The Irregular at Magic High School
Summer Vacation Arc +1
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Tsutomu Sato
Illustration Kana Ishida

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Illustration assistants Jimmy Stone, Yasuko Suenaga

Design BEE-PEE

Mizuki Shibata
Tatsuya's classmate. Sits next to the main character in class. Plain, but very popular among some upperclassmen as the "healing little-sister character." Because of her pushion-radiation sensitivity, she wears glasses, which is unusual in this day and age.
"It's almost like... you're being torn between a lover and your sister."
Erika Chiba
Tatsuya's classmate. Has a bright personality, a troublemaker who gets everyone involved. Her family is large and famous for *kenjutsu*—a magical technique that combines swords and magic.
Honoka Mitsui
Class 1-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in controlling light-wave vibration magic. Rather subjective in her outlooks.
"It would be a shame to spend the whole time under a parasol."
"Tatsuya, we've come all this way to the ocean. Won't you swim with us?"
"You can't say that, Mizuki. It was just starting to get interesting!"
Miyuki Shiba
The younger sister of the Shiba siblings. Part of Class 1-A. An elite who entered Magic High School as the top student. A Course 1 student, called a "Bloom," whose specialty is cooling magic. Her lovable only flaw is a severe case of a brother complex.
"Tatsuya, are you thinking about something?"
Shizuku Kitayama
Miyuki's classmate in Class 1-A. Specializes in high-power vibration and acceleration magic. Cool and collected at a glance, her personality is the opposite of Honoka's.

“...A phantom?”
Eimi Akechi
Class 1-B. A quarter-blood, rare for modern magicians. Her full name is Amelia Eimi Akechi Goldie. Specializes in bombardment magic, which can move large quantities of objects quickly and swiftly.

Masaki Ichijou
A freshman at Third High and an athlete competing in the Nine School Competition as the freshman ace. Can use advanced magic freely and is also known as the Crimson Prince. Next leader of the Ichijou, one of the Ten Master Clans.
"I have a talented adviser right here, and his name is George."
"...You can't flatter me, Masaki."
Shinkurou Kichijouji
A freshman at Third High and an athlete competing in the competition. Also Masaki's good friend and adviser. A boy genius who discovered the first Cardinal Code of magic programs at the young age of twelve. Given the nickname Cardinal George for his achievements.

Azusa Nakajou
Though she looks like a middle school student, she's a junior at Magic High School and the student council secretary. Called "Ah-chan" by Mayumi. Has a rare skill called the "Azusa Bow," an emotional interference spell.
"...I can't possibly!"
Hanzou Gyoubu-Shoujou Hattori
A junior. Vice president of the student council. Called "Hanzou" by Mayumi. Has excellent magic abilities and is the next strongest after the three giants.
"....."
"We need to announce the candidates tomorrow, but we don't even have any."
Mayumi Saegusa
Magic High School's student council president. The eldest daughter of the Saegusa family, one of the Ten Master Clans. Petite but glamorous. Said to be a once-in-a-decade genius of ranged precision magic. Has an impish personality.
"Give me the ballots for a moment! I'll find who wrote these things!"
Tatsuya Shiba
The older brother of the Shiba siblings. A new student of the National Magic University Affiliated First High School. Part of Class 1-E. One of the Course 2 students, mockingly called "Weeds." Specializes in designing Casting Assistant Devices (CADs), among other things.
"...there's no possibility I'd get any votes."

Magic and Magicians

• Magician

Short for *magic technician*. Technicians are those with the skill to use magic at a practical level. Regardless of whether they use modern or traditional magic, the users are all defined by this general term. However, due to the differences between new magic and old, those who use traditional forms prefer to be called by the specific names associated with their particular form, like *sorcerer*, *Onmyoudo practitioner*, *devotee*, or *shinobi*. It's said that one in a thousand teenagers have the talent to become a magician, but due to the stress of puberty, only one in ten thousand adults retain those abilities. However, this only applies to magic at a practical level. Those with the ability to use magic at a combat level are even rarer.

• Magic Program

Fabricated information bodies created to temporarily alter the makeup of events. Magic programs are composed of psions, which are transferred from the magician to the world. Events are also made up of their own information bodies, which are in turn composed of the same psions, so some liken a program's alteration properties to a computer virus. The world has a recovery mechanism that attempts to retain temporal fluidity, so the effects of magic programs don't last forever. However, because this power of recovery keeps temporal relations stable, if one continues altering the world with magic for long enough, the alterations can sometimes become established in the world as truth. Magical healing techniques use this property.

• Magic Program Output Process

The following outlines the flow of a magic program.

(1) Magician receives an activation sequence from his or her CAD. This is called "reading the activation sequence."
(2) Variables are added to the activation sequence, and it is sent to the magician's *magic-calculation region*.
(3) The activation sequence is combined with the variables to construct the magic program. This process happens automatically inside the magic-calculation region of the magician's mind, and the exact implementation at work is a black box even to the magicians themselves.
(4) The fully constructed magic program is transferred via a route from the uppermost part of the brain's *unconscious* region to the bottommost part of the *conscious* region. From the "gate" that exists between these regions, the program outputs to the *idea*.
(5) Magic programs outputting to the *idea* interfere with the *eidos* (information bodies) at the specified location and overwrite them.

Being able to complete this five-stage process with a single-family, single-process spell in half a second or less is the standard used to gauge if someone can use magic at a practical level.

• Families of Magic

Traditional magic typically categorized spells into symbolic elements, based on the effects produced. The representative ones are the four elements (earth, water, fire, and wind); the five rings (earth, water, fire, wind, and additionally, air); and *wu xing*, which is wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Some add other categories such as light, dark, void, null, sky, moon, lightning, mountain, and swamp. Modern magic, which began with supernatural ability research, categorizes spells based on their applications rather than their visual effects. There are offically four families and eight types in all:

- Acceleration and Aggravation (Weighting)
- Migration (Movement) and Oscillation
- Convergence and Dispersion
- Absorption and Emission

Of course, there are always exceptions to any system, and in fact, there are plenty of spells even this eight type–four family system of modern magic cannot categorize. For example, because it is based on application, ESP—the ability to perceive things beyond what your sensory organs can, also known as *clairsentience*—is a spell in a different field than the four families. But in the field of ESP, parapsychological approaches are alive and well. In terms of academic research, magic families and types are narrowly categorized, but all share one trait: They overwrite the information accompanying matter and energy in the known universe and project an alteration onto the real world. Typed or not, all magic is the same in this respect.

• Magical Processes

The term *process* has two main meanings in modern magic. The first is the general process by which magic is activated; the second refers to each *individual magical process*, when multiple spells are simultaneously enacted for multiple event alterations. The latter meaning can be illustrated with the following example: Assume you want to move an egg from the kitchen to the dining table, using magic. Four processes are needed for this: acceleration, movement, acceleration, and movement. The movement spells are to overwrite the object's speed and linear coordinates. If you were to remove the acceleration processes, the target object would continue to accelerate without being affected by momentum. In this case, the egg would crack. If you were to remove the movement processes and attempt to perform the task with only acceleration and deceleration, the egg would travel through the air with projectile motion, requiring intensely precise control over deceleration. Even though there are more processes, it is easier to use acceleration magic to decelerate the object to a certain speed, then bring its speed down to zero with a movement spell. These four processes, when combined in proper order, become a single spell that will move the egg from the kitchen to the dining table. Generally speaking, consumer-use spells are more frequently multistage processes than combat spells are.

• Magic Evaluation Standards (Magic Power)

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 are 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*. Other factors, such as the amount of psion retention one possesses (which affects how many times one can activate spells) and the number of variables one can deal with at a time (which affects how freely one uses magic) are not considered in magical evaluations. Magicians are managed under a license system, and the assessments for ranks A through E utilize this three-criterion standard as well.

• Magic-Calculation Region

The mental space that formulates magic programs. This is essentially the primary location of magical talent. It exists within the unconscious regions of a magician's brain. While a magician can consciously use his or her magic-calculation area, they are unaware of the exact processes taking place inside it. It can be considered a black box, even to the magicians themselves.

The Irregular at Magic High School

SUMMER VACATION ARC+1

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YEN ON
NEW YORK

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THE IRREGULAR AT MAGIC HIGH SCHOOL

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

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 1-E. One of the Course 2 (irregular) students, who are mockingly called "Weeds." Sees right to the core of everything.

Miyuki Shiba

Class 1-A.
Tatsuya's younger sister; enrolled as the top student. Specializes in freezing magic. Dotes on her older brother.

Leonhard Saijou

Class 1-E.
Tatsuya's classmate.
Specializes in hardening magic.
Has a bright personality.

Erika Chiba

Class 1-E.
Tatsuya's classmate.
Specializes in *kenjutsu*.
A charming troublemaker.

Mizuki Shibata

Class 1-E.
Tatsuya's classmate.
Has pushion radiation sensitivity. Serious and a bit of an airhead.

Mikihiko Yoshida

Class 1-E. Tatsuya's classmate. From a famous family that uses ancient magic. Has known Erika since they were children.

Honoka Mitsui

Class 1-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in light-wave vibration magic. Impulsive when emotional.

Shizuku Kitayama

Class 1-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in vibration and acceleration magic. Doesn't show emotional ups and downs very much.

Shun Morisaki

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

Subaru Satomi

Class 1-D. Frequently mistaken for a pretty boy. Cheerful and easy to get along with.

Eimi Akechi

Class 1-B. A quarter-blood. Full name is Amelia Eimi Akechi Goldie.

Mayumi Saegusa

A senior and the student council president. One of the strongest magicians ever to grace a magical high school.

Azusa Nakajou

A junior and the student council secretary. Shy and has trouble expressing herself.

Suzune Ichihara

A senior and the student council accountant. Calm, collected, and book smart. Mayumi's right hand.

Hanzou Gyoubu-Shoujou Hattori

A junior and the student council vice president. Very serious and a good student.

Mari Watanabe

A senior and the chairwoman of the disciplinary committee. Mayumi's good friend. Good all-around and likes a sporting fight.

Koutarou Tatsumi

A senior and a member of the disciplinary committee. Has a heroic personality.

Midori Sawaki

A junior and a member of the disciplinary committee. Has a complex about his girlish name.

Kei Isori

A junior. Top grades in his class in magical theory. Engaged to Kanon Chiyoda.

Kanon Chiyoda

A junior. An energetic, vivid girl. Engaged to Kei Isori.

Katsuto Juumonji

A senior and the head of the club committee, the unified organization overseeing all club activities.

Takeaki Kirihara

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

Sayaka Mibu

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

Yakumo Kokonoe

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

Haruka Ono

A general counselor for Class 1-E.

Masaki Ichijou

A freshman at Third High. Participates in the Nine School Competition. Direct heir to the Ichijou family, one of the Ten Master Clans.

Shinkurou Kichijouji

A freshman at Third High. Participates in the Nine School Competition. Also known as Cardinal George.

Retsu Kudou

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

Harunobu Kazama

Captain of the 101st Brigade of the Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked major.

Shigeru Sanada

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

Muraji Yanagi

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

Kousuke Yamanaka

Executive officer of the 101st Brigade of the Independent Magic Battalion. Medical major. First-rate healing magician.

Kyouko Fujibayashi

Female officer serving as Kazama's aide. Rank: Second lieutenant.

Glossary

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

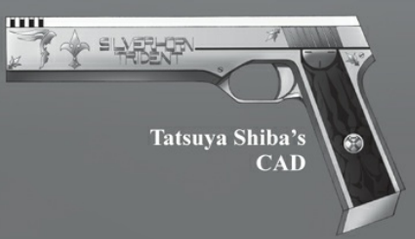
Slang terms used at First High to display the gap between Course 1 and Course 2 students. Course 1 student uniforms feature an eight-petaled emblem embroidered on the left breast, but Course 2 student uniforms do not.

Course 1 student emblem

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.

Miyuki Shiba's CAD



Tatsuya Shiba's CAD

Four Leaves Technology (FLT)

A domestic CAD manufacturer. Originally known more for engineering magical products than for manufacturing finished units. 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 out 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. Yet 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 Irregular at Magic High School

Summer Vacation

SUMMER VACATION

“Wanna go to the beach?”

—It all started with a few words from Shizuku.

“The beach? To go swimming?”

Standard videophone systems were capable of handling ten-way conversations these days. Miyuki, who had responded to the question with one of her own, had been enjoying some idle chitchat with her classmates Shizuku and Honoka.

“Yep” came Shizuku’s clipped affirmative.

Her reply was too short for Miyuki to really understand. Honoka, who had been good friends with her since entering elementary school, seemed to catch on immediately. *“Oh, you mean…?”*

“Yep, I do.”

Miyuki, though, had only met them four months ago. When they started finishing each other’s sentences like that, things got too difficult for her to handle. “‘You mean…’ what, exactly?” she asked.

Only now did they realize they’d accidentally been leaving Miyuki out. The girls exchanged glances—although on Miyuki’s display, it just looked like they were averting their eyes. Then Honoka directed her gaze back toward the center of the screen where she could see Miyuki.

“Umm, Shizuku’s family has a summerhouse in Ogasawara.”

“What? Your family has its own private beach, Shizuku?”

“Yeah…” came another short response from Shizuku. This time she nodded, looking slightly embarrassed.

It was a fad among the wealthy at the moment to have a summerhouse on

one of the uninhabited islands of Ogasawara. This phenomenon was hammered with criticism—and envy—that it was an environmentally harmful hobby of the nouveau riche, an argument raised by ignorant critics who mistook mudslinging as an expression of their own intellect. All the uninhabited islands they built these holiday villas on had been inhabited once. But now they were vacant, though it was true that the emptying of people from them had caused them to become wastelands.

However, building a posh, zero-emission summer home on one (though because they used sunlight for power, if the solar panels themselves were included, it couldn't be said that these buildings were entirely zero emission) was far from destroying its environment. It was an effective use of national land and deserved no shame whatsoever.

Naturally, Miyuki hadn't intended to attack Shizuku or her family with the question and was merely surprised by the fact that her family had one. Owning a vacation home with a private beach was a privilege limited to a small handful of extremely wealthy people. Shizuku probably knew what Miyuki meant, but hearing the unfair aforementioned criticisms repeated over and over like all of society accepted it had likely instilled an unconscious feeling of guilt in her mind.

Shizuku collected herself (a change so slight that, again, one who didn't know her well wouldn't be able to tell) and explained the circumstances. *"Dad told me to invite my friends. I think he wants to meet you and Tatsuya."*

Honoka pulled away a little bit. *"Oh, so Uncle Ushio will be with us this year…"*

She looked like she was mulling something over—doubtless a memory of the vacations she'd spent with Shizuku and her father in the past. Perhaps at the very villa they were currently discussing.

"Don't worry. He'll only be there at the start," Shizuku explained. *"I think he's got a lot of work. A few hours are all he can spare."*

Honoka's somewhat scared expression loosened in relief. Miyuki mentally raised her eyebrows in curiosity, wondering what could have happened, but the curiosity wasn't enough to make her forget the actual question at hand. "I wouldn't mind," she offered. "…When did you want to do it?"

“Haven’t decided. I wanted to do a time that’s convenient for Tatsuya.”

Miyuki’s expression indicated that she would need to ask after her brother’s schedule, but Shizuku’s response indicated that she already understood that quite well.

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“…And that is what they said.”

Tatsuya first heard of this potential outing after breakfast a day later. The thought *This is what they were up late last night getting excited about?* immediately crossed Tatsuya’s mind, but of course, something else came out of his mouth. “Would it just be Shizuku, Honoka, and us on this trip?”

“Shizuku said she wanted to invite Erika, Mizuki, Saijou, and Yoshida as well,” his sister said, looking slightly hesitant before continuing. “They aren’t as close with them as we are, so Shizuku wanted to know if I would invite them on her behalf.”

Miyuki probably hadn’t wanted to cause her brother extra work. Originally, she’d had no intention of bothering him with this, and planned on talking to them herself.

“I see. I’ll get in touch with Leo and Mikihiko, then. As for my schedule…” On the other hand, in Tatsuya’s world of preestablished harmony, he couldn’t possibly push such a trifling matter onto his sister. He took a sip of coffee and mentally unfurled his schedule. “…Next week, I’m free on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Anything after that would be a little difficult.”

Summer vacation for magic high schools lasted until the end of August. (Many high schools of science and literature ended their summer vacations in the middle of August, while art school and physical education school vacations frequently lasted until mid-September.) Last year and the year before that, most of Tatsuya’s summer vacation had been taken up by training with the Independent Magic Battalion and various research. (Last summer had been additionally packed with exam preparation—mainly as Miyuki’s home tutor.) Because the Nine School Competition had been during the first half of the year, his current schedule was excessively tight. The development of a flight magic–specific device, coming up next month, was only making it worse. For him,

summer vacation would, once again, not really be a vacation at all.

“Then a two-night, three-day stay from next Friday to Sunday would be best? I will contact Shizuku and inform her.”

That was why Miyuki had been adamant about not letting this kind of chance pass him by. She was a bit disappointed they wouldn’t have alone time together, but in her mind, giving her brother some time off was obviously more important than her own desires.

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Shizuku appeared willing to clear her schedule for Tatsuya’s sake; when Miyuki called her back, she nodded, with her reply ready. Shizuku then contacted Honoka to tell her the plan, while Miyuki talked to Erika and Mizuki. During that time, Tatsuya invited Leo and Mikihiko. Every single person was able to make it. Was that really just a coincidence? Whatever it was, it made Tatsuya want to keep his wits about him.

And so, still caught up in his own amazement, the day of the trip arrived. The girls in the group had gone shopping together in preparation, creating a stare-worthy event in the swimsuit section of the department store, but Tatsuya had put his memories of that away in a drawer and welded it shut, so we will omit the details here.

For whatever reason, the group finally assembled at a marina in Hayama instead of an airport.

“Wow…that’s a fantastic cruiser.”

This time (unlike during the Nine School Competition), Erika’s shorts and unreservedly exposed slender, shapely legs weren’t out of place as she looked up at the white boat, eyes glittering.

“Erika, I’m sure your family has at least a cruiser,” mentioned Shizuku, her face slightly flushed. (Tatsuya, too, had grown to understand her expressions well.) “We have a boat, but you can’t really call it a cruiser… Or at least, I don’t want to. They always have the stabilizers turned off, so it’s a pretty terrible ride.”

“…For training?”

“That’s right.”

“You’re quite thorough with your training…” said Miyuki, amazed.

Next to her, Mizuki didn’t know *what* expression to make, so she just gave a vague smile.

On the other hand…

“A Fleming propulsion system… I don’t see any air ducts, so it doesn’t run on a gas turbine. Is it a hydrogen photocatalyst plant plus a fuel cell battery?” muttered Tatsuya to himself, taking a very detailed look at the propulsion system, his attention drawn to the mechanical side of the boat like any normal (?) boy.

“Just in case, there actually is a hydrogen storage tank on board as well” came an unexpected response. (The answer’s contents weren’t surprising, but Tatsuya hadn’t planned on receiving an answer in the first place.) He turned around and saw the “captain” standing there. He wore a Greek fisherman’s cap low over his eyes and a jacket with decorative buttons. He even had a pipe in his mouth to top the image off. He did, however, seem to lack the proper physique. Obesity stemming from lifestyle issues had been eliminated from society twenty years ago with the proliferation of new medicines, but if he was going for the captain cosplay, he could have used a little bit more breadth.

As Tatsuya thought about it, face worried, the “captain” reached out for a handshake. Incidentally, he held a tobacco pipe in his left hand with an expert grip—though upon closer inspection, the pipe was empty.

“Tatsuya Shiba, right? I’m Ushio Kitayama, Shizuku’s father.”

Tatsuya couldn’t help but feel mystified—the man had an unexpectedly casual personality. Still, Tatsuya possessed a great amount more societal experience than a regular high school student. He smoothly returned the handshake without letting his bafflement show. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Tatsuya Shiba. I have heard about you many times. Thank you very much for allowing my sister and myself to be here.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

Tatsuya had intended to return the handshake Shizuku’s father offered only

lightly, so as not to overstep the bounds of courtesy, but Ushio held his hand in a tight, firm grip.

His hand felt stronger than Tatsuya would have guessed. Even so, compared to Kazama's and Yanagi's, his fingers and palm seemed more accustomed to desk work. Actually, what got Tatsuya's attention more than his grip was the force of the man's gaze. It was a look of appraisal, yet it didn't discomfort him. They were the eyes of a seasoned war veteran, a leader who stood above men and crossed swords with those of similar status.

"…Your intelligence doesn't reside only in books. Nor does your technical prowess rely on cheap tricks. You have the look of someone truly reliable."

Ushio's words were quiet, to the point that one wouldn't normally have been able to hear them; his voice was low enough that even Tatsuya had to focus to make anything out. However, he found more than the minimum required amount of polite consideration was contained within them. But even if they had been said at a normal volume, Tatsuya wouldn't have thought them discourteous. A sense of dignity drifted from Ushio Kitayama, one that made it seem natural for him to appraise those before him.

However.

"Yes, Shizuku has sharp eyes. She really has her head on straight, if I do say so myself!"

At this sudden remark, Tatsuya, maintaining an outwardly meek expression, sighed to himself. *This* was the Ushio Kitayama he'd heard so much about?

It was simply out of politeness that he hadn't told the man he was already aware of his name. Using a business name instead of your real one in order to protect privacy was the norm in corporation management these days. Tatsuya's father, for example, was employed as FLT's head of research and development under the name Tatsurou Shiibara rather than his real name of Tatsurou Shiba.

When Shizuku had first relayed that her father ran a company, he hadn't realized anything, but when he asked for the man's business name, Tatsuya was pretty surprised at how big the man really was.

Because of his late marriage, Ushio Kitayama was already past fifty

(overcoming all the obstacles involved with his proposed marriage to a magician had taken years), but his nonchalance—or rather, his comical air—made him look no older than forty.

"—Miyuki!" Tatsuya called, after nodding to him.

Miyuki came trotting up, quickly gauged the situation, and then gracefully bowed to Shizuku's father. "Pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Miyuki Shiba. Thank you very much for inviting us along today."

"I thank you for your politeness, m'lady. I'm Ushio Kitayama. Allow me to say that welcoming such a beautiful young woman here is an unexpected honor, both for this ship and our family's humble home."

Ushio returned the bow quite theatrically, with a hand to his chest, and Miyuki followed along, smiling and curtseying in the Western fashion.

Considering Miyuki's beauty and elegance, it was no wonder Ushio's face relaxed just a bit.

"Uncle, I don't remember you ever saying things like that to me."

"Dad, stop ogling and behave."

But lack of lenience and lack of logic were different things. The two girls suddenly opened fire at the older man.

"No, no, I was doing nothing of the sort…"

Against one person, even his own daughter, Ushio might have been able to evade the issue. But even this talented businessman couldn't seem to handle Shizuku teamed up with Honoka, her friend from elementary school who he treated like a second daughter. (Incidentally, the reasons Honoka had hesitated when she heard Ushio would be here included, but were not limited to, the distinct possibility that he really did believe she was his daughter; and how he'd give her more than a little pocket change to spend whenever she came, which she felt bad about.) Ushio made a grand gesture and spoke to Erika and the others, who had stopped a short distance away, in an obvious effort to deflect the conversation. "—Oh! You're all my daughter's new friends as well, aren't you? Welcome! I hope you have a lot of fun. Unfortunately, I need to be going. Feel free to make yourselves at home."

Deals with business partners were one thing, but his daughter was another story entirely. Unrest was peeking through the surface, particularly in how his tone of voice kept changing between formal and informal.

Shizuku's father hurried to climb into a large passenger vehicle. Inside, he took off his fisherman's hat and looked at it regretfully. "He probably wanted to feel like he'd gone on a trip with his daughter, at least…" Tatsuya whispered to himself, sympathetically.

◇ ◇ ◇

The Muko Islands, where the summerhouse was, were about six hundred miles away. The voyage took approximately six hours on a Fleming ship, which actually had a maximum speed of one hundred knots.

Right now, Tatsuya hadn't the faintest idea whose interests had led them to use a boat instead of an airplane (VTOLs with propellers were not currently unusual, and were actually more expensive than Fleming-propelled cruisers), but according to Leo and Erika, it was all about the journey, not the destination. He almost retorted that their goal wasn't the trip but swimming at the beach. But he let it go with a sigh, thinking instead that the two were quite the pair.

In any case, he wasn't about to get seasick—he'd been brought here by the goodwill of others. They had met up at an early hour—6:00 AM—because of how long it would take to get there. Tatsuya boarded the ship so that they could get moving quickly.

The ship was large even from the outside, but the deck seemed larger than it appeared before. There was nothing huge like a pool or theater, of course (it wasn't a cruise liner, but rather a cruiser), but there was more than enough room for the eight of them to set up deck chairs and cast fishing lures into the water.

…Of course, the entire deck was covered by a clear, streamlined dome to decrease air resistance, so fishing wasn't actually possible.

"The side does open up when we're going at low speed," explained the cruiser's navigator, an all-around housekeeper named Ms. Kurosawa, who, according to Shizuku, would be personally looking after them at their beach house destination as well.

As for her looks… Tatsuya felt like there was a more appropriate word for her than *housekeeper*. Especially since she barely looked to be in her mid-twenties.

Nevertheless, her image was not one of constant blunder; she seemed more the type to which the term *well organized* would apply. Though the dome cut thin the harsh rays of midsummer sunlight shining on the ocean, she must have been feeling muggy in that outfit. Actually, it made him hot just looking at her.

Of course, Tatsuya himself was unfalteringly wearing a long-sleeved jacket—albeit designed for summer—so maybe he didn't have any room to talk.

The ship's layout featured the bridge on the upper part of the bow with cabins below that. The transparent dome extended from the bridge's ceiling, and behind the bridge, the deck took up the other half of the ship.

Once Kurosawa confirmed everyone was on board, she quickly withdrew into the bridge. Moments later, the ship pulled away from the coast.

◇ ◇ ◇

Without running into any storms or letting anybody suffer from seasickness—even though the waves were somewhat rough—thanks to the stabilizer and swing adsorption system, the ship safely made it to Nakoudo Island, where the beach house was located.

The coral reefs near this island had met their bitter end in the latter part of the previous century due to goats that had gone feral. Artificial restoration of the reefs had later been planned but showed poor results. Now, the coastline, after its loam was dredged, had been converted into a wharf and sandy beach with the private capital used to build the summerhouse. This was the so-called environmental destruction that intellectuals so often targeted in their criticisms.

However, the coral hadn't been damaged while this island was inhabited, and it was also thanks to humans that the feral goats were wiped out. So had the environmental harm come because people were present, or because they'd left?

Tatsuya felt compelled to sink further into cynical thoughts, but he decided better of it. He couldn't arrogantly criticize the place when he was one of the

people who had come to it for fun.

As you might expect from this internal monologue, Tatsuya and the others had already arrived at the island and gone to the beach.

The white sands. The shining sunlight.

But the beach shone even brighter than that.

“Tatsuyaaa, aren’t you gonna swiiim?”

“Tatsuya, the water is cool. It feels very good!”

Erika and Miyuki both called out to him from the water’s edge. Tatsuya smiled vaguely and waved his hand from the shade of the parasol he’d stuck into the sand.

…At any rate, it really is brilliant.

If asked what was dazzling so brilliantly, his answer would have been the girls clad in beachwear as they frolicked by the water.

The first one to draw his eye was Erika, who wore a one-piece bathing suit in showy primary colors. It had a simple design with no unnecessary ornamentation, which only served to further highlight her slender proportions.

Miyuki, who was waving from Erika’s side, wore a one-piece with a big flower-print design. The florid pattern visually clouded her own proportions, which grew ever more feminine each day, emphasizing her vaguely faerie-like charm.

What surprised him more was Mizuki. She wore a two-piece swimsuit with a detailed polka-dot pattern; it didn’t expose as much skin as a bikini, but it was cut low at the chest, placing emphasis on its abundance. It created a sense of seductiveness from her that he couldn’t imagine given her usual maturity. Though, on the flip side, perhaps because her shoulders and hips were slender, she didn’t have many curves around the waist area; that was more what you would call a “cute” feature.

Honoka was also wearing a two-piece, but she had a pareu wrapped around one shoulder, going for a more adult look with the asymmetric design. If judging not simply by size but the assorted variables, she might have had the best proportions of the whole group.

In contrast, Shizuku was wearing a light-hearted one-piece heavily decorated with frills. When Shizuku, who even now showed an impassive, mature expression, wore this, it seemed to have a somewhat kinky, mystical charm to it.

Tatsuya realized that he couldn't keep staring at them like this, so he looked off to the side, where big splashes marked the water's surface rather far from the beach. Leo and Mikihiko were having a swimming race.

As far as Tatsuya could see, Leo was having a great time, but Mikihiko was desperate and close to being finished. It was rather endearing for some reason.

Tatsuya gazed farther out to sea, toward the horizon, letting his mind empty and escape into the azure sky.

He spent a little while like that, his mind miles away.

Suddenly, he noticed someone was nearby.

Your body is blocking my view, he thought—but he kept himself from speaking, which made him want to pat himself on the back.

Five people crouched near him, peering into his face. This normally wouldn't be an issue, but considering they were wearing swimsuits as they were crouching, it was no small problem for him.

"Tatsuya, are you thinking about something?" Shizuku asked, squatting down with both hands on her knees as she examined his face.

From this angle, he realized that she didn't have quite as childish a body as he'd thought. But that was something he couldn't let show in his words or attitude—and of course, staring more was out of the question.

"Tatsuya, we've come all this way to the ocean. Won't you swim with us?"

"That's right. It would be a shame to spend the whole time under a parasol."

Unfortunately for him, Miyuki was to his left and Honoka to his right, surrounding him, both in the same position Shizuku was. His gaze couldn't escape in either direction.

Leaving Mizuki aside—who stood behind Shizuku, innocently waiting for his answer—he wasn't going to be able to let Erika be; she was standing next to

Mizuki with an evil grin on her face. He had no clear evidence, but he could feel it.

“I suppose you’re right. I’ll swim.”

He casually averted his gaze from the five alluring figures by standing up and brushing the sand off his legs and swim trunks. Still looking downward, he took off his three-quarter-sleeved yacht parka.

With the sound of his parka falling onto the sand, the mood changed abruptly.

Oops, thought Tatsuya immediately, but it was already too late.

“Tatsuya, you… What in the…?” Unconcealable tension ran through Erika’s voice.

He knew right away what she was talking about. Tatsuya wasn’t the only one who knew what she had gone stiff in surprise for—so did Honoka, Shizuku, and Mizuki. After all, their eyes were all glued to the “things” on his body.

His parka had hidden a steeled, trained physique. The size of his muscles wasn’t so surprising in and of itself; they didn’t have the volume of a fully grown man’s. But despite the boyishness, his abs and pecs were tightly and firmly packed, carved into his torso like a Renaissance sculpture.

But there were also things that wouldn’t have been on a sculpture. Specifically, the several scars engraved in his skin.

Most of them were gashes. Almost as many were stab wounds. Here and there were small burn marks. Strangely, there were no bruises from broken bones, but even without them, his body was not one that could come from a normal upbringing.

Training your body normally didn’t make it like this. You could shed blood during training, but that wouldn’t have been enough to do this.

You could only acquire a body like this after *actually* being cut, stabbed, burned, and bloodied in torturous—or actually torture-like—training. Erika understood that, which was why she couldn’t help but say something.

“Tatsuya… What on Earth…? You…”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure it doesn’t feel very good to look at.”

He gave an unrelated response to the question she couldn't ask, then looked away from her and reached out for the parka he'd just taken off.

But his hand didn't grab it. He thought he'd dropped it on the sand, but Miyuki had quickly knelt down to pick it up and was now carrying it at her chest.

She might have been his little sister, but he couldn't reach out toward a woman's chest like that, so his left hand wandered through the air without a destination. Fortunately (?), there was no need to worry about the metaphorical sheathed sword, because Miyuki no sooner stood up than took his left arm in her right.

"Ah!" he gasped in surprise. His sister's chest, separated from him only by her swimsuit, pushed up against his arm. Miyuki, however, didn't seem to be embarrassed about it.

"Tatsuya, it's all right." Her cheeks did redden slightly, but her shame didn't come from the fact that she was embracing him half-naked. "I know that each and every one of these wounds is proof of how hard you've worked to become stronger than anyone." It was from the embarrassment of looking into his eyes from so close a distance. "I would never think your body is unsightly."

Tatsuya's expression loosened, but a moment later, he felt a soft impact against his *other* arm.

Erika gave a short whistle. Not out of ridicule, though, but out of praise.

He was pretty sure he knew what happened, but he craned his neck to see what was causing the enveloping sensation on his right arm.

And sure enough, Honoka was clinging to him, holding on to his bicep with both hands as if to compete with his sister. Unlike her, however, Honoka's swimsuit was a two-piece, so his arm was directly touching supple skin. Maybe that was the reason Honoka's face was three times redder than Miyuki's.

"I…I don't mind it, either," she said, at first stammering and then rattling the rest off. That was only natural, too. It would be one thing if she was his girlfriend, but she wasn't, and being of the opposite sex *and* in a swimsuit made this action too bold. It would be stranger if Honoka *hadn't* been restless.

Of course, in terms of strangeness, the act itself had been stranger.

For a teenage girl—actually, even for a woman with more life experience—it should have been difficult to look directly at the wounds carved into his body. There were many of them, but they were all small, so maybe it didn't seem disgusting to her. But still, it was normal to imagine the things that had caused those wounds and start to get scared, wasn't it? He knew that, so the fact that he'd still taken off the jacket in front of the girls had been nothing but a mistake on his part. He reflected bitterly that he must have still been in a daze from the weather here, so far south.

That aside, Erika's reaction might have been unusual coming from a girl as well, but Tatsuya could still understand that more than this. He'd already given up on using a normal scale to judge Miyuki's words and actions toward him. But it was a mystery to Tatsuya what drove Honoka to do all this. It was almost like — "It's almost like…you're being torn between a lover and your sister."

"Hey, shh! You can't say that, Mizuki. It was just starting to get interesting!"

Mizuki wasn't teasing; it was her honest impression. Tatsuya knew that as well, though he was in complete agreement with Erika about the "you can't say that" bit. However, he was in complete *dis*agreement with the latter part of Erika's comment.

But the redhead's tone of voice was clearly different from before, regardless of the part of the sentence; she was being completely candid. Mizuki's tone was the same as it always was.

Despite clearly hearing what Mizuki had said, Honoka was still clinging to his arm. It was just too much for him. (He hadn't minded Miyuki in the first place.) So, Erika took it upon herself to direct a slightly awkward grin at Tatsuya. "Errr, sorry, Tatsuya. I didn't mean to be so weird about it."

"No, I don't mind, so don't be sorry."

"Well! Even though I've been told not to mind it, you know…" Erika smirked as if she'd just thought of something good. "…As an apology, I'll show you mine, too." She stuck her right thumb under her bathing suit's shoulder strap and winked, lifting it up about a finger's height.

Next to her, Mizuki froze.

Tatsuya looked at each of the girls on his arms in turn. Honoka wasn't about to bring her own face back up, and Miyuki just kept smiling at him. "Um, let's go swim."

With the two of them still hanging from him, Tatsuya headed for the water's edge.

Erika puffed out her cheeks in irritation while Mizuki deflated, giving a worried smile.

Shizuku, who had passed by them to follow Tatsuya and the others, was nodding several times at the girl on his right arm, as if to say "well done."

◇ ◇ ◇

The dazzling blue sky spread out before Tatsuya. As he rested his back against the water's surface (though almost entirely submerged, with only his face above the water), he floated along, drifting among the barely discernible waves.

The aquatic dialogue from just a little while ago had evolved into a playful aquatic battle, then evolved to the point where he wanted to call their shots "jet streams" (magic ones, of course, with Tatsuya being delegated to the role of target). Still, being the only boy in a group of five girls was mentally straining even for Tatsuya. If Leo and Mikihiko had been there, it wouldn't have been bad enough for him to flee like he had. Unfortunately, the two had gone for a long-distance swimming race, and they were pretty much out of sight by now. When Tatsuya had said "I'm going out a little farther" and turned his back on the quintet, Miyuki had given him a fairly unhappy look, but she still appeared to understand his needs.

The girls in the group were playing on a boat now, a bit closer to the beach than where Tatsuya was floating. Their compromise, spearheaded by Miyuki, seemed to have been not to bother him while he was taking a breather, but still to keep him within eyeshot.

The gentle breeze carried their delighted voices to Tatsuya's ears. All he could hear was the undulation of their speech; he couldn't make out much of what they were actually talking about. Still, it did allow Tatsuya to keep a grasp on their positions without needing to look. Honoka and Shizuku were on the boat, while Miyuki and Erika were in the water holding on to its side. Mizuki was probably taking a rest under the parasol.

Come to think of it, he thought, his body gently rocked by the waves, *Honoka said she was bad at swimming.* The boat was only a shallow-draft one—small, unstable, and no more than an overgrown surfboard. Would she be all right this far out?

His ominous premonitions of this sort oft happened to be correct. Everyone had their own words for that—some called it a "flag," while others put it down to *kotodama*, referring to the traditional Japanese belief that words and names were imbued with power—but the number of times that somebody around him said something inconvenient might happen and then it really did exceeded what logic would suggest. The idea was applied not only to words spoken aloud but also to thoughts people kept to themselves.

A sudden shriek pierced the calm summer air. His mind detected the boat capsizing (which he'd been apprehensive about) *even before his eyes could look in that direction*; in a split-second, *he stood up on the water* and *sprinted* across the surface toward the now-overturned boat.

This movement technique was certainly not something he should have used where others could see, but this was far faster than swimming. He ran up beside the capsized vessel, then cut the effects of his Water Spider spell (which increased surface tension), which he'd been flash casting with each step.

He dived into the water feetfirst. He waved away Miyuki, who had dived underwater before him, then put his hands around Honoka's waist. She struggled, flailing her arms and legs; she was probably panicked. Tatsuya kicked

them back up to the surface anyway.

Above the waves, Erika had just finished pushing Shizuku up onto the deck. Had it been Erika or Shizuku who flipped the thing over? And how did it flip in the first place? Though still concerned, he left such inquiries for later and decided to get the girl in his arms onto the boat, now that it was righted.

She seemed to calm down a bit once her face was above the surface, but her state of panic hadn't subsided. Despite not being crazed in her resistance, she was shouting things like "Wait a minute" and "Please, stop," repeatedly voicing her distress at climbing onto the boat. However, despite the warmth of the summer sea, it would slowly sap her endurance the longer she was in it. She'd almost drowned; she needed to rest—so Tatsuya forced her body up as she shook her head in disagreement. She was turned around by the momentum, and Shizuku, already on the boat, caught her back. With Honoka facing him now, Tatsuya finally understood what it was she was so distressed about.

It had probably been designed with an emphasis on fashion, not actually swimming.

The top of Honoka's bathing suit had been turned up.

Tatsuya shut his eyes and let gravity pull him toward the seafloor.

Honoka gave a belated scream and curled up on deck, both hands clutching her chest.

◇ ◇ ◇

"*Hic…hic…ic*…"

"Umm, Honoka, I… Is…? Are you all right…?" asked a bewildered Mizuki. Honoka had finally sat down on the sandy beach and promptly broke down in tears for real. The other three—Shizuku, Erika, and Miyuki—stood around them awkwardly.

"*Hic*…that's why…*ic*…I said…" she sniffed, "I said to wait…"

Of course, the one finding this hardest to bear was Tatsuya. He truly wanted to run away. There was no option for a course change or a retreat in this situation, though.

“Well, I mean…Tatsuya was the one who saved you…” noted Erika honestly, but it didn’t have much effect. Miyuki couldn’t find any words to comfort her, either, given simply that Tatsuya had been one of those involved.

“Honoka, well…I’m sorry.” Tatsuya hadn’t meant to be mean—and in fact, he barely held any responsibility for this. But he couldn’t look on with indifference forever, so he bowed his head and apologized.

Shizuku whispered quietly into Honoka’s ear. “*Honoka, you know Tatsuya isn’t to blame for this, right?*” Only Honoka was able to hear her voice. “*You had time to fix your suit.*” Despite the low volume of her voice, and even though a part of what she said was contradictory, it was effective in calming her down. “*I know this didn’t go as originally planned…*”

But they seemed a little shady for words of comfort.

“*…but this could be your chance.*”

In fact, they were outright conspiratorial.

Shizuku whispered a few more words to her, and Honoka finally looked up. “Tatsuya…are you really sorry about it?”

“I wouldn’t lie about this. I really am sorry,” said Tatsuya, once again bowing deeply.

“Okay, then…” said Honoka. “…For the rest of the day, do as I say.”

“What…?” Confusion entered Tatsuya’s face at the unexpected remark. He felt like Honoka’s idea of what she should have been looking for at a time like this wasn’t the same as his. He didn’t seem to be the only one who thought that, either—Miyuki and Erika made the same sort of expression.

“And then I’ll forgive you. Is that okay…?”

Tatsuya and Miyuki exchanged glances. His sister gave a dry, resigned grin. “…If that is enough,” he replied with a reluctant nod, knowing she wasn’t the sort of girl to make wicked demands of him like in the king-playing game popular decades ago.

“It’s a promise!” nodded Honoka in return, a wide smile on her face.

◇ ◇ ◇

When Leo emerged from the ocean after his looong (long-distance and long-sustained) swimming race, it was just about teatime on the balcony.

Cold drinks and a rainbow assortment of fruit sat upon the table.

Working as the steward, Kurosawa wore an apron, underneath which was not the same clothing as before, but a thin one-piece mini. Over that short one-piece, which exposed her shoulders and slender limbs, was a big white apron larger than the dress itself. She possessed a sexiness that would have normally made a teenage boy unable to take his eyes off her, but there were four even more powerful swimsuit wearers here: Despite yielding ground in terms of maturity, two of the girls had amazing looks, and the other two were certainly above average. For Leo, who, when faced with the myriad of swimsuits, was able to practice the old expression of “food before romance,” the adult charm that Kurosawa gave off was not that challenging an opponent.

That wasn’t to say he was entirely apathetic. When he saw the four young women in their swimsuits, Leo quirked his head to the side. “Hm? Where’s Tatsuya…and Mitsui?”

“They’re…over there…on that boat.”

The answer came not from the table but from behind him. It was Mikihiko, dripping with seawater, exhaustion evident on his frame. He spoke while trying to catch his breath and pointed.

Tatsuya and Honoka were in an old-timey rowboat, heading out to sea.

“…What’s up with that?” Leo asked.

“A lot is ‘up with that,’” answered Erika, turning a cheek to him. Her expression was less cold and more half-sulking. Instead of being offended, though, Leo’s curiosity only grew.

Mikihiko came up next to him, seeming to be highly interested in the conversation. But his attention quickly returned to the two still at sea.

They couldn’t quite make out Tatsuya’s expression, as his face was in the shadow of the straw hat he wore—much less Honoka’s, as she had her back turned and a parasol up.

Still, as the small boat drew farther away from the shore, Mikihiko felt a friendly, cheerful air about them.

"…They look like they're having a good time."

"H-hey—!"

…*You idiot*, Erika started to say, until she was cut off by a chilling air from the seat across from her.

Crickle-crackle, crickle-crackle… Mikihiko heard an ominous noise that was more at home in the dead of winter coming from the hands of the girl next to him.

"Yoshida, would you like a very well-chilled orange?" said Miyuki pleasantly.

Mikihiko nodded quickly and took the nearly frozen orange from her. As if on cue, Kurosawa held out a spoon out to him. Mikihiko took the sherbet spoon mechanically.

Miyuki took a new piece of fruit. Once again he heard the *crickle-crackle*, and in the blink of an eye, she'd created an ice-cold mango sherbet. She peeled her cold glare from the fruit and, with a friendly smile, offered it to the seat diagonal to her.

"Would you like one as well, Saijou?"

Even Leo could only stammer out an "Uh…thanks…"

Miyuki looked again at the pile of fruit but, perhaps finished venting, turned away in disinterest. "Shizuku, I'm sorry, but I seem to be rather tired. Would I be able to take a rest in my room?"

"Sure, don't worry about it. Ms. Kurosawa?"

"Yes. I will show you there, Lady Miyuki."

Miyuki followed after the help and disappeared into the beach house.

Mizuki's scrunched-up face relaxed in relief, in good contrast to Shizuku's customary poker stare.

◇ ◇ ◇

For dinner, they had barbecue. The eight of them stood harmoniously around

the grill, going back and forth between it and the table.

Miyuki had regained her calm after a bit of rest, while Honoka boldly hovered around Tatsuya a bit too much, and Erika had a pleasant conversation with Shizuku.

Mizuki, perhaps slightly traumatized by that afternoon's teatime, sat slightly away from Miyuki and the others, preferring to exchange quieter words with Mikihiko.

Leo used his mouth only for eating. His appetite had basically repurposed Kurosawa into his personal waitress.

The group wasn't clearly divided, of course. Sometimes Honoka would join Miyuki's circle, and sometimes Tatsuya and Leo would have a small food fight.

But there was a little bit—compared to normal—of an awkward atmosphere floating among them.

◇ ◇ ◇

The calm before the storm.

They didn't know what would happen, but they still felt like something was coming. The one to break that mood and roll open the curtains of chaos was unexpected.

Right after the five girls had finished their card game, with Mizuki in the loser's seat, Shizuku asked Miyuki if she wanted to go outside for a bit.

Miyuki hesitated, but only for an instant. "…That's fine with me," she said with a prompt smile and a nod.

"…Umm, are you going for a walk? Can I come?"

"Nope, Mizuki. You have to play the punishment game."

Mizuki had been about to rise and follow her friends, but Erika grabbed her shirt and pulled her back down.

"What?! I didn't hear about that!"

"The loser always has a punishment game. Anyway, we'll be busy with that, so you two be careful," said Erika with a wave, pretending not to notice the

tension between the two girls. She restrained Mizuki, unable to tell if the girl could read the room or not.

The girls weren't the only ones to notice the oddly nervous air. Leo had quickly gone out by himself after dinner, almost certainly because he'd sniffed out this atmosphere in its formative stage. Mikihiko, busy with a game of *shogi*, had stolen a glance at their exchange but wasn't focused on it.

"Check. I'll win this in ten more moves."

"What? Already?!" he cried at Tatsuya's merciless declaration.

◇ ◇ ◇

The pair left the summerhouse and went left, following the water's edge.

Shizuku walked in silence, and Miyuki followed in silence.

Once they had walked to a place where the beach house's lights no longer reached, Shizuku finally turned around.

Her face was more impassive than usual—no, it was strained with tension.

Miyuki had a gentle smile on, but it was an archaic smile, one that betrayed no emotion.

"Sorry for bringing you out here."

"It's all right. You had something to talk about, right?"

Though expected, Shizuku didn't broach the topic right away.

After the noise of waves washing the beach sounded ten times, Shizuku finally opened her mouth to speak. "I want you to tell me something."

"What is it?"

"What are your feelings for Tatsuya?" she asked. Without any preamble, the question was so abrupt that "not mincing words" or "to avoid beating around the bush" didn't even begin to cover it.

"I love him," replied Miyuki simply, without a moment of hesitation or confusion.

"…Do you mean…as a man?" In fact, the hesitation was coming from Shizuku's end. Still, she wasn't flustered—though that was probably because of her

personality.

“No,” answered Miyuki, not showing even a little bit of vacillation. More than anything, the look on her face was actually relaxed. “I respect and love my brother more than anyone else. But not as a woman. My feelings toward him are certainly not ones of romantic love. Such a thing wouldn’t be possible between my brother and me.”

She met Shizuku’s gaze. “Though I think I understand why you asked the question.” Miyuki smiled. “And it’s fine. I don’t plan on getting in Honoka’s way.” She paused. “Though I will be jealous, all right? I’d tell you not to be worried, but perhaps that wouldn’t work.”

Miyuki giggled a bit, but now Shizuku looked like she was going to cry. “…How?”

“How what?”

“How…can you be so rational about it? I mean, you love him so much.”

Miyuki took a step toward Shizuku. The latter tensed but didn’t retreat. Miyuki walked past her, then stopped, their backs to each other. “…It’s difficult to explain our relationship to others. There are too many opinions and expectations tangled up within it. My feelings toward my brother aren’t actually that simple…but saying I love him seems the most accurate.”

“…Are you not…related by blood?” asked Shizuku, turning around.

“My, that’s a rather intrusive thing to ask,” replied Miyuki, doing likewise.

“…Sorry.”

“No, I wasn’t criticizing you for it,” said Miyuki, shaking her head and smiling carelessly. “It must be nice, though—to have a friend who’s willing to go to such lengths for you.”

“I…consider you a friend, too, Miyuki.”

“I know. That’s why you were wondering, right? You didn’t want friends to hurt each other.”

Shizuku looked down, embarrassed under her warm stare.

“Back to the question… We are related by blood. At the very least, it says so in public records, and no DNA tests have ever come up saying that we weren’t.”

“But…”

“I know what you want to say.” Miyuki nodded knowingly as Shizuku struggled to find her words. “Everyone else thinks my feelings for him go beyond sibling love, too.”

Shizuku fell silent, her face confused.

“You see…I actually died three years ago.”

But that confession was sure to earn a “what?” from Shizuku anyway.

“Or maybe I should say I was *supposed* to die? But at the time, I very distinctly felt my own life leaving me, so saying I actually died isn’t untrue, either.”

Miyuki’s smile as she spoke was so fragile that it lent credence to her words. Shizuku felt a chill go down her spine.

“I’m only able to be here now, like this, thanks to my brother. The fact that I can cry and laugh, the fact that I can talk to you—it’s all thanks to him. My life was given to me by him, and so every part of me belongs to him.”

“What does…?” …*that mean?* she tried to ask but couldn’t—and so, she received no answer.

“My feelings toward my brother are not romantic love.”

Instead, the answer was the same as Shizuku’s second question: of whether she loved him as a man. It had an equal amount of confidence this time as well.

“Romantic love is when you yearn for someone, right?” This time Miyuki asked the question. “Isn’t love when you want someone to be yours?”

Shizuku couldn’t answer. For one thing, she thought giving a textbook answer was unfitting— “But there is nothing about my brother that I yearn for. Because he already gave me…well, *me.*”

—and for another, she understood it was a rhetorical question.

“I can’t ask for anything more of my brother. I can’t even ask for him to accept my feelings. Words to express this feeling…can’t be boiled down to anything

other than ‘I love him,’ I think.”

“…I give up.” All Shizuku could do after Miyuki’s confession was wave the white flag. “Miyuki, you really are something else,” she said, just shaking her head.

“I’d be the first one to admit how strange I am,” she said, shutting one eye mischievously.

◇ ◇ ◇

Right after Shizuku and Miyuki left, Honoka stood in front of a mirror. Going out to pick flowers had just been an excuse to leave the room.

As she looked into the mirror, she remembered what Shizuku had whispered to her after dinner: *“I’ll get Miyuki outside, and then you can invite Tatsuya.”*

She knew right away what Shizuku had meant. They didn’t even have to talk about it, because Shizuku could read her like a book.

Even the accident earlier in the day, where the boat had overturned, had actually been a matchmaking scheme of Shizuku’s. It had been her plan to mention beforehand that Honoka was a bad swimmer, get Tatsuya to rescue her, and then have Honoka approach him in various ways as a means of thanking him. They even had a backup plan ready in case Tatsuya didn’t make it in time. The shameful event that had actually transpired was a complete accident, but as a result, she’d been able to monopolize the boy. Honoka felt guilty about it, but happy at the same time.

And now, Shizuku had set everything up for her love confession. Honoka hesitated a moment, putting on only a little bit of light lipstick so it wouldn’t stand out. After checking her hair and clothing again, she chimed an “all right!” to raise her spirits. Intending to follow the plan and invite Tatsuya out while his sister was absent, she returned to the living area.

She didn’t realize that her legs were trembling slightly.

◇ ◇ ◇

Stealing furtive glances at Tatsuya, who walked beside her, Honoka worried over when she should bring it up. Things had gone as she’d pictured thus far: He’d readily consented to going outside together, to the point that Honoka

found herself thrown off balance instead.

It had started too smoothly, and now it seemed like she was the one being pulled along.

Yet Tatsuya was silent.

They had left the beach house and gone off to the right, along the water's edge. He was matching her pace as they walked, him closer to the water, as if to shield her from the surging waves.

Somehow, she thought, it felt like he'd guessed her intent already but was avoiding actually arriving at the destination.

She had to be the one to make the first move, or else matters would remain unsettled. The danger of doing that gave Honoka the push she needed.

"Tatsuya," she said finally, after opening and closing her mouth several times. He stopped and turned to her.

The lights from the house no longer reached them.

The words being exchanged on the other side of the dark beach were swallowed by the waves, lost to the two.

Only the splashing of the water filled the darkness under the starry sky, as Honoka faced Tatsuya.

But she didn't go further. Even when prompted by his gaze, she instead averted her eyes and looked down.

"Well…" After a time, she looked back up into his eyes, as though she were about to say something—only to then grow nervous and look back down. This repeated several times.

"Mmhmm. What is it?" asked Tatsuya, spurring her on. His tone and words were both softer than usual; that voice, more than his words, seemed to give her the courage she needed.

"Umm…well…I love you, Tatsuya!"

Her answer, wrung from her at the end of her wavering, could have perhaps been heard on the other side of the dark. But Honoka wasn't relaxed enough to

be thinking about that.

For her, right now, she and Tatsuya were the only two people in the world.

"…I want to know how you feel about me!"

Unable to meet his gaze, she shut her eyes tight. The answer took a while.

"…Am I…bothering you?" asked Honoka in a tearful, nervous voice after anxiously opening her eyes.

Tatsuya smiled and shook his head. "You're not bothering me. I figured you would probably say this to me eventually. But I only realized it this afternoon."

His eyes look sad, she thought when she looked up into Tatsuya's face. Honoka balled her hands into fists, pretty sure that she'd have to endure the sadness that drew ever closer.

But Tatsuya's answer was unexpected, and didn't match the good outcome or bad outcome she had imagined.

"…Honoka, you see, as a person, I lack certain mental faculties."

"…Huh?"

"When I was a kid, I was in a magic accident… Well, it erased part of my mind's functions."

Honoka's face paled—so white he could tell even in the dark. Her eyes widened, and her hands wobbled up to her mouth to cover it. "That's awful…" she said through them.

"I think I lost the ability to feel love after that…romantic love. It's not locked away anywhere, so I can't set it free or anything. It's not broken, so I can't fix it, either. You can't recover something that's been erased."

The way Tatsuya spoke of it made it sound like it concerned someone else, not him.

"I don't understand what romantic love is on an emotional level. I can come to like someone but not love them. I mean, I do *know* what it is. But I gave my heart a long, careful look, and came to the conclusion that I don't have it."

Honoka was still covering her mouth, and she didn't say "That's crazy" or "I

can’t believe it.” But she couldn’t say anything else, either. She was literally at a loss for words. Dumbstruck, with Tatsuya’s confession the only thing in her mind.

“This may sound kind of mean, but I do like you, too, Honoka. But only the way I feel about my other friends. No matter how hard you work for my sake, I don’t think I’ll ever look at you as a special woman. I know that would be difficult for you—that it would hurt you if I made you do that.”

As he spoke, a powerless smile made its way onto his face.

“I can’t reciprocate your feelings for me.”

He closed his mouth.

Honoka stayed silent as well.

Only the sound of the waves coming in and going out filled the dim night.

The waves slowly drew nearer.

Finally, after enough time had passed where they were almost reaching their feet…

Honoka looked up. “Please don’t get angry at me but…I thought that you loved Miyuki. Not as your sister, but as a girl.”

“…That’s a misunderstanding.”

“Yes, that’s what it seems like. Tatsuya, you’re really smart… If you were going to lie to me, you would have told me something that sounded more trustworthy. I’ve never heard of any spell that can erase certain functions of your mind, but I guess that’s why I believe you. But that means you won’t have any other girlfriend apart from me, either, right?”

Confused at the somewhat unexpected turn of events, Tatsuya nodded. “Well, I guess not…”

“…Then it’s okay.”

“Huh?”

“You’re not going to have a girlfriend for a really long time, right? That means if I stay in love with you, you won’t go off with someone else, right?”

“I…suppose you’re right…?”

“So there’s no problem. I decided to keep being in love with you! Just until I fall in love with someone else, anyway!”

It was a cheerful declaration with a transfer notice attached.

“…I guess you’ve got me there,” nodded Tatsuya with a dry smile.

Even he wasn’t dull enough to miss what she meant by adding “until I fall in love with someone else.”

◇ ◇ ◇

The sunlight had been asserting itself again since the first light of the day. Early in the morning, the temperature had already climbed to over eighty-five degrees.

And as if the sweltering heat covering the sandy beach wasn't enough…a terribly hot battle was taking place as well.

"Tatsuya, show me your back. I'll put on your sunscreen."

"Tatsuya, do you want to some juice?"

Things like that.

"Shizuku says she'll let us borrow a water ski. Would you like to take a ride on it?"

"I hear there's a good diving spot a little farther out."

And things of that nature—a new annoyingly painful heat, this time emitted by other people.

"Miyuki really had to hold herself back yesterday…"

"Honoka looks like she's gotten over a lot…"

Erika's and Mizuki's somewhat amazed comments.

"…"

Shizuku's slightly worried look.

"Err. Must be tough."

Leo's deeply empathetic expression.

"…Yoshida, what's the matter?"

"Uh, er, nothing!"

Mikihiko's—actually, it would be better not to say in order to preserve his honor.

In any case, every eye, each pair with its own set of emotions attached, rested on Tatsuya. For his part, he was fielding the requests from Miyuki and Honoka in order, sometimes with a sigh.

He dashed across the ocean surface on the water ski, with Miyuki in the tandem seat. (After that he ended up riding with Honoka, too.) Honoka, who evidently was a great swimmer after all—her panic yesterday had been for a different reason—took him out on a motorboat to go to the diving spot. (Miyuki came with them as well.) Applying sunscreen and having it applied (and reapplied), having one product of the sea after another pushed into his mouth had a taste of what it was like to be a foie gras goose (more commonly known as *spoon-feeding*)…

Tatsuya, stuck between the warm, high-pressure air masses of Ogasawara and the beck and call of the burning hot winds…

…He seemed somehow to be—more than yesterday, more than usual—relaxed and having a good time.

The Irregular at Magic High School

The Honor Student's Extracurricular Lesson

THE HONOR STUDENT'S EXTRACURRICULAR LESSON

Summer vacation was well into its second half now, and the First High campus lay dormant. The season's biggest event, the Nine School Competition, was over, and the sports-related clubs had since shifted into independent training mode. There was still one more week until the new term began; clubs would restart their actual activities then, but none were scheduled now.

That wasn't to say the campus was completely empty, of course. Though few, there were some students who came out for independent training.

Especially the freshmen. The training facilities were almost always reserved for upperclassmen, so for the freshmen, it was a chance to get full usage of them. Indeed, many freshman club members could be seen here in the closed-quarters battle practice area.

◇ ◇ ◇

He ran, weaving in and out of the fat, sporadically placed rectangular columns.

Indoors, he couldn't see very far, so it was essentially a labyrinth even though it had no walls. The lighting in some parts had been dimmed on purpose, and scrap materials were scattered underfoot to serve as obstacles.

But he couldn't slow down—he was in the middle of a time trial. It was just independent training, but he wasn't about to leave an unsightly record.

He came to a T-intersection in the forest of pillars.

A snap decision—the path on the right. Down that way waited an automatic gun emplacement.

Mostly out of reflex, he pointed the muzzle of the CAD he gripped in his right hand at it and pulled the trigger, activating a weighting spell tuned for competitive purposes.

The emplacement's gravity sensors felt the weight, which caused it to stop.

A belated cold sweat broke out on his back. No time to think about it. He picked up his pace through the maze; he'd reflexively stopped his feet to fire, and he knew he had to recover the lost time. Slipping past the silenced emplacement, he followed the pillar to his left and turned to correct his course.

That exact moment—

—something sticky hit him from the side…

…and a buzzer sounded to announce it was over.

◇ ◇ ◇

Feeling glum, Morisaki looked down at himself as the lights came back on the course. A red paintball had splashed against the right side of his combat-shooting club practice uniform.

The rubber paint had already dried. He probably could have torn it off anyway, but he'd have to use the remover in the prep room to get it off cleanly. He headed for the exit at a run, careful not to disturb the next person in line for the course.

At the sound of the door clattering open, the female student doing maintenance on a directed-shooting launcher blinked in surprise and turned around. (To explain, "directed shooting" was the name of a magic-based sport where a person fired a bullet using only magic, no gunpowder or compressed air, at a small target 2.54 centimeters—or 1 inch—across. The launchers used for directed shooting were shaped like rifles, with a CAD built into the stock and four long rails in place of the barrel, which held bullets inserted from four directions.) "…Morisaki, you look frazzled," said the girl, Kazumi Takigawa of Class 1-C, speaking to him in a worried tone as she stopped her work on the launcher.

"Takigawa…? Aren't you in the D.S. club? What are you doing here?" Of course, D.S. was short for "directed-shooting club."

"Wow. How's that for a hello?" she sniped back.

In the end, Morisaki's reply was, as Takigawa had discerned, not a very pleasant "greeting."

“I came to get some of your built-in CAD parts,” she explained. “I got permission from your president, so I don’t think you have any right to treat me like a suspicious person.”

“Hmph… Can’t even manage your own inventory, I see.”

“Gee, sorry. Just so you know, it’s a tradition among the shooting clubs to pool our extra parts. You wouldn’t know, since you only ever use your own CAD.”

Aside from the members of the student council and disciplinary committees, members of general clubs had to adjust the CADs belonging to their clubs for personal use. They were also equipped with restrictions on where it was possible to use them via a local positioning system, or LPS. Morisaki had joined the disciplinary committee right after entering school, and he’d been using his own CAD for all his club activities. There hadn’t been a chance for him to learn about the maintenance of club CADs.

Normally it would have been an airtight argument, but he snorted and turned his back to her. Ignoring Takigawa calling him a creep, he took a spray can from a locker on the wall and sprayed under his arm. The paint that was stuck to his side started peeling away, eventually rolling up into a ball before falling to the floor. Several other red clumps were strewn about the floor.

“Morisaki…how many times have you done this? Think you might be overdoing it a little? You should probably call it quits for today.”

“…Are you worried about me?” answered Morisaki sarcastically, wiping the sweat dripping from his brow and showing no signs of stopping.

“Well, of course.” Takigawa nodded seriously. “And don’t start with any creepy jokes about love. I can’t just sit by and watch while someone I know seems like they’re about to fall flat on the floor.”

“…I know that,” he said dismissively, looking away.

Takigawa continued. “Then give it up for today. Doing any more will just wear you down at this point. You won’t be satisfied with that.”

Morisaki shot her a glare, and she held it.

“…I know.”

The first one to look away was Morisaki. He said nothing more and disappeared into the boys’ locker room.

“I get why he’s in such a rush, but… Actually, I guess I don’t. Morisaki’s the same kind of boy as *him*, after all,” said Takigawa to herself as she watched him leave.

◇ ◇ ◇

He took off his club gear and replaced it with his regular uniform, consisting of shirt and slacks. As he was about to put his arms through his summer blazer, the emblem embroidered on the left breast pocket caught his eye.

—Four months ago, he’d been proud of this emblem.

—But sometimes, especially lately, it was strangely irritating.

Now was one of those times. An unclear irritation was eating away at his mind. Or maybe it would be more apt to say he was letting its identity remain unclear.

Morisaki decided not to put on the jacket, instead slinging it over his shoulder and leaving the locker room. When he looked up, he squinted against the strong sunlight pouring down.

He didn’t need Takigawa to tell him; Morisaki knew he was being impatient. But he also knew that if she hadn’t said it so firmly, he probably would still be wasting time with fruitless training. The next time he saw her, he’d have to treat her to an ice cream or something.

Even the wounds he’d sustained during the Nine School Competition, which had been diagnosed as needing over a month to heal normally, had been perfectly mended by magical healing. But his body had dulled during his weeklong stay at the hospital, and it wasn’t completely back to normal yet. At least, not by his standards.

And there was one more thing.

He felt like his experience on the grand competition stage hadn’t helped his magical talents grow. In fact, he felt less skilled than before the vacation…

The notion had built a little nest in his heart. His mind knew that wasn't a good thing, but he couldn't seem to clamp down on his impatience.

The teachers aren't even here…

The personalized instruction from teachers, the special privilege of Course 1 students, didn't mean much when the teachers weren't at school. Not only Morisaki, but the rest of the Nine School Competition athletes, wouldn't be receiving extra help during summer vacation, and they could only make appointments here until next week. The library was always there for self-studying theory, but he wanted to polish his practical skills now. He didn't need anything crazy like real battle experience.

Right now, the only thing he wanted to do was get better at casting magic.

◇ ◇ ◇

When most people thought of the Morisaki family, they thought of their quick-draw.

The family wasn't one of the Numbers, just a branch family, and even compared to the Hundred Families their magical abilities were rated as average. But when it came to their one very specific talent, some said they were as good as the main Numbers families.

What kind of technique was quick-draw?

Nothing outlandish, actually. Quick-draw was simply that—rapidly drawing a gun and firing. Its purpose was to activate a spell as quickly as possible using a CAD. In a little more detail, the idea was to quickly activate a CAD from a non-combat stance, speed through the activation processing, and disable an opponent before they could activate their own spell.

The user's spell power was secondary. The difficulty level didn't matter, either. The spell could be a weak one, but even a weak one could disable an opponent if you attacked first.

The implementation of CADs had brought about a speed-up in the magic activation process, and this technique was an extension of the ideas behind that: develop and improve CAD efficiency.

Because the technique stressed speed, a greater importance was placed on

specialized CADs than multipurpose ones. Specialized CADs were mainly shaped like handguns, so the technique had been born from positioning the body to efficiently draw and activate a handgun-shaped device. This was where the name *quick-draw* was derived.

The original technique had a side effect nobody had expected at first. The whole point was that you activated a spell more quickly than an opponent—from an unarmed state in which your CAD wasn't in your hand—and took them down first. It was an ideal skill for Japanese bodyguards to have, since they were required to carry their weapons concealed. Bodyguards like the United States Secret Service would instead flaunt their weapons as a feint against assailants. Japanese security details, however, were ordered to keep their weapons out of sight so they wouldn't pressure their clients or other related persons.

Because of this technical characteristic, the members of the Morisaki family were frequently hired as bodyguards, their clientele mainly consisting of wealthy private citizens who could not expect the public authorities to provide protection at all times. The family's main business was still modern magic research, but this side job, the bodyguard-dispatching security company, was famous enough for society to treat it as more important.

Shun Morisaki, the only son of the main Morisaki family (in the sense that he had no brothers) had been helping out in the bodyguard business for two years now. They made full use of his boyish appearance, since it lowered the guards of unsuspecting people. His family didn't use him as the main bodyguard, where he would need to act as a physical shield for the client, but rather as a backup, so he could keep an eye on the surroundings and work to stop attacks from happening.

But even though the family business (or side business, rather) frequently came running to him for assistance without a care for his convenience during busy times, they hadn't called him for anything at all lately. Morisaki didn't want simple practice; he wanted an honest mechanism (real combat) to feel his significance. But there were no orders for him today, either.

After taking off his uniform, he locked eyes with the boy in the mirror, irritation clear in his expression.

But there was nothing there but his own face.

Takigawa’s warning echoed in his head.

He could feel that his mind was in a pretty bad state right now. He forced his impatience back down, telling himself he needed a change of pace while he was still listening to others, then took his hand away from his training gear and changed into more casual street clothes.

◇ ◇ ◇

His afternoon outing had been on a whim, but if he’d opened his address book, he probably would have quickly found four or five people to meet up with.

Yet Morisaki decided to wander the streets by himself.

With his small CAD tucked safely away in a holster hidden inside his open vest and a few miscellaneous things thrown into a single-strap bag, he climbed into a cab headed for the city.

He’d chosen his destination, Ariake, purely on a whim. He didn’t have anything to do there, nor did he particularly enjoy the place. If he had to say why, it was because Ariake wasn’t too noisy, but had just enough clamor to be lively. It made you want to idle your time away there.

Though the area had many parks, it wasn’t just for kids. Still, on a weekday afternoon like this, school-aged boys and girls possessing something called “summer vacation” stood out among the rest. The greater portion of them wore clothing that competed for skin exposure, which was fitting for the season.

That felt fresh to Morisaki. At school, even during summer break, students would wear the uniforms designated by school rules. The boys wore long sleeves, while the girls wore leggings under their skirts. And both had to wear some sort of outerwear. Training clothes were long-sleeved and reached down to the ankles as well. Their swimwear was no different—girls wore athletic bathing suits that covered everything up to their necks.

Here, though, tank tops and tube tops weren’t uncommon. Bare feet in sandals were a given, and even the miniskirts and short shorts that only

bothered to cover the bare minimum fit the occasion.

Morisaki himself was wearing a patterned short-sleeved shirt with two buttons undone in a rough style. But on top of that, he wore an open vest to hide his CAD. That seemed to be the most out of place of all.

The kids walking around didn't have CADs. For a while now, he hadn't seen any boys wearing jackets or vests to hide something in, nor any girls wearing broad bracelets.

There were no magicians in sight at all, since some time ago.

It made Morisaki belatedly feel the objective truth—he was part of an absolute minority.

And then, suddenly, he felt a bit acerbic.

…I've been sweating a lot since this morning…

Deciding the lack of moisture was getting to him, he spied the open terrace of a café. Without thinking anything, as if to reject the very act of thinking or doubting, he walked toward the first café in sight.

It wasn't very big inside the café, and all the seats were taken. Without any other choice, he sat down on the terrace, where the only thing blocking the sun's rays was a parasol. Outdoor air conditioners weren't uncommon these days, but this store didn't have one. Given the log cabin–style exterior and the plain wooden chairs and tables, the store's owner probably liked the down-to-earth feel.

There was a certain demand for ostensibly stylish cafés such as this, but demand changed depending on the season. As proof of that, almost none of the seats out here were filled.

Morisaki took a seat near the side of the terrace and stared idly at a group of kids walking around with iced coffees in one hand. It seemed like most of the people out here walking were boys and girls his age. And half of them were couples, with 90 percent of the rest in groups. Not even 10 percent of that remaining half were lone wolves like him (though he felt less like a lone wolf and more like a one-man army).

As he people-watched, and the sense of being on the wrong side ate at him, he suddenly caught sight of a certain girl.

She was alone, like him—and actually, lone girls were probably far rarer than boys. She wore a high-necked sleeveless shirt, a knee-length pleated skirt, and sandals. Her fashion sense was something between showy and boring.

But her appearance couldn't be called normal.

Eight out of ten people—nine out of ten, if they were men—would have rated her as "pretty" or "beautiful."

She wore her hair in one long ponytail hanging over her left shoulder, and it was so long that if undone it would reach her waist. Her eyes were large and slanted slightly upward, and her movements were graceful and completely devoid of waste. They gave her the appearance of a large feline—and not a tiger or a lion, but a panther.

Her face looked clearly Asian, but her skin color was whiter, like a Caucasian's. So maybe she was more like a snow leopard than a panther. (Though in reality, snow leopards had gray skin, not white.) Furthermore, she appeared to be two or three years older than him.

Her appearance certainly stood out, but in terms of prominence, there were plenty of other girls with more showy clothing on. Morisaki had spotted her because of her outward appearance, but what kept his eyes glued to her was something else.

She's…a magician, isn't she?

Still, she didn't wear the most common bracelet-shaped CAD. She had a handbag, so she might have been carrying around a portable terminal type, but he wouldn't be able to tell from here if it wasn't turned on.

There was nothing about her outward appearance that would pin her as a magician. But Morisaki instinctively felt she was related to magic.

Without noticing Morisaki's eyes, or else not caring about them, she passed by the café where he sat on the terrace. He followed her with his eyes as she walked away, and then he noticed other eyes tracing her in the same way.

Not to hit on her.

His instincts started blaring—the ones he'd honed during his job as backup, helping his family.

The gazes clinging to her harbored a hostile malevolence.

After using the tabletop terminal to pay, he stood up, acting naturally.

The reason he followed the girl wasn't due to any deep thoughts he had. His career hadn't been long enough yet to chalk it up to an occupational disease, but that was the closest way to describe it. To point out another thing rather bluntly, the fact that the girl was such an attractive (young) beauty was another thing influencing his actions.

The girl (who looked a bit too old to be called that) was headed away from the park areas and toward the warehouse district. Did she have something to do there?

Morisaki, following carefully from a distance, noticed that there were fewer and fewer people passing by. The parks and recreational facilities were in the other direction, but passers-by were decreasing far too quickly to be chalked up to mere coincidence.

Something unnatural was at work—something literally not of nature.

He didn't know much about old magic, but he thought he remembered hearing about techniques in Taoism or Onmyoudo that acted upon a person's unconscious to cause them not to approach a specific area.

That meant that this was the work of a magician. The girl had shown no signs of using magic since he'd first seen her, so he guessed that someone other than her was magically drawing eyes away from her.

What was their motive? It certainly couldn't have been because someone was too embarrassed to confess their love for her.

Kidnapping, robbery, or…sexual assault.

Given the time of day, he wouldn't have thought of the possibility of assassination, but whatever it was, he decided it was something bad.

The next question was how many of them there were. Their spell was

affecting a pretty large area, so it wasn't just one or two. As long as he didn't know how powerful they were, it would be foolish to take them head-on. Instead, as soon as these "enemies" made a move, he would temporarily disable them with a surprise attack from the flank and use the chance to get the girl out of there.

That was the course of action Morisaki decided on.

However, the situation developed much more quickly than he'd anticipated.

He had been under the impression that the thieves—he'd decided they were thieves—would only make a move after they entered a warehouse area where nobody could see them. No matter how few people were around now, the main roads still had surveillance cameras. He'd thought that once they realized the girl was headed for the (second) Rainbow Bridge, it would throw off their expectations.

Unfortunately, the very moment the last cars and pedestrians disappeared, the watchers of the girl manifested as figures surrounding her.

"H-hey, who are you?!" shouted the girl at the silently approaching men.

Her response could have been called a courageous one. In her position, even a man would have drawn back out of fear of the unknown, unable to speak freely, and the situation wouldn't have been strange.

But considering that she hadn't noticed that all the people around her had disappeared, the spell must have affected her as well.

After first making sure the girl hadn't panicked—if she had, he would have needed to change his plan—Morisaki readied his CAD from the shadow of one of the trees on the roadside. Surprise attacks from the shadows weren't part of his family's special skills, but as someone who had worked guard duty as a backup, others would have seen him as more of a sneak attack than a quick-draw anyway.

Six thieves.

If he didn't want to let any harm befall the girl, he would have to deal with them all quickly.

A bead of sweat dripped down his temple.

Morisaki forced himself to calm his suddenly shallow, rough breathing, and then he leaped out from under the tree.

He charged toward the girl, pulling the trigger twice. When he saw the men reach into their jackets, he flung himself forward and pulled again in midair. As he rolled onto the road, he pulled again. Then again as he stood up.

Given the nature of their roles as bodyguard—which, though a side job, was still a profession—the Morisaki family had developed spells that would disable opponents in one strike without dealing a great deal damage.

With a two-process acceleration spell that switched in an instant from applying backward acceleration to forward acceleration to cancel itself out, the spell shook the target's innards. Especially the brain. The five men fell, one after the other. The sixth man, however, tried to aim for Morisaki, and he felt his heart pound.

It was a suppressor—and the barrel of a gun.

Not a CAD.

A gun with live rounds. An automatic handgun.

Morisaki had expected a magic-based counterattack. He hadn't thought there'd be a gun. They were already using magic, so he'd let himself believe they'd attack with magic, too. He had defenses set up against magic, but not against physical bullets.

Whether he wanted to stop the bullet or move himself out of the way, a spell wouldn't make it in time.

He put strength into his legs, trying to somehow get out of the line of fire. But before his muscles could process his mental command to *jump*, the particularly dull sound of a gun firing with a silencer rang out.

The muzzle had aimed away from him.

The girl had rushed up next to the man and grabbed the hand firing the gun.

Morisaki pulled his CAD's trigger. The sixth man collapsed, and the girl sank to the road, pulled down with him.

Morisaki ran over to the girl.

“Can you stand?” he asked, not waiting for a reply before taking her hand. “We should get away from here quickly. Let’s get to the station for now. I think they’re afraid of witnesses.”

The girl really was made of stern stuff. Despite being attacked moments ago, she wasn’t beginning to cry nor fall into hysterics. Instead, she nodded at Morisaki’s suggestion, grabbed his hand, and stood up.

“This way.”

“Thank you,” said the girl, her hand in his, as they ran for the station.

At first, Morisaki didn’t think she’d be able to run properly in high-heeled sandals, but she didn’t slow him down at all. In fact, she ran alongside him (though he was going at a slower pace for her.) She didn’t try to pull her hand away.

The softness of the girl’s small hand lit a fire, so to speak, in Morisaki’s sense of chivalry.

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Upon arriving at the station, Morisaki suggested leaving Ariake, but the girl shook her head. “I’m meeting someone here.”

“Then you could send them a text…”

“I…can’t, really. It’s not possible for me to contact from my end,” she said with big eyes, giving a concerned smile.

Morisaki couldn’t help but be flustered at that enchanting face.

“Thank you so much for saving me.” Luckily, the girl pretended not to notice his reddened expression.

Her considerations were a bit different from people the same age as him, but it was more than agreeable to him.

And then the sense of duty—or whatever it was—that he felt toward this young, beautiful girl swelled inside him even more.

Which meant that the next words weren't what he wanted to hear, and he had a hard time accepting them: "But I'll be fine from now on. I would like to thank you at a later date…somehow. Maybe you could give me your contact information?"

At that point, *Oh no* visibly crossed the girl's face.

Morisaki tensed, wondering what the problem was, but a moment later, she smiled bashfully, causing a different sort of tension to run through him. "Oh, sorry. My name is Rin Richardson. I go to college in California, and I'm on vacation right now. You can call me Rin."

"I'm Shun Morisaki." The fact that his voice didn't crack as he told her his name gave him no end of relief. "And I don't need any thanks. Back there, well, you saved me in a bad spot, too. More important…"

Morisaki worked up his sense of duty to change gears and drive away his giddiness (though that duty itself was, when put nicely, spurred by a rather romanticist sentiment). If the enemy had numerical superiority, it wouldn't be a smart idea to hang around close to where she was attacked. This wasn't the sort of situation where they could be chatting so casually.

"It doesn't seem like that will be the end of it. Do you have any idea why they attacked you?"

If they couldn't take the most appropriate option and flee, he wanted information so he could formulate a plan to intercept any opposition. Who was their enemy? When would allies arrive? How much could he learn? Not intruding on a client's private affairs was a crucial mind-set for a bodyguard, but if the information was necessary to keep her safe, it was a different story.

"I'm sorry. There are reasons, but…"

And even if he couldn't get enough information, that didn't mean he couldn't fully carry out his guardian role. "I see… All right, I understand. I won't ask after your circumstances. In exchange, would you allow me to serve as your bodyguard until the other party arrives?"

Rin's eyes widened at Morisaki's offer. "…Why?"

“In this country, we have a saying that goes, ‘Even a chance acquaintance is decreed by fate.’”

“I know that much, at least,” said Rin, sounding rather annoyed.

“I see. Excuse me…” apologized Morisaki awkwardly. But he couldn’t keep quailing at her forever, either. “It may have been a coincidence, but I happened to be present at the place you were almost kidnapped. That’s certainly some kind of fate.”

Morisaki didn’t know exactly why he was being so stubborn about it. Rin’s intentions were clear: She hadn’t outright rejected his offer, but she didn’t want to get him tangled up in her problems any further, either. And yet, he still didn’t feel like backing down at the moment.

However, the kidnapping part was Morisaki’s subjective opinion in the first place. It could have just been that Rin ran away from home, and her parents had requested that those men bring her back. Even if he was right about them being kidnappers, maybe the girl was involved in some great crime and those men were the organization on the other side. Maybe they were trying to bring back a runaway member of their group. But whatever the case was, people who would open fire at someone in broad daylight without any warning shots couldn’t possibly have been anything but villains. That was Morisaki’s conclusion—or decision, anyway.

“…You know now that this is dangerous, right?” she said. “You don’t seem like someone who can’t tell the difference between games and reality.”

Rin’s exasperated look wasn’t enough to cool down Morisaki’s enthusiasm. These people were criminals targeting an unarmed frail girl. It was pretty clear whose side he should take. Clear to him, anyway.

“You’re in more danger than I am, Ms. Rin. Our country’s police force is excellent, and I don’t say that to brag. But that doesn’t mean crime is nonexistent. We don’t have nearly enough officers, especially ones who can respond to magical crimes.”

“It’s the same in every other country, you know,” said Rin wryly.

Morisaki wasn’t fazed. “Therefore, I believe you’re in need of a bodyguard.”

“…You’d be my bodyguard?” she asked, again teasingly.

He nodded, completely serious. “I may look young, but I’ve been doing it for two years now.”

“…Morisaki, you look like you’re in high school.”

“I’m a freshman at the National Magic University Affiliated First High School. But my family are the ones who own the bodyguard dispatch business.”

“Oh… Morisaki, as in a member of that Morisaki family.”

Rin hadn’t been taking him seriously until now. Half of what she heard had gone right past her. Now, though, she finally nodded, apparently convinced. At the same time, it meant she was a person of standing who was familiar with the personal bodyguard industry.

“But I don’t have anything on hand to reward you with.”

“I’m not doing this as a part of my job. I just didn’t want to pretend I didn’t see anything.”

“You’re quite the gentleman,” giggled Rin. Morisaki looked away, embarrassed. She composed her expression and looked him in the eye. “…All right. If you’re that worried, then I suppose I’ll take you up on your offer.”

“…Please leave it to me,” he said, nodding proudly.

“Then I know it’s sudden, but I have a request. Is that okay?”

“What is it?”

Safety details weren’t butlers. But building a healthy relationship with the client was important for completing his mission smoothly. As long as the requests weren’t impossible, or caused difficulties for the escort, they were required to comply with their client’s wishes. That was one of the first things in the bodyguard manual, whether in the East or the West—though perhaps the eastern side was a bit different.

“Call me Rin from now on. If you call me Ms. Rin again, you’ll be on your way, okay?”

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“…Does that mean you’re not a magician, Rin?”

“Yes. I’m not sure why you thought I was, Shun, but…”

Rin smiled, her face confused. In contrast to Morisaki, who was endeavoring to open up to her but still maintained a stiff formality, Rin casually called him Shun as though they were already friends. Was she so composed because she was older?

He stole a glance at her face. She was pretty. Normally, people looked significantly better when watched from afar. But in her case, she was charming even seen close-up—perhaps even more so. It was probably thanks to her vivid expressions. She never wore the same face twice. At least, that’s the answer Morisaki came up with based on his lacking experience.

“Oh! Maybe it was this thing’s fault,” she said, pulling a pendant out of her clothes and showing it to him. The glimpse of the soft-looking curves on her chest through her unbuttoned shirt raised Morisaki’s heart rate. His increased blood flow should have been reflected in his facial color, but thankfully, Rin’s expression made it seem like she didn’t notice at all.

“What is it?”

“A magic item.”

“A what?”

“A magic item. You wear it to keep people away. They made it back when premeditated kidnappings were a big problem. It’s a charm that protects you from being seen by bad people… Yes, it’s a real thing.”

Modern magic was the researched and systematized form of old magic. Though he’d never seen one, he knew that of the objects referred to as “magic items,” more than a few actually did possess magical effects. But at the same time, the fact was that fakes—no more than simple accessories—were hundreds of times more common than the real things. Earnest, young modern magicians like him had a tendency to get suspicious whenever terms like *magic item* were thrown around.

Still, Morisaki didn’t feel like doubting Rin’s words at the moment. Her smile drove away the suspicion he felt and lifted his cynical attitude. But then a

different doubt came to him in its place. “You’re not a magician, but you have a magic item?” he asked, his face serious.

Rin looked a little flustered. “Y-yeah. Someone I know gave it to me to keep stalkers away.”

“Stalkers…? Have you run across them in the past, too?”

“W-well, sort of.”

“Could the men before have been the same? Wait, I promised not to ask that. I apologize.” When she saw Morisaki back off meekly, Rin was secretly relieved.

“…Still,” he continued, “it didn’t seem to work against them.”

His attention had already moved to the attackers from a little while ago, and Rin appeared convinced by his sincerity. “…It didn’t work against you, either, so maybe it doesn’t apply to magicians?”

Her question bended the flow of conversation toward a direction different from the one Morisaki had expected. Normally, he would have stuck out his chest and nodded. He considered himself special. He was proud of being a magician, and confident he was particularly excellent even among those in the same grade. The Nine School Competition had ended with unfortunate results, but without that cowardly rule violation, he knew he could have gotten the same results without having to borrow the skills of that impudent trickster.

But for some reason, he found himself unable to nod. “…We’re not that different. Magic is technology humans made. Your magic item is essentially a magician’s spell—they both allow the person to use magical powers.”

“Yeah… You know, you’re right. Magicians and us are both people, huh?”

She clearly didn’t realize that her words betrayed the fact that she thought of magicians and non-magicians as different kinds of people.

Fortunately, neither did Morisaki.

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As a result of Morisaki stressing that they should avoid underpopulated places, the two decided to spend their time waiting for a message from Rin’s contact in a restaurant by the front of the station. She did nearly all the talking,

and he was mostly nodding along and agreeing with her. Neither of them seemed bored at all, though.

As Morisaki had hoped, they'd seen no further signs of suspicious persons. By chance, however, he did feel some presence observing them from afar.

Then, suddenly, Rin's face tensed up. Morisaki gave her a questioning look as she took out an information terminal.

She must have gotten a message from the person she was meeting up with. But tensing up instead of looking relieved at the person's contact… Morisaki wasn't sure quite how to interpret that. Maybe the person, or people, she was meeting up with was Rin's actual enemy. He wished she'd at least tell—confess that—to him.

"Directly under the Rainbow Bridge," said Rin, stone-faced. "They said they'll get a boat there."

"…Then let's get going."

"Under the Rainbow Bridge" probably referred to the plaza constructed next to the bridge abutments. Even on weekdays there were always tourists there. When Morisaki suggested they leave, he reached for the tabletop terminal.

But when his hand got within a literal hair's breadth from it, Rin held a card up to the terminal.

"Trying to pay for an older woman's meal? Pre-tty-chee-ky for a high schooler." She poked him in the forehead with her index finger as he blushed. Her face, which had been tense mere moments ago, wore a relaxed smile.

The distance would be shorter if they walked down main roads, but Morisaki purposely chose winding, twisting park routes. He had decided that the spell from before, which had prevented pedestrians and vehicles alike from coming near, would be less effective in parks where people mostly stayed in one place, rather than avenues, where they were naturally on the move and passing through.

It certainly wasn't because he wanted to be with Rin for longer. Not consciously, at least.

He'd made her put the pendant in her purse. Averting other people's attention would have the opposite effect from what they wanted at the moment.

The idea had been theoretically correct—but unfortunately, it had invited some unexpected trouble.

There was a wall of people in front of them now. All were young men around Rin's age. They were packed in tightly, like pro soccer players trying to block a free kick. Unfortunately, their clothing, countenances, and other features were as far as they could be from any sort of bracing sportsmanship. Frankly speaking, they didn't look very respectable.

There were small differences, but they each wore essentially the same thing. The most common outfit consisted of a vest made from shiny fabric, metal rings around the wrists, below the elbows, and above the elbows.

The vests' surfaces, which looked like lizard scales, were metal-skins, a material that had brought in a *minor-league* fad about three years back. The synthetic resin boasted defense and shock absorption that was leaps and bounds more advanced than the bulletproof, stab-proof synthetic fibers of yesteryear. However, it was a defective product—its lack of breathability meant that you'd sweat wearing one even in a heated room in wintertime, nevermind outdoors in summertime. Even sleeveless vests were still seen as too hot, and most young men who wore them never zipped them up in the front. Of course, that would make them useless as protection against stabs or gunshots from the front. In other words, it was nothing more than a fashion statement.

The metal rings around their arms were muscle amplifiers using EMSs, short for electronic muscle stimulators. EMSs had been used in training devices going back to the 1960s, so it was old technology. In modern times, however, they had succeeded in raising the contraction rate of muscle tissue by using feedback from the muscles' own electrical current. They had originally been medical tools used for rehabilitation, but they could easily raise the force of a punch, so they were popular among lazy street fighters.

A few of the young men had donned fitted AR goggles over their eyes as well. Judging from the image sensors affixed along the metal bands holding the

goggles up, they probably had an optical search application installed. The app would inform them, via arrow, if something had come within a certain distance, but most amateurs couldn't make much use of it. This, too, was just a fashion statement.

Their martial (?) style, with its emphasis on appearance, was characteristic of a group of delinquents who called themselves "the Warriors."

Each of the young men in front of them sported a smirk.

None said a word.

Morisaki put his arm around Rin's shoulder and tried to go back the way they'd come.

He heard several crude whistles. Then, in unexpectedly coordinated movements, the human wall morphed into a circular enclosure, fencing them in.

"…We're in a hurry. Please let us through."

"What's the rush? I'm sure you've got time to play with us."

"Yeah, that's right! We know way more fun things to do than that kid does."

Rin's attempt at a peaceful resolution was met with offensive coaxing as the ring closed further.

"We really are in a…"

"It's no use," interrupted Morisaki as she tried again. "They weren't going to listen in the first place."

"Whoa, that stings!"

"He's right, though. We didn't come here to talk."

"Gya-ha-ha-ha!" came rude laughter.

"You learn pretty fast, dick."

"We'll take things from here. You can go home now. Scratch that—we're gonna make you!"

…That one must have been the leader of these Warriors. The young man who

was at the back of the wall—now directly in front of the two of them—flipped his tone from a friendly one to a threatening one.

He was a head taller than Morisaki. His T-shirt looked like the sleeves had been ripped off, and the arms coming out of it were rolling with thick muscles. There was silver paint from the backs of his hands up to his shoulders, crawling up in a geometric fashion. This was for the same purpose as the muscle amplifiers—to quicken muscle contraction (though its effects were questionable). And with his lean abs and full thighs, his body clearly wasn't that of an amateur.

Confronted with a gaze that could only be called diabolical, Morisaki let a short, scornful chuckle leak out.

"What's so funny…?" asked the young man, lowering his tone to sound even more threatening.

"Please, excuse me," responded Morisaki, using polite words despite the ridiculing smile on his face. "Shibuya and Ikebukuro are one thing, but Ariake? I simply hadn't expected to run into any endangered species like you here."

"…You think you're funny, don't you?"

"You're satisfied now that you've gone through your posturing, right? We really are in a hurry. Would you let us pass, please?"

"…Guess you really do wanna get hurt, eh?"

Upon seeing the young man shift his weight to his toes, Morisaki pulled his right shoulder back a little. His open vest swayed a bit— "Hawk, the kid's a magician!"

—And in so doing, one of them caught a glimpse of the grip of his CAD, poking out of its hidden holster.

The young man to Morisaki's right had been the one to make the warning outburst. The boys surrounding them froze, then withdrew, each of them cringing away—save for one.

"Grow a pair already!" shouted the only exception—the leader named Hawk—spurring the rest on. "I know all about you magicians." He deliberately looked

down at Morisaki, lips twisting into a smile.

It didn't seem like he was all bark. In fact, he might have deserved to be called "not bad." "Magic works like guns, don't it? They'll put you away if you use it on someone unarmed."

Morisaki silently returned his stare.

Now with more fuel added to the fire, the young miscreant continued belting out insults. "And magicians who can't use magic are good for nothing. I see right through your bluff, you little shit."

As the young man burst out with another stupid-sounding *gya-ha-ha*, Morisaki looked up at him with a cruel smile. "Are you testing me, endangered species?"

"…What was that?"

"I'm asking if you want to know whether we magicians really are good for nothing without magic. Or are you all bark and no bite?"

"Hah…? Hmm. Hey, no one else lay a hand on him."

The leader of the endangered species calling themselves Warriors changed his stupid-looking confused face back to his normal twisted expression (and still looked ugly), then raised his hands, opened his stance, and bent a bit at the waist. It was a half stance.

Morisaki suppressed a low, ridiculing laugh of his own, dropping his bag from his shoulder. He clenched his fists in front of his face and took a few quick steps forward.

"Let's do this, good-for-nothing."

"Bring it on, you toothless mutt. But don't even try laying a finger on the girl. If you do, I'll make you all wish you'd never been born."

"Big words for such a little shit. Come on!"

That signaled the start of the battle.

A high, bending kick flew at Morisaki's face. He was protecting Rin behind him, so he couldn't retreat from it. Instead, he ducked, slipping under the

roundhouse. Hawk's foot stopped as it flew through the air, sharply changing course to come down on Morisaki's head.

A hook kick—no, an axe kick.

Morisaki brought his body up toward the kicking foot, then twisted slightly to avoid the strike.

His opponent's face paled. As soon as the man brought down his foot, he started throwing out quick, backhanded jabs. Morisaki parried them with one hand.

A push kick, a middle jab, a low kick, a middle kick, a leg sweep, a sideways elbow… His speedy chain of hits indicated that the young leader was certainly *not* all bark. This wasn't something he'd learned out of imitation—it had the look of specialized instruction, likely a type of full-contact karate.

But Morisaki dodged and parried every blow.

Hawk started to show irritation. He threw out a wide, long hook at Morisaki's jaw, meant to take him down in one shot.

Morisaki didn't let the chance go. He stepped in and threw a left jab at his adversary's face. Except the force behind it was equal to a follow-up left straight. It had such power that an untrained fist would have hurt itself in the process, but Morisaki didn't seem to be bothered by it one bit. His opponent's knees gave way, and Morisaki came out with a tightly formed, palm-heel strike.

Hawk staggered back and crumpled to the ground. He looked baffled—this tiny kid had taken him down in just two strikes.

His expression said he couldn't believe it. Morisaki looked down at the older boy and taunted him, laughing. "You're slow. Too slow. That kind of speed might be enough for street fights, but it's not going to work against magicians in a real battle."

His opponent probably didn't understand what he'd just declared. Magicians were completely reliant on their underhanded power, their magic. He couldn't seem to accept the reality before him: that someone had surpassed all the close-combat training he'd done.

Acceleration magic: one of the eight types. It didn't have to be used to accelerate or decelerate a target; you could use it to accelerate yourself, too. Magicians who used self-acceleration spells experienced the very limit of the velocity their senses could process every day—speed impossible for those who couldn't use magic. It was analogous to experiencing the speed a professional racer experienced on the circuit at school, outside school on training grounds, in matches, and in real combat. For Morisaki's overclocked awareness, the slightly fast speed of an amateur martial artist was nothing more than slow motion for him.

The bodyguard picked up his bag and took Rin's hand. He had no intention of going along with the members of this endangered species who refused to accept reality. And while this wasn't a very big loss of time, it was still no doubt a detour.

But then Rin batted his hand away.

He stared at her face, dumbfounded. His thoughts froze and his limbs ground to a halt.

When they saw Morisaki lock up, the young men reached out—not for him, but for Rin. One grabbed her hand, then brought her to him, sticking a knife up to her face—this was probably planned. But this act by the cornered rats gave him a setback now that they held Rin.

Morisaki restarted his frozen mind, unconsciously and reflexively begining to move through a pattern ingrained in him.

With one flowing motion, he drew his CAD from his vest. By the time he leveled the muzzle, it was already out of suspended mode. Without even a fraction of a second's hesitation, he triggered his spell.

The young men, their brains shaken in their skulls, collapsed to the road one after another. Some fell hard and started bleeding, but Morisaki's conditioned reflex didn't stop.

When he snapped out of it, the only ones standing were him and her.

And one other—the young man who had avoided being knocked out, still on his rear end. He didn't look like he could stand. Hawk scrambled backward

across the road.

Morisaki's emotionless eyes—his senses hadn't completely returned yet—stared daggers at him.

"Y-y-you monster! Stay away! Stay away from me!" Still sitting down, Hawk started fishing through his pockets, frantically throwing whatever he could find.

After seeing a still folded-up knife flung way off target, Morisaki once again reached a hand out to Rin.

This time, she took it.

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Without a word, the two walked hand in hand as they made their way to the place where the boat was to arrive.

Nothing disturbed them on the way there. Numerous couples were in the plaza square by the water, which had been turned into a park. These outsiders would spare a glance for their peculiar display, only to then look away, interest quickly waning.

The small pier Rin and Morisaki stood on was a platform for watching the comings and goings of boats. The girl looked out to sea. Their hands had separated naturally.

"…Shun…" she said suddenly, after a long silence.

"What is it, Rin?"

She kept looking out to sea, not turning to him. "Do magicians all…like fighting?" she asked. She was unable to see Morisaki's face, and she didn't show him her own.

"Rin?"

"Do magicians like battle? Do they like hurting people? Do they like danger? Do they like showing off their special power that normal people don't have?"

Her voice was steadily rising, and Morisaki could tell she was criticizing him. "…Are you angry?"

"I'm not angry! It just gets to me!"

Which means you're angry, right? he thought to himself in a corner of his mind, but Morisaki couldn't stay calm enough to put in the witty retort.

When Rin turned back, there were tears in her eyes.

"…We don't enjoy fighting because we're magicians," he said. "As for hurting people—I, at least, don't enjoy that."

Her tearful expression stung. "Then why did you have to provoke those kids like that?!"

"They wouldn't have responded to any attempt to talk things out!"

But Morisaki had his own reasoning, too. He didn't believe that his actions had been wrong. They might not have been the best, but he was under the impression that he'd been skillful in dealing with the gang.

"Then you should have just run away! You didn't have to rough them all up! Couldn't you have just used a spell to get away?! And if you didn't want to, then you could have called for help. It really doesn't seem to me like fighting was the only answer."

"That's…" Morisaki started. He knew full well she had a point.

Still, though…

"You're right. We might have been able to run away. But then they could have gotten even more of their friends and come after us. We don't know if or when the men from before will attack again, either. We can't take too many risks. If there's a chance to remove enemies from the picture, then it's necessary to do so."

…He couldn't yield on this.

"Why is fighting the only thing you can think about?! Why is whether someone's an enemy or an ally the only thing on your mind?!"

"Magicians aren't superheroes! We can't deal with every single thing perfectly, like they do on TV!"

That was something the uncle closest to him in age had taught him when he had been initiated into the bodyguard business.

Magicians aren’t superhuman.

Magic isn’t a power that lets you do everything the way you want.

That’s why you can’t hesitate pulling the trigger.

Decide calmly who your enemies and allies are.

The incredible strength to protect one’s client, even while allowing the enemy a head start, an overwhelming power like what the Ten Master Clans were famous for… Unfortunately, the practitioners of the Morisaki—Shun Morisaki included—didn’t have that strength.

“—I’m not good enough to be able to go easy on my enemies.”

“Shun…”

The passion drained from Rin’s eyes as she watched Morisaki grimace. Her expression softened, and she took his hand.

“Rin…” he said, not meeting her gaze, though he let her have his hand. “Do you…think magicians are monsters, too? Do you think that wielding power beyond human understanding makes us beasts? Do you think we’re some kind of deus ex machina that can grant any wish no matter what…?”

“Shun…”

“Magicians… They’re people, too.”

“Shun, are you…scared of fighting?”

“…I am. It doesn’t matter if it’s a gun, a knife, a fist, or magic… I’m scared of them all.”

“Then why do you fight? You’re only in high school. Why are you doing such a dangerous job?”

“Well…that’s because I have the strength to…”

“Shun. I don’t think you have to do dangerous things just because you’re a magician—just because you have magic powers. If you’re scared, isn’t it okay to stop…? Magicians are just people, right?”

A visible jolt ran through Morisaki’s face. A ray of fear and a ray of hope wove together amid bewilderment. Rin regarded him with a watchful smile.

Given all the couples around, their behavior didn't stand out very much. But in hindsight, they'd been too absorbed in their conversation.

Rin was the first to notice something was wrong.

"Shun…does something seem wrong to you?"

"Rin?"

"I feel like nobody's looked this way for a while now…"

If one of his classmates had said that, Morisaki would have assumed they were being too self-conscious (save for a select few). But it was a different story when a girl as pretty as Rin was saying it. "Rin, you haven't been using that pendant, right?"

"Huh? No…that's why it's strange. I'm not using it, but it feels the same as when I do…"

"Rin, excuse me for a moment."

"Kya?!"

Morisaki abruptly embraced her. At the same time, he quickly scanned to the left and right. Even such a bold (in his opinion, at least) action didn't draw the slightest bit of attention. Not even a glance.

He let her out of the hug and searched for any signs of magic. He couldn't tell clearly, but he *felt* like there was a vague sort of air covering them up.

"What? What is it?"

"Keep quiet!"

Morisaki took off his bag, removed a thick bracelet from it, and put it on his left arm. Then he took out an empty holster and hung it from his right pants pocket. He'd abandoned any pretense of not standing out. He was prepared for action.

As if waiting for that, from out of nowhere came men wearing black suits, pants, and sunglasses, surrounding Morisaki and Rin in a semicircle. They looked like the urban legends about men in black had come to life.

Morisaki clenched his teeth. He should have realized they'd been using a

mental interference spell.

…Leave the regrets for later! he berated himself.

One of the suits walked toward them. His eyes, hidden behind sunglasses, were directed not at Rin, but at Morisaki. "…We're with the COIA," he said, taking out a black leather card case. He opened it to show Morisaki.

Indeed, there was the emblem of the Cabinet Office Intelligence Agency—a special seal that changed color and pattern depending on the viewing angle. Morisaki, who knew the pattern had hypnotic effects, looked away immediately after verifying it.

The man's lips turned up just slightly as he returned his ID card to his jacket. "We will take over providing protection for Ms. Richardson. This is a government matter now, so we must ask you to step away."

He almost nodded to them without thinking, before realizing Rin was clinging tightly to the back of his vest. "Rin, are you going with them?"

She vehemently shook her head at the question. Then, she looked straight back into the man's eyes—well, his sunglasses, to be specific.

"I refuse," said Morisaki clearly.

"I believe I told you this is now official government business…"

"You're guards, right? That means you can't make her go with you against her will. Or would you happen to have a warrant? I don't believe the COIA has the authority to make arrests."

The man in black smiled meaningfully, as though to say he'd been bested, then looked to the side.

That was the signal.

Muzzles peeked out from their suit cuffs.

Morisaki wrapped his left arm around Rin's waist, then reached over with his right hand to activate the bracelet CAD as he jumped for the water.

She let out a shriek. Her voice was overtaken, though, by the sound of compressed gas firing and a short needle piercing through the air.

The tranquilizer darts flew just over them as they dived.

In midair, Morisaki activated a movement spell. Their fall stopped right before they hit the water, then they jumped up to the next pier over. As they landed, he made Rin squat down; then, crouching himself, he put his bracelet into suspended mode. A moment later, Morisaki had already drawn his handgun-shaped CAD from his hidden holster.

He had seen eight enemies when they'd been surrounded, and two of them were magicians.

He made himself forget about where they were from. All he thought about was protecting the girl behind him. The option to run didn't even come to mind. His fear of fighting had vanished, and he had no qualms about being watched by frightened eyes.

He would defeat this enemy to protect his charge. That was the only option his mind presented him.

Knowing he had to neutralize the magicians first, he pulled the trigger twice in quick succession. He heard one muffled groan. The results were clear—one was down, the other blocked it. He saw the enemy magician's fingers dancing over his CAD. He saw another man leveling a tranquilizer gun at him.

With the unreal speed of something like a magic trick, Morisaki holstered his handgun at his waist and rebooted his multipurpose bracelet CAD from its state of suspension.

He felt an acceleration spell beginning to affect his body. He ignored it. The activation sequence he called up was an area-of-effect movement spell. The dart, fired with compressed gas, was caught up in his spell, Stasis.

The acceleration to fling him to the side hit his body then. His feet left the ground and he fell into the water.

Rin leaned over the pier and shouted his name. The group of men in black all rushed over to her.

A gun barrel poked out of the water. His right hand, holding a CAD in the shape of a handgun, surfaced even before his nose could get above water to breathe. It pointed at the magician waiting near the back.

The spell fired.

The enemy magician, taken by surprise, was knocked out cold by Morisaki's magic.

Once again, he put his specialized CAD into suspended mode, but left it in his hand. Then he rebooted his multipurpose CAD's functions. As he sank deeper, he pressed buttons on the CAD's number pad and activated an acceleration spell.

With a jump even dolphins would gape at—no, a jump impossible for dolphins—Morisaki's body leaped out of the water.

His right arm went up, and his left arm went down. As his wrists crossed, he not only pointed his specialized CAD at the enemies but also switched off the power on his multipurpose one. He let psions flow out of him and into his specialized CAD, then pulled the trigger six times in midair.

Unable to completely kill the momentum of his free fall, as soon as he hit the ground, he ended up crash-landing on the paved road.

And as his body fell, so, too, did the men in black, one at a time.

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"Shun, Shun! Are you all right?!" called Rin, face desperate as she knelt beside him.

"I'm fine," he said, nodding and opening his eyes. He was faceup; he stayed there for a few moments to catch his breath, then brought himself to a sitting position. When he tried to stand up, though, he fell back to one knee with an "Agh!"

"Shun?!"

"I'm all right… Just a sprain or two," he said, though a greasy sweat had appeared on his brow.

Rin looked all around for help. The effects of the mental interference spell, which had prevented anyone from noticing them, had already disappeared. Most of the tourists and couples out on dates were looking at them from afar. But they were distant stares—uncanny ones. Everyone focused on Morisaki's

left arm, noting the mounted bracelet-shaped CAD that marked him as a modern magician.

She could hear them whispering to each other. Nobody dared come near. Morisaki gave up on standing and instead sat down with his legs crossed. “Rin, is the boat here yet?”

“Huh? Oh…I think that’s it over there.”

“I see…”

A small cruiser was approaching. It was a high-speed ship made for shallow waters in both the ocean and rivers.

“I’m sorry. This is my fault…” Rin’s head drooped.

“It’s fine,” replied Morisaki. “More important, you’re safe. I’m relieved I could keep my promise.” That didn’t sound like a show of courage. His voice sounded genuinely satisfied.

“Why…?”

“Why, indeed…” replied Morisaki, not really giving an answer to her question. “Maybe you were right, Rin.”

But even without enough words, he knew what she was trying to ask him.

“Maybe magic is a tool made for fighting… And maybe we magicians, since our minds are built around magic, really are tools meant for fighting. Because we like it.”

Morisaki’s monologue sounded as though he was forsaking himself, and tears formed in Rin’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Shun, I’m so sorry…” she repeated between sobs, the tears immediately starting to flow as she looked down.

“Rin? Why are you apologizing? Why are you the one crying…?” Confused, Morisaki sought the reason for her tears and apologies. But he was calm—so calm it surprised even him. There was no confusion in his heart.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for saying such terrible things to you…”

“Rin?”

Morisaki was at a loss. He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to

do. Unfortunately, nobody had ever given him instructions for times like this.

“Don’t say you’re a tool. You protected me without even considering the danger. You’re far more human than those worried people over there who can only watch from a distance.”

Her scattered words, spoken disconnectedly amid hiccups and sobs, strung together in his mind…

…and filled his heart with pride.

“I’m so ashamed. I was just like them before. Somewhere in my mind I thought of magicians as monsters, as different creatures than me. I’m so sorry, Shun.”

“It’s fine. Really.”

Encouraged by the strength of his tone more than his words, Rin looked up.

“I’m satisfied I could help you out. This ended up being a really worthwhile day for me.”

Just as Morisaki had no inkling of Rin’s circumstances, she didn’t have any means of knowing about his worries.

Rin looked at him askance as he smiled, brightly and clearly.

“Rin, your boat has arrived.”

She turned around. As he said, the small cruiser had finished docking, and two men in suits were bowing deeply toward her.

“Go on, Rin. I’ll be fine after a couple of minutes of rest.”

“What? But…”

“Please, go. They could attack us again.”

“…All right, Shun. Really, thank you so much.”

No good-bye kiss. He’d be lying if he said the thought hadn’t crossed his mind. But that would make everything too convenient, tarnishing this reality that felt so fulfilling to him. And that wasn’t him trying to inflate his ego.

The more unfortunate thing for him was that he had to remain sitting to see

her off. As Rin waved to him from the boat, he waved back, still cross-legged on the ground.

It didn't look very cool, but maybe that, too, was fitting for him.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Lady Meiling, it is good that you're safe."

"Yes, thanks to some help from that young man before."

After the cruiser left the shoreline, Rin nodded to one of the men who came to meet her. Her expression was cold, and she answered to a different name—it was like she was an entirely different person. A kind old man, whose hair had all turned gray, stood before her.

"Lady Meiling…please give more thought to coming to this nation alone in times such as these."

"Are you giving me an order?"

"No, I would never do such a thing," the old man replied, respectfully bowing to her. His manner was impeccable, but his attitude seemed somehow false. "However, it would appear this nation's government is fully prepared to fight us. I believe their discourtesy toward you this day deserves suitable retaliation," he suggested, gazing up at her.

"I will not allow it," she replied, cutting the notion down without a second thought. "I see. The Japanese government's actions today were high-handed and discourteous ten thousand times over. However, I received that much kindness and more in return from that young man. If you are going to set me up as your leader because none of you are able to use magic, then I will forbid any action taken against this country. If that dissatisfies you, then please, send me back to California."

"There is no need. All shall be as you will it, Lady Meiling."

◇ ◇ ◇

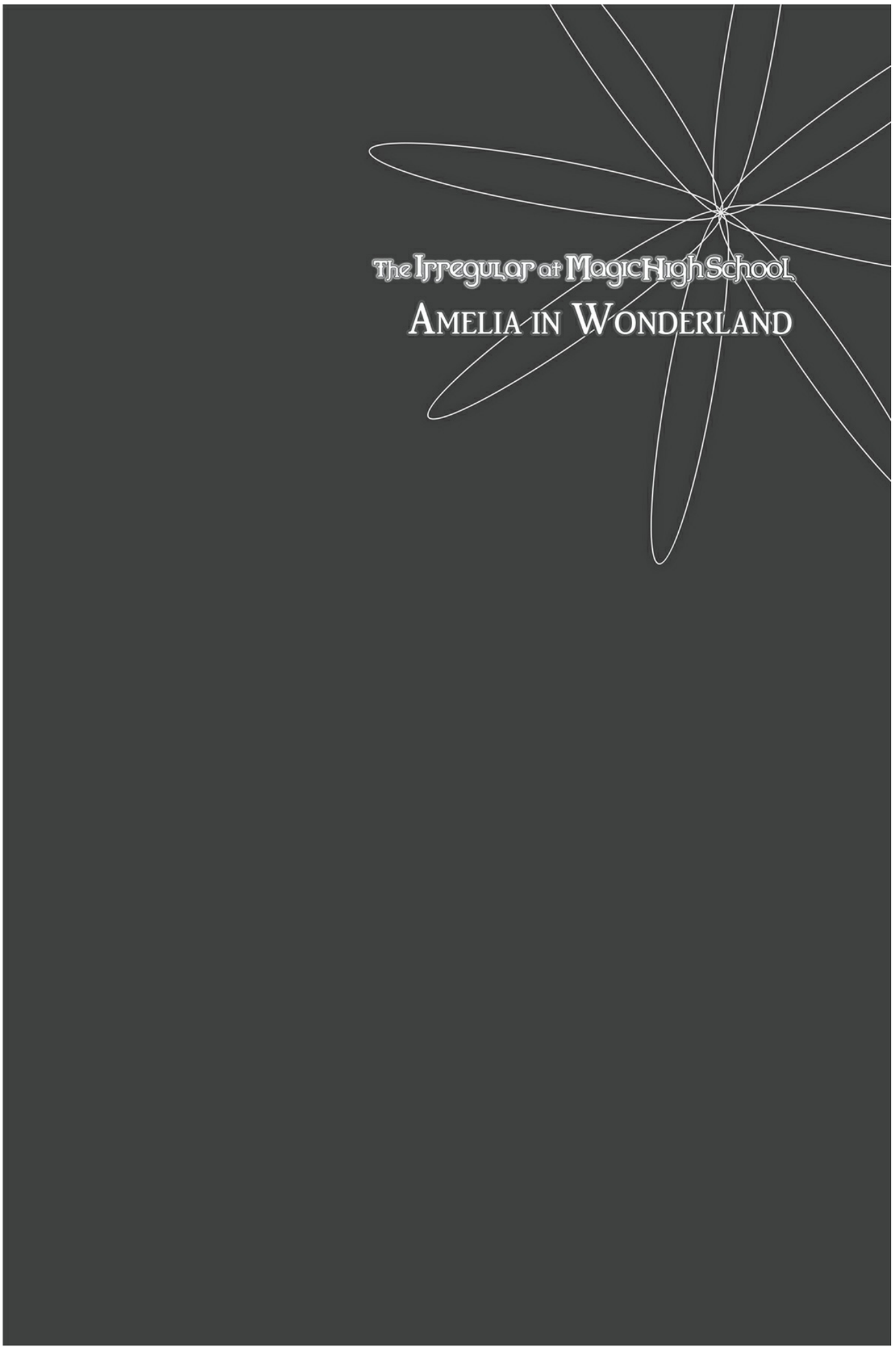
Morisaki was not taken into custody by the COIA.

That was probably because they weren't acting lawfully, either. Other members of the unconscious suits' allies had retrieved the defeated right in

front of Morisaki, and the agents who had come to recover them hadn't spared him even a glance.

Who exactly *was* Rin? Why was a national agency after her? Nobody told him.

Ultimately, the chance never came for him to find out who she really was: the foster daughter of Richard Sun (daughter to a mistress her father had particularly enjoyed the company of), the former leader of the Hong Kong–based international crime syndicate No-Head Dragon before his assassination. She was the girl who had been raised to the position of leader by the organization's fleeing remnants: Meiling Sun.


The Irregular at Magic High School
Amelia in Wonderland

AMELIA IN WONDERLAND

On a clear summer day near the end of August 2095…

A girl, conspicuously dressed in a green military-style button-down adorned with many pockets and a miniskirt, waited for her friends at the gate of an amusement park, her prominent ruby-like hair fluttering in the breeze.

Today was one of the last remaining days of summer vacation, and she was going to spend it while having fun at this amusement park with her fellow classmates, whom she didn't normally have the chance to hang out with because they were in different clubs.

Maybe I'm a little too early…

It was thirty minutes before they were supposed to meet. That would be fine if she were on a date with a member of the opposite sex, but maybe it really was too early for going out with her female friends. (However, her assumption about the opposite sex was all show, since she didn't have any such experience yet.) The reason she'd come here so early was partially thanks to an unexpected long-distance phone call this morning.

◇ ◇ ◇

Eimi found herself dragged from the world of dreams by the ringtone of the videophone she had brought into her bedroom. The digital clock showed that it was five in the morning.

What a bother, she thought before looking at the message window and seeing it was from her English grandmother. She was the aunt of the current head of the Goldie family, renowned in England for its modern magic, and the number two woman within the family in terms of authority.

Eimi's eyes snapped open.

Her parents' skill at staying asleep was larger than life: They wouldn't wake

before a specified time even if someone crashed a truck into the house. It was an unwritten rule of the Akechi family that Eimi would be the one to handle early calls and visitors, since she didn't use a sound-sleeper, a device that helped people get restful sleep.

"…It's been quite a long time, Auntie." Eimi didn't say *good morning.* "I haven't dressed myself yet, so please exccuse me for being voice-only."

"Good morning, Amelia."

She's at least somewhat aware of the time difference, thought Eimi. During the summer, there were eight hours between here and England, which made it nine in the evening there. She had probably waited until the last possible moment to call in consideration of the difference…though Eimi honestly wished she'd waited another hour.

"I hear it's very hot there. How have you been feeling lately? You were never a very fit person."

If you know I'm not big and strong, then let me sleep a little longer, thought Eimi sincerely. She didn't say that, though, of course. "I'm doing fine, Auntie. The heat wave has softened a lot over the past few days."

This wasn't polite small talk, nor was it her trying to allay the worries of an elderly woman. The heat had been fierce and exhausting the week previous, growing much more comfortable this week. Summer seemed to be on its way out.

"Is that so? You mustn't push yourself too much, Amelia."

"I know. Thank you, Auntie," she replied politely as she tilted her head in confusion. What on earth had her grandmother called her for?

"I myself have actually decided to avoid the heat and wait for autumn in our mountain villa in Switzerland. I would very much like you to come as well, Amelia."

Her aunt had gotten to the point right as Eimi started to get suspicious, as though she could sense it. All Eimi could do was repeat it. "…You want me to go to Switzerland?"

“Yes. Amelia, it’s been a long time since we were able to sit down and have a nice conversation.”

“I very much want to learn more from you, Auntie, but…” But she couldn’t. The second school term would start in a little over a week. Eimi tried to explain that and politely refuse, but her aunt wouldn’t be so easily persuaded.

“There are wonderful academies for magic in Switzerland, too, if that’s what worries you. Why not study abroad there for half a year? I can talk to your current school about it for you.”

When she added that she was even an old friend of the principal at the National Magic University, Eimi started to panic. It wasn’t strange at all for her aunt to have acquaintances in the upper echelons of Japan’s magic society. In a world where long overseas stays by magicians were strictly controlled, students of magic high schools virtually never attended study abroad programs—at least, Eimi had never heard of it. Her aunt, however, might have been able to make this happen.

If things continued like this, Eimi would be forced to study abroad against her will.

She managed to win a compromise with her aunt through application of logic and emotion, thus preserving the status quo. But after the phone call was done, she felt not relief, but confusion—or rather, suspicion.

She was the grandchild of a daughter who had married into another family, currently living in Japan, but her aunt had almost never meddled in her life before. Her aunt was always strict with manners whenever Eimi went to her home to play, but she also spoiled her niece and let her do whatever she wanted.

Until now, anyway.

She had to have had some reason to come up with this so suddenly.

Eimi didn’t have a clue as to what it was, though, and in her endless worrying about it, she failed to go back to sleep, which is how she ended up with too much time on her hands and left the house early.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Amy!”

At the sound of her name, she turned to see a girl—their sponsor for today—waving her hand.

“Sakura!” She waved back, then trotted over to her.

The girl, who wore a gothic Lolita–styled (key word being *styled*) one-piece, was named Akaha Sakurakouji. Though the characters for her first name, meaning “red leaf,” were more commonly read “Momiji,” hers was instead a more literal “Akaha.”

On the day the two classmates met…

Eimi: “What characters do you use to write ‘Akaha’?”

Akaha: “It’s ‘red leaf.’ You write it like ‘Momiji’ and pronounce it ‘Akaha.’”

Eimi: “Oh! You have cherry blossoms *and* red leaves. What a flowery name.”

Akaha: “Both are destined for a short life before death, though.”

Eimi: “Aha! The beauty of *wabi-sabi* , huh?”

Akaha: “You don’t look like you have much to do with *wabi-sabi.* You’re very pretty and colorful.”

After that conversation, they both gave a hollow laugh. That was how they became friends, though—destiny worked in strange ways.

“Sakura, did you and Subaru come together?”

“Eh-heh-heh…”

Eimi hadn’t meant anything in particular by the question, but Akaha laughed, indicating the answer.

Wait, is that what she’s into? Eimi made a note of that in her grade book—unbeknownst to Akaha, of course. But with the person next to her brought into focus, she revised her thoughts. *Maybe I do understand a little.*

At first glance, it was a pretty boy wearing a summer suit. A pair of fake bottom-rimmed eyeglasses only strengthened the boyish image.

But in actuality, it was a boyish-looking girl from their class.

Eimi had gotten to know Subaru Satomi after they'd been teammates during the Nine School Competition. They hadn't been friends for very long, but they'd already gotten to the point where they were comfortable enough having conversations like, "Subaru, can you come with me so boys don't try to hit on me?" "I would be delighted to escort you, my lady."

It warrants adding that during the conversation, they were not so much smiling as smirking.

"What's wrong, Amy?" asked Subaru, looking over Eimi's face as she let her imagination run wild.

Eimi's heart almost skipped a beat seeing how handsome Subaru looked, but she sure as hell wasn't going to let that show. Instead, she shook her head shortly and replied, "Nothing."

"Really?"

Subaru's responding grin got on her nerves, so she thought about pressing the issue. On the other hand, reacting like that would probably make things more embarrassing for everyone. So instead, she tried her best to pretend that she hadn't noticed it.

"That's good. Well, then, let's go inside."

Objectively speaking, Eimi's attempt to feign ignorance wasn't a very good one, but Subaru pushed that aside. She knew when to drop it; it was one of her more charming characteristics. Charming for a girl, anyway, though Subaru would have definitely been against that idea.

Not to say Eimi didn't have any questions as to what in the world "that" was and why it was "good," but Eimi had no objections to Subaru's objective of not wasting any time. "You're right," she said, her voice springing. "It's been a long time since I've been to an amusement park."

But for some reason, Akaha interrupted her: "A theme park," she corrected, sounding unhappy.

"Huh?"

"It's a theme park. Wonderland isn't an amusement park—it's a theme park."

Akaha was enough of a regular here to be given complimentary tickets, and she seemed to be quite particular about this amusement park—or rather, theme park. “Sorry, sorry,” said Eimi. “Yeah, Wonderland’s a theme park, huh?”

How could it possibly matter what I call it? was what she was actually thinking. But on the other hand, it didn’t matter, so there was no need to make trouble about it, which was why she had immediately corrected herself. Still, it was hard to prevent her tone and attitude from coming off as dismissive. The levity didn’t seem to please Akaha very much, and she turned a squinting glare on Eimi. She and Subaru had already gone off toward the gate, though, so Akaha quickly followed them in a rush.

The three continued to mess around as they skipped the lines, went in through the invitee gate, and got lost in Wonderland.

◇ ◇ ◇

Wonderland was a magic-themed amusement facility. Whether for that reason or something else, the attractions and hedges in the park were placed in a labyrinthine pattern. Plus, all the attractions were trick houses of one variety or another. Once you entered the park, the layout made it hard to get back out even if you went past all the attractions in order without stopping. One didn’t so much enter the park as one wandered in and got lost.

And now one girl had actually lost track of where she was.

“Come on! I get that using an LPS would spoil the fun, but why on earth can’t I use the GPS?!” complained Eimi into her portable terminal. She and the other two had been to three attractions so far. But now, for some reason, she seemed to have lost sight of them.

“What did you expect? That’s their selling point.” Subaru was the one she was venting to.

“But they’re blocking signals! That’s going too far!”

“It’ll be okay. Do you see any signs nearby?”

Even Eimi’s irritation calmed slightly at Subaru’s response; she was always gentle, and was noted for knowing how to handle girls well (despite being one herself). “I’ve been looking for one for a while…but I don’t even see any guides,

much less signs.”

“Hmm…? Well, if it really gets bad, you can shoot off a firework and we’ll use my magic to come to you.”

Subaru’s magic of choice was Leap. In addition, she possessed an innate skill called Awareness Block, which made her hard to notice. (Her regularly theatrical behavior was apparently a reaction to nobody paying attention to her anymore.) Her Awareness Block wasn’t at the same level as the stealth of Haruka Ono, a counselor at First High and secret part-time operative for Public Safety. Still, it was a cinch for her to float along through the air in secret, without being noticed, while everyone else was absorbed in their own fun.

On the other hand, Eimi’s own specialty magic was a type of movement magic people called bombardment magic (purely a nickname)—spells to move large masses quickly and over a short distance. During the Ice Pillars Break event of the Nine School Competition, it gave her a power technique: She had used her own ice pillars as wrecking balls, bowling them into the enemy’s pillars to mow them down. By compressing a cloud of air instead of a heavy bullet and firing it upward, she could easily create a cracking sound on par with fireworks going off.

“You can’t, Subaru. If you use magic for a reason like that, they’ll make us take guidance lectures.” However, Akaha rejected Subaru’s plan after cutting into their call with her own terminal.

The law placed a numerous restrictions on magic usage. If they used it simply to locate a lost friend, they’d almost certainly cause trouble for the police.

“…I suppose you’re right. Amy, can you see the Tower of Sages from there?”

The Tower of Sages was the symbolic attraction of Wonderland, and the highest structure in the park. “Yep…just barely,” replied Eimi, looking all around and spotting the tip of the tower, which resembled a white stone construction beyond all the hedges.

“Then let’s meet up there.”

“Okay, got it.”

After hanging up, Eimi cast a dangerous glare at the tower as though it were

revenge against her parents—though perhaps it was not *that* dangerous. But it *was* at least on par with revenge against a misbehaving pet.

◇ ◇ ◇

Subaru thought of something as she stared intently at the portable information terminal's voice communication unit; its in-call light now off.

That obviously caused her companion doubt. “What’s wrong, Subaru?” asked Akaha, her tone an even split between curiosity and worry.

Subaru smiled, a little bit awkwardly. “Well, just thinking… I wonder why Amy got separated from us.”

“Because she can’t ever sit still?”

“W-Well, I mean…” stammered Subaru at the blunt answer. “A few minutes is one thing, you know? I was just thinking it’s weird we didn’t notice it until we lost track of each other.”

“Hmm… Maybe she has no sense of direction.”

“…Okay, Sakura. While I’d love to ask you both what you think about each other, this isn’t the time.” Subaru shook her head to drive off a sigh, then made her tone a little more serious. “Leaving that aside, she’s never been bad with directions. She’s part of the hunting club. Plus, people see her as very skilled, even for a freshman. Indoor shooting contests would be one thing, but you have to have a sense of direction when you’re out hunting birds and animals in the wild.”

Subaru’s indication finally made Akaha consider the possibility that Eimi might not have simply gotten lost.

“Also, this park is made for children. It might be constructed like a maze, but you shouldn’t actually get completely lost, with no idea where your friends are or any signs or guides in sight.”

“…You might have a point. This park does pride itself on handling these situations.”

The two exchanged serious glances. “Anyway, let’s go,” suggested Subaru before heading for the Tower of Sages.

◇ ◇ ◇

Unlike her friends, now steadily making their way to the meeting place while filled with deep misgivings, Eimi hadn’t made any progress toward their destination. Frustration had taken over again. She couldn’t think about anything else.

Like before, she could still make out the top of the tower, so she hadn't lost track of her direction. But whenever she tried to head that way, she wound up in dead ends. Then a forced right turn, then detours going all over the place.

In Subaru's estimation, Eimi wasn't bad with direction—but that was her being more than a little modest. Eimi, in fact, had a very sharp, well-honed sense of direction. That, combined with her ability to grasp the geography of a place, was telling her she'd been wandering around in circles for a while.

She could see it, but she couldn't get near it. She understood the situation, but she couldn't break out. That only made her many times angrier. Once she'd lost count of how many of the annoying thorny walls she came to, her patience ran out. The hedge in front of her, made of thorny wild roses, would be painful to push through even for a man. A girl forcing her way past it was pretty much impossible.

But Eimi wasn't just any girl.

I'll chop it down…! Now thoroughly angry, Eimi reached into her pocket—pocket-shaped hole, anyway—for the holster wrapped around her thigh and brought out a thin and slender portable terminal CAD. Her weapon of choice was a shotgun-shaped CAD, but she obviously couldn't walk around town with it on. This substitute was more than enough to get rid of a stationary obstacle.

Though these were normally used with one hand, she used two for it as she expanded an activation sequence.

"Hold on! Akechi, are you insane?"

But then, as if on cue, a voice addressed her from behind. It shocked her in much the same way a bucket of ice water would if it were dumped on her head. The magic program she was trying to construct fizzled out midway through.

Caught red-handed in the act of unlawful magic usage.

Technically it was only *attempted* usage, but given how far along in the process she was, any magician could see what she was trying to do. The chances of getting off easy were slim. The worst part, according to her cornered thoughts, was that they knew who she was.

Her back felt so tight against the wall, metaphorically speaking, that she didn't

even consider that the speaker could have been an acquaintance. And if they were, they would probably pretend they hadn't seen if she pleaded.

Eimi turned around slowly and nervously, and then froze in bafflement. She hadn't expected this at all.

The one who had called out to her was a clown of small stature. (Small for a man, anyway, but still taller than Eimi.) Circuses frequently had a clown come out between acts to do tricks for the audience, so it wasn't strange for Wonderland, with its magical theme, to have a staff member dressed like one.

This clown, however, didn't wear the baggy clothing one would expect. His right side was black, and his left side was white. He wore a shirt, whose right sleeve had irregular horizontal stripes in black and white, and left sleeve had thin vertical stripes, also in black and white. His pants were black on the right and white on the left. His waistcoat, meanwhile, was white on the right half and black on the left half on the front, with the colors swapped on the back.

It was a strange outfit. On his right hand, he wore a white glove, and on the other a black one. On his head, instead of the expected brimless clown hat, there was a wide-brimmed silk hat with horizontal stripes (also in white and black). Then, beneath the silk hat, was a fabricated expression made of black and white. No, it was a false face entirely—a mask. The white material on the right depicted a sad face in black, and the black material on the left showed a smiling face in white.

The particularly eerie feeling the getup gave off wasn't clown-like, but rather…

"…A phantom?" she said, reminded of a different, but still famous, stage play character.

"Huh? Akechi, what?"

She recognized that casual speech, though, and she immediately snapped back to reality. "…Is that you, Tomitsuka?"

"Yep. It is I, Tomitsuka."

Underneath the mask was a face she knew well—that of Hagane Tomitsuka, Class 1-B, of the National Magic University's Affiliated First High School. Her

classmate.

“Why are you wearing that?” she asked, eyes wide.

“It’s a side gig,” answered Hagane, mask rustling as he put it back on.

“A part-time job? Why?”

It wasn’t as though First High forbade students from having part-time jobs. She meant the question as, “Why are you working as an amusement park staff member when that’s the kind of thing normal students do?”

Hagane Tomitsuka was both a magic student and a Course 1 student at First High. Furthermore, he was an honors student ranked fifth in their grade in both practical magic and theory, and ranked fourth in their grade in overall academics. The magic he was skilled at wasn’t suitable for him to be considered for competitions, so he hadn’t been chosen for this year’s Nine School Competition. But with his magic martial arts, a form of empty-handed close combat with magic woven into it, and his small stature, he was rumored to be one of the most prominently skilled students even as a freshman. Eimi couldn’t judge whether being prominent at First High was amazing or not from an outside viewpoint, but she had no doubts as to the excellence of this magician (in-training).

Those who possessed superior magic abilities, even if they were only fledglings or up-and-comers, never bothered themselves with short-term employment. For magicians, there were always recruitment opportunities for jobs that only someone with magical talent could do. The majority of them had better terms than normal jobs, too. The pay made by host staff at this amusement park was outside the scope of her imagination, but it couldn’t possibly be higher than payment given to magicians.

“It’s family related.”

“…Oh, I see.”

Now that she heard his reason, it made sense.

The Tomitsuka were one of the Hundred Families. Even among the Hundred Families his family boasted prominent talents, and they were also counted among the distinguished and wealthy magician families in the country. He must

have meant the Tomitsuka family had invested in the company managing this amusement park, or the parent real estate firm that owned it. He was probably working part-time on the park staff so he could deal with magic-related trouble.

—Which meant Eimi had a few things to say to him.

“Hey, Tomitsuka, don’t you think this is all going a little too far?!”

“…What is?” Hagane flinched away, confused at Eimi’s sudden threatening attitude as she pointed at the hedge, her voice irritated.

“The gimmick with these hedges! I don’t know what kind of magical space you’re trying to make here, but don’t you think it’s a little cruel to move them around so people can’t get anywhere?! I’ve been walking around the same area for a long time now!”

After hearing what she had to say, Hagane’s mind reset to a blank slate. He didn’t understand what she was talking about. “Wait, Akechi. Wonderland doesn’t have any gimmicks like that.”

“Huh?” Eimi had expected an excuse, but now she gaped at Hagane’s answer.

“Of course not. The design concept for this place is just to have a mazelike *layout*, not be an actual maze. Making guests lost and frustrated is actually a bad thing. I mean, if they couldn’t get anywhere, they wouldn’t get to the attractions, and the park would lose money.”

“What? …But…”

“Guests aren’t supposed to come into this area in the first place. It’s being expanded right now. Even the staff doesn’t come here much during the day. How on earth did you get lost in here?”

Eimi was steadily becoming more and more panicked as she heard all these unexpected details, but she managed to move her hands and tongue. “How…? I came from that way.” She pointed at the thorny hedge she’d just been about to dispatch.

“Huh?”

“I said, I came from that direction! That hedge wasn’t there before!”

“…You serious?”

“Totally serious! I’m confident in my geographic senses, you know.”

Hagane saw how serious Eimi’s expression was, and his eyes, visible through his mask, suddenly sharpened. He gave the hedge a close stare, then sniffed.

A moving hedge made of thorny wild roses. As far as Hagane knew, the park had no moving-obstacle gimmicks. Considering what he’d gleaned from other people’s conversations, even electricity hadn’t been routed to this area yet. *If this was something mechanical*, it shouldn’t have been able to move.

Just to be sure, he took out his information terminal and looked at the test status of this new addition to the park—and found that, indeed, nothing here was operational.

Which meant this hedge couldn’t have been here—*shouldn’t* have been here.

“…Akechi, I’ll allow it. Do what you were doing before.”

“I… What?” Eimi’s reply was only natural; Hagane’s advice, or rather, his order, was too sudden for her.

“I don’t mind, so get rid of it,” he said, pausing. “The hedges here are made of species without thorns, selectively bred. This is a park, after all. We don’t want guests to get hurt from accidentally running into them. And I don’t think I remember a hedge being here anyway.”

“Hmm.” Eimi knew what he was getting at, so she began to re-expand the activation sequence for the spell that had misfired earlier. “Then here goes nothing… You’re taking responsibility for this!”

After pushing the responsibility onto Hagane, she activated the spell.

Exploder: a spell in the movement family. The spell struck all objects in its effective range, sending them away an equal distance from where the spell was targeted—essentially in a spherical pattern. It could be used against obstacles like wreckages and barricades, which were made up of many smaller objects, but was ineffective against solid singular structures like walls or boulders. But by perceiving each wild rose leaf as a single object and widening the effective area, Exploder caused an explosion in the middle of the bush. The leaves were pulled apart, with their stems being pulled out along with them. In the end, it left a gaping hole in the middle of the hedge.

Eimi nodded, satisfied, and went to climb through the hole she'd made.

"Wait!"

But she was stopped by her classmate's voice.

"What?" she asked, peeved that her initial joy at finally getting out of the endless loop had been dampened.

"I thought so…" But Hagane stared carefully at the wall of thorns with the hole in it, not seeming to notice her displeasure (though his expression was invisible behind the mask).

"What? Come on, what's the problem?" Her tone of voice slightly lowered, while its volume slightly rose.

This time Hagane *did* notice the aura of dark clouds around her threatening to storm. He answered hastily. "Look, Akechi. This hedge doesn't have any roots. And there's no shelf to support the stems."

"…Now that you mention it…" Thorny hedges were something Eimi was more familiar with, having stayed numerous times (though never for long) in Britain. Half-vine shrubs like wild roses couldn't grow that tall without something to support them. It wasn't possible to create a hedge over six feet tall like this.

"That's right, Akechi. This wall is supported by magic!" said Hagane, thrusting his right arm through the hole Eimi had created.

A moment later, the stems, which had been pushed away and scattered, latched on to his arm. They weren't just wrapping around it—they were eating into it. The stems' thick thorns were like fangs, and ate into his black-and-white-sleeved arm. Or at least, they would have.

"That's all?"

But what ended up being bitten off was the magic responsible for the vines' movement. A shock wave radiated out from his right arm, sending the wild roses in the wall scattering all over.

"…What was that?" All Eimi saw come out of his arm were psi-waves. But psions couldn't directly interact with physical matter. You weren't supposed to be able to blow up something physical with psionic waves.

“What do you mean? It was just a movement spell. I just made psi-waves permeate where they were touching me, drove away the stasis spell holding the wall up, and activated Explosion.”

Explosion was a spell that accelerated all objects in its area of effect away from the point of impact at the same acceleration—it was just like Exploder, except in the acceleration family rather than the movement family. Basically, as soon as the thorny stems touched his arm, Hagane must have used a typeless spell to destroy the spell supporting the wall, then gave the stems outward-facing acceleration to remove the thorns before they ripped his shirt.

“Program Demolition…?” murmured Eimi, taken by surprise and in awe. Program Demolition was a typeless spell that forcibly canceled other spells, using pressure from psionic waves. There were almost no magicians who could use it.

But Hagane, his expression pained (though still covered by the mask), shook his head. “No, unfortunately… I can’t send out enough psions unless I’m physically touching it.”

Oh, that reminds me, thought Eimi, remembering his nickname.

She’d heard him sometimes called Range Zero. In addition to being a jab at his ineptitude at ranged magic, it was also a term of respect, since he could exhibit unrivaled strength from close quarters. When she heard that he had a code name separate from the alias his family already had, she had wondered why. He hadn’t done anything particularly noteworthy.

This made sense to her, though. If he could lay one finger on his target, he could cancel any protective anti-magic, then clean up with an attack spell while his opponent was defenseless. Actually, he could just send some dense psionic-wave motion into someone’s body to throw their biological wave motion into disarray. Then you wouldn’t even be able to stand.

“…Well, leaving my magic aside for the moment…” said Hagane, awkwardly averting his gaze (though his face was… Okay, no need to repeat it again), possibly misunderstanding Eimi’s silence for something else. His voice came out a muffled mutter thanks to the mask. “We have guests. They’re looking for you, aren’t they?”

Either their plan was to come out now, or they saw their chance when their fake wall was destroyed, because a group of men in black clothing, black sunglasses, and black hats appeared around the two of them.

“Men in black?”

“They don’t use disguises like that, though.”

Neither Eimi’s utter amazement nor Hagane’s relaxed tone fit the heightening sense of tension around them. Perhaps it was an effort to dampen the newcomers’ enthusiasm.

But if that were the case, the attempt failed miserably.

The men shuffled in closer.

The amused air clinging to Hagane evaporated. For some reason, Eimi put the CAD she was holding back into her skirt.

As Hagane was stricken by how weird that seemed, he put a hand to his mask—but not to remove it. Instead, he pushed it firmly onto his face.

She immediately knew why. When the mask pressed down, it strengthened its curvature to fit to his face, making the eyeholes wider and allowing him greater vision.

“What might you be looking for?” asked Hagane in a polite tone, perhaps giving a bit of staff-like consideration toward the possibility of a misunderstanding.

But he hadn’t been hoping for an answer at all. One of the cardinal rules of creating fear in horror movies was silence. It was the same for combat.

Counting the numbers, hiding identities, blocking escape routes, and applying silent pressure—and then, when the enemy was exhausted, entering negotiations. The men in black had loyally followed the manual up until the part where they blocked off the escape routes.

“Madam Goldie.”

However, contrary to Hagane’s expectations, one of the men spoke, his tone cordial—not using Miss, but the old-fashioned Madam.

“We have no intention of harming you.”

The man spoke to Eimi in English, but Hagane didn’t have any trouble conversing in the language, either.

“There is simply something we’d like to get from you. We don’t expect it to be free, of course. In exchange, we will prepare for you that which you will need most in the future.”

“I find myself having difficulty understanding.” Her English, spoken as Amelia, was stiffer and more formal than the Japanese she spoke as Eimi, and perhaps because of that, it sounded oddly refined to the point of resembling a different person’s. Perhaps it was appropriate; she was a member of the famed Goldie family, despite being from a collateral line.

“I do apologize. Allow me to do away with the indirect language.”

The man’s tone was as polite as it had been before. But the ring of suited men closed in around Eimi and Hagane just a little bit more, pressuring them.

“Madam Goldie, we want you to teach us the Magic Bullet Tathlum technique. In exchange, we shall fend off any assassins that may come for you in the future.”

Hagane had thought their goal was simply to kidnap her for ransom. But the conversation had ballooned into something larger than he’d expected, so he lost the chance to get a word in—and perhaps to take any action as well.

When Eimi answered the man in black, she did so stiffly, but firmly. “That spell is the secret of the Goldie family. Only those acknowledged as members of the main line are permitted to be given instruction regarding it. Do you think that I, living in Japan and far away from the main family, would have been taught the Magic Bullet Tathlum?”

Yes. The Magic Bullet Tathlum was said to be the Goldie family’s trump card; the family had originally been a clan that passed down old magic teachings, but when modern magic saw its sudden rise, they mastered it, too, ascending to one of the cornerstone authorities of modern magic in England. The spell was actually old magic rearranged into a modern spell, and nobody knew anything about it other than that it used physical bullets.

At least, Hagane and the Tomitsuka family hadn't acquired any more information than that.

"We do not think that—we know it."

But from the man's response, Hagane guessed that his female classmate had indeed been taught the secrets of the Magic Bullet Tathlum. When he thought about it, he felt his head fill up with an irresistible curiosity that he couldn't control.

"We know from certain avenues that you have been instructed on the Magic Bullet Tathlum, Madam Goldie."

On the other hand, Eimi had nearly finished mentally putting together the background of this act.

It was true—her grandmother had taught her the spell. But only those of the Goldie family inner circle would have known about that. She'd never used the Magic Bullet Tathlum outside the Goldie family, but even if she'd been seen by an outsider practicing the spell, they wouldn't know that it was the Magic Bullet Tathlum.

The reason the spell was secret lay in its activation sequence. Normally, the only thing a magician could perceive was the result of the magic, or the result about to appear. If they only looked at the event alteration's result, a person wouldn't be able to tell the difference between it and a regular movement spell.

If they knew she'd been taught the Magic Bullet Tathlum in spite of that, it could only mean…

Conflict within the family… I guess that's why Grandma would suddenly come out with something like that…

It wasn't right on the heels of yesterday—it was actually just this morning. Things were developing so quickly that Eimi wanted to laugh, even though it involved her.

"Will you accept? Our statement that others will appear and threaten your safety is also a confirmed fact. Excuse us for saying this, but your parents are normal magicians; their strength alone will not ensure your safety."

And if I refuse, they'll turn into those people who are going to threaten my safety. Is that it?

Eimi sighed. "Why do you want this spell in particular?"

It pained her to get Hagane involved in this—after all, he was just a classmate.

"Well, I suppose I do know the answer."

But as long as these men had no intention of returning her without payment, regardless of how this played out…

"That spell is the symbol of the Goldie main family."

…if she was going to have to give up on a peaceful resolution…

"Even those born into the main family aren't counted as members of it unless they can use the spell."

…then Eimi would steel herself for this.

"And you, of course, cannot claim succession."

A moment after Eimi made that declaration, there was an outpouring of murderous intent from the men surrounding them.

"You're like an open book," she said more roughly, switching to Japanese and preparing herself for action.

"You will not cooperate with us?" The man switched to Japanese as well. "What a shame. Secure Miss Goldie. Give her a few bruises if you need to. Get rid of the kid."

At his signal, glints of steel shone from out of the men's sleeves all at once. Slender throwing daggers appeared in their hands. It wasn't in accordance with the style of Wonderland, of course, but they *did* have spring mechanisms in their cuffs for their knife cases.

Daggers could be used for both close combat and throwing, but the weight of the ones they had was in their tips, meaning they were for throwing. Surrounding them and throwing their daggers all at once was an effective tactic against magicians.

But before the daggers could soar into the air, their encirclement broke apart.

“Get rid of me? Don’t decide something so callous on your own.”

Before the men in black could throw their daggers, the monotone clown drove into their encirclement like a wedge.

Did he close in so quickly the eyes couldn’t follow?—No, he didn’t. He was fast, but with a bit of training, anyone could reach the normal running speed he used to close the distance. Instead, he’d moved while the men’s leader was still talking. The clown simply hadn’t let himself be noticed—like a ghost hiding in the shadows.

Hagane, wearing his mask, touched one of the men’s chests with his palm. It honestly did only look like a light touch.

But the man soared thirty feet back through the air before slamming into the pavement.

The monochrome hues spun.

Light changed for darkness, and the sudden shift from black and white blurred his outline.

Hagane’s knife hand struck the next man in the shoulder and an ominous crack rang out. He hadn’t brought the hand down on his shoulder—he’d just touched it a little. Just ran it along the shoulder.

Nevertheless, it nearly broke the man’s upper arm as he held his dagger.

The leader let out a shout of surprise. “Magic arts?!”

The term was an abbreviation of *magic martial arts*. Magic martial arts was a form of empty-handed combat with magic woven into it. One of its fundamental techniques was to use contact magic, with the activation point set as the point of contact. It eliminated the need to input a position variable.

In response to the leader’s voice, the other men moved to hem in Hagane, dropping into ready stances.

Hagane grinned audaciously at the men, who were now careful—now serious. “Sirs, this area is not yet open for business,” he said, theatrically putting his right hand to his chest, left hand out sideways, and right foot behind his left. “I’m terribly sorry, but I must ask you to leave for the day.” He bowed

dramatically. “Or would you like me to escort you out…to a police box?”

His deferential tone was provocative. One man sidled up behind Hagane and attacked. Yet, charging out alone created a hole in the circle.

That was what Hagane wanted. He moved in time with his adversary, turning aside to evade the strike while simultaneously stepping toward him.

The man in black wasn’t an amateur, either. He held his throwing dagger in an overhand grip and stabbed it downward. Not toward the head—that would be easy to dodge. Instead, the man aimed for the center of Hagane’s body, the solar plexus.

But the flickering and fluttering of white and black threw his aim off. After evading the mistimed thrust with a light step, Hagane’s fist punched into the man’s jaw. This wasn’t magic in the real sense but a magic trick—an illusion to fool the eyes. His magical dance was not one that could be learned in a single day; it was an experienced one that utilized the whole body. His bizarre outfit wasn’t just his theme park staff member costume. It was battle gear made with real combat in mind. The attention of the men in black, including their leader, turned to Hagane.

That gave Eimi a chance she couldn’t pass up. She ran her hands over the pockets dotting her utilitarian jacket, but she didn’t bring out her information terminal CAD. Instead, when she brought her hands up in front of her, they were holding playing cards in a fan shape.

She casually swung her hands to either side. The cards flew from them, dancing into the air. Some went straight, while others twisted and traveled in an arc. They sped along faster than the eye could see, penetrating the bodies of the men in black, one after another.

Splatters of fresh blood.

Nobody sustained life-threatening wounds, but nobody got off lightly, either.

“Satisfied?” said Eimi in Japanese to the leader of the men in black—as she looked at the gushing blood calmly, like it was nothing more than a flipped-over container of tomato juice. “That was the Magic Bullet Tathlum you wished to see so badly. Of course, you won’t figure it all out just by seeing it.”

“Impossible… The Magic Bullet Tathlum was supposed to use round shells…”

The man probably didn’t realize he was responding to her Japanese in English, either. His intense pain kept him from feeling out of place.

Well, considering he was the only one left standing, maybe he deserved to be called their leader. Eimi wasn’t impressed, though. Nor was she interested. “… You didn’t even know that? Gee, maybe I actually said too much.” Her eyes wandered restlessly from side to side, a reflection of her worrying about how to cover up what had just happened. The most likely course she considered was *letting them know* she’d just used the Magic Bullet Tathlum in failure. She got ahead of herself because she thought it would be fine either way since they already knew about it in the first place, and that had been what caused her mistake.

Then, she either gave up or turned defiant, because her clouded expression quickly changed to a strong, bright one.

“Umm, that’s not quite right. Everyone has their own style of what to use for the Tathlum. Using shells… That must have been my great-uncle who passed away two years ago, right? Yeah, I think he had a grandson two years younger than me. He’s my second cousin, so I’ve never met him. Would he happen to be your employer?”

She put a hand on her waist, then made the fingers on her other hand into a circle and brought it to her eye, as if to brag about how good a detective she was. She must have decided to keep her momentum up and have her own way here, but unfortunately, the man she was talking to was less than amused.

“……”

In fact, he didn’t even respond.

“Uhh, Akechi?” said Hagane a little reservedly as Eimi waited for the man to answer.

“Mm?”

“He’s unconscious.”

“Huh?” Eimi, who hadn’t been bothered by the sight of blood, approached

the man in a fluster. “Hey, wait! If you’re gonna pass out, you could at least do it after you answer me!”

“And I’m telling you that’s absurd.”

She stepped in to give the silenced man a slap to the face, but Hagane ran over to stop her. If she was actually going to hit him, he thought he needed to hold her back (because any additional attacks could lead to a homicide). However, when she didn’t hit him, he sighed in relief.

“Oh… T-Tomitsuka?” stammered Eimi, suddenly sounding meek, looking up to Hagane.

He stood next to her, his expression—though he was wearing a mask (the rest omitted)—was one of exasperation. *She’s a different person than just a minute ago*, he thought.

He was kind of scared leaving her like that, though, so he decided to throw her a raft.

“What is it, Akechi?”

“Umm…I’m sorry for involving you in this!” she said, hastily bowing her head in apology.

“What, that’s all?” he replied, as if the wind had been taken out of his sails. “I know it’s a part-time job, but I’m still a member of the security staff patrolling Wonderland. If a kidnapping was about to happen in the park, you wouldn’t be able to make me to let it slide. Besides, letting that many intruders into the park in the first place is clearly our fault, so don’t worry about it.”

Eimi’s expression cleared up instantly. Hagane had to crack a pained smile at how calculated her attitude was.

With the tension gone, though, he slipped and said more than he should have. “Besides, you showed me something unusual,” he mused. “So, that was the Magic Bullet Tathlum. A ranged spell, where you put a delayed, conditionally activated spell on whatever you use as bullets. The movement spell activates just from you throwing them…

“I don’t know how long the delayed spell can last exactly, but when an enemy

appears, you don't have to use your CAD or construct a magic program. You can fire one shot, rapid fire, or scattershot—whatever you want… I see, I see. Definitely a technique suitable for being called the trump card of the famed Goldie family."

Hagane noticed the change in the mood only after he'd finished getting carried away with his rambling.

"…You figured it out just by seeing it one time? I guess I should have expected as much from a direct descendant of the Tomitsuka, one of the strongest of the Hundred Families."

"Huh? Um, Akechi?"

"…That's really too bad. We were finally friends, too."

"Huh? What? Why are you using past tense?"

"Tomitsuka, let me tell you something good."

Warning alarms blared incessantly in the back of Hagane's mind. But for some reason, his feet wouldn't move. They were glued to the ground. "Err, what is it…?"

"Secret techniques—they're called secret techniques because they need to be kept secret."

"Ahh! Wait, wait, hold on!" he cried, frantically waving his arms as he watched Eimi fan out more cards in her right hand. Not only that, but he quickly took off his hat and removed his mask. "I won't tell anyone! I'll keep it a secret! Look at my face! Does this look like the face of a liar?!"

He apparently took the mask off because he wanted to use that line.

As he promptly began groveling before her, Eimi felt her tension wane significantly, then felt difficulty in carrying on like that. "…Geez, it's fine. I got to see an interesting dance anyway."

"Ah, ahh…" This time, Hagane groaned, knees still on the ground.

That voice was all Eimi needed to know he didn't want other people knowing about that magic trick. He'd probably devised the technique by himself as a last resort. That made things easy.

“Then we’ll both keep it a secret!” said Eimi, crouching down to look him in the eye (with her legs closed, of course, so he couldn’t see up her miniskirt).

Hagane grinned, embarrassed, and nodded.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” As though she’d been appeased, Eimi suddenly and forcefully stood up and brought her CAD out from her skirt.

What could it be? thought Hagane as he saw a spell activate.

Its effects manifested as light, heat, and a smell. The cards stuck in the bodies of the men wearing black burned up, scorching the wounds and turning to ash. “Evidence destroyed, bleeding stopped. Now, then, Mr. Part-Timer,” she said, suddenly sounding ruffled.

“Wh-what is it…?” he replied, naturally cautious.

Unfortunately, quite often in this world, just being cautious wasn’t enough to do anything.

“Helping injured people on park grounds is the staff’s job, right? And if those injured people happened to be carrying illegal weapons, reporting that to the police is also the staff’s job, right?”

“Akechi…are you leaving this whole mess for me to clean up?”

“No, I would never! But look—I’m a guest here today, you know? My friends are waiting for me, too.”

“…That isn’t fair.”

Eimi was unconcerned by the bitter, hateful glare that followed. “Anyway, now that that’s over with, I’ll see you at school, Tomitsuka!”

She waved, then ran off. Hagane watched as she left, his sullen expression slowly changing into a dry grin, until it finally gave way to a heavy sigh.

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Upon finally meeting back up with Subaru and Akaha, they sat on a park bench together, gnawing at crepes they’d gotten instead of lunch. Eimi watched a staff member wearing a horizontally striped shirt and pants pass by them, and asked, to nobody in particular, “If this is Wonderland, how come there aren’t any rabbits…?”

“Look…you know that would probably be copyright infringement.”

“Hm? Amy, did you want bunny boys to wait on you or something?”

“No! Geez… We came all the way to a wonderland. I was just thinking maybe the staff should be wearing more wonderland-y outfits.”

“Wonderland-y?”

“Hmm… Yeah, like a street magician in a Venetian mask.” A certain monotone clown had come to Eimi’s mind, one that looked similar to certain wounded people. But she figured that would make children cry as soon as they saw him, so she searched her brain for something with a similar impression.

“Oh, that might be good.”

“Mmhmm, I think so, too. It would make things interesting.”

As they enjoyed talk of meaningless wardrobe changes every time a staff member walked by, Eimi was privately thinking to herself, *Maybe a bunny-boy outfit would be good on Tomitsuka*—an idea Hagane would find endlessly sinister.

The Irregular at Magic High School

Friendship, Trust, and Lolicon Suspicions

Friendship, Trust, and Lolicon Suspicions

The National Magic University Affiliated Third High School was on the outskirts of the city of Kanazawa, in the prefecture of Ishikawa. Ishikawa's administrative system had seen a change, however, and was now technically a large administrative ward. Because of that, it was more accurately the "former Ishikawa prefecture," but everyone, media included, referred to it using its old prefectural name. They were used to it—the same reason scholars believed the prefecture didn't take the name Kagahan or Noto-no-Kuni. People were just used to calling it Ishikawa.

That aside…

In the reference room of Third High—which sat on the outskirts of Kanazawa, Ishikawa—Shinkurou Kichijouji took a break from typing his report and gave a big stretch. His neural assistance interface headset got in the way of his arms, though, so he removed that and leaned back for another stretch.

He'd been sitting in the same position for longer than he thought. With the crisp cracking of bones came a slight pain, and he winced.

Instead of going back to writing, he looked to the side. The reference room had no windows, since you could view highly secret documents here. To give the same refreshing effect as windows, however, the small private rooms each had a video display on the wall that resembled one, with the backdrop image varying for each booth. The "scenery" he could see from this one showed a bamboo forest in the mountains, swaying in the breeze. It was his favorite.

He was busy with composing his presentation for the thesis competition—the Magic Association of Japan's All-High Magic Thesis Competition—that would take place at the end of October. He was a world-famous researcher of magic, so even though he was a freshman, he'd been chosen as Third High's representative member for the event. He'd actually started getting it all

together before summer vacation started. Now that the Nine School Competition was over, though, he could feel himself really getting absorbed in the task.

And he knew the reason why: to challenge the man he'd met at the Nine School Competition, Tatsuya Shiba.

Until this year's competition, Kichijouji had never felt like he was inferior to anyone else his age when it came to magical theory. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he felt so opposed to someone. Practical usage of magic was one thing, but in magic theory, he was confident there were only a handful of people in the entire world, not just the country, with the intelligence to equal him. He'd discovered a Cardinal Code, after all.

And that certainly wasn't him having a swelled head. Even now, many new research results were announced every day in the magic world, but discoveries as big as Cardinal Codes happened once a year, if that. That was how rare and important Shinkurou Kichijouji's accomplishments were.

But his confidence had been smashed to pieces at this year's Nine School Competition. At least, that's how he felt.

Theory only meant something when it was put into practice—a stance that had a lot of support in the magic research community. People took it as common sense, a fundamental rule. Especially in this country.

Kichijouji never had any doubts to that. Magic theory's only purpose was to allow people to use magic in better ways. Without practice, theory couldn't exist. If magic studies kept advancing as an academic subject, it could one day evolve into a purely theoretical field that elucidated the true essence of the mind. But modern magic studies weren't at that stage yet.

When he'd seen the skills of that man, the First High freshman Tatsuya Shiba, he knew in his heart that he had lost in terms of applying theory to practice. He had no doubts that he'd been utterly bested—not in intelligence alone, nor in skill alone, but in using both in conjunction.

That was endlessly frustrating for Kichijouji.

His confidence in his intelligence and skill was what supported him. He would

never beat *them* with strength, but *they* absolutely needed his help. He couldn't let anyone take that away from him. That's why he'd promised himself to avenge his defeat during the Nines at the thesis competition. He believed beating First High and taking the top spot at this event was the quickest way to getting his confidence back—a road he couldn't avoid traveling.

Because of that, he'd been spending almost every day since the competition holed up in this reference room, striving to put together the presentation.

Speaking of things that had happened since the competition ended…

——Ichijou has been acting a little weird lately——

Occasionally, too often to be called "once in a while," Kichijouji would overhear someone saying that.

He didn't disagree. Masaki *had* been acting strange. Kichijouji thought so himself. He also knew it definitely wasn't just them all imagining things, because he knew the reason Masaki had been acting weird.

…Still, it's not like there's anything I can do about it.

Masaki wouldn't blame him, wouldn't say Kichijouji was a bad friend. He had always been afflicted with a sickness—one that doctors said couldn't be healed, one that hot spring therapy had no effect on.

Kichijouji knew. The sickness troubling Masaki Ichijou was love.

"Miyuki Shiba."

That was the source of Masaki's lovesickness.

The next in line to lead the Ichijou family having romance troubles was inconceivable. Because of his skills, looks, and family, girls flocked to him without any effort on his part. Not because he was an innocent, pure-hearted boy, or aloof to everyone, or a womanizer. Still, this was her, so he was convinced that Masaki could be so worried about his unrevealed, one-sided feelings. Even Kichijouji couldn't lie and say his heart didn't start pounding when he thought about her.

That was how incredibly good-looking she was. She was so pretty that if someone told him she wasn't a real person, but a 3-D image that had taken the

form of the ultimate desire of all young men using over-technology, he'd believe them. Despite not needing a picture to clearly see her in his mind's eye, he'd started thinking of her as a dream or a product of his fantasies more than once or twice.

Kichijouji didn't feel romantic love toward her, and even *he* was brought to this state. Masaki falling in love with her and turning uncharacteristically shy was understandable.

In Kichijouji's case, she was too high a flower for him to reach, so to speak. Instead, she inspired awe within him. Because of that (probably), he didn't have to worry about hopeless, unrequited love. Unfortunately, the fact that Masaki actually had a chance to reach her level made his lovesickness all the more serious.

The name *Miyuki Shiba* held special meaning for Kichijouji, even outside of Masaki's love, though. She was Tatsuya Shiba's younger sister.

The sister of the target of his hostility was taking a hold on his friend's heart.

The inner workings of Kichijouji's own heart were more complex than he knew.

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"George!"

With the sun far in the west and the gates about to be closed, as Kichijouji was leaving school he turned around at a voice addressing him from behind. "Masaki?"

He didn't need to turn around to know whose voice it was; he said his name as he swiveled.

"You going home, right? Let's go walk home together."

"Sure, if you're okay with it."

By "it," Kichijouji meant "not stopping anywhere"; he went straight back to his dormitory almost every day. Masaki, however, liked to stop at other places on his way back. Not all of them were for fun—though he did that a lot, too. As the eldest son of the Ichijou, he was always having to run around doing errands

and jobs.

“Yeah, I don’t have anything scheduled today,” he assured him. “Oh, George. You should come over. It’s been a while.”

“Huh? This is sudden. I won’t cause trouble?” Kichijouji asked, displaying a downright sensible reaction to his friend’s abrupt ideas.

But Masaki laughed it away cheerfully. “You don’t have to act like a stranger. And the rest of my family loves it when you come over.”

“Really? All right, I’ll come over.”

Kichijouji lived by himself; Masaki was inviting him purely out of the goodness of his heart. But Kichijouji had a reason he couldn’t free himself from the Ichijou family’s goodwill.

And anyway, he liked visiting their house. If Masaki was going straight home, Kichijouji didn’t have to worry about his friend’s commitments getting in the way. He nodded at the invitation without showing much hesitation.

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Masaki’s house was only thirty minutes from school on foot. Not to say his commute took thirty minutes but that it took thirty minutes to *walk*.

Third High and the Ichijou residence being within walking distance of each other was pure coincidence. There was no hidden reason for it of the sort one sometimes heard, like the Ichijou family having established Third High or one of them being its principal. After all, like the other magic high schools, it had been created as an affiliate of the National Magic University. It was up to competent authorities to decide where they’d be built. The Ichijou family, despite its standing as one of the Ten Master Clans, were no more than civilians to the public, so they hadn’t any chance to get a good word in—the clans’ influence wasn’t something to be used for matters of that nature.

Masaki and Kichijouji went through the thirty-minute trek home in twenty-five without much hurry. Although the season with the longest days was behind them, it would take some time yet today before the twilight sky was covered in purple. Kichijouji noted to himself the others in his family probably hadn’t returned yet. So when someone addressed him from the front yard not a

moment after going through the gate, he was a little surprised.

“Huh? Oh, welcome, Shinkurou!” came the energetic, high-pitched soprano—or rather, simply a child’s voice.

“Good afternoon, Akane. Please excuse my intrusion,” said Kichijouji with a smile.

She was Akane Ichijou, Masaki’s younger sister. She was in sixth grade, and she and Masaki had another sister, even younger. Kichijouji hadn’t gotten much chance to talk to that one much—she was in third grade—but Akane had been attached to him since they were little. She would always come to see him at least once whenever he visited their house, if she was around. He didn’t know how serious she was, but she’d made it clear that she would do him the favor of being his bride in the future.

When he’d first heard that, Kichijouji found himself at a loss for the third time in his still-short life. Akane was Masaki’s sister, after all—she was sure to be beautiful in the future. But her declaration of marriage had come when she was only in fourth grade. Kichijouji himself had only been in his second year of middle school, and the word *marriage* didn’t seem very real to him. Nevertheless, he didn’t hate the girl, and when he considered his debt toward the Ichijou, it meant he couldn’t treat her any more coldly. At the time, he had no idea how he was supposed to deal with it.

She hadn’t come up to him to declare her love that bluntly in the past year or so, but sometimes she did mention it. Kichijouji didn’t get confused about it anymore, maybe because they were steadily “filling the moat between them,” as it were—growing more familiar with each other. Though he didn’t realize it himself.

Anyway, Masaki wouldn’t forgive any lolicon-related behavior from him (meaning Masaki wouldn’t let him try anything while she was still a child), so whether the moat was being filled or the water drained from underneath, the conclusion would have to wait until the future.

She seemed to have just come outside to do some chores, so they parted ways. Still, Kichijouji never went home before they treated him to dinner, so they’d probably meet again later.

The residence's owner and Masaki's father, Gouki Ichijou, the current head of the Ichijou family, hadn't returned home yet. In the twenty-eight families with the potential to become part of the Ten Master Clans, the leading magicians of each held many assets, either as not-too-famous executives, or investors—all in order to maintain the necessary personal combat strength. There were some publicly prominent local figures who had real control of things by more discreetly being the "shareholder of a shareholder of a shareholder…" in big international corporations, but the arms of the Ichijou family weren't that widespread. The official family business of the Ichijou was an ocean floor resource mining company that operated in the Sea of Japan. Kichijouji knew that, as long as nothing out of the ordinary happened, Gouki would be back for dinner.

On the other hand, Masaki's mother was a full-time homemaker, but she was absent at the moment as well. She'd probably gone shopping. In this age, daily essentials, including food, could be procured through online shopping, but there were a lot of women—especially homemakers—who liked to actually look at products before buying them. Nevertheless, they wouldn't bring them home after buying them. They'd have them delivered instead. Kichijouji felt like it was basically the same as buying it online, but maybe that was just his viewpoint on it as a man.

Meanwhile, the Ichijou residence was a mansion ten times the size of an average single-family home, but the family had no live-in servants, no maids of any kind. For family gatherings and events where magician-related guests were invited over, they dealt with this by getting people in from local inns and cookeries they were on friendly terms with. Even their yards, which needed to be cared for with an expert's hands, were tended to by a landscaper they called at regular intervals. In contrast to servant-filled families in the Ten Master Clans, like the Saegusa and the Itsuwa, the Ichijou liked to let machines do the things they could. The entire place had home automation installed.

They hadn't planned on any particular guests today. The two male high school students walked down an empty hallway, not having to pass by anyone else, on their way straight to Masaki's room.

That room was Western-style, six tatami mats large in the traditional

measurement, or about one hundred square feet. Compared to the conventionally accepted room size, it wasn't very big. Yet, in the modern style of upper-class construction, the bed and wardrobe could be folded into the wall, so even the hundred square feet gave them enough room.

Kichijouji, thoroughly familiar with his friend's room and feeling no need for restraint, took out the long, thin table from the wall opposite to the one the bed was folded up into, then sat down on one of the matching chairs.

Masaki's room had a small, fixed refrigerator, and he took out two cups of chilled tea blends. He placed one in front of Kichijouji, then sat across from him with the other in his hand.

"How goes the report, George?" asked Masaki as he took his seat.

"Thanks, it's going well," he replied with a modest smile, confidence flickering across his face. "What about you? I hear you've been crazy over your stuff."

Aside from the aforementioned rumors, Kichijouji had heard from others that Masaki had been focused on some pretty hard training after the Nines had ended. And he could understand why—just as Kichijouji felt a sense of defeat at Tatsuya Shiba in regards to CAD application and adjustment, Masaki had probably felt such regret about his defeat in Monolith Code that he wanted to clear his name.

"I'm getting there," replied Masaki to Kichijouji's question, which he'd worked hard to make come off as casual. "Not going to see results that quickly with this."

Masaki's voice was cheerier than Kichijouji thought it would be—he didn't sense any anxiety or tension. "I guess you're right," he replied lightly, nodding in relief.

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There was an electronic beep, and a moment later Masaki let out a groan, like he'd just crawled out of the pits of the earth.

"George…it's time."

"But it's almost over. You want to use up all your time halfway through?" asked Kichijouji, looking over their back-to-back monitors.

Masaki nodded helplessly.

The real-time strategy game they'd been playing on their screens paused. All the motion and change in the image of the urban district froze as though time had stopped, and Masaki switched to a bird's-eye view. Engrossed, he stared at the monitor.

Kichijouji wanted to smile—his friend, ever one to hate losing, worried a lot even over games like this. He had to consciously stop his lips from turning up. Of course, he hadn't needed to; Masaki still had his eyes glued to the screen, clearly unable to spare any attention to other matters.

And in this game's case, while it was a "game like this," it didn't deserve to be taken as "just a game." This simulation had been written by the Magic University's Military Club Tactical Research Room, and it was incredibly precise. A few more optimizations in the algorithm and the divisions of the National Defense Force for magicians could use it to simulate city-based combat for training.

"…That was a really evil trick, ambushing me there. And you actually used a *rope* instead of magic…"

Maybe Masaki's complaints were just him talking to himself, but Kichijouji answered him immediately. "The spot I ambushed you in isn't the problem. Masaki, you just saw someone use this tactic: drawing the enemy's attention away with magic and then moving in without using any."

He still spoke as if it were casual conversation, but Masaki's reaction was an extreme one: His eyes stretched wide-open and he clenched his teeth. "Right, *him*…"

"Yes. The tactic he used in the match against Second High in the rookies' Monolith Code."

Neither of them had to ask; the "him" Masaki said and the "him" Kichijouji mentioned were one and the same: First High's freshman Tatsuya Shiba. Masaki nodded as Kichijouji opened the game's menu and selected the suspend option; he'd realized his opponent's attention wasn't on the game anymore. An option appeared on Masaki's monitor asking if he wanted to save and quit. After pressing YES, he lowered the screen in front of him and then looked at his friend

again, who had also shut his laptop-type information terminal.

Kichijouji was the first to speak. “For better or worse, I think you take the simple approach too much.”

“That hurts,” said Masaki with a chagrined smile and a shake of his head.

“I know you probably don’t want me to tell you this, but I want you to listen anyway,” said Kichijouji, his face a little tense.

The smile on Masaki’s lips disappeared. “I try not to be that petty. What is it?”

“Right. Sorry,” said Kichijouji, his tension loosening, contrary to Masaki. “Taking the simple road isn’t a bad thing. It’s the one prepared the best, and it’ll take you to your destination the fastest. Plus, even if I told you to start using more tricks and surprises, I don’t think your personality would let you.”

“You’re probably right about that,” said Masaki, his pained smile returning.

This time, Kichijouji didn’t rebuke him for it, instead smiling along with him. “It’s okay. That’s just how you are.” As he smiled, he narrowed his eyes even further. Depending on who you asked, they might have said he was beaming.

“Is that praise I’m hearing?” responded Masaki jokingly, either not noticing it, noticing it but not touching upon it, or interpreting it another way.

“Don’t worry, it was basically praise.”

“Wait, ‘basically’?”

They both gave a laugh at the same time, as if they had planned for it.

“I think what you have to learn isn’t how to use tricks, but what to do when someone uses them against you.”

“…You’re not just talking about this simulation, are you?” asked Masaki, both his tone and eyes inquisitive.

Kichijouji nodded briskly. “No, I’m not just talking about the simulation. And if you’ll let me be so bold…” he said, pausing a moment after seeming to brace himself. “If all you’re doing is frantically training, you might end up meeting the same fate in next year’s Nines.”

It took a short period of silence for Masaki to realize what he was implying.

Then he said, “You mean I’m going about this the wrong way?”

“I wouldn’t say it was pointless,” answered Kichijouji, indirectly, though not allowing any room for misunderstanding. “Whenever you train yourself, your ability gets more solid. It’ll work itself into your flesh and blood.”

But Masaki wasn’t fooled by the surface agreement. He instinctively knew that what Kichijouji really wanted to say, he was about to say.

“But victory isn’t decided by strength alone.”

Even though he’d braced himself, it was hard to hear that from Kichijouji.

“Masaki, I still think you’re stronger than Tatsuya Shiba.”

“But I lost,” said Masaki flatly, sounding like he was saying it to himself more than anything else.

“That’s why. It’s not just you, Masaki. I lost to the old magic user from the Yoshida family, too. In terms of speed, I was way above him. And we lost as a team to First High, too. Sure, part of it was that their abilities were greater than we anticipated, but…” On the other hand, Kichijouji’s voice was careful, as though going over conclusions he’d drawn after long, hard thought. “I think we lost bigger when it came to strategy. And depending on how you looked at it, more important than us getting caught in their trap, we self-destructed.”

Masaki gave Kichijouji a dubious look. “I don’t think you made a mistake in your strategy, though…” He wasn’t trying to be comforting—that was what he really thought.

But Kichijouji shook his head. “No, I did mess up with the strategy. In hindsight, I think I was too attached to strategies.”

“…I don’t really get it.”

“What I mean is that we shouldn’t have been so keen to use strategy at all. We should have just fought like we usually do, instead of coming up with ways to control how they acted.” Kichijouji stopped and observed Masaki’s expression. He still didn’t understand, so he sighed inwardly, continuing his explanation. “You didn’t need to get so close to him, Masaki.”

And although Kichijouji sighed to himself, he was helping Masaki out—making

up for something he lacked—and that gave him a joy that even he didn't notice.

"Think about your original style, Masaki. If you stuck to shooting at him from a distance, he wouldn't have gotten so close to you. There were no obstacles on the grasslands stage, so you didn't have to worry about someone jumping out and surprising you, right? I think I was being too careful about him."

Masaki nodded at the self-effacing words, not offering any comfort.

For Kichijouji, that was the response he'd hoped for—and expected. "My strategic mistake caused our loss. But there is something I want you to think about, too."

"Whoops, my turn now, eh?" Masaki made a show of bending over backward in distress.

Kichijouji smirked, too, now acting tough. "You followed the plan, but you could have avoided that sonic attack at the end if you'd been a little warier of him using tricks. When he got into close-combat range, you decided to intercept him, but you could have jumped up or something to get more distance, and the outcome would have been different."

"That really hurts… Basically you're telling me not to be a foolhardy warrior, and to know when to retreat, right?"

Their theatrics had been defense mechanisms, ones that wouldn't let the mood between them get too serious. It worked, to an extent.

"Not really. Like I said before, you're not meant for tricks. I think what you need to learn isn't how to use tricks, but how to respond when someone uses tricks against you."

"Like what, in particular?" he asked, constructively requesting a prescription rather than letting himself be depressed by the harsh words or shooting back a nasty response. That was how they'd been doing things for a long time now.

"I think you should train your decision-making ability: like whether you should pull back for the moment and observe, barrel on through with brute force, or stall for time and ask your adviser. And you need the senses to notice when something's up, too."

Masaki made a sour face as he thought about the advice. The fact that he was making that face probably meant he knew what Kichijouji was talking about. The warning had been cutting, but Kichijouji had no doubt Masaki was a big enough person to accept it gracefully.

“So, instead of torturing your body, train your mind for now. I’ll look for some tactical simulations for you—ones that are closer to real combat than video games like this.”

“Urgh…” groaned Masaki, sounding fairly serious in his distaste for the idea. Kichijouji couldn’t help but laugh.

“You sound like you’re having fun, Shinkurou. What were you talking about?”

Right when Kichijouji let the laugh slip, there was a knock at the door. It was Akane, and she entered the room.

“Akane…how many times have I told you to wait for an answer before opening the door?” said her brother, candidly advising her.

“But it’s just Shinkurou, so it’s okay. If you brought a girl here, even I would wait.” Without a hint of shyness, Akane walked over to the table where the two sat facing each other.

“Look, Akane…”

“What? I guess you didn’t want this drink, then.”

Masaki’s sour face became even more acrid, and he fell quiet. As Kichijouji watched the heartwarming exchange between the siblings, Akane placed two glasses with iced coffee and one with iced cocoa on the table.

There’s one extra? asked Masaki silently.

In response to her brother’s question, Akane crafted a wide, innocent smile and took a seat right down on a chair next to Kichijouji—one he’d deftly pulled out from the under-table storage space while Akane was placing the glasses on the table. This kind of thing happened on a daily basis in this house.

As soon as she sat down, she turned herself to look at Kichijouji. “So, Shinkurou, what were you laughing about? Did my brother do something really dumb again?”

“Hey, Akane, you can’t talk about your brother like that…” complained Masaki with an exceedingly complete sourpuss face. She was clearly trying to leave him out.

“I wasn’t *talking* to you,” she replied, her answer truly insolent. “I was asking Shinkurou.”

Masaki casted about for words, but despite his efforts, he couldn’t find any.

Akane left about five minutes later, satisfied with her bout of playing with Kichijouji for the moment.

The two high school boys exchanged worn smiles at having been pushed around by a grade school girl. Maybe it meant she was a woman despite her size.

“…Sorry for the trouble,” apologized Masaki honestly, his shoulders drooping.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha…” Kichijouji answered with an empty laugh. “Well, I mean, at least she’s energetic, right?” he added, trying to work out some kind of acceptable words of comfort.

“As her brother, I wish she’d be energetic in a more obedient way.”

Masaki’s whining didn’t stop there. Instead, it escalated as he muttered things to himself, like, “I mean, just look at his sister in comparison,” “Can’t believe she’s that guy’s sister,” “I’m jealous,” “It’s not fair,” and “I’ll never forgive him!”

Kichijouji decided he needed to get his course corrected before it got bad. “Okay, okay. I think Akane is fine.”

Unfortunately…

“George, you…”

…Kichijouji left out the most important part.

“If you’re fine with it, then I’m not going to say anything uncouth about it, but…”

“Huh?” When Masaki looked at him with a mix of horror and caution, Kichijouji finally realized what he’d said—or hadn’t said.

“…but please, at least wait until she’s out of elementary school to go out with

her.”

“Uh, well…” *That’s not it*, he tried to say in his defense. What he’d meant to say was “I think Akane is fine the way she is.”

“Look, I trust you, George. I know you’re not a lolicon.”

Unfortunately, those next words got caught in his throat and didn’t make it out—in that instant, he thought that maybe it would be interpreted as him rejecting Akane, and possibly even as rejecting the relationship he had with the Ichijou family as a whole, including Masaki.

Kichijouji had chosen to keep things calm between him and Masaki over clearing up any misunderstandings.

Subconsciously.

Without knowing it himself.

“Of course not! I’m not a lolicon!”

Because he didn’t know why he couldn’t reconstruct the words he couldn’t speak before. Instead, he could only make a rebuttal that brought the conversation far away from where he wanted it. Now he had no choice but to endure Masaki’s detached gaze. The gap created a huge active fault, but he didn’t have time to consider how big an earthquake it could cause in the future—but still, this was a private conversation happening between them, so maybe that was exaggerating. Right now, he didn’t have the time to seek out a future he couldn’t see.

Eventually, unable to endure it anymore, Kichijouji changed the topic in desperation. “What about you, Masaki?! Did you get anywhere with her?”

One is always sorry after the fact. Repentance always came too late. As soon as the topic-changing words left his mouth, Kichijouji felt immense regret. *Crap…!*

“If you mean her, no, I haven’t,” answered Masaki, his voice aligned with his expression—not a poker face, but a stone-faced look of impassivity, as he gave his answer: He hadn’t gotten anywhere.

“…Why not?” *Stop*, said a voice in his mind. The voice of Kichijouji’s reason.

His tongue and lips, however, weren't stopped by his inhibitions. "Didn't you get her number?"

"I didn't ask how to contact her."

"But why?! Masaki, you danced with her, didn't you? It seemed like she liked you just fine."

"Oh, I know she doesn't hate me. But I couldn't."

Masaki sounded like he was restraining himself, and even Kichijouji felt the pressure. It was suffocating. "But why?!"

"She's his sister. Until I avenge my defeat, I don't feel like requesting a relationship."

She wouldn't care about that, thought Kichijouji, but he couldn't say it. It seemed like an incredibly irresponsible and rash promise to make. Even if it were true, Masaki was the one who was bothered by this, so there wouldn't have been a point. *That stupid pride of his*, he thought. But he didn't laugh about it. What was Masaki without pride in times like this?

His next words flowed out smoothly from within him, without any hesitation or calculation.

"I'll help you, Masaki. Or rather, we'll avenge that defeat together."

"Yeah. I'll be relying on you."

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Masaki's father, Gouki, would be coming home late today because of a sudden dinner engagement with a business partner.

Of course, that meant his other dinner plans were canceled. So instead, the Ichijou dinner table was surrounded by the five of them: Masaki; his mother, Midori; Akane; his even younger sister, Ruri; and Kichijouji. Kichijouji sat facing Masaki, with Akane next to him and Ruri next to Masaki. The end of the table, with a view of all four of them, was Midori's seat.

The mood around the table was the same as always. Akane energetically talked to Kichijouji, while Ruri silently ate her food across from her. Masaki glanced at the youngest Ichijou from time to time to check on her, and Midori

smiled as she watched all the children.

It had been about three weeks since Kichijouji had last come over for dinner. Of course, ten of those days (two weeks, counting everything) had been taken up by the Nine School Competition, so it hadn't actually been all that long.

Midori seemed to think differently. "It's been a while since you came, Kichijouji. Have you been busy?"

"Yeah! You should come over to play more often," agreed Akane immediately.

Kichijouji wasn't foolish enough to disagree, given the circumstances.

"You just want him to play with you, don't you?" Masaki grumbled.

"Big brother, don't tell me you're jealous! It's okay. I won't take Shinkurou from you."

"Stupid. We're not like that," he flatly denied.

Kichijouji almost said something but prudently stopped himself.

"Hey, don't call me stupid!" Akane retorted. "Hmph! You'd better enjoy it while you can. Friendship is nothing in the face of love!"

"L-love?! Akane, you've got a long way to go until that! Maybe get out of elementary school first!"

"Did you just make fun of me because I'm in elementary school?! Maybe you should stop being so lazy! You're in high school and don't even have a girlfriend!"

"Akane, you little… You didn't just go there!"

"Both of you are noisy."

"Ruri! That's not very nice to say to your big sister!"

"All right, all right," called their mother finally. "Masaki, Akane, Ruri, settle down a little. Dinner is supposed to be enjoyable, remember?"

Kichijouji couldn't find it in him to interrupt such a homey conversation. Careful not to let his expression come off as jealous, and making sure nobody saw through his insincere grin, he watched the Ichijou family with a pleased

smile.

Of course, he only retained his position as an outsider until the next thing came out of Akane's mouth.

"I got it! Shinkurou should come live here."

"Oh, Akane, that's a good idea," followed up Midori, not allowing Kichijouji a chance to get a word in.

"Yeah, I know! This house has tons of empty rooms. Come on, Shinkurou, get yourself out of that dormitory and come live here."

"Oh no, I couldn't possibly put you through all that…"

That wasn't simple reservation on his part—it was what he really thought. Well, it was still him being reserved, but it was sincere, not fake or for show.

"Shinkurou, you needn't feel so hesitant about it."

His honesty only made it worse for him when Midori added this.

Because, in truth, he didn't have any qualms with going to live with the Ichijou family. In fact, he struggled much more with how to turn them down because of how attractive the prospect was.

If Masaki hadn't come in to help him, Akane and Midori might have won him over.

"Mom…" he began, "Akane's one thing, but you're making George uncomfortable. We talked about this two years ago, remember?"

Yes—talk of him moving in had come up two years ago as well. He had refused, and decided to keep living in a dormitory. He would have forgotten if it wasn't for Masaki defending him.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Ichijou.” He wouldn’t call her Auntie—he’d been thoroughly warned away from that already—and the name “Mrs. Ichijou” flowed smoothly from his mouth. “I wouldn’t feel good about imposing any more on you, and there’s a lot of convenient things about living in a laboratory dorm.”

The latter part wasn’t a lie, either. The Kanazawa Magical Physics Institute, built where the site of the old First Lab used to be, was the research facility Kichijouji belonged to, and the place he’d discovered a Cardinal Code. It was separate from Third High, but the dorm was built on the same plot of land—extremely convenient for not having to sleep on the floor in the office if experiments ran late. But that reason was tacked on after the fact and only supplemented the more important part: that he would feel bad imposing on them any more than he was now.

“Really? …If you change your mind, you can move in with us whenever you want. It’s no trouble for us at all.”

Seeing that Kichijouji’s attitude on the matter was unyielding as usual, Midori didn’t press any more. Akane didn’t look very happy, but she let it go with a sullen look, maybe realizing that pushing him more would upset him.

Relieved that Midori and Akane had backed down, Kichijouji also felt guilty that he was bothering the Ichijous, whom he owed his life to. However, there was also a psychological reason tying his hands and preventing him from taking up Midori and Akane’s goodwill offer.

——Three years ago, at the same time the Great Asian Alliance invaded Okinawa, the Federal Soviet Republics marched onto Sado. The Soviets still denied any involvement in the invasion, but there were no doubts that the attacking contingent had been from their nation.

The invasion force had been a small-scale one. Even so, it was enough force to transgress upon the island of Sado. Kichijouji, who lived there at the time, lost his parents in the battle and became a war orphan.

His parents had both been magical scientists. At the time, there was an experimental facility on the island built into a deserted mine. It was for the purpose of exploring the nature of psions, and his mother and father had worked there.

Some said the Soviet invasion force's goal had been that facility. It took the brunt of the surprise attack, and over half the scientists had lost their lives, embroiled in the battle between the invaders and the defense garrison.

The tragedy only took a day. At 10:00 AM, they received reports of an unknown militant force conducting a surprise attack. Kichijouji couldn't get in touch with his parents, and that day, guided by faculty from his middle school, he evacuated to a nearby shelter.

He was already an adult at the time: Even while he prayed for his parents' safety, he could still make realistic, pessimistic assumptions.

But he was also still a child at the time: He could do nothing but shake powerlessly, forgetting that he possessed a weapon called magic.

As he sat in that shelter, curled up, trying to bear the terror, a team of militia members commanded by the Ichijou had saved him…

Saving him from that hopeless peril wasn't the only thing they did, however.

It had been on the recommendation of Masaki's father, Gouki, that he had gotten into a magical science laboratory as an apprentice scientist, despite being in his first year of middle school. After losing both of his parents in one stroke and not having any other relatives, he would have had no choice but to stay in an infamous magician orphanage if not for the Ichijou family giving him a place to live and a means to make his livelihood. This was objective fact, not a mental bias on his part.

Despite having paid back his debt not long after going there by blossoming his rare natural talent into the amazing accomplishment of discovering a Cardinal Code, Kichijouji had never forgotten what they'd done for him. He didn't consider his debts to them paid at all.

He treated repaying the Ichijou family as a lifelong mission.

So becoming a part of the Ichijou, even just boarding with them, felt like more than he deserved.

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Kichijouji brightened Akane's mood by promising to come to the house to tutor her once a week. The deal was much worse for him in terms of what he

would gain, but he had absolutely no qualms with it. In fact, he was unconsciously happy to have a reason to visit so regularly.

After dinner, once he retrieved his possessions from Masaki's room, he stood at the front door, bowing his head— "Thank you very much for the meal."

"You're very welcome. I'm sorry my cooking never gets better."

"No, not at all. I love your cooking, Mrs. Ichijou."

"Oh, my. Well, thank you."

—because Midori didn't seem to want to release him from this battle of courtesy.

"Mom, you should go back. Akane and Ruri are waiting, aren't they?"

His younger sisters were busy cleaning up after dinner. Others might have thought washing dishes was the job of a HAR, or home automation robot, but Midori had said she would find it too embarrassing to present her daughters for marriage when they couldn't even do that much. She made the sisters do the cooking, laundry, and tidying on a daily rotation.

"My, you're right. Come over again soon, Shinkurou."

"Okay. I did promise Akane, after all."

Since they couldn't come to the front door to see him off, after Kichijouji had said good-bye to the sisters in the dining room (though *cafeteria* would have been more appropriate a word), Akane had made absolutely sure he remembered his promise to tutor her. Midori gave a somewhat pained smile to this response and retreated into the house.

"Sorry for holding you up so late," apologized Masaki, exhaustion evident in his voice.

"I don't mind. We're on break anyway," said Kichijouji, smiling and shaking his head. "I'll be by myself anyway back at the dorm, so I had fun."

"Right. That makes me feel better about it."

Kichijouji had his hands full with the thesis competition and a report for the laboratory, and Masaki knew he didn't have any free time even though they

were on summer vacation. He'd invited him over anyway, knowing that. Kichijouji saying it had been fun actually did set Masaki quite a bit more at ease.

"I'll come again on Saturday."

"…You know, you don't have to worry about what Akane said."

"No, I can't just ignore her," said Kichijouji, letting a grin slip out. It seemed like friends fighting over an elementary school girl. "Tutoring Akane isn't the only thing. I have to play against you in the simulations, too."

Masaki's lips turned into a frown as he remembered the thorough beatdown he'd been handed during today's game. Kichijouji knew that just by looking at him. Nevertheless, he didn't try to press the issue any further and instead decided to finally get home.

Unfortunately, he was interrupted by Masaki. "Hey, George, I've been thinking."

"What is it? No need to be so polite."

"Well, I wasn't really trying to be…" As he made this preface, Masaki's expression was certainly not one to expect jokes from. "All that before—basically, it's a problem with me judging the situation, right?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Advance, retreat, or maintain the situation… Immediate decisions like that are made on a personal combat level. I don't think tactical simulations have much to do with it."

"That's not true. In terms of seizing opportunities, there's no fundamental difference between group tactics and individual tactics."

"But still, snap decisions are reflexive and instinctive, right? That would mean doing more sparring would be better for training my tactical eye on an individual level…"

"Masaki…we lost to First High in Monolith Code because we didn't know how to go about our individual battles inside a broader tactical picture. Training your tactical eye on a group level is something you can't ignore."

"But if we're talking group tactics, wouldn't that mean getting the advice of a

talented adviser is more important?”

“Well…that’s why they call it an adviser,” agreed Kichijouji hesitantly.

Strangely, Masaki gave a clear smile. “Then there’s no problem. I have a talented adviser right here, and his name is George.”

The surprise attack did serious damage to Kichijouji. For him, the words were a sweet attack of the greatest variety. It took almost all his mental strength to tighten up his face before it broke into a full smile. “…You can’t flatter me, Masaki. It’s the general’s job to decide on strategies his staff officers offer.”

“I wasn’t trying to be flattering…” Masaki muttered to himself as they said good-bye and Kichijouji turned around to leave.

His poker face was almost at its limit.

Fortunately, it didn’t seem like Masaki had noticed.

If he had, it would have been embarrassing, and there was no doubt that Kichijouji wouldn’t have been able to think this next thing.

Masaki, I’ll become the best adviser you could ask for. I won’t advise anyone else. So you have to become the best general I could ask for.

Ever since the Nines, he’d been thinking about his rival and his younger sister, the one Masaki had feelings for. But now they weren’t on his mind. Right now, he was simply happy the person he was so indebted to, Masaki Ichijou, needed him.

The Irregular at Magic High School

Memories of the Summer

MEMORIES OF THE SUMMER

[AUGUST 31 (1)]

August 31, 2095 AD—the last day of summer vacation for magic high school students.

Their vacation was about the average length for high schools. Most technical and liberal arts schools had already started the new term, while many art schools and physical education schools would be on break until mid-September. The Nine School Competition had, incidentally, been held from August 3 to August 12, but the representative members didn't get the special privilege of an extended break.

Even in the twenty-first century, long breaks came with assignments (homework). And all across Japan, one could observe the signs of the season: students nearly crying—or actually crying—on this last day of their break as they stared at piles of worksheets or electronic documents containing only a title. Still, not all students were that irresponsible (?). There was certainly no shortage of boys and girls like the sibling freshmen enrolled at the National Magic University Affiliated First High School who would be spending this last day relaxing at home.

Though the refined manner in which they spent it—eating tea biscuits and amusing themselves through conversation—could have been unusual.

"Miyuki, it's finished."

"Thank you. Please excuse me, Tatsuya. I didn't want to busy you with trifles such as these…"

Tatsuya had to smile at his sister's display of gratitude, rather overdone as it was. "Making crushed ice is no trouble at all," he said, placing the ice pick on the dining room table.

Drawn by that smile, Miyuki gave a graceful one in response. In her hands was a coffeepot made of heat-resistant glass, liquid shaking around inside.

She had actually created a block of ice using magic (made by freezing water bottom-up in a container and letting out the gas), then Tatsuya had made crushed ice out of it with an ice pick, *not by using magic* (if he had tried, it would have gotten smashed into a snow cone). He poured it into the thick coffee.

A sweet fragrance spread through the room.

In order to encapsulate the scent, Miyuki placed a film of cold air over the top of the large, rounded cup, then picked up the tray. It had both their iced coffees on it.

Tatsuya's eyes narrowed into a musing smile at the advanced technique, so casually performed.

Miyuki smiled bashfully when she noticed him, before turning around with a spring in her step.

Miyuki placed the tray back down on a small table, in a first-floor room that faced their small yard. It had originally been used as a guest bedroom, but the bed had been removed, so now it was a perfectly empty room. After opening all the windows and the sliding glass door, Tatsuya and Miyuki settled down to enjoy a coffee break, at least able to feel as though they were on an open terrace at a resort.

Of course, Miyuki was so busy briskly waiting on Tatsuya that she had no time to warm her own seat, but she found it fun, so it would be uncouth for a third party to say anything about it.

Still, eventually satisfied, she took off the modestly frilly white apron and sat down—not across from Tatsuya at the round table but next to him.

She wore a light dress under the apron, one with wide shoulder straps joined around her neck and exposing her fair arms. Tatsuya remembered that breezy polka-dot dress.

Her sharp eyes read his expression, and before he could speak, she glanced away shyly and asked, "You noticed?"

“Of course. It looks very good on you.”

Tatsuya’s praise didn’t contain the slightest bit of jest, and Miyuki’s cheeks reddened a little. “Oh, that’s all you ever say, Tatsuya.”

“Because I really think that way. That’s what I’ve been saying since the beginning. Besides, I wouldn’t have given you a gift I didn’t think looked good on you.”

With a cool, collected expression (at least by general, common knowledge), he tossed these loaded words that seemed inappropriate for one’s younger sister, and this time Miyuki’s cheeks became extremely flushed. “Um, well… thank you.”

As she blushed, but still looked up at him with happy, searching eyes, Tatsuya remembered the day he’d bought it for her.

She made this same expression then, too.

[AUGUST 14 (1)]

August 14—two days after the Nine School Competition. Tatsuya and Miyuki had come to a shopping tower in the city.

They were both high school students currently on summer break. They hadn’t necessarily needed to come all the way to the city on a Sunday just to go shopping, but they had a reason, of course. From tomorrow, the fifteenth, to the eighteenth, Tatsuya would have to appear at meetings at Four Leaves Technology’s R & D Section 3 regarding the commercialization of the flight device. Next week, he planned to attend field training and meetings with the Independent Magic Battalion on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. If his weekends were the only days he had free either way, Tatsuya decided he shouldn’t leave this until too much later.

But what didn’t he want to leave until later? Tatsuya wanted to buy Miyuki something nice as a reward for her victory in Mirage Bat. Miyuki had gotten strangely sulky at the term *reward* rather than *present*, but she seemed happy to receive a gift regardless of what he called it, so she was in a great mood as she walked alongside him.

Of course, she wasn’t as happy to be receiving a gift as she was to be getting

one *from Tatsuya.* It was a small yet profound difference, and not something Tatsuya was capable of understanding.

Miyuki's outfit for the day was a light-colored blouse with see-through sleeves, a long off-white skirt, and sandals. She wore a wide-brimmed straw hat on her head. As they were going out in private, she could have exposed more skin and been completely fine, but her fashion habits were, *outside the house*, conservative as always.

Meanwhile, Tatsuya wore a T-shirt under a button-down vest in place of a jacket, along with conspicuous synthetic-fiber pants of high elasticity. They looked tight, but they were made out of a great, breathable material for summer. They covered everything right down to his ankles, but weren't as hot as they looked. Still, aside from his neck up and wrists down, no part of him was exposed to the air, very much like his sister.

Women's affinity for shopping was one tendency that hadn't changed, and was still a common mind-set. Yes, even in the last decade of the twenty-first century, young girls especially loved to shop. There seemed, however, to be three different behavioral patterns when it came to girls shopping.

The first was getting what they need right away.

The second was getting what they need last of all.

The third, and seemingly the most common, was keeping what they need in mind but getting distracted by other things, coming and going elsewhere as they please.

Miyuki fell into the first group. When Tatsuya had asked her the day before if there was anything she wanted, she thought for a moment, then answered, "A summer dress." It might have been due to the one Mayumi had shown off on the bus on the way to and from the Nine School Competition piquing her interest. At least, that was what Tatsuya thought when they arrived at their destination. After all, the boutique in the fashion building Miyuki dragged him to had mostly dresses like that on display. Their designs went in a considerably different direction from the one she was wearing now, but as Tatsuya looked at a mannequin wearing a more revealing summer dress, he decided it was fine for his sister to be adventurous once in a while.

Meanwhile, as Miyuki looked at the same dress, she appeared to wince slightly. Well, she wasn't looking at the *exact* same thing, but the price tag.

"You don't have to hold back, Miyuki. You know my income."

Price tags, unlike a century ago, were now all virtual ones that used augmented reality to display the price. It was necessary to use an AR app on an information terminal—one that everyone had as a matter of course—to check the price, so there was no way for Miyuki to hide where she was looking from Tatsuya.

Tatsuya had already booted up his AR app and checked the virtual tag. The price on it didn't surprise him.

Miyuki liked this store. Therefore, none of the clothing would be cheap.

And he hadn't been trying to act tough at all. The things in here were expensive, but they were still just ready-made clothing for young adults and teens. The costs weren't as outrageous as a haute couture boutique. For one half of Taurus Silver, these prices couldn't even be called a drop in the bucket.

The act of flashing his wallet was one that would make certain people disgusted, but it seemed to help Miyuki make up her mind. Maybe she decided holding back would actually be rude to her brother. Her face now free of hesitation, she began giving a careful look to the dresses displayed on the mannequins and hangers.

The simple fact that actual clothing was on display, and not 3-D images, marked this as a high-class store. In mainstay boutiques and shops whose draw was selling mass-produced items at low prices, common practice was to display their products using 3-D imaging technology. In most shops, you simply got a synthesized image of yourself in a piece of clothing and that was it. You couldn't feel the fabric on your skin, but that was considered in the return policy. This store, however, was a rare sight these days—you could actually try on sample clothing.

After taking a look around inside, Miyuki called over an employee and pointed at three different dresses, requesting to try them on. The employee smiled widely and nodded. The smile didn't seem to stop at a plain old businesslike one; Tatsuya mused to himself that she might have secretly wanted to use

Miyuki for the store's PR.

It wasn't uncommon for such ulterior motives when Miyuki was involved. And it wasn't something he could agree to. Even if the advertisement would only be broadcast on a strictly local basis, he couldn't let Miyuki be a model for them, since the actual reason was that he didn't want to risk exposing her to an unknown number of evil eyes.

But in keeping with a (relatively) high-class shop of this variety, the employee wasn't brazen enough to suddenly suggest something like that. She withdrew into the stockroom, still smiling, and promptly came back out with the clothing samples for Miyuki to try on. Every time the clothes went back in there they were automatically washed and disinfected, so she had no qualms taking them in hand. Now carrying the samples, Miyuki let the employee guide her to the changing room.

Tatsuya decided to wait for her to be done on a bench inside the store. If she needed something, she would call an employee—and even if she didn't, *if something were to happen to Miyuki, Tatsuya would know immediately*.

Now on time-killing duty, Tatsuya popped open a reading website. But he couldn't pick out the lines of characters on his information terminal. Right after he'd opened the site, he noticed the employee from before staring at him, standing in front of him and slightly to the side.

"What is it?"

He could have waited for her to say something first, but an employee properly trained in courtesy toward customers would have found it difficult to address a customer (more accurately, a customer's escort) while he clearly appeared to be waiting for his companion. So instead he had decided to try to draw her out.

"Sir, I had something to ask…"

"Should we go somewhere else?" Tatsuya thought it might be private, but he was thinking too much.

"No, if I could just have a moment of your time…"

Tatsuya nodded to acknowledge her request, and the tension in her face loosened. "If it is quite all right, about the dress your companion has bought…"

“We haven’t decided to buy one yet,” interrupted Tatsuya brusquely to the somewhat hasty suggestion.

“Oh, of course! I simply mean that if you were to purchase one of our store’s products.”

“I do, of course, plan on buying it if my sister likes it.”

“Thank you very much!”

Tatsuya wasn’t particularly trying to bully the employee or anything. He thought he’d been giving natural responses, but he felt like she was overreacting. She might have had some unrelated reason for doing so, but that wasn’t an issue right now. “In any case, what did you need?” Though he’d been the one to push the conversation off course, he urged her back to the topic with an air of nonchalance.

“Oh, yes.” The employee didn’t show any distaste in her expression. Maybe that was the result of training to work in a boutique like this. Or maybe she was just toying around with him. “If our store’s products have piqued her interest, would she be willing to wear one that she purchased right away?”

All that aside, the employee’s *question* was a strange one at first thought. Not that there was anything particularly strange about the request itself. She was looking at a sleeveless summer dress—a ready-made one, and one that didn’t even need much altering. Wearing the clothing right out of the store wasn’t an unusual thing, at least for stores that had inventory rooms in the back like this. The strange part was the *employee asking for it*.

“Do you mean you’d like her to walk around in one of the store’s dresses?” Tatsuya didn’t ask the reason why—he immediately knew what she, or rather the boutique, was up to. They wanted to make her into a walking advertisement.

“Yes, sir. In exchange for your help, we can offer you a discount.”

The employee also appeared to realize Tatsuya knew what they wanted, quickly bringing out talk of lowering the price. Despite her young age, she seemed like a very good salesperson.

The discount wasn’t all that attractive to Tatsuya, but he held an interest in

her request for another reason.

“Will that really be all? I won’t let you take pictures.”

“No, of course not. We would never do anything to harm the privacy of one of our customers.”

“Could you show me a few pieces of clothing in the window that aren’t for sale?”

“Yes, gladly.”

Not bad, he thought.

Right as he and the employee reached an agreement regarding her *question*, another employee came to Tatsuya to tell him Miyuki was calling for him. Without showing any annoyance, he smoothly stood up. He had expected this, and even if he hadn’t, there was no reason to be annoyed.

“Tatsuya, how does this look…?”

The changing room door was open as Miyuki shyly asked him the question, with a person-sized three-sided mirror to let her see her back. (Places like this didn’t have cameras, to prevent hidden photography.) She wore a gray-toned jumper.

“The elegant design looks good on you. But I think you could go a little showier.” The simple design that reached below her knees was a good match for Miyuki’s refined beauty, but Tatsuya felt that it was a little more modest than it needed to be.

“Do you think so…? Then please wait a moment,” she bowed slightly, shutting the door.

There were soft sounds of rustling fabric. The silence that followed must have been her tidying her sleeves and hair.

“Sorry to make you wait. How does this one look?”

This time, her face was less shy and more just clearly embarrassed as she asked his opinion, not meeting his eye. *She must be more embarrassed because it’s so different from what she usually wears out of the house.*

This time she wore a checkered camisole dress. Everything from the bottom of her neck to her shoulders was exposed. The skirt was pretty short, too, ending two inches above her knees. Even while appearing innocent, the clothes gave her an almost dizzyingly seductive air.

“Yeah, I like it. I can barely take my eyes off you.”

“That isn’t…” Miyuki’s cheeks flushed at Tatsuya’s blunt appraisal.

He understood that, but the employee was blushing far harder than Miyuki. Was it because of her bewitching figure or Tatsuya’s wording being too honest?

“Didn’t you have another one? Did you not like it?”

“No, that’s not it… Shall I show you that one as well?”

She repeated the process of changing clothes.

The summer dress she came out with this time was in the middle of the other two dresses in terms of exposure. However, it also had a design that came in at the waist to emphasize her chest and hip lines.

“Well…how is this one?”

Despite exposing less skin than the second dress, this one had more in terms of sex appeal. She’d probably realized that after putting it on; that must have been why she seemed so embarrassed.

Without a rounded, voluminous chest or hips, the dress’s design would have been ungainly. But it fit her surprisingly well. Tatsuya was well aware that her body was maturing—he saw her in her underwear every week for her CAD adjustments—but after applying such an objective (?) measure to her, he realized she was much more of an adult than he’d thought. There was an unbalanced charm exuding from this dress—one different than the camisole dress before, and probably unique to her current age.

“That’s troubling. Even I might lose my sense of reason.”

“……” Miyuki’s face grew even redder at Tatsuya’s blatant praise as she silently went back into the changing room and shut the door.

She continued to try on clothes (read: put on a fashion show) after that. Each and every time, Tatsuya would give her blunt praise that made it seem like he

wasn’t aware he was embarrassing her, and every time she would get embarrassed enough for the both of them. And yet she still kept trying more on to hear what he had to say. Doubtless she enjoyed her brother’s praise so much that the stress on her heart and her face’s blood vessels weren’t enough to dissuade her from it.

Miyuki had no modeling experience. Although she had the beauty to make the world’s top models run away with their tails between their legs, she had no professional modeling skill. She hadn’t acquired the art of changing clothes quickly.

Basically, what he was trying to get at was that a lot of time was passing as she continued trying on new clothes. He couldn’t obviously look inside the changing room while the door was closed, but when she came out to show her clothes to Tatsuya, she could be seen from the shop’s display space as well. Every once in a while, Tatsuya would request that she do a little twirl, or turn, or strike a pose, and eventually a small crowd of people started to form around the changing room.

They weren’t being overt about it and piling up in a group to watch her. Tatsuya wouldn’t have kept quiet in that case, and the employee would probably ask them politely to leave before he did anything anyway. Instead, some young people had made a distant ring so they could glance over. They walked slowly, too, pretending to look at the mannequins but actually totally unable to tear their eyes from the spectacle.

The young people weren’t all male. There were some guys, but in terms of numbers, the girls clearly had the upper hand. Which was understandable—the store was awkward for male customers to enter alone. They made up about one-third of the people there, and all were college students or entrepreneur-looking people the young women had brought with them. Tatsuya was probably the only male high school student here…though he doubted many people had enough power of insight to see that.

The women who came by themselves and in groups containing only women would look at Miyuki with a mix of praise and envy in their eyes, then quickly look away. Then when the changing room door closed, they would breathe a sigh of relief—and as if drawn by the sound of the door opening again, they

would discreetly steal a glance her way with faces hiding trepidation.

On the other hand, those escorted by men—or ones they dragged along with them—might have been in a somewhat better mental state. When their boyfriends (though what *kind* of boyfriend varied, depending on the person) looked at Miyuki, enraptured by her appearance, their partners would step on their feet, elbow them in the gut, or pinch them.

On the other hand, the young women would also stare in jealousy at Tatsuya as he stood there constantly praising Miyuki with no embarrassment or hesitation, then give their male companions critical looks. Thus, needlessly making their significant others panic. Basically, they were using the men near them to vent, thus maintaining a proper emotional balance.

Tatsuya obviously caught on to all the furtive glances at him and his sister. At this point, he automatically and nearly unconsciously distinguished between harmful stares and harmless ones, pushing the latter out of his mind; meanwhile, Miyuki was ignoring all the eyes on her naturally—she wouldn't be able to walk the streets if she couldn't—so it wasn't a major-enough reason for them to stop their shopping.

He never gave anything but words of praise every time, but he never said the same thing twice. Miyuki was so happy about her monopoly over her brother that she almost seemed inebriated, but she never let the tiny differences in nuance her brother used get past her. Once she'd tried on over twenty dresses, she took the slim, polka-dot dress she'd been keeping in the changing room. It was a sleeveless summer dress that ended above the knees like a camisole dress. The wide shoulder straps were lined with frilled lace, with the upper chest and skirt hem also decorated with plenty of the same. Despite how revealing it was, it had an elegant feel to it, and the rainbow of small polka dots all across the ivory-colored fabric also imparted a kind of cuteness befitting her age.

"Tatsuya, I think I want this one…"

"I think that one fits you best, too. It's really cute."

She'd chosen this one because it garnered the highest ratings from her brother, but upon Tatsuya saying again that it was cute, her resolve stiffened to

the point where not even a hair on her head had any hesitation. “Then…shall we go buy this?”

Miyuki wasn’t trying to be reserved at this point. Instead, she simply coaxed him into it, with a huge, lovely smile—one that was, in her mind, appropriate for receiving a gift from her brother.

“But of course.”

On the other hand, in Tatsuya’s mind, he didn’t feel like he’d been coaxed into it—or forced to do so. Maybe he always thought the best use of his money was to buy his sister things she liked. Leaving aside whether he was actually aware of that, anyway…

The men who saw Miyuki’s lovely “coaxing” found their minds freezing.

The women who saw Tatsuya’s natural dapperness sighed with jealousy.

“We’ll take this dress, as well as number two and number seventeen. She’ll wear this one home, so could you deliver those clothes along with the other products?”

“Yes, of course. We’ll be waiting for you to come again.”

And the employee, who had unexpectedly good customers today, nodded, very pleased.

[AUGUST 31 (2)]

“Still, I hadn’t thought you would buy three dresses. They were rather expensive, too.”

Miyuki was thinking back on it, too, with a happy smile, though a mischievous tease was slipping into her tone.

“I would have been fine with just this one. Tatsuya? Are you spoiling me?”

“I didn’t let you try on twenty-one dresses for nothing. It’s summer break, but I can’t go out shopping with you very much. Or was it unnecessary of me?”

“Oh, no, never!” Miyuki had simply pretended to criticize the act as useless spending, but with the tables turned, she immediately held up the white flag. “I was, well…I was happy about it.”

On the surface, it would appear that Miyuki had been talked down by Tatsuya, but she didn’t find it displeasing. In fact, the distance between them—her looking up at her brother bashfully, and him looking down at her—had gotten even shorter than before.

Tatsuya smiled, satisfied, as he watched his sister give him the good-natured apology. “We don’t get chances like that very often, after all.” Then his face clouded before he bitterly said, “I would have liked to let you take a leisurely look at the *yukata*s and other summer items, too, but…”

“…It wasn’t your responsibility, Tatsuya,” whispered Miyuki gently, placing her palm on the back of the hand Tatsuya had on the table.

[AUGUST 14 (2)]

Picking out clothes had taken substantial time, but nonetheless, it was still

before noon. Going home now, after getting to be alone with Tatsuya, would have been a waste—a truly unthinkable act for Miyuki.

Fortunately, Tatsuya wasn't the type to stay indoors, either. Plus, he'd cleared his schedule for today precisely to care for his family (aka his little sister). They continued to idle the time away without disagreeing very much, and it looked like they'd keep doing so until evening.

Right now, they were in a fashion building aimed toward young women. Its fourteen floors of lined-up shops dealt not only in clothing but in such things as shoes, hats, accessories, *yukata*s, and swimsuits. All the eateries catered to the same crowd, offering light snacks and sweets. The atmosphere in here made it a little awkward for men to go in, but it was a different story if they were coupled with a lady—even if that lady was his sister. (Nobody would be able to tell.) Nobody, in fact, would have pinned them as siblings without hearing the words they exchanged. Actually, even if they listened in, they still would have been clueless until they heard Miyuki call him her brother.

No matter how you saw it, Miyuki snuggling up happily to Tatsuya, her arm in his, made her look like a girl fawning over her boyfriend. The most someone would do was say to themselves with a tinge of envy that they weren't "right for each other." And that was probably only the young men, too—who would then be chastised by the girls they were with for ogling another woman. In a way, it was just how the world worked.

As stated earlier, the building was filled with stores aimed at women. Men wouldn't be interested in coming here unless they had a particular goal—which seemed mostly to be paying tribute to their girlfriends via gifts, or female friends they wanted to be their girlfriends. If you were a young man with that constantly on your mind, then leaving aside how enjoyable it was, it might have been an efficient use of time. Though, at the very least, Tatsuya didn't fall into that group.

However, not once did he look displeased as Miyuki took her sweet time window-shopping. Her eyes would glitter in front of one display case, then scowl in dissatisfaction at the next. It put a smile on his face. Whether through nature or nurture, whether acquired from others or self-created, everywhere, city or mountains, was the same to him as long as she was there.

She was the one thing he was really able to want. With her by his side, no other conditions were relevant. It made sense, as anyone who knew him could tell you. Between Tatsuya and Miyuki, Tatsuya was perhaps the one truly dependent on the other.

Of course, if you asked them something like that, they'd probably say, *It's none of your business* in unison. A punishment worse than a horse kick would be waiting for you.

And that—the worse punishment—wasn't reserved only for outspoken questioners.

It applied to rude gate-crashers as well.

As they ate a slightly early lunch at a pasta house, the siblings had directed unhappy stares at the young man standing at the table next to them.

Tatsuya and Miyuki had entered the restaurant completely by coincidence, entirely on a whim.

When they ate out, they almost never chose stores with layouts such as this one had: ones with nothing to block incoming stares. Usually they chose places with individual rooms or partitions between tables. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to eat with all the attention on them—well, the attention on Miyuki, anyway.

Given the location, most of the diners here today were either women or the men accompanying them. He'd thought nothing too terrible would happen, but, well, that idea seemed to have been naive.

Unfortunately, as soon as Miyuki followed Tatsuya into the restaurant, the hustle and bustle immediately silenced. Even the employees—unusual for a casual place like this, they were waiters rather than waitresses—couldn't help but gasp and stand there. Even Tatsuya hadn't expected to get such an overreaction. He figured a stylish place like this would have some resistance to Miyuki's good looks. But it was actually *because* it was a stylish place that people found raw beauty like hers a rare sight.

Just before Tatsuya could turn on his heel to leave, the waiter snapped out of it. More accurately, he felt confusion at his attempt to do so, and used the

chance to come back to his right mind. Tatsuya couldn't quite tell if that made his attitude professional or not, but the man did succeed in keeping the two customers there.

Even if they had been picky, he guessed other places would have reacted the same way. He obediently followed the waiter to their seats. Miyuki, for her part, was used to the constant attention on her. As long as Tatsuya was with her, though, all other things were trivial in comparison.

The two-person table wasn't a fixed booth but a wooden (at least, on the surface) one with wooden chairs. Tatsuya stopped the waiter before he could pull out the chair and went around behind Miyuki to do it himself. Bashful, she turned around, bowed a little bit, and then sat down. Tatsuya sat across from her and glanced at the waiter, who quickly handed them menus. After responding generously to the waiter's haste, Tatsuya let him leave.

His acting was filled with dignity unsuited to his age, and the waiter who had been treated poorly didn't show any sign of distaste. The eyes of the other guests on Miyuki just for a moment went to Tatsuya. Most of them were women, but their slight confusion was replaced by acceptance. They had been thinking they weren't right for each other, that the man must have bad habits, in compensation for the sense of defeat they felt toward the rival woman. Now, though, their impression had changed—they were a good couple, and so the onlookers could accept their unilateral defeat.

Hostility abandoned, the jealous stares turned into admiring ones. Now, among the heterosexual couples, the men instead looked to be the ones feeling envy-like doubts and anxiety. Not many of the boyfriends perfectly understood their girlfriends' expressions, but unconsciously—perhaps instinctually—they knew that what had stolen the attentions of their girlfriends (or future girlfriends) was not only the surreal, beautiful girl, but also the boy sitting across from her. They were like a pair of walking marital vows.

It was as Tatsuya finished ordering for both of them under these covert stares that a new actor entered the stage.

She was an exceptionally pretty girl.

Looking to be around twenty, she was equipped with both the vivacity of a

woman just exiting her teens and a magnificent complexion, like a chokingly aromatic rose bouquet.

Wherever she was, whenever it was, her beauty would not fail to draw attention.

This beauty's owner understood that well, and moved as if she were showing her assets off. The show was clearly something she was used to but didn't allow those watching to feel any distaste toward it. She had probably been tempered by others watching her, and honed herself while watching back. That was the sort of career it felt like this woman had.

Behind her followed a young man who appeared several years older, like an empress's gentleman-in-waiting. Perhaps she was a celebrity—an actress, maybe. In 2095 AD, the position of "idol" had been mostly supplanted by realistic 3DCG, but an actress was still a job for a real-life human. And this woman had a kind of natural aura about her; if someone had introduced her as a famous actress, anyone would have believed it.

Tatsuya could only speculate as to why she had come to such a casual establishment. It could have just been a simple whim, or it could have been a preliminary inspection of a filming location. The one thing he could say for sure was that if she were to set foot in an eatery filled with all these "normal people," she would draw stares from all over the shop.

That was her own prediction as well. Neither conceit nor self-esteem was part of it. It was a prediction based on her experience, of repeating this dozens and dozens of times, until her experience had sublimated into a steadfast rule. She put her attractiveness on full display, so that anyone could look at her from any angle, with a skill of acting that had already become second nature to her.

However, her guess was wrong. There were no rules without exceptions: That, in and of itself, was a golden rule. And the laws her experience had taught her to expect now ran right up against one of those exceptions.

The employee who had welcomed her had looked surprised and gave her a compliment, but it was a more subdued reaction than she thought it would be. In her experience, it was rare that a mere waiter would be able to stay straight-faced at her beauty. The *normal people*, who took up 80 percent of the seats,

did turn to look at the slight disturbance at the entrance, and men and women alike acknowledged her beauty with expressions of surprise. But they soon lost interest, their eyes returning to the store's interior and a certain table by the wall.

Sure enough, given her appearance, she was indeed an actor. She had made her debut five years ago, and in that time she had built for herself a firm position as a celebrity. The slow-witted could not survive show business. CG technology had improved with the years, and beauty of form was steadily losing the absolute advantage it once had. Not only did she have that beauty, but she also had a mind with sharper emotions than most. That was how she'd become a star with incredible acting abilities despite her age.

Of course, she might not have needed especially sharp emotions to come to her next conclusion; a normal level of sensitivity would have sufficed. She realized someone else in this restaurant was being paid more attention than she was. She didn't find that very pleasing. In fact, you could say it made her unhappy. It was only natural she started to wonder what kind of person could draw all the attention when she was in the room.

Her pride as a star, however, wouldn't let her do something so *civilian* as steal glances every once in a while. As the waiter was leading her to her table, she made a point of not looking at where the other guests were.

But by accident or coincidence, the table she was led to was near the table everyone was looking at—diagonally in front of her, in fact. When she went to sit down, she feigned nonchalance and gave their table a glance. There was a young couple sitting there. The boy was facing her, and while he certainly wasn't ugly, he wasn't the type she'd think girls would be into. At the very least, he wasn't handsome enough to warrant all the restaurant's attention. Which meant the *normal people* were paying all their attention to the girl sitting facing away from her.

——These thoughts were born mostly of her trying to act tough. The level to which she did so marked her as no normal woman. She had actually known the very moment she got a split-second glance of the girl's profile. She probably would have understood even just from her view of her back. This girl was *special*.

She'd never felt this way before. If she had to put it into words, it was like a jealousy that could never be overcome. She didn't think of herself as someone chosen by the gods. She was proud of how she clinched her current position. Sure, she was born with a somewhat pretty face, but she didn't rest on her laurels. She strictly followed life habits that would make her even more beautiful, researched the kind of behavior that would display her beauty, and greedily studied every acting skill she could.

But this girl was different. Whether she was beloved by the gods or made a deal with the devil, she wasn't normal. She wasn't in a world one could reach through effort.

It isn't fair, she thought. *This girl didn't have to work* at all *to monopolize the admiration of all these people.*

The actress felt that made all her efforts thus far meaningless. An impulse arose within her, an urge to prove that becoming a star wasn't something one could accomplish through natural appearance alone.

She waved the young man sitting across from her forward and leaned over the table herself, whispering something in his ear.

As the young man brought his face toward the beauty gesturing to him from the other side of the table, he had a different woman on his mind.

No, perhaps this should be corrected: another *girl* on his mind.

The girl, sitting behind him to the side, was more dazzling than any he'd ever seen, and *that* was what was occupying his mind.

For him, beautiful women were products, toys, accessories. As the third president of a huge entertainment production company, he had placed several sought-after actresses under his support, and had made dozens of as-yet-unknown actresses his own. It was only natural for him—he didn't feel a scrap of guilt about it. That went for the woman in front of him, too. Sure, she was a star actress *now*, one who walked with a pompous swagger. But before, she was a terrible actor with nothing going for her aside from her pretty face. He was fairly sure she'd only attained her current position because he'd been looking after her since she was just starting out. Having a good time with her was the proper reward for all the hard work he'd put in, and she'd been

benefiting from this as much as him. He thought a show of gratitude was in order.

He'd brought her to a plebeian shop such as this because he wanted to show her off and watch the plebs stare in envy at her. Accessories were pointless but to show them off. He knew it was a base hobby, but the professional entertainment world was a base trade already, wasn't it? He didn't know anything of his predecessors' struggles through the wars, during the hard winter of entertainment. The seat of president of production was nothing more than a way to casually satisfy oneself with short-lived vanity.

He'd brought his favorite accessory of the moment here today, under the guise of scouting out a new filming location. Her earnings weren't at the top of the company's, but her appearance was first among his women. Now that he'd managed to befriend a first-rate actress, imperfect though she may have been, he couldn't take her around places as lightly as he could when she was unknown. But that only served to feed his superiority complex all the more. In the eyes of others, the actress was the master here, and the man only an attachment—but looking at himself that objectively was likely impossible for him, given his status and age.

He thought of her as a kind of large diamond bead, cut and polished by the hands of a master craftsman. He'd stocked up on gemstones, had them polished by a craftsman in his employ, and cut them. That was production's job, and the finished jewel was a product called an "actress." She was certainly a creation he had processed and created, the fruit of his labor—but even if she had been wrought by a craftsman from another company, she would be nothing more than an article for sale, and one that could be bought.

But he could tell at a glance. Unlike her, that girl wasn't the sort of thing that could be bought with money at all. If the woman in front of him was a huge diamond worth several dozen million yen at current market value, that girl was like the priceless Great Star of Africa. That was how large the difference between them felt.

Fortunately, she was with a mere child who had a slightly haughty attitude.

The president ardently desired to add her to his own collection, but an actress

from his company was with him now. If she'd been one of the many others, that would be one thing. But he had enough reason left to calculate that angering a product that had made him so much money would be a bad thing.

So when the woman in front of him was the one to suggest they scout the girl for the new movie, it was a godsend to him. He pretended to mull it over for a few moments, and then stood up from his seat, pretending like he was only going along with his talent's willfulness.

For a little while now, Tatsuya had been sensing a sulking stare (in the childish sense) of hostility on him. He'd decided it wasn't the type to cause harm to Miyuki, so he'd left it be, but it wasn't a very pleasant experience. Just as he was thinking that, its origin—the now-standing young man at the table diagonally in front of him (and diagonally behind Miyuki)—walked over to the siblings' table.

The two of them gave him a displeased look as he stood beside their table. People stealing glances was one thing, but it was only natural to be unhappy with a complete and total stranger unreservedly staring from up close.

"My mistake for interrupting."

His way of speaking, too, was unreserved. He did seem to be trying, at least, considering his apology, but his tone was overly familiar.

Tatsuya lost all intention of handling this young man amicably.

Meanwhile, a cold light glinted in Miyuki's eyes before she very naturally turned away.

Undiscouraged by the clear rejection, the young man, still with an insincere smile on, took out a business card from a case and offered it to Miyuki. "Here's my card."

It was an old-fashioned business card, made only of paper, without a chip embedded in it. No micro-patterns were printed on it, either. It really was a classic, cheap paper card. Without a choice, Miyuki took it, skimmed over it, and handed it to Tatsuya.

The last name and first part of the business name on the card had the same characters in them, and the man's title was "president." The latter half of the

business name said *production*. Tatsuya guessed he was a professional in the entertainment world.

“Are you interested in movies?”

Miyuki didn’t look at the man.

“I have the perfect role for you…”

Her attitude was the very picture of indifference, but still the man failed to yield.

“Could you tell me your name?” he asked, crouching a little to bring himself nearer to Miyuki’s face. He completely ignored the obvious air of rejection coming from her. His denseness and mental toughness were the right stuff for a salesman, and as he watched, Tatsuya felt a little impressed.

Of course, he was feeling a lot *more* irritated.

Eventually, Miyuki brought her averted eyes to the young president.

They hadn’t softened at all, though.

The cold light in them…the harsh stare, criticizing the lack of etiquette…

For a moment, the young professional winced. It didn’t last very long, though, before he returned to his seemingly insincere—no, *actually* insincere—smile and engaged in the brutish act of reaching a hand out to her.

It was probably his pride as an entertainment professional at work. He was the president of production, and he treated pretty and beautiful women as *products*. An amateur’s beauty overwhelming him seemed to have wounded his pride.

But that, too, was a hasty act. The kind young people with important positions tended to make, the bad habit of letting one’s emotions get out of control when faced with someone in a weaker position than them. The young man seemed to have it, too.

He was trying to either grab her hand or touch her face. Whichever the case, Tatsuya wasn’t about to let such foolish behavior pass.

Suddenly he was standing, his hand latched on to the man’s arm as it reached

for Miyuki.

“Wha…?!”

The young man’s selfish gasp of resistance changed to a yelp midway through, and then even that faded. He couldn’t say anything as he was stricken with intense pain he’d never felt before.

“I’m going to ask you to leave.”

Tatsuya’s words probably didn’t reach the young man’s mind. He was twisting his hand upward, his fingers digging into a pressure point in his wrist that could give extreme pain if held at the right angle. The pain was blinding, and it had complete hold over the man.

When Tatsuya let go, the man stumbled back a few steps, then fell onto his rear end. The face looking down at him wasn’t a scornful one—in fact, it was completely expressionless. He felt such a chill of terror up his spine that he forgot he was in pain. If it had been a derisive stare, he could have burned his pride and gotten angry—even if it was slightly, just for an instant, like a toy firework. But this stare had no emotion in it, only the message *You’re in the way*. He couldn’t even feel antipathy toward him.

The young man was instantly scared stiff. He couldn’t pry his eyes away from Tatsuya’s glare; he backed up even as he staggered to his feet. But even when confronted with the glare—which stated that Tatsuya would have no hesitation getting violent after imparting such docile pain in comparison—he had enough grit to stand back up. Someone weaker of heart probably would have soiled themselves in this situation.

The woman the man had brought with him, however, didn’t seem to agree. Tatsuya heard the sound of chair legs scraping against the floor. When he turned to look, he saw the beauty in question quickly exiting the restaurant, puffed up with arrogance, her heeled sandals clacking as she went. The man didn’t even glance at her.

Then the rest of the patrons started moving again. Two waiters hurried over, taking care not to let their footsteps be too loud. Not to Tatsuya—but to the man. One of them, his demeanor polite, whispered something to the company president, and the man’s face reddened.

Tatsuya didn't hear any of what the man said in return; he seemed to still have the faculties not to start ranting and raving. Tatsuya only made out some of the louder bits, like "think I am" and "ridiculous." He wasn't about to force it out of him, though. Despite not being physically restrained, the man had been psychologically overwhelmed by the waiters on either side of him. After Tatsuya saw him leave the establishment, he returned to his seat.

As though waiting for the moment he settled down, a forty-year-old man in a white cooking uniform came over to the table. After introducing himself as the shopkeeper and chef here, he bowed deeply to Tatsuya and Miyuki.

"I have no words to express my apologies for the offense you just experienced."

"No, I apologize for making trouble and making a scene."

Despite being only sixteen, Tatsuya had been trained quite a bit in the presence of adults. If the other person was being courteous, then he was entirely capable of reacting sensibly. The shopkeeper's eyes softened a bit at Tatsuya's newfound calm, probably thinking he seemed mature for his age.

"Please, don't mention it. He was the one who made a scene, not you. He got another customer involved in it; that was all."

Even at the end of the twenty-first century, the bad habit of both parties in a fight being to blame was still deeply ingrained in society. The shopkeeper didn't appear to be the sort that appreciated the bad habit of letting the blame remain indefinite.

"I'm grateful you think that way." The man's attitude was black-and-white, something Tatsuya found likable. He bowed naturally in return, feeling no particular need to keep up appearances.

"This happened because our employees were slow to react. If you like, you may feel free to enjoy our food. Without charge, of course."

The man turned and went back into the kitchen before Tatsuya could argue the point.

Despite the casual appearance of the store, the food tasted sublime. The soup that came after the appetizer as well as the main pasta dish that followed

presented themselves as plain challenges of taste to the customers, no tricks or traps involved. They were reminiscent of the shopkeeper's stubbornly frank personality, and had Tatsuya and Miyuki licking their lips.

Dessert came last, and this in particular had Miyuki almost in delirium. It was a light ice-cream cake, about eight inches in diameter. It was light on the toppings decorating it, too. It was enveloped in the rich scent of a thick vanilla flavor—another plain and simple work. Neither too firm nor too fluffy, the cool texture melted in their mouths. It seemed like something a more high-class restaurant easily could have served.

The flavor and texture weren't the only things delighting Miyuki about it. One of the waiters, a young one—a little older than them, and probably the leader of them—had brought only one, with two spoons and no smaller plates. The spoon handles were unnaturally long, and appeared unsuited for one person eating his or her own food.

After placing the dish and spoons in the middle of the table, the waiter whispered to them both, his voice conspiratorial. "A splendid boy for a pretty girl, and a pretty girl for a splendid boy. And a moment of sweetness for the fitting couple."

It had to have been a line they'd written to go along with the sort of place this was. Miyuki, though, seemed to have taken it rather seriously. Her face had reddened and she had smiled with bliss as she'd scooped up some of the ice cream and brought it toward Tatsuya's mouth.

After their dessert scene, which had seemed purposely embarrassing, and with their food finished, Tatsuya took the promised no-charge receipt and gave it to one of the waiters along with a one-time-use money card rather than an electronic wallet. Then he beat a hasty retreat from the restaurant, not giving the waiter any time to argue.

Though his lunch had left him in an unexpectedly refreshed mood (with just a little bit of embarrassment mixed in), nothing ever ended so simply. They were about to walk down the escalator leading out of the restaurant area and into the shopping one when Tatsuya scowled. Miyuki, too, frowned in revulsion, half hiding behind her brother.

The young entertainment professional from the restaurant before was standing there. His female companion was absent. She'd probably left him and gone home. Instead, he had four extra people with him, each appearing to be the opposite of both his looks and physique (in other words, their looks were bad and physiques good).

"You humiliated me in there."

He was controlling his voice for the moment, but the sullenness was clear. Who knew when he'd start screaming?

The kind of stereotypical line meant for a full-on small-fry , thought Tatsuya to himself in disbelief. But he didn't intend to be the one to throw down the gloves first. At least, not yet. "I said this earlier. I'm going to ask you to leave."

Still, if he didn't want to pick a fight, then he might have wanted to say something else. Tatsuya wasn't feeling particularly peaceable, either. He certainly didn't tell the man that his woman ran away because he had no stones, but he didn't try to hide the contempt in his voice. He didn't want to pick the fight, but maybe he was ready to take the man up on one. If he was, then what he'd said had been truly effective.

"…If you want to get on your knees and beg forgiveness, now's your chance."

"You're going to make a scene out here?"

His words and attitude made it pretty clear he was serious, but Tatsuya couldn't believe he'd commit acts of violence in front of all these people. He'd asked the question, actually worried about the man's societal standing.

"Shut it. Damn magicians. You're a mockery of human beings."

Unfortunately, that abuse was enough to get rid of the restraint and hesitation Tatsuya had. He shifted, hiding Miyuki completely from the young man's eyes. The emotion vanished from his expression, and his eyes narrowed into slits.

He didn't know how the man had misunderstood the change in Tatsuya's attitude, but he smiled scornfully, satisfied. "Yeah, I knew I'd seen you somewhere before. That broadcast of the Nine School whatever it was. I thought I'd spotted an amazing raw find, but it turned out to be a terrible

imitation.”

The young man seemed to believe the misinformation that magicians were artificially created humans, made through genetic manipulation. There weren’t many believers, but Tatsuya had both the knowledge and experience of observing such obstinately blind people, so the man’s words didn’t come as a surprise, in and of themselves.

Instead, he noticed the shameless lie that lay within them. “You’re lying,” he said. “Today’s the first time you’ve ever seen either of us. If you’d seen my sister during the Nine School Competition, even on video, vermin like you wouldn’t dare to stand before her.”

A chill began to descend upon them. It wasn’t the sort of chill that would create snow or ice, but one like a steel blade without a single tarnish or speck on it.

“What the hell? You into your sister or something?” jeered the man, smiling widely—his face pale and voice trembling.

Tatsuya didn’t answer the man’s ridicule. In fact, he ignored it completely and continued what he’d been saying. “You probably had those grunts of yours tell you, didn’t you?” His emotions weren’t delicate enough to be bothered by the barking of a cowardly dog raised indoors. Nor could he be asked to tolerate him—he was just a powerless mutt, after all. “Maybe it would be better to go home before making a mistake in front of everyone. Or maybe you need me to say *before you wet yourself* to understand.”

Tatsuya hadn’t been the one insulted. It had been Miyuki. He didn’t have the slightest inclination to settle things peacefully. He took a step toward the man. The hangers-on nervously showed themselves. He couldn’t sense the skill of professional bodyguards from them, but they’d probably seen their share of action. On a street-fight level, anyway. Their clothing didn’t match the job of gang members, but Tatsuya was pretty sure that was what they were. Even if the oft-heard stories of entertainment professionals and violent organizations holding hands weren’t always true, at the very least, they weren’t a complete lie, either.

“What are you so scared of?! Magicians can’t use magic in public. That’s how

they're made!"

The man appeared to have very easily swallowed the urban legends.

Magicians didn't use magic in public because it was restricted by law, not because of any mind or machine control. They were simply warned not to use it without a very good reason: Magicians were encouraged to use magic for rescue purposes in times of accident or disaster, but using it in self-defense was also permitted by law.

The gang members following him didn't seem to believe in the legends as innocently as the young president did. Their hands were behind their backs—they probably had folding knives in their pockets—as they regarded Tatsuya's every motion with care.

Tatsuya took two steps and stopped, opening his hands and holding his chest out. He wasn't acting as though he'd been held up. He waved his open hands a bit, making an appeal to the fact that he had no weapons.

The gang members took that as mockery. They didn't know what kinds of CADs there were or how to control them, but they did know magicians had to use small devices to use magic. They interpreted the act as a declaration—that he didn't need magic to take them on.

And they were right. Tatsuya was, in fact, provoking them: He *didn't* need magic to take them on.

The provocation had immediate effects. The men were lower members anyway—no more than hoodlums. Nothing more than a handful of pieces to throw the young president's way when he called in the emergency. And as was usual for hoodlums, they had a low boiling point.

They all took out their folding knives and leaped at Tatsuya en masse.

It was normal for violent organizations to train their members in group combat. Even normal city-goers were probably part of self-defense groups these days. These people might have been professionals of violence, but without the ability to coordinate, they couldn't make anything out of it.

Two came from the left and right—a knife attack in waves, leaving intervals between.

A young girl shrieked.

It wasn't Miyuki. She actually looked quite relaxed as she stared at Tatsuya's back, silently and without changing her expression. What she had was an absolute faith in her brother's ability.

That faith would never betray her.

Four little attacks. One per person. His fist ripped exactly into their vital spots, sending the gang members to the floor, crawling.

Tatsuya started moving forward again. He advanced one step, and the young president retreated two.

And then the man stopped. He'd run into something, and before he realized it, both his arms were grabbed and he was thrown to his knees. He frantically looked behind him and saw who had jumped in: officers in uniform.

They were a team of eight in total. Two held down the president, four placed handcuffs on the gang members on the floor, and the other two looked at Tatsuya.

Miyuki walked right up behind Tatsuya. The officers glanced between the two of them, and then one stammered, "Err, we'd like to hear what you have to say, if that's all right. Would you mind accompanying us to the station?"

Tatsuya couldn't help but be surprised at how unexpectedly inferior the officer sounded. It was self-defense, yes, but it was still an act of violence in public. He wouldn't have been surprised to be arrested in flagrante delicto.

He looked more closely and saw one of the officers with a bangle-shaped CAD on his left wrist. He was a magician. Maybe he'd realized they were magicians and thought of them as members of the same group. Still, the slightly nervous attitude the officer had concerned him.

"Well, you see, that is…"

The second officer that had come over to them tried to speak, but had trouble and stopped before actually saying anything. This one had a handgun-shaped CAD on his waist.

He brought one hand behind him. Was he getting out handcuffs? Tatsuya

could sense Miyuki's eyebrows raising without turning around to look. He gestured for her to be prudent.

The officer's hand came back out in front of them. Or rather, both of their hands. In front of Miyuki. They both held small notebooks. They didn't look like police memos, though. They were probably for personal use.

"…You're Ms. Miyuki Shiba, right? You were in the Nine School Competition this year. We're actually all graduates of First High, so…if it's okay with you, would you mind…giving us your autograph?"

The other officer was holding out a classic ballpoint pen, rare in this day and age.

Tatsuya and Miyuki exchanged glances, then Miyuki turned to the two officers and grinned.

[AUGUST 31 (3)]

"I never would have thought we'd meet alumni in a place like that," giggled Miyuki, remembering what had transpired that day. Tatsuya, too, let a laugh slip out recalling it all, as if to make up for the laughs he couldn't have at the time. She went on, "Though upon thinking about it, it wasn't that surprising. First High is the only magic high school in Kanto, so most magicians in Tokyo who become police officers would be graduates."

"Yeah. Either way, the fact that they were your fans kept us from being held at the police station for a long time…which means you're to thank. You really helped out."

"You're very welcome. All I want is to be helpful to you, Tatsuya."

"Of course, when they invited us for tea after that, I didn't know what to do. It was pretty hard to turn them down."

"Well, I never! That was not my fault."

They exchanged glances, then smiled broadly again. Miyuki put the straw in her mouth and emptied her glass. The contents of Tatsuya's glass had vanished moments ago as well, leaving only ice behind. After his sister's mouth left the straw and she shifted her attention to him, he got up out of his chair.

“The banks are open now, so we should be going.”

“Yes. I will return after cleaning up the glasses, so could you wait for a moment, Tatsuya?”

“No, I’ll help you clean up,” said Tatsuya.

Not a word of argument left Miyuki’s lips as she quickly swept up the tray. It appeared a rough action, but they didn’t even hear the sounds of ice crashing and clinking together inside the glasses. Though she looked a little dissatisfied, she let her true feelings show in her light step as she followed after Tatsuya into the kitchen.

They went to the bank, though not to withdraw cash. Electronic wallets and money cards, evolved forms of personal checks, had spread throughout the country to replace physical wallets. Cash money now saw very limited use. Still, there was no reason to go to a bank to deposit paychecks, or to balance one’s checkbook, either. Paychecks and transaction records had mostly been converted to online systems, so using a brick-and-mortar bank for those things only happened in special cases.

What had Tatsuya come here for, then? He had to update the identification card he needed to use those online services. There was no set interval for renewing IDs. You could use the services without problems just with the initial settings on one, without updating at all. The ID was important, not renewing it. The act of renewing one was part of a larger security-level control system, and updating your identification data had to be done in person at an actual bank, not online. It was a way to strengthen security.

Tatsuya made a point of renewing his ID once every three months. On average, people renewed them every half a year, so every three months was on the more frequent side. Some of the sample included highly strung users who would renew theirs every week, though, and compared to them, it wasn’t that uncommon.

Inside the air-conditioned building, Tatsuya and Miyuki waited in line to be called, their shoulders pressed together. Not because they were cold, mind you; they’d been clinging together even out on the blazing-hot road leading from their cabinet station to the bank.

They did it to stop people from hitting on Miyuki. Clearly indiscreet boys of the same age didn't usually try to get involved with Miyuki, perhaps thinking she wouldn't pay attention to them from the start, but it was a huge pain to get those who did to give up. So when they were out in public, they purposely made themselves seem like a couple.

Rather than wanting to buy something, wanting to go somewhere, or wanting to see something, Miyuki's main goal in wanting to leave the house might have been to be close to her brother like this. As evidence, despite the bank's waiting lobby being a fairly boring room, she was in a very good mood.

It was a brother complex, and there was no room for excuses.

Be that as it may, because of their limited uses, modern banks didn't keep as much cash on hand as they used to. They possessed plenty of money cards in place of that cash, but the ones issuing them could stop them from being used via their electronic systems. They weren't signed and circulated like checks, so the only ones that would bother would be their holders. Those reasons added up to bank robberies turning into a rare sight on the level of endangered species.

At least, *he'd* thought they were.

"Looks like we came across something unusual…"

Now, the two of them were present at the scene hosting one of those endangered species.

No sooner had four men burst into the bank than they'd whipped out crude-looking modified pistols and threatened the bank clerks and customers. The knit ski masks hiding their features at the hottest part of summer were quite retro. They also wore slightly dirty jackets, and thrust a large leather travel bag onto the counter. They stuck to such a traditional style that Tatsuya almost thought they'd walked into a theme park attraction by mistake, but judging by the desperation in the teller's voice as she groaned, this was a real-life bank robbery.

"What shall we do, Tatsuya?" asked Miyuki in her normal tone, looking up at the brother she clung to. "If you'd prefer, I will…" And, as usual, her voice implied she couldn't let her brother be bothered with something so petty as

this.

“No, there’s no need for us to get involved,” said Tatsuya with a smile, putting his arm around her shoulder, patting it a few times to calm her down. Miyuki happily leaned into Tatsuya’s chest.

It was incredibly clear from their attitudes that they were taking no notice whatsoever of the bank robbery, much less all the other customers, frozen with uneasy expressions. The heartwarming mood they exuded amid the wild situation, needless to say, stood out.

To explain Tatsuya’s thinking in an effort to preserve his honor (?): He hadn’t told his little sister to disregard the current happenings just so that he could flirt with her. The act had purely been to pacify her, since she was getting ahead of herself. Bank robberies had become a rare crime, but that didn’t mean banks had neglected defense systems. A bank robbery with mere modified pistols would never succeed.

Proof of that fact played out before the customers’ eyes. There were clear shields reaching down from the ceiling toward the counters anyway, and those couldn’t be crossed. The transparent shields slid down in front of the bank tellers inside them, closing up the open window portion in front.

The travel bag in the window was crushed, almost torn apart. If one of the robbers’ arms had been there, it might not have been severed, but there was enough force to easily imagine severe bone fractures.

One of the robbers fired at the shield. The bullet dug into the first shield layer and stopped. The outer, clear shield seemed to be made of a highly viscous, almost fluidlike substance. It was probably to prevent collateral damage from ricocheting bullets. Tatsuya was impressed—it was good forethought.

The robber spat out a few mumbled curses, then turned back to the lobby. Tatsuya, who had been watching the man, averted his eyes so they wouldn’t meet. Instead, he looked into Miyuki’s face. Personally feeling that she was suddenly being gazed at, she hastily looked down in embarrassment. Tatsuya’s hand remained on her shoulder.

The corner of the robber’s eye, mostly hidden behind the ski mask, could be seen rising. He’d momentarily forgotten the guests in the lobby—but despite

the fear and the tension among them, the man couldn't be called especially impatient. There was no doubt the robber was staring at the two of them.

Tatsuya was sensitive to malicious stares. He couldn't serve as a bodyguard if he wasn't. It was impossible for him to miss the hatefulness in the man's glare. He also noticed a sadistic glint in his eyes.

Miyuki noticed the sadism in the robber's gaze as well, and she hugged Tatsuya's chest much more tightly. It made her look scared; the robber noticed that, too, and his lips curled up in a satisfied grin underneath the ski mask.

But she wasn't feeling tense. Her expression of fear was only on the surface; underneath she was playfully chiding him. Tatsuya understood without even needing to think about it.

A dry smirk almost made its way onto his lips, but he trapped it under his steely poker face. Instead, he grasped Miyuki's shoulder more firmly and gave off a look like he was trying his hardest to suppress his fear. He hoped it didn't come off as feigned; it didn't happen all the time, but he did have a tendency to get carried away.

All four bank robbers focused on them. Under the ski masks, their upturned lips could not be seen, but their eyes showed they were grinning. The pair's little performance seemed to have stoked the fires of sadism inside them.

Tatsuya pretended, a little exaggeratedly, to shiver. *I'm a terrible actor, if I do say so myself*, he thought, but the robbers seemed to be quite happy with the gesture.

Their attention had turned away from the other customers now. Considering the fact that the store had even taken ricocheting bullets into account in their defense systems—there was no way the robbery countermeasures would end after only cutting the lobby off from the people behind the counter.

A moment after their attention focused on the couple, the latticework ceiling disappeared, leaving beams behind. At some point they'd swapped the ceiling panels with 3-D images. A person dropped down onto the robbers from one of those beams.

Burly police officers had the robbers arrested in mere moments.

Tatsuya watched it happen, feeling almost no surprise at all. A simple 3-D image screen was no obstacle for someone who could detect the presence of others. He knew the police officer was stationed overhead; that was why he decided to wait and watch.

The employees of the bank, of course, didn't share his unique circumstances. When Miyuki buried her face in his chest, they naturally interpreted it as her breaking down from the tension and crying. Tatsuya putting his arm around her head only furthered the illusion. In reality, she was just trying to hide her relaxed expression of jubilation from the police officer and employees, who had just done a very serious job.

As Tatsuya cradled Miyuki's head, the bank manager came out and bowed to them. After asking Tatsuya's name, he offered a yearlong exemption from any extra fees in apology for the danger they had faced. Tatsuya wasn't sure what expression he should make, so he kept his poker face on—which looked like a stiff, tense face to the bank manager—and accepted the proposal. After all, it was true. It *had* been a dangerous situation for normal people.

He told them he was there to renew his ID, and the manager called an employee to start the procedure for him. Tatsuya gently straightened Miyuki up. She let him lead her by the shoulder, hiding her expression with her long hair.

Renewals were conducted in a completely private room with a machine, with no worry of sneak photography or wiretapping. Once they entered, the need to be concerned about the eyes and ears of others was gone. The siblings exchanged glances and broke out into laughter, finally unable to endure it any longer.

The bank robbery they'd happened across was nothing more than a single panel in the comic of the slightly strange day they'd had. No doubt they'd already filed away these "incidents" on the last day of summer vacation as just a few more "memories of the summer."

The Irregular at Magic High School

The Student Council Election and the Queen

THE STUDENT COUNCIL ELECTION AND THE QUEEN

"We'll be retiring this month, too, huh…?"

The thing to subtly change the mood in the student council room, in which they'd been excitedly talking about their summer vacations, had been a remark from Mayumi.

Until then, on this first day of the new term, the student council room lunchtime (which always had a considerably biased ratio of girls to boys) had been taken up by students recounting their experiences of the summer.

In these times, during which it was typical to protect one's chastity until marriage—to use an old way of describing it—these "summer experiences" were quite a bit more sobered than the so-called age of free sex. However, the reason women had stopped having premarital sex was because it was now seen as "cool" not to flirt with men. The result was the same, but the mind-set was significantly different than the days before the age of free sex.

Still, it wasn't like there were any social penalties for women who did go all the way, so there were certainly some girls who did. But the majority of girls liked to brag about games of chicken, where they slammed on the brakes right at the last possible second. Not to mention the fact that none of the girls in this student council room would ever sell themselves cheaply. Plus, all of them had several methods of *self-defense* if it came to that. There would never be any *accidents* or *criminal acts* committed.

Even so, a succession of lines like "He tore off my parka" or "He pushed me down onto the bed" or "His breath on my neck" would make any healthy young

man uncomfortable. Not to mention when they casually ended the story with “I would have liked a more romantic mood” or “I got bored, so I put him to sleep.” Those men wouldn’t be able to stand it anymore.

Either he was no longer treated as a male or they had forgotten he was actually there (it *could* have been an accident), but Tatsuya had gotten fed up with this “summer experience” talk that they weren’t supposed to let members of the opposite sex hear. For a little while now, he’d been concentrating on a grimoire (a unique paper document he found in the disciplinary committee room), so he missed the conversation shifting toward the subject of the council members’ retirements.

But because the new topic could have involved him—in fact, it was almost sure to—his keen sense of hearing picked up on it.

“Oh, now that you mention it, the student council elections are next month, aren’t they?” remarked Tatsuya, looking for confirmation.

The answer came from Suzune. “Yes. The elections are at the end of the month, but we do have to put on a display. We’ll have to announce them by the end of next week and get all the necessary preparations done.”

Suzune, on the other hand, had sat through the entire girls-only talk—which might not have been rated R but definitely PG-13—without letting her cool and collected expression break down. He had to wonder about that; she was a girl their age, after all.

He had his questions, but he asked something else for his second question, of course. “Only a display?” He was commenting on how she’d implied the election would just be for show.

Suzune understood what he meant. “We have elections if there are multiple candidates. However, there are only so many students willing to become student council president, so it ends up being an internal battle.”

He thought back and remembered hearing something like that on the first day he’d been called to this room. “Does that mean the student council president is decided without needing an election?”

“Not necessarily. It’s been that way for five years—meaning it was different

six years ago. No non–student council member has ever become president, so even if we do have an election, it would likely be a one-on-one contest between Hattori and Nakajou. They'll probably talk it out and decide who the candidate will be before the election."

I see. An internal battle indeed, thought Tatsuya.

One of those major contenders, however, wasn't convinced. "I can't possibly be student council president! We don't have to talk it out, because I don't plan on being a candidate."

That was enough to convince Tatsuya. Someone already teary-eyed at this point wouldn't be a good student council president. Although…

"If that happens, we'll have our first student council president in six years who isn't at the top of his class…"

"I guess Hanzou will be the next president…"

Neither the disciplinary committee chairwoman nor the current student council president sounded very happy with that. Leaving aside their personal likes and dislikes, Azusa was probably closer to them on a policy level. Tatsuya kind of understood why they'd want to put her in the president's chair, but… *If she doesn't actually want the job, then…*

If there were no candidates at all, they'd end up having to persuade her to do it, but if Hattori was a candidate, then he was the most appropriate to have there.

"Azusa, you were the top of the class last year when you enrolled?" Miyuki's thoughts, though, had gone in a different direction than his. He was caught somewhat off guard, but he knew what she was thinking by her remark. He realized he, too, had been thinking Hattori was the top student last year.

Mayumi nodded toward his sister. "That's right. There's not much of a gap in grades right now, is there?" she asked Azusa.

Suzune was the one to respond. "In theory, Isori is at the top of the class, with Nakajou in second and Hattori in third. In practice, Hattori is at the top, with Nakajou second by a slim margin. Hattori is also first overall, with Nakajou again second by a slim margin."

Is there…a point in putting the first semester rankings up on the big conference display to explain? They're on the school bulletin boards… thought Tatsuya. There was an old saying about being careful who to associate with, but any serious student would never be able to compete with this president and chairwoman on equal terms. That was his assessment of Suzune.

"Azusa's practical grades are higher than Chiyoda's, aren't they?" Miyuki had already seen the rankings, too, but she probably had a different impression now, upon seeing the name of someone she'd become friends with during the Nine School Competition.

"Kanon doesn't have much attention to detail, after all."

Mayumi smiled drily, then corrected Mari's blunt criticism. "At the very least, shouldn't you phrase that as, 'she's dynamic,'" she said. "Attention to detail is Ah-chan's thing, so she's not meant for sporting events like the Nines."

"But next year she'll probably have to be a competitor, too."

Azusa had been watching Mayumi support her as though it didn't concern her, but she reacted to the bomb thrown by Mari with a jolt.

"…I know I'm the one who brought it up, but…that's next year, Nakajou. There's no point getting ahead of ourselves about it now."

"Y-you're right. Next year…we'll have lots of promising athletes besides Chiyoda, like Shiba and Kitayama and Mitsui…" she said, forcing out a superficial laugh.

Mari sighed back at her. "Yes, we had plenty of promising freshman girls this year…but I don't think second place in the class should push the responsibility onto her underclassmen."

"No, I wouldn't, I would never force them. I just meant, well, we need to have the right people in the right places, and…"

What she was saying seemed logical enough, but she couldn't argue very much against those bemused eyes on her. Once again, Tatsuya thought the role of student council president would definitely be hard for her.

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When he stepped into the disciplinary committee HQ for the first time in six weeks, it was unusually crowded.

“I don’t recall hearing we were planning a meeting,” mentioned Tatsuya to Mari, who was standing next to the entrance for some reason.

She nodded, as if it were a matter of grave concern. “You wouldn’t have. I don’t remember notifying you.”

“Then is this a new-term ceremony or…?”

“The only entrance ceremony we have is at the beginning of the year.”

“There aren’t any particular committee functions, then?”

“Not really.”

Tatsuya bowed slightly to her, then walked away toward the locker with the personal video recorders in it…and then stopped after taking three steps. He turned around to Mari, who was standing at the same distance as she had been before. In other words, she’d stayed in step with him.

“…What is it?”

“No functions, but that doesn’t change the fact that this is a big event for the disciplinary committee.”

“Oh…” replied Tatsuya, exhausted.

Mari sighed at him. “…I think you should fix that habit of yours where you don’t care about the rest of the world.”

“I browse the major news.”

“I’m talking about things closer to you,” she said, shaking her head as if to say there was no fixing him. At least, that’s how it seemed to Tatsuya.

But Mari was the one who broke first. “The disciplinary committee doesn’t have terms of office.”

“I am aware. I do find it rather strange, though, that you don’t have to quit even though new people get elected.”

“We may cling to the position, but it’s not a very comfortable one to have. Every year we replace the people who graduate anyway, so not many members

quit before that." Mari made a slight slumping gesture with her shoulders. Probably an unconscious display of her being fed up with the explanations around school about why the disciplinary committee had the special privileges and rank that they did.

"One of the seniors selected by the club committee resigned with the end of the last term. His replacement is coming today."

Tatsuya raised his eyebrows in a display of incomplete understanding. "And we're having a welcoming party?"

"No, not at all. You know as well as the rest of us we're not that unified as a group."

She was right. The words *divided* and *opposed* fit the disciplinary committee better than *unified*. That was why Tatsuya felt confused. What was this gathering for, then?

"It's just rare for a girl to be chosen for the committee. The bunch of idlers came to see."

I see, thought Tatsuya. His upperclassmen had all come here not out of a sense of camaraderie but of curiosity. But if that was the reason, then…

"You must have gotten attention when you were chosen, too, Chairwoman."

Mari fell silent, her face sullen. It didn't seem to be something she wanted to remember. Maybe she'd been standing at the door so she could keep an eye on everyone, so that her underclassman wouldn't have to feel uncomfortable.

"…Well, we'll leave my case aside. I'd like you to look after her for a while once we get her settled into the committee."

"…Do you mean me, Chairwoman?" It was reasonable he'd come back with a question like that. Chores and errands were for the underlings to do, but backing up a new member definitely wasn't a job to leave to an underling.

"You, Tatsuya."

Mari's face, though, was 100 percent serious.

"I have a feeling I know who the new person coming is, but…I still don't think this is a job for a freshman."

“No, not at all. Nobody in the disciplinary committee is more suitable for this job than you.”

The placement of emphasis on the words *disciplinary committee* unconsciously made sense to him, and decided his defeat.

The new committee member was exactly the one he’d expected.

“Now that we’re all introduced…Kanon, I want you to go with Tatsuya for the day and get an idea of what patrolling is like.”

Introductions didn’t seem necessary for a person as famous as Kanon, but they’d gone through the motions anyway. After that, some of which had been excessively excited, Mari came back over to Tatsuya, the last one in the room, and announced the words above.

As always, Tatsuya didn’t seem to have the right to refuse. In fact, based on him staying behind after all the other committees left, Kanon’s own choice could only have been Tatsuya or Mari.

“Huh, why? You’re not going to teach me, Mari?”

And, as he thought, she seemed to prefer the latter. He was right there, too. Her attitude was fairly rude, no ifs about it, but Tatsuya could understand the complaint. It didn’t have to be Mari. If it was a junior like her, that would be fine, but Kanon probably didn’t appreciate Mari making an underclassman out to be her elder. But Tatsuya, too, wanted Mari to be Kanon’s instructor, so internally he cheered Kanon on, hoping she pressed further.

“You won’t learn much from me. Anyone with a guilty conscience takes one look at me and sneaks away. In that regard, Tatsuya has the longest list of incidents he’s run into in the whole committee. The most arrests made, too, incidentally.”

“Oh, I see. That makes sense.”

…Unfortunately, Kanon quite easily agreed.

That aside, Tatsuya was stricken with the urge to ask, “‘Incidentally’?” but he gave up immediately. He knew the effort would only go to waste.

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“There’s no set patrol route you need to follow. You also don’t have to look around every single corner of the school. I’ve never been on patrol with another member, but I believe many of them only go around specific routes.”

He wasn’t happy about it, but he still had to do his job. Tatsuya was trying to be serious as he lectured Kanon on the job description while they walked together, but…

“Huh… Shiba, you’re really adaptable.”

…The sudden impression of him was wholly unrelated to his explanation.

“I mean, right after you enrolled, you started doing this important job of patrolling the school all by yourself. I’ve heard tales of your heroism from club recruitment week.”

“Well, there was a lot going on back then…”

He felt like her admiration was somewhat misdirected, but he didn’t deliberately argue the point. Suddenly throwing him into a patrol job by himself was normal; Kanon was the one acting overprotective.

But if he’d told her that truth, nobody would be happy. Instead of arguing, he continued his lecture: “For my part, I primarily focus on checking the practice rooms. Past patrol reports indicate very few cases of problems occurring in classrooms.”

“Since they’re always monitored. Even if you wanted to do something outrageous like in a novel, you couldn’t.”

“A novel…?” Now he was interested in what kinds of novels she was reading. But he didn’t know what he’d do if she confessed to him that they were all erotic titles, so he put a lid on his curiosity.

“You don’t go to the gym or the sports grounds? I’d think more problems would happen there than in the practice rooms.”

“As long as nothing special is going on, like the club recruitment week, those are under the club committee’s jurisdiction, as a rule. Of course, if a fight were to break out, the disciplinary committee would be the ones to step in.”

Kanon had been placed in the disciplinary committee by the club committee’s

selection, after all. Plus, she was a regular in track and field (who specialized in obstacle courses). She would already know about the club committee's privileges of autonomy.

"It's still okay just to take a look around, though, right? I mean, if a problem did happen, it would be too late by the time you ran over there."

And yet she still says things like this, thought Tatsuya. *She must be totally willing to get into a turf war…*

◇ ◇ ◇

Upon Kanon's insistence, they decided to focus mainly on the gymnasiums for their patrol today. (Tatsuya was rather serious in his doubt of whether he really needed to accompany her or not.) Because of its location relative to the school, the first one they visited was small gym number two. By pure coincidence, the *kenjutsu* club was using it to practice today.

"…Shiba, my man. You've got a different girl with you every time I see you."

"Please stop making things out to be scandalous."

Kirihara was the one to address him, his tone hard to judge as serious or joking—though Tatsuya felt a certain percentage was doubtlessly serious.

"That's right, Kirihara. You're being rude to Chiyoda. Her heart belongs to Isori."

"…Sure, that's fine, too."

It was Sayaka's remark that caused Kanon to wince and Tatsuya to heave a sigh.

The reason Sayaka, a kendo club member, was taking part in *kenjutsu* practice wasn't because they were on a date using club activity time.

Ever since the incident that spring, more and more people started to hold the opinion that magic-based competitive clubs and nonmagic-based ones should have more mutual interaction with one another. Especially for the clubs whose sports were originally the same, where the only rule was whether or not you could use magic—the tendency had sprung up to get everyone to come out of their shells and proactively adopt the strong points of each side.

The initiative had been spearheaded by the kendo and *kenjutsu* clubs, with Sayaka and Kirihara paving the way for the first chance to participate in an interclub exchange (since they were also part of the original incident that caused the friction).

That didn't mean, of course, that the two of them weren't getting along with each other during practice.

Back to the subject at hand.

Despite Sayaka's advice (?), Tatsuya decided to explain the situation to Kirihara, who was still looking at him suspiciously. "Chairwoman Watanabe ordered us to go together."

And despite his earlier remark, he couldn't resist making the excuse. It would be one thing if he'd volunteered for this, but the job had been forced upon him and even stigmatized him afterward. He couldn't help it.

"I see! So the rumors were true." Kirihara believed him unexpectedly easily but added a little extra to the statement.

"Rumors?"

"What? Shiba, you didn't know?"

"The rumors are that Chairwoman Watanabe is setting Chiyoda up to be the next disciplinary committee chairwoman. I didn't really believe it, since I figured she wasn't the sort of person who'd want to go through all that trouble."

After Sayaka passed the baton to Kirihara for the explanation, Tatsuya chose to remain silent. He knew those rumors were perfectly true.

"That's why I told you she would if it was for Chiyoda. Watanabe really likes her. If she wanted to install someone in her place, especially Chiyoda, who has no experience, she'd do all that and more."

Tatsuya's staying quiet didn't quell the excitement, though.

"You don't say? I didn't know she was a treasure trove on the outside and inside. You're right, though. They do make a pretty picture when they're together."

Out of all the theater entertainment that had appeared in recent times, one

could say the most traditional of them was the girls' musical. That was why Tatsuya didn't feel like Kirihara saying she was a "treasure trove on the inside" was especially *dishonorable*, but Kanon's emotions seemed to have come to a different conclusion.

"Really, now? Say what you want about me, but giving Mari the *yuri* treatment… You've got some nerve!"

"Wait a minute!"

An aura of flames rose up behind Kanon like the fierce deity Acala. (It was actually just a diffusion of energized psionic particles.) "I didn't say anything about that!"

In terms of pure power, Kanon was number one among the juniors, and her cries of anger were high-pitched as well. Kirihara waved his arms and shook his head frantically. "Words are cheap!"

Tatsuya sighed heavily at Kanon's unnecessarily strong pronouncement, and then stuck out his right arm, quickly and smoothly.

"*Hyan*!"

At the same time a discordant yelp rang out, the storm of dancing psions settled down.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" cried Kanon, slumping to the floor, her face red, her eyes indicating that her current condition hadn't been caused by pain.

"…That worked better than I expected. I honestly thought all the talk about pleasure points was fake."

A pressure-point technique he'd learned from Yakumo. As he stared at his index finger, which he'd used to poke the "key pleasure point" on her back (he'd just learned about it this morning), Tatsuya mumbled to himself, making Kanon's face flush even more.

But Tatsuya's expression went back to normal. "Chiyoda, you're a disciplinary officer. You can't be the one causing trouble."

She groaned. "But…"

"No buts. Listen, if you come under sexual harassment, you can just take legal

action with the punishment committee. As a rule, a disciplinary committee member's testimony is taken as evidence."

"Hey, wait!"

With the conversation suddenly on the verge of a major upheaval, Kirihara quickly tried to interrupt, but Tatsuya and Kanon didn't even glance at him.

"Do. You. Understand? In the future, please refrain from causing moments like this that could boil over."

"…All right, I got it."

Kanon looked away, her face sullen. She didn't hear it when Sayaka muttered, "…Wasn't what Shiba just did also harassment?"

"Come to think of it, the student council elections are coming up, aren't they?"

Now that the chaotic situation had finally settled down, and perhaps reminded of it by talk of the next disciplinary committee chairperson, Sayaka broached the topic for the second time today (for Tatsuya, anyway). They moved near the wall so they wouldn't get in the other club members' way, standing in a circle trading idle chatter.

"End of the month, right?" answered Kirihara to her question. "Yeah, I guess they are coming up."

"They say it'll be a choice between Hattori and Nakajou." Kanon quickly added herself as a friendly member of the conversation, either because they were all juniors or there was no hierarchy obsession present.

"No, Hattori's not gonna do it," Kirihara stated.

Though it was the second time Tatsuya had talked about this, a new fact now came to light.

"Wait, really?" Kanon seemed just as surprised at the news.

"Yeah. He's been recommended for the next club committee chairman. He wants to do it, too. He said he won't be in the election."

"Hattori? Really…? I guess that's reasonable. You have to have more brute

strength for the club committee anyway.” Kanon seemed convinced as she nodded at the young man’s answer.

Now that they said something, Tatsuya, too, had an image of the club committee as more rough around the edges than the student council. They already had a lot of elements fighting over things like headhunting and job stealing. Katsuto had them all under his watchful stare for now, so nothing major would happen. If he were ordinary, though, it wouldn’t be the same.

But still…, thought Tatsuya. That meant neither of the two strongest candidates for the next student council president would be in the election.

Who would the next president be?

◇ ◇ ◇

On the way home after patrolling…

Miyuki was finished with her student council duties. Leo, Erika, Mizuki, Shizuku, and Honoka were finished with their club activities. Mikihiko had finished with his independent training in the lab building.

After meeting up with all the usual suspects of the group for the first time in a while, Tatsuya and the others now sat around a café table, at a place on the way to the train station.

And at some point, once again, the conversation turned to the student council elections.

Leo groaned in thought. “To be honest, I’m not sure she’s very reliable.”—A harsh opinion of Azusa.

“But her abilities are top-notch.”

“I think the student council president should be someone nice and kind.”

Shizuku and Mizuki seemed to be supporters of Azusa.

“In any case, Hattori doing it is completely out of the question now, right?” Erika asked once again.

“Yeah,” confirmed Tatsuya. “He heard it from the man himself. Even our current president couldn’t snatch away the person they decided would be the next chairman of the club committee.”

“Right… I don’t think any of them could stand up to Chairman Juumonji.” Erika nodded to herself a few times.

“Then doesn’t that mean Nakajou is the only one who can run for office?” asked Mizuki, bringing the topic back to their predictions on the next president.

“But she said she didn’t want to, right? I got it. Miyuki, you should run!”

Miyuki’s eyes widened at Erika’s unexpected suggestion. “Wait, Erika, what are you saying?”

Surprisingly, though, Erika seemed to like her own idea. “It’s not like there’s a rule that says a freshman can’t be student council president, right? I’d think she’s powerful and famous enough for it. She won the rookies’ Pillar Break at the Nines, *plus* she won the main Mirage Bat event over all the juniors and seniors.”

“Don’t be unreasonable. A high school student’s ability can’t be measured on magic power alone.”

“You have Tatsuya for the academic side, don’t you? If you were president you could name whoever you want as officers.”

Mizuki then entered the exchange between Erika and Miyuki, on Erika’s side. “You’re right. President Saegusa said she wanted to abolish the Course 1 rule, didn’t she?”

“You too, Mizuki…?” Miyuki said, meaning to chide her, though a waver stole into her voice.

“Yeah! Plus, if you were president, you could get Tatsuya out of the disciplinary committee…”

Erika’s whispers of Mephistopheles (the girls’ edition) clearly affected Miyuki.

“Couldn’t Tatsuya be student council president instead?”

“Hah, that could be pretty cool.”

He wasn’t trying to compete with his childhood friend, but this time Mikihiko was the one to suggest something crazy. Leo was getting carried away, too.

Tatsuya looked at Leo in mild exasperation. “Not happening,” he said flatly.

“Miyuki might be able to gain some support, but there’s no possibility I’d get any votes.”

Shizuku, however, thought differently. “But you were a key figure in the competition.”

“Well, Shizuku, that’s… Even if I concede that I did contribute to our victory, I only appeared in one event. You can’t tell what’s going on behind the scenes from the other side.”

Tatsuya once again refused the possibility of entering the running, but then Honoka gave a zealous rebuttal: “But I would definitely vote for Tatsuya if he ran!”

“So would I, Tatsuya,” agreed Miyuki. “If you were to run for office, I would do anything, from making campaign speeches to handing out flyers.”

Thus Miyuki and Honoka subtly competed over him from either side. Tatsuya felt their enthusiasm bringing on a mild headache.

[2]

A week passed after the new term began.

The student council presidential election would be announced very soon. Even the unconcerned freshmen (particularly those in the Course 2 classes, E through H) began to talk about who would run and who was likely to win.

Tatsuya had said his good mornings to his classmates and just booted up the terminal at his seat when Mikihiko, who had come earlier, said good morning to him.

“Good morning, Mikihiko. You come early a lot.”

“Ha-ha, I do. I finally got them to let me participate in our morning *gongyo* services recently, so I’d like to take it a little easier… I guess it’s a habit.”

The term *gongyo* was originally a Buddhist term, but because of its syncretism with Shinto, Mikihiko’s Shinto family performed it as well. Morning *gongyo* was basically an early-morning religious ritual. Mikihiko had said they’d let him participate, but Tatsuya knew from fragments of what he’d heard from Mikihiko and Erika in the past that he actually meant “I’m able to participate again.”

He felt both happy and envious of his friend for steadily regaining his strength and then improving even beyond that. Mari had joked to him in the past about Mikihiko transferring to Course 1, but now Tatsuya thought he might actually be the first upward transfer.

“By the way, Tatsuya. You might think this is weird to ask, but…”

“*Is* it weird?”

The question sounded blunt to others, but both of them had already learned that if they responded politely, the conversation wouldn’t get anywhere. They silently matched each other’s pace.

“Well, I don’t think it’s that weird. Is it true that you’re going to run for student council president?”

“…What?”

Oh, he’d heard what Mikihiko asked just fine. Tatsuya’s response came from a sense of surprise that was too big for him to handle.

“Well, I mean, there are rumors saying you’re going to run for it.”

“Rumors…?” Hadn’t Mikihiko been the one to suggest he run last week?

“It wasn’t me!” Tatsuya hadn’t intended to sharpen his glare, but Mikihiko hastily claimed innocence, adding gestures to his defense. “Mr. Tsuzura asked me after school yesterday in the practice room. He said, ‘Is it true that Tatsuya Shiba is going to enter the running for student council president?’”

Mr. Tsuzura was a licensed teacher whose area of expertise was magic geometry, though he had deep knowledge of magic engineering as well. He taught juniors at the moment.

Previously, he was a lecturer at Magic University. Known as an excellent young scientist in the academic world, he was considered close to having the position of assistant professor, but his way of thinking—and his words and actions, too—tended to be a little too freewheeling. He’d been thrown into an affiliated high school partly as a reprimand by their PR department…but he didn’t let it bother him. In fact, he reveled in being able to do whatever research he wanted.

Perhaps because of such traits, he was one of the most helpful teachers to Course 2 students, and despite Tatsuya being in a different grade than he was assigned, he’d come to Tatsuya for a chat several times.

“I didn’t know false rumors like that were spreading…”

“Oh, so it’s false, then? You mentioned you weren’t going to run, so I thought it was a little strange.” Mikihiko’s expression looked let down.

Tatsuya nodded, astonished. “I don’t think I’d get any votes even if I ran, and I didn’t want to do so anyway. Why are rumors like that going around the teachers?”

“Who knows?” Mikihiko wouldn’t have been privy to the internal affairs of the faculty room, and as expected, he could only tilt his head in doubt.

Tatsuya hadn’t asked the question expecting an answer, either, though. It was more like an idle complaint.

“It ain’t just the teachers.”

Contrary to his expectations, though, an eavesdropper nearby provided evidence that Tatsuya really didn’t want to hear.

“My seniors in my club are making remarks like that, too. Everyone seems weirdly open to the idea,” said Leo, from one seat over.

Erika, who was leaning against Mizuki’s desk, agreed. “Oh! Now that you mention it, I overheard something yesterday. That a freshman disciplinary committee member was running for student council president. That would have to be you, Tatsuya, wouldn’t it?”

Would it? Tatsuya didn’t want to agree, but now that Leo and Erika had brought their own similar information to Mikihiko, he couldn’t deny it.

“Me too…”

Are you kidding? Mizuki, too? Tatsuya wanted to collapse over his desk.

“Yesterday during counseling, I think I remember the topic coming up.”

But after hearing the rumor, he decided to be positive and proactive in dealing with this.

In more concrete terms, he felt like it was time to ask Haruka a few questions. Whether or not that was positive, though, might have garnered a few objections.

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The biggest dissenter in terms of Tatsuya’s course of action being expressed as “positive” was probably Her.

“It’s still first period.”

Her attitude was unbecoming of a counselor. When Tatsuya entered the room, she scowled at him. She seemed to be wounded from when he’d cheated the No-Head Dragon information out of her—though as far as he knew, he was under no contractual restrictions as to how he would use the information he’d bought.

“I finished my work for first period.”

Of course, Haruka could dislike him all she wanted. It wasn’t even an itch for Tatsuya. They both shared certain secret information with each other, but the cards in his hand were stronger.

“…Blasted honor students.”

“I’m no honor student. My practical skills exam scores were just barely passing.”

“…Yes, but when you say it, it sounds sarcastic.”

One might possibly have been justified in calling them close enough that they needed no formalities between them.

“It’s the truth. Anyway, there was something I was worried about, so I wanted to hear your opinion on it.”

Haruka’s eyes widened at his suggestion, and, perhaps on reflex, she straightened up in her seat. “You can talk to me about anything.”

Sure, that was a splendidly professional mind-set to have, but she did seem to lack the ability to learn quickly. It was about time she figured out that the topics a counselor could talk about didn’t always have to extend to any “worries” he had.

“What I’m worried about are the student council elections coming up at the end of the month.”

“Yes, they seem to be having issues finding candidates to run. What’s wrong? Did someone ask you to convince your sister to run?”

“Yes, that would certainly worry me as well. But the thing I wanted to talk to you about today was a different rumor.”

“A rumor?”

“Yes. Apparently, the faculty have been saying I’ll run for student council president. You wouldn’t happen to have any idea about that, would you?”

Tatsuya looked straight into Haruka’s eyes as he said that, and for a moment—only a moment—her expression said *Oh, shit* to him.

“I heard from Shibata that you talked about it yesterday. I would very much like to hear the details.”

He’d been watching her closely enough, however, to spot any change in her expression, no matter how quick. Tatsuya wasn’t about to let that slip. “I know this sounds ridiculous, but you wouldn’t happen to be starting these rumors, would you?”

Haruka’s facial muscles went through a hectic cycle of tightening and loosening. When she finished, she put on a common, insincere smile. “Oh, come on. That is ridiculous. I would never do anything so irresponsible.”

Her lips weren’t drawn back at all. She seemed to have improved her ability to pull together facial expressions.

“…How on earth did a false rumor like that get started?”

“Oh…so it was false after all. Well, that makes sense… You’re not one to bear the full brunt of something. You’re more the mastermind, the secret agent type.”

“I won’t deny that.”

They exchanged mean-looking grins. That could have been an effect from their shared tutelage. That wasn’t enough of a commonality for them to warm up to each other, though.

“So how, exactly, did the false rumor of me running for student council president get started?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know much about it myself.”

“I see. I would be fine with what parts of it you do know.”

“…”

Tatsuya waited for Haruka’s response as though he’d just made the most obvious question in the world. She then realized no amount of playing dumb would get her anywhere.

“…I’m not exactly sure who started it…but it ended up being like a game of telephone: ‘Hattori won’t be running, Nakajou won’t be running,’ ‘Now the student council is having trouble finding candidates,’ ‘Wouldn’t it be interesting

if Shiba ran…' At some point, it went from 'Apparently Shiba isn't going to run' to 'Apparently Tatsuya Shiba is going to run.' 'Wait, Shiba?' 'Yes, the one from the disciplinary committee.' 'Oh, the one who appeared in the rookie competition? Huh, wouldn't that be a sight?' …And that's basically how it happened."

After listening to that, Tatsuya became so exhausted he felt like he was going to slide off his chair onto the floor. "…That's so stupid. Why did the teachers believe that?"

Still, rumors were by nature stupid and irresponsible. If his classmates or upperclassmen were idly chatting about it, it wouldn't have bothered him. He knew he couldn't let everything bother him.

But in the faculty room? Even teachers like Tsuzura who were excellent—at least in terms of intelligence—were treating it seriously? He couldn't exactly bury his head in the sand over this.

Though he still hadn't rejected the possibility of someone purposely manipulating information, either.

"The teachers actually seem to be taking it more seriously than the students. We controlled all the information about what happened in April, but the faculty knows the truth."

"…About the incident with Blanche?"

"Mmhmm. A lot of the teachers think very highly of you for being the central factor in resolving it."

It was a surprise to Tatsuya, and he knew it shouldn't have been. He hadn't thought he'd stood out that much during the incident… All he could say was that he wasn't being aware enough.

"Juumonji blacked out all the information, so we don't know exactly what happened. But we know you got rid of terrorists by using force, and that's why they think so well of you. And since the student council president at a magic high school is a job that demands the use of force sometimes, there are a bunch of teachers who think it would be interesting if someone with such dominating ability held the spot, even if it was a freshman."

…This is not looking good, thought Tatsuya.

As he thanked Haruka and excused himself, he knew he'd have to do something about it.

Before he left the counseling room, he didn't forget to tell her that he wouldn't look into how she had gotten her information.

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Unfortunately, there were only so many ways he could deal with groundless rumors. And he wouldn't be able to do it on his own. So maybe he should have been happy to welcome *her* as a foothold to breaking the deadlock.

He tried to use that fact to comfort himself, but it didn't do anything to quell the annoyance he felt right now.

Twenty-five members per class was relatively low. At least in the sense of being able to see what everyone was doing at a glance. Even if he didn't want to know, it was hard to deny that twenty people (everyone minus the four he'd chatted with before classes started) were, without exception, stealing glances at him and trading rumors.

He could hear the fragments of sentences, like "I knew it" and "president" and "election," being passed around.

He didn't think he'd ever felt this uncomfortable before.

After turning back around in his seat, he suddenly realized Mayumi was standing in front of him. She'd barged into the freshman classroom (though upperclassmen in this day and age didn't think so much about boundaries like that) and stopped in front of him. As soon as he turned to face her, she put her hands together, trying to make herself look cute (!) and said, "Tatsuya, please. Do you have a moment?"

Behind her stood Suzune, looking exasperated. He put her to the side for now.

Tatsuya glanced at the digital clock in the corner of his screen. Five minutes left until second period started. Given how long it would take the two seniors to get back to their own classroom, they only had about a minute to talk.

“We can just make it official student council business, and we won’t get demerits,” answered Mayumi, reading the silent question from Tatsuya’s expression, her hands still clasped. Her hands were subtly lower now, though, looking a bit less like someone asking a favor and more like a maiden praying. That was a bad sign.

She probably could have easily folded her hands at her chest and made her eyes water, too.

Second period, like first period, would be a classroom lecture on their terminals. Twenty or thirty minutes away from class wouldn’t be an issue for him at all.

He stood, exchanging glances with his friends, and nodded to Mayumi.

Mayumi came around in front of his desk, replacing him, and held up the ID card to the reader—complete with its special privileges.

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They brought him to the student council room.

They always gathered in here for lunch, but Tatsuya knew why they’d brought him this time.

“Sorry for pulling you out of class, but we’re burning daylight,” apologized Suzune.

“No, it’s fine,” said Tatsuya, shaking his head.

“Thanks. It makes me feel better to hear that.” After an exaggerated exhalation, Mayumi broached the main topic. “It’s about the student council elections…”

As he’d thought. He already had an answer. “I think this is still too early for Miyuki.”

“Miyuki is… Wait, how did you know that?” Mayumi’s eyes widened in haste—was he a mind reader?

Tatsuya gave a pained grin and explained. “You wanted to talk to me without Miyuki here. That’s why you took me out of class instead of asking during lunch break, right? Considering the time left, I thought it must be about Miyuki

running for office.”

He hadn’t been trying to show off his deductive powers by answering her before she asked. Just Mayumi was one thing, but if she was teamed up with Suzune, he was afraid that if he didn’t take the wind out of their sails right away, they’d be able to talk him down.

For now, his preemptive strike was right on the mark. He needed to secure guaranteed victory before his opponents—particularly Suzune—had a chance to regroup.

“I’m sure there are examples out there of freshmen being student council presidents. But it’s still too soon for Miyuki. She’s not fit for leading an organization yet.”

“…Didn’t she have a president-like role during middle school?” asked Suzune.

“I stopped her,” he denied immediately.

“She seems fit for the job…” remarked Mayumi.

“She’s still a child. I know I might be too helpful to her sometimes, but she doesn’t have enough control over herself yet. I at least want her to be at the point where her magic won’t go out of control,” said Tatsuya, showering them with rebuttals.

They both looked like they had more to say—mainly to change the “might be too helpful” to “definitely too helpful”—but they couldn’t argue that her magic going out of control was a shortcoming they could ignore in a student council president.

“But that leaves us in a bind. We need to announce the candidates tomorrow, but we don’t even have any.”

“I was led to believe there was a week until the paperwork deadline for running.” Couldn’t a candidate still appear in that time?

Mayumi shook her head at Tatsuya’s “in the first place…” argument, her face dark. “One of the student council’s jobs is to narrow down the candidates for the next president. If we don’t, we’d have a flood of them, and it would be out of control.”

“…I would think having many candidates in an election would be for the better.”

“Even if it develops into people firing magic at each other? They’d all be tough guys trying to lead the school.”

She was right. If that happened, things would become even worse than club recruitment week. “…I really don’t think… They’d actually want to be president, though, wouldn’t they?” Since they wanted to be student council president, they wouldn’t want to cause disturbances like that.

“You’re being optimistic, Tatsuya,” said Mayumi, flat-out eliminating his sensibilities.

“Our school’s student council president has a lot of privileges, and they’ll be thought of highly after they graduate as well. The student council four years ago actually advocated for a free, democratic election. Once the number of casualties reached the double digits, they took down their ‘free election’ signboard, the president strongly recommended the vice president as the next president, and they finally got the situation under control. It’s in the school records.”

Tatsuya’s doubts were all wiped out by Suzune’s surprising insider story. “… What kind of developing country are we in, anyway?” he groaned.

“It just means high school kids aren’t adult enough to exhibit perfect self-control when given great power like magic,” said Mayumi, putting her hands together and again assuming an imploring pose. “So, you know? She might still be a child from your point of view, but I’m sure Miyuki would be fine. They do say that people grow into their positions.”

So it’s come to that, thought Tatsuya. Mayumi was very determined—she hadn’t been president this year for nothing. Still…

“You don’t have to worry about Miyuki,” he pointed out. “I would think if Nakajou were to announce her candidacy, that would be enough. Isn’t she the most suitable for next student council president based on order and actual merit?”

Mayumi fell silent, her face sour.

“…You’re certainly correct, but…” Suzune couldn’t seem to say any more, either.

Yes. He knew very well what they weren’t saying: They’d brought the topic to him because Azusa was refusing no matter what. It was clear; they didn’t have to explain.

What he said next, though, was completely out of both Mayumi’s and Suzune’s expectations. “…If you’d like, I can persuade Nakajou for you.”

“What? …Tatsuya, you’d do that for us?”

“Yes.”

Mayumi seemed so surprised, she didn’t know what face to make. But after his words slowly permeated her mind, she suddenly grabbed his hand.

“You’ll really do it? Then yes! Yes, please! I knew I could count on you, Tatsuya!”

She started swinging their hands up and down. Tatsuya and Suzune exchanged pained grins.

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That day, as though her small-animal danger instincts had warned her away, Azusa didn’t come to the student council room for lunch. Tatsuya figured that, at this rate, she might make up some reason she couldn’t come after school, either, so after fifth period, he decided to march into Azusa’s classroom. (Magic high schools had five periods in all: three in the morning and two in the afternoon.) He looked into the classroom from the door. Azusa was hurriedly getting ready to go home. She probably would have escaped before getting caught if not for her earnestness keeping her in front of her terminal until class ended, thus bringing her to ruin.

Along with his sister, who would never balk at such neglect of rules when she was with Tatsuya—she probably wouldn’t hesitate to even dirty her hands with a grave crime—he stepped foot into the classroom of 2-A.

He received *Who the hell is that?* stares, mostly from the boys. Still, they were mature enough not to flare up at an underclassman just for coming into the room. Of course, part of their difficulty at taking action was the pressure

coming from the girls' stares, which were keenly interested, as though they were assessing a brand product in a store.

Tatsuya gave all those stares the cold shoulder and walked straight to Azusa's desk. She'd realized he was approaching a few moments ago, but he'd gotten to her while she was still hesitating to run away and instead only looking worried.

She gave a hesitant, insincere smile as she stood up. Her hands tightly grasped her bag, but her feet didn't move. Tatsuya and Azusa were nearly one foot apart in height; normally he would speak to her from a distance so as not to intimidate her, and when they were close, he would bend a little. Today, though, he purposely took up a close position and looked down on her.

There was a cool (?) smile on his lips, but his eyes stared hers down, preventing her escape. "Nakajou."

Tatsuya's appearance wasn't outstanding, nor was his voice rich enough to listen to in ecstasy. But, perhaps thanks to his throat and lung capacity, which had been forged in combat training, his voice was deep and far-reaching. Young girls might have found it harsh or adult-like.

"There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

And timid young ladies might have found the pressure in his voice difficult to oppose.

"Umm, I can't really today…"

"It won't take very much time."

She'd managed to search for a way out anyway, but Tatsuya put a tiny bit more oomph in his voice to cut off her escape route.

As Azusa blinked in surprise at his overbearing attitude, the classmates watching them (mostly girls) moved from meaningful looks to hushed whispers. Along with what bits he could make out, like "surprisingly pushy" and "wild man" and "maybe kind of cool," he felt another persistent gaze on him.

Miyuki, feeling both conscious and unconscious flirtation in those stares, had quickly gone downhill in terms of her mood. And that aura of distaste coming from behind him—from Miyuki, in other words—was putting a lot of pressure

on Azusa.

“I only need five minutes.”

“…Well, if it’s really just five minutes…”

Taken in—more like forced into agreement—by the conventional objection of a dirty salesman, Azusa followed him out.

She wore no manacles or ropes, and he didn’t hold her hand, but it looked pretty clearly like he was dragging her away for questioning.

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“I’ll be short,” began Tatsuya as soon as they sat down at a table in the corner of the café. “Nakajou, please run as a candidate in the student council elections.”

“I figured that’s what it was… Did the president ask you to persuade me?”

“Yes.”

At first, she’d requested he persuade Miyuki, who was sitting next to him, not Azusa. Tatsuya didn’t say a word of that.

“…I can’t do it. Student council president is too big of a role for me,” she said with a shake of her head, looking down and balling her hands in her lap.

Her attitude was more stubborn than he’d expected. She even looked like she was about to cry. She might have actually started if he pushed her too much. Though, no, that was highly likely.

But if that was all it took to make him give up, he wouldn’t have agreed to this in the first place. “Hattori is being recommended for the next club committee chairman, so there aren’t any candidates for the student council election. If you don’t run, we’ll have to have an election without the student council being in control of it.”

“That’s all right, isn’t it? There are plenty of people more suitable than me for the job,” she responded rather aggressively.

Tatsuya heaved a sigh.

“…”

“…”

Before even ten seconds had passed in silence, Azusa began to fidget. She shot a glance at Tatsuya, and when she saw he wasn’t going to respond, her eyes went to Miyuki for a moment instead.

Miyuki looked back, her lips in an enigmatic, unreadable smile. Azusa felt like it was sucking her in, and quickly looked away…

…back to Tatsuya. This time, their eyes met.

Azusa’s face locked up, and it looked like she was about to groan.

Tatsuya sighed again. “Is a repeat of the tragedy from four years ago really okay with you?”

Miyuki, listening in, thought the word *tragedy* was an exaggeration. He thought the same way.

Azusa, though, was white-faced. She looked like she was in shock.

“I hear over ten people were heavily wounded. I would expect you to know more about the details than me.”

In her unrest, her lips began to tremble pathetically.

But Tatsuya attacked once more. “There are video records from it, aren’t there? Serious injuries caused by magic… I’m sure nobody would want to see stuff like that.”

The main job of the student council secretary was to manage the student council records. If a huge incident like that was in them, it would have at least drawn her attention while she was organizing.

As expected, Azusa started to tremble all over now.

“I wonder if history will repeat itself…”

“Wh-what…do you want me to…?”

She looked completely beaten. Miyuki, who had been silent ever since arriving at the café, answered her in a kind voice. “If you were to run for student council president, we wouldn’t have to see such terrible things. It’ll be okay. I’m confident you can do a good job.”

Azusa's eyes wavered. The brother threatened, and the sister offered help. It was a beautiful good cop–bad cop combination.

"Oh, now that I think of it…" Tatsuya, loosening his serious expression—a faked one—brought out the next piece of "candy," pretending he'd just remembered something. "I received two flight devices to review from FLT that go on sale next week…"

As soon as she heard *that*, her eyes flared to life. The white in her face changed to the crimson of blood as she unfurled herself and leaned over the table. "…You mean the Silver model specialized CAD for flight magic? The latest in the Silver series said to be the most efficient at implementing flight magic, when it was just announced in July?!"

Tatsuya nodded. Azusa stared deeply into his face.

Her eyes said, *Gimme gimme gimme gimme gimme…*

"Well, they're for review purposes, so they're not for sale, and they don't have serial numbers…"

Azusa gulped. A haze started to form around her eyes, as if she had a fever.

"But their specs are no different from the commercial versions, so I was thinking I'd give you one as a gift when you became student council president."

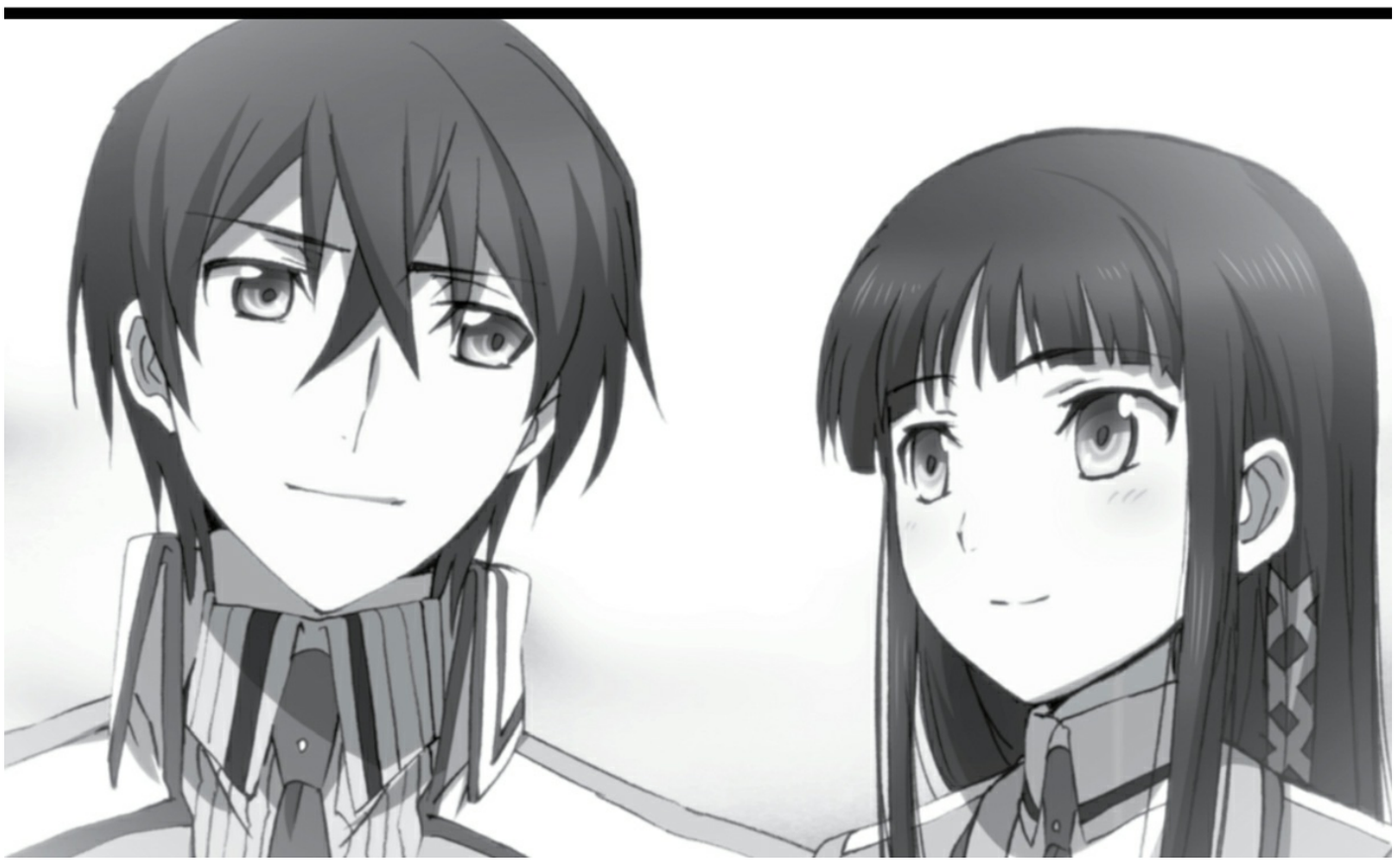
"Really?!" cried Azusa, standing up. Her chair clattered over behind her, but she didn't seem to notice any of the curious glances their way. Her mind wasn't relaxed enough to do so, even if she'd wanted to.

"Yes. You've been a big help to Miyuki, too, so I thought a congratulatory gift for the new student council president would have to be at least that good…"

"I'll do it! I'll take on anyone! I'll get elected to student council president for sure!" she declared with power, glaring at illusions of opposing candidates she couldn't yet see.

She'd entirely forgotten about three things: that he'd come here to threaten and cajole her into taking the spot because there was nobody else in the first place, that it would be no more than a vote of confidence at this rate, and that she'd been firmly refusing to run just a little while ago.

As Azusa descended into a manic state, Tatsuya and Miyuki secretly nodded to each other.



[3]

September reached its final week.

Most days were hot with the lingering heat of summertime, but slowly and surely, more and more days felt remarkably like autumn.

“Even so, I think it’s also strange how cool the atmosphere at school is.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Mayumi, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes just a little bit at Tatsuya.

“The student council elections.”

The school assembly and council elections would at last be held tomorrow. It was Mayumi’s second-to-last day she’d be spending time in this room as student council president, but she didn’t look to be at all emotional.

At the same time, he couldn’t see any signs of debates or public appeal contests being waged for the seat of the next student council president.

“…Well, they *are* just student council elections. Maybe they’re nothing to get so excited about, but…”

There wouldn’t be much need for zeal if this were an honorary position with no reward other than maybe raising the marks on your student record. Even still, Tatsuya knew there were other reasons to be enthusiastic. Only one candidate would be running—no need to be excited about a simple vote of confidence. Plus, there was a near-zero chance she *wouldn’t* have the confidence of the voters.

This hadn’t happened because the position of student council president wasn’t attractive enough to bat an eyelash at. Sure, even the student council president of a magic high school was no more than the leader of an autonomous student body from society’s point of view. An honorary position, close to no authority or influence at all. In that respect, it was no different than a high school for the sciences or one for the arts.

However, that “honor” was on a different level. It made sense if you thought about it a little. Only nine magic high schools—high schools affiliated with the National Magic University—existed in this country. That wasn’t a count of national high schools but of high schools that could give students a higher education in magic. Even if they wanted more, they wouldn’t be able to get enough teachers for them.

Just nine magicians per year would have the ability to say they were student council president of a magic high school. It was no exaggeration that such a title would follow them their whole lives as long as they continued along the path of magicians. Some even said the honor was on par with a third-degree decoration, though that was unofficial.

Of course, those at the top of the magicians’ world frequently earned second- or first-degree awards. But if you achieved such lifelong honor as early as high school, you’d think everyone *would* bat their eyelashes. You’d think, anyway.

In actuality, no shortage of—or, bluntly, *many*—students secretly hoped for the position of student council president.

Then why was there only one candidate?

The reason at work was, of course, an artificial power.

Tatsuya was still looking at the current student council president, who was tilting her head in a (seemingly) guiltless expression of confusion. How on earth had she “persuaded” the other latent opposing candidates and gotten them to give up on running? Had she coaxed them with that smile of hers?

That was a scary thought in its own right.

“Hmm, well, unfortunately Ah-chan is the only one this year…but we’ll still have the speeches before the vote of confidence, so I think things will be more exciting tomorrow.”

It wouldn’t be *speeches*, plural, with only one candidate, but Tatsuya wasn’t interested in making such dull comments. He looked over to the corner of the room to see Azusa, expression serious, staring down at her speech as she gobbled up her lunch, mumbling to herself.

She *did* seem into this. Rather than use a terminal screen, she’d printed the

speech out on paper to read it.

Incidentally, he'd already given her the "trophy" flight device as soon as she'd announced her candidacy. It was all the result of him thinking about how she would react. People like her tended to keep their spirits up from the pressure of having been given a reward preemptively, rather than from exerting themselves for a reward upon their success.

And, just as his scheme had intended, Azusa was now captive to a strange sense of obligation, spurring herself on to do her very best despite there being no candidates to oppose her. She'd probably maintain her spirits until her speech was over. It didn't look like she was the one to be worried about right now.

"If I had to say, the bigger problem will be the general assembly," said Suzune. She hadn't been reading his mind, but she *had* been thinking about the same thing.

She'd been looking at her desk terminal screen for a while now. (She seemed to be going without lunch today.) Her eyes traveled up and down, as though she were scrolling through a document to read, or maybe reread, and revise.

Mari closed her lunch box. "The special assembly in spring was incredibly impressive, after all. Nobody will be brushing it off at this point," she remarked.

"Not that I'm trying to draw them in at all," added Mayumi.

"I was concerned we might have people acting rashly this time, but it seems I was worried for nothing," said Miyuki with a joking smile as she poured tea for everyone.

"Surprise attacks? Well, no student of our school in their right mind would challenge *this* woman," said Mari, shooting the suggestion down.

"Wow, excuse me. Don't you think it's rude to call a girl '*this woman*'?" said Mayumi, directing the question to Tatsuya. She was grinning, clearly messing around. She must have been just as confident that nobody would challenge her in a contest of magic—and even if there were someone strong enough, they wouldn't pull a cowardly move like a surprise attack.

"I suppose…though I don't think you can be too cautious."

His response, though, was in a slightly different direction than what she'd expected.

"Huh?"

"Our president is a girl. And a beautiful one, at that."

"Y-you think?" As his elder, Mayumi tried to play it off and stay relaxed, but he couldn't say she did it very well. Her unrest showed in her eyes.

Meanwhile, Miyuki gave him a strong, sullen glare, suspicious of her brother's intentions in suddenly saying that.

"Why the sudden compliment?"

Miyuki wasn't the only one to be suspicious—Mari also came at him, with an even more straightforward question.

"Was it sudden? I only suggested it based on the reality that certain students were plotting to thwart the president's plans, and they haven't shown many results."

"I guess I have heard rumors like that, but…" answered Mari, a little perplexed.

Tatsuya also saw the opposition faction conducting themselves with skill and tact. He had a more accurate grip on the situation than Mari, thanks to his own dishonest information gathering from a certain member of the faculty.

"The opposition only has today and tomorrow left. President…I believe you should make sure you're not alone today."

"Ah-ha-ha. Please, Tatsuya. Don't you think you're exaggerating a little?" Mayumi took his statement as a joke and tried to laugh it off. It didn't go well, and he didn't go along with it.

Mari frowned. "Do you know something…?"

"Unfortunately, no. If I did, it would actually be more of a relief."

"Maybe you're overthinking it a bit," said Suzune, in belief that his fears were unwarranted.

Tatsuya laughed a little as well. "Ha-ha. Well, maybe," he said, nodding.

But it was clear to everyone he was only pretending.

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“Tatsuya?”

As Tatsuya was about to go back to his classroom, with only a few moments left in lunch break, he was stopped by Mari. They were in the hallway, right after leaving the student council room.

Tatsuya and Miyuki turned in tandem, and for some reason Mari gave a pained smile. Perhaps she had thought *overly friendly siblings*, but if he worried about every single thing like that, he’d be worrying forever.

“What is it?” said Tatsuya, urging Mari on, wanting to settle whatever it was in a quick fashion.

“There’s something I want to talk about. Could you come to HQ?” He didn’t have to ask what “HQ” meant. Whenever she said it, she meant the main disciplinary committee office.

“Right now?”

“It won’t take long. Oh, right. Could Shiba come with you, too?”

Tatsuya and Miyuki exchanged surprised looks. As far as they remembered, this was the first time Mari had come to Miyuki saying she needed something or wanted to talk.

“Miyuki, do you have enough time?”

“Yes. Fourth period is general, so it won’t matter if I’m somewhat late.”

General was an abbreviation for *general subject*. It referred to subjects outside magic science and magic practice, like mathematics and language study. Each student used his or her own terminal and learned separately. It was almost self-study, so she was right—being somewhat late wouldn’t be a problem.

“What about you, Tatsuya?” she asked.

For his part, he had a practical skills test coming up called “ability measurement.” Course 1 students would have a teacher using the measuring device (and giving advice, of course), but Course 2 students would each use the device freely. If they achieved passing marks within the given period of time,

they would complete the course.

"…I'm fine," he said to Mari, nodding to Miyuki. Mari gave a short apology and walked past them, toward the staircase.

…Despite it being faster to go through the student council room to get to HQ.

It was like a different person—well, different *room*—compared to half a year ago. Now, it was nicely kept and orderly. Mari sat down at the lounge set, which also wasn't around six months ago, and faced the siblings. (Incidentally, the lounge set had been stored away because the room had so much stuff in it. Now it was used for interrogations—er, rather, questionings.) "…Given who you are, I'm sure you have an idea of what this is about."

Oh? thought Tatsuya. It was a somewhat pretentious opening line. He could sense that she was subtly nervous. It couldn't possibly have been Miyuki's presence. They saw each other every day in the student council room. Despite them somehow having few chances to exchange words, there was no reason Mari, as her upperclassman, should have felt nervous about her.

"…I wanted to talk about Mayumi. I've actually been having the same doubts you pointed out before."

Still not sure about Mari's reason for being nervous, he decided to speak up. "About the opposition to the plan to abolish the Course 1 restriction on student council members?"

"Yeah," she said. "You're not the only one who thinks the opposition faction has been too quiet. We didn't see any outright rebels at the spring assembly. Maybe they were affected by the mood in the room at the time. But there's no lack of kids feeling emotionally resistant to Mayumi's plan…or at least, there shouldn't be. I don't want to think about this as a fellow student at First High, but if peaceful attempts at monkey business haven't gone well, then I think we should be very careful about kids coming out with more violent approaches."

Tatsuya didn't feel any hesitation or distaste in thinking that way. He nodded easily to her dark expression. "I could see that happening," he said.

"Mayumi, well…whether you want to call her softhearted or a properly raised young lady, she tends to be unfamiliar with the evil intentions others can have.

Cornered rats can bite a cat, and I don't know if she understands how that feels."

Mm. He inwardly agreed.

Mari seemed to be acting awkwardly about this. The two of them could only say things like that about Mayumi because they were such good friends. Anyone watching would have been able to tell. From Tatsuya's point of view, it was only natural Mari would be worried about her friend. Mari, however, didn't seem to think so.

"And…she didn't really take your caution seriously, either. With her special Multiscope skill, nobody would be able to surprise her if she was paying attention to her surroundings. But it's an active scan, not a passive perception ability, so it's a waste if she's not alert."

"…Right." *So what do you want with us?* he thought.

"Oh, uh…sorry. This is going all over the place…" Fortunately, he didn't have to say anything, since Mari brought the conversation back on topic herself. "That's where you two come in… I wanted to know if you would go home from school with Mayumi today."

"…You mean escort her to her house?"

"You don't have to go that far…" She paused. "Though, actually, if you could, that would be great. I don't think we have anything to worry about in school. She's surrounded by a bunch of followers in the classroom, and we have Ichihara and Hattori in the student council room. But for some reason, the girl doesn't try to stay close to her followers outside school."

"Isn't that because she's in the direct line of one of the Ten Master Clans?" asked Tatsuya casually.

But Mari's expression told him she hadn't thought about that until now. "…Is that how it is?"

"Who knows? I'm not part of one of them myself, so I'm only guessing."

"Well, you might be right… Anyway, she usually goes home by herself. It's easier to make things look like an accident outside school. If all this stuff wasn't

going on I'd ask Hattori, but I think he'll have a lot to prepare when he moves to the club committee…which is why I'm asking you, Tatsuya. You have the strongest anti-magic spell, Program Demolition, so I'm sure you wouldn't fall for any surprise attacks, right?"

Tatsuya had one question about what Mari was saying, but he couldn't get it out. Before he opened his mouth, Miyuki answered on his behalf: "Please leave it to him. You won't regret asking my brother."

Mari's last sentence had technically been a question, but it had actually been a challenge, or maybe an incitement. Because of Miyuki's oddly enthusiastic —*competitive*—agreement, the mean question Tatsuya was sitting on, about why Mari wasn't going herself, ended in naught.

Instead—though maybe that wasn't the right word—he made an evil smirk as he looked at his classmate.

"Wh-what? Something you want to say?"

"No, nothing."

"I don't have any ulterior motives. If she were to get hurt now, we'd have a mess on our hands. She knows that, too, but I mean, she's still being reckless… It's not really like I'm worried about her."

As he watched Mari try her best to make excuses, Tatsuya thought, *What a* tsundere.

…Or perhaps he didn't. The world may never know.

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"…Good work. We're all set for tomorrow, right?" asked Mayumi, as though giving a closing address.

"Yes, everything is in order," said Azusa.

"We've finished checking the location as well," said Hattori, his voice calm. Not only did he answer her, but he also continued into apologetic words. "… President, I really am sorry about this."

"Yes, yes, Hanzou. Excellent work today. You may feel free to leave now." He had to take the reins of the club committee now, and Mayumi understood that.

“I’m sorry, President…”

“Don’t worry! You should get going, too, Ah-chan. Get some rest for tomorrow.”

As Hattori headed for the prep building with an apologetic air and even more regret, Azusa hastily threw her things into her bag and excused herself, leaving the student council room behind her.

“Miyuki, you can go home for today, too.”

Miyuki hadn’t risen from her seat despite the two juniors going home (though only Azusa was *actually* going home), so Mayumi said something to her, too.

However, she gave an unusual answer: “If it’s all right with you, I would like to stay here a little bit longer.”

“For Tatsuya?”

“Yes. I think he’s somewhere radio waves don’t reach, because I can’t get in touch with him.”

“Somewhere radio waves don’t reach…?” repeated Mayumi, confused.

“Could he be in the document room in the basement?” whispered Suzune into her ear (though loud enough for Miyuki to hear, too).

Mayumi nodded in understanding. “The unexplored regions… If he holed himself up in there, you wouldn’t be able to contact him…but that’s okay. I’ll be leaving after I clean up a bit anyway. Oh, Rin, you can get going. You have something you can’t get out of, right?”

“…Yes. I’m sorry, President.”

“It’s fine. You can make up for it tomorrow.” She let herself smile a little; whether or not her answer was thoughtful was up for debate.

With only the two of them left in the room, Miyuki and Mayumi quietly made their way to the desk.

After a short while, just when Mayumi was stretching her arms, the electronic sound signaling the entrance of an authorized person (someone whose ID card was registered in the exit and entrance management system) went off. Miyuki

stood and looked in that direction.

“Sorry I made you wait.”

As she expected, Tatsuya had been the one to enter.

“No, you did nothing of the sort.”

As Miyuki trotted over to him happily, Mayumi grinned, a little embarrassed. “I know it sounds weird at this point…but you two really are friendly with each other.”

“Oh, President. Were you by yourself?”

“Totally ignored… Not that it matters. Yes, today Miyuki and I were the last ones left.” Mayumi, as expected at this point, didn’t lose her cool over Tatsuya’s impudent pace, and switched gears with her usual smoothness.

“Would you like some help?”

That, though, definitely seemed to surprise her. “My, how unusual,” she said. “I suppose you’re about to tell me it’s snowing.”

“Well, I can’t do that…but my sister could do it easily. Miyuki, I believe our president has requested snow.”

“Of course. How much snow should I give her, Tatsuya?”

“Let’s see… I think ten centimeters should be enough, don’t you?”

“Wait! Stop right there! You don’t have to make it snow!”

Mayumi had let it go because she’d taken it as a joke before, but they looked so serious about it that she got worried they might actually do it. So in a mad rush, she stopped them.

“I swear,” she said. “I really can’t joke around with you.”

“But I was joking, of course,” explained Tatsuya without smiling or smirking.

Mayumi shot him the most suspicious (and distrusting) stare she could. But after seeing it have no effect whatsoever, she sighed and shrugged.

She seemed to have gotten used to Tatsuya’s style of doing things—and the feeling was mutual.

“Jokes aside,” he continued as she glared up at him—a gesture he ignored, of course. “It’s going to get dark soon, so if you have work left to do, I can help.”

Calendars showed it was well into autumn. He wasn’t exaggerating when he said it would get dark soon. Understanding—for now, at least—that Tatsuya was trying to be nice (or perhaps misunderstanding) she softened her expression. “Mm…I think I’ll just go home after all. Thanks for the consideration.”

“I see.”

“President, would you like to walk to the station together?”

As soon as Tatsuya readily backed down, Miyuki made her own approach. *Strange things really do happen*, thought Mayumi, her face naturally breaking out into a smile. “Won’t you be with everyone else?”

“Well, it’s late. I knew my ‘basement exploration’ would take a while anyway, so I had them go home without me.”

“…By the way, what were you looking for in the document room?”

“Literature on old magic related to the philosopher’s stone. I didn’t find anything notable in the documents that have been converted and put into the database.”

“…That’s a pretty outlandish—err, technical thing to look up.”

“Just wondering if I could compensate for my lack of ability with tools.”

“R-really…?” The unexpectedly serious motive made Mayumi wince. But a moment later, her cheeks puffed out in discouragement. “…Wait, what are you talking about? You can use Program Demolition. Just that probably makes you in high demand with the police and National Defense Force.”

She knew Tatsuya’s feelings toward his own magical talent were warped. It was a bit different from a regular old inferiority complex, though. She was aware that the social system that limited his opportunities by labeling him an inferior student was something he put off as a minor annoyance.

Unintentionally forgetting that and feeling naturally sympathetic toward him made her feel like she was being led around by the nose, and it gave her just an

inkling of irritation.

He might not have been able to hope for a high magician rank based on international standards, but given the needs of society (and the professional world), people with outstanding skills in specific fields, like him, were in extremely high demand.

“You know, Tatsuya, I think you should stop highlighting how you’re an inferior student so much. You’ve already done enough to put high achievers to shame, so…if you keep going, both Course 1 and Course 2 kids might start getting jealous.”

“I hadn’t been intending to highlight it.”

Tatsuya neither thought he possessed enough masochistic inclination to call himself an inferior student, nor did he want to exhibit such inclination. He’d only answered her question (albeit indirectly) of why he’d been looking that up—though the bits about “talent” had been a lie to cover up the truth. His real reason for researching the philosopher’s stone was related to thermonuclear reactors equipped with an always-ready magic program that controlled gravity.

Leaving that aside, he hadn’t emphasized his “inferiority” on purpose.

Still, in the end, he answered, “…No, I’ll be more careful.”

He was adult enough to know she was worried about him.

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Mayumi and the siblings walked down the straight road from the school gates to the station, the same road the siblings would usually travel with Leo, Erika, and the others. Miyuki seemed a little on edge—and while he could understand that, Mayumi seeming nervous was more smile inducing than anything. She held her bag in front of her with both hands, her eyes downcast. Her posture made him want to joke about which school for young ladies she’d graduated from.

Of course, she actually was one of those proper young ladies.

Tatsuya wasn’t the sort to offer a topic of conversation. Small talk in particular was not really in his field. Plus, they were on alert for surprise attacks from the opposition faction. All that meant the three had gone down almost 70

percent of the road without saying much at all.

“…Hey, Tatsuya?”

“What is it?”

So when Mayumi suddenly tried to talk to him, he accidentally braced himself, thinking something was going on.

“You two were waiting for me to go home, weren’t you?”

But even though he’d braced himself, the remark still surprised him, and he couldn’t immediately respond.

Unconcerned with him, she continued to talk, almost to herself. “Mari asked you to, didn’t she? To escort me to my house because someone from the opposition faction could attack?”

“…You’re very perceptive, President.”

The honest answer came not from Tatsuya but Miyuki. She’d realized she couldn’t fool the bull’s-eye assumption, and at least tried to give Tatsuya an alibi (?) so he didn’t have to say he was the one to fess up.

“It’s okay,” said Mayumi, looking at Miyuki and giggling a little. “I won’t tell Mari I got the truth out of you.”

Miyuki looked down in embarrassment. She’d seen through everything about this.

Tatsuya didn’t show any awkwardness, though. That wasn’t to say he had turned defiant, either. Instead, he just asked, his face puzzled, “But why would you…?”

“To get you to understand that you don’t need to come all the way to my house. Oh, please don’t misunderstand. I don’t mean you’re a bother or anything.”

Tatsuya nodded silently, a gesture for her to continue.

“Mari told you I’m careless for going home alone most of the time, didn’t she? The reason for it is to prevent anyone else from getting mixed up in things if something were to happen.”

“You’re…not just referring to this time, are you?”

“No. It may sound odd coming from me, but I’m your classic high-class lady, so in terms of money and politics, people tend to go for me.”

There wasn’t a shard of boastfulness in the word *high-class* , just a hint of self-deprecation.

“Because the Saegusa family is famous for never falling out of the Ten Master Clans since its inception.”

Mayumi smiled painfully, knowing that Tatsuya was implying that she couldn’t help it. “…Well, that’s how it is. I’ve been taught never to let my guard down, and always be prepared to activate magic if needed.”

She raised her left hand and pulled her sleeve back to reveal her CAD, which was not in sleep mode but standby mode.

“And I have a bodyguard, too.”

“Wait, you do?” Miyuki’s eyes flitted about their surroundings, but she couldn’t find anyone that looked like a bodyguard.

“…I had him wait at the station.” She looked away a little. “It would be embarrassing to bring a bodyguard on the road to school.”

As she said, it was indeed embarrassing. “Ah, which is why you said we don’t have to accompany you to your house… Because you have a bodyguard waiting at the station.” At that point, Tatsuya nodded, finally understanding.

“That’s right.”

But his understanding made him more curious. “But why would you tell us something like that?”

He knew the question wouldn’t avail him, but he couldn’t suppress his curiosity. If that was true (though he couldn’t see a reason she’d be lying), then it was something so personal even Mari wouldn’t know.

“Hmm…maybe just because I wanted to go home with you and Miyuki?”

But when he saw her slightly embarrassed expression as she answered, he was stricken with a thought. *I think I failed…*

“Me too?”

Miyuki, tilting her head in confusion, didn’t share his premonition.

Mayumi gave her a very big sister–like smile. “Yes. After I became student council president last fall, those first six months were fulfilling in their own way. But these last six months have been really fulfilling for me.” She looked over at Tatsuya. “And I’m pretty sure that’s thanks to the two of you.”

“…I feel like you’re thinking too highly of me,” he argued, face impassive.

Mayumi giggled, completely relaxed. “I mean, I knew this before…but you’re actually pretty shy, Tatsuya.” Then, as he stared dumbfounded with a face as stony as a theater mask, she began to laugh as though she couldn’t take it anymore. “I…I guess that part of you is right for your age. A lot of times I feel like you could be ten years older and lying about it.”

He’d been faced with similar suspicions related to age fraud from acquaintances other than Mayumi in the past. He couldn’t do anything but stay silent, a little astonished.

She wiped her eyes with her index finger—the tears were from laughing too hard—and looked at the siblings, refreshed. “…Ah-chan and Hanzou are really good kids, but I think you two are wonderful underclassmen. You’ll probably be my most vivid memory of my high school days.”

Her beaming face put even Miyuki at a loss for words.

Unlike her older brother, though, she was red all the way to her ears.

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Their father stayed around his second wife, so the Shiba residence, for all intents and purposes, belonged only Tatsuya and Miyuki. It was pretty large for a private house. Still, compared to the palatial mansions of the Kitayama or Saegusa (not that the siblings had actually seen either of those yet) it was only on the level of a *private house*.

Of course, you couldn’t call it just any private house.

The basement was taken up by a university-level magic engineering research facility. (It sounds like a secret base when it’s put that way, but the facility had

the same surface area as the first floor, just completely renovated into a laboratory.) Tatsuya, who had just come up to the living room out of the basement lab, sank down onto the sofa, seeming unusually exhausted.

He firmly rubbed his temples with his thumb and middle finger, bringing them around a couple of times. As he did, he looked at the ceiling, freeing his mind from his thoughts.

His mind then wandered to his memories of what had happened this evening. About how they'd brought Mayumi to the station, and about the bodyguard she'd introduced to them. Her escort had been male, which Tatsuya hadn't expected.

He'd always figured a girl her age would need to have a female bodyguard, so he was honestly quite surprised. He'd been an aging gentleman in his mid-fifties or so, though, so maybe he didn't have any need to worry about their appearance from society's perspective.

The middle-aged man looked more like a butler than a bodyguard—and honestly, more like her grandfather than a butler. However, he kept his back straight and was lean despite his slender build. It only took one look for Tatsuya to know he was fully fit for the job. His characteristic bearing was *very polite*, to use a roundabout expression. It gave Tatsuya the sense that the man had military experience, and was in the military for quite a long period of time as uniformed personnel.

That, by itself, was nothing unusual. At the end of the twenty-first century, which had experienced just as much warfare as the previous one, anyone foolish enough to discriminate based on military experience alone was shunned by society. A former soldier-magician offering his experience and talents as a bodyguard to a respectable family wasn't in any way something to be concerned about.

What was getting to Tatsuya, though, was the bodyguard's name—specifically, his last one.

"Tatsuya, are you not going to sleep yet?"

He looked over to the voice and saw Miyuki standing there in the living room entrance, sporting pink pajamas.

“Miyuki, I didn’t know you were still awake. Tomorrow…or, wait, today, I guess…you’ll be the hostess, right?”

Miyuki had been given the role of facilitating the campaign speeches today, a job given to the freshman student council officer every year.

“I was a little thirsty, so…” she said timidly in her defense, her head down as she looked at her brother, feeling that he’d implicitly scolded her to go to sleep.

“Well, I guess that’s fine.” Tatsuya, ever a soft one for his sister, smiled painfully and nodded.

Her face immediately lit up and she came over to him almost at a trot. She asked with her eyes, and he nodded with his. Smiling happily, she sat down next to him.

The mornings and evenings were starting to get colder this time of year, but the pajamas she wore were still cool ones for summer. With her short sleeves and three-quarter-length pants, the thin fabric gently brought out her body lines. It wasn’t the sort of outfit to be alone with a man this late at night in, but Tatsuya purposely didn’t say anything—if he did, he was pretty sure he’d be digging his own grave for her to bury him in. Or to bury himself in.

“What were you thinking about?”

Whether or not she knew how Tatsuya felt about it, Miyuki playfully brought her face closer and asked him a question.

He knew the topic was unfittingly serious for such an innocent smile, but because he was considerably tired, he accidentally told her the truth. “Well…I was just thinking about Saegusa’s bodyguard a little.”

Before he could think *oops* to himself, the smile vanished from Miyuki’s lips. “His name was Nakura, wasn’t it?”

Mayumi had introduced the old gentleman as Saburou Nakura.

“Tatsuya, are you possibly thinking about…him being an Extra?”

He grinned painfully. She’d seen right through him just from that. She didn’t need to think about the possibility; it would have been better if she hadn’t noticed. But she had, so he knew he wouldn’t be able to pass it off with

vagaries. “I’m not sure about that… The Ten Master Clans always hire bodyguards for children of direct lineage, even if they’re not the heir or heiress to the family. If he was given a false last name like we were… I don’t think we can deny the possibility that he is one.”

“I didn’t think any families other than the Yotsuba gave members false last names…”

“We don’t know that, though. Nobody knows about Yotsuba’s practices, so there might be other families Yotsuba doesn’t know the customs of the other nine families, or in the remaining eighteen.”

“But…our aunt is one thing, but the Saegusa always keep up appearances. Would they employ someone from one of the Extras in a place so close to the main family—to protect their eldest child?”

“Well, they do want to keep up appearances. They may be trying not to act discriminatory in doing so.”

“I see… I didn’t think about it like that…”

The Extra Numbers, or Extras for short: families of magicians that had their numbers stripped from them. There were various reasons for a family to be stripped of its number—sometimes the crime of rebellion, sometimes the failure of a serious mission, and sometimes because they were just not very good. When magicians were once weapons and test subjects, the “success cases” would be granted numbers. If they couldn’t produce results befitting success cases, then they were stripped of their numbers and labeled as Extras.

Today, the term *extras* was officially forbidden from use. It was seen as a serious criminal act to discriminate against a person based on the fact that they were an Extra.

But just as the Course 2 discrimination in magic high schools had continued to this day, discrimination against Extras still quietly existed in a more widespread and serious manner in magical society. In Tatsuya’s generation, most would probably not know that their family was one of the Extras at all. Their parents would keep it from them. That was how deep the prejudice, how they were labeled “failures” or “undesirables,” ran in a magician’s unconsciousness.

If Nakura was from a family that had fallen from the Nanakura—with *nana* meaning “seven”—then he had to wonder about the intentions of the Saegusa’s leader for choosing him as a bodyguard for their daughter.

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A fair bit earlier.

When there was still a good three hours before the date changed, in the Saegusa residence—which had to be described as a mansion, and not in an overstatement—Mayumi slipped into a gorgeous bathtub in a gorgeous bathroom that would just be a tad foreign to regular people, looked down at herself, and sighed lightly.

Even I don’t think my proportions are bad.

I ended up not growing any more after my senior year of middle school, but my younger sisters are just as petite as me, so I have to accept it’s genetic.

With a *splish*, Mayumi stuck one arm and one leg out of the water.

Boutiques and beauty salons often say I have long limbs for my height.

She brought her arm and leg back in and softly put a hand to her breasts.

They say my chest is large for my height, too, and I never have trouble fitting into any clothing with my waistline.

I know I’m relatively hot.

But her… No matter how much I tell myself not to care, it makes my confidence waver.

The pronoun *her*, spoken in her mind, was converted into the proper noun *Miyuki Shiba* in her unconscious regions.

I’d never seen such a beautiful girl until I met her.

Her arms and legs are both so thin and long, but just barely big enough that she doesn’t look unhealthy.

Her waist is tight and firm, and her chest and hips are already curved with enough femininity.

And most amazingly of all, her body is symmetric down to the last detail. I

mean, people's organs are on different sides of their bodies, so they can't be perfectly symmetrical, even on the outside.

Still, magicians, when compared to non-magicians, frequently had highly symmetrical bodies. Mayumi knew that it went beyond people being beautiful or ugly. Those with high magic talent tended to have more symmetrical skeletal structures.

Sometimes I can't even see her as a living person.

It's enough to put me in a trance, even though I'm a girl.

It makes me think how ordinary other girls look to the boy who has her as a little sister.

And her brother…

Once again, she sighed, still not aware that she'd done so.

He's so normal-looking that it's hard to even believe they're actually blood related.

He's not ugly.

But it's at the level of "just okay."

Mayumi's face sunk into the water up to her nose. Her breath caused bubbles to form and pop on the surface. Whether the bubbles came from a weary sigh or one of contentment, not even she knew.

But inside, he's far from average.

He's excellent. No, he's abnormal.

Our magician rating standards were devised by the combined wisdom of scholars from throughout the world, who were given plenty of time and labor.

His very existence is a challenge to that system.

No matter how highly you think of him, on the international standard he'd be C rank at best.

And yet the actual things we've seen him do surpass those of A-rank magicians.

She brought her face above the bathwater and inhaled deeply. After taking a few breaths, she giggled.

I bet he's really worrying the faculty.

I hear the plan to replace the fundamental system that's been here for decades and create a new magic department and magic engineering department is very realistic.

She smiled painfully and shook her head.

But even that won't be enough to support him.

Because if intellect and knowledge were all he was good at, he wouldn't be causing all this disorder in the first place.

A freshman with mastery over the strongest forms of anti-magic, which almost nobody can use.

He takes critical magic hits and goes on fighting like it's nothing.

I've been hearing that, in reality, it was his strength alone that defeated the terrorists.

The unbalance between his magic power and magical combat power.

And even in just knowledge, I'm not sure a simple curriculum change could support him.

The water was plenty warm. Nevertheless, she shivered. She knew it wasn't from cold on her skin, but she sank deep into the bathtub anyway.

He stayed quiet while I introduced him to Nakura today, but that was a test.

A test to see if he reacted to the name Nakura *or his appearance.*

When I introduced him, there was a fraction of a moment when I saw agitation in his eyes. I was paying absolute attention to him, so I didn't let it slip.

He knew what Nakura *meant.*

That means he's as deeply connected to the "darkness" of modern magic as Juumonji and I are.

He's no ordinary magician.

He's no magician from some nameless family.

Tatsuya "Shiba." Shiba. Shi*. Four. It's a different character, but…*

Maybe he is another one of the Extras…

That was what Mayumi thought as the blood rushed to her head.

[4]

Morning began at school, and right away, everyone was practically levitating with excitement.

Today all afternoon classes were canceled, and the student assembly, campaign speeches, and voting would be conducted.

In an age where even assemblies for individual classes had mostly disappeared, it was a very big event.

Not only that, but for the student assembly, they planned to enact a proposal to make a huge change in the system of student autonomy.

The conflict between the supporters and the opposition had actually begun behind closed doors before summer vacation began.

In addition to the current student council president Mayumi Saegusa's popularity, the actual proposal was difficult to contest on the surface. Still, perhaps affected by the Course 2 team's achievements in the rookie Monolith Code event, there were far more supporters than opponents. And yet the stubbornness of those who remained its opponents felt much more dangerous to those keeping an eye on the present situation. That only made the atmosphere at school even more restless.

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"Everyone here? Great. I'll go over our positions one last time."

After morning classes ended, all the disciplinary committee members met in the committee headquarters.

The members were on rotations and frequently acted out of sync with one another; everyone being together in one place was a rare sight. The student council election was one of the few affairs the disciplinary committee would mobilize all its members for.

"Our posts are mostly inside the auditorium. The school system keeps watch

outside. The self-government committee'll support us with that."

There were nine disciplinary committee members in all. They had to provide security for a venue containing the entire student body of 560 kids, so they didn't have the ability to deal with suspicious persons outside. Even without them, any villains who invaded from outside wouldn't be the students' job to deal with.

"Chiyoda and I are at the big doors. Tatsumi and Morisaki, at the entrance…"

She seems unusually into this, thought Tatsuya as he listened to her instructions. She was speaking quickly and clearly, which was unusual for her to do among friends.

"…Sawaki, you're to the left of the podium. Shiba, on the right. That's all."

Everyone, including Mari, stood up and nodded.

Tatsuya would be at one of the stage wings. If some rash person were to jump up and try to attack one of the officers onstage, then he and Sawaki would be the last line of defense…but Tatsuya wasn't worried very much about things like that.

Leaving school with Mayumi yesterday had taught him that. No student at First High was reckless enough to attack her. Or rather, to attack her *inside* the school. The upperclassman boys would all know that…

"Get to your positions right away. Shiba, you wait here a sec."

Once they were alone, Mari went back to her usual tone. "Sorry for being sudden, but how did it go yesterday?"

He didn't need to ask the topic. "There were three attacks," he said.

Mari's face drew back in tension.

"Targeted at me, anyway."

After she heard that, though, she got confused. What was he talking about?

"Well, I seem to have underestimated the president a little."

"…Would you mind explaining?"

"Well, basically…it was her fan club," managed Tatsuya.

Mari looked convinced. “They misunderstood and got jealous?”

“Miyuki was there, too, so you’d think they’d realize it wasn’t that sort of situation…”

The wave of (mental) exhaustion came back to him when he remembered what happened yesterday. At least, that was how Tatsuya felt about it. “Well, all I had to do was turn on my CAD. They didn’t seem to be bold enough to take any real action. They probably didn’t want to do something stupid and have the president hate them.”

“I see…”

“I suppose they wouldn’t have been able to do anything about that crossfire of eyes on them even if they wanted to… They knew they’d get ganged up on as soon as the president aimed one attack at them.”

They were fanatics, sure, but they didn’t want to die like dogs. Suicide bombings happened because people could get their enemies (or their enemies’ supporters) caught in it. No sniper would take the shot if they knew it would give them away and not get through the bulletproof glass anyway.

Feeling like they were idiots for being worried about her, they exchanged smiles tinged with exhaustion.

…Which was why Tatsuya’s level of enthusiasm was at an all-time low.

With an attitude of super-seriousness—feigned—with no meaning to it beyond creating an alibi for himself, he stood beside the stairs at stage right.

When he thought about it, the problem was simply who was allowed to be selected for the student council. Even if the position of student council president had considerable practical implications, it didn’t mean very much to graduate as the vice president or secretary. Under First High’s system, the president could select two vice presidents, four vice presidents, etc., if he or she wanted. The issue of whether a Course 2 student could be an officer was a matter of honor, an issue of pride.

And the pride riding on this was pretty weak.

Maybe the ways of the secular world have poisoned me too much…

For the sake of ideals, for the sake of money, for honor, for pride… Tatsuya's world was filled to the brim with situations where human lives had a low market value. The *stage* nearby, where people tried to seriously approach resolving their differences of opinion with logic-based discussions, made him feel like he was watching an unrealistic old movie on a silver screen.

"…For those reasons, I propose that we abolish the system of limitations that determine eligibility for student council officers."

Now that Mayumi was finished outlining her agenda, one of the students in a row of seniors quickly raised her hand. She was a Course 1 student he didn't know. (Which meant she wasn't in the Nine School Competition, which meant she didn't have enough ability to be chosen as a member of their team.) She moved to the questioning seat.

Modern sound-collecting microphones had the ability to pick up everyday conversation from fifty meters away, so having a question chair itself was just a formality, a way to make it look good.

Each of those pieces of equipment, both small and large, steadily took the realism away from what he was watching.

"…On the face of…your argument is sound…"

The words of the questioner, of the opposition faction, only reached his ears in a broken, disconnected fashion. He wasn't wearing earplugs, of course. He was unconsciously filtering out any remarks that could possibly cause trouble.

"Is there a current problem with the system that requires you to change it? What I mean is, is there a Course 2 student you'd like to choose for the student council?"

Tatsuya frowned—her intentions were clear. (He didn't feel the need to hide his expression, since he had nothing to do with the question itself.) He figured the best thing would be to dodge the question somehow, but Mayumi must have had a plan—or maybe she wasn't thinking at all—because she answered frankly.

"I am vacating the position of student council president today. I will not be naming any new officers, so I haven't given any thought to that."

“But you could try and make it so the next president can elect a Course 2 student near to their heart, couldn’t you?”

“Near to her heart,” she says… thought Tatsuya. *It didn’t take long for her to be blunt.*

“I have no intention to let retired emperors make all the decisions in the student council.”

Her slightly silly tone caused a few chuckles.

“Naming the next officers is the sole prerogative of the next president. I have no intention whatsoever to interfere with that.”

“Which means that there are Course 2 students the next president wants to surround herself with. That’s the reason you suggested changing the system, isn’t it?”

Stinging words began floating through the auditorium. Evidently Tatsuya wasn’t the only one to think *What the hell?*

“Please, quiet down.” Miyuki’s clear voice called for attention, helping them to move along.

Because she was currently a related party to the question Mayumi was being asked, Hattori had taken over as facilitator temporarily, with Miyuki supporting him. (Incidentally, the student assemblies here didn’t have a moderator to act as a neutral intermediary.) “…My answer to that question is no. The reason I make this proposition now is because this is my last chance to do so. Because I believe it is the student council president’s duty not to leave any seeds of conflict for my underclassmen.”

In his mind, Tatsuya gave her a *wow*. Evidently, she could come off as imposing even outside sports fields.

“If there are no Course 2 students actually named to a position, it wouldn’t be cause for opposition.”

On the other hand, the questioner—he thought her name was Asano—seemed to have gotten stubborn.

“This is not an issue of whether or not such a candidate exists, Ms. Asano.

Systems reflect the ideas of the group. A system in which Course 2 students can't be officers, where regardless of their abilities they cannot hold office, is a declaration that they don't have the *right* to be officers. This sort of *elitism* is wrong."

That was a pretty drastic way to put it, thought Tatsuya.

But there was a loud applause in the auditorium after that. And Course 2 students weren't the only ones causing it.

"You're trying to trick us with words!"

Even the dullest of minds would have been forced to realize the unfavorable situation in the auditorium. Despite that—or perhaps as a natural result—Asano's voice reached hysteric proportions.

"There's a Course 2 student you want in the student council. That's why you want to abolish the requirements! Your real motive is favoritism, isn't it?!"

A few sporadic desperate voices in the audience agreed, but they were immediately squelched by a storm of boos. The tempest's high waves were descending on the questioning chair as well.

"President Saegusa! Your real goal is to get that freshman over there in the student council, isn't it?!"

As Asano shouted hysterically, her finger pointed straight at Tatsuya.

"I know all about it! You went together to the station yesterday after school!"

That remark was most likely made out of despair and self-abandonment.

Mayumi's face stiffened.

But that one statement produced a surprisingly large effect.

The storm of booing ceased, and it became silent.

The students all looked back and forth between Mayumi and Tatsuya.

He saw Mayumi's face redden just slightly and thought, *That face is only going to make this misunderstanding worse!* But with all this unwanted attention on him, he couldn't say that out loud.

The thing to overcome the situation was a chilling remark made from up on

the stage.

“Is that all you would like to say?”

Before he knew it (probably just a moment ago) Miyuki had stood up.

Her cold eyes stared down straight through the face of her upperclassman.

Even from the back of the stage—no, likely even more so from there—her eyes held a sublime, queenlike dignity that sealed the lips of the upperclassman attempting to fabricate gossip.

Her magic…it’s not going off.

Tatsuya immediately checked to see if she was letting her magic run away with her, but this pressure wasn’t from magic.

Despite there being no active magic, the chill of severe winter that could take away your freedom of movement was emanating from the stage. Even Tatsuya could feel it.

“Your previous remark contained personal slander that we cannot overlook. Therefore, with the power vested in me as assistant facilitator of these proceedings, I order you to leave this place. If you are unhappy, then please demonstrate proof that President Saegusa does, in fact, harbor special feelings toward a certain freshman.”

“Well…” Of course, Asano faltered at that. Mayumi having feelings for Tatsuya was no more than pure speculation, and saying that was her motive for this proposal was no more than slander. She knew that.

As she stood there unsure of what to do, Miyuki continued to stare coldly at her. Her eyes, not her magic, were filled with disdain, as though she was trying to freeze the girl’s mind. And now, the agitator who had attempted to involve her brother in a slanderous remark was indeed standing stock-still, unable to move a finger.

Authority, hierarchy, rank… High school students had little societal experience, and so were far removed from those concepts. But this scene was elucidating exactly the kind of situation the word *solemnity* would be used to describe.

“——Allow me to amend that. You don’t need to leave the auditorium. However, we will not be answering any more questions from you. Asano, please return to your seat.”

The one who finally tried to get things under control was the one acting as facilitator, Hattori. Yes, *finally*—even he had been overawed by Miyuki’s pressure.

Miyuki gracefully bowed, then returned to her chair. Asano, without anything left to argue, wobbled back to her seat.

In the end, the opposition faction’s attempt at interference came to naught. After that, the auditorium had been filled with a tense air. There weren’t even any cheerful hoots or jeers going around. Little by little (in a rather weak ending) the electronic votes were collected, the proposal to abolish the student council officer restrictions passing by a majority.

Then, finally, it was time for Azusa’s election speech.

It was closer to a general policy speech, since she was the only candidate. Still, there would still be a formal vote of confidence (using paper votes, not electronic ones). Azusa stepped up to the stage, her face a mix of enthusiasm and nervousness.

She quickly bowed and was met with a loud applause. There were some whistles and cheers in there, too, but they quickly stopped once she began her speech.

Tatsuya and Miyuki, being uninformed about things related to entertainment, wouldn’t have known this. But the auditorium felt like when a cute and feminine female singer got up on a live stage, crowded around by male fans.

Something he also wouldn’t know was how, despite being the top achiever in both theory and practice in their class, the lack of any arrogance, alongside the presence of humility and sociability, had already coupled with her appearance and created a slightly different position at school for her than Mayumi’s had been—that of an idol who was easy to get along with.

She presented her political views and policies with unexpected eloquence (though maybe it was rude to call it *unexpected*). It was essentially a

continuation of the current student council's stances. Many parts of the speech certainly tended toward high school student–like ideals, but in general, it went acceptably… The occasional strange cheers of "You can do it!" and "You got this!" were, perhaps, just part of the fun.

The trouble happened when she referenced the next student council officers.

"…With respect to today's decision, I would like to appoint capable officers to the next student council, regardless of whether they are in Course 1 or Course 2."

"Does she mean the Course 2 kid over there—?"

"I didn't know Azusa liked wild younger men—"

It started with truly low-level hoots. They were the basest of comments born from the opponents' unhappiness after having found themselves quashed right at the start without having gotten a chance to do much. In their subconscious they probably figured Azusa would ignore them rather than argue.

What a miscalculation that turned out to be.

They were right in that Azusa said nothing to the jeers, but…

"Who was that just now?!"

"How dare you make fun of Nakajou!"

"If you've got something to say, say it to all of us!"

"Hang the cowards!"

…it was only because other people started shouting that she didn't have the time to.

A little skirmish broke out in the middle of the auditorium, a grappling contest between the opponents who had heckled Azusa and her fans nearby.

"Please stay quiet! Return to your seats!"

"Silence, please!"

"Everyone, please calm down!"

Miyuki, Hattori, and Mayumi raised their voices several times, but the

students were now too frenzied to hear them. The ring of fighting quickly grew bigger—and the jeering comments less tolerable. It was a fight between children all clumped together, no skills or anything involved. But forcing your way between them would only get yourself caught up in it and jostled around. If nobody cared about people getting hurt it would be simple, but… Tatsuya, his head hurting thinking about how hard this would be to rein in, traded glances with Sawaki and Tatsumi and made up his mind to jump into the fray.

But his decision had come too late to be of use.

The moment an opponent shouted something exceedingly vulgar to place unjust suspicion on Tatsuya and Azusa's relationship, a girl's booming voice quieted the disturbance.

"Silence!"

The voice was so loud it seemed strange that there was no audio feedback from the microphone. It wasn't the volume, though, but the firmness that had overpowered the minds of the students wrestling with each other.

The students looked over on reflex, and a moment later they closed their eyes on reflex, too, then blinked and looked back up at the stage.

There was a blizzard of psionic light raging on the stage. A tempestuous wrath threatening to erode the world away.

Modern magic altered the world by putting together information bodies representing false phenomena and projecting them onto the world. It should be impossible to trigger any magical effects without an organized presence of mind.

And yet the turbulent emotions were now dragging the rest of the world into their chaos. It was a power of influence that made no sense. At this rate, who knew when the entire auditorium would be iced?

Mayumi, Hattori, Suzune, and Azusa all reached for their CADs at once to hold the queen of the icy world, Miyuki, in check.

…Fortunately, however, the great magical battle between student council members, the worst possible scenario, was averted right before coming to pass. A male student had, at some point, stepped onto the stage, facing away from

the audience and hiding her violent emotions from their sight. Both his hands went around her shoulders, wrapping up the power trying to remake the world. The act somehow appeared as though it had completely suppressed it.

From offstage, nobody could tell what the two of them were talking about, or saying with their eyes without exchanging words.

But until the boy pulled away from the girl and returned to his original spot offstage, everyone in school—the freshmen, the juniors, the seniors, everyone—had their eyes glued to how their eyes were locked (?) on to each other.

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After that, as though evil spirits had left the room, the auditorium went back to perfect order. Nobody made rude comments, and nobody shouted cheers like it was some kind of concert. Once the rest of the proceedings were carried out in silence, the students, like domesticated sheep, lined up to cast their votes.

The results would be counted that same day by a third party hired with student council funds and announced in the morning…

“Congratulations, Ah-chan.”

“Nakajou, congratulations.”

“Congratulations, Nakajou.”

Before she had time to hear the congratulatory words in the student council room first thing in the morning, Azusa had been elected student council president. The issue had been settled—or, well, it should have been.

“…Shiba. You really don’t have to worry that much. Those votes were null and void, after all.”

“That’s too bad. You were pretty close, too, Tatsuya.”

The siblings, listening to Suzune’s almost-sympathy and Mari’s not entirely concealed amusement, both made sour faces as they looked at the tally.

Five hundred forty-four votes had been cast.

Of them, one hundred seventy-three were valid.

The voting breakdown for president…

"…I never thought it would turn out like this, though," said Mayumi.

"Shiba with two hundred twenty, Nakajou with one hundred seventy-three, and Tatsuya with one hundred sixty-one…" mused Mari.

"…Please, wait. I understand we must accept so many people having misunderstood and voted for me, but…" Miyuki argued, controlling her voice but clearly not wanting to accept it. But that was as long as she could last. "Why are we counting votes for 'the queen' and 'her royal majesty' as votes for me?!" she cried tearfully.

"On the ballots, they are written as *Queen Miyuki* and *Her Royal Majesty Miyuki Shiba* and *Lady Miyuki the Snow Queen*… There really is no other way to interpret them," Suzune said apologetically, trying to be soothing.

That wasn't going to convince Miyuki, though. "What does that even mean? Do I strike them all as having a personality of…of perversion?!"

"…No, I really don't think that's what they meant," denied Mari in haste, as though overpowered—actually, she had cringed a bit. "I don't think anyone would have the guts to say that after seeing you up there…"

"Then did I really come off as so self-important?! Was my attitude truly that intolerable?!" Miyuki's voice was quickly starting to descend into crying.

"…Miyuki, please, calm down. I assure you that nobody thinks that way," said Mayumi in her best possible wheedling voice, trying to suppress her anxiety.

It didn't have much effect. "Give me the ballots for a moment! I'll find who wrote these things!"

"That's crazy. How would you even do that?"

The common sense someone attempted didn't help at all in this situation. Miyuki turned around to face Tatsuya, her eyes immediately starting to water. "Tatsuyaaa…"

As she drew close to him, her eyes imploring and tearful, he put his own bewilderment to the side for the moment. "That would be unreasonable, Miyuki. These are secret ballots, so it's against the rules to investigate who cast

what vote.” He patted her on the head, as if trying to persuade a small child.

“But…but…”

Now she actually started to sob.

This wasn’t completely unforeseen. He gently embraced her. “It’ll be all right,” he said into her ear. “You’re not a queen.” His voice was profoundly soft. “However others see you, you’ll always be a charming princess in my eyes,” he said.

“Tatsuya…”

Her crying steadily ceased, along with her irritation and anger. Everyone else in the room, who had braced for the true Armageddon, put their hands to their chests and breathed sighs of relief.

But then they had to keep a hand to their chests for a different reason. Miyuki had stopped crying but showed no signs of leaving Tatsuya’s arms. In fact, she was rubbing her cheek gleefully against her brother’s chest now.

The sickly-sweet scene was starting to give them heartburn.

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During lunch break that day, the Shiba siblings didn’t show up to the student council room. But the council members weren’t worried; Mayumi had gotten a text from Tatsuya saying that, while Miyuki’s upperclassmen seeing her cry was one thing, them seeing her being hugged and coddled like that must have been embarrassing for her. He didn’t come off as the least bit embarrassed in his text, though.

Azusa was absent because she was celebrating with her classmates. Suzune, as always, didn’t show up unless she had something to do here.

Today, unusually, Katsuto came to the student council room.

“Yes, come in.”

“I came after I was finished with lunch,” he explained as Mayumi gave him some tea. He nodded a silent thanks and brought the hot water to his lips.

“What’s the matter today, Juumonji?” asked Mari, who was an outsider herself but had loitered around the place so long that she treated it like her

own room.

“Nothing,” answered Katsuto. “Today is the day Saegusa effectively retires. I just came to see her as student council president for the last time.”

“I see. You’ve come to show your appreciation, then?”

“Oh, Juumonji. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” Katsuto shot down their two-pronged grin attack with a sober face.

“…Huh. I thought Tatsuya reminded me of someone. He’s a lot like you in this respect,” remarked Mari.

“Shiba?” asked Katsuto. *We’re alike?* his eyes added.

Mari shrugged. She was under the impression they were alike on the surface, but Tatsuya was deliberate, while Katsuto was more spontaneous. She had the discretion not to say that, though. Shrugging it off wouldn’t be enough to evade the question, however, so she went for a sudden change in subject. “Speaking of whom, I was worried for a minute there yesterday…”

“You’re right…” said Mayumi. “But there was no need for worry in the end.”

They must have been curious about it, too, though, because both Mayumi and Katsuto were immediately drawn in.

“I couldn’t tell from below,” said Katsuto. “I take it that was Shiba stopping his sister?”

“Yes,” said Mayumi. “I couldn’t believe the output and control he had.”

Katsuto, as he said, couldn’t quite tell what had happened from offstage, but Mayumi had been right there. She’d seen it, and was pretty sure he’d used Program Demolition. It had only taken a moment to expand the psionic structure—a product of typeless magic, which molded the psions themselves rather than information bodies that would influence eidos. The netlike structure had engulfed the mass of wildly out-of-control psions and compressed them all with overwhelming power, pouring them back into Miyuki’s body.

A person’s physical body wasn’t what produced psions, but it was the medium through which they were released and absorbed. Activation sequences, which

used CADs, were the typical example of that.

Tatsuya had stuffed the psions Miyuki had scattered about unconsciously back “inside” her, in a manner of speaking.

“I get that typeless magic is his thing, but I didn’t think you could control other people’s psions that easily. Even if they’re family. I guess we’d need to consider that Miyuki’s own psions were going completely out of control, but…” said Mayumi, offering her doubts.

“Maybe that was an old magic technique, too?” guessed Mari. “I think I remember the hermit arts being good at controlling psions…”

“No, old magic already takes a long time to learn, and they say that the hermit arts are a branch that takes especially long,” said Katsuto, indirectly pointing out that that wasn’t enough to explain what had happened. “Her strength is another thing, too. I don’t think we can ignore genetics playing a part…”

“But he said he wasn’t part of the Ten Master Clans, right?” This time Mari was the one to offer a rebuttal to Katsuto’s speculation.

“Yeah. He didn’t seem like he was lying.”

They were at a dead end now. Mari and Katsuto were left wondering to themselves about it before Mayumi suddenly said, “Let’s stop talking about it. We shouldn’t be digging into people’s family lines.”

Both Mari and Katsuto thought Mayumi’s sudden change in attitude was unnatural, but she was right. It was a breach of courtesy among magicians to investigate the bloodlines of others, so they couldn’t argue the point.

Of course, it was a secret thought of Mayumi’s that she hadn’t told them. She had taken to believing that if Tatsuya was an Extra, then investigating him would be taboo.

…And thus, without either Tatsuya or Mayumi meaning it, Mayumi became a conspirator in concealing Tatsuya’s identity.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for purchasing another book in *The Irregular at Magic High School* series. For those of you who just replied, “But this is the first time,” I’ll use this opportunity to introduce myself. I’m Tsutomu Sato.

As volume 4’s afterword suggested, this fifth volume is a collection of short stories. Timewise, they show five episodes during summer vacation but after the Nine School Competition, and one that takes place from September 1 to October 1. *How nice*, you may think—but some of the characters ran into some not-so-nice trouble. Please, pardon the format and stories as a kind of adventure. They were good memories for those involved.

Here are some additional explanations about each episode, as is customary (?) in collections of short stories.

Summer Vacation

This episode was created by my worldly passions of wanting to write a bittersweet youthful story—and a swimsuit scene. I was in high spirits as I typed away on my keyboard writing it. I think it’s one of those things where if you come to your senses it’s all over, so I didn’t do much revision other than finding things that were clearly inaccurate.

The Honor Student’s Extracurricular Lesson

The concept of this episode was Morisaki having time in the spotlight, since he never seems to get rewarded for his efforts. The kid can do it if he puts his mind to it! …So I made sure he tried his best.

Amelia in Wonderland

The origin of the title goes without saying—the thing with the rabbits and the playing cards and the eggs and all that. Only playing cards appear in this story, though. Will the day ever come when Tomitsuka becomes a rabbit? Will he ever

escape Amy's clutches? …That's not what the story was about.

Friendship, Trust, and Lolicon Suspicions

This episode is about the freshman duo of Third High, Masaki and Kichijouji. Not only are there suspicions about the latter having a Lolita complex, but you might have been even more suspicious about something else. That would be a misunderstanding. Probably. Where will Kichijouji's future lead?!

Memories of the Summer

In contrast to Summer Vacation being one of those "make a bittersweet story" episodes, I wrote this one just to be sweet. So sweet you might vomit sugar. In terms of how good an author I am, I feel I still have a ways to go on the sweetness end of things, but what do you think? When I said that to my editor he just sighed at me.

Queen of the Student Council Election

This is the "plus one" episode. It's a short story, but it's closer to a sub-story continuation of the main story… Do your best, Ah-chan. You'll have a lot more to struggle through in the future.

I'd like to show my appreciation for all those involved in this book. Thank you all very much. Mr. M, I really am sorry for making you go along with my fervent, indecipherable cry of "It's finally the swimsuit issue, so let's go with that for the cover!" I was excited this time around, even for me. I'll reflect on my attitude. Ms. Ishida and Mr. Stone, thank you for all the fabulous illustrations once again, even though you were busy. I watch *Aquarion Evol* every week!

Finally, I'd like to give a heartfelt thanks to everyone who's read this far in the afterword. If you thought it was interesting, then that's all I need to do my best for next time.

Tsutomu Sato

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