that the others were probably all thinking the same thing. Rindou would likely stay where he was, just like Kaguya was doing. She wasn't too sure about Haru, but Haru seemed like the type to take action. Koyuki might be considering firing off a test shot, but was probably worried Kaguya or one of the others might be in the way.

Of course—gunfire.

Her sidearm pistol might not do much good against a hero, but if she fired it off into the air, the sound of the gunshot *might* let people know her location.

The gun was on her belt on her left side. As she reached for it, Kaguya finally realized...

...they had a fourth problem.

"My left hand—?!"

Everything past her left wrist was *completely gone*.

No. To be more accurate, it wasn't gone. It had turned *skeletal*.

There was no pain. She hadn't felt an impact or even noticed until now. It was almost as if her body was disintegrating into mist. She had apparently also lost the club that she should have been carrying.

The bones looked familiar. After all, she had just seen something similar. A collection of bleached human skeletons, about twenty in total.

There had also been about twenty people in the First Response squad. That meant they must have been those skeletons.

"Don't attack the bones—?!"

Don't attack the bones, because they had originally been human.

"Shit...!!"

This fog wasn't to hide the hero—it *was* the hero. Anyone who spent enough time inside the fog would eventually dissolve. They'd become a skeleton, just like the other monsters, left even without minds of their own. This hero turned people into its servants.

This disappearing trick didn't stop at her wrist. It was steadily moving up her arm. It seemed like the mist was eating away at her. Kaguya felt a chill run down her spine.

"F-first things first, I need to get out of this fog...!!"

Kaguya began running. Right now, she was near the center of Yoyogi Park. She pointed herself toward the exit and ran as fast as she could. No matter how dense and sprawling this fog might be, she should be able to make her way out eventually, and she had to do it before her legs also dissolved in the mist.

She must have been running for about two minutes when she spotted a figure up ahead. Although wary, she decided to approach. Once they were close enough to barely hear each other, Kaguya finally made out the person's face.

"Second Lieutenant...Takanashi..."

"Don't sound so excited."

It turned out to be Haru. Her uninjured leg had now dissolved. The right knee was gone, and Kaguya could see the bone. Kaguya doubted Haru could even stand at this point.

Haru had been right next to her a moment earlier. Why was she so far away now? Perhaps the hero had the power to teleport them.

"Some luck I'm having... First I get injured, now I lose a leg. What's next?"

Regardless, Haru didn't seem particularly shaken up.

"Once it gets your legs, you're just a sitting duck. But on the bright side, at least it doesn't hurt. Although, at this rate, I might disappear entirely."

"You're taking this very calmly, Second Lieutenant Takanashi..."

“Hey, worse things could happen. Like I said, at least it doesn’t hurt...”

Even without an actual injury, just having her bones and nerve endings exposed should have been unimaginably painful, but from the look on Haru’s face, she seemed perfectly fine. Kaguya hadn’t felt anything, either. Indeed, she hadn’t even noticed at first.

It was probably some kind of illusion, thought Kaguya, but she still wasn’t about to let herself disappear to see what happened.

“L-listen, Second Lieutenant Takanashi! I’ve figured it out. If we spent too much time inside this fog—”

“We’ll turn into skeletons and start attacking people—right?” said Haru, taking the words from Kaguya’s mouth. She seemed unperturbed. “Those things that attacked us earlier must have been the squad that came in before us... There were probably civilians visiting the park as well.”

“...!”

Kaguya and the others had attacked the skeletons without knowing they were humans. Some of the skeletons had even wound up in pieces. What about those people? They weren’t dead, were they?

Had she just killed people with her own hands? The prospect weighed heavily on her. *What have I done?* she thought, in panicked self-recrimination.

Of course. This must be what it feels like for them—the heroes.

So painful, harsh, and unfair. Kaguya probably seemed like the devil when she showed up to badger them with the truth.

Kaguya revised her opinion. She had actually been *surprisingly* successful up until now.

She finally understood. It wasn’t she who was so impressive, it was them, the ones who had turned into heroes. She was impressed by the weight on their shoulders, on their ability to face up to and accept the truth. It was a coincidence that she had mostly run into people who were capable of doing that, but people like Shinji Takamura were almost certainly the norm.

Pride...is a terrible thing.

She wallowed in her remorse for only a moment, however. Right now, she had to help whoever she could. Kaguya put an arm around Haru and lent her a shoulder, helping her to her feet. Haru stared at Kaguya dubiously.

Just then, however, both of Haru's legs disappeared. She teetered, off-balance, before landing hard on the ground on her behind.

For once, she was speechless. Haru breathed deeply to calm herself down.

"I guess it's not every day you get a chance to see your own bones, is it?"

"Grab onto my back!" Kaguya crouched down. "Holding on with just your arms might be a little unstable, but you should at least be lighter now, Second Lieutenant Takanashi. Just don't let go."

Haru hesitated, but forced herself to wrap her arms around Kaguya. Her legs—or what had been her legs—rattled noisily. The sensation was very strange.

Then they heard a clattering noise, off to the left.

They froze. What if it was the skeletons from earlier? Or, even worse, the hero—?

Kaguya crouched in place, her guard up. The figure that emerged from the mist had vermilion eyes.

"Koyuki...!"

"Oh, Kaguya. It's you..."

Koyuki's eye—her left eye—had begun to dissolve. She lowered her gun, which she must have been holding at the ready in caution.

"Ahh!" Koyuki suddenly covered her eye with her arm. "Sorry, sorry, you probably don't want to see that—wait..."

Koyuki stared at Kaguya's arm in surprise. But when she saw what Kaguya was carrying on her, she really swallowed hard.

"What the hell happened to you...?!"

"My legs started to disappear. Koyuki, do you have any idea where the exit is?"

"Sorry, I'm lost too," said Koyuki, staring at Haru transfixed. "More

importantly, are you all right...? Your legs...”

“No, I’m fine. It’s just inconvenient, it doesn’t hurt. I’m guessing you’re not in pain either.” Haru sounded as calm as ever. “If our bones were really exposed, I doubt we’d be able to withstand the pain. This must be an illusion— isn’t that right, Lieutenant Shinohara?”

Kaguya agreed. This was like some sort of bad dream. Her left arm, Koyuki’s left eye, all of it.

“Those skeletons that appeared at first; our bodies dissolving; the way we got lost; our inability to hear each other. What if it’s all an illusion, created by this fog hero?”

“Wait, hold on a second—are you saying that this whole time—?”

“Yes. By the time those skeletons appeared, I think we were already under its spell.”

Already inside the illusion.

“Th-then...what are we supposed to do...?”

“Our only option is to search for the hero. We find it, and I enter its mind. That’s the only way.”

“Understood...”

It really did seem like their only choice. The fog wasn’t going anywhere—it would probably cover everything before long. With their limited fighting power, the sole way out of this situation was through Kaguya.

“I don’t know... I’m not sure that’s the only way,” Koyuki insisted suddenly. Kaguya raised an eyebrow. “You don’t need to shoulder everything on your own, even when it comes to something only you can do.”

“Koyuki...?”

Koyuki stood before Kaguya, her usual familiar self.

“I mean, if we’re relying on you to protect us, we might as well pack it in. You never even held anything heavier than a pen in your hand until a few months ago.”

“Well, that’s not a very nice thing to say...,” said Kaguya, laughing awkwardly.

“Sorry, but we can’t afford for you to make a martyr out of yourself. You’re not some princess from Technical anymore, so stop trying to fight these battles on your own,” said Koyuki. She recognized Kaguya’s determination, but she had her own convictions as well.

“Of course not,” answered Kaguya, a smile rising to her face. You could always count on Koyuki not to back down. She had backbone; she knew who she was.

Koyuki was the first to begin moving. Kaguya could tell from the sound that Koyuki had taken a long bold step. Bold, just like *her*...

And then Kaguya turned pale.

She heard something else.

Something clattering, off to the left.

Hero Emergence



[16]

Location: Somewhere in Tokyo

Type: Suspected tamer

Is this golden ax the one
you dropped
into the spring? Or is it this
silver one? As a reward for your honesty,
I shall grant you eternal death. I pray that someone
comes to retrieve the life you lost.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Clarity

“...!!”

She could see at a glance that they were no match for it.

The thought came to her unbidden—this hero was like the water sprite from the fable of the golden ax. Its face was blackened out, as usual, and despite its spritely veil, its body was made of bleached white bone. Its arms were strange, with three on its right side and one on its left, gold and silver axes held aloft in its bony hands. It floated above the ground on insectile, tripartite wings.

There was a spring beneath the hero, small as a puddle of water, from which the fog seemed to emerge.

Seeing the creature up close left Kaguya speechless. This was the fog hero, formidable and imposing.

Kaguya set Haru down softly.

“Kaguya...do you think you can manage?” Koyuki whispered warily.

“It’s pretty high—but if I jump, maybe.”

The hero was positioned about two meters above the ground. That in itself wasn’t too big of an issue. The more imposing problem was the obstacles in getting there. What did it have so many axes for?

Was it to identify those capable of withstanding its attacks—those who were suitable targets for reproduction?

Kaguya’s legs weren’t strong enough to jump that high. That was where Koyuki came in. Covering Kaguya and Haru with one arm, she fired with the

other, with bull's-eye accuracy, her torso steady.

After several shots, the hero tilted slightly.

Seeing her chance, Kaguya rushed forward—except she shouldn't have come from the left. It was Koyuki's blind spot, meaning neither of them noticed the hero's arm concealed on its right side.

"Ah...?!"

A small cry from Kaguya, the sound of creaking bone, and a faint unraveling sob. All the sounds happened at once.

"N-nrk..."

"Kaguya!!"

It was like it knew her for what she was. The hero—a thing that had once been human—grabbed Kaguya round the throat with its bony arm and lifted her into the air. Kaguya groaned in unexpected distress.

A shot rang out from somewhere in the fog. The sound immediately died away, lost in the mist. Kaguya could see Koyuki out of the corner of her eye, crouched in a shooting position. Before she could fire a second shot, however, something happened—perhaps the worst thing that could happen to Koyuki. Despite the position she was in, Kaguya saw it happen.

Koyuki's...other eye...

Koyuki's right eye began to dissolve.

How was she supposed to aim now? Her vision was probably fading. Still, Koyuki did not lower the barrel of her gun. Judging from the expression on her face, she was searching for something. Whatever it was, finding it was going to be difficult under these conditions.

"F-from here!" shouted Kaguya, barely able to breathe, calling out to the now-blind Koyuki. "About—a meter and a half! Diagonal and up, from the sound of my voice!"

Koyuki understood immediately and bolted forward.

She ran. Taking aim and shooting while in motion, blind as she was right now,

had to be close to impossible. There was a high chance she would miss.

Kaguya, however, was not afraid. If there was one thing she knew, it was that Koyuki never missed.

She was surprisingly quick to pull the trigger. *Fwip*. The bullet hurtled toward one of the axes with a small sound. In less than half a blink of an eye, Koyuki had landed her shot just as her right arm suddenly disappeared.

The hero's arm was suddenly blown back, ax and all, with the distorted sound of ricocheting metal. Kaguya groaned slightly as she landed on the hard ground, but she immediately began to race toward Koyuki.

"Koyuki...!"

Koyuki collapsed where she was with a thud. Her legs had dissolved as well, but without her eyes, Koyuki could no longer see them.

She was completely blind now. There was nothing she could do. She summoned up the last of her strength...

"Stay away!"

...and shouted at Kaguya, almost angrily.

"Kaguya!! Go!!" she screamed.

It was all in Kaguya's hands now.

Kaguya understood. Koyuki had given her an opening. She couldn't let it go to waste.

It was simple. All she had to do was hit the creature. Trying to face it head-on looked difficult, but her sidepiece was just a normal gun; if she fired it at the hero a few times maybe it would come to her instead.

Unfortunately, history soon repeated itself.

"No..."

Her right hand began to dissolve as well. There was no way for her to hold the gun's grip with her bony, fleshless hands.

Why, when she still had legs to stand on? When Koyuki had put herself on the line to save Kaguya?

There was a sharp *whoosh* as the hero swung one of its axes into the air and overhead Kaguya, who had now lost the use of both hands.

Koyuki had fallen unconscious, her eyes and left arm now completely dissolved. Haru had lost everything from her waist down and couldn't even move. Kaguya had lost everything past her left shoulder and right wrist, and couldn't unholster the gun at her side.

She had legs to run, but she couldn't leave Koyuki and Haru behind. Besides, even if she managed to run away, the fog itself was the hero. There was no point. No way out.

There was nothing else she could do.

"Giving up so soon?"

Rindou's sneer flashed across her mind.

"Just gonna sit on your ass now that things look hard?"

"You wish..."

When you get knocked down, you have to get right back up. Never stop thinking.

"I was just thinking of how I'm going to take this thing down."

Kaguya wasn't some princess anymore.

However, she couldn't charge in recklessly—her one chance was to make contact with the hero, and Kaguya still had her legs. She could still move.

She slid her right foot behind her with a soft rustle. The hero waved its ax around in the air multiple times, and then brought it down with a heavy thud, as if delivering her sentence.

Kaguya evaded the blow by a hairbreadth—it was pure coincidence. The attack just happened not to land in the direction in which she rushed forward. She was a pure amateur.

The only thing necessary for me to enter their minds is probably—

Contact, direct or indirect. Not a light touch, but a hard impact. Ranged attacks from a distance didn't work. In short, her power required her to be in

range of the hero's attacks.

There are four axes in total.

One on the right and three on the left. Some were gold and some were silver, but the color seemed to be the only difference.

In which case, I should approach from the right.

The hero's right. She began to run, but slowly. The powerful attack of its right arm was much faster than she was, and its rain of blows blocked her way.

Kaguya desperately, just barely, managed to avoid the blade.

After dodging a second time, Kaguya realized something.

There was a moment after the hero swung downward, just a brief moment as it lifted the ax back up, during which the hero was left open. She had to make contact during that moment and get inside. It was the only way.

In order to do that, however, she needed to be next to where the ax was going to come down—right in the line of fire, where one wrong step could end with her getting struck.

Naturally, she chose to approach the single arm on the right. Kaguya wouldn't be able to hold out against multiple axes if they all came down at once, and her plan wouldn't work if the timing was a little different. If she was going to succeed, it had to be done in one go.

The hero mechanically swung its golden ax upward. Kaguya tried to anticipate the course of the blade. There was no way to read the hero's eyes—it didn't have any. The only thing she could rely on was the subtle movement and positioning of its arm.

With a *whoosh*, the ax swung upward. A moment later it began to descend, straight toward Kaguya.

Okay—I see where it's going. I can manage this.

Kaguya acted like she wasn't going to dodge, purposely taking just a few steps out of the way. She gripped her weapon, ready to strike at the hero's arm after the ax descended— But the ax, which she thought was coming toward her, stopped in midair and suddenly changed trajectory. It shifted right over

Kaguya's head at a speed she had no hope of escaping.

"Ah—?!"

She was intensely aware of death.

She couldn't see the hero's face; it was gouged out, like a well of shadow. Heroes had no such thing as a proper facial expression, no real awareness of the world outside, and no feelings about what was happening out there.

But Kaguya knew, instinctively, that it was smiling. Tired of toying with its prey and smiling as it prepared to deliver this unforgiving strike against Kaguya.

"No..."

Kaguya's life kaleidoscoped before her eyes.

Her first thoughts were of Technical. Of the Director and Mari. Her own Revival Project research, and its completion. Next, she thought of Koyuki and the others. Koyuki, Rindou, Haru, and Sakura, who had already left without them.

The last thought in her head was of him, the boy with the icy silver hair. She hadn't been able to keep her promise in the end.

This was it. It looked like she was about to die. A "compatible" human probably wouldn't die from this, but what about her, someone who had already started to turn into a hero once before? She was afraid of death, after all.

But the fear didn't last long. Only one emotion remained.

A wish for this hero to be saved. Her friends. Everyone. She hoped they would all find salvation, even if it was too late for Kaguya herself.

"Good-bye..."

Kaguya wasn't sure what, exactly, she was saying good-bye to, but she never blinked. Kaguya wanted to keep her eyes open until the very end.

The ax continued its descent, undeterred by Kaguya's determination.

The sound of bursting flesh, followed by a spray of blood within the mist.

"If you ever need help..."

It was the hero's freshly spilled blood.

"...I promise to come. That was what I was going to say."

Kaguya stared in a daze.

The sound of pounding footsteps amid the quiet fog, a gunshot, blood spraying from the hero's arm.

A silver earring splattered with fresh red blood. Dark eyes, full of resolve.

His back, standing before her. Warm and reliable.

The sight of Captain Azuma seared into Kaguya's violet eyes.

She saw him.



CHAPTER NINE

Faith

Kaguya watched in a daze.

She understood who was standing before her and what had happened, but she had no idea how or why.

“Captain Azuma... Why are you here?” Kaguya muttered in shock. “You’re supposed to be in the hospital...”

“I was, and I came back.”

“You came back?!”

“More accurately, I *had them change course* along the way.”

“Had them...?”

Azuma was being transported to the hospital by the Combat Support Branch, which was Mirai’s division. Not by Mirai herself, though, as no one thought it was a good idea to let her drive. The fact that it hadn’t been Mirai made it all the harder to believe that Azuma’s change of heart had been permitted.

Azuma was holding his side in apparent distress. The bleeding was severe, and it looked like he was just barely back on his feet. Even if he was on his feet, he had to be in a lot of pain. Despite that, he had searched for them and come running all this way.

Kaguya took a good look at the captain, really taking him in...

“Are you stupid?!”

...before shouting his ear off.

“I’m sorry, let me rephrase that... Are you a complete idiot?!”

“You seem angry... I did come here to save you, you know.”

“Of course I’m angry! What were you thinking, given the state you’re in?!”

“Like you’ve got any room to talk,” said Azuma, half teasing, half exasperated. He had a point. “Remember when you came for me? I just did the same thing.”

Azuma was referring to several months ago, when he had started to turn into a hero himself.

“Stand up, already. Don’t worry; I’m not going to let you die.”

Kaguya felt relieved by his reassuring smile.

“Pretty slick, Captain Azuma. I didn’t know you had it in you, though you do look like you might keel over at any moment.”

“You just had to add that last part, didn’t you? I just wish I could say that you were wrong.”

Kaguya could only see his back, but Azuma seemed to be laughing in exasperation. She stood up.

She heard Azuma breathe in sharply.

“Captain Azuma,” she said. “Don’t go dying on me, okay? You’re here now, so let’s do what needs to be done.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

There was a loud rumble, like a stone statue suddenly springing to life. The hero seemed to be moving in earnest now.

The three axes in the hero’s left hand swung in almost comically exaggerated fashion as the onslaught began.

The way Azuma moved as he responded to this storm of axes was almost hypnotically dexterous. Kaguya could never hope to reach his level, but she knew she could trust her life in his hands.

She, too, had her own role to play.

Azuma was fielding the ax strikes with just one hand. One of the blades flew

right by Kaguya's side, hitting the ground behind her with a crash.

Kaguya, however, never bothered to look. She knew no more attacks would be coming her way. This wasn't recklessness—this was faith between the protector and the protected.

But this bond did not only go one way. Kaguya wasn't just being protected. She raced forward—to protect Azuma in turn.

A flurry of ax swipes flew all around her. Azuma fielded them all, firing with his gun or executing defensive techniques to parry. None of the strikes reached her.

She ran, diving forward so that she was close enough to grapple with the hero. When she looked up, she could see the creature. If she jumped now, she could just reach its leg.

It's now—or never!

Kaguya rushed forward, fixing her eyes on the opening in its defenses. She ran straight ahead, as if there were no obstacles in the way. Azuma shot down every strike that came toward her. It didn't matter—Kaguya's gaze never faltered.

“—?!”

Thwump. Azuma suddenly collapsed—no, not collapsed. He fell to one knee.

“Captain Az—?!”

Before she even finished saying his name, she realized what had happened. His left leg, from the knee downward, had disappeared. His right leg soon turned skeletal as well.

He had pushed himself too far, she knew it. He couldn't stand anymore, he couldn't move.

Azuma's face turned pale as he tried to struggle to his feet. Maybe it realized they were in a pinch, but the hero released a cry, as if it tasted victory in the air.

“SKRREE—WRAA—”

Its singsong cry almost sounded like it was laughing, mocking its prey in their

final moments. Or like an older sister, watching a younger child play.

As it continued to emit those strange laughing sounds, the hero swung one of its silver axes downward. It was aiming for Azuma, who dropped his gun as he quickly dodged out of the way. There was a thunderous crash as a crack appeared in the earth just centimeters from Azuma. In a panic, Kaguya picked up the gun and tried to drag Azuma away, but she soon realized it was hopeless.

As Kaguya stared up at the abominable creature, it suddenly hurled one of its golden axes at her.

Kaguya's terrified face was reflected in the deadly gleaming surface of the ax's blade as it headed straight for her neck. Just before the blade separated her head from her body, Azuma reached out and yanked her by the arm, pulling her on top of him.

"Run," he said. "If you keep moving you might find Rindou or one of the others eventually. Find someone else and then think of what to do next."

"But what about you, Captain—?"

"Don't worry about me. I won't die that easily," he said, smiling like he was invincible.

Kaguya didn't know what to say.

She desperately tried to think of something, but she couldn't even get close to the hero on her own. A variety of possibilities passed through her head, but they were all nonstarters. Only the plain, sober truth remained, merciless and unvarnished as it was. There was nothing she could do.

As things stood, Kaguya wasn't strong enough to carry Azuma with her as she ran. Even now that he had lost everything below his waist, Azuma still must have weighed a good thirty kilograms. Maybe if she could have carried him on her back—but Azuma was a man. He was much heavier than Haru. Even if they did manage to get away from the hero, so long as they remained within this fog, their end was certain.

What do I do? What am I supposed to do...?!

Kaguya was too busy panicking to notice.

The gun she had picked up earlier—in her moment of despair, she accidentally let it drop. It tumbled through the air toward Azuma, who was lying below.

It all happened in less than the blink of an eye. Azuma turned his eyes toward it as it fell.

It took no more than half a second for it to fall—to surrender to gravity and hit the dirt—but just before it made contact with the ground— —Azuma contorted his body, grabbing the gun by its grip just before it fell, and took aim from his new position. It was the same move he had pulled off once before.

Azuma tightly hugged Kaguya, who was still confused, and pulled her toward him.

“Once I shoot, you go,” he whispered into her ear. “This shot will hit; I’m certain of it.”

After all...

“...That thing is nowhere near as fast as Koyuki.”

The same moment a shot echoed in the billowing fog— **“SKKRRREEEEEE—GWRAARRR—!!”**

—the bullet ripped through the hero’s arm and torso. It teetered to the side from the damage. It did not collapse to the ground, but it was low enough that even Kaguya could jump up and hit it.

It has to be now...!!

Kaguya disentangled herself from Azuma and began running. Now, while it was damaged. This was her only chance. She snatched the gun from Azuma and ran straight for the hero, pouncing at its torso. She threw herself into danger’s path, pointing the gun at the hero’s chest.

“Don’t think that you can run away!”

As she spoke, she pressed the barrel of the gun against the hero’s body.

“I don’t care if you hate it. I don’t care if you cry and shout!”

Kaguya placed her finger on the trigger. It didn’t matter if she couldn’t fire the

gun at this close range. Hubris or not, just so long as she could press herself into another's psyche and insist upon the cold, hard reality—



“I will bring you back.”

She pulled the trigger. There was no gunfire, no rebound. A profoundly quiet attack.

The gun, the bullets, the trigger, for Kaguya these were no more than tools. Just as a normal gun was no more than a tool to take lives—in Kaguya’s hands, this was a tool to save souls.

In less than a heartbeat, Kaguya was communicating with the creature, inside its mind.

I don't know your name. I don't know your face. But whoever you are, no matter why you chose to abandon reality...

I'm choosing to risk my life to save you.

CHAPTER TEN

Depths

Inside, it was like summer vacation.

The hot sun pouring down from above slowly worked its way into Kaguya's skin. She stood motionless in the middle of a schoolyard. It was still and quiet. Not a single cicada could be heard.

"Where am I...?"

Kaguya didn't know what normal schools were like. She was aware that summer vacations were supposed to be very fun, but she had never experienced one for herself.

There were no sounds of people nearby. Even for Kaguya, who didn't know what a place like this should look like, the desolation was repellent. After all, not even the cicadas were chirping. It felt like this space alone was isolated from the outside world.

Which, I suppose it is, after all.

Commanding her nerves to get back under control, Kaguya began walking forward in search of the lord of this world. The moment she chose a direction and took a step forward, she heard singing.

Kaguya lifted her head in surprise. That song—it was the same melody the hero had been joyfully singing. The sound of the young girl humming pleasantly drifted toward Kaguya on the breeze.

She turned in the direction of the sound—it was coming from quite high up. Kaguya craned her head almost straight up. She spotted someone and called out. There was a girl, *dancing* on the roof.

She was dancing outside the fence that ran around the perimeter of the roof. The fence was there for safety, and there was a ledge, about one meter wide, between the fence and the roof's edge—such a small stage to dance on. Kaguya didn't know much about dancing, but the way the girl was moving, her right and left arms alternating irregularly, wasn't that how the hero had been moving?

Graceful. She spun about like a ballerina, but with passion, like in a musical. Her song was willowy and beautiful. Aloft and magnificent, like beating wings—and she fell.

Kaguya gasped as what had been the girl struck the earth before her eyes. There was a momentous crash, and blood splattered across Kaguya's cheek. She stared in astonishment at the sundry lumps of flesh strewn about the area. It was all so gruesome.

This is...supposed to be a perfect, idealized world, isn't it? So why...?

While each world had its individual differences, every world Kaguya had intervened in up until now had been a fun place. Playing in a sandbox with your mother; walking your beloved dogs; taking on the role of a saint and providing succor to the masses; living quietly in a house with your little sister; or reunions with loved ones in a field of flowers.

What was this perversion? This world? It was as if this person didn't even know how to dream.

“LA—LA LA—”

Kaguya heard singing again. Even without lifting her head, she knew the girl was there again. The singing girl, an idol dancing in the gap between life and death. It had to be her. She was the lord of this world.

Kaguya soon arrived on the roof. She squinted as she opened the unlocked door and stepped outside.

The same girl that had fallen was dancing there, on the ledge outside the fence.

She stopped dancing when she spotted Kaguya.

“Sorry... Who are you?”

“One of the staff at this school. I, um...saw you from down below.”

The girl was openly suspicious. Kaguya could tell the girl thought she was too young to be a staff member. Even Kaguya knew that people who worked in these sorts of places were usually adults.

But that was the girl’s only reaction. She didn’t seem otherwise disturbed by Kaguya’s arrival. She seemed as uninterested as she would be by a passing stranger who said hello. She turned her gaze back toward the ground.

And then she began singing again, as if Kaguya wasn’t even there as far as she was concerned.

She sang and danced outside the fence, her grand spotlight.

Kaguya tried to stop her. She had no idea what this scene had to do with the girl’s idealized, perfect world, but it was a natural impulse to try to stop someone from doing something dangerous while you watched.

“Wait! You’re going to—ah!!”

As Kaguya touched the fence, she realized it was incredibly hot. Hot enough to burn.

With the sun beating down overhead it would make sense for aluminum to grow hot to the touch, but this felt like something more. It was so hot, like touching fire itself. Cellular and intense, like the jutting shards of a broken mirror.

Realizing there was no way she would be able to climb over the fence, Kaguya decided to try words, but she had never talked someone down from the ledge before. She didn’t understand how someone like that felt. That was what Rindou had told her. But even if Kaguya didn’t understand, that didn’t mean she wouldn’t try.

“What is your name? Would you at least tell me that? Your name?!” asked Kaguya.

The girl was forced to acknowledge Kaguya’s presence. Her leg stopped mid-dance, just as she was about to step off the ledge. She answered quietly without looking at Kaguya.

“Suzume...”

“Suzume—” Kaguya tried touching the fence again. She wanted to stop the girl, but it was still too hot. She couldn’t keep her hand on it for more than a quick second. “Please, step away from the ledge! Or at least—it’s so dangerous, would you please stand still?”

The ledge outside the fence was about a meter wide, but that didn’t make it any safer. Suzume didn’t seem to hear her, however. Kaguya could see what she was about to do.

“Suzume...I know this might sound trite...” Kaguya hesitated for just a moment, and then continued speaking. It was all she could think of—the only words she could muster. “But death isn’t the way. Don’t just jump like it means nothing—well, I know it doesn’t mean nothing. But don’t jump so suddenly like this—”

“Huh?”

Suzume turned on Kaguya with a terrifying look in her eyes. Kaguya suddenly felt rebuffed, just as she had before. A strong wind rose up around her, as if to reject the intruder.

No!

Kaguya extended her hand. The girl was so close, close enough to touch, but with this burning fence in her way, Kaguya was powerless to reach her.

Suzume was no longer looking toward Kaguya. Kaguya felt like the wind was going to whip her somewhere far away. Ignoring her, Suzume opened a small bag she held in her hand.

Someone’s ashes were inside the bag. As she stared at the ashes, Suzume smiled *proudly*, before dancing and jumping from the edge. When Kaguya saw her face, she knew.

I was right. This is definitely that girl’s ideal world...

...But the girl’s dream wasn’t to live in happiness with somebody special. It was to die.

But if that really was what she had wished for—to keep dying here forever—

“!!”

Two seconds after Kaguya froze—

“Urgh-gh, Lieutenant!”

—she fell hard on top of Azuma. Time seemed to have stopped for her. Azuma somehow managed to catch her with just his upper body, and peered into her face.

“...!”

The hero wasn’t disappearing. Its movements had grown much more sluggish, but it was still there, majestic and grave. It turned its eyes downward longingly, staring with empty eye sockets at something else, something not here. The hero.

Kaguya had failed. The realization caused Azuma to break out into a cold sweat.

A failure now was bad. Almost everyone was out of commission. Kaguya was the only solution. They couldn’t even retreat temporarily. Kaguya’s arms continued to grow skeletal, and most of Azuma’s own flesh had disappeared as well.

Azuma clenched his teeth. Was this all he had come for?

Turning into a skeleton like this was not the same as turning into a hero, but it still meant turning into a monster. With a pang of fear, he clutched at Kaguya, the only thing he could do. As he held her, her eyes began to flutter.

“Kaguya?!” he shouted.

Kaguya bolted up immediately. She lifted her eyes, not toward Azuma, but toward the hero in front of them.

She had that same pathetic, downcast look in her eyes that she had when she had been told to give up last time. But then, Azuma gasped. She stepped on his shoulder without hesitation and kicked off, leaping into the air.

Her legs weren’t powerful enough on their own, however. The leap fell short, and she began to fall back toward the ground. As Azuma watched her from

behind, it seemed to awaken something within him. The thought of becoming less human made the hairs on his entire body stand on end—but that didn't matter now.

He let the feeling that rose inside him take control. Everything from his stomach down had already turned skeletal. He could barely summon any strength, but by hell or high water, he tossed Kaguya as hard as he could, using pure arm strength alone.

That was when he saw it. Beyond the darkness that enveloped the hero's face — A girl. She was facing in their direction, staring at something fondly, with eyes that were not in focus. Although Azuma's fear remained, he also felt a touch of pity at the sight of that expression.

After all, he, too, had been on the other side of that shadowy veil once upon a time. His sister and Sakura hadn't been able to make it back but, for their sake, they had to bring this girl back.

“Ahh!”

Azuma hollered, falling backward with opposite force, but there was no one there to stop him. Kaguya had pointed her gun toward the hero once again and was already pulling the trigger.

She fell unconscious once more as Azuma watched, his eyes wide.

• • •

She appeared in the same place again.

The isolated, quiet, and oppressive schoolyard where a young girl sought death, again and again.

If the girl's dream was for death itself, then success meant stopping this cycle. This time Kaguya already knew where she was heading. She quickly arrived at the roof. She opened the door, which was once again unlocked for some reason. There she was, just as expected.

“Ah?” The girl's eyes went wide once again. **“Aren't you the person from before?”**

“Yes, that was me.” Kaguya rapidly approached. She spoke, avoiding the

searing metal fence. “You said your name was Suzume, didn’t you?”

Suzume glanced at Kaguya as if she thought Kaguya was a nuisance. The sunshine grew a little stronger. Kaguya felt like she was burning up. She spoke softly, amid the hot quiet.

“This place—this world is not your real school.” It was unnaturally hot, and the cicadas weren’t even chirping. The girl didn’t seem particularly interested in contradicting what Kaguya said. “You created this; it is your ideal world.”

“I don’t understand. Are you really a staff member here?”

The girl was being blatantly wary, her eyes indicating that she thought Kaguya might be dangerous. Kaguya ignored her reaction; she was used to it by now. She didn’t mind. Trying to resolve her fears...

“I’m sorry for lying... I’m not a staff member.” Kaguya prepared to introduce herself. She was Kaguya Shinohara. A scientist. “I came here to stop you. You abandoned reality, and you’re being deceived—”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The girl laughed, cutting Kaguya off mid-sentence, her back still turned.

The laughter was nauseating. It was girlish, but it concealed a kind of deep despair. Kaguya sensed both resignation and contempt in that laugh.

As the girl turned around and there were tears in her eyes. Tears of joy?

“I have no idea what you are talking about. Live? Die? Wait... Is that the setting? That’s so stupid!”

A shiver went down Kaguya’s spine at the girl’s unaffected laughter. Didn’t the girl remember? Didn’t she understand the situation she was in?

“The setting—? Suzume, do you understand what you’re doing right now?”

Kaguya tried to grab the fence, but she was once again unable to. It was so hot that it felt like her skin might stick to the metal if she made contact.

“What I’m doing?” said the girl, cocking her head and staring at Kaguya as if Kaguya wasn’t making any sense. **“This is a stage, obviously. And we’re almost at the climax. Stop interfering.”**

Kaguya had no idea what the girl was talking about, but she could see what the girl was trying to do. The climax, she had said. The climax of her life. She really did understand, didn't she? What she was about to do. She understood, and had chosen it.

"Why do this? Please don't die. It doesn't have to be this way—"

"You say that, but you don't really care. It's all talk. You pretend you're worried about me, but your focus is somewhere else. That's the impression you give me."

"B-but I'm still—"

"Fine. In that case, what are you actually going to do for me?"

The surrounding temperature suddenly fell from its original intensity to a slightly more pleasant heat.

That change in temperature likely indicated a change in Suzume as well. A sudden cooling of whatever swirling heat was inside her.

Kaguya stood there, dumbfounded, and the girl stared back in contempt.

"If you don't have an answer to that question, then why are you bothering me in the first place...?"

A howling wind rose. This was no midsummer breeze. The air, vaguely cold, stung Kaguya's cheeks. The rejection was clear.

But Kaguya learned. She saw the girl's grief, reaching out as if to be saved. She felt her heart.

"What was her deal?"

After watching the scarlet-haired girl disappear, carried off somewhere by the wind, Suzume plunked herself down in place. Why was she so tired? This was her big moment, her stage!

A cheer rose from the crowd. The scene changed.

Suzume realized she was on the boards. It was a stage, like the kind used for a school cultural festival, and they were acting out the final scenes of the script.

"Shizuka, do you know her? That girl from earlier," whispered Suzume,

speaking to the girl next to her. Her face was almost identical to Suzume's. "Have I met her before? Why do you think she was saying all those things—?"

Telling her not to die.

"Maybe she's in the cast. I hope she doesn't get in the way."

The other girl listened in silence, nodding her head repeatedly. Her face was like a carbon copy of Suzume's. The girl, Shizuka, extended her hand in Suzume's direction.

"Does it matter? Let's go. Everyone is waiting for you, Suzume!"

Suzume reached out and took the girl's hand. This time she was going for sure. Going to where Shizuka waited— **"Stop!!"**

A piercing voice called out to her from behind.

Everything changed once more. They were on a plain, concrete rooftop. The schoolyard below was empty. Turning toward the source of the voice, Suzume spotted a face she had seen before—a girl with scarlet hair—beyond the burning fence.

"Don't! You can't go that way—don't throw your life away so easily!"

Suzume sighed openly as she saw the girl's face and heard what she had to say. This again? She turned back around, in the direction she had originally been facing.

Couldn't that girl say anything else?

First of all, who did she think she was, thinking she had the right to stop someone from trying to end it? Suzume hadn't asked for life in the first place. The least they could do is allow her the privilege of refusing it. As if living was the be-all and end-all of happiness.

Only fools who were already happy believed living was the "be-all" of anything. Fools who had never starved, were never heinously injured, who never stole. People who couldn't even imagine what Suzume had lived through, been through.

But what else could you expect from someone who had never been placed on *that stage*?

“Just leave me alone already. Go away.”

“**No.**” The girl continued to hold her ground from inside the fence, where it was safe. “**I may not understand, but I’ve come here to—**”

“Go away! You’re not welcome here!”

The wind rose up again. This was no midsummer breeze. The air, vaguely cold, stung Suzume’s cheeks as well as the girl’s. Suzume felt it as well, whether she liked it or not—what she was doing. The rejection was clear.

But this time she saw it.

The scarlet-haired girl’s face. Crying, yet full of determination. Suzume felt it—the girl’s heart.

• • •

“Oh, she wants me to leave her alone, does she—?”

“You’re not welcome here! Just leave me alone already.”

Kaguya understood full well what the girl was saying, feeling, but that didn’t mean she had to accept it. She shouted back angrily in turn.

“Well, I refuse!!”

10-2

“...!”

Watching from the outside, Haru had no idea what Kaguya was doing.

None of them did, probably.

After hitting the hero the first time, Kaguya had stopped for several seconds. After freezing, she had naturally fallen toward the ground, and Azuma had scrambled to catch her.

But then Kaguya had *woken up* partway through. More than once. Azuma was missing everything from the waist down and could no longer stop her. Kaguya shook him off, her focus solely on the hero now.

It had been about six seconds since she had first made contact with the hero, but she kept waking up partway through. This was already her third dive. If, like

Kaguya said, every second was like ten minutes inside, she had been in that mental world or whatever it was for a full hour now.

She woke up again. But shaking herself free, she extended an arm to use Azuma's shoulder as a step once more, pointing the barrel of her gun toward the hero.

Haru was pretty sure Kaguya couldn't fire that gun. It was almost as if what she was really firing was her own heart.

"What's happening...?"

Haru had no idea what kind of hidden battle Kaguya was fighting, but from the outside, it was clear that she kept failing.

"What is she doing? What in the hell does she think she's doing?"

If she couldn't save them the first time, wouldn't it be better to just leave them be? What was the point of this? It was so illogical.

The battle Kaguya was fighting wasn't exactly something that others could understand. Even now, Haru herself didn't really get it.

The other members of Charon, even Azuma, probably felt the same. Sure, they probably understood the importance of what she was doing, but Haru doubted they really understood anything beyond that. Why would she do this?

"You see what we have to deal with?" said a voice.

Haru was lying face up in the dirt, her world upside down.

It was Koyuki's voice. Koyuki had already lost her eyes and had withdrawn from the front lines, but from the way she spoke, it was almost as if she could see what was happening.

Haru didn't want to look at the empty cavities where Koyuki's dissolved eyes had been, but she reached out with her still good hand to search for her.

"I'm guessing you understand why Azuma gives her special treatment now." Why Azuma tried to protect her—why she was allowed to do what Haru was not. "It's her. Even if we turn into heroes, it's Kaguya who can still save us, and can let us die as people. It's something no one else is capable of."

And even if they couldn't become human again, even if they did die as a hero, Kaguya would remember that they were more than just a homicidal monster in the end. It was why Captain Azuma, why all of them, saw her as special. For young men and women like them, who were constantly on the precipice of death, it was easy to think of Kaguya as something precious and irreplaceable—"—but it's people who think like that who piss me off the most."

"Huh?"

"Kaguya isn't our *hope*. She's just a girl," said Koyuki, scowling with bitterness that seemed to come from somewhere deep down. "What was Sakura thinking, dropping something like that into Kaguya's lap in her last moments? Kaguya eats like a dog, she's argumentative sometimes, a little kinder than other people maybe, but just a normal girl... Since she originally came from Technical, she could just pick up and run if she wanted, but she keeps doing this—I don't understand it either. Why does she push herself so hard?"

Haru recalled something Kaguya had once said. The smell of soup, still in its pouch, had been lingering in the air. She'd said something about not giving up.

Haru watched as Kaguya once again dove into the hero for the umpteenth time. Kaguya didn't seem to be paying any mind to the rest of them, not even to Azuma.

It didn't matter what anyone else said, or what anyone else thought. She was inexperienced and she was rash and she was going to save this person standing there in front of her.

It was becoming hard to watch.

"Why does it matter so much, saving them—?"

Just like Haru's boyfriend—the man she had fought side by side with once upon a time, who would never give up on saving others, even when no one else could understand. But he had tried so hard that he wound up hurting the very person he tried to hold onto, and turned into a hero himself. She was just like him.

And she was just like the girl who had fought by that man's side, once upon a time. The girl who had loved him, and all his naive beliefs up until that day. She

was just like Haru herself.



“Ah...!”

Kaguya dove in again.

But after failing so many times, she was starting to panic. Back in the real world—outside—almost six seconds must have passed. Under normal circumstances, six seconds may not have been long, but on the battlefield, six seconds could spell the difference between life and death.

The phrase “full of yourself” crossed Kaguya’s mind. It truly was arrogant of her to keep trying after she had already been rebuffed. It would be fine if she wasn’t causing anyone else any trouble. But while she was inside doing this, on the outside, Azuma and the others— “No...”

She had to believe. In him.

Kaguya knew she was asking too much, but still asked for more. She didn’t care if she had already been rejected, she was going to try again. She was going to make herself understood.

She wasn’t just being rash, however. After the past attempts, she had realized a few things.

The first time she confronted the girl, something had felt off. There was just one person in there, alone. There was always a Goddess in these mental worlds, but in this one, it was just the girl on the roof. No one else was around. Where was the other person, the one driving her toward death?

Maybe “person” was a misnomer. If the girl had someone precious with her in that world...

That has to be it.

It was the ashes the girl was holding.

They were her Goddess.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tenacity

How many times have I fallen so far?

How many? Suzume wondered, as she stared at the now familiar ground below.

Suzume had an unusual way of looking at her own life. Having been almost entirely loved, she often felt as if she was disassociating—like she was looking down and watching herself from above. Life was a stage, a performance, a script. Shizuka was the one who had taught her that.

Shizuka Amayuri. Suzume's twin.

"..."

It had been more than twenty-two hours since Suzume had stood atop this roof for the first time.

At some point she realized she was standing on the roof outside the fence. She couldn't remember what she had been doing before that, but she kept jumping off the roof and to the ground four stories below as if drawn to do so—as if driven.

Sometimes it looked like a stage instead, like she was in some kind of bad play written by someone with terrible taste when they were drunk.

That was the only thing that made sense. This was her revenge, wrecking the terrible flop before it could finish.

However—even though she jumped, she found herself back on the roof again each and every time. Like a soul trapped on the banks of the netherworld,

stacking boulders for eternity, there was nowhere for her to go.

After falling so many times—it was in the hundreds by now—she had obviously become inured to the experience, but it still hurt. It was not an experience she wanted to keep repeating.

But, well, she didn't exactly want to stop, either. She couldn't.

Maybe this time it would really be over. She jumped again and again, clinging to that possibility, but she couldn't even remember what *it* was that she wanted to be over.

She was no longer bothered by the scarlet-haired girl who showed up when she tried to jump.

She figured it was just one of those things—part of how it went. The girl continued to say the same naive things. It was nothing worth listening to.

“Suzume, who are you holding hands with?”

But, after however many times—it must have been the third—the girl asked something different. Suzume finally took an interest.

“Is it someone important to you? Important enough to keep holding on to even at a time like this?”

“That has nothing to do with you...”

“But the reason you're trapped like this is because of those ashes,” the scarlet-haired girl said. Once again, like she knew everything. **“Who is it? Is it someone you know?”**

“This is—”

Suzume wheeled about in annoyance, but suddenly found herself at a loss for words.

Ashes?

Why was she carrying around ashes?

“This...is...”

“You can't remember?” the girl asked softly.

Feeling vexed, Suzume willed herself to remember. It must have been someone close to her if she was going to all the trouble of carrying the ashes around with her. She wasn't sure why she had forgotten, but if the person was that important to her, surely she would be able to remember them.

"Suzume," a voice said. "Suzume, don't let yourself be deceived."

It was Shizuka's voice.

Suzume's surroundings distorted and changed, becoming unpleasantly bizarre, like a mix between the rooftop and the stage of a play. The scarlet-haired girl was glaring at her from behind, while in front of her was a sea of attendees—the two scenes were like night and day.

"Come. This way."

Shizuka stood before her and extended her hand. Farther. This way.

She wanted Suzume to come quickly. Her voice was sweet and inviting. Suzume took another step forward.

"Huh?"

As she began to step, Suzume realized that something about this step felt slightly different compared to the last. Freeing, she might say, if she tried to put the feeling into words. This time it really would be over, she understood instinctively. With a sense of joy, Suzume took another step, and another, moving closer.

"Suzume, there's someone there, isn't there?" the other girl called, but her voice couldn't reach Suzume.

"Took you long enough," Shizuka said with a hint of satisfaction.

Took me long enough? Suzume turned to face Shizuka, in shock.

"Your—your face."

The expression plastered across Shizuka's face could no longer be called a smile. It was madness, like a strained imitation of a smile created by something that was not a person.

Suzume hesitated—why was Shizuka making this face when she was about to

die?

“I—”

“—n’t do it!!”

The girl standing behind her, the one inside the fence, seemed to be shouting something. But her voice suddenly seemed so hazy that Suzume couldn’t make it out.

However, she could hear the voice of the girl next to her loud and clear.

“Come with me,” Shizuka said, sweetly.

Yet again, Suzume began to walk. She took another step forward.

That was when she realized she could feel something hot at the base of her throat.

It felt like it was about to split open. Just once more—if she just jumped one more time, surely. This time, maybe, it would all be over at last. She began to step forward.

That was when she heard a clanging noise from behind her.

Suzume wheeled around in surprise, but there was no one there. The scarlet-haired girl was gone.

Of course, thought Suzume, vaguely disappointed. The girl had given up easily in the end.

Suzume wasn’t surprised. The girl must have finally realized that no amount of talk was going to do any good.

Not that it matters, I guess... Now there’s finally no one to interfere—

Suzume shrugged and turned around once again.

The final step—this time she knew it would all be over.

That last step...

“I caught you!!”

She never made it.

“...?!”

Someone had seized her from behind. In the same instant, the warm dream scattered into mist. She was back on the plain, hot, concrete rooftop. There was supposed to be a fence behind her. No one was supposed to get this close. No one should have even been here in the first place.

In this closed world, in this space where one lone girl continued to die, over and over again.

“Ah...”

And yet, here she was.

Someone who continued to persist despite having already been rebuffed so many times; who refused to understand, no matter how many times Suzume told her no; and who now, for the first time, had finally stopped her— It was the girl with the scarlet hair.

11-2

The girl’s hands, her arms, and even her legs were in a terrible state.

“D-did you climb the fence...?!”

Suzume knew how blistering hot that fence was. It was there to isolate her. It was supposed to be impossible for Suzume to get inside the fence, or for anyone outside to come this far.

“L-let me go!”

“I won’t.”

“No—stop it!!”

“I won’t stop.”

Suzume cursed the girl’s stubbornness. If the girl was just a fool, spouting naive nonsense, Suzume could have ignored her. But she was different. A fool, yes, but not one who had come to play games and manipulate Suzume from a safe distance.

“I understand very well now what you want—and I reject your ideals.”

“My ideals—?”

“Your real desire is for things to never end. To refuse to accept that, even in death. But I see through this. If it was really death you so desired, then why are you still lingering here? In this gap between life and death, playing out your death again and again. If you really wanted—”

“Stop it.”

Don't say it; don't say you don't want it to be over.

Don't say the truth.

“But I will say the truth...”

The girl's voice almost seemed to echo deep inside Suzume.

“Right now, you've become a rampaging monster.”

“A monster...?”

“You understand, don't you? This world, where you keep dying over and again—a world like this can't be real.”

Of course Suzume understood that.

Something had felt off about this world. People who died didn't come back. But no matter how many times she jumped she wound up right back where she had started. Plus, there was the way the world kept spinning and changing. It was like being forced to watch a bad movie.

“Your rampage may have killed around twenty people already—possibly more. You've become an ax-wielding skeletal maiden, and you're trying to kill my friends. But there's a chance you could still turn back.”

“Turn back to what...?”

Suzume already knew the answer, but she couldn't keep herself from asking.

“Into a human,” said the girl, just as Suzume was expecting. **“Do you really want to die this way—as a monster?!”**

But what was the big deal? There were countless ways to die, just like there were countless ways to live. What was so noble about dying as a human? Besides...

“It's got nothing to do with you—”

“But it does!” shouted the girl, suddenly, leaving Suzume momentarily at a loss. This was a far cry from the image of the girl Suzume had built in her mind so far. **“You don’t get to decide that! This may just be my own hubris—there’s no way for me to understand what you’re going through, and I won’t say anything as flippant as ‘I understand how you feel.’ I know I’m acting like this is all about me!”**

Suzume didn’t say anything at first. It took her a moment to register the torrent of words spilling out of the girl’s mouth. Even once she registered her words, she didn’t really understand what the girl was talking about.

“I’m not going to shut off my brain and give up just because I can’t understand.”

This girl was a stranger, about as far from Suzume as it was possible for another person to be, but Suzume understood the emotion in this girl’s voice. This was determination.

“I don’t understand the path you’ve walked in life. There’s no way for me to understand it.”

A surprising glimmer of surprising strength rested in the girl’s violet eyes.

“But your life can change, can’t it...? After all, we’re here meeting like this right now, aren’t we?”

“What?”

Suzume nearly did a double take. This was their first time meeting. It had been less than an hour since they had laid eyes on each other for the first time. She didn’t even know the girl’s name. She knew more about the random neighbors on her street.

“Sorry, but what value are you, as just one person, supposed to hold for me? We’ve only just met—”

“It doesn’t matter how many times we’ve met before,” the girl insisted. **“Life is a series of encounters. Meeting or not meeting, one person along the way can completely change the trajectory of a life.”**

“So...are you saying you could be that one person?”

Talk about hubris, thought Suzume. The trajectory of a life? Did she really believe this? What made her think that she alone could change a person's life? That she could change the script that had already been written?

"You really are full of yourself," Suzume said, plainly exasperated. "You should leave this place. Someone like you isn't going to rewrite my script—you sound like some guidance counselor hopped up on positive thinking."

Suzume wasn't about to put her faith in someone whose whole brilliant idea was just "think positive." Either this girl was drunk on her own words, or she was trying to manipulate others for her own ends.

"Give those ashes to me... Give them to me, or throw them away."

Just as Suzume expected. The girl was only saying what she said because there was something she wanted Suzume to do. However...when the girl reached out, Suzume saw her burnt palm and the terrible state it was in.

Maybe this was more than positive thoughts. For the first time, Suzume made direct eye contact, staring into the girl's violet eyes.

"This world is a reflection of your own mind."

"..."

"And you're still here. You haven't been able to escape, however how many times you've jumped—if all you really wanted to do was die, your wish would have been granted after the first."

"But..."

"Don't let yourself be deceived, Suzume," said Shizuka. "You've just met this person. What about me? You know which one of us you can truly believe."

"I...I..."

Shizuka was important to Suzume. She was her precious sister.

However, Suzume would be lying if she said something didn't feel wrong. Since when had Shizuka been this pushy?

"Tell me, please. What is it you really want?"

"Tell her, Suzume. Tell her what you really want to do."

What she really wanted to do. What she really wanted. What was it?

Suzume looked to the cold ground below. The girl was still holding Suzume back, by the arms, from behind.

She kept seeing the girl's hands. The burnt palm. The delicate fingers, damaged and red. The peeling skin. It had to be painful.

Suzume turned slightly to glance behind her. The girl's eyes were filled with powerful determination. Suzume could see her own face reflected in those eyes.

They were serious eyes. When she saw her own face in those eyes, she finally realized the truth. Shizuka was dead. She had jumped from the school roof on a hot summer's day, just like this.

And Suzume hadn't been able to bring herself to accept it. That was all.

Of course. What she had really wanted, the thing she had really wanted to do...

"You said my life could change, now that I've met you..."

"Yes..."

"You weren't lying...?"

"No, I meant it."

Suzume had met plenty of liars before, so she knew this girl wasn't one of them. Just like she knew...

"Suzume! It's okay! Come with me!"

...this Shizuka was a liar.

After all, Shizuka was no longer here. Suzume understood that.

She could immerse herself in a sweet dream knowing that it was a lie, or face up to reality knowing that it was cruel. Suzume had been unable to choose either, and had instead selected endless choice.

"Maybe it would be worth finding out, at least for now...whether my life really will change."

“Of course...,” said the girl, eyes widening.

Suzume pulled back her leg, which was still mid-step, almost as if she were being pulled back by the girl. Instead...

“I’m sorry, but you’re not Shizuka.”

...with the slightest force, almost a tender stroke, she pushed Shizuka from behind. Shizuka gasped, and her face began to transform. It was like an insect’s, bestial and full of malice.

“I can’t accept an impostor like you,” said Suzume.

After all, Shizuka would never make a face like that.

“So—farewell. Even if you were an impostor, even if it was fake, thank you for letting me see her one more time—”

A sudden gust of wind rose up.

A strange wind, powerful, yet gentle. It enveloped her like nothing she had ever felt before... It was like being held for the very first time.

No, not the first time.

After all, if she had never been held before, she wouldn’t know this is what it felt like.

Yes—come to think of it, maybe it didn’t matter now. She had tried not to think about it for so long, but once upon a time, someone had held her. As bad as things were now, there was once a time when she had been embraced. If not for that, how else would she have gotten through life thus far?

“How long has the past and present been eating away at me like this?”

If things were worse now than they had been in the past, then maybe things could also go the other way. She had always assumed things would just keep getting worse. Even now, the possibility seemed likely, but nothing was ever set in stone. That much was true.

“I guess I can at least see for myself whether what you say is true—I can always die later; it’s not like there’s any rush.”

As she was speaking, the wind grew stronger. She was having trouble seeing

her surroundings. The string came undone on the bag of ashes she held precariously in her hand, and the ashes inside began to scatter in the wind.

“Before I go, tell me...,” Suzume began, speaking to the scarlet-haired girl, without looking at the swirling ashes.

She didn’t really think it was important, but she still wanted to know.

“...What is your name?”

“Kaguya Shinohara.” Those strong-willed violet eyes stared directly into Suzume. **“I like to play at being a saint, but I’m an ordinary person, just like you. The kind of girl you find anywhere.”**

Looking into her strong, gentle eyes for the first time, Suzume felt as if she might cry. Her heart had never been touched before, but at that moment it felt like it was melting.

She drifted gently into the air. Not the falling she had experienced so many times already, but this time, up.

She doubted she’d find hope waiting for her out there. Reality wouldn’t change so easily. Maybe once she returned, she would just decide she wanted to die again.

But for now, at least—maybe it was not anything so grand as hope, just a faint ray of light amid the darkness, but she had found something that changed her mind. So maybe things could be different.

Maybe, just maybe, she thought.

“I guess what I really wanted to do was to accept myself the way I am, and to move forward.”

One step—just one step forward. That was all she wanted, the real truth of this world.

At some point, the ashes she had been clutching had disappeared.

• • •

“Damn—!!”

Kaguya began to fall toward the ground after having frozen again for the

umpteenth time. Azuma did his best to catch her using only his upper body, hitting the back of his head hard. He held on tight, however, and began crawling away using his left arm, trying to put distance between them and the hero.

His left arm had disappeared just a moment ago, but now it was back. Not only that—the sensation in his legs suddenly returned. Once he realized he had his legs again, he began running on autopilot, trying to get as far from that spot as he could. He was holding Kaguya, who remained unconscious.

“Wake up!!” Azuma shouted, but Kaguya, who was lying across his shoulders, was still out cold. “Kaguya!!”

The effects of the fog had weakened. Kaguya’s left arm had returned as well, and Azuma could see the fog growing thinner before his eyes. Everything was still hazy, but he could finally see again.

As things grew clear, he finally realized where they were: near the entrance. Azuma and the other members of Charon had been in the same place this entire time.

“Azuma!”

It was Rindou’s voice. The others were there as well. He saw what looked to be the first responders, too, but Azuma ignored everyone else and continued to shout at Kaguya.

“Kaguya! Wake up, Kaguya!”

She wasn’t coming to. Why was it taking so long? Usually it only took a few moments for her to open her eyes, but twelve seconds had already passed.

“The fog!” someone shouted. It was Koyuki, who was now getting back to her feet.

The fog was lifting. The faces of the others grew clearer. Even the first responders, despite getting wiped out earlier, were all there. Several were writhing about in pain with broken arms or legs, but it didn’t look like their lives were in any immediate danger.

Kaguya was the only one who hadn’t yet come to.

What if she never wakes up?

A wave of fear rose from the pit of Azuma's stomach. They didn't know the mechanism behind Kaguya's ability. They had no proof or past examples to go by. What if it had just been luck that she had come back so quickly every other time, and after intervening in so many psyches there was a chance she might never return?

If anything, wouldn't that be the more likely scenario?

Fifteen seconds passed. He tried calling her name again.

She still didn't wake up. She was frozen, eyes open, almost as if she was dead. An unfamiliar feeling, like cold lead, began to creep into Azuma's chest.

"Kaguya!" shouted Koyuki, rushing over. "What—?! Why isn't she waking up?!"

Twenty seconds. Still, Kaguya remained unconscious.

Rindou tried calling her name as well. And then Azuma again, in desperation.

"Kagu—!"

"Would you pipe down...?" Kaguya mumbled.

She sounded drowsy, like she was waking up from a long sleep, or had just been shaken out of a nap.

"You don't have to keep shouting my name like that. I heard you already!"

Underneath the clear blue sky, in the heat of early summer, Kaguya Shinohara sat up and took a look around. The first thing she saw was Azuma's face, causing her to just barely smile.

"Wow, your face. You look good in red."

"Ha...ha-ha... Well, don't go getting any ideas. I'm not blushing; it's only blood," joked Azuma, feeling the relief deep down in his heart. "But it took you long enough. Did something happen?"

"In a way, I guess. I think I just overdid it, diving in so many times."

Kaguya glanced around before calling out to a girl collapsed a little distance away.

"Suzume..."

The blond girl slowly turned her face their way—toward Kaguya. She looked to be crying and laughing at the same time.

She must have been the fog hero. Azuma sensed the egg in her throat.

Azuma realized several other people were lying on the ground around him as well. They were members of the First Response squad who had temporarily been turned into skeletons. Whoever had called for help on the radio was probably among them.

And Haru was there. She didn't seem ready to get up, but it didn't look like she was injured, either. No one seemed seriously injured—in fact, Azuma was probably in the worst shape out of all of them.

The tension began to slowly dissipate in much the same way as fear after waking from a bad dream slowly turns into relief.

And then, the air turned electric.

There, wafting in the air—the sweet smell of osmanthus.

“It's not over yet!” shouted Azuma, rallying the others.

They weren't done. The Goddess was out there somewhere. Their real enemy.

The scent of osmanthus was coming from all directions. It was extremely strong—overpowering enough to make them sick, even without breathing in deeply. But where was its source? Where was it coming from?

Azuma scanned the ground with his eyes. What if the Goddess was buried in the dirt and—?

A shadow appeared.

“Anybody who is still on their feet!” Azuma shouted. As he raised his voice, he felt a hot gush of blood drip down his face, but he ignored it. “It's above us!!”

All of Charon (apart from Haru), Suzume, even those among the first responders who were still conscious, turned their eyes upward. There she was.

A massive bee, several times as large as the average human adult.

“Is that the Goddess...?!”

“What is that thing...?!”

With the exception of Azuma and Kaguya, this was the first time any of them saw a Goddess’s true form. An insect—and an extremely large one at that. But their astonishment was short-lived.

“Bring it down!”

Koyuki was the first to act. She fired a shot upward using the long-range rifle she was carrying on her back. She didn’t even bother to stabilize it first. The simple physical recoil, as opposed to a Chronos rebound, knocked her back with force.

But it was worth it. The shot blasted one of the bee’s tripartite wings from its body.

A Goddess’s own combat strength was extremely low, so much so that it was hard to believe it could have once been a hero.

Was this thing once human, too?

If heroes eventually turned into Goddesses, that would mean there must have been a time when this Goddess was human as well, although that identity must have been lost long ago.

Strangely, Azuma didn’t feel hatred for the thing. Instead, pity welled up in his breast—it was a miserable, pathetic thing.

As the Goddess bee attempted to flee, everyone except for Haru, who was still in a daze, did their best to attack it.

Rindou leaped forward first and attempted to grab it, but the bee increased its speed suddenly and slipped through his fingers. As it had three sets of wings, losing just one pair must not have been too serious of an impediment.

As the bee continued trying to slip past him, it was met with a volley of gunshots, but the shots weren’t coming from Chronoses. The bullets couldn’t even graze the Goddess, but this concentrated fire from the first responders (normal troops) did succeed in grabbing its attention.

Now that it was open, Azuma leaped forward.

Kaguya, however, still had his gun. He leaped toward the Goddess anyway,

covering far more distance in a single bound than any regular person should have been capable of. He knocked the Goddess to the ground with a single kick.

The Goddess was massive, with wings as large to match. There was a loud crash and the ground shook as she struck the earth.

Two pairs of wings left.

If Azuma could tear off just one of them—but how was he supposed to do that barehanded, especially when he was already seriously injured?

No, forget how.

It had to be done.

This was his role. It was a matter of pride, as Charon's captain. Despite being drenched red with blood, Azuma grabbed a piece of one wing in his right hand and twisted. Try as he might, however, he couldn't tear through it.

This is too much for mere human strength—

He was also injured.

—however, I'm not human.

Azuma summoned all his strength, and the wing began to crack and tear. His own bleeding also increased, but he could worry about that later.

With a buzz, the wings began to vibrate. Azuma quickly leaped backward. He would be in serious trouble if the creature flew into the air while he was hanging on. Maybe he could do that under normal circumstances, but not with this hole in his side.

"What...?"

Just as it was about to fly away, Azuma saw her running past him from behind. Barely as tall as his shoulder, her teal blue hair fluttering in the wind, she sprinted past Azuma so fast it was hard to believe she had been writhing on the ground just moments ago.

"Takanashi?!"



Haru heard Azuma call her name, but she ignored him and just kept running. As she ran, she remembered.

Why I wanted to make it so that no more heroes are born.

The cause was rooted in Haru's past. After protecting her, one of her allies had turned into a hero before her very eyes. That person had been someone like Kaguya, always trying to save everyone, and as a result he became a monster in the end. One that hurts people. He had tried so hard to save everyone, but it had all backfired.

He could have just died and been saved, but he had rejected even that.

As rare as it seemed, it was actually a common story. Plenty of people had been through the same. There was no need to talk about it, no need to let the emotions raging inside show on one's face.

That was when Haru became arrogant. She felt no need to explain her own backstory.

Normal weapons don't work against a Goddess. Not under normal circumstances, that is!

Normal weapons were like children's toys to heroes and Goddesses. A child could attack an adult with a toy BB gun all they liked, but even if it hurt, they would never manage to injure the adult, no matter how hard they tried—it was the same with normal weapons for these creatures.

However, if the creature was already close to death, wounded, and an effective blow could be delivered to that wound...

The weapon in Haru's hand was just an ordinary knife. It couldn't even nick a Goddess, let alone a hero. It was just metal. But Haru was used to the feel of it in her hand.

Two pairs of wings left.

With a buzz, the Goddess's wings began to vibrate. It was attempting to flee.

"Don't let it get away—"

"Not a chance!" shouted Rindou.

He batted the Goddess out of the air as it attempted to fly off. Between his physical strength and his brass knuckle-shaped Chronos, he managed to land a precision strike to the part of the wing that had already been bent by Azuma, causing it to break off on one side.

There was now one pair of wings left. With Haru's meager strength, however, a swipe from her knife probably wouldn't be enough.

As she glanced behind, Haru sensed someone running after her.

Desperate, unsteady footsteps. Not the powerful footsteps of Rindou, who was used to battle, or even those of Azuma, who was injured and could no longer move. Koyuki, too, had been injured by the recoil from her first shot. Haru was certain it wasn't them.

Kaguya Shinohara had caught up with her.

"There's one pair of wings left."

Kaguya approached from behind to stand beside Haru. No one could call her a princess now. She spoke in a firm voice, without looking at Haru. "There's good news and there's bad news. Which do you want first?"

"In that case, the good news."

"I might be able to use this gun to put a hole in that thing."

That wasn't what Haru had expected her to say. She thought Kaguya couldn't fire the gun—or more accurately, that no bullets came out of it when she did.

"I thought you couldn't use the gun..."

"Not exactly... I managed to use it once several months ago, against a different Goddess. I'm not sure why, but I felt a strange sensation when it happened, like the weapon *gave me permission*—"

"Permission...?"

"Yes."

A thing giving a person permission. Haru raised an eyebrow at Kaguya's strange choice of words, but after seeing the serious expression on Kaguya's face, Haru decided just to roll with it. Kaguya wasn't the type to tell jokes at a

time like this.

After all, if heroes had hearts, what else might be possible?

“And the bad news...?”

“I only have one bullet. Missing is not an option.”

If she missed, there would be no second shot. Reading between the lines, Haru understood that Kaguya was asking for her help.

“That’s not such bad news...”

Haru reversed her grip so that she was holding the knife backward, close to her body. Using all her weight...

“Hyrarrgh!!”

She swung at the Goddess, putting every last ounce of momentum behind the knife. The blade was unable to cut through the Goddess’s flesh, but the impact was still transmitted through the blade, much like a punch.

In that moment, for just a moment, the Goddess teetered off balance.

“...After all, you’re not going to miss!”

There was no need for a signal. Kaguya was already in position, the barrel of her gun pointed directly at the Goddess’s head.

Would shooting a Goddess in the head even kill it? Haru had no idea. But one thing was for sure: She had never seen a Goddess cornered like this before.

It was usually difficult to even catch sight of these, but here it was, already in arm’s reach.

There had to be more than one Goddess out there, but in this moment the image of that creature burned itself into their eyes. This was the source of all the tragedy.



All of it. Their friends who had turned into heroes; the countless deaths that had occurred at the hands of heroes; the family members who had been taken away from them. Everything. Not one of them had been spared the sorrow, so all eyes were fixed on the creature now, ready to see how it ended.

Kaguya wielded her gun with a flourish, ready to deliver that conclusion. The cold look in her eyes made it hard to believe she was really a scientist. Those eyes were also clouded by pity, ever too kind—but that lasted for a mere moment. She then pointed her gun at the head of the faltering Goddess and pulled the trigger.

Gunpowder exploded inside the body of the gun, and the ordinary bullet that had been loaded inside hurled forward at a speed of 250 meters per second. The body of the gun was swept with a wave of heat and force beyond what any human body could withstand. Despite this, the trigger did its duty.

The gun had long since grown used to and had accepted this experience, but it suffered all the same. Just because it was used to the pain and heat did not mean it felt it any less.

Which was precisely why they wanted to choose who they defeated.

They couldn't point themselves toward other heroes. They had refused those who had attempted to make them do so until now by rebounding, although there were still those they could not refuse.

But if it was to strike at their enemy? If it was revenge?

As if it recognized Kaguya. As if it gave permission. As if it called out to her: *Use me—use me to kill the Goddess—*

The bullet passed through the barrel of the gun and shot out into space. For the one pulling the trigger, this seemed like an unremarkable act. For the one being fired, however, it was an act of desperate courage—it was blistering, all-consuming pain. A gunshot spat out that pain.

At that moment, there was a high-pitched scream and an explosive rupture. The Goddess crumpled to the ground.



Once the massive Goddess collapsed, silence fell.

Everyone was exhausted and in shock.

For Haru, this had been her first time ever seeing a Goddess—in fact, it was the first time for almost everyone there. It had resembled a bee, but was it a living creature? Despite the similarities, it was quite different from a real bee; the resemblance seemed forced.

Haru knew it was her enemy, but instead of hatred, she just felt empty inside. Who would have thought these creatures were so easy to defeat?

Even now, nothing about their situation had really changed.

“Hah... That was a surprise.”

Haru turned around. Kaguya was breathing heavily, and seemed to be in pain, but she forced herself to smile.

“You...you always look so cool and detached, but you’re actually quite the firecracker...aren’t you?”

“I could say the same for you... I guess you’re not a princess so much as a lady knight.”

“Ha-ha... I don’t know about that... I think I ran too hard...”

“You should work on your stamina if you’re going to go the route of a knight. It would be a shame to let all that go to waste.”

“Go to waste...?”

“Your courage. You’ve got surprising guts.”

She used to think Kaguya was the princess and Azuma was her knight in shining armor, but maybe she had things backward. If Kaguya had chosen to fight...

“If you’re the knight...,” said Haru, slowly glancing in Azuma’s direction, “then maybe that would make him the real princess.”

Haru had meant it as a joke, of course, but Kaguya burst out laughing as if that was the funniest thing she’d ever heard. Kaguya’s laughter was infectious; for the first time since arriving at Charon, Haru smiled.

Suzume Amayuri was immediately taken away by ambulance. Azuma was also too injured to ignore at this point, and was to be taken to a military hospital. His wound wasn't that deep, though—and maybe they had a personal grudge against him now, because he was left lying in the dirt, completely ignored.

I guess I had that coming..., thought Azuma.

How had Azuma made it to Yoyogi Park, and why had he decided to come? The how was simple: he had simply threatened the driver of the transport vehicle while he was being taken to the hospital. He had left it up to the driver's final judgment in the end, so it wasn't really a threat, but of course he had wrapped an arm around the driver's neck, which some might construe as an act of violence...

As for why he had decided to do something like this in the first place...

The first reason was that Major Mirai had contacted him to let him know that a suspicious fog had appeared in the park, and that communication with Rindou had been lost as soon as the fog appeared.

However, Mirai hadn't contacted Azuma because she wanted to send him in as well.

"I just imagined it must be tough for you not knowing what's going on out there," she said, figuring she should at least fill him in. *"We adults really are useless, aren't we?"*

Azuma could hear her shaky voice clearly in his mind.

"We can't even watch, all we can do is make contact like this from far away."

Hence why Mirai felt she should at least let him know what was happening. Obviously she wasn't going to ask someone who was injured to go into battle, but she must have thought it was too cruel to wait until he was in a hospital bed and it was all over to give him the news.

The other reason he had gone was because of the audio recording he had heard.

The way Kaguya had sounded when she screamed *"Wait!!"* didn't even sound

like her.

After hearing that voice, Azuma had decided to go. It wasn't that he didn't have faith in them, and yes, he was still scared of turning into a hero. But it didn't matter.

Because he was Charon's captain.

Fear was nothing to be embarrassed about. Azuma understood that now. But he still didn't want to become the kind of person who averted his eyes because he was afraid of loss; he didn't want to use that as an excuse not to fight.

Besides, even if he did turn into an aberration, there was someone there to stop it. She was there then, and she was here now.

"Captain Azuma..."

Kaguya had approached at some point. Her expression visibly changed when she saw how covered in blood he was.

"What were you thinking...?" she asked.

Kaguya crouched down next to Azuma. They made eye contact.

"Actually," she said, "I guess you figured out the dilemma we were in."

"Yeah. I spoke to Major Mirai."

"I know you're not the type to stay away, Captain Azuma." Her gaze was directed at Azuma's wound. "But are you sure it was such a good idea to come? You're pretty hurt..."

"Of course. If anything, I feel guilty for not coming in the first place, with a little scratch like this."

"It's...more than just a little scratch." Kaguya smiled. Gratitude, with perhaps some exasperation mixed in. "In any case, thank you for coming...for saving me. Even if it was a surprise."

"From the way you reacted, you could have fooled me."

"Hmph. It's not my fault you're so persistent, Captain," she said.

A moment later she gasped softly in realization.

“Speaking of which, everything seemed all right earlier.”

“What do you mean...?”

“Remember, you saved me when I was almost hit by that hero attack. We came into pretty close contact when that happened, but you didn’t have any of your symptoms, did you?”

“I guess not.”

Azuma had lost everything from his knees down at that point. He had pulled Kaguya toward him to protect her when that ax had come flying.

And then.

“ ... ”

Azuma pursed his lips shut, remembering what he had done after that.

It must have been the adrenaline from being injured, and the stress of battle, but now that it was over the memory left him feeling tongue-tied. Ordinarily, he would have never done something like that.

Although, no...at the time, it couldn’t be helped. If I hadn’t done that, the lieutenant would have died...and besides, it’s important to keep your field of vision open when you’re wielding a gun. Obviously.

Kaguya seemed a little confused by Azuma’s silence as he sat there, making excuses for himself. She soon clapped her hands together in understanding.

“The symptoms must not be a problem during battle, what with all the other stresses happening. This is an important discovery!”

“Of course...”

Let’s just leave it at that, thought Azuma.

“All the same, Azuma, it was pretty impressive how you could find the hero. Sound barely traveled at all in that fog. Wait. Was there something special about the sound of its egg?”

“No. Sometimes there are little differences, but the sound of the eggs don’t really change that much between heroes.”

“So then, how...?”

As Kaguya stared at him blankly, Azuma flashed a teasing grin. Finally, some payback.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

It wasn’t the pulsing of the hero’s egg he had been listening to. It was the sound of the egg inside Kaguya.

But I’m not about to tell her that.

He recognized it immediately. Hers was the sound he knew best. Better than anyone’s.

INTERLUDE FOUR

Thawing Ice

Later that night, Haru Takanashi was speaking with someone on the phone. No one else was around.

“Lieutenant Shinohara’s unusual behavior these past few months...”

Haru had been spying on Kaguya. She had been sent to Charon and permitted to take the field as an informer. The reason she was making this call was to deliver her report.

Kaguya’s strange behavior...

“That was just her idea of fun.”

“...? *Fun?*”

“Yes. There’s no question about it.”

It wasn’t even really a lie. Kaguya seemed to have been hell-bent on exposing herself, even when there was no personal advantage in doing so. What else could that be, if not her own strange predilections?

“As far as I could see during battle, her behavior involves no particular hindrance to combat. Well, whether she winds up dead or not is her own affair, but otherwise no hindrance. No further investigation is necessary in my opinion.”

“Wait... Is that all you have to say?” The person on the other end of the line sounded both put out and completely baffled. *“Your assignment was not to clarify, it was to counteract with whatever it took, even false accusations. You were supposed to drag Lieutenant Shinohara back here with you, that was your*

job. Her inappropriate behavior—”

“Was a bit of fun, just as I said,” repeated Haru, her voice firm. She knew there was nothing they could say in response.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Second Lieutenant Takanashi...but you were supposed to smoke Kaguya Shinohara out. Are you telling me that isn’t necessary?”

“...Yes.”

As Haru spoke, she recalled everything Kaguya had done.

She hadn’t abandoned Haru. She genuinely cared about the hero, and though she had more reason to be scared of death than any of them, she had gone so far as to expose herself to danger to save it.

Not once, but repeatedly. Even when she knew no one else would understand.

“I see. Then what you are saying is you are against us. Are you sure you are ready for that?”

“I’m sure,” Haru asserted without hesitation. “Besides, what’s fair about an investigation if the report has already been decided? I can see full well that this order didn’t come from our people—from Inspection. This was your own arbitrary stunt.”

Haru heard a small grunt. The person on the other end seemed to be at a loss for words.

“I don’t know why you marked Kaguya Shinohara out as a target, but I won’t be accepting any more unofficial orders, even if that means being tossed out of Inspection.”

“Biting the hand that feeds you, I see. So this is how the hand feels... Don’t you want those records anymore, about the heroes?”

“Of course I do. But records, of all things—well, maybe not of all things—but records aren’t that important to me anymore.”

It wasn’t a lie.

Kaguya, for all her unusual ways, was much more valuable than a bunch of documents that might have been fabricated. Knowing this, it made no sense to keep clinging to some possibility that may or may not even exist. That was all.

No. Not all.

“Besides—I thought I might try on a little naïveté for myself, for a change.”

With that, Haru hung up the phone, not even waiting for a response.

Haru’s dream of stopping people from turning into heroes might not collapse just because Inspection got rid of her, but it was probably going to be harder now. She wouldn’t be able to get her hands on the information she needed.

But strangely she did not regret her decision, not after what she had seen, and how Kaguya had kept trying, again and again, even when things didn’t go her way the first time.

In fact, despite everything, the expression on Haru’s face right now was almost cheerful.



EPILOGUE ONE

Missing

In the end, Kaguya kept her promise to Mari.

It was several days after they had handled the fog hero. Kaguya was visiting the Extermination Bureau Headquarters at Mari's invitation.

"For God's sake. Who would leave important documents tucked away inside a book somewhere and lose them?!"

"Oooh, I'm sorry..."

This time, however, they weren't meeting around a lunch table.

Kaguya and Mari were in the headquarter archives, relying on what Mari could remember as they searched for a certain set of documents.

The archives were not off-limits. Anyone assigned to the department could enter whenever they liked. However, between the massive number of documents stored inside and how disorganized the place was, as all old documents now out of use (things that were not important enough to be destroyed) were placed inside, very few people ever actually bothered to enter.

The place was chaos. Mari and Kaguya were currently huddled up in one corner of the archives, which was the size of a university library, as they searched through separate shelves.

Kaguya was searching the shelves closest to the entrance. She was going through each book, one by one, because there was a chance someone had left what they were looking for tucked away inside one of their pages.

"Huh?"

As Kaguya was furtively rifling through the books, she heard Mari say something.

“What is it? Did you find what we’re looking for?” Kaguya asked her.

“No, something else.”

Mari approached Kaguya tentatively and held out a small square of paper. It was smaller than what Kaguya had been expecting, and didn’t look like something that belonged in a repository such as this.

“Is that...a photograph? It’s rare to see one printed out...,” Kaguya remarked.

“It looks like it was probably just a commemorative photo, but see here, in the background?”

Kaguya directed her attention to where Mari was pointing, and her eyes went wide. Mari was right; there was an aberration in the background with its face blacked out. The couple in the photo looked happy. Adults couldn’t perceive these monsters.

But that wasn’t the most interesting part. An electronic display had been installed on one of the buildings in the background, showing the date and time at which the photograph had been taken.

April 6, 2030. 2:20 PM.

Mari hesitantly said what was on Kaguya’s mind.

“This photograph is from thirty years ago, isn’t it...?”

“I-it is...”

Kaguya stared transfixed at the hero in the photograph’s background.

It didn’t resemble a *hero*. It looked like the kind of aberration Kaguya knew all too well, its face blacked out. The kind of creature that made you want to look away. There was no way the name “hero” had come from a creature such as this.

But from what Kaguya had heard, heroes were supposedly given their name because their appearance had at first been similar to an anime or cartoon hero.

“Well, it probably would have taken a few months after heroes appeared for

people to figure out what was going on. For all we know, this could have been the dozenth hero or so to show up.”

“Yes...you could be right.”

And yet it was hard to shake the feeling that something seemed off.

For starters, there were no existing records of the first hero. In other words, strictly speaking, no one knew for sure why heroes had been given that name. Furthermore, while they knew how many years ago the creatures had first appeared, they didn’t know the exact month and day—a fact which, for some reason, no one seemed to find strange.

But even before getting to that, something seemed even stranger.

Despite the presence of a hero, the surrounding neighborhood looked fine. The couple was smiling happily. Heroes, by their very nature, were supposed to hurt people. They were supposed to be monsters. So then...why didn’t there seem to be anything wrong?

If the hero had gone on a rampage right after the shutter had been snapped, this photograph wouldn’t have survived in the first place.

“Heroes...”

There was an advertisement for an anime on one of the other buildings in the photograph’s background. Written there, in the advertisement— Heroes had the power to save.

“No, heroes...”

Heroes had the power to destroy.

“What is this...?”

Kaguya was confused. Everything they knew was being turned on its head. She flipped the photo over and looked at the back. She stared in amazement at the words she found scrawled there: *Technical No. 1*

It was the predecessor to Technical No. 2, which had been destroyed six years ago. Why would those words be written here?

“Lieutenant, are you there?” It was a call from Azuma over the comms.

Kaguya snapped out of her thoughts. “Another one has appeared. They’ve been showing up a lot quicker lately—this one’s in Tokyo, Ward Three. It shouldn’t be far from where you are now. I’ve been authorized to go as well. Come quick.”

“Ah... R-roger! I’ll head there now.”

She returned the photograph to Mari, who furrowed her brow.

“I’m sorry, Mari. we’re going to have to postpone this. I need to go.”

“O-okay... Be careful out there.”

Mari sounded strained, but accepting. Kaguya smiled apologetically. Internally, however, she sensed that something was off. It was a feeling she couldn’t quite shake. It felt like there was something she was missing.

INTERLUDE FIVE

Careless

There's something I'm missing.

The Director hadn't been able to get that thought out of her head.

"A conscious hunk of meat, huh...?"

She understood now that these hero cells, as well as the Chronoses made from those cells, possessed a consciousness, but she hadn't been able to figure out more than that. She could observe changes in their emotions by immersing them in liquid, but despite having managed to kill that sample the other day using a Chronos, she had yet to find a fundamental method for breaking down their physical substance.

"If I could apply a more powerful force...for instance, nuclear, maybe then it would be possible."

But they had already succeeded twenty-five years ago. Could something possible in the past really be so impossible now? Especially with twenty-five years of progress in between?

This problem was like a maze, and the Director had stumbled into yet another dead end.

"And what do you think...? Oh, that's right, you can't talk, can you?" said the Director, speaking listlessly to the hunk of tissue sitting on the table before her.

Naturally, the flesh did not respond. At the moment, it wasn't even immersed in liquid, so it really was just a piece of matter.

Too bad. If it could talk, maybe it would be able to tell us something, thought

the Director, starting to feel tired.

Come to think of it, what about Kaguya...?

She was the one person capable of exchanging words with those creatures, even though they couldn't speak. Maybe, next time, she should get Kaguya to help—although she knew how Kaguya felt about heroes.

Actually, why do heroes even possess mental worlds to begin with?

If all its actions, its attacks, were part of a reproductive behavior carried out through humans, why would it need such mental worlds in the first place? It would make more sense to destroy the ego and turn the person into a rampaging puppet.

Suppose a hero were to reject the process on their own, without Kaguya's interference? The Director didn't think anything like that would actually happen, but it was a possibility that left room for failure.

Biological workings—at least when it comes to leaving offspring—should be as logical and efficient as possible.

For instance, immobile plants emit sweet scents from their flowers to induce insects and birds to carry their pollen. The flowers may be beautiful, but they are only beautiful in order to attract such creatures, never beautiful simply for the sake of beauty.

But when it comes to Goddesses, there seem to be flaws—or more accurately, if all they wanted to do was propagate, there would be no need to leave the human will intact.

Furthermore, the Director had these mental worlds inside these heroes and the existence of sentient weapons to contend with. The Director highly doubted the two were unrelated.

She wasn't sure if heroes and Goddesses had come from nature, or if they were artificial, but something smelled fishy. It all seemed too cut-and-dried for weapons with hearts and minds.

It's unnatural. Almost as if they existed solely for that purpose.

People twenty-five years ago shouldn't have known that heroes had egos. By

extension, they shouldn't have known that Chronoses were sentient, either.

So why had production been stopped? Because the weapons had been failures?

Under normal circumstances, you would expect the presence of rebounds to lead to more research, rather than less, in an attempt to eliminate those rebounds. Instead, they had halted experiments entirely, as if such experiments collided with some sort of taboo and needed to be hidden.

"A taboo, huh...? You would think they would be long past such concerns by the time they embarked on creating weapons as horrendous as these."

Of course, the Extermination Bureau probably hadn't known the truth about Chronoses at the time. The Director had already submitted a report on the matter. Technically, she was required to report on what she was doing. If she didn't, she would have Inspection breathing down her neck.

The very idea behind the development of Chronoses was approaching blasphemy. Chronoses were created from the enemies—the heroes. People relied on the enemy in order to defeat the enemy. A highly warped arrangement.

Guns and whips, things created by people, are required to hunt creatures such as tigers and bears, as well.

But those weapons aren't made from the hides of tigers.

Not to mention...

Even if Chronoses were developed thirty years ago, development couldn't have started right after heroes appeared. Only children could see them, after all.

According to what she had been told, the Extermination Bureau was just a collection of volunteers at first. They couldn't rely on adults.

This would mean, at the very least, they must not have been able to put up much of a fight against the first heroes to appear. Considering how much difficulty the Director was experiencing, it had also probably taken quite some time before the first Chronos was successfully developed.

So how on Earth did they manage until—?

Before she could finish the question, a thought suddenly occurred to her. A new hypothesis sprang like magic into her mind.

“What if...it happened the other way around...?”

It only took a few seconds. The Director’s genius was unmatched. A new possibility, one that should have been impossible, to undermine every theory she had ever formed until now.

“Hold on, that would be a pretty big leap... If that were true...”

Why had no one noticed until now? Or...why had no one been *allowed* to notice?

“Of course... *That’s where the name comes from.*”

The Director stood up from her chair with a start. If her suspicions were true—*Kaguya might be in danger.*

“She’s out on a mission now, I think. I need to contact Mirai quickly.”

As the Director was about to leave the lab, striding quickly and with purpose, the door suddenly squeaked, moving slightly. But the Director hadn’t touched it yet. Someone had placed their hand on it from the outside. Someone was there.

“Who’s there...? Mari?” asked the Director, her face stiff. She already knew the answer.

Mari knew better than to enter without knocking. And, at the moment, the Director and Mari were the only ones stationed at Technical. That meant it was an outsider.

“This place is supposed to be off-limits. Who is—?”

The Director froze, mid-sentence. She had caught sight of it, with her ebony black eyes. A piercing gaze, cold and impersonal, was pointed her way. And, equally piercing, the silvery-white blade of a curved saber.

That instant the blade swung through the air, as it pierced her throat with a wet and meaty slash spraying blood everywhere—that millisecond of brutality, her own death...

“...Ha-ha...”

The moment burned itself into her retinas as she laughed, half in self-contempt, half in contempt of the person now standing before her. Her thoughts were growing muddled, but she already knew this was the end.

“You wanted a katana, didn’t you?” said the voice, heavy and low. “Well, congratulations. Your foolish curiosity has been rewarded.”

Of course—I drew too much attention—

The Director cursed herself. Why had she submitted that report? At least she had only put her name on it. That meant there was still someone left who knew that Chronoses were sentient.

My life doesn’t matter. This was unanticipated, but Kaguya and Mari will carry on in my place.

The Director had two talented disciples, two stunning vessels to carry on with her work. If anyone should despair, it was the other side.

Those fools. They have no idea what they’ve done.

With the Director’s death, *she* would investigate and take action. She would get to the bottom of why her former boss had been killed. Once Kaguya Shinohara sunk her teeth into something, she never let go.

I just hope Mirai will forgive me.

Mirai and Yuuna had long been friends, the kind that could trade barbs and quips—something that was hard to come by.

They had promised to get lunch together. The promise had been made three years ago, and with everything on their plates since, Mirai had probably forgotten—but the Director remembered. She always thought there would be plenty of time. But now...

I’m sorry. I broke my promise. Yumi, my sister—

Through a red haze, the Director could see the figure point the tip of their blade her way. Their face was expressionless. She saw the coldness in their eyes. That moment when the figure placed the blade between her brows was seared into her vision.

It was the last thing the Director of Research and Technical, Lieutenant Colonel Yuuna Arimura, ever saw.

Copious volumes of blood flowed from Lieutenant Colonel Yuuna Arimura's skull. The blood of the deceased woman poured out almost entirely onto the chunk of hero flesh resting on the measuring table behind her.

That chunk of flesh, no bigger than a fist, had been cut free by Captain Azuma from the hero once known as Sakura Arakawa.

Once the flesh was almost entirely concealed within that pool of blood, there was a sudden *thump*, like something throbbing.

The piece of flesh atop the measuring table sank further into the copious volume of blood. There was so much that, even if the Director somehow survived her wound, the blood loss alone would have surely been enough to kill her. In exchange for the loss of that single human life, reinvigorated by the blood of the dead, the piece of tissue suddenly took shape.

Into a beautiful bloodred tempered katana—into a Chronos.

EPILOGUE TWO

Darkness

A hissing sound, like gas escaping.

In the next instant, an explosion rang out. A gas canister, which Haru had set up, had just been shot with a rifle-type Chronos.

The entire area, hero included, was enveloped in an explosive ball of fire. The old abandoned school building collapsed, on fire, almost as if it were laughing. While the explosion did not do any direct damage to the hero, the falling rubble managed to pin it into place. Just as planned—Kaguya began running, without waiting for a signal.

“Not yet. Stay back,” said Haru, curtly, over the comms. Kaguya slowed her pace. “We haven’t exhausted its options yet. We don’t know what kind of power it might still have.”

“It’s not like it can move anymore. Aren’t you being a little too cautious?” said Koyuki optimistically—despite what she said, however, she still fired a shot from the gun in her hand, just in case.

In response, a part of the hero, one of its tentacles, lashed out at Koyuki. Fortunately, she was out of range, and it didn’t hit her.

“Yikes! That was a close one!”

“I told you...”

“I still think you’re being a little too cautious,” said Rindou, sounding perfectly nonchalant. “We can’t waste too much time after...all!”

Laughing casually, Rindou delivered a gorgeous one-two punch with his brass-

knuckled fists.

“I’m going in...,” said Kaguya, laughing as well as she gripped her Chronos lightly in hand. Even though she wasn’t able to fire it for some reason, when she pulled the trigger, she was able to talk to the heroes. She had faith in Azuma, who cleaved a path for her, and followed him. But he wasn’t there to protect her—it was a mutual relationship of shared trust.

“It looks like we might have a little trouble with this one,” murmured Azuma as he raced forward. “Maybe if Sakura were here.”

The hero they were fighting at the moment was a close-combat, tank-type hero, the kind where physical attacks really showed their worth.

“Yes, I agree,” said Kaguya, smiling and looking slightly into the distance. If Sakura were here. But... “But she’s gone now.”

For a brief moment, Kaguya recalled Second Lieutenant Sakura Arakawa’s ephemeral face as she disappeared. Kaguya wondered if Sakura had been reunited with her parents for real after that.

Kaguya hoped so. It was a nice thought.

Before she disappeared from this world, Sakura had asked Kaguya to take care of everyone for her. Kaguya didn’t believe in an afterlife, but if there were such a thing, it would probably be the endless field of flowers she had seen in Sakura’s world.

“If Sakura had lived, do you think she’d be fighting by our side like this right now?”

“Who knows? But she really was strong,” said Azuma, swiping quickly with his dagger, which he had now gotten used to wielding, before preparing for the next move. “Okay, Kaguya—you got this, right?”

“Leave it to me. I don’t care how far the Goddess tries to pull that kid in; I won’t let her.”

It didn’t matter how much darkness there was inside, Kaguya was never going to give up. She pointed her gun at the egg. Like a prayer, a plea for permission, she fired her empty weapon.

Kaguya was carried into the hero by her own momentum. What kind of world was it going to be this time? What kind of dream would they be dreaming?

“Stay back.”

Darkness, deep and vast. Kaguya was unceremoniously dropped into an abyss.

It didn't matter how vast and impenetrable this darkness was, Kaguya was determined to save the person inside. It was her mission so long as there was even one ray of light to be found.

However—

“What...? What is this place?”

It took Kaguya a moment to realize she had no idea where she was.

Genuinely, no idea. The words escaped her stunned lips. This was like nothing she had ever seen before.

There was no light. It was darkness itself, a cold black gloom precluding her from seeing even an inch in front of her face.

Kaguya gulped. The inky blackness here was so deep that she couldn't even see the tips of her own hands. She took a step back. It felt like something was eating away at her, but there was nothing there. Nothing before her. And nothing behind her, either.

Kaguya remembered something someone had once said to her.

“If you dive in too deep, you could wind up getting lost in there instead.”

This was the second time she had gotten lost. But this time Azuma wasn't here. There was no one.

There was no way, in this moment, for her to resist.

**HERO
SYNDROME**

VOLUME 3



**Comprehend the heroes who
exact vengeance on the world.**

**SPRING
2025**

AFTERWORD

Long time no see, everybody. Unless some of you are here for the first time. It's me, Rei Ayatsuki.

Thank you very much for picking up the second volume of *Hero Syndrome*. Welcome to my afterword.

It was only after the first volume was released that I realized that people expect entertainment in the afterwords to books as well. For this afterword, I would like to talk about the idea of afterwords themselves.

Apparently, an afterword is “words appended to the end of a piece of writing or book,” although some also consider it to be a letter to the reader.

But I started to wonder, why do afterwords exist at all? Why isn't just the novel good enough? I considered what I was looking for when reading the afterword to a light novel, and the purpose started to become clear. Of course, it was another form of entertainment. Maybe.

...In any case, I figured I might as well write about some of the characters' favorite foods.

First, the protagonist, Kaguya Shinohara. She eats like a horse, and her favorite foods are pretty much everything. The one thing she hates is carbonated beverages. As a kid, she tried to act all grown up and take a big swig, but it rushed up her nose and she's hated carbonation ever since.

Yuuri Azuma. Azuma doesn't eat that much. He tends to choose his foods based on nutritional value, which is why he likes eggs. He's the type who eats things even when they're a day or two past their best-by date. He doesn't really mind.

Koyuki Asaharu. In true girly fashion, she likes foods and drinks that are cutesy and fun. She could eat an endless stack of pancakes. She's also a sucker for limited-time specials, and takes tons of photos before she eats.

Rindou Yumeura. His favorite food is energy bars. He tends not to eat properly. In general, he's not the type to take much of an interest in day-to-day living. He doesn't own many things.

As for the new character appearing in this volume, she loves sour things. She's also a fan of gross and bizarre foods, and is the type to put way, way too much soy sauce on things.

Mari Ezakura. Of all the characters, she is the one with the most mature palate. She also knows how to cook for herself. She likes Japanese food, but tends to eat Western food with Kaguya when they get lunch. The Director only eats when she remembers to, and sometimes she even gives herself an IV instead. Major Mirai is the proper, three-meals-a-day type.

Now onto the acknowledgments!!

To my editors M and N, sorry for all the trouble I caused. To riichu, who handled character design for *Hero Syndrome*, Kaguya is as cute as ever. To GEKIDAN INU CURRY Doroinu, who participated in the role of creature design, the heroes are incredible! You really blew my socks off this time.

To everyone in the editing department, everyone else involved, and the readers who have picked this work up, I can never truly be grateful enough. Thank you.

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