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Tsutomu Sato
Illustration Kana Ishida

The Irregular at Magic High School

South Sea Riots Arc

20

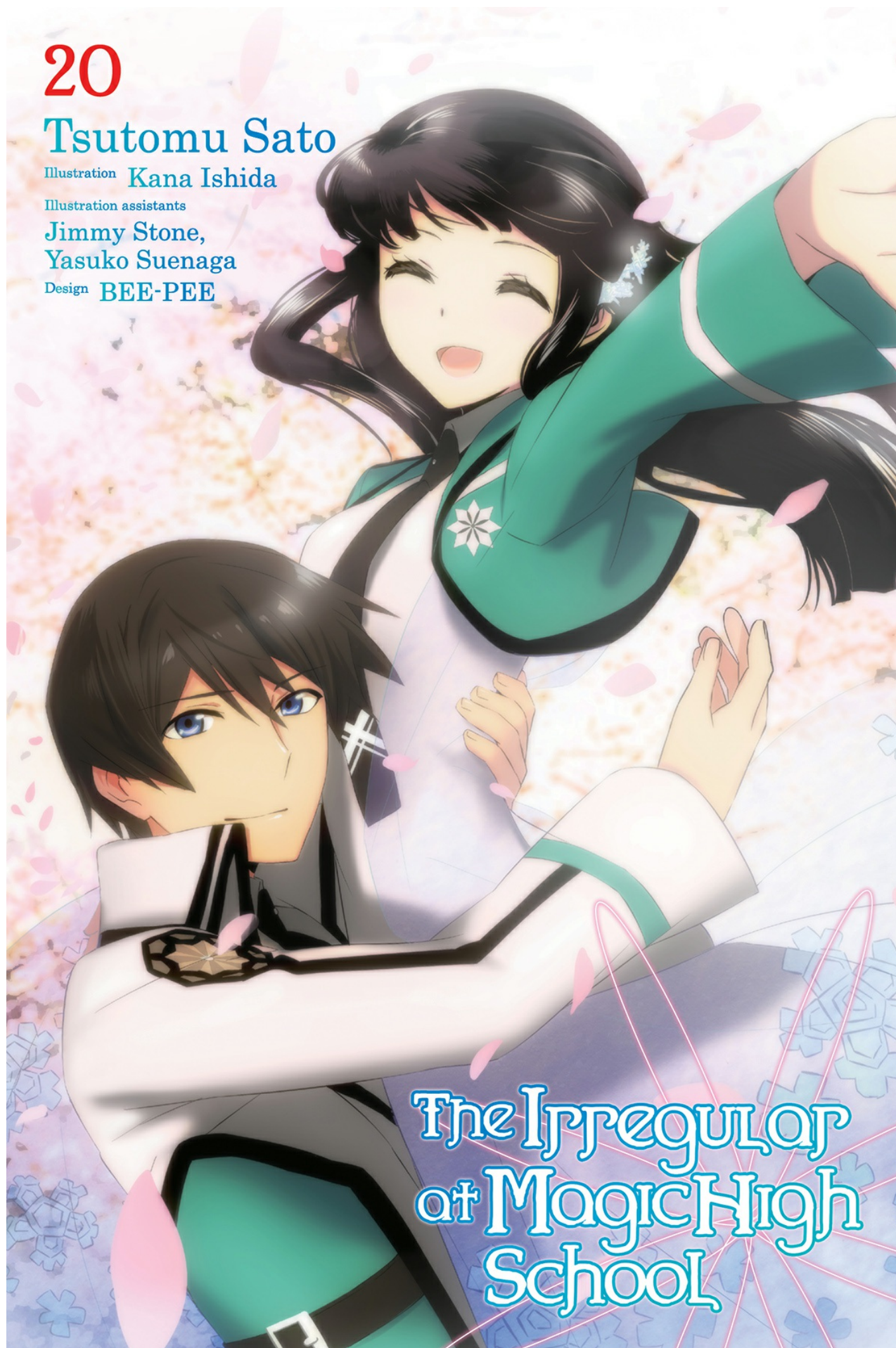
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Illustration Kana Ishida

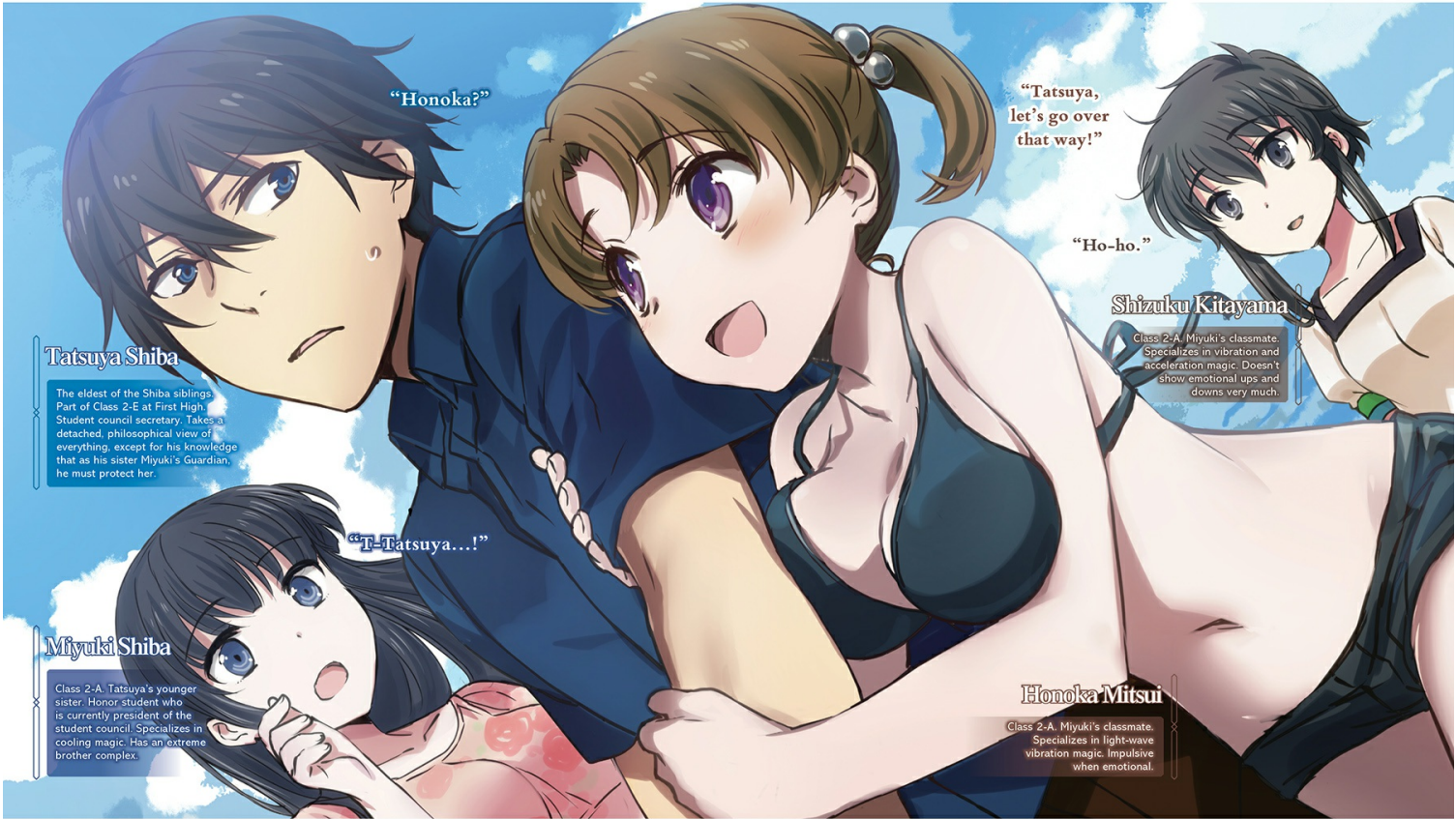
Illustration assistants

Jimmy Stone,
Yasuko Suenaga

Design BEE-PEE



The Irregular
at Magic High
School



Tatsuya Shiba

The eldest of the Shiba siblings. Part of Class 2-E at First High. Student council secretary. Takes a detached, philosophical view of everything, except for his knowledge that as his sister Miyuki's Guardian, he must protect her.

Miyuki Shiba

Class 2-A. Tatsuya's younger sister. Honor student who is currently president of the student council. Specializes in cooling magic. Has an extreme brother complex.

"Tatsuya, let's go over that way!"

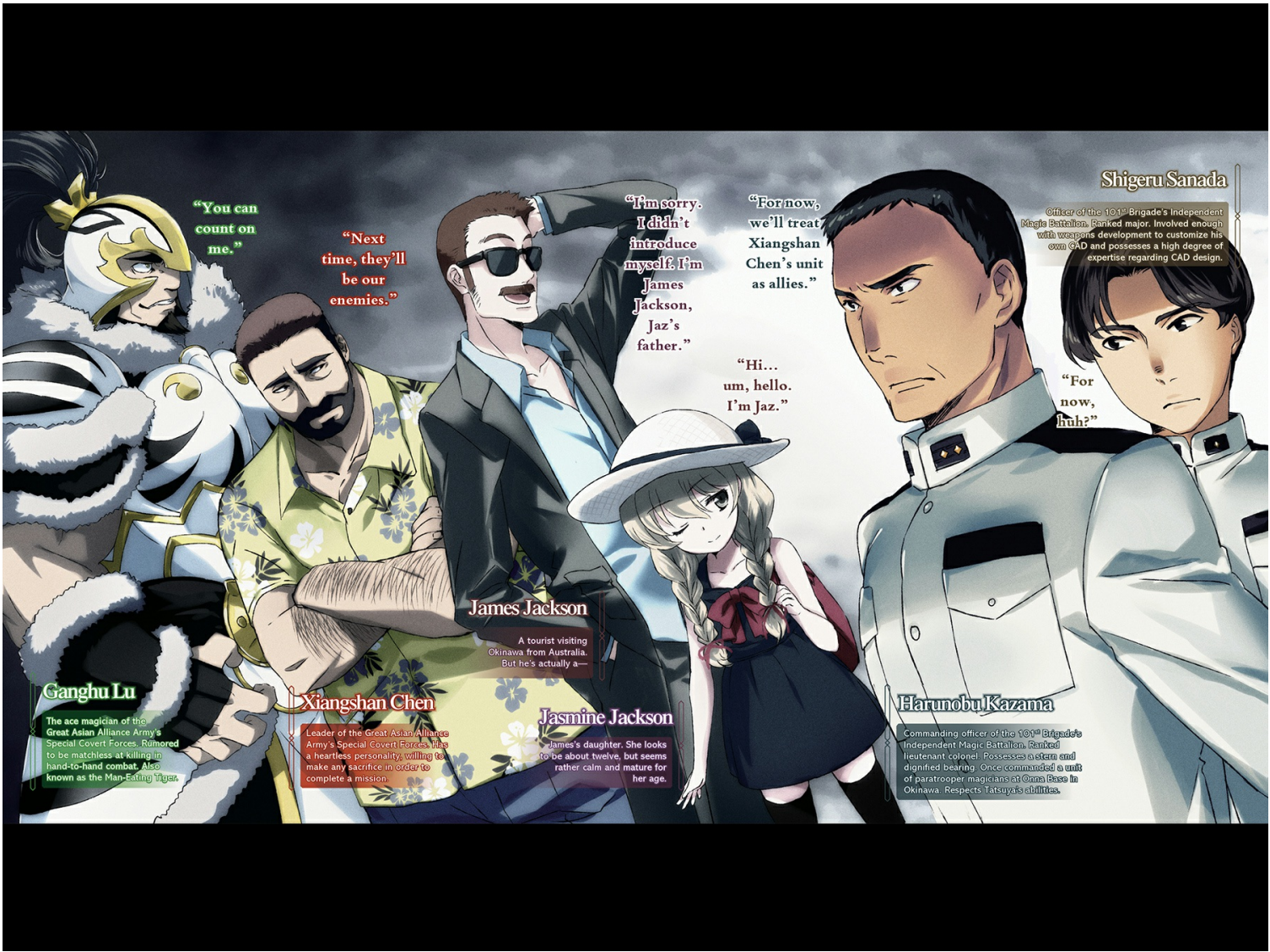
"Ho-ho."

Shizuku Kitayama

Class 2-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in vibration and acceleration magic. Doesn't show emotional ups and downs very much.

Honoka Mitsui

Class 2-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in light-wave vibration magic. Impulsive when emotional.



"You can count on me."

"Next time, they'll be our enemies."

"I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. I'm James Jackson, Jaz's father."

"For now, we'll treat Xiangshan Chen's unit as allies."

"Hi... um, hello. I'm Jaz."

"For now, huh?"

Ganghu Lu

The ace magician of the Great Asian Alliance Army's Special Covert Forces. Rumored to be matchless at killing in hand-to-hand combat. Also known as the Man-Eating Tiger.

Xiangshan Chen

Leader of the Great Asian Alliance Army's Special Covert Forces. Has a heartless personality, willing to make any sacrifice in order to complete a mission.

James Jackson

A tourist visiting Okinawa from Australia. But he's actually a—

Jasmine Jackson

James's daughter. She looks to be about twelve, but seems rather calm and mature for her age.

Harunobu Kazama

Commanding officer of the 101st Brigade's Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked lieutenant colonel. Possesses a stern and dignified bearing. Once commanded a unit of paratrooper magicians at Okinawa Base in Okinawa. Respects Tatsuya's abilities.

Shigeru Sanada

Officer of the 101st Brigade's Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked major. Involved enough with weapons development to customize his own CAD and possesses a high degree of expertise regarding CAD design.

Magic High Students Present in Okinawa

KEYWORDS

Recently Graduated

Azusa Nakajou, Kei Isori, Kanon Chiyoda, Hanzou Gyoubu-Shoujou Hattori, Takeaki Kirihara, Sayaka Mibu

Attending the Completion Party

*The recent graduates are also attending

Honoka Mitsui, Shizuku Kitayama

Attending the Memorial Service Planning Meeting

Tatsuya Shiba, Miyuki Shiba

Saika New Island

Saika New Island is an artificial island constructed by Japan in order to develop more domestic resource extraction capability. Situated off the island of Kumejima in the Okinawan chain, it's involved in several projects backed by prominent Japanese industrial groups. (One of which is a company owned by Shizuku Kitayama's father.) Since the artificial island's capability to extract undersea resources is crucial to national security, it's been equipped with sealing magic as a safeguard against natural disasters. With seals installed ahead of time, the island infrastructure's fire and shock resistance can be temporarily boosted on very short notice. The Isori family, who specialize in this field of magic, were responsible for the seals' installation on the island. Consequently, both the Kitayama and Isori families were invited to the completion party for Saika New Island.

Memorial Service

In honor of the victims of the August 2092 Okinawa Invasion by the Great Asian Alliance, there will be a memorial service held in August of this year, 2097. At Maya Yotsuba's direction, Tatsuya and Miyuki Shiba are attending as official representatives of the Yotsuba family. This visit is for the planning meeting. Additionally, Tatsuya has been given a separate job during this excursion to Okinawa.

The Cease-Fire Between Japan and the Great Asian Alliance

In the Scorching Halloween of late October 2095, the Great Asian Alliance Navy suffered the loss of a considerable number of warships and a naval base. In response, the Japan Maritime Defense Force dispatched its fleet from Sasebo in mid-November to secure a decisive victory. Mio Itsuwa, Japan's publicly acknowledged strategic-class magician and one of the Thirteen Apostles, was included in this deployment. Japan was, in effect, prepared for all-out war. However, Japan and the GAA avoided exchanging any fire, and at the GAA's request, they agreed to a cease-fire.

In March of 2096, after the GAA agreed to essentially all of Japan's demands, a peace treaty between the two nations was quickly ratified (although Japan's conditions had been admittedly conservative). Despite the agreement's ratification, there are radicals conspiring to upend the peace treaty and return the two nations to a state of active war.

The Disposition of Australia

After World War III, the Australian government assumed a doctrine of strict isolationism. The practical effects of this doctrine are heavy restrictions on immigration, emigration, and exacting customs inspections, with the flow of people and goods so severely limited that both are effectively banned. Many other nations have criticized the Australian policies, but in the wake of World War III, there were widespread incidents of terrorists posing as tourists and military installations being established in the guise of foreign capital investment. So when the restrictions were justified as necessary for national security, they were difficult to argue with. As a result, Australians interested in traveling abroad are few, and it's become quite rare to see their citizens outside the country.

The Relationship Between Australia and Great Britain

The two nations formerly cooperated on magician-related technology transfer under the supervision of William MacLeod. These efforts, which consisted of Britain sending its strategic-class magician and one of the Thirteen Apostles to advise Australia's magician development programs, involved applying MacLeod's expertise to not only programs that developed engineered magicians but also ones that enhanced naturally born magicians. It is not an overstatement to say that the postwar strength of Australia's military magician program is largely thanks to his contributions.

The Irregular at Magic High School

SOUTH SEA RIOTS ARC

20

Tsutomu Sato

Illustration Kana Ishida

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PRESS
NEW YORK

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THE IRREGULAR AT MAGIC HIGH SCHOOL

TSUTOMU SATO

Translation by Paul Starr

Cover art by Kana Ishida

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An irregular older brother with a certain flaw.

An honor roll younger sister who is perfectly flawless.

*When the two siblings enrolled in Magic High School, a dramatic
life unfolded—*

Character



Tatsuya Shiba

Class 2-E. Advanced to the newly established magic engineering course. Approaches everything in a detached manner. His sister Miyuki's Guardian.



Miyuki Shiba

Class 2-A. Tatsuya's younger sister; enrolled as the top student last year. Specializes in freezing magic. Dotes on her older brother.



Leonhard Saijou

Class 2-F. Tatsuya's friend. Course 2 student. Specializes in hardening magic. Has a bright personality.



Erika Chiba

Class 2-F. Tatsuya's friend. Course 2 student. A charming troublemaker.



Mizuki Shibata

Class 2-E. In Tatsuya's class again this year. Has pushion-radiation sensitivity. Serious and a bit of an airhead.



Mikihiko Yoshida

Class 2-B. This year he became a Course 1 student. From a famous family who uses ancient magic. Has known Erika since they were children.



Honoka Mitsui

Class 2-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in light-wave vibration magic. Impulsive when emotional.



Shizuku Kitayama

Class 2-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in vibration and acceleration magic. Doesn't show emotional ups and downs very much.



Subaru Satomi

Class 2-D. Frequently mistaken for a pretty boy. Cheerful and easy to get along with.

Eimi Akechi

Class 2-B. A quarter-blood. Almost everyone calls her "Amy." Daughter of the notable Goldie family.



Akaha Sakurakouji

Class 2-B. Friends with Subaru and Amy. Wears gothic lolita clothes and loves theme parks.

Shun Morisaki

Class 2-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in CAD quick-draw. Takes great pride in being a Course 1 student.



Hagane Tomitsuka

Class 2-E. A magic martial arts user with the nickname "Range Zero."

Mayumi Saegusa

An alum. College student at Magic University. Has a devilish personality but weak when on the defensive.



Azusa Nakajou

A senior. Former student council president. Shy and has trouble expressing herself.

Suzune Ichihara

An alum. College student at Magic University. Calm, collected, and book smart.



Hanzou Gyoubu-Shoujou Hattori

A senior. Former head of the club committee. Gifted but can be too serious at times.

Mari Watanabe

An alum. Mayumi's good friend. Well-rounded and often sporting for a fight.



Katsuto Juumonji

An alum and former head of the club committee. Has advanced to Magic University. "A boulder-like person," according to Tatsuya.



Koutarou Tatsumi

An alum and former member of the disciplinary committee. Has a heroic and dynamic personality.



Midori Sawaki

A senior. Member of the disciplinary committee. Has a complex about his girlish name.



Kei Isori

A senior. Former student council treasurer. Excels in magical theory. Engaged to Kanon.



Kanon Chiyoda

A senior. Former chairwoman of the disciplinary committee. As confrontational as her predecessor, Mari.



Takuma Shippou

The head of this year's new students. Course 1. Eldest son of the Shippou, one of the Eighteen, families with excellent magicians.

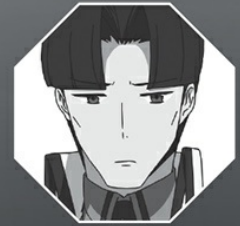


Minami Sakurai

A new student who enrolled at Magic High School this year. Presents herself as Tatsuya and Miyuki's cousin. A Guardian candidate for Miyuki.

Isao Sekimoto

An alum and former member of the disciplinary committee. Lost the school election. Committed acts of spying.



Takeaki Kirihara

A senior. Member of the *kenjutsu* club. Junior High Kanto Kenjutsu Tournament champion.



Sayaka Mibu

A senior. Member of the kendo club. Placed second in the nation at the girl's junior high kendo tournament.



Kasumi Saegusa

A new student who enrolled at Magic High School this year. Mayumi Saegusa's younger sister.



Izumi Saegusa

A new student who enrolled at Magic High School this year. Mayumi Saegusa's younger sister. Kasumi's younger twin sister. Meek and gentle personality.



Kento Sumisu

Class 1-G. A Caucasian boy whose parents are naturalized Japanese citizens from the USNA.

Koharu Hirakawa

An alum and engineer during the Nine School Competition last year. Withdrew from the Thesis Competition.



Chiaki Hirakawa

Class 2-E. Holds enmity toward Tatsuya.

Satomi Asuka

First High nurse. Gentle, calm, and warm. Smile popular among male students.



Kazuo Tsuzura

First High teacher. Main field is magic geometry. Manager of the Thesis Competition team.



Tomoko Chikura

A senior. Competitor in the women's solo Shields Down, an event at the Nines.

Jennifer Smith

A Caucasian naturalized as a Japanese citizen. Instructor for Tatsuya's class and for magic engineering classes.

Tsugumi Igarashi

An alum. Former biathlon club president.

Yousuke Igarashi

A junior. Tsugumi's younger brother. Has a somewhat reserved personality.

Haruka Ono

A general counselor of First High. Tends to get bullied but has another side to her personality.



Kerry Minakami

A senior. Male representative for the main Monolith Code even at the Nines.

Yakumo Kokonoe

A user of an ancient magic called *ninjutsu*. Tatsuya's martial arts master.



Kumiko Kunisaki

Class 3-B. Eimi's teammate in the Rower and Gunner event at the Nine School Competition. Frank personality.



Masaki Ichijou

A junior at Third High. Participating in the Nine School Competition this year as well. Direct heir to the Ichijou family, one of the Ten Master Clans.

Gouki Ichijou

Masaki's father. Current head of the Ichijou, one of the Ten Master Clans.



Shinkurou Kichijouji

A junior at Third High. Participating in the Nine School Competition this year as well. Also known as Cardinal George.

Midori Ichijou

Masaki's mother. Warm and good at cooking.



Ushio Kitayama

Shizuku's father. Big shot in the business world. His business name is Ushio Kitagata.

Akane Ichijou

Eldest daughter of the Ichijou. Masaki's younger sister. Enrolled in an elite private middle school this year. Likes Shinkurou.



Benio Kitayama

Shizuku's mother. An A-rank magician who was once renowned for her vibration magic.

Ruri Ichijou

Second daughter of the Ichijou. Masaki's younger sister. Stable and does things her own way.



Wataru Kitayama

Shizuku's younger brother. Sixth grader. Dearly loves his older sister. Aims to be a magic engineer.

Harumi Naruse

Shizuku's older cousin. Student at the National Magic University Fourth Affiliated High School.

Pixie

A home helper robot belonging to Magic High School. Official name 3H (Humanoid Home Helper: a human-shaped chore-assisting robot) Type P94.





Toshikazu Chiba

Erika Chiba's eldest brother. Has a career in the Ministry of Police. A playboy at first glance.



Naotsugu Chiba

Erika Chiba's second-eldest brother. Mari's lover. Possesses full mastery of the Chiba (thousand blades) style of kenjutsu. Nicknamed "Kirin Child of the Chiba."



Inagaki

An inspector with the Ministry of Police. Toshikazu Chiba's subordinate.

Anna Rosen Katori

Erika's mother. Half Japanese and half German, was the mistress of Erika's father, the current leader of the Chiba.



Maki Sawamura

A female actress who has been nominated for best leading female actress by distinguished movie awards. Acknowledged not only for her beauty but also her acting skills.

Ushiyama

Manager of Four Leaves. Technology's CAD R & D Section 3. A person in whom Tatsuya places his trust.



Ernst Rosen

A prominent CAD manufacturer. President of Rosen Magicraft's Japanese branch.

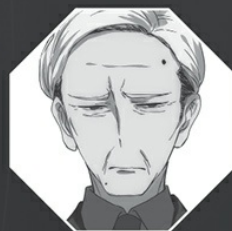
Retsu Kudou

Renowned as the strongest magician in the world. Given the honorary title of Sage.



Makoto Kudou

Son of Retsu Kudou, elder of Japan's magic world, and current head of the Kudou family.



Minoru Kudou

Makoto's son. Freshman at the National Magic University Second Affiliated High School, but hardly attends due to frequent illness. Also Kyouko Fujibayashi's younger brother by a different father.



Mamoru Kuki

One of the Eighteen Support Clans. Follows the Kudou family. Calls Retsu Kudou "Sensei" out of respect.



Harunobu Kazama

Commanding officer of the 101st Brigade's Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked major.



Shigeru Sanada

Executive officer of the 101st Brigade's Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked captain.



Kyouko Fujibayashi

Female officer serving as Kazama's aide. Ranked second lieutenant.

Hiromi Saeki

Brigadier general of the Japan Ground Defense Force's 101st Brigade. Ranked major general. Superior officer to Harunobu Kazama, commanding officer of the Independent Magic Battalion. Due to her appearance, she is also known as the Silver Fox.



Muraji Yanagi

Executive officer of the 101st Brigade's Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked captain.



Kousuke Yamanaka

Executive officer of the 101st Brigade's Independent Magic Battalion. Physician ranked major. First-rate healing magician.

Sakai

Belongs to the Japan Ground Defense Force's general headquarters. Ranked colonel. Seen as staunchly anti-Great Asian Alliance.

Gongjin Zhou

A handsome young man who brought Lu and Chen to Yokohama. A mysterious figure who hangs out in Chinatown.



Xiangshan Chen

Leader of the Great Asian Alliance Army's Special Covert Forces. Has a heartless personality.



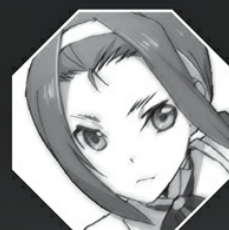
Ganghu Lu

The ace magician of the Great Asian Alliance Army's Special Covert Forces. Also known as the "Man-Eating Tiger."



Rin

A girl Morisaki saved. Her full name is Meiling Sun. The new leader of the Hong Kong-based international crime syndicate No-Head Dragon.





Miya Shiba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's actual mother. Deceased. The only magician skilled in mental construction interference magic.



Honami Sakurai

Miya's Guardian. Deceased. Part of the first generation of the Sakura series, engineered magicians with strengthened magical capacity through genetic modification.



Sayuri Shiba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's stepmother. Dislikes them.



Yuuka Tsukuba

A candidate to become the next leader of the Yotsuba clan. Twenty-two years old. Former vice president of First High's student council. Currently a senior attending Magic University. Strong in mental interference magic.

Yoshimi

A Yotsuba magician related to the Kuroba. A psychometrist specializing in reading the psionic traces left behind in psionic information bodies. Intensely secretive.

Maya Yotsuba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's aunt. Miya's younger twin sister. The current head of the Yotsuba.



Hayama

An elderly butler employed by Maya.



Katsushige Shibata

A candidate to become the next leader of the Yotsuba clan. Employed by the Ministry of Defense. An alum of Fifth High. Specializes in convergence magic.



Kotona Tsutsumi

One of Katsushige Shibata's Guardians. A second-generation Bard series-engineered magician. Specializes in sound-based magic.



Kanata Tsutsumi

One of Katsushige Shibata's Guardians. A second-generation Bard series-engineered magician. Like his older sister, Kotona, he specializes in sound-based magic.



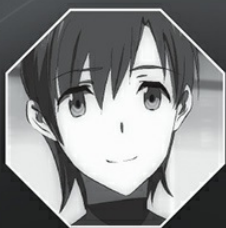


Angelina Kudou Shields

Commander of the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Rank is major. Nickname is Lina. Also one of the Thirteen Apostles, strategic magicians.

Virginia Balance

The USNA Joint Chiefs of Staff Information Bureau Internal Inspection Office's first deputy commissioner. Ranked colonel. Came to Japan in order to support Lina.



Silvia Mercury First

A planet-class magician in the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Rank is warrant officer. Her nickname is Silvia, and Mercury First is her code name. During their mission in Japan, she serves as Major Sirius's aide.

Benjamin Canopus

Number two in the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Rank is major. Takes command when Major Sirius is absent.



Mikaela Hongou

An agent sent into Japan by the USNA (although her real job is magic scientist for the Department of Defense). Nicknamed Mia.

Claire

Hunter Q—a female soldier in the magician unit Stardust for those who couldn't be Stars. Q refers to the 17th of the pursuit unit.

Alfred Fomalhaut

A first-degree star magician in the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Rank is first lieutenant. Nicknamed Freddie. Currently AWOL.

Rachel

Hunter R—a female soldier in the magician unit Stardust for those who couldn't be Stars. R refers to the 18th of the pursuit unit.

Charles Sullivan

A satellite-class magician in the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Called by the code name Deimos Second. Currently AWOL.

Kanda

A young politician affiliated with the Civil Rights Party. Supporter of civil rights in opposition to the military. Also anti-magician.



Raymond S. Clark

A student at the high school in Berkeley, USNA, where Shizuku studies abroad. A Caucasian boy who wastes no time making advances on Shizuku. Is secretly one of the Seven Sages.

Kouzuke

A young Tokyo-based politician in the ruling party. Known as a legislator with favorable views toward magicians.



Gu Jie

One of the Seven Sages. Also known as Gide Hague. A survivor of a Dahanese military's mage unit.



Joe Du

A mysterious man aiding Gu Jie's escape from Japan. Skilled enough at his job to consistently evade the Ten Master Clans magicians hunting them.

Kazukiyo Oumi

Known as the Dollmaker, a magic researcher who specializes in necromancy and a practitioner of ancient magic. Rumored to use forbidden magic to reanimate corpses.

Bradley Chan

A deserter from the Great Asian Alliance military. Rank: first lieutenant.

Daniel Liu

Like Chan, a deserter from the Great Asian Alliance military. Also one of the architects of the sabotage operation in Okinawa.

Joseph Higaki

A military magician who fought the Great Asian Alliance alongside Tatsuya during the previous invasion of Okinawa. One of the Leftover Blood—descendants of orphaned children of the American soldiers who'd been stationed in Okinawa.

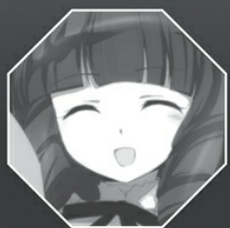
Mitsugu Kuroba

Miya Shiba and Maya Yotsuba's cousin. Father of Ayako and Fumiya.



Ayako Kuroba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's second cousin. Has a younger twin brother named Fumiya. Student at Fourth High.



Fumiya Kuroba

A candidate for next head of the Yotsuba. Tatsuya and Miyuki's second cousin. Has an older twin sister named Ayako. Student at Fourth High.



James Jackson

A tourist visiting Okinawa from Australia. But he's actually a—



Jasmine Jackson

James's daughter. She looks to be about twelve, but she seems rather calm and mature for her age.



Saburou Nakura

A powerful magician employed by the Saegusa family. Mainly serves as Mayumi's personal bodyguard.



Kouichi Saegusa

Mayumi's father and current leader of the Saegusa. Also an ultra-top-class magician.



Mai Futatsugi

Head of the Futatsugi, one of the Ten Master Clans. Resides in Ashiya, Hyogo Prefecture. Publicly she is the majority shareholder in a variety of industrial chemical- and food-processing companies. Responsible for the Hanshin and Chugoku regions.



Gen Mitsuya

Head of the Mitsuya, one of the Ten Master Clans. Resides in Atsugi, Kanagawa Prefecture. Whether it's public is a matter of some question, but in any case, he's an international small arms broker. In charge of the still-operational Lab Three.



Isami Itsuwa

Head of the Itsuwa, one of the Ten Master Clans. Resides in Uwajima, Ehime Prefecture. Publicly the executive and owner of a marine-shipping company. Responsible for the Tokai, Gifu, and Nagano regions.



Atsuko Mutsuzuka

Head of the Mutsuzuka, one of the Ten Master Clans. Resides in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture. Publicly the owner of a geothermal energy exploration company. Responsible for the Tohoku region.



Raizou Yatsushiro

Head of the Yatsushiro, one of the Ten Master Clans. Resides in Fukuoka Prefecture. Publicly a university lecturer and majority shareholder in several telecommunications companies. Responsible for the Kyushu region, except for Okinawa.



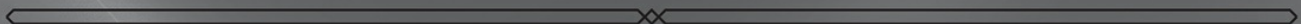
Kazuki Juumonji

Head of the Juumonji, one of the Ten Master Clans. Resides in Tokyo. Publicly the owner of a civil engineering and construction company that primarily serves the armed forces. Shares responsibility for the Kanto region, including Izu, with the Saegusa family.



Aoba Toudou

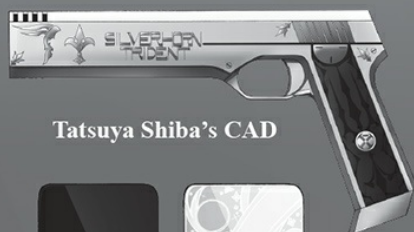
Referred to by Yakumo as His Excellency, Priest Seiha. An old man with the shaved head of a priest, his origin and past are unknown. Per Yakumo, he's evidently a sponsor of the Yotsuba family.



Glossary



Course 1 student emblem



Tatsuya Shiba's CAD



Miyuki Shiba's CAD

• Magic High School

Nickname for high schools affiliated with the National Magic University. There are nine schools throughout the nation. Of them, First High through Third High each adopt a system of Course 1 and Course 2 students to split up its two hundred incoming freshmen.

• Blooms, Weeds

Slang terms used at First High to display the gap between Course 1 and Course 2 students. Course 1 student uniforms feature an eight-petaled emblem embroidered on the left breast, but Course 2 student uniforms do not.

• CAD (Casting Assistant Device)

A device that simplifies magic casting. Magical programming is recorded within. There are many types and forms, some specialized and others multipurpose.

• Four Leaves Technology (FLT)

A domestic CAD manufacturer. Originally more famous for magical-product engineering than for developing finished products, the development of the Silver model has made them much more widely known as a maker of CADs.

• Taurus Silver

A genius engineer said to have advanced specialized CAD software by a decade in just a single year.

• Eidos (individual information bodies)

Originally a term from Greek philosophy. In modern magic, *eidos* refers to the information bodies that accompany events. They form a so-called record of those events existing in the world and can be considered the footprints of an object's state of being in the universe, be that active or passive. The definition of *magic* in its modern form is that of a technology that alters events by altering the information bodies composing them.

• Idea (information body dimension)

Originally a term from Greek philosophy; pronounced "ee-dee-ah." In modern magic, *Idea* refers to the *platform* upon which information bodies are recorded—a spell, object, or energy's *dimension*. Magic is primarily a technology that outputs a magic program (a spell sequence) to affect the Idea (the dimension), which then rewrites the *eidos* (the individual bodies) recorded there.

• Activation sequence

The blueprints of magic—and the programming that constructs it. Activation sequences are stored in a compressed format in CADs. The magician sends a psionic wave into the CAD, which then expands the data and uses it to convert the activation sequence into a signal. This signal returns to the magician with the unpacked magic program.

• Psions (thought particles)

Massless particles belonging to the dimension of spirit phenomena. These information particles record awareness and thought results. Eidos are considered the theoretical basis for modern magic, while activation sequences and magic programs are the technology forming its practical basis. All of these are bodies of information made up of psions.

• Pushions (spirit particles)

Massless particles belonging to the dimension of spirit phenomena. Their existence has been confirmed, but their true form and function have yet to be elucidated. In general, magicians are only able to sense energized pushions. The technical term for them is *psycheons*.

• Magician

An abbreviation of *magic technician*. *Magic technician* is the term for those with the skills to use magic at a practical level.

• Magic program

An information body used to temporarily alter information attached to events. Constructed from psions possessed by the magician. Sometimes shortened to *magigram*.

Magic-calculation region

A mental region that constructs magic programs. The essential core of the talent of magic. Exists within the magician's unconscious regions, and though he or she can normally consciously use the magic-calculation region, they cannot perceive the processing happening within. The magic-calculation region may be called a black box, even for the magician performing the task.

Magic program output process

- ❶ Transmit an activation sequence to a CAD. This is called "reading in an activation sequence."
- ❷ Add variables to the activation sequence and send them to the magic-calculation region.
- ❸ Construct a magic program from the activation sequence and its variables.
- ❹ Send the constructed magic program along the "route"—between the lowest part of the conscious mind and highest part of the unconscious mind—then send it out the "gate" between conscious and unconscious, to output it onto the Idea.
- ❺ The magic program outputted onto the Idea interferes with the eidos at designated coordinates and overwrites them.

With a single-type, single-process spell, this five-stage process can be completed in under half a second. This is the bar for practical-level use with magicians.

Magic evaluation standards

The speed with which one constructs psionic information bodies is one's magical throughput, or processing speed. The scale and scope of the information bodies one can construct is one's magical capacity. The strength with which one can overwrite eidos with magic programs is one's influence. These three together are referred to as a person's magical power.

Cardinal Code hypothesis

A school of thought claiming that within the four families and eight types of magic, there exist foundational plus and minus magic programs, for sixteen in all, and that by combining these sixteen, one can construct every possible typed spell.

Typed magic

Any magic belonging to the four families and eight types.

Exotyped magic

A term for spells that control mental phenomena rather than physical ones. Encompasses many fields, from divine magic and spirit magic—which employs spiritual presences—to mind reading, astral form separation, and consciousness control.

Ten Master Clans

The most powerful magician organization in Japan. The ten families are chosen every four years from among twenty-eight: Ichijou, Ichinokura, Isshiki, Futatsugi, Nikaidou, Nihei, Mitsuya, Mikazuki, Yotsuba, Itsuwa, Gotou, Itsumi, Mutsuzuka, Rokkaku, Rokugou, Roppongi, Saegusa, Shippou, Tanabata, Nanase, Yatsushiro, Hassaku, Hachiman, Kudou, Kuki, Kuzumi, Juumonji, and Tooyama.

Numbers

Just like the Ten Master Clans contain a number from one to ten in their surname, well-known families in the Hundred Families use numbers eleven or greater, such as Chiyoda (thousand), Isori (fifty), and Chiba (thousand). The value isn't an indicator of strength, but the fact that it is present in the surname is one measure to broadly judge the capacity of a magic family by their bloodline.

Non-numbers

Also called Extra Numbers, or simply Extras. Magician families who have been stripped of their number. Once, when magicians were weapons and experimental samples, this was a stigma between the success cases, who were given numbers, and the failure cases, who didn't display good enough results.



Various Spells

• Cocytus

Outer magic that freezes the mind. A frozen mind cannot order the flesh to die, so anyone subject to this magic enters a state of mental stasis, causing their body to stop. Partial crystallization of the flesh is sometimes observed because of the interaction between mind and body.

• Rumbling

An old spell that vibrates the ground as a medium for a spirit, an independent information body.

• Program Dispersion

A spell that dismantles a magic program, the main component of a spell, into a group of psionic particles with no meaningful structure. Since magic programs affect the information bodies associated with events, it is necessary for the information structure to be exposed, leaving no way to prevent interference against the magic program itself.

• Program Demolition

A typeless spell that rams a mass of compressed psionic particles directly into an object without going through the Idea, causing it to explode and blow away the psionic information bodies recorded in magic, such as activation sequences and magic programs. It may be called magic, but because it is a psionic bullet without any structure as a magic program for altering events, it isn't affected by Information Boost or Area Interference. The pressure of the bullet itself will also repel any Cast Jamming effects. Because it has zero physical effect, no obstacle can block it.

• Mine Origin

A magic that imparts strong vibrations to anything with a connotation of "ground"—such as dirt, crag, sand, or concrete—regardless of material.

• Fissure

A spell that uses spirits, independent information bodies, as a medium to push a line into the ground, creating the appearance of a fissure opening in the earth.

• Dry Blizzard

A spell that gathers carbon dioxide from the air, creates dry-ice particles, then converts the extra heat energy from the freezing process to kinetic energy to launch the dry-ice particles at a high speed.

• Slithering Thunders

In addition to condensing the water vapor from Dry Blizzard's dry-ice evaporation and creating a highly conductive mist with the evaporated carbon dioxide in it, this spell creates static electricity with vibration-type magic and emission-type magic. A combination spell, it also fires an electric attack at an enemy using the carbon gas-filled mist and water droplets as a conductor.



• Niflheim

A vibration- and deceleration-type area-of-effect spell. It chills a large volume of air, then moves it to freeze a wide range. In blunt terms, it creates a superlarge refrigerator. The white mist that appears upon activation is the particles of frozen ice and dry ice, but at higher levels, a mist of frozen liquid nitrogen occurs.

• Burst

A dispersion-type spell that vaporizes the liquid inside a target object. When used on a creature, the spell will vaporize bodily fluids and cause the body to rupture. When used on a machine powered by internal combustion, the spell vaporizes the fuel and makes it explode. Fuel cells see the same result, and even if no burnable fuel is on board, there is no machine that does not contain some liquid, such as battery fluid, hydraulic fluid, coolant, or lubricant; once Burst activates, virtually any machine will be destroyed.

• Disheveled Hair

An old spell that, instead of specifying a direction and changing the wind's direction to that, uses air current control to bring about the vague result of "tangling" it, causing currents along the ground that entangle an opponent's feet in the grass. Only usable on plains with grass of a certain height.

Magic Swords

Aside from fighting techniques that use magic itself as a weapon, another method of magical combat involves techniques for using magic to strengthen and control weapons. The majority of these spells combine magic with projectile weapons such as guns and bows, but the art of the sword, known as *kenjutsu*, has developed in Japan as well as a way to link magic with sword techniques. This has led to magic technicians formulating personal-use magic techniques known as magic swords, which can be said to be both modern magic and old magic.

1. High-Frequency Blade

A spell that locally liquefies a solid body and cleaves it by causing a blade to vibrate at a high speed, then propagate the vibration that exceeds the molecular cohesive force of matter it comes in contact with. Used as a set with a spell to prevent the blade from breaking.

2. Pressure Cut

A spell that generates left-right perpendicular repulsive force relative to the angle of a slashing blade edge, causing the blade to force apart any object it touches and thereby cleave it. The size of the repulsive field is less than a millimeter, but it has the strength to interfere with light, so when seen from the front, the blade edge becomes a black line.

3. *Douji-Giri* (Simultaneous Cut)

An old-magic spell passed down as a secret sword art of the Genji. It is a magic sword technique wherein the user remotely manipulates two blades through a third in their hands in order to have the swords surround an opponent and slash simultaneously. *Douji* is the Japanese pronunciation for both "simultaneous" and "child," so this ambiguity was used to keep the inherited nature of the technique a secret.

4. Zantetsu (Iron Cleaver)

A secret sword art of the Chiba clan. Rather than defining a katana as a hunk of steel and iron, this movement spell defines it as a single concept, then the spell moves the katana along a slashing path set by the magic program. The result is that the katana is defined as a mono-molecular blade, never breaking, bending, or chipping as it slices through any objects in its path.

5. Jinrai Zantetsu (Lightning Iron Cleaver)

An expanded version of Zantetsu that makes use of the Ikazuchi-Maru, a personal-armament device. By defining the katana and its wielder as one collective concept, the spell executes the entire series of actions, from enemy contact to slash, incredibly quickly and with faultless precision.

6. Mountain Tsunami

A secret sword art of the Chiba clan that makes use of the Orochi-Maru, a giant personal weapon that is six feet long. The user minimizes their own inertia and that of their katana while approaching an enemy at a high speed and, at the moment of impact, adds the neutralized inertia to the blade's inertia and slams the target with it. The longer the approach run, the greater the false inertial mass, reaching a maximum of ten tons.

7. *Usuba Kagerou* (Antlion)

A spell that uses hardening magic to anchor a five-nanometer-thick sheet of woven carbon nanotube to a perfect surface and make it a blade. The blade that *Usuba Kagerou* creates is sharper than any sword or razor, but the spell contains no functions to support moving the blade, demanding technical sword skill and ability from the user.

Magic Technician Development Institutes

Laboratories for the purpose of magician development that the Japanese government established one after another in response to the geopolitical climate, which had become strained prior to World War III in the 2030s. Their objectives were not to develop magic but specifically to develop magicians, researching various methods to give birth to human specimens who were most suitable for areas of magic that were considered important, including, but not limited to, genetic engineering.

Ten magic technician development institutes were established, numbered as such, and even today, five are still in operation.

The details of each institute's research are described below.

Magic Technician Development Institute One

Established in Kanazawa in 2031. Currently shut down. Its research focus, revolving around close combat, was the development of magic that directly manipulated biological organisms. The vaporization spell Burst is derived from this facility's research. Notably, magic that could control a human body's movements was forbidden as it enabled puppet terrorism (suicide attacks using victims that had been turned into puppets).

Magic Technician Development Institute Two

Established on Awaji Island in 2031. Currently in operation.

Develops opposite magic to that of Lab One: magic that can manipulate inorganic objects, especially absorption-type spells related to oxidation-reduction reactions.

Magic Technician Development Institute Three

Established in Atsugi in 2032. Currently in operation.

With its goal of developing magicians who can react to a variety of situations when operating independently, this facility is the main driver behind the research on multicasting. In particular, it tests the limits of how many spells are possible during simultaneous casting and continual casting and develops magicians who can simultaneously cast multiple spells.

Magic Technician Development Institute Four

Details unknown. Its location is speculated to be near the old prefectural border between Tokyo and Yamaguchi. Its establishment is believed to have occurred in 2033. It is assumed to be shut down, but the truth of that matter is unknown. Lab Four is rumored to be the only magic research facility that was established not only with government support but also investment from private sponsors who held strong influence over the nation; it is currently operating without government oversight and being managed directly by those sponsors. Rumors also say that those sponsors actually took over control of the facility before the 2020s.

It is said their goal is to use mental interference magic to strengthen the very wellspring of the talent called magic, which exists in a magician's unconscious—the magic calculation region itself.

Magic Technician Development Institute Five

Established in Uwajima, Shikoku, in 2035. Currently in operation.

Researches magic that can manipulate various forms of matter. Its main focus, fluid control, is not technically difficult, but it has also succeeded in manipulating various solid forms. The fruits of its research include Bahamut, a spell jointly developed with the USNA. Along with the fluid-manipulation spell Abyss, it is known internationally as a magic research facility that developed two strategic-class spells.

Aside from these ten institutes, other laboratories with the goal of developing Elements were operational from the 2010s to the 2020s, but they are currently all shut down. In addition, the JDF possesses a secret research facility directly under the Ground Defense Force's General Headquarters' jurisdiction, established in 2002, which is still carrying on its research. Retsu Kudou underwent enhancement operations at this institution before moving to Lab Nine.

Magic Technician Development Institute Six

Established in Sendai in 2035. Currently in operation.

Researches magical heat control. Along with Lab Eight, it gives the impression of being a facility more for basic research than military purposes. However, it is said that they conducted the most genetic manipulation experiments out of all the magic technician development institutes, aside from Lab Four. (Though, of course, the full accounting of Lab Four's situation is not possible.)

Magic Technician Development Institute Seven

Established in Tokyo in 2036. Currently shut down.

Developed magic with an emphasis on anti-group combat. It successfully created colony control magic. Contrary to Lab Six, which was largely a nonmilitary organization, Lab Seven was established as a magician development research facility that could be relied on for assistance in defending the capital in case of an emergency.

Magic Technician Development Institute Eight

Established in Kitakyushu in 2037. Currently in operation.

Researches magical control of gravitational force, electromagnetic force, strong force, and weak force. It is a pure research institute to a greater extent than even Lab Six. However, unlike Lab Six, its relationship to the JDF is steadfast. This is because Lab Eight's research focus can be easily linked to nuclear weapons development, (though they currently avoid such connotations thanks to the JDF's seal of approval).

Magic Technician Development Institute Nine

Established in Nara in 2037. Currently shut down.

This facility tried to solve several problems modern magic struggled with, such as fuzzy spell manipulation, through a fusion of modern and ancient magic, integrating ancient know-how into modern magic.

Magic Technician Development Institute Ten

Established in Tokyo in 2039. Currently shut down.

Like Lab Seven, doubled as capital defense, researching area magic that could create virtual structures in space as a means of defending against high-firepower attacks. It resulted in a myriad of anti-physical barrier spells.

Lab Ten also aimed to raise magic abilities through different means from Lab Four. In precise terms, rather than enhancing the magic calculation region itself, they grappled with developing magicians who responded as needed by temporarily overclocking their magic calculation regions to use powerful magic. Whether their research was successful has not been made public.

Strategic Magicians: The Thirteen Apostles

Because modern magic was born into a highly technological world, only a few nations were able to develop strong magic for military purposes. As a result, only a handful were able to develop "strategic magic," which rivaled weapons of mass destruction.

However, these nations shared the magic they developed with their allies, and certain magicians of allied nations with high aptitudes for strategic magic came to be known as strategic magicians.

As of April 2095, there are thirteen magicians publicly recognized as strategic magicians by their nations. They are called the Thirteen Apostles and are seen as important factors in the world's military balance. The Thirteen Apostles' nations, names, and strategic spell names are listed below.

USNA

Angie Sirius: Heavy Metal Burst

Elliott Miller: Leviathan

Laurent Barthes: Leviathan

* The only one belonging to the Stars is Angie Sirius. Elliott Miller is stationed at Alaska Base, and Laurent Barthes outside the country at Gibraltar Base, and for the most part, they don't move.

New Soviet Union

Igor Andreivich Bezobrazov: Tuman Bomba

Leonid Kondratenko: Zemlja Armija

* As Kondratenko is of advanced age, he generally stays at the Black Sea Base.

Great Asian Alliance

Yunde Liu: Pilita (Thunderclap Tower)

* Yunde Liu died in the October 31, 2095, battle against Japan.

Indo-Persian Federation

Barat Chandra Khan: Agni Downburst

Japan

Mio Itsuwa: Abyss

Brazil

Miguel Diez: Synchroliner Fusion

* This magic program was named by the USNA.

England

William MacLeod: Ozone Circle

Germany

Karla Schmidt: Ozone Circle

* Ozone Circle is based on a spell codeveloped by nations in the EU before its split as a means to fix the hole in the ozone layer. The magic program was perfected by England and then publicized to the old EU through a convention.

Turkey

Ali Sahin: Bahamut

* This magic program was developed in cooperation with the USNA and Japan, then provided to Turkey by Japan.

Thailand

Somchai Bunnag: Agni Downburst

* This magic program was provided by Indo-Persia.

The International Situation State of the World in 2096



World War III, also called the Twenty Years' Global War Outbreak, was directly triggered by global cooling, and it fundamentally redrew the world map.

The USA annexed Canada and the countries from Mexico to Panama to form the United States of North America, or the USNA.

Russia reabsorbed Ukraine and Belarus to form the New Soviet Union.

China conquered northern Burma, northern Vietnam, northern Laos, and the Korean Peninsula to form the Great Asian Alliance, or GAA.

India and Iran absorbed several central Asian countries (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan) and South Asian countries (Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka) to form the Indo-Persian Federation.

The other Asian and Arab countries formed regional military alliances to resist the three superpowers: the New Soviet Union, GAA, and the Indo-Persian Federation.

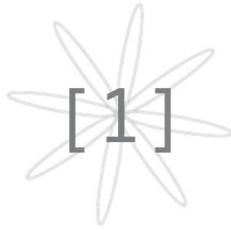
Australia chose national isolation.

The EU failed to unify and split into an eastern and a western section bordered by Germany and France. These east-west groupings also failed to form unions and now are actually weaker than they were before unification.

Africa saw half its nations destroyed altogether, with the surviving ones barely managing to retain urban control.

South America, excluding Brazil, fell into small, isolated states administered on a local government level.

The Irregular at
Magic High School



Darwin Base, Australia: Formerly the international airport, the facilities were discontinued for civilian use once Australia adopted isolationist policies after the Twenty Years' Global War Outbreak. It now functioned as a magic research facility, established with support from the UK.

Generally, isolationist policies do not imply a complete cessation of contact with foreign nations. Even when the state discontinues interaction overtly, private trade—sometimes under the pretense of a deal between private individuals—allows for the preservation of a limited form of international exchange.

This was particularly true in the case of Australia. The country's isolationism wasn't a product of explicit national policy, but rather the end result of strict limitations on immigration under the pretense of controlling terrorist threats, to the extent that entering the country became essentially impossible. However, individuals whose services the government needed were still secretly admitted entry, and when negotiations for this were necessary, an ambassador would be quietly dispatched.

Having stopped the progress of desertification and successfully turned great tracts of desert into arable land, Australia had the resources to be fully self-sufficient in terms of food and raw materials. They currently wanted only for military might—specifically, the technology that would enable them to mount an effective home defense.

In particular, they needed the militarized magic technology that would allow them to counter the guerilla tactics of invaders who'd breached their borders, while minimizing collateral damage to infrastructure and the civilian population.

Thanks to the historical connection they shared, it was the UK to whom

Australia turned for this aid.

After all, the UK was considered the USNA's equal when it came to the cutting edge of magical research.

A hypersonic transport craft was landing at Darwin Air Base—one of the latest models, whose super-stratospheric airspeed exceeded Mach 6. While the aircraft was designed for hypersonic bombing operations, the VIP it was delivering today was important enough to the British military to justify its use as transport.

The individual in question was neither a high-ranking general nor a powerful politician, but rather a civilian researcher. And yet, in terms of his importance, he was considered critical to the collective endeavor of national defense.

“Sir William MacLeod—welcome to Australia.” The commander of Darwin Air Base had personally come out to welcome the British VIP, William MacLeod, one of the Thirteen Apostles, the world's only strategic-class magicians. (The public number of the Apostles remained at thirteen because Yunde Liu's death in combat had yet to be acknowledged by the Great Asian Alliance.)

“My thanks for the warm welcome,” said MacLeod. He was sixty, his silver hair neatly combed and lean figure the very image of a gentleman. His bearing was exceedingly humble, and therefore, at a glance it was hard to imagine that he was equal in standing to the British prime minister at the very least.

“Sir William, right this way, if you please,” said the base commander, opening a car door and gesturing inside. He gave not a salute but a respectful bow.

MacLeod elegantly returned the bow before taking a seat in the Rolls-Royce limousine.

The limousine's destination was a research lab hidden in the deepest level of the underground emergency shelter beneath the air base.

It was a facility for the research and production of engineered magicians. Once, MacLeod had given Australia guidance on producing magicians here.

His expertise wasn't limited to the creation of engineered magicians, either; he was also knowledgeable in methods of enhancing naturally born magicians. It wasn't an overstatement to say that MacLeod was an instrumental part of

how postwar Australia's military magician units had come so far.

Awaiting MacLeod in a room so luxuriously appointed that it was hard to believe it was underground were a Caucasian girl who looked twelve or thirteen, along with a Caucasian man in his thirties.

"It's been some time, sir."

"It's an honor to see you again, sir."

"It's a delight to see you again, Jaz," said MacLeod. "And Captain Johnson, I'm pleased to see you haven't changed a bit."

"So am I, sir."

"Much obliged, sir."

"All right, make yourselves comfortable, the both of you," ordered MacLeod as he himself sat down on a couch.

Neither the girl nor the captain sat down, but they did stand at-ease.

"So, moving right along, I assume you've heard?"

"Yes, sir," answered the girl and the captain simultaneously.

"I'm sure it's not an operation either of you are eager to undertake, but if Japan extends their influence any further, it won't do the balance of power any favors. This mission is significant not just to your nation but to the British Commonwealth as well."

During the restoration of order after the end of World War III, the Commonwealth of Britain had been obliterated both in name and substance.

But while the organization was gone, the connections remained. Cooperation had secretly continued to lay the foundations for the New British Commonwealth to someday become a reality.

But the New British Commonwealth was not the only choice available, either for Britain or Australia. Both nations were fully aware of this, and each knew the other was considering their options.

"We have no objections to our orders. We'll do everything we can."

It was the girl, Jaz, who answered. Her full name was Captain Jasmine

Williams, and she was a member of the Williams family, whose engineering MacLeod had personally carried out.

Despite her apparent age of twelve or thirteen, she was actually twenty-nine this year, and a skilled magician.

“I see,” said MacLeod with a satisfied nod, then produced a card-shaped data storage device from his pocket. “I believe all you’ve yet to hear is an overview of the operation itself, then.”

“Affirmative, sir,” replied Captain Johnson.

“The particulars are in here, although as usual, the names of locations and individuals have been redacted.”

Just as MacLeod said, that was standard operating procedure, so neither Jasmine nor Johnson offered any comment on the matter.

“The target of the strike is off Kumejima Island, in the Okinawan chain. Japan has constructed an artificial island for exploiting underwater resources there,” MacLeod began for the two officers as they awaited his explanation.



SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2097

After seeing Masaki Ichijou off—he had been temporarily transferred to First High in order to help with a terrorist investigation—Tatsuya and Miyuki returned to a meeting room inside the Magic Association’s Kanto branch office.

“Did we keep you waiting, Mother?” Tatsuya asked. He was careful to say *Mother* and not *Aunt*, as this was the Magic Association, a public setting.

“Not at all, Tatsuya. You’re still quite ahead of schedule.”

Tatsuya was aware of this. But if he’d kept Maya waiting regardless of the time, any other considerations were moot. As such, her answer came as a relief to the siblings, in particular to Miyuki.

“Have a seat, both of you,” Maya offered gently. The tone put the siblings more on guard, wary that they were about to have some new boondoggle foisted off on them.

But in this case, it would’ve been even less auspicious to have remained

standing. Tatsuya was first to sit, followed shortly by Miyuki.

“Tatsuya, I’m sorry to ask this of you so soon after wrapping up the Gu Jie affair, but...”

Tatsuya mentally breathed a sigh of relief. The incidents caused by the Dahanese terrorist had concluded only insofar as they were over, but the matter could hardly be considered settled. For one thing, the police investigation was ongoing, and even the Diet was fiercely debating measures to prevent not *a* recurrence, but *multiple* recurrences of similar incidents.

Tatsuya had already gotten Maya’s forgiveness for being unable to resolve the incident in the most desirable manner possible. But such failures could always be dragged back out and continue to haunt him. Tatsuya was nervous, but he couldn’t be said to be overreacting.

“I have another job I’d like you to do,” Maya began cheerfully.

“If you’d said something, I would’ve been happy to come to you,” replied Tatsuya seriously.

“Oh, you needn’t be so considerate all the time. I had business here, too.”

Tatsuya didn’t ask what sort of business she meant.

The Yotsuba family weren’t mountain ascetics who ate nothing but air, and that mountain village of theirs was hardly self-sufficient.

The village was in its entirety a former secret military research facility. Since its reason for existing had been the ability to close its doors and protect its research results, self-sufficiency wasn’t impossible per se, but even if its residents could provide for their own bare necessities, they still needed money for certain things.

Like the other Ten Master Clans, the Yotsuba had their own subsidiary companies, trade partners, and sponsors, and it was occasionally necessary for the head of the family to go and meet with them in person.

“So about the errand I have for you—I want you to go to Okinawa. Along with Miyuki.”

“Both of us?”

“Publicly, you’ll be going to attend a memorial ceremony to be held on the five-year anniversary of the *event* that happened there. I say ‘attend,’ but all you have to do is sit there and listen. This is just the government trying to appease the families of the victims. While you’re there, you’ll also attend the Buddhist *Ohigan* services to celebrate the spring equinox.”

The “event” Maya spoke of was the August 2092 invasion of Okinawa by the Great Asian Alliance. In the fighting that ensued, Tatsuya’s real mother’s Guardian, Honami Sakurai, had been lost. She had been like family.

“But, Mother—we’re not related to anyone who was lost,” Miyuki nevertheless interjected, not because she didn’t want to go, but because she didn’t want to make Tatsuya relive painful memories.

Tatsuya had yet to regain true emotions, and he was unlikely to ever do so. But even if he never felt true sadness, he did occasionally experience a vague wistfulness. He did not, however, raise such excuses before Maya.

“You might as well be, though, right? And in any case, this is official Ten Master Clans business, because the two of you are the only members of the Ten with a direct connection to that day.”

“...Yes, I understand. I apologize for my lack of forethought.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” said Maya, readily accepting Miyuki’s apology. She then returned her gaze to Tatsuya. “Now then, this is the job I *actually* want you to do.”

No sooner had Maya glanced back toward her butler, Hayama, than he’d acknowledged his mistress’s gaze and handed Tatsuya a large envelope.

“May I open it?”

“Yes, have a look while you’re here.”

Tatsuya used a letter opener that had been left on the room’s meeting table to cut the envelope open, finding a thin stack of perhaps ten sheets of paper, with blank cover pages on both sides of the stack.

Tatsuya ran his eyes over the pages as he flipped quickly through them, then replaced them in the envelope. He stood and handed them back to Hayama.

Hayama bowed, then gave the envelope to Maya.

“Will you take care of this for me, Tatsuya?”

“Yes,” he answered, again taking the envelope from Maya when she offered it to him.

Immediately upon entering his grasp, the envelope and its contents vanished. Tatsuya had dismantled it.

“Mother, may I inform Miyuki of the contents?”

“Of course. I’d like the two of you to cooperate on resolving this, but I leave how you accomplish it up to you, Tatsuya.”

And this time, don’t fail me.

Maya didn’t bother saying it out loud, and she didn’t have to: Tatsuya understood perfectly well what she was demanding.

“Understood,” he obliged, bowing.

Maya nodded and stood. “I’m sorry for not offering you tea. I’m afraid my day’s gotten rather packed.”

“Not at all.”

Tatsuya and Miyuki likewise rose to their feet. As the two of them executed perfect forty-five-degree-angle bows, Maya said, “If you’ll excuse me,” and left the room.



Monday, the first day back at school after the weekend.

Miyuki was on her way to the practicum room when Shizuku called out to her in the hallway.

“Miyuki, want to go to Okinawa?”

The word startled her. Last night, her brother had explained the real motivation for their trip. There was no way Shizuku could have known about that, but timing-wise, it was impossible not to wonder.

“Okinawa?”

“Yeah.”

Honoka added helpfully, “Did you know there’s an artificial island off the coast of Kumejima?”

“Yes, I’m aware,” said Miyuki, carefully projecting the appearance of total calm.

“Wow, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” Honoka seemed impressed, since she herself hadn’t known about the island until hearing about it from Shizuku—who, in turn, hadn’t known until hearing about it from her parents.

“...So anyway, it turns out my father’s company is investing in the artificial island’s construction.”

Miyuki wasn’t particularly surprised to hear this. Shizuku’s parents were prominent industrialists, and the Kumejima artificial island project was extremely important to Japan’s economic development. It would’ve been strange if the government *hadn’t* asked them to invest in it.

“The island was completed last month. And—” Honoka glanced at Shizuku.

“—And there’s going to be a party to celebrate the completion,” Shizuku announced, taking the baton from her. “Do you want to come, Miyuki?”

“When is it?”

“March twenty-eighth. We’re going to make a vacation out of it, leaving on the twenty-fifth and coming back on the thirty-first.”

“...I’m sorry, I’ve got family obligations right around then.”

Honoka’s eyes widened upon hearing Miyuki’s regretful—and it was sincere regret, not feigned—refusal of the invitation. “Family as in the Yotsuba family?” she blurted out before hastily clapping her hand over her own mouth.

“It’s nothing weird,” Miyuki said with an awkward smile. She could understand being afraid of the Yotsuba in general, but that display of panic still felt like an overreaction. “This year is the fifth anniversary of the Okinawa Incident, right?”

For the past several years, the term *Okinawa Incident* had come to refer to the August 2002 invasion of Okinawa by the Great Asian Alliance. Honoka

would understand what Miyuki meant.

“And since it’s the fifth anniversary, there’s going to be a large memorial ceremony this summer. We’ve been asked to be present at a planning meeting for the ceremony,” she continued. “Although, if they were going for significant anniversaries, the *shichikaiki* next year seems more appropriate,” she added.

Perhaps thinking better of it, neither Honoka nor Shizuku made any comment.

“We’ll also be participating in the *Ohigan* services that will be happening in the same period, so both Tatsuya and I will be leaving for Okinawa immediately after the closing ceremony on the twenty-third. So...I can’t travel with you, but since I’ll also be in Okinawa, maybe we’ll run into each other.”

Upon hearing that Tatsuya would be going to Okinawa as well, Honoka’s eyes lit up. His duties for the Yotsuba family would prevent him from traveling with her, but right as Honoka was ready to give up on the idea, it dawned upon her that he was still heading to the same destination, which caused anticipation to bloom anew within her.

“If there’s time, do you think we’ll all be able to do something fun together?” Honoka didn’t just sound excited—she was physically leaning forward.

“Probably. I doubt we’ll be occupied with work the entire time, so if we’re free, we’ll get in touch.” Miyuki finished with a pleasant smile and nod.

“Good,” Shizuku replied. Despite her typical brevity, she seemed quite excited.



March 15. Today was the graduation ceremony for magic high school—not only First High, but all nine schools in the magic high school system would be holding their graduation ceremonies today.

At First High, the farewell party for the graduating seniors had just recently wrapped up, and the school’s halls were raucous with sounds of both joy and sadness.

Tatsuya had still been on the disciplinary committee the previous year, so he hadn’t been involved in planning either the graduation ceremony or the party. He’d stepped back and kept an eye out for mishaps. But this year, as a member

of the student council, he'd been constantly running around behind the scenes in support of Miyuki, the student council president.

After the separate (as usual) Course 1 and Course 2 students' parties had been cleaned up after, Tatsuya was retreating to the student council room for a break. Miyuki had gotten there ahead of him, having fled the throngs of guests in attendance.

"Oh, Broth—I mean, Tatsuya."

Publicly, Miyuki couldn't call Tatsuya her brother anymore. But the habit was proving hard to break. Lately, she'd been correcting herself before the word was fully out of her mouth, but it was taking time for her to become fully accustomed to the new status quo.

Somehow, she just couldn't rid herself of the idea that talking about him in this new fashion created a false impression that they were on equal footing, which didn't sit right with her.

As a compromise, she'd started occasionally calling him *sir*. She'd gotten the idea from the way Minami addressed him as *Tatsuya, sir* and thought she might give it a try. Somehow, it didn't seem particularly odd for the fairy-tale beauty Miyuki to address her fiancé so formally, so people around her more or less accepted it.

"Good work today," she said.

"You as well, Miyuki."

Minami offered a cup of coffee to Tatsuya, who was sitting in front of the terminal he so often used that it might as well have been reserved for him.

Strictly speaking, food and drink weren't allowed while using the terminals, but no one had ever criticized Tatsuya for this. Even Izumi didn't say anything despite generally being less than generous when dealing with him. Not when Tatsuya singlehandedly handled all the IT maintenance for the entire student council.

...Between that and Miyuki's charisma, it was hard to deny that the two did constitute a threat to the principles of democracy in the current First High student council.

Of course, Tatsuya did have a reason for eating at the terminal instead of one of the tables where food and drink were permitted. The (so-called) meeting table was fully occupied by a group of graduating students: Azusa, Isori, Kanon, Hattori, Kirihara, and Sayaka.

“Good work, Shiba,” said Isori without standing up.

Tatsuya likewise remained seated and responded with an appreciative smile. He’d already spoken numerous words of congratulations to the graduating students, so he didn’t feel the need to belabor the point.

Likewise, the graduates—Kanon included—had no complaint with Tatsuya’s attitude. Isori quickly returned his attention to the conversation around the table.

“So everybody here is still okay with the plan?” Azusa asked to double-check. There were no replies to the contrary.

“Still, in my freshman year I never would’ve imagined that *this* would be the group I’d be taking a graduation trip with.”

“C’mon, Mibu, it’s a little late for worrying about that.”

“Yeah, Mibu, listen to Hattori!”

“Seriously! You’re a war buddy by now! ...Although I would have rather done a trip with just Kei.”

“You can’t just say that out loud, Kanon.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

As Tatsuya drank his coffee, vaguely listening to Hattori and the rest of the graduates’ chatter, Honoka came up to him.

“Apparently, Nakajou and her friends are going to Okinawa for their graduation trip.”

“They’re going to Okinawa, too?” Tatsuya had only heard from Miyuki that Honoka and Shizuku were traveling to Okinawa.

“Yes. Isori’s family provided technological support to the artificial island project that Shizuku’s family financed, so they’re all going to attend the

completion festivities.”

“Ah, okay.”

The Isori family was an authority in engraving magic, which was well regarded for its usefulness in the field of disaster recovery. If they were properly engraved ahead of time, building materials could quickly—if not instantaneously, then certainly rapidly—have their shock-and heat-resistant properties enhanced.

The artificial island was a strategically important base for undersea resource exploitation, which gave engraving magic obvious relevance. It made perfect sense for the Isori family to be involved.

It was no coincidence that Tatsuya’s mission overlapped with this event. The job Maya had given him was related to the completion ceremony of Saika New Island, the artificial island Honoka was talking about.

Tatsuya was actually wondering whether he should warn Honoka and Shizuku, at least. In the end, he decided to prioritize secrecy.

Miyuki, meanwhile, was deeply conflicted over her friends’ involvement. But this was information about a secret mission that involved the National Defense Force. She wanted to warn them, but she had to stay silent for now.



Though the graduation ceremony was finished, the third semester of the school year would continue until spring vacation began.

Although, thanks to the specifics of this year’s calendar, the graduation ceremony had been held two days earlier than usual, their enemy had no concern for scheduling convenience.

Tatsuya’s orders from Maya were to thwart the sabotage of the artificial island off the coast of Kumejima, which would coincide with the project’s completion celebration. And if that had been his only assignment, waiting until spring vacation began wouldn’t be too late.

However, the more time the enemy was given, the more difficult stopping them would become. And there was no guarantee the scope of sabotage would be limited to the completion ceremony. If a hostile foreign power was allowed

to damage the project despite a Yotsuba magician being on-site, even if Tatsuya managed to successfully carry out his mission, the greater goal would still end up compromised.

Of course, if things went that far, it would no longer be solely a Yotsuba family problem. It wouldn't only be the Ten Master Clans whose reputation suffered, but it would be a huge embarrassment for the military as well. Given the intelligence that foreign agents were planning an operation on Japanese soil, the Yotsuba family's and Defense Force's interests were aligned.

Sunday, March 17. In a sense, it was totally unsurprising that Tatsuya—both a member of the Yotsuba family and an officer in the National Defense Force—would visit the Independent Magic Battalion's headquarters.

Nevertheless, he needed to make it clear that he was not undertaking this mission on behalf of the military, but rather aiding the military as a Yotsuba family magician.

"We'll proceed ahead of you to Okinawa. You can rendezvous with us on the twenty-fourth under the cover of attending the *Ohigan* services."

When Tatsuya broached the topic, Kazama's answer was immediate; he was quick to grasp the implications. He might have been feeling some regret over standing idly by as Gu Jie had run rampant.

In any case, whatever his reasons, Tatsuya was grateful to hear this. "I'll take you up on that, then," he said with honest appreciation. On top of which, rather than keeping the question that came to mind to himself, he simply asked it: "Colonel, will you be taking direct command in the field?"

"I won't just be commanding. I'll be a combat asset myself. The nature of the operation limits how many people we can deploy, after all," Kazama answered with a fearless grin. No doubt he was looking forward to his first combat deployment in quite some time.

"There's no guarantee the enemy force will be small," Tatsuya mentioned, but he wasn't seriously entertaining that possibility. The Okinawa Incident had been five years ago. The Yokohama Incident, one year ago. Neither the National Defense Force nor the police were so incompetent as to let another large-scale invasion happen, Tatsuya thought.

“If the enemy tries deploying a large force, they’ll be met by the military forces stationed there. From their perspective, even if the operation itself doesn’t succeed, if they cause enough of a disturbance, that’ll be enough to achieve their goal.”

Tatsuya immediately grasped what Kazama was getting at: The enemy’s tactical aim was the destruction of the artificial island and the elimination of the important figures attending its completion party.

But on the strategic level, they wanted to rouse the ire of the Japanese people and push them toward breaking the peace treaty.

If the enemy were to mobilize a large force, the media would surely catch wind of their true goal. If it was revealed that the sabotage was the work of the anti-reconciliation faction of the Great Asian Alliance, that alone would be enough to sway public opinion.

But under the present circumstances, that wouldn’t just be bad for Japan—it would be unprofitable for the Great Asian Alliance as well...



Japan and the Great Asian Alliance signed a cease-fire agreement in December 2095.

At the end of October that year, in the Scorching Halloween that consumed the southern tip of the Korean peninsula, the Great Asian Alliance had lost a naval stronghold as well as several warships. In light of this, in order to solidify their victory over the GAA, the Japan Maritime Defense Force dispatched more ships from Sasebo in mid-November. This wasn't their entire force, given the ever-pressing need to defend against the New Soviet Union, but aside from that, it was fair to say Japan marshaled every warship they could spare for the operation. Japan also sent a publicly acknowledged strategic-class magician, Mio Itsuwa, who was one of the Thirteen Apostles. Japan had placed itself on de facto footing for total war.

Fortunately, the fleet never exchanged fire with Great Asian Alliance forces. The strategic-class magic of Abyss was never employed, nor was one of Japan's precious strategic-class magicians lost. Before any of that could happen, the Southeast Asian Alliance successfully brokered a cease-fire at the request of the GAA.

And in March of 2096, the GAA agreed to nearly all of Japan's terms in signing a cease-fire agreement.

The quick ratification of the treaty was in part thanks to Japan's relatively modest demands. Mostly, it was due to the considerable losses the Great Asian Alliance had suffered.

That said, not everyone was in favor of the cease-fire.

Within any nation, and within any nation's military, there will always be

factions that oppose negotiation and reconciliation. And both the GAA and Japan had more than a few hard-liners.

Moreover, there were more proactive agitators, too, who wanted to destroy the fragile peace and return the two nations to war.

March 21. Naha Airport, Okinawa.

There wasn't anything special about the day. Like the day before it, this was just one out of 365 in the year. There wasn't anything special about the airplane that landed there, and the people who disembarked from it weren't particularly notable either. Each individual was unique, but their differences all fell well within the normal range of expectation.

Even the mountain of muscle who was 6'6" and looked to weigh well over 250 pounds passed through customs with no trouble—there were no irregularities on his passport, and nothing illegal was in his luggage.

Unlike his fellow travelers, the man was not traveling with a large suitcase. He carried only a single duffel bag as he walked toward the taxi stand.

For some reason, there was no one around him.

No one was coming out of the building. There wasn't a single taxi waiting at the stand.

Feeling suddenly suspicious, the man stopped.

He could hear a single set of footsteps approaching from the direction of the domestic terminal.

The man turned toward the source of the sound.

He set his duffel down and assumed a ready stance, his knees and elbows slightly bent.

The approaching figure was not as large as the traveler but still sturdy and well-built. It was only the towering height of the man that obscured the figure's powerful physique.

If anyone had been there, they would have been able to tell as much at a glance. The two figures were not simply large; their physiques had clearly been trained and developed with violence in mind.

“Captain Lu...” The stationary man found himself murmuring the words.

“Lieutenant Bradley Chan, deserter.” By contrast, Ganghu Lu’s words were clearly meant to address him. “Feel free to resist.”

Ganghu Lu wore the grin of the man-eating tiger that had given him his nickname.

“Damn, Qimen Dunjia, huh?” Chan finally realized why there was no one else around. Qimen Dunjia was being used to create a disjointed volume in space. This was clearly a trap that had been set for him.

Chan had six inches and fifty pounds on his opponent.

But Ganghu Lu was the one wearing an easy smile, while Bradley Chan’s face betrayed his anxiety.

Chan turned his back to Ganghu Lu.

When he sensed the approach of a presence from behind him at this feigned retreat, he aimed a kick backward.

Ganghu Lu didn’t stop. His body didn’t stop.

He intercepted Bradley Chan’s shoe with one hand, thrusting it aside.

Chan leaped.

Moving with a lightness that seemed impossible for someone so large, he landed on the roof of the taxi stand.

As Chan looked down, his lips began to curl into a smile, but then his expression froze.

Ganghu Lu was no longer standing in the street.

Chan looked up. He and Ganghu Lu locked eyes. Their respective lines of sight were on even ground.

Chan took a deliberate tumble off the roof.

Ganghu Lu’s right foot arced viciously through the space where Chan’s head had been a moment earlier. Midair, Lu rotated his body into a horizontal position, then kicked off the edge of the taxi stand roof with his left leg and landed back down on the street.

Chan was a moment quicker in adjusting, and the moment Lu's feet touched the ground, Chan attacked.

The knife edge of his palm arced down toward Lu's head. Lu met it with the upthrust heel of his own palm. The impact echoed like a great gong.

"Gang Qigong, huh?" murmured Lu.

"You're not the only one who can use it," answered Chan.

But Lu's murmur had a note of amusement in it, and Chan's answer lacked even an echo of triumph.

Lu smiled, his teeth ferociously bared. He launched himself forward.

In an instant, he'd closed the distance between himself and Chan, leaving charred footprints behind in the pavement.

He launched into a dizzying flurry of punches, elbow strikes, and palm hits.

With an expression of firm resolve on his face, Chan counterattacked. The fight was clearly tilting in Ganghu Lu's favor.

Then, in the middle of their struggle—a thrown dagger.

Ganghu Lu easily deflected it, and in the momentary pause that created, Chan leaped backward to open up some distance between them.

Without moving his head, Ganghu Lu's eyes swiveled toward the direction the dagger had come from.

Standing there was a man just shy of six feet tall, wearing sunglasses.

This was the intruder who'd penetrated the Qimen Dunjia exclusionary space.

As Ganghu Lu sized him up, a voice said:

"That's enough, Captain Lu. Withdraw."

It didn't come from the figure facing him. Nor did it come from some new attacker approaching from behind. There were no electronic speakers anywhere to be seen that might be broadcasting the voice, either.

"Fine," Lu said in Chinese before turning his back on Chan.

As he walked away, Ganghu Lu's posture was totally nonchalant. Chan kept

his guard up as he watched him disappear into a building.

A taxi pulled up.

This wasn't odd; they were, after all, at a taxi stand.

Bradley Chan and the man in sunglasses both climbed into the vehicle.



“Have you figured out the identity of Chan’s accomplice?”

Fujibayashi was standing slightly behind Kazama. “The name on his passport is James Jackson,” he answered. “Ostensibly, he’s an Australian tourist.”

“Australia, huh? Rather uncommon.”

After the end of World War III, Australia had enacted policies that severely restricted interaction with other nations. To the average Japanese citizen, this was understood as a policy of de facto self-isolation.

However, the approach Australia had taken and the isolation policy Japan itself had employed during the Edo era were fundamentally different.

While the Australian government was diplomatically isolationist, trade and passage were both still, in principle, allowed. Nonresident ownership of domestic assets was prohibited, but indirect ownership via profit-sharing plans was not.

So why was the public perception one of de facto self-isolation?

Because immigration and customs were extremely tightly controlled, and along with the strict enforcement of laws against alien crime, the transit of both people and goods was suppressed to the extent of it being effectively, if not literally, illegal.

Many nations objected to Australia’s policy in this regard. But after World War III, also known as the Twenty Years’ Global War Outbreak, the reality was that terrorists sometimes posed as tourists, and covert military installations could very well be established under the guise of foreign investment. National security was the pretext for the isolationist measures, but it was hard to argue against them when confronted with the reality they addressed.

The stringent immigration screenings also applied to citizens reentering the

country. Even being abroad for a short period of time meant enduring a thorough examination upon your return. It was called a screening, but in reality, it was an investigation.

As a result, few citizens were inclined to travel abroad, which meant opportunities to see an Australian outside of Australia were quite rare.

“Put in a request with Intelligence to get his background.”

It raised a question—if he was an operative, would he really be sporting something so conspicuous as Australian citizenship? And if he was using a false Australian identity, it raised the question of what the goal of doing so could possibly be.

“I’ll transmit it immediately.” Fujibayashi saluted Kazama, then holstered her notebook-style terminal and exited the room.

As she left, a towering man entered to take her place.

After concluding his rather flashy performance, Ganghu Lu returned to the meeting room that had been rented at the airport.

“Good work, Lu,” said the man sitting across from Kazama. It was Xiangshan Chen, a member of the GAA Special Covert Forces.

Both Xiangshan Chen and Ganghu Lu had been captured during the Yokohama Incident and imprisoned as suspected war criminals for carrying out illegal clandestine action, but once the treaty between Japan and the GAA was enacted, they had been released as part of a prisoner exchange.

The exchange of prisoners, however, had happened quietly, out of the public eye. Embedded deep-cover operatives caught attempting acts of sabotage were normally not included in prisoner exchange agreements, but these men had been used to bargain for the return of Japanese operatives captured by the GAA.

“Hardly. I let him escape.”

“Don’t concern yourself about that. I was the one who ordered you to withdraw. A suicide bombing here would play right into their hands.”

Ganghu Lu saluted to indicate his understanding, then took up position

behind Xiangshan Chen like a bodyguard.

Sanada, standing in a similar position behind Kazama, met Lu's eyes coolly. His lips curled into a predatory smile in reply.

"We've put a tail on the taxi they took. As long as they're on the island, we won't lose them," Kazama stated.

"We appreciate your cooperation," replied Xiangshan Chen in fluent Japanese. "For our part, we hope to capture not just Lieutenant Chan but other deserters as well. Thank you for your willingness to take this risk."

The rationale for letting Chan escape was the hope that he would lead them to more of his deserter comrades.

"Indeed. We're in agreement on that." Kazama—and the entire National Defense Force—wanted to round up every single covert agent who'd managed to infiltrate the country.

And so, they were temporarily cooperating with the GAA, given their shared interest in the matter.

After reaching a consensus on how to proceed, Xiangshan Chen and Ganghu Lu left the airport. They were escorted to a lodging house Kazama's subordinates had arranged for their stay. Their driver would also keep track of their movements.

When Chen and Lu left the meeting room, so did Major Yanagi, along with a returning Fujibayashi. With her, Kazama, Sanada, and Yanagi, the entire command staff of the Independent Magic Battalion had assembled on Okinawa, aside from Yamanaka.

"How did it look, Yanagi?" Kazama asked.

"I believe Bradley Chan was fighting seriously. Ganghu Lu, however, didn't appear to be giving it his all," Yanagi replied briskly, no uncertainty in his tone. Despite the area being affected by Qimen Dunjia, Yanagi had observed the fight between Ganghu Lu and Bradley Chan from a distance.

"So they're not colluding."

"I believe the desertion was real and not a feint, yes."

“I see.” Kazama nodded, then gestured for the assembled officers to sit.

“Well, it looks like the specialist won’t be rolling his eyes at us this time,” Sanada joked.

“He’s not a specialist at the moment, Major Sanada,” replied Fujibayashi, tongue-in-cheek.

“Oh, right.” It was obvious that he knew exactly what she meant and needed no reminder.

“Everything about this op, including his participation, will proceed as planned,” Kazama clarified. It went without saying that the person Kazama referred to was the aforementioned specialist, *i.e.* Tatsuya. Tatsuya was a part of this operation not as a specialist in the Independent Magic Battalion but rather as a Yotsuba family magician. This was what Fujibayashi had been joking about.

But what Kazama had called this meeting to make doubly sure of was their cooperation with Xiangshan Chen’s unit.

Earlier that month, Kazama had received orders from Saeki to participate in a joint operation with a GAA unit, before his meeting with Tatsuya. But during that meeting with Tatsuya on the seventeenth, he didn’t mention the operation.

The deserters were planning to commit acts of sabotage within Japan, and the GAA was asking for Japan’s cooperation in apprehending them. That much wasn’t particularly odd. If the terms of the peace treaty were violated, the GAA stood to lose even more than Japan did.

The seeds of division were always sprouting, so the GAA’s central government had to prioritize maintaining control over the military. If deserters from regional units were allowed to do as they pleased, insurgency could spread like so many falling dominoes. From the perspective of the GAA’s leadership, it was not a risk that could be underestimated.

On the other hand, Japan couldn’t ignore the possibility that the desertions were being faked by the GAA to create a justification for soliciting a joint operation that would give them an opening to launch a fresh attack on Japan.

Failing to be on guard for such a betrayal wouldn't be mere naïveté, but negligence and dereliction of duty.

Of course, Saeki and the 101st Brigade had considered that possibility. Kazama had been handpicked to watch the GAA military for any signs of suspicious activity.

Kazama understood this, too. He hadn't been chosen simply because of his connection with Xiangshan Chen. Nor was it his ties to the Yotsuba family. Harunobu Kazama's considerable abilities had earned him the nickname the Great Tengu, when he'd made fools out of the GAA forces in Indochina, and this was what had informed the staffing decision. There was anticipation, too, to see how his subordinates matched up against the Man-Eating Tiger, Ganghu Lu.

"For now, we'll treat Xiangshan Chen's unit as allies."

Based on the results of their cooperation thus far, and Yanagi's report, Kazama had decided, for the moment, to trust Chen.

"For now, huh?"

Of course, just as Sanada's ironic tone indicated, nobody expected this relationship to last for very long.



SATURDAY, MARCH 23

Immediately after the school's closing ceremony concluded, with Miyuki and Minami in tow, Tatsuya hurried to make the flight to Okinawa.

Normally, they would have just missed classes that day, but Miyuki was the student council president. She couldn't very well be absent for the semester's closing ceremonies.

One might think delaying the departure to the next day would have been reasonable, but the early afternoon of the twenty-fourth had been set aside for the *Ohigan* ceremony for the victims of the Okinawa invasion. Rather than feeling tight on time that day, they'd decided it would be easier to arrive the day before, even if it was a bit less convenient.

Incidentally, Honoka and Shizuku were arriving on a flight on the twenty-fifth.

Ushio Kitayama, Shizuku's father, would be flying in on the day of the artificial island's completion party, bringing her mother, Benio, and younger brother, Wataru, with him.

Azusa and the rest of the newly graduated students would have arrived in Okinawa the day before.

On his flight to Okinawa five years earlier, Tatsuya had sat in a cramped economy seat. This time, however, he had a full private mini-cabin to share with his sister. And just because Minami was staff didn't mean she was relegated to economy class, either—although she seemed uncomfortable having an entire luxurious mini-cabin to herself.

The three would be staying at a high-end hotel near the airport. The villa he'd stayed at with Honami before had been liquidated by his mother while she was still alive. Even if it had remained in Tatsurou Shiba's name, Tatsuya wouldn't have been inclined to bring Minami there.

The day they checked into the hotel, nothing of particular note happened. The next day, March 24, Hayama had made all the arrangements ahead of time, so just as their guide said, all Tatsuya and Miyuki had to do at the *Ohigan* service was be present as representatives of the Yotsuba family.

In a black dress and with her hair in an updo instead of clipped back with her usual ornament, Miyuki was extremely conspicuous among the attendees, but this, too, was hardly notable.

When the service ended, they returned to the hotel and changed before heading back out—and it was here that the main event for Tatsuya and Miyuki began.

Their hotel was close to Naha Airport, while their destination was right next to it. It was a two-story restaurant directly in front of the National Defense Force's Naha Army Base. It didn't serve Okinawan cuisine, though—it was a steakhouse run by the descendants of orphaned children of the American soldiers who had once been stationed in Okinawa—so-called Leftover Blood.

Tatsuya and Miyuki's destination was the second floor, where they had reservations.



“Hey, Tatsuya! It’s been a while, man!”

As soon as Tatsuya entered the restaurant, a large, dark-skinned man with a shaved head called out to him. The man had the cheerful, booming voice you’d expect from someone with his physique.

“Joe,” said Tatsuya, his voice faintly surprised as he spoke the man’s nickname. “It’s been some time, yes. What are you wearing? Surely you haven’t retired.”

Joseph Higaki, the military magician Tatsuya had met five years earlier, was wearing an apron the same gaudy color as the restaurant’s logo.

“Oh, I’m still active. Just got promoted to sergeant a little while ago, in fact.”

“Congratulations.”

Five years earlier, Joseph had been a private first class. Evidently, his military career was proceeding well—although he had served heroically during the invasion of Okinawa.

“I’m off duty today, and I just wear this when I’m helping out here. I don’t get paid, so it ain’t a job. This place belongs to a retired buddy of mine, see.”

“Ah, okay.”

Five years before, Joseph and his buddies had played at being swaggering small-time criminals. But during the invasion that claimed so many lives, their heroic fighting had helped ease the prejudice the Leftover Bloods had suffered under—or so Tatsuya had heard, but it appeared to be at least somewhat true.

Some of the Leftover Bloods had acted as guides for the enemy. The National Defense Force had kept quiet about this, and Tatsuya had agreed to silence. Seeing Joseph now, Tatsuya’s confidence that this had been the correct decision was renewed.

“I’ve been hearin’ your name more these days, too! Can’t believe you went and got engaged to—”

“Joe.”

Tatsuya cut him off, but not harshly. It was enough for Joseph to realize he was shooting his mouth off. “Whoops, sorry. I’m holding you up, aren’t I? Your

date's waiting on the second floor. You can just take those stairs up."

Tatsuya nodded, then led Miyuki and Minami upstairs.

Tatsuya knocked at the door and announced himself. "It's Tatsuya Shiba."

Immediately, there was the sound of a lock turning, whereupon Sanada's face appeared from the other side of the door. "Glad you could make it. C'mon in."

Sanada's gaze lingered on Minami briefly, perhaps because this was the first time they'd met. He'd been told ahead of time that she would be attending, though, so the fact that this was a party of three, not two, should not have come as a surprise.

It was Tatsuya who ended up surprised.

Inside the room waited Kazama, Sanada, and a completely unexpected individual.

Tatsuya managed to keep his poker face up, but Miyuki slapped a hand over her mouth and was still unable to fully stifle her cry of surprise.

"Lieutenant Colonel Kazama, Major Sanada. I look forward to working with you."

"The feeling is mutual," said Kazama, standing to greet Tatsuya before he turned his eyes to Xiangshan Chen, who was still sitting. "He'll be helping us with this operation."

Kazama explained this before inviting Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami to sit because common sense dictated that the man they'd be meeting with shouldn't have been here.

But this mission defied the idea of common sense, which was why Xiangshan Chen was present.

"For this operation, Colonel Chen from the Great Asian Alliance will be working with us. Confirm that you understand this, then have a seat."

"Understood. Miyuki?"

"Yes. I also understand," replied Miyuki, addressing Tatsuya rather than Kazama. She then sat in the chair Tatsuya pulled out for her.

“Thank you,” Tatsuya said to Kazama politely before taking his seat next to his sister.

Minami remained standing off to one side behind Miyuki.

Kazama glanced at Minami but didn’t force her to sit. “Getting right to it, let me bring you up to speed on the situation.”

“If you would,” said Tatsuya. Xiangshan Chen remained silent.

“There has been no major movement from operatives who have infiltrated the island of Okinawa. With Colonel Chen’s help, we attempted to provoke them into action, but for the moment, they’re being very cautious.”



Tatsuya regarded Xiangshan Chen. This elicited no reaction from him.

Tatsuya returned his attention to Kazama. “How many confirmed enemy operatives have you identified?”

“Six on the island of Okinawa, including two Japanese and one Australian.”

“An Australian?”

“According to his passport. And the flight he arrived on recorded its departure from Sydney.”

“What do you know about this Australian?”

“His name is James Jackson. Forty years old. A journalist.”

Tatsuya’s expression became less doubtful upon hearing the word *journalist*. One way to get a covert operative embedded somewhere was to disguise them as a reporter.

“The purpose given for his entry was tourism. He has his twelve-year-old daughter with him.”

“Does the daughter actually exist?”

“This is a photo of her.” Kazama handed a tablet-style terminal to Tatsuya. Tatsuya looked closely at the photo on its display as he held it so that Miyuki could see, too. It showed a bearded man along with a girl of twelve or thirteen wearing a straw hat.

“They don’t look much like each other.”

“Assuming they even *are* father and daughter,” replied Kazama with a skeptical smirk. “If it’s for his cover story, I still don’t see why they would send along a little girl like that. Surely they’re not planning to use her in a suicide bombing.”

“If she *is* a little girl, that is.” Tatsuya hummed.

Kazama’s eyes widened. “Are you saying she’s older than she looks?”

“It’s impossible to tell from just a picture.”

“Hmm. I can’t deny the possibility...but the problem is that background

information on Australians is very hard to come by. We'll take it into account as we proceed."

Kazama was addressing Tatsuya not as Specialist Ryuuya Ooguro but as Tatsuya Shiba of the Yotsuba family, probably because Xiangshan Chen was sitting right there. Chen didn't know Tatsuya's alter ego, but he had witnessed the siblings' combat prowess in Yokohama.

Of course, there was a different reason why Kazama wasn't hiding the fact of Tatsuya Shiba's cooperation with the military from Xiangshan Chen.

Magicians backed by foreign powers were carrying out sabotage and terrorism against Japan. The fact that the Yotsuba family and the rest of the Ten Master Clans were responding wasn't just unsurprising, it was completely natural. Given that Tatsuya had been publicly acknowledged as a member of the Yotsuba family, the Ryuuya Ooguro identity's only purpose now was to conceal the existence of a strategic-class magician, and nothing more.

"There hasn't been any activity on Kumejima Island yet. But we know their target is the artificial island off the coast."

Kazama gave no explanation of the basis for this certainty, but Tatsuya didn't doubt it. He inferred that Xiangshan Chen had provided intelligence confirming the artificial island as the target.

"If there are any movements, we'll contact you immediately. Until then, rest up and save your strength."

"Understood." Tatsuya knew their role in this.

As known members of the Yotsuba family, he and Miyuki were too conspicuous. It wasn't merely Miyuki's beauty that had drawn attention to them at the memorial service earlier.

They'd been stared at intensely from every direction. But the fact that nobody—not even the media—had been so bold as to approach them was proof that their circumstances were well-known.

"That's all from me," said Kazama. "Any questions?"

"Not in particular."

“All right. What are you doing next?”

“I believe Miyuki’s a bit tired after the service, so I’d like to return to the hotel and rest,” said Tatsuya, upon which Miyuki gave Kazama an apologetic smile.

This was simply an excuse not to linger. While Chen might have been the military’s ally for this operation, he still wasn’t someone Tatsuya or Miyuki wanted to share a friendly meal with.

“You just came in from Tokyo yesterday, right? I’m not surprised you’re tired,” said Sanada, who’d been silent up to that moment. He seemed to be trying to smooth things over to avoid anyone taking insult. “Fujibayashi also mentioned she was tired.”

“Makes sense.”

“So is Lieutenant Fujibayashi resting? I saw her at the venue for the service today, but there wasn’t a chance to talk to her, so I was hoping to give her my regards here,” said Tatsuya.

Sanada’s expression turned briefly awkward. Fujibayashi’s absence from this meeting wasn’t a coincidence. The reason she wasn’t here was because she was specifically trying to avoid seeing Tatsuya. But Sanada couldn’t very well just say that.

“Ah, no, she’s resting back at the base. Sorry,” was all he managed.

“It’s fine.”

Tatsuya asked no further questions on the matter of the aide-de-camp’s absence from her commander’s side.



“Hey, is it really okay that I came along?”

Just about the same time as Tatsuya was meeting with Kazama, a group was making its way through a shopping mall in Naha when a member of the party suddenly blurted out the abrupt question.

“Really, Sawaki? It’s a little late for that, y’know?” Hattori sighed, exasperated.

“Seriously, Sawaki. This is our third day here.”

“Sure, but if I weren’t here, it’d be three boys and three girls. I feel seriously awkward.”

“What...?!” Hattori was momentarily at a loss for words.

“S-Sawaki, what’re you talking about?! H-Hattori and I don’t have that kind of relationship!” rushed a red-faced Azusa hastily, popping out from behind Hattori.

“...Nakajou’s right. Honestly, I’m grateful to be spared the awkwardness of being a boy and a girl hanging out with two couples.”

Hattori glanced at the paired Isori and Kanon and Kiri-hara and Sayaka with a look that said *Could you tone it down a little?*

Isori was wearing a garishly patterned button-down shirt and beige chinos, and Kanon completed the matching look with a shirt of the same pattern and a beige knee-length skirt.

Kiri-hara wore a solid color T-shirt and white jeans, and Sayaka had on a T-shirt in the same color and a three-quarter-length skirt in white denim—making them another matching couple.

Azusa and Hattori did not match. Hattori wore a lightweight jacket, which contrasted with Azusa’s hoodie and capris.

It made sense that they wouldn’t want to have been lumped in together with the couples.

The two couples giggled at the combination of Hattori’s words and the look in his eye.

They were a group of alumni who’d recently graduated from the National Magic University First Affiliated High School.

There were seven of them here on their graduation trip—Isori and Kanon and Kiri-hara and Sayaka were the two couples, with Hattori, Azusa, and Sawaki along for the ride.

“Did seeing Shiba and his group make you think that?” asked Isori, looking back over his shoulder. Kanon was clinging tightly to his arm, but Isori didn’t seem the slightest bit self-conscious about it. None of their classmates were

unfamiliar with the pair's openly affectionate relationship. Sawaki didn't seem particularly disturbed, either.

"I hadn't thought about that specifically, but now that you mention it, that's probably related," agreed Sawaki with a nod.

"Oh come *on*," interjected Hattori from one side.

"I can see where Sawaki's coming from, though, honestly," said Sayaka. "Maybe it's inappropriate to notice this during a memorial service, but Shiba and Miyuki looked really great together." There was an admiring and almost envious tone in her voice. "Usually, even a good-looking guy can't measure up to someone as beautiful as Miyuki, but Shiba's sheer presence was every bit as noticeable."

"Although neither of them looked much like high school students," added Kiriara bluntly to Sayaka's rhapsodizing. His crack elicited a round of laughter from not just Sayaka but Kanon, Isori, Hattori, and even Azusa.

Sawaki's face was the only one that remained serious. "You're not kidding. Shiba's noble bearing was especially impressive. Before magicians or the Yotsuba family existed, you'd call a man like him a warrior."

"It's okay, Sawaki, one glance at you and it's like, wow, a samurai," joked Kanon.

"You think so?" replied Sawaki, completely serious.

As their conversation has suggested, after Isori and the rest of the alumni had attended the memorial service for the victims of the invasion of Okinawa, they headed into the town to see the sights.

They didn't have a particular destination in mind; the trip was at the "if anybody sees an accessory they like, they can buy it" level of casualness.

Which was why it had to be pure coincidence that Sayaka's eye happened to land on the girl.

"What's wrong, Mibu?" asked Kiriara, his eyebrows furrowed in concern as he followed Sayaka's gaze. "...It's not *that* rare to see white kids these days, right?"

The object of Sayaka's concern was a chestnut-haired girl of about twelve or thirteen, standing there all alone. From the color of her hair and tone of her skin, it was clear she was Caucasian.

"No, that's not it. You can't tell?"

"Huh?" At Sayaka's prompt, Kirihara narrowed his eyes and looked more carefully at the girl.

"What's up, Kirihara?" asked Hattori.

Sawaki lowered his voice. "...They don't look friendly. I don't like this."

As the girl stood there waiting for someone—probably her parents—four grown men seemed to be watching her. And they were getting closer, moving to surround her.

"A kidnapping?" murmured Hattori in a contemptuous tone, taking a step forward.

Sawaki grabbed his shoulder and stopped him short. "Wait, Hattori. Kirihara and I will go. We're close-quarters combat specialists but weak at longer range. Plus, Isori doesn't specialize in anti-personnel techniques. You're the only one who can cover the girl and have backup magic ready in case we need it."

Hattori glared over his shoulder with a look that said *Why should I?* then proceeded to walk toward the girl.

Kirihara immediately began to follow him, at which point Sayaka called out, "Kirihara, I'm going, too!" She wasn't trying to stop him—she wanted to join them.

"Hold on—those guys are clearly looking for trouble, y'know?" Kirihara said in a roundabout way.

"But," Sayaka objected, "if only you and Sawaki go, it's going to look really weird—to both the girl and the other bystanders."

Kirihara scowled. The girl was probably a grade school student—or else had just barely started middle school. Meanwhile, they were all about to be college students. Kirihara would be attending the Academy of Defense, which would make him a public servant.

It was true that if just he and Sawaki were to approach the girl, it could invite an unfortunate misunderstanding. Kirihara was forced to admit the good sense in Sayaka's warning.

"...Fine. But stay by my side."

"I know." Sayaka was fully aware that she was entirely dependent on her skill with the sword. She had no intention of doing anything reckless.

Kirihara looked backward. Hattori nodded to him. He—along with Kanon—was restraining Isori.

Kirihara and Sayaka quickened their strides to catch up with Sawaki.

Kirihara and Sawaki approached the girl, and only then did they consider that they hadn't thought through what they would do next.

Each of them had figured they would say something to her. But neither of them knew what exactly to say.

Moreover, from her perspective, they were just two strange adult men. They hesitated, realizing that by suddenly approaching her and striking up a conversation, *they'd* look like the suspicious ones.

"Hello there. My name's Sayaka."

"Hi...um, hello. I'm Jaz."

It ended up being Sayaka who spoke to the girl. After worrying over whether she should try English, considering that she didn't speak French or Italian, she finally decided to try Japanese first, which the girl fortunately understood.

"Are you waiting for someone, Jaz?"

"Daddy... Um, I'm waiting for my dad."

Sayaka decided to keep to herself the shock she felt at the girl's Japanese being much more fluent than her own English.

"I see. Did he tell you to wait here? It would be a lot cooler over there in the shade, don't you think?"

"Are you a policewoman?"

"Huh? No, I'm not, but..."

“Okay, would you take me somewhere where I can talk to the police? It looks like my dad got lost.”

Or so she claimed.

Surely she just didn’t want to admit she’d gotten lost, Sayaka thought, feeling suddenly rather fond of the girl. This was why she didn’t notice what had happened until Kiri-hara and Sawaki stepped between her and the girl.

Suddenly, there was no more bustling pedestrian traffic around them.

The four men, all wearing sunglasses, were getting closer and moving to surround them.

The men were all dressed differently, and each wore a separate style of sunglasses. But they all shared a certain similarity that no amount of clothing could disguise.

It wasn’t their facial features or body types—it was their movements.

“Four of ’em, huh?” muttered Kiri-hara, clicking his tongue in irritation.

The First High alumni had the advantage in numbers. Even just counting the boys, it would be four against four.

Nakajou has good magic ability, but we can’t just throw her into a fight. Chiyoda’s magic isn’t usable at this range without also hitting us. Isori’s magic wouldn’t cause collateral damage, but it wouldn’t be much better...

Unconsciously excluding Sayaka from the list of combatants, Kiri-hara nervously realized that, effectively, it would be three against four.

“Kiri-hara, Mibu, we’re gonna run,” said Sawaki suddenly, keeping his voice so low that Sayaka and Kiri-hara could just barely hear it.

He wasn’t making a proposal. He’d already decided on their course of action.

“Kiri-hara, Mibu, go!”

“Are you serious?” spat Kiri-hara before urging Sayaka on. “C’mon, Mibu!”

Sayaka took the girl’s hand. “Jaz, come with me!”

“Okay,” the girl named Jaz replied with surprisingly little hesitation, doing as Sayaka asked with no particular fuss.

Kirihara took the lead, with Sayaka and Jaz in the middle as they ran for where Hattori and the others waited. Sawaki brought up the rear.

Ahead of Kirihara, two men in sunglasses moved in from the sides to block their path.

“Outta my way!” Kirihara shouted to the men.

Neither of the men in sunglasses was carrying anything. Unarmed, they still came at Kirihara.

One hopped up and used the momentum to launch a quick jump kick. Kirihara twisted his body to avoid it.

Kirihara had stopped in his tracks in response to the ambush, and the other man immediately threw a right jab at him. Kirihara blocked it with his own right hand.

With his attack intercepted by Kirihara’s vertical punch, the man drew back his arm and aimed an elbow strike at Kirihara’s face.

Kirihara met it with his own left elbow, collapsing the space between them.

Immediately after the man stopped moving, Kirihara pulled back while swinging downward at his opponent’s forehead with the knife edge of his right hand.

His opponent blocked with his left arm. It felt like hitting a car tire.

Kirihara recovered and swept his leg at the other man, who was preparing to attack Sayaka.

Unable to evade Kirihara’s kick, the new opponent blocked it. He didn’t settle for defense and immediately countered with a kick of his own.

Kirihara was taken off-balance by the unexpected ferocity of the counterattack. But it wasn’t a fatal mistake. Just as Kirihara had executed his kick, Sayaka pulled her thin belt free from her denim jeans.

The belt—a seemingly decorative accessory with no practical purpose—straightened into a long, thin sword.

It was a self-defense tool Isori had made based on the Chiba family’s *Usuba*

Kagerou. Unlike that weapon, however, it had no cutting edge, but even without any special hardening magic applied, it could do plenty of damage as a blunt object. In the hands of a trained swordswoman like Sayaka, it wasn't just a self-defense tool—it was a serious weapon.

Sayaka wasn't carrying it because she'd anticipated violence, though. It was a simple coincidence.

Isori had mostly been interested in creating a concealable weapon based on the *Usuba Kagerou*, but neither he nor Kanon had any sword training.

Erika probably could have used it, but even someone completely untrained in *kenjutsu*—like Isori—knew that it wouldn't be well suited to her.

For no particular reason, he'd given it a feminine design, so he couldn't ask Kiri-hara to test it, either.

So despite only being vaguely acquainted with her, Isori had ended up asking Sayaka to evaluate the weapon.

It was a happy accident that Sayaka happened to be wearing that belt today, and she certainly wasn't going to waste the good fortune.

Sayaka struck her attacker in the midsection with the baton, which had the strength and resilience of wrought iron thanks to the engraving magic used on it. The blow wasn't quite enough to take him out, but the man retreated, putting distance between himself and Sayaka as well as Kiri-hara.

The next instant, an explosive, freezing blast assaulted the men.

It was Hattori's magic, which used a projectile of highly compressed room-temperature air that was rapidly decompressed to create an explosive blast that dramatically dropped the ambient temperature. The unexpected rush of cold air froze the man in his tracks.

Meanwhile, the man who'd blocked Kiri-hara's strike was stepping forward to initiate another attack but found himself off-balance.

Azusa looked at the man's feet, blinking. Her magic was what had caused him to slip.

The street was made of highly porous concrete to allow water to pass through

it. Forcing pressurized air up through it would create an air cushion, not unlike the phenomenon an air hockey table used.

Kirihara had been first to stumble, and in turn, he was first to recover. He lunged at the man to close the distance between them, striking at his throat with an index finger. No—not striking—it was merely a touch.

The man tried to brush Kirihara's arm aside.

But he stopped before he could finish the motion, and the man crumpled like someone had cut his strings.

Kirihara's specialty, a high-frequency oscillating blade, was essentially a magic technique that made his hand a vibrating cylinder. Anything it touched would also vibrate.

Its effects were not limited to inanimate objects.

By using his opponent's neck as the grip of a notional sword and therefore making his target's head the blade, he'd given the man a violent concussion.

After confirming his victim was actually unconscious, Kirihara turned around, expecting to see Sawaki struggling in a two-on-one fight.

However, his concerns were unfounded.

One of the men was already on the ground.

And Sawaki was about to deal the other one a final knockout blow.

The seven graduates took Jaz to the mall's food court. There had been objections from some that they should wait for the police to arrive, but Sawaki had insisted they get away from the scene immediately.

The girls had protested that taking Jaz anywhere else would worry her father, but Jaz herself had brushed aside that concern, explaining that she had a cell phone with GPS, so there was no need to worry. Her initial story about her father being lost and her wanting to see the police had been a stalling tactic aimed at Kirihara and the others who'd approached her.

"Sorry for the wait."

"Sorry for the trouble."

“It’s fine, really,” said Hattori, thanking Isori and Kanon for buying drinks for the group.

Once everyone was seated around the table, Sayaka spoke up to Jaz. “Jaz, are you okay? Was that scary for you?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you so much for your help.” Jaz’s Japanese was excellent, and her calm demeanor was far from childish. Magic high school students tended to be mature for their age, but Jaz seemed to be on a different level. And given that they’d just met her, and furthermore had been the ones to involve themselves with her business, they were somehow hesitant to ask her how old she was.

“Do you have any idea who those men were?” Kanon asked instead.

“No, not at all.” Jaz didn’t seem to be hiding anything, and none of the group had the slightest suspicion that a child as young as her would be able to lie effectively.

“I see... Well, I doubt anyone will come after you in a crowded, public place like this, but we’ll stay with you until your dad comes, so don’t worry.”

Then, as though Kanon’s reassurance had been his cue, a deep-voiced man shouted, “Jaz!”

“I’m here, Daddy.” The girl’s voice was even and calm in contrast to the man’s tense tone. At the very least, she didn’t *seem* particularly lonely or worried.

“I was so worried when you suddenly vanished! ...Um, who are you all?”



The man, apparently Jaz's father, looked over Isori and the others with open suspicion.

"You're Jaz's father, right? My name is Gyoubu Hattori." He stood as he introduced himself to the man. It was only natural that he'd be suspicious—or at least Hattori thought as much—so it was easy to overlook his unfriendly demeanor.

"We happened to see four men about to accost Jaz here. We couldn't very well just let it happen, so we brought her to a public area with lots of people around."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. I'm James Jackson, Jaz's father."

His doubts didn't appear to be completely cleared, but his guarded expression relaxed a bit as the man introduced himself as the girl's father. His Japanese wasn't as good as his daughter's, but it wasn't so bad they'd have to resort to handwriting questions back and forth. Hattori wasn't the only one who sensed a certain deliberateness in his clumsy Japanese once he started speaking to them, however, but nobody ventured to ask him about it.

"We managed to drive off the kidnappers, but we thought there might be more of them, so we decided it was best to vacate the area. If you're planning to contact the police, we're happy to come along."

"Ah, no, that won't be necessary."

"I see... Well, I don't know what your circumstances are, but I'd recommend staying close to busier locations."

"Right. We'll go back to our hotel. Thank you so much for rescuing my daughter."

"Not at all. It was the right thing to do."

"Thank you. Bye-bye." Jaz looked over her shoulder and waved as her father led her away.

Sayaka, Kanon, and Azusa all waved back as they watched her go.

Once the two were well out of sight, Hattori spoke to Sawaki in a hushed

tone. “Sawaki, why didn’t you turn the thugs over to the police?”

It seemed as though Hattori wasn’t satisfied with dispatching the four assailants. Although he and Sawaki weren’t close friends, over their three years in school together, Hattori had gotten a sense of Sawaki’s temperament. He wasn’t the kind of guy to be intimidated by a few kidnappers.

“The guys I fought were speaking Chinese.”

“What?!” Kiriwara blurted.

This earned him a sharp “Shhh!” from Sayaka, sitting in the next seat over.

“Ah, right, sorry,” Kiriwara apologized to the rest of the table, whose gazes were all focused meaningfully on him. But his mouth didn’t stay closed. “Don’t tell me...is this like what happened two years ago?”

Kiriwara didn’t have to say *Great Asian Alliance* out loud for everyone there to know what he was talking about.

“Just because they were speaking Chinese doesn’t tell us that for sure. They could be a criminal syndicate totally unrelated to the government.”

Hattori’s point was perfectly valid.

“That’s true, but their technique had the whiff of military combat training.”

He didn’t have anything concrete to refute this statement of Sawaki’s, though.

“Oh no... Is it happening again...?” Sayaka wondered ominously, and unfortunately, nobody was confident enough to say anything to the contrary.



James Jackson’s statement that they would return to their hotel wasn’t a lie.

It was the only thing he’d said that was the truth.

“What was that terrible Japanese about, Captain *Johnson*?” Jaz—Captain Jasmine Williams of the Australian military’s magician unit—asked her “father” in a sharp tone once they’d swept the room for listening devices.

“It really sounded like I was a foreigner whose Japanese was pretty sketchy, right?”

James Jackson was a false name. His real name was James J. Johnson, and like Jasmine, he was a magician who held the rank of captain in the Australian military.

“You’re not some third-rate comedian. Stunts like that will only draw more attention to us. Honestly, I’m pretty sure those kids were plenty suspicious of us as is.”

“Seriously?”

Jasmine sighed at James’s reaction, which was notably lacking in any sense of real concern. “I’ve got to put in that new partner request.”

“Can’t imagine it’ll be approved.”

Jasmine heaved a deeper sigh.

As James said, their partnership was not a recent development. Their cover story as father and daughter, too, had been forced onto them in the course of their operational duties.

Captain Jasmine Williams was an engineered magician. She’d manifested the expected level of ability her enhancements were meant to imbue but suffered from a genetic abnormality as a side effect.

Her body had stopped aging. She had arrived at her current appearance—that of a girl of twelve—when she was twenty. In the nine years since, she had undergone no apparent physical changes. It was somehow the reverse of the premature aging effects of progeria.

The Australian military had made no attempts to cure this genetic defect. She was a fully trained military magician with the appearance of a young girl. More than a few people thought that this gave her a unique tactical value even when compared to that of a beautiful young woman.

In order to fully develop that potential, the Australian military had trained her as an infiltration specialist.

Her appearance and identity as a twelve-year-old child traded freedom of movement and independence for lower suspicion. James’s role was therefore to pose as her father on a variety of operations.

Of course, if the job had just been to pose as her father, a man like James wouldn't have been necessary.

Captain James J. Johnson was 5'11" and 165 pounds, with dark brown hair and brown eyes. For a Caucasian man, he was completely unremarkable in the looks department.

However, if being nondescript were all that mattered, the Australian military was filled with men even less memorable. James was assigned as Jasmine's partner owing to his highly valued skills as a combat magician.

Jasmine's specialty was long-range, wide-area attacks. Owing to her relatively weak physique, she was unsuited to close-quarters combat.

On the other hand, James was a frontline magician specializing in self-acceleration magic. Capable of summoning power above and beyond what his physical body could already produce, tricks like snatching Jasmine right out from under the enemy and carrying her to safety were child's play to him.

In a word, their abilities were highly compatible. They'd been partners for years and knew each other very well. There was no way the brass would approve a breakup after all this time.

"Have you figured out who they were?" Jasmine stowed the chatter and switched topics to the men who'd tried to make off with her.

"GAA operatives. Guys like us."

"A counter-op unit, then," said Jasmine with a nod of recognition. She then cocked her head curiously. "How did they figure out who we were?"

"I reckon Japanese military intelligence told them," came James's straightforward answer.

"So the GAA and Japanese militaries are cooperating."

"If they weren't, I can't imagine those guys would've dared to move so openly."

"I guess the treaty was just signed, so it's not that surprising," Jasmine admitted, although James's supposition hadn't sounded like the result of particularly deep thought. She'd vaguely been thinking similar things herself.

“They need to show off how well they’re getting along now, to avoid the Soviets or USNA from feeling tempted to take advantage.”

“So by cooperating, even if it’s just on a covert op, each nation avoids showing weaknesses that an operative could exploit.”

“It’s not just that, I’ll bet. The moment they let anti-treaty sabotage happen, both Japan and the GAA will be humiliated. The GAA wants to round up their deserters themselves, and Japan can’t afford another terrorist attack happening on their own soil. Given the circumstances, they’re both probably willing to be a little flexible.”

“Their interests are just about perfectly opposed to ours.”

“Of course they are. We’re trying to ruin the opening ceremony of a big, fancy national project.”

The two weren’t just chatting about their current situation. As they conversed, they were also packing.

“I’m all set here. Jaz?”

“I’m done, too. Let’s go.”

Jasmine being targeted meant their hotel had been marked, too. It wasn’t even worth mentioning; both of them knew.

They were obviously being surveilled at that very moment. Whether they sneaked out the back or made a show of checking out like normal tourists, the result would be the same.

In order to lose their tail, they would have to get a little dirty.



Maya’s orders for Tatsuya were to prevent a terrorist attack at the celebration of the artificial island’s completion. Searching for the operatives responsible was outside the scope of his mission this time.

The 101st Brigade had been informed as much, and the meeting with Kazama had ended with the conclusion that they’d contact Tatsuya if they located the operatives. This might have also been because Kazama wanted to avoid revealing the existence of a secret strategic-class magician to the GAA while

conducting this joint operation, or it might have been General Saeki's decision.

Either way, Tatsuya was unable to act as Specialist Ryuuya Ooguro, Independent Magic Battalion Special Officer, and that came with the downside that he couldn't use military equipment like the MOVAL suit. Still, Tatsuya was grateful that it let him keep Miyuki close.

"We may as well go back to the hotel," said Tatsuya to Miyuki as they walked away from the steakhouse where they'd had their secret meeting with Kazama.

"Yes, let's. I'm a bit tired."

Tatsuya hadn't been lying to Kazama when he said they planned to return to the hotel. "Shall I call for a cab?" asked Minami after Tatsuya confirmed what Miyuki wanted to do. They weren't far from the hotel, but it would still be at least a ten-minute walk.

"Yes, if you would."

"Right away," said Minami, reaching into her handbag for her portable terminal and accessing the autonomous taxi service.

But her eyebrows soon furrowed in concern.

"What's wrong, Minami?" asked Tatsuya, noticing her confusion.

"It's... The taxi center isn't responding."

"It's not?"

Minami shook her head.

Tatsuya took his own terminal out and began to type on it.

"The only thing I can't connect to is the traffic control system," murmured Tatsuya, loudly enough to make sure Miyuki and Minami heard him. He didn't take his eyes off his terminal. "It's not a software fault. It could be a hardware failure, or...no, it could be sabotage."

Miyuki paled, and Minami's expression stiffened.

"Does that mean...the terrorists are already one step ahead of us?"

Tatsuya shook his head. "A disruption in the local network will just make the system switch to an alternate connection. Without also involving some other

form of sabotage, like arson or inciting an armed uprising, there's no meaning to a disruption like this."

"Ah, I'm connected," blurted Minami, proving Tatsuya's point.

"They're probably doing this to escape. I don't know if it's part of their plan or an improvisation on their part, but they probably disrupted a few base stations in order to throw off our side's pursuit."

When there was significant disruption to service, there were secret military routers installed alongside the public mobile communications network that would seamlessly cut in to support the smooth operation of high-bandwidth data connections. Even if the public network connections and base stations were destroyed, the network would simply switch over to separate relay points, and if there wasn't suitable local access, military hardware could connect directly to stratospheric or orbital communications platforms.

Destroying local base stations would only cause a temporary disruption in communications. And that would only last a minute—or even less.

But if the escaping operatives had a way to neutralize the pursuit team within that minute, the brief opening in the net tightening around them would give them a chance to elude capture—which, per Tatsuya's deduction, meant his current adversaries had the skills that would make such a slim chance worth creating.

"...Could this mean the saboteurs are close by?"

"More like they *were* close by. It doesn't look like they tried disrupting coverage again, so there's a high possibility that they've already escaped," said Tatsuya, answering Miyuki's question in the negative once again.

"Minami, call a cab. We're heading to the hotel."

"Understood, sir."

This singular clue pointing to the principal saboteurs wasn't enough information for Tatsuya to use his Elemental Sight to pinpoint them. At the moment, there was nothing he could do.

And this time around, there was no pressure on him to be proactive. In

contrast with the Hakone terrorist attack, dealing with this sort of problem required a different class of personnel. If the operatives were targeting the network, Sanada or Fujibayashi might be able to turn up more clues. They might even already know where the enemies were.

As he climbed into the autonomous taxi along with Minami and Miyuki, Tatsuya put the incident out of his mind, aware that he wasn't the right person, or in the right place, to deal with it.



Tatsuya's prediction was half right and half wrong.

In a temporary command center in a National Defense Force base, Fujibayashi delivered her report of the operation's failure to Kazama, her voice devoid of emotion.

"The pursuit team sent to capture the Australians checking out of the hotel was completely wiped out. No fatalities, but they were all incapacitated."

"Wiped out, huh...? Were there enemy reinforcements?"

"No. We believe it was a magical attack originating from the pursuit target."

Kazama's group had indeed grabbed the saboteurs' tail. But they'd failed to pin them down.

"What kind of an attack was it?"

"It involved a toxic concentration of ozone gas. The pursuit team is suffering from paralysis."

Sanada was also present, and as Fujibayashi gave some specifics, he mumbled to himself as he typed at his terminal. "Ozone Circle, huh?"

"Sanada?"

"Sir! Apologies, sir," Sanada offered hastily, standing and apologizing after realizing belatedly that this was no way to act around a superior officer.

"Never mind that. What's 'Ozone Circle'?"

"Sir. While there are other magic techniques to create ozone gas, if they knocked out a trained counterterrorism unit *outdoors*, there's a very good

chance they used the spell Ozone Circle.”

“...True.”

The counterterrorism unit sent to capture the saboteurs was trained to expect more than run-of-the-mill small arms and explosives from their adversaries—they should have been able to handle chemical weapons. A regular gas attack wouldn’t have taken them down so easily. This suggested the enemy’s magic had smothered the unit with concentrated ozone so quickly that there wasn’t time to react.

And just as Sanada said, Ozone Circle was the top candidate for a technique that could produce that amount of ozone that quickly.

“Australian magicians have Ozone Circle?” asked Fujibayashi dubiously.

“It shouldn’t be that surprising,” Sanada replied.

Ozone Circle was famous as a strategic-class magic that England’s William MacLeod and Germany’s Karla Schmidt used. Prior to the breakup of the European Union, development of the technique was originally meant to address the ozone hole.

Per the terms agreed upon before the breakup, the information pertaining to the Ozone Circle magic program was commonly owned by every member of the former European Union. It wasn’t terribly surprising that Australia—once a member of the British Commonwealth—had been able to secure that information for its own military magicians.

On the other hand, that meant either the man who’d introduced himself as James Jackson or the girl who was supposedly his daughter was a magician from the Australian military. Or *both* of them were.

“Fujibayashi, do we have identities for those two yet?”

“Not yet. However, from what we can tell from the psion sensor readings, we’re inferring that the magic that incapacitated our pursuit unit came from Jasmine Jackson.”

“The little girl, huh?”

“Or a magician who happens to look like a little girl,” Fujibayashi stated.

Kazama hummed. “You mean she isn’t the age she appears to be? Tatsuya said something like that, too.”

Fujibayashi’s expression faltered slightly at the mention of Tatsuya’s name, but Kazama couldn’t tell what emotion the brief change signified.

“You know as well as I do, Commander, of cases where espionage agents have been given hormone blockers to suppress their development. Similarly, we can’t rule out the existence of operatives who’ve undergone procedures to prevent physical maturation.”

Kazama had no particular comment on Fujibayashi’s rather inhumane deduction. Instead, he changed the subject. “Do we have any more information on the group who interfered with the GAA agents?”

“Yes,” said Fujibayashi, and the wry smile on her face was plain to see. “They are graduates of the National Magic University First Affiliated High School. They’re a year ahead of Tatsuya and just had their graduation ceremony a few days ago. Apparently, they’re visiting Okinawa for their graduation trip.”

“Now that you mention it, the eldest son of the Isori family was invited to the opening celebration for the artificial island. Which means their involvement was purely coincidence—or the work of some overachieving, nosy kids, more like.”

Kazama made a good show of sighing and letting a chuckle creep into his voice. This was not the place for any of the other thoughts he might have had about the First High graduates.

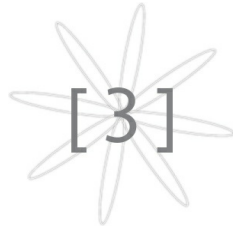
“Fujibayashi, keep looking into the identities of the Australian operatives. Sanada’s on the search for the main enemy force.”

“Understood.”

“We’ve got eyes in the skies tracking James and Jasmine Jackson. They won’t get away.”

“Very well.”

Sanada and Fujibayashi stood, saluted, and left the room.



Captain Jasmine Williams (“Jasmine Jackson”) and Captain James J. Johnson (“James Jackson”) received their intelligence the evening of March 24. Having escaped capture by Kazama’s unit, they proceeded to a secret meeting with a leader of a unit of deserters from the Great Asian Alliance at a British-style seaside hotel favored by international capital.

“Yotsuba magicians?” echoed Jasmine.

Major Daniel Liu, one of the leaders of the anti-treaty faction and the mastermind behind this sabotage operation, nodded. “The next leader of the Yotsuba family attended today’s service with her fiancé.”

“By ‘service,’ you’re referring to the memorial service held for the victims of the invasion five years ago?”

Liu nodded again without elaborating.

“I don’t think it’s particularly odd that representatives of prominent magic organizations would be sent to honor the victims,” said James, who sat beside Jasmine.

“It’s true, that’s not terribly surprising,” said Liu, acknowledging James’s point. “But it’s not something we can afford to ignore, either. Even if it’s unrelated to us, a Yotsuba presence here on Okinawa places the operation in considerable jeopardy.”

“It’s my understanding that the Yotsuba princess and her fiancé are still high school students.”

This time Liu shook his head at Jasmine’s counterpoint. “In the Yokohama operation, many of our losses were caused by the current head of the Juumonji family, who was a high school student at the time. We can’t underestimate

them just because of their youth.”

Despite his warning to Jasmine and James, Liu still didn’t know Tatsuya’s and Miyuki’s true value, nor how dangerous they could be as magicians.

It wasn’t that he failed to comprehend the fact—he simply didn’t know.



MARCH 25, 2097

After receiving authorization to consider the enemy operatives as official persons of concern, Tatsuya and Miyuki were able to devote the day to proactive counterterrorism activity—is what *should’ve* happened.

Instead, the two spent the day relaxing at the hotel.

“It’s quite nice to treat yourself once in a while, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“I’m not finding this that relaxing, personally...” said Minami hesitantly to her two masters, whose breakfast she was serving tableside on their hotel room’s balcony.

Their accommodations consisted of a two-bedroom suite. Officially, they were here as representatives of the Yotsuba family, attending the remembrance service for the victims of the invasion of Okinawa and the planning meeting for the memorial that would happen in the summer. Since none of the other Ten Master Clans had sent representatives, it wasn’t an overstatement to suggest that Tatsuya and Miyuki were representing the entire Master Clans Council. Naturally, the family was paying all their expenses, and in order to maintain appearances for the Ten Master Clans, the accommodations were of the highest quality.

The suite they were staying in had two twin bedrooms. Tatsuya had one room to himself, while Miyuki and Minami shared the other. Neither Miyuki nor Tatsuya saw any reason to get a separate hotel room for Minami.

But the suite was so luxurious that it made Minami paradoxically uncomfortable. She also felt a vague sense of guilt for somehow coming between the engaged couple and had quietly requested to stay in a less

expensive room several times.

But every time, she found herself shut down with a response of, “What’s the point of a bodyguard who doesn’t stay close to the person they’re guarding?” The less expensive room Minami was asking for would put her on a different floor of the hotel, where she would be unable to reach Miyuki in time if something was to happen.

“I apologize,” she said, bowing as she spoke the latest of many such apologies.

“Come on, Minami, have a seat,” said Miyuki kindly, since the table was fully set with food and drink.

Minami bowed politely. “Yes, ma’am,” she said, having long since learned it was pointless to argue at times like this.

Minami refilled the coffee cups, then took the dirty dishes away on a cart. This was technically the job of the hotel staff, but it was clear enough that Minami felt she ought to be allowed to have her way here in exchange for enduring the overly sumptuous room. Presuming as much, both Tatsuya and Miyuki silently left her to her business.

“Are you feeling rested, Miyuki?” Tatsuya asked.

“Yes. I was able to relax yesterday evening, and I’m not feeling the least bit fatigued anymore.”

“That’s good to hear,” Tatsuya replied with a kind smile after checking with his sight to make sure Miyuki wasn’t just putting on a brave front.

Miyuki looked away bashfully, but seeming ashamed of her own timidity, she met his gaze again, her cheeks slightly red.

“Shall we go out somewhere today?”

“I would love to!”

Miyuki didn’t ask about their mission. If Tatsuya was going to dedicate some of his time to her, she couldn’t possibly object. It would never cross Miyuki’s mind to do something so disrespectful as questioning a decision Tatsuya had made.

“You should come along, Minami,” Tatsuya suggested.

“Very well, sir,” said Minami with an unhesitating nod, having just returned to the table. In her case, the option of refusing her master’s request simply did not exist.

“We’ll be boarding a boat, so both of you should wear comfortable clothing.”

“Understood, sir. If you’ll give me just a moment.”

“There’s no need to rush. Go ahead and help Miyuki get changed. I’ll make my own preparations.”

“As you say, sir.”

Miyuki and Minami returned to their own room, while Tatsuya headed for his to change clothes.



Upon arriving at the port, Tatsuya led Miyuki and Minami to a yacht capable of traversing the open ocean. It looked like a yacht, anyway—its engine and instrumentation wouldn’t have been out of place on a military vessel, but from the outside, it was impossible to tell.

“Hey, you made it.”

“Hi, Joe. Thanks for this.”

Waiting aboard the yacht for Tatsuya’s group was Sergeant Joseph Higaki, whom they’d met the previous day.

“Um, Tatsuya, what is...?”

Miyuki had been surprised enough by yesterday’s unexpected reunion, but this was beyond comprehension.

“I’d planned to use an airplane today, but last night Sergeant Higaki offered to get us a boat. I decided to take him up on the offer.”

As Tatsuya finished his explanation, Joseph—despite being in plain clothes—squared himself to Miyuki and snapped a salute. “Sergeant Joseph Higaki, ma’am. I’ll be your party’s security detail today.” He then lowered his hand and broke into a good-natured grin. “Although really, I’m just entertaining you. I

guess the higher-ups just can't ignore the Yotsuba name. Making a big deal out of it would be bad in its own way, though. You never know what kind of sleepy mutt you'll run into."

It seemed Joseph was trying his best to make a point about letting sleeping dogs lie.

"The base commander was going crazy until Lieutenant Colonel Kazama came to the rescue by pointing out there was a noncom who'd already met the future Yotsuba family head. In other words, yours truly." Joseph gave Miyuki a wink. Despite his rugged appearance, he was surprisingly affable.

"So when Tatsuya told me he wanted to go to Ishigaki Island, I borrowed a high-speed boat along with her crew. She's military, but she's meant for taking the brass around on inspection tours, so I can guarantee the ride's quality."

"Ishigaki? I had no idea your plans included going that far today." Miyuki looked up at Tatsuya with open surprise on her face.

"It might've ended up canceled because of weather. I didn't want to disappoint you."

"I'm just surprised...but also very happy." And true to her words, Miyuki smiled at her brother.

It was about four hundred kilometers to Ishigaki, and the voyage took about three hours. The sea wasn't particularly calm, but it was surprisingly quiet aboard the ship, and Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami disembarked at their destination without the slightest bit of seasickness.

There was a rental car waiting for them at the port. The red carpet was really being rolled out for them—Joseph's use of the word *entertainment* hadn't been an exaggeration.

"All right, should we have a look around at the sights?"

"Yes, let's."

Joseph took the driver's seat. The car's autonomous driving could handle the sightseeing route, but it didn't have a comprehensive map of every road, so they still needed a licensed driver.

Having been raised on the main island of Okinawa, Joseph wouldn't necessarily have had reason to visit Ishigaki often, but nevertheless he was an efficient and helpful tour guide. Even with a bodyguard and maid with them, Miyuki enjoyed this surprise date with Tatsuya.

As the sun sank lower and the time to return to the main island approached, Tatsuya sent for the car to come meet them at their current location, a famous jewelry store that specialized in pearls.

Tatsuya had Joseph wait out front, then brought Miyuki and Minami into the shop.

"Hello, I'm Tatsuya Shiba," Tatsuya announced to the salesclerk.

"We've been expecting you," said the salesclerk, leading him to a table farther inside.

Miyuki found herself feeling a combination of suspicion and excitement at seeing that Tatsuya had obviously made a reservation to visit the store.

Having led them into the store, the salesclerk then brought out a jewelry case of the sort used to hold a necklace and gracefully opened it. "And here we are."

"Oh my...!"

What inspired Miyuki's involuntary exclamation was a gorgeously multicolored pearl necklace.

It used a combination of white, black, and gold pearls in graduated sizes, at a classic length. Each pearl was perfectly round and seemed free of blemishes, boasting vivid color and deep luster. Miyuki didn't have to be a jeweler to tell it was of extremely high quality.

"Can we check the length?"

"Certainly," said the salesclerk with a polite bow, then turned to Miyuki. "Shall we try it on?"

"Um...is this...for me?" Miyuki asked. There was no reason to think otherwise, but she couldn't help herself.

"Of course. Happy birthday."

Miyuki covered her mouth with both hands.

“As for a ring...that will come soon enough. For now, I hope a necklace will do.”

Tatsuya’s face was as calm as ever, but in his expression and tone there was a hint of bashfulness.

“It will more than do! I’m so happy. Thank you so much, Tatsuya.” Miyuki’s eyes welled up from the emotion.

Minami was the only one who noticed the deeper meaning in the way Miyuki spoke his name rather than refer to him as her brother.



“Thanks for everything today, Joe.”

“Hey, no sweat. I got to take it easy today thanks to you.”

Joseph accompanied them up to the entrance of the hotel, then left in the autonomous taxi.

Tatsuya watched him go, and once the taxi was out of sight, he looked up at the building across the street from the hotel.

“Tatsuya? Is something the matter?” asked Miyuki, noticing his gaze.

Hearing her voice, Minami moved to cover Miyuki’s back from the direction of the building Tatsuya was looking at.

“Is it...an enemy?” Miyuki followed his gaze, but all she saw was a window with a curtain drawn. She wondered if she was the only one who couldn’t see anything but then noticed the uncertainty in Minami’s eyes. Whatever it was Tatsuya was looking at, Minami couldn’t see it, either.

“Probably just a hired pair of eyes. He couldn’t tell us anything even if we caught him.”

Tatsuya didn’t say *He probably couldn’t tell us anything*, nor did he say *He almost certainly couldn’t tell us anything*. Tatsuya’s declaration had been “He couldn’t tell us anything,” and Miyuki could make no further questions or objections.

Tatsuya gently nudged Miyuki from behind.

Miyuki did as he bade and walked through the hotel's revolving doors.



As he watched the backs of Miyuki, Tatsuya, and Minami as they entered the hotel, in a room in the building across the street, Captain James J. Johnson finally exhaled the breath he'd been holding. He wiped his forehead, only to notice for the first time how sweaty his palms were.

Nerves...? No, I was outright spooked. What's gotten into me?

Australia wasn't merely diplomatically isolated and passive; they were reluctant to deploy troops overseas. Regardless of whether the term *isolation* was really appropriate to describe the nation's stance, there was no question that they publicly pursued it as a form of foreign policy. They were neither members of any alliance nor did they engage in any joint military exercises.

But that didn't mean a soldier like James had had no opportunities to gain real-world combat experience.

Australia was a resource-rich country. And it wasn't just mineral wealth. Having successfully halted desertification and greened the interior, they were one of the few nations that, even now, were agriculturally self-sufficient. As such, they were targeted on a near daily basis by the clandestine organizations of other nations whose territorial ambitions burned hot.

Also, despite their openly isolationist policy, they did not adhere to total neutrality. As in this current operation, it was not uncommon for them to join forces with other nations in participating in espionage operations.

As a military specialist in such operations, James had spent his career on the front lines of these conflicts and was a seasoned combat magician. He'd narrowly escaped death more than a few times. He prided himself on being a difficult man to rattle.

A kid like that...getting to me?

But however much he might want to deny it, he knew very well it would be empty posturing.

He didn't just notice my surveillance. It felt like death itself was staring right into my soul... That nickname, Untouchable, is no joke.

Thirty years earlier, around the time of the destruction of Dahan, a certain warning had started circulating.

Don't interfere with the Yotsuba in Japan. Those who do are destroyed.

Indeed, in the shadowy world where James worked, it was credibly rumored that the GAA had been forced into an unfavorable treaty arrangement with Japan because they'd meddled with the Yotsuba. There were also voices that claimed the strategic-class magic that had scorched the southern tip of the Korean peninsula was Yotsuba-developed.

James had even heard unconfirmed reports that the USNA's Stars, widely considered the strongest unit of military magicians in the world, had meddled in Japan and been repelled by the Yotsuba.

It was all so far-fetched that James couldn't bring himself to take all the rumors at face value.

In James's current operation, the opposing Japanese military forces were under the command of Harunobu Kazama, whose service in Indochina had earned him the nickname the Great Tengu. He was the most visible part of Japan's high-standing military magicians.

Japan's magic combat prowess wasn't limited to the Yotsuba. The military itself, whose combat deployment of the world's first airborne magician unit was instrumental in repelling the advance of GAA shock troops, wielded a considerable amount of that power.

It was the opinion of both James and the Australian military that the strategic-class magic that resolved the situation was a secret weapon developed by the Japanese military. Common sense dictated that such a vast power couldn't possibly be held by a single private organization. The nation's balance of power couldn't possibly be preserved under such conditions.

But no Yotsuba can be underestimated.

Even a teenage student.

James carved the fact into his mind again.



The necklace wasn't the only thing Tatsuya had prepared for Miyuki's birthday.

The couple had enjoyed a full-course dinner at the hotel's gourmet restaurant—Minami had excused herself from this activity, not so much out of consideration as it was to save herself some heartache—and afterward, were now relaxing with drinks in the observation lounge.

Naturally, both of them were having nonalcoholic cocktails, Tatsuya having gently rejected Miyuki's request of "Perhaps just a little..." He remembered all too well Mayumi's miserable experience back at the Kyoto hotel.

He didn't merely refuse her alcohol; he went as far as using his Elemental Sight to check the contents of her glass.

He knew for a fact, therefore, that Miyuki had ingested no alcohol.

"Tatsuya...I'm feeling rather..."

And yet, as she sat next to him on the sofa in the lounge and looked up at him hotly with her large, dewy eyes, her focus seemed to be rather unsteady.

Miyuki was wearing a classic A-line cocktail dress with a hem that fell at her knees. In a normal sitting position, her knees would just barely be visible. But the sofa was relatively low, with plush cushions, so her slender, shapely legs were visible well above the knee.

Fortunately, there was a privacy screen such that hid them from the view of the other patrons. But to Tatsuya, her sitting position on the sofa made her legs extremely noticeable. And because her posture was still entirely proper, Tatsuya was having trouble figuring out where he should rest his gaze.

Perhaps she wasn't feeling unwell so much as she was merely drunk on the romantic atmosphere.

In either case, Tatsuya concluded it would be best to wrap things up.

"Maybe we should head back to the room soon," he suggested, rising to his feet.

Miyuki obediently followed. She wasn't the sort of girl who would whine or argue, especially not with anything Tatsuya said.

Instead, she smoothly twined her right arm around Tatsuya's left, drawing herself close to him and looking up at him with hopeful eyes.

Back when they'd been simple siblings, he would've gently scolded her and extracted himself, but now Tatsuya let Miyuki do as she wished. Given their position now, there wasn't anything unnatural about it at all.

Miyuki seemed to have made a similar calculation. And yet there was a faint expression of relief on her face, as though she'd known the possibility of being rejected was tiny but had feared it anyway.

Tatsuya left the observation lounge with Miyuki on his arm.

Just before they entered their suite, Miyuki released Tatsuya's arm from hers.

Her expression completely innocent, she thanked Minami for watching the suite while they'd been away.

Tatsuya also thanked Minami, and after telling Miyuki to go ahead and bathe before him, he returned to his bedroom, changing into some loungewear and sitting down at the writing desk.

He then turned his sight to the day's tactical results.

Most of his attention was on the Idea—the information dimension.

The infinitely branching tree of causality. Until last year, he'd only been able to traverse it in a three-dimensional visualization, but after running up and down countless threads during his recent search for a terrorist bombing mastermind, he'd developed (to a limited degree) the ability to take in a bird's-eye view of causal connections.

Within that wide panorama, he quickly located the traces of an information unit he himself had emitted.

His marker had stayed on its target. He began reading information on the subject of his search.

...James Jeffrey Johnson. Magician for the Australian military. Rank, captain.

The information Tatsuya was viewing had come from the enemy operative who'd been conducting surveillance when he'd returned to the hotel with Miyuki and Minami earlier that day. At the time, there'd been enough distance that all he'd been able to discern was that the observer was a Caucasian male.

Suspecting it might have been half of the "father-daughter" team Kazama had showed him photos of the other day, Tatsuya had tagged the man with a psion tracking marker via the Idea.

He's currently at sea, off the northwest shore of Kumejima. Did they pay off a fishing boat or something?

Unfortunately, he couldn't read any information besides the man he'd tagged. He was still learning how to deploy his field of vision using a marker as an origin point and hadn't perfected the technique.

But there was still considerable value in knowing that "James Jackson" was actually Captain James J. Johnson. Determined not to undervalue what he'd discovered, Tatsuya produced a large, notebook-sized personal terminal from his travel bag and sent an encrypted message to Kazama detailing his discovery.

After bathing, Tatsuya returned to his bedroom to sleep, where, to his surprise, he found one pajama-clad sister sitting on the room's other bed.

There was nothing provocative about her pajamas—they weren't transparent, nor did they have a plunging neckline, nor were most of the buttons undone, nor were they too big such that they bared her shoulders.

However, through the sheer, silklike material—it was probably real silk—Tatsuya could tell from the outline of her chest that she wasn't wearing anything underneath it, so he casually averted his gaze.

"...Was there something you wanted to talk about?" he asked his sister/fiancée, carefully not looking below her neck.

"Not particularly? I'm not worried about a thing," Miyuki said, tilting her head slightly. There was something warm and fluffy in her tone.

Despite having already confirmed the fact several times, Tatsuya couldn't help himself from using his sight to check Miyuki's blood alcohol level one more time.

“...Don’t look at me like that, please. It’s so embarrassing...” Miyuki’s face was red as she looked up with almost tearful eyes.

Even Tatsuya couldn’t help but feel slightly flustered by this. “Oh, uh, right. Sorry.”



If it had been anyone else, they would have been more than *slightly* flustered. Either their capacity for reason would've been obliterated in a lycanthrope-style transformation, or their psychological endurance would've been immediately eroded to nothing.

"Tatsuya, are you going to bed already?"

There was something suspicious in her choice of words as well as her tone of voice.

She was clearly intoxicated with something other than alcohol. Looking at the way she was acting, Tatsuya could come to no other conclusion.

"That's my plan."

"Then feel free to get into bed. I'll turn out the light for you."

"...Thanks."

Tatsuya realized it would be impossible to shoo her out of his room.

He didn't hear running water, but Minami was probably still bathing. Once she finished and came out of the bathroom, she would soon realize where Miyuki was.

There was no avoiding the resulting misunderstanding. Tatsuya accepted this and closed his eyes.

When he heard his sister's happy-sounding even breathing from the other bed, that was some small consolation.

When she hastily sneaked out of the room in the middle of the night, Tatsuya pretended not to notice.



The next morning, Tatsuya explained the day's plan to Minami and Miyuki, both of whom seemed to be trying to avoid looking him in the eye.

"As planned, we're going to Kumejima today."

This was not a surprise excursion like the previous day's. That said, it wasn't directly related to their mission. So if there was time, they would stop by the artificial island to see what they were supposed to be defending in person, but if not, then the day would be full of the main activity—sightseeing. Since Miyuki had received her major gift the previous day, the main goal of this day was to pass the time enjoyably.

The success or failure of the mission came down to whether the opening celebration for the artificial island on the twenty-eighth of the month concluded without incident. But to stop the operatives ahead of time required neutralizing the enemy's operational capacity, and doing that required knowledge of where the bulk of their forces were hiding. Figuring that out was the military's job. Until the enemy's forces were located, Tatsuya had nothing to do.

Even Tatsuya felt like it would be a waste to just sit around in the hotel waiting until then. That said, he wasn't inclined to go hunting around for foreign magicians when it wasn't even his job.

Which was why Tatsuya had decided to treat the day's free time as a vacation.

"Our plane leaves at eight thirty. We can bring our CADs on board."

He didn't need to repeat this detail but did so just for confirmation.

In the case of government employees, they were generally allowed to carry their CADs aboard airplanes as long as they had police approval. This extended

to Magic University and magic high school students as well; Tatsuya hadn't exercised any sort of Ten Master Clans–related privilege. However, in exchange, they were obligated to assist in case of emergency.

“Everything's prepped and ready to go. All we need to do now is to change clothes for the trip,” said Minami.

“Thank you for taking care of things,” added Miyuki, acknowledging Minami's good work in anticipating their needs.

“Let's have breakfast first,” Tatsuya suggested.

They headed for the hotel restaurant, where breakfast was being served.



“Tatsuya!”

However, no sooner had they entered the airport lobby than a voice called out from the side.

“Oh, Honoka. And Shizuku, too.”

It had been Honoka who had called Tatsuya's name, and next to her was Shizuku.

Tatsuya wasn't surprised to see them. He'd heard that Miyuki had been invited to travel with them and that their plans had some overlap.

“Yup! Good morning.”

Honoka and Shizuku weren't the only familiar faces there.

“Good morning, Nakajou.”

“Good morning! Are you also going to Kumejima, Miyuki?”

“Yes.”

“I saw you among the people attending the memorial the other day, so I was wondering if we'd run into each other somewhere, but this is quite a coincidence.”

“Yes, I also heard that you and some of the other seniors were planning to go to Kumejima, so the thought crossed my mind as well.”

After making a bit of chitchat with Azusa, Miyuki greeted Hattori, Isori, Kanon, Kiri-hara, Sayaka, and Sawaki in turn.

The group hadn't been waiting for Tatsuya and company, but it wasn't all that surprising they'd run into each other.

The flight Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami were taking would arrive at 9:00 AM.

For tourists staying on the island of Okinawa proper who wanted to do some sightseeing on Kumejima, it was the ideal departure time—so while it was a coincidence that the day of their trip overlapped with the graduates', it was to some degree inevitable that the departure time was so similar.

Tatsuya's group of three, plus the pair of Shizuku and Honoka and the party of graduates, made for a total of twelve people. "We've already invited Mitsui and Kitayama along, so would you guys like to come with us, too?" Azusa asked Miyuki's group as they were all preparing to embark. She was clearly inviting them along for their Kumejima excursion.

Miyuki looked up to Tatsuya with an expression that said, *What shall we do?*

"Sure, why not?" Tatsuya agreed with a nod—and loudly enough that Azusa could hear it.

"All right," Miyuki said to him, then returned her attention to Azusa. "Thank you very much." She bowed politely. Before Hattori or Isori could give their approval, Tatsuya and Miyuki's itinerary was decided.

The group of First High students and alumni first settled on taking a cruise all the way around the island of Kumejima in a glass-bottomed boat that Shizuku had reserved. The initial plan had been for Shizuku and Honoka to take the same tour on a shared boat, but with the suddenly much larger party, she had to scramble to charter a boat for the whole group to take together.

She'd made the request just before they departed from Naha Airport, and it had been met by the time they arrived on Kumejima, although that might have been a testament to the influence of the Kitayama family, one of the wealthiest in Japan.

It was a straight shot of about five kilometers from the airport to Kanegusuku Port. The group made the trip on rented bikes, and after a short wait, they

boarded their boat.

“Wow!”

“This is amazing!”

Kanon’s and Azusa’s exclamations upon boarding were not feigned surprise.

The glass-bottomed boat the Kitayama family had chartered on Shizuku’s behalf was partially submersible, making it possible to see into the ocean not just through the floor but through windows along the sides as well.

But *windows* wasn’t quite accurate to describe the vessel’s construction. Below the waterline, almost the entire length of the hull’s sides was transparent. And save for one small section, so was the deck. The boat’s cabin afforded a truly panoramic undersea view.

And it wasn’t just underwater—the scenery above deck was spectacular as well. The island terrain was wildly varied, from pure-white beaches to rugged, intricately shaped cliffs and crags. The First High group was kept very busy running back and forth between the boat’s cabin and deck trying to take it all in.

The boat proceeded east-northeast from the southern tip of Kumejima, anchoring off the famous uninhabited sand island of Hatenohama.

“What are they doing?” wondered Kanon aloud.

“This boat has a pretty deep draft,” Isori explained, “so they’re probably getting dinghies ready so we can go ashore.”

Just as he said, above deck the boat’s crew was inflating rubber dinghies and attaching outboard motors to them.

There were two dinghies, each of which sat six. Based on their size and the power output of the motors, it seemed likely that a crew member with a small boating license would be needed for each one, but—

“Tatsuya, you have one, right?” asked Shizuku.

“A small boating license? I do.”

“Oh, I have one, too!” added Isori, raising his hand. The entire group would therefore be able to make a landing on the spit together. As it turned out,

among the group, Minami (like Tatsuya) had a Class Two Small Craft (Personal Watercraft) license, and Hattori had one for specialized small craft.

One dinghy was crewed by Tatsuya, Miyuki, Minami, Honoka, Shizuku, and Sawaki. The other carried Isori, Kanon, Hattori, Azusa, Kirihara, and Sayaka.

Thus divided, the twelve made a landing onto the pure-white sandbar.

Sawaki was the first out of Tatsuya's boat and lent Miyuki and Shizuku a hand in disembarking.

"I'll mind the boat, sir," said Minami after Tatsuya had finished checking that the outboard motor was fully powered down.

"Okay, thanks," said Tatsuya, letting Minami take watch duty without pointlessly asking if she really wanted to.

"Just leave it to me."

Everyone else in the party was her senior. Forcing her to come along would only have been stressful for her, so Tatsuya figured that Minami would actually find it more relaxing to just wait for them to get back.

"I'll go check on the other one," said Sawaki once Tatsuya followed Honoka out of the dinghy. He headed off without waiting for Tatsuya's reply.

From the direction of the other boat, Tatsuya heard Azusa hastily protesting, "Hattori and I aren't—!" and kept out of it, deciding this wasn't something he needed to be involved in.

This was not the time to be worrying about other people's problems.

After all, he had his own—like Honoka, who suddenly started taking her clothes off.

Underneath her airy, front-buttoned dress, she was wearing a two-piece swimsuit, which consisted of a bikini top and boy shorts. In addition to this endowment-highlighting style, she'd put her hair up instead of tying it back in her usual shoulder-length pigtails, and overall she cut a sophisticated, sexy figure.

Despite the subtropical climate, it was still March. It was early for swimsuits. While there were a few tourists here and there enjoying some ocean swimming

and snorkeling, they were sparse.

Honoka's daring swimwear drew the attention of both her schoolmates and the other sightseers.

But Honoka was (seemingly) ignorant of the gazes that showered her as she grabbed onto Tatsuya's arm. "Tatsuya, let's go over that way!"

Whether it was deliberate or not, her chest pressed up against his arm.

Miyuki watched this daring move. Sheer surprise seemed to be the only thing keeping her from losing her cool.

Exploiting the opening, Honoka began to drag Tatsuya off.

Tatsuya was similarly surprised at this uncharacteristic pushiness. Of course, it wasn't confusion or shock that stopped him from shaking her off his arm.

It was because he sensed danger.

Honoka usually had a certain back-to-the-wall desperation about her. And today, that impression was particularly strong.

She forced a coy, devilish smile as she looked up at him.

And indeed, it was easy to tell she was forcing it.

The moment Honoka looked ahead, Tatsuya looked over to Miyuki. Honoka was important to him as a friend, but she wasn't someone he was going to spare any attention if doing so hurt his sister.

But Miyuki met his gaze not with jealousy but rather concern for Honoka, who was acting unlike herself. Or perhaps his gift to her yesterday—not just the necklace—had given Miyuki a sense of security. In either case, she didn't seem annoyed with him.

Of course, there was a reason behind Honoka's excessively forward actions.

Honoka and Shizuku had arrived in Okinawa the previous day, March 25. The day before that, Honoka had uncharacteristically gone out without Shizuku, heading to a fashionable shopping area in the city with Amy and Subaru.

Honoka and Shizuku weren't quarreling, though.

In addition to being a fledgling magician, Shizuku was a proper young lady

who spent a great deal of time in polite society. And in order to learn how to navigate that world, she juggled a considerable amount of study outside of her regular schoolwork.

This meant that before any sort of significant travel, she was always very busy with enrichment study to prepare for said travel. As a result, she was totally overwhelmed before any trip.

Amy's invitation to Honoka had been to "go hang out somewhere popular."

Normally, Honoka avoided crowded places.

But that was because Shizuku found crowds difficult. Honoka herself had no particular aversion to them. If anything, she enjoyed the energy that filled places packed with people her age.

To put it another way, Shizuku's lack of availability let Honoka get her fill of city fun.

The day's plan was just strolling and window-shopping, so neither Amy nor Subaru had any particular goal in mind. But since she was here, Honoka had a particular item she wanted to buy.

"Actually, I'm going to Okinawa tomorrow," she blurted out during a stop at a fast-food place.

"What, really?!" said Amy, her response a mix of surprise and envy.

"I knew that. You're going to the Kumejima artificial island party, right?" said Subaru, showing off her social savvy. "And?" he added.

"I was hoping to do some shopping for clothes to take with me."

"Like a party dress?"

Honoka shook her head at Amy's question.

"Oh, so something to show off to Shiba."

Honoka neither affirmed nor refuted Subaru's inference. But her embarrassed silence was, given the circumstances, as good as a nod.

"Ah, I see. So you want us to help you pick something out!" said Amy with conviction, as though proud she'd cracked the code.

She wasn't wrong.

"...So what do you think would be good?" Honoka tentatively asked the two.

Subaru's answer was immediate. "A swimsuit, probably. And for you, Honoka, one with a bikini top."

"Huh?!" If Honoka had been taking a drink at that moment, she undoubtedly would've spit it out.

"Oh, I bet that'd look great on you. That's the way to go. Oh, but won't it still be too cold for that, even in Okinawa?" Amy blithely moved the conversation's direction further down the path to a firm conclusion.

"It's not like she'll actually be going into the ocean. If it's chilly, she can just put some warming lotion on along with her sunscreen."

"You're a genius, Subaru!" Amy exclaimed triumphantly.

"Wait a second!" Honoka finally managed to object. "If I'm the only one wearing a swimsuit, it's going to be sort of weird..."

"You're going to Kumejima, right? So even if you don't go swimming, you'll still go to the beach, won't you?"

"...Probably, I guess."

"In that case, it's not weird to wear a swimsuit. And if you do end up being the only one wearing one, it'll just make you that much more alluring."

"But it'll be so embarrassing!"

Subaru fixed Honoka with a stern gaze. She looked serious enough to start pounding the table. "Honoka," she began, in a voice every bit as dire as his expression. "Are you serious about stealing Shiba away from Miyuki?"

Subaru's unexpected intensity silenced both the other girls.

"Ah, sorry, that might be an unfair way to ask. I know your feelings for Tatsuya are sincere. What I'm trying to say is: Do you really want to beat Miyuki?"

"Well..." she began, but for some reason she couldn't get out the *Of course I do* that ought to have followed.

“I think you know this better than I do, but you’ll never beat Miyuki in a fair fight.”

“...I know that.”

It was the brutal truth. Perhaps not in every possible field, but on the battlefield of Tatsuya’s heart, the statement was undeniably correct.

“There are differences between the two of you, but you and Miyuki are quite similar. You’re both straightforward and serious. You’re both very devoted, and while you both have a tendency to occasionally lose your cool, you’re fundamentally modest and demure.”

Honoka had no response. Everything Subaru was saying made sense.

“You’ll never close the distance on someone who’s ahead of you by doing the same thing they’re doing.”

It was finally not Honoka but Amy who replied. “Okay then, Subaru, what are you saying you’re going to do about it?”

“Not me, her. I’m saying she needs to change her approach.”

“Be more specific.”

“She needs a new look, for starters. You’ve got good fashion sense, Honoka, so you need to push that weapon as far as it will go. In the sexiest direction possible.”

“Mm, mm.” It was Amy nodding along to this. Honoka, meanwhile, gaped like a fish out of water.

“So I think you should do something Miyuki would never do. Like, for example, being the only one wearing a skimpy swimsuit.”

“I couldn’t!” Honoka finally yelped. Subaru and Amy, meanwhile, only glanced at Honoka before continuing to scheme.

“I don’t know, are you sure Shiba won’t be freaked out by it?”

“Him? No way. That would make him actually likable, for one thing.”

“Ah, yeah, you have a point.”

“And at this rate, it’s gonna be game, set, and match for Honoka. This is no

time to shy away from taking risks. Am I right, Honoka?”

“I guess...” Honoka found herself nodding to the question that was suddenly posed to her.

“Okay, then,” said Subaru, standing. She dragged Honoka to her feet, too.

“Wha—?”

“Now that we have a plan, it’s time to find you a swimsuit.”

As if on cue, Amy gathered their drink cups onto a tray and rose to her feet as well. “Yeah, and it’s gotta blow everyone’s mind!”

“Huh?! Wha—?!”

Subaru dragged Honoka out of the restaurant. Amy dumped their cups into a recycling bin then trotted after them.



This episode had resulted in Honoka hiding her shame behind a mask of playful flirtation in the process of aggressively trying to catch Tatsuya's eye.

Miyuki drew alongside Tatsuya, either finally snapping out of her consternation or deciding that she ought not to tolerate such obvious overtures toward Tatsuya right in front of the graduates.

Nevertheless, Honoka continued to hold on to his arm.

The other people on the sandbar weren't the only ones to see this display. From Nakanohama, the next spit over, a middle-aged man operated a portable terminal with practiced motions. Its heavy-duty construction contrasted with his lightweight clothing.

Tatsuya sensed the man's gaze, but it seemed no more intense than any of the other onlookers, so he didn't pay it any special concern.



Even upon returning to the glass-bottomed boat, Honoka's attack continued. She did put her dress back on but left the top three buttons undone, keeping her bikini top visible.

Fortunately, no one on the boat seemed to find Honoka's appearance openly distasteful. The graduates were keeping their distance from her, though, and Tatsuya was forced to give up on trying to do anything about that.

And there wasn't really anything he could do about the nasty looks Kanon and Sayaka were giving him. They knew he wasn't trying to two-time anyone. But the one who was suffering from unrequited love was Honoka, a girl just like them—and as girls themselves, they couldn't help but stare daggers at him for it.

Despite the pressure brought to bear on him by Honoka's seduction, Miyuki's resistance, and Kanon's and Sayaka's disparaging looks, Tatsuya was the first to notice something was amiss.

"Sorry, Honoka, I need a second."

"Tatsuya?" She wondered at the change in his tone of voice.

Leaving her unanswered, Tatsuya extricated himself from her and stood,

heading to the pilothouse.

Noticing something odd, Hattori followed. Behind him came Sawaki and Kirihara. Those three were able to hear Tatsuya's explanation of the unfolding crisis.

"Captain, you should be able to detect a submarine five hundred meters ahead of us, near the seafloor."

"What in the—?"

Behind Tatsuya, Sawaki, Kirihara, and Hattori exchanged glances as, in the pilothouse, the captain ordered a sonar sweep to the fore.

"There it is! A conventional submarine, estimated length eighty meters!"

"What's that thing doing *here*?!" cried Kanon, in a belated arrival, as she clung to Isori's back.

"Are we sure it's not a National Defense Force boat?" Sawaki asked, but in fact even he knew the chance of that being the case was close to zero.

"If it is, then there's no problem. But we need to be ready to deal with it if it's not!" said Hattori, pointlessly arguing the issue.

"Reverse course! Hard to starboard!" barked the captain.

As the pilot complied, the ship began to arc to the right.

Realizing from this movement that they'd been detected, the unidentified submarine stirred from its silent running. With that, the chance that it was a Japanese vessel vanished.

"Tube flooding signature confirmed!" cried the sonar officer. "Unidentified submarine is preparing to launch torpedoes!"

"You can hear the sound of the torpedo tubes flooding? Must be an old model."

"This is hardly the time!" growled Hattori in response to Tatsuya's nonchalant—or unconcerned—observation.

Tatsuya didn't bother responding. "Minami," he said. Minami had appeared behind the group of graduates at some point.

“Yes, sir.” Minami’s voice was as calm as ever, despite the circumstances.

“Ready your anti-material barrier. Deploy it thirty meters out from the boat, big enough to leave a ten-meter radius in front of every torpedo. Make certain not to block the boat’s path. You can do it, right?”

“Leave it to me, sir,” said Minami without the slightest trace of fuss, giving a confident nod.

“Torpedoes incoming!”

A pair of white wakes traced their way toward the boat, picking up speed.

The boat was still turning, making it impossible to evade the torpedoes.

“Minami.”

“On it, sir.”

Minami activated her personal terminal–style CAD.

Tatsuya wasn’t the only one whose magical senses allowed him to detect the anti-material barrier that appeared in the water.

A great column of water exploded into the air—

But no shock wave ever reached them.

Minami’s anti-material barrier could have completely deflected it, but the torpedoes themselves had never been meant to destroy them in the first place.

“Foam-release torpedoes. So they just wanted to keep us from escaping.”

Tatsuya wasn’t just talking to himself; he was explaining the situation to Hattori and the rest.

When Minami lowered her barrier, the foam spreading across the ocean’s surface began to close in on them.

“I’ll handle this.”

Isori activated his CAD and swept his arm out grandly. The foam was cleared aside as though a giant wiper had pushed it away.

“Next will probably be an attack from a manned torpedo–shaped boarding vessel,” Tatsuya instructed.

“Second wave inbound!” shouted the sonar officer, almost overlapping with his prediction.

“Right back atcha!” Hattori’s magic exploded out toward the four wakes traced out by the approaching torpedoes.

Air bubbles appeared in the water surrounding the four torpedoes. Not only did this foam render the propellers unable to provide motive force, but it also absorbed their forward inertia, bringing them to a stop.

But they weren’t real torpedoes. Suddenly, the dorsal midsection of the manned torpedo-shaped vessels opened wide. From the opening of each one exited a man wearing a dry suit-like combat outfit.

As the men popped up out of the water, Sawaki leaped from the boat’s deck. “I got this!”

Sawaki’s jump took him higher in the air than the men were, and he executed a sharp direction change in midair, descending rapidly toward them.

Sawaki’s kick sent one man slamming back down into the water.

This wasn’t flight magic. It was an aerial maneuver based on vector control.

Using air as a foothold, Sawaki jumped again and felled another one of the attackers.

The remaining two men made it aboard the glass boat.

“I thought you said you had this!” said Kirihara, but his voice was amused. “Looks like we landed some big ones!” he shouted with gusto, rushing at the men and brandishing a fishing rod.

The two attackers raised their arms to block Kirihara’s strike. No—it was the anti-material barrier in *front* of their arms that absorbed Kirihara’s high-frequency blade.

“C’mon, boys! Ha-ha-ha!”

That wasn’t the end of Kirihara’s attack, though. In combination with the high-frequency blade, he rained down a hail of blows with the fishing rod, which, thanks to its reinforced construction, became a powerful weapon in his hands.

Kirihara roared a villainous laugh as he struck down one of the men like a berserker. Finally unable to defend, the attacker went down in a spray of blood. Unsurprisingly, Kirihara hadn't actually gone so wild that he cleaved his opponent in half, and none of the wounds he'd inflicted would have broken bones. That said, his victim was clearly seriously injured.

The other man didn't simply stand by and watch his comrade be cut down, though. Unable to keep up with the series of strikes, he assumed a backup role, leveling his gun at Kirihara.

But he never got to pull the trigger.

A hail of projectiles hit him from behind, and he slumped forward, facedown on the boat's deck.

The projectiles were ice, created from seawater. This was Hattori's magic.

This technique had considerable overlap with the magic Mayumi used. This was no coincidence—he had watched her closely, but this was no simple imitation. He'd absorbed it and made it his own.

Sawaki landed back on the boat. "Who are these guys?" he asked to nobody in particular as he looked down at the two men Hattori and Kirihara had felled.

"Pirates...or submarine pirates, I suppose." It was Tatsuya who answered.

After snapping a photo of the pirate Hattori had felled, Tatsuya squatted down beside him and used both his hands to grab the belt of his combat dry suit. Then, standing, he hefted the man up and tossed him into the ocean.

"Hey!"

Ignoring the startled Hattori, Tatsuya moved to the other man, who was bleeding in several places thanks to Kirihara's strikes. After taking a picture of him as well, Tatsuya grabbed him by the legs and dragged him to the edge of the deck.

"As long as we're holding these men, the pirates will continue to attack us."

"You mean they'll come to rescue them?"

"Or they'll just sink our boat with their men on board to keep us from exposing them," answered Tatsuya without bothering to look at Hattori as he

pushed the other pirate overboard. “If we force them to rescue their men, it buys us some time. We’ll use it to escape.” He looked meaningfully at the boat’s captain.

“Understood,” said the captain, his face going pale. He hurried to the pilothouse to start giving orders to his crew.

“...You’re honestly a terrifying guy,” said Kiriara with a shiver.

Tatsuya regarded him and shrugged.



As Tatsuya predicted, the submarine didn’t pursue the group of First High students and graduates.

This wasn’t so much thanks to Tatsuya’s excellent deductive reasoning as it was simply the difference that having background information made.

Tatsuya—along with Miyuki and Minami—knew that the “pirate” crew aboard the submarine was actually a coalition of GAA deserters and Australian covert military operatives. Knowing that Australia in particular could not allow this fact to become public, coupled with the fact that they had to make every possible effort to conceal themselves until their true goal—the sabotage of the artificial island—was achieved, it wasn’t difficult to predict what the submarine would do.

The mood aboard that submarine was very dark at the moment.

“This is why I warned you not to get unnecessarily involved.” Captain James J. Johnson, a covert operative attached to the Australian military’s magician unit, hissed at Major Daniel Liu, leader of the Great Asian Alliance’s deserters.

His partner, Captain Jasmine Williams, was not aboard the submarine. This was because Jasmine’s physical characteristics were crucial to her usefulness as a military weapon. Obfuscating her true identity gave her a much bigger advantage than it did for other operatives, and in this operation, the only one on the GAA deserter side who knew what Jasmine looked like was Daniel Liu. She couldn’t board the submarine, because if she did, contact with other officers would be unavoidable.

So at the moment, Jasmine was working separately from Captain Johnson.

“Major Liu, weren’t you the one who warned us not to underestimate them just because they were high school students?!” The only casualties this time had been GAA deserters. It might have seemed, therefore, like Johnson had no reason to be upset, but this pointless attack would certainly put the Japanese forces on higher alert, which was more than enough reason to be furious.

Johnson pushed aside his anger. “So what will your next move be?” he asked.

“We’ll pick the operation’s targets from attendees of the party on the twenty-eighth.” Liu’s answer was not a particularly articulate one.

It had been Liu’s associates who’d led this operation to capture the boat Tatsuya and the others had been aboard.

The goal had been to either capture a Yotsuba magician or at least render them unable to interfere with the operation on the twenty-eighth. Moreover, by kidnapping the daughter of the Kitayama family and feigning a simple ransom plot, enemy personnel would be tied up in the search. In adding the future National Defense University students that the Kitayama girl was traveling with to the ransom list, they would seem like mere pirates.

In point of fact, Liu himself wasn’t very enthusiastic about this plan. But he also hadn’t definitively opposed it.

Johnson, however, had.

And in the end, the operation had resulted in no gains whatsoever, a crew member wounded badly enough that he was unlikely to survive, and the existence of their submarine revealed to the enemy. The mission could not be continued, but Liu now had to admit that it was Johnson who’d been correct and he and his men who had been mistaken.

In short, it was a blow to his pride. To a man like Liu, that was a difficult thing to bear.

After all, it was pride that fueled his opposition to the peace treaty with Japan. He’d added other reasons—reducing domestic political instability and foreign presence, the annexation of undersea mineral resources—but at the heart of it was the simple fact that bending the knee to a tiny nation like Japan was an indignity he couldn’t endure.

“That strikes me as an appropriate course of action.”

There was a note of scorn in Johnson’s meticulously polite reply. To mask his frustration, Liu changed the subject. “How did they manage to detect us, I wonder?”

“I imagine they used active sonar,” replied Johnson dismissively.

“I wonder. A civilian tourist boat or pleasure vessel’s active sonar is really only meant for detecting shallow objects that might damage the hull. We were skimming the ocean floor, so ordinarily they wouldn’t have been able to detect us.”

Liu paused for a moment to see if Johnson understood what he was trying to say.

Johnson’s eyes peered out at him from behind a veil of indifference.

“Their distance from us was a full five hundred meters. Without knowing our coordinates and pointing in exactly that direction, there’s no way civilian sonar could’ve spotted us.”

“...Is this some Yotsuba magic, then?”

There was a vaguely satisfying note of fear in Johnson’s voice.



Had the preemptive detection of the submarine before it attacked been some kind of Yotsuba magic?

Captain James J. Johnson’s inference was half correct and half mistaken.

Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami returned to their hotel on the main island of Okinawa.

Starting that day, Shizuku and Honoka would be staying in a hotel on Kumejima.

Azusa and the rest of the graduates were moving to that same hotel. Their initial plan had been to go straight from the hotel on Okinawa to the party, but when Shizuku explained that she could secure them rooms, they switched to the easier option.

Tatsuya's party received the same offer from Shizuku. However, Tatsuya and Miyuki still had public-facing work to do on Okinawa proper. Explaining this, they said goodbye to the other First High students at the airport.

Now back in his hotel room, Tatsuya was checking to see whether the trace marker he'd placed on Captain Johnson was still active.

The psion round he'd fired after tracing Johnson's surveilling gaze back to its source was fading, but it still had plenty of potency left. Just to be safe, though, Tatsuya transmitted a new psion round through the information dimension and dismantled the old one.

Evidently, the Australian magician hadn't noticed Tatsuya's handiwork yet. Given the attack earlier, there was no indication that he'd discovered the tracker and was using it to give false intel.

Tatsuya hadn't anticipated the GAA deserters' attack by spotting their submarine. Rather, he'd gotten a fix on Captain Johnson's signal in the sea to the south of Kumejima.

Johnson didn't know there was a bell tied around his neck. The possibility of observation via Elemental Sight was an unknown art to him, and moreover, he had no way of discovering it.

It wasn't the GAA deserters whose tails had been caught. It was the Australian military's.

Curiosity killed the cat.

Johnson had observed Tatsuya and Miyuki in the course of his duties, so it was misleading to suggest that curiosity was doing him in. But the circumstances that had befallen him were very much in line with that old proverb.

However, it was Tatsuya's magic, not the Yotsuba's, that was tracking the Australian covert operations unit's every move.



The next day was March 27, on which the meeting for the summer memorial service had been scheduled. This was the last of Tatsuya's official duties; all that remained after that was to attend tomorrow's opening celebration for Saika New Island.

But of course, Tatsuya had more work to do than that. In fact, his real job was just beginning.

"Tatsuya, what's up? Wasn't the memorial meeting supposed to be happening now?" It was Fujibayashi who came out to meet him; he'd suddenly shown up needing to see Kazama.

Outwardly, Fujibayashi's attitude toward Tatsuya hadn't changed since the new year.

But even given that he didn't have an appointment, she'd had plenty of opportunity to psychologically brace herself between the base front gate and showing him into the room. Tatsuya had no idea whether her feelings about him really hadn't changed.

He didn't particularly feel the need to, either.

But it wasn't that he didn't care. She was an important collaborator. There was a considerable gap between the actions he could take depending on whether the Electron Sorceress's abilities were available to him.

So if possible, Tatsuya wanted to preserve a collegial working relationship with her. However, he had no intention of going out of his way to specifically flatter her.

In other words, if Fujibayashi was going to pretend things were the way they'd always been, Tatsuya would just go along with that.

“The family sent some backup, so I’m leaving that to Miyuki.”

In fact, the previous night, Hayama’s assistant, the butler Shirakawa, had arrived in Okinawa to aid with Tatsuya and Miyuki’s work.

The truth of the matter was that the memorial service planning meeting was simple bean counting. There was nothing special happening that would require any particular negotiation.

Miyuki had thus far not made a public appearance as the Yotsuba family’s scion, but she was attending this meeting in her capacity as the next family head. There was no guarantee that someone who wanted to harm the Yotsuba family or use them in some way wouldn’t attempt to force some unreasonable condition. To guard against that, Tatsuya had planned to attend the meeting as backup.

However, with Shirakawa by Miyuki’s side, there was no need for Tatsuya to accompany her. Shirakawa had demonstrated his reliability as Hayama’s assistant and would be more help to Miyuki in this context than Tatsuya could be. Whatever the potential difficulty she may run into, it would be neither magical nor physical, but verbal.

Maya must have known this, too, and sent Shirakawa. Tatsuya was happy to accept the favor—even though he understood the message beneath it: *I’ve made sure she’ll be properly supported, so make sure you do your own job properly.*

“I see. Well then, I wonder what sort of intelligence you’ve brought us today?”

Fujibayashi’s question wasn’t meant in earnest. She couldn’t possibly imagine that even Tatsuya would have already encountered the enemy. It would be far too convenient. This was simple banter.

“We can sink the operatives’ submarine, so I would like to request your help. These are the presumed current coordinates of the submarine.”

There was a bit of lag between Tatsuya’s statement and Fujibayashi’s comprehension.

As she took the data card Tatsuya offered her, Fujibayashi switched from

chatting with her younger friend to addressing a member of a powerful magic family. "...I'll call the commander. Wait here a moment," she said, stepping into the next room.



Tatsuya waited longer than he expected to. But when he looked at Fujibayashi's face after she called him in, the reason for the delay was soon obvious.

In addition to the ranking officers of the Independent Magic Battalion—Kazama, Sanada, and Yanagi—Ganghu Lu and Xiangshan Chen were sitting around the table.

Tatsuya had only met Ganghu Lu once before, at the Hachiouji Special Detention Center. They hadn't encountered each other since Lu had attacked the Special Detention Center in an effort to kill Isao Sekimoto, their cat's-paw, in advance of the Yokohama Incident.

At the time, it had been Mayumi and Mari who'd fought Lu, with Tatsuya only preventing him from harming Miyuki. And it had been Mari who'd finished him off—although she hadn't killed him.

During the Yokohama Incident, Tatsuya hadn't been among those who'd faced off against Lu in front of Yokohama Bay Hills Tower, either. So in that sense, Tatsuya had little direct connection to the man.

That said, it was plain fact that a year and a half ago, Xiangshan Chen and Ganghu Lu had planned a number of covert operations that centered on Tatsuya and his immediate circle. At the time, they had been unambiguously his enemies.

But now he regarded them with no particular animosity—and no particular friendliness, either. If anything, Ganghu Lu seemed discomfited by Tatsuya's lack of emotion.

Xiangshan Chen, meanwhile, did not seem at all distracted by such idle thoughts.

"Mr. Shiba, if I may."

"Certainly, Colonel."

This was all that passed as a greeting between the two.

Xiangshan Chen got immediately to the point. “I know this meeting is to plan the sinking of the enemy operatives’ sub, but are you certain the operatives in question are hiding in this submarine?”

Tatsuya felt a degree of sarcasm in his usage of the phrase *enemy operatives* but didn’t say anything to muddy the waters any further. “We know for a certainty that an Australian agent who’s cooperating with your nation’s deserters is aboard.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any use in asking precisely *how* you know this.”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” replied Tatsuya. There were no follow-up questions to his clear refusal.

“The sub in question belongs neither to your side nor ours. Just in case, I used channels to query every nation we currently have a diplomatic relationship with, and none of them took responsibility for the boat,” Kazama explained in an attempt to fill the silence.

“Did you ask Australia, too?” asked Chen.

“Yes. Of course, I don’t imagine they were being honest.” Kazama nodded with a smirk.

“Indeed,” said Xiangshan Chen with a similarly wry look, but their faces soon turned serious again.

“It’s a very near thing, but the sub is currently in international waters. We can’t just openly attack and sink her.” Kazama’s gaze went to Tatsuya.

“What about sinking her with long-distance magic?” he wondered.

“Will this be Yotsuba magic?” Chen asked.

This time, Tatsuya’s answer was straightforward. “That’s correct.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’d like to save that for insurance in case the operation goes off-nominal,” said Kazama, then looked over to Sanada, who sat next to him, with a glance that invited him to speak.

“From the positional data Shiba provided us, we’ve gotten our own fix on the

sub's present location."

Chen looked slightly surprised at Sanada's use of Tatsuya's name without any rank attached.

Or had he looked surprised on purpose? If the use of *Shiba* was meant to reflect Tatsuya's special relationship with the Japanese military, perhaps Chen was trying to prompt some concern by reacting to the perceived "slight."

But there was nothing in particular that needed to be kept secret about the beginning of Tatsuya's relationship with Kazama and Sanada during the incident five years ago. While Tatsuya's involvement in the engagement—or more accurately, the annihilation—of the invading forces itself was a secret, the officers' familiarity with Tatsuya itself didn't point to that. Chen was probably reminding himself that being excessively logical made one apt to jump to conclusions.

This had all been Sanada's intent in using *Shiba* to refer to Tatsuya. And even if it hadn't been, Tatsuya wasn't naive enough to be flustered by it.

"The enemy boat is surfacing. It's likely they're resupplying," continued Sanada, ignoring Chen's glance.

"Are they visible above the water?" Chen queried.

"No, your countrymen are surely not that foolish," answered Sanada, shaking his head with a smile.

It was hard to tell exactly why, but there was something mean-spirited lingering around the edges of that smile.

"They're not our countrymen anymore. They're deserters."

"Ah, pardon my mistake. Returning to the subject at hand, the sub in question is currently in a wet dock that's disguised as a medium-sized tanker."

Oil-based fuels were largely obsolete, but oil was still important as a raw material in industry. It wasn't especially uncommon to see tankers in the East China Sea.

"It's not clear how much time they're planning to spend resupplying, but if we strike now, disguised as pirates, we can seize both the sub and the wet dock."

“May I request that the deserters from our military be returned to our custody?” Chen continued.

“Of course. Since you’re aiding in this operation, we’ll do what we can to facilitate that,” Kazama agreed.

“My country thanks you.” Chen nodded to him, then glanced at Lu, giving him a wordless signal.

Ganghu Lu stood and left the room. He was going to assemble the unit that would participate in the strike.

“This operation is a race against time. Prepare to move out immediately,” Kazama ordered.

“We can mobilize in ten minutes,” replied Yanagi firmly.

“Can I ask you to accompany us, Shiba?”

“Certainly.”

Taking Tatsuya’s answer as a signal, everyone present stood.



The submarine that the anti-peace treaty faction of the Great Asian Alliance had obtained was conventionally powered, since sourcing a nuclear submarine would’ve been impossible.

Currently, international agreements prohibited the use of nuclear power in weapon systems, and the International Magic Association had staked its own existence on monitoring compliance with those agreements. The main application for nuclear power generation in weapons of war was for large warships, but if a nuclear warship was ever discovered, the International Magic Association would move rapidly to neutralize it.

That said, the association didn’t have the ability to check every weapon in the world. The walls of the nation-state were still thick. Deploying force against inherently stealthy nuclear submarines was very difficult, and in practice their use went unchecked.

But it would be an overstatement to suggest the International Magic Association’s activities were meaningless. Per their charter, they were allowed

to use any means necessary to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, regardless of national origin, and most nations feared the possibility of nuclear war enough that their own magicians recognized the need to abide by the terms of the charter.

Even if a government didn't fear nuclear weapons, its citizens did. And even governments that could afford to ignore the will of the people couldn't ignore the risk that making enemies of the world's magicians posed.

Since nuclear-powered warships were included in the ban on nuclear weapons, the more powerful nations couldn't openly possess them. While it was an open secret that the major powers did field nuclear submarines, the necessity of preserving deniability limited their use. Another nation could not be allowed to obtain proof of a nuclear sub's existence.

With such vessels so strictly managed and controlled, it was impossible for the GAA deserters to have gotten their hands on one.

While the renegade unit's submarine in this operation was conventionally powered, modern technology allowed it to be equipped with fuel cells that enabled air-independent propulsion. It thus needed hydrogen and oxygen to power the fuel cells that supplied it with electricity. And as was the fate of all smaller vessels, it required frequent resupply of other goods as well.

It would need to replace the torpedoes it had expended in the encounter the previous day. Only a day before its actual mission began, it had entered a disguised dock out of necessity.

...Johnson understood all this rationally, but he could not suppress his frustration.

Yesterday's encounter had been completely meaningless. His conviction of this had only become stronger overnight.

And thanks to their appalling failure in that meaningless encounter, they were making an unscheduled resupply stop only one day before their actual operation, taking the risk of surfacing right in the enemy's backyard. They had completely squandered the benefits of having a sub in the first place.

The complement of GAA officers and soldiers aboard could sense Johnson's

frustration, and the relationship was growing increasingly strained on both sides.

For that reason—although it wasn't the only reason—Johnson was parting ways with the main concentration of the renegade unit. To that end, he was currently waiting for the arrival of a ferry.

“Captain, your boat has arrived.”

“Understood. I'll be right there.”

He had been waiting inside the wet dock constructed in the hollowed-out interior of the tanker. He could see the ferry and didn't need the escort who was leading him to it.

The vessel that had surfaced inside the dock was a two-man submarine, its shape long and thin like a torpedo. It was about as livable as an overgrown underwater motorcycle, but it had enough speed and stealth to get the job done.

He'd already changed into the dry suit he'd need to transfer to the tourist boat that would take him ashore. He wanted to get moving before his animosity toward his allies became open hostility.



Five minutes later, Tatsuya noticed that the Australian operative was on the move. He didn't inform Kazama.

The submarine's location wasn't changing. He had no reason to doubt Sanada's word. The private jet—actually a military transport—carrying Tatsuya and the others was headed straight for the operatives' sub, or more accurately, for the disguised mobile dock in which the submarine currently rested.

The sub itself was the highest priority. James J. Johnson's position would continue to be available to Tatsuya. There was currently no need to provide information that would just cloud Kazama's judgment.

“Five minutes to contact,” reported Sanada.

“Prepare for jump,” ordered Kazama in response, directing the unit to be ready for their drop.

There were no special orders given to Xiangshan Chen or Ganghu Lu. Both of them were experienced in operations like this—that much was clear just from their unconcerned bearing.

Sanada would remain on the jet. Tatsuya, of course, would infiltrate the submarine. Of the Independent Magic Battalion, both Yanagi and Kazama would be jumping this time.

This would be Kazama's first time in close-quarters combat in quite a while, but Tatsuya remembered well his experience jumping with Kazama in front of the enemy soldiers, so he wasn't concerned in the slightest.

"We have visual."

"Jump!"

At the jet's airspeed, they would only be over the target for a moment. In rapid succession, Yanagi and the squad of seven he led, Ganghu Lu and Xiangshan Chen and their eight men, along with Tatsuya and Kazama, all leaped into the air.

As the soldiers of the combined Japan-GAA unit landed one after another on the deck of the tanker, the GAA renegades were immediately overwhelmed.

In order to minimize descent time and keep the window of vulnerability as small as possible, they used deceleration magic to slow their fall at the last possible instant. This wasn't a particularly novel technique; its usage wasn't commonly seen during the last world war, but by twenty years later, the militaries of the USNA, the New Soviet Union, the Indo-Persian Federation, and Japan had made it a viable tactic. It had also been used during the invasion of Okinawa five years ago.

Nevertheless, despite the broad knowledge, the tactic's sheer speed made it difficult to counter. Even the Japanese military, which was well versed in its use, would probably have struggled to repel a sneak attack like this one, which came from a carefully disguised jet.

Neither Tatsuya nor Yanagi and his unit were wearing MOVAL suits. They weren't willing to let the GAA see quite that much of their technology.

But they were wearing field combat gear, which, despite looking like regular

clothing, would easily deflect standard small arms fire. The face shields of their helmets were transparent but strong enough to resist sniper rifle fire.

It wouldn't stand up to heavy machine-gun fire, though, nor was it much good against special high-powered anti-magician rifle rounds. But they could advance against any other handheld weapon without hesitation.

Yanagi and Ganghu Lu bolted belowdecks as though they were racing.

Along with Kazama, Tatsuya brought up the rear. He was fully aware that this wasn't a situation where he needed to be charging ahead.

Instead, Tatsuya focused on assisting Yanagi's group by disabling the interception systems.

Using his almost clairvoyant information sense, he dismantled anti-personnel radar units one after another. Next, he destroyed the surveillance cameras within the ship.

This alone rendered the anti-personnel weapons useless, but as he continued deeper into the ship, Tatsuya destroyed every system within it that his sight revealed to him.

By the time they'd realized Yanagi's unit had penetrated the command center of the disguised dock, the situation was hopeless for the GAA deserters.

"No response from remote guns!" cried the junior officer manning the ship's defense systems.

"Use the gas!" roared Major Daniel Liu, who'd come aboard the dock from the sub, his usual calm demeanor nowhere to be seen.

"That will affect our men, too!"

"I don't care! Stopping the intruders comes first!"

"Yes, sir! ...No good! The gas nozzles won't open!"

The response from the junior officer only enraged him further. "Damn it, what the hell is going on?! Seal all bulkhead doors! Slow them down!"

"Door controls unresponsive!"

"What the hell is happening?!" shouted Liu, but nobody there could answer

him.

Tatsuya was hanging back and casting.

—The remote-controlled gun turrets in Yanagi and Ganghu Lu's path that tried to activate fell apart.

Tatsuya cast.

—The control circuits for the gas nozzles broke.

Tatsuya cast again.

—The power lines for the bulkhead doors were cut.

It might not have been as efficient as Fujibayashi's or Sanada's hacking, but physically neutralizing systems had the plus of being harder to recover from.

While its hull remained intact, the mobile wet dock platform had been effectively dismantled from within.

"That ought to be enough," suggested Kazama, who was walking next to Tatsuya. "Yanagi and Chen have both reached their checkpoints. There's no need to further risk revealing your magic."

"Understood." Tatsuya nodded, wrapping up his work by dismantling the connection between the submarine's propeller and the drive shaft.

Yanagi and Ganghu Lu reached the wet dock proper at the same time.

They exchanged a look.

Lu leaped across to the submarine while Yanagi sprinted down the gangway.

Enemy soldiers appeared from within a different hatch than the one they were heading for.

There weren't many enemies. The renegade unit had always had limited numbers, and beyond that, most of their forces had surely remained ashore.

Their equipment was also lacking. While even the vanguard of the forces involved in the Yokohama Incident had carried high-powered rifles, the soldiers who appeared here had nothing more than bayonet-equipped automatic carbines.

If this was all Yanagi and his unit were facing, their protective gear would probably allow them to simply overwhelm their opponents, but Yanagi was not inclined to get sloppy.

Yanagi made contact with the enemy ahead of his unit. He didn't give his opponent the chance to pull the trigger.

The man was carrying a short bullpup-style assault rifle, whose short total length made it well suited to tight shipboard or indoor combat. Yanagi struck the weapon's large carrying handle with the blade of his left hand, deflecting the gun outward and away.

The enemy soldier's posture opened from there, and Yanagi followed with a palm strike to his chin.

The soldier's body went flying, traveling a distance far too great to be explained by the physical impact.

The acceleration magic that reinforced Yanagi's physical movement affected the enemy soldier's entire body, not just his chin.

Deserters leveled guns at Yanagi from both sides. They chose not to fire immediately, probably to avoid the risk of friendly fire.

Under normal conditions, that wouldn't have been a mistake. But in terms of the outcome, it was indeed one.

Yanagi stepped inside the grasp of the soldier to his right, then grabbed the assault rifle's carrying handle and jerked it toward himself. As the soldier stumbled forward, Yanagi took hold of his collar and smoothly rotated around and behind him, close enough to touch the man's face.

Each of the two enemies' bayonets closed in on the other's chest.

With a strike to the back of the soldier he'd slipped past, Yanagi provided the final push.

There was a pair of horrible screams.

The assault rifles with their bayonet attachments clattered to the deck, a sound that was followed shortly by the thumping of two bodies doing the same.

Disorder spread among the enemy soldiers.

Yanagi was right in the middle of them. If they tried to fire on him, they risked hitting their own comrades. But if they chose to engage with their bayonets, two of them had already demonstrated a bad example of the future that awaited them.

They were stuck on the narrow gangways of the hidden dock. To an extent, their predicament was unavoidable. But the GAA renegades who'd come to intercept their attackers had still made a tactical error.

They were too close together.

Attempting to preserve their numerical advantage made sense, but just because their enemy was pressing a close-quarters attack didn't mean that bunching up as much as they had was the right move.

Because Yanagi's unit was behind him, too.

After letting some distance open up, two of Yanagi's men fired bursts from their compact submachine gun-style assault carbines.

The enemies were wearing bullet-resistant armor as well, so that alone wouldn't be enough to wipe them out. But at a distance of three meters, the damage from taking direct hits was still considerable.

Between Yanagi getting to his feet and the attack from his men, the enemy soldiers found themselves completely pinned down.

Shots rang out from the other side of the submarine.

"You three, with me. The rest of you, cover us and restrain this guy," ordered Yanagi, then sprinted down the hallway without waiting for a response.

Following immediately behind him were three of his unit. One of the remaining four restrained the fallen enemy soldiers while the other three opened suppressing fire.

The GAA unit that boarded the submarine had divided into two groups. Xiangshan Chen remained above deck surrounded by four guards, while the other five infiltrated the submarine, led by Ganghu Lu.

Inside the submarine, Lu was tall enough that he should have been constantly hitting his head, but he moved smoothly and seemingly unhindered through the

interior, easily cutting down deserters one after another.

While the other four weren't as skilled as Lu, their combat ability still easily outstripped that of their former comrades.

Guns weren't easily usable within the tight confines of the submarine. And even if they had been, Lu's Steel Qigong technique could stop even high-powered rifle rounds, to say nothing of small arms fire.

Lu proceeded aft from the hatch, while his four men headed fore, and the combat action wrapped up quickly.

"Boat secured," came the message from Lu.

"Did you find Daniel Liu?" replied Chen.

"No, he isn't aboard. Neither is Bradley Chan."

"Leave your men to restrain the deserters and rendezvous with us immediately, Captain."

"Yes, sir."

There was a good chance that Bradley Chan had never been aboard the sub in the first place. On the other hand, Xiangshan Chen was certain Daniel Liu was here.

If he wasn't aboard the submarine, then he was probably in the mobile dock's command room.

The Japanese may have beaten us to the punch...

Despite that thought, Chen wasn't concerned at all.

Daniel Liu had masterminded the sabotage operation, and Bradley Chan was responsible for commanding it on the ground. If the two had been captured, then this attempt at disrupting the peace treaty had been thoroughly foiled.

Xiangshan Chen didn't have any particular need to personally be the one to apprehend Liu. His mission had been to stop the sabotage operation and to capture the deserters. So long as that result was accomplished, he was satisfied.

Kazama and Tatsuya headed for the bridge of the hull that had been disguised as a tanker.

They'd initially made for the docking facility proper, planning to board the submarine, but upon hearing the report from Yanagi that there were fewer enemy soldiers than expected, they'd changed tack and were moving to secure the dock itself.

Kazama had indicated the change in plan, and Tatsuya had kept pace without any questions.

They had both trained under Yakumo, but they hadn't lived or trained together as his disciples. They hadn't had any opportunity to become closely coordinated as partners, so their wordless communication came from the influence their shared master had over shaping their mental states in similar ways.

Tatsuya had already destroyed the shipboard surveillance devices, beginning with the cameras. The bridge was blind. Even if the enemy commander was definitely considering escape, he would still have to deploy direct human observation.

Tatsuya and Kazama had already encountered two lookout teams of two people each. And even facing directly toward Tatsuya and Kazama, the lookouts hadn't recognized them.

Tatsuya had a fair amount of faith in invisibility techniques, but as they passed completely undetected by the lookouts, he knew he hadn't cast any such magic on himself.

This must be Cloak of Concealment, one of the tengu techniques said to have been worked out by Kiichi Hougen. It's similar to Hiding Mantle, the European ancient magic technique.

Kiichi Hougen was the legendary *onmyoudo* magician whose writings on the art of war Minamoto no Yoshitsune was said to have stolen (or been taught?) and was generally known as the master of swordsmanship who founded the Kyouhachi-ryuu style of *kenjutsu*.

But as the understanding of magic as real began to take hold, another legend was added to the stories about Kiichi Hougen:

From his connection with Minamoto no Yoshitsune, Kiichi Hougen tended to

be identified with Kurama Tengu. Kurama Tengu taught Yoshitsune *kenjutsu*, and Kiichi Hougen taught him the art of war. If Yoshitsune was considered a pivotal figure, it was natural that these two people (or one person and one god, perhaps) would end up being seen as one individual.

But why Kurama *Tengu*? Kurama by itself made sense. The source of Yoshitsune's instruction in the *kenjutsu* style that would become Kyouhachiryuu was a Buddhist monk in Kurama. But that alone didn't have any connection to the concept of tengu.

Historians of magic proposed that the reason Kiichi Hougen came to be called a Tengu came from how he reworked *onmyoudo* to use as a weapon, then introduced it to *ninjutsu* and called the result tengu techniques. This had become a widely accepted theory.

Kazama had studied tengu techniques before he became Yakumo's disciple. His nickname, the Great Tengu, came from his expertise with the ancient magic. While he'd learned a wide variety of *ninjutsu* techniques under Yakumo, Kazama's true strength remained his mastery of tengu techniques.

The obfuscatory magic called Cloak of Concealment was one of the signature tengu techniques. It was similar to the congenitally determined ability Haruka Ono had, as an IS magician.

They were visible but went unseen.

They were audible but went unheard.

Because they were visible, affected targets moved to avoid them. They just didn't realize they were doing it.

Rather than blocking or disrupting light and sound, the magic interfered with conscious awareness, leading to the assumption that there was nothing there to see in the first place.

The interference wasn't as strong as Haruka Ono's innate ability. But the Cloak of Concealment technique could render other people, as well as the caster, imperceptible.

Magic's range was dependent on the skill of the caster. For Kazama, that meant he could hide up to four other people.

None of the enemy lookouts were spotting Tatsuya because Kazama's Cloak of Concealment was hiding him.

The two paused in front of a room at the foot of the bridge. This wasn't a pilothouse, but a command room. While the ship appeared to be a small tanker, its interior configuration had all the characteristics of a warship.

Kazama opened the door to the command room.

The commanding officer of the renegade GAA unit turned around at the sound, but as soon as his eyes fell on Kazama, he appeared to lose interest and turned away.

"Sitrep, now! ...Damn. It's no good, Major. The team we sent to intercept the boarders has been wiped out."

"We can't contact anyone on board the sub. Recommend we evacuate now, while we still can."

Three men remained in the command room. The rest had either been dispatched to the dock or were out on lookout duty.

Tatsuya, unfortunately, couldn't understand what they were saying, but Kazama had a good command of Chinese.

After confirming that these three were the command staff of the sabotage operation, Kazama looked to Tatsuya and gave him a wordless signal.

Tatsuya's Dismantle created holes in the bodies of the GAA renegade unit officers.

Specifically, two holes in the femoral arteries of each leg on all three men.

With twelve total simultaneous castings, Tatsuya neutralized the enemy's command staff.



As Kazama and Xiangshan Chen were finished securing the submarine and its disguised dock, Captain Johnson was still at sea.

Just before midday, he'd reached the rendezvous point and had exited the sub and surfaced wearing a dry suit. Upon seeing the civilian yacht (actually another one of the operation's vessels) was waiting to meet him, Johnson

breathed an uncharacteristic sigh of relief.

Waiting for him on the yacht's deck was Captain Jasmine Williams.

"Jaz?! Did something happen?" Per the plan, she was supposed to have been waiting in a safehouse on Kumejima.

Jasmine wasn't the kind of person to deviate from an operational plan on a whim. The tone of Johnson's question didn't leave any room for teasing or banter, either.

"You don't know? ...No, obviously not."

A sense of dread welled up inside Johnson at this reply. It was, unfortunately, warranted.

"Most of the forces for tomorrow's operation have been captured by the Japanese military. I know you've just gotten back, but we need to have a meeting immediately."

Johnson's shock lasted less than a second. "—Understood. I'll go change."

"I'll be waiting in the galley."

Without even taking the time to watch Jasmine leave, Johnson headed for the cabin that had been designated as the changing room.

Sitting on chairs in the galley waiting for Johnson were Jasmine and Bradley Chan, commander of the renegade Great Asian Alliance unit.

Chan was glancing frequently in Jasmine's direction, surely unable to reconcile her appearance with her true nature.

Thus far, Jasmine had avoided meeting any of the GAA deserters aside from Liu. She only met with Chan now because of Liu's capture.

Chan hadn't seen her in person before today. Given her appearance, it was undoubtedly difficult for him to really accept that she was a military magician with the rank of captain.

The two were seated around a small table attached to the simple kitchen that was the yacht's unimpressive galley. Chan was clearly uncomfortable in the tight space but didn't seem emboldened to complain about such minor

inconveniences.

Neither was Johnson.

“When you say ‘captured,’ do you mean they were boarded and inspected? I thought the mobile dock was in international waters.”

“It wasn’t an official inspection. I don’t know the details, but it seems to have been an extralegal raid.”

“So their military is resorting to piracy now?!” spat Johnson, furious.

“We can’t really criticize the Japanese military on that count,” said Jasmine, not trying to mollify Johnson, but rather to cool his head by holding up a mirror.

“...What else do we know?” continued Johnson, not fully calmed but managing to restrain his tone as he asked for more information.

“It seems the GAA’s pursuit unit was involved.”

“I knew the Japanese and GAA militaries were cooperating, but that’s bad news. Should we assume intel about tomorrow’s operation has leaked?”

“They’ve already pulled the trigger on an extralegal strike. I doubt they’ll hesitate to use truth serum.” There was no resentment or repulsion in Jasmine’s voice. Discussing brainwashing or torture was hardly rare for a covert ops specialist like her. “And the operation itself is already a failure.”

The role the Australian military had tasked them with was essentially to act as backup for the anti-peace treaty elements of the GAA. And that had been largely confined to logistical support. Aside from the team of Jasmine and Johnson, no other combat elements had been dispatched.

And even Jasmine and Johnson hadn’t planned to actively participate in the sabotage operation as part of the main force. Per the operational plan agreed upon as a condition of the Australian military’s cooperation with the anti-peace treaty GAA faction, their main role would be to act as observers, and they would only participate in combat if it was absolutely necessary.

Of course, the Australian military wasn’t going to outright forbid them from engaging, either. If combat duty had been an absolute no-go, they wouldn’t have sent two combat-capable agents. The duo’s participation had been

strongly influenced by Great Britain's view, but Australia certainly could have declined to send them.

That said, Australia had no interest in getting involved with an operation whose chance of success was low. It was Britain whose desire to forestall the expansion of Japanese presence had led them to propose the operation. Australia was only participating thanks to their secret alliance.

Bradley Chan, however, differed. He wanted to push the operation forward, despite the setbacks. "The operation is still a go. If we stop now, it wastes everything we've sacrificed to get here."

Given his position, that wasn't surprising. He was participating in this operation as a deserter from the GAA Hong Kong military.

The British government's influence over Hong Kong was an open secret, but nevertheless, it was ultimately part of the GAA.

If he returned to Hong Kong, Chan would be a criminal. The sentence that awaited a high-ranking officer like him would be hard labor, if he was lucky, but his likelier fate would be brainwashing, followed by deployment as a puppet soldier, a weapon robbed of all free will.

It was common knowledge that brainwashing techniques damaged magical ability, but the GAA had made brainwashing of magicians to turn them into absolutely obedient soldiers practical, with the caveat that the process damaged their ability to use magic creatively or with variations. The technique had been derived from magic—or more accurately, curses—introduced by Gu Jie through the No-Head Dragon crime syndicate.

This was equivalent to a death sentence for the magician involved. Stripped of volition, they would be used and discarded. Though they lacked a mind with which to experience suffering, the horror of the punishment made it worse than death.

The only path left for Chan was to make the sabotage operation succeed, overturning the GAA's peace treaty with Japan. This would transform his crime into a meritorious achievement. And even if, after the restoration of the anti-peace faction, the government still refused to acknowledge his success, succeeding with the sabotage operation would give him some leverage in

requesting asylum with Australia or Britain.

In any case, unless he could successfully complete tomorrow's operation on the artificial island's completion celebration, his future would become very dark.

"But the submarine and most of the operational assets have been lost," pointed out Jasmine.

And just as she said, the separate force Chan led was meant to draw the attention of the Japanese security forces, opening a gap that the submarine would use to attack from the sea. The sub would use not torpedoes or missiles, but deploy operatives who would approach with stealth and attach explosives to the island's floats.

"We still have some smaller vessels. If we can make the seagoing approach without being noticed, the operation's still possible. The submarine isn't absolutely necessary."

"Is that actually feasible?"

"We still have magicians specializing in underwater operations left in our unit. We have fewer men, but it doesn't preclude the operation."

Hearing Chan's confidence, Jasmine looked to Johnson, meeting his gaze.

"We can't make that decision independently. Give us time to contact our superiors," answered Johnson in Jasmine's place.

This was not a delaying tactic. The need to ascertain their country's position on the matter was very real.

"...Understood. I'll hope for a favorable response." Chan seemed to know this, as he restrained his sense of urgency and nodded.



Johnson used a British tight-beam military communications satellite in order to contact his superiors. This, it went without saying, was to avoid his communications being intercepted.

Unfortunately, however, even when he went to such lengths, the Japanese military was listening.

“Good word, Lieutenant Fujibayashi.”

“My pleasure, Commander.”

Fujibayashi—also known as the Electron Sorceress—was mainly famous for her hacking abilities, but she had magic skill to match.

She was a user of emission, focusing, and oscillation magic that could interfere with electromagnetic radiation—a “witch” who, rather than using it to attack or locate enemies, specialized in magic that could intercept both wireless and wired communication. And because even fiber-optic communications were ultimately converted into electrical signals, they, too, fell within the purview of her abilities.

Fujibayashi wasn’t limited to signals in transit, either. She had a special knack for reconstructing recorded electronic, electromagnetic, and optical data from storage media after it had been erased.

And even when there were transmissions she couldn’t interpret, there were physically no transmissions she was incapable of intercepting. Thus, Fujibayashi’s magic ensured that Johnson’s tight-beam satellite transmission had arrived not only at its intended destination but also at an Independent Magic Battalion receiving device.

“Sanada, is the decryption finished?”

“Yes. It wasn’t that complicated of a cypher.”

Most of the signals that Fujibayashi couldn’t decode, Sanada could. He wasn’t just an excellent magic engineer; he was also well-known among cryptographers as a capable code breaker.

“What did it say?”

“It was inquiring as to whether the operation tomorrow should be canceled or not. The Australian military has yet to reply.”

“I’d appreciate it if they went ahead with things, honestly...” said Kazama.

Had Tatsuya been here, he might have objected to that. From Tatsuya’s perspective, avoiding an incident at all was the ideal outcome.

But from Kazama’s standpoint, a moderate amount of sacrifice was required

in order to obtain the most desirable outcome. In fact, he was actively pursuing that option.

The GAA deserters who opposed the peace treaty had already had their war fighting ability stripped from them. Kazama and his unit had determined that much. The chance that they would be able to regain that capacity by tomorrow was functionally nil. Even if they decided to attempt the operation anyway, they were unlikely to inflict many casualties.

“Could we falsify a reply? ...No, that won’t work.”

Sanada grimaced at Kazama’s muttering. “Sending a fake transmission isn’t technologically impossible. But it would be difficult to block the real communication.”

“Of course.” Kazama understood that, which was why he’d cut off his own idea.

Just as Kazama was tilting his head and trying to think of something even more diabolical, Fujibayashi spoke. “We’ve got the response from the Australian military.”

“What did they say?”

The transmissions had already been decrypted once. They hadn’t been foolish enough to reuse the same encryption key, but it was still possible to automatically display the plaintext.

“Sir. ‘Permission granted for tomorrow’s operation. Cooperate with anti-peace treaty GAA elements and pursue mission completion.’”

“I see. Yanagi,” Kazama called.

At the sound of his name, the man said, “Yes, sir,” and stepped forward from a corner of the room.

“Inform Xiangshan Chen and ready an intercept formation. I leave the details to you.”

“Understood, sir.” Yanagi saluted and left the room. The sound of his footsteps seemed somehow oddly lighter than usual.

“Still, Australia’s getting bold. I wonder if they have some new weapon or

something,” Sanada commented to Kazama, without any particular urgency or concern in his voice.

But the reply that came from Kazama didn’t seem to be a joke. “No, I think they might not seriously expect to succeed.”

“Then why in the world—?” blurted Sanada.

“That seems like an odd order to me as well, if they’re serious about the operation. I think if they actually wanted the mission to succeed, they’d provide specific orders pertaining to the specific adverse conditions that have come up,” offered Fujibayashi by way of conjecture.

“That’s the thinking of a high-up officer with plenty of backup. Detailed orders from command often end up having nothing to do with actual battlefield conditions, but the brass always wants to micromanage the front lines as much as possible,” Kazama added.

Kazama’s cynical view seemed just as likely to apply to life in general as it did to military matters. He’d spent so much time saddled with an unfair reputation for being prone to independent, unilateral action that even after he’d risen in the ranks, he took a generally dim view of managers.

Naturally, he had the good sense not to let the managers hear him say so.

“On the contrary, when they don’t provide specific orders, the brass are often expecting failure and trying to avoid responsibility for it. In this case, I can’t help but wonder if that’s what’s going on.”

“I see your point, Commander, but if their op fails, doesn’t that mean they’re jeopardizing the safety of the operatives they’ve already dispatched?” Sanada asked, finding himself unable to agree with Kazama’s interpretation.

“I’m sure they know that,” Kazama explained. “What I’m saying is the Australian military has decided they can live with that.”

Even Sanada couldn’t hide his surprise at this bold deduction. “You’re saying they’re willing to cut two magician operatives loose?”

Kazama nodded, his expression unperturbed. “If the magicians were truly irreplaceable, they wouldn’t have been dispatched on such a dicey mission in

the first place. It's not just that it's high-risk. It's like they're being forced to walk a tightrope without a net."

"So you're saying they were disposable from the very beginning...?" It was Fujibayashi who spoke up rather than the astonished Sanada, her voice a little shaky.

"Suppose a magician who represented a major threat to Japan showed up in the USNA. Would we send Tatsuya over all alone, I wonder?" Kazama posed a concrete example.

"No... At the very least, he would have some backup," said Fujibayashi with a thoughtful nod.

"But they would have some kind of deficiency, either physically or with their magic skill, that made it acceptable to send them on an infiltration mission. They would be capable, but not so capable as to make their loss unacceptable—that would be the thinking."

Kazama picked a tablet-style time terminal up off the desk—the same one he'd used during his meeting with Tatsuya at the steakhouse.

The data he summoned to the display was the same he'd called up then, too. The screen showed still images of a bearded man and a tween girl wearing a straw hat.

"For example—what if this 'girl' looks the way she does not because of pharmaceutical intervention but because of chromosomal abnormalities that arose as a side effect of her enhancements?"

"Commander, that's..." The words *enhancement* and *side effect* caught in Fujibayashi's throat.

"It's just a guess. But it sounds plausible, doesn't it?"

"It does," Sanada took over from Fujibayashi. "It's most definitely possible. With an engineered magician like that, they might end up burning themselves out at any moment. There's a good chance the Australian military is doing just what the commander is saying."

No one had anything further to add to Sanada's conclusion.



March 28 finally arrived.

Miyuki's public duties as *the next head of the Yotsuba family* had ended the previous day. Today, she planned to attend the party at her friend's invitation, escorted by Tatsuya.

—Or at least, that was their cover story.

In reality, today was the main event for the real reason they were there: Having successfully finessed an invitation to the party, their true job was to prevent a terrorist attack targeting the event.

"All of my preparations for your attendance are in order, Miss Miyuki, but it seems they were unnecessary," said Shirakawa the butler with a pleasant smile. He had been dispatched from the main Yotsuba house to accompany her.

He ranked sixth of the eight family butlers and was not among the top three who were permitted knowledge of the Yotsuba's secret.

Even among the members of the Yotsuba family and its branches, that knowledge was limited to a handful of people, plus the first three butlers and a few researchers involved with the core projects of Old Lab 4, so that didn't mean the fourth butler and below, like Shirakawa, were *completely* ignorant of internal family matters kept quiet from the public.

In the end, Shirakawa possessed more than adequate knowledge in order to carry out all his duties, which was why he'd been dispatched here in the first place.

"I must admit it's difficult to say whether Master Tatsuya's attending the party will be a good thing or not, though," the butler concluded.

Tatsuya was in agreement, so he didn't scold the man for being slightly less deferential than he ought to have been toward a central family figure like Miyuki. Although Miyuki herself looked a bit dissatisfied, since she was very much looking forward to Tatsuya being her escort.

"It's true that there will be some limits on what I can do, but at least this time I'll know where the enemy is and what they're targeting. They'll be simple to deal with."

The words were boastful, but Tatsuya was wholly sincere. And not just Miyuki but also Minami and Shirakawa knew he wasn't bragging.

The only way an attack whose target was prepared in advance could succeed would be for the attacker to overwhelm the target with sheer strength or for the power available to the target to be limited. Neither of those were the case for this mission. This opponent would be much easier for Tatsuya to deal with than the last, when he'd had to try to uncover a well-hidden enemy.

Tatsuya, Miyuki, and the rest of their party were currently on a yacht arranged by the Yotsuba family. Immediately after the Nagasaki incident, anticipating an increase in oceangoing operations, the second butler from the main Yotsuba house, Hanabishi, had placed an order with a Nagasaki-based shipbuilder, which had arrived in Okinawa in order to be used for this mission. Externally, it appeared to be a pleasure vessel, but it was a true wolf in sheep's clothing, being internally a fully capable high-speed combat vessel.

"I'll take us out, then." It was Shirakawa at the helm. Tatsuya and Minami were both also capable of piloting the yacht, but Shirakawa had an open-ocean small craft pilot's license that Tatsuya was not yet eligible for because of the age requirement.

Additionally, Tatsuya needed to repel the enemy attack, and Minami had to stay by Miyuki's side in order to protect her. Shirakawa was the obvious choice to helm the yacht.

"If you would," she said.

Upon receiving permission, Shirakawa eased the high-speed vessel posing as a yacht into motion, pulling so smoothly out of port that there was hardly any sense of motion aboard the ship at all.

The ride aboard the vessel Joseph had borrowed for their use three days earlier had been quite pleasant, but this was on another level of comfort still. There seemed to be magic involved. In fact, the entire vessel was an integrated magic device, not unlike an integrated armament-type CAD. There was one other Yotsuba family servant serving aboard the ship as an officer, but Tatsuya only sensed them as they activated the vibration and motion control magic that kept the vessel's ride smooth.



An airplane flight from Okinawa to Kumejima took thirty minutes, but a high-speed boat took two hours to reach Madomari Harbor on the island's eastern coast. "At this vessel's top speed, we could've made the trip in an hour, but I piloted with an eye toward comfort," explained Shirakawa.

Rather than steaming straight for the artificial island, they had docked at Madomari Port, since the party didn't start until evening, and it wasn't even noon yet.

"Hi, Miyuki."

"Tatsuya!"

Shizuku and Honoka were waiting for them at the harbor. Miyuki had contacted them ahead of time to let them know when their yacht would be making port.

"Honoka, Shizuku—you came all the way to meet us?" Tatsuya asked.

Miyuki hadn't told her brother that she'd messaged the two. Tatsuya should've found Honoka and Shizuku's appearance at the harbor somewhat unusual, but he evinced no surprise.

He might've anticipated the possibility of Miyuki doing just that. Or perhaps he had subconsciously decided it had no bearing on his mission.

In any case, he didn't seem to be totally indifferent to their presence, otherwise he wouldn't have said this: "Have you two eaten yet? If not, would you like to get lunch with us?"

"Yes! Absolutely! With pleasure!"

“That’s a bit much, Honoka... Although we were going to invite you all to do the same thing.”

Honoka looked like she was about to start dancing, while Shizuku seemed a bit bashful. Regarding them, Tatsuya smiled faintly—not the cynical smirk when nobody was looking back around the time he started high school, but a gentle and sincere smile.

For lunch, at Honoka’s recommendation, they had a “prawnburger.” The food served at the party that evening would have hors d’oeuvres, but even without full courses it would all be quite fancy, so Honoka insisted that a casual lunch was the way to go.

The burger had two layers: one of fried shrimp and one of sautéed vegetables, and the five of them (Tatsuya, Miyuki, Honoka, Shizuku, and Minami) divided it into five pieces to share as they savored the taste of a dish rarely found in Tokyo.

“By the way, Tatsuya, where are you guys going to change clothes?” asked Shizuku after lunch, addressing Tatsuya but mostly looking at Miyuki. The group was currently eating a dessert of Okinawa *Zenzai*—shaved ice topped with sweetened red kidney beans.

Shizuku was probably imagining that, with their hotel on the mainland, Miyuki didn’t have anywhere to change her clothes. And she wasn’t necessarily wrong.

“If you like, I can take you to a salon.”

But they had come prepared: “Thank you! But we’re fine. We can change aboard the yacht,” said Miyuki.

It wouldn’t be as nice as a salon’s changing room, but there was a full-length mirror and makeup tools on board (what appeared to be) the yacht (but was actually a high-speed transport). They would be able to dock directly at the artificial island and go straight to the party.

But now that the question had been posed again, Tatsuya wondered if that would be enough.

“Miyuki, why don’t you go ahead and take Shizuku up on her offer?”

Tatsuya considered his sister incomparably beautiful even without makeup, to the point that he was concerned that a makeover from a second-rate beautician would actually lessen her charm. Such thinking was why it hadn't occurred to him to make a reservation at a salon on Okinawa or Kumejima.

But any salon Shizuku recommended would be anything but second-rate. If the option was there, Tatsuya didn't see any reason not to have a skilled artist enhance her beauty.

Though he himself was only vaguely aware of it, Miyuki sensed the faint anticipation from her brother.

"If Tatsuya thinks that's best...I'll take you up on that, then," she said, reversing her previous statement.

"It's my pleasure," replied Shizuku without so much as a flicker of irritation. "You should come, too, Minami."

At this, Minami looked up at Tatsuya.

"Go ahead and go along with them," he agreed immediately.

His quick answer was all the prompt Minami needed. She bowed to Shizuku. "Thank you very much."



It was 2:00 PM when Tatsuya dispatched a taxi to take Miyuki's and Minami's dresses to the hotel where Shizuku was staying. At 4:30, two hours before the party was to start, he received a message from Miyuki telling him their preparations were complete.

It wasn't that they had taken longer than he'd expected. Even at a moderate estimate, this was still *Miyuki* going to see a high-class beautician to have her makeup done for a formal party. The beautician would have to use all their skill to do her face justice. If anything, two and a half hours was on the short side.

But the fact remained that they didn't have much safety margin left in their schedule. Tatsuya collected Miyuki and Minami, and they set out from the harbor immediately.

Meanwhile, Shizuku and Honoka had said that they planned to take a

helicopter to the artificial island.

Saika New Island was thirty kilometers off the western coast of Kumejima. By helicopter, they would arrive in plenty of time. The two girls—Honoka in particular—had strongly suggested that Tatsuya and his party ride with them.

It was true that a helicopter obviated any need to hurry. But owing to the parameters of his real mission, Tatsuya couldn't take Shizuku up on this invitation. He couldn't let Miyuki travel separately from him, and Minami's entire job was to stay close to Miyuki. Given those circumstances, the three returned to their high-speed transport and headed for the artificial island by sea.

Tatsuya hadn't been idling away while Miyuki and Minami had been getting ready for the party.

He'd met with Kazama at a National Defense Force base on the north side of the island, during which he'd given the location of James J. Jackson as reported by his Elemental Sight.

After the meeting, he'd gone up in an air force reconnaissance craft and scouted the surroundings of the artificial island using both his eyes and Elemental Sight.

He'd returned to Madomari Harbor at 4:00, then hurriedly changed into a suit for the party before going to pick up Miyuki and Minami.

The day's forced march had been exhausting even for Tatsuya. It would have been a little easier if they hadn't gone to lunch with Honoka and Shizuku, but he had no intention of complaining about it. However, once they'd left the transport, he couldn't deny that he wanted to catch his breath for a moment.

Tatsuya took his jacket off, hung it up, and sat down in a chair in his cabin. It wasn't a couch, but it had a supportive full-length backrest (including a headrest) and was fully cushioned, so he had no problems with its comfort.

It vaguely occurred to him to worry about creasing his dress clothes, but he was reluctant to change all over again.

He leaned back in the chair.

“Tatsuya?” There was a knock at the door but no answer. Concerned at the lack of reply, Miyuki softly opened the door.

“Oh!” she exclaimed before hastily slapping both hands over her mouth.

Tatsuya showed no sign of waking.

Miyuki put a hand to her chest with a sigh of relief, then quietly slipped into Tatsuya’s cabin.

His peaceful expression gave her a feeling of profound happiness.

She knew that even when he was sleeping, Tatsuya would still be aware of people around him. Even asleep, he was always ready to fight.

The fact that Miyuki could get this close to him without his waking meant that in every sense Tatsuya did not think of her as a threat. It was the proof that for her, his guard was fully lowered.

Miyuki drew still closer to Tatsuya.

She looked back over her shoulder to make sure the door was fully closed.

Nevertheless, she was still agitated, looking hastily around herself before seeming to accept that they were alone, and only then relaxing from her doubtful, hesitant state.

She closed her eyes, placed her hands over her chest, and took a deep breath.

She opened her eyes, smoothing her hair with one hand and her skirt with another before slowly bringing her face closer to Tatsuya’s.

The evening last October, two days before the thesis competition—in other words, the evening two days before the Yokohama Incident. That night, in a similar situation, Miyuki’s hand had slipped. Remembering her failure then, Miyuki kept herself from reaching out to Tatsuya and instead used her hand to brace her body.

Gradually, her lips approached his.

Tatsuya gave no sign of waking.

She passed the distance at which their breath intermingled, and with a hair’s breadth left to cross—

Miyuki closed her eyes tightly...

...And pulled away, turning red to the tips of her ears as she fled Tatsuya's cabin.





Saika New Island was a partially submerged megafloat. The base of the artificial island was octagonal, sitting atop sixteen cylindrical columns, twelve of which doubled as floats and four of which served as ore transport paths for the crisscrossing assembly of undersea resource extraction units on the seafloor under it. The island's base comprised a five-level residential section, part of which was a high-class hotel for visitors to the installation.

The party was being held in the hotel's ballroom on the first "underground" level of the island. It was thirty minutes before the opening ceremony, and invitees were beginning to gather in the lobby outside of the ballroom.

"...Am I in the wrong place?" murmured Sayaka as she regarded the fine ladies and gentlemen gathering, all of whom were wearing expensive-looking clothing and jewelry that clearly communicated their social class even if she didn't know who they were.

"You're just fine, Mibu. You look lovely," Azusa reassured her.

"Do I, though?" Sayaka asked, unconvinced, fiddling with the end of her stole.

"You're worrying too much," Kanon agreed. "From what I can tell, we're not the only high school or college students here. Plus, this party isn't even the main event for our trip. Just have a good time and don't sweat the small stuff."

Her encouragement seemed to help, and Sayaka finally mumbled, "I...guess you're right."

Just as Kanon had said, here and there in the lobby were men in their early twenties or girls that looked about Sayaka's own age. There were surprisingly many young attendees at the party.

Sayaka and Kanon looked vaguely in the direction of the staircase that descended to the lobby, where they met the gaze of a thoroughly dressed-up Honoka.

"Chiyoda, Mibu, you're both quite early," she called after carefully hurrying her way through the crowd to avoid getting in the way. Next to her, Shizuku gave a small bow.

“Mitsui, Kitayama—you came alone?” Kanon’s group had been invited as representatives of the Isori family, with Kanon attending as his fiancée and the other five as Isori’s friends.

But Kanon knew that in Shizuku’s case, Shizuku’s parents had been the actual invitees, with Shizuku and Honoka as plus-ones. To enter the ballroom, Shizuku would have to be with her parents.

“No, they’re over there,” Shizuku explained, indicating her parents with a glance.

There where Shizuku was looking were Ushio Kitayama and his wife, Benio, with their eldest son, about to enter middle school, in tow. A politician with a familiar face was going out of his way to greet them.

Azusa heard Shizuku and Kanon’s conversation. “Wow,” she murmured, impressed.

“I think that guy’s a pretty important politician, right? They didn’t greet him—*he* went out of his way to go say hello to *them*.” Kanon’s tone, meanwhile, went over impressed and into a note of disgust.

At some point, Isori had come up behind the group. “He’s not just pretty important, he’s an experienced cabinet minister,” he interjected. “He’s a big shot in national defense, so I bet he’s being extra nice.”

None of the companies under the aegis of the Kitayama family were directly involved with weapons. But the Kitayama-owned companies produced a large share of the raw materials needed for everything from small arms to fighter planes. Since supplying the defense industry wasn’t a major part of their business, if Ushio Kitayama felt slighted, he could easily shift to focusing on consumer industries or exporting materials, which would hamstring the National Defense Force’s requisitions. Isori’s use of the word *nice* was, if anything, an understatement compared to the reality.

“This is as good a time as any. We may as well go say hi ourselves.”

“To which side?”

“Both, of course,” said Isori, pushing Kanon, who looked like she still had questions, over to Ushio and Benio and the politician who was talking to them.

“There’s really no hurry,” murmured Shizuku as she watched the two go, prompting Sayaka and Azusa to blink rapidly, looking like pigeons shot with a toy pellet gun.

They didn’t have to go say their greetings right this moment—they had Shizuku. Even once the party started, there would be plenty of opportunities for conversation. Sayaka’s and Azusa’s bemused expressions came as they realized that was what Shizuku meant by her murmured words.

While he looked calm, Isori was anything but composed.

Meanwhile, Shizuku had already stopped watching Isori and Kanon. She noticed Honoka glancing warily around the lobby. “What’s wrong?”

Of course, Honoka was looking for someone, and nobody had to ask who.

“I wonder if Tatsuya is here yet...”

“Good question. I’m sure when Miyuki and her party arrive, it will be obvious.” Shizuku tried to subtly remind her friend not to forget about the women who would be accompanying the object of her affection, but to no avail.



Honoka’s worries notwithstanding, the high-speed transport carrying Tatsuya and Miyuki had already arrived at the artificial island.

The reason Miyuki had yet to appear in the lobby was that she absolutely loathed being crowded.

The fact that she was the “princess” of the secretive Yotsuba family was already enough to arouse people’s interest and social calculations. Add to that her stunning appearance for the evening, and it was obvious that she was feeling gloomy about the prospect.

Tatsuya, meanwhile, had a different reason not to be at the ballroom. He was instead heading for the shopping mall on the island’s recently opened first level.

Most of the shops’ real business wouldn’t come until the undersea resource extraction began the next month, but a few souvenir shops and convenience stores had opened their doors already.

In front of a convenience store from a national chain, Tatsuya watched James

J. Johnson. Johnson's hair and eye color had changed, and he'd shaved his beard. On top of that, he'd altered his physique with body-shaping underclothes. But none of that was enough to fool Tatsuya's sight. Tatsuya had arrived here having gotten Johnson's location in the first place by using Elemental Sight.

His opponent had probably noticed him as well. Tatsuya hadn't disguised himself. It was fairly impressive that he wasn't betraying any nervousness.

Johnson had a girl who looked about twelve or thirteen with him.

She had red hair and green eyes. Not the same colors she'd had in the picture Kazama had shown him. Her dressed-up, taller-seeming appearance, along with the different hairstyle, gave a considerably different impression, but Tatsuya wasn't deceived.

The "girl" looked up.

Their gazes met.

"I'm sorry," said Tatsuya, giving a slight nod of acknowledgment. "I'd heard this evening's party wasn't an international event. You'll have to excuse my glance."

"Ah, no, don't mention it," said Johnson in an unsurprisingly rattled tone, hurriedly trying to move away from him.

But Tatsuya wasn't going to let them get away.

"And my apologies to you as well, miss. That was no way to treat a lady. I hope you'll forgive me," he said, looking into Captain Jasmine Williams's eyes and offering a stiffly formal apology that was in no way suitable for a child.

"...It's quite all right. Please don't trouble yourself," said the girl in a high, brittle voice that suited her appearance. She gave him a nod.

On that cue, Johnson and Jasmine turned their backs to Tatsuya.



After checking with a glance over his shoulder to make sure Tatsuya had entered the convenience store, Johnson quickened his stride.

With her shorter legs, Jasmine had to trot to keep up with him, but Johnson's

pace didn't waver.

Only after turning a corner such that the convenience store was out of sight did he slow down. And even then, it was only to allow Jasmine to match his speed. He didn't stop until they reached a blind spot created ahead of time by tampering with a security camera.

Johnson and Jasmine both quickly looked around the area. After confirming there was no one around, they opened a door they'd unlocked earlier that led to a service stairwell and slipped inside.

Johnson exhaled loudly; Jasmine, quietly. But their relief lasted only a moment.

"Jaz."

"What?"

"Do you think he...noticed us?"

"No idea."

Johnson's voice was strained as he asked the question, and Jasmine's expression was stiff as she shook her head with her answer.

"There wasn't any sign of him following us. And I didn't sense any magic being used..." Jasmine's tone was colored with her uncertainty. "There wasn't any sign of magic use, right, Jay? He didn't do anything to us, right?"

She was calling him not by his name or rank but by her nickname for him. It was a sign of how disturbed she really was.

"Jaz, what's wrong?"

Jasmine was only a year younger than Johnson. But in that moment, as she looked helplessly up into his eyes, she seemed exactly the age she appeared to be.

"I don't know... There wasn't any sign of magic. I didn't feel like anything hit me. But I don't know... Somehow, I have a really bad feeling. Why? Why do I feel like a noose just slipped around our necks?"

"Jaz, calm down." The truth was that James remembered exactly the feeling

Jasmine was admitting. The “noose” she spoke of described exactly the dire premonition that had hit him earlier. He was shocked.

But he suppressed the unease he felt and summoned the most confident smile he could manage as he looked into his partner’s eyes. “I didn’t see anyone do anything to you, either, Jaz. At the very least, I’m sure he didn’t lay a finger on you.”

Jasmine’s panicked breathing began to calm slightly. “...Sorry. It’s not like me to panic like that. I’m sure I’m just being overcautious around a magician from *the* Yotsuba family.”

“No, there’s definitely something off about him.”

Jasmine’s expression relaxed. She thought Johnson was joking.

But Johnson was dead serious.

“Jaz, should we call this one off?”

It took Jasmine a few seconds to understand what he meant.

“...Don’t be absurd. We’ve already gotten orders to proceed.”

“I’m well aware of that. I just...have a really bad feeling about this mission.”

Johnson was insinuating that they should abandon the mission.

“Captain Johnson, those words alone warrant a court-martial.”

“We’re the only ones here. Which makes us the only ones with command authority. In a case where we determine there’s a serious risk of overwhelmingly adverse circumstances, we can independently decide to retreat.”

“That’s only when there’s a high probability of fatalities! We haven’t seen objective evidence of anything like that.”

“This isn’t a conventional combat situation! Magicians attack with secrecy. We have no idea what terrors are waiting for us!”

“That’s no different from any covert operative, magic or not! It’s no reason to just run away!”

Johnson and Jasmine glared at each other.

Johnson was first to look away.

“...Sorry. Guess I’m just rattled.”

“...I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear any of that.” Jasmine accepted the apology Johnson offered.

“Thanks... I guess we should get back. The party will be starting soon. He should be gone by now, too.”

“Copy that.”

Johnson headed down the walkway that connected two separate staircases, making for a different door than the one they’d entered by.

As Jasmine followed him and watched, she distinctly felt the same urge, terribly strongly, to abandon the mission.



Tatsuya bought some mineral water at the convenience store, then returned to the high-speed transport where Miyuki was waiting.

He wasn’t particularly thirsty. He just thought it would seem odd if he left the store without buying anything.

“Tatsuya, shall we head to the ballroom?” Miyuki asked.

They had talked about that before Tatsuya had left the transport alone. He’d said he’d return before it was time to go to the ballroom.

But Tatsuya shook his head. “We still have a bit of time, right? Give me five more minutes.”

“That’s fine, of course, but...Tatsuya?” The reason they’d returned to the transport—it was probably so they couldn’t be watched by a third party. As soon as Miyuki made that connection, she realized why it was important for Tatsuya to remain out of sight. “Just let me know when it’s time to go.”

“I will. Thanks,” replied Tatsuya to Miyuki’s well-considered request before closing himself up inside his cabin.

It was very unlikely that Miyuki or Minami would enter his room without permission, but just to be safe, Tatsuya locked the door, then stripped to the

waist and sat down in the cabin's chair.

He closed his eyes.

He was not taking a break—he was extending his sight outward, beyond what the normal five senses could perceive.

Tatsuya could observe the Idea—the information dimension—even while using his physical eyes. However, when making closer observations, it was best to minimize the input from his other five senses.

Using the psion tracker he'd covertly placed on the "girl" during their recent encounter, Tatsuya accessed her information.

Jasmine Williams. Captain, Australian military magician unit. So she isn't the age she appears to be.

She was a magician with chromosomal abnormalities sustained during the process of enhancement.

Even knowing this, Tatsuya's heart was unmoved.

It would be disrespectful to his enemy to hold back out of sympathy—but even this was merely an excuse.

She *was* an enemy; Tatsuya had no choice but to neutralize her. If she ceased to be an enemy, perhaps his feelings would change.

To be safe, Tatsuya double-checked the tracker on James J. Jackson. Its trace was still running well. So long as it wasn't noticed, it felt like it would continue functioning for another three days.

It might be a little excessive, but...this will be a perfect opportunity to test It.

Once he was finished preparing *It*, Tatsuya opened his eyes.

He looked at the cabin's clock.

More time had passed than he'd realized.

He stood, and just as he was putting his shirt back on, there was a knock at the door. "...Tatsuya, it'll be time to go soon."

"Got it," he called, opening the door.

Miyuki's barrette was removed, and her hair was in an updo. Around her bared neck glittered the pearl necklace in a perfect balance of white, black, and gold.



The party celebrating the completion of Saika New Island was beginning.

The ballroom doors opened, and the crowd of people waiting in the lobby began to slowly filter in.

For events like these, there were two schools of thought—one where the highest-ranking individuals should be given the first right-of-way, and the other that held that the most important people should enter last. But today, neither seemed to apply, as the first to enter were simply those closest to the doors.

As a result, since Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami hadn't been waiting in the lobby, when they entered the ballroom, they weren't late but were the last to arrive. In other words, Miyuki entered a full ballroom escorted by Tatsuya and with Minami at her side.

The murmur of conversation in the ballroom fell quiet around its entrance.

It was as though the main character had taken the stage. And in that moment, Miyuki was unmistakably the ballroom's main character.

People held their breath, frozen, captivated by the sight of a beauty that seemed beyond anything human.

At the center of the ballroom, Miyuki gave a faint smile, seeming somewhat at a loss with so many gazes on her.

At that, the spell over the crowd was broken.

The murmur of conversation returned, with most of it consisting of phrases like "Who *is* that beauty?" "That's the Yotsuba's..." and "*That's* who she is?" as the rumors began to fly.

There was one exception—the people who already knew Miyuki: the First High students and graduates, along with Shizuku's parents.

Escorting Miyuki and with Minami in tow, Tatsuya first went to greet Ushio Kitayama. It was through Ushio that they were attending today's party, so it

was the obvious thing to do.

“Thank you very much for your help today. It’s been quite some time.” Tatsuya bowed politely. Taking his lead, Miyuki executed a beautifully poised bow, and Minami’s was youthfully crisp.

“It has indeed. And you have my thanks as well,” replied Ushio with a warm smile as gazes from all over the ballroom fell on them. In fact, Tatsuya and Miyuki had seen Ushio the previous month, after the Hakone terrorist attack, so it had not been “quite some time.” But there was no way to tell who might be listening, so there was no need to be truthful.

And given that it *had* been quite a while since they had seen Ushio’s wife, Benio, it wasn’t even that odd of a greeting.

“You’ve become quite a remarkable young man since we last met,” said Benio to Tatsuya, her speech and manner perfectly suited to the occasion. Of course, Tatsuya also caught the bitter subtext behind her words: *And how dare you deceive us like that.*

Tatsuya, however, wasn’t overawed in the slightest. “And you haven’t changed at all, madam. We’re honored to be able to see you today.”

A flicker of hatred was apparent in Benio’s eyes, but she managed to preserve her pleasant smile.

Perhaps trying to avoid letting the tension get any worse, Miyuki looked down at the young boy standing next to Benio wearing a nervous expression. “Hello there, Wataru,” she said in a voice like a tinkling bell. “I hear you’re about to enter middle school.”

The sound of the beautiful voice that matched its stunning owner froze anew many in the ballroom, young and old.

“Yes, starting in March I’ll be in middle school!”

It was hard to blame Wataru for being so shaken with nerves. His reply was largely meaningless, but it was impressive that he was able to summon any words at all.

Ushio grimaced as he watched his son, then addressed Tatsuya. “My daughter

is here, too—she’s right over there. You ought to go say hello to her.”

Ushio was looking in the direction of the group of First High graduates—Shizuku, Honoka, Azusa, and the others.

“I believe we’ll take you up on that,” said Tatsuya, bowing again to Ushio and taking their leave.

The ballroom crowd seemed to finally realize their gawking had exceeded the bounds of politeness. As Tatsuya’s group moved, the crowd’s gazes drifted off them to resume conversations with the people around them.

Azusa and Hattori’s group seemed even more relieved by this than Miyuki.

“I thought I was used to it by now, but...seeing you like that, it’s kind of overwhelming all over again.” It was a credit to Kanon’s fortitude that she managed to say this, as Azusa and Sayaka had been thoroughly overcome by Miyuki’s aura—that is, her “aura” in the current situation’s common sense of the word.

“Is it so rare for everybody to see someone from the Yotsuba family?” asked Miyuki, not offering any empty humility or flattery. She had enough self-awareness to know that after having stunned the room the way she had, offering even a sincere compliment to Kanon’s appearance wouldn’t go over well.

Here, the party’s host took the stand to give a few words of welcome, after which ten or so speakers took their turns to say their congratulations. Among them was Ushio, by which Shizuku seemed slightly discomfited.



Sixty kilometers off the western coast of Kumejima, a ship cut northwest.

It appeared to be a largish fishing vessel, heading back to its home port at an economical speed.

Years ago, Japanese inspection vessels had chased GAA fishing boats illegally working these waters, with tensions frequently escalating to the point of both nations sending in warships that would paint each other with fire-control lasers in deadly games of chicken.

But ever since the invasion of Okinawa five years earlier, the GAA had abruptly ceased any hint of such provocation.

And after the ratification of last year's peace treaty, GAA vessels plying the region had appeared to be assiduously behaving themselves.

"Lieutenant, are you really going? We won't be able to extract you..."

"The rest will work itself out. First, we have to accomplish the mission," said Lieutenant Bradley Chan, climbing into a torpedolike capsule and assuming a facedown, prone position.

Chan was the GAA renegade unit's second-in-command. Its number one, Major Daniel Liu, had been captured by the Japanese, which put Chan in charge. When Chan said he was going to deploy on an operation that was a one-way ticket, there was nobody who could overrule him.

Of course, Chan wasn't going out without any forethought. When he said, "the rest will work itself out," he'd done a quick estimate of the situation.

If the sabotage operation succeeded, even if the artificial island didn't sink, it would be a scene of utter chaos. In the confusion, it wouldn't be too difficult to commandeer a ship capable of a long-range voyage.

"Close the hatch."

"Yes, sir!"

At his order, the hatch behind his back was sealed. For a moment, Chan's vision was swallowed by utter darkness, but a faint light soon appeared.

They had five torpedo-shaped transport capsules. Chan had boarded one alone, but the remaining four held two men each. These nine men constituted the suicide squad mounting this final operation.

The capsules were launched into the sea from a hole in the ship's hull.

The propellers at the rear of the capsule were enclosed by a metal sheath that ran the full length of its hull. This modification was to avoid detection of their approach by the sound of the propeller.

The five capsules headed for Saika New Island, propelled only by the magic of their occupants.



In the hotel ballroom on the first level of the artificial island, with the opening remarks out of the way, there was time for open socializing.

The wealthy, high-class attendees seemed to have finally remembered their manners, and there were now fewer glances stolen at Miyuki. Their faces betraying relief at being released from the anxiety-inducing situation, the First High graduates helped themselves to some food.

“I thought you might end up saying a few words onstage, too,” Tatsuya said to Isori, reaching for an hors d’oeuvre.

Isori helped himself to the same thing, shaking his head with a chuckle. “Honestly, it was discussed, but I managed to decline. I don’t think anybody would’ve been happy to hear anything from me.”

“That’s not true at all! I would’ve loved to see you up there looking cool, Kei!” Kanon immediately interjected. From her tone, it sounded like this wasn’t the first time they’d argued about the subject.

“By the way, Isori, could we have a minute?”

It wasn’t Isori who was surprised by this request from Tatsuya, but rather Miyuki. “Tatsuya?” she intoned.

Isori actually *had* been surprised, but the timing of Miyuki’s interjection had robbed him of the chance to express it. “...Did something happen?”

Isori was sure he caught the whiff of something truly annoying.

From Tatsuya’s expression, he realized his intuition was right.

“All right. This way.”

Isori’s family had been involved with the planning of the island. He knew the location of a small room adjoining the ballroom they were in. It was meant to be a changing room for events where a clothing change might be necessary, but it wasn’t being used today.

“Wait here, Miyuki. Minami, keep her safe.”

“...Understood,” said Miyuki.

“Yes, sir,” said Minami.

“You wait here, too, Kanon,” Isori added.

“...Okay.”

Both Miyuki and Kanon had started to come along, but Tatsuya and Isori stopped them, then discreetly slipped into the smaller room.



“Okay, you want to tell me what’s going on?” Isori whispered at Tatsuya, despite nobody else being in the room with them.

“This party is being targeted by a rogue GAA unit,” Tatsuya explained plainly.

Isori swallowed audibly—quite clearly to hold back the shout that rose up in his throat. “Why...now...?” he said, strangled. The whole of his fragmented question was surely *Why did you wait to tell me this until just now?*

Tatsuya raised his hand in a calming gesture. “Don’t misunderstand this,” he said. “A rogue GAA unit planned this attack, but countermeasures have already been taken. There is nothing they can do.”

Isori didn’t seem entirely convinced by Tatsuya, but he was willing, at least, to hear him out.

“The saboteurs plan to approach the artificial island by sea, place explosives, and blow holes in the floats.”

“...That’s not going to be enough to sink Saika New Island.”

“But it would be enough to interrupt the party. If it were to succeed, that is.”

Isori’s returning composure brought his critical thinking skills back with it. He regarded Tatsuya doubtfully. “You sound pretty confident... In which case, why bother talking to me at all?”

“If there’s fighting, I’m asking you to watch yourself.”

“I don’t need to be told not to put myself in danger, if that’s what you’re saying,” said Isori with very pacifistic expression. You didn’t have to be Tatsuya to tell it was an obvious lie.

Tatsuya had another card to play in dealing with Isori’s poker face. “I know

about the engraved magic defense system protecting this installation. And I know that you can activate it at will.”

Isori’s eyes went wide. But he soon recovered and nodded. “Given your position, I guess you’d know. So you understand that even without the military’s help, there’s no way an explosive is getting planted on the island, right?”

Isori had been on the scene during the Yokohama Incident. He knew Tatsuya was a special officer in the military.

“They won’t even be able to approach. The repulsion field around the floats meant to keep large sea life away also works on humans. It won’t injure them, but anything with a bioelectric field can’t make contact with either the floats or the mining installation.”

“Got it in one. And incidentally, anything that does make contact will be shed using the principle used in ultrasonic cleaning. It doesn’t have to be me—so long as there’s a magician here who can activate the engraved magic, it’ll be impossible to plant any sort of explosive.”

“Indeed. And the saboteurs know that.”

Isori paled. His mind went numb, almost unable to comprehend the meaning of the words.

“...So they’re going to target me?”

“Correct. Or more accurately, they’re *also* going to target you,” Tatsuya said, his voice cruelly casual as he nodded. “Don’t worry. A military magician has been assigned to guard you in the ballroom. Him.”

The moment Tatsuya finished speaking, a presence emerged from behind Isori.

Isori hurriedly looked backward to see a magician dressed as a waiter bow to him.

“When did...?”

Rather than answer Isori’s question, the magician turned waiter introduced himself. “First Sergeant Haebaru, Ground Defense Force. Apologies, but regs

prevent me from telling you my unit.”

First Sergeant Haeburu was a slim man who appeared to be about thirty, and even Isori, who wasn't especially familiar with such things, could tell his true physique wasn't simply what it appeared to be under the waiter's uniform he wore.

“The sergeant specializes in personal protection. He's excellent at individual-scale defensive magic as well as hand-to-hand combat. If you need to move locations, just tell him.” Tatsuya waited for Isori's nod of comprehension, then continued. “Good, let's head back.”



A beautiful woman wearing a conservative dress that gave her a “private secretary of a famous CEO” look called out to Tatsuya once he returned to the ballroom.

“Please go on ahead.” Tatsuya nodded to Isori.

“Understood,” replied Isori tactfully, returning to the table around which Kanon and the others had clustered.

“Is that the eldest son of the Isori family?” the beautiful woman asked. “What a cutie. Feels like he'd look better in a dress.”

“Please don't tell him that. I expect it would bother him.”

“Don't worry, I won't. Do I look *that* insensitive?”

“No, I'm just making sure,” said Tatsuya lightly, which earned him an impish smile from Fujibayashi. “Are they here?” he asked, as though making small talk.

“Yes. They'll cross the defense line in five minutes.”

Fujibayashi had put up an anti-eavesdropping barrier around the two of them to keep their conversation from being overheard. It wasn't an acoustic isolation field from modern magic, but an ancient magic technique passed down through the Fujibayashi family. Ancient magic like this was harder for sensors to detect, so it was a better fit for this situation than more potent modern techniques.

“So about ten minutes until they surface?”

“A bit sooner than that, probably.”

“Understood. I’ll prepare for the attack.”

“Roger that. I’ll tell the commander.”

Tatsuya started to walk away, but sensing Fujibayashi’s gaze on his back—as though she wanted to tell him something—he stopped. “...Yes?”

“You...really don’t hesitate, do you, Tatsuya?”

“What do you mean?”

Tatsuya wasn’t being obtuse. Fujibayashi’s observation was too vague for him to be certain what she was talking about.

“I heard you lost someone important to you five years ago,” said Fujibayashi.

“That’s correct. And?” It would’ve been fair to say Tatsuya’s voice was cold and hard.

“And we’re in the same place, facing the same enemy, but you’re the same way you always are... I wish I could be strong like that.”

It sounded more like Fujibayashi was talking to herself than to Tatsuya, but his answer was straightforwardly honest. “It’s not entirely the same. The disposition and circumstances of my enemy are different. And there’s only one person who’s really important to me.”

Fujibayashi didn’t have to ask who that was. “...So as long as you don’t lose Miyuki, you don’t care what happens to the rest?”

“A meaningless supposition. So long as I am alive, nothing like that will happen,” said Tatsuya effortlessly, and this time when he walked away from Fujibayashi, he didn’t stop.



As Tatsuya approached the table, the curious gazes of everyone standing around it fell on him. Both Kirihara and Hattori opened their mouths to speak.

“Sorry,” said Tatsuya, cutting them off. “I’ve received a message from the family, and some business has come up.”

Up until last year, Tatsuya had taken a variety of precautions to keep his connection to said family a secret. But now he could use his status in the

Yotsuba family as an excuse.

All he had to do was drop the family's name, and its notoriety would keep people from prying. Truth be told, every time Tatsuya did so, he rather cynically tended to feel that it was awfully convenient.

Here, too, nobody asked him what the business was.

"I'll have to step out for a bit. Miyuki, I'll be back before the party's over."

"Of course, my Tatsuya. I'll be waiting."

Tatsuya nodded, then walked off toward Ushio Kitayama, presumably to inform him, too, that he would be stepping out.

As Miyuki watched him go, Azusa spoke up. "So you're calling him 'my Tatsuya'?"

"Yes. Just 'Tatsuya' somehow didn't feel right."

Despite the sudden question—she had used *my Tatsuya* many times in front of Azusa and the others—Miyuki answered without hesitation or embarrassment, a comfortable smile on her face.

In the face of such confidence, all Azusa could do was laugh. "Gosh, what is there to say? It definitely works for you, that's for sure."

Kanon looked up at the ceiling with a smug expression. "I don't think I'd be able to do it..."

"You just keep doing what you've always done, Kanon. I'm happiest that way, too," said Isori by way of offering some support.

Kanon giggled. "Oh?" she said, sidling up to him.

"Aaand they're off in their own little world again. I swear, what happened to the pure modesty of the Japanese maiden?" Kiriara grumbled, averting his gaze from the sweet tableau Isori and Kanon were presenting.

"Hey, you brought your girlfriend, too, pal," teased Hattori.

"Kiriara likes reserved girls, though, right? I guess I should try being a little more reserved."

Kiriara didn't react to Hattori's jab, but Sayaka's crack visibly flustered him.

“H-hey!”

As the graduates—including Isori and Kanon—laughed, off to one side, Honoka and Shizuku quietly approached Miyuki, their voices hushed.

“You’re not going with him, Miyuki?”

“Isn’t there something we could do to help?”

“I think the best thing we can do to help is to stay here and behave ourselves,” Miyuki noted.

But this was not what Miyuki really thought.

It wasn’t just a question of her emotions, either—she had an important role to play in the operation’s final stage.

For now, though, she would be staying here. That part wasn’t a lie.

Miyuki’s answer was the appropriate thing for a civilian and a minor to say, so Honoka and Shizuku basically accepted it. But there were others who wouldn’t back down so easily—who, presented with a crisis, wouldn’t be content to just protect themselves.

Tatsuya—and Miyuki, too—had underestimated how hot-blooded the First High alumni really were.



Just one kilometer west of Saika New Island, a single man stood alone atop the waves, illuminated by a full moon.

He was a giant in white Chinese-style armor. This was Ganghu Lu, clad in his Baifujia spell armor.

“They’ll be here soon.”

“Understood. Beginning dive.”

“I expect you know this, but Baifujia doesn’t work well with water. It’s not as bad as fire, but...”

“I’m aware. But it wouldn’t be any fun without a little handicap.”

“I suppose fire never slowed you down before, Captain. I’m not terribly worried.”

“Just leave it to me.”

“Go.”

At Xiangshan Chen’s order, Ganghu Lu’s form began to sink into the ocean.

That in and of itself wasn’t so odd.

What was odd was how, up until that point, he’d been standing on the surface of the water. And it was odd, too, that he didn’t plunge into the water with a splash, but rather slowly and smoothly sank beneath the surface.

Lu had neither a snorkel nor an air tank on his back. He was breathing normally. If one looked more closely, it was clear that no water was contacting his body. A thin layer of air surrounded his hulking, armor-clad form.

Standing there underwater, he cast his gaze ahead.

Almost no moonlight or starlight penetrated to this depth. The ocean at night was as dark as the brine it was made of. You could reach your arm out and not see your hand. If you were using *physical* light, that is.

Lu’s vision used a combination of the psion light emitted with the use of any magic and the spirit light that emanated from all animate bodies.

He stepped forward through the water.

He thrust his left arm outward, drawing his right inward.

The layer of air surrounding him thickened. He’d extracted oxygen from the water around him. Normally, this would have put him in a state of oxygen poisoning, but Lu’s body could absorb high concentrations of oxygen and store it as reserved power.

Binding the energy generated by his body to the power from this technique, he thrust his right arm outward, and from it was released a tremendous wave.

This wave vibrated not the water but only bodies within the water.

And from the scattered echoes of that wave that returned to him, Lu detected a very particular response.

He leaped forward through the sea. His upward kick connected with the leading torpedo capsule.

As the capsule tilted toward vertical from the impact to its nose, two men were ejected from within it. Panicking, they swam for the surface.

The other deserters ejected from their capsules as well, attempting to surface.

Lu pursued them, a ferocious grin on his face.



As Lu was making contact with the torpedo capsules, Tatsuya was skimming across the surface on a watercraft.

He wasn't alone. Speeding alongside him in a small boat were Joseph Higaki and Yanagi.



“Do you have a visual, Major?”

“So you see them, too?”

Via separate types of sight, both Tatsuya and Yanagi could sense the wave.

“Enemy operatives are surfacing.”

“I’m going. Watch my back.”

“Copy that.”

Just as Tatsuya gave his reply, Yanagi leaped from the deck of the boat. In his hand was a staff roughly two meters long.

Yanagi landed on the water’s surface. One would think *plunged into* would be the better term, but as his feet didn’t sink into the water at all, *landed* is the only appropriate word.

He planted his feet on the waves and thrust his staff into the ocean. Pushing down on the near end of the staff with his left hand, he used a great deal of force to lever it up from where his right hand grasped it, about twenty inches down its length.

The enemy was *flung upward* out of the ocean. Yanagi thrust the staff at the midair operative.

The operative’s strangled cry was swallowed up by the motor sound of Tatsuya’s watercraft. The only hint as to the degree of damage he’d taken was his limply flailing form.

The enemy soldier Yanagi had sent flying fell into the boat Joseph was piloting. Joseph quickly restrained the fallen man as Yanagi turned his attention toward the next operative whose face emerged from within the water.

A tremendous presence was surfacing, coming at Yanagi from behind him.

Yanagi swung his staff horizontally to strike the head that popped out of the water at nearly the same instant a huge form burst from the surface like a breaching whale.

Tatsuya aimed his magic at the hulk—but he didn’t pull the mental trigger.

He could tell that an even vaster form chasing this one was about to surface

as well.

The huge man was Lieutenant Bradley Chan, a member of the rogue GAA unit. Pursuing him was Captain Ganghu Lu of the GAA military.

Physically, Bradley Chan was the larger of the two.

But in terms of the energy he contained, Lu towered over his quarry.

Tatsuya was about to leave Chan to Lu and help Yanagi clean up the small fries, but— What happened next surprised even Tatsuya.

“Destroy!” An inexplicable battle cry came from a somehow familiar form, which assailed an enemy standing on the surface of the ocean with a flying kick.

The enemy operative sank into the sea, and the young man responsible for said kick used the follow-through to land rather rudely on the back seat of Tatsuya’s watercraft. It was Tatsuya’s former upperclassman from the disciplinary committee, Sawaki.

“...Sawaki. What are you doing here?”

“Hmm? You don’t seem very surprised.”

“Well, I could tell it was you from your kicking form,” said Tatsuya neutrally. He’d only let Sawaki land on the watercraft because he’d figured out who it was. He would’ve shot down anyone whose identity he didn’t know.

“You can tell that much even at night? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“...Well, it’s not that dark. There’s the moonlight. It’s enough.”

There was a full moon, and the skies were clear. It wasn’t totally cloudless, but at the moment the moonlight falling on the sea to the south was totally unobstructed.

As Tatsuya said, it wasn’t terribly difficult to make out a human form in these conditions.

“Hyaaaah!” A familiar voice rang out a short distance away.

Tatsuya felt a phantom ache in his head. “Kirihara, too?”

“Oh yeah. Hattori’s here, too,” came the answer from behind him,

threatening to turn Tatsuya's phantom headache real.

Tatsuya turned the watercraft about and headed toward Kiri-hara's voice.

On the way, he fired two weak magic shots to provide cover for Yanagi and came alongside the watercraft Hattori was on.

"Not just Kiri-hara and Sawaki, but Hattori, too? What are you three doing? And what are you *wearing*?"

Tatsuya had changed out of the dress suit he'd been wearing for the party and into combat gear that wasn't a full wetsuit or dry suit but wouldn't get in the way if he found himself needing to swim.

But the trio of First High alumni were all still in their regular suits.

"It seemed like a good time, so we figured we'd get in on it! Not really impressed with you keeping all the fun to yourself, Shiba," drawled Kiri-hara, who was wielding a four-foot fighting staff in place of a wooden sword. He'd probably borrowed it from the artificial island's security forces.

"The girls are all somewhere safe, right? Unlike in Yokohama, this time we can just take out the bad guys!" Sawaki evidently considered this a serious answer.

Kiri-hara's and Sawaki's statements made Tatsuya, meanwhile, seriously wonder how many screws were loose in their heads. His headache was definitely getting worse. And in Sawaki's case, part of him wanted to ask, *Have you always been like this?*

"...Hattori, while you're here—"

"Listen, I tried to stop them! I only came along because I thought that'd be better than letting them go by themselves!"

Tatsuya could see the glee with which Hattori was firing off his magic, but he decided not to point that out.

He decided instead to lodge a complaint with Kazama. "Colonel Kazama."



“...What is it?”

There was a brief delay before the reply came. From this, Tatsuya concluded that Kazama already knew about the alumni’s recklessness. “Why are there *unauthorized* civilians here?” He put special emphasis on the word.

The answer was—perhaps unsurprisingly—evasive. *“Publicly, there’s no mission happening here in the first place.”*

Since the military expected to cover up the attack on the island, obviously there wouldn’t be any records left of this combat having ever occurred.

“That’s no reason to allow civilians to get involved.”

“Unlike with airspace, we can’t restrict anyone’s free passage across noncombat territory. All the more so when we’re unable to so much as admit the truth that combat is taking place.”

Evidently, Kazama wanted to emphasize that the military had not told anyone what was happening here.

But not telling the alumni they were in a combat zone and stopping them from rampaging into the middle of a battle were different things—or at least they ought to be.

“You could give any number of reasons. Colonel—don’t tell me you deliberately avoided stopping them.”

“I certainly didn’t actively point them toward the line of battle.”

In other words, he’d allowed this.

So he’s trying to gauge their combat ability for future reference... If that was the case, further arguing would be pointless.

Hattori, Kirihara, and Sawaki, as was obvious from their names, were not members of a Numbered family. They were outside the center of Japanese magic society.

The Independent Magic Battalion—no, General Saeki’s entire 101st Brigade—would want to secure them as personnel. Saeki had probably told Kazama to use this chance to strengthen their connection to the military.

“So you’re saying they can’t be forced to withdraw?” Tatsuya asked there in the darkness. If so, this was tantamount to condoning their participation in combat.

“They can’t,” came the answer, just as Tatsuya expected.

After getting Sawaki to switch over to riding behind Hattori on his watercraft—which was fortunate timing, since three people riding on one badly reduced its mobility—Tatsuya returned to providing cover fire for Yanagi.

Or at least he would have, but the enemy operatives were nearly all mopped up. Of the three left, Sawaki and Kirihara were delightedly pummeling two of them with fists and a staff.

Their two opponents weren’t especially skilled. Tatsuya could afford to let the others handle them however they wanted to.

The other one, however—his skill was so much higher that it put him on another level entirely. But Tatsuya didn’t have to handle him, either. If anything, getting involved would have been pointless.

Ganghu Lu charged across the surface of the sea.

Bradley Chan skated over the water as his stance swiveled into a counter.

Lu’s left hand and Chan’s right both thrust outward.

Their palm strikes collided.

They didn’t, however, proceed into a grapple.

In an instant, the stronger of the two strikes prevailed.

Chan was flung backward.

Lu closed on him as he tumbled over the waves.

Chan’s body began to sink into the sea. Lu brought his foot down in a stomp.

The ocean surface shook.

It wasn’t a wave that emanated outward. A five-meter-radius circle of the water’s surface quivered like a struck bell.

The solidified surface crumbled and broke violently apart. Chan popped up

from within the waves and their spray.

Lu rushed him.

He connected with an upward knee strike. Chan went flying, his face a mask of agony as he splashed into the ocean.

As Tatsuya watched their fight, something occurred to him: Bradley Chan had been making “footholds” on the water, while Lu was making “paths.”

Tatsuya could make footholds, but he didn’t know how to make paths, which meant Lu was using a different technique. *I’d like to watch him more closely, but...I suppose don’t have that luxury right now.*

This wasn’t the only place Tatsuya needed to be observing with his sight. He pushed down his curiosity to avoid risking the failure it potentially invited.

Even here, there were more important things he needed to be watching.

Lu and Chan’s fight was approaching its end.

He couldn’t afford to miss its resolution.

Tatsuya’s judgment of the enemy operatives as unskilled only applied by the standards of the environments he spent most of his time in—the Yotsuba family, the Independent Magic Battalion, and his training with Yakumo Kokonoe.

To Kiriara and Sawaki, they were more than worthy opponents.

Neither Kiriara nor Sawaki had yet mastered the technique of moving freely over the water’s surface while fighting. Kiriara could create footholds for eight steps, and Sawaki five—although Sawaki could leap into the air and come back down to perform another five steps.

In either case, as they fought, both of them had to return to the watercraft Hattori was piloting.

The larger watercraft Hattori had commandeered had room for three, so it was unencumbered even when all of them were on it. But Hattori had to keep constant tabs on where Kiriara and Sawaki were in order to get to them before they started to sink into the ocean, which put him under even more psychological stress than the two boys actually engaging in combat.

Just as Tatsuya had estimated, Kirihara's and Sawaki's actual combat ability was better than the enemy soldiers'.

But when their two opponents were pushed into unfavorable positions, they would retreat underwater and attack from below. The GAA deserters had magic that allowed them to move freely both on and under the water.

A comparison could be made to ancient Japanese magic, specifically the users of the *suiton* underwater *ninjutsu* technique. The magic technique of the Hong Kong military the deserters had originally been attached to was a confused jumble whose base was ancient magic from both the Chinese mainland and Great Britain, to which had been added fragments of modern magic and techniques adapted from their Japanese enemies. Even a criminal syndicate like No-Head Dragon was more faithful to its traditions.

The deserters were merely using the techniques, unconcerned with what their lineage might be.

But using whatever was available probably was the right way to make a technique into a tool. This sort of reasoning itself wouldn't have any effect on the likelihood of victory or defeat, after all.

"Yaaaah!" Kirihara brought his staff down onto his opponent's shoulder.

In addition to striking a nonfatal part of the body, he also didn't put his full power into his high-frequency blade. Nevertheless, the vibrating staff split both the enemy's clothing and skin, causing damage all the way to the bone.

He tried to block with the knife in his other hand, but the vibrations were transmitted from the blade to his hand, causing instant numbness and loss of control.

The only reason the enemy didn't drop the knife was because his fingers were looped through a knuckle guard on its handle.

The enemy fell to one knee, then toppled into the water with a splash.

"Again?! Whoa—?!"

The enemy's underwater movement speed was faster than Kirihara had anticipated, and it got the better of him. Attacks from below weren't typically

assumed, and this went for magic-enhanced *kenjutsu* as well.

Kirihara toppled into the water and began to sink.

An arm wrapped around his neck.

Just as the enemy was about to plunge a knife into Kirihara—
—there was an explosion directly below them.

Both combatants were flung bodily into the air by a mass of water bursting upward.

As Kirihara was wrapped in a floating sensation, there was a sudden downward g-force applied to the enemy's body, sending him slamming into the water's surface.

For the instant the water's surface tension supported the body, an electric current ran across its surface.

It was a weak electric shock, not even strong enough to incapacitate a human.

But it was enough to disrupt the man's movement for a moment, creating a brief opening.

The underwater explosion, the downward acceleration, and the electric shock: The entire sequence of magic had come from Hattori.

Hattori opened some distance up and loosed his magic, even as he continued to pilot the watercraft. He raised his voice in a loud shout—"Now, Kirihara!"—even though likelier than not it wouldn't reach its intended target.

But Kirihara did hear.

And he didn't miss his chance.

"On it!"

Kirihara changed his airborne direction with Leap magic, then, letting gravity take hold of him, he brought his staff—whose High-Frequency Blade effect was still active—down on the sinking soldier.

As the ultrasonic vibrations contacted the seawater, it vaporized, foaming violently.

The resulting resistance slowed the staff's descent, which turned out to be a fortunate development, because:

Kirihara's staff came down on the enemy soldier's midsection, pushing right through the foam stirred up by the vaporization.

The foam acted as a cushion around the staff, so instead of being cut wide open, the enemy was violently shaken into unconsciousness.

Kirihara's face popped up out of the water as he hauled the unconscious enemy to the surface.

Meanwhile, Sawaki's battle continued, his enemy from underwater and himself from the air.

Simply put, they were failing to engage.

After sustaining considerable damage from Sawaki's punches and kicks, the enemy soldier had switched to attacking entirely from underwater. In response, rather than running across the water, Sawaki was launching himself into the air, watching for the enemy's head to breach the surface, then changing his vector to land high-speed kicks.

This sequence of attacks had played out several times.

Sawaki was trying to crush the enemy.

The enemy was trying to snag Sawaki's leg and drag him under.

"That doesn't look good. I should probably help him out," murmured Kirihara with a frown as he bobbed in the water, finally able to check and see how his compatriot was faring.

He saw Sawaki, continuing to leap up into the air, and the enemy in the water, watching for the chance to strike.

It was clear that Sawaki's stamina was running out more quickly.

And Kirihara wasn't the only one to notice.

The enemy's face emerged from the water.

The next moment, a thin disk made of water came skimming over the surface at him.

The man quickly dived back underwater. The disk stopped suddenly, directly over him, then dropped straight down.

Kirihara didn't have to see it happen to know that the sudden increase in water pressure would damage the amphibious soldier.

As he watched the fight unfold there in the moonlight, Kirihara couldn't help but let out a low whistle of admiration.

It was clear this was Hattori's magic.

He hadn't overwritten the path of that disk on the fly. He'd predicted the enemy would dive and programmed the disk's flight path ahead of time. This took both the perceptiveness to think one step ahead and the ability to execute his magic accordingly.

"Wow, that's the General for you. He's a cut above the likes of me," murmured Kirihara, quietly enough that it wouldn't reach Hattori's ears. He knew perfectly well that Hattori hated the nickname.

The General.

As an adjective, the word *general* meant "not specialized," "overall," "widespread," and carried, if anything, a broadly passive sense. For example, a generalist was someone with a wide variety of knowledge and experience, but it was also often used with the disparaging implication that such a jack-of-all-trades could never master a single discipline well enough to be called a specialist.

But modern magic, with its ubiquitous use of CADs, was a form of technology predicated on the existence of "an all-purpose soldier who can handle any situation alone." *Unspecialized* also meant "unconstrained by specialization"—in other words, able to do anything. This was the form of modern magic's goal.

Kirihara and his classmates, the magicians of Hattori's class, a year behind Mayumi and Katsuto and a year ahead of Tatsuya and Miyuki, exemplified the most faithful fulfillment of the goals of modern magic education.

Mari, a year ahead of them, was capable of considerable variation, but even she specialized in destructive anti-personnel techniques, a tendency that made her weaker against mechanized units.

But not Hattori. His notional specialization was long-distance area-effect combat, but he was highly proficient in precision sniping and close combat as well. Even Kirihara, whose specialization was close combat, had trouble beating Hattori when they were sparring.

And there was another reason his nickname was the General.

Hattori was not from a Numbered family. Nor was he from a family with a tradition of ancient magic. And although there was a Hattori family prominent in *ninjutsu*, his family was unrelated to it. It was one of the Hundred Families and had a long lineage, but it was not among the leading forces in the magic world.

And yet Hattori could stand on more than equal footing with the Numbered families, so for other non-Numbered students like Kirihara and Sawaki, he was regarded as a future leader—a general.

Kirihara and Hattori surely couldn't see it, but up in the air, Sawaki's lips moved slightly while, like Kirihara, he murmured Hattori's nickname.

There was no precision in the movements of the enemy soldier's fists when his head came up out of the water. He had clearly sustained damage from Hattori's high-pressure attack, which had struck just as it was intended to.

Sawaki plummeted out of the sky down toward the floating soldier.

The enemy, anticipating another round of kicks, tried to grab his legs. But his arms caught nothing but air.

Sawaki had drawn his own legs up—and not just that, his back and upper body, too, were balled up into what amounted to a tightly wound spring. And then he thrust his feet downward.

With acceleration magic, they approached the speed of sound.

The resulting wall of air that impacted the water's surface completely neutralized the enemy soldier.

Ganghu Lu's fight with Bradley Chan was also nearing endgame.

In a fair fight, Chan could never beat Lu. Lu was known as the Man-Eating Tiger and, as a fighter, was considered one of the strongest hand-to-hand

combat magicians in the world.

Chan had suffered a defeat during the Yokohama Incident thanks to a serious injury dealt by another of the world's foremost close-quarters combat specialists, Naotsugu Chiba, the Illusion Blade, when he'd faced Mayumi and Tatsuya as enemies as well. Alone, close-quarters fighters like Mari, Erika, or Leo would've had trouble defeating even an injured Lu.

Chan was outmatched in both physical and magical technique.

Had he finally come to understand that? All trace of confidence in his margin had vanished from his form.

No, *confidence* was probably not the right word. Chan was keenly aware that he had something he needed to accomplish after this fight. His objective wasn't beating Lu; it was successfully sabotaging the artificial island.

And that made it possible for him to be defeated before reaching his target. Chan knew that all too well.

Bradley Chan's eyes shifted color. A mirage-like shimmer enveloped his body from the psion emanation he couldn't restrain.

"Oh-ho." Ganghu Lu's eyes narrowed in amusement, his lips twisting in a sneer.

A steel-colored layer of psions appeared over the white of Ganghu Lu's armor, immediately increasing its density and hardness.

Atop the waves, Chan leaned forward.

He placed both hands down on the surface of the water, as though gathering strength to face the four-legged carnivore that was about to attack him.

The water crawled up his arms.

Soon the seawater had flowed over Chan's arms and legs to cover his entire body, lifting him up into the air.

The seawater wasn't restraining Chan. The mass of water split into two halves, top and bottom, which shifted to form the jaw of a great serpent.

From within the maw of the vaguely outlined serpent—or dragon—Chan

looked down at Ganghu Lu.

Ganghu Lu looked up—and smiled, making no attempt to hide it.

It was a ferocious, delighted, bare-toothed smile.

Ganghu Lu took a step forward in the same instant that Chan's dragon-serpent struck.

Ganghu Lu was swallowed up in the wave that was the water dragon.

Then from within the wave echoed a roar.

It was not the roar of a dragon. It was the roar of a tiger.

A column of water lifted up, leaving a bowl-shaped indentation around it.

At the bottom of the bowl stood a soaking wet Ganghu Lu, his shoulders heaving with breath.

The surface of the sea returned to normal.

Before the intruding water could reach him, Lu leaped into the air.

From above, Chan rained a barrage of high-pressure water droplets down on him.

Lu's Baifujia armor was the product of ancient continental magic and adhered to the rules of the Wuxing, the Five Phases.

One of these rules was the affinity of metal and water: Metal derived power from water.

To look at this another way, water had its power stolen by metal. This was distinct from the inter-regulating interactions, since as one phase was strengthened, the other was weakened.

Baifujia's essence was metal. It provided strong protection and certain victory. While its mental quality was rationality, its inherent emotion was rage.

The Baifujia, with its metal nature, leached power from water. Something simply involving a large volume of water wasn't necessarily affected, but attacks that used the water phase would see their strength gradually lessened.

Even though he'd removed his limiter, the reason Bradley Chan's attack had

passed through Ganghu Lu was thanks to the elemental advantage conferred by the logic of the Wuxing.

But it was not for nothing that Lu was known far and wide as the Man-Eating Tiger, and he did not stop there.

The itchy sting of the pressurized droplets raining down on him fueled his growing rage.

Transforming his opponent's attack into energy for his own strike, Ganghu Lu *kicked aside* the area-of-effect technique Chan was employing.

Chan was flatly denied.

Lu's kick had his full power behind it. It shattered Chan's water magic and sent his hulking body flying in a great arc.

Perhaps it was coincidence, or his last act of will: As Bradley Chan fell, he was trying to launch one last attack on Tatsuya.

Tatsuya's response was simple.

He merely opened the throttle.

His watercraft accelerated quickly away, leaving Bradley Chan to sink helplessly beneath the waves.



Just as Kazama expected, the fight at sea had no effect on the party.

But everyone who knew the situation kept their guard up. Isori remained in the ballroom per Tatsuya's warning, and Miyuki and Minami did their best to stay close to the other First High affiliates.

However, there was no time at all for individual action. Some instances simply could not be avoided. For example:

"Kanon, where are you going?" asked Isori.

"To use the ladies' room," she replied without a shred of shame.

"Oh, me too!"

"I'd like to come, too."

Kanon's compelling excuse prompted Sayaka and Azusa to declare their participation as well.

She grinned. "Would you like to come as well, Kei?"

"...No, go right ahead," Isori muttered, red-faced.

Miyuki's and Minami's eyes met.

They'd both heard from Tatsuya about the possibility that Isori would be a target. Properly speaking, they also ought to have kept their eyes on Kanon and the others, too.

But Miyuki had only one body. For Minami, leaving her side was out of the question.

So in the end, the two decided to stay where they were.



Jasmine and Johnson, the Australian military magicians, took independent action without waiting for the seaborne approach of the operatives.

Both of them were well aware that the GAA renegade unit's operation was doomed to failure as soon as it had lost the bulk of its force.

The two were now in the corner of a hallway, discreetly whispering to each other.

"Can we get control?"

"Unlikely," Johnson stated. "The entrance to the control room is crawling with military, probably because there are so many VIPs here at the moment. And one of them's the Great Tengu to boot."

"Haru Kazama, huh? Yeah, that's not happening."

In addition to his nickname of the Dai-Tengu, Colonel Harunobu Kazama, commander of the Independent Magic Battalion, was known to foreign magicians by the shortened moniker of Haru Kazama. To digress, in the late twenty-first century, even English-speaking militaries used the term *Dai-Tengu* instead of its literal translation, *the Great Long-Nosed Goblin*. A possible explanation for this was the successful export of Japanese subcultural terms, but the true reason was unclear.

“I know it’s a little late for this, but maybe we should bail?”

“We’re done with that conversation,” shot back Jasmine, a bit more flatly than was necessary, since the same thought had just crossed her mind as well.

“That’s right, god damn it! ...Anyway, what’d *you* find out, Jaz?”

“At the very least, it’s more than I can handle. To crack the magic systems on this island, we’re going to need Kei Isori’s cooperation.”

“Which means we’re not getting anywhere without snatching him first.”

“That’s more realistic than getting past Kazama, at least.”

“I guess you’re right about that... Whoops—” Johnson closed his mouth as he noticed someone approaching.

Jasmine reflexively put her guard up, which meant returning to her “normal girl” facade.

“Those girls... Are they Kei Isori’s classmates?”

Jasmine and Johnson were sitting on a couch that was a short distance away from the ladies’ room. From where she was, Jasmine could clearly see the faces of Kanon, Sayaka, and Azusa as they entered.

“Really?”

“I’m sure of it.”

Johnson seemed not to remember them, but having been dragged around by these meddling kids under the hot sun for hours, Jasmine was very confident.

“Perfect timing. Captain Johnson, go find some cover. I’m going to take them hostage and draw out Kei Isori.”

To Johnson’s eye, none of the three girls seemed likely to possess combat abilities that would make them a threat. The one with the ponytail seemed fairly capable, but still not someone Jasmine would have trouble dealing with if things got serious.

“Copy that.” Moving carefully, Johnson opened a staff-only service door and hid on the other side of it.



After fixing her makeup and emerging from the powder room, Sayaka noticed a dressed-up little girl looking at her.

She was petite but looked to be about twelve or thirteen. But Caucasian people tended to look more mature than Japanese, so she might have been younger.

“Oh... Wait, are you Jaz?”

“Yes, Sayaka.”

Sayaka had the vague sense that the girl looked familiar, when she suddenly realized it was the same girl they’d rescued from a near kidnapping the other day.

“Huh? But your hair color...” said Kanon, and indeed, Jasmine’s hair color had changed since then. A close look revealed that her eye color had, too.

Her chestnut hair was now red.

Her brown eyes, green.

With different features, and dressed in fancier clothes, she gave off a considerably different impression, but there was no mistaking it, especially since the girl herself had just confirmed the truth.

“What’s wrong, Jaz? Where’s your father?”

“Um, I’m in a little bit of trouble...”

“Oh, did something happen?” It was putting it kindly to say Kanon had an outgoing nature, as her somewhat incautious tendencies led her to approach Jasmine.

But in her defense, her opponent appeared to be a tween. It was a bit too much to expect Kanon’s guard to be up under the circumstances.

“The thing is... Don’t move!”

But the outcome was just what you’d expect.

Jasmine grabbed Kanon’s arm and twisted it up, then with a kick to the back of her knee, brought the older girl to her knees before holding a knife she’d been concealing to Kanon’s throat.

“Jaz, what’re you—?!” Sayaka shrieked.

Jasmine smiled cruelly. “You can’t judge people by their appearances. You should remember that.” After cowing both Sayaka and Azusa with her gaze, Jasmine carefully kept both girls in her field of vision. “Now bring Kei Isori here.”

“Kei? What do you want with him?! Ggh—!” Kanon tried to break free, but Jasmine’s joint lock on her was firm, so her demand ended in a strangled gasp.

“I have no intention of harming him. Now bring him here.”

“No! I won’t let you put him in danger because of me!”

Azusa and Sayaka exchanged a glance.

So far, Jasmine hadn’t made any move to injure their friend. But given the cold look in her eye, they could tell she wouldn’t hesitate to use her knife.

“You don’t have to call me. I’m right here,” came Isori’s voice from behind the paralyzed girls.

“Kei!”

“Kei, why did you come here?! Angh—!”

“I’m going to have to ask you to quiet down a little. We won’t be able to talk otherwise.” Jasmine silenced Kanon with a squeeze.

Isori’s attention was on Jasmine. Rage burned in his eyes. “Let Kanon go first. If you want to negotiate, start with that.”

“You should think more carefully before you speak. I am the one giving the orders here, not you. Let’s see. How about you call off the soldier standing next to you first.”

Isori clenched his jaw but nodded to Haebaru, who stood next to him. He almost gave a defeated sigh.

Haebaru wordlessly took two steps back.

At the revelation that the man wearing a waiter’s uniform was actually a soldier, Sayaka’s and Azusa’s eyes went wide. But the two refrained from complicating the situation further by saying anything unnecessary.

“Very good. Now, to the business at hand. Mr. Isori, please come with us.”

“...If I go with you, will you let Kanon go?”

“Yes. Now, James.”

Jasmine used his first name in order to obscure their origins, and thus summoned, James emerged.

“Mr. Isori, this way, please.”

“Very well.”

“Kei, no, stop!”

In that moment, Kanon was seized with the sense that Jasmine’s intention with Isori was something unspeakable. If she was to act in desperation, it would render the exchange meaningless.

Johnson’s attention was entirely focused on Sayaka as well as Isori and Haeburu. Being a close-quarters combat magician, Johnson could tell that Sayaka was more capable than she looked.

It was probably inevitable that the two of them failed to notice the danger that Azusa posed. It was the same reason people weren’t cautious around Jasmine. Azusa’s physical appearance completely obscured how much of a threat she was.

But Azusa was the one girl Jasmine should’ve been most wary of.

—It was the sound of a string.

—From nowhere in particular came the sound of something like a harp’s string being plucked.

The emotional interference magic called Azusa Bow.

The seductive tone drew Jasmine’s attention away from reality.

She wasn’t sure where she was hearing the sound from.

She didn’t even know if it was something that was actually reaching her ears or a hallucination.

But even though she couldn’t afford any distractions in that moment, all Jasmine could think about was where the sound could be coming from.

She was consumed by concentrating on when she might hear the sound again...

Everyone seemed to have forgotten to move as Azusa took her portable terminal-type CAD out of her clutch and activated her next spell.

The knife at Kanon's throat was forcefully pulled away.

Jasmine came back to her senses at the sensation of the knife being wrenched away. But not wholly. There was little strength in her grip, and the knife slipped from her hand.

It fell to the floor.

Seeing this, Sayaka moved. "Yaaah!" The blade of her hand sliced toward the nape of Jasmine's neck.

Jasmine released Kanon and quickly stepped back.

"Jaz!" Johnson, having recovered from the spell's effect sooner, scooped up Jasmine's small body into his arms.

As Haebaru stepped forward to try to restrain the two, Johnson flung a handful of darts at him, which he'd earlier liberated from the hotel's game room.

Haebaru easily shot down the three darts, but it delayed him enough for Johnson to escape through the service door with Jasmine still in his arms.

Isori hurried to Kanon's side now that she'd been released. "Kanon, are you all right?"

"Yes... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," said Kanon, bursting into tears upon seeing his face close-up.

Isori, unruffled by her crying, gently held her head close. "Were you afraid?"

"No, no, that's not what I..."

"What's the matter, then?"

"I...I put you in danger, Kei. I wasn't cautious enough!"

Isori stroked her hair gently. "Why are you apologizing? You didn't do a single thing wrong."

“But I—!”

As Kanon was about to launch into another apology, Isori brought his lips close to her ear. “I’m just glad you’re safe.”

Kanon gasped, then buried her face in Isori’s chest and wept.

“Wow... How grown-up,” Azusa remarked, but fortunately, her bitter words didn’t reach the two.

Nor did they notice the envious gaze Sayaka sent in their direction. For once, they were alone in their own world.



“Looks like we managed to get away... Jaz, are you all right?”

“I screwed up. I can’t believe Azusa Nakajou used emotional interference magic...”

“We didn’t have enough intel. It’s not our fault. The question is: What do we do now?”

Jasmine bit her lip in frustration and looked down, deep in thought. At length, she looked back up, her eyes filled with resolve. “I didn’t want to do this, but...I can use my magic on the ballroom where the party is happening.”

“I guess that’s our only option at this point...”

Johnson was just as reluctant as Jasmine was. Using her magic, Ozone Circle, on the ballroom was no different than a poison gas attack.

No excuse could possibly justify it.

It would result in harsher criticism from the international community than even a terrorist bombing would bring. In order to deflect censure, Johnson and Jasmine would probably be offered up as sacrifices by their government.

But there was no chance the bombing mission would succeed—it had, in fact, already failed—and both the operation to seize mechanical control of the island and the attempt to crack its magic systems had also ended without success.

The only measure that remained was Ozone Circle. Given that the order from Australian command was to pursue completion of the mission, they had no

choice but to try, even if ruin awaited them at the end.

“Jaz, first, let’s get to our escape boat. If you use Ozone Circle, they’re going to seal the dock immediately. We should be ready to exfiltrate before they do that.”

“Understood.”

With Johnson in the lead, the pair descended the service stairs and hid in a utility room adjacent to the dock. They didn’t head directly out onto the dock because they wanted to avoid witnesses.

There was no one else in the room when they reached it. It wasn’t merely unoccupied, but seemed totally deserted.

“Pretty lucky that no one’s here.”

“Yeah, a little *too* lucky...” replied Jasmine. She couldn’t shake her wariness.

“They might’ve been called away thanks to the scuffle earlier.”

There was no time to dally, though. Jasmine forced herself to accept her partner’s explanation. “Cover me.”

“Copy that.”

Merely conjuring ozone wasn’t terribly difficult in itself. But creating a high concentration of it outside the line of sight using only relative positioning quickly enough that there wouldn’t be time for their targets to react required intense focus and concentration. During that period of focus, the caster was defenseless. To deploy Ozone Circle behind enemy lines, a partner to defend the caster was absolutely necessary.

She engaged her CAD and took in the activation sequence. She closed her eyes and concentrated, and using her magic-calculation region, she began to construct the magic program.

There was a contradiction involved in consciously using the magic-calculation region, which was part of the unconscious mind. Aligning both conscious and unconscious aspects simultaneously required considerable concentration.

Jasmine forgot even to breathe as she constructed the program for Ozone Circle.

The coordinates were already set.

Jasmine faced the ballroom and—trying not to think about the crowd of people inside it—activated the spell.

But—

Here she encountered an astonishing problem.

“...The magic activation...failed?”

“What?” Johnson asked in spite of himself, briefly distracted from his role of watching their surroundings.

“I think...something failed in the activation of Ozone Circle. I didn’t feel any response.”

“That can’t be right!” The fact was shocking enough that Johnson couldn’t help but raise his voice.

No, it wasn’t just shocking—it was essentially impossible.

Jasmine Williams’s enhancement had been personally overseen by the inventor of Ozone Circle, William MacLeod. She was physically optimized for its use. While she couldn’t reliably cast it at strategic-class levels, her activation speed and accuracy surpassed even MacLeod’s.

This wasn’t just theoretical, either. Jasmine had used Ozone Circle many times in the field. Before today, she had never failed. When she’d used it four days earlier to throw off the Japanese military’s pursuit, she’d had no problems whatsoever.

“I’m going to try again!” Jasmine closed her eyes and concentrated.

Johnson watched her, his guard duties totally forgotten.

Jasmine opened her eyes and sank weakly to her knees in shock.

“It’s not activating... Why? Is my power just gone?”

“No,” came a third voice, beautiful and clear as a bell.

Impossibly, after the voice rang out, the presence of a third party in the room came into being.

Johnson reflexively turned toward the presence and tried to fire an air blast. But his magic, too, failed to activate.

One man and two girls revealed themselves to the two dumbfounded operatives.

The man was Colonel Xiangshan Chen of the GAA Special Forces.

The girls were Miyuki and Minami.

“Neither of the two of you has lost your magic ability.” It was Miyuki who addressed Jasmine and Johnson. There was a faint sadness in her voice as she continued her explanation. “It’s Gatekeeper, a secret technique of the Yotsuba family. What do you think?”

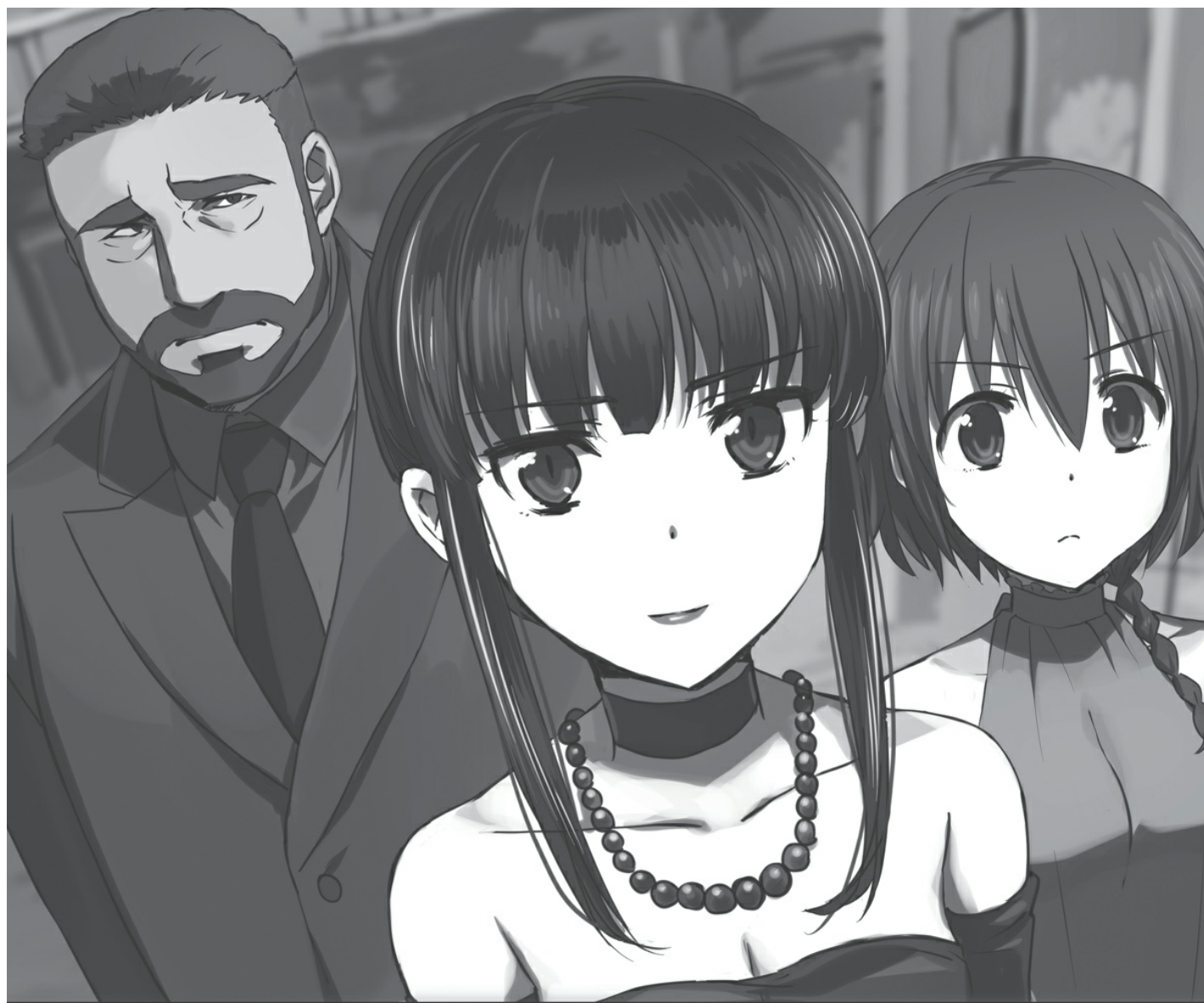
“A Yotsuba...technique?” replied Jasmine in a strangled voice.

Miyuki smiled kindly. Jasmine’s question had been in English, but Miyuki responded in Japanese. “Yes. Normally, we wouldn’t bother with an explanation like this, but today is special. You’ve already demonstrated your precious techniques to us, after all.”

Miyuki glanced to Chen.

He responded with an awkward smile.

Miyuki returned her gaze to Jasmine. “In order to affect a target, magic programs are constructed in the unconscious regions of the mind and passed along a route from the top layer of the unconscious to the bottom layer of the conscious mind through a gate that stands between the two regions.”



“Yeah, so?” said Johnson, irritated.

But then Jasmine realized what Miyuki was getting at. “...No, don’t tell me you —?!”

“The gate is the boundary between the magician’s mind and the information dimension, which is the platform for the eidos manipulation that makes magic possible. Your gate is exposed to the information dimension. When it’s not, it’s impossible to deploy magic programs externally.”

“That’s impossible! There’s no way you could’ve—”

“I see you seem to have figured it out. Gatekeeper acts on this gate, destroying magic programs immediately after they pass through it. So long as Gatekeeper is active on a magician’s gate, they—you—will be unable to use magic.”

Miyuki’s explanation was not the whole truth.

She had described it as “a secret technique of the Yotsuba family,” when in fact it was a secret technique of Tatsuya’s. The only member of the Yotsuba family currently capable of constant observation of a target’s gate was him.

Jasmine fell forward, her hands on the floor.

Johnson wordlessly came at Miyuki.

But even before his body could be stopped by Minami’s barrier, a precipitous drop in his body temperature robbed him of the strength to stand.

“Don’t worry. We already have experimental proof that cold hibernation is a temporary, reversible state.”

Again, Chen let a wince slip. He’d been that experimental proof, after all.

Miyuki turned toward the door. “All right, men, if you would.”

At her signal, the door opened and suited military personnel came through it to restrain Jasmine and Johnson.

As Jasmine looked out through the door, she saw not the island’s docks, but a plain, undecorated room.

Through the open door came the faint sound of music.

With a horrible lurch, Jasmine realized they were right next to the ballroom.

“You didn’t notice, did you? Apparently, it’s called Qimen Dunjia. The two of you thought you were descending those stairs, but you were actually going somewhere else entirely. So even if Gatekeeper hadn’t been working, your relative position-based targeting would’ve caused Ozone Circle to fail.”

Overwhelmed by the blow of this final revelation, Jasmine could only laugh a weak, strained laugh. “Ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha... What the hell? We were in the palm of your hand the entire time...”



By the time Tatsuya returned to the artificial island, Miyuki was back in the ballroom.

“Welcome back, Tatsuya. I hope it wasn’t too exhausting.”

“I heard you had plenty to do yourself. Apparently, everything went according to plan, though.”

“Yes. There was a bit of unexpected work at the very end, but getting to stretch a little bit was actually more satisfying than just delivering an explanation.”

Just as he’d asserted ahead of time, Tatsuya had returned to the party well before it finished.

His suit was still spotless, and his polished shoes were without a single smudge. If anything, he was more put-together than he’d been at the beginning of the party.

Honoka and Shizuku approached him, looking him over shrewdly.

“So, Tatsuya, did you take care of your ‘business’?”

“Yeah. Though it took a little longer than planned,” he replied.

“The party’s not even halfway over.”

Tonight’s party was going to be two hours long. Even if “not even halfway” was an overstatement, there was still an hour or so left before it wrapped up.

“Anyway, what about the graduates?”

“Yeah, where *did* they go?”

Just as Shizuku and Honoka said, the group of recent graduates from First

High had disappeared from the ballroom, including Isori, who was one of the more prominent attendees of the party.

Miyuki and Tatsuya both knew what had happened, but neither of them were inclined to explain.

Honoka and Shizuku seemed to intuit as much and said nothing further on the subject.



Of the graduates, Azusa and Sayaka had gone to the artificial island's docks.

They were there to meet the returning Hattori, Kirihara, and Sawaki, but—"Geez! You're soaked! You know seawater is murder on clothes and shoes, right?!"

As Sayaka hit Kirihara with a barrage of scolding, he along with Hattori and Sawaki all seemed to shrink.

"Mibu, maybe this isn't quite the right time for..." Azusa couldn't help but feel self-conscious about the amused glances coming from the military personnel around them, who were otherwise busy moving the captured enemy soldiers.

"But just look at them! They can't go back like this!"

The fine suits the boys had worn for the party were filthy with seawater, and their dress shoes were ruined with brine. Sayaka didn't come from wealth, and with her average person's sense of money, it was hardly surprising that she was aghast.

"It'll b-be fine!" said Azusa, and desperate to get out of the situation, she activated her CAD without thinking about how conspicuous it would be.

Azusa's magic quickly enveloped Hattori, Kirihara, and Sawaki.

The seawater that soaked them was extracted and separated into liquid droplets and solid powder, which fell to the deck.

Then both the powder and the droplets moved toward the ocean and disappeared.

The boys' clothes and shoes were dry.

Their dress shoes aired themselves out, and the wrinkles in their suits were smoothed.

Even the boys' short hair was blown out, dried, and set in pleasantly mussed-looking styles.

In just ten seconds' time, any trace that Hattori, Kirihara, and Sawaki had been in the ocean had completely vanished.

"That should do it, right? So let's get back to the ballroom." Azusa hadn't noticed any of the attention her magic had drawn.

She assumed the military personnel were staring at her for some other reason as she turned to Sayaka and Hattori. "Come on, let's go," she urged them.

Sayaka briefly debated whether to explain why everyone was staring at Azusa but decided that, in this case, ignorance was bliss. "...No, wait, we should go and check on Chiyoda and the others," she replied.

"Did something happen to Chiyoda?" asked Hattori.

"I'll explain later. Let's go," Sayaka replied as she gave Azusa a push from behind.

Given everything that had occurred, Isori and Kanon were provided a room to themselves in which to recover.

"...What the hell happened?!" demanded Hattori vehemently after kicking open the door to where the two were "resting."

Kanon was no longer crying. Her eyes were dry, and her sobs had ceased.

Her face, however, was still buried in Isori's chest.

Isori laughed nervously. "Uh, well... It was just the shock of it all." He seemed eager to move past the incident, but Hattori was not going to let the matter drop.

In the end, they left Kanon to recover with Isori, and as Azusa and Sayaka took turns explaining the recent hostage situation, it was soon time for the party to end.



Xiangshan Chen and Ganghu Lu took a high-speed transport carrying the captured deserters back to the mainland.

The disguised fishing boat carrying Bradley Chan and the others had been seized. Chen and Lu's job was largely over.

"Captain, join me in a toast."

"With pleasure."

There on the deck, Chen and Lu shared a toast as they looked up at a full moon. They were heading west, passing through the Taiwan Strait and making for the port of Amoy.

"A very fruitful mission," Chen said.

"Indeed it was," replied Lu, not being entirely insincere.

"I imagine we'll have to settle things with the Japanese military once and for all, eventually."

"I agree."

The two men continued to regard the moon.

"It's unfortunate that we didn't manage to get Colonel Kazama to tip his hand, but we did get a good sense of his subordinates' abilities."

"Yes. Major Yanagi seems particularly formidable."

"Quite." Chen refilled his drinking partner's cup.

Lu politely took his cup with both hands.

"But..." began Chen.

"Yes?"

"They must be crushed before they become an even more powerful enemy."

"Just as you say."

"Tatsuya and Miyuki Shiba. The troublesome heirs to the Yotsuba legacy."

As Chen spoke, Lu's eyes blazed with the fury of his fighting spirit.

"They are a threat. Simply confirming that fact to be true is a major gain."

“It is.”

“Next time, they’ll be our enemies.”

“You can count on me.”

“Mm.”

Xiangshan Chen drained his cup as though drinking down the very reflection of the moon in it.



After the party was over, Tatsuya contacted Maya via the yacht’s transmitter.

“Good work out there today.”

“Thank you.”

This particular mission had gone off without any hitches. If it had gotten a grade, it would’ve been around a 90.

The only reason it wouldn’t get full marks was the lack of extra credit.

“I am satisfied with the outcome this time.”

“Thank you very much.”

“I also heard something quite interesting. Gatekeeper seems like a rather handy magic technique.”

“With improvement, I think it could be usable by people other than me.”

“Which would mean true neutralization of a magician would finally be possible. I look forward to your progress.”

“I’ll try to make it viable as quickly as I can.”

“The GAA magic was rather interesting, too. I’d like to hear your detailed report in person, so come to the main house once you’re back in Tokyo.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll report at once.”

“Goodness, there’s no need to hurry. Rest up and enjoy yourselves over there for two or three days first. The report can wait until April.”

“I understand.”

"I look forward to seeing you next month, then."

With those words, the call ended.

Tatsuya was bowing, and he waited for the transmitting light to go out before he raised his head.

He allowed himself a slight stretch. Even when delivering a successful report, talking with Maya was still tiring.

He headed up from his cabin to the deck in order to refresh himself, where he found Miyuki and Minami looking up at the moon.

"Did you finish talking to Aunt Maya?" asked Miyuki.

"Yes. She wants us to come to the main house to debrief us in person once we're back in Tokyo. But she said to wait until April to come."

"Goodness... I wonder if she's especially busy right now." Miyuki put one hand to her mouth in surprise, her eyes widening slightly. She must have been expecting to be ordered home immediately.

"That's probably it."

When Tatsuya was initially given this mission, Maya had been considering making a rare excursion from the main house—she didn't often venture outside the grounds except for Master Clans Council meetings. Some urgent matter might have come up with the sponsor.

"But it looks like we have some free time now."

"Looks that way." Tatsuya came and stood alongside his sister.

Perhaps reading the room, Minami retired to her cabin.

The two of them alone on the deck now, Miyuki drew closer to Tatsuya. She was still wearing her formal dress, and her hair was still up as she gently laid her head against his shoulder.

"I know it was for a mission, but...this was a fun trip."

"I enjoyed it, too."

"But I hope we get to do some travel just for fun someday. I'd like to go on vacation with my brother. I mean—with you, Tatsuya."

“You can call me your brother, you know.”


Careful not to move the shoulder on which she was resting her head, Tatsuya looked down at Miyuki’s profile.

“‘My brother’ or ‘my Tatsuya.’ I’m still not sure which I...”

“There’s no hurry. We have plenty of time.”

“You’re right. There’s lots of time left.”

Miyuki happily closed her eyes, and not even Tatsuya could read what was in the depths of her heart.



[Epilogue]

There were six kinds of people in the airport departures lobby.

People sending someone off with smiles.

People sending someone off with tears.

People sending someone off with some other expression.

If you tried to categorize them more precisely than that, there'd be no end to it, and expressions aside from smiles and tears were within the margin of error.

There were then three types of people being seen off.

Those departing with smiles.

Those departing in tears.

Those departing with some other expression.

But if one was to add one more type of person to the aforementioned six—

It would be those returning home weary. Some were tired from work and others from play, some physically and others mentally, but the bulk of the travelers waiting for their flights home were in this last category.

She, too, looked utterly exhausted.

It was March 29, the day after the party held at the artificial island off the western coast of Kumejima.

"What a trip," Sayaka murmured with quiet conviction as she used both hands to haul her suitcase onto the baggage scale to be weighed.

Although Sayaka was only talking to herself, Azusa overheard and couldn't help but chuckle hoarsely. Azusa couldn't very well say so in front of the

classmate who'd invited her on the trip, but she must've been thinking *Same here!*

Sayaka's boyfriend, Kiri-hara, seemed to have a different opinion. "You think? Me, I had a great time!" he said with a cheerful expression. The previous night's excitement still seemed to be buoying his spirits. Not the excitement of the party, of course, but the fighting.

"...Oh, I'm sure you *did*. You had a grand old time splashing around and got totally soaked, just like a little kid."

Kiri-hara quickly looked away under Sayaka's reproachful glare. He remembered all too well getting soundly scolded for nearly ruining his suit.

"I—I wasn't out there just playing around in the water. Right, Sawaki?"

It wasn't particularly clear what Kiri-hara was implying they *had* been doing, but Sawaki nonetheless nodded vehemently. "Yeah! It was a good experience and really satisfying to go all out for once."

Sawaki found himself pierced by several daggers stared at him by Sayaka and Azusa. But he could've been turned into a porcupine by the invisible daggers, and it still wouldn't have put a dent in his cheer.

It was there that Isori entered the conversation with an apologetic expression. "Hey, I'm sorry about all this. I didn't mean to get you guys involved in all this weirdness..."

"Oh, no, not at all!" Sayaka hastily shook her head. "I'm sorry for being weird about it myself. We definitely had fun."

Isori nodded to Sayaka with a slightly awkward smile. "It's exhausting to get involved in that kind of incident, though. It would've been nice if we could stay another day."

"Agreed!" said Kanon, pouncing on Isori's tossed-off statement. "So let's cancel our flight today and book another night!" she said, wheedling away at her fiancé as she linked her arm around his.

"We can't do that."

"Isori's right. We've got a few days before the college entrance ceremony, but

I want to start getting ready,” said Hattori.

Azusa nodded her agreement with this, but Kanon would not be convinced. “What *preparation* do you even need to do?”

Hattori ignored Kanon’s objection and addressed Isori. “Anyway, want to get our flight check-in done?”

“Good idea.” It was Sawaki who answered, then immediately started pushing his suitcase over to the check-in counter. Hattori followed after him.

“Hey, wait! C’mon, you can’t just ignore me!” Kanon said, but her objection wasn’t profound enough to motivate her legs into action.

“It’s not like it’s a foreign country. We can just come again in the summer, right?” said Hattori.

“Hey, there’s an idea. We should all come again together,” said Isori, warming to the suggestion.

“Aw, I wanna do a trip with just the two of us, Kei,” Kanon immediately complained.

“I’m not sure if *we’re* actually going to be able to use our summer vacation however we want,” said Kirihara, who would be starting at the Defense Academy. Sayaka, who was doing likewise, nodded ruefully.

“It doesn’t have to be *this* summer, and it doesn’t even have to be summer at all. There are risks no matter what we do, but there are always chances to be had.”

“What is that, Hattori, some kind of philosophy?” shot Kirihara.

Hattori grinned and shook his head. “Nothing so profound. Just some consolation.”

“I have no idea what you’re trying to get at, man.”

“I’m just saying it’ll work out better next time.”

“Ah.”

Having finished their check-in, Sawaki looked over his shoulder and interjected. “And next time, let’s make sure we’re good enough to handle any

trouble that comes up on our own.”

“That sounds about right,” said Hattori with a nod, still smiling.



Unlike the First High graduates who returned to Tokyo the day after the party as originally planned, the group of current First High students were lazily floating over the waves. They were indulging in a redo of the glass boat sightseeing trip that had been previously interrupted by the submarine attack.

“Somehow, we ended up having a trip that wasn’t a mission after all,” said Miyuki with a bit of chagrin.

“I don’t think this really counts,” Tatsuya replied.

“What doesn’t count?” asked Honoka, confused.

There was no particular reason to hide it, so Tatsuya answered the question honestly. “Since this trip to Okinawa was work-related, we were talking about going on a trip without any work being involved.”

Miyuki had brought up the possibility last night, while they’d talked on the yacht as it took them from the artificial island to the main island of Okinawa. That wasn’t even a day ago. If this counted as “a trip without work,” then both Tatsuya and Miyuki couldn’t help but feel like that conversation had been rather pathetic.

“Ah, I see.” Honoka didn’t push any further, perhaps realizing that if she asked if she could come, she would be inviting an undesirable answer.

“How long can you stay here?” Shizuku asked Miyuki, noticing her friend’s distress and changing the subject.

“I think we’ll need to head back to Tokyo tomorrow or the day after.”

“That doesn’t leave you much time, does it?”

“Originally, we’d planned to head back on the flight today. This gives us a little breathing room, at least.”

“Huh...”

Miyuki didn’t explain why they’d gotten a break.

Shizuku likewise didn't ask.

"And we'll have to hold a meeting for the school entrance ceremony soon, too."

"Oh yeah."

Shizuku was, on paper at least, on the disciplinary committee, so even when there were big school events, she didn't get particularly busy. But Miyuki was the student council president. There was a lot of preparation to do for the entrance ceremony.

In a normal year, she would've already met with the class representative for the new students and finished the initial planning before the end of March, but this year Miyuki was almost a public employee—not *public*, but effectively something not far from it—and had left Tokyo immediately after the school's closing ceremony. She'd finished basic preparations before the beginning of spring break, but she hadn't yet met with the representative of the entering class.

"The rep for this year is a girl again, right?"

"Yup."

"From one of the Ten Master Clans?"

"Yes. Shiina Mitsuya. The youngest daughter of the Mitsuya family. I haven't met her yet, though."

"Ah, all the more reason why you don't want to put it off any longer."

"Yes, unfortunately."

As soon as Miyuki said this, it wasn't just Shizuku who felt better—Honoka was visibly relieved, too.

This wasn't because Miyuki's return to Tokyo would mean she wasn't spending time with Tatsuya. Honoka was on the student council as well, and like Miyuki, she had preparations to make for the entrance ceremony, too.

Honoka and Shizuku had planned to return to Tokyo on the thirty-first, but if Miyuki had decided to return on the thirtieth to start working on the entrance ceremony planning, they would've had to consider moving their own flight up,

too.

Her spirits having recovered, Honoka took another pass at Tatsuya. “... Anyway, let’s take it easy while we’re here! It’s a little early for swimming in the ocean, but our hotel has a pool, so you should come by. It’s a pretty big one, too!”

While talking with Miyuki, Shizuku thought she noticed some of the ease disappear from Miyuki’s face as Miyuki watched Honoka.



The news that Jasmine Williams and James J. Johnson had been captured by the Japanese military reached William MacLeod the next day.

Superficially, the abortive attempt to sabotage the artificial island off of Kumejima had been a cooperative effort between the renegade GAA unit and the Australian military, but it had been Great Britain who’d coordinated the two parties. If this background was to come to light, the British military would find it impossible to avoid the blame for masterminding the attack.

The mood around British Military Intelligence was rather tense at the moment, since they were well aware of this.

There was no kicked bee’s nest of commotion, though. In the DI (Defense Intelligence) building in Whitehall—the area of London where most of the national government’s administrative buildings were—people talked in hushed voices for fear of information leaks. This only intensified the oppressive feeling.

As he walked, MacLeod found himself on the end of more than a few accusatory glances. They knew he’d played an instrumental role in mobilizing the Australian military magician unit for the operation.

He was well aware of the looks he was getting. An apology had already been demanded from him. MacLeod didn’t need anyone to tell him that his position had worsened.

But William MacLeod appeared completely indifferent to the displeasure directed at him. Even in the middle of his testimony to the top brass, his calm, noble bearing hadn’t faltered.

Part of this was his calculation that as one of the Thirteen Apostles, a publicly

acknowledged strategic-class magician, the British government couldn't afford to treat him too carelessly. But his lack of concern, despite having been so deeply involved in this operation that he'd traveled to Australia to personally oversee it, didn't seem to come from simple confidence in the security of his position.

Summoned, MacLeod left the DI building and walked one block over to a shabby-looking building, which he entered. This was GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters, formerly MI1), the branch responsible for SIGINT (Signal Intelligence: espionage involving wiretapping, communications interception, and analysis of radar waves and beacons).

The building's purpose was completely opaque to outsiders, and it was MacLeod's place of work. To be more strictly accurate, MacLeod had been given a room inside GCHQ to use as a personal office.

He headed straight to his room without meeting anybody, entered, and locked the door. It was a low-traffic building to begin with, but MacLeod's office was tucked away in a corner of a maintenance floor that hardly anybody ever entered. If he used the dedicated elevator, there was no way for anyone to know he was even there.

MacLeod pressed the switch on a communication terminal whose modern design was incongruous with the old building.

A man soon appeared on the display of the terminal. Apparently, he'd been waiting at his own terminal for the call.

"Hello, Sir William MacLeod. How are you feeling?"

"Hello, Dr. Clark. And I'm feeling capital, thank you. Despite my age."

"That's not what I intended to imply... My apologies."

"No, no, please excuse me. It was merely a joke."

The man whose nervously smiling face was on the display was Edward Clark. He was a researcher with the USNA's National Security Agency who specialized in large-scale information systems.

"Rather impish of you, sir. Incidentally, regarding the matter in question—I

understand it failed, as planned?"

"I see I can't hide anything from you, Doctor."

"You'll have to forgive me. So the Trojan horse has been planted?"

"Not yet. Jasmine is being held by Haru Kazama at the moment."

"I see... And we were so certain she'd be a sample the Yotsuba would take an interest in."

"I would say the chances are still fifty-fifty. There seems to be a special connection between Haru Kazama and the Yotsuba family."

"We're hoping her telepathic connection to the Williams Brother, who shares identical genetic code with her, will give us even a little bit of insight into some Yotsuba secrets."

"'Sister' might be more accurate in Jaz's case. And inasmuch as they don't have conscious use of their telepathic connection, the reliability of the intel you get from it might be lowered, but it's also that much harder for our adversary to discover. When combined with your system, Doctor, it may considerably expand the reach of our eyes and ears."

"To control the world, you need information above all. Sir William, for your cooperation in this operation, regardless of its success or failure, the USNA thanks you."

"You're too kind. Britain will surely be asking for your expertise in the future, Doctor."

"Of course. We are allies, after all." There on the display, Edward Clark concluded their conversation with a friendly *"Let's talk again soon"* before the screen went dark.

MacLeod switched off the power to the terminal, carefully locked the system, and left his secret office.



Several days after the failed sabotage attempt on the artificial island off the coast of Kumejima, Maya visited an opulent private residence near the heart of the capital.

It appeared to be a large, old, detached home. In reality, it was a kind of fortress, protected by several layers of the latest security technology over which had been laid an ancient magic defensive circle.

The house's master's name was Aoba Toudou. The old man was also known as His Excellency, Priest Seiha. He was one of the dark masterminds—some called him a demon—who pulled the strings of the Japanese political world. He was the true owner of Old Lab 4, and the sponsor of the Yotsuba family.

Old Toudou did not often summon Maya. While he was their sponsor, the Yotsuba family did not have a unilaterally subordinate relationship to him. From a purely financial perspective, if Toudou financial support was to disappear, the Yotsuba family would still manage.

The Yotsuba family had eliminated the managers and staff of Old Lab 4, winning their freedom from the military. But there was another detail: Before that, the military had stolen control of Old Lab 4 from the Toudou family. Just as the Yotsuba family was dependent on Toudou's authority, Toudou was helped by Yotsuba power.

It was a mutually beneficial relationship. Thus, when Toudou summoned Maya, it meant a matter of considerable importance.

After exchanging the usual pleasantries, Maya and Toudou got down to business.

"Well done on the Kumejima problem."

"You're very kind," said Maya.

It had been at Toudou's request that Maya had dispatched Tatsuya to stop the sabotage operation.

"I understand you've taken the Australian magicians into custody."

"That's correct. One of them is unremarkable, but the other is a rather interesting specimen."

Toudou nodded at Maya's observation as if to agree. "I'm not surprised you're intrigued. But you must not let her into the inner circles of the Yotsuba."

Maya's eyes widened slightly. "I see... Do you mean to say that she's a trap?"

Some sort of suicide bomber?”

“She’s worse than any bomb. She’s a pair of ears.”

Toudou was using an abstract figure of speech, but Maya correctly intuited that by “ears,” he meant the woman possessed some kind of special espionage ability.

“I see. I’ll warn General Saeki to dispose of her immediately.”

Maya had no doubt that what Toudou told her was true.

She didn’t bother asking how he knew it.

The Yotsuba family was not only the product of Old Lab 4. Even before the establishment of Lab 4, hybridization had taken place within the organization that was its predecessor.

And Toudou still had left at his disposal some of the individuals who had contributed to the Yotsuba bloodline.

“Good idea. I daresay Saeki will be more likely to listen to you than to me.”

Upon hearing this, Toudou’s order to her, Maya smiled a clear, unclouded smile as she bowed.

Southern Sea Riots Arc: End

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for coming this far with me. How did you like the Southern Sea Riots arc? I hope you enjoyed it.

My original plan was for Volume 20 to kick off the senior year of high school. But owing to a variety of circumstances, I ended up using it to present a self-contained side story.

The priorities for this volume were 1) Tell a self-contained episode with little connection to the main story; 2) Give the members of the cast who just graduated a chance to shine, since they haven't been in the spotlight much so far; and 3) Use the idea of a graduation trip, and set the story in either Hokkaido or Okinawa.

But for some reason, as I started outlining the plot, the somewhat fishy story you just read ended up emerging. I guess Hattori and the gang did get some screen time, and there was a graduation trip, and the setting was where I'd planned, but...

The Master Clans Council arc was a tough one for Tatsuya and Miyuki, so this time I'd hoped to let them take it easy and relax—was that so wrong? Tatsuya just went around using the heck out of his oh-so-convenient powers. If I give him that kind of latitude, normal enemies are just totally helpless.

Anyway, after this, they're going to start facing situations where simple strength alone won't be enough to overcome them... Or that's the plan, anyway.

In the epilogue, we see some characters who are going to be incredibly consequential in the main story. Contrary to its original conception, this can't really be called a side story anymore. But I think I'm actually happy that I ended up having to show them here.

Also, even just in name, a new first-year student is here. Her original name was going to be Fumino, but it overlapped with Fumiya too much, so that was out. Then I thought maybe Shiino, but then I realized, wait, those were the same characters as a heroine of a certain super-popular series, so that was nixed, too. I finally settled on Shiina. She's a very interesting character in several ways, and you can look forward to her activities starting with the next volume.

The undersea resource deposits that appear in this volume are a reference to the Gondou Field, which JOGMEC (the Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation) announced the discovery of in January of 2015. In February of this year (2016), the hydrothermal deposits at the site were also discovered, and it would be great if these resources could be extracted on a commercial scale. Let's keep looking forward to technological advancement.

The artificial island in this volume is modeled on Aquapolis, which was constructed for Expo '75, the 1975 World's Fair in Okinawa—although the scale and design are completely different.

Personally, when it comes to seafloor resource extraction, I think underwater structures like the Ocean Spiral are more promising than megafloat designs, but since a megafloat was more convenient for this story, that's what I ended up using. But the Ocean Spiral sure is romantic! I wonder if anything like that will be completed in my lifetime.

So in the next volume, the senior year of high school is really going to get underway. I'm planning all sorts of twists that will have our protagonists saying *Are you serious?*—it'll be everything the last year of school should be. I hope you'll stick with the series through to the end. I'll do everything I can to make the journey a good one.

I hope we'll meet again in Volume 21, the beginning of the Prologue to Upheaval arc.

Tsutomu Sato

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