

The Irregular at Magic High School

Escape Arc ①



24

Tsutomu Sato
Illustration Kana Ishida

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KEYWORDS

Oath

For many years, Tatsuya's Material Burst was sealed by a mental interference exotype spell called Oath. The caster was Touka Tsukuba, head of the Tsukuba clan—a branch family of the Yotsuba. Oath not only sealed Tatsuya's most powerful spell but also halved his magic power. The primary purpose of the seal was originally to limit Tatsuya's thoughts. Weakening his magic was a secondary effect.

Oath's unique nature allows it to be maintained with the magic power of the spell's target or a third party who is paired with them. To make sure the behavioral restrictions are semipermanent, the target is generally used to maintain the spell. In situations where the restrictions need to be temporarily lifted, the paired third party must be present.

In Tatsuya's case, Miyuki served as his partner and was the key to breaking the seal when it was necessary. At this point in time, Oath has been dispelled.

The ESCAPES Plan

On May 31, 2097, during the Taurus Silver press conference held at the FLT headquarters, Tatsuya revealed a development plan for a stellar reactor facility fed by seawater. He presented this project as an alternative to Edward Clark's Dione Project.

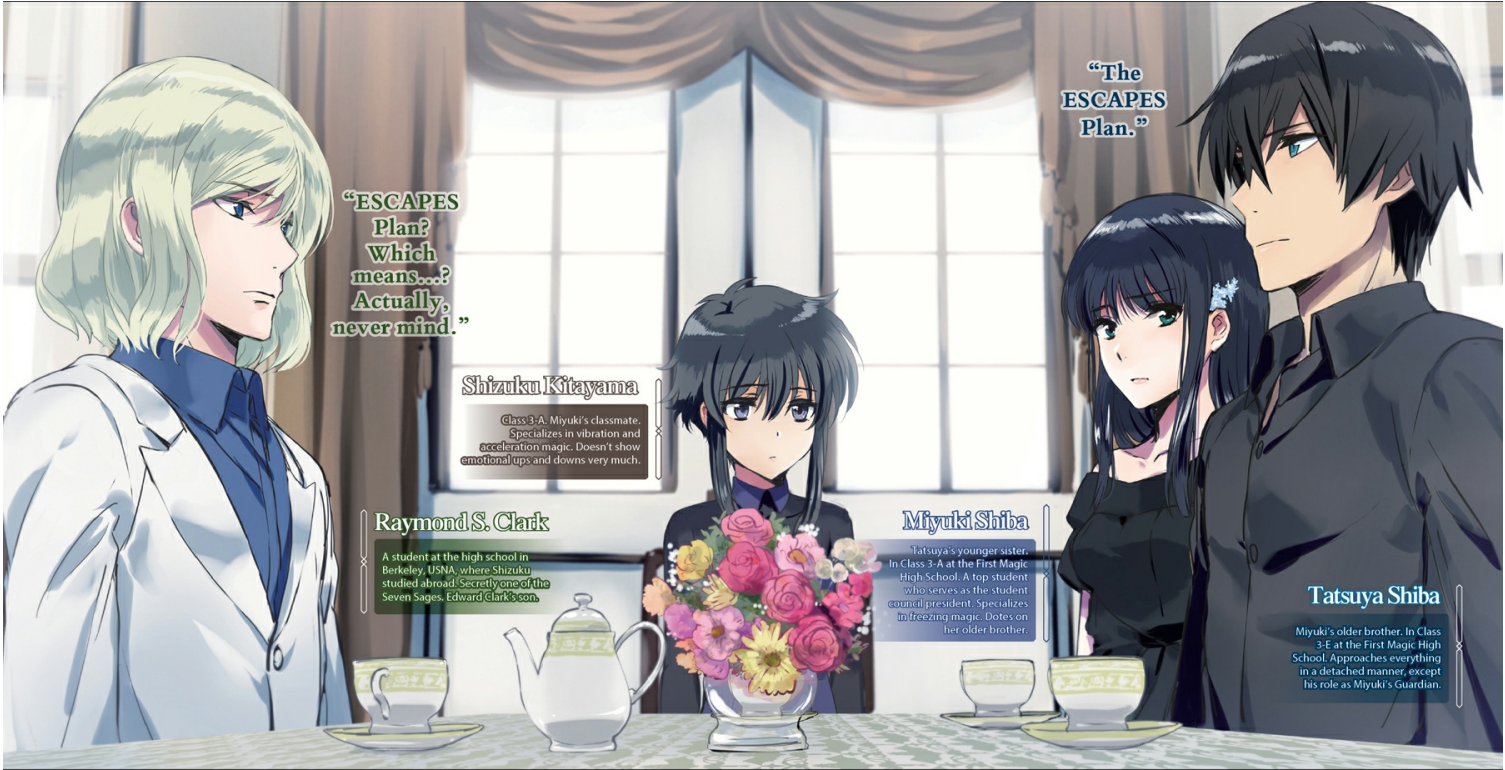
While Tatsuya has not yet decided on a formal name, he temporarily called the project the ESCAPES Plan, ESCAPES being an acronym for the phrase "Extract both useful and harmful Substances from the Coastal Area of the Pacific using Electricity generated by a Stellar reactor."

The goal of this project is to find a practical application for magic stellar reactors and thermonuclear fusion reactors by satisfying both private and industrial energy needs. From a certain perspective, the ESCAPES Plan could spark the formation of independent magician-led nations.

What is a stellar reactor?

The concept of a stellar reactor involves a continuously heated thermonuclear fusion reactor that utilizes a terminate-and-stay-resident gravity spell. As its name suggests, the stellar reactor produces fusion reactions much like those naturally occurring in the cores of stars, where gravity forces atomic nuclei to fuse together. However, the way a stellar reactor achieves thermonuclear fusion is very different. These reactors rely on magic to control gravity and overcome electromagnetic repulsion.

On April 25, 2096, an experiment involving stellar reactors was conducted at the National Magic University Affiliated First High School.





“That sounds good.
You’re the only one
I can count on.”

“Leave it
to me.”

The Irregular at Magic High School

ESCAPE ARC PART I

24

Tsutomu Sato

Illustration Kana Ishida



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THE IRREGULAR AT MAGIC HIGH SCHOOL

TSUTOMU SATO

Translation by Kenia A. Hara

Cover art by Kana Ishida

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An irregular older brother with a certain flaw. An honor roll younger sister who is perfectly flawless.

When the two siblings enrolled in Magic High School, it marked the beginning of tumultuous days to come—

Character



Tatsuya Shiba

Class 3-E.
Approaches everything in a detached manner. His sister Miyuki's Guardian.



Miyuki Shiba

Class 3-A. Tatsuya's younger sister; enrolled as the top student last year. Specializes in freezing magic. Dotes on her older brother.



Leonhard Saijou

Class 3-F. Tatsuya's friend. Course 2 student. Specializes in hardening magic. Has a cheerful personality.



Erika Chiba

Class 3-F. Tatsuya's friend. Course 2 student. A charming troublemaker.



Mizuki Shibata

Class 3-E. Tatsuya's friend. Has pushion-radiation sensitivity. Serious and a bit of an airhead.



Mikihiko Yoshida

Class 3-B. From a famous family who uses old magic. Has known Erika since they were children.



Honoka Mitsui

Class 3-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in light-wave vibration magic. Impulsive when emotional.



Shizuku Kitayama

Class 3-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in vibration and acceleration magic. Doesn't show emotional ups and downs very much.



Subaru Satomi

Class 3-D. Frequently mistaken for a pretty boy. Cheerful and easy to get along with.



Akaha Sakurakouji

Class 3-B. Friends with Subaru and Amy. Wears gothic lolita clothes and loves theme parks.



Hagane Tomitsuka

Class 3-E. A magic martial arts user with the nickname "Range Zero."



Azusa Nakajou

An alum. Former student council president. Shy and has trouble expressing herself.



Hanzou Gyoubu-Shoujou Hattori

An alum. Former head of the club committee. Gifted but can be too serious at times.



Katsuto Juumonji

An alum. Currently a student at Magic University. "A boulder-like person," according to Tatsuya.

Eimi "Amelia Goldie" Akechi

Class 3-B. A quarter Japanese. Almost everyone calls her "Amy." Daughter of the prominent Goldie family.



Shun Morisaki

Class 3-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in CAD quick-draw. Takes great pride in being a Course 1 student.



Mayumi Saegusa

An alum. Currently attends Magic University. Has a devilish personality but weak when on the defensive.



Suzune Ichihara

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



Mari Watanabe

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





Koutarou Tatsumi

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



Midori Sawaki

An alum. Former member of the disciplinary committee. Has a complex about his girlish name.



Kei Isori

An alum. Former student council treasurer. Excels in magical theory. Engaged to Kanon.



Kanon Chiyoda

An alum. Former chairwoman of the disciplinary committee. As confrontational as her predecessor, Mari.



Takuma Shippou

A junior. Eldest son of the Shippou family, one of the families with excellent magicians and a new addition to the Ten Master Clans.



Minami Sakurai

A junior. Presents herself as Tatsuya and Miyuki's cousin. A Guardian candidate for Miyuki.

Isao Sekimoto

An alum and former member of the disciplinary committee. Lost the Thesis Competition. Committed acts of espionage.



Takeaki Kirihara

An alum. Junior High Kanto Kenjutsu Tournament champion.



Sayaka Mibu

An alum. Placed second in the nation at the girl's Junior High Kendo Tournament.



Kasumi Saegusa

A junior. Mayumi Saegusa's younger sister. Izumi's older twin sister. Has a cheerful and feisty personality.



Izumi Saegusa

A junior. Mayumi Saegusa's younger sister. Kasumi's younger twin sister. Has a meek and gentle personality.



Kento Sumisu

A junior. A Caucasian boy whose parents are naturalized Japanese citizens from the USNA.

Koharu Hirakawa

An alum. Participated as an engineer in the Nine School Competition. Withdrew from the Thesis Competition.



Chiaki Hirakawa

A senior. Holds enmity toward Tatsuya.



Shiina Mitsuya

A new student enrolled at First High. Always wears custom earmuffs due to her keen sense of hearing.



Saburou Yaguruma

Shiina's childhood friend and self-proclaimed bodyguard.



Haruka Ono

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



Yakumo Kokonoe

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

Satomi Asuka

First High nurse. Male students love her calm and warm smile.



Kazuo Tsuzura

First High teacher. Specializes in magic geometry. Manages the Thesis Competition team.



Jennifer Smith

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

Tomoko Chikura

An alum. Competed in the women's solo Shields Down, an event at the Nine School Competition.

Tsugumi Igarashi

An alum. Former biathlon club president.

Yousuke Igarashi

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

Kerry Minakami

An alum. Male representative for the main Monolith Code, an event at the Nine School Competition.

Kumiko Kunisaki

An alum. Amy's teammate in the Rower and Gunner event at the Nine School Competition. Has a frank personality.





Masaki Ichijou

A senior at Third High. Direct heir to the Ichijou family, one of the Ten Master Clans.



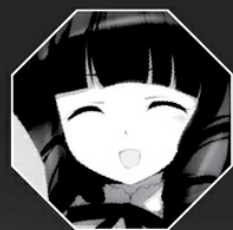
Shinkurou Kichijouji

A senior at Third High. Also known as Cardinal George.



Mitsugu Kuroba

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



Ayako Kuroba

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



Fumiya Kuroba

Former candidate for the next head of the Yotsuba clan. Has an older twin sister named Ayako. Student at Fourth High.

Yoshimi

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

Harumi Naruse

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

Gouki Ichijou

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



Midori Ichijou

Masaki's mother. Warm and good at cooking.



Akane Ichijou

Eldest Ichijou daughter. Masaki's younger sister. A junior in middle school. Likes Shinkurou.



Ruri Ichijou

Second Ichijou daughter. Masaki's younger sister. A put-together girl who marches to the beat of her own drum.



Ushio Kitayama

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

Benio Kitayama

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

Wataru Kitayama

Shizuku's younger brother. Just started middle school. Dearly loves his older sister. Aims to be a magic engineer.





Toshikazu Chiba

Erika Chiba's eldest brother. Deceased. Worked at the Ministry of Police.



Naotsugu Chiba

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



Inagaki

Deceased. When he was alive, he worked as an inspector at the Ministry of Police and was Toshikazu Chiba's subordinate.



Maki Sawamura

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



Pixie

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

Ushiyama

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



Ernst Rosen

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

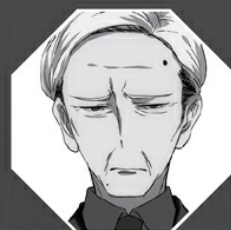
Retsu Kudou

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



Makoto Kudou

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



Minoru Kudou

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



Mamoru Kuki

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



Harunobu Kazama

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



Shigeru Sanada

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



Kyouko Fujibayashi

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

Hiromi Saeki

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



Muraji Yanagi

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



Kousuke Yamanaka

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

Sakai

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

Xiangshan Chen

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



Ganghu Lu

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



Gongjin Zhou

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



Rin

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



Bradley Chan

A deserter of the Great Asian Alliance. Ranked first lieutenant.

Daniel Liu

A deserter of the Great Asian Alliance, like Chan. Also one of the architects of the sabotage operation in Okinawa.

Joseph Higaki

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



Maya Yotsuba

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



Hayama

An elderly butler employed by Maya.



Miya Shiba

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



Honami Sakurai

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



Sayuri Shiba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's stepmother. Dislikes them.



Yuuka Tsukuba

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

Katsushige Shibata

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



Kotona Tsutsumi

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



Kanata Tsutsumi

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



Hyougo Hanabishi

A young butler who serves the Yotsuba clan. The son of the Yotsuba clan's second butler, Hanabishi.





Angelina Kudou Shields

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

Virginia Balance

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



Silvia Mercury First

A planet-class magician in the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Ranked warrant officer. Nickname is Silvie. Code name is Mercury First. During a mission in Japan, she served as Major Sirius's aide.

Benjamin Canopus

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



Mikaela Hongou

An agent sent into Japan by the USNA (although she actually works as a magic scientist for the Department of Defense). Nicknamed Mia.

Claire

Hunter Q—a female soldier in Stardust, the magician unit for those who don't make it as Stars. Q refers to the 17th pursuit unit.

Alfred Fomalhaut

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

Rachel

Hunter R—a female soldier in Stardust, the magician unit for those who don't make it as Stars. R refers to the 18th pursuit unit.

Charles Sullivan

A satellite-class magician in the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Code name is Deimos Second. Currently AWOL.

Kanda

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



Raymond S. Clark

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

Kouzuke

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



Gu Jie

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



Joe Du

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

Karla Schmidt

A German Union strategic magician
and academic conducting research
at Berlin University.



Igor Andreivich Bezobrazov

A strategic magician of the
New Soviet Union and leading
magic researcher at the
Science Academy.



Edward Clark

An engineer working for
the USNA National Science
Agency (NSA). Administrator
of Hlidskjalf.

Kazukiyo Oumi

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

James Jackson

A tourist visiting Okinawa
from Australia. Actually a—



Jasmine Jackson

James's daughter. She seems
no older than twelve but acts
mature for her age.



William MacLeod

A British strategic magician.
A prodigy who has earned
several teaching accolades
from universities abroad.





Mai Futatsugi

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

Kouichi Saegusa

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



Saburou Nakura

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



Gen Mitsuya

Head of the Mitsuya clan, one of the Ten Master Clans. Resides in Atsugi in Kanagawa Prefecture. While it isn't exactly public knowledge, he works as an international small arms broker. Manages Lab Three, which is still operational to this day.

Isami Itsuwa

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



Atsuko Mutsuzuka

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

Raizou Yatsushiro

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



Kazuki Juumonji

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

Aoba Toudou



Tsukasa Tooyama

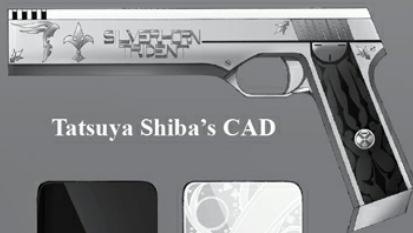
A member of the Tooyama clan, one of the Eighteen Support Clans, which aids the Ten Master Clans. The Tooyama exist to protect the functions of the state rather than the people.

Yakumo refers to him as His Excellency, Priest Seiha. An old man with the shaved head of a priest, his origin and past are unknown. Per Yakumo, he appears to be a sponsor of the Yotsuba clan.

Glossary



Course 1 student emblem



Tatsuya Shiba's CAD



Miyuki Shiba's CAD

Magic High School

Nickname for the high schools affiliated with the National Magic University. There are nine schools throughout the nation. First High to Third High adopt a system that splits the two hundred incoming freshmen into Course 1 and Course 2 students.

Blooms, Weeds

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

CAD (Casting Assistant Device)

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

Four Leaves Technology (FLT)

A domestic CAD manufacturer. Originally more famous for magical-product engineering than for developing finished products, the development of the Silver model has made FLT much more widely known in their industry.

Taurus Silver

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

Eidos (individual information bodies)

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

Idea (information body dimension)

Originally a term from Greek philosophy, pronounced "ee-dee-ah." In modern magic, Idea refers to the platform upon which eidos, or information bodies, are recorded. The primary function of magic is to yield a magic program (a spell sequence) on this Idea medium and overwrite the eidos recorded there.

Activation sequence

The blueprints of magic—and the programming that constructs it. Activation sequences are stored within CADs in a compressed format. Magicians send psionic waves 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 decompressed magic program.

Psions (thought particles)

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

Pushions (spirit particles)

Massless particles belonging to the dimension of spiritual phenomena. Their existence has been confirmed, but their true form and function have yet to be determined. In general, magicians are only able to sense energized pushions.

Magician

An abbreviation of magic technician. Refers to those with the skills to use magic at a practical level.

Magic program

An information body used to temporarily alter information connected to events. Constructed from psions possessed by magicians. Sometimes shortened to magigram.

Magic-calculation region

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

Magic program output process

- ① An activation sequence is transmitted to a CAD. This is called "reading an activation sequence."
- ② Variables are added to the activation sequence and sent to the magic-calculation region.
- ③ A magic program is constructed from the activation sequence and its variables.
- ④ The constructed magic program is sent along the "route" from the highest part of the unconscious mind to the lowest part of the conscious mind, out the "gate" between consciousness and unconsciousness, and output to the Idea.
- ⑤ The magic program output interferes with the eidos at designated coordinates and overwrites them.

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

Magic evaluation standards

The speed with which a magician constructs psionic information bodies is known as magical throughput, or processing speed. The scale and scope of the information bodies magicians can construct is known as magical capacity. The strength with which magicians overwrite eidos with magic programs is known as magical power.

Cardinal Code hypothesis

A school of thought claiming there is the existence of a total of sixteen foundational plus-and-minus magic programs within the eight types of magic—acceleration, weighting, movement, vibration, convergence, dispersion, absorption, and emission.

Typed magic

Any magic belonging to the four families and eight types.

Exotyped magic

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

Ten Master Clans

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

Numbers

Just like how the Ten Master Clans contain a number from one to ten in their surnames, well-known families within the Hundred Families use numbers eleven or greater, such as Chiyoda (one thousand), Isori (fifty), and Chiba (one thousand). Although the number value is not equivalent to the family's level of strength, the presence of a number in a surname is a broad indication of that family's prominent lineage and talent.

Non-numbers

Also called Extra Numbers, or simply Extras. Magician families who have been stripped of their number. Back in the day when magicians were used as weapons and experimental subjects, success cases were given numbers, while failures—those who did not produce sufficient results—were not.



Various Spells

- **Cocytus**

Exotyped magic that freezes the mind. A frozen mind cannot order the flesh to die, so anyone subject to this spell enters a state of mental and physical stasis.

- **Rumbling**

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

- **Program Dispersion**

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

- **Program Demolition**

A typeless spell that rams a mass of compressed psionic particles directly into an object without passing through the Idea, causing it to explode and blow away the psionic information bodies recorded in magic, such as activation sequences and magic programs. Although this spell is considered a type of magic because it is a psionic bullet without any structure, such as a magic program for altering events, it is not affected by Information Boost or Area Interface. The pressure of the bullet itself also repels any Cast Jamming effects. Since it has zero physical effect, it is unblockable.

- **Mine Origin**

A spell that imparts strong vibrations to anything that can be conceptualized as the ground—including dirt, boulders, sand, and concrete—regardless of its composition.

- **Fissure**

A spell that uses independent information bodies or spirits as a medium to push a line into the ground and create a fissure in the earth.

- **Dry Blizzard**

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

- **Slithering Thunders**

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



- **Niflheim**

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

- **Burst**

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

- **Disheveled Hair**

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

◆ Magic Swords

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

1. High-Frequency Blade

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

2. Pressure Cut

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

3. Douji-Giri (Simultaneous Cut)

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

4. Zantetsu (Iron Cleaver)

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

5. Jinrai Zantetsu (Lightning Iron Cleaver)

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

6. Mountain Tsunami

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

7. Usuba Kagerou (Antlion)

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

Magic Technician Development Institutes

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

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

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

Magic Technician Development Institute One

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Two

Established on Awaji Island in 2031. Currently in operation. Develops magic opposite to that of Lab One, e.g. magic that can manipulate inorganic objects, especially absorption-type spells related to oxidation-reduction reactions.

Magic Technician Development Institute Three

Established in Atsugi in 2032. Currently in operation. With its goal of developing magicians who can react to a variety of situations when operating independently, this facility is the main driver behind the research on multicasting. In particular, it tests the limits of how many spells are possible during simultaneous casting and continual casting and develops magicians who can simultaneously cast multiple spells.

Magic Technician Development Institute Four

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

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Five

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

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Six

Established in Sendai in 2035. Currently in operation. Researches magical heat control. Along with Lab Eight, it gives the impression of being a facility more for basic research than military purposes. However, it is said that they conducted the most genetic manipulation experiments out of all the magic technician development institutes, aside from Lab Four. (Though, of course, the full account of Lab Four's situation is not possible.)

Magic Technician Development Institute Seven

Established in Tokyo in 2036. Currently shut down. Developed magic with an emphasis on anti-group combat. It successfully created colony-control magic. Contrary to Lab Six, which was largely a nonmilitary organization, Lab Seven was established as a magician development research facility that could be relied on for assistance in defending the capital in case of an emergency.

Magic Technician Development Institute Eight

Established in Kitakyushu in 2037. Currently in operation.

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Nine

Established in Nara in 2037. Currently shut down. This facility tried to solve several problems modern magic struggled with, such as fuzzy spell manipulation, through a fusion of modern and old magic, integrating ancient knowledge into modern techniques.

Magic Technician Development Institute Ten

Established in Tokyo in 2039. Currently shut down. Like Lab Seven, doubled as capital defense, researching area magic that could create virtual structures in space as a means of defending against high-firepower attacks. It resulted in a myriad of anti-physical barrier spells.

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

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

Strategic Magicians: The Thirteen Apostles

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

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

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

USNA

Angie Sirius: Heavy Metal Burst

Elliott Miller: Leviathan

Laurent Barthes: Leviathan

* The only apostle belonging to the Stars is Angie Sirius. Elliott Miller is stationed at Alaska Base, and Laurent Barthes is stationed outside the country at Gibraltar Base. For the most part, their positions don't change.

New Soviet Union

Igor Andreivich Bezobrazov: Tuman Bomba

Leonid Kondratenko: Zemlja Armija

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

Great Asian Alliance

Yunde Liu: Pilita (Thunderclap Tower)

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

Indo-Persian Federation

Barat Chandra Khan: Agni Downburst

Japan

Mio Itsuwa: Abyss

Brazil

Miguel Diez: Synchroliner Fusion

* This magic program was named by the USNA.

England

William MacLeod: Ozone Circle

Germany

Karla Schmidt: Ozone Circle

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

Turkey

Ali Sahin: Bahamut

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

Thailand

Somchai Bunnag: Agni Downburst

* This magic program was provided by Indo-Persia.

The International Situation State of the World in 2096



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

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

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

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

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

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

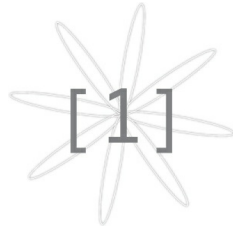
Australia chose national isolation.

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

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

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

The Irregular at
Magic High School



“Taurus Silver is Tatsuya Shiba, a current senior at the National Magic University First Affiliated High School. Citizens of Japan, I ask of you to convince Tatsuya to join our cause.”

This video message sent by a member of the enigmatic group that called themselves the Seven Sages sent shock waves through both Japan and the United States.

In the field of magical studies, the name *Taurus Silver* was as noteworthy as Shinkurou Kichijouji, the pioneer of fundamental code. Since Kichijouji had not made many notable discoveries in the field of weighting magic since discovering its fundamental code, some actually held Taurus Silver in higher regard due to his achievements of making flight magic a reality. At the very least, the American magic society generally considered Cardinal George as the master of the theoretical and Taurus Silver the master of practical application when discussing the study of magic in Japan.

Then Taurus Silver’s hidden identity had suddenly been revealed, and surprisingly, he was around the same age as Shinkurou Kichijouji. Even for those who typically showed little interest in magic, this kind of news was big enough to make it a sensationalized topic.

Alone in his room, Raymond chuckled contentedly at the people on the internet acting exactly as he had predicted. The only thing he lamented was that he couldn’t share his enjoyment with his high school friends. The fact that Raymond was one of the Seven Sages was a secret known only to him and his father, Edward Clark. It wasn’t something he could go around boasting about to just anybody.

Just as Raymond stood up from his desk to have dinner, the home security

system signaled his father's return.

Well, that's rare, Raymond thought. But he suspected his father's early homecoming had something to do with what had happened that day.

Edward Clark typically came home once or twice a week. Whenever Raymond had something to discuss with him, he usually went to his father's office. Raymond had not seen his mother since he was ten. She had left the house after she and Edward got divorced.

Edward's uncharacteristically early return home on a day he usually stayed at the office clued Raymond in that it must have something to do with the mischief he caused that day. Although knowing he would be getting a scolding, Raymond left his room and greeted his father with a smile.

"Welcome home, Dad."

"Raymond! What the hell were you thinking?" Edward yelled more fiercely than his son had predicted.

"Sorry," Raymond apologized meekly. But it was clear from his face and tone that he didn't mean it. He believed deep down that his father wasn't truly that angry with him. Sure enough, Edward quickly changed his tune.

"Then again," he said, "this might be a good thing. If government officials were responsible for publishing the personal information of a minor, this could have stirred up unnecessary trouble with the media and advocacy groups. Since I was already pondering how to go about cornering Tatsuya Shiba, the timing is perfect."

"Glad I could help," Raymond replied, his meekness gone as soon as it had appeared.

In the United States of North America, or the USNA, the government was not allowed to openly violate the rights of magicians, especially minors. This was why Edward couldn't publicly disclose Taurus Silver's identity to manipulate public opinion in Japan, even though that seemed to be the most cost-effective strategy.

As long as the information came from another source, the USNA government would be shielded from any media or NGO scrutiny. Raymond was well aware

that his scheme to expose Taurus Silver's identity through the Seven Sages was a very convenient development.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Dad?" he asked.

Raymond didn't necessarily care about helping his father; he just wanted to play some more. Edward narrowed his eyes at his son, aware of his true intentions. Yet he didn't scold the boy. After all, he realized he could use the Seven Sages to his advantage.

"I'm planning to visit Japan soon," Edward announced.

"You are?" Raymond asked.

Edward nodded. "Would you like to come with me?"

"Really? Yeah, of course!" his son replied enthusiastically.



Tatsuya saw the news report featuring one of the Seven Sages' videos at seven in the morning. Three hours later, he stopped ruminating over it and began to act. It was 10 AM when he made a call to the Yotsuba clan's main house.

"Hello there," Maya's voice answered on the other side of the screen. *"That was quite a mess, wasn't it?"*

Unlike before, she didn't need any pretenses to feign she wasn't home. The Maya who appeared on the visiphone screen seemed unbothered by Tatsuya's sudden call.

"Yes," Tatsuya answered directly. "I don't think we can remain passive any longer."

Maya's eyes widened with mild surprise.

"Are you saying you want to retaliate instead?"

"That's why I called to talk," Tatsuya replied, unfazed by his aunt's sudden show of displeasure.

Without a hint of a smile, he got straight to the point.

"You seem to have something in mind," Maya remarked.

“I do.”

“.....”

Maya’s faint smile disappeared, and she fell into thought. Tatsuya simply watched her in silence, ready to hear what she would say next. He didn’t have to wait long.

“I’ll send someone to pick you up. Let’s discuss it over an early lunch.”

“All right,” Tatsuya replied.

He would have preferred it if they could have settled the conversation over the phone, but he couldn’t refuse his aunt’s invitation. He bowed politely before hanging up.



Tatsuya arrived at the Yotsuba clan’s main house at 11:30 AM. Hyougo Hanabishi had come to pick him up and proceeded to guide him into the mansion. The dining room, where the successor nomination took place on New Year’s Eve, was set for a meal, but Maya still hadn’t shown up. Tatsuya didn’t fear Maya’s authority. At the same time, he was relieved when he saw that he hadn’t been keeping the most powerful person in this house waiting.

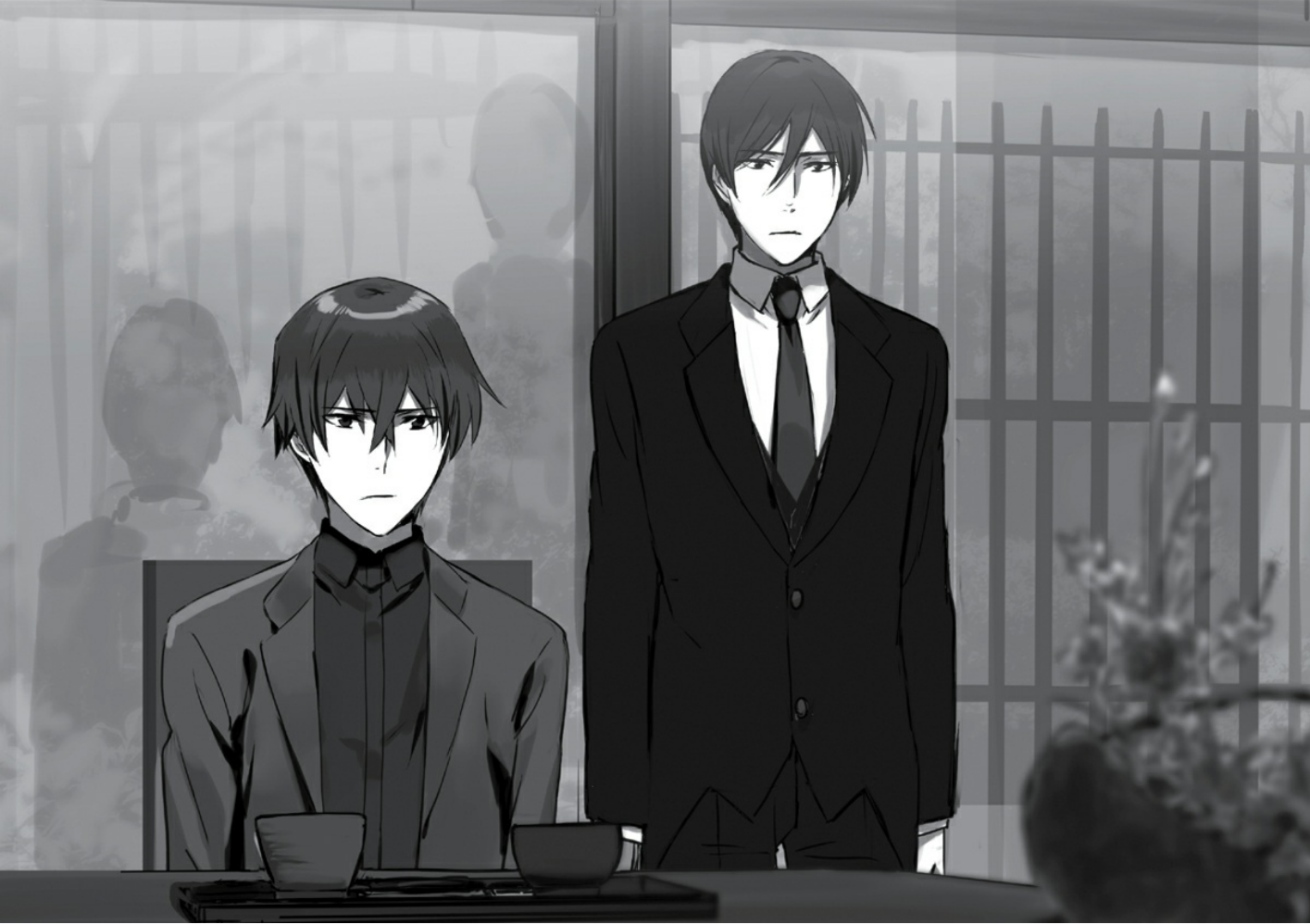
Tatsuya had just taken his seat when Maya finally appeared. He stood as she entered the room.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she apologized.

“It’s not a problem,” Tatsuya replied.

“Good,” she said, giving him a generous nod to signal him to take a seat.

Tatsuya obediently returned to his chair, and the two sat across from each other. The table was much smaller than the one that had been out on New Year’s Day, making it easier for them to chat.



Hayama stood behind Maya, while Hyougo took his place behind Tatsuya. Hayama nodded at the nearby maid to bring out lunch. Instead of a course menu, the meal consisted of a regular meal of rice, soup, and three dishes, served all at once so that the servants would not disturb the conversation.

“Please help yourself,” Maya urged.

“Thank you,” Tatsuya replied and began to eat while still paying close attention to his aunt.

“Not even I was expecting today’s sudden turn of events,” Maya began suddenly.

“Neither was I,” Tatsuya quickly admitted.

“Do you know the person responsible for the broadcast?” she asked.

“You mean Raymond Clark?” Tatsuya clarified. “Yes, I know him, but we have never spoken in person.”

After Tatsuya had helped temporarily resolve the parasite incident, he relayed the details to Maya in a written report. This report included information provided by Raymond Clark.

“Did you not realize his relationship to Edward Clark?” Maya asked again.

“I didn’t,” Tatsuya admitted. “That was careless of me. Although we promised to stay in touch, he never contacted me once since then.”

In a video message to Tatsuya, Raymond had promised to consistently provide him with any necessary information in the future. However, that verbal pledge was never fulfilled.

“Did you forget?” Maya asked.

“In the sense that I never recalled it, yes,” Tatsuya said. “Hlidskjalf’s existence also slipped my mind, but I regret not looking into it earlier. The moment Raymond reached out to me should have been a clear sign that he knows I’m Taurus Silver. None of this would have happened if I had just taken a closer look at his tools.”

“Well, there is no use crying over spilled milk,” Maya said after an awkward

pause.

Tatsuya wondered about this pause, but simply replied, "You're right."

"Anyway," she said, abruptly changing the subject. This was clearly her way of making an excuse for her awkwardness. "What happened to your seal? It seems to have been broken."

"We dispelled it before my battle with Juumonji," Tatsuya replied matter-of-factly.

"What do you mean?" Maya asked. She seemed confused more than anything else.

"We broke Oath itself," Tatsuya explained calmly.

Maya scoffed. "That's quite a risky move."

"I had to take risks to win the battle," Tatsuya explained.

"I'm sure you of all people could have won even with the seal in place," Maya said.

This time, there was criticism in her voice. But it only meant that she was worried about how reckless Tatsuya had been. For some reason, she did not seem to reproach him for breaking Oath without permission.

"After all, you came out the winner in the end," she continued.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Tatsuya said simply, with a conclusive bow.

"All right. Let's move on to the topic at hand," Maya conceded, although it was not clear if she was satisfied by Tatsuya's reply or just ready to get down to business.

At the same time, it was obvious she wanted him to elaborate on how he planned to mount a counterattack. Tatsuya temporarily set aside his chopsticks, though he wasn't finished eating.

"I would like to request permission to hold a press conference at FLT Headquarters," he began.

"So you are willing to appear in public of your own accord?" Maya seemed mildly surprised.

“Yes.”

“Tell me,” Maya pressed, searching Tatsuya’s face for answers. “What do you plan to say in a room full of reporters?”

“I want to announce the development of a seawater-fed stellar reactor facility,” Tatsuya replied.

“You mean the nuclear fusion reactor you were developing with a gravity-control TSR magic program?” Maya asked. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

“It’s a plan that will extract both useful and harmful substances from the coastal area of the Pacific using electricity generated by stellar reactors,” Tatsuya replied. “I call it the ESCAPES Plan for short.”

This was the first time he had revealed his true goals to his aunt.

“Interesting,” she replied. “Are you trying to build an independent nation for magicians with this ESCAPES Plan?”

“I don’t intend on seceding from Japan,” Tatsuya said with a shake of his head. “From a practical standpoint, it’s unrealistic to expect that magicians alone can cater to all the basic needs of life.”

“So you won’t demand political autonomy,” Maya said.

“Needlessly provoking the government would only put us at a disadvantage,” Tatsuya replied.

“That’s not how a child should think,” Maya said, covering her mouth to hide an amused smile.

But Tatsuya wasn’t offended.

“I’ll be satisfied once the rights of magicians are truly protected. Currently, they’re protected by law only in name,” he continued.

“So your goal is to secure a real guarantee of those rights from the government.”

“Exactly. At the same time, I don’t deny the possibility that, in the process, magicians will obtain substantial autonomy along the way.”

Unable to hold herself back any longer, Maya burst into laughter.

“Well,” she managed through her mirth, “institutional autonomy will probably be unpopular with the general public.”

She finally stopped laughing and turned to Tatsuya with a serious gaze.

“Now that I’ve heard your plan, at the very least, *I* believe your calculations are more than sufficient.”

Tatsuya noticed his aunt’s intentional emphasis on *I*.

“You seem to be implying that my plan can’t proceed with your permission alone,” he surmised.

“Correct,” Maya replied. “But that doesn’t mean that you need permission from every one of the branch families.”

Tatsuya quietly stared straight ahead, waiting for her to continue.

“The Yotsuba clan has a particularly close sponsor,” she explained.

“You mean Lord Toudou,” Tatsuya interjected. “I’m familiar with his name.”

“Oh, really?” Maya said in surprise, but immediately broke into a satisfied smile. “Well, that makes things easier.”

She took a sip of tea to wet her lips. When she turned to the side, Hayama quickly replaced her teacup with a new one.

“In order to initiate your plan, you must personally explain it to Lord Toudou and obtain his approval,” Maya explained. “I will ask him when he is available.”

“All right. Thank you,” Tatsuya replied calmly with a bow.

“That said, I’m sure you will also have your hands full with the FLT press conference,” Maya said. “Let’s set a tentative time. How about four days from now—Friday, at 10 AM?”

“That works for me,” Tatsuya responded promptly.

After all the recent turmoil, Tatsuya’s duties as a high school student, a corporate researcher, and a special officer had all fallen by the wayside. His schedule was completely open.

“If Lord Toudou is unavailable on that day, we can postpone the press conference,” Maya continued. “And if you can’t obtain his approval, it will need

to be canceled.”

“I understand,” Tatsuya said.

“Good.” Maya smiled at Tatsuya’s composure.



As soon as he was done speaking with his aunt, Tatsuya returned to the Izu villa. He hadn’t planned to stay the night, but there was also nothing urgent that he needed to get back to. Ever since New Year’s, the main house servants’ behavior toward him had changed dramatically. However, perhaps since he had never lived in the main house itself, he still wasn’t very popular.

“I’m sure that doesn’t bother him, though,” Maya murmured.

In the private space of her study, Maya unconsciously let some of her thoughts slip out. Though Hayama surely heard her, he did not say a word. Instead, he simply placed a teacup on her desk.

“Hayama?” Maya said, addressing her butler in the same tone as her soliloquy.

“Yes, ma’am?” Hayama responded.

“What do you think about what Tatsuya said?”

“Do you mean what he said about Oath or the press conference?”

“Both, but...” Maya thought for a bit. “First tell me what you thought about his independent decision to dispel Oath.”

“Let’s see,” Hayama pondered. “This is but my humble opinion, but I do not see a problem with it.”

“So you’re saying there is no problem whatsoever with Tatsuya getting rid of the seal entirely?” Maya said, taken aback.

“Forgive me if I’m wrong,” Hayama said slowly, “but I was under the impression that he no longer needs the seal now that he has become engaged to your heiress.”

“The seal wasn’t devised as a means for the Yotsuba clan to control him,” Maya said.

“Yes, I am aware. But, ma’am,” Hayama insisted, “I do not mean to be rude, but do you truly believe there is still a possibility of Tatsuya’s magic going out of control?”

The complete removal of Oath meant that Tatsuya could now consistently use his abilities at 100 percent. In other words, he could cast Material Burst whenever he wanted. The seal had originally been placed on him because of the terrifying possibilities of Material Burst. If Tatsuya’s anger, sorrow, or hatred was triggered in any way, he had at his fingertips a destructive power that surpassed any strategic nuclear weapon and was fully capable of threatening the entire world. Even if the earth itself was spared, all living beings—including humans—could easily be annihilated.

The Yotsuba did not dare discard this almighty power. Instead, they cherished it and made it accessible with certain procedures. The Oath seal was merely set in place to prevent Tatsuya from impulsively wielding destructive magic without thinking. In other words, it was a precaution in case he ever lost control.

It was also important to note that Tatsuya wasn’t the only one bound by Oath. The spell restraining Tatsuya’s magic was maintained with Miyuki’s magic. While Oath sealed a part of Tatsuya’s abilities, it simultaneously consumed a substantial amount of Miyuki’s power. This made it detrimental to two of the Yotsuba clan’s most formidable magicians and diminished their overall strength. Therefore, Oath was unnecessary as long as Tatsuya had his magic under control.

Hayama’s question came as a surprise, and Maya couldn’t immediately respond.

The butler continued, “Tatsuya’s skill at controlling magic is unparalleled within the Yotsuba clan. In fact, it may be one of the most powerful in the world.”

“Yes, that is true,” Maya said. “His skill is superior to mine, at the very least.”

Hayama neither agreed nor disagreed with this last statement.

Instead, he said, “As long as nothing happens to Miss Miyuki, I do not believe Tatsuya will let his magic escape his control.”

“And if something *does* happen to Miyuki, Oath won’t be able to hold back anything.” Maya sighed. “Is that what you mean?”

“Precisely, ma’am.” Hayama nodded. “I believe the Yotsuba clan should focus on protecting Lady Miyuki at all costs. Though that may be presumptuous of me to say.”

“It’s fine,” Maya said. “Everything you say is true.”

She reached for her teacup and let out a deep sigh.

“It’s not easy having so much power,” she continued. “Even if you think you are the one using it, power tends to have a mind of its own. Even if you try to isolate yourself from it, it eventually comes back to haunt you.”

“It is impossible to pretend a real threat does not exist,” Hayama said with another nod. “We must either reach a compromise, bury it, or submit to its power. As long as we do not remove the source of the threat, keeping the power in shackles only serves as a temporary fix.”

“You’re right.” Maya sighed again. “Until we strip away the threat’s power completely, a seal will not solve anything. And if that power is inseparable from the threat’s existence, the only option is to bury it.”

“As long as we cannot reach a compromise, that is,” Hayama corrected.

“Well, yes,” Maya relented. “Generally, deferring issues through compromise is an option. In this case, however, compromise seems difficult. After all, the threat of the magic in question affects the entire world.”

“Do you think there will be those who try to assassinate Lord Tatsuya in the future?” Hayama asked.

“I believe they already exist,” Maya responded, before bringing her teacup to her lips.

“That would be quite serious,” Hayama remarked.

Maya glanced at her butler out of the corner of her eye. To her surprise, there was a smile on his lips. She suddenly felt the need to fight back.

“No one could assassinate Tatsuya,” she insisted.

“I agree,” Hayama said. “Tatsuya is essentially immortal. Miyuki, on the other hand, is a different story.”

Maya’s teacup made a sharp clinking sound as she set it on the table.

“Are you saying Miyuki may get mixed up in an assassination attempt on Tatsuya?”

“I do believe that is the largest threat facing the Yotsuba clan,” the butler replied.

Maya fell silent. Tatsuya was always protecting Miyuki. They were physically separated now, but that wouldn’t stop him from fulfilling his duty. Distance wouldn’t get in the way of Tatsuya serving as Miyuki’s Guardian. Maya felt very reassured by this indisputable fact.

She was reminded that Tatsuya possessed a magic ability that could disassemble magic programs on a fundamental level, the core of magic itself, and a supernatural power that cured injuries as long as its caster remained alive. However, it went without saying that he wasn’t immortal. His battle with Katsuto Juumonji was not an easy victory by any means.

Although Tatsuya could break down and cancel magic programs, that didn’t mean he could nullify every magic spell. Katsuto’s defensive Phalanx, for example, was one he couldn’t neutralize. Instead, Tatsuya had to use physical means in the form of neutron beams. Since Katsuto couldn’t use his neutron barrier at the same time as he was casting another spell, he couldn’t block the beams. He could, however, evade them. Unfortunately, using Baryon Lance put a significant load on Tatsuya’s magic-calculation region. So when Katsuto proved capable of dodging the beams, this put Tatsuya in a considerably vulnerable position.

Tatsuya might not die from most attacks. But if he ever received a near-fatal attack, it would leave him unable to protect Miyuki. There was probably a magician somewhere in the world capable of conducting such an attack.

Actually, it was already clear that they most certainly existed. Tatsuya suffered a major injury from Angie Sirius’s charged particle cannon, causing him to lose a hand. Although advances in medicine would have made recovery possible even if he didn’t have the unique ability to regenerate, this incident

was proof that he was capable of sustaining significant damage.

Tatsuya had also been unable to completely neutralize Bezobrazov's Tuman Bomba in the Soya Strait. The fact that Tatsuya was positioned remotely at the Kasumigaura Base at the time was not a strong enough excuse. Moreover, it was clear that if Tatsuya had not prepared Baryon Lance in advance, he would have lost to Katsuto in their most recent showdown.

After a few minutes, Maya spoke up. "Hayama, are you suggesting that protecting Tatsuya means protecting Miyuki and, consequently, prevents Tatsuya's magic from going berserk?"

"Please do not misunderstand," Hayama said. "I do not believe Lord Tatsuya would be any less of a magician even with his magic restricted by Oath. That said, limiting his ability to protect Lady Miyuki by regulating his power seems to contradict your original purpose of preventing a Material Burst rampage, does it not?"

"Yes...you're probably right," Maya replied with a sigh and leaned back in her chair. "Fine. I will allow the breaking of Oath."

Hayama raised his eyebrows slightly, revealing a hint of surprise at Maya's unexpected magnanimity.

"Mitsugu and Touka might make a fuss," Maya continued, "but I can convince them, if needed."

"Understood," Hayama said. "I will do my best to help us avoid too much of a problem."

"That would be helpful. Thank you," Maya replied.

The two seemed to agree that this settled the matter. Maya moved on.

"So what do you think about Tatsuya's ESCAPES Plan?"

"I was impressed," Hayama replied.

His voice was filled with such atypical emotion that Maya turned to look at him in surprise. Sure enough, the butler's facial expression reflected his words.

"That's surprising, coming from you," Maya remarked.

“Edward Clark’s Dione Project presented an ideal that made it difficult for any respectable magician to oppose,” Hayama responded. “Yet Tatsuya’s plan presents a different solution. He proposes a righteous cause to directly confront Clark’s scheme.”

“I can agree it is certainly hard to go against a proposal that claims to be for the sake of all humanity,” Maya said.

Earth’s limited inhabitable land and a shortage of resources were inevitable problems that needed to be addressed if the human population continued to increase. The Dione Project was presented as a way to solve these issues. If the plan proposed that magic was a necessary part of the process, magicians could hardly refuse to contribute. Even if it meant sacrificing their own lives, turning their backs on the project would result in being branded as traitors to humanity, regardless of the ultimate success or failure of the project.

“However,” Maya retorted, “in terms of grandiosity, I think Tatsuya’s plan falls a few steps behind the Dione Project.”

Noticing that Hayama sounded a bit too enthusiastic about Tatsuya’s plan, there was a hint of sarcasm in Maya’s voice. But Hayama’s enthusiasm was genuine.

“That makes it all the more believable,” he replied. “I believe capitalists prefer investment opportunities with more realistic returns.”

He seemed to be evaluating the effectiveness of Tatsuya’s plan strictly as a counter to the Dione Project.

“Generally, yes,” Maya acknowledged with a hint of defeat in her voice.

“As you say, the ESCAPES Plan may lack a sense of romance or adventure,” Hayama conceded. “However, I would argue that it may be more powerful than Clark’s plan when it comes to gathering funds from sources outside the nation.”

“I just hope Lord Toudou agrees with you,” Maya whispered under her breath.

Whether Tatsuya could persuade Aoba Toudou and break the current deadlock all depended on that.

Rather than answering his employer, Hayama decided to change the subject.

“By the way, ma’am...” he began.

“Yes?” she replied.

“In regard to our previous discussion, I do not necessarily believe that compromise is impossible.”

“When it comes to Tatsuya’s magic posing a global threat?”

“Yes.” Hayama nodded. “Tatsuya did not deny the possibility of magicians gaining substantial autonomy via his plan. If he were to hold a position equal to those representing a nation, would that not make compromise far more conceivable?”



On the day a mysterious figure exposed Taurus Silver’s identity to the public, the media swarmed First High School. Reporters didn’t directly approach students with microphones on their way to school that morning to avoid making them late for classes. However, by the time second period began, all of the school’s entrances—including both the main gate and the side entrances—were completely surrounded.

Some reporters demanded interviews with Tatsuya from the school, only to be adamantly refused. This was a reasonable decision, considering that Tatsuya had not committed any heinous or illegal act. His rights were still protected as a minor. The school was even decent enough to refrain from disclosing that Tatsuya was not currently attending classes.

Nevertheless, the media was persistent. They seemed almost indifferent to whether they obtained the school’s permission or not from the beginning. After morning classes concluded and lunch break came around, a large number of reporters continued to linger around the First High premises.

“They’re still here,” Kasumi groaned.

“Is it just me, or are there more of them than before?” Izumi sighed.

The twins gazed with understandable frustration toward the school’s main gate from the student council office window.

“The main gate is practically flooded with reporters,” Honoka added wearily.

She could see what was happening outside all the way from her seat by bending the light so it reached her eyes. This was usually considered a form of unauthorized magic that was against school rules, but no one was around to reprimand her for the violation.

“I’m mostly worried about what happens when school ends,” Miyuki murmured in distress.

“Should we call the police?” Shizuku asked on a whim.

But Miyuki shook her head. “Only the teachers can make that decision. It’s not up to us.”

“I guess,” Shizuku said, immediately backing down.

“But I don’t think we’ll be able to go home safely on our own,” Shiina insisted.

If Saburou had been there, he would have unabashedly reassured Shiina that he would protect her. Unfortunately, he wasn’t on the best terms with the student council members, so he was currently out of sight.

Shiina’s worry extended from the assumption that they wouldn’t use magic. Technically speaking, the use of magic was allowed as a form of self-defense. However, determining what constituted self-defense posed a considerable challenge. Because the students were minors and the media was shielded by the freedom of press, the likelihood that magic would legally be allowed in this situation was quite low. Journalism was still considered a sacred institution, especially among so-called intellectuals. The danger that this could pose was what worried Miyuki.

“We need to come up with a solution,” she declared solemnly.



Predictably, First High was not the only place the media took over. Reporters also swarmed Four Leaves Technology, where Taurus Silver worked. Perhaps because they did not need to worry as much about minors as they did at the high school, several reporter teams brazenly pointed their cameras at the building. If they didn’t have their media credentials, someone might have suspected them of deliberately obstructing business.

Luckily, the aggressive reporting subsided by afternoon. At 2 PM, FLT responded to the media requests with a statement.

“FLT will hold a press conference concerning Taurus Silver in four days,” a young female PR worker announced. “The conference will take place on the first floor of this building at 10 AM on Friday. Please make sure to pick up your credentials today. Those who do not pick up credentials will be denied entry on the day of. Additionally, if we receive any complaints from either our company employees or First High School students due to interview requests, we will refuse entry to those involved.”

Despite the employee’s efforts, there were still those who had complaints about the announcement, and dissatisfied reporters made sure to voice their opinions. Though the exact wording varied, their grievances were essentially the same—“Are you trying to violate our freedom of the press?!”

Surprisingly, not everyone was this vocal. There was a genuine fear that causing a commotion would get the press conference canceled entirely. Many reporters chose to stick together rather than trying to outshine each other by securing an exclusive scoop. Despite the heated exchanges among the media that crowded around the FLT Headquarters, they eventually all left without causing a bigger uproar.

FLT’s Development Headquarters was home to the personal office of Tatsurou Shiba, Tatsuya and Miyuki’s father and the chief development officer of FLT. As the largest FLT shareholder, Tatsurou had a more luxurious office than even the company president. He soon welcomed a representative sent by the Yotsuba main family, who were the true overseers of FLT’s endeavors.

“Good work dealing with the media.”

A young man in his mid-twenties praised Tatsurou with a polite but condescending attitude.

“I was simply following the PR department’s instructions,” Tatsurou replied.

He resented the young man who treated him with disdain despite being twenty years his junior. But he decided not to act on it. Tatsurou lacked the willpower to defy the main house in any way, even if it only involved a servant.

“No need to be humble,” Hyougo said. “You did an excellent job. I hope you can ensure no trouble occurs this Friday, as well.”

“Of course.” Tatsurou bowed. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Good,” Hyougo replied with a satisfied nod. “I will see you then.”

Just as he turned around to leave, Tatsurou hesitantly called out to him.

“Before you go, would you mind answering a question?”

Hyougo spun back around and smiled. “And what would that be?”

Tatsurou immediately averted his gaze, but Hyougo didn’t rush him. After a few seconds, Tatsurou finally mustered up the courage to speak.

“What is the main house planning on doing with the boy?”

“Boy? Do you mean Master Tatsuya?” Hyougo asked.

Tatsurou didn’t respond. His lips only quivered, finding it difficult to move his throat and tongue.

“I’m not sure,” Hyougo said. “I just joined the main family as a servant, so I wouldn’t dare guess what Lady Maya is planning.”

His tone remained courteous, but the underlying contempt suggested Tatsurou was even below himself in station. Tatsurou sensed this acutely, and the unease spread across his face.

“Besides,” Hyougo added, “Master Tatsuya is engaged to the future head of the Yotsuba family. His well-being is no longer your concern.”

“B-but I’m his father!” Tatsurou stammered.

It wasn’t clear whether his anger stemmed from the disregard for his relation to Tatsuya or his inability to endure the general humiliation any longer.

“Yes, I am aware. And your point?” Hyougo said dismissively. “Now that Lady Miyuki has become the heiress to the Yotsuba clan and Master Tatsuya is her fiancé, there is nothing more you need to do. You should be happy.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” Tatsurou asked.

“I heard that you hated Master Tatsuya all of his life,” Hyougo explained.

“Now you no longer have to play the role of his father.”

Tatsurou was silent.

“Also, a word of warning,” Hyougo continued. “Miyuki may be your daughter, but Tatsuya is no longer your son. His true mother is now the current head of the Yotsuba clan, and you have no right to claim otherwise.”

This was the premise that Maya had come up with in order to allow Tatsuya and Miyuki to get engaged. At this point, it was considered indisputable truth.

“If you had ever loved Tatsuya as a father, the main house would have respected your bond,” Hyougo said firmly. “But the reality is that you never did. Deep down, you wanted nothing more than to get rid of your son. Now that wish has been granted.”

There was nothing that Tatsurou could say to this. Ultimately, Hyougo was right.



The reporters surrounding First High had largely dispersed by the time afternoon classes ended. After last period, approximately half of the reporters remained.

The ones who had left had not necessarily given up on coverage. They were simply wary of FLT’s threat and feared being excluded from Taurus Silver’s press conference. The ones who had stayed either were indicating their refusal to yield to the very same threat or had not heard about the press conference in the first place.

Even though the reporters were half the group than they originally were, there were still enough of them to intimidate the First High students. It might have seemed strange for magicians to be afraid of some reporters who couldn’t use magic. If they decided to resort to force or violence, First High students could easily scatter the press. But if they did that, they would be labeled as criminals. Even if they miraculously avoided legal consequences, it wasn’t hard to imagine a future where they were feared, shunned, and ostracized. First High students understood that they had no choice but to live as members of human society. That was why they feared the violence of the pen that could easily derail their futures.

“I take it breaking through the mob with force isn’t an option, right?” Kasumi asked.

“Kasumi!” her twin exclaimed. “Don’t say things like that.”

Kasumi sighed and turned her gaze back toward the school gate. The twins were at the entrance of the school’s front courtyard, which led to the main gate. They hid themselves in the shadows of the trees, trying not to be spotted by reporters while observing the situation outside.

“Hey, it’s Miyuki!” Izumi whispered with excitement as she noticed Miyuki coming out of the school building.

While Kasumi continued to monitor the media, Shiina, who had been cautiously hiding behind the twins’ backs, followed Izumi and turned toward the approaching student council president. Once Miyuki, accompanied by Minami, had come close enough to speak, Izumi piped up.

“How did it go?”

“Unfortunately, the principal is intent on not involving the police,” Miyuki responded. Her tone suggested that she’d had a feeling it would turn out this way. In other words, the school had no intention of dealing with the media themselves.

“Does that mean we just have to let the media swarm us?” Shiina asked anxiously, on the verge of tears.

“I doubt they would do anything rash,” Miyuki replied, but her voice was unsure. Decent reporters wouldn’t even dream about causing trouble for students. But it was entirely possible that some rabid anti-magicians were milling about in the crowd outside.

Honoka approached the group in the front courtyard with Shizuku and Mikihiko in tow.

“Miyuki?” she said.

“Hello, Honoka,” Miyuki greeted her. “How did the side gate look?”

“Not good,” Honoka replied. “There’s a large group of reporters waiting there. I doubt we can pass through easily.”

“There were some rough-looking guys, too,” Mikihiko added. “I’d recommend avoiding the side gate.”

Shizuku nodded in agreement.

“Miss President?”

From the opposite side of the courtyard, Igarashi, Tomitsuka, and Takuma approached the group. Even Saburou, who wasn’t part of the club activities committee, was among them.

Miyuki turned toward the new voice. “Hello, Igarashi.”

Despite the situation, Igarashi froze in awe of Miyuki’s beauty. Tomitsuka, who had built up more resistance, spoke in his place. Interestingly, the least affected by Miyuki’s appearance was Saburou. Without a glance at the student council president, he rushed to Shiina’s side to make sure she was okay.

“We have canceled all club activities for the day. Everyone is ready to go home once the coast is clear,” Tomitsuka reported.

“Thank you for your help,” Miyuki replied gratefully.

“What do we do now?” Takuma asked. “If we let everyone go at the same time, reporters are bound to corner a few of them. Should we grab some boys from the sports clubs and have them form a wall around the others?”

“We can’t just use the boys as a shield. That would be a form of discrimination,” Miyuki said kindly but firmly.

Shizuku, however, looked disappointed. She rather liked Takuma’s idea.

Unable to come up with anything better, the group looked to Miyuki for guidance. Under the irresponsible gaze of both classmates and underclassmen, Miyuki sighed. At this point, she felt more resigned than upset about the current situation.

“I will go speak to them,” she said.

“You? Speak to the reporters?” Izumi yelped in surprise.

“Yes. I will respectfully ask them to leave,” Miyuki replied.

“But that’s dangerous!” Izumi insisted.

“I agree with Izumi,” Shizuku said more calmly.

Miyuki sighed. “I don’t particularly want to do it, but as the student council president, it’s my responsibility to do something.”

“But you have a special relationship with Tatsuya—the guy they’re really here for,” Shizuku said.

“All the more reason for me to confront them,” Miyuki replied.

“It’s actually the other way around.”

“How so?”

“It’s a walk in the park for reporters to find out you were once Tatsuya’s younger sister even though you’re now engaged,” Shizuku said more firmly than usual.

She recognized the danger of reporters pressing Miyuki on this delicate topic.

“You know that’s not normal,” she continued. “Worst-case scenario, the issue gets blown out of proportion, and you won’t be the only one it affects.”

“Do you mean the reputation of all magicians could be at risk?” Miyuki asked.

“It’s definitely a possibility,” Shizuku replied.

Miyuki looked clearly hurt. It bothered her that her engagement to Tatsuya was under scrutiny. Shizuku recognized this but knew that she could not back down. Honoka and Mikihiro looked on uneasily from the sidelines.

“I understand that you feel responsible for the situation,” Shizuku continued, “but it’s not safe for you to go out there right now.”

Shizuku’s father, Ushio Kitayama, was the owner of a major corporate group. The media was usually hesitant to launch blatant attacks at someone of his status, but Ushio was always mindful of how to deal with reporters and optics in general. It was her father’s example that helped Shizuku understand the terrible power of the media more than anyone else present.

“But still...” Miyuki trailed off.

Something had to be done. But when she glanced toward the group of reporters, she suddenly froze in place.

“Miyuki? Are you okay?” Izumi called out.

But Miyuki still didn’t budge. Izumi’s voice couldn’t reach her.

Feeling something was off, everyone turned to follow the student council president’s gaze. Now everyone noticed the approaching car behind the swarm of reporters. And they all had a hunch about who it may be.

“It can’t be...” Honoka whispered.

Miyuki suddenly tried to run toward the school gate, but Minami grabbed her arm. Miyuki spun around in surprise. She quickly came to her senses and smiled at Minami, who released her arm with a bow. Miyuki walked toward the gate at a calm pace with Minami following closely behind. Honoka, Shizuku, Kasumi, Izumi, Shiina, and Saburou all exchanged glances before going after them. Mikihiro was at the tail end of the group. Meanwhile, Tomitsuka and Takuma remained in the courtyard, deciding not to walk down the tree-lined path.

At this point, the reporters, journalists, and cameramen who had gathered outside the school gate had also noticed the approach of the electric car, and they cleared a path. They were careful not to commit the minor offense of obstructing traffic and risk arrest. Some of them must have also believed they could take advantage of the electric car’s entry through the gates to slip onto the school grounds if they were lucky.

The electric car stopped in front of the school gate. Miyuki and the others stopped on the other side a few seconds later. Only a few reporters and journalists paid much attention to them. The figure that stepped out of the electric car proved much more exciting.

“What are you...?” Miyuki gasped, her sentence left unfinished.

The person on the other side of the gate was none other than Tatsuya.

“Are you Tatsuya Shiba?” a reporter called out.

None of them had expected to see him here today. Tatsuya was dressed in his school uniform. No disguise or so much as a hat to make it slightly harder to recognize him. All the reporters who had done their research knew who he was. Yet there was a hint of uncertainty in the voice of the reporter who called out.

“I am,” Tatsuya responded calmly.

The boy’s emotionless expression made the reporter falter for a moment, but he quickly regained his composure and assumed his usual audacity.

“Is it true you’re Taurus Silver?” he asked.

“You should have already heard about this,” Tatsuya responded, without providing a clear yes or no. “There will be a press conference at FLT Headquarters concerning Taurus Silver. If you have any questions, please ask them during that time.”

Everyone in the crowd heard his voice, which reached even the back rows of reporters and beyond the closed school gate.

“Really? A press conference?” Mikihiko asked with a mixture of admiration and disbelief. “Tatsuya really doesn’t hold back.”

Miyuki stood still, her eyes wide with a hand over her mouth. Tatsuya glanced her way. Even before Mikihiko spoke up, he had sensed Miyuki and the others on the other side of the gate.

“Now, please step aside,” he said to the group of reporters blocking his way.

He didn’t raise his voice or shout. In fact, there wasn’t a single trace of aggression in his tone. Yet the reporters who blocked his path staggered backward. Some of them, embarrassed by their own timidity, blushed as they stood aside and allowed Tatsuya to proceed.

“So it’s safe to assume you are Taurus Silver?” another reporter called out.

“Who are you?” Tatsuya asked in an icy tone.

“Huh?” The reporter looked surprised.

Clearly, Tatsuya’s question had caught him off guard. But he quickly pulled himself together and proudly announced the name of the major news publication that he worked for.

“I see,” Tatsuya replied. “Well, assuming you’re not a freelancer, your company should have given you a heads-up about the press conference.”

“H-how dare you speak to me that way!” the reporter exclaimed. As someone

who looked to be in his thirties, he undoubtedly didn't appreciate being treated so offhandedly by a boy who was more than ten years his junior.

But Tatsuya's eyes didn't show any signs of irritation or anger. There wasn't even contempt or pity. He simply looked at the reporters the way someone might look at a pebble on the road. Most of the reporters trembled under his gaze. To them, Tatsuya seemed unsettling, almost alien—like someone who only looked human.

"As FLT has already announced, if we hear any complaints from First High students about a certain media outlet, any reporters affiliated with them will not be allowed to attend the Taurus Silver press conference," Tatsuya stated.

A murmur of concern rippled through the crowd. Apparently, most of the reporters present were unaware of this announcement.

"I'm sure you can't throw around accusations of violating press freedoms when you only have to wait a mere four days," Tatsuya continued.

His words didn't satisfy or silence all the reporters, but their rebuttals were drowned out by the louder, more explosive sound of a gunshot.

Some of the female reporters screamed in horror. At the same time, the reporter who had confronted Tatsuya stumbled backward. He realized that if Tatsuya had evaded the shot, he would have been struck by a bullet.

Tatsuya originally had his back to the reporters. In a sequence akin to a slow-motion scene, he had spun around and caught the bullet in midair before it could pierce his chest. When he opened his left fist, the bullet dropped to the ground.

A nearby reporter's eyes widened in disbelief. Another journalist standing a couple feet back noticed Tatsuya's gloves, but he knew even highly advanced ballistic gloves couldn't possibly stop a bullet like Tatsuya did.

The tight cluster of reporters, journalists, and cameramen suddenly broke apart. The ensuing chaos was punctuated by panicked screams as they all tried to escape the line of fire. There was pushing and shoving. Some even fell to the ground and were subsequently kicked or trampled by their colleagues and rivals in the frenzied scramble.

The assailant who had infiltrated the crowd paid no attention to the press. His bloodshot eyes were fixed solely on Tatsuya. He gripped a pistol tightly in his hand and pointed it straight at his target. More gunshots rang out in quick succession.

But Tatsuya intercepted every bullet as if it were child's play. Of course, he was not simply catching the bullets in his hands. He used decomposition magic to disperse the forward momentum of the bullets.

Unfortunately, no matter how much of the bullets' force was decomposed, the resultant force would still act upon any object it met. In other words, even decomposition magic didn't physically reduce the damage Tatsuya's hand would sustain if he simply caught them.

But the phenomenon of decomposing the momentum of flying bullets was not a physical one. The information that a bullet's momentum carried was transmitted not only to the target but also to the space where there was no target to act upon. As a result, Tatsuya caught the bullets in almost a frozen state.

This was all a concept that magicians alone could truly grasp. After all, it was physically impossible for humans to catch bullets. Seeing Tatsuya accomplish this superhuman task, the anti-magic assailant panicked. Not realizing that his gun was out of ammunition, he continued to aim the gun at Tatsuya and repeatedly pull the trigger.

Realizing the man no longer had the ability to act, Tatsuya made no attempt to subdue the terrorist. It was almost as if he wanted to emphasize to the media that he was the one who had been attacked.

His eyes still fixed on the gunman mindlessly pulling the trigger, Tatsuya tried to get a sense of whether there were any accomplices. However, there was no sign of any follow-up no matter how much time passed. It seemed this was a lone wolf attack. After reaching that conclusion, Tatsuya took a step toward the terrorist.

The man let out an outlandish cry, one that could easily have been mistaken for the howl of a wild dog. Or perhaps the yelp of a defeated dog.



As Tatsuya continued forward at a normal pace, the man cried out again, throwing his unloaded gun. The now useless weapon flew by Tatsuya's face, missing him entirely. Still whimpering, the terrorist reached into his pocket and brandished a short blade. It was a push dagger—the type of knife designed to be held in a closed fist, so the blade protruded between the wielder's fingers. Carrying this type of weapon was illegal, of course, but considering the man had been armed with a gun, the knife seemed almost inconsequential.

Despite the knife's short blade, it was fully capable of killing. Yet Tatsuya took another step toward the man. They were now within reach of each other. It was then the terrorist who took the final step to bridge the distance, thrusting his push dagger toward Tatsuya's abdomen.

Surprised his attacker hadn't aimed for his head, Tatsuya grabbed the man's wrist with his left hand, veering right and then left. The man easily lost his balance and flipped over.

That was when a First High security guard finally appeared on the scene. He opened the gate slightly and squeezed through the gap. Luckily, there weren't any audacious reporters trying to slip through the small opening in the gate. Meanwhile, Tatsuya pinned his assailant's right arm and hand, which held the push dagger, keeping him on the ground until the security guard could take over. As they slowly realized what had transpired, a commotion spread among the crowd of reporters.

"Did he use magic?" someone whispered.

"Not that I could tell," another responded.

The reporters were filled with awe at Tatsuya's ability to subdue the attacker without magic. Although he had used magic to catch the bullets, the reporters hadn't been able to detect it. To them, Tatsuya appeared to be a magician who could stop bullets without magic and effortlessly captured a knife-wielding attacker. The crowd stood still, unsure of how to react.

Tatsuya seized this opportunity to pass through the school gate, grab Miyuki and Minami, and lead them into the back seat of his electric car. He then sat in the driver's seat and started the engine. The crowd backed up instinctively as the car pulled away.

“When did you get your license, Tatsuya?” Miyuki asked.

Out of all the questions she could have asked, she picked the most inconsequential one. Even in this day and age, it was required to be at least eighteen years old to acquire a four-wheel motor vehicle license. However, there were more loopholes than before. For example, if it was deemed an administrative necessity and the minor was sponsored by a business, they could obtain a license once they had completed compulsory middle school education and already possessed a two-wheel vehicle license.

Katsuto received a regular license shortly after enrolling at First High, sponsored by the construction company run by the Juumonji family. This license didn’t even require having another licensed driver in the vehicle. However, the qualification test was much more challenging than the standard driving test. In Tatsuya’s case, he didn’t have the support of a business entity, but it *was* deemed a necessity.

“As soon as I arrived in Izu,” Tatsuya replied. “Being able to drive is a useful skill to have under my belt.”

“I had no idea,” Miyuki said, a bit miffed. “Why didn’t you tell me? Are you keeping secrets now?”

Tatsuya laughed. “My bad.”

This kind of adorable back-and-forth between them was only possible thanks to the privacy of the car. Their trivial conversation finally put Miyuki at ease.

“Anyway,” she said, “why did you come get us? It’s risky appearing in front of the press.”

“I thought you might be pushing yourself too hard as the student council president,” Tatsuya replied. “I couldn’t stand the idea of putting you through something like that.”

“Tatsuya...” Miyuki said with her usual enraptured expression.

Minami, meanwhile, awkwardly put on a poker face.

“So what is the real reason?” Miyuki continued in an almost drunk voice.

Minami blinked in surprise. It wasn’t like Miyuki to doubt what Tatsuya told

her.

But Tatsuya just laughed. “That’s not nice. I’m not lying to you.”

“Maybe not.” Miyuki beamed. “But you certainly aren’t telling the whole truth.”

She wasn’t about to let Tatsuya deflect.

“Well, I did want to put a stop to the media’s meddling,” Tatsuya admitted. “If they continue to brazenly sniff around, it may affect important future coverage. I also wanted to show those reporters I wasn’t afraid of them. But that said, my main objective was still to resolve the commotion happening at First High to lighten your burden, Miyuki.”

“All right,” Miyuki said. “If you say so.”

Deep down, she did not completely believe him.



As Tatsuya had expected, the crowds surrounding First High soon disappeared. About thirty minutes after Tatsuya’s electric car left the scene, all the reporters and journalists had departed.

Luckily, there weren’t any reporters resorting to stalker-like behavior by hiding in the shadows and ambushing students with interviews. As a result, all the students and staff could return home without being bothered. The threat of being excluded from Taurus Silver’s press conference proved quite effective.

After escorting Miyuki to her new residence in Chofu, Tatsuya confirmed the press’s withdrawal from First High. Although he hadn’t personally conducted surveillance on the high school, he knew someone who had. Once all of this was complete, he returned to his Izu villa and met with the informant in the living room.

“Thanks for all your hard work today, Hyougo,” Tatsuya began, taking a seat.

He had started calling the young man by his first name to differentiate him from his father, who served in the Yotsuba family’s main house. The sudden first-name basis was not a sign that the two had grown closer.

“I should say the same to you, Master Tatsuya,” the young man replied.

Hyougo remained standing at attention across from Tatsuya, although he wasn't ordered to do so. He was simply too stubborn to sit down.

"All I did was go pick up Miyuki," Tatsuya said modestly. "Thank you for the intel on the assailant, by the way."

He had actually been informed in advance of an infiltrator with violent intentions who lurked among the press that had been thronging outside First High.

"Was it useful?" Hyougo asked.

"It was." Tatsuya nodded. "I was just surprised there was only one."

"I took precautions to thin out any potential threats that could have harmed Lady Miyuki," Hyougo explained. "Apologies if that was an unnecessary move on my part."

"You took precautions?" Tatsuya asked with mild surprise. "No need to apologize. That was a smart decision."

Hyougo put a hand to his chest and bowed. "I am glad you think so. I have received news that several reporters exhibited signs of distress after witnessing the shooting incident. Some of them have even begun a discourse that overly generalizes all anti-magic folks as armed terrorists."

"I guess it was worth getting shot at," Tatsuya said cynically.

"The sight of a person coming under fire is shocking to those unfamiliar with firearms, even if the intended target is a natural threat," Hyougo commented. "The way you intercepted the bullets left an especially strong impression. I am sure the impact of today's incident will gradually spread as time goes on."

"Do you think it would have been even more effective if I had gotten injured?" Tatsuya scoffed.

"I do." Hyougo nodded. "However, it's for the best that you avoided any injury. The sight of you bleeding would distress Lady Miyuki to no end."

"You're right," Tatsuya agreed with a faint smile. "Making Miyuki lose control of her magic would be counterproductive."

Hyougo closed his eyes and offered another bow. As they spoke, it became

clear that Tatsuya had deliberately let himself get shot at. While the assailant was not exactly a pawn, Tatsuya and Hyougo may have taken matters into their own hands to stage an attack if the man did not begin shooting on his own.

“In the initial plan, it would have been enough for the media to understand the risk of becoming involved with magicians and potentially being caught up in an anti-magic terrorist attack,” Hyougo continued. “Luckily, things turned out better than expected.”

“I will leave the rest to you,” Tatsuya said.

“Understood, sir.”

Hyougo bowed a third time. The pleased look on his face suggested that the intrigue and the execution of covert missions filled him with pure joy.



The villa where Tatsuya was staying wasn't the only property that the Yotsuba family owned in Izu. They also kept an unassuming house once meant to keep an eye on Miya without intruding on her rest.

Miya had been the only member of the Yotsuba family with her unique type of magic. The small house had originally been built as a precautionary measure to keep away malicious individuals who may be attracted to her special skills and try to kidnap her.

There had actually been three attempts to kidnap Miya. While all of them were successfully repelled, they also justified the precaution of constructing the small house. After Miya's passing, both the villa and the small house were left mostly untouched, with the exception of occasional maintenance. Now that Tatsuya was staying in the villa, the opportunity to use the small house again had finally arrived.

“Miss,” a servant announced, “all the furniture and equipment have been successfully set up.”

“Thank you.”

The eldest daughter of the Yotsuba clan's Tsukuba branch family, Yuuka Tsukuba, nodded gracefully.

“Shall we get started as soon as we put away your luggage?” the servant asked.

It was the evening of the day Tatsuya and Maya had lunch to discuss how to deal with Edward and Raymond Clark. Yuuka’s visit to the small house in Izu was, of course, not for leisure; it was to fulfill the mission that Maya had assigned her.

Yuuka’s task was to create a barrier to keep the media away from Tatsuya’s villa. Spells of this kind were a specialty of ancient magic and were not usually suitable for modern magic. Luckily, the Tsukuba family excelled in mental interference magic. Using a condition-triggered spell with reduced power and extended duration, they could weave a barrier that was no less effective than the spells of old.

The Tsukuba team arrived at the small house at twilight, meaning they would have the barrier set up by the time it was completely dark. While magicians could use magic, they didn’t have night vision. The so-called Darkvision was a skill separate from magic. So naturally, Yuuka didn’t notice the shadowed figure at first.

“There is a suspicious person over there, Miss,” the servant reported.

“What? Where?” Yuuka asked peering into the darkness. “...Oh, wait. I see him peering into Tatsuya’s villa.”

The suspect in question was wearing a dark blue shirt and pants to help him blend into the night. A pair of binoculars hung around his neck. No matter the angle, it was clear he was peering in the direction of Tatsuya’s villa.

Yuuka’s servant had noticed the man, thanks to the sudden completion of the barrier. The spell worked by interfering with thought processes, making it impossible to perceive the villa where Tatsuya was staying. The Tsukuba family barrier operated on a principle similar to the Qimen Dunjia spell used by Gongjin Zhou and Xiangshan Chen. Even if their eyes worked perfectly fine, a suggestion implanted within their consciousness convinced them there was nothing there.

To someone who had been surveilling the villa just before the completion of the barrier, it would seem like the building had suddenly disappeared. And if

that happened, it wasn't at all strange for someone trying to conceal their own presence to get flustered and let their guard down.

In other words, if the suspicious man in the shadows hadn't been so shocked by the villa vanishing without warning, he was probably skilled enough to have stayed hidden from Yuuka and the rest of her team.

"Catch the man, but don't kill him," Yuuka ordered one of the nearby guards. "Make sure he doesn't sustain any heavy injuries."

"Yes, ma'am," the guard replied and disappeared into the darkness.

"I'm sure Tatsuya has already detected him," Yuuka murmured as she gazed in the direction of Tatsuya's villa. The lights in the windows were like will-o'-the-wisps glittering in the darkness.

There was not a chance that Tatsuya didn't notice he was being watched. He was simply ignoring the suspicious person, because he didn't recognize the man as a threat. Or maybe he thought the consequences he would have to deal with after catching the man weren't worth the trouble.

The suspicious man was hiding within the grounds of the villa, which was part of the extensive property privately owned by the Yotsuba clan—or, more precisely, by a real estate company that the Yotsuba clan secretly controlled. However, there were no conspicuous barriers, such as fences, which marked the perimeter of the property. Accusing the man of trespassing might backfire, especially if the intruder claimed he wasn't aware the area was private property.

"It looks like he wants us to do all the dirty work," Yuuka muttered.

The suspicious person was not the only one Tatsuya sensed. Yuuka's group was surely on his radar, too. Consequently, he probably saw no need to sully his own hands dealing with small fry. Yuuka sighed, imagining her distant relative's probably exasperating expression.



"Lady Maya, the barrier has been completed successfully."

"Good work."

After catching and interrogating the suspicious man in the shadows, Yuuka returned to the small house and called Maya.

“We also found a shady character who had his eye on Tatsuya, so we captured and questioned him,” Yuuka reported.

“Oh?” Maya’s eyes widened in mild surprise, but she smiled. *“Were you able to identify him?”*

“He is a Tomita clan magician,” Yuuka replied.

“Isn’t the Tomita clan one of the Hundred Families?” Maya posed. *“I believe they have ties with the Magic Association.”*

“Yes, that’s right.” Yuuka nodded. “It seems it was that same Magic Association that gave the order to keep an eye on Tatsuya.”

“Is that so?” Maya replied slowly.

The Yotsuba clan head’s bewitching smile sent a chill down Yuuka’s spine, but she maintained her composure and continued.

“The Tomita magician claims not to have any sinister motives. It seems the Magic Association was simply worried Tatsuya might disappear somewhere.”

“I see.”

“We currently have the man in custody. What would you like us to do with him?”

“Let him go. There’s no need to wipe his memories, either.”

“Are you sure, ma’am?”

“Yes,” Maya replied. *“The Yotsuba clan will never abandon one of its own. The Magic Association would do well to remember that.”*

How shameless, Yuuka couldn’t help but think. Of course, she refrained from saying it out loud.

She couldn’t believe Maya could say such a thing, considering how the Yotsuba had treated Tatsuya up until the previous year. In fact, that had continued until fairly recently.

Yuuka had initially thought Tatsuya’s duel with the head of the Juumonji clan

was simply to prove himself worthy to be the future husband of the Yotsuba clan's next leader. However, once she realized how much military intelligence agents had been involved, Yuuka felt quite bitter about the lack of substantial support from the clan for Tatsuya.

"Is that all?" Maya asked.

"Not exactly. There is one more thing not directly related to the current mission," Yuuka replied immediately, to hide the fact that her mind had been wandering. She was the best at this of the four candidates for clan heir.

"Go ahead," Maya said.

"My mother was wondering about Tatsuya's seal that was recently broken."

"Wondering is a mild way to describe what she's probably thinking," Maya mused.

Yuuka didn't reply to this comment. Her mother, Touka, was very proud of her magic ability. All magicians felt superior about their magic in some way or other, but this was especially the case with Touka. Anyone who knew this could imagine how her state of mind now that Oath had been broken.

"You don't think there is anything wrong with it?" Yuuka asked, honestly curious.

"With the fact that Oath was broken? Well, I'm not exactly pleased," Maya said. *"But there isn't much that we can do."*

"There isn't?" Yuuka repeated. Maya's answer took her by surprise.

"Everyone knew Oath was not infallible," Maya explained. *"We simply did not expect Tatsuya to go as far as to put Miyuki's life in danger to break it. Isn't that right?"*

"Y-yes," Yuuka stammered. "I suppose that's true."

Everyone involved had known that a complete erasure of Oath was likely to cause significant harm to Miyuki, who had been maintaining the spell. The fact that Tatsuya would take such a risk was unexpected, to say the least.

"Besides," Maya continued, *"we can't very well recast Oath on Tatsuya now, can we?"*

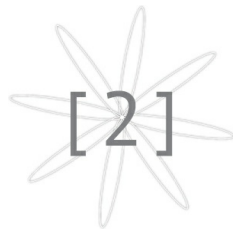
Yuuka had to admit that this was true. Oath imposed a significant burden both on the person it was cast on and the person maintaining the spell. This strain was far higher than any recoil they might have to deal with during the dispelling process. In other words, Oath consistently impaired the magical abilities of both parties in their daily lives. At this point in his life, Tatsuya would not tolerate an arrangement that diminished Miyuki's magic.

"Agonizing over things we cannot do is just another form of escapism," Maya stated.

Her statement was a harsh critique of Yuuka's mother disguised as a general comment. Yuuka knew this, but given her status, it was impossible to argue.

"Y-yes, of course," she replied. "You're absolutely right."

What's more, deep down, she agreed with what Maya said.



Katsushige Shibata was the current head of the Shibata family, a branch of the Yotsuba clan. He was also an official bureaucrat employed at the Ministry of Defense. Despite his exceptionally high aptitude for magic combat, his job mainly entailed the theoretical application of magic in warfare rather than personally engaging in battle himself.

While large-scale conflicts persisted in South America, Central Asia, and Africa, it was mostly peaceful in East Asia and the Western Pacific. Thanks to this, the Ministry of Defense's staff members routinely left work relatively early.

Following the media uproar over Taurus Silver's true identity—which didn't mean much for the general non-magician population—Katsushige left the office shortly before 7 PM. Instead of heading straight home, he made his way to a hotel in the heart of the city. While not one of the top-tier internationally renowned lodgings, it was still well regarded among businessmen for its excellent dining options and robust security.

Katsushige quickly found the man he was scheduled to meet at the designated restaurant. That said, since they were dining in a private room, he was pretty hard to miss.

"Hey, thank you meeting with me today," the man greeted him.

He was a middle-aged man about the age of Katsushige's father, dressed in an ordinary suit. If he didn't know better, Katsushige would have mistaken him for an average businessman.

"It's no problem at all," Katsushige replied. "I'm so sorry my father couldn't make it. I hope you can accept me in his stead."

"Please," the man said. "It's my fault for demanding to meet all of a sudden. I

should be the one apologizing.”

“If you insist, Mr. Kuroba.”

Katsushige’s host was none other than the head of the Yotsuba clan’s Kuroba branch family, Mitsugu Kuroba. Mitsugu offered Katsushige a seat, and the two men sat down.

The same waiter who had led Katsushige to the private room returned to take their order. They asked for several cups of sake and some appetizers for the table before sending the waiter on his way.

“Now then,” Mitsugu began, slightly leaning toward the table, “I asked you here today to talk to you about that boy.”

“Tatsuya, you mean?” Katsushige replied.

Though Mitsugu avoided the young man’s name, Katsushige wasn’t afraid to say it. Mitsugu didn’t seem to be bothered.

“Yes,” he said. “Taurus Silver’s true identity was finally revealed to the public yesterday, and I want to know what you make of it.”

“To be honest, I saw it coming as soon as Taurus Silver’s name came out of Edward Clark’s mouth,” Katsushige replied. “The Yotsuba clan probably isn’t too happy about it, but I don’t believe Tatsuya is to blame.”

Mitsugu wasn’t expecting this sort of response.

“But don’t you think this could have all been avoided if the boy had obediently joined the main family instead of going to high school?” he asked. “Edward Clark clearly wants him on the Dione Project because of the stellar reactor experiment he conducted last spring. Not for Taurus Silver’s achievements.”

Katsushige shook his head. “Tatsuya didn’t go to First High of his own volition. He had to go because of the Yotsuba clan’s Guardian system.”

“You may not know this, but after the Yokohama Incident, the Yotsuba clan head ordered the boy to spend his disciplinary suspension at the main house,” Mitsugu informed him. “However, he refused and continued attending First High. If he had disappeared from the public eye at that point, he probably

wouldn't have attracted nearly as much attention as he's getting now."

"You're mistaken, sir," Katsushige retorted. "The moment Tatsuya used Material Burst, it was only a matter of time before he was dragged into the shadowy arena of international politics. Moreover, he had little option besides using the spell. Without it, Japan would have suffered irreparable damage."

"I'm not so sure about that," Mitsugu replied. "The Yatsushiro family is in Kyushu, and when it comes to maritime combat, the Itsuwa family is always eager to help. Even without Miss Mio's Abyss, the Itsuwas are a force to be reckoned with. The Great Asian Alliance may be a formidable enemy, but we could have defeated them without Material Burst."

"Even so," Katsushige pressed, "at the time, there was no choice but to cast Material Burst. War isn't just about winning or avoiding defeat. A blemish on national honor means the available forces for the next battle will diminish. It's important to consider both the time and money it takes to replenish military forces. This is especially clear if you look at what happened to the Great Asian Alliance after the losses they suffered due to Material Burst."

Mitsugu was at a loss for words. He didn't need to hear all that. He understood the situation well enough before Katsushige spelled it out.

"I hear what you're saying about the boy's magic being indispensable to our national defense," Mitsugu said, changing his tune. "That gives us all the more reason to not hand him over to the Americans."

"Correct," Katsushige replied simply.

This was the first time he had agreed with Mitsugu all evening. Taking advantage of this momentum, Mitsugu eagerly leaned forward in his seat.

"Then, shouldn't the Yotsuba clan be closely protecting him? The USNA would surely give up on the boy if he were to die suddenly. If we framed the death as a humanist attack, we might even be able to dull the public's backlash against magicians."

"Sure," Katsushige said.

"Then, why don't—"

“Mr. Kuroba.”

Mitsugu was about to suggest that the Yotsuba clan branches form a united front and demand Tatsuya be confined. Katsushige knew this and forcefully cut him off.

“I, too, found it hard to understand why the heads of the branch families showed Tatsuya excessive hostility,” he said.

Mitsugu recognized Katsushige’s intentional use of the past tense and immediately understood what he meant.

“So the other day, I confronted my father about it,” Katsushige continued. “He was reluctant to speak at first, but he eventually told me everything.”

“I see.”

There had been an agreement to keep that subject under wraps. However, Mitsugu couldn’t bring himself to blame Osamu, Katsushige’s father. In fact, it would be a contradiction. After all, Mitsugu himself was the first to tell someone else.

“Mr. Kuroba,” Katsushige said. “I cannot bring myself to agree with either you or my father. It’s a mistake to treat Tatsuya like the enemy.”

Just then, the two men heard the waiter’s voice outside their room. They paused their conversation as the waiter placed two glasses of cold sake on the table and walked away.

“But the boy is dangerous,” Mitsugu began again.

“One individual holds the power to destroy the world; a single authority holds the switch to bring about the world’s ruin; one government body possesses the ability to annihilate the world. While these three scenarios may seem different, they are fundamentally the same. In any democratic nation, the military is always ready to act at a moment’s notice. Otherwise, it would be useless. There’s little point in maintaining a standing army if the nation is destroyed while waiting for a democratic consensus to be reached before taking any military action. The reason we have civilian control of the military is primarily to restrain those in power, preventing them from arbitrarily deploying the military and ensuring that there are systems in place to prevent the indefinite use of

military force. At the same time, any system of governance or oversight that insists on controlling every aspect of military power makes even self-defense impossible.”

“Still,” Mitsugu offered, “having some restraint—even if it serves merely as a deterrent—is better than having none at all.”

“I agree.” Katsushige nodded. “That is why we shouldn’t allow dictators to have weapons of mass destruction. Military power should always be under civilian control. However, Mr. Kuroba, it’s important to remember that even democratically elected leaders can turn the key to launch strategic nuclear missiles whenever they please. Even if these keys are physically divided among government staff, ultimately, the person in power chooses who holds them, and that leader is backed by the support of voters.”

“Now you’re just being extreme,” Mitsugu contended.

“Saying that Tatsuya will destroy the world is also extreme,” Katsushige fought back.

“If that’s the case,” Mitsugu said, “then claiming a dictator will use weapons of mass destruction is just as extreme.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, sir. A dictator’s regime won’t have checks and balances designed to stop them from exercising power. That’s what makes them a dictator. An individual is different. You can’t intervene in an individual’s mind. Others can’t stop him from thinking or deciding whatever he pleases. However, as long as that individual is not a dictator, his actions can be stopped. Outside forces can influence him to reconsider, restrain himself, and even persuade him to go down another route.”

“Are you suggesting an individual is closer to the leader of a democratic government than to a dictator?” Mitsugu asked.

“An individual who is alone—or believes they are alone—may be closer to a dictator. But an individual who wants to be around others and knows he is not alone will not become a dictator. That is, as long as he doesn’t actively try to become a dictator or get elevated to that status of one by others.”

“.....”

“I beg you, Mr. Kuroba. Do not turn Tatsuya into a dictator. If you genuinely care about the future of the world, you should not isolate him. With all due respect, sir, what you are trying to do seems counterproductive. Not only does it reduce the strength of this country, but it jeopardizes the future of the entire world.”

“Is that what you believe?”

“I came here in my father’s stead. I hope that answers your question.”

Katsushige rose from his seat and concluded, “Mr. Kuroba, I implore you. You must be more realistic.”

With that, he left Mitsugu behind and headed home to his apartment, where Kotona was preparing dinner.



Around the time Mitsugu and Katsushige parted on a rather tense note, the president of the Magic Association, Hisui Tomitsuka, sat in her private office in Kyoto with her head in her hands. In front of her was yet another deliberately formal request from the USNA. The document outlined Edward Clark’s upcoming visit to Japan and expressed a desire to arrange a meeting with Taurus Silver, aka Tatsuya Shiba.

Leaning back in her chair and staring up at the ceiling, Hisui screamed hysterically.

“Ahh—! What am I supposed to do?!”

She covered her face and answered herself, “No. I know what I need to do! I just need to make the preparations for Edward Clark’s meeting with Tatsuya Shiba!”

At this point, she was at her wit’s end, and it was practically driving her crazy.

“Yes, I know. It’s so obvious,” she said, smacking her head down on her desk. “The problem is I don’t have the authority to do that.”

She let out a deep sigh.

“Unfortunately, I can’t simply refuse.”

After a few minutes, she slowly lifted herself up.

“It looks like Mr. Clark wants to meet this Saturday. You can’t get much more last minute than that. And that isn’t the only bad news.”

She glanced at the small display on the corner of her desk, which was streaming the latest news.

“It looks like Saturday is the day after the Taurus Silver press conference. What in the world do they have to talk about?” she wondered.

It couldn’t be anything good.

“Why does this have to happen while I’m president?” she groaned, once again collapsing into a messy pile on top of her desk.



Maya gave Tatsuya a call at a little past 9 PM that night.

“Apologies for calling so late,” she began.

“It’s no problem,” Tatsuya replied. *“Thank you for calling.”*

“No need to overthink it.” Maya chuckled. *“This is a planned call.”*

Right, Tatsuya recalled. *She promised to call once she confirmed Aoba Toudou’s schedule.*

Yet he was surprised his aunt was calling him herself. He quickly put his feelings aside and acted like everything was normal.

“Did you set up an appointment with Lord Toudou?” he asked.

“Yes,” Maya replied. *“He has agreed to meet you tomorrow evening at seven.”*

She had sensed Tatsuya’s surprise but wasn’t cruel enough to point it out.

“Where will he meet me?” Tatsuya asked.

“At the Ninefold Temple. Yakumo Kokonoe has agreed to host you both,” Maya replied.

This time, Tatsuya was unable to hide his surprise. Maya chuckled as if she had pulled the cleverest prank.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to laugh,” she said. *“I was quite surprised myself when Lord Toudou suggested the temple. I’m glad to see I’m not the only one.”*

“Yeah,” Tatsuya said. “I didn’t expect Master Yakumo to be involved in all this.”

“It seems Lord Toudou and Yakumo have long been friends,” Maya explained. *“The world is a small place.”*

“It is,” Tatsuya replied almost automatically.

Deep down, something bothered him. Kazama had been the one to introduce him to Yakumo. At the time, both Kazama and Yakumo confirmed that the Yotsuba family was not involved in their meeting. Considering the subtle rivalry among the Yotsuba family, the Independent Magic Battalion, and the 101st Brigade, there seemed no reason to doubt their words. However, now that Tatsuya knew that Yakumo and Aoba Toudou were close—although how close, exactly, remained unclear—the nature of their relationship could be different.

Yakumo and Tatsuya were not technically master and pupil. They had decided that the first day they started sparring. If forced to describe their relationship, they would probably say they were magic sparring buddies. There was nothing for Yakumo to teach Tatsuya in the ways of battle. The younger boy would ask questions at times, but Yakumo wouldn’t always reply. That was just how things were.

At the same time, Tatsuya had learned a great deal from his master, especially during the parasite incident. The psion rounds developed to defeat the parasites, for example, would not have been possible without Yakumo’s help. Although Yakumo didn’t always provide information, Tatsuya had acquired a significant amount of knowledge from him that was perhaps meant to stay a secret.

Tatsuya had initially thought this sporadic disclosure of information to simply be one of Yakumo’s whims. Without knowing the priest better, he had also suspected there might be some ulterior motive. He had even considered the priest may be scheming to separate him from the Yotsuba family and turn him into the National Defense Force’s pawn. As their relationship progressed, these suspicions gradually dissipated.

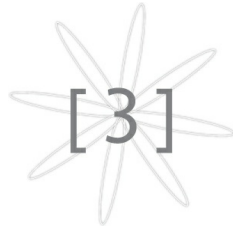
But...maybe they were warranted, Tatsuya thought.

He should have known that Yakumo was a sly character. The fact that the

priest could go toe to toe with Tatsuya proved he was a force to be reckoned with. Nevertheless, Tatsuya found himself trusting Yakumo, almost without realizing it.

“I’ll go to the Ninefold Temple tomorrow at 7 PM, then,” Tatsuya said. “Thank you for organizing this.”

Though his tone remained calm, he harbored a growing sense of caution.



Taurus Silver became the talk of the town on the Monday when Raymond Clark spoke as the First Sage on public television. However, most people's interest had quickly waned the next day, and by Wednesday, he was hardly a topic of conversation anymore.

Among the magic community, Taurus Silver was a celebrity to the extent that everyone knew his name. However, those who could use magic practically were only one in ten thousand of the adult population. Of course, there were still individuals who worked as engineers, managers, politicians, and military personnel who regularly interacted with magicians in some shape or form. Therefore, it was wrong to claim that 99.99 percent of the population were entirely disconnected from magic in their daily lives.

In recent years, there had even been a noticeable rise in anti-magic sentiment among those with some kind of involvement with the magic community. To be fair, only a few citizens directly benefited from magic in terms of security, national defense, or disaster response. So it was true that most continued to lead lives with no direct connection to it.

Ultimately, magic wasn't essential to modern life—at least not in places where there was peace. That allowed the general public to remain indifferent to magic, even when magicians—guilty or not—were persecuted. There simply was no inherent need for magic in daily life. Above all, maintaining indifference meant avoiding any feelings of guilt.

This was why news about Taurus Silver merely provided another sensational story for the public. It was still this way when Tatsuya visited Ninefold Temple.

At 6:45 PM, Tatsuya stepped off the self-driving city commuter. He found himself at the foot of the stairs leading to the temple, and he was alone, as

Aoba Toudou had requested.

Tatsuya gazed at his surroundings, taking his time to look left and right. He was deliberately being conspicuous to gather the attention of anyone who might be nearby. There didn't seem to be anyone watching him now. A few moments ago, he had felt someone on his tail on his way to the temple, but they disappeared as he approached the base of this small hill.

This couldn't be a mere coincidence. Maybe Yakumo's disciple—or even Yakumo himself—had taken action to get rid of the stalker. Tatsuya knew that Yakumo wouldn't entrust guests—even unwelcome ones—to someone unless he was confident they could handle it appropriately. He quickly decided there was no need to worry.

Yakumo probably wouldn't be brazen enough to disrupt a meeting with Aoba Toudou, a figure secretly known as the Puppet Master in political and business circles. But Tatsuya couldn't be certain. The fact that the meeting was at the temple could mean that Yakumo was planning some sort of test.

Tatsuya arrived fifteen minutes early with this possibility in mind. At the same time, he was skeptical whether fifteen minutes would be enough to deal with whatever Yakumo may have set up. Hoping the priest wouldn't push things too far, Tatsuya began to climb the temple's steps.

Unfortunately, Tatsuya's fears were right. About halfway up the stone steps, his sense of distance suddenly became distorted. The stairs seemed to grow bigger, or rather, he seemed to be growing smaller in what appeared to be an illusion.

Tatsuya realized that magic was influencing his consciousness. The way that it sustained manipulation over his mind hinted that it was ancient magic. Since modern magic emphasized speed, it could not be continuously cast until the desired effect took hold.

A blend of reality mixed with hallucinatory scenes as Tatsuya processed the contents of the magic program attempting to infiltrate his mind. Even psychological spells that functioned with pushions used magic programs constructed within psionic bodies. Though Tatsuya wasn't skilled in mental interference magic, he knew that magic programs could interfere with an

opponent's magic before a spell was activated, allowing time to set up some defense. The spell cast on him was the type that gradually ensnared its victim. If anyone else had been around, they would have already succumbed to the illusion.

Tatsuya, however, still retained some mental clarity. The caster—most likely Yakumo—would have also realized this by now. Yakumo Kokonoe was not the type of opponent who clung to methods that proved ineffective against a capable adversary. If illusion magic didn't work, the next step would be—

Physical attacks, Tatsuya thought.

Just then, four void blades flew at him from both sides. These were not actually vacuums totally devoid of matter; they were created by a spell that involved finely crushing stone into powder, suspending that powder with thinly compressed sheets of air, and propelling it forward at very high speeds.

Both sides of the stone steps were bare, devoid of any vegetation or low hedges. Tatsuya instantly disassembled the four blades that had appeared out of the darkness. Of course, Yakumo's attack was not about to end there. Even if he wasn't treating Tatsuya like a real enemy, Yakumo Kokonoe was not the type to settle for a mere illusion and attacking from a distance. Something much more sinister was yet to come.

The stone staircase to the temple was not particularly long, and it was a clear moonlit evening. Normally, the other side of the mountain gate was visible from where Tatsuya stood, even at night. But now, it was completely cloaked in shadow.

A burst of arrows rained down from the darkness, yet there was no audible sound of bowstrings. Tatsuya couldn't sense any magic being used to suppress the sound or to propel the arrows forward.

Is Yakumo using a skill to shoot arrows silently, or did he craft special bows that make no sound? he wondered while focusing on the arrows.

In a matter of seconds, he had disassembled the arrows entirely. When his spell took effect, he realized that the arrows had never had any physical substance.

Information body—concealment magic?! Tatsuya exclaimed inwardly.

What he was experiencing wasn't a mere illusion. It was a type of illusion that deceived the eyes' perception of information by manipulating the information dimension. Lina's spell, Parade, worked in similar ways to distort the prediction of physical attacks.

Honing his five senses, Tatsuya sprinted up the stone steps. He sensed a disturbance up ahead, but he didn't come to a halt or proceed cautiously. Instead, he charged forward. This clearly came as a surprise to his opponent, and he finally managed to pinpoint their location.

Tatsuya's heightened hearing caught the sound of fabric rustling. His sharpened sense of smell detected a fragrance on the clothes. His enhanced vision captured the silhouette of a figure stepping out of the darkness at the top of a set of stairs. Tatsuya, at the bottom of those stairs, found himself in an unfavorable position. Not worrying about losing his balance, he leaped forward and delivered a kick at the same height as his approaching opponent.

The shadowed figure twisted at the torso to dodge the flying kick. Tatsuya's momentum carried him over his opponent, and he quickly came to a stop on the stone steps. Now he held the high ground. However, that left his back wide open. His heightened sense of touch detected movement in the air. He was about to be attacked from behind. Before the enemy could strike, Tatsuya activated teleportation magic using flash cast. Magic activated via flash cast tended to be small in scale and low in power. Its sole advantage was speed.

Luckily, as long as he didn't need to move more than sixty centimeters, flash cast was plenty. In this case, sixty centimeters was more than enough. Tatsuya teleported to the top two steps quickly enough to avoid his opponent's punch. As soon as they advanced again, Tatsuya had already assumed an offensive stance.

Tatsuya's karate chop was aimed at Yakumo's neck, while Yakumo's fist approached Tatsuya's side. Both attacks stopped just short of their respective targets, moments before contact.

"That was a pretty violent welcome, Master," Tatsuya said.

"Well, it's almost time," Yakumo said nonchalantly. "Let's go. His lordship is

waiting.”

Tatsuya glanced at his watch. The dark digital numbers read 6:50 PM. Only five minutes had passed since he began to climb the stone steps. He was shocked that he was able to conclude his fight with Yakumo in such a short time. Maybe it was simply because Yakumo had been keeping a close eye on the time. Tatsuya had done everything he could without destroying his surroundings. Meanwhile, Yakumo still seemed to have the luxury of taking time into consideration. Slightly frustrated, Tatsuya realized he still fell short of the old priest.



Tatsuya’s suit was pristine by the time he entered the temple’s main hall. He had used restoration magic to remove any blemishes caused by Yakumo’s mischief. Yakumo guided him into an inner room on the right side of the temple, leading to the inner sanctum—the central area where the temple’s main deity was enshrined. This was where Aoba Toudou waited.

Toudou’s head was clean-shaven like one of the temple priests. His attire, however, was a bespoke suit. He sat with a naturally straight back, his excellent posture showcasing his broad shoulders and robust legs. While signs of aging were unavoidable, there was no doubt that he must have cut a handsome figure in his youth.



The area below his bald crown, however, was another matter. Thick gray eyebrows hung above a set of acorn-shaped eyes. His facial features were anything but handsome, but they were dignified. The strangest impression stemmed from his left eye, which was clouded white and gave off an eerie sense of oppression.

Tatsuya couldn't help focusing on this eye. He quickly realized that he had met this elderly man before—around New Year's on January fourth at this very temple. Although they hadn't spoken, Tatsuya had seen Toudou from behind as he was leaving the temple. That day, Toudou had turned toward him, casting his clouded white eye in his direction.

Tatsuya took a seat on the tatami mats. He considered staying silent until Yakumo introduced him, but he felt this might let Toudou dictate the pace of the conversation. With his head bowed, he said the first words.

"May I introduce myself?"

"Proceed," Toudou replied. His manner of speech may have sounded anachronistic if spoken by another person, but it strangely seemed to fit well with the elder man's voice.

"My name is Tatsuya Shiba. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I am Aoba Toudou. I have been looking forward to meeting you, Tatsuya Yotsuba."

Tatsuya noticed that Toudou called him Yotsuba rather than Shiba, but Tatsuya kept his head bowed, not daring to move an inch.

"You may rise," Toudou said.

Tatsuya did as he was told and raised his gaze to meet Toudou's. That was how he had interpreted Toudou's order. Neither Toudou nor Yakumo scolded him for insolence, so it appeared to be the right move.

Toudou spoke again. "Maya said you had something to tell me."

"That's correct," Tatsuya replied simply. He sensed Toudou didn't expect him to go through all the formalities.

"Let's hear it, then," Toudou said. Sure enough, he urged the boy to

immediately get to the point.

“Long story short,” Tatsuya began, “I have a proposal for the construction of a plant that uses magic to produce energy.”

He proceeded to explain the ESCAPES Plan. Toudou remained silent throughout the explanation. Tatsuya included the fact that his goal was to counter the information warfare Edward and Raymond Clark had initiated and reveal this through a press conference. When he had finished, Toudou simply said, “All right.”

“Then, will you allow me to appear in front of the media?” Tatsuya asked.

“Indeed,” Toudou replied. “I will even connect you with one of my acquaintances who may prove helpful as you proceed with your plan.”

“Thank you,” Tatsuya said.

But he was more wary than grateful. His caution wasn't caused by Toudou's quickly gained permission, but rather because he knew there had to be a catch. He waited anxiously in silence for Toudou to continue. Sure enough, Toudou spoke.

“By the way, I have a question.”

“Yes?” Tatsuya responded. Though his face remained unchanged, he couldn't deny a sense of disappointment. He had been mentally preparing himself for some kind of demand. Toudou noticed the young man's inner turmoil but chose not to feed into it.

“You mentioned earlier that you are not seeking political power,” he said.

“That's right,” Tatsuya replied.

To be precise, Tatsuya had only stated that he wouldn't seek further authority as long as the operation of the power plant was left undisturbed. But since he also had no intention of actively seeking political influence, he chose not to correct Toudou's statement.

“It is clear to me that the strength you possess is formidable,” Toudou remarked. “It not only surpasses the limits of power an individual should possess, but also that which should belong to any entity short of a nation.”

Since he believed this to be true himself, Tatsuya didn't argue with Toudou on this point. At the same time, that didn't mean he had any intention of relinquishing or entrusting his power to someone else.

"What do you intend to use that power for? Or better yet, what do you wish to achieve with that power?" Toudou inquired.

"Just a pleasant everyday life," Tatsuya said without hesitation.

Toudou furrowed his brow at this answer in clear discomfort.

"Do you claim to use that overwhelming power solely for your own benefit?" he asked. "Are you not interested in the peace of society and survival of the nation?"

"Well, I can't live a comfortable life without peace in society, and the survival of the nation is indispensable for maintaining social order," Tatsuya responded in a roundabout way.

"Ah," Toudou said. "So you are willing to lend your power to the nation as long as it serves you personally."

"I have no intention of selflessly lending my power to others, but I do agree with the importance of national defense and maintaining public order when necessary," Tatsuya replied.

"Very well, Tatsuya Yotsuba," Toudou said, his eyes directly on the younger boy. Based on the intensity of his expression, Tatsuya realized Toudou was intentionally calling him by this name.

The elder man continued, "Then, what I seek from you remains the same. I want you to be a deterrent force for this country."

At first, Toudou's statement left Tatsuya rather perplexed.

What does he mean by a deterrent force? he thought. *Is he asking me to publicly reveal myself as the strategic magician who can cast Material Burst?*

When he realized that would contradict what Toudou had said earlier, Tatsuya needed clarification. Deciding not to waste time in the labyrinth of his own speculations, he candidly asked, "Are you asking me to declare myself as a strategic magician?"

“That is not necessary for now, but you should do so if the need arises,” Toudou replied.

“By ‘need’ you mean if a military threat like the one we faced two years ago appears again?” Tatsuya posed.

In late October two years prior, Tatsuya annihilated a Great Asian Alliance fleet with strategic magic. He wondered if Toudou was asking him to fulfill the same role in the future. But Toudou’s next words made Tatsuya think otherwise.

“Deterrence is the power to make a threat abandon their intentions before they become a reality,” Toudou explained. “The power to counter a military threat that has already materialized is merely a demonstration of military strength. Ideally, deterrence does not need to be used. Do you understand?”

“No. I’m sorry to say I don’t,” Tatsuya replied. Actually, he had a decent understanding of what Toudou was trying to say. He just chose not to play guessing games and sought a direct answer.

“It should not be too difficult for you,” the elder man said. “You simply need to instill a sense of fear and keep other nations in check when necessary.”

I see what he’s saying now, Tatsuya thought. This was basically what he thought Toudou was saying.

In other words, Toudou wanted Tatsuya to play the role of a demon lord. Not the typical RPG demon lord who was destined to be defeated by a hero, but a fearsome transcendent being whose interference would bring calamity.

“You mentioned that deterrence ideally shouldn’t be used. But won’t there be times when I may need to showcase my power to instill fear in my opponents?” Tatsuya asked.

“Certainly, those times may arise,” Toudou said. “What you do then will be up to you.”

He seemed to imply that, per the situation, the methods Tatsuya used should not be restricted. Recently, Tatsuya had begun to think of deterrence as a necessary evil as he envisioned shifting the role of magicians from the military sector to civilian life. As a result, the military power that magicians traditionally

held would naturally decline. Magic was a force that was not bound by quantity. By having magicians in the military, even minor nations could challenge larger powers.

Without the power of magicians, minor nations would lose their standing on the global stage. In this case, predicting a future where four major nations took over the world, leading to another era of conflict, was unfortunately far too easy.

If the world was once again ravaged by war, magicians would quickly be deployed as weapons, and his quest to improve their lot in life would go right back to square one. To avoid such a future, Tatsuya's only choice was to serve as a deterrent that could replace the military value of magicians. He had already considered this before Toudou even made the request.

What Toudou was offering was not only acknowledgment but also support for Tatsuya's role as a deterrent, seeing it as the first step toward freeing magicians from being used as weapons. Tatsuya saw no reason to refuse.

"Then, I'll be happy to do as you say," he said, indirectly accepting Toudou's conditions.

Yakumo, who had been listening to the conversation in silence, finally spoke.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Only loneliness awaits you if you go down that route."

"I don't mind," Tatsuya said.

All he truly needed was one other person. As long as she was by his side, he would never feel lonely. His heart was built that way. He was certain Miyuki would never voluntarily leave him. Not even death would part them. He wouldn't allow it. No other forms of loneliness would steer him away from his goals, so he didn't consider Yakumo's warning a risk.

"It is settled, then," Toudou concluded. Though Yakumo seemed to still have something to say, Toudou put an end to the conversation.

Tatsuya, too, wasn't willing to entertain Yakumo's protests any further. He could sense the priest was concerned about him, so prolonging the discussion would only make the situation awkward. He turned instead to Toudou.

“What do you propose I do first?”

“I do not wish to give you any specific instructions. Feel free to act according to your own judgment,” Toudou said.

This didn’t mean Toudou was giving Tatsuya free rein. Rather, it implied that he was refusing to take responsibility for whatever actions Tatsuya chose to pursue. If anything bad were to happen, Tatsuya would bear full responsibility.

The young man understood this completely. It was common knowledge that the mastermind always stayed in the shadows while the actor bore the blame. What Toudou said seemed almost redundant.

“Yes, sir,” Tatsuya replied.

“All right. I will reach out to my acquaintance soon,” Toudou promised. “I have enjoyed speaking with you.”

“May I take my leave, then?” Tatsuya asked, recognizing the finality of Toudou’s words.

“You may,” Toudou said.

Takuya bowed deeply, his forehead almost touching the tatami mats before he rose to his feet. It was not until now that he realized he had not been provided with a cushion. His eyes lowered to the floor, Tatsuya turned away from Toudou and left the room.



After escorting Tatsuya through the mountain gate, Yakumo returned to the inner room. Toudou was in the same position as when Tatsuya left. Yakumo prepared another cup of tea. Once Toudou had finished the contents of his cup, Yakumo slid onto the mats to sit directly in front of him.

“How was speaking to him in person?”

As the sponsor of the Yotsuba family, Aoba Toudou held a position that allowed him access to detailed information on Tatsuya if he wished. In fact, there was very little chance that Toudou had not looked up that information before meeting Tatsuya. What Yakumo wondered about were the elder man’s impressions after seeing him in the flesh.

“He was more broken than I expected,” Toudou replied.

Yakumo found this answer intriguing.

“Did he not meet your expectations?” he asked.

Rather than responding directly, Toudou said, “Though he is broken, it does not mean I cannot use him. Even if the safety is broken, pulling a gun’s trigger will still fire a bullet.”

“Do you mean it depends on how you use him?” Yakumo probed.

“Exactly. Though it will prove risky,” the elder man said, meeting Yakumo’s gaze. His clouded left eye seemed to pierce into the depths of the priest’s very soul.

“Your commanding gaze didn’t seem to affect him much, my lord,” Yakumo smirked.

“My apologies,” Toudou said. “I did not mean to employ it.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” the priest consoled him.

Aoba Toudou hailed from a family of spirit magicians, one of the oldest in Japan, if their lineage was to be believed. Toudou chose to fulfill the role of leading the family rather than honing his own abilities. Therefore, despite being a spirit magician himself, he never mastered the full potential of his eyes. Yakumo knew this. If Toudou claimed his powerful gaze was unconscious, it wasn’t merely an excuse.

“As you say, it is difficult to truly understand the boy,” Toudou continued. “The Yotsuba family has an intriguing individual in their midst.”

“He’s more of an accidental addition,” Yakumo corrected, “but he sure is something.”

“Indeed,” Toudou agreed, unable to suppress a smirk. In a matter of minutes, the elder man’s serious expression quickly returned.

“Yakumo Kokonoe, I have a question for you,” he said.

“Please ask me anything,” Yakumo replied with his constant faint smile.

“Could you eliminate Tatsuya Yotsuba if the situation required it?”

“Well...based on our little spar today, I’d say I have about a sixty percent success rate. Seventy percent if you count our mutual demise as a success.”

Clearly, the earlier skirmish on the stone stairs was to measure Tatsuya’s skill.

“Do you mean to tell me that even a man of your abilities has a thirty percent chance of failure?” Toudou asked with genuine surprise.

“Not exactly,” Yakumo replied. “There is a thirty percent chance of him counterattacking me. The idea of either of us escaping is impossible.”

“So not even the man hailed as the modern-day Kashin Koji can escape?” Toudou pressed.

“I may have been able to six months ago,” Yakumo said. “By the way, the sixty percent success rate only holds true today. In another year, I may not be able to best him at all.”

“He is that strong?”

Toudou’s astonishment was something rarely witnessed by anyone other than Yakumo. The fact that the elder man felt comfortable expressing his genuine feelings indicated a deep level of trust between the two.

“That’s right,” Yakumo replied. “In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if his abilities soon surpassed mine. To my knowledge, there is only one young person in Japan who can stand against him. Even if we were to expand that to the entire world, I doubt the number of people would even reach ten.”

“What terrifying times we live in.” Toudou shuddered.

“Isn’t that the truth,” the priest agreed. “Would you like more tea, your lordship?”

“Please.”

Yakumo took Toudou’s empty cup and moved to the hearth. With practiced movements, he whisked up a fresh cup of green tea and casually returned it. Toudou, in his own nonchalant manner that disregarded formalities, simply raised the cup to his lips and sipped slowly.

“Thank you. That is delicious,” he said.

“That’s very kind of you,” Yakumo replied. “Though my tea isn’t worthy of your praise.”

“You can say that again. It seems making tea is the one skill you never improve,” Toudou said without restraint.

Yakumo smiled wryly in response.

“I will be back,” Toudou promised. He rose from his seat.

“Do you want me to see you out?” Yakumo asked, still seated.

“No need,” Toudou replied.

He slid open the door and left without saying goodbye.



Once Tatsuya had left the Ninefold Temple and returned to the villa in Izu, it was nearly 10 PM. He headed to the home phone as soon as he walked through the door. But he wasn’t planning to call Maya. It was much too late for that. He simply wanted to tell Hayama or Hayama’s helper, Shirakawa, to pass on the news that he had received Toudou’s approval. But for some reason, it was Maya’s face that suddenly popped up on the visiphone. It was as if she had been waiting for him to call.

“Hello, Tatsuya,” she greeted him. “Do you have news?”

“Sorry for disturbing you so late at night,” Tatsuya apologized. “I just now got home from Ninefold Temple.”

This wasn’t the most exciting way to start the conversation, but Maya never expected Tatsuya to put on a show.

“I see,” she replied simply. “It’s good to see you got back safely. Did you meet with Lord Toudou?”

“I did.” Tatsuya nodded. “And he approved my plan.”

“Did he?” Maya said, her eyes slightly narrowing as they analyzed Tatsuya’s face. “Was there anything he asked for in return?”

Clearly, Tatsuya wasn’t the only one who expected there to be a catch. Since they were on the same page, he wasn’t particularly angry with her for not

warning him about it.

“He asked me to serve as a deterrent against other countries,” he reported.

“So he wants you to reveal yourself to the public,” Maya mused.

Since this was the same misconception Tatsuya had himself, he couldn’t find it in him to laugh. It simply confirmed how reasonable that line of thought was.

“Not exactly,” he corrected. “Lord Toudou said there was no need to make my strategic magic public right away. As for how I go about being a deterrent, he is leaving everything to me.”

“Wow,” Maya said. *“That’s quite a responsibility.”*

Her reaction mirrored Tatsuya’s exactly. He wondered whether it was because it was a rational thought process or because he and his aunt were similar people.

“Anyway, I’m glad you received his excellency’s approval,” Maya continued. *“Let’s proceed with the press conference as planned.”*

“Thank you.”

Having secured both Toudou’s approval and Maya’s commitment to his plan, Tatsuya felt a sense of relief. Clearly, the struggles of being used by others would remain the same until he truly made it to the top.

“By the way,” Maya said, *“do you remember our conversation about Miyaki Island?”*

This sudden subject change forced Tatsuya to mentally switch gears.

“You mean the one we had in mid-April?” he asked. “I think you were talking about building a new research facility on the island.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Maya nodded. *“Well, I’ve changed my mind about the research facility. Instead, I would like you to build the power plant you’re planning there.”*

Her sudden proposal took Tatsuya by surprise. He didn’t know what to say.

Maya continued, *“I spoke to Hayama about it, and we both agree the island is the perfect size for what you have in mind. What do you think?”*

“In other words, it’s perfect for bringing in outside investment?” Tatsuya asked cautiously without being too confrontational. Maya smiled in a way that suggested he was on the right track.

“We could manage with our affiliated companies alone as long as we keep things small scale,” she said. “But considering the future, I think involving partners from the very beginning would only help us.”

Tatsuya agreed. If they were to start the plant with only Yotsuba affiliates, the magic engineers working there would end up all having ties to the Yotsuba clan. This would only lead to the establishment of a Yotsuba-controlled project, rather than the liberation of magicians as a whole.

“Given the amount of land available, only so many people would make a fuss if the area becomes a quasi-autonomous district,” Maya added.

Tatsuya had to agree with this, as well. An area of approximately eight square kilometers was big enough to rival a small city. At the same time, there wouldn’t be enough people to try to start a mutiny or found a kingdom for magicians.

“What do you think?” Maya asked again.

“That would be great, actually,” Tatsuya said.

“Then, can we go ahead with that plan?”

“Sure. Thank you for the offer.”

At that moment, Tatsuya vaguely worried that his own plan might be taken over by someone else and used for different purposes. But he convinced himself that prioritizing the plan’s advancement was crucial over all else.



Ushio Kitayama, the head of the Hokuzan Group, wielded significant influence in both the business world and the political arena. His business name was Ushio Kitakata. Although he was often invited to government meetings and similar events, it was common for people to ask about his availability, and he would work them into his schedule.

On the last Thursday of May, however, Ushio was suddenly summoned to a

high-end restaurant downtown. He quickly canceled all his other appointments, because this guest was someone he couldn't ignore—Aoba Toudou.

Only a select few knew the name of this powerful and influential man who preferred to lurk behind the scenes. Unlike famous fixers who often appeared in public, Toudou never stepped onto the front stage. Those who came into contact with him, however, quickly recognized the undeniable power he wielded.

Fortunately, Ushio had never been threatened by Toudou's hidden influence. But he had heard of the founder of a rival emerging company who underestimated Toudou's authority and lost all of his wealth. Ultimately, the man ended up serving a long prison sentence for seemingly ordinary crimes that wouldn't normally draw attention. Any chance of making a comeback was instantly crushed. After witnessing this stark reality, Ushio knew better than to snub Toudou.

"Thank you for asking me to meet with you." Ushio bowed.

"Of course." Toudou nodded. "Though I'm sorry for doing so last minute."

Toudou was in his sixties, while Ushio was in his early fifties. Given their age difference, it was natural for Toudou's tone to be somewhat relaxed. However, the difference in their attitudes seemed to reflect the type of power they wielded—it was political for Toudou and financial for Ushio—rather than solely being attributed to their age.

For a brief moment, the two men engaged in casual small talk to pass the time. Even Toudou didn't dare to tactlessly state his business off the bat to a top-tier businessman like Ushio.

He was also mindful of the waitstaff's gaze. Establishments frequented by people like Toudou not only were expensive establishments that offered delicious food and drinks, but also enforced strict rules on their staff to adhere to the three wise monkeys principle: "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." Toudou's caution despite this policy was surely the result of having survived the cutthroat world of intrigue and manipulation.

Once an array of exotic dishes and drinks had been served, he finally broached the subject.

“The reason I called you here today was to ask you to help a young man’s business plan,” he said.

“In other words, you want me to provide a young entrepreneur with financial support,” Ushio remarked.

He was used to getting these kinds of requests. But he was especially intrigued that it was Toudou coming to him directly this time.

“I can’t imagine what kind of person is worthy enough to meet your high standards,” Ushio continued.

“You know him,” Toudou said. “His legal name is Tatsuya Shiba.”

There was a brief pause before Ushio spoke again.

“...Tatsuya Shiba?” he echoed.

That was the last name he expected to come out of Toudou’s mouth.

“Is this new business related to Taurus Silver’s inventions, or is it connected to the fusion reactor?” he asked.

“The latter. Tatsuya’s goal is to liberate magicians from their current role as weapons by providing them with jobs in energy production,” Toudou explained.

“Understood. I accept,” Ushio replied immediately.

Toudou was taken aback by this sudden change in tune.

“Are you sure you don’t want to think on it some more?” he asked.

But Ushio showed no sign of hesitation.

“As you are aware, both my wife and daughter are magicians,” he said. “My wife was forced to work as a weapon for a long time, but she has now stepped down from that role.”

Toudou was, of course, familiar with Ushio’s wife, Benio, and his daughter, Shizuku. He remained quiet so his friend could continue.

“However, if war were to break out, both she and my daughter may be roped into battle. In the case of total war, I fear that magicians who have limited industrial use may be forced to become military assets.”

“They could still serve on the American project,” Toudou remarked.

He wasn’t seriously suggesting Ushio collaborate with the Dione Project. This was more of a test to see how serious Ushio was about the issue.

“I have no intention of offering my wife or daughter as sacrifices,” Ushio insisted. “That’s worse than being drafted into the military.”

“Oh?” Toudou said, this time with genuine curiosity. “What makes you say that?”

“The Dione Project is all about banishing magicians into space,” Ushio stated. “Whether the true mastermind is the USNA, Edward Clark, or some other entity is unclear. What is clear is that they seem to want to exile Shiba from this planet. But he most certainly will not be the only one. If the Dione Project is put into motion, any magicians involved will no longer be able to live on Earth. That’s what it is truly all about.”

Ushio’s response echoed Tatsuya’s conclusion. Surely, they weren’t the only ones who saw the truth behind the dreamlike project. Once they peeled away its veil, anyone could reach the same conclusion.

“Indeed,” Toudou replied. He, too, had caught on to the Dione Project’s hidden agenda.

“Shiba’s plan, on the other hand, expands the place for magicians on this planet,” Ushio continued. “Even during wartime, energy production is indispensable. If Shiba’s power plant is integrated into the national energy grid, there will be no need to waste magicians on the front lines. Such foolishness would only lead to energy shortages. I must admit, the plan is well thought out.”

What Toudou also appreciated the most about Tatsuya’s ESCAPES Plan was its ability to create a trade-off relationship between the supply of military force and energy. This made it impossible for the government to use magicians as weapons, even if they wanted to.

From a national defense perspective, it was not productive. If that had been the whole plan, Toudou may have turned against it. Luckily, Tatsuya accepted the role of being a deterrent. If his energy production system centered around

stellar reactors spread globally, other countries would gradually lose their magician forces and Japan's military—armed with a Material Burst trump card—would improve their standing.

Whether a deterrent comparable to Tatsuya would emerge in the next generation remained uncertain, but that would be a challenge for the leaders who would come later. Toudou was a man who preferred to live in the present. He wasn't strong enough to take on the burdens of both the present and the future.

"I agree." He nodded.

Likewise, Ushio wasn't overly concerned about the decline of magicians in the military. He was not a politician. If military power was lacking, he believed it could be supplemented with conventional forces. His company didn't deal with weapons, but he was ready to enter the arms industry for the sake of his family.

"Could you tell me more about Shiba's plan?" he asked.

Since Tatsuya's plan aligned with his own interests, Ushio had become quite optimistic about it. Maybe his family's involvement dulled his investor's skepticism. This wasn't particularly an issue, since Toudou had no interest in deceiving his acquaintance. But he did want to curb his enthusiasm for the sake of caution.

"You should ask him yourself," he suggested.

"You're right. My apologies," Ushio replied with a solemn bow of the head. He took a mental step back and realized a need to focus on addressing more immediate concerns.

"If I may, my lord," he continued, "I would like to ask a somewhat different question."

"What is it?" Toudou said.

"Do you know how the government will react to Shiba's plan?"

The world was currently welcoming the Dione Project. Outwardly opposing it could create a diplomatic disadvantage, since the project enjoyed high approval in other countries. Aoba Toudou knew this, of course.

“I simply won’t let them get involved,” he stated plainly.



It was Friday, May 31, 2097.

Media representatives had been crowding the Four Leaves Technology Headquarters since early morning. Needless to say, they were there for the Taurus Silver press conference. Although the conference itself was scheduled for ten o'clock, the large crowd of journalists and photographers were both a disruption for Four Leaves employees and a potential traffic hazard. To cut down on the commotion as much as possible, the venue was opened shortly after nine.

Even major traditional newspapers, which rarely showed interest in the magic industry, had organized large reporting teams and staked out their spots. Though many of their peers frowned upon their self-important attitudes, they all seemed more or less the same from an outsider's perspective.

The chaotic chatter among them subsided as a public relations staff member took the stage. The crowd watched with bated breath as the staff conducted final checks on the lighting and microphones. When the venue's digital clock struck ten, the front doors flew open, and Tatsuya walked onto the stage with Ushiyama in tow.

The room echoed with the sounds of hundreds of camera shutters clicking at once. Tatsuya took a stand in front of the microphone. There was no chair prepared for him there.

"I'm Tatsuya Shiba, in charge of Taurus Silver software development," he announced.

"And I'm Kinji Ushiyama, in charge of Taurus Silver hardware development," Ushiyama added.

Murmurs spread through the crowd. Despite his youthful appearance in his suit, everyone believed Tatsuya to be the person behind Taurus Silver. But now the man next to him, dressed in what seemed to be factory slacks, was also claiming to be Taurus Silver. The press was utterly confused. As no questions came from the crowd, Ushiyama continued.

“As you can see, Taurus Silver is not an individual researcher. Shiba and I are a development team that uses *Taurus Silver* as our team name. We have just made this information public, so you’re welcome to verify it at our patent office.”

“Why would you fool the people into thinking you were one person?”

After finally regaining her composure, a female journalist dared to speak up. Her tactless wording and lack of respect toward Ushiyama and Tatsuya seemed to be characteristic of her journalistic style.

“We did not mean to fool anyone,” Ushiyama responded. “It’s not uncommon to file patents under a group name and keep the personal information of its members private.”

“But Taurus Silver was hailed as a genius technician who advanced CAD software ten years in the span of a single year. Your company never denied that praise,” the reporter pressed.

“We never confirmed those descriptions, either,” Tatsuya replied, leaving the reporter with no room for rebuttal.

“The main reason for keeping our personal information private and declining interviews until now was because Shiba is a minor,” Ushiyama hastily explained.

In this day and age, protecting minors was a strong justification. Not even the media could argue against it.

“Does that mean only half of the video leaked by the individual claiming to be the First Sage was true?” another journalist asked, subtly shifting the topic.

“Again, Taurus Silver is the name of my and Ushiyama’s team,” Tatsuya said, directly confronting the journalist. “In other words, any reports claiming Taurus Silver is just me are completely false.”

“Are you saying a national broadcast station aired fake news?” the journalist clarified.

“The station aired news that diverges from the truth. Isn’t that the definition of fake news?” Tatsuya provocatively replied.

“But it’s true that you’re Taurus Silver!” an almost hysterical voice screeched from another part of the venue.

Tatsuya calmly turned to face the source of the voice and spoke in a tone that resonated with a sense of authority.

“Didn’t we just say Taurus Silver is not the name of a single individual?”

Another voice of rebuttal spoke up.

“That doesn’t change the fact that you have created a huge misunderstanding among the public.”

“I think this would be the perfect opportunity to announce the dissolution of Taurus Silver,” Ushiyama interjected awkwardly in an attempt to smooth things over.

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

“What do you mean?” a reporter asked.

“We have decided to put an end to all of our activities as Taurus Silver,” Tatsuya answered matter-of-factly.

This time, a journalist representing a media outlet well versed in the magic industry spoke up.

“Does this mean there will be no more CAD production?”

“Ushiyama will continue to produce CADs, but I will be moving on to another business—the production of magic stellar reactors,” Tatsuya replied and motioned to the large screen behind him. “This is a new venture aiming to commercialize fusion reactors utilizing gravity-control magic, providing an accessible energy source for both household and industrial use.”

The crowd immediately began conversing among themselves. Tatsuya remained silent until the commotion subsided.

“The structure of the power plant that will house the reactors isn’t especially groundbreaking,” he said in the now silent venue.

All the journalists in the crowd refrained from interrupting with questions.

“As you can see, we plan to construct the plant on a remote island or offshore location,” Tatsuya continued. “Using the power generated by the stellar reactors, we will produce hydrogen from seawater and transport it to the mainland. During the process of hydrogen production, we aim to simultaneously remove harmful substances from the seawater, which will contribute to marine cleanup efforts.”

A simple animation illustrating the core mechanisms of the plan was projected onto the large screen behind him. A female FLT employee provided the commentary for the video. A slight buzz filled the venue as the video concluded. Then, an intrigued journalist from an industrial trade publication raised his hand.

“Have you considered direct transmission of power from the fusion reactor?” he asked.

“I’m sure many of you have concerns about the stability of the magic stellar reactor,” Tatsuya responded. “This is why we plan to initially construct the plant far from urban areas. Considering the transmission losses due to distance, we are planning to deliver energy as hydrogen.”

“That sounds like it will require a considerable number of magicians,” the journalist commented.

“It will,” Tatsuya confirmed. “All magicians who participate in this project will be relocated to the island or offshore base where the plant is located.”



“Are you trying to create an independent colony for magicians?!”

This time, a journalist representing a media outlet with a negative stance on magic spoke up.

“Due to the nature of the power plant, it can’t be operated solely by magicians. If anything, the staff will likely consist of more technicians than magicians,” Tatsuya clarified.

“So a small number of magicians will essentially be controlling a larger number of non-magician staff?” the journalist pressed.

“The power plant will operate in compliance with standard regulations,” Tatsuya responded firmly.

He didn’t dare dignify the journalist’s blatant hostility with a direct response. Luckily, his nebulous textbook answer left no room for further baseless accusations.

“What about the invitation you received to participate in the Dione Project?” a journalist from a magic-sympathizing media outlet inquired.

His question helped shift the topic in a different direction.

“The USNA National Science Bureau’s invitation was directed to the high school student claiming to be Taurus Silver,” Tatsuya replied. “However, since Taurus Silver no longer exists as of today, there is no reason to provide a response.”

“That sounds like convenient logic to me!” another journalist exclaimed.

This accusation didn’t bother Tatsuya. He was already aware of the flaws in his evasive response and had prepared a response in advance.

“Do you really believe the USNA National Science Bureau’s own Edward Clark is asking me to participate in the project?” he prompted.

“Mr. Clark was clearly referring to you when he mentioned Taurus Silver!” the journalist insisted.

“Was he?” Tatsuya countered.

He knew the journalist was right, but it had not been explicitly confirmed to

the public. This gave him an opportunity to neither confirm nor deny the journalist's assertion. As far as anyone knew, the fact that Clark had directly invited Tatsuya to join the Dione Project was merely speculative. The crowd found themselves at a loss for words.

“Even if I were to receive an invitation to the Dione Project in the future, it would be impossible for me to accept it,” Tatsuya continued. “The plans for the magic stellar reactor power plant are already underway. I don't have time to be involved in any other large-scale projects.”

With that, he brought the conversation to an end.



Tatsuya's press conference was broadcast live on television. It wasn't on any major networks, just on a minor cable station known for its comprehensive coverage of magic-related news targeting viewers interested in magic and magicians. During the Nine School Competition, the channel was renowned for simultaneously broadcasting all the matches at once via a split-screen monitor. This catered to audiences interested in following the competition closely.

Minoru Kudou, who had been staying home from school since the previous day due to poor health, was watching the broadcast from his bedroom.

“Tatsuya sure has guts...” Minoru whispered quietly as the broadcast ended.

He turned off the TV and lay down on his bed. A combination of praise and admiration toward Tatsuya filled his heart. Tatsuya announcing the ESCAPES Plan (though he didn't call it by that name during the conference), his skill at deflecting the journalists who confronted him, and his ability to take advantage of the attention that had gathered on him were nothing less than spectacular. In fact, Minoru envied Tatsuya's ability not to miss a single step despite the intense scrutiny he was under.

Tatsuya was out there using his intelligence and strength to their fullest to challenge society and the world. Meanwhile, Minoru could only watch the other boy's achievements through a television screen from the narrow confines of his bed. Nothing could be more frustrating. If only he had a healthier body, that could be him.

Minoru was very confident in himself. Not only in terms of his intellect or

magic ability, but also in how he generally stacked up against Tatsuya. This wasn't a sign of arrogance. Minoru simply acknowledged Tatsuya's skill and evaluated his own capabilities accordingly. He wasn't the only one who thought this way. His grandfather, Retsu Kudou, always lamented Minoru's waste of talent.

Fortunately, he had managed to avoid any bouts of illness during the previous year's Thesis Competition. Tatsuya may not have participated, but more importantly, Minoru had managed to win, surpassing others like Kei Isori from First High and Shinkurou Kichijouji from Third High. Thinking about the Thesis Competition stirred memories from the month before the competition.

We first met on October sixth, Minoru thought. It was a Saturday.

We fought together for the first time on the next day—October seventh.

Then, we met again two weeks later on October twentieth.

The next day, he looked after me when I caught a fever.

On October twenty-seventh, I paid back his kindness by stopping Gongjin Zhou in his tracks.

Minoru remembered everything as if it were yesterday. It was the first time he had proved himself useful.

As he was reminiscing through his memories, he drifted off to sleep. In his dreams, he found himself back at the day before the Thesis Competition on October 27, 2096.

There, he saw a boy standing in front of Uji Bridge. Somehow, he was watching himself in the third person. Sparks flew from the hood of the car he was sitting in. Right before the car exploded, he leaped out and found himself staring face-to-face at his other self.

Just then, he realized that he had become Gongjin Zhou. He ran along the lower banks of the Uji River, trying to escape. A girl with a bob cut hit him in the back. Even though it was a dream, the pain felt excruciatingly real.

Masaki Ichijou appeared in front of him, and Tatsuya appeared behind. This part of the incident was something Minoru had never experienced himself. But

his dream self wasn't too worried about it. He figured that he must have pieced it together from elements of the incident report.

Masaki shot at him, and the insides of both of his calves suddenly felt like they were exploding. But this time, he didn't feel any pain.

"I will never perish. Even should I die, I shall continue to exist!" Minoru stated firmly in his own voice.

I'm sure it's people like this—clinging to resentment—who turn into angry spirits, he thought.

After bearing witness to Gongjin's last words, Minoru felt pity for the man. But the dream didn't end there. Gongjin's consciousness remained intact.

Gongjin ran along the upper banks of the Uji River, his angry spirit quickly approaching. Without warning, Minoru was now looking at the dream from his own perspective as he stood on the Uji Bridge.

"Become one with me!" Gongjin screamed, leaping toward him.

With that, the surroundings disappeared. Even the bridge below his feet disappeared. Minoru found himself floating above the river.

Suddenly, he realized what was happening. This wasn't a dream of what happened seven months ago. This was reality.

Recalling memories from the past had connected certain pathways in his mind. More than half a year later, Minoru realized that Gongjin Zhou's ghost had set its sights on him.

"You're mine!" Gongjin yelled.

His fingers pierced Minoru's chest. Or rather, they sank in. It was as if he was trying to enter Minoru's body. Yet Minoru was strangely calm. For some reason, he felt no fear toward the angry spirit that was trying to possess his body. He knew what needed to be done.

Minoru immediately recognized that the entity before him was both the core of a parasite and the same essence as himself. The sickly boy was undeniably a genius and the Kudou family's most powerful magician. His siblings did not realize it. His father did not acknowledge it. But his grandfather did. By sixteen

years old, Minoru had already mastered all of the Kudou family's magic.

"Begone, spirit," he said and cast a mental interference spell at Gongjin.

In the dream world, Minoru found it easy to cast magic, despite not having a physical body or CAD. Particles of light erupted from Minoru's form like a powerful gust of wind, blowing Gongjin away with a gale-like force.

Both Minoru and Gongjin existed as phantoms in this world, their bodies manifestations of their minds. Psion-based techniques like Program Demolition couldn't blow Gongjin away, but mental interference magic made both offense and defense possible. As Gongjin's form parted from Minoru, it lacked both of its hands. His hands had remained in Minoru's chest, torn off at the wrists. Still he continued to attack Minoru.

"Give me your body!" he screeched.

"My body may be a useless mass of flesh that I can't control," Minoru said calmly, "but I won't let you have it."

He cast another spell. A multicolored lightning bolt shot through the empty space and pierced Gongjin's phantom form.

In this world, Minoru could cast any magic he wanted at will. He felt so much freer than he was in the real world.

"Give...me..." Gongjin gasped.

His phantom form was now partially charred, his once handsome features obscured and smeared by black patches.

"You're pitiful, Gongjin," Minoru murmured. "Let's end this."

By mastering all of the Kudou family's magic, he now had the ability to create Parasidolls. In other words, he could cast loyalty enchantments to bind parasites to himself.

"Obey me, spirit. Become my prey," he chanted.

He grabbed Gongjin's arm and activated a spell to subjugate spirits. Typically, loyalty enchantments required compensation to compel the spirit's compliance under a specific condition. The compensation for creating Parasidolls was usually a supply of psions that the parasite required. The condition was

absolute obedience. Any defiance from the spirit would result in its loss of psions and any psion absorption pathways.

The compensation Minoru offered was his own life. The condition was that the spirit must be absorbed into himself. In other words, Minoru used the loyalty enchantment to devour Gongjin's ghost.

"Good job," Minoru whispered. "Thank you for bringing your knowledge straight to me."

He could feel all the hidden magic-related knowledge that Gongjin had been hoarding within himself.

In his dream, a smile spread across Minoru's lips. That smile was exactly like an envoy looking down on Earth from the heavens—beautiful yet arrogant and lacking any shred of humanity.



Tatsuya thanked Ushiyama for accompanying him at the press conference and the staff for organizing the event before leaving FLT Headquarters.

He didn't make any effort to see his father. He simply didn't feel the need, and he doubted his father wanted to see him, either.

After changing in the company dressing room, he headed down to the underground parking lot to avoid any persistent journalists. Walking to his car, he was suddenly stopped by a woman who identified herself as a Magic Association worker.

"Is this going to take a while?" Tatsuya grumbled.

He didn't have anything particular against the Magic Association. He just wanted to leave this place as soon as possible. Tatsuya knew better than to underestimate the media's ability to find their target.

"N-not at all!" the woman stammered. "I just need you to answer a simple question."

The Magic Association had clearly sent a woman to meet Tatsuya in the hopes that she would be better received than a man. Unfortunately, it wasn't going very well. This woman must not have interacted with many men before. She

trembled like a tiny mouse under Tatsuya's gaze. Since he didn't have some weird superiority complex, all that did was make him feel bad. Tatsuya wasn't the type of person who enjoyed scaring women, so the situation was awkward to say the least.

"All right," he said. "Get in the car."

There was a slight tone of resentment as he urged the associate into his vehicle.

According to the associate, the Magic Association wanted Tatsuya to meet with Edward Clark, who would be arriving in Japan the following day.

"So you want me to stop by your headquarters tomorrow afternoon?" Tatsuya asked.

"Precisely! A-any time that works for you is perfectly fine, of course," the woman said frantically.

The more she talked to him, the more Tatsuya had a feeling she wasn't just unaccustomed to speaking with men. It might be bad enough to be considered a phobia. He couldn't fathom why the Magic Association decided to send her of all people to meet him. It was a mistake on so many levels.

"This is fairly sudden," Tatsuya commented.

"My apologies!" the woman yelped.

Tatsuya's self-driving car was currently in auto mode, but Tatsuya was seated in the driver's seat, as per regulations. The associate, meanwhile, had pressed herself against the passenger side door. Rather than feeling sympathetic, Tatsuya found her behavior annoying and decided to wrap up as quickly as possible.

"Fine." Tatsuya sighed. "I'll go to the Magic Association's Tokyo branch tomorrow at two PM."

"You will?!" the woman gasped.

"Well, it's not like I can say no," Tatsuya stated honestly.

While the invitation wasn't official, Edward Clark was still requesting a meeting with him as a representative of the USNA government. Even though

Tatsuya knew how the interaction would end, rejecting the invitation outright would have significant diplomatic repercussions. Tatsuya wasn't arrogant or childish enough to ignore that fact.

"Th-thank you so much!" the woman gushed profusely.

Unable to deal with her any longer, Tatsuya pulled over to the side of the road and let the associate out of the car.



Afterward, Tatsuya headed straight to First High. He had originally intended to go there immediately after the press conference. Though the Magic Association associate didn't exactly send him on a detour, he did feel like he had wasted unnecessary time.

Tatsuya had changed into all the parts of his school uniform except for his jacket in the FLT changing room. Once he arrived at the school, he swapped his business blazer for his jacket, completing his transformation into a First High student. But instead of heading to the classrooms, he walked toward the administrative office.

There, he informed the receptionist that he wanted to meet with the principal. It was nearly noon, meaning it was almost time for lunch. Normally, a student arriving at this time and immediately requesting a meeting with the principal would be scolded and sent away. However, the First High staff were well aware of Tatsuya's situation. At this point, it would be odd if they weren't.

Either the principal's schedule just happened to be free, or he immediately cleared it when he heard Tatsuya wanted to see him. In any case, Tatsuya was promptly ushered into the principal's office.

"Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice," Tatsuya began with a polite bow.

"I saw the live broadcast," Momoyama said. "Is this power plant you talked about the reason why you refused to participate in the Dione Project?"

Though abrupt, the principal's comment made it easier for Tatsuya to broach the subject.

"That's correct."

“So does this magic stellar-reactor energy power plant plan have an easier name?”

“Taking the power plant’s location into account, I’ve opted for the acronym ESCAPES.”

“Huh,” Momoyama scoffed. “That’s a name you definitely can’t use in public.”

He immediately picked up on its not-so-hidden meaning—the magicians’ escape from the military.

“Yes, well, that’s why I only called it the magic stellar reactor power plant plan at the press conference,” Tatsuya replied.

“Right. So how realistic is this plan of yours?” Momoyama asked, staring at Tatsuya from behind his desk.

His tone would have made any other student tremble.

“It’s already underway, actually,” Tatsuya stated, sensing the principal’s skepticism. “I wasn’t bluffing just to get out of the Dione Project.”

“All right. I trust you,” Momoyama said.

The fact that he had to explicitly state his trust meant that it wasn’t 100 percent genuine. But he said it as a pledge to take the boy’s side for now.

“Thank you, sir,” Tatsuya said. “One more thing. I was wondering about the status of my exemption from classes given that I am choosing not to join the Dione Project.”

“You are still excused from classes,” Momoyama stated firmly. “I can guarantee your graduation certificate and my recommendation to the Magic University, as well. In the meantime, you are free to pursue your ESCAPES Plan.”

“Really?” Tatsuya asked, not completely convinced.

Originally, Tatsuya’s exemption from classes was intended to pressure him into participating in the Dione Project. Now that he had refused, Momoyama had no reason to give him any special treatment.

“I encouraged you to participate in the Dione Project, since I believe it offers a meaningful way for magicians to live honorably,” Momoyama explained.

His statement implied that he wouldn't have treated Tatsuya differently if he was simply under pressure from the USNA. Whether this was true or just a way to cover up for succumbing to political pressure, Tatsuya couldn't tell.

"However," Momoyama continued, "your ESCAPES Plan offers a peaceful way for magicians to live. I find it provides an equally significant social impact when measured against the Dione Project proposal. As such, I see no reason to go back on my previous promises."

"Thank you." Tatsuya bowed.

He still couldn't discern the principal's true intentions, but it didn't hurt to appreciate the current kindness he was receiving.

"Good luck," Momoyama said.

After another bow of gratitude, Tatsuya left the office.



Lunch was just minutes away by the time Tatsuya stepped into the hallway. He hesitated a moment. He had initially planned to return to Izu right away, but now he spontaneously decided to head to the student council office instead.

Using a route that avoided passing by any classrooms, he made his way to the far end of the fourth floor. His ID card still worked as a key to the office. Since it hadn't been too long since his last visit, Tatsuya didn't feel particularly nostalgic as he walked into the room. He simply took his usual seat and powered up his terminal.

He checked on the progress of student council tasks. It seemed Miyuki and the others were right on schedule without any major delays. By distracting himself with unrelated work for a while, lunchtime arrived sooner than he'd expected.

Tatsuya had assumed everyone would come to the office after finishing their meals, but Miyuki arrived promptly after the bell. And she wasn't alone. Honoka, Shizuku, Minami, and even the younger Izumi and Kasumi, were right behind her.

"Tatsuya? Is that you?" Miyuki gasped in surprise.

“Tatsuya?” Honoka echoed, peering into the room.

“I would say long time no see, except it hasn’t been, really,” Shizuku remarked.

She was right. It was Friday, and the last time Tatsuya had stopped by First High had been Monday. On top of that, he had been speaking with Miyuki on the visiphone every night.

“Did you stop by to tell the school about today’s press conference?” Miyuki asked.

“Yeah. How did you know?” Tatsuya said.

“You told me about the press conference, so it was just a lucky guess,” she replied.

“Well, I just finished speaking to the principal. He said he would still exempt me from classes even though I won’t be joining the Dione Project,” Tatsuya continued.

“I see,” Miyuki remarked.

Tatsuya suddenly noticed that both Miyuki and Honoka seemed on edge, as if his presence was interfering with their plans. Now that he thought about it, the entire group was made up of girls. Maybe they had some sort of girls-only subject they needed to discuss.

“Uh, am I getting in the way of something?” Tatsuya asked.

“N-not at all,” Miyuki stammered. “We were simply planning to watch your press conference.”

“Ah,” he said.

Now it all made sense. His press conference had been held during class hours. No respectable student could have caught the broadcast in real time. Miyuki must have recorded it on the student council server. The channel that had broadcast the press conference was an important source of magic-related news, so it was accessible through the school’s system.

Tatsuya was much too embarrassed to watch his own press conference on the television, so he came up with an excuse.

“I’ll go to the library, then. Let me know when you’re ready to go home.”

With that, he fled the school council office.



After school was over, Tatsuya met up with his friends in the cafeteria. This time, the student council members weren’t the only ones there. The whole gang had assembled. Since Tatsuya had driven to school, he couldn’t stop by their usual coffee shop.

He could feel the persistent gazes of the other students in the cafeteria, but he couldn’t blame them this time. The student council members weren’t the only ones who had access to the press conference recording. It was streamed in the cafeteria at lunchtime on a large screen. Many students also watched it on their personal devices during breaks between classes. That was how invested everyone was.

Tatsuya’s friends were, of course, no exception.

“We saw the press conference,” Leo said.

“You put up with those idiot reporters pretty well,” Erika commented.

“I was surprised to hear about the stellar reactor plan,” Mizuki chimed in.

“But it sounds incredible,” Mikihiko added. “I never could have come up with something like that.”

For some reason, it was the non–student council group who had something to say first. Maybe it was because they were less emotionally invested.

“Yeah, the stellar reactor power plant sounds amazing, but isn’t there any easier name for it?” Leo asked.

This was exactly what Momoyama had asked earlier that day. Perhaps everyone was wondering about it.

“I unofficially call it the ESCAPES Plan,” Tatsuya said.

“ESCAPES?” Leo echoed. “Does that stand for something?”

“Extract both useful and harmful substances from the coastal area of the Pacific using electricity generated by stellar reactors,” Tatsuya explained. “In

other words, E stands for extract, S stands for substances, CA stand for coastal area, P stands for Pacific, E stands for electricity, and S stands for stellar reactor. ESCAPES for short.”

“Oh, I get it. Nice wordplay,” Leo said with a grin.

He always seemed to catch on at the most random times.

“Exactly,” Tatsuya replied.

“What exactly are you escaping from?”

“The military’s manipulation.”

Leo suddenly turned serious.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Leo came from a family of engineered magicians developed as weapons. He keenly realized that escaping his role as a weapon was an escape from the fate imposed on magicians forced into military control.

Leo wasn’t alone. It wasn’t lost on Minami that she was also the child of people who were biologically engineered weapons. Honoka, Kasumi, and Izumi, whose parents or grandparents were likely victims of genetic manipulation, had particularly stern expressions.

Tatsuya didn’t bother to hide his intentions. His friends clearly understood, so there was no need to beat around the bush.

“Then, we really need to make it happen,” Mikihiko said meaningfully.

“That won’t be a problem for Tatsuya,” Erika cheerfully chimed in, making the entire group smile.

“You’re right. Tatsuya can pull anything off,” Honoka said with conviction.

“You said the place had been decided, but what about specific dates?” Mizuki asked.

“The plan is already in motion,” Tatsuya said.

“You’re kidding,” Mizuki gasped. “But what about school?”

A faint smile spread across Tatsuya's lips.

"My absences have all been excused in advanced like before, but I plan to come back once things have settled down."

"That's great!" Honoka gushed with her hands to her heart.

Her over-the-top reaction made everyone laugh.

Then Shizuku turned to the man of the hour and called out his name.

"Tatsuya."

"Yes?"

"My father wants to see you."

Kasumi looked away. It wasn't hard to imagine what kind of misunderstanding she might have, but of course, it wasn't the case.

"It's probably about your project," Shizuku explained.

"Okay," Tatsuya said. "When does he want to meet?"

He guessed Toudou had used his influence to pull a few strings, but he couldn't make anything too obvious now.

"Sunday works best," Shizuku replied.

"What time?"

"He didn't say."

"Then, what about a little past one?"

"That should be fine. I'll let you know if we need to reschedule."

"Sounds good."

For Tatsuya, what was supposed to be a mere coffee break turned out to be much more.



Ultimately, Tatsuya ended up staying at the new residence in Chofu rather than returning to Izu that night. He had to meet Edward Clark at the Magic Association's Tokyo branch the next day anyway, and the following day was his meeting with Shizuku's father. It wouldn't be very practical to return to Izu at

this point.

It was Tatsuya's first time staying the night in Chofu. But Miyuki was probably the most excited about it. In contrast, Tatsuya was completely calm. It was Miyuki who got herself all worked up.

"If you don't need anything else, I'll take my leave for the night," Minami announced as they arrived at the apartment.

"Sure. Good night, Minami," Tatsuya said.

"Good night," Miyuki echoed.

The building's top floor was entirely dedicated to Miyuki's new residence. It had the same layout as a typical apartment, but with separate entrances. One entrance was for Tatsuya and Miyuki's living area, and the other was for Minami's sleeping quarters. Essentially, Minami had transitioned from a live-in maid to a commuting maid, who was just a few minutes away on foot.

This layout also meant that Tatsuya and Miyuki were alone at night. For Miyuki, it was an exciting opportunity that she couldn't let slip by.

"You can go ahead and take a bath first," Miyuki said.

"Thanks," he replied.

As soon as they stepped out of the car, Miyuki had reverted to treating Tatsuya like her brother again. It wasn't the first time this had happened. She always treated him like her brother over the phone, too. This was her way of putting what they discussed at the Izu villa on Saturday night into practice.

However, it probably wasn't a conscious decision. Treating Tatsuya like her brother felt natural for her, ever since that day in Okinawa five years ago.

Miyuki's bath suggestion didn't mean she personally had to prepare anything. The Chofu residence's bath was fully automated, from cleaning to filling with hot water.

Their bath in their previous house was much the same, but this one was more advanced. Once in the bathroom, Tatsuya realized it was possible to bathe himself without lifting a finger. He seriously considered just using the fully automated shower booth for a quick wash, but after seeing the luxurious tub

and spacious washing area, he decided to take his time and bathe in the traditional way. Well, at least as traditional as was possible. There were still plenty of automated features involved.

“Shower,” Tatsuya said aloud.

After he lathered his hair with soap, there was no need to grope around for the showerhead. With a simple vocal command, hot water poured down precisely where it was needed. Tatsuya effortlessly rinsed out his hair and reached for the brush to wash his body.

Just then, he sensed a presence behind him on the other side of the bathroom door. But he didn’t feel particularly anxious. Even with his back turned, he could tell it was Miyuki standing there. She was the anxious one.

“Tatsuya?” she said hesitantly.

“What is it?” he replied.

Though he could sense his sister behind him, he couldn’t understand why she was calling, much less why she was nervous.

“Will you let me wash your back?” she asked.

“What?”

It wasn’t that Tatsuya couldn’t hear her. He simply couldn’t comprehend the question. In fact, he didn’t want to comprehend the question.

She wants to wash my back? he thought. But why? How?

For a split second, Tatsuya’s brain froze in a rare moment of confusion.

Either impatient for a response or seizing the opportunity, Miyuki opened the bathroom door.

“Here. Let me,” she said.

Tatsuya dearly regretted not having locked himself in, but there was nothing he could do now. As he heard Miyuki’s footsteps approach, he didn’t dare turn around. Thanks to his quick reflexes, he managed to throw a towel over his lap, hiding his lower half at the very least.

He felt Miyuki drawing closer, but he didn’t know what she looked like.

If only there was a mirror in here, he thought briefly before immediately chasing the thought from his mind.

There actually was a mirror in the bath right in front of Tatsuya's face. It was simply covered. He was grateful for not being in the habit of using a mirror when he bathed.

"Excuse me for a moment," Miyuki said, reaching past him for the sponge.

Tatsuya could see her white skin as her arm passed by the side of his face. For an instant, he felt the soft swell of her chest against his back. But it was through the soft cotton of a towel, not her bare skin against his. Tatsuya breathed a slight sigh of relief at this tiniest of mercies.



Miyuki brought the soapy sponge to his back. With every movement, he could feel her slender fingers, too. Unable to stand the awkward silence any longer, Tatsuya spoke without turning around.

“Where is this coming from, Miyuki?”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “Am I bothering you?”

“No, not at all,” he said.

That was a lie. He was very hot and bothered. But he couldn’t stand the thought of making Miyuki feel bad. Especially not now.

“That’s good,” she replied with a giggle close to tears.

One wrong move, and there clearly would have been waterworks.

“I was just thinking,” Tatsuya continued. “You’ve never washed my back before.”

He felt Miyuki’s fingers tremble slightly along his back.

“I just wanted us to be together,” she said, her voice shaking with embarrassment. “It’s been a while since it has been just the two of us.”

She paused before whispering in a honeyed voice, “Are you mad?”

“No,” Tatsuya replied immediately, as if under a spell.

The bathtub in the Chofu residence was about twice the length of one in a typical household. The spaciousness allowed Tatsuya and Miyuki to share the tub with their backs to each other.

Facing each other seemed out of the question. Even with the extra length, there wasn’t enough room for both of them to sit comfortably. Tatsuya stood over five-feet-ten, and Miyuki’s legs were much longer than the average Japanese woman’s.

Both of them had taken their towels off in the water. Although it was just their backs, the sensation of their bare skin touching made it difficult for Tatsuya to remain calm. Miyuki’s cheeks were likewise flushed for reasons beyond the heat of the water. It took everything she had to maintain her usual tone.

“How long will you be staying in Chofu?” she asked.

“I’ll head back to Izu on Sunday night,” he replied stiffly.

“So you won’t be returning to First High yet?”

“We can’t be sure what the USNA and New Soviet Union might have up their sleeve. It would be safer to wait it out a little longer.”

“I see,” Miyuki whispered.

It was impossible for her to hide her disappointment. At the same time, she didn’t dare to selfishly ask him to return soon.

Instead, she asked, “Can I visit you in Izu again sometime?”

“Of course,” Tatsuya replied. “As long as it doesn’t affect your studies, you’re welcome anytime.”

“Goodness,” Miyuki gasped sarcastically. “You sound like my legal guardian.”

“I think that’s off the table for older brothers. Maybe I can be both your fiancé and your legal guardian, though,” Tatsuya said.

Miyuki giggled at his bad joke.

“Well, that sounds good to me. You are the only one I can count on.”

“Leave it to me,” Tatsuya assured her.

He pretended not to notice her insinuation that their father was not someone she could trust. This feigned ignorance made her a little sad.

“Could I go with you to Shizuku’s house on Sunday?” she asked.

“Actually, that wouldn’t be a bad idea,” Tatsuya said.

His suddenly serious tone took Miyuki off guard.

“Are you saying I *should* be with you to meet her father?”

“It’s important to meet the top sponsor of what will most likely turn into our life’s work,” Tatsuya clarified. “I’d like you to come.”

“All right.” Miyuki nodded deeply.

The words *our life’s work* didn’t go unnoticed. She knew exactly what that

meant.

“Miyuki? Are you okay?”

Tatsuya suddenly felt Miyuki’s back pressed more firmly to his than before. If this was intentional, he could brush it off as a slightly escalated form of affection. Then again, there was a chance that it wasn’t.

“Whatever do you mean?” she asked in a somewhat inebriated voice.

This can’t be good, Tatsuya thought.

He was afraid Miyuki was getting light-headed.

“I think it’s time to get out of the bath,” he suggested.

“Yes...Good idea...” she replied in an even weaker voice.

There was no sign of movement.

What now? Tatsuya thought.

Lifting Miyuki’s naked body out of the tub himself would be only a last resort. He could call for Minami’s help, but he would need to get out first. The only problem with that was the difficulty he would have without touching Miyuki in some way on the way out. He was also afraid Miyuki may fall into the water if he weren’t there to support her.

In a flustered state, it took him over a minute of deliberating to come up with a solution to get them both out of the tub.

Luckily, neither he nor Miyuki caught a cold after their bath.



Edward Clark's arrival in Japan was greeted by a swarm of reporters. The commotion was more akin to a high-profile celebrity's private trip than a diplomatic visit. Edward and Raymond's tendency not to avoid public attention likely contributed to the heightened frenzy. In fact, they seemed to almost purposefully bask in the limelight. Even so, they declined all press conference and interview requests, ultimately escaping the airport under police escort.

Their destination was the USNA Embassy. Since Edward Clark was a government official, being welcomed by the embassy wasn't entirely surprising. However, it caused many reporters and journalists to be intimidated by the alleged influence of the USNA government behind Clark.

By early afternoon, Edward and Raymond had departed the embassy and arrived at the heliport on top of Yokohama Bay Hills Tower—the location of the Magic Association's Tokyo branch.

Tatsuya arrived there five minutes before the meeting. Though he had been informed that Edward was already waiting in the reception room, Tatsuya showed no signs of panic or urgency. He thought this was only fair after being forced to make time in his schedule the day before.

Honestly, Tatsuya was tempted to keep Edward waiting for about an hour. But he was more bound by convention than he thought and arrived at the reception desk on time. A different woman from yesterday led him to the room.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Tatsuya Shiba," he said, intentionally introducing himself in Japanese.

This may have been a childish move on his part, but it was his way of showing the slightest form of resistance.

“Hi, there. I’m Edward Clark,” the American man responded.

To Tatsuya’s surprise, Edward spoke very fluent Japanese. But he refused to let this take him off guard. Tatsuya’s insistence on sticking to Japanese was a testament to his resilience. He did, however, have the unique ability never to forget something once he had heard it, making it possible for him to master English as well as the languages of other major countries.

“It’s an honor,” Tatsuya said.

“Same here,” Edward replied with a smile.

Despite Edward’s unassuming appearance, Tatsuya immediately realized he was quite the smooth talker. His meticulously tailored suit, neatly combed toasted-blond hair, and average physique of about five-foot-ten made him look more like a senior executive in sales than a researcher or technician. Actually, what he really looked like was a government agent.

Surely, this wasn’t limited to his appearance. Even if Edward Clark was a technician, the role he was currently fulfilling was clearly government related.

Tatsuya immediately took a seat when Edward offered it. The Magic Association associate seemed uneasy about this behavior, but Edward and Raymond took seats opposite Tatsuya without the slightest sense of disturbance.

“I saw your press conference yesterday, Mr. Shiba,” Edward began. “That power plant plan of yours took me by surprise, but it seems impressive.”

“Thanks, that means a lot,” Tatsuya replied. “Of course, my plan is nothing compared to the Dione Project’s scale. Your project is so ambitious, I doubt it can be completed in a single person’s lifetime.”

“You flatter me,” Edward said.

Though slightly hard to tell, Tatsuya’s comment was more of a jab than a compliment. He heavily implied the project’s aim was isolating magicians from society on a temporal and spatial scale.

Whether Edward understood this critique or not was unclear from his expression. At the very least, the Magic Association associate, who presumably

remained as a witness, was oblivious. If Edward could maintain a poker face despite catching on, Tatsuya thought he must be very clever.

“I would like to talk to you about the gravity-control magic-based nuclear fusion reactors,” Edward continued. “I believe you called them magic stellar reactors. Were they developed for building power plants?”

“Yes,” Tatsuya responded. “In their final form, they require seawater to function.”

Edward flinched ever so slightly. He understood Tatsuya’s comment as a warning that the reactors would not work in space.

“Constructing a power plant using magic stellar reactors sounds like a significant project for Japan,” Edward said. “Terraforming Venus, on the other hand, provides hope for all humanity. This is why I want you to participate in the Dione Project, Mr. Shiba. Your numerous technical accomplishments as Taurus Silver would make you an indispensable asset to the project.”

This invitation came out of the blue. It was unclear whether this was part of Edward’s original plan or out of desperate urgency.

“If you saw yesterday’s press conference, you would know that I am not Taurus Silver,” Tatsuya remarked. “Although I’m sure you were well aware of this before my official announcement.”

There was subtle irony in Tatsuya’s tone, hinting that he knew Edward had already found out the truth with Hlidskjalf. Raymond had told Tatsuya about Echelon III’s backdoor system. If Tatsuya knew about it, Edward surely knew as well.

“Taurus Silver’s reputation stems from his remarkable achievements in software development. In other words, I believe you are his very essence,” Edward insisted.

“Software is just scribbles without the hardware to support it,” Tatsuya argued. “Neither one is superior to the other; they’re complementary.”

“That’s not true. Hardware is just a box without software,” Edward said.

“Actually, it’s the hardware that does the real work,” Tatsuya countered.

Raymond nudged his father in the side with his elbow as a sign they were getting off track. Edward deliberately cleared his throat and tried to refocus the conversation.

“Since the team known as Taurus Silver disbanded yesterday, I will give up on seeking their participation,” he relented. “Instead, let me put it this way—Mr. Shiba, will *you* join the Dione Project?”

“Unfortunately, I’ve already taken on the role of overseeing the magic stellar reactor power plant project as of yesterday,” Tatsuya stated. “I could have delegated the project to someone else if you had asked me, rather than Taurus Silver, to join your project from the very beginning. But now the timing isn’t quite right. Please understand that I must decline.”

And with that, Tatsuya firmly rejected Edward Clark’s request with the Magic Association associate as his witness.



Edward and Tatsuya continued their conversation for a while but, ultimately, to no avail. The American scientist had known that persuading Tatsuya wouldn’t be easy. What came as a surprise was that he couldn’t get Tatsuya to admit any fault on his part.

“He’s even more formidable than I thought,” Edward murmured after returning to his hotel.

Bodyguards occupied the adjacent rooms on both sides. This VIP treatment proved that Edward Clark was not simply a mere technician.

“What now, Dad?” Raymond asked.

“It doesn’t look like we can settle things by peaceful means,” Edward mused.

“I still think assassination should be a last resort,” Raymond said.

Edward didn’t bother to hide what was on his mind around his son. Likewise, Raymond didn’t even flinch at his father’s lack of aversion to getting his hands dirty. Not having secrets between them may have solidified their positive parent-child relationship, but Edward significantly deviated from societal norms in terms of his son’s moral education. The act of giving Raymond the Hlidskjalf terminal was more than enough proof that Edward was fine with ignoring

common ideas of what was right and wrong.

“If neutralizing the boy with the Dione Project proves impossible, we’ll need to consider assassination as a viable option,” Edward continued.

For him, the purpose of the Dione Project was not to develop Venus. While terraforming Venus was ideal if possible, the project’s true purpose was to neutralize Tatsuya Shiba or, more specifically, his strategic magic, Material Burst.

“But as you said, it should only be a last resort,” he continued. “I’ve scheduled a televised interview tomorrow. I’ll try to stir up the Japanese public opinion there.”

“Then we can decide our next move based on that outcome,” Raymond said.

“That’s right, son.”

“Dad? Is everything okay?”

Raymond noticed the frown on his father’s face despite his positive words.

“I’m afraid the New Soviet Union might resort to aggressive tactics without waiting for a possible change in public opinion,” Edward revealed.

He was especially referring to Bezobrazov.

“If that happens, and the results are mediocre, it may not even prevent Tatsuya from launching a counterattack,” he continued. “I would rather they exercised restraint for a while longer.”

“Want me to use Hlidskjalf to find out what the Soviets are up to?” Raymond asked.

Edward shook his head.

“There are rumors the New Soviet Union has developed a counter-surveillance system to block Echelon III. While I doubt they would catch Hlidskjalf, we shouldn’t risk jeopardizing our relationship with Bezobrazov.”

“Okay...” Raymond sighed reluctantly. “Then, can I go off on my own tomorrow?”

“As long as you don’t go too far,” Edward said. “What are you planning to

do?”

“Visit Tia.”

“Tia? Oh, you mean that Kitayama girl.”

Edward fell silent for a moment and weighed the pros and cons of deepening ties with the Hokuzan Group, which was a prominent company even in the USNA.

“Fine, why not? Have fun,” he finally said.

“Thanks,” Raymond replied and ran excitedly to his bedroom to give Shizuku a call.

Edward smiled fondly at his son as he watched him leave the room.



The meeting on Sunday between Tatsuya and Shizuku’s father, Ushio Kitayama, ended quickly and on a positive note. Ushio confirmed his intention to support the ESCAPES Plan. While this process was facilitated by Aoba Toudou’s recommendation, Ushio’s decision wasn’t based on Toudou’s influence alone. Providing nonmilitary employment opportunities for magicians aligned with Ushio’s personal beliefs as well.

At the current stage, Tatsuya couldn’t delve into specifics about construction or operating costs, so he simply gave Ushio a more detailed look at his plan than the one he presented at the press conference. Once the explanation was over, Ushio saw Tatsuya and Miyuki to the reception room door.

“Fascinating plan,” he commented. “I was very inspired. In fact, I believe the stellar reactor may be capable of going beyond hydrogen production and extracting lithium, cobalt, uranium, and other rare elements from the sea as well. I have a company within the Hokuzan Group that is researching the exploitation of maritime resources, so I’ll have them explore various options.”

“Thank you. That would be great,” Tatsuya said.

Despite his expertise and insights in the realm of magic engineering, Tatsuya’s industrial knowledge was still at the level of a high school student. Learning more about extracting resources in a cost-effective manner was exactly what he

had been looking for. Securing Ushio's full support was a significant step forward.

"Do you mind if I pay Shizuku a visit, sir?" Miyuki asked.

The fact that Ushio's daughter's friend had come along had also helped soften Ushio's demeanor. Miyuki was proving to be as useful as Tatsuya planned.

"Of course not. She will be delighted to see you," Ushio replied with a smile.

Just then, an older maid spoke up from the hall.

"Mr. Kitayama."

"Yes?"

"Miss Shizuku is currently entertaining another guest," the maid reported.

"She is?" Ushio blinked. "Oh, yes. Now I remember."

"It seems Shizuku is busy," Miyuki noted. "I don't wish to bother her."

"Not at all," Ushio said. "Actually, the guest is a boy Shizuku met during her time abroad. He called just yesterday asking to see her. I wanted to decline since it was on such short notice, but I relented when he explained he will be leaving the country tomorrow. I'm sure you two have met before. It shouldn't be a problem if you pop in to say hello."

"We've met before?" Tatsuya asked.

"I believe so," Ushio said. "The boy's name is Raymond Clark."

With the vast information network in his head, Ushio obviously understood the meaning behind the Clark family name. Tatsuya immediately grasped what Ushio was trying to do.

"All right," Miyuki said with a bow. "We would be happy to stop by."

"Excellent," Ushio replied. Then he smoothly turned to a nearby servant, as if it were part of a script. "Bring them to my daughter, please."

Shizuku was entertaining Raymond in the tearoom with the doors wide open. Even if there were servants present, Ushio probably didn't want Shizuku spending time alone with a young man in a closed room. Or it could have been her mother's preference.

“Hello, Shizuku,” Miyuki greeted her from the doorway. “I hope we aren’t bothering you.”

Shizuku quickly turned around.

“Miyuki...” she gasped as if relieved.

“Mind if we join you, Raymond?” Tatsuya asked, barging into the room.

Raymond looked surprised at first but quickly broke into a smile.

“O-of course, Tatsuya. We didn’t get to talk yesterday. Fate must have brought us back together to fix that.”

“Did you have something you wanted to talk to me about?” Tatsuya asked, confused.

He thought Raymond was focused on wooing Shizuku. At the same time, he was interested in hearing what the American boy said, so he settled in the seat across from him. Though Shizuku had been in that seat, she shifted to a different chair before anyone said anything. Miyuki then took the chair between Tatsuya and Shizuku.

“I wanted to ask you a question, Tatsuya,” Raymond replied casually, giving Tatsuya his full attention. “So tell me. Does the stellar power plant plan have a shorter name?”

“I’m sure you could find that out for yourself if you did a little research,” Tatsuya said.

He mischievously insinuated the American boy could use Hlidskjalf to look it up.

“You wouldn’t have held a press conference if that information was searchable,” Raymond grumbled.

Not finding Raymond much fun to tease, Tatsuya decided to tell him what he asked.

“The ESCAPES Plan.”

“ESCAPES Plan?” Raymond echoed. “Which means...? Actually, never mind.”

There was no need to press any further. He immediately sensed there was

more importance in the conscious use of the term *escape* than in whatever the letters stood for.

“Are you really going to put the plan into action?” he asked instead.

“Everyone seems to have the same question.” Tatsuya sighed without an ounce of empathy. “The ESCAPES Plan isn’t a decoy to avoid the Dione Project. In fact, I’ve been working on it since before your country came up with the ridiculous idea to terraform Venus.”

“That’s not a nice way to put it.” Raymond frowned.

“Then, let me ask you this,” Tatsuya said. “Are you seriously planning on terraforming the surface of Venus?”

Raymond fell silent, so Tatsuya continued.

“Actual human migration to space isn’t something that will happen within the next ten or twenty years. It will take centuries. The project your father has proposed requires continuous investment of capital and resources that will span multiple generations. I find it hard to believe the USNA genuinely wants to take on something of that scale. In fact, I don’t think there’s a single nation on Earth that does. Yet such a grand project would need the whole world to support it. Do you disagree?”

“The Mars colonization plan isn’t much different, and it’s still thriving,” Raymond countered.

“The plan itself may have seen progress over the last hundred years,” Tatsuya said, “but they haven’t even decided how they’re going to get people up there yet.”

“Well, don’t you think grand projects are the key to promoting a unified global community?” Raymond argued.

“Forcing the world together will only turn wars into civil strife,” Tatsuya replied, unfazed.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Raymond insisted, likewise remaining undiscouraged. Tatsuya’s words had struck a sensitive chord.

“Dreams don’t exist because they can be achieved,” he continued. “They exist

precisely because no one knows if they'll ever be realized. Isn't that what dreaming is all about?"

"Well, aren't you a romantic," Tatsuya scoffed. "Does that mean the Dione Project is just an unfeasible dream to you?"

"Don't you see? Soaring into space with the power of magic and led by their hearts is humankind's greatest dream," Raymond said.

"That's beautiful and all, but why do I have to be dragged into something like that?" Tatsuya asked.

"What?"

Tatsuya's question took Raymond off guard, leaving him at a loss for words.

"You're welcome to keep your dreams about using magic to venture into space," Tatsuya said. "But isn't that *your* dream? There shouldn't be any reason why I have to go along with it."

"Well..." Raymond faltered.

"The reason you want to rope me into the Dione Project has nothing to do with chasing dreams. There has to be a more practical incentive," Tatsuya insisted.

"Fine." Raymond sighed. "If practical is what you want, let's talk practical."

Though he seemed defeated, the American boy showed surprising tenacity.

"Ocean development may delay the process of reaching the Earth's population cap for a while, but there's still a finite amount of space on this planet," he stated. "No matter how much we put it off, there will inevitably come a time when humanity's population growth becomes unsustainable."

"I can agree with that." Tatsuya nodded.

"Then, isn't space development an unavoidable reality?" Raymond persisted. "We can't turn our backs on it just because it's hard. If we want humanity to continue to thrive, we have to move to space while we still can."

"Why is space development your solution to population growth?" Tatsuya countered.

“What do you mean?” Raymond asked hesitantly, his face turning completely blank. “Isn’t it obvious? Earth has its limits, so we need to venture beyond it.”

“Space is finite, too.”

“That’s true, but...”

“And the parts of space capable of being adapted for human survival are even more limited.”

“.....”

“Developing space won’t allow us escape its limits,” Tatsuya contended. “All humans can do is postpone reaching those limits.”

“Now you’re taking things too far,” Raymond said.

“If delaying our environment’s spatial limits is all we’re capable of, we should prioritize what we can do now.”

“Now you’re just making excuses! Space practically has no limits! And with the help of magic, humans can soar to infinite frontiers!”

“The purpose of the ESCAPES Plan isn’t to address population growth.”

“.....”

“Completing the stellar reactors and building the reactor power plant is my goal. Go ahead and aim for space. If that’s really your ultimate goal.”

Unable to fight back any longer, Raymond slowly rose from his chair with a crestfallen expression.

“Sorry, Tia. I have to go.”

“Oh... Okay.”

“Tatsuya, we will *never* let you escape.”

“Well, I will never become your prisoner.”

“I hope you don’t regret this one day,” Raymond said.

Then he turned back to Shizuku. “See you later, Tia.”

“Sure. See you, Ray,” Shizuku replied with a sad smile as she watched him walk out the door.



Once Raymond had left, the tearoom was filled with a lingering sense of unease. Shizuku instructed a nearby maid to open the windows, hoping to physically clear the air. Then she grabbed the remote to turn on the television, hoping that would help, too.

Unfortunately, the program that appeared on the screen had the opposite effect. Shizuku moved to change the channel, but Tatsuya stopped her.

“Wait. Leave it there.”

Edward Clark was being interviewed on the screen. He spoke in English as Japanese subtitles provided a simultaneous translation.

“—So my point is, if you truly want to harness magic for the future, it should be used for space development,” Edward said. “Don’t get me wrong. The magic fusion reactor is a fantastic invention. It should just be used in places where it is difficult to replenish fuel and obtain solar power, such as on the satellites of Jupiter. With the help of nuclear fusion, satellites can provide stable electricity sources even when they are eclipsed by Jupiter’s shadow.”

“Give me a break,” Tatsuya muttered sarcastically. “Ganymede’s orbit only lasts seven days, and even Callisto’s is under seventeen.”

Of course, his voice didn’t reach Edward’s ears on the other side of the television screen.

“Other technologies can be used for ocean development, such as offshore solar power and geothermal energy,” the American scientist continued. “These alternatives can ensure the power needed for power plants is obtained without the use of magic. The rare potential of magic should be put to more meaningful purposes.”

“Doesn’t that sound familiar?” Miyuki asked in a tone of innocent curiosity rather than sarcasm or spite.

“Like father like son, I guess.” Tatsuya shrugged.

“Edward is Raymond’s father?” Shizuku asked in mild surprise.

“I’ve never confirmed it with USNA officials, but I’m almost positive he is,”

Tatsuya replied.

“I had no idea,” Shizuku said.

“Really? Didn’t Raymond ever have parties at his house when you were abroad?” Tatsuya asked.

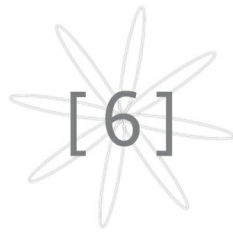
This statement was based on the stereotype that there were more house parties in America than in Japan.

“No, he didn’t,” Shizuku replied.

She had definitely been invited to parties when she was studying abroad. But not all parents were actively present in their children’s social circles. In that sense, the USNA and Japan weren’t that different.

“That being said, it would mean the world to us if Tatsuya Shiba participated in our plans to pioneer humanity’s greatest frontier,” Edward stressed emphatically on the screen.

Knowing what he really wanted, Tatsuya couldn’t help but scoff.



In the 2030s, Magician Development Institutes were established in ten locations across Japan. By 2097, half of them were still operational while the other half had closed. However, three of the five of these officially closed institutes had simply rebranded and effectively continued to exist.

The former Magician Development Institute Nine in Nara, for instance, had been transformed into a private research facility called the Ninth Magician Development Institute and was jointly funded by the Kudou, Kuki, and Kuzumi families. This facility ostensibly claimed to focus on researching perception-type magic.

While this claim wasn't a lie, it wasn't the sole focus of their research. One of the current Lab Nine's products of their research were Parasidolls, which had plagued Tatsuya the previous summer. Parasidolls were humanoid weapons that incorporated parasites—entities existing independently from the human psyche—into gynoids, imbuing them with magic abilities.

Due to recurring operational problems, the Parasidoll project was frozen before they could be put into practical use. But since they were deemed capable of combat, they were put in a dormant state rather than discarded entirely. In fact, they were still stored in Lab Nine, paralyzed in slumber.

On the night of Sunday, June 2, 2097, a figure approached the warehouse where Lab Nine's Parasidolls were securely stored. Illuminated by the faint light of emergency lamps, the figure's appearance was otherworldly, possessing an ethereal beauty that seemed almost divine in nature.

Minoru Kudou was almost inhumanly beautiful on a daily basis. The darkness of the night simply emphasized his mystique and allure, presenting him as a being that transcended the existence of ordinary mortals.

The warehouse door opened effortlessly at his touch. But he used neither magic nor hacking. He simply used a key that he borrowed from the facility's management office.

Minoru stepped into the warehouse. Its air-conditioned interior felt cold, almost chilling, and pleasantly dry. He could hardly sense any spiritual energy. The families associated with the number 9 usually boasted a hybrid of old and modern magic. Likewise, Minoru possessed an aptitude for mental interference magic and could perceive pushion waves. Unlike Mizuki, who had special eyes that could see spirits themselves, Minoru could only discern the waves that spirits produced. In other words, he could sense spirits at a heightened level.

The fact that even he couldn't perceive any active spirit waves in the warehouse proved that the parasites—the core of the Parasidolls—were immobilized in their dormant state.

"Will absorbing these things really make me healthy?" he asked.

"Yes, but you will only need to absorb one of them. The parasite may transform some parts of your body, but it won't overtake your consciousness," Gongjin Zhou's knowledge replied directly into Minoru's mind.

The boy's invocation of the loyalty enchantment had helped him subjugate and absorb Gongjin's spirit. Loyalty enchantments were usually meant for enslaving rather than assimilating. Therefore, Gongjin's spirit was added to Minoru's mind in the form of a secondary consciousness. To Minoru, it felt like having an ego-less advisor or a spiritual AI assistant connected to his brain.

"What do you mean, it may transform parts of my body?" he asked.

"According to the USNA military's information base, you'll grow additional organs for communication with the brain," Gongjin replied.

"Won't that be dangerous?"

"I cannot guarantee it will be completely harmless, but your health issues are mainly due to your body's inability to control psions. Parasites excel at controlling psions more than humans, so assimilating a parasite should eliminate all your physical discomfort."

"Wouldn't it be better if I just learned how to control the psions myself?"

“In theory, yes. But your body may not withstand the training required for that.”

Minoru bit his lip. This information was nothing new. He didn't blame Gongjin for this, since the supplemental intelligence simply responded to any questions he asked it. Lacking the concept of repetition, its response would always be the same.

Ultimately, simply exerting a normal level of effort wouldn't enable Minoru to excel when he needed. His body wouldn't even allow the extraordinary efforts needed to overcome its own defects. In other words, Minoru knew that effort alone couldn't mend his physical flaws. That was why he had come to the Lab Nine warehouse tonight. Here, he was provided with a means to liberate himself from the defects of his body.

It wouldn't be difficult for him to awaken the dormant parasite or make it possess him. Though he had never done it before, he knew it was perfectly feasible. The knowledge stored in Lab Nine and his supplementary intelligence spirit assured Minoru of this fact.

Now, all that was left was to make a decision. It was up to Minoru alone to work up the resolve to discard his humanity. He stood there pondering for what seemed like hours until his statue-like figure, sculpted in youthful beauty, finally stirred back to life and made his move.



He immediately turned around and left the warehouse, closing the door behind him. His ghostly advisor remained silent. Its supplementary intelligence responded only when questioned. Minoru didn't bother to ask whether his decision to leave was correct.



After his television appearance, Edward Clark briefly thanked the Magic Association before returning home with his son. They arrived at Los Angeles International Airport at 6 AM, local time. After a brief nap, he went to his office at 2 PM.

At the National Science Bureau's California branch, Edward didn't have a direct superior. Even the branch director wasn't fully aware of what Edward did each day. The American scientist was given complete autonomy and a private office. This was initially to prevent any leaks about Echelon III reaching his colleagues, but it eventually evolved into a privilege granted to him for advancing strategic magic countermeasures across the Japanese mainland.

"I think it's seven in the morning over there..." he murmured.

These unconscious mutterings were a side effect of working alone for so long. He was probably not even aware he was talking to himself, since no one had ever pointed it out to him. It was also possible that it was a habit limited to the space of his private office.

"Should I wait? No."

Once he had gone through the ritual of gathering his thoughts, Edward stopped hesitating and headed to his communication device. This device looked like a regular visiphone, but it was equipped with an Echelon III system to prevent eavesdropping and limit call access.

"Good morning, Doctor," Edward said in greeting.

"Good morning. Although I suppose it is the afternoon over there," Bezobrazov replied without the slightest hint of exhaustion.

"I apologize for calling so early," Edward continued.

"Nonsense," Bezobrazov said amicably. *"It is the dead of night where you are*

when it becomes a reasonable time of day here. Besides, I'm sure you are calling with something urgent."

"It's not exactly urgent"—Edward hesitated—"but I did want to speak to you about something right away."

"Go on."

Bezobrazov's mild expression suddenly took on an air of seriousness. Edward's did the same.

"I'm sure you are already aware," Edward began, "but Japan's strategic magician, Tatsuya Shiba, has refused to join the Dione Project and has announced a plan of his own."

"Yes," Bezobrazov said, "I saw the press conference in real time."

Edward suddenly panicked. It was natural for Bezobrazov to show an interest in Tatsuya's press conference. While Edward had not expected him to watch it in real time, he should have known that the Russian scientist would have known about the content of the press conference a day ago. By this time, he may have even already begun taking matters into his own hands.

Though worried that this call came too late, Edward decided to continue calmly. But Bezobrazov was already a step ahead of him.

"A stellar reactor that uses gravity-control magic to generate energy is an intriguing idea indeed. I'm almost tempted to ask the boy if I can join him," Bezobrazov remarked before cracking a slight smile. "Don't give me that look. It's a joke."

"Jesus, Doctor," Edward said. "That's not funny."

Even though he knew this was just Bezobrazov's way to show initiative, he couldn't hide his agitation.

"My apologies," the New Soviet scientist replied. "But the power plant project's attraction is an undeniable fact. Wouldn't you say it has become more difficult to exile Tatsuya Shiba now to Jupiter?"

"I still don't believe this means the Dione Project has failed," Edward insisted. "I intend to continue to exert pressure on the USNA government to prevent

Japan from approving the power plant's construction. If necessary, I'm willing to even cause an 'accident' to prevent any further progression. In any case, I would like to ask for your continued cooperation with the Dione Project."

"Hmm," Bezobrazov mumbled, deep in thought. "I was actually considering a more direct approach to neutralize Material Burst."

"Doctor!"

"If you insist, Mr. Clark. I will continue to observe the situation from afar."

"I would appreciate that." Edward sighed with relief.

Just as he feared, Bezobrazov had already started planning something rash. In theory, there would be no problem if an attack succeeded. The USNA would be delighted if Bezobrazov managed to eliminate Tatsuya Shiba.

However, there was always a chance the attack would fail. While Bezobrazov was confident in his abilities to cover his tracks, his identity as a strategic magician was well known worldwide. Merely by pointing out traces of magic attacks, Tatsuya could cast doubt back on the Soviets and claim he had been ambushed.

In this case, the New Soviet Union wouldn't be the only ones under suspicion. The world wouldn't easily forget Bezobrazov's public support for the Dione Project. If the Soviet scientist was accused of an assassination attempt, it would spell disaster for the project as well. Edward was making this call precisely to prevent such an outcome.

"But I will say this," Bezobrazov continued. "If it proves impossible to bring the boy onto the Dione Project, my country will need to follow its own path. And we will not hesitate to use any means to eliminate the threat of mass-energy conversion magic."

He was clearly implying that he would use his strategic magic, Tuman Bomba. Edward's throat suddenly felt dry. Feeling a cough come on, he quickly took a sip from his bottle of mineral water.

"...Excuse me. I will do everything in my power to avoid that necessity at all costs."

"I sincerely hope so," Bezobrazov replied and disappeared from the screen.

Filled with intense anxiety, Edward reached for his other phone.



On Tuesday afternoon, a representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited the Kyoto branch office of Magic Association president Hisui Tomitsuka.

"Let me get this straight. You want the Magic Association to put pressure on the Yotsuba family?"

"Precisely."

"That's impossible!" Hisui shouted, forgetting herself. "The Magic Association doesn't have the authority to dictate magician behavior."

This was in no way an excuse or a lie. The Magic Association was a mutual aid organization, not a governing body.

"But you surely wield considerable influence over magicians," the representative persisted. "The International Magic Association could even organize an extrajudicial punitive force."

"That's only possible when preventing the use of nuclear weapons!" Hisui practically shrieked. "The Japan Magic Association doesn't have enough influence to interfere in magicians' private business activities!"

"Really?" the representative asked, genuinely surprised.

"Really!"

It was painfully clear to Hisui that this man didn't have any close relationships with magicians. She needed to persuade him to back down.

"Besides," Hisui continued, "the Ten Master Clans have more powerful magicians than the Magic Association itself. Even if we could organize a task force, it wouldn't be enough to intimidate the Yotsuba family."

"But the Ten Master Clans are not a monolithic entity," the representative said.

Unfortunately, he was exacerbating Hisui's distress with every word he said.

"Are you seriously suggesting I try to incite internal conflict within the Ten

Master Clans?!” she screeched.

“Not ‘incite,’ per se,” the representative responded. “We don’t wish to encourage inter-magician conflict. However, it is within the realm of proper governance for an organization to enforce a system of checks and balances on its members to prevent anyone from stepping out of line.”

“The Magic Association does not rule over the Ten Master Clans,” Hisui countered, feeling a dull ache in her gut as she explained this.

Yet the representative was still unwilling to listen.

“I never claimed otherwise,” he said. “But objectively speaking, you wield the most influence over the magic community that calls themselves the Ten Master Clans. Anyway, I’ll leave you to it.”

With that, he rose from his seat and walked out of the office. Once alone, Hisui broke out in a cold sweat. She pressed her palm against her aching abdomen as the pain intensified and a wave of nausea completely overcame her.



The Japanese government’s attempt to interfere with the ESCAPES Plan undoubtedly came at the request of the USNA government. At this stage, the government was unconvinced about the value of extracting underwater resources.

Especially given the numerous failures of similar schemes in the past, there was skepticism about the feasibility and economic viability of Tatsuya’s plan. Most representatives were focused solely on ensuring that there were no diplomatic or trade-related drawbacks. The economic sector, however, had a different reaction.

“Kitakata, I heard you are already involved in the most recent project.”

Kitakata was Ushio Kitayama’s business name. During informal lunch meetings like this one, it was considered proper etiquette in the business world to use business names rather than legal ones. At official government or municipal events, however, using legal names was often required.

“Impressive, Muromachi,” Ushio replied. “I should have known you would

have received wind of that news so quickly.”

Muromachi wasn't Ushio's companion's legal name, either. He was the de facto owner of a group of old zaibatsu-affiliated companies. Although smaller in scale compared to Ushio's Hokuzan Group, Muromachi's group was much more focused on tradition. He himself was an elder figure in the business world. To Ushio, he was like an older brother.

“I heard you have even secured your investment in the project.” Another familiar face was showing interest. “I'm curious as to how that came about.”

“You're also very well informed” Ushio remarked. “Where did you hear all of this?”

“Let's just say I have my sources,” Iwata replied.

The two men exchanged a smile. Unlike Muromachi, Iwata was the leader of a formidable rival group. In fact, he and Ushio had recently competed fiercely over a major foreign project. However, neither of them showed any hint of rivalry this day.

“There is no reason to hide it,” Ushio said. “My daughter is Shiba's classmate.”

“Ah, that's right,” Iwata replied. “I remember you telling me your daughter goes to the National Magic University First Affiliated High School.”

“Is your daughter close with Shiba?”

This time, a man sitting across from Ushio stepped into the conversation. Even though Ushio had only just met with Tatsuya about the project, word of it had clearly spread already.

I'm sure Aoba Toudou had something to do with this, Ushio thought with an amicable expression on his face.

Simply hearing about a promising new business venture was usually not enough to decide whether to invest. However, if major investors were already on board, it created the temptation for others to join in. For the big figures in the financial world present at this table, the amount needed to construct a power plant was reasonable enough to entice them to consider investing.

“Why don’t you introduce us to Shiba, Kitakata?” someone suggested.

Suddenly, requests to participate in the project flooded in. Having more investors was not a bad thing for Ushio. It allowed for risk diversification and made it possible for stakeholders to leverage their influence and rally around him. Ultimately, it could mean strengthening his leadership role in the project.

“I will let Shiba know that you wish to meet him,” he replied with a smile as the luncheon came to an end.



After finishing her training for the day, Lina was told to report to the command room. This made her instantly frown internally. Her outward expression, however, remained neutral. She had learned to comply with orders without showing any sign of reluctance.

The last time she was summoned to the command room, Lina was ordered to escort Edward Clark. As a result, she learned about a dark side of the USNA military that made her wish she had stayed oblivious. She couldn’t shake the feeling that another unpleasant outcome awaited her. At the same time, she couldn’t refuse orders. Rebellion and escape were not yet an option.

“Ben!” Lina exclaimed in surprise. “Were you called here, too?”

“It looks like we’re in the same boat.” He sighed.

The fact that Canopus was present only made Lina’s sense of foreboding grow. It wasn’t unusual for both Lina and Canopus to be summoned at the same time. During the Gide Hague—also known as Gu Jie—incident, Lina had been ordered to stay behind while Canopus took on the mission in her place.

Even if it meant facing another uncomfortable mission, having Canopus around often meant he could shoulder the burden. In that sense, their simultaneous summoning should have come as a relief. Yet Lina still couldn’t shake the ominous feeling that it hinted at a trying mission ahead.

“Major Angelina Sirius, reporting for duty.”

“Major Benjamin Canopus, reporting for duty.”

“Come in.” Base commander Colonel Walker’s voice echoed from inside the

office.

Lina held Canopus back and opened the door herself. The next moment, she froze in place as she spotted a high-ranking officer who shouldn't have been there.

"Colonel Balance..." she gasped in surprise.

But she quickly snapped back to attention, sharply saluting both officers. Canopus stood beside her and followed suit. Colonel Walker rose to his feet to return their salutes.

"At ease," he said and sat back down.

Meanwhile, Balance remained standing next to Walker's desk.

"Majors Sirius and Canopus, I called you in today to ask you something a little out of the ordinary," Walker continued. "I would like your opinion."

"Our opinion?" Lina repeated.

"Yes," Walker replied. "Based on that, I will decide whether or not to send the Stars on this mission."

Lina and Canopus exchanged glances.

As Walker said, this kind of request was highly unusual. It was normal for superiors to seek their subordinates' input when planning operations. However, that typically involved determining the means to achieve a set goal. The decision to execute a mission or not was usually made at a higher level. Exceptions were almost unheard of.

"I believe you are both already aware that the magician responsible for the strategic magic incident known as Scorching Halloween on October thirty-first, 2095, was none other than a young Japanese man named Tatsuya Shiba," Walker began.

Lina and Canopus nodded simultaneously.

"Have you heard that this same young man declined NSA's invitation and initiated a new project?" Walker asked.

"I have," Canopus answered.

Lina knew that Tatsuya had turned down the Dione Project but wasn't aware of much more than that.

"He is planning to build a power plant using gravity-control magic fusion reactors," Walker explained. "If his plan were to materialize, it would deal another severe blow to our nation's resource industry."

Since the shift in energy sources from fossil fuels to solar, wind, geothermal, and biofuel power, companies in the oil, coal, and nuclear sectors had suffered significant losses. However, some still managed to survive by venturing into biofuel, which required vast tracts of land, or by developing small-scale nuclear reactors for regions with inadequate sunlight for solar power. These efforts had allowed the companies to rebuild their portfolios and survive to the present day.

With the magic advancement in the fields of suppressing nuclear fission and radiation shielding, the public's aversion to nuclear power had decreased since the previous century. The decline in nuclear power generation was primarily a result of the soaring costs of uranium and the burden of employing magicians for accident prevention measures. Meanwhile, nuclear weapons were often sealed away, and the civilian use of protactinium had not occurred to date.

"Regardless of industrial considerations, the fact that we cannot neutralize Tatsuya Shiba's strategic magic through the Dione Project is inconvenient for the USNA," Walker continued.

Lina couldn't believe her ears, but she had a feeling she knew what was coming next.

"Some officials believe that if we can assassinate the boy during his plan's execution phase, we can completely eliminate the threat posed by Material Burst's intercontinental range."

Despicable, Lina thought.

Though she didn't know all the details, it seemed Tatsuya's plan involved constructing a power plant for civilian use. Yet certain business entities were trying to use the military to crush it for their own interests. That was already hard to accept. What made things worse was that the real goal was most likely Tatsuya's assassination.

Since when did the Stars become a bloodthirsty mafia?

Lina shook her head.

“What do you think?” Walker asked.

“Permission to speak, sir!” Lina asked, purposefully seeking the go-ahead.

This wasn’t because she was keeping calm. In fact, the opposite was true. Aware that she was boiling with anger, Lina tried to maintain her military discipline with the little self-restraint she had left.

“Granted.” Walker nodded with little emotion on his face.

“I’m against an assassination,” she said. “Tatsuya Shiba is a citizen of an allied nation who is not hostile to our country. Simply considering him a potential threat and resorting to murder is a mafia tactic. The military shouldn’t be engaging in heinous acts like that.”

“I agree.”

“Really, Canopus?”

Though Walker had been listening to Lina’s opinions with an unchanging poker face, his eyebrows went up in mild surprise at the Stars’ number two’s response.

“Assassination aside, sabotaging the power plant does not seem advisable,” Canopus said. “While the energy industry may temporarily suffer a significant blow, a steady supply of inexpensive hydrogen fuel extracted from the oceans is likely to benefit the lives of our citizens. Instead of resorting to assassination or subversion, we should focus on learning how to build fusion reactors for our country.”

“In other words, you believe we should harness this potential rather than obstruct it,” Walker mused.

“Colonel Walker, can I share my opinion as well?” Balance asked, speaking up for the first time.

“Go ahead,” Walker replied, at least externally amicable.

“Thank you.” The colonel nodded. “Major Sirius’s principles are one thing, but

I do believe Canopus's point is worth considering."

Lina was clearly shocked, but Balance chose to ignore her and continued expressing what was on her mind.

"Non-magicians' opinions of the Stars are a delicate matter. If the Stars were to brazenly act in the interest of specific companies or industries, there is a risk of strong backlash from other industries or consumer groups."

"Sabotage is typically conducted covertly," Walker said.

"And our adversaries are not incompetent," Balance pointed out. "It's unrealistic to assume it's possible to knock out an entire power plant without leaving any clues that lead them back to us."

Walker had to admit Balance was right. Concealing sabotage conducted on a large-scale at a construction site that was already attracting public attention would be close to impossible.

If their handiwork was examined closely, there would be limits to how much they could make it look like an accident. Even pushing the blame onto another military power relied on the assumption that the scene wouldn't be thoroughly investigated. While evading punishment by covering tracks might be possible, rumors would inevitably spread. Assassinating an individual like Tatsuya was a much easier endeavor, in terms of the amount of evidence that would be left behind.

"All right," Walker said. "The consensus seems to be that the cons outweigh the pros. I will ask General Staff Headquarters to cancel the mission."

Lina heaved a sigh of relief at the colonel's conclusion.



After leaving the colonel's office, Balance led Lina to another room. The two sat around a single table. Lina agreed to this only because it was more difficult to talk standing, and Balance insisted they sit.

A hot Americano rather than hot milk with honey was placed in front of Lina. Ever since returning from Japan the previous year, Lina had become a coffee drinker outside of her private quarters. It was almost as if milk alone was no longer enough. At the same time, drinking strong coffee upset her stomach, so

she couldn't live without both cream and sugar.

"How have you been feeling, Major?" Balance asked.

"No problems here, ma'am," Lina replied.

"I see."

Balance also had a hot Americano, but hers was black. Since the coffee had originally been brewed quite strong, she probably couldn't taste cream and sugar, even if it had been added.

"I was hoping to talk to you about the conversation we just had," Balance continued.

"Of course, ma'am."

Lina straightened up in her chair. Though it was just the two of them, she was nervous about speaking up. For all she knew, someone could be listening in on their conversation.

"As Colonel Walker mentioned, we can't be sure what General Staff Headquarters will decide," Balance said. "It's very possible that you will be deployed."

"If that happens, I will dutifully fulfill my mission," Lina immediately replied.

She was still keenly aware someone could be watching and listening in.

"Good."

It wasn't that Balance was oblivious of Lina's behavior. She simply opted to ignore it to avoid any problems.

"It seems the National Defense Force has a different opinion, however," Balance said as if speaking to herself.

"Do you mean they have a different stance toward Tatsuya Shiba?" Lina clarified.

"Yes," Balance replied. "They are leaning toward using him rather than competing against him in a very similar way to how Major Canopus described."

"So something along the lines of learning more about the nuclear fusion reactors," Lina said.

“Exactly.” Balance nodded. “Economically speaking, this means gleaning any knowledge about the reactors. Military-wise, it means sharing the load of deterrence.”

“The load of deterrence?” Lina echoed, confused.

Balance chuckled.

“You’re the one who suggested that part.”

“What? I am?” Lina asked.

“You still don’t understand?” Balance smiled.

She seemed more sympathetic than condescending.

“After Scorching Halloween, it’s possible to utilize satellite targeting systems,” she explained. “Their accuracy is likely superior to ours. If we can acquire the expertise to build them, your Heavy Metal Burst and Tatsuya’s Material Burst could dominate the military realm worldwide. At the very least, they would deter larger-scale military operations.”

“So Tatsuya and I would be working together?” Lina said.

“From the very beginning, the military had no intention of limiting your strategic magic to national defense,” Balance said. “Unlike Leviathan, which specializes in base defense and offense, Heavy Metal Burst doesn’t have specific limitations on where it can be used.”

Actually, Heavy Metal Burst required a certain length of metallic mass in the vicinity to unleash significant power, and its effectiveness was limited when used in rugged terrain. But compared to Leviathan, which relied on large bodies of water, such as oceans, large lakes, or rivers, to be fully effective, Heavy Metal Burst did offer more versatility. It was also not as unaffected by geographic conditions, like Ozone Circle or Agni Downburst. Considering power and activation speed, Heavy Metal Burst was even a spell well suited for deterrence in a way that potentially replaced strategic ballistic missiles.

“Don’t tell me you’re surprised,” Balance said. “An alliance between the New Soviet Union and Japan would make Japan easier to handle. Don’t act too awkward about it if it ever happens.”

Lina suddenly realized that this was why Balance had brought her here—to suggest the possibility of teaming up with Tatsuya. If the situation ever arose, it was important that Lina didn't act suspiciously or harbor any doubts. Balance's warning was a precaution against arousing any doubts around Lina herself, especially considering the rumors that Lina might have special feelings toward the Japanese high school boy.

"...Yes, ma'am," Lina replied.

"Just be sure to remember that."

The uncertain look on Lina's face made Balance glad about having this conversation.



After Balance, Lina, and Canopus had left the room, Colonel Walker waited a moment before summoning the captains of Stars' third and fourth units, Captain Arcturus and Captain Vega, respectively.

"Captain Alexander Arcturus, reporting for duty."

"Captain Charlotte Vega, reporting for duty."

"Come in," Walter replied.

The ranks of the two captains were lower than that of Lina and Canopus. However, the Stars currently had an unusual structure with six individuals of the same ranks as Lina serving as commanders. Therefore, Captain Arcturus and Captain Vega's lower ranks were not uncommon.

The fact that Vega was older than Lina by more than ten years and yet held a lower rank, however, was a source of discontent on Vega's side. It caused her relationship with Lina to be strained as she held a one-sided grudge against the younger woman.

Arcturus, on the other hand, did not openly despise Lina, but the relationship between the two was not particularly close. After all, two years prior on Christmas Eve, it was Lina who had killed Lieutenant Fomalhaut, a member of the third unit that Arcturus oversaw.

Arcturus recognized that Fomalhaut deserved punishment after committing

mass murder with his pyrokinesis abilities. But he did not approve of Lina's method of shooting him on the spot without giving him a chance to defend himself in military court.

It was precisely the psychological distance between the two captains and Lina and Canopus that inspired Colonel Walker to summon them to his office.

"The mission I am about to tell you cannot leave this room. You must not even tell Major Sirius," Walter began.

"Yes, sir!" the two captains replied.

While an anxious frown appeared on Arcturus's face, Vega's eyes sparkled. She was clearly excited about keeping a secret from Lina. Perhaps it was a sign of immaturity, but even for magicians, logic didn't apply in the realm of jealousy. Walker noticed Vega's emotion but chose not to scold her.

"Tatsuya Shiba is currently planning to build a power plant," he continued. "Your mission is to stop him, using whatever methods you deem necessary—up to and including assassination."

Arcturus's eyes widened in clear surprise.

"Are you ordering us to assassinate Tatsuya Shiba?" he asked.

"The main priority is to stop his project," Walker explained. "If you can do that with peaceful means, there is no need to resort to bloodshed."

"But if stopping the project proves difficult, we are allowed to kill him as needed?" Vega said with a smile.

"Correct," Walter replied. "Even back when the boy's strategic spell was called the Great Bomb, the policy was if it could not be obtained, eventual neutralization would be unavoidable. This policy hasn't changed. Currently, the primary aim of the Dione Project is to neutralize the spell, but if it doesn't succeed, we have no choice but to revert to our original plan."

"Yes, sir." Arcturus nodded.

He didn't like the sound of this mission, but he obediently complied. Vega, on the other hand, was raring to go. She had heard from her fellow female officers that Lina harbored affection for Tatsuya Shiba. Aligning oneself emotionally

with a potential national enemy and significant threat was unacceptable for USNA military personnel. By putting Tatsuya's life on the line, Vega intended to give Sirius a real wake-up call. With this in mind, she was eager and determined to carry out this mission.



Lieutenant Alfred Fomalhaut's heinous actions cast a shadow over the hearts of all Stars personnel, and the ensuing manhunt of a first-class Star left a sour taste throughout Stars Headquarters. Lieutenant Jacob Regulus, who belonged to the same third unit as Fomalhaut, had a particularly close relationship with the man. To this day, he continued to investigate the truth behind the incident.

Fomalhaut's actions were officially attributed to his possession by a parasite. The details behind this possession, of course, were highly classified. The practical use of magic had diminished the psychological resistance against supernatural entities. Fomalhaut's biopsy revealed organs in his brain that shouldn't exist in humans. Even self-proclaimed realists found it difficult to deny the existence of parasites. Though this explained how Fomalhaut became violent while retaining his psychokinetic abilities, it wasn't enough to convince Regulus.

He still couldn't figure out exactly how Fomalhaut became possessed in the first place. Fomalhaut was on a solo mission just before the incident, and there were no signs of abnormality before he left. So it was almost certain that he was possessed during the mission.

What Regulus wanted to know was when, where, and by whom did the possession occur. If signs pointed to it all being an accident, he would need to investigate a potential parasite outbreak to prevent recurrence. Many scientists were actively working in this direction. While their research still remained at the hypothetical stage, discussions regarding the parasite mechanism were already underway.

On the other hand, Regulus dedicated himself to investigating the possibility that Fomalhaut's parasite possession was *not* accidental. In which case, he had to find out who summoned the parasite and possessed his friend. Especially if this wasn't an isolated incident, it could potentially indicate a terrorist attack capable of causing significant damage to the USNA, since it had the power to

turn a magician capable of single-handedly fighting an entire battalion or regiment into a violent weapon.

Regulus couldn't ignore the possibility that his friend had been manipulated into becoming a terrorist, only to be disposed of by his own comrades. While it wasn't the Stars' responsibility to investigate after a perpetrator's punishment, Regulus had been pursuing the case in his spare time.

A year and a half later, he began leaning toward the conclusion that there was no perpetrator. It had all just been a freak accident. But just as he was trying to come to peace with this, he received new information.

"What is this?" Regulus whispered.

His surprise was warranted. An email from an unknown sender had somehow bypassed the highest level of USNA military security and arrived in his terminal without being flagged for censorship.

Normally, Regulus would have isolated the email within the system and forwarded it to security. This time, however, he chose to open it. His gut told him that he had to read it himself and not let even his superior get his hands on it.

The email wasn't even encrypted. It likely was designed with other means to evade detection. Its contents were nothing less than astonishing.

"The micro black hole experiment was the work of Japanese operatives?!" Regulus exclaimed.

The email read as follows:

- The micro black hole experiment was conducted by a civilian magic organization in Japan.
- This organization knew that a spirit-like entity would be summoned as a result of the experiment.
- Unable to conduct the experiment in Japan, the organization sought out another country to host.
- At the time, scientists from the USNA military, desperate for information on mass-energy conversion magic, took the bait.

- The organization continued to seek further experimental data. If the micro black hole experiment was conducted again, agents of the organization would likely come to observe.

- Fomalhaut was caught off guard and possessed by a parasite. A high-level magician cannot be possessed if they maintain a strong consciousness and focus on their purpose.

Regulus refused to take this information at face value. In all honesty, he found it highly suspicious. In particular, the idea that someone could avoid possession simply by maintaining a strong consciousness seemed too convenient. He was, however, intrigued by the suggestion that the micro black hole experiment had been secretly carried out by operatives acting outside of his knowledge.

The circumstances around the experiment were perplexing to say the least. Both scientists and politicians were cautious and dubious about its results from the start. A minority group of scientists believed that the true nature of mass-energy conversion magic could be explained by Hawking radiation.

Regulus understood the risk of attributing events beyond his comprehension to conspiracy theories. However, the possibility of external forces influencing the implementation of the experiment made it easier to believe why the experiment was conducted with such peculiar timing.

He still wasn't sure whether those external forces were indeed the Ten Master Clans, the largest private organization of magicians of Japan. He reminded himself not to be swayed too much by the suspicious anonymous document in his in-box. However, now that his investigation had reached a dead end, he began to consider it a possibility.

Trying to conduct the experiment again could confirm whether the micro black hole was, in fact, the source of parasites. It could also verify the authenticity of the mysterious document Regulus had received. And if its contents were true, it could provide the perfect opportunity to catch the culprits.

Of course, Regulus recognized that reconducting the experiment risked new victims being possessed by parasites. However, if they were all Star-class members like himself, they would be capable of capturing and eliminating the

parasites on sight.

There's no reason not to try, Regulus reasoned.

At this time, he didn't consider the possibility that he may fall victim to the parasites himself.



Regulus approached his direct superior, Captain Arcturus, to propose a reenactment of the micro black hole experiment shortly after Arcturus had returned from Colonel Walker's office.

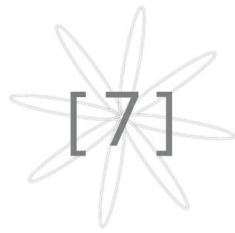
Revealing the mysterious document, Regulus passionately argued for the experiment's necessity. If this had happened any other day, Arcturus might have simply reprimanded Regulus for his rash behavior and left it at that.

However, he had been deeply disturbed by the mission Walker had assigned him. At this point, the possibility of catching Japanese operatives intrigued him, and he was drawn to the idea, despite his mental state.

He couldn't help but think that obtaining this significant bargaining chip against Japan could help the military neutralize Material Burst without resorting to the despicable act of assassination. This thought was irresistibly tempting.

Arcturus and Regulus headed to the command room. Somehow, Regulus was even able to persuade Colonel Walker. Perhaps deep down, even the colonel had entertained the thought of subverting the mission given to them by General Staff.

Negotiations with higher-ups took place on the spot, and it was agreed that the micro black hole experiment should be reconducted. Further communication would follow at a later date.



After school on Wednesday, Hagane Tomitsuka paid the student council office a visit. Though it was not uncommon for Yousuke Igarashi, the head of the club association, to stop by the student council office, Tomitsuka was a different story.

“When is the next time Tatsuya is planning to visit the school? I’m sorry, but he didn’t say,” Miyuki said sadly.

This wasn’t a lie, and her tone was genuine.

Tatsuya was currently taking a break from school to keep an eye on how the press conference affected public opinion. His return to classes depended on the results, so even Tatsuya himself couldn’t say when it would happen. Miyuki had been increasingly frustrated by his inability to attend school freely.

“Oh...” Tomitsuka said, unable to hide his disappointment. “Then, could you tell me where he is right now?”

“Do you have some sort of business with him?” Miyuki asked suspiciously.

Anyone would have felt that Tomitsuka’s impatient behavior was odd. He wasn’t usually one to push his own agenda onto other people. Luckily, Miyuki’s question made him realize how he was coming off.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I just have something I need to speak to him about.”

His eyes wandered hesitantly before meeting Miyuki’s gaze again.

“You see, my mother fainted the other day.”

“She what?!” Miyuki gasped, covering her mouth in shock.

“D-don’t worry,” Tomitsuka quickly reassured her. “It’s nothing serious. The

doctors found an acute ulcer in her stomach, but they say she will be back to normal after a month of bed rest.”

“Oh, I see. I’m so sorry about that,” Miyuki said in consolation.

“Thanks,” Tomitsuka replied.

He still seemed to have something to say. Before he could find the right words, Izumi spoke up first.

“Isn’t your mom the president of the Japan Magic Association?”

“That’s right,” Tomitsuka replied.

“Is her illness heart-related?”

This time, Tomitsuka was the one giving suspicious looks.

“The doctors say it’s stress-related,” he answered.

“Oh, I see,” Izumi said. “You think Shiba is the reason your mom fainted.”

“I never said that!” Tomitsuka exclaimed.

But his face was bright red. Evidently, Izumi’s comment wasn’t far off.

Realizing he was getting worked up, Tomitsuka took a deep breath before speaking again.

“Apparently, the government was on my mother’s case recently.”

“About Tatsuya?” Miyuki asked calmly.

“Yeah...that’s right.” Tomitsuka nodded. “They tried to make her convince Shiba to ditch his power plant idea and join the Dione Project.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Honoka cried.

Izumi and Shiina looked just as upset. They clearly agreed this was unfair.

“Are you sure you can tell us that sort of thing here?” Miyuki hesitated. “That sounds like top secret information.”

“Well, the conversation was supposed to be off the record, but it sent my mother to the emergency room,” Tomitsuka fumed. “No one will mind if I tell people who are closely involved already.”

His irreverence toward the government was a clear sign of his anger.

“For the record, I don’t mean to blame Shiba for my mother’s hospitalization,” he clarified. “Even I know that’s not fair.”

“Well, if you don’t plan on getting mad at him, why do you want to talk to him?” Izumi asked, taking the words out of Miyuki’s mouth.

“Not to side with the government, but I think he should join the Dione Project, too,” Tomitsuka stated. “It’s clearly designed for the good of mankind. The USNA is even honoring him with an invitation. There might be other things he wants to do, but I believe his participation in the Dione Project would benefit both Japan and Japanese magicians. I didn’t feel I had the right to speak up about this before, but seeing as how deeply my family is involved now, I thought I might as well.”

None of the student council members agreed with his opinion. At the same time, they also didn’t stop him from saying his piece.

“Again, I hate the idea of siding with the government after all their senseless demands,” Tomitsuka continued. “But I still want to convince Shiba to be a part of the Dione Project.”

Miyuki made sure he was done before speaking up.

“I cannot allow you to do that.”

“What?”

Tomitsuka looked flabbergasted. He clearly didn’t expect Miyuki to turn him down.

“If that is what you are after, I cannot tell you where Tatsuya is,” she said firmly.

“But why...?” he stammered.

“I simply refuse to help you if your goal is to get in his way.”

A look of disbelief crossed Tomitsuka’s face.

“But don’t you see how selfish he’s being? It’s not right!” he argued. “He just needs to put up with the project for a few years, and everything will be fine!”

“You think he is being selfish?” Miyuki sighed.

She didn’t even try to hide her disappointment.

“Oh, Tomitsuka,” she continued. “Your mother’s illness seems to have caused you to lose all sense of reason. I think you should leave now. For both our sakes.”

Miyuki knew that Tomitsuka was usually on the timid side and rarely expressed himself self-righteously like this. That was why she sought a peaceful resolution. At the same time, it wasn’t like her to handle insults to Tatsuya so calmly. The main reason her magic wasn’t going haywire was because dispelling Oath had restored her control over it.

Unfortunately, a peaceful resolution had the opposite intended effect on Tomitsuka, who was feeling cornered and desperate.

“President Shiba, I challenge you to a duel,” he said.

“To resolve our differences of opinions?” Miyuki asked calmly.

“Yes.” He nodded. “If I win, I want you to tell me where Tatsuya is.”

Miyuki’s composed demeanor was only skin deep. On the inside, *angry* did not even begin to describe what she was feeling. An icy emotion verging on murderous rage was quietly building inside her.

“Very well,” she said. “I accept your challenge.”

“Wait, Miyuki,” Minami interjected.

“What is it?” Miyuki asked in a mix of both surprise and concern.

She distinctly noticed that Minami called her by name instead of referring to her as the president. She never did that at school. Once Miyuki became the Yotsuba clan heiress, Minami’s role as her bodyguard took all precedence. Even over their relationship as cousins. No one had ever asked about it, but everyone knew this to be the case. So when Minami suddenly changed the way she spoke to Miyuki, there was clearly a reason.

“Tatsuya ordered me to protect you,” she said. “I am bound by that duty to stop any battles that you may become involved in.”

Miyuki was speechless. She didn't dare to oppose her brother's wishes.

"That said, it appears Tomitsuka will not be satisfied without a fight," Minami continued. "I volunteer to fight him in your place."

"All right," Miyuki agreed. "What do you think, Tomitsuka? If Minami loses, I still promise to tell you Tatsuya's current location."

Tomitsuka was confused by this sudden switch. Or better put, things were moving so fast, he found it hard to keep up. But he decided to simply go with the flow. All he cared about was finding out where Tatsuya was.

"Fine," he said. "That's all I ask."

Students settled disputes among themselves through physical confrontation, which was one of the problem-solving methods incorporated in First High's list of rules and regulations. Naturally, mock battles were strictly regulated by a set of procedures. Students also had to obtain permission from the student council president and disciplinary committee chairman to prevent one-sided violence, especially in cases where there was a significant gap in power between the two parties.

"I would never have guessed someone would be dueling the student council this year," Mikihiko grumbled.

As the disciplinary committee president, he had been called for his stamp of approval. Since the student council president was directly involved in the conflict, Vice President Izumi took her place to approve the fight.

"It's not a duel, Yoshida," she corrected him lightly. "It's a match."

She presented him with the student council-approved permit specifying the format of the match. Mikihiko was taken aback.

"Really? Hand-to-hand combat?" he said. "You do realize Tomitsuka and Sakurai are of the opposite sex, right?"

It was unusual for male and female students to engage in close combat. Mixed-gender matches potentially raised issues of sexual harassment.

"The battle ends when one party stops their practice knife just before they land a hit on the other party's body, so no contact," Izumi said. "Sakurai seems

confident enough.”

This explanation didn’t provide any sense of relief. Even though the results of the battle were determined by the position of a practice knife, it didn’t change the fact that punching and kicking were allowed.

“I’ll be the referee.” Mikihiko sighed.

He couldn’t stand the possibility of a female student injuring a male student who was not under his watch.

Tomitsuka waited for his opponent in the third seminar room fully dressed in his club uniform. He turned toward the door as Miyuki and Minami walked into the room.

“You’re going to fight in *that*?!” he exclaimed.

“There is no rule that says I cannot,” Minami replied calmly.

“Still...” he faltered.

Tomitsuka was dressed in a uniform meant for martial magic arts matches. He wore a long-sleeved shirt with padding at the elbows and loose, buttonless pants with cushioning at the knees and a snug fit at the ankles. On his feet, he sported soft shoes designed for combat sports.

Minami, on the other hand, was clad in a short-sleeved shirt and short spandex shorts often used for gymnastics. Her practice knife was tucked into a weapon belt wrapped around her right thigh, but otherwise, her arms and legs were exposed. She looked as if she was dressed for regular sports or a track and field event.

“Are you worried about me getting hurt?” Minami guessed, voicing Tomitsuka’s inner thoughts. “I have no doubt that your attacks would cause significant swelling, and there is definitely a risk of fractures.”

“Then...”

You should wear more protective gear, he tried to say.

Before he had time to finish his sentence, Minami interjected, “But that is what mock battles are about. Even if we weren’t engaging in close combat, the risk of injury remains relatively the same.”

No one had seen Minami this eloquent before.

“You weren’t worried about hurting a girl when you instigated today’s match,” she continued.

An intentional pause, and then—“We’re only here because of you.”

There was no opportunity for Tomitsuka to respond to this admonishment. He froze stiff in place.

“Tomitsuka, do you want to concede the fight?” Mikihiko asked. “This match will leave you with a bitter taste in your mouth whether you win or lose. If you back down now, you’ll be spared any regrets.”

He meant to come off as supportive and offer Tomitsuka a way out. But his act of goodwill was flattened by Tomitsuka’s stubbornness.

“Give the signal,” Tomitsuka said.

In his mind, all he needed right now was Tatsuya’s location. Mikihiko’s mention of regret made him even more unwilling to back down and risk feeling bad about it later. Even if it meant injuring a girl.

“...If you say so.” Mikihiko sighed. “You both know the rules. The first person to come closest to landing a hit wins. I’ll make the final call.”

Tomitsuka and Minami nodded simultaneously. Unfortunately for Mikihiko, neither party was willing to back down.

“Ready...go!”

On his signal, Tomitsuka and Minami began casting spells.

Tomitsuka raced toward his opponent, aiming to disrupt her sense of balance with vibration magic and secure victory without causing injury. However, the plan he had envisioned was thwarted by the barrier standing before him.

Recalling Minami’s skill in the previous year’s stellar reactor experiment and Nine School Competition, Tomitsuka couldn’t help but be amazed by how fast she cast spells. Before he could blink, she had already initiated a shield to obstruct his approach. Though surprised, Tomitsuka didn’t panic and charged straight into the transparent barrier.

He was still unable to project psions away from himself. Though he could attack distant targets with certain spells, this was merely the effect of those spells initiated at his location reaching into contiguous space. They weren't directly cast at remote locations.

Luckily, he was also still capable of enveloping high-density psions and nullifying touch-based magic in a way akin to Program Demolition. He had even strengthened this latter skill as his control over psions improved.

Tomitsuka charged into Minami's magic shield shoulder first. He felt resistance for less than a second before the barrier shattered. He then attempted to follow up with a strike of his palm. However, Minami took advantage of the brief moment Tomitsuka's attention was on her shield to maneuver to his side.

She had the ability to specify the position of her magic shield in either relative or absolute coordinates. Setting up the barrier in true absolute coordinates would result in being left behind by the Earth's rotation at breakneck speed. So in most cases, Minami used coordinates relative to the position on earth. In the realm of human understanding, however, even this method was often referred to as absolute coordinates.

Being able to cause damage by directing opponents toward her shield using true absolute coordinates was an extremely advanced offensive magic technique. Minami had deployed her barrier in the general sense of absolute coordinates. Yet Tomitsuka acted on the assumption that his opponent was beyond the barrier. This made him lose sight of Minami the moment he broke through the shield.

Minami launched some basic offensive magic in the form of compressed air bullets at Tomitsuka's side. Her inherited calibration Sakura series made her particularly skilled in barrier magic. But she was not limited to this specialty like Tatsuya or Tomitsuka. The fact that maintaining the compressed state of air bullets was conceptually similar to barrier magic made this another easy-to-use magic in Minami's repertoire.

Its equivalence to powerful magic made it particularly threatening. This was perhaps why Tomitsuka's intuition was triggered. Suddenly driven by intense

urgency, he immediately cast an armor-like magic barrier around himself. Tomitsuka's magic was limited to objects or areas with physical contact. However, at range zero—where the distance of contact was zero meters—he could display unparalleled strength. That what was defined Hagane Tomitsuka as a magician.

Tomitsuka's specialized magic barrier activated in a way that overlapped the clothes he was wearing and intercepted Minami's compressed air bullets. His new armor deftly withstood both the impact of the collision and its resulting shock wave.

Once that was over, Tomitsuka activated movement magic, which was the foundation of his specialty technique, Self Marionette. He quickly appeared in front of Minami, who was already preparing her next offensive spell.

Sensing the floor beneath his feet, he immediately drew his right hand just in front of his right side, assuming the stance for a palm-heel thrust. But before he could move, an unexpected sight caught his eye, causing him to freeze midway.

Minami's expression betrayed her surprise at this unforeseen turn of events. From her perspective, it seemed as if Tomitsuka had suddenly materialized in front of her. She narrowly evaded his attack thanks only to her reflexes, which had been honed through combat training provided by the Yotsuba clan.

As Tomitsuka began preparing for his palm-heel strike, Minami swiftly bent over backward and forcefully launched herself into the air. Her acrobatic backflip was something right out of a movie and managed to thwart her opponent's attack.

Actually, Tomitsuka's delay in movement wasn't so much due to the flip itself. Rather, judging from the direction of his gaze, his attention was momentarily captured by a glimpse of skin peeking out from beneath his opponent's shirt.

Minami was more relieved than disgusted. Tomitsuka's momentary hesitation felt like an opportunity to end the battle. She was willing to sacrifice a glimpse at her belly button if it meant a chance at victory.

If I had been fighting Tatsuya right now, I would have been done for, Minami thought.

While her backflip had helped her evade Tomitsuka's palm strike, she likely wouldn't have been able to dodge his next attack as she attempted to land.

This would have been even truer if Tatsuya had been attacking. Tatsuya also wouldn't have frozen up simply because he caught a glimpse of some skin.

Minami jumped to the side again and reestablished her magic barrier. At this point, Tomitsuka had recovered from his momentary surprise and advanced on Minami with quick footwork. Again, he shattered her barrier. Up until this point, it was just a repeat of the last time. But instead of moving sideways, Minami now stepped back. The moment her shield was destroyed, she constructed a new one.

If she had been dealing with Tatsuya's Program Dispersion magic, her shield would have instantly been destroyed. Magic programs exposed to information could not resist Program Dispersion, since it had the ability to break down psionic information bodies.

Program Demolition, on the other hand, used psion pressure to blow away magic programs attached to the eidos. Depending on the strength of the magic program's adhesion, there was always a time lag before its effectiveness kicked in.

Area magic that fixed magic programs in empty space was usually vulnerable to Program Demolition. However, Minami's barrier magic was anything but normal. Her inherent anti-object barriers, which belonged to her Sakura series, could endure tremendous pressure and were extremely persistent about remaining in place. This made it possible for them to withstand Program Demolition for a short period of time. Even when it was destroyed, this resilience bought time for Minami to prepare her next spell.



Her barrier obstructed Tomitsuka's approach. He quickly destroyed it, but it took only a second for her to shift backward and complete the next barrier. This skill was very similar to a pseudo-Phalanx.

As Tomitsuka continuously shattered her shields, Minami grew progressively more fatigued from casting so many spells. Nevertheless, she continued to retreat while meticulously creating magic barriers in a way that kept them from making contact with Tomitsuka's psion armor.

Tomitsuka's ability to quickly break the shields helped him stubbornly advance without stopping. He continued to move forward so swiftly that it almost looked as if he were standing still. This wasn't Tomitsuka's usual style. He typically relied on agility and speed to overwhelm his opponents. Engaging in tackling matches like sumo or rugby was never his forte.

Minami retreated diagonally through the practice room, keenly aware of the quickly approaching corner. Suddenly, she saw a momentary shift in Tomitsuka's gaze toward the space behind her. He clearly thought he had her cornered. In two more steps, her back would be up against the wall without anywhere to go.

Once her rear shield was shattered, she took a large step backward and refrained from constructing another barrier. Tomitsuka, who had been leaning forward to break the next shield, felt his balance shift. The fact that he needed physical contact to nullify magic worked in Minami's favor. It also helped that Tomitsuka had grown complacent once the shield breaking became routine.

Minami promptly activated her next spell: Descending Whirlwind. It created a downward airflow centered around herself. Though not very strong, it was able to catch Tomitsuka in a gust of wind and completely ruin his balance. Minami circled around him, discarding her practice knife and pushing him forward.

Tomitsuka's flushed face wasn't just from panic. Minami's thin gym shirt couldn't hide the soft swell of her chest as it pressed against his back. Fortunately for him, Minami didn't notice his blushing.

She hooked her leg around Tomitsuka and pushed his body forward. He tried to twist himself in a way that would throw her off, but she skillfully shifted her weight, causing him to fall to the ground face-first with her on top. Minami

straddled Tomitsuka's back, grabbed a spare practice knife from the belt around her thigh, and pressed it against his throat.

"And the winner is—Sakurai!" Mikihiko announced.

If Minami's knife had been real, Tomitsuka's throat would have been sliced open. The victor of this battle was as clear as day.



By the time the group had finished cleaning up after the mock battle, it was almost time for the school to close. Miyuki and the other student council members completed their daily duties and met up with Erika and Leo at the usual coffee shop.

"I never knew you were so good at fighting, Sakurai," Kasumi said in awe.

"I was just lucky today," Minami replied modestly.

Everyone was full of nothing but praise for her performance in the mock battle.

"Luck might have had something to do with it, but you could never have beaten Tomitsuka on luck alone," Erika interjected.

"Did you know how strong Sakurai was all along?" Leo asked.

As Minami's fellow mountaineering club member, he knew how physically capable she was. Yet with her gentle, unassuming demeanor and lack of prominent muscles, she was the epitome of the saying "Don't judge a book by its cover." If anything, Minami looked more like a bookworm who didn't excel in sports. This was why Erika's knowledgeable attitude came off as strange to Leo.

"She's been trained in pretty complex ways," she explained. "But I can tell how capable she is if I pay attention."

"Impressive..." Leo remarked.

It wasn't clear whether it was Erika's insight or Minami's strength he was impressed with. Probably both.

"Then, why do you have such bad grades in gym class?" Izumi asked curiously.

"I'm not very good at ball games," Minami replied shyly.

Izumi, who didn't have much of an affinity for gym herself due to a lack of confidence, didn't press Minami any further.

"I agree with Sakurai, though," Mikihiko chimed in. "There was *some* element of luck involved in today's battle."

Worried too much praise might make Minami feel uncomfortable, he shifted the conversation in another direction.

"I don't think I've ever seen Tomitsuka seem so uneasy about fighting someone," he added.

"Is it because Sakurai is a girl?" Shizuku asked.

Mikihiko nodded. "And I'm sure the fact it was hand-to-hand combat didn't help."

"Then, why didn't they just use magic?" Saburou wondered.

"That would obviously be impossible for Tomitsuka, given his area of magic expertise," Shiina shot back dismissively.

As she explained the meaning of Tomitsuka's nickname—Range Zero—to her childhood friend, Honoka spoke up.

"Then Tomitsuka should have just backed out of the fight."

"I bet he enjoyed himself," Shizuku joked quietly.

"Now that you mention it, he *was* staring pretty closely at Minami's belly button," Honoka mused.

"What do you mean?" Shizuku pressed.

Instead of stopping the conversation there, she excitedly egged it on.

"You see," Honoka explained, "Minami was wearing her gym clothes during the battle."

"Scandalous," Shizuku gasped.

"And she did a backflip to avoid one of Tomitsuka's attacks."

"Oooh."

"That's when her shirt flipped up, flashing her stomach. That was all we saw,

of course, but Tomitsuka froze for a good minute. Everyone could tell he was focused on Minami's belly button."

"Caught red-handed," Shizuku smirked relentlessly.

"He was also clearly blushing," Honoka added.

"He was?!" Minami shrieked.

"I think so," Honoka replied. "He might have accidentally hit your chest."

"....."

Minami buried her flushed face in her hands. Feeling some sort of secondhand embarrassment, Leo and Mikihiko shyly dropped their gazes to the floor.

"Interesting," Erika teased boldly. "Maybe the gym clothes were a ploy."

"Manami just wanted Tomitsuka to cancel the fight," Miyuki said defensively. "I was the one he originally challenged."

"That would have been a disaster," Erika said immediately.

Her reaction didn't just stem from the pair's different levels of abilities. It also came from the fact that Tomitsuka couldn't engage from a distance, while Miyuki could easily unleash area-denial magic from afar. In a mock battle with a no-touch rule, Miyuki would be the undeniable victor.

"Tomitsuka had clearly lost all sense of reason," Miyuki explained.

"So Miyuki stepped in to help him cool down," Erika said, putting the pieces together.

"By the way," Mikihiko interjected, "why did he challenge you in the first place?"

The student council had called him over earlier without filling him in on the details.

"He wanted to know where Shiba was," Izumi explained in Miyuki's place.

"Why did he want to know that?" Mikihiko asked.

He wasn't the only one confused.

“His mother was recently hospitalized for stress,” Izumi said.

“Isn’t Tomitsuka’s mother the president of the Japan Magic Association?”

“Wow, someone is well informed.”

Izumi’s praise didn’t faze Mikihiko. He was too concentrated on hearing what happened.

“Apparently the government has been putting a lot of pressure on his mother, Hisui, in relation to Shiba,” Izumi continued.

“Have they been pressuring her to convince him to join the Dione Project?” Mikihiko asked.

“That’s right.” Izumi nodded. “The stress gave her an acute stomach ulcer, and she has been ordered to take bed rest for a whole month.”

“But that wasn’t Tatsuya’s fault,” Leo contended.

“I know that.” Izumi nodded simply.

No one claimed anything differently.

“Tomitsuka said he didn’t blame Shiba, either, but I’m sure he does deep down on some level. He was asking where Shiba was, so he can convince him to join the USNA’s project.”

“That must be his way of trying to do something for his mother,” Mizuki whispered sympathetically.

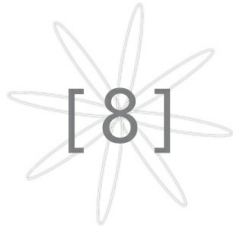
“Now that you mention it, Tomitsuka looked pretty disappointed after losing the match,” Honoka remarked.

“But pinning the blame on Tatsuya is just holding an unreasonable grudge,” Erika argued.

“You can say that again,” Leo agreed. “Besides, Tatsuya has already told everyone what he’s going to do. It’s not fair for strangers to complain about his decisions on the sidelines.”

“That might be true, but people like Tomitsuka are not just going to disappear,” Kasumi countered. “There will always be those who think they’re right and Tatsuya is wrong.”

Since she felt indifferent about Tatsuya, Kasumi was able to take a third party's perspective. In a way, her words felt like a prophecy that no one could dispute.



Thursday sparked a significant change in Tatsuya’s situation. Asha Chandrasekhar, a female scientist known for developing the strategic spell Agni Downburst and a leading figure in magic engineering at the Indo-Persian Federation’s University of Hyderabad, held an unprecedented press conference where she expressed her full endorsement for Tatsuya’s ESCAPES Plan.

“—And for those reasons, we would like to support Japan’s stellar reactor plan rather than the USNA’s Venus development project.”

For weeks, the Indo-Persian Federation had not publicly announced their stance on the Dione Project. Though this sudden expression of nonsupport was voiced by an individual scientist rather than as an official government statement, it made Asha’s statement all the more surprising.

It was also significant that their reason for not endorsing the Dione Project stemmed from a desire to back the private initiative of a young man from Japan. Even before its official name had been determined, Tatsuya’s ESCAPES Plan had clearly attracted attention from around the world.



The day after Dr. Asha Chandrasekhar’s press conference was broadcast worldwide, a Turkish opposition network secured an interview with Ali Sahin, one of the Thirteen Apostles who hailed from the USNA. While the interview wasn’t live, it was broadcast on television networks all over North America and Western Europe the same day. During the interview, Sahin expressed his reservations about the Dione Project.

“Do you think Dr. Chandrasekhar’s statement means the Turkish government believes that the USNA should not force citizens from other countries to join its space program?” the interviewer prompted.

“It’s important to note that Dr. Chandrasekhar does not speak for her government,” Sahin responded. “What I can say is, I personally believe the path to peaceful use of magic should not be predetermined. Japan’s recent groundbreaking project using magic-powered nuclear reactors is an excellent example.”

“Are you referring to the project Dr. Chandrasekhar mentioned in her press conference yesterday?”

“Yes.” Sahin nodded. “Believe it or not, nuclear fusion reactors utilizing gravity-control magic were considered one of the three major technical challenges of weighting-system magic. The young Tatsuya Shiba has not only solved that challenge, but even aims to use it for peaceful applications.”

“That sounds like quite the ambitious project,” the interviewer remarked.

“Yes, I agree. But I see it as the beginning of many more initiatives for the peaceful use of magic worldwide. The Dione Project may be an impressive endeavor, but I think we should stay away from options that may stifle other opportunities.”

The lack of any sense of lecturing or obligation in Sahin’s remarks made this interview more widely accepted among Western audiences than Dr. Chandrasekhar’s press conference.



Meanwhile, Major General Leonid Kondratenko, one of the Thirteen Apostles and a state-sanctioned strategic magician of the New Soviet Union, appeared on a visiphone screen with a distinctly displeased expression.

“I understand what Sahin is trying to do,” he said. “The kid wants to prevent any further cooperation between our country and the USNA at all costs.”

Ali Sahin was still only thirty years old. To Kondratenko, who was over seventy, Sahin was undoubtedly nothing more than a child.

“In order to do so, he is trying to sabotage the Dione Project by spreading a negative image,” Kondratenko continued. “Especially now that it has sparked an alliance between our country and America, he’s doing everything in his power to stop it.”

“Do you think Japan might be manipulating him?” Bezobrazov asked.

His own investigations found no evidence of conspiracy between Sahin and any Japanese organization. But considering the uncomfortable riff between Sahin and Kondratenko, Bezobrazov wondered if his senior might be privy to information that he was unaware of.

“Not a chance,” Kondratenko said plainly. “If anyone from outside of Turkey contacts Sahin, I’ll know about it. This time, it seems the kid acted on his own accord.”

“But don’t you think the timing is too perfect?” Bezobrazov prompted.

“Sahin has been looking for ways to sabotage the Dione Project ever since you announced your support for it,” Kondratenko replied. “For him, our country joining forces with America is his worst nightmare.”

“Ah,” Bezobrazov remarked. “So Tatsuya Shiba’s announcement of his nuclear fusion reactor power plant project was like stumbling upon a well in the desert for him.”

“Exactly.” Kondratenko nodded. “The kid must have been jumping for joy.”

“It simply wasn’t immediately clear if the well’s water was drinkable,” Bezobrazov said knowingly. “That would explain the delay before he finally decided to use it.”

“Right.” Kondratenko nodded again. “It probably took Sahin no more than a couple of days to decide to use Tatsuya’s plan. Then he reached out to American TV networks to feign interest and get them to request an interview. That’s likely how it played out.”

Bezobrazov didn’t argue against this speculation. He agreed there was a high likelihood it was mostly accurate, give or take a few minor discrepancies.

“So, Doctor. What will you do now? I don’t believe Edward Clark will prove very useful anymore.”

“Indeed...” Bezobrazov mused.

By now, he had already concluded that Edward Clark had failed at manipulating international public opinion.

“Either today or tomorrow, I will be heading back to Vladivostok,” he said, “this time with some Igroks in tow.”

“In that case...”

“It is no longer safe to leave strategic magic that may one day turn against our country unchecked,” Bezobrazov said suggestively.

“I see,” Kondratenko said, intrigued. *“Best of luck.”*

The older man understood the significance of Bezobrazov taking Igroks with him. He gleamed with anticipation on the visiphone screen.



On Saturday, the sky clouded over in the early afternoon. Yet despite the gray weather, Miyuki’s heart was bright. She had felt nervous since returning home from school, her usual vigilance replaced by an attentiveness to her surroundings. Miyuki wasn’t the only one. Minami, too, had been plagued with a nagging unease since that morning.

I’m probably just overthinking things, she tried to tell herself.

While a moderate level of apprehension helped her to be a successful bodyguard, too much could be counterproductive. Besides, they were heading to Tatsuya now. With him nearby, Miyuki’s safety was guaranteed. There was no need for Minami to be on edge.

Yet no matter how much she reassured herself, her unease lingered. What made things worse was that she couldn’t pinpoint the source of her anxiety.

Miyuki and Minami arrived in Izu just before sunset, but their surroundings had already darkened considerably due to the rain and fog. Visibility was severely limited to less than ten meters to the naked eye, but the automated radar and high-precision positioning system of their car were unfazed by these adverse conditions. Even without mechanical assistance, their driver, Hyougo Hanabishi, also remained calm and collected. He pulled into the Izu villa driveway only a couple minutes later than scheduled.

“Thank you for the ride, Hanabishi,” Miyuki said.

Tatsuya came to greet the group with an umbrella, thanking Hyougo as well.

“My pleasure,” Hyougo replied with a wry smile, suggesting he felt Tatsuya had usurped his role.

The younger boy opened the rear door and held an umbrella over Miyuki to shield her from the rain, not minding if he got wet himself. Minami, who had been had been sitting on the passenger side, had already positioned herself ahead of Hyougo so she didn’t need to go around the car.

“It’s good to see you, Miyuki,” Tatsuya greeted her. “You too, Minami.”

“Thank you for having us, Tatsuya,” Miyuki replied gracefully as she held the umbrella over her own head.

Her polite behavior proved that she was keenly aware of Hyougo’s gaze. Minami bowed silently to Tatsuya and then helped Hyougo unload the luggage from the car. Their efforts were quickly rendered unnecessary as a covered motorized cart emerged from the house to take over.

“You two can go on in,” Tatsuya urged the girls.

After making sure they stayed dry, he turned to Hyougo.

“Any news?”

“Nothing today, I’m afraid,” Hyougo replied. “I was simply asked to drive Miss Miyuki here.”

“I guess that means no one has taken any decisive action yet,” Tatsuya said.

“No one in Japan at least,” Hyougo mentioned suggestively.

“You mean something has happened somewhere else?” Tatsuya asked in mild surprise.

“I am sure you have already heard of Dr. Chandrasekhar’s press conference and Sahin’s interview,” Hyougo said.

“Yes, I’m aware,” Tatsuya answered.

Neither he nor Hyougo seemed to mind the pelting rain on their heads.

“Both the USNA and the NUSSR have yet to react to these incidents,” Hyougo said meaningfully.

“Are you saying that’s even more suspicious?” Tatsuya asked.

“Yes.”

“All right.” Tatsuya sighed. “I feel like a passive observer just staying vigilant like this.”

“I can continue gathering information for you,” Hyougo offered.

His training at the British PMSC gave him access to unique information channels abroad. Now that Tatsuya had distanced himself from the Independent Magic Battalion, Hyougo was one of the most reliable sources among Tatsuya’s acquaintances when it came to overseas activity.

“That would be great,” Tatsuya said.

“Very well. Until next time.”

Hyougo gave Tatsuya an elegant bow, used magic to dry off his uniform, and climbed back into the car.



When Tatsuya returned to the villa, three cups of strong coffee were waiting on the living room table. To Minami’s disapproval, Pixie had prepared it. Once the girls had warmed up with their coffee, they retreated to their rooms to change. Minami went with Miyuki so that she could personally help her.

When Miyuki returned to the living room, she was wearing a loose-fitting silk brocade dress that resembled a dalmatic tunic. Thanks to Miyuki’s inherent mysterious elegance, it gave her the air of a high-ranking priestess dressed in her vestments.

Minami, on the other hand, had opted for a practical suspender skirt. It wasn’t what she usually wore, but the way it resembled an apron suited her typical tastes.

“Take a seat, you two,” Tatsuya said. “I want to hear all about what’s been happening since I’ve been away.”

This was his way of preventing Minami from engaging in a kitchen battle with Pixie. It wasn’t out of malice; he simply wanted to give her a break. She wasn’t a tireless robot, so she deserved some rest once in a while.

Without showing any sign of dissatisfaction—meaning she was internally

unhappy—Minami sat beside Tatsuya. Meanwhile, Miyuki took the seat in front of him and began speaking with a wry smile.

“Well, on Wednesday...” she began, “Tomitsuka came to the student council office asking where you were and when you would be back to school.”

True to her recent declaration, she decisively treated Tatsuya as her brother again. Tatsuya didn’t seem to pay much attention to this. He was much more interested in Tomitsuka’s sudden request.

“Not even I can answer that,” he said.

“That’s what I said. But then he said he wanted to see you and tried forcing me to tell him where you were.”

“What was the rush?” Tatsuya asked.

Tomitsuka’s desire to physically come to see him genuinely sparked his interest.

“He said he wanted to try to convince you,” Miyuki replied.

“Convince me? Why?”

He immediately knew it had to be about the Dione Project. What he was confused about was why Tomitsuka would want to do something like that, especially since they were classmates with a decent level of rapport.

Miyuki explained everything that happened from the beginning. Minami would cut in sometimes to add a few things, so the process took a while. After hearing the whole story, Tatsuya only had one thing to say.

“I see. That’s terrible.”

He was, in fact, much more worried about Minami.

“You had it pretty bad, too, Minami.”

“I’m fine,” she said promptly. “But thank you.”

She couldn’t hide her surprise at Tatsuya’s reaction. She hadn’t expected him to be so concerned for her well-being after such a trivial incident.

“Tomitsuka is a tough opponent when he fights well,” Tatsuya explained. “You may have been spared by his childishness, but it’s a miracle you weren’t hurt. I

don't want you to put yourself in those kinds of situations."

At first, Tatsuya's comment made Minami frown. It reminded her of how her belly button had been exposed to a boy, and she didn't want to remember. At the same time, she found Tatsuya's caring words touching.

"All right. I appreciate your worry," she replied.

Meanwhile, Miyuki watched this interaction with a somewhat terrifying expression.



After Bezobrazov arrived in Vladivostok, his intelligence officers immediately informed him of Tatsuya Shiba's activities.

"So he's staying with his fiancée at a villa in Izu," he mused.

The boy's isolated location made things easier. Ideally, he should also be alone, but that was something out of Bezobrazov's control. The Soviet scientist had heard that Tatsuya's fiancée was also a skilled magician, but he had enough confidence in his own abilities for this fact not to faze him. Besides, he had brought Igroks with him this time. These external devices helped amplify his magic power.

Bezobrazov had been born through in vitro fertilization. In colloquial speech, he was what was known as a test-tube baby. He wasn't genetically manipulated in any way, but out of numerous fertilized eggs, only the most successful candidate was selected. That candidate became Igor Andreivich Bezobrazov, the New Soviet Union's officially recognized strategic magician.

The next natural step was to biochemically replicate the fertilized egg that Bezobrazov grew from, resulting in clones that could be considered his sisters. These clones were expected to become strategic magicians like Bezobrazov himself. Sure enough, seven of the clones named the Andreyevnas mastered the strategic magic, Tuman Bomba.

Unfortunately, the Andreyevnas were not in good health and required a sterile environment to survive. Moreover, their magic abilities paled in comparison to Bezobrazov's. While they could technically activate Tuman Bomba, their range and activation speed were insufficient for practical combat.

Nevertheless, they proved useful as external terminals to assist Bezobrazov with his magic.

Since the Andreyevnas were copies of Bezobrazov's fertilized egg, differing only in gender, synchronizing to their magic-calculation regions was not a difficult task. The clones' consciousnesses had been stripped away to prevent them from taking over Bezobrazov's mind. As a result, they became mere vessels for magic activation through body-enhancing apparatuses known as Igroks. In other words, the clones became players for Bezobrazov to conduct so that he could perform magic at will as the Dirizhyor. This was the role assigned to the Andreyevnas and the life forced upon them.

The Igroks' psyches deteriorated each time Bezobrazov used them, but this didn't give him pause. He considered it a part of his fate. As a winner in the game of life, he devoured the losers as a matter of course.

He may have made a name for himself as one of the New Soviet Union's leading scientists, but as a manufactured being, he had no other life to choose from. That fundamental truth remained unchanged. Bezobrazov had no choice but to use Igroks. He instructed his personnel to perform the final adjustments on the large CAD that had been hauled to this location by a military train via the New Siberian Railroad.



The movements of the Thirteen Apostles—officially recognized strategic magicians who had a significant impact on the world's balance of power—were the focus of many military circles. In China, the death of Yunde Liu prompted one of the Thirteen Apostles to be newly replaced by Lirei Liu. In the New Soviet Union, Bezobrazov, who had been extremely elusive until recently, attracted the most scrutiny of late among the Thirteen Apostles. Perhaps it was because of his sudden increase in visibility ever since he expressed support for the Dione Project.

For Japan in particular, Bezobrazov posed a direct threat. It didn't help that they experienced attacks ostensibly caused by Bezobrazov's strategic magic, Tuman Bomba, near Sado Island and the Soya Strait in April. Monitoring and predicting Bezobrazov's actions were of utmost importance for Japan's national defense.

On the night of Saturday, June eighth, Major General Hiromi Saeki, who oversaw the National Defense Force 101st Brigade, received important news through a private channel she had established within the military. The news revealed that Bezobrazov had traveled to the eastern side of the New Soviet Union via a private train.

“Though the Far East is vast, he probably went to Vladivostok,” Saeki murmured to herself. “But why on a private train?”

Her intel suggested that activating Tuman Bomba involved the use of a large-scale CAD the size of an entire train car. This information was unconfirmed and subject to extensive debate. But theories claimed that Bezobrazov traveled throughout the New Soviet Union on a private train consisting of connected carriages carrying his CAD. This allowed him to approach targets and control Tuman Bomba more closely.

If this was true, it would imply that Tuman Bomba’s range was not as extensive as Material Burst, which could span the entire world. With magic, physical distance was not inherently limiting. However, a deep understanding of magic and a strong conviction—or a resolute will to defy conventions—were essential requisites to transcend all kinds of distance.

If Bezobrazov lacked the necessary willpower, that would mean he needed to physically approach his targets to use Tuman Bomba. His movements to the Far East via a private train could indicate that he intended to target somewhere in Japan.

The target could even be Japan itself. He could target anywhere from Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu, to even Hokkaido.

“Based on the current situation, his target is probably the boy,” Saeki mused.

Should I tell him? she pondered.

After nearly a minute of deliberation, she decided to drop it. Or rather, she decided to observe from afar. She picked up the base phone and pressed a number on the speed dial.

“Colonel Kazama, it’s me,” she said over the speaker. “I’m sorry for calling so late, but I need you to come to the office immediately.”

Now that the tension around the Soya Strait had subsided, Japan found itself in a time of peace. Though it was after hours, Kazama would surely arrive soon.

Kazama should help me observe what happens without arousing suspicion, she thought. If things go well, I might even be able to identify weak points for both Tatsuya and Bezobrazov.

Saeki mulled over her thoughts as if snapping beads back and forth on an abacus.



While Miyuki was at the villa, Tatsuya took a break from his research to spend time with her. This wasn't out of a sense of obligation, but rather his own desire to listen to her stories and share time together.

His desire probably stemmed from the mental conditioning imposed on him by his birth mother, Miya. If emotions could be limited to a single type, it was possible that the remaining feelings intensified over time.

This didn't bother Tatsuya. Even if his mind hadn't undergone any manipulation, he might have envied his flawless sister. He could have even hated her.

It was fairly common for the less talented sibling to resent his sister's talents. In this sense, Tatsuya honestly believed things were much better as they were.

However, everything, of course, had its limits.

After finishing dinner and taking (separate) baths, the two siblings spent some time relaxing in the living room. It was then that Miyuki made a request that even Tatsuya couldn't readily agree to.

"Miyuki," he said, "I think sleeping in the same bed is taking things too far."

His sister's request wasn't anything suggestive. That might have been easier for Tatsuya to handle. What Miyuki was asking for was for them to sleep in the same bed much like a child would beg their parents.

"Is that a no?" she asked sadly.

Tatsuya suddenly felt dizzy. He couldn't believe how pathetic he was for not being able to put his foot down in a situation like this.

“Fine,” he conceded. “I’ll prepare the futons in the tatami room like last time. But all we’re going to do is sleep. Got it?”

“Yes, thank you! That’s perfectly acceptable,” Miyuki exclaimed happily with her hands clasped at her chest.

I can’t believe this is happening, Tatsuya thought, sighing inwardly.



Bezobrazov placed the Igroks of Anna Andreyevna and Veronika Andreyevna inside the sterile capsule of his large Argan CAD. Then he took a seat in the operator’s chair.

Argan was just a nickname that meant “organ.” Bezobrazov’s team used it in the sense of a pipe organ. The name was adopted after a government official, upon seeing how the CAD occupied a single train car, exclaimed, “It looks just like a pipe organ.” After that, the name simply stuck.

The resemblance lay only in its size and pipe-lined shape. Instead of facing the central console, the “players” were set inside the machine, and the “conductor” sat in a luxurious chair within the machine’s casing.

Although there were seven Igroks in total, Bezobrazov never needed to use all of them simultaneously. He could activate Tumba Bomba on his own. The Igroks simply served as assistants and safety precautions. For the scale of the current operation, two of them were enough.

Bezobrazov scanned through the information the New Soviet Union’s intelligence network had provided on the target area. The local weather in Izu was light rain with no strong winds. In other words, the conditions were near optimal for the use of Tuman Bomba. Bezobrazov’s current time was six in the morning, making Japan time five in the morning. That meant the target was probably still asleep. The New Soviet Union strategic magician prepared to activate his magic and turn his target’s sleep into eternal slumber.



Back in Izu, two floor futons were laid out side by side in the same tatami room where Tatsuya and Miyuki worked together to dispel Oath. The futons were fitted snugly together without the slightest gap between them. Tatsuya and Miyuki rested on these futons beneath thin summer blankets. Despite

being an engaged young couple, the bedding showed no sign of disorder. Each person had their own futon and blankets.

The few wrinkles in the sheets and their pajamas were merely the result of them turning over in their sleep. Miyuki slept peacefully while angled toward Tatsuya with a content expression on her face. Tatsuya slept quietly on his back.

It was not even dawn yet. Even for an early riser like Tatsuya, there were more than thirty minutes until his alarm clock rang. Neither sibling showed any signs of waking just yet.



The large computer connected to the Argan CAD converted location data obtained from observation instruments into a format that the CAD could access. Then, that same large computer created the original data required to construct magic programs. Instead of specifying the magic program's parameters in his mind, Bezobrazov did all of that on the computer console and assembled an appropriate activation program to match. This way, he could construct extremely complex magic programs that were impossible for an ordinary magician alone.

Similar large computers had also been installed at the Far East branch of the New Soviet Academy of Sciences. These actually had superior computing capabilities than the one Bezobrazov used. However, their systems did not incorporate the use of Igroks. Bezobrazov brought Argan along because he knew he would need Igroks for this particular operation.

The two Igroks he was using now kept two Andreyevnas in an electrically stimulated slumber while extracting their psions. The Andreyevnas themselves were women in their early twenties. Their fully naked unconscious bodies submerged in a body temperature saline solution inside a sterile capsule wore expressions of agony beneath their oxygen masks.

However, as their capsules were not transparent and the two Andreyevnas were enclosed within Argan, no one could see what they looked like. Not even Bezobrazov knew. That said, even if they were visibly suffering, it was doubtful that Bezobrazov or his staff would have even batted an eye.

Psions were injected into Argan's main body, immediately initiating the

output of an activation program. Bezobrazov and the two Andreyevnas simultaneously loaded the activation program into their minds. The former did so consciously while the latter, forcibly linked to Bezobrazov via the Igroks, bypassed their nonexistent consciousness.

By adjusting the input speed of the Igroks' activation program, Argan synchronized the timing of the output of the three magic programs. Once the magic programs were constructed, the Bezobrazov and the two Andreyevnas automatically initiated the strategic spell Tuman Bomba.



Tatsuya felt some kind of malicious force making its way toward him and Miyuki and forced himself awake. Once his eyes were open, he discerned the true nature and magical properties of the hostile force.

A decomposition of water... Generating and recombining hydrogen and oxygen gas... It's Tuman Bomba! he realized.

The light rain that had been falling had already transformed into mist. The process of further breaking down raindrops into finer particles, converting mist into vapor, and then simultaneously combining hydrogen and oxygen—this was what led to activation. Tatsuya now fully recognized Tuman Bomba's true nature.

Almost instinctively, he reached for his handgun-type CAD, the Silver Horn Custom Trident, which was next to his pillow. He always kept his favorite CAD within reach when he slept.

With the experience from the Soya Strait under his belt, Tatsuya had a plan. Instead of opting for Program Demolition, he cast Mist Dispersion. This spell involved decomposing water molecules into hydrogen and oxygen. The modification process targeted molecules generated within a radius of ten meters and occurred within the span of one second. As soon as Tatsuya sensed Tuman Bomba, he deployed Mist Dispersion. The conflicting alterations of particles caused a clash, resulting in the breakdown of both spells' effects.

It's not over yet! Tatsuya thought.

Sure enough, the enemy's attack didn't end there. The magic program for a replication spell—a chain cast of Tuman Bomba—was just getting started. After

a slight lag, hydrogen and oxygen gases were generated from the raindrops falling from the sky once again.

“Let me!”

Just as this voice reached Tatsuya’s ears, Miyuki activated a spell. It was Freeze Flame, a vibration-based concept expansion magic. Its purpose was to prohibit the magnitude of heat with a target area, inhibiting combustion.

“Now, Tatsuya!” she yelled.

“Got it!” he replied.

The area within one hundred meters of them, centered around the villa, was now incapable of ignition, even if hydrogen gas was generated. Utilizing the time Miyuki’s spell bought him, Tatsuya turned his Elemental Sight toward the caster of Tuman Bomba. Following the thread of malice aimed at him and Miyuki, he visualized its source.

That was when he saw it. The enemy’s attack was not over yet. High in the sky, beyond the reach of Miyuki’s magic, another Tuman Bomba had been cast.



Although Tatsuya and Miyuki managed to thwart Bezobrazov’s first and second strikes, the strategic magician remained unfazed. Tatsuya wasn’t the only one who had learned from the battle at Soya Strait.

Back then, Bezobrazov had speculated that his opponent might be a strategic magician specializing in mass-energy conversion magic. In preparation for encountering that opponent again, he had simulated countermeasures based on his initial assumption. Pushing Argan’s mainframe computer, he input a series of data for constructing magic programs based on the tactical simulations from that time.

He had not expected his opponent to employ combustion inhibition magic, but the resulting phenomenon was similar to a collapse due to mutual annihilation. The prevention of hydrogen gas combustion remained the same. That meant there was no need to alter the countermeasures he had prepared.

Bezobrazov had already released a magic wave attack based on his previous simulations. He now simply waited for the moment of victory atop his

conductor's chair, confident in his impending triumph.



Tatsuya watched the dense fog created by the decomposing rain clouds form a funnel-shaped mass two hundred meters above the villa. This was beyond the range of Miyuki's Freeze Flame. The funnel shape was used to reproduce the Monroe Effect. Tatsuya tried to analyze its structure.

But even with the speed of his decomposition magic, Tatsuya couldn't stop the Tuman Bomba spell above them, which was already entering its final stage. There wasn't enough time to analyze the structure of the fog mass that was condensing into a funnel.

The fog was a mixture of decomposed hydrogen and oxygen. The hydrogen gas burned continuously from the outside in. Due to the Monroe Effect, a shock wave converged at a single point in the funnel. This point was not at the center of the funnel's opening but far below, toward the villa. A shock wave struck just above Tatsuya's head. Instinctively, he pulled Miyuki into his arms, shielding her from the impending doom.



I've won! Bezobrazov cheered silently.

When his final move consisting of three consecutive wave attacks successfully hit its mark, he was confident of victory.

The rain clouds that had covered the sky were now dissipating as a secondary effect of the Tuman Bomba spell. Although the New Soviet Union did not possess any low-orbit reconnaissance satellites flying over the vicinity of Izu, Japan, he knew just when a satellite in geostationary orbit was in the perfect position.

He accessed the observation data of that satellite using the communication function installed in his large Argan CAD.

"What?!"

Just then, a scream escaped his lips.

The footage on his monitor showed the Izu villa to be intact. It was impossible that a wooden structure could remain unscathed after being subjected to

Tuman Bomba's concentrated shock waves.

Bezobrazov had used the reconnaissance satellite to analyze the villa's structure half a day earlier to confirm it was made of wood. It was highly improbable for the part of the villa aboveground to remain intact. Unless...

Was it defensive shield magic? he wondered. *But could such a shield really withstand my attack?*

He had, of course, already accounted for the possibility that either Tatsuya or his fiancée could cast a defensive shield spell. But he was confident that their magic was no match for his own.

The variation of Tuman Bomba he had used was the same one he had employed during the armed conflict across the Bering Strait against the USNA known as the Arctic Hidden War. It was also the same one that killed former supreme commander of the Stars, William Sirius.

Could Katsuto Juumonji have protected them?! he suddenly thought.

He was very aware of Katsuto Juumonji. He even acknowledged him as a formidable adversary with the potential to completely counter his Tuman Bomba with his powerful barrier magic. But Bezobrazov shook his head.

Impossible. None of the information I received would place him in Izu now.

He dismissed the passing suspicion, reasoning the intelligence department wouldn't overlook the movements of such an important individual.

Who was it, then?

He found himself trapped in a maze of unanswered questions. Unfortunately, little did he know that this pointless hesitation was wasting valuable time and a missed opportunity.



Minami was an early riser. She made sure she was the first one to wake up in the Shiba household. The same was true at the Izu villa.

However, at five in the morning, she was still very groggy. She didn't have particularly low blood pressure, but she wasn't exactly a morning person, either. The incentive that immediately woke her up this day came from none

other than her rival, Pixie.

“Above! Must protect Master!”

It felt like someone had just punched her in the face. She realized the scream echoing inside her head came from Pixie’s active telepathy transferred through traces in her CAD. Minami always kept her CAD powered on and within reach, so that she could fulfill her duty as a bodyguard at any minute. Since she’d already changed clothes, it was now tucked in the pocket of her apron.

She quickly grabbed it, channeled psions through her fingers, and pressed the shortcut key. Then she looked up. To minimize the time required for her spells to activate, the coordinates were predefined in her activation program as an area of empty of space in the direction of the user’s gaze. An image of a dome-shaped magic barrier covering the roof appeared in Minami’s mind’s eye. Echoing this image, she activated a defensive spell.

Immediately afterward, a shock wave hit her shield. While Tatsuya’s disassembly spell didn’t make it in time, Minami’s defensive spell did because it was self-contained. It was a type of magic capable of intercepting any physical attack. However, its vague definition imposed a heavy burden on the caster’s magic-calculation region. It was much easier for magic to have a limited scope when the intent was to defend a target. Not to mention, it wasn’t helpful that the oncoming shock wave was powerful enough to almost break through Minami’s shield.

Compared to a single-layer defensive barrier, Minami’s shield was comparable to Katsuto’s Phalanx. The two simply differed in their method of maintenance. Once the Juumonji clan’s Phalanx shield was created, it could essentially be left alone. If an attack exceeded its durability, it shattered for a short amount of time, but its very collapse served as a condition to activate the next shield. Juumonji clan members could also create and maintain multiple layers of shields that were maintained one after the other with zero lag time.

On the other hand, Minami’s Sakura series defensive barriers consisted of a two-tiered magic technique: generating a barrier to intercept physical attacks and maintaining that barrier with continuous magic manipulation.

There were also no repercussions from the act of duplication. Leo’s skill in

reinforcement magic, for example, meant that even if he cast another reinforcement skill while the effects of the previous one were still active, there was no increase in the demand of interference force in the subsequent spell.

Minami's barrier spells were very similar. She could cast several barrier spells in the same area to prevent her shields from being breached. However, this meant continuously activating defensive magic against random attacks. Not only was this difficult, but it also put a heavy strain on her magic-calculation region.

I won't lose! I just can't! she told herself. *I have to protect Miyuki!*

From an objective standpoint, there was no clear reason why Minami would go to such lengths to protect Miyuki. Unlike Tatsuya, she wasn't driven by familial love. Honami Sakurai, Minami's aunt, showered Miyuki with affection at one point. But that was in the past, and Minami didn't feel any connection to that.

The reason she protected Miyuki boiled down to an order from the Yotsuba clan head, who essentially treated the genetically modified individuals of the Sakura series as slaves. At the same time, Minami had only lived with Miyuki for just over a year. Yet here she was enduring the pain of her magic-calculation region overheating to maintain her barrier.

Do I protect her because it gives me purpose as a magician? Minami thought.



Because of my distorted values instilled by a biased education?

Because I'm afraid of being deemed expendable?

No. It isn't for those kinds of superficial or passive reasons. I wouldn't risk my life for that.

Then, why do I protect her?

Minami probably couldn't even answer that question herself, no matter how much she asked it. She didn't know the reason. In fact, she didn't need a reason. She was Miyuki's shield from the strategic spell Tuman Bomba. As the gas the spell produced burned out, the shock wave subsided. It lasted only a brief, almost fleeting moment. But for Minami, that moment felt like an eternity. She had already reached her limit. Sensing the attack was fading, Minami dispelled her barrier magic.

At the very same time, she started to feel faint. She lost all feeling in her legs and fell to the floor. Her excessive use of magic had caused her magic-calculation region to overheat. In the same way that Honami Sakurai had lost her life, Minami collapsed, losing all consciousness.



"What in the world...?"

Miyuki whispered in a daze as Tatsuya held her in his arms.

The last thing she knew, Tuman Bomba had activated, sending an incoming shock wave toward them. Neither her Freeze Flame defense nor Tatsuya's interception magic would make it in time. That said, she didn't think she would die. No matter what injuries she sustained, she believed Tatsuya would heal her, or even restore her to life. A naive reliance on her brother allowed her not to fear the pain that she knew would soon come.

Yet the devastating attack never landed, and the expected excruciating pain never arrived. It was nothing short of a miracle. But she still couldn't grasp what had just happened.

"Miyuki! Cast Deceleration Zone in a thirty-meter radius! Now!" Tatsuya yelled.

“R-right!” she stammered.

The effects of her Freeze Flame had already dissipated. Disregarding any concerns about magic duplication, she activated the spell that Tatsuya asked for: Deceleration Zone. This spell slowed down the movement of objects within the targeted area. While it typically only affected solid objects, Miyuki’s Deceleration Zone extended to the molecular motion of gases as well. This included restraining the rate of expansion caused by explosions, resulting in the attenuation of shock waves and a drop in destructive force.

Both Tatsuya and Miyuki had been wrong all along. The correct magic to counter Tuman Bobma was not Freeze Flame, but Deceleration Zone.

“Pixie! Take care of Minami!” Tatsuya called out into the void.

“*Yes, Master,*” Pixie answered telepathically.

Tatsuya didn’t provide further instructions. His top priority now was to prevent any more attacks. He resumed his aim at the sky, extending his specialized CAD Trident overhead. Then, he directed his Elemental Sight toward the origin of Tuman Bomba. Not toward the explosion’s point of origin, but toward the source of the magic itself—the magician who had unleashed the spell.

His search brought him to the eidos of two young women. They were severely distorted and fragile modified magicians on the verge of breaking.

The caster isn’t Bezobrazov? Tatsuya thought in confusion.

The Bezobrazov who appeared at the televised Dione Project press conference was a man in his late forties. Of course, there was no guarantee that he was, in fact, Bezobrazov himself. On the other hand, under no circumstances could Bezobrazov be a woman in her twenties like the figures who appeared before Tatsuya at this moment.

Elemental Sight was never wrong, and there were no traces of psychological manipulation, like Lina’s Parade. Yet something seemed off.

“Are these secret strategic magicians that the New Soviet Union has been hiding?” Tatsuya wondered.

Besides the thirty officially recognized strategic magicians worldwide, there were rumored to be another thirty or forty strategic magicians hidden by national governments. Tatsuya himself was one of them. Regardless of who these two individuals were, Tatsuya was certain they were the source of Tuman Bomba.

“In that case, I’ll need to erase them,” he purposefully said out loud.

He activated Trident, a threefold decomposition magic bearing the same name as his favorite CAD. It eradicated the interference field of other magic, nullified the information enhancement safeguarding the magicians’ bodies, and disintegrated the body into its basic elements. In other words, the spell didn’t merely cause human combustion; it erased a human being from existence across distances of up to approximately one thousand kilometers.



The large Argan CAD console flashed a series of intense warning lights, and alarm bells rang above Bezobrazov’s conductor seat. Checking the alerts left the strategic magician in a mixture of shock and relief. The warning message displayed on the console revealed that the capsules containing Anna and Veronika Andreyevna had ruptured.

Much like the tragic princesses depicted in fairy tales, the two Andreyevna sisters had dissolved into bubbles inside their saline solution–filled capsules. The increase in pressure due to the vaporization of their bodies exceeded the capsules’ durability, causing them to rupture inside of Argan. Bezobrazov made an emergency escape from his seat. Damaged by the capsules’ rupture, the large CAD was in dire need of repairs if it was ever to launch another attack again.

But more importantly, the disappearance of his decoys that had concealed Bezobrazov’s presence left him vulnerable. He, too, could be targeted by a remote magic attack, causing his body to dissipate into thin air. The thought alone was terrifying.

The Igroks served as both an external terminal to assist with Bezobrazov’s magic and a firewall to protect him. He had been unleashing Tuman Bomba through Anna and Veronika, but now their protective barrier had disappeared.

The next target was undoubtedly the magician connected to the same CAD as the vanished Igroks. For those well versed in magic organization, this outcome was self-evident.

Unsatisfied with just escaping from Argan, Bezobrazov left the entire CAD train car as well, distancing himself from the tracks. Then he stared silently at the train car from afar. There were no follow-up attacks. It wasn't humiliation that filled Bezobrazov's heart, only relief at having survived.



Tatsuya observed the two magicians vanish through the information dimension. Noting the CAD used for Tuman Bomba was damaged, he finally felt safe enough to put down his guard.

"It's over, Miyuki," he said.

"Where is Minami?" she asked.

She suddenly realized it was their cousin's defense magic that had protected them from the shock waves.

"Come with me," Tatsuya said solemnly.

Unable to meet Miyuki's gaze, he turned away from her and walked out of the bedroom. Sensing something was very wrong, she quickly trailed behind him. Once in the dining room, they found Minami crumpled on the floor. Miyuki let out a bloodcurdling scream.

(To be continued in the Escape Arc, Part 2)

AFTERWORD

Dear readers, it's been a while. Did you enjoy Volume 24, *Escape Arc, Part 1*?

This isn't the first episode broken up into multiple volumes. In fact, more of the episodes I've written are like that than not. However, I believe the *Escape Arc* has the strongest unity between the first and second parts. Volume 23, *Isolation Arc*, and Volume 24 also have elements that are connected in terms of in-world time, but Volume 24 and Volume 25 are truly a continuous episode in every sense.

This is why I sincerely want to provide you with Volume 25, *Escape Arc, Part 2*, as soon as possible. I have even made the afterword shorter this time. You can look forward to my reflection on both parts in the next volume.

Until then, I hope to see you again in the *Escape Arc, Part 2*.

Tsutomu Sato

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