



The Irregular at Magic High School

Master Clans Council Arc



19

Tsutomu Sato
Illustration Kana Ishida

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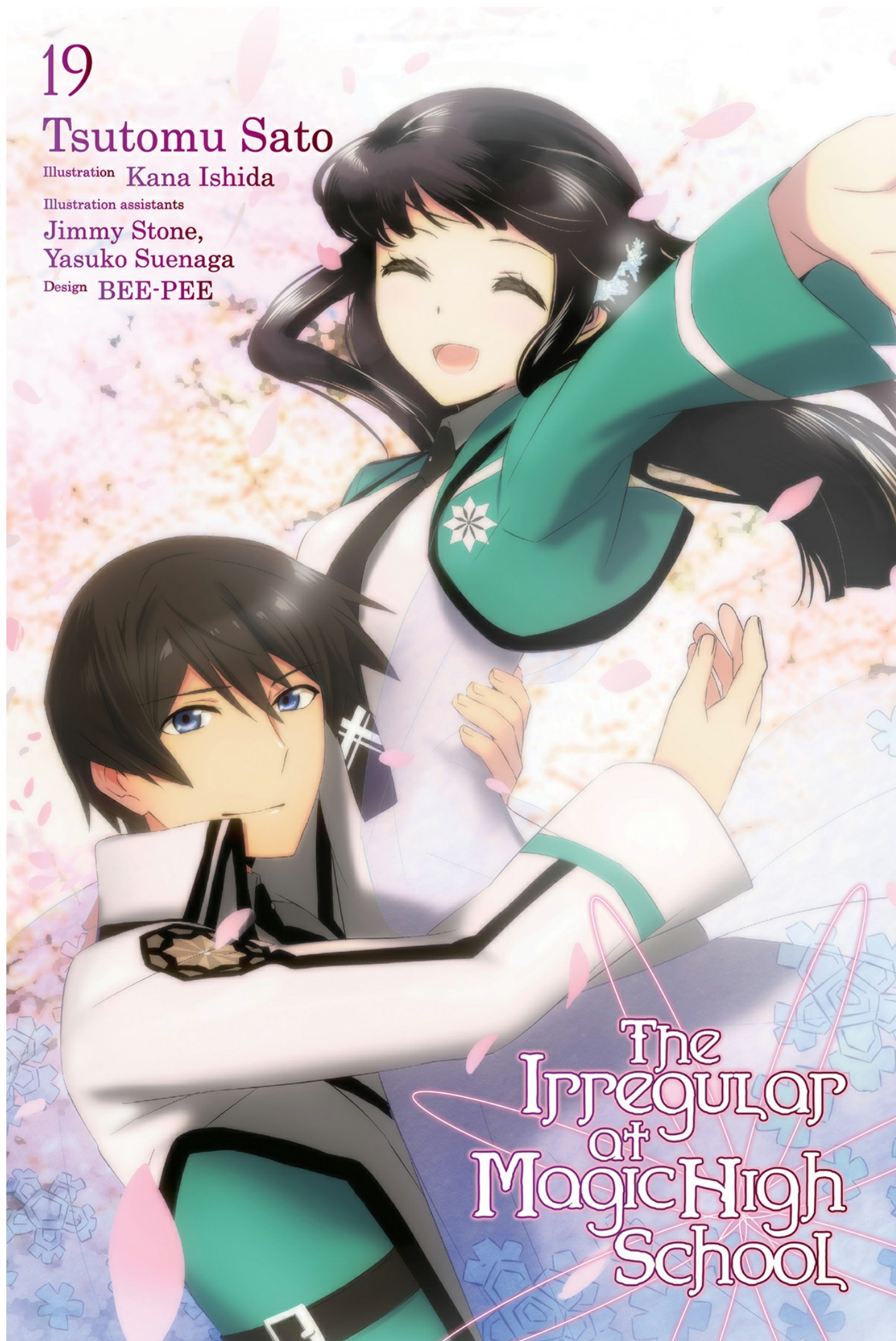
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School

Gu Jie: Covert Operations

Gu Jie, alias Gide Hague, has spent a significant portion of his life targeting Japan. He's the leader of Blanche, the international anti-magician organization that, at his direction, created the subordinate organization Égalité responsible for agitation at First High.

A year earlier, using the international criminal syndicate No-Head Dragon that he created through Richard Sun, Gu Jie sent Generators—magicians turned into living weapons—to disrupt the Nine School Competition. (Moreover, they were equipped with Sorcery Boosters, dangerous magic-enhancement devices that increase magic ability.)

Gongjin Zhou, Gu Jie's last disciple, led the Great Asian Alliance's covert operatives in what would come to be known as the Yokohama Incident and was responsible for the Parasidoll disturbance at the previous year's Nine School Competition.

Finally, Gu Jie carried out this year's puppet terrorism attack on the Master Clans Council using magic that controlled corpses.

All of this has been done in the pursuit of revenge against the Yotsuba family and Japanese magic society in general. However, lately, Gu Jie's motives have become unclear, even to himself. He aligned himself against the Kunlun Institute over differences in philosophy about the primacy of ancient as opposed to modern magic, and the Yotsuba clan later drove the Kunlun Institute to destruction. So if anything, the Yotsuba were the enemy of his enemy. But whether out of love for his country or projecting onto the group that stole his chance for vengeance, all that can be known for certain is that, as Gongjin Zhou said, Gu Jie's mind has devolved into a state of perpetual obsession; he is now little more than a vengeful spirit on the loose.

Gu Jie: Abilities and Traits

He specializes in techniques like Sorcery Booster, which turns humans into magical components; Generator, which turns humans into tools; and Necromancy, which allows him to animate corpses to do his bidding. He's also skilled in antiaging magic, but this only

preserves his appearance and does not extend his life. Gu Jie developed this technique at the Kunlun Institute, and it was also the reason ancient magicians were expelled from said institute.

Masaki Ichijou's School Transfer Journal: What Is It?


A journal secretly kept by Masaki Ichijou, a student at National Magic University Third Affiliated High School and the next leader of the Ichijou clan. He earned the moniker Crimson Prince for his actions during the New Soviet Union's Invasion of Sado.

The journal is said to contain high-level magic theory developed during his academic studies, techniques for magic combat, and thoughts on the future of the Ten Master

Clans—all independent musings from the young prodigy.

Currently, thanks to the cooperation of his father Gouki and Third High's Principal Maeda, he is attending First High, where Tatsuya and Miyuki also study. His experiences there are likely recorded in the journal as well.

Incidentally, not even his best friend, Shinkurou Kichijouji, also known as Cardinal George, knows of its existence.

A full-page illustration of Miyuki Shiba, a young woman with long black hair and bangs, wearing a white bikini with lace trim and bows. She is standing with her hands on her hips, looking down with a slight blush. The background is a large, close-up, slightly out-of-focus face of a person with long dark hair and blue eyes, looking directly at the viewer. The overall color palette is soft, with purples, blues, and pinks.

“I am right
here, and
you are
protecting
me.”

Miyuki Shiba

Tatsuya's younger sister. Honors student who is currently president of the student council. Cooling magic is her specialty. Adores her brother to the point of having a severe brother complex.



Katsuto Juumonji

Former head of the club committee.
Currently attending Magic University.
Head of the Juumonji family, one of
the Ten Master Clans. Per Tatsuya,
"A boulder-like person."

"Ichijou,
stay on
Gu Jie!"

"Okay—
watch
yourself!"

Joe Du

The man who helped
Gu Jie escape Japan using
a carefully assembled,
multilayered escape plan

"No need
for alarm,
Master
Hague."

"We
haven't
shaken
them off.
What's
the plan?"

Masaki Ichijou

A junior at Third High.
Participated in the Nine School
Competition this year as well.
Direct heir to the Ichijou family,
one of the Ten Master Clans.
Has formally proposed an
engagement to Miyuki.

"I'll
handle
this.
Go!"

Tatsuya Shiba

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

Gu Jie

Also, known as Gide Hague.
A magician obsessed with
getting vengeance on Japanese-
magic society. A survivor
of the Kunlun Institute and
Dahan's military magician unit.

The Irregular at Magic High School

MASTER CLANS COUNCIL ARC ③

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Illustration Kana Ishida

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PRESS
NEW YORK

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THE IRREGULAR AT MAGIC HIGH SCHOOL

TSUTOMU SATO

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Cover art by Kana Ishida

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MAHOUKA KOUKOU NO RETTOUSEI Vol. 19

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2016 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: May 2022

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Sato, Tsutomu. | Ishida, Kana, illustrator.

Title: The irregular at Magic High School / Tsutomu Sato ; Illustrations by Kana Ishida.

Other titles: Mahōka kōkō no rettosei. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2016— Identifiers: LCCN 2015042401 | ISBN 9780316348805 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316390293 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316390309 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316390316 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316390323 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316390330 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975300074 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327125 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327149 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327163 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327187 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327200 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332327 (v. 13 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332471 (v. 14 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332495 (v. 15 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332518 (v. 16 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332532 (v. 17 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332556 (v. 18 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975343835 (v. 19 : pbk.) Subjects: CYAC: Brothers and sisters—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | High schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction. | Japan—Fiction. | Science fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S265 Ir 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015042401>

ISBNs: 978-1-97534383-5 (paperback) 978-1-9753-4384-2 (ebook)

E3-20220427-JV-NF-ORI

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An irregular older brother with a certain flaw.

An honor roll younger sister who is perfectly flawless.

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

Character



Tatsuya Shiba

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



Miyuki Shiba

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



Leonhard Saijou

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



Erika Chiba

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



Mizuki Shibata

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



Mikihiko Yoshida

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



Honoka Mitsui

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



Shizuku Kitayama

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



Subaru Satomi

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

Eimi Akechi

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



Akaha Sakurakouji

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

Shun Morisaki

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



Hagane Tomitsuka

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

Mayumi Saegusa

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



Azusa Nakajou

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

Suzune Ichihara

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



Hanzou Gyoubu-Shoujou Hattori

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

Mari Watanabe

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



Katsuto Juumonji

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



Koutarou Tatsumi

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



Midori Sawaki

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



Kei Isori

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



Kanon Chiyoda

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



Takuma Shippou

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



Minami Sakurai

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

Isao Sekimoto

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



Takeaki Kirihara

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



Sayaka Mibu

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



Kasumi Saegusa

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



Izumi Saegusa

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



Kento Smith

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

Koharu Hirakawa

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



Chiaki Hirakawa

Class 2-E. Holds enmity toward Tatsuya.

Satomi Asuka

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



Kazuo Tsuzura

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



Tomoko Chikura

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

Tsugumi Igarashi

An alum. Former biathlon club president.

Yousuke Igarashi

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

Kerry Minakami

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

Kanda

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

Jennifer Smith

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

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.



Kouzuke

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



Masaki Ichijou

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

Gouki Ichijou

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



Shinkurou Kichijouji

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

Midori Ichijou

Masaki's mother. Warm and good at cooking.



Ushio Kitayama

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

Akane Ichijou

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



Benio Kitayama

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

Ruri Ichijou

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



Wataru Kitayama

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

Harumi Naruse

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

Pixie

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





Toshikazu Chiba

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



Naotsugu Chiba

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



Inagaki

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

Anna Rosen Katori

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



Maki Sawamura

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

Ushiyama

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



Ernst Rosen

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

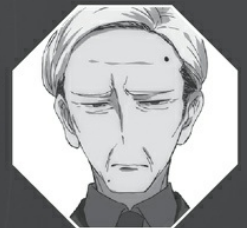
Retsu Kudou

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



Makoto Kudou

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



Minoru Kudou

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



Mamoru Kuki

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



Harunobu Kazama

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



Shigeru Sanada

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



Kyouko Fujibayashi

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

Hiromi Saeki

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



Muraji Yanagi

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



Kousuke Yamanaka

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

Sakai

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

Gongjin Zhou

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



Xiangshan Chen

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



Ganghu Lu

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



Rin

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





Miya Shiba

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



Honami Sakurai

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



Sayuri Shiba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's stepmother. Dislikes them.



Yuuka Tsukuba

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

Yoshimi

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

Maya Yotsuba

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



Hayama

An elderly butler employed by Maya.



Katsushige Shibata

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



Kotona Tsutsumi

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



Kanata Tsutsumi

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



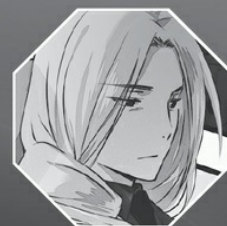


Angelina Kudou Shields

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

Virginia Balance

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



Silvia Mercury First

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

Benjamin Canopus

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



Mikaela Hongou

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

Claire

Alfred Fomalhaut

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

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

Charles Sullivan

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

Rachel

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

Raymond S. Clark

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



Gu Jie

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

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.



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.



Kouichi Saegusa

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

Saburou Nakura

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

Mitsugu Kuroba

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



Ayako Kuroba

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



Fumiya Kuroba

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



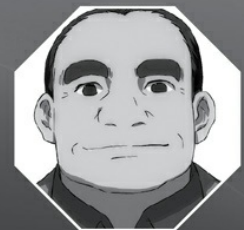


Mai Futatsugi

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

Gen Mitsuya

Head of the Mitsuya, one of the Ten Master Clans. Resides in Atsugi, Kanagawa Prefecture. Whether it's public or not is a matter of some question, but in any case, he's an international small arms broker. In charge of the still-operational Lab Three.



Isami Itsuwa

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

Atsuko Mutsuzuka

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



Raizou Yatsushiro

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

Kazuki Juumonji

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



Aoba Toudou

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

Glossary



Course 1 student emblem



Tatsuya Shiba's CAD



Miyuki Shiba's CAD

Magic High School

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

Blooms, Weeds

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

CAD (Casting Assistant Device)

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

Four Leaves Technology (FLT)

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

Taurus Silver

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

Eidos (individual information bodies)

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

Idea (information body dimension)

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

Activation Sequence

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

Psions (thought particles)

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

Pushions (spirit particles)

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

Magician

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

Magic program

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

Magic-calculation region

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

Magic program output process

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

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

Magic evaluation standards

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

Cardinal Code hypothesis

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

Typed magic

Any magic belonging to the four families and eight types.

Exotyped magic

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

Ten Master Clans

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

Numbers

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

Non-numbers

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



Various Spells

• Cocytus

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

• Rumbling

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

• Program Dispersion

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

• Program Demolition

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

• Mine Origin

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

• Fissure

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

• Dry Blizzard

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

• Slithering Thunders

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



• Niflheim

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

• Burst

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

• Disheveled Hair

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

◆ Magic Swords

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

1. High-Frequency Blade

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

2. Pressure Cut

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

3. Douji-Giri (Simultaneous Cut)

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

4. Zantetsu (Iron Cleaver)

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

5. Jinrai Zantetsu (Lightning Iron Cleaver)

An expanded version of Zantetsu that makes use of the Ikazuchi-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 six feet long. The user minimizes their own inertia and that of their katana while approaching an enemy at a high speed and, at the moment of impact, adds the neutralized inertia to the blade's inertia and slams the target with it. The longer the approach run, the greater the false inertial mass, reaching a maximum of ten tons.

7. Usuba Kagerou (Antlion)

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

Magic Technician Development Institutes

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

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

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

Magic Technician Development Institute One

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Two

Established on Awaji Island in 2031. Currently in operation.

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Three

Established in Atsugi in 2032. Currently in operation.

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Four

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

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Five

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

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

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Six

Established in Sendai in 2035. Currently in operation.

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Seven

Established in Tokyo in 2036. Currently shut down.

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Eight

Established in Kitakyushu in 2037. Currently in operation.

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Nine

Established in Nara in 2037. Currently shut down.

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

Magic Technician Development Institute Ten

Established in Tokyo in 2039. Currently shut down.

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

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

Strategic Magicians: The Thirteen Apostles

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

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

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

USNA

Angie Sirius: Heavy Metal Burst

Elliott Miller: Leviathan

Laurent Barthes: Leviathan

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

New Soviet Union

Igor Andreivich Bezobrazov: Tuman Bomba

Leonid Kondratenko: Zemlja Armija

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

Great Asian Alliance

Yunde Liu: Pilita (Thunderclap Tower)

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

Indo-Persian Federation

Barat Chandra Khan: Agni Downburst

Japan

Mio Itsuwa: Abyss

Brazil

Miguel Diez: Synchroliner Fusion

* This magic program was named by the USNA.

England

William MacLeod: Ozone Circle

Germany

Karla Schmidt: Ozone Circle

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

Turkey

Ali Sahin: Bahamut

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

Thailand

Somchai Bunnag: Agni Downburst

* This magic program was provided by Indo-Persia.

The International Situation State of the World in 2096



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

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

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

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

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

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

Australia chose national isolation.

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

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

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

The Irregular at
Magic High School



At an intersection between First High and its nearest station, a group of anti-magic activists were using antinite—a restricted substance—to interfere with the activation of Minami’s magic. Her adversaries were humanists, a group wholly unworthy of their self-appointed moniker.

The Cast Jamming noise was overwhelming; she clutched her chest and stumbled forward. Her delicate shoulders rose and fell as her breaths came hard and fast.

Seeing her in obvious pain made a particular summer day from five years ago flash vividly through Miyuki’s mind:

August 11, 2092, the day the Great Asian Alliance invaded Okinawa.

The day when, in a supposedly evacuated base, she’d been attacked by a rebel faction of the military.

She’d only been able to stop one of them. Her failure had gotten Honami, her mother, and herself shot. It wouldn’t have been strange if they all died.

Tatsuya’s Regeneration had saved her and her mother, but Honami had still ended up a casualty.

And now a girl who was the spitting image of Honami was suffering under the effects of Cast Jamming, just as she had. The sight of it pulled Miyuki back into the scenes from that terrible summer day, forcing her to relive them one after another in the space of an instant—

“I won’t allow it,” she murmured in a voice trembling with rage.

Seeing her suffer again.

Losing her again.

I won't allow it.

I'm going to stop it this time.

I'm going to stop all of them this time.

The past and the present seemed to blend together, and Miyuki had lost herself in this strange world. Swept up in her grief and fury, Miyuki began to unleash her power—

That was when Minami cried out, interrupting her mistress's magic—Miyuki's madness.

“Miyuki, please stop! Are you planning on going against Tatsuya's orders?”

Although she'd forgotten both herself and all notions of restraint, Tatsuya's words echoed in Miyuki's mind.

Now that you've been publicly announced as the next head of the Yotsuba family, it wouldn't be a good idea for you to use magic against a civilian.

Tatsuya had told her as much just last night. Miyuki put her brother's orders above all else, his words pushing past even the memories of that terrible day as they echoed in her heart.

At the invocation of Tatsuya's name, Miyuki canceled her casting of Cocytus, the spell that would have frozen both mind and body of the attackers.

“...Minami?” she called out anxiously after just emerging from her waking nightmare.

“...I'm all right, Miyuki.” Minami forced a smile, glad her mistress had been pulled back from the brink.

Minami's barrier had been starting to weaken under the Cast Jamming, so she released its Deceleration aspect and focused on Isolation, which gave it more stability.

And not a moment too soon, because burly fists immediately struck the transparent wall. Minami ignored the instinctive terror the attack brought, instead meeting Miyuki's gaze resolutely, her forehead covered in a sheen of sweat.

I can handle this, so don't be hasty, her eyes begged.

Miyuki returned the look with her own—one that said *I'm all right now*. She returned her CAD to her breast pocket.

“Miyuki...?” Izumi asked anxiously, wincing at the psionic noise.

She was confident that there was no way Miyuki would be troubled by a little Cast Jamming or a few thugs, but Izumi herself was unfortunately experiencing considerable difficulty in using any magic. Still, she looked up to Miyuki immensely, so the look she gave her classmate now was one of confidence.

Miyuki nodded firmly back, as if to say *Don't worry*. She then dropped her gaze and folded her hands over her chest.

Her body began to glow softly, though it was with a light the humanists could not see.

The psionic glow—a light that only people who used magic could see—filled the air around her. There was no specific intent behind this display, because the source of the light was not imbuing it with any. Miyuki was producing pure psionic light, with no other qualities added to it.

Psions carrying no interference strength had no effect on physical phenomena or magic. The glow would not disturb Minami's barrier, nor would it harm the men who were trying to hurt them.

As the gentle light enveloped her as well, Minami suddenly realized that the pain from the Cast Jamming noise was lessening.

Ultimately, Cast Jamming was merely hindered magic activation and didn't physically injure magicians. However, it did tend to make people who were sensitive to psionic emissions dizzy or nauseous, like a particularly disturbing noise.

However, given the capacity of psions to block the pathways that magic activation used, it was more than simple acoustic noise. The activation pathways weren't only connected to the invocation target, but also to the source of that invocation—in other words, to the magic calculation region of the caster, subconsciously.

Even if they weren't particularly sensitive to psions, in the moment of casting, the pathway opened, so the effects of psionic noise would be unavoidable. Magicians deploying semi-persistent effects like shields, which had to be refreshed on a rapid cycle, were particularly susceptible to Cast Jamming.

Minami could feel the ill effects of the noise begin to dissipate. There was some residual discomfort, but only perhaps half as bad as it had been. "Miyuki...?" she asked again, searchingly. It could only have been her mistress doing this; there was no other explanation.

"You're amazing, Miyuki!" Izumi cried in wonder. "You're using a dense psionic curtain to weaken the jamming, aren't you?"

Minami had to agree: A cloud of psions with no interference potential wouldn't block their ability to cast but would provide a major buffer against Cast Jamming noise, because it, too, had no inherent interference power.

Their attackers, however, were not so impressed. "Ridiculous! There's no such thing as a type of magic unaffected by Cast Jamming!" the leader shouted nervously.

He was merely revealing his own ignorance, and neither Izumi nor Minami could hide their amusement. They didn't even try.

Minami smiled a little unconsciously. Izumi, meanwhile, grinned smugly from ear to ear.

It was true that Cast Jamming was effective against *most* forms of magic. But Miyuki's technique was not, strictly speaking, magic by modern standards; it was more accurate to say it was a form of typeless magic since it involved the emission and manipulation of psions outside the body.

Using this unorthodox form of magic, she was deploying a counter-countermeasure.

There was no way these philistines, who hadn't even tried to understand normal magic, could comprehend just how advanced Miyuki's technique was, nor how superb a magician she was.

Plus, there was magic that Cast Jamming didn't work on.

Suddenly, the psionic noise emanating from the antinite disappeared. The chaotic emissions faded into mere ripples.

“Tatsuya!” Miyuki opened her eyes and looked back over her shoulder.

There her brother stood, his face as expressionless as a mask, save for the furious glint in his eyes.



Earlier that day, after feeling stymied by his investigation’s lack of progress, Tatsuya had headed to Kamakura in an effort to pick up the trail of the terrorist mastermind Gu Jie.

He’d gotten word from Katsuto that the day’s meeting was canceled, so after Kamakura, he’d planned to go to Zama and double-check for any clues or leads that might have remained there.

If he’d been seriously searching, there was a more effective method available to him:

Just once, Tatsuya had seen Gu Jie.

He wasn’t clairvoyant, though. He wasn’t particularly skilled at perceiving the existence of people he didn’t have a strong personal link to.

In addition to the physical distance separating them, they didn’t have any particular connection. Gu Jie’s disciple, Gongjin Zhou, had been very hostile to Tatsuya, but that didn’t especially deepen his connection to Gu Jie himself. The attack on Maya, likewise, held little meaning to him. If such things were enough to make meaningful connections between people, his vision would have been blocked by a flood of information.

In order to actively track someone he’d sighted only once, he needed to gather more sensory impressions of them. To do so, he’d have to take his sight off other targets.

In other words, he’d have to take his eyes off Miyuki.

Capturing Gu Jie wasn’t worth going that far.

However, if there was any object left behind that was strongly tied to Gu Jie, he could use it as a starting place for tracing. Of course, if something like that

existed, one of the other investigators would have almost certainly found it already, but the current situation was so dire that even a faint possibility was worth pursuing.

But on the way to Kamakura, Tatsuya suddenly turned around.

He was heading not home, but to school.

He couldn't see the future. His sight was only useful for the present and the recent past—the last twenty-four hours, to be specific.

So he was simply going by his intuition—that someone was trying to harm Miyuki.

Tatsuya didn't have the option of ignoring a feeling like that. Compared to Miyuki's safety, the search for Gu Jie was *utterly irrelevant*.

He switched his motorcycle from manual to semiautomatic driving and sped toward her location, devoting half his attention to the information dimension and readying himself to come to her aid at any moment.



And now, the ruffians *cornering Miyuki* came into view.

Tatsuya brought his bike neatly to a stop, took off his helmet, and exhaled a slow, deliberate breath. Without taking that moment to calm himself, there was a very good chance he'd be unable to restrain the urge to murder Miyuki's assailants.

Any intent to harm Miyuki was unacceptable. Just knowing that someone was considering the possibility was enough to make Tatsuya want to *erase* them.

If he'd decided there was a chance that she really would be harmed, Tatsuya wouldn't have hesitated. Vaporizing a human body without leaving any evidence behind was well within his capabilities.

But because he knew that even antinite would pose little more than a mild nuisance to his sister, he'd held back from pulling the trigger. The fact that Minami was being made to suffer was not enough to engage his killer instinct.

That didn't mean Tatsuya was some kind of sadist, though, particularly when the victim in question was almost family to him. He activated his Dismantling

magic in order to eliminate the pain the Cast Jamming was causing her.

He didn't even need to use the bracelet-style CADs he wore around both wrists. Dismantle was one of two techniques he could use freely; he didn't even need to gesture with a pointed finger or outstretched arm the way many magicians did. He targeted the magic simply by focusing his will.

Program Dispersion.

The information decomposition magic erased the complex web of psionic waves that were sustaining Cast Jamming.

Their coherence destroyed, the waves became little more than harmless ripples before disappearing.

“Tatsuya!”

He heard his sister call his name out from within the knot of combatants. Through a gap in the crowd, he glimpsed Miyuki's surprised face as she spotted him.

Tatsuya wondered what was so surprising to her. There was no way he *wasn't* going to come running at the slightest danger to her, no matter how small a threat it may have been.

But that thought was soon painted over with rage.

On Miyuki's face, there was a faint but unmistakable expression of fear.

A high school girl was being surrounded and detained by a group of strange men. Regardless of the power she may have possessed, it was only natural for her to be afraid.

Tatsuya fixed his gaze on the group of men and sucked in a heavy breath.



“Step aside!” came Tatsuya's harsh shout.

Staggered by the sheer intensity of his voice, the attackers opened a path. It was not the result of any mental interference magic; confronted by the roar of a beast far stronger than any of them, the men's bodies moved instinctively, before their minds even registered what they were doing.

Tatsuya strode quickly forward. He didn't need to push anyone aside. No one tried to stop him or get in his way. No one so much as lifted a finger against him.

"Minami," Tatsuya said, stopping directly in front of the magical barrier.

"Yes, Tatsuya?" Minami replied, even as she continued to maintain the barrier.

"Can you move while keeping that barrier up?"

"I can."

They both knew this was possible; he was asking out of consideration for her condition, and Minami understood that.

"All right. In that case, the three of you, follow me." Tatsuya turned. He looked to his left and right, and the humanists flinched at his gaze, backing up one step, then another.

"Wh-what're you waiting for? Jamming team, again!"

Evidently, only the higher-status members of the group had been equipped with antinite rings. At the sound of their leader's incensed voice, they mustered the courage Tatsuya had robbed them of, and pouring psions into their antinite, they started Cast Jamming again.

But the psionic noise held its shape for less than half a second.

Tatsuya merely glanced back over his shoulder. He didn't so much as raise his hand.

That was enough for the Cast Jamming to completely stop working.

Psionic noise interfered with the activation of any magic. Such an effect could hardly be achieved spontaneously out of disorder. The noise in Cast Jamming was a pattern of psionic waves that was carefully constructed in accordance with very complicated principles.

So long as it had a form, it was susceptible to Tatsuya's Dismantling ability. Being composed of bare information bodies, all the more so. Cast Jamming posed no obstacle to Tatsuya at all, to say nothing of being the trump card it was meant to be against magicians.

“Why isn’t it—?!” the ring-bearers began to cry out, panicked.

“Hold the line! Again!” The zealots’ leader continued to shout orders.

Tatsuya didn’t even bother looking back this time. Again, the noise failed to last even half a second.

Cast Jamming was not a constant effect; it broadcast in bursts, each emission beginning slightly before the one preceding it ended.

Antinite had the unique property of emitting jamming waves when exposed to psions. But continuously pouring psions into antinite without using technological assistance—like the flight device—was difficult even for an average magician. This was why Cast Jamming was employed in discrete bursts.

For these anti-magicians who were unused to psion manipulation, successful Cast Jamming would require considerable concentration and effort.

But the noise was being neutralized as soon as it appeared.

These young men were not proficient enough to make a third attempt after being shut down twice in a row.

Tatsuya quickened his stride, leading the girls along. They were already outside the ring of humanists.

“Minami.”

“Yes, Tatsuya?”

“Good work. You can dispel the barrier now.”

Minami did as told and lowered her barrier.

“Miyuki.”

“Yes, Tatsuya?” she replied solemnly.

“Take the other two and head back to school.”

“Understood.” Miyuki gave her brother a graceful bow, then placed her hands on the backs of the two younger students and directed them toward the road that led back to First High.

That was when the leader of the attackers finally recovered his composure.

“Wh-what are you doing?! Brothers, do not let these heretics escape!”

This, however, did nothing but invite a very unfortunate fate.

Ignoring Tatsuya, the humanist gang charged past him.

However, none of them made it more than three steps.

There were fifteen of them in all. They didn't start their charge in unison, either; only five of them moved at first. The other ten had yet to take action and were still just standing there.

It went without saying that Tatsuya promptly neutralized that impetuous one-third of the group. But he didn't accomplish this with magic.

The first he knocked out with a brutal fist to the solar plexus.

The second took a palm strike to his temple.

The third was seized by the scruff of his neck just as he hit his second stride and got yanked backward until he hit the ground.

The fourth suddenly found a fist hurtling into his chin just as he tried to take a third step.

The fifth was grabbed by the wrist mid-step and flipped forward head over heels before impacting the road.

Felled by Tatsuya's fluid series of takedowns, not a single one rose to try again. It was doubtful they could stand even if they wanted to.

“You bastard! You think you can get away with this, huh?!” the ringleader barked.

“I'm merely thwarting a violent assault on these young ladies. I'm sure the traffic surveillance camera footage will prove that it was your people who attacked the First High girls,” Tatsuya taunted, smirking. He looked meaningfully into a camera attached to one of the streetlights, and his sneer darkened as he glanced back to the man.

Even from a distance, the red of the leader's face was vividly clear. Of course, it wasn't because he was ashamed of his behavior. It was simply rage.

His eyes went bloodshot with a zealot's madness as he pointed at Tatsuya and

shrieked, “Take care of this one first! This is God’s will!”

His underlings roared their assent with an unsettling energy.

They’d retreated upon discovering they were no match, physically, for Tatsuya. But their minds had been poisoned by fanaticism, and they were no longer capable of properly interpreting the signals of fear their bodies were attempting to send.

“You will pay for your sins!” A man standing in the group closest to Tatsuya came at him. In his hand, he held an extendable baton that was already popped and ready to strike.

As the man’s right hand came down, Tatsuya intercepted it from the inside with his left, cracking the fingers that gripped the baton.

“Nghaaaaah...!” The baton went flying as the man crumpled forward, clutching his hand.

Tatsuya reached for the man’s head. It was not a blazing-fast punch, though. The movement was downright leisurely.

Tatsuya’s thumb came from the side and connected with the soft part of the head, just below the ear.

His screams stopped as the man crumpled to the floor.

“This is your warning. If you continue to attack me, I can’t be responsible for the consequences,” Tatsuya said, sweeping his gaze over the ruffians, not even bothering to glance at the man lying in a heap at his feet.

It wasn’t meant as a provocation. It was the most literal of warnings.

Having secured Miyuki’s safety, Tatsuya could think clearly again. He’d lost any inclination to initiate further confrontation, but that didn’t mean he had any intention of eschewing violence entirely. If he was attacked, he would absolutely answer in kind. His words were clearly also meant for the traffic cameras so he could have an alibi later.

But they were heard as a taunt.

“Absurd! You think we’re scared of *you*, a mere *tool*?!” The leader’s disgraceful behavior was unending. However, his underlings were beginning to

exchange nervous glances. Fear of violent consequences was beginning to triumph over their feverish zealotry.

But still, they did not retreat—they had not fully come to their senses. It wasn't that they were still gripped by the mad belief that attacking magicians would be forgiven, but rather that their judgment hadn't recovered enough to correctly conclude that if it came to violence, they were the weaker party.

The stalemate was to Tatsuya's advantage. On his way here, he'd spotted a crowd forming in front of the nearby police station as well. They were probably trying to delay the arrival of the police. Even so, law enforcement would most likely begin to arrive soon.

"I expect the police will be here momentarily. You're all guilty of attempted sexual assault, but you can still escape if you hurry."

Tatsuya warned the men again, but this time he was clearly provoking them. He certainly didn't see any need to be diplomatic.

The zealots were immediately enraged.

"Damn brat!" The leader lunged at Tatsuya.

Tatsuya narrowed his eyes at the weapon the man had produced from inside his jacket. It was a flattened stun-whip, about a foot and a half long. Not only did it run an electric current across a spark gap at its tip, but it was made from spring steel which, when switched off, allowed it to be as flexible as a leather belt, so it could easily be wrapped around the arm or torso and carried inconspicuously.

Like the sword cane (a shape-memory alloy baton that could transform into a short sword) Erika's family had developed around the same time, the stun-whip was used by the police and was not available on the open market. The humanist leader couldn't have gotten one without connections to law enforcement. Either that, or he'd simply stolen it from a cop.

Either way, it was an interesting detail, and Tatsuya noted it in a small corner of his mind as he evaded the stun-whip blow coming from overhead. He rotated his body by stepping forward and ended up behind his opponent.

From the perspective of his attacker, it must have felt like the weapon had

passed right through Tatsuya's body.

Before the man realized where Tatsuya had gone, Tatsuya said, "Behind you."

The leader of the humanists hastily looked back over his shoulder, seemingly thinking that if he didn't do anything, he'd suffer imminent retaliation. He desperately swung the stun-whip.

Tatsuya made a show of raising his arm as though he intended to block the whip, then suddenly dropped the arm just before it made contact. He'd already backed well clear of where the whip could reach. The big swing the leader had taken from his awkward posture struck only air, and thoroughly unbalanced, he stumbled and fell backward.

Tatsuya couldn't help but let a chuckle slip, but it wasn't a taunt, or at least he didn't mean it that way. He simply couldn't stop himself from laughing at the bumbled attack. He didn't intend to further provoke the man, but he didn't care about his pride so much that he was going to bother keeping a straight face, either.

It was probably inevitable that the humanist leader took Tatsuya's laugh quite personally.

"I'll kill you!"

Still, murder would probably be considered an overreaction by most. But the man's rage wasn't limited to words. He threw his evidently useless whip to the ground and thrust his hand into his coat pocket.

The moment he drew it back out, Tatsuya's right leg struck with lightning speed.

But he didn't kick the zealot's hand upward—rather, he stomped it down.

In a crisp motion, the heel of his foot came down on the man's hand, knocking the weapon out of it. Then, without even dropping his foot to the ground again, he kicked outward. The blow connected with the leader's face, knocking him flat on his back. He lay there, motionless, either due to the force of the kick or his new head injury from hitting the ground.

But even if he'd had the bad luck to be seriously injured, the police were

unlikely to blame Tatsuya.

The weapon the leader had produced lay on the road. It was a small handgun with two over-under barrels, the latest model of which was still called a derringer even in the late twenty-first century. Naturally, it was inexcusably illegal for a civilian to be carrying around such a thing.

The other humanists stared agape at the weapon on the ground. Those still standing and conscious looked shocked, as though it had never crossed their minds that their leader would be carrying a firearm.

Tatsuya looked back at the remaining zealots.

They had lost all will to fight. Moreover, they also seemed disinclined to run.

Judging the situation to be settled, Tatsuya relaxed and dropped his stance.

But the next moment, he spun around, fully alert once more.

“Tatsuya!”

No sooner had he heard Miyuki cry out in warning from where she stood at the intersection than he’d finished preparing to activate his magic.

The humanist leader’s body was moving.

He ought to have been unconscious. And in fact—he still seemed to be.

That was a minor detail, however.

Tatsuya was not reacting to a surface-level abnormality.

The man’s arms were thrust out, and above his open palms hovered a spiritual being. Although *evil spirit* was probably a more fitting term, Tatsuya thought, given the ominous purple glow.

“Miyuki, stay down!”

“All right!” she called, though it was probably more the strange sight than Tatsuya’s directions that made her duck back behind the corner.

Tatsuya thrust out his hand, palm open, and unleashed a torrent of psions. The purple flame hovering above the zealot’s hands was engulfed in the countless psions and blown away.

Program Demolition. This was the obvious consequence of being hit by the typeless magic that was considered among the most powerful countering techniques in existence.

And yet, a cry of astonishment escaped Tatsuya's lips: "What?!"

Above the zealot's hands, the flame of the evil spirit flickered back to life.

It certainly wasn't impossible to reactivate a spell that had been swept away by his spell. Program Demolition simply hit its target with a blast of psions. Its effects ended as soon as the blast did. They didn't persist.

But reactivating the stifled magic required preparation from the magician. No matter how fast they were, the process of constructing a magic program could not be abbreviated. Even psychics who didn't need to use activation sequences couldn't alter physical phenomena without a magic program.

Takuya saw no such process occurring within this man.

This isn't his power. A third party is supplying the SB.

The evil spirit was being remotely delivered to the man's hands over a semantic connection by another practitioner. In other words, this anti-magic activist was the pawn of an ancient-style magician. He might have been ensorcelled without even realizing it. In fact, that was the likelier scenario.

Tatsuya refrained from blasting the spirit's malevolent pyre away again. The man who'd resorted to violence over a terrorist attack planned by an ancient magician was himself under the influence of an ancient magician—and that couldn't be a coincidence. Using the flames as a foothold, Tatsuya focused his sight on seeking out the true form of the magician who was responsible.

"H-he's a magician?!"

"The leader's a...heretic?!"

The man's comrades gawped at the ball of flame hovering above their leader's hands, their voices dismayed.

This time, Tatsuya wasn't the only one who could see the flames. The purple fire from the SB the man had summoned—or which had been forced into him—had become completely visible. Its deepening color, however, totally obscured

what was happening to the hands beneath it. It was possible that the phenomenon didn't merely resemble flame but also had the physical properties of fire.

"Guh... Gaaaaaaagh!"

The leader's young followers who were supposed to be his comrades scattered like spiders.

Tatsuya didn't give chase. There was no need to.

A moment later, the purple flame burst open.

Rather than the flame compressing into a smaller ball and scattering, it spawned dozens of fireballs of similar size, which shot out in all directions.

The fireballs didn't penetrate buildings, instead evaporating like phantoms upon hitting walls and windows.

But the roadside trees they struck were engulfed in flames and charred black, seemingly ready to fall at any moment.

No—*charred* wasn't quite accurate. Anywhere on the trees the flames touched withered and rotted to black, leaving scars not from temperature, but as though it had been stripped of life force.

So what would happen to a human who came into contact with that?

Tatsuya used Program Demolition on any fireballs that came flying his way, but only those that threatened to actually hit him. He was devoting most of his attention to finding the magician behind this and neutralizing this magic was a secondary priority.

As far as he could tell, the purple flame wasn't being aimed at specific targets. The fireballs he didn't shoot down passed by him to his left and right. Some of them rained down on the man's underlings.

The shouts that followed were surprisingly quiet, considering they were death cries.

If Tatsuya had looked, he would've seen the strange sight of human bodies withering in a patchwork of decay. This wasn't the full-body desiccation of a mummy, but rather a rapid aging of wherever the flame touched them.

He was well aware that it would be dangerous to ignore this magic. Somewhat belatedly, he paused his trace of the magician to turn his attention toward silencing the spell.

If the magic's source was the humanist leader, rendering the man unconscious would have been sufficient. However, he was merely being used as a weapon from which to strike, and it was impossible to knock out someone who was already unconscious. He could end the man's life, though.

That would probably be the most expedient method. The other magician could probably project magic using corpse manipulation, but Tatsuya's method of killing reduced the body to dust. There wouldn't be a corpse left to control.

But he ultimately decided against doing that. It was excessive force to use in self-defense, and it would needlessly incite the media.

The magician controlling the purple flame magic has to use that man as a relay. Otherwise he wouldn't be able to keep sending out those SBs...

If the caster could freely transpose SBs from wherever he was hiding, they wouldn't have gone to the trouble of deploying them from a single point. If it had been an option to use the other zealots and create a more chaotic battlefield, it might have been possible to actually attempt hurting Tatsuya.

So there must be some reason that one man is the only outlet.

—Like, for example, a relay seal carved on his body.

As the thought occurred, Tatsuya focused his vision.

Out of my way.

He used Program Demolition to banish the flame flickering over the man's hands.

The purple fire of the SB magic soon sprang back to life.

—*Found you.*

But not before Tatsuya spotted the sigil on the man's hand. The design shone through the man's palm from the back, written in psions.

A tattoo on the back of the hand, made using flesh-colored ink. The pattern

differed from the seal magic Tatsuya was familiar with, but insofar as psions flowed through it to derive some magical effect, it was the same.

This was the sort of technique that ancient magicians were slightly more practiced at. Even as he felt a sort of misplaced admiration for it, Tatsuya focused on a portion of the tattoo and used Dismantle.

The color evaporated from the center of the tattoo, whose design seemed far too complicated to have been possible for human skill. Dismantle removed the pigment even from the deeper dermal levels.

Tatsuya used Program Demolition to shoot down two more fireballs that came flying at him. Those were the last. The disruption of the psion pattern that was acting as the marker for the relay magic made remote control of SBs impossible.

The tattoo seemed to have also functioned as a remote manipulation method for the leader himself. He'd been sitting upright in the road with his hands outstretched, still as a statue, but once the magic was nullified, he fell back again.

The man didn't get up. He seemed to have been actually neutralized this time.

Tatsuya waited for ten seconds, then let himself relax.

From around the corner, he heard "Nobody move!" It didn't do much good for the police to show up only after everything was over, but Tatsuya wasn't particularly bothered.

Instead, he looked at the trees that lined both sides of the road and frowned, then glanced over his shoulder to see the dismal state of the zealots and sighed. He couldn't help but feel that it would've been better for the police not to get involved at all. The police who were posted to the station nearest First High were magicians with combat training, but he doubted whether the officers of the First High Station precinct could've defended against or neutralized SBs.

Tatsuya complied with the order not to move and stood silently where he was. There wasn't any need to move—he didn't have to in order to follow the data.

He'd gleaned the necessary information upon determining that the tattoo

was the enemy's chosen medium. Now, in the information dimension, he was already tracking the enemy's footsteps.

The magic's effect had ended, but the magician had been directly connected to someone while casting it, and that someone was lying on the ground nearby. Given that Tatsuya had been the target of the magic, it stood to reason that the caster was still quite close.

With this much material to go on, and with information on the technique itself so close at hand, finding its source—the magician responsible—was not a difficult task for Tatsuya.

His presence here was the result of a vague premonition he'd had that something was threatening Miyuki's safety. The fact that he'd encountered a new lead outside of his search for Gu Jie was a complete accident.

So even if it meant assuming a bit more risk, he had no intention of letting the opportunity slip away.

The Ten Master Clans' search for the terrorists had stalled. Not even the Yotsuba family had turned up any new information, and internally, they were starting to get nervous.

Not that he'd gotten any prodding from Maya about it, though. Truth be told, he hadn't received much—or any, really—pressure from her about it. Privately, he felt that it would've been fine to let law enforcement and state intelligence agencies handle the Gu Jie situation, and as far as the rise in anti-magician sentiment went, to a certain extent, it seemed unavoidable.

He couldn't deny that to someone who couldn't use magic, magic itself seemed *just* as threatening as a gun or a bomb. He'd accepted that magicians were armed with magic and that it was understandable that many people who were essentially unarmed wanted magicians kept far away from them. Or at least he had, until a few moments ago.

If anti-magician activists were going to let that fear and distrust turn them into puppets of dangerous hostile magicians, they couldn't be ignored. They probably hadn't recognized that they'd been manipulated for ulterior motives, but if so, that made them mere tools. Whether puppets or tools, they were serving the enemy's interests, so there wasn't a substantial difference.

The humanist who had been used to relay the magic had been wearing a white wristband trimmed in red and blue. It was the symbol of Égalité, a subordinate organization of Blanche, an international anti-magician syndicate that Tatsuya was quite familiar with.

Gongjin Zhou had been behind Blanche, and Gu Jie was behind Zhou. Tatsuya had heard as much from multiple sources.

In other words, simply by virtue of the chain of command, the members of Égalité had been Gu Jie's pawns from the very beginning. However, the closer those members were to the bottom, the more closely they resonated with—or were brainwashed with—the ideals of humanism. The leader here had been shouting humanist dogma, and it hadn't seemed like an act.

They'd been deceived. It was reasonable to conclude that the man hadn't even realized he'd been tattooed with the seal that acted as a relay for the evil spirits.

If *armed* thugs like this, wielding magic and firearms, started mixing with unarmed protesters in order to attack Miyuki, it was a clear sign things were getting complicated. It gave Tatsuya pause. If he could be at her side constantly, there wouldn't have been anything to worry about, but until Gu Jie was captured, that wasn't possible. In order to fulfill his duty, he inevitably had to spend time apart from her.

To carry out his assignment and wipe out the terrorist threat, he would have to live with the fear that came with his loved ones being exposed to that terrorism. If his opponent was a criminal organization—or, going further, combatants in a civil war, or even a war between nation states—the same horrible irony applied. The *only* difference between war and terrorism was whether noncombatants were considered valid targets. It was fair to say that the two had only become differentiated since the modern era had given rise to rules that drew distinctions between combatants and civilians. Whether those rules were respected was a different question.

But that didn't mean Tatsuya could choose to abandon his pursuit of Gu Jie. Even if he pulled back at this point, *it wouldn't guarantee Miyuki's safety*. In the end, his only option was to locate and silence Gu Jie as quickly as possible, and

not a second later.

He split his consciousness and directed one half toward the vast sea of information. With the other half of his awareness dedicated to monitoring for any threat to Miyuki, the first half went in pursuit of information about the magician behind the purple fireballs.

Information was inseparable from phenomena. Whenever there was a change in anything, there was always information indicating that change left behind. Even for magic, itself the art of manipulating information, the same principle applied. Information manipulation used to erase the tracks of another change left its own traces behind. If the signs that pointed to the use of SBs had been painted over, that obscuring paint would remain, and even if that paint had been carefully chosen to blend in with the background, its shade would still be slightly unnatural to the discerning eye. The information left behind could be disguised, but it could never be erased.

...There you are.

A magician's information floated up in Tatsuya's vision.

Not Gu Jie, but...

The magician whose information Tatsuya was viewing unfortunately did not belong to the one he'd encountered at Zama. If the person his trace revealed had been that man, he might have been able to fire Mist Dispersion from here and been done with it. If he could see this clearly with his information vision, physical distance wasn't relevant.

If I'm seeing this level of detail, could I acquire granular location information...?

Tatsuya rapidly absorbed information about the distant magician. His name was Kazukiyo Oumi, also known as The Dollmaker, and he was currently in Kamakura, specifically...

—!

Suddenly, there was a drastic change in the information he was observing. He reflexively cut the connection in order to avoid any damage to his vision, his field of view returning to just what was available to his physical eyes. The police

officers hadn't come much closer since he'd switched his attention to the information dimension. Less than a second had passed, but—

He killed him right after I broke through the magic...?

The information shift he'd observed had been a transition from a living state to a dead one. Tatsuya had begun his information trace ten seconds after destroying the purple fireball magic—just about the time someone standing next to the magician would have realized the connection was broken. It might have been coincidence that this also disrupted Tatsuya's observation, but perhaps the murder itself was premeditated. If his opponent had learned—or deduced—that Tatsuya had the ability to perform information traces, that would have been one explanation for a betrayal like that.

He's just not going to go down easily...

Raising his hands to the approaching police in a gesture of compliance, Tatsuya sighed.

He'd realized something.

He couldn't afford to be picky about his methods at this point.



There in Kazukiyo Oumi's house, looking down at the body of the man he'd just murdered, Gu Jie mulled over the realization that he was running out of time.

He'd just killed an ancient magician who'd been his good friend because he'd suddenly sensed that the magic was being traced. He had no knowledge of any techniques that could do such a thing, but he'd still gotten the clear sense that some terrifying force was approaching, backtracking the channel used to transmit the SB magic.

He'd killed Oumi and closed the channel mostly out of reflex, but he had no confidence that this would completely thwart his adversary's technique. It ought to have been enough to isolate whatever the counter-spell was, but there was still a possibility that his location had been discovered.

What he'd felt had been Tatsuya's vision, and Gu Jie had no way of knowing that it was strictly an information-gathering ability, with no attack potential at

all. But having spent nearly half a century on the run, Gu Jie's heightened danger awareness had helped him detect a moment of observation taking place in the information dimension—and that it was hostile to him.

"It would've been nice to get just one more day," murmured Gu Jie, glancing at the two bodies laid out side by side in the other room. One of those bodies had greater potential than any other he'd ever controlled. It was enough to make Gu Jie feel bad about having to use it as a disposable tool... If he'd had just one more day, he would've been able to use him not as a soldier of death (a literally dead soldier, rather than a soldier who was prepared to die), but as a Generator that would produce power for an extended period of time.

"Such a waste...but it makes no sense to get too greedy about such things."

Gu Jie shook his head as though shaking off his regrets, then, still bearing the intricately decorated dagger he'd just used to end his friend Kazukiyo Oumi's life, he headed into the next room.



This vanity of mine is probably going to be the end of me someday...

Izumi looked gloomy, masking her thoughts from the adults in front of her. She was, in fact, quite depressed, so this playacting wasn't particularly difficult.

"...Now then, aside from the barrier magic Miss Sakurai used to prevent immediate physical harm, no one used any magic?" Class 1-B's homeroom teacher asked.

"That's correct," answered Izumi briefly.

"Is it true that the men who accosted you used Cast Jamming?" This question came from Vice Principal Yaosaka.

"Yes," Izumi said with that same crisp brevity, although facing four teachers including the vice principal wasn't a particularly pleasant experience for her.

Why was she having to go through this gut-wrenching process? Izumi wondered resentfully. But she had landed herself in this situation, and she knew it, so her irritation and rage merely smoldered internally.

Girls from her school had been harassed by a group of young men. Given the

possibility that the confrontation could have led to students being seriously injured, it was hardly surprising that the principal, in addition to the vice principal, were giving it their full attention. And since Izumi had been directly involved, she had to admit it was natural that she'd have to explain what had happened.

The question was why she alone was saddled with that responsibility.

But logically, Izumi also understood that well enough to know that this couldn't have turned out any other way.

The assailants had carried antinite, a rare material predominantly controlled by the military. Not only that, one had attempted to use a firearm meant for assassination.

In the end, that supposed anti-magician activist had used magic and caused both human casualties and property damage. A serious incident like this wasn't going to be concluded with a straightforward interview at the police substation. Not only had the perpetrators been taken to the Hachioji police station, but Izumi and the other victims had been asked to go there as well.

But the seriousness of the incident also required an immediate report be made to the school. Someone had to go and do that.

The police had asked Minami, as the one who'd raised the magical barrier, to go to the station, and Tatsuya couldn't very well refuse questioning, given his physical encounter with their assailants (whether or not it had been in self-defense). And while it fell short of magic, strictly speaking, Miyuki's high-volume psion emission had been picked up on sensors.

By process of elimination, that left Izumi as the one to return to First High to report. Izumi understood the reasoning. But as is often observed, logic and emotion are separate things.

"Miss Saegusa," said Principal Momoyama, breaking his silence up to that point.

"Yes," Izumi said, her voice and face both anxious as she looked to the principal.

"Are you quite certain that your attackers targeted you only after identifying

you?”

Even as she quailed under the principal’s keen gaze, Izumi’s answer came in a clear, unhesitating voice. “Yes, I’m certain. After they looked at me and identified me as a member of the Saegusa family, then confirming among themselves that President Shiba was First High’s student council president, they came for us.”

“So that would mean that your group was a higher priority to them than the freshman they were bullying at first.”

“I believe so, yes.”

“Hmm,” murmured Principal Momoyama thoughtfully, folding his arms within the deep sleeves of his traditional kimono.

Izumi patiently waited for his next words. It was the other adults who seemed unable to endure the silence.

“Principal, sir,” said Vice Principal Yaosaka hesitantly.

Giving no indication that his silent contemplation had been disturbed, Momoyama turned to Yaosaka. “Vice Principal, class will be temporarily suspended beginning tomorrow. For now, the suspension will continue through Saturday the twenty-third.”

“Principal, sir, suspending class so suddenly will be—” Yaosaka blurted, only to quickly stifle himself.

But the expected angry rebuke from Momoyama didn’t come. “You need to hear a reason?”

“Er, yes, well...”

Instead of a shout, Momoyama fixed Yaosaka with a withering gaze of contempt for the man’s lack of perspective. But he continued with an explanation—once a teacher, always a teacher.

“If our students were being attacked indiscriminately, that would be the violent act of a discontented mob. But in reality, it appears that our best and brightest are being specifically targeted. There’s a very good chance that this isn’t impulsive, haphazard violence, but the calculated acts of an organization.”

“You mean...organized crime?”

Yaosaka wasn't the only one to pale at the suggestion. Class 1-B's homeroom teacher, the head freshman teacher, and the other staff gathered around the principal's desk did as well. Izumi also felt the blood drain from her face.

“There's a reasonable expectation that unlike a simple mob, their methods will become more extreme. We need to keep a close eye on the situation.”

“Yes, Principal...as you say, sir.”

“I leave the particulars to you,” Momoyama said to Yaosaka before turning back to Izumi. “Thank you, Miss Saegusa,” he said.

He didn't sound very thankful, but Izumi took this as a signal that she was dismissed. She wanted to get away from there as quickly as possible, so she didn't let the chance slip away. “Not at all. It's the least I could do,” she said. “If you'll excuse me, Principal.”

Izumi bowed politely and made for the exit.



When Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami arrived home after their interviews at the police station, the short hand of the clock was just past seven. Given the nature of the incident, they were escorted home in an unmarked patrol car, while a motorcycle traffic officer rode Tatsuya's bike home. The officer seemed to realize that the bike's fairing and tires were bulletproof, but didn't mention the fact. It wasn't clear if Tatsuya's identity was a factor in that decision, or if the officer even knew who he was.

Miyuki's and Minami's personal effects were still in their lockers at school, but given that there was nothing in them that would spoil, they unanimously decided not to leave home for the rest of the day. It meant that the clue about Gu Jie Tatsuya had managed to gain via his magic trace would immediately go to waste, but he had an idea for that.

Regardless, Tatsuya and Miyuki were planning to enjoy a quiet evening at home, but no more than ten minutes after they'd taken off their shoes did they receive a summons via e-mail.

Having immediately changed out of his riding jacket and pants that doubled

as combat gear, Tatsuya sat on the living room couch, frowning at the screen of his fully opened portable terminal. Miyuki came down soon thereafter, having changed clothes herself.

“...Tatsuya, you’re making a very concerned face. Did you get some bad news?”

“No, nothing like that, just...” Tatsuya hummed and looked up at his sister, then indicated the seat next to him with his eyes.

Miyuki accepted the invitation and sat beside him, peering at the screen of his terminal, which he tilted toward her.

“Tatsuya, Miyuki, your tea is ready,” announced Minami, carrying a tray that held cups of the strongly steeped green tea Tatsuya had requested. Minami set the teacups on the table, then looked to Tatsuya to see if he needed anything else.

“Stay a moment, if you would,” he said, then turned to Miyuki.

Miyuki was just looking up, having finished reading the unpleasant message. “Tatsuya, this... I suppose we can’t very well refuse, can we?”

“Probably not,” he agreed with a small sigh before turning to Minami, who was awaiting instructions. “When we’re finished with this tea, Miyuki and I will be going out. We’ll have dinner then, so enjoy having the evening to yourself. If you want to go to bed before we’re home, feel free.”

Miyuki seemed to find her older brother’s explanation insufficient. “We’ve been invited out by the new head of the Juumonji family. We’ll probably be a bit late coming home.”

Of course, Minami’s answer would have been the same with or without a detailed explanation. “Understood,” she said, bowing politely to the siblings she served.



Miyuki’s explanation had left a few choice details out. When Tatsuya arrived at their destination with Miyuki in tow, Katsuto wasn’t the only one waiting for them—Mayumi and Masaki were there as well.

The meeting place was the restaurant they'd been holding their gatherings at. From outside, it looked like nothing but a largish private home, and when they entered, Miyuki appeared a bit hesitant.

Tatsuya had already informed Katsuto that he would be missing today's meeting. It was after 8:00 PM, and normally, the post-meeting dinner would have been over by now.

And yet, they'd been summoned. Katsuto, Mayumi, and Masaki all greeted Tatsuya and Miyuki with serious faces.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Tatsuya greeted perfunctorily.

"Not at all, I'm sorry for the sudden call on short notice. Have a seat," Katsuto said with a fair bit of sincerity, gesturing for the siblings to sit.

All three of the people who were waiting for the Shibas' arrival were already seated at the table. Katsuto was in the host's position, with Mayumi and Masaki seated to one side of him, next to each other. Although the restaurant served French cuisine, the places were set in the British-American style, either to signal that precise table manners weren't required, or because they hadn't worried about it in the first place. Tatsuya took this to mean the latter and seated Miyuki across from Mayumi, then took his own seat, across from Masaki.

"Are you all right, Miss Shiba?" Masaki inquired politely once she'd sat.

"Yes, I am. In the end, none of us were hurt. Thank you very much for your concern, though," she replied with a pleasant smile. Masaki's face reddened, and his shoulders relaxed in obvious relief.

He seemed to have been genuinely worried about Miyuki. Seeing this, neither Katsuto nor Mayumi chided him for his breach of conversational etiquette.

"Today was something of a disaster, wouldn't you say, Shiba?" Katsuto asked Tatsuya.

"Indeed. It was unexpected." Rather than put up a strong front, Tatsuya honestly admitted that his expectations had been naive.

"On top of having firearms, they attacked with magic, correct?" Mayumi wondered, worried.

Masaki picked up on her line of reasoning and asked bluntly, “So the anti-magician activists used magic? Or are there hostile magicians mixed in with the humanists?”

Rather than answering this directly, Tatsuya continued the report he was delivering to Katsuto: “The one used as a relay for the magic was a member of Égalité, which is a subsidiary of Blanche.”

“Blanche?” the young man’s surprise was clear from his frown. “I thought they’d been driven out of Japan.”

“That just means that their remnants have gone underground,” Tatsuya remarked.

“Mmm,” murmured Katsuto, folding his arms thoughtfully. It seemed to be an unavoidable conclusion. The Juumonji family had been involved in the cleanup following the Blanche attack incident. Perhaps Katsuto had thought Blanche and Égalité were completely neutralized.

Mayumi herself had been far from uninvolved in the incident on the First High campus in April of the previous year, but her interest was piqued by a different detail. “Tatsuya—relay, you said?”

“The man leading the Égalité group’s ‘harassment’ of the freshman was not a magician. An ancient magician elsewhere was using him as a relay—a ‘familiar,’ in their terms—to remotely cast magic.”

“Is something like that really possible?” Mayumi seemed genuinely surprised. Remote casting of magic using a relay was not solely the purview of ancient magic, but its use in modern magic was admittedly very rare. It wasn’t surprising that she was unaware of it.

“I’ll skip the details of the theory, but creating a relay involves applying a magic seal to something, whereupon magic can be activated through the seal. It can be used for methods of attack that don’t involve projectiles or energy emissions like sound or heat, too. This particular instance involved the collection and indiscriminate projection of SBs into the surrounding area.”

“So the one responsible was an ancient magician, right? Did you discover who it was?” Masaki asked, while Mayumi made an impressed-sounding “Huh” in

response to Tatsuya's explanation.

Although he didn't say it, Tatsuya felt that this was the most important question to ask. "I made a recording of the technique. I'm having it investigated as we speak," he said as a temporary deflection. It was true, after all, that it was being investigated. He had a name and address, but since it wasn't Gu Jie himself, that alone wasn't much use.

What sort of background did the ancient magician known as Kazukiyo Oumi have? Who did he associate with inside Japan, and what places did he frequent? What organizations was he connected to? These questions were still unanswered, but they would all be useful in locating Gu Jie.

It was clear that Gu Jie had already fled Oumi's residence, but he might have left something there that could be traced to him. Ayako and Yuuka had been dispatched to investigate in the hopes of finding exactly that. Tatsuya had gone to Yuuka for this case because he had anticipated that the Tsukuba family—given their excellence with mental interference magic—would be better suited to a pursuit than the Kuroba family.

"You recorded the technique...? How in the world...?" Masaki wondered.

The activation sequence in a CAD stored a blueprint of the associated magic program as electrons. Thus, recording a magic program was not, in principal, impossible for modern technology. However, that was merely recording the *construction* of a magic program with a given effect as its desired outcome. Observing and analyzing an opponent's magic during combat and recording it as data was currently beyond the state of magic engineering. Masaki's doubt was unsurprising.

But before Tatsuya could even answer, Masaki murmured an apology for the interruption, bowing his head. It was considered a breach of etiquette in magic society to pry into another magician's methods. His question was one such infringement, and before his colleagues around the table could correct him, he'd realized his own blunder.

Tatsuya accepted the apology with a smile. "Don't worry about it. However, if you'd keep this a secret, I would appreciate it."

"Naturally," Katsuto said, directing the conversation back to the topic at hand.

“So, Shiba, when do you expect results from the investigation?”

Tatsuya dropped his smile and turned back to Katsuto. “I expect it will take all of tomorrow. If we turn anything up, I will let you both know. And you, too, Ichijou.”

“Understood. We’ll leave that part to the Yotsuba family,” Katsuto said, and neither Mayumi nor Masaki raised any objections.

Instead, Mayumi shifted her gaze from Katsuto to Miyuki. “Miyuki, it sounds like today was awful. I’m so glad to hear you weren’t hurt.”

“I appreciate your concern very much,” she said with a slight bow, waiting for Mayumi to continue.

Mayumi’s real question, of course, was about something else entirely. “I heard from my sister that the anti-magic activists were targeting you specifically?”

The sister in question had to be Izumi. It seemed the situation hadn’t gotten explained properly, so Miyuki took it upon herself to correct this.

“No, to be more precise, they were already harassing another student, but once I caught their eye, they came after me instead.”

“I wonder if they knew who you are?” Mayumi asked in contemplation. It seemed like what she wanted to say was *I wonder if they knew that you’re the next head of the Yotsuba?*

Miyuki denied that in a roundabout sort of way. “It seemed like they knew I’m the student council president of First High.” She didn’t mention that, as far as the Ten Master Clans went, it was Izumi who had been identified as a prominent member of the Saegusa family by one of their assailants.

“In any case, reprehensible as it might be, do you think the humanists’ eyes will be on Miss Shiba now?” Masaki asked from the side.

“We believe they will,” replied Mayumi immediately, before Miyuki or Tatsuya could say anything against it. “So, Miyuki, would you consider letting us assign you a bodyguard?”

Miyuki looked perplexed. “A bodyguard? But I already have...”

...my brother, she was about to say, but then she realized that this wasn't a situation where she could say those words.

The Gu Jie investigation was still keeping Tatsuya apart from Miyuki during after-school hours. Even when they were physically separated, Tatsuya could keep an eye out for danger around her using his special sight, but his ability to do so was a secret, and she couldn't very well explain it in front of the others.

Without a detailed explanation of Tatsuya's abilities, it was unlikely that Mayumi and the rest would be persuaded—all the more so given the threat to her safety Miyuki had faced that same day.

"And this would be someone to apprehend whoever might come after Miyuki?" Tatsuya stepped in swiftly, a tinge of displeasure creeping into his voice.

His gaze flicked from Katsuto to Mayumi before stopping on Masaki. "Ichijou, are you planning to use her as a decoy?"

"No!" he shot back, agitated. "I would never let that happen! If someone's going to be a decoy, it'll be me!"

There didn't seem to be a hint of deception in Masaki's words, but Tatsuya's eyes remained dubious. "So you don't deny that there is a plan involving a decoy, then."

Masaki said nothing, but *oops* was written all over his face.

"I suppose the idea came from Kichijouji."

This bull's-eye made it even harder for Masaki to offer a rebuttal.

"It's true that Ichijou proposed a plan involving him acting as a decoy," Katsuto said in an attempt to dispel the awkward atmosphere. "By assigning a bodyguard to the next head of the Yotsuba family, the hope is that we can capture some of the terrorists and turn up some leads on the whereabouts of their leader, Gu Jie."

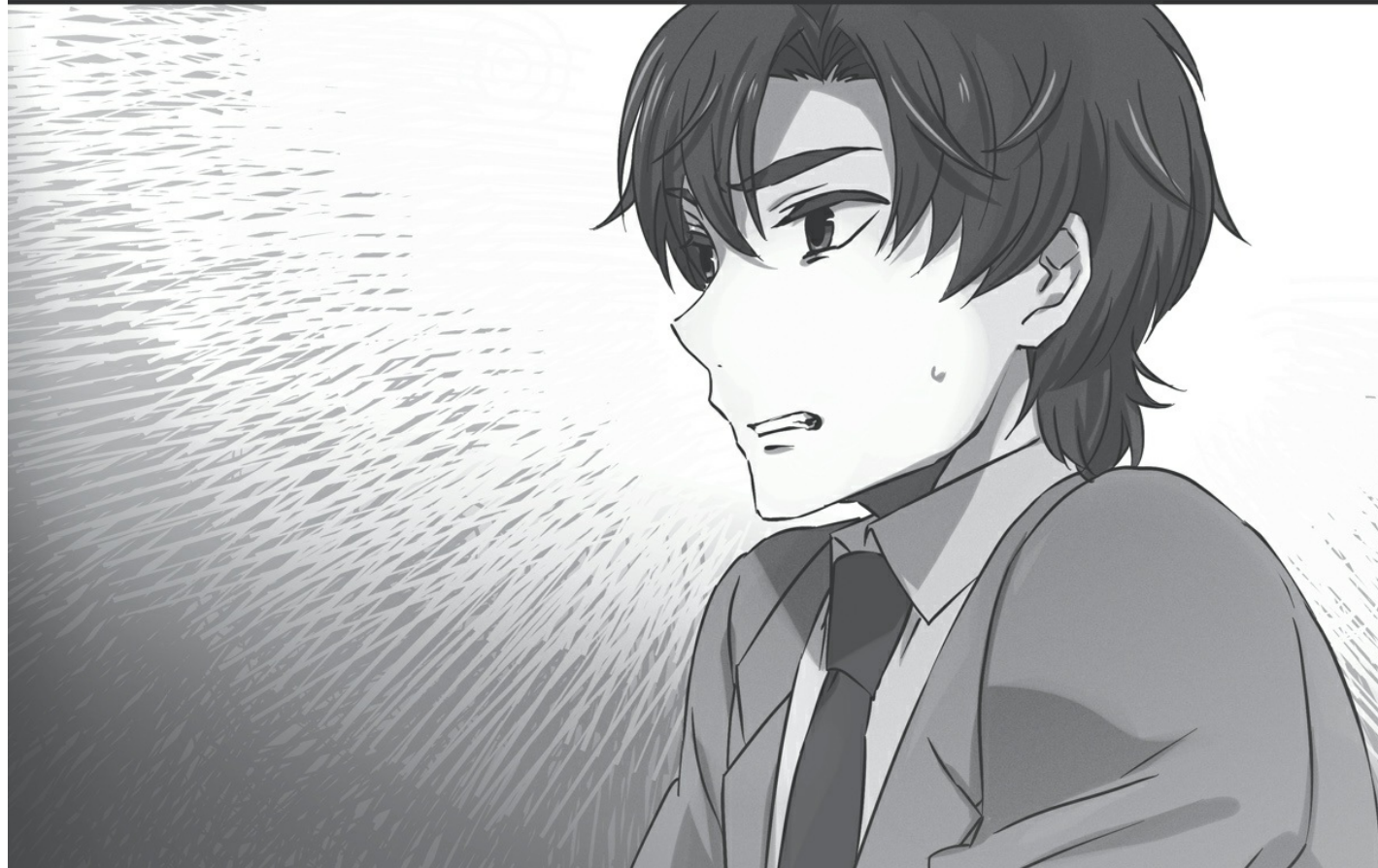
The "next head of the Yotsuba family" Katsuto referred to was, it went without saying, Miyuki. He was admitting that Tatsuya's suspicions weren't groundless. "But that's not the primary goal. The bodyguard's main job would

be to protect the family heir. Shiba, Saegusa came up with this to help you focus on the search.”

Tatsuya shifted his gaze from Katsuto to Mayumi.

With some effort, Mayumi returned his look.

“...I understand,” Tatsuya finally said, and the edge in his eyes softened. “However, I’m going to decline. The Yotsuba family will handle her security,” he said crisply. Given Mayumi’s disposition, her suggestion was probably *mostly* meant in good faith, but in reality, it would be Mayumi’s father who assigned any theoretical guards. It wouldn’t end up being a simple personal bodyguard.



“I see... I suppose that’s to be expected, given Miyuki’s position,” Mayumi said.

“Not at all. I’m very grateful for the offer,” Miyuki returned with a polite bow.

Mayumi smiled and shook her head, and the matter was closed.

Turning his attention away from Miyuki and Mayumi’s interaction, Tatsuya addressed Katsuto. “Juumonji,” he began, and Katsuto replied with a look. “I’m the one who actually retaliated against the anti-magic activists. If you’re looking for a decoy, wouldn’t I be the most suitable?”

It was Mayumi, not Katsuto, who disagreed. “No hyena is going to pick a fight with a lion. Sure, if the lion corners them, they’ll fight back, but that’s different.”

“They might try something if they see an opportunity to steal another’s prey, though,” Katsuto added nonchalantly.

Mayumi looked at him intently. “Juumonji, don’t tell me you’re seriously considering using Miyuki as the ‘prey’ in this scenario. You’re not, right...?”

“Saegusa, we’re talking about this like it’s somebody else’s problem, but the anti-magic activists aren’t going to stop with the Yotsuba family heir. There’s a fairly good possibility that they’ll come after you, the eldest daughter of the Saegusa family, as well.”

Mayumi blinked several times, caught off guard by the point.

“About what happened today,” Miyuki said, speaking up in the space left by Mayumi’s stunned silence. “I was not the only one targeted by the humanists. They also recognized Izumi, and I heard them positively identify her as a part of the Saegusa family.”

Miyuki hadn’t been trying to find an especially effective moment to say so, but she wasn’t going to let the chance that had fallen into her lap go to waste.

Katsuto’s, Tatsuya’s, and Masaki’s gazes all turned to Mayumi.

“...What, me?” Mayumi pointed to herself nervously.

“Saegusa. What’s your personal security like?”

“I’m fine. I can figure something out on my own.”

Katsuto shook his head gravely. “It seems clear that we need to rethink your security situation as well.”

“Yes, we do,” said Tatsuya, at which Katsuto made another grave gesture—this time a nod.

“C’mon, I just said I was fine!”

“Nobody is doubting your abilities, but we need to be prepared for all contingencies.”

“It’s not like I don’t have any security at all!”

“Is that so? I haven’t seen anybody like that around the college campus...”

“Obviously I’m not gonna bring random security personnel to wander around the school halls with me!”

As they watched Mayumi and Katsuto argue, Tatsuya and Miyuki couldn’t help but muse that they’d successfully dodged having Saegusa family security added to their own.



Just when Tatsuya and the rest were wrapping up the meeting and beginning their dinner, Yakumo Kokonoe was receiving an unexpected guest.

In the inner room of the main temple hall, Yakumo bowed his head respectfully to the floor. Unusually, he was wearing a monk’s stole; he was actually playing the part of a man who’d renounced worldly concerns today. However, the man he was receiving was not someone he could afford to be naive about.

The visitor had a distinctive appearance. He seemed quite frail from age, but his shoulders were broad. You could tell even when he was sitting that he’d been a magnificently sturdy man in his youth.

His head was shaved bald in the manner of a priest, but he was wearing an obviously expensive name-brand business suit that seemed natural on him. It wasn’t that he seemed used to having luxurious things, however; rather, there was a feeling as though the bespoke suit’s aura of import and authority was

something that radiated out from its wearer.

With bushy gray eyebrows and round, bulging eyes, his features were more distinguished than they were handsome. But his left eye was cloudy white, and it had an unsettling effect on whomever he was talking to. It also enhanced the impression he gave of being no ordinary person.

“I wonder what change in the wind could bring as illustrious a presence as Your Excellency, Priest Seiha, to this humble, nameless temple?” Yakumo placed a cup of perfectly brewed tea in front of his guest.

The suited monk artlessly picked up the teacup and took a deep drink before returning it to the tatami mat. His manner of drinking flew in the face of etiquette, and yet it didn’t seem like a breach of manners, somehow.

“Nameless temple, eh? Careful, if you speak too humbly, people will think you’re being sarcastic, Yakumo Kokonoe.”

“My apologies,” said Yakumo airily, at which the old man he’d addressed as “Your Excellency, Priest Seiha” narrowed his right eye.

“To begin with, no priest from a nameless temple would dare speak to me, Aoba Toudou, in such a rough manner.”

“Oh, have I hit a nerve?”

“Hardly. On the contrary, it’s a relief,” Toudou said, downing the dregs of the tea Yakumo had offered him in one gulp. “Another cup, if you please.”

Yakumo bowed with a thin smile and took the cup.

Pouring water from the kettle that was simmering on the brazier—there wasn’t a hearth set into the floor of the inner chamber, so even in the winter, they used a portable brazier for heating—into the teacup, Yakumo then lazily whisked powdered tea into it. “So, Your Excellency, what business brings you here today?” he asked. He drew the whisk out of the mixture, then rather than extend the teacup to Toudou, slid it toward him before looking up. “You visited just last month, and I’m certain you didn’t merely come to see my face.”

The “visit last month” had been on January 4. Toudou had been the unexpected guest who’d interrupted Tatsuya and Miyuki’s visit to the temple

that day.

Toudou's response was extremely straightforward: "Yakumo Kokonoe, I need your help."

"What might a powerless monk like myself possibly do for Your Excellency?"

"Enough false modesty. Your illusory techniques are sufficient for you to be lauded as the reincarnation of Koji Kashin. If you're powerless, then who in this world would we call powerful?"

"Well, now. Some might consider Koji Kashin a mere conjurer. Who's to say all that talk about being his reincarnation isn't an insult suggesting that all I do is sleight of hand?"

"Isn't that a notion from when people thought magic was something that only existed inside fairy tales? There's no use in trying to throw me off the trail. I'm well aware of your true abilities."

Yakumo scratched his head at his tone, which wasn't merely expressing confidence, but rather a statement of hard fact. "...All right, Your Excellency. What do you need my help for?"

Yakumo hadn't thought he could muddy the waters for Toudou to begin with. He was well aware of who the old man with the cloudy left eye really was.

"Gu Jie, the sorcerer from the continent, has become too much to tolerate. His corpse-puppeting arts do nothing but taint and pollute. Using it as indiscriminately as he does makes it impossible to scour away the impurities."

"Excellency, a Buddhist monk like myself knows nothing of Shinto concerns."

"I have no intention of ordering you to perform any rites. I merely want you to help eradicate the source of this blight."

"So you're telling me to liberate Gu Jie from earthly concerns?" Yakumo's sigh was not an act.

"Simply expelling him from Japan will be sufficient. I care little whether he's alive or dead."

"Your Excellency's subordinates don't seem to feel that letting him go is acceptable."

“The Yotsuba are no longer under me. I am merely a sponsor now.”

Yakumo let Toudou’s statement go without particularly believing it. It was true that the old man was old Lab Four’s owner and the Yotsuba family’s sponsor, but he wasn’t “merely” anything. And Yakumo was well aware that the Yotsuba weren’t all he sponsored.

“The head temple can be rather annoying when I get involved in worldly affairs.”

This was no mere excuse. As pathetic as Yakumo felt about it, it was true. Of course, such complaints held no meaning for Aoba Toudou.

“I have already spoken to Mount Hiei.”

The old man, after all, had more than enough influence to push aside such *minor* issues.

“I see...” Unusually for Yakumo, he seemed to be in the mood to do little but sigh.

“That said, I do not intend to ask too much of you. That’s hardly my place, after all.”

“Well, please explain specifically what you need of me, then I’ll decide if I can accept.”

Only Yakumo could have answered in such a manner. Retsu Kudou, for example, despite being older than Toudou, would not have been able to refuse any request for a “favor.”

“I want you to help Tatsuya Shiba.”

“...Is Your Excellency partial to him, too?”

“Despite being an accidental *creation*, he is a singular, ultimate individual. He shall continue to be useful.”

Yakumo had to feel sympathy for Tatsuya at that—after all, the “usefulness” Toudou spoke of was the same usefulness a lab animal had to its researchers.

Aoba Toudou’s reach was long. It seemed to Yakumo that Tatsuya would have a difficult time escaping the man’s grasp.

As far as the mission, however, Yakumo didn't imagine that Tatsuya would experience any serious difficulty. "I shouldn't think that he'll have any trouble with someone like Gu Jie."

"I'm not worried about Tatsuya Shiba facing off against Gu Jie."

"So is it the possibility of a clash with Stars that concerns you?"

Yakumo knew that a high-ranking officer from Stars, the USNA military's magician unit that reported directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had infiltrated Japan, and he knew what that officer's objective was. He hadn't gone so far as to look into their motivation, but he knew that the USNA military wanted to assassinate Gu Jie themselves. They were trying to prevent him from falling into the custody of Japanese authorities. There was undoubtedly something they didn't want potentially getting revealed.

As Tatsuya closed in on Gu Jie, it was easy to predict that Stars would try to hamper his progress again. Still, that didn't seem to Yakumo like a situation that called for his personal intervention.

"From the standpoint of pure combat ability, I don't think that Benjamin 'Canopus' Lowes, the Stars second-in-command, would present a serious challenge for Tatsuya Shiba," he said.

"Not in a no-holds-barred fight to the death, no."

"I see."

Yakumo saw what Toudou was concerned about. Aoba Toudou wanted to avoid his Yotsuba "product" being dragged into a scenario where the outcome would be decided by something other than violence.

"What I ask is that you hold Tatsuya Shiba's reins such that he doesn't find himself in an inconvenient situation."

"Even at the expense of the hunt for Gu Jie?"

"I would be ideal if Shiba can still eliminate him, but it's no disaster if he doesn't. Stars will deal with Gu Jie if we don't, in any case."

In other words, Toudou didn't care if Stars assassinated Gu Jie. This suggested he was indifferent to the Ten Master Clans saving face. It might even be to the

old man's advantage for the Ten Master Clans to be forced into a slightly worse situation.

"In that case, I shall do as you ask. Tatsuya Shiba is hardly a stranger to me, after all."

"I thank you. Will ten cushions suffice?"

"Cushion" was a code word from back when transactions were commonly conducted with paper bills. A single cushion referred to ten thousand 10,000-yen bills—in other words, one hundred million yen, or about one million USNA dollars. Ten cushions therefore meant one billion yen.

Yakumo shook his head with a rueful chuckle. "No, no. Despite it all, I truly have renounced worldly concerns. I need no monetary compensation."

Toudou, in turn, shook his own head. "The old saying 'There's nothing more expensive than free,' always holds true, or at least I believe it does. If you won't take cash, let me at least send you an appropriate statue of the Buddha."

Incidentally, there was no doubt that any image of the Buddha that Aoba Toudou sent would be made of pure gold.

"Just don't send anything that will be hard to dispose of, please."

"Something you'd have trouble disposing of? It's an amusing idea, but I can't imagine such a thing."

Toudou braced his hands against his knees and stood; the motion belied his old age.

A moment later, Yakumo rose silently to his feet as well.

"Well, the tea was awful, *as usual*, but my thanks for it all the same."

Yakumo smiled at the obligatory parting phrase, then opened the room's sliding door for his guest to leave.



It was past ten o'clock when Tatsuya and Miyuki arrived home from their dinner with Katsuto, Mayumi, and Masaki.

But for high school students, that wasn't really such a late hour. Minami was, quite naturally, still awake.

"Welcome home," she said, greeting Tatsuya and Miyuki in the entryway wearing her work clothes (which is to say her maid outfit).

"Hi, Minami. Were there any calls for us while we were out?"

A faint look of hesitation flickered across Minami's face. "There were no calls from the main family office, the Kuroba family, or the Tsukuba family."

It was true that Tatsuya was waiting on results from the magicians performing traces for him. But something in Minami's tone gave the impression that there had been a message about some other matter.

"I'll hear it in the living room."

"Very well."

Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami filed into the living room. The siblings sat on the sofa there, and Minami stood facing them to report on the message that had arrived.

"There was an urgent message from First High."

"Urgent?"

"Yes, Miyuki. The contents are not particularly pressing, but I believe it was marked urgent because of the need to disseminate the information by the end of today."

“So what was it?” asked Tatsuya.

“School will be closed starting tomorrow, through at least Saturday the twenty-third, although the message mentioned that it may be extended.”

Minami delivered her answer to Tatsuya’s question, and the siblings were considerably surprised.

This felt like a hasty response to both of them.

“...That’s quite sudden,” said Miyuki.

“Today’s incident is close on the heels of the one that happened at Second High. I suppose I can’t blame them for taking precautions,” replied Tatsuya, who, in searching for some kind of logic behind the decision, ended up convincing himself of its correctness.

“I see... Still, that’s a bit of a problem.” Miyuki sighed softly, putting her hand to her cheek.

“What’s the matter?” Tatsuya asked.

Miyuki looked slightly abashed and seemed to be vaguely avoiding meeting his eyes. “There was the commotion on the way back to school, and then once the police were finished interviewing me, I came straight home, so...I left my personal things in my locker at school.”

Her expression made it seem like there was something in them that she didn’t want other people to see.

“We can retrieve them tomorrow.”

Miyuki looked up at her brother, surprised. “When the campus is closed?”

“We’ll just be getting them to let us in to get your things. If we really can’t get in, it’ll be okay to give up, right?”

Notably, Miyuki didn’t take the opportunity to protest that it wasn’t such a big deal. “That’s...true, yes.”

She was undeniably concerned and, in the end, decided to rely on Tatsuya for tomorrow.

Because Tatsuya now knew where the long-distance SB attack had originated

from, he could head to its location. However, he did not go back out that night and pursued a different idea instead.

Just before bedtime at midnight, Tatsuya knocked at his sister's bedroom door. "Miyuki, do you have a second?"

"Ah, yes. Just a moment," came her flustered voice from the other side of the door. There was the sound of hurried preparation, and Tatsuya didn't have long to wait before her face appeared in the doorway. "Please come in."

There was a faint flush around his sister's eyes, perhaps out of embarrassment at her appearance—she'd hastily thrown a robe on over her negligee. But she hadn't closed the front of the robe, perhaps because there hadn't been time.

Standing there in his own pajamas, Tatsuya didn't hesitate to enter Miyuki's room once he'd been invited in.

"Please sit," she offered.

"No, I'm fine." Tatsuya's back was to the door, and he didn't go any farther into the room.

"Tatsuya?"

"Miyuki, I'm sorry to spring such an odd request on you, but..."

"Yes?" She tilted her head curiously at his uncharacteristically roundabout manner.

"Would you mind getting up early tomorrow?"

Miyuki's face turned puzzled—why would something as simple as that be a difficult question for her brother to ask? Her answer seemed obvious. "No, I don't mind that at all. But can I ask by what time specifically you'd like me to be up?"

This was the answer she got: "I'd like you to come to the basement laboratory at four AM."

"...That's quite early."

"I know, I'm sorry, but..."

“No, I don’t mind!” Miyuki had been so taken aback by the early hour that she’d blurted out her initial feelings, but she soon composed herself and walked back her reaction. She used a bit more force than was necessary out of an urgent need to make it clear that she could never hold any sort of grievance against her brother.

“Okay,” Tatsuya replied, his eyes widening, although he soon regained his composure.

“Is there anything else, Tatsuya? You can tell me anything, you know.” Miyuki continued to press Tatsuya out of her consuming desire to avoid being disliked by him even for a brief instant.

With her robe untied, Tatsuya could see the swell of her bare chest beneath her negligee. He raised his gaze to make sure that nothing below her shoulders entered his field of view and, pushing aside his discomfort, answered his sister’s question.

“Make sure you bathe before you come. A shower’s fine, as long as you make sure to purify yourself.”

“I understand!” Miyuki’s voice was raised, but her own anxiety over not letting Tatsuya hear the hammering of her heartbeat kept her from noticing that.

“You can wear a robe and your underwear—actually, it would be better over a swimsuit.”

Miyuki’s heart felt like it was going to burst in her chest. “All right. Um, er...is this a CAD adjustment?” She’d suspected as much as soon as Tatsuya had specified the laboratory, but she had to ask, just to contain her own excitement.

“No, it’s not that,” Tatsuya said, averting his gaze.

Seeing this, Miyuki’s eyes widened in surprise.

—Was her brother actually *embarrassed*?

“I’ll explain what we’re doing when you get there. Sorry. I’m counting on you,” he said, his eyes still averted and speech rapid. When he was finished, he all but darted out of her room.

Once the door closed behind him, Miyuki slumped to her knees. Putting her hands to her cheeks, she could feel the heat in them.

“I’ve *got* to make sure to wake up at three,” she swore to herself, cursing her shaky legs as she stood and turned toward her bed. Sleep seemed impossible, but telling herself that appearing in front of her brother with dark circles under her eyes was completely unacceptable, Miyuki forced herself into sleep.

It was possible, rather, that she passed out from *overthinking*, but considering the consequences of being unable to sleep from the excitement, this outcome was just fine.



Despite only getting three hours of sleep, Miyuki’s eyes opened at exactly 3:00 AM. She washed herself assiduously and put on clean underwear, then a bathrobe, which she tied closed. Tatsuya had recommended a swimsuit, but Miyuki had the feeling that underwear would be better.

In front of her vanity, she brushed her hair thoroughly. There weren’t any tangles, so a single pass with a comb would have been sufficient, but she still ran her brush through it over and over.

Her eyes went to her makeup kit, but in the end, she decided to forego it, thinking that was what her brother would prefer. She’d gone with unscented shampoo, and she wasn’t wearing anything decorative at all—this was how she’d interpreted his request that she “purify herself.”

Just before 4:00 AM, Miyuki headed downstairs to the basement laboratory. This was the room where the flight device had first been tested.

“It’s Miyuki,” she said at the door.

“Come in.”

She took a breath and opened the lab door. For a moment, she froze in spite of herself, but she soon stepped in and closed the door behind her.

It was surprise at Tatsuya’s appearance that had stopped Miyuki in her tracks. He was wearing nothing besides a pair of skintight swimming trunks that extended to his mid-thigh.

The hallway outside was heated, but it was even warmer in the lab. Tatsuya had probably adjusted the temperature to avoid a chill while he was wearing only his swimwear.

Miyuki's hesitation lasted only a moment.

She untied the sash at her waist and let her bathrobe slip from her shoulders to the floor.

Now it was Tatsuya's turn to feel his breath catch in his throat. He'd expected her to be wearing a modest one-piece swimsuit.

But in reality—

She was wearing a white bra and panties, whose lacy material meant that there were many places here and there where her skin was visible through them.

If the same design had been red or black, it definitely would've seemed purposefully sexy, but the white color gave it a certain elegance. Of course, Miyuki's general bearing contributed to that impression.

"...Tatsuya," she began. Her eyes were slightly downcast, and her face faintly flushed—although when he looked closer, he saw that her blush wasn't limited to just her cheeks, but actually extended down her neck and to her chest. "Just tell me what you need me to do..."

"—Before we get started, I need to explain a few things."

"—All right."

There were about two meters between them.

"As you know, my sight isn't some kind of clairvoyance. It's not some convenient power that subconsciously identifies what I want to see and projects it into my consciousness. Without active selection based on the laws of causality, my ability won't lead me to the information I'm seeking."

"I think it's a wonderful ability—not relying on intuition, but rather accurately gathering specific information."

Tatsuya showed no modesty in the face of Miyuki's praise. "It's true that the effort required to consciously sort through information makes it more accurate

than abilities that rely on unconscious thought. But insofar as it involves consciously tracing threads of causality, the process requires far more mental resources than something like clairvoyance.”

“By ‘resources,’ do you mean magical resources?”

“Attention, concentration, persistence, various cognitive abilities... it’s not something that only involves magic, but if you were to lump everything it takes together, ‘magical resources’ isn’t a bad term.”

“All right, that’s how I’ll think of it, then.” Perhaps drawn in by Tatsuya’s explanation, somewhere along the line, Miyuki had stopped averting her eyes.

She was looking at him attentively. Tatsuya nodded and continued. “Past this point, I’m going to set aside the general theory and talk about my current assignment. At Zama, I sighted Gu Jie, my target. I haven’t turned up any information connected to him since then, but even without any causal relationships, with the information I gathered on him at the time, I can get a fix on his location—if I devote sufficient resources to it. However...”

“You don’t have sufficient magical resources? Is there anything I can do to assist?”

“No, if I pour all the resources at my disposal into the task, I ought to be able to locate any specific individual in the country who has special structural information. I wouldn’t even need to be at 100 percent. If I devote 70 percent of my resources to Elemental Sight, I think that would be enough.”

Hearing this, Miyuki knit her brows together in consternation, but no more than five seconds later, she gasped, her eyes widening. “Wait, is it because you’re dedicating some of your hyper-perception resources to protecting me instead?”

Tatsuya’s expression was pained and awkward as he nodded. “I’m constantly dedicating about half of my Elemental Sight resources to you.”

No matter how far apart they were, Tatsuya’s magic would protect her from any threat. What made that possible was nothing less than the fact that he was constantly keeping her in his sight.

Constantly meant nothing less than literally twenty-four hours per day. Of

course, not even Tatsuya could use magic while asleep. But even in slumber, his subconscious watched over her. His sight remained active. If anything threatened his sister, Tatsuya was confident that he would wake immediately, no matter how deeply he was sleeping. In fact, it wasn't a matter of confidence; the system would work with 100 percent certainty.

But because of that, certain tasks that were possible in principle became impossible due to lack of resources. And that was precisely the situation now.

“Tatsuya, please release the resources that you're dedicating to my protection immediately! I am right here. There is no need to use your sight on me!”

Given Miyuki's personality, this was not a surprising reaction. Her dear brother was failing in his mission, and it was because of her. Even someone who wasn't Miyuki would undoubtedly have made a similar demand.

But Tatsuya shook his head.

“Why? There are no enemies here. We're underground, surrounded by thick walls—it would be difficult for even magic interference to reach us here. And even if there were a magical attack, the sensitive instrumentation and sensors here in the lab would immediately detect it. Surely you understand that even better than I do.”

“Logically, you're completely correct.”

Miyuki gazed at her embarrassed, reluctant brother, her eyes full of questions as she waited for him to continue.

“You're right, but...I have an emotional problem that makes it impossible.”

Miyuki's breath caught. The question marks in her eyes turned to exclamation marks.

“Miyuki, I'm afraid to let you out of my sight. If I looked away from you for even a second, the thought of something happening to you while I'm not looking drives me mad.”

“Tatsuya...” With effort, Miyuki took a breath and managed to get that one word out.

Tatsuya's sole remaining emotion was love for his sister. Miyuki knew this, having heard it from her mother.

But this was the first time she had heard Tatsuya himself say that his love for her was this strong, this profoundly intense.

"Logically, I know you're right. When I'm right next to you, even if you're not in my sight, I'd still be able to react if something were to happen. And if I were to look away from you for a second, I know that you're not so weak that something could instantly hurt you. It's not like Okinawa anymore. I know that, too."

Tatsuya looked away and sighed in self-reproach.

"But even if I understand, logically, that it's true, my emotions won't accept it. If I neglect finding Gu Jie, something like yesterday might happen again. I know it increases the chance someone might threaten you with violence. I know I need to focus all of my Elemental Sight on him to break this stalemate, but my feelings won't let me." Tatsuya pointed his right thumb at his heart and shook his head dejectedly. "I never knew until now just how inconvenient emotions could be."

Miyuki rushed close to her brother, wrapping both her hands around one of his. "Is...is there anything I *can* do?"

Tatsuya met his sister's gaze, peering deeply into her eyes. "Yeah. Miyuki, I need your help."

"Yes, anything! Anything at all!" For the moment, Miyuki had forgotten any sense of shame. Perhaps it was her imagination, but Tatsuya seemed, if anything, more embarrassed.

"I asked myself why I couldn't bear to take my sight off of you, and I came up with a single answer." Miyuki's eyes urged him to continue, and Tatsuya forced his awkwardness down and delivered his conclusion. "I think I'm afraid of losing my sense of certainty that you're safe."

"But, Tatsuya, I'm right here." Miyuki couldn't understand how her brother could be anything other than certain when she was right in front of his face.

"My eyes see nothing besides light and shadow."

Unfortunately, that was unavoidable. What was it that Tatsuya saw with his sight? Only he knew the answer to that question.

“In normal circumstances, seeing light and shadow is enough for me not to feel anxious. But with you, I’m always using my other sight as well.”

Tatsuya’s hyper-perception allowed him to gather far more information than the usual five human senses could. He was constantly using that preternatural sense, Elemental Sight, to watch Miyuki, so compared to everyone else in the world, whom he merely observed with his normal senses, she had far more presence and weight in his reality.

While they weren’t quite shadows on a cave wall to him, other people were like the color drawings there—images without any depth.

“Simply looking at you with my naked eyes isn’t enough for me to really believe you’re safe. That’s what’s stopping me from freeing up any resources.” Tatsuya placed his free hand over Miyuki’s two, which still clasped his right. “So, Miyuki, I need you to put my mind at ease.”

Miyuki was so lost in Tatsuya’s eyes that she didn’t even feel herself nodding.

Still in his swim trunks, Tatsuya moved to the center of the lab. He sat down on the floor, crossing his legs comfortably, not bothering with a more formal lotus position.

This was a bit of an oversimplification, because: Wearing nothing but her underwear, Miyuki sat in his lap, her back against his chest.

Tatsuya’s arms were wrapped around her body, his left hand clasping her right, and his right, her left—a pose that seemed to say *I’ll never let you go*.

Miyuki’s body was stiff as she looked down, her skin flushed faintly pink all the way down to her toes. The only reason she wasn’t as red as a tomato was due to the delicate balance of arousal and nervousness she was feeling. In either case, it didn’t seem like it was a healthy state to spend a long time in.

“Miyuki.” Tatsuya spoke her name, his mouth close to her ear. His warm breath tickled her earlobe. “Try to relax a bit more.”

In response, Miyuki’s grip on Tatsuya’s hands tightened. “I—I can’t...” she

whispered, on the verge of crying out. The only reason she didn't shout was because she was already having enough trouble breathing that mustering more volume was impossible.

The hands that held hers were large and masculine.

The arms that encircled her were well-muscled and sturdy.

On her back, she could feel the warmth of his chest—this person who was both her brother and her fiancé.

Were the intense heartbeats she felt her own or her brother's? Miyuki couldn't distinguish them anymore.

"Your body temperature has risen a little. Try to relax."

Miyuki felt so shy and self-conscious, she thought she was going to die. At the very least, she wanted to cover her face, but both of her hands were currently being held still, so she couldn't even do that. The one saving grace was that with her back to Tatsuya, he couldn't see her expression.

But—this was far from unpleasant. On the contrary, being held like this made Miyuki very happy.

Of course, this only added to her embarrassment.

...It's not like we're doing anything dirty, Miyuki desperately reminded herself. She was indisputably a very sheltered girl, but she had an average amount of knowledge about such things for a high school junior. Perhaps her understanding was a bit meager in certain places, but in any case, she knew the basics.

She was indecently dressed in only her underwear, with her skin making direct contact with a boy's. The situation was fundamentally intense, but that was all that was happening. She was simply being held from behind.

That boy's hands were holding hers. Her hands were holding his.

Between them, there was no unseemly touching or petting. And yet—

It's like my body and mind are going to melt into a puddle...

She couldn't think, but she also wasn't about to faint.

And then she heard Tatsuya's voice whisper next to her ear:

"Even when I close my eyes, I can feel the softness of your skin and the warmth of your body. You are truly in my heart."

"I am right here. I am right here, and you are protecting me." Miyuki's response slipped from her lips before she could even think. "So, Tatsuya...there isn't a single thing to worry about. You can act freely and do what you please. You can use your power however you need to."



She was in a sort of trance, as though she were a shrine maiden speaking the words of a god who had possessed her.

Miyuki's words were the trigger that unleashed Tatsuya's power.

The resources he had dedicated solely to her returned to him.

Tatsuya's sight hurtled through the sea of information as he sought the answer to his question.

He traversed the tree of causality, searching through countless branches in a process of trial and error—

—And then he saw the form of his enemy.



Gu Jie—the mastermind of the Hakone terrorist attack, the stateless corpse-manipulating magician from the former nation of Dahan—was pulled out of slumber by the sudden piercing gaze he felt.

He didn't understand how he was being watched. There was no one inside the room, nor was anyone peering in from outside.

The gaze wasn't coming from anywhere in this world. It was as though he was being watched from the other side.

Before he attempted to ascertain the nature of whatever was watching him, he activated a spell-blocking seal. It was an improved version of a Taoist mystical dance, developed at the Kunlun Institute, that didn't require actually pacing through the pattern of the seven stars in the Big Dipper. The technique was meant to seal out SBs, so its utility against modern magic was somewhat limited. There was no way of knowing how much use it would be against the attack that Gu Jie expected to follow the gaze itself.

An instant after he'd prepared himself, his defenses were shattered by a powerful concentration of psions that struck like a bullet.

Gu Jie hastily put up a new defensive barrier.

There was no second strike.

The sensation of being watched had vanished.

Gu Jie exhaled in relief, then checked himself for injuries. He felt no pain anywhere, but there were plenty of magic techniques that could end a life without causing physical sensation.

He was well-versed in such techniques, but strangely, Gu Jie could find no signs of harm anywhere. Nor was there any indication of delayed effects or conditional activation.

Gu Jie didn't like not knowing what had been done to him, but he would deal with that later. It was clear that he'd been found. He had to get moving immediately.



Miyuki *came out of her trance* upon sensing the powerful magic Tatsuya's body was emitting. She was about to start feeling embarrassed, but before she could, Tatsuya released her hands and relaxed his arms, at which point Miyuki quickly got to her feet.

She sensed that behind her, Tatsuya likewise stood. Miyuki reflexively stiffened. But the embrace she dreaded—or hoped for—never came. Instead, he walked smoothly past her.

Tatsuya stopped in front of the door. Miyuki watched his back. Without turning around, he spoke.

“Thank you, Miyuki.”

The full-body shiver that passed over her was not from cold. “Was that helpful?” she asked in a voice hoarse from delight.

“Of course it was,” answered Tatsuya with a faint chuckle, still not turning around. “Let's save the details for when we're dressed again.”

Miyuki's face went beet red, and she clasped her hands to her chest and crouched down, overwhelmed.

Tatsuya, meanwhile, turned and left the laboratory.

It wasn't even 5:00 AM yet, but Miyuki had no inclination to try going back to bed. She felt a bit sweaty, but since she'd decided to wait to take a shower until after she'd spoken with Tatsuya, she put on some loungewear rather than her

school uniform.

When she arrived in the dining room, she found her brother sitting at the table, dressed for a workout.

“Good morning, Miss Miyuki.”

“Good morning, Minami.”

Tatsuya wasn't the only one up—perhaps thanks to her professional dedication, Minami was there, too, fully armed and operational in her maid outfit.

“Will tea be all right?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Miyuki sat down across from Tatsuya, and Minami poured a steaming hot cup of green tea. Its pleasant flavor brought Miyuki's mind fully back to wakefulness.

“Minami, we're all set here. Go rest.”

“Understood.” Minami bowed and left the dining room. She didn't insist on staying, because she understood that Tatsuya wanted to discuss something with his sister without her overhearing.

After making sure Minami was gone, Tatsuya turned his attention to his sister.

“Miyuki.”

“Yes, Tatsuya?” Miyuki's posture was always good, but she sat up even straighter now. The sound of his voice as he addressed her brought the heat from moments earlier, when his bare skin had pressed against hers. The sudden rush of nervousness, rather than bashfulness, made her tongue-tied.

“Sorry about earlier,” he offered, and his concerned gaze immediately banished her nerves.

“...I am so pleased to have been able to help you, or rather, to have avoided being a burden to you.” Miyuki held Tatsuya's gaze steadily as she shook her head slightly and smiled. “In any case, did you find any clues?”

Miyuki was taking the lead in the conversation to avoid the need for Tatsuya

to make any further excuses.

He didn't waste her kind consideration. "I found him."

"So did you settle it already?"

Miyuki didn't consider the killing of another human to be especially immoral; more precisely, she felt no compunctions about Tatsuya killing another human.

If Tatsuya had killed someone, then that person needed to die. Unconsciously, she had fully embraced this warped form of ethics.

"No, I didn't erase him."

Once he'd apprehended the information of an entity, physical distance was no longer relevant. Be it inanimate matter, a living thing, or even a human, he could turn it to dust. Tatsuya understood what Miyuki meant by "settled," which was why he'd shaken his head.

"May I ask why not?"

Miyuki's question was not meant to criticize Tatsuya's decision. She meant precisely what she was asking. She didn't understand what the point of showing Gu Jie mercy would be.

"The goal of this mission isn't to eliminate our enemies. It's to uncover the truth behind the terrorist attack and reveal that truth to the world."

Tatsuya's answer was indirect, but it was enough for Miyuki.

"So you're saying that if you erased the mastermind without anybody knowing, it would become impossible to establish his responsibility?"

"Right. Aunt Maya said she didn't care whether he was alive or dead, but obviously, bringing him in alive would be best. Even if I were going to kill him, I'd need to show how I'd found him, and I would need to leave a body."

"I see—you'd have to leave him in a state that he would still be identifiable as the mastermind of the terrorist attacks."

Tatsuya nodded.

She was pleased at his acknowledgment that she'd gotten it right, but then her eyes suddenly went wide, and she drew a sharp breath. "In that case, you

really don't have any time to be sitting around here chatting with me, do you? If you've finally identified where he is, shouldn't you be heading to apprehend him right away?"

Tatsuya gave his suddenly flustered sister an easygoing smile. "It's fine. I put a marker on him."

"A...marker?"

"Yup. I learned the technique when I took down Gongjin Zhou."

When Tatsuya had been pursuing Zhou in Kyoto, he hadn't been able to break the man's Qimen Dunjia on his own. The only reason Zhou hadn't escaped was because Nakura had fought him earlier and lost, leaving some of his blood—or more accurately, the intense force of will contained in that blood—on Zhou, which allowed Tatsuya to locate him.

Tatsuya didn't have the ability to send his own blood flying. Instead, he'd developed a new technique. He'd used a durable, high-density ball of psions—which he'd learned to create as an anti-parasite countermeasure—as a bullet, which could then be traced for several days afterward. The technique let him ascertain geographical coordinates, and once he'd gotten close, he used the energy-manipulation he'd learned from Yakumo to completely nullify Qimen Dunjia.

"There wasn't a chance back in Zama, but this time, I definitely got a hit. I'll be able to track Gu Jie's location now even without dedicating a lot of resources to it," Tatsuya confidently declared.

They had him.

Miyuki had no reason to doubt his words.



Tatsuya headed out for his usual training at Ninefold Temple, but not out of complacency or misplaced confidence.

As he'd explained to Miyuki, his current mission was to capture the mastermind, not eliminate him. They would need to assemble a pursuit unit, and it was still too early in the day to contact the relevant parties.

Until the appropriate time to move came, he would train at Yakumo's temple as usual.

However, after he and Yakumo finished their sparring, they had an unusual exchange.

"So, Tatsuya, how goes the mission?" the monk asked conversationally, sitting on the floor of the main hall as he sipped the tea one of his disciples had brought.

"Not much progress so far," Tatsuya answered, omitting the *until yesterday* qualifier.

"You don't seem too concerned about it." Yakumo sounded more amused than dubious.

"Well, it's not really any of my business." This time, the words Tatsuya omitted were *until a day ago*. When Miyuki had been attacked by anti-magic activists yesterday, finding and eliminating Gu Jie had become a task of personal importance.

"None of your business, eh...? You certainly seemed to be applying yourself to it diligently enough."

"I was given the mission. I have yet to defy orders," Tatsuya replied, ignoring Yakumo's knowing smirk. "It's rare, though, Master, for you to take any interest in my duties."

"It's not rare at all. I've helped you out more than once in the past. What about the vampire incident, or the Parasidoll incident?"

"So you're saying there's something in this one you can't overlook?"

"Just because I'm a priest doesn't mean I've completely disconnected myself from the wider events of the world. Much to my annoyance," Yakumo replied airily. Tatsuya didn't get the impression that Yakumo was actually particularly annoyed.

"In that case, might I ask your assistance in tracking down Gu Jie, the former Dahanese ancient magician and terrorist mastermind?"

Tatsuya decided that any further muddying of the waters would only be

irritating, so he shamelessly stated the request. He was presupposing that he'd be turned down, which would let him needle Yakumo about it.

"Certainly," Yakumo said.

This ready agreement caught Tatsuya so off guard that he was briefly stumped for how to respond.

"What's wrong? You seem surprised."

Tatsuya knew that if he lost his temper here, it was game over. He decided to wave a white flag—either way, it was a defeat.

"I'm surprised. I had no idea you would agree so easily."

"It's just assistance. I'll help you out a little, that's all."

Tatsuya couldn't see past Yakumo's still-cheerful expression to whatever his real motivations were. "All right, I'll try and figure out something you can help with."

"Excellent. I'll do whatever's in my power to do. Oh, but no more asking me to teach you new techniques."

"I know, I know."

In this moment, Tatsuya had yet to realize that he'd been manipulated into asking for Yakumo's assistance.



After he returned home from training, Tatsuya changed into his uniform as usual and headed to school.

He hadn't forgotten that school was canceled. It was merely time to retrieve the girls' things.

Unlike a century earlier, there was no need for students to haul textbooks and notebooks to and from school every day. But they did need to bring clothes to change into for gym classes, practicums, and club activities.

For gym clothes and other items where they didn't need to worry about small details, students could cheaply send items to the cleaner's, but even the girls who were willing to entrust their uniforms to a professional didn't send in their

underwear.

In addition to that, girls tended to carry all sorts of accessories with them. Thus, most of the students who went to school empty-handed were boys, and it was the girls who to varying degrees brought personal items to school.

The gate was closed owing to the situation, but they had everything they needed in order to enter. They were wearing their uniforms, they had their student IDs, and they had a valid reason to be there. They encountered no protests on their way in. Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami had every reason to believe their return home would be equally smooth.

That expectation was not, itself, mistaken. However, there was an unexpected person at the school once they got there.

“Shiba!”

“Ichijou?”

In the 2-A classroom sat Masaki, alone, at his desk.

“...Are you studying?” Miyuki asked despite the obvious answer to her question—she was simply too taken aback at seeing him sitting there alone with his online study terminal open.

“Yeah...” Masaki answered with a chagrined smile, fully aware of how odd the scene he presented was. “Third High has class today, so...”

“Oh, right.”

Despite their surprise, Tatsuya—and Miyuki, too, of course—accepted this explanation. Since Masaki was continuing the Third High curriculum while here at First High, he’d been given a seat. But it was just a seat, not a full enrollment. Of course, classes for him might well be canceled, too, but that was dependent on Third High.

“Third High is off, too, starting tomorrow, so I’m trying to finish my work up this morning.”

Then wouldn’t it have been better to take today off? Tatsuya held the words in his throat, but in the end, he kept silent, because just then, the notification tone on Masaki’s terminal chimed. Masaki hastily looked back to the terminal.

Keeping her footsteps quiet so as not to interrupt Masaki, Miyuki headed to the lockers at the back of the classroom and quietly collected her things.

After coming back around to the front of the classroom, she bowed to Masaki, and she and Tatsuya quietly left the room.



They encountered no trouble on the walk home from First High. It felt more anticlimactic than nerve-racking to Tatsuya, but he decided that even these activists had more sense than to cause incidents in the same place two days in a row.

Now that he could concentrate on the main investigation, he had no right to be frustrated. Based on the information that Masaki would be available in the afternoon, Tatsuya undertook preparations for the imminent pursuit of Gu Jie.

“Tatsuya, you’ve tracked down the mastermind, haven’t you?”

“Yes. I just received a message from the main house.”

“I see...”

Tatsuya saw a frustrated scowl on Mayumi’s face in reaction to the lie he had told her. Perhaps she thought it was embarrassing for the Yotsuba family to have beaten her family to the punch, despite the incident having happened in Saegusa territory.

The truth was that the Yotsuba family hadn’t made much progress, either, but naturally, Tatsuya didn’t say that.

“Gu Jie, the mastermind of the Hakone terrorist attack, is currently hiding in Hiratsuka city.”

“Huh? Hiratsuka?!”

“Our enemy hasn’t been moving much this whole time, instead staying within a fairly limited region. He used our assumption that the perpetrator of a major terrorist attack would avoid densely populated areas against us.”

“I see...” The irritation evident on Mayumi’s face in the visiphone was aimed at herself, her father, and her older brother.

The Saegusa unit assembled to find Gu Jie that her brother Tomokazu was

leading had sortied out from the Koto district to Narita. Based on the results from their search in Hakone, Izu, and the Miura Peninsula regions, they had concluded that there was a low probability their target was hiding out there.

And yet, the perpetrator was there, tucked away in an area they'd supposedly already cleared of suspicion. This meant the dragnet they'd cast hadn't been tight enough. This made it hard for Mayumi to keep her faith in the prowess of the Saegusa family, which was supposed to be right up there with the Yotsuba family's might within the Ten Master Clans.

"May I continue, Saegusa?"

"Ah, I'm sorry. What is it?"

Tatsuya didn't have to read Mayumi's mind to know from her expression that she was being tortured by her powerlessness. But rather than offer her any comfort, he turned her attention back to the task at hand. "In order to give him no time to prepare an escape, I believe we should move to apprehend him immediately. However, I don't believe we should resolve the Hakone terrorist attack entirely on our own. We need to take the optics of the police into account."

"That's true. This was a large-scale bombing that happened right next to the capital. The reputation of the police depends on them being the ones to arrest him. If private citizen magicians like us bring him in, there's no way it won't hurt the relationship between us and law enforcement..."

If they captured Gu Jie but damaged their relationship with the police, it would be a net loss. The Saegusa family actively pursued relationships with non-magician organizations, so Mayumi readily agreed with Tatsuya's assessment.

"So, Saegusa," Tatsuya requested, "can you mobilize the police to arrest Gu Jie?"

Mayumi's brow furrowed. *"Under what pretext? I'm sure you know this already, but we can't get an arrest warrant just because the Yotsuba family asks for one."*

Tatsuya answered without batting an eye. "I know. If we could get the police moving using standard procedures, I wouldn't even think to ask for your help.

But given that we don't have the material evidence necessary to convince law enforcement to act, I was hoping that the Saegusa family, with its strong connections to police in the Kanto region, would be able to help."

Despite how obvious this provocation was, Mayumi was unable to keep her irritation from showing on her face. *"I mean, I can try, but...when it comes to influence with the police department, to be honest, I would think your girlfriend would be a better choice."*

But she wasn't going to make the obvious mistake of being provoked into promising something. Mayumi teasingly emphasized the word *girlfriend* to make it clear she wasn't feeling cornered.

Of course, such a bluff had no effect on Tatsuya at all. "Certainly, if you don't mind my contacting the Chiba family, I can try talking to Erika."

Of course in that case, it would be the Saegusa family who lost face.

"Okay, please, just stop!" If it came out that Mayumi had independently authorized the Chiba family's involvement, she would have to answer to her family. It wasn't surprising that she'd raise her voice to stop that from happening.

"Nevertheless, I'd like to act tonight."

"Fine! I'll get things arranged by then! Just stop bullying me!"

"I appreciate your help." Notably, Tatsuya did not dispute Mayumi's use of the word *bullying*.

After talking to Mayumi, Tatsuya finished a visiphone meeting with Katsuto and Masaki. Just when he was considering resting until it was time to leave, the doorbell rang, announcing visitors.

It was Fumiya and Ayako.

Miyuki, who happened to be wearing modest clothing that was suitable for leaving the house, greeted them in the living room. "Ayako, Fumiya—welcome! Wait, didn't you have school today?" she asked.

It was only 4:00 PM. All magic high schools shared the same hours, and outside of extracurricular activities, classes ended at 3:20 PM, which didn't leave enough

time to come all the way here from Fourth High. Both Fumiya and Ayako were dressed in inconspicuous, casual clothing. Their lack of luggage suggested that they had checked in to a hotel before coming by. Not knowing their circumstances, Miyuki's question was entirely natural.

"Please pardon our intrusion, Miyuki. Fourth High has also canceled classes today."

"Oh? I'd heard that Third High is in session today," Tatsuya called.

"Following First High's example, Second High and Fourth High are closed starting today. I heard that Fifth High is following suit starting tomorrow, too," Fumiya replied.

"Kind of an overreaction," Tatsuya muttered, as though it didn't have anything to do with him, even though he'd been directly involved in the incident that was the cause of the school closures. Commenting on the issue as though he was a disinterested party was fundamentally mistaken. However, nobody present pointed that fact out; it was hard to say whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Miyuki was the student council president of First High, so by rights, she should have known all of this already, but since she'd delegated the reporting of yesterday's incident to Izumi, she hadn't heard. "I'll need to make sure I make this up to Izumi," Miyuki murmured in a quiet voice. No doubt if Izumi were to know this, she would have been overjoyed.

"I hope you won't mind if I ask what brings you all the way out here?"

The twins, sitting across from Tatsuya, made eye contact and had a silent exchange to decide which of them would speak. Neither of them was trying to push the job off on the other.

"We verified the body of the ancient magician you informed us about, Tatsuya. Kazukiyo Oumi, alias the Dollmaker, was an ancient magician, and his specialty was a form of continental magic that reanimates corpses using spiritual beings. Your current target, Gu Jie, uses a different sort of technique to manipulate corpses."

"Using SBs to possess a corpse, rather than direct manipulation...that is

different from what I've heard of Gu Jie's magic. So they're not practitioners of the same school?"

Fumiya nodded immediately to Tatsuya's question. "Oumi was the descendant of practitioners who immigrated to Japan from the mainland one hundred fifty years ago. He seems to have been secretly proud to be carrying on a tradition more faithfully than Dahan or the Great Asian Alliance."

"So he was the descendant of an imported magical tradition that dates back to before the existence of magic was publicly revealed..."

They might have fancied themselves as successors of a great magic tradition, but from the perspective of ancient magicians who'd had roots in Japan for centuries, they were but newcomers. It wasn't hard to imagine them feeling uncomfortable. The strangely old-fashioned names these magicians had were surely their parents' attempt to blend in with the other magicians of Japan—although this one seemed to have gone in precisely the opposite direction of that.

"They were on rather bad terms with the ancient magicians of the onmyouji tradition, apparently."

"Which is the opening Gu Jie used."

"Most likely, yes."

"It's not a completely unsympathetic position, but this can't be justified," Tatsuya stated. "Not that I sympathize at all," he muttered to himself before continuing his inquiry. "Do you have any information on other collaborators?"

"Based on psychometric analysis of Oumi's body, it seems that Gu Jie obtained two new bodies... Sorry, we don't know anything else about them, though."

"Since the Kuroba and Tsukuba families also don't know anything, there's a good chance they're fairly high-level magicians," Tatsuya muttered.

"Yoshimi and Yuuka are of the same opinion."

A dead body was a dead body, whether they'd been a magician in life or not. There was no such thing as a magic postmortem examination technique that

only worked specifically on magicians. However, if a corpse that was being magically controlled were to keep some of the abilities it had had in life, there was a solid possibility that it would be able to evade tracking by perception-type magic.

Gu Jie's subordinates in the No-Head Dragon organization had possessed techniques that allowed them to process the brains of magicians into tools they called Sorcery Boosters to aid in casting specific magic. There was no reason to assume Gu Jie himself didn't possess similar abilities.

And back in Kamakura, Gu Jie had been planning to use the bodies of the magicians he'd transformed into Generators. If he'd been unable to utilize the power they had while alive, there would have been no need for that. It would have been more effective to have them self-destruct upon death, engulfing his enemies.

And yet, Tatsuya couldn't help but wonder—what could possibly let a corpse retain the abilities it had before dying?

The prevailing belief held that magic was an ability of the mind. There was no evidence contradicting this.

However, there was still no answer to the more fundamental question of *What is the mind?* Everything was still supposition and hypothesis.

Those hypotheses ran the gamut from ones that were broadly accepted to fields where there was no consensus at all. For example, to the question *What is the mind composed of?* the widely held answer was *It is composed of pushions*. On the other hand, the theme of *Where is the mind?* explanations ranged from *It exists in the information dimension* to *It exists in a mental dimension* to *It is materially extant in this world* to *It has no fixed location and is transient, shifting like water*, and each hypothesis had its adherents.

If a corpse could use magic, a mental ability, that meant life was not a necessary precondition for a mind. Indeed, it raised the question of what the fundamental difference between life and death really was.

Tatsuya had personally borne witness to the fact that once death had settled upon someone, they could not be brought back. This wasn't a feeling—he had seen it. His own Regenerate technique confirmed it. There was an undeniable

and distinct boundary between the state of life and that of death.

But if a corpse could use a power of the mind, would it not then be possible for that corpse to access other products of the mind—will, memories, emotions? Logically, didn't a corpse comprise the same character it had possessed in life within the realm of possibility? And if so, how was that fundamentally different from a living person?

"Tatsuya?" three voices chorused, pulling Tatsuya out of the reverie into which he'd fallen. Evidently, he'd been lost in thought for longer than he'd realized.

"Ah, sorry."

"Not at all. I apologize for interrupting your thoughts," Miyuki said.

"It's fine. Anyway," Tatsuya went on, changing the subject before she had a chance to commence an apology battle with him, "back to my first question—what are you two doing here? Even given the possibility that communications could be intercepted, surely you're not just here to give me the results of the investigation." He looked between the siblings intently.

They shared a glance, then Ayako sighed. "Tatsuya, you're honestly a bit too perceptive at times."

She meant *perceptive* in the literal sense of being good at perceiving things, not in the sense of being an empathetic person. It was an entreaty for him to stop seeing through everything all the time.

"As part of our efforts to avoid cooperating with the Juumonji and Saegusa families, we've recused ourselves from this investigation. Our father and Yuuka have done likewise."

This investigation was admittedly not so important as to necessitate the revelation of the Kuroba and Tsukuba families' high-level mental interference magic to the rest of the Ten Master Clans, who possessed no such abilities. The Yotsuba family was already fulfilling its obligations by sending Tatsuya to participate.

"With school being canceled through the weekend, we've been sent to act as Miyuki's bodyguards. She's much more powerful than us, but nevertheless..."

“So I hope you won’t mind putting up with us until Sunday.”

As Fumiya and Ayako bowed, Tatsuya nodded with an awkward smile. “No, it’ll make me feel better knowing you two are with her. So you’ll be staying in a hotel until the weekend?”

“Yes, but we were wondering if we’d be able to change shifts sleeping here. You don’t need to find us a bed.”

In other words, Fumiya was asking if they could keep watch overnight here. It was not, admittedly, a strange thing for a bodyguard to ask.

“If the two of you don’t mind sharing a bedroom, you can just cancel the hotel and stay here,” Tatsuya offered.

The former guest room was now Minami’s room, but the bedroom their mother had used when she was alive was currently unoccupied. It already had a twin bed in it, so it was perfectly usable. If their father, Tatsurou, happened to come over for some strange reason, they could simply send him to his second wife’s apartment, given that at this point, Tatsuya’s family position was stronger than Tatsurou’s.

“...What do you want to do, Ayako?” Fumiya asked.

Fumiya felt it was more responsible to stay here—and it was also what he personally wanted to do. Ayako felt the same way. Nevertheless, given that they’d be sharing a bedroom, Fumiya thought Ayako might have some misgivings, so he wanted to ask and make sure.

Fumiya’s concern was not misplaced; Ayako wore a faint scowl. While they were twins, Ayako was a girl of a certain age, and she seemed to feel some reluctance at sharing a room with a boy, even if it was her brother. Miyuki noticed her struggle and was about to invite Ayako to sleep in her own bedroom. But Ayako’s answer came first.

“We’re happy to accept your kind offer. Tatsuya, Miyuki, Minami—thank you all for your cooperation.”

“Not at all. Thanks for helping out. Minami, would you please get their bedroom ready?”

“Certainly.”

It was rather late to be tidying a room and making up a bed, but Minami accepted Tatsuya’s directive without a trace of irritation.

“All right, we’ll go get our luggage from the hotel,” Ayako said as she and Fumiya stood.

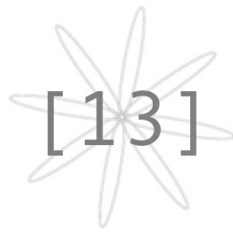
“I’ll be heading out shortly myself. I may not return tonight. Miyuki, can you handle the rest?”

“Of course, Tatsuya.”

“Good hunting, Tatsuya,” Ayako encouraged.

Tatsuya and Miyuki both stood a moment after the twins did.

“I expect to have this wrapped up by tomorrow morning,” Tatsuya replied crisply.



Gu Jie was hiding in the Hiratsuka metropolitan area. Katsuto, who was leading the unit tasked with capturing him, had deliberately kept its numbers as low as possible, both to avoid alerting the target prematurely and to avoid alarming the civilian population. He directed his force to advance.

But their movement had apparently been detected by their enemy. Not Gu Jie, but by a group that was attempting to aid in his *escape*.

“Major, we’ve confirmed that a combined force of magicians and law enforcement led by Katsuto Juumonji has begun deploying into Hiratsuka. Evidently, Japanese magicians have managed to get a fix on Hague’s hiding place.”

As the commander of the first squadron of the Stars, a special magic unit that reported directly to the USNA Joint Chiefs of Staff, Major Benjamin Canopus was the presumptive number two of the entire unit, behind only its general commander, Angie Sirius. In a mobile command center disguised as a trailer, he listened to the report from his subordinate, then replied without so much as pausing to talk to himself. “They’re bringing the police in, too? Apparently, the Japanese want to arrest him.”

This was not a member of the first Stars squadron, his usual subordinates. For this operation, the USNA military wasn’t using any Stars personnel aside from Canopus. The mission involved aiding the escape—or more accurately, preventing the arrest—of a known terrorist, and assassination. It was a highly illegal operation, and the need to avoid leaving any evidence that implicated their involvement was even higher than the previous year’s mission to liquidate USNA deserters.

Zama had been conveniently close to the joint operations base, so they’d

been able to use regular soldiers there. This time, however, they were not so fortunate. Canopus's unit was composed of covert operatives of plausibly East Asian appearance, which military intelligence maintained for these kinds of situations.

In terms of their capabilities, they were near Stardust. And like Stardust, who were unable to become Stars, they were disposable soldiers, who took pharmacological enhancements to increase their abilities at the cost of a shortened lifespan.

The unit was split fifty-fifty between those with and without magic; the non-magical soldiers had received not only biological enhancements but also mechanical ones. They didn't have the capabilities of the full-body cyborgs that appeared in fiction, but they were no less capable of blending in with the population to perform their covert duties than their magic-wielding comrades.

They were a rough-and-tumble unit lacking both morality and respect for the law, but after displaying his own power, Canopus had their full respect.

Canopus gave brief instructions to his temporary subordinates, who were awaiting orders. "Per the simulation, proceed with blocking the arrest of Hague."

His unit had known Gide Hague/Gu Jie's location all along, thanks to their use of technology Japan didn't possess. They'd already thoroughly ascertained where he was hiding, as well as working out his likely escape routes. The fact that they were operating on foreign soil was no handicap whatsoever, and if anything, the typical home-field advantage had been reversed.

Upon receiving Canopus's orders, the unit of illegal operatives immediately sprang into action. Canopus, meanwhile, headed for a destroyer that was waiting offshore in international waters.



Ever since entering Japan, Gu Jie had moved from hiding place to hiding place mostly on his own. He'd relied on a few "old friends" to supply safehouses, but for the most part, he'd obtained the people he used for bodyguards or distractions in situ.

The more people who were involved, the easier it was for information to leak.

By keeping his human contact to an absolute minimum and disposing of contacts as soon as it seemed they could be traced back to him, Gu Jie had managed to evade the magicians of Japan. That was the extent of the value and trust he placed in supposed comrades who had sworn blood oaths.

But now that it was time, finally, to make his escape from Japan, Gu Jie could no longer advance his interests entirely by himself.

First, he would have to cross the border. The freighter he'd used to sneak himself in was still waiting, but it was a decoy. His real plan was to use a smuggling vessel operated by some No-Head Dragon remnants, but this was proving a more arduous process than he'd anticipated.

No-Head Dragon was an organization Gu Jie had created through Richard Sun, but in the summer of 2095, it had been destroyed by a joint USNA-Japan force. (At the time, the Great Asian Alliance had tacitly endorsed the action.)

After this, the organization's remnants had accepted Richard Sun's daughter, who was attending a university in California, as their new head, and began rebuilding. The problem was that this daughter's name was Meiling Sun. She established a new rule for the organization, forbidding activities against Japan. She was willing to look the other way when it came to smuggling, but anyone who ignored her orders and attempted to deal drugs or engage in human trafficking was mercilessly purged.

There were many among them who opposed this weak stance on Japan, but most of the membership was willing to take a wait-and-see attitude toward their new leader, who had, after all, quickly reestablished the organization and returned it to profitable activity. Consequently Gu Jie had found it quite difficult to locate anyone willing to cooperate with him.

"Master Hague, this is Du. May I enter?"

That had been the situation the previous week, when he had found this fixer, Du. He was the man who'd driven the ambulance in which Gu Jie had escaped from the Japanese magicians back in Zama. "Hague" had been Gu Jie's code name in No-Head Dragon, and he'd ordered Du to address him as such.

"Come in."

Gu Jie did not trust Du. He'd used him in Zama because there hadn't been time to do anything else, but the timing of his appearance was too convenient. And the name Joe Du was clearly a joke. It was too close to John Doe, the name given to unidentified bodies, which having lived in the USNA, Gu Jie was well aware of.

"Master, the arrangements for the ship are completed."

"I see."

Unfortunately, no matter how suspicious this man was, there was no choice but to use him. That was how cornered Gu Jie felt.

In the predawn gloom of that same morning, he'd felt that mysterious gaze. Gu Jie had determined that it was the search magic of some Japanese magician; he had no idea what kind of magic it had been, nor how much detail it had provided the observer, but he was certain that he'd been apprehended by a Japanese magician—probably from the Ten Master Clans.

He couldn't afford anything but haste.

He was smack in the middle of enemy territory. At this rate, he might find himself killed half out of sheer revenge.

The top priority was getting out of Japan, even if he had to endure a certain degree of risk to do so.

"We should leave immediately."

"Allow me to show you the way."

His things were already packed. He didn't really have anything that could be considered traditional luggage. The only things he needed to carry were cash and his casting tools. Carrying his tools himself and letting a *certain* former inspector carry a bag containing bills and electronic currency from a variety of nations, he followed Du.



6:00 PM. The cloudy winter sky had long since gone dark. By contrast, the ground beneath it overflowed with artificial light.

With the rise of telecommuting and working from home, the term *commuter*

town was fast dying. At the same time, the expansion of the high-speed transit network had dramatically expanded metropolitan markets compared with the previous century. For example, “going from Hiratsuka to Shibuya to do some shopping” was last century’s equivalent of “going to the train station to do some shopping.” This had the effect of making the suburban areas surrounding metropolitan centers even sleepier.

But 6:00 PM was still early enough that there were a considerable number of people walking around. It was too early to do battle here.

“Gu Jie is on the move. Three individuals total.”

Tomokazu Saegusa, the eldest son of the Saegusa family, nodded curtly to his underling’s report. “Understood.”

Tomokazu was twenty-seven years old this year, and physically, he resembled his father, Kouichi (save for his lack of sunglasses). Although he didn’t quite reach the power of his three-years-younger brother Koujirou in magic, he was at roughly the same level as Mayumi. In cleverness, he exceeded both his brother and sister. Although he lacked his father’s cunning, he was already known to be better than him at organizational finesse. He was a serious individual, with none of his father’s venomous temperament.

In other words, he was the capable but rather boring type. As a friend, he might be somewhat lacking in charm, but as a professional colleague, he was highly trustworthy.

“Mr. Juumonji, shall we let the police officers we brought along begin their interrogations?”

Mayumi was not taking part in the evening’s operation. Tomokazu was fulfilling the Saegusa family’s obligation in this matter. While it might have seemed natural that he would direct the family’s efforts during the culmination of a major operation like this, Tomokazu had an ulterior motive for her absence as well—he hated the notion of his sister undertaking any sort of dangerous mission. Yes, Tomokazu was considerably more prudent than Kouichi.

But he had not been blessed with good instincts about violence.

“...I wonder if that’s not a bit dangerous at the moment,” said Katsuto mildly

to Tomokazu's suggestion. "I can't imagine that our target will meekly obey police orders. Even if we approached him peacefully with just a few people, I'm certain he'd immediately react with force, and we'd make them into mere sacrifices—plus there's the risk it would lead to urban combat."

Tomokazu hadn't suggested going at him with their full forces because he didn't want the Ten Master Clans to be accused of exceeding their authority later. But he hadn't thought deeply about the possibility that their enemy might be stronger than they were anticipating, nor about what the consequences of that might be.

"So are you suggesting that we need to avoid urban combat at all costs, Mr. Juumonji?"

"Once pedestrian traffic levels off a bit, I think it'll be possible to engage more aggressively."

Katsuto recognized his own miscalculation. He had expected their target to begin moving later in the evening.

"I believe our enemy will head either to the fishing harbor near the mouth of the Sagami River or to the new port a bit beyond that, Mr. Saegusa."

"So you're saying he'll make his escape by sea?"

"Yes. I understand that our mastermind used a small freighter when he entered the country as well. He probably plans to board a small coastal runabout, then transfer to a larger oceangoing vessel anchored farther offshore."

"Shall we divide our forces, then? We can have Ichijou and Yotsuba head to the new port while you and I follow the target's car along with the police."

Katsuto felt that the balance of Tomokazu's proposal was ill-considered. Tatsuya had no Yotsuba family subordinates with him, and Masaki had already sent the Ichijou troops he'd brought around to the north to cut off the escape route there.

"I'll send my family's personnel to accompany Mr. Ichijou and Mr. Yotsuba. That will leave us with only your people as our escort, but if you're all right with that—"

This didn't strike Tomokazu as a bad proposal. The pursuit unit was likelier to apprehend the target than the blocker unit. If the only non-Saegusa member of the capturing team was Katsuto, most of the credit for making the capture would naturally go to the Saegusa family. It would help considerably with the rehabilitation of the family's image.

"...I have no objections."

"That's how we'll proceed, then," Katsuto said, picking up the communications handset to call Tatsuya and Masaki.



"Looks like our Japanese magician friends are tailing us," said Gu Jie from the back seat of the car that was being driven by the former Japanese police officer. He'd noticed the car tailing them immediately.

They didn't have far to go until arriving at their destination. In fact, it was close—too close to try to throw off their tail by changing their route, probably.

"No need to worry," said Du, who looked back at Gu Jie from the front passenger's seat. Gu Jie, meanwhile, was considering whether to have the soldiers of death he'd prepared intercept their tail.

"Being followed is well within our expectations. I've taken appropriate measures," Du stated.

Then, a moment later—

—a fiery bloom suddenly appeared behind their car. The explosion wasn't singular, either—there was a series of them, one after the other.

"Hand grenades...? No. Not portable missiles, either. An automatic grenade launcher, then...?"

"Very perceptive, Master. However, despite catching them off guard, the explosives seem to have all been blocked with shields. I wonder if the Juumonji magician I've heard such rumors about is directly participating in the pursuit."

"We haven't shaken them off. What's the plan?"

Just as Gu Jie said, the unharmed pursuit car burst through the scattering flames and accelerated.

But Du's face betrayed no concern. "No need for alarm."

Traffic in the adjacent two lanes had started to slow thanks to the multiple explosions, and they overtook the car ahead of them and sped through an intersection. Traffic in this area wasn't centrally managed, but their driving was still within the parameters of automatic driving systems.

On the other hand, Gu Jie's pursuers were clearly breaking traffic laws. The lead vehicle was causing the obstacle-avoidance programs of oncoming traffic to engage and pull over.

Using the newly opened space, the pursuit vehicle accelerated and tried to speed through the intersection. But before it could, another car rolled into the intersection, ignoring the signal and blocking its path.

If it had been a large truck or trailer, the pursuit car might have noticed and stopped, or attempted an evasive maneuver. But the large car blocking the intersection had turned off its headlights and location beacon and was effectively a barricade.

With its brakes squealing uselessly, the car pursuing Gu Jie slammed violently into the side of the obstructing vehicle.



By the time Katsuto noticed the suspicious van trailing them in their own pursuit of Gu Jie, the first grenade had already been fired at them.

It was good luck for the entire squad that he'd been in the last car of the four they'd boarded. Katsuto's magical barrier kept the barrage of grenades from getting close enough to do any damage.

"Mr. Saegusa, I think we're beyond worrying about civilians at this point," Katsuto said over the radio to Tomokazu, who was one car ahead of him. "I'll take care of the van behind us. Don't let Gu Jie get away."

"Understood. I'll leave them to you, Mr. Juumonji."

As Katsuto ended the communication with Tomokazu, he ordered the driver to stop.

The driver of the car Katsuto was in was a magician in the service of the

Saegusa family. He was neither a Juumonji man nor one of Katsuto's subordinates. Nevertheless, as soon as Katsuto said, "Stop," the man stepped on the brakes.

Katsuto opened the door and got out of the car.

The van the grenades had come from had also stopped, turning sideways.

Katsuto may or may not have noticed that there didn't seem to be anybody behind the barrel of the grenade launcher that emerged from the window. Either way, he thrust his right arm out.

As it arced toward him without a report or muzzle flash, the grenade round was encased in an anti-material, anti-heat barrier, its explosion contained and dissipated.

His arm still outstretched, Katsuto turned his attention to the van from which the attack had come.

The next instant, it was crushed.

The window was blocked by the van's roof being crushed from above. The grenade launcher's barrel bent, trapped as it was between the roof and the door frame. It didn't explode, though, either because it was out of ammo or because it had excellent fail-safes. Even as it rolled to one side, the van did not catch fire.

Keeping his Phalanx shield up, Katsuto used vaulting magic to close the distance between him and the van, landing right next to it. He peered inside.

There was nobody there.

As he looked at the van with a furrowed brow, from behind him, in the direction Tomokazu and the rest of the pursuit team had gone, came the horrendous sound of a violent crash that rattled Katsuto's eardrums.

Katsuto turned around and leaped over the car he'd been riding in with another dose of movement magic, heading toward the scene of the collision.

Although the front of the car Tomokazu had been in was magnificently crushed, the cabin was essentially undamaged. While the safety engineering of the vehicle had surely contributed something, most of this was due to

Tomokazu's quick protective instincts.

Unfortunately, the guard hadn't come up in time for the other two cars. The police car was particularly mangled. In this case, the vehicle's safety features had clearly saved the occupants' lives. They were lucky there wasn't too much size difference between the car that had acted as a barrier and their own.

"Mr. Saegusa, are you all right?" Katsuto groaned, bringing his face close to the window.

Tomokazu answered with a self-effacing grin. "Physically, sure. No injuries, really."

A restless clicking sound stopped, and the car door finally opened. It had taken Tomokazu several moments to get out of the car, because he'd had to switch the power door locks to manual mode in order to crack the door open.

"Would you be so kind as to check on the police officers?" Katsuto waited for Tomokazu to nod, then walked over to the large car that had blocked their route forward.

A string of three large passenger vehicles had stopped in the intersection, blocking it like so many billiard balls, and had been hit from the side. One car had been flipped from the impact, one had been launched sideways and burst a tire such that its chassis was making direct contact with the road, and the nose of Tomokazu's car had plowed into the back seats of the third, turning it to scrap.

With Phalanx still active, Katsuto peered inside the cars that had aided Gu Jie's escape.

As with the van, all three were empty, without even drivers.

The obstructing cars were robotic.

The thoroughness of the enemy's preparation here was troubling.

If they had this much organizational ability, Gu Jie should have long since been able to escape Japan.

"Mr. Juumonji."

Katsuto turned around, his thoughts interrupted by Tomokazu's voice.

He was right behind him.

“Mr. Saegusa. How were they?” Katsuto asked, taking the initiative to inquire about the police officers’ injuries.

“Nothing life-threatening. I used healing magic to perform some first aid, but we should call an ambulance. I’m afraid it’s not possible for all of us continue the pursuit. You saw the vehicle’s condition,” Tomokazu said regretfully, glancing back at the car he’d ridden in, which was no longer drivable. “You should go after the terrorists, Mr. Juumonji. I’ll have the unit cutting off the inland escape route meet up with you.”

Katsuto was about to ask if that was really acceptable for the Saegusa family, but he thought better of voicing it. The betrayal of the current head of the Saegusa family, Kouichi, lingered in Katsuto’s mind, but that was unfair prejudice. Tomokazu Saegusa was a man capable of putting national interest and the good of Japanese magical society first.

“I doubt there will be any more ambushes, but do take care, Mr. Saegusa.”

“You too, Mr. Juumonji.”

Katsuto used magic to clear the robotic cars their enemy had used to block the intersection and returned to his own vehicle.



Tatsuya and Masaki, both motorcycle-mounted and leading two sedans, arrived at the new port at the mouth of the Sagami River.

Each of the two sedans carried five magicians. That came to a total of ten combat magicians, all in service to the Juumonji family, which was known for its fighting prowess. They had certainly brought enough fighting ability.

Tatsuya and Masaki parked their bikes side by side and stood at the entrance to the port. The new port was surrounded by an embankment, and there were four fishing vessels docked in it, all of them small coastal boats.

“I wonder if he’ll switch ships offshore?” murmured Masaki, almost as though he were talking to himself.

“That is a possibility,” Tatsuya said honestly.

This seemed to take Masaki by surprise, and he looked slightly abashed. “Shiba, do you know Gu Jie’s location?” he asked in a somewhat curt tone.

“He’s heading this way.” Tatsuya wasn’t mean-spirited enough to point out Masaki’s every little mood. There wasn’t anything fun about teasing another guy.

“So just what we expected.”

Katsuto and Tomokazu’s guess had been right when they’d sent Tatsuya and Masaki here. As Masaki realized as much, he seemed to steel himself.

Masaki didn’t know how Tatsuya was getting a fix on Gu Jie’s location, but he didn’t doubt the information. Tatsuya’s track record was good enough to earn Masaki’s trust.

And if Tatsuya was right, then the credit for capturing the terrorist mastermind was going to go to the ones who’d been sent ahead to cut off his escape. That meant Masaki—or to be more accurate, Masaki and Tatsuya.

The prospect excited Masaki. “How much time do we have?”

“He’ll be here soon...wait, no!” Tatsuya’s voice turned sharp as he swung his leg back over his bike. “Gu Jie’s diverted to the west! Ichijou, we’re going after him!”

Only fractionally behind, Masaki opened his bike’s throttle. Since both of the motorcycle’s wheels were powered, the front didn’t lift off the ground even under hard acceleration. Both he and Tatsuya turned west, heading down the highway that ran along the coast.

There was one car ahead of them. Tatsuya didn’t have to say anything for Masaki to know that it was carrying Gu Jie.

He readied to pull alongside Tatsuya—but just before he could accelerate, Tatsuya kicked off the foot pegs, leaping free of his bike.

Masaki reflexively swerved away from the now-riderless motorcycle. He braked hard, then powerslid to correct his direction. The auto-balancer automatically corrected the bike’s orientation, and Masaki ended up exactly where he’d meant to, with Tatsuya’s bike directly ahead in his field of view.

This gave him a perfect vantage point to see Tatsuya's motorcycle get sliced perfectly in two by an attack from above.



Contrary to Gu Jie's expectations, instead of heading for the new port, Du took the expressway heading west.

"Are we not making for the port?"

"That's certainly what our enemies expect. We'll get to the water a different way."

Evidently, Du had made preparations beyond what even Gu Jie could anticipate. He'd been wary that their enemies might be waiting for them at the port, so if that could be avoided, he had no complaints.

"...Their reactions have been a bit faster than I expected. Perhaps they've been using an especially powerful perception-type magician."

They hadn't been on the expressway very long before Du clicked his tongue in irritation as he looked at the rearview monitor. (The car Gu Jie was in could be driven from either of the two front seats.)

Gu Jie turned around and looked back.

Two motorcycles were approaching from behind them, along with the headlights of two sedans.



“What happened to holding them up?”

“My apologies, Master. I’ve made arrangements a bit farther ahead.”

Gu Jie didn’t betray any hint of irritation or displeasure. It wasn’t that he had perfect control over his manner, but rather that he was perversely relieved to see a chink in the armor of the otherwise faultless Du.

“They’ll catch us at this rate.”

“Let me drive. I’ll lose them somehow.”

“No need for that.” Gu Jie spoke to the soldier of death sitting next to him. “Go. Kill them all.”

Opening the rear seat sunroof, the soldier grabbed the sword cane Gu Jie had enchanted and, with another sword slung on his back, leaped out of the car.

He immediately lashed out at the nearest bike behind them, drawing the blade in midair and, with a single cut, slicing the motorcycle in half.



After he leaped off his bike, Tatsuya landed on the road’s surface—not disastrously, but using magic to control his orientation. Quickly, he looked at his beloved bike, which was now halved. Or more accurately, he looked at the absurd attacker who’d cut his bike in half with a blade.

The two cars carrying the ten Juumonji family magicians reached them.

They stopped, and the magicians began to prepare for combat, but Tatsuya raised his voice to stop them short. “Ichijou, stay on Gu Jie! The rest of you should continue the pursuit as well!”

Their opponent, sword in hand—although it was probably a blade-shaped combat device—turned his murderous attention toward Masaki. But before he could attack, the enemy leaped sideways. A knife stuck in the ground where he’d been standing a moment before, having been thrown from above at freakish velocity.

It hadn’t been a natural throw. It had been accelerated along a curved trajectory by kinetic magic. This was Tatsuya’s attack.

“I’ll handle this. Go!”

“Okay—watch yourself!”

Tatsuya had been keeping the enemy occupied.

Masaki and the Juumonji magicians went after Gu Jie.

Tatsuya stopped his delaying action and prepared himself for combat.

His chosen weapon today was a purely thought-controlled CAD, along with thought-operated Silver Torus bracelets around both his wrists.

In his breast pocket, he carried an automatic pistol.

On his utility belt, he’d sheathed two knives with knuckle guards. One of them he’d already thrown into the asphalt.

Tatsuya recalled the knife to him with kinetic magic and readied it in his left hand, keeping his right hand free to draw his firearm if need be.

His opponent assumed a ready stance with the long blade’s tip pointed at Tatsuya’s eyes—it seemed to be a sword cane, since it lacked a guard.

As the man’s face came into Tatsuya’s vision, the pale light of the streetlights overhead brought his features to bare.

Tatsuya had seen this man’s face before.

“Inspector Toshikazu Chiba?!”

His face was pale white and as expressionless as a Noh mask. But the face and stance unmistakably belonged to Erika’s eldest brother, Toshikazu Chiba.

“Why would the eldest son of one of the Hundred Families be helping a terrorist?!”

No words came to answer the question.

The reply came in the form of pure hostility.

Toshikazu struck at Tatsuya.

It was perfectly optimal—the minimum required movement and the greatest speed possible.

Even given Tatsuya’s hand-to-hand prowess, it took everything he had to

avoid the polished sword technique he was facing.

He leaped back, opening up some distance in order to avoid the rapid series of strikes.

But with almost no delay at all, Toshikazu closed the distance back up.

This was the highest-level attack speed Tatsuya had ever faced.

However, it wasn't something he'd never seen before. It wasn't beyond what he could deal with.

Tatsuya shot a psion torrent at Toshikazu, directing Program Demolition to cancel the auto-acceleration magic that was active on him.

Toshikazu's striking speed slowed—but only for a moment.

His body was packed with psions, and he came at Tatsuya again with the same speed he'd had before the magic program hit him.

But in that brief moment, Tatsuya had backed out of striking distance.

He was about to demand *Why are you cooperating with these terrorists?* again but knew it was meaningless to try.

He'd read Toshikazu's eidos.

He's dead? No—

Toshikazu's feet barely brushed the paved road surface as he leaped again at Tatsuya.

Tatsuya aimed Partial Dismantling at his legs.

The instant Tatsuya loosed his magic, Toshikazu's feet touched the ground, and he brought his blade down.

There was a soundless explosion. The flash it released was an otherworldly light invisible to the naked eye.

Toshikazu had discharged an overwhelming wave of psions.

It was Program Demolition, used to nullify the magic that was targeting him.

Tatsuya could not hide his shock. But it was not at the fact that Toshikazu could use Program Demolition itself.

Tatsuya had never heard anything about the eldest son of the Chiba family being able to use Program Demolition, and surely neither had anyone else. There had never even been the whisper of such a rumor.

But if that were all, then he could have simply accepted that the Chiba family had effectively kept their eldest son's ability a secret.

Tatsuya fired Dismantle again, targeting the legs, shoulders, and blade.

Each time, it was met with a blast of psions from Toshikazu, and each time, Toshikazu's store of energy grew fainter.

He's converting his existence information into psion flow?

The fact was shocking. Diverting one's own existence information to some other purpose would lead to one's own erasure. No sentient being was capable of willingly doing so. And above all, the information bodies that recorded existence did not contain sufficient psions to be diverted toward Program Demolition.

Tatsuya wrapped the blade of his own knife in Dismantling and raised it to block Toshikazu's strike. The blade would decompose any material it touched at the point of contact, and it would appear as though the knife had cut through the sword.

But Toshikazu's blade withstood Tatsuya's magic.

Has the sword been defined as a singular entity?

The moment the active area of the magic—which is to say, the knife's edge—contacted the sword, the information that explained Dismantle's failure came to him.

The secret sword technique of the Chiba family: Zantetsu. A magic technique that defined a sword not as a lump of iron and steel, but as the singular concept of *blade*, and used kinetic magic to move it through a path described by the spell. Since it was temporarily defined by magic as a singular, indivisible concept, there were no constituent components into which it could be dismantled.

Magic that had failed to activate would typically evaporate via definition

collapse. But because Tatsuya was using Dismantle on such a tiny volume, he was able to maintain it.

One second later.

The blades ground against each other.

Two seconds.

Knife and sword clashed.

Three seconds.

Then.

Soundlessly—

Tatsuya's knife cut the blade in two.

Toshikazu's blade was composed of countless metal atoms, most of which were iron. The deceptive magic that maintained its state as a singular entity could not endure forever. Zantetsu was, in the end, a magic technique meant to cut through a target in a single moment. The effect of Toshikazu's Zantetsu could not stand in the face of Tatsuya's Dismantle.

Since the sword's blade offered no resistance as it was cleaved, the force Toshikazu had put behind the strike carried his body forward. However, this left no chance for Tatsuya to counterattack. By risking a thrust directly at Tatsuya, he'd destroyed the space Tatsuya would have needed to follow up with a knife or a fist.

Tatsuya spun around, reaching Toshikazu's back.

His opponent swung the half of his blade that remained in an effort to hold Tatsuya off.

Tatsuya smoothly retreated farther back.

His special sight took in his target's information.

Toshikazu Chiba's presence was becoming weaker and weaker.

Is he converting his life energy into magical power?

Tatsuya didn't know of any such technique. To begin with, the existence of

“life energy” had yet to be confirmed by modern science—magic science included.

But such energy was widely acknowledged as an undeniable fact in most ancient magic traditions. Tatsuya heard Yakumo reference it frequently, and during the parasite incident, Mikihiko had used the term *spirit energy* to refer to it, explaining that magic beasts didn’t consume flesh and blood as food, but rather spirit energy.

If Gu Jie possessed a technique for transforming life energy into magic power, it answered a variety of questions Tatsuya’d had for a while.

A dead man who wasn’t dead, with an eidos that seemed to be caught in the very process of dying.

If living people possessed life energy and dead people lacked it, then killing someone—i.e. the process of changing them from a living person to a dead one—would release surplus life energy. If that excess life energy was being pooled within the corpse and used as fuel for magic, that explained how it was able to be dead but seem alive. It also clarified why it seemed to be losing life energy in the process of becoming a true corpse.

The transformation of life energy also explained how Toshikazu was able to use Program Demolition.

The weakening of his existence information could also be understood as the loss of his information as a living being.

It wasn’t limited to corpse control—this loathsome magic manipulated the stuff of life itself.

Tatsuya did not personally regard magic as either inherently good or evil. Like any other power humans wielded, virtue or lack thereof could only be determined by its outcomes. And given that those outcomes were themselves measured by value judgments, they, too, did not have any moral implications. So Tatsuya believed.

But despite his convictions, he felt there was something evil about Gu Jie’s magic. There could be nothing righteous about grinding people—magicians—down this way. Generators and Sorcery Boosters were distasteful enough, but

this magic inspired unconditional revulsion in Tatsuya.

He was angry.

“Toshikazu Chiba!” Tatsuya shouted the dead swordsman’s name. “Are you conscious?! Can you understand my words?!”

Toshikazu did not reply. He tossed aside the halved blade in his hand and drew the katana on his back.

“Toshikazu Chiba! That’s your name. That’s the word that makes you you!” Tatsuya yelled as he watched Toshikazu draw.

It was unlike Tatsuya to do this.

Toshikazu was pointing his katana at him. He had obviously hostile intent. Normally, Tatsuya would have already been taking action to counterattack. Even if it was someone he knew was being manipulated, he would only act to keep them safe after he had rendered them harmless. It was his policy.

But now Tatsuya was trying to open a dialogue with someone who had already attacked him, even knowing that being already dead, the possibility that his opponent would be able to reply was near zero.

Toshikazu did not answer Tatsuya. Perhaps he couldn’t.

Instead, Toshikazu struck.

Rather than trying to block the razor-sharp edge of the sword with his knife, Tatsuya sidestepped out of the way.

There was more margin for error here than he’d had with the earlier strikes. Tatsuya could perceive sloppiness creeping into Toshikazu’s technique. The deep curve of the katana seemed not to suit him.

The Chiba family were also called the sword magicians. The eldest son of the main family would not be walking around with a weapon he couldn’t wield perfectly. It must have been given to him by a third party—Gu Jie, almost certainly. Still, the fact that it was a katana of the type commonly used during the Nanboku-cho period, lacking the broad curvature typical of continental blades, might mean that a Japanese confederate somewhere had provided Gu Jie with it.

Tatsuya was not especially knowledgeable about antique swords. As part of his martial arts training, he'd been schooled in how to use both *uchigatana* and *tachi*-style swords, but he'd learned little of their history or artistic value.

But even Tatsuya could tell there was something odd about the shape of the blade Toshikazu held. It had a distinct, even curve, as though it had been cast from a section of a perfectly circular arc. The hilt was metal, with elongated holes that passed through each end. The hilt itself resembled those of *kenuki-gata tachi* swords from the late Heian period.

That was as much time as Tatsuya had to observe the weapon, since Toshikazu recovered his stance and came at Tatsuya with another strike almost immediately. In addition to his Elemental Sight, Tatsuya's eyesight was also excellent, but that didn't mean he was an expert in sword appraisal. He knew nothing about the finer points of blade analysis.

He met the incoming horizontal sweep with his knife. It was at the part of the blade where the most force was concentrated, but by sliding his knife along the curve of the blade, Tatsuya allowed himself to be pushed back out of Toshikazu's attack range.

As he flash casted a spell to slow down his inertia and retreated, Tatsuya had to infer that Toshikazu's sword was a magic tool of some kind. It wasn't a sword that had been improved via enchantment; it was a new weapon that Gu Jie's associate had created specifically for him, perhaps to afflict its victim with negative status effects through any wounds it opened.

If Tatsuya'd had time to get a good look at it with his sight, he would've been able to determine what sort of magic had been used on it. But unfortunately, there wasn't time for that.

Tatsuya loosed Mist Dispersion at the sword. His target was not the magic placed on the sword, but rather the sword's material itself. He didn't want to risk the side effects that might come from meddling with magic that hadn't been activated yet.

The same moment Tatsuya fired off his spell, Toshikazu brought his sword up in front of his face. But this couldn't have been a reaction to Tatsuya's magic; the timing was wrong. Perhaps it was muscle memory, his body remembering

its anti-magician combat training.

But no:

Releasing a burst of compressed psions, the blade scattered Tatsuya's Mist Dispersion program.

By the nature of how they operated, magic programs were exposed and vulnerable. Even Tatsuya's magic was not exempt from this.

His specialty neutralized, Tatsuya lunged inside Toshikazu's guard.

Along the way, Tatsuya grabbed his other knuckle-guarded knife, now dual-wielding.

He made a horizontal sweep with his left hand.

The knife passed through the base of the sword's blade, which had stopped emitting psions.

The blade fell, leaving only the hilt behind.

Toshikazu, having just scattered Mist Dispersion, couldn't immediately neutralize Dismantle. The counter-spell set on his body couldn't keep up with Tatsuya's speed as he repeatedly cast his specialty.

The blade fell to the pavement, but before it hit, Tatsuya struck Toshikazu in the chest with his knuckle-guarded fist.

The heavy blow to his ribs caused Toshikazu to stumble backward and begin to fall. Tatsuya hadn't felt any bones break, but the hit was vicious enough that a normal person could easily have passed out.

As he stumbled back, Toshikazu executed a back handspring and recovered into a half kneel with one knee to the ground. He didn't stand back up—apparently, a near-dead body was still capable of taking damage.

"Toshikazu Chiba!" Again, Tatsuya went against his better judgment and tried calling out. "Don't you know that name? Have you forgotten who you are?"

Death was an irreversible transition from life. Even Tatsuya's Regeneration couldn't bring a dead person back to life.

But where was the border between life and death?

Was it when brain function halted? When the heart stopped? When the metabolism stopped? Or was it the loss of the soul?

With his sight, Tatsuya could see that Toshikazu was already dead.

And yet, he was still somehow using magic, which was a power of the mind. His magic wasn't being relayed from somewhere else—Tatsuya could see very clearly that it was coming from him.

If Toshikazu weren't fully dead, perhaps Regeneration could actually bring him back to life.

But even if he *wasn't* fully dead, if Toshikazu continued to attack, his eventual death was certain.

And Tatsuya didn't have time to conduct a thorough examination. Gu Jie was still escaping at that very moment.

So Tatsuya called out.

If there was still even the smallest bit of self-awareness that lingered within that body, Tatsuya would avoid dealing any fatal blows.

If Miyuki had been here, there wouldn't have been any need to worry. She could have frozen him temporarily. Of course, Tatsuya didn't regret her absence. It was obvious that Miyuki's safety took priority over Toshikazu's life.

If he had been prioritizing rationality, he wouldn't have been facing this dilemma. Enemies were to be dispatched briskly. That was the correct approach. And Toshikazu Chiba, of all people, was not an opponent to be dealt with halfheartedly.

And yet, Tatsuya did not want to kill Toshikazu.

"Answer me! If you have any mind left to answer with, answer me!"

Where did death come from, and how long could life persist? The desire to know these things burned within Tatsuya. And if he could prolong Toshikazu's life somehow as he was, it might lead to a hint for those questions.

But the desire for that knowledge aside, he could not accept the extinguishing of a magician's life in this manner.

Magicians were tools for war.

Yet again, Tatsuya thought of himself as a tool.

Given how many lives he himself had taken, perhaps he was in no position to insist on the sanctity of human life. No matter how death came or how the killing was accomplished, death was death, after all.

But at least—

You deserved to die fighting.

You deserved to die struggling.

You deserved to die afraid.

You deserved to die surrendering.

You deserved to accept death.

You deserved to die cursing your unjust fate.

You deserved to die unaware, as though falling asleep.

Death belonged to the person doing the dying.

Even if you were killed for someone else, or even if you died for someone else.

To be used even in death, unthinking, insensate, to have your life used only to be killed again—this was a thing that should not be.

Even slaves had the freedom to die.

Even livestock were simply meat, bone, and sinew in death. A thing without life.

But a magician whose life force was manipulated so that their power could be used after their death—such a tool was lower even than livestock.

Tatsuya could not accept this.

Tatsuya—who had quietly been making preparations to establish a way of life for magicians beyond acting as weapons and tools, and also to ensure that this terrible fate would never be forced upon his sister—could never, ever accept this.

“Toshikazu Chiba!”

But in the end, Toshikazu didn't answer Tatsuya's call. He no longer possessed the capability.

Toshikazu stood and readied his bladeless sword again.

The moment Tatsuya answered this challenge with a ready stance of his own, Toshikazu's body physically expanded, growing. He dashed toward Tatsuya with such terrific speed that Tatsuya's eyes couldn't follow the resulting blur.

Tatsuya only lost sight of Toshikazu for a moment, and even then, he only lost focus on his enemy, still keeping him in his field of vision the entire time.

He could see what his opponent was trying to do.

With his right arm, he was trying to bring his sword's blade down onto Tatsuya.

The slash could not possibly reach him.

But instinctively sensing danger, Tatsuya raised his knife to block the sword's blade where it met the hilt.

As Toshikazu brought the sword down one-handed, the blade met Tatsuya's knife. The resulting force sent the blade flying, but Toshikazu continued to bring the pommel down. The pommel's descent was halted when it met Toshikazu's open left hand.

Toshikazu's hold on the sword's grip was obscured beneath Tatsuya's knife.

Toshikazu rotated the grip, switching from a vertical slash to a horizontal one.

The bladeless sword sliced across Tatsuya's gut.

Tatsuya used the knuckle guard of the knife in his right hand to knock the sword hilt away. And yet—

"Ngh!" A spatter of blood arced away from Tatsuya's belly.

His bulletproof, bladeproof jacket had been sliced open like paper, his bare skin peeling back from the gash.

Just above the skin, there was a black line that was easily lost in the nighttime gloom. Anything that contacted the repulsive fields above or below it would be split open—it was the weighting-type magic Pressure Cut. The technique was

normally applied to the edge of a blade or a thin steel wire, but Toshikazu had deployed it through empty space as an extension of his sword's broken blade.

Tatsuya had managed to block the edge of the repulsive force before it had made direct contact, but the force had still reached his skin and the muscle underneath.

Self-repair spell: auto-starting.

Cancel self-repair spell. Tatsuya willed the programing to stop. He pushed aside the pain from the cut with sheer willpower and engaged a different form of magic.

Program Dispersion.

He dismantled the magic program responsible for creating Pressure Cut's black cutting edge.

Without missing a beat, Tatsuya activated his next magic program.

Program Demolition.

Tatsuya had already identified the magic that was forcibly siphoning off psions from Toshikazu's body and using them to achieve the Program Demolition effect. He was going to dismantle that magic.

With his Elemental Sight, Tatsuya found the dense concentration of psions in Toshikazu's chest, around his heart.

Without the time to be concerned about Toshikazu's safety, he slammed his left fist in toward Toshikazu's heart.

Mist Dispersion.

A hole opened in Toshikazu's chest, passing all the way through his back. A psionic glow enveloped his body. The psions were escaping.

The strength draining from his limbs, Toshikazu sank to his knees, then toppled over sideways.

The magic that had been cast on him apparently used his heart as its medium.

The dying body was now a dead body.

Tatsuya could feel no life force remaining in it.

Even in death, Toshikazu's hand did not let go of the katana's grip.

Tatsuya gazed quietly down at Toshikazu for a long moment, silent like a prayer.

"Tatsuya."

Suddenly, a voice addressed him from behind. Tatsuya hadn't noticed his approach at all, so he immediately prepared to attack. But as he turned, he saw Yakumo, with both of his hands raised and a wry grin on his face.

"I didn't mean to surprise you, for what it's worth. Anyway, don't you think you'd better heal yourself up?"

Now that it was pointed out, Tatsuya suddenly remembered the slash through his torso.

In an instant, the wound disappeared. Not only did the wound close, but the spilled blood vanished, and the cut in his jacket was repaired.

"That power always seems so convenient..." Yakumo wasn't engaging in empty flattery; he sounded genuinely envious.



“Master, what are you doing here?” Tatsuya snipped, ignoring the small talk.

“We talked about it this morning, didn’t we? My helping you resolve this situation, I mean.”

There was something irritating about Yakumo’s grinning face, but he wasn’t wrong about what he was saying. And time was of the essence now.

“Thank you very much. Would you take care of this body for me, then?” Tatsuya said without any idle conversation as a preamble. Having foisted the cleanup off on Yakumo, he turned his back to him.

“Hey, Tatsuya.”

Tatsuya wordlessly broke into a sprint.

Yakumo watched him go. “My goodness,” he murmured. Then, looking over his shoulder, he continued. “I suppose we can’t just leave you here, can we?”

There in the darkness, more monks from the temple began to appear, one after another.

“Send him to his rest,” Yakumo said.

Yakumo’s disciples placed Toshikazu’s body on a stretcher and carried it to a van that had been parked at the shoulder of the expressway.

The van headed east. Then, the expressway that had conveniently been devoid of traffic began to fill with a steady trickle of passing headlights.



While Tatsuya was still agonizing over whether to kill Toshikazu (or deanimate his dead body, more specifically), the car carrying Gu Jie was about to arrive at its immediate destination.

“There, make a left!”

Du was giving directions.

Inagaki was the puppet behind the wheel, obeying Du’s directions as he threaded the car through the erosion control forest before finally emerging onto a beach.

Du adroitly got out of the car, then came around to open the rear door next

to Gu Jie's seat.

"Master, we're changing cars here!"

Gu Jie was all too aware of the reason for Du's haste.

The headlights of their pursuers' cars were beginning to close in.

"Keep our enemies at bay here," Gu Jie ordered Inagaki's body before following behind Du. A bit farther down the beach, an amphibious vehicle about the size of a minivan awaited.

From behind Gu Jie came the sound of gunfire.

It was the sound of Inagaki's body opening fire on the figures who emerged onto the beach.



"Major, Hague is being overtaken by the Japanese pursuit unit. Request permission to engage."

As he was passing the southern tip of the Boso Peninsula on his way to the destroyer anchored in international waters, Canopus received a request for orders from his operatives.

This was an unwelcome development. For his part, Canopus wanted to avoid open engagement with the Japanese forces as much as possible. His deployment of troops in Zama had been a political tightrope act.

This particular mission was entirely off the record. Even Colonel Balance, who'd ordered it, would feign ignorance if pressed on the matter.

Just the revelation of the origin of Du, the man aiding Gu Jie's escape, would cause a huge scandal. Although he was one of Canopus's illegal operatives and as such had no public connection to the USNA military, the Japanese military and diplomatic corps were hardly so naive as to believe that piece of fiction.

If the various operations to extract Gu Jie were to come to light, there would be dire consequences for Canopus. He knew that. His high position in Stars would be of no use. He would probably be stripped of rank, declared dead, and used solely for illicit cloak-and-dagger operations. If anything, the military brass would be happy to gain a high-level magician they could use in deniable covert

operations.

But that didn't mean they could allow Gu Jie to fall into the hands of Japan's magicians, the Ten Master Clans, either.

"Delaying action is authorized."

"Copy."

Canopus switched his information terminal from "transmit" to "scan." Using its IFF (Identification, Friend or Foe) signal, he could check the distance remaining to the destroyer.

If he could lure Gide Hague (Gu Jie) into international waters and assassinate him, the mission would be complete.

Canopus sighed. Even if it went perfectly, this operation was going to leave a bad taste in his mouth.



When he saw Gu Jie's car enter a narrow road leading into the erosion control forest, Masaki thought, *We've got him!*

At the end of that road was the beach. Back on the expressway, he'd hesitated to use Burst because of the potential collateral damage, but on the deserted midwinter beach, there was no problem with getting a little *messy*.

Deep-drafted ships couldn't be used near the beach. That wasn't a problem for inflatable boats, but the arrival of such a craft would be impossible to miss. Gu Jie probably planned to take a smaller boat as far as the offing, then transfer to a proper oceangoing ship. Getting from his car to the boat would also take time; if things went well, Masaki figured they could snatch Gu Jie in the midst of his transfer without even having to destroy the boat.

He cut through the forest and beat them to the beach. Masaki got off his motorcycle there; it was a road bike with none of the features needed to run on the sand. As the pursuit squad sedans passed him, Masaki prepared movement magic to follow behind them.

The car Gu Jie had been using was stopped in the middle of the beach. The sedans attempted to speed past and around it.

Gunfire rang out.

The lead sedan's tires burst.

To so easily puncture bullet-resistant tires, the shooter's ammunition must have had its penetrating power magically enhanced.

The sedan skidded over the sand, avoiding rolling only by the barest of margins.

The second sedan slammed on the brakes, stopping barely short of the first.

Ten magicians emerged from the two cars. They were all fully exposed, with none of them attempting to use the vehicles as cover.

From behind Gu Jie's car came a hail of gunfire directed at the lead magician.

The bullets might have punctured the reinforced tires, but an anti-material barrier stopped them.

That was the Juumonji magicians for you. Masaki couldn't help but feel some admiration at that.

But he wasn't just taking in the sights.

He pulled his crimson pistol-shaped CAD from its shoulder holster.

Aiming at Gu Jie's car, he activated Burst.

The car went up in flames. The fact that it was an ethanol-powered vehicle was disastrous for his enemies. Sparks generated when the fuel tank burst caused the vaporized ethanol fuel to ignite.

A young man in a suit came tumbling out of the burning car. He had a pistol with an integrated CAD in his right hand; clearly, he had been the shooter.

Masaki decided to go after Gu Jie, leaving the Juumonji men to deal with him. They quickly surrounded the young man—Inagaki.

But he completely ignored the strike force and took aim at Masaki instead, firing.

A magician between Inagaki and Masaki stopped the bullet with an anti-material barrier. Instantly, Inagaki charged, pistol thrust out like a blade. He dashed forward, pulling the trigger.

The gun fired with a flash of psionic light, its report sounding nothing like a normal pistol's.

The anti-material barrier gave way.

The Juumonji magician fell. There was a large hole in his throat, his neck very nearly severed.

He'd been killed instantly.

Inagaki had used *kenjutsu*, but not with a sword—with his pistol.

Masaki had never heard of such a technique, but he understood immediately how dangerous it was.

He leveled his crimson CAD at Inagaki and fired.

A blinding psionic light issued forth from Inagaki's body.

It was Burst—being neutralized by Program Demolition.

Masaki was shocked, but not so much so that he delayed his next magic program.

Ever since Tatsuya had defeated him at the Monolith Code event during the summer of 2095, Masaki had been preparing for a rematch. He'd run countless simulations, training constantly in order to be ready for any tactical situation, no matter how outlandish.

Some of those included situations where Program Demolition was used against him.

If that spell neutralized one magic program, another one had to be ready to go immediately. If you could deny the opponent time to consider their attack, eventually, they wouldn't be able to keep up with canceling yours.

After analyzing Program Demolition's mechanism, which involved the release of a torrent of psions, Kichijouji had proposed that as a countermeasure. Masaki had drilled it into his body and mind until it was a conditioned reflex.

He would not be stopped by Program Demolition.

Masaki fired Burst again.

Meanwhile, the spell Gu Jie had embedded in Inagaki was incapable of

collecting psions that fast.

Masaki's magic would not be stopped by a halfhearted trickle of psions.

And so:

Inagaki's body burst in a gush of blood.

The spray almost reached where Masaki was standing, the blood seeping into the sand.

His side was down one, and now the other side was, too.

That left Gu Jie and one other. At that very moment, they were trying to climb into a van.

No—at a glance, it looked like a van, but it was probably an amphibious vehicle.

Not that it mattered.

Masaki pointed his crimson CAD at the vehicle.

Just as he was about to pull the trigger, he was tackled from behind.

He crashed into the sand. The person who'd knocked him down was one of the Juumonji men—one of his allies.

Just before he could ask why, a series of gunshots rang out.

The magician covering Masaki had raised an anti-material barrier, but it was wavering.

The roar of these gunshots far outstripped the pistol fire from earlier. Masaki had heard them before, during the Yokohama Incident.

It was a high-powered anti-magician rifle.

A flurry of high-velocity rounds specially designed to break anti-material barrier magic rained down, both from behind them and from the edge of the tree line at their flank.

Masaki estimated that the enemy force was at least twice as large as their own.

The Juumonji family magicians were known as the Wall of Iron. The family

head had picked only the finest among them for this mission, and they were holding up admirably against high-powered rifle rounds specifically designed to kill magicians. But the enemy force was probably using cutting-edge weapons. Moreover, since the occasional high-explosive shell came falling down from overhead, they were unable to focus their barriers only in the direction of the forest.

The Juumonji magicians were at their limit just maintaining these defenses.

This kind of high-end gear... Wait, don't tell me the USNA military was behind Gu Jie?!

Masaki's guess was simplistic, but he wasn't wrong. Gu Jie hadn't been induced to commit terrorism by the USNA government, but it was indeed a USNA military force that was currently attacking Masaki and his squad.

The van carrying Gu Jie plunged into the surf.

So it was an amphibious vehicle.

Masaki, still prone, aimed his CAD at its retreating form.

But just then, a concentrated wave of enemy fire arrived.

Masaki switched from Burst to an anti-material barrier magic. It wasn't an omnidirectional barrier like the Juumonji men were casting, but he could leave the explosive shells coming in on high parabolic arcs to the Juumonji magicians. In exchange, Masaki was defending against the high-powered rifle fire.

There was no margin left over to take a shot at the amphibious craft in the water. At the moment, it was all he could do to maintain his defenses.



At the signal sent by his subordinate, Katsuto's sedan turned down the road that led to the beach.

Gunfire echoed up ahead, mixed in with the occasional explosion. While there weren't many civilians in the area, it wasn't a deserted wilderness, either. There was a moderate amount of traffic. He didn't know who was responsible for this, but it was far too bold a military operation.

Heavy gunfire rained down on Katsuto's car, too. But having anticipated high-

velocity, high-mass anti-magician weapons, Katsuto's anti-material barrier magic was completely stopping it. He was neutralizing the grenades that were being lobbed in the path of the car, as well.

Katsuto had the vehicle stop in the middle of the erosion control forest.

He got out alone.

A shot came at Katsuto—and the moment he traced it back to its origin, he leaped.

Surrounded by his spherical barrier, Katsuto's bulk soared, flying straight at the source of the shot, ignoring broken branches and shattered trunks along the way.

It was the sniper who was shocked. Panicking, he fired haphazardly in Katsuto's direction. Every shot ricocheted off, with one nicking his cheek. The man froze as the implacable, impregnable wall closed in on him.

Upon impact with the barrier, the man was sent flying.

This did not satisfy Katsuto.

The man had slammed into a tree trunk, and Katsuto continued to advance on him—his barrier, of course, still up.

Pinned between the tree and the barrier, the man vomited blood.

After confirming that the sniper's silence was real—Katsuto didn't particularly care whether he was unconscious or dead—he searched for his next objective.

The man slumped at the base of the tree wore dark fatigues, but there was nothing on his clothes that made it obvious what organization he might belong to. The weapon he carried was not something a mere criminal syndicate would be able to get its hands on; if the man was a foreign operative, then the combat happening at this very moment was nothing less than a challenge to Japan's sovereignty. Moreover, simply from the standpoint of public safety, this could not be ignored.

Katsuto decided then and there that the quelling of this armed conflict took priority over the capture of Gu Jie.

The gunfire had tapered off. As he internalized this, Masaki finally took notice

of the fighting that had been happening in the forest. Flickers of powerful magic flashed here and there. He remembered another time he'd felt like this.

The summer of 2095. The incredible bravery he'd witnessed on the final day of the Nine School Competition.

That's Juumonji fighting!

There in the forest, Katsuto was battling the enemies who'd had them pinned down on the beach. And he was winning.

When he realized this, Masaki took off running—not toward the ocean, but toward the forest. Rather than trying to stop Gu Jie while worrying about being shot from behind, it would be better to take out this interdicting force first in order to be able to pursue their quarry without any hindrances.

Concentrating his shield ahead of him, he plunged into the firefight.

High-powered rounds impacted his magical barrier. Masaki's shield befit someone of his magic talent, but in a certain sense, he fell short of the barrier specialists in the Juumonji family.

Before he came under continuous fire, he rolled into a prone position on the beach. Keeping his body low, he lined up the enemies and activated Burst.

There was a sense of cringing horror that drifted out of the forest, perhaps from the gruesome deaths the surviving enemies had just witnessed.

The Ichijou family's Burst was effective not just because of its raw power, but because of the devastating effect it could have on a target's morale.

Watching your comrades in arms burst open in a shower of gore was not something even a seasoned combat veteran could shrug off. Nobody wanted to die that way.

If this is enough to terrify you, you shouldn't have brought this fight in the first place, Masaki thought.

On the other hand, some coldly calculating part of him realized that the shaken enemy force was giving them an opening.

"Push them back!" Masaki bellowed.

His battle cry was answered by shouts from his own comrades.

The magicians who'd been thus far forced into a purely defensive posture stood together and began to charge forward.

Gunshots rang out.

Fireballs from explosive shells illuminated the nighttime dark of the beach.

But the Juumonji men's advance did not stop.

Masaki pushed forward, dismembering enemies in streamers of blood.

Soon, they breached the edge of the forest.

Deeper in, Katsuto was *methodically crushing* his opponents one by one.

Some of them had abandoned their guns and resorted to their knives to fight back.

This was the correct decision—firing haphazardly in the middle of a pitched battle without worrying about friendly fire made it likelier that bullets ricocheting off magical barriers would hit their comrades.

Masaki and Katsuto, along with the ten Juumonji magicians, overran the illegal USNA operatives with terrible fury.



Canopus was nearing his rendezvous with the destroyer when he got word of the interdiction force's annihilation.

They'd accomplished their objective, which was to buy time. The amphibious vehicle Gu Jie was riding in had already been taken aboard the oceangoing escape vessel waiting offshore. So long as they didn't use something like flight magic, the Japanese forces wouldn't be able to capture Gu Jie within their territorial waters.

Despite the report of "annihilation," most of the interference operatives were alive. They were now problematic witnesses to the USNA's participation in this incident. The weapons they possessed were similarly inconvenient material evidence.

Canopus picked up a simple transmitter, and closing his eyes, muttered a

prayer: “May their souls rest in peace.”

He did not ask for any forgiveness.

Opening his eyes, he pushed the button that annihilated the operatives in the most literal sense of the term.



Upon confirming that all enemy resistance had halted, Masaki looked for his classmate.

“Juumonji!”

“I’m here, Masaki.” Katsuto stepped out from behind a tree. The two had been surprisingly near each other.

Katsuto was wearing a jacket over a blade-resistant sweater. The outer garment didn’t have a scratch or a smear of dirt anywhere on it. Quite a difference, Masaki thought, from his sand-coated motorcycle jacket. He had the sense, somehow, that the difference in how soiled their outerwear was reflected a deeper difference in power, which was a slightly depressing thought.

“What happened, Masaki?”

The state Masaki was in must have looked very odd to Katsuto. Masaki just shook his head at the question. “Nothing. Anyway, what are we going to do with these guys? I don’t think we can just leave them here.”

“True...” He nodded after a moment’s thought. “It’s not clear whether they’re with the terrorists, but either way, we can’t let a group that pulls something like this just run away.”

Katsuto was worried that if they took up too much time here, it could lead to Gu Jie making a clean getaway.

Masaki had the same concern, so he proposed a division of labor. “Well, can we hand them over to the Juumonji forces? I’ll go after Gu Jie.”

“How? From what I saw, Gu Jie already made it off the shore.”

“I’ll follow him across the water.”



“I guess that’s the only way, huh...?”

If he encountered resistance at sea that was as heavy as they’d just experienced, even Katsuto would be stopped in his tracks. It was highly doubtful that Masaki would be able to deflect it.

However, Masaki’s offensive magic was much longer-range than Katsuto’s. Once he had Gu Jie’s ship in his line of sight, he could immediately destroy the engine room and render it immobile. Even if he mistakenly attacked the wrong ship, capturing Gu Jie was important enough that it justified the risk. They’d just have to quash the story by blaming the terrorists.

“All right. We’ll handle the situation here,” Katsuto said, making the call.

No one could accuse him of being too indecisive to make the decision on the spot, because no one could have known that the operatives who’d interfered with the capture of Gu Jie would resort to what they did, in the end.

It happened the moment after Katsuto gave Masaki the go-ahead.

Suddenly, the enemy combatants who had fallen in the forest burst into flames. This was not a figure of speech—all of them, dead and injured alike, were engulfed in raging fires.

It was a self-destruct program that used human combustion magic. Though *self-destruct* wasn’t entirely the right term. These irregular USNA operatives had received an external signal that acted as a subconscious suggestion to activate human combustion magic. They’d even been programmed to incinerate their dead and non-magician comrades as well.

Katsuto immediately raised a shield around himself and Masaki.

The Juumonji magicians answering to him also hastily put up magical barriers.

Their actions were hardly an overreaction. The enemy soldiers weren’t all that caught fire.

Their equipment did, too—some components melting, others exploding.

The shrapnel from the exploding weapons hit the magical barriers.

The blaze that was reducing the bodies to ash soon spread to the trees. And

not just in one or two places, either.

“Put out that fire!” Katsuto roared to his subordinates.

The highest priority here was no longer the capture of Gu Jie. It was preventing the spread of a wildfire.



Tatsuya ran down the coastal expressway at a speed of sixty kilometers per hour. He wasn't using flight magic.

There was a reason he couldn't. For this operation, he wasn't receiving any support from the Independent Magic Battalion. It wasn't that he'd requested support and been denied. Ahead of the battle near Zama base, he'd gotten clearance for the use of classified magic, but that had been less “permission” than it had been the honoring of an existing agreement.

For this portion of the mission, Tatsuya had not asked for support from the IMB. Likewise, the battalion had not taken any proactive measures to offer such support. So unsurprisingly, Tatsuya was not wearing a MOVAL suit.

He could fly without one, but without the benefit of its defensive strength, he couldn't simultaneously deal with enemy attacks. He wasn't particularly adroit with either anti-material barriers or heat-resistant barriers. He could detect and intercept enemy attacks with Dismantling magic, but in midair, where he didn't know from what direction and distance an attack might come, 100 percent interception wasn't possible.

Essentially, Tatsuya's magic specialization had left him with a weak point in his defense. His self-restoration magic was meant to be used after he'd been injured, and Tatsuya was not interested in the kind of suicidal attacks that presupposed sustaining grave injuries.

Gu Jie was already well clear of the coast and heading south-southeast at a fair clip. It was only a matter of time until he reached international waters.

Whatever forces had lent Gu Jie their assistance, they had considerable organizational power. The only one that came to Tatsuya's mind was the American military. He had no idea what the USNA's interest in aiding and abetting Gu Jie's escape was, but thanks to their intervention, that escape was

all too likely.

—Tatsuya would rather eliminate a source of future worry than let him escape.

Given Gu Jie's callous use of magicians' lives, he could not be allowed to live.

Ideally, he would be taken into police custody, then quietly assassinated.

But as a plan B, Tatsuya was considering *erasing* Gu Jie himself.

Tatsuya was heading for the beach where Gu Jie had escaped onto the ocean. He knew that his target wasn't there, but he was planning to meet up with Masaki and the others first.

When he arrived, the firefighting efforts had finally begun to calm down.

"What happened here?" Tatsuya asked Masaki, who only smirked bitterly.

It was Katsuto who answered the question. "The attackers self-destructed."

"It's not like there's a bunch of dry branches here. Why would that turn into a fire?"

"Seems like they used human combustion magic."

Once he heard that, Tatsuya understood that the enemy's aim had been complete destruction of all evidence. Apparently, there was a reason why the USNA wanted to keep Japan from capturing Gu Jie. He didn't want to believe it, but he was starting to wonder whether Gu Jie's terrorist attack had been their plan, too.

"Shiba," Katsuto said, interrupting Tatsuya's musing. "Ichijou wants to use marine traversal magic to follow Gu Jie. What do you think?"

The most expedient option would be for Tatsuya to erase Gu Jie from here.

But that was a card he needed to keep secret.

"Can we not ask the coast guard for assistance?" Tatsuya suggested.

"Even if we call for a boat right now, there won't be enough time, right?" Masaki interjected.

"Not to follow him. Gu Jie's boat is just about to pass between the Boso

Peninsula and Oshima Island. If there's a patrol boat anywhere in that vicinity that can intercept him, I can guide it from here."

Masaki wondered exactly how Tatsuya was able to know Gu Jie's precise location, but he didn't bother asking. Katsuto probably had the same question, but his good manners kept him from prying into Tatsuya's magic.

"I'll try to contact Tomokazu," Katsuto said to Tatsuya's suggestion, picking up his terminal.

With serendipitous timing, the call chime on Katsuto's terminal started to ring.

The caller information on its display indicated that it was Mayumi Saegusa.

Katsuto put the call on the terminal's speaker so Tatsuya and Masaki could hear, then hit the answer button. "Saegusa? What's up?"

"I assume you don't have much time, so I'll get right to the point." Mayumi was supposed to have been excluded from this evening's operation, but somehow, she seemed to know what was going on. *"I got a ride on a patrol boat, and I'm near your position. You might be able to see me."*

Tatsuya, Katsuto, and Masaki all looked out to the sea. Indeed, they spotted the lights of a patrol boat approaching their position on the beach.

"Can we ask you to help us go after Gu Jie?"

"You sure can," Mayumi answered Katsuto in the affirmative before abruptly asking, *"Is Tatsuya there?"*

"Right here," answered Tatsuya briskly.

"You know Gu Jie's position, right? Would you mind coming over to me?"

Mayumi's request was exactly what Tatsuya wanted to do. "Copy that," he said with a ready nod.

"Saegusa, this is Ichijou," Masaki interjected hastily from the side. "Would you mind if I come along, too?"

"Sure, why not?" Unsurprisingly, Mayumi cheerfully agreed to Masaki's request to board. *"What about you, Juumonji?"*

“I’ve got some stuff over here that needs to be taken care of. I’d better stay behind.”

Katsuto wanted nothing more than to participate in the chase, but the burned bodies, destroyed equipment, and smoldering remains of a wildfire couldn’t be left unattended. Someone had to explain it all to the police and firefighters when they arrived.

“Roger that. Tatsuya, Ichijou—I can’t really come get you, so can you make it to me?”

“Understood,” Tatsuya and Ichijou said simultaneously, facing the terminal Katsuto was holding.

The two took off toward the ocean as though it were a race, neck and neck as they sprinted across the water to the patrol boat.



Gu Jie—along with the amphibious vehicle that had carried him there—had come aboard the awaiting high-speed cargo vessel and was now relaxing in his quarters, which happened to be the stateroom normally reserved for the captain.

There was a knock at the door, at which Gu Jie gave a sharp “Enter.”

“My apologies, Master.” It was Du at the door, unsurprisingly.

Looking at him, Gu Jie found himself belatedly taking in his physical appearance for the first time.

Du seemed to be in his thirties. He was somewhere around five feet nine. He had black hair, black eyes, and well-tanned skin. His facial features were completely forgettable. He really did have an unremarkable appearance, but Gu Jie decided the reason it felt like he was looking at him for the first time despite seeing him dozens of times over the past week was because just how frantic he’d been. He couldn’t help but laugh at himself.

“Master, would you care for a drink?”

Du was holding a bottle of Chinese rice wine. Assuming the label matched the contents, while it wasn’t the absolute finest available, it was nonetheless a

respectably fine liquor.

“Sure.” Gu Jie nodded, and as Du placed the bottle on the table, Gu Jie took two shot glasses out of the cupboard the cabin was furnished with.

Du poured the liquor into the glass in front of Gu Jie.

“You did good work out there,” said Gu Jie. “You should have the first drink.”

“I’d be honored,” said Du without any polite hesitation, and taking the glass, drained its contents.

Du obviously knew that he was being used to check for poison, but without any fuss, he retrieved another glass for Gu Jie and filled it with rice liquor.

Gu Jie downed this glass in a single quick gulp. “Mm...a good liquor.”

“My pleasure, Master.”

Gu Jie set the shot glass down on the table and, still standing, looked to Du. “So what’s our status?”

“We’ll be outside Japanese territorial waters in less than an hour. So far, there’s no sign of pursuit.”

“I see.” Gu Jie didn’t let it show on his face, but he was finally feeling like he could take a deep breath. It was hard to suggest they were safe yet, though. Just because they’d made it to the open sea didn’t mean they’d completely eluded their pursuers. But he couldn’t help but feel some relief at having managed to slip through his enemies’ fingers. “What will we do after that? The Japanese have probably ID’d this boat.”

“Yes, I imagine so. Consequently, while I know it will be more trouble for you, Master, we’ll be switching to a different vessel.”

“You’ve made very thorough preparations.”

“You honor me to say so, Master. Once we’ve boarded the other ship, we’ll head directly to Sydney.”

“And no ports of call along the way.”

“No, I thought that would be preferable. However, if you wish to make a stop somewhere...”

“No, I leave it in your hands.”

“Very well, Master. Now, please let me know if you need anything and I’ll come right away,” Du said, and then left the room.

Gu Jie reached for the bottle on the table.



When Tatsuya jumped up from the ocean into the patrol boat, it was Mayumi and Yakumo who were there to welcome him.

“Hey there, Tatsuya. Took you long enough.”

“Master...what’re you doing here?” Tatsuya wondered with a frown, but Yakumo only smiled his usual airy smile.

“What am I doing here? Exactly what I said—I’m lending my hand. Did you forget our conversation?”

“That’s not what I’m asking. I’m asking how you managed to get aboard this boat.”

As Tatsuya questioned the man, Masaki—who’d boarded along with Tatsuya—looked to Mayumi. “Er, Saegusa, who might this monk be?”

She smiled, somewhat flustered, and replied, “He’s Master Yakumo Kokonoe, a *ninjutsu* practitioner. He’s Tatsuya’s martial arts master, and he says he’s here to help us.”

“Strictly speaking, I’m not his master, as Tatsuya is neither a ninja nor a monk. I’m just his sparring partner, really,” Yakumo interjected.

The sharp glare he earned for this from Tatsuya made Mayumi feel as though she were being blamed herself, so she hastily added to Yakumo’s answer, “I got told not to do anything today, but I just couldn’t sit around and do that, so...”

So...? said Tatsuya’s look, inviting her to continue.

“So...when I called the new port at Hiratsuka to have them take out a patrol boat just in case, Master Yakumo was there, and...he said he knew where you were, Tatsuya, so I let him come along. I knew he was your instructor and all, but...was that a mistake?”

Mayumi's voice went up tremulously as she asked, and Tatsuya swallowed his sigh. "No, it wasn't a mistake."

"Thank goodness," Yakumo replied.

Tatsuya found himself vaguely irritated by this. But he held back any further pointless questions and returned his attention to the task at hand. "Saegusa, we should commence our pursuit immediately."

"Okay. Can you give us a course heading, Tatsuya?"

"I can."

Tatsuya and Mayumi headed for the patrol boat's bridge with Masaki and Yakumo in tow.



Canopus, summoned to the destroyer's CIC, frowned. His operation had moved into its final stage, and he was currently being told that one of the undesirable potential endings was beginning to emerge.

"In other words, you're telling me that the Japanese coast guard vessel is going to intercept the freighter Hague is on?" Canopus summarized after scanning a sea chart with the relevant ships' distance and velocities.

"That's possible, but not certain," said one of the dedicated staff that had been assigned to the destroyer especially for this operation, apart from the normal crew. "We estimate that the Japanese coast guard vessel will catch up with the freighter very close to the edge of international waters. But because Japan has the right of pursuit, that makes it problematic for us to board the freighter."

The right of pursuit, also called the right of hot pursuit, was established by international treaty, and it referred to the right of a nation to pursue into international waters any vessel that had violated its laws and to seize that vessel. Canopus knew this much and did not require an explanation of the concept.

"We'll have to adjust the final stage of our plan," concluded the staff member.

Canopus heaved a deep sigh. “So it’ll come down to the use of force...”

Evidently, they weren’t going to get off as easily as he’d hoped. Canopus consoled himself with the fact that they’d avoided the worst possible outcome, which would have been the sinking of Gu Jie’s ship in Japanese waters.

“Notify me when we’re approaching Gu Jie’s ship. I’ll be in my quarters.”

“Understood, Major,” Canopus’s staff chorused as he left the CIC.



“Steady as she goes. We should be able to see it soon.”

True to Tatsuya’s word, a ship soon emerged from the dark in the patrol boat’s spotlight.

The high-speed patrol boat Mayumi had arranged for used its speed to get within visual range of Gu Jie’s ship just before it crossed over into international waters.

“Captain, if you would!”

No sooner did he hear Mayumi’s voice than the patrol boat’s captain was giving orders to his crew to signal the ship they were pursuing.

Using both signal lights and its PA system, the patrol boat ordered Gu Jie’s vessel to heave to. This established the right of hot pursuit.

A sense of relief pervaded the patrol boat’s bridge.



Relaxing in his cabin, Gu Jie could hear the multilingual order to slow and prepare for boarding.

There was a hurried-sounding knock at the door.

“Come in!” Impatience tinged Gu Jie’s voice.

“Pardon me, Master!” Du opened the door. His consternation was obvious.

“It seems the Japanese coast guard has caught us. How many vessels?”

“One, sir,” Du answered reflexively, not understanding why he was asking.

“And what are we doing about it?”

“We will proceed into international waters.”

“Aren’t our pursuers faster than us?”

Du responded to Gu Jie’s point with an odd confidence. “Our allies await just outside of Japanese territorial seas. Our ride may get a bit rough here, so please watch your step.”

Gu Jie had no pawns here, nor did he himself have enough combat strength to sink the patrol boat personally.

But he wasn’t entirely out of cards to play, either.

When he didn’t have pawns, all he had to do was make some.

Without time or materials, they would be completely expendable, but fortunately, there was only one boat pursuing him. If he could get out of this situation, he’d figure something out.

Gu Jie looked over the man called Joe Du. He’d known from the moment they met that he was concealing considerable abilities. He’d hid his powers, but to Gu Jie, they were clear as day.

“All right. I’m trusting you, Du.”

“Very well, Master.”

Du bowed so deeply that Gu Jie could see his back. Deep enough that Gu Jie’s view of his hands was blocked.

Gu Jie activated the magic program he’d prepared on Du.

Du’s body shook violently, as though he were seizing.

He then fell to the floor.

Du had landed on his side, a small pistol clutched in the palm of his right hand.

“So you were going to assassinate me, eh? You certainly went to a lot of trouble to pretend otherwise, but did you really think I would unconditionally trust a man I’d never seen before in my life?” Gu Jie mocked the corpse in front of him, then gave it an order. “Stand, Du.”

Unsteadily at first, but soon with brisk efficiency, Du started moving again and

stood.

“Can you understand my words?”

Du wordlessly nodded.

Gu Jie clicked his tongue in irritation. “But you can’t speak anymore, can you?”

While he’d prepared the magic ahead of time, he’d omitted all but the most basic rites, and this had compromised his preparation. The process to convert life energy to magic fuel had been successfully completed, but some of the body’s function had been lost.

Gu Jie gave up on the prospect of questioning Du about his background and motivations and ordered him to deal with the patrol boat. “Du. Sink, and take that patrol boat with you.”

Du nodded and left the cabin.

Gu Jie followed him, heading for the bridge to seize total control of the ship.



There was a knock at Canopus’s door, at which he answered, “Enter.”

It was not a member of the destroyer’s crew, but one of his operation staff.

The staff member entered and closed the door behind him, then stood directly in front of Canopus. “Major, agent Joseph Du’s life signal has been lost.”

“So the assassination failed?” Canopus asked, his eyebrows going up.

“Unfortunately, we believe that is highly likely, sir.”

Canopus silently stood. He was about to leave the cabin when the staff member stopped him short. “Major, the amphibious vehicle Gu Jie used to escape the Japanese coast has launched from the freighter and is heading toward the patrol boat.”

“Leave it. I’m sure the patrol boat will sink it.”

Canopus grabbed the katana-shaped armament that he’d hung next to the door to his quarters and headed up to the deck to settle the matter personally.



Once the patrol boat captain saw that the freighter they were signaling to heave to was showing no signs of slowing down, he ordered a warning shot.

“Targeting vicinity of vessel...wait! I confirm launch of a small craft from enemy vessel!”

It was Mayumi who was first to react to the report from the fire control officer. “Tatsuya!”

“No, he’s not aboard.”

Mayumi wasn’t the only one whose immediate thought was that Gu Jie was trying to escape. Tatsuya had suspected the same thing, which was why he was able to answer so quickly.

The truth became clear very shortly.

“The launch craft is heading straight for us!”

“Is it armed?! What type of boat is it?!”

The fire control officer answered the captain’s question in a disbelieving tone. “It’s an amphibious craft! It’s fast, too! Where’s that speed coming from?!” he replied, stunned at the incongruous speed the amphibious vehicle was displaying.

“It’s been magically accelerated!” Masaki said firmly, leveling his crimson CAD at the craft.

Masaki’s body began to glow with surplus psionic light. He was activating Burst.

The craft seemed to use hydrogen fuel, so there was no explosion. The gaseous hydrogen must have dissipated into the air before it was able to ignite.

In this case, that meant the magician aboard the amphibious vehicle sustained little damage.

As the amphibious craft began to sink, a figure escaped from it and began to approach the patrol boat at high speed, as though skating along the top of the water.

“Fire a warning shot at the ship. We’ll deal with whatever that is,” Mayumi

told the captain. She had already finished loading an activation sequence.

“Visual contact!”

“Target, vicinity of enemy vessel!”

“Firing preparations complete!”

“Fire!”

A ribbon of auto-cannon fire laced with brilliant tracers grazed the hull of the ship Gu Jie was aboard.

Simultaneously, Mayumi activated her spell: Magic Bullet Shooter.

There was no rule that said Mayumi’s projectiles had to be made of dry ice. She could control water ice just as well. In fact, the situation where Mayumi was at her most powerful was above a body of water, where the material for her projectiles was plentiful—any situation where she was over a lake or an ocean.

Creating ice pebbles directly out of seawater, she flung them at the presumable magician in an omnidirectional shower. Exposed to the barrage, the figure vanished into the water.

“Target vessel has crossed into international waters.”

“Irrelevant. Cut it off.”

At the captain’s orders, the patrol boat closed the distance to Gu Jie’s ship.

Mayumi was worried about the magician who’d seemingly sunk into the ocean, but not so much so that she asked for him to be rescued. The patrol boat’s orders to apprehend Gu Jie had come from her, after all.

They were about to catch up with Gu Jie’s ship when the radar officer’s voice rose, alarmed. “Captain! The USNA destroyer has started closing on us!”

“What?!” the captain shouted in spite of himself.

They’d known as soon as they’d started their pursuit that a USNA navy destroyer was parked just inside the edge of international waters. They’d made their affiliation clear in response to the patrol boat’s inquiry. Their position in the line of the escaping freighter was concerning, but unless the destroyer took

hostile action, there was nothing to be done about it.

But now it had started moving.

Its heading could let it either aid in the freighter's seizure or interfere with the capture operation.

The patrol boat bridge was suddenly very busy. The communications officer started hailing the destroyer in rapid-fire syllables.



"Target has crossed into international waters."

"Half ahead."

At the destroyer captain's orders, the ship began to steam southwest. To the starboard side was Gu Jie's ship, and just behind it was the Japanese patrol boat.

The destroyer's powerful engines allowed it to rapidly close on the high-speed freighter carrying Gu Jie.

Standing at the bow, Canopus drew the katana-shaped armament from its sheath, fixing his gaze on the freighter.



On the bridge of the freighter, Gu Jie had turned the entire crew, from the captain on down, into puppets. They'd offered essentially no resistance, but the process had not been completed instantaneously. During the time Gu Jie's technique was finishing, the freighter had simply plunged forward, with no one paying attention to its surroundings.

"Stop the ship!"

"Full astern!"

The bridge crew had merely been deprived of free will. They could still carry out orders with the same skill they'd always had.

At the captain's order, the freighter began to slow. Its speed steadily decreased until it was near zero.

The destroyer closed on the freighter's course.

Gu Jie started to think that a collision had been averted—until the next instant, when he was overwhelmed by a mighty magic presence, and any thoughts he had came to a sudden halt.



Canopus raised his armament to activate Atomic Divider.

Gu Jie’s location was shown in the penetration-scanning display of the glasses he wore. Operative Joseph Du had given his life in order to leave the transmitter that made the scan possible.

Major Benjamin Canopus, the second most powerful member of the USNA after Major Angie Sirius, commander of the first Stars unit, activated Atomic Divider at maximum power, and with Gu Jie in his sights, swung his sword down.



“Full astern!”

Aboard the patrol boat, the same order as had just been issued on the freighter came down in order to avoid collision with the destroyer.

The destroyer’s bow approached the path of Gu Jie’s freighter.

Then—

Tatsuya felt the activation of powerful magic.

The activation area was seven hundred meters long—a long, narrow plane-shaped volume.

It was extremely wide area-of-effect magic.

The magic type was Atomic Divider, a molecular bond strength reversal technique.

Is he trying to cut Gu Jie in half along with the entire ship?!

A hit with an Atomic Divider of that strength wouldn’t even leave a body. It would be totally lost at sea along with the rest of the ship.

If that happened, all of the effort Tatsuya had gone to would be rendered completely meaningless. If all he’d wanted to do was erase Gu Jie, he could’ve

done that this morning and cleaned his hands of the whole mess.

Tatsuya readied Program Dispersion in order to nullify Atomic Divider.

As was his usual habit, he extended his right arm.

Which Yakumo then grabbed.

Tatsuya looked over, the question on his face.

Yakumo shook his head rapidly.

Tatsuya felt a moment of hesitation.

That same moment—

Atomic Divider activated, and a vast blade came slicing down.

Gu Jie's ship offered no resistance as it was cleaved in two.

At the same time, the psion marker Tatsuya had left on Gu Jie vanished.

The being known as Gu Jie had ceased to exist as a coherent entity.

"What...was that?" breathed Mayumi.

"Was that...Atomic Divider?" murmured Masaki.

Tatsuya gave Yakumo a sharp glare.

But seeing the firm gaze that his martial arts master looked back at him with, Tatsuya decided that this was not the time to ask Yakumo what his reason had been.

The patrol boat captain shouted furiously over his transmitter's mic.

In response came the calm voice of the destroyer captain, explaining that the freighter had been a notorious pirate ship that they'd been hunting for a long time. Because it had been ignoring orders to surrender, they'd been forced to sink her, insisted the destroyer captain.

"It was in the process of stopping!"

"That's not what it looked like to us."

"That's a bald-faced lie!"



“If you have any objections, please file them through the appropriate diplomatic channels,” said the destroyer, before turning to an easterly heading.

It wasn't only the patrol boat crew who watched them go with gritted teeth.

Feeling frustrated and useless, Tatsuya, Masaki, and Mayumi looked back and forth between the receding stern of the USNA destroyer and the water where Gu Jie's ship had sunk.



Having lost his beloved motorcycle, Tatsuya got a ride home in Yakumo's car. The automated public transit system ran twenty-four hours a day, but Tatsuya was carrying a variety of items that would get him in trouble if they were found on him.

Sitting in the left-hand rear seat, once they started moving, Tatsuya didn't say anything for a while. Yakumo, sitting next to him, didn't break the silence.

They were about halfway to their destination when Tatsuya finally spoke. "Master, are you awake?"

Yakumo had been resting with his eyes closed, but at the question, he opened them and looked over to Tatsuya. "Sure, I'm awake."

"Why did you stop me earlier?"

"You mean when you were about to neutralize the American military's magic?"

"Yes." Tatsuya's voice was even but heavy with some unfathomable darkness.

Yakumo answered Tatsuya's question with another question. "I'm more interested in asking you why you'd even consider doing something so rash."

So he'd stopped Tatsuya because he'd been acting rashly, then.

"Killing Gu Jie without showing that he was behind the terrorist attack would have done nothing to help the counterterrorism effort. The ideal solution would have been for judicial authority to be present. If I had stopped the Atomic Divider there, I could have brought the situation to its best possible conclusion." Tatsuya clenched his jaw in frustration for a moment before continuing. "But in the end, we didn't even manage to recover Gu Jie's body, and the truth behind

the terrorist attack was lost along with him.”

“Was solving the case really that important to you, I wonder?”

Yakumo’s reply caught Tatsuya by surprise. He was momentarily stymied for a comeback, and Yakumo pressed his attack:

“Let’s suppose that you had in fact neutralized the Atomic Divider of Benjamin Canopus, the number two magician in the American military.”

This revelation was even more surprising for two reasons.

One was the fact that Benjamin Canopus had been dispatched to a mere regional incident like this one.

From the perspective of the Ten Master Clans, it had been a major incident, but it didn’t seem like a problem that would affect USNA national interests one way or the other. Unless—perhaps there were background details in the incident that the USNA needed to keep secret.

The other source of surprise was Yakumo’s knowledge of Canopus’s involvement.

It was true that such a large-scale application of magic was hard to accept coming from anyone besides the Stars number two. But that just meant “I can believe it came from Canopus.” That didn’t mean that seeing the magic was enough to decisively conclude that the magician who activated it was Benjamin Canopus.

He had to have known about Canopus’s involvement ahead of time.

Yakumo surely noticed Tatsuya’s astonishment, but he let it pass without comment. “Last year, you tangled with the Stars commander, Angie Sirius. I’m sure the American military would assume the nullification of Canopus’s magic was your work. You’re not some nameless magician from an unknown family anymore. You’re a Yotsuba magician who’s been named as the fiancé of the next head of the family.”

The light in Yakumo’s eyes grew sharper.

Tatsuya was suddenly aware of how overwhelmed he was.

“The Yotsuba name is weightier than even you imagine it is. If you’d

dismantled Canopus's Atomic Divider, the American military would have designated you a major threat. And as a threat to American hegemony, they would have begun planning your assassination," concluded Yakumo, his eyes fixed mercilessly on Tatsuya. "Which would have in turn exposed Miyuki to danger. Were you thinking about that in that moment? I don't think you were."



It was a new calendar day by the time Tatsuya finally returned home, around 2:00 AM.

Surely, everyone else was asleep. That was Tatsuya's assumption as he wirelessly unlocked the house's security system and quietly opened the front door.

"Tatsuya, welcome home."

Yet, there was Miyuki, sitting in the traditional fashion on her knees, waiting for him.

"Uh...right, I'm home," Tatsuya mumbled, taken off guard.

Miyuki executed an enchantingly perfect bow, then looking up with a smile, she stood. "You must be very tired. Would you like to take a bath first? Then would you like some dinner? Or perhaps—"

"Thanks. I'll take that bath. Something light to eat after that would be great."

Tatsuya was sure that Miyuki hadn't been about to follow her "perhaps" with anything so vulgar as *me*? but some feeling of disquiet spurred him to cut her off before she finished whatever it was she was going to say.

"Understood."

It was Minami who spoke, having appeared while Miyuki was talking. Her slightly dissatisfied expression was, perhaps, due to not being the first to offer the formal greetings.

They were not the only two who were awake.

"Thank you so much for your hard work, Tatsuya."

"You were really out late, weren't you?"

Fumiya and Ayako, who were spending the next few evenings with them, appeared from the living room.

“You guys all stayed up for me?” Tatsuya asked, shocked, at which Miyuki seemed to puff up her chest.

“I couldn’t very well just sleep while you were out there working so hard for us.”

“Miyuki, you sound just like a young wife when you say things like that,” joked Ayako, but it was Fumiya who blushed.

Miyuki just smiled happily.

Tatsuya knew it would be pointless to tell everybody to go to bed. He decided against trying and headed for the bath.

Separating his weapons and combat suit from regular laundry, Tatsuya carefully washed the blood out of it, then went to the dining room wearing a sweatshirt and sweatpants.

Miyuki, Fumiya, and Ayako were seated around the dining table, with Minami standing next to Miyuki.

Tatsuya took his seat, and Minami briskly brought out a plate of small sandwiches.

Perhaps out of consideration for the late hour, she set a cup of herbal tea down in front of him as well, asking, “Will this do?”

“That’s perfect,” said Tatsuya with a nod.

Then, he looked to each of the other people around the table in turn.

“The mission was a failure,” he said to the three, no, four of them, before so much as taking a sip of tea or a bite of the sandwich.

Everyone but Tatsuya drew a sharp breath.

As they were all stunned speechless, Tatsuya popped one sandwich into his mouth, followed shortly by another one.

“Er, Tatsuya, when you say ‘failure,’ does that mean Gu Jie managed to...?” Miyuki couldn’t bring herself to say the final word: *Escape?*

Tatsuya finished eating the last finger sandwich, then looked to his sister. “No. We confirmed Gu Jie’s death.”

Miyuki was clearly relieved at this pronouncement. Fumiya’s and Ayako’s stiff expressions likewise relaxed.

“If he was really intent on resisting, I suppose it was unavoidable that he would end up being killed,” Miyuki went on. “But if so, that’s not really a failure, is it? True, I think it would have been ideal if he could’ve been taken alive and brought in to face justice, but even Aunt Maya said she didn’t care whether he was brought in dead or alive, so...”

“No, that’s not the problem,” Tatsuya said, shaking his head.

Miyuki gave him a confused look. Fumiya and Ayako shared a glance of consternation.

“Gu Jie was killed by a USNA magician. There was no body left to recover. Thanks to that, there’s no way to prove to the world that he was the one behind the terrorist attack. The public will continue not knowing who planned the attack, and not knowing whether that person is dead or alive.”

“But the terrorist mastermind was a former Dahanese magician named Gu Jie, and Gu Jie is dead, right? So doesn’t that mean the case is solved?” Ayako suggested.

Tatsuya shook his head again. “There’s no objective proof that Gu Jie was the mastermind. We know that he was, but there’s no way to show the public the truth of the matter. And even if we could clearly establish that he was behind the attack, with no body left, there’s no way of escaping the suspicion that he might still be alive somewhere.”

Ayako made an *oh* expression, while Fumiya looked to Tatsuya with a tight-lipped face. He turned his attention away from the twins and back to his sister.

Miyuki was simply watching him with a concerned expression on her face.

“The goal of my mission was to show the world that we magicians had solved the case by our own hand. So long as the general population feels any uncertainty about that fact, it can’t be called anything other than a failure.”

A gloomy silence descended over the dining room table.

Tatsuya finished his herbal tea and set the teacup back down.

As though prompted by the *tap* of the cup touching the table, Miyuki spoke up. “Even if the rest of the world is unsure, I know the matter has been settled. I know it was your abilities that tracked him down and forced him out. And...” Miyuki’s gaze seemed to intensify. “You came back to me safely. For me, that’s the happiest part of all.”

Miyuki gave her brother a lovely smile. Not one that needed a simile like *like a flower* or *as bright as a jewel*, either—just a smile that you could only describe as lovely.

“Tatsuya, thank you so much for all your hard work,” Miyuki said to comfort him.



Afterward, Tatsuya and Miyuki retired to their respective rooms.

Minami left the dishes to the HAR and vacated the dining room.

Tatsuya explained to his cousins that since he was there, there was no need for them to stay up overnight on guard duty. Feeling somewhat as though their *raison d’être* had been foiled, the twins retired to the bedroom they’d been given, each taking one of the beds therein.

“...Fumiya, are you awake?” Ayako asked just as her brother was beginning to doze off.

“...I’m awake. What is it, sis?” he asked back, not betraying a hint of the fact that she’d just stopped him from falling asleep.

“Mm...it’s not really anything, just...”

“You can’t sleep?” There was a faint smile in Fumiya’s voice as he asked. “Come to think of it, we haven’t slept in the same room like this in a long time.”

The twins had long been well-known for seeming to get along well. And it wasn’t just how it appeared on the surface; they were genuinely quite close. Even now, though their exchange seemed superficial, they still trusted each other above anyone else.

They hadn't slept in the same room like this since elementary school. Being an adolescent boy and girl of a certain age, it would've been a lie to suggest they never argued. And yet, as they lay in adjacent beds like this, Fumiya and Ayako felt transported back to a time when they'd been too young to worry about their differences.

"That's true. When they said we'd be sharing a room, I was kind of annoyed, to be honest, but now I almost feel like I should thank Tatsuya."

Fumiya couldn't help but give a stiff smile. "Speaking of Tatsuya, I've hardly ever seen him frustrated like he was today...but Miyuki really cheered him up, huh? Miyuki really never fails to impress. Moments like that, they really do feel like an engaged couple instead of siblings."

"I really won't ever measure up to that..." At Fumiya's words, Ayako's tone dropped its ladylike formality, and for a moment, her murmuring tone was that of an ordinary girl. "You saw it too, right, Fumiya? That smile of Miyuki's. I don't think I could ever smile like that."

If her words had come from a place of envy or jealousy, Fumiya would've been able to tease her or chide her. But his sister was speaking from her heart, and Fumiya was briefly at a loss for how to respond.

"Of course, she's beautiful to begin with, but...that's not enough to be able to have such a lovely smile. I feel like that smile conveyed her feelings to Tatsuya more eloquently than a million sweet whispers ever could."

Ayako sighed a quiet sigh. She kept it soft so Fumiya wouldn't hear it.

But Fumiya didn't miss it.

"I suppose that's why Tatsuya was able to regain some of his cheer," Ayako said, only to fall silent.

Before the quiet could settle, Fumiya replied, "I know all too well that Miyuki's a beautiful girl, but you're no slouch yourself, sis."

"...And yet, somehow, I don't feel terribly complimented by that."

"It's not just flattery! Objectively speaking, you're beautiful."

"...Am I being condescended to, or is it merely my imagination?"

“No, not at all! There are a bunch of guys at Fourth High who would love to go out with you, I’m serious.”

“...You’re really going there? Okay, fine, it’s my turn now, *Little Miss Yami*.”

Ayako’s ears didn’t miss the sound of Fumiya’s breath catching. She snickered and continued, “Objectively speaking, you’re a beautiful girl, too, Yami. I mean, when you’re cross-dressing as a boy, I hear plenty of whispers about how ‘Oh, if only Yami were a girl...’”

“I’m not cross-dressing as a boy!”

“This sort of thing isn’t really to my taste, but among the girls who enjoy stories about boys becoming *especially* close, I’ve heard them talking about you more than a few times, giggling about who they’d pair you up with...”

“I have no interest in that!” Fumiya cried into his pillow, perhaps trying to be at least minimally discreet and avoid raising a ruckus in the middle of the night. He rolled over, turning his back to Ayako. “Good night!” he growled, curling up.

Ayako giggled, then with a grateful tone, agreed, “Good night.”



Dawn broke on the failure of Gu Jie to be captured and executed.

February 20, 2097. Tatsuya was visiting the Chiba family with Yakumo and his disciples.

Their business was the delivery of Toshikazu Chiba’s body.

Masaki, who’d destroyed Inagaki’s body with Burst, had said he would come along, but Yakumo had stopped him, explaining that they were going not to apologize, but to explain.

All Tatsuya could tell Miyuki was that he was going out to tie up some loose ends. He’d left her, along with Fumiya, Ayako, and Minami, with instructions not to leave the house. They were probably all having a great time playing a video game or something right about then. Maybe making sweets of some kind. There was also the possibility that Fumiya, the sole boy, was being mercilessly ganged up on by the three girls.

The Chiba family had been contacted that morning about the visit, including

its nature.

The van carrying Toshikazu's body arrived at the Chiba estate, where a somber atmosphere prevailed.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Yakumo offered to the gathered family members after he stepped out of the van, speaking as a simple bystander rather than as a priest.

"I humbly apologize for the terrible trouble my foolish son has caused," said the head of the Chiba family and Toshikazu's father, Jouichirou, bowing deeply. He was in his fifties, but he was in excellent physical shape and possessed impressive musculature. Nevertheless, he was despondent over the loss of his son, and it made him look diminished.

Yakumo's disciples carried Toshikazu's body. The face was hidden, but the body alone was seemingly enough to recognize him by, as a woman wearing a black kimono started to weep. If Tatsuya's memory served him, that was Toshikazu's elder sister, Sanae.

There were other familiar faces among the people who were present to meet them. Some were Chiba family students whose ability had earned them truly heroic status, but their eyes were now moist with tears.

Toshikazu's younger brother, "the Chiba prodigy" Naotsugu, was nowhere to be seen. The brothers were rumored not to have gotten along well, but Tatsuya couldn't imagine that was the reason for his absence now. More likely, he was away from the house for training.

The last person Tatsuya's eyes fell onto was Erika, who stood at the very end of the receiving line. In all honestly, Tatsuya didn't much want to interact with her, but he wasn't going to just avert his gaze. Talking to Erika was, in fact, the main reason Tatsuya had come at all.

"Do please come in."

Behind Jouichirou followed the Chiba family students, who took over carrying the stretcher with Toshikazu's body from Yakumo's disciples. Behind them came Yakumo and Tatsuya, who proceeded into the main house.

The body was carried into Toshikazu's own room and now lay there on a

futon. His room was surprisingly tidy for an unmarried man—or, well, perhaps that wasn't the right way to put it. There was a desk, a closet, and a katana stand holding a single blade. That was the entire contents of the six-tatami-mat room.

Neither Yakumo nor his disciples ventured to recite any sutras. The Chiba family temple would handle those services. Indeed, Yakumo's disciples didn't even enter the house and were instead waiting in the van.

Yakumo and Tatsuya faced Jouichirou in the receiving room. They were sitting not on a sofa but on thin *zabuton* cushions laid out on the tatami floor. Yakumo and Tatsuya had no difficulty sitting in the traditional *seiza* posture on their knees, but it was clear that the household's style would have been rather uncomfortable for most modern people, who were unused to sitting on tatami floors.

"We have caused you terrible inconvenience. Again, please accept my most humble apologies." Jouichirou placed his hands against the tatami mat and bowed his head very low. Sitting next to him, Erika did likewise.

Erika was the only other person seated on the Chiba family side. Both Yakumo and Tatsuya were aware that Jouichirou was a widower, and they already knew that Naotsugu was not present. Sanae had remained in Toshikazu's room, undoubtedly still crying—in sharp contrast to Erika, whose eyes were not marred with tears.

Erika was wearing her First High uniform—another point of contrast with Sanae, who was dressed in mourning. She was wearing the full uniform, so there was nothing wrong with her attire per se, but at a family memorial, the green blazer and white dress did seem out of place. Tatsuya, incidentally, was wearing a black suit.

"Your son met his death in rather unusual circumstances, so we thought it would be appropriate to impose upon your hospitality to explain those circumstances, Mr. Chiba," replied Yakumo.

Jouichirou met this statement with another, lighter bow. "By all means, I would like to hear. To speak truthfully, I am terribly confused."

"You have my deepest sympathies," Yakumo said again, then began to relate

what had happened to Toshikazu Chiba.

How he'd been made into a puppet by a Dahanese magician responsible for the Hakone terrorist attack.

How he'd attacked the unit that was in pursuit of that suspect.

How, by the time Tatsuya faced him down, he was already dead.

"...We performed a cleansing ceremony overnight, so I do not believe there is any lingering malign magic."

As Yakumo finished his explanation, Jouichirou closed his eyes.

His closed fist was resting on his knee, and Tatsuya noticed it occasionally trembling.

"...For all of this, we remain in your debt."

When Jouichirou finally opened his eyes, he betrayed no trace of his disquiet.

With the conversation concluded, tea was brought out for Yakumo and his disciples. Jouichirou was going to extend the invitation to Tatsuya as well, but Erika had already taken him to the family dojo.

Jouichirou forgave his daughter her impolite behavior, since it was clear to him that Tatsuya, too, wanted to speak to her.

The dojo was unoccupied. Given what had happened to Toshikazu, it was hardly surprising that training had been canceled.

Erika continued into the middle of the dojo, then sat directly in the center of the wooden floor.

Tatsuya sat down facing her.

"Thank you very much for bringing my brother home." Erika suddenly bowed very deeply. Then, before Tatsuya could answer, she looked back up and fixed his eyes in her piercing gaze. "I want you to tell me something."

She spoke in her usual manner, but there was an unfamiliar dignity and weight to her voice.

"Did you catch the magician who made my idiot brother into a puppet?" Her voice shook with fury on the words *idiot brother*, which made her grief stand

out all the more.

“He died. We were unable to recover the body.”

“I see.” Erika clenched her jaw.

Tatsuya found it strange that he didn’t hear any tooth-grinding noises.

“So,” Erika forced the words out with some effort, “I guess that means you’re the person I have to take my vengeance on.”

“I guess so.” Tatsuya accepted Erika’s irrational sentiment, because he himself felt it was undeniable that he’d been the one to finish Toshikazu Chiba.

Erika seemed shaken at the agreement. “...Can’t you do something about it with that magic of yours?”

She knew what Tatsuya’s Regeneration required in exchange.

She knew that demanding that of him was unreasonable.

She understood that Toshikazu had paid for his mistake with his own life.

And still, she had asked.

“The dead cannot be brought back to life.” Tatsuya’s voice was dispassionate and matter-of-fact. There wasn’t a trace of guilt in it.

He had no reason for guilt; this was only logical. And yet, Erika couldn’t help her fury at his heartless affect.

“—Tatsuya Shiba! Fight me!” Erika brought one knee up as if to stand.

Tatsuya immediately struck her with a spinning kick.

Erika went flying all the way to the wall.

She stood, steadying herself against the wall, and grabbed a wooden practice sword that was hanging there before looking back into the center of the dojo.

Tatsuya looked back at her, his hands down at his sides in a natural stance.

Erika fell into her own stance, her sword pointed directly at him.

Tatsuya began walking, as though he’d been waiting for that. He walked toward her, neither slowly nor quickly, seemingly unconcerned about the shrinking distance between them.

“Yaaaah!” Erika raised the wooden sword.

Tatsuya did not break his stride.

She swung the practice sword down. It was a brute-force attack, with none of her usual finesse.

Tatsuya grabbed the descending blade with one hand. His arm fixed in place, he relied on his core to swing the sword—and Erika—over and around himself.

Her grip on the wooden sword immediately faltered. Erika tumbled to the floor, and as she knelt to stand, she found herself staring at the point of the practice sword.

Tatsuya had taken it from her and was now pointing it at her.

“Well, you win.” Tears welled up in Erika’s eyes as she acknowledged her defeat. She slumped forward, palms down on the wooden floor, and sobbed.

Tatsuya stood there in front of her until her crying ended.

The whole time, for some reason, nobody entered the dojo.

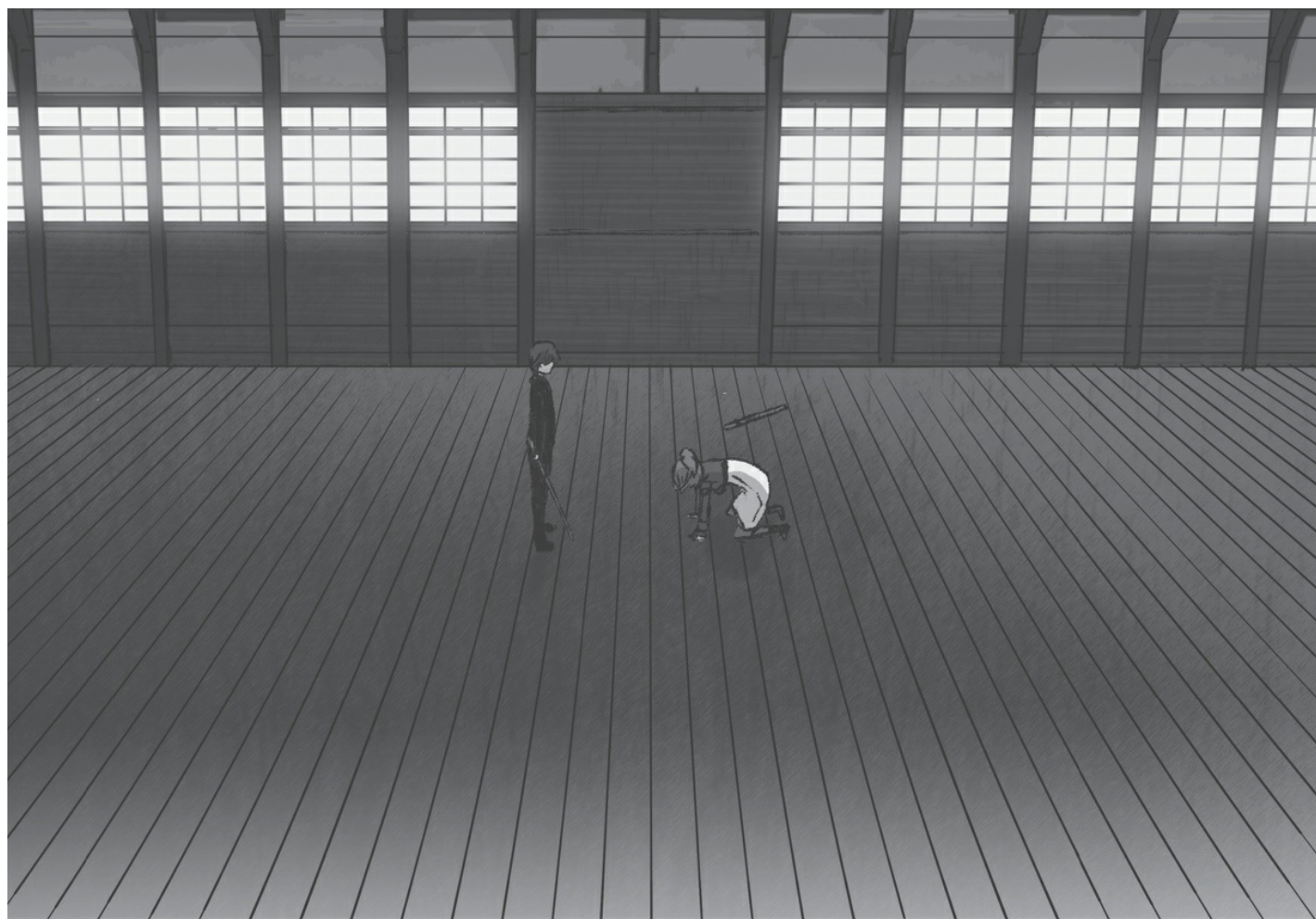
“...A girl’s bawling her eyes out right in front of you. You could at least offer her a hanky,” Erika muttered bitterly.

Tatsuya held out a handkerchief with an uneasy smile. “You don’t have to give it back.”

“Gee, thanks.” Erika took the handkerchief and dried her eyes, then blew her nose. Even that wasn’t apparently enough, so she rubbed her eyes with her uniform sleeves. Then she suddenly started complaining. “You really think that move would fly? If it’d been a real blade, I’d have sliced your hand open.”

Evidently, she took issue with the way Tatsuya had grabbed the practice sword.

“It was a wooden sword,” said Tatsuya with a smirk as he looked at the thing, which lay where it had been tossed onto the floor once their fight was over.



“Hmph...and what’s with kicking me like that outta nowhere?”

“The fight had started, hadn’t it?”

“Nnngh...” Erika growled in frustration. She was starting to look like her old self. Her cried-out eyes were clear now, having lost the vacantly possessed glaze they’d had. “Tatsuya—my idiot brother, was he tough?”

“Yeah. Even as a puppet, he was tough.”

“Okay... Well, a compliment from you is more eulogy than he deserves,” Erika said, turning her back to Tatsuya.

She offered no apology for picking a fight with him.

And Tatsuya didn’t want one.



With Jouichirou and his senior student, Yakumo and Tatsuya sat next to each other in the van as they left the Chiba home. Yakumo turned to Tatsuya with an unpleasant grin.

“I figured you’d come back with your cheeks a little redder.”

“Erika would never forgive me if I let her hit me on purpose.”

“That so? I guess girls inherit warrior blood, too.” Yakumo snickered somewhat villainously for a moment before asking, “So what are you doing with the rest of your day?”

“I’m going home for a bit, then heading to the main Yotsuba house to deliver my report.”

“You’re going there personally? Not calling?”

“Yes. I think it will be better to face up to the scolding I’ll get.”

“I don’t really think there’s anything to scold you about, but...”

Yakumo had been given a request by a sponsor of the Yotsuba family, Aoba Toudou: Watch over Tatsuya Shiba and make sure he doesn’t go too far. During the previous day’s events, the absolute top priority had been making sure that Tatsuya and Miyuki didn’t get the attention of the USNA, but doing so also fell within Toudou’s request.

In other words, the sponsor's wishes had been respected, so there was nothing worth a reprimand.

However, Tatsuya didn't know that. Even if he knew of the existence of a sponsor named Aoba Toudou, they'd never met. Tatsuya didn't know the man's face.

Yakumo's words therefore must have seemed unavoidably obtuse.

"Honestly, I don't think Aunt Maya will be terribly upset. But appearances and formality are important in times like these."

"Ah, so you're going and apologizing personally for appearances' sake. I guess it's not easy being Tatsuya Shiba."

Tatsuya smiled a long-suffering smile and said nothing further. His immediate thought was that he only seemed hardworking compared with Yakumo, but he knew better than to wake that sleeping dog.

"Not going to report to Kazama?"

"Going to and from the main house will take up the rest of today, so I'll make that appearance tomorrow."

"I see. Well, good work."

Without any further meaningful conversation, Tatsuya was dropped off in front of his house.



Tatsuya had told Yakumo he was going to the main Yotsuba house, but in reality, his destination ended up being the Kanto branch office of the Magic Association in Yokohama. After calling ahead to confirm his visit, he'd been told that Maya was at the Magic Association and that he should meet her there.

Tatsuya left the house in Minami's care and headed for the Yokohama Bay Hills Tower with Miyuki, Fumiya, and Ayako in tow. He hadn't particularly wanted to bring them along, but they (mostly Miyuki) had insisted on coming.

Arriving at the Kanto branch of the Magic Association, they were led into its most luxurious meeting room. Apparently, after this, there was going to be a teleconferenced meeting of the Ten Master Clans, and at the Kanto branch,

Maya had won the right to use this room over Kouichi, Katsuto, and Takumi Shippou by insisting “ladies first.”

“Goodness, the gang’s all here. Welcome,” said Maya upon the arrival of the four, who were shown into the meeting room with Tatsuya at the head of the group.

Before Tatsuya could be shown to a seat, he stood before Maya and bowed deeply at the waist. “Aunt Maya,” he said, conscious of the fact that this was the Magic Association and addressing her as the relation to him that she was publicly known to have. “I was unsuccessful in the completion of this operation, and I deeply apologize.”

Maya accepted Tatsuya’s apology with a smile. “I heard about what happened yesterday. I don’t think there was anything you could’ve done, so don’t worry yourself about it too much.”

“Thank you very much.” Tatsuya bowed, and the matter was concluded—or so he thought, but the world was not going to let him off so easily.

“It’s unfortunate that we were unable to recover Gu Jie’s body, but...it’s certain that he’s dead, correct?”

“Yes,” Tatsuya nodded, suppressing the rising wariness he felt. After having already reassured him that he needn’t worry, what was Maya trying to say?

“How did you ascertain Gu Jie’s death, I wonder? There may well be people who try to make some hay over this, so I’d like to ask the question first, just in case.”

This wasn’t something that needed to be kept secret.

“Based on what I learned from struggling with Gongjin Zhou’s Qimen Dunjia, I used tracking magic.”

“Still, up until yesterday, your search did not seem to be going very well at all.”

Tatsuya was starting to wonder if Maya suspected that he’d gotten sloppy.

“There are conditions on how it can be used, but yesterday, I was finally able to apply it to the mission.”

It was true that in some sense, he *had* been sloppy. But that was because there was a duty that took precedence. That wasn't an excuse—Tatsuya genuinely believed it, so there was no hesitation or guilt in his voice.

“Conditions? Such as?”

But this question was one he couldn't answer. Even Tatsuya wasn't so aloof as to be able to say *I had to hold Miyuki in my arms before I could use it* with a straight face.

“...It was a problem of sensory perception, so it's difficult to explain,” Tatsuya said evasively, fully aware that this was an answer that would invite suspicion.

“My, how uncharacteristic of you. Very well, then. I'm sure it happens to the best of us,” Maya said with an amused smile. Her gaze was not on Tatsuya, but rather the red-faced Miyuki, who was standing diagonally behind him. She might very well have guessed what Tatsuya's “condition” was based on Miyuki's expression.

“I have one other question for you.”

“By all means.”

Thus far, Maya seemed to have been enjoying watching Tatsuya squirm, but now her smile took on a frigid edge. “Was Toshikazu Chiba really that strong?”

“...What do you mean by ‘that’? He was certainly a formidable opponent.”

“Oh, just that he seemed to give you a fair amount of trouble for someone who possessed only melee combat abilities, who, since he didn't have his personal dedicated armament device, couldn't use the full extent of his own powers, that's all.”

A cold shiver ran down Tatsuya's spine.

It was true that if he hadn't felt so much sympathy for Toshikazu at the time, he could've beaten him faster. If he hadn't been distracted by unnecessary curiosity, he could've avoided wasting precious time.

If it were argued that this had led to the failure to capture Gu Jie, it would be difficult to completely refute.

In order to evade that possibility, Tatsuya decided to report something he

hadn't initially planned to. "He might have been unable to call upon his former power, but Toshikazu Chiba's body had been temporarily enhanced by the technique Gu Jie used on him. This is speculation, but I believe I'm correct."

"His magic ability was temporarily enhanced?" Maya's gaze sharpened. "No-Head Dragon's Sorcery Boosters were apparently developed based on Gu Jie's corpse manipulation techniques... Perhaps this was something related."

Tatsuya realized his mistake, but it was too late to feign ignorance. "I don't think so. It didn't appear that he needed any external equipment."

"So what are you suggesting it was?"

"...If we allow for the possibility that life energy exists, then Gu Jie's technique might work by killing a target to release that life energy, pooling it in the corpse, and using it as a battery for psion manipulation."

"Life energy...? Interesting. And the magic is activated via an inscription on the corpse's heart, correct? Which is why you deleted Toshikazu Chiba's heart."

"—You're perceptive as ever."

"I wonder if the reason we didn't observe the technique in Kamakura was because you had already dismantled the Generators' hearts."

"Quite probably." That possibility hadn't occurred to Tatsuya, but now that it was pointed out to him, it seemed likely.

"A Sorcery Booster is a piece of magic equipment made by processing a brain. And now you've encountered a method of magic enhancement that uses the heart as its medium. Our magic research has focused entirely on mental factors, but it looks like there may be keys to deeper understanding to be found elsewhere in the body."

There was a strange light in Maya's eyes—the obsession of a mad scientist.

Please, just don't start human experimentation now, Tatsuya prayed.

Perhaps his prayer reached Maya, or perhaps she intuited the concern being directed her way. In any case, Maya's mood quickly returned to normal.

"Ah, I'm so sorry! I can't believe I let my mind wander like that. Tatsuya, Miyuki, Fumiya, Ayako—please sit." Maya directed the four to take a seat, then

without turning around addressed Hayama. “Hayama, bring some tea for Tatsuya and his friends.”

Hayama had been standing as still as a statue. “Very well, ma’am,” he replied with a respectful bow.

While Tatsuya was undergoing his interrogation by Maya, the other three had found it hard to breathe.

Once the tension between Maya and Tatsuya evaporated, Miyuki and the others sat and drank their tea as the life came back to them.

But it was too soon for anyone to let their guard down.

“You probably know this already, but after this, there’s going to be an online meeting of the Ten Master Clans,” Maya began.

There was nothing odd about that in and of itself. Tatsuya and the other three all realized this as well.

Online meetings of the Ten Master Clans could either be attended directly from home or by going to the nearest branch office of the Magic Association. The Ichijou and Futatsugi families were close to the main office in Tokyo, and the Tohoku, Shikoku, and Kyushu branch offices, while nothing fancy, were also equipped for online meetings.

If it had just been with Kouichi and Katsuto, then there would’ve been a chance that the meeting was just to wrap up yesterday’s incident, but with Takumi Shippou also in attendance, it was natural to assume that this was a special convening of the Master Clans Council.

“And if Mr. Mitsuya would only show his face, we could get started,” Maya snipped.

“Has a problem besides dealing with Gu Jie come up?”

Maya heaved an exaggerated sigh. “Well, you know that anti-magician activity has gotten worse. Up until recently, we thought that the extremist groups responsible for the unjustified attacks on magicians have been mostly composed of regular citizens, so we’d left them alone, but...” Maya glanced at Tatsuya. “The attacks on magicians seem to be coming from suborganizations of

Blanche, and the extremist groups who supposedly abhor magic are actually using it themselves...so to an ignorant observer, it looks like an internal conflict between different magician groups. And if this starts being viewed as something regular people are being caught in the middle of, it makes our position as magicians worse and worse.”

Tatsuya couldn't help but groan.

Maya was clearly talking about the remnants of Égalité that he'd thwarted the day before yesterday near First High.

Those men hadn't been magicians; one of them had merely acted as a magic relay.

But Tatsuya couldn't prove that. He could barely even explain it.

Gu Jie's death brought the Hakone terrorist attack to a conclusion.

But the seeds of malice that he'd scattered had sprouted and bloomed and were about to bear fruit.

(To be continued in the next chapter, Overture to Upheaval)



“That concludes this report on the Hakone terrorist incident. I believe the National Defense Force has an obligation to regard the ease with which the USNA military was able to interfere in domestic affairs as an extremely serious matter.”

“...Is that the official position of the Ten Master Clans?”

“No, sir. That’s my opinion, Colonel.”

“Understood. I agree with you, Specialist. It’ll be in my recommendation to the brigade commander. You’re dismissed.”

“Sir!”

After Colonel Harunobu Kazama, commander of the National Ground Defense Force’s 101st Brigade of the Independent Magic Battalion dismissed his subordinate, Specialist Ryuuya Ooguro, an undisclosed strategic-class magician, he folded his hands together and closed his eyes.

Normally, Tatsuya would have attended school today, but instead, he had reported to the Independent Magic Battalion’s headquarters to be debriefed on the end—although it was certainly not a *conclusion*—of the Hakone terrorist incident.

When Tatsuya had come to a hospital near Zama base that did work for the military in order to apprehend the terrorist mastermind who was hiding there, he’d requested permission to use classified magic, and thus perhaps felt obligated to deliver a report. Because apprehension of the terrorist was not the military’s responsibility, Tatsuya could’ve gotten by without delivering a report, but Kazama was just as happy to have gotten the chance to hear it firsthand.

The incident had not been part of Tatsuya’s military duties, but as to whether

the Independent Magic Battalion was wholly unrelated to the series of events—there was, in fact, some connection. Kazama and his unit were trying to expose the covert domestic collaborators of hostile foreign powers and were secretly participating in the police investigation.

Kazama was also aware of the USNA military's intervention. Because Tatsuya had warned him ahead of time about the coming conflict at Zama, they'd obviously been performing surveillance. That was the only time that regular USNA forces had been deployed, but Kazama's unit had also had a broad sense of the rampant actions taken by the irregular, covert operators who came afterward.

If the Independent Magic Battalion had aided Tatsuya's investigation, the Hakone terrorist incident would probably have been resolved more quickly. Gu Jie wouldn't have managed to escape to international waters, and there was high probability that his body could've at least been recovered.

And above all—the loss of two law enforcement officers could've been avoided.

It was impossible to say whether this conviction on Kazama's part was warranted. That belonged to the world of speculation.

In reality, Kazama and his unit had not been directly involved in the case, the terrorist mastermind was consigned to the deep by a USNA military magician, and Inspector Toshikazu Chiba along with his aide had died in the course of their investigation, sacrifices to an evil magic that shamed their very corpses.

What haunted Kazama was that he couldn't quite convince himself that he held no responsibility for the tragedy that befell inspectors Chiba and Inagaki. Even if Kazama's unit hadn't gotten involved at all, the two detectives might still have pursued the necromancer and stumbled into his trap.

But that was entirely supposition.

In reality, the National Defense Force had led inspector Chiba to the residence of a heretical magician. If Kazama didn't care, his assistant certainly would.

Lieutenant Fujibayashi had, after all, been worried enough about Inspector Chiba's safety to insist on actively intervening in order to help solve the case.



Lieutenant Fujibayashi was stunned. The shock she felt was far greater than anything she would have expected.

She had been given the audio recording of Specialist Ooguro's verbal report on the Hakone terrorist incident by her commander, Colonel Kazama, in order to listen to it and prepare a written summary. Specialist Ooguro's—i.e., Tatsuya's—narrative was so logical and well-considered that she could essentially transcribe his statement into a word processor and the report would be finished. From the standpoint of technical difficulty, the report would be easy to finish up.

But she had yet to type a single word. She was regretting her initial decision to go ahead and listen to the recording all the way through first. If she had simply worked one sentence at a time, she might at least have been able to pretend to work.

She couldn't bring herself to play the recording again. She didn't have the courage to.

That didn't stop Tatsuya's voice from echoing in her ears.

"After Inspector Chiba's life was taken, he was made into a puppet, which I engaged in combat.

"I believe Inspector Chiba was captured at the home of an ancient magician named Kazukiyo Oumi, who was one of Gu Jie's collaborators."

Fujibayashi remembered the name Kazukiyo Oumi. She would probably never forget it now—because she had been the one who led Inspector Toshikazu Chiba to Kazukiyo Oumi's house.

It was Major General Saeki's idea to use the Hakone terrorist attack investigation to identify possible sympathizers among magicians suspected of having connections to remnants of the Kunlun Institute, a former Dahanese magic research institution, by pointing the police at them and gauging their reactions. Fujibayashi had carried out Saeki's orders as relayed by Kazama, seeding their list of suspects among information brokers and following up on leads.

Of course, it had been a complete coincidence that Toshikazu Chiba was the one who pulled Oumi. Fujibayashi hadn't egged him on. In fact, she'd specifically told him that Kazukiyo Oumi was rumored to have connections with former Dahanese magicians. Because if Toshikazu didn't heed that advice, it was on his head.

She knew this from the get-go.

Fujibayashi couldn't get over it, though, because she and Toshikazu had had a personal relationship.

In autumn of 2095, just before the Yokohama Incident, she'd worked with Toshikazu in order to mop up the Great Asian Alliance operatives who had infiltrated the southern Kanto region.

In the end, they hadn't been able to prevent the Great Asian Alliance's invasion, but they'd succeeded in capturing quite a few operatives along with their collaborators.

Fujibayashi and Toshikazu had even gone out drinking to celebrate. And even before that, they'd spent quite a bit of time together on their investigation through the city.

The memories now lingered in the corners of her mind. She hadn't thought about them until recently, but meeting Toshikazu again brought them rushing vividly back.

They hadn't been in love.

They didn't have a romantic relationship of any kind.

Objectively speaking, they'd only been on two or three "dates" of professional interaction and were only slightly closer than perfect strangers.

Undoubtedly, he would've felt the same way about her.

Toshikazu hadn't even known she'd been promoted to lieutenant. He had clearly only pretended to flirt with her in the course of what was in the end an unremarkable adult relationship.

What Fujibayashi had not yet realized was that her entire way of thinking about this was proof that she was very much conscious of him in precisely that

way.

Fujibayashi was a sensible, intelligent woman, but her romantic experience was shallow.

A well-bred young woman from the Fujibayashi family of ancient magicians, she'd had a fiancé chosen for her by her parents. She'd been engaged to him—a childhood friend—since before middle school.

During her student days, she'd been even more serious-minded than she was now, and she avoided dating, reasoning that she already had a match made. He was her age, and she thought of him more as family than as anything romantic, and there was never any hint of chemistry between them when they were together.

But given that, Fujibayashi quite naturally accepted him as someone who would eventually become literal family to her.

Her fiancé was a peaceful man, but he'd entered the National Defense Academy and later joined the National Defense Force. Fujibayashi didn't try to stop him. As part of a distinguished family, she'd been raised with the worldview that national service was a matter of course. At most, she would joke that it didn't suit him and that he should quit, then laugh the idea off. Her fiancé chose the path of a technology officer, and since he wouldn't be on the front lines anywhere, it was easy not to worry about him.

Her fiancé's specialty had been reconnaissance and detection magic. His first posting was Okinawa.

That was where he died.

In 2092, the Great Asian Alliance launched a surprise invasion of Okinawa. He was killed in its defense.

Their wedding would have been three months later.

Fujibayashi had such regrets. Why hadn't she seriously tried to stop him from becoming a soldier?

Up until that point, she'd been heading toward a career in research, but upon the death of her fiancé, she'd changed her path and become a uniformed

military officer. It was hard for her to explain her reasoning why, even to herself.

Did she want to retaliate against the enemies who'd taken her fiancé from her?

Did she want to continue his work?

Did she want to put herself in his position to somehow comfort herself?

Or did she want to get revenge on the military from inside it for taking her fiancé?

Whatever her reasons, Fujibayashi was unable to forget about him.

She'd gone out with several men since then, but none of them for very long.

For the last several years, her family had persistently tried to set her up with potential marriage partners, but she refused them all, citing her duties as the reason.

The National Defense Force was predominantly male, but men never seemed to approach her, perhaps out of intimidation at her professional excellence.

The first person in a very long time to see her considerable ability and not be intimidated by it—and to approach her without letting her well-known family name enter the calculation—was none other than Toshikazu Chiba.

He was probably the first, excluding her late fiancé.

Oh. So that's why, Fujibayashi thought.

She finally realized.

That was why she was so shaken by this.

She had heard the first report of Toshikazu's death the previous night. She'd been able to keep herself together because the reality hadn't set in yet.

The same thing had happened when she'd first been told about the death of her fiancé.

The reality only hit her when she was at the memorial service in Okinawa for the servicemen who'd been killed, and she'd seen his photograph among the portraits of the deceased.

Similarly, Fujibayashi realized it had only been upon hearing Tatsuya detail how Toshikazu had died that it finally felt real to her.

That's why she was so shaken. Why her heart was so confused.

She was always too late, she thought.

She was too late to stop her fiancé from becoming a soldier.

She was too late to stop Toshikazu Chiba from getting close to Kazukiyo Oumi.

She only ever realized her feelings after the person she felt them for was gone.

It was true when she realized she loved her fiancé.

It was also true when she understood that she felt something more than friendship for Toshikazu Chiba.

Fujibayashi exhaled a deep, slow breath.

No tears came. For what she felt was not sadness but merely regret.

Facing the terminal, she began the work of preparing the report.

(End)

MASAKI ICHIJOU'S SCHOOL TRANSFER JOURNAL



Sunday, February 10, 2097

I'm in Tokyo right now as I write this journal. Not at a hotel, but at a different Ichijou house.

My father built this house in Tokyo about ten years ago, saying that any family that was part of the Ten Master Clans had to have a house in Tokyo, which didn't make much sense to me. As a kid, I remember childishly thinking, *That seems like such a waste*, and as it turns out: It was. We have it, but we've hardly used it. For starters, you can easily day trip to Tokyo these days, and we hardly ever have business in Tokyo that requires staying here overnight.

Especially since the invasion of Sado five years ago, it's really rare for my father to venture far from the main house. And these days, it's unheard-of for my father and mother to be away from home at the same time. If they're only ever going to visit Tokyo one at a time, then a hotel would be way more convenient. And if they checked with the Magic Association, I'm sure their security measures would be more than adequate.

That's why I once seriously proposed to my father the idea of selling the Tokyo house. His reply was *Even if we wanted to sell it, there are so many fixtures we'd have to strip out first that it's not worth the trouble*. I swear, the way he charges ahead with every little idea he gets always makes the cleanup afterward a huge pain.

But you never know what's going to happen. Like me having to stay in Tokyo for a while, which is why I'm writing this from inside that very residence.

But I'm not upset about having to live in Tokyo.

In fact, I'm even a little excited about it, though that's probably inappropriate given why I'm here.

The reason I'm going to be living on my own for a little while is that I've been given a task as the eldest son of the Ichijou family, one of the Ten Master Clans.

That task is capturing the mastermind behind a contemptible terrorist attack.

Five days ago, there was a terrorist bombing that targeted the hotel where the Ten Master Clans Conference was taking place. A total of twenty-two

people died, and thirty-four were injured—all of them innocent bystanders—because of this heinous crime targeting the Ten Master Clans. I'll never forgive whoever did this. Even if I hadn't been ordered to participate, there's no way I would've been able to stand idly by. If anything, I'm grateful to have been put on the mission to find the culprit and honored that the Master Clans Council chose me. I plan to fulfill this duty to the best of my ability.

I was given the mission on the same day as the attack, but events have been set in motion now, so I'm feeling more and more tense.

Faced with such an important duty, it's probably inappropriate to be feeling this way, which is why this is the only place I'm going to be honest. I would never admit to something this frivolous in front of anybody.

Starting tomorrow, I'll be attending First High, thanks to Principal Maeda asking a favor of the First High principal.

I'll be living my high school life in the same school building as *her*.

Even if it's only for a month, how could I be anything other than happy about that?

Monday, February 11, 2097

This isn't a dream, right?

I'm in the same class as her!

Calm down. Calm down, me.

Okay.

Today was my first day at First High.

Because of the complicated circumstances, or more accurately, a special arrangement, I didn't transfer or officially enroll here.

At first, my father was thinking that I'd have to miss school because of the mission and went to Principal Maeda asking about public service leave. Since the search area had been specified as the southern Kanto region going all the way to Izu, I wouldn't be able to attend class at Third High. Missing a day or two wouldn't have been impossible, but a week or two was naturally problematic.

So the fact was my father went to the principal to ask a favor.

But it didn't end up being that easy.

I mean, of course it didn't. For one thing, the Ten Master Clans aren't a public institution. So obviously, working on a mission for them doesn't constitute public service. If public service leave could be used for absences that weren't public service, anybody affiliated with the Ten Master Clans could get as much vacation as they wanted.

There was no way the principal was going to approve something like that.

But Principal Maeda isn't *just* a hard-ass. It might be a little presumptuous of me to say so, but Principal Maeda is only hard on us because she cares so much. She does have a tendency to treat high school students as boot camp recruits, but she really looks out for us. She even goes out of her way to give the standard curriculum students extra training they wouldn't be able to get otherwise, thanks to a shortage of teachers, calling it recreation or outdoor activities.

I'm just one student, but she really bent over backward for me, and I don't

think the fact that I'm technically in line to become the next head of a Master Clan family or the fact that she's close with my father had anything to do with it. Principal Maeda understood that I'd been given a very important duty, and to make sure I didn't have to worry about anything beyond that, I bet she had to really bow down in front of the First High principal, Momoyama.

So by special arrangement, I'll be continuing my Third High classes at First High. These days, teachers don't stand behind a lectern and teach a bunch of students at once—students each study via their individual terminals and progress at their own pace. Of course, there's a limit to what's considered an acceptable pace—if you don't progress an acceptable amount in a given subject during a year, you'll fail that subject.

Even at magic high school, classroom study for all subjects—magic specializations and general education alike—takes place at your individual terminal. So while this doesn't hold true for practicums and lab classes, classroom study doesn't actually require physical attendance. In principle, at least.

But the problem is that some of the content in the magic curriculum is privileged information. That's why there's a strict limit on the amount of material a student can bring home for study, and it's unable to be copied out over the network. George once tried to break the copy protection, and not only did he fail to pull it off, but he got caught and received a serious scolding from the faculty, so it's at least strong enough that high school students can't break it.

That's why Principal Maeda thought to use the private network that the Magic University and Magic University-Affiliated High Schools use; it's inaccessible to the public, and the schools use it to exchange data. This system is also what we use to check out materials from the Magic University.

Principal Maeda negotiated with Principal Momoyama, and they set up things such that I can access class materials on the Third High server via the Magic University using a First High terminal. So this is how I'll be able to continue my studies at Third High while attending First High.

They'll let me take makeup classes over spring break for the practicums and

lab classes I'll miss. As for my spring break, well, that's just how it goes. I got a lot of special accommodations made for me to keep from falling behind, so I can't get greedy.

Speaking of which, Principal Momoyama has been kind enough to let me participate in the First High practicums and lab classes. They won't count as course credit, but still, getting to participate in another school's classes is a really rare opportunity. I can't thank both Principal Maeda and Principal Momoyama enough.

That's the story behind my transfer to First High. Except it's not really a transfer, so...uh...maybe *admission* is a better term?

Ugh, this is getting complicated, *transfer* is fine.

Who gets this critical in their own private journal?

When I went to the faculty office in the morning to introduce myself, the vice principal personally took me to the principal's office. After that, instead of meeting the homeroom teacher, the vice principal led me directly to the classroom. I learned this later, but at First High, there isn't a morning homeroom teacher-led assembly. At Third High, they don't do one for the standard curriculum, but for the special course, the homeroom teacher gives a pep talk every morning. I guess every school's style is a little different, even when they're all magic high schools.

The class I was led to was 2-A. And much to my surprise, *she* was there.

Miyuki Shiba.

The brilliant, beautiful girl who's just been named the next head of the Yotsuba clan.

My goddess.

I know my friends at Third High would laugh at me if I said that out loud, but I really do think of her as a divine being who descended to earth. *Beautiful girl*? I know I just used the words myself, but such a clichéd old phrase can't possibly begin to express what she is. If I had a more poetic way with words, I would spend my life just searching for lines of prose that would do her justice. I'm frustrated by my clumsiness with words.

If people knew about how I felt, I'm sure some of them would say something like this:

If she's a goddess and not just a beautiful girl, aren't you terrified at the prospect of dating her?

Or something.

It's an obvious question.

And at first, I was.

But I'm a healthy high school boy. Of course I want a girlfriend. But once I met her, I could never be satisfied with another girl.

Besides, having a goddess as your exclusive lover would feel so exquisitely transgressive, wouldn't it? I feel like I understand the man who stole the swan maiden's robe just to keep her close.

Look at me, getting all worked up.

Anyway, when I went into the classroom and saw her there, I was shocked. The blood rushed to my head, and I could tell that my nerves were making me turn red.

But I couldn't awkwardly mumble my way through my introduction. I couldn't disgrace myself in front of her, no matter what.

So I cheated a little.

The old Lab One is where the Ichijou family has its roots, and the magicians there were given magic that uses direct manipulation of the body in order to neutralize an opponent.

The Isshiki family has nerve interference. However, ever since the Ichihana family was demoted to Extra status, there's an unavoidable taboo around magic that controls the opponent's body.

The Ichinokura family has body temperature interference.

And my family, the Ichijou family, has body fluid interference. The fact that Burst is also useful on machines was an unexpected side effect; the technique was originally created in order to vaporize the liquid within an opponent's body.

The many variations of body fluid interference techniques aren't limited to vaporization. There's magic for controlling the flow of blood. I used it to keep excess blood from concentrating near the skin of my face, which should have kept me from blushing.

But that didn't do anything for the nervousness my excitement was causing. It was incredibly difficult to keep from tripping over my tongue. I was so focused on not stumbling over my self-introduction that even now, I don't really remember what I said.

I didn't say anything weird, right?

I didn't notice any weird looks from the class once I was done, so I think it went okay.

On the contrary, they were really friendly. First High and Third High are rivals. I'd prepared myself for the possibility of a lot of skepticism from them, so I'm relieved that my worst expectations turned out to be wrong.

Unfortunately, I didn't get to talk to *her* very much. I guess that's not surprising, since I didn't try to approach her.

I'm not resentful or anything, though. I figure a brand-new transfer student who immediately goes chasing after girls isn't going to make a very good impression, so I restrained myself. I wouldn't want to go out with some pickup artist guy, either, you know?

So today, I hung out with the guys in Class A.

Shun Morisaki seems like the leader. He's the oldest son of the "Quickdraw" Morisaki family. His record in the Nines is only decent, but in actual combat, he's apparently pretty good. I heard that the summer before last, he faced off against guys from the Cabinet's intelligence division and managed to hold his ground against them.

The story is he did it to protect an American college student whom the intelligence guys were going to abduct. I remember hearing about it and thinking, *That guy had some guts*, and being impressed that he didn't get hauled in for interference with public servants in the execution of their duties.

Morisaki's been a member of the disciplinary committee since his freshman

year, his friends bragged to me. Morisaki seemed vaguely annoyed, but why? The disciplinary committee system here is the same as Third High's, and I've actually been on that committee since my freshman year, too. Even if it's nothing like being the student council president, it's still an honor to get picked for the disciplinary committee.

Speaking of which, I learned that at First High, the incoming student representative is selected by the invitation of the student council. At Third High, the disciplinary committee makes that invitation. Maybe at First High, the disciplinary committee is less prestigious overall than it is at Third High.

Third High does have quite a few troublemakers, though. Without a strong disciplinary committee, the campus would be a mess. When I think about it that way, it might be Third High's disciplinary committee that's the exception, rather than the rule.

I had lunch with Morisaki and his friends, and they told me a lot about First High. Apparently, these days, First High is a female-dominated society, and within the junior year, that's an even more pronounced trend. I was half-jokingly warned not to do "anything that would catch the eye of the girls."

That was also when I learned about who the strongest juniors are.

Naturally, Shiba, who's also the student council president, is in a class of her own. There were some other names that came up, like Kitayama, "The Shadow Disciplinary Committee President," who's also in Class A, and Akechi in Class B, "The Annoying Troubleshooter." Class D has Satomi, and Class F has Chiba.

And yup, they're all girls. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that I was already familiar with a bunch of those names from the Nines. Chiba's the exception, but I'll have to watch out for her. We only worked together on that second day in Kyoto, but that's enough for me to know she's a tough customer. You get the unsettling feeling around her that if you let your guard down, there's no telling what might happen to you.

But what's that "Shadow Disciplinary Committee President" thing about? I seem to remember that Yoshida's the actual disciplinary committee president. Between the Nines and the thing in Kyoto, there's no mistaking his ability. Is there really a Shadow President that stands above him somehow? Maybe the

one I need to be the most wary about is Kitayama. There's something unusual about that mature exterior she has.

Speaking of unusual, I was shocked to hear that the *other* Shiba was a Course 2 student his freshman year. At Third High, that's what we'd call a standard curriculum student, get it? In other words, he didn't even have a guidance teacher in his freshman year when he made us eat that humiliating defeat at the Nines.

Having a mentor in high school makes a huge difference. It can even make a big difference within just a trimester.

But he was already so far ahead of us. His working knowledge of magic methodology was ahead of even George's, to say the least.

Just what kind of education did he get with the Yotsuba?

It pains me to admit it, but the guy gives me chills.

Today also had the introductions for my mission. Of course, it wasn't really an introduction to anyone, since I already know everybody else on the team. It was more like our first meeting about the mission itself.

The mission leader is Katsuto Juumonji, the head of the Juumonji family, with the oldest son of the Saegusa family, Tomokazu Saegusa, acting as his lieutenant. It's going to be a double-barreled investigation, with the Juumonji and Saegusa families operating side by side. I'll be taking orders from Juumonji.

The problem with this arrangement is that, with the Juumonji side and the Saegusa side each operating their own investigations, it risks duplicating effort or overlooking things. To be honest, I was worried about it. But apparently, this is something they've already thought about.

In Tokyo, there were already arrangements in place for Juumonji and Mayumi—the oldest daughter of the Saegusa family—to meet directly and update each other on progress. Apparently, Shiba's also attending those meetings as the Yotsuba representative. And today, he invited me to participate as well.

I have complicated feelings about owing that guy anything, but I didn't have any way to refuse the offer, so I agreed. And what do you think he said next? "I'll send you the map, so get your terminal out." Seriously!

I guess I was the idiot for being ready for him to invite me to go along with him. Are guys like that really a thing? Just giving somebody brand-new to the city a map and telling them “get there yourself”? I mean, sure, I can use an app, so I’m fine on my own. But what about, I don’t know, human emotion?

There really is something wrong with that guy. I know I shouldn’t feel this way, but when he said he was going to skip the post-meeting dinner, I was relieved.

The fact that a guy like that is *her* older brother—I mean, cousin—and fiancé is just so screwed up.

Tuesday, February 12, 2097

First period today was Class 2-A's practical application of magic. The subject was the definition of a magic program's termination condition.

The practice took the form of students defining the duration of a magic program as a variable number, and the practical application was changing the color of a white plastic ball in a cycle of red, green, and blue ten times in a thirty-second period. Each repetition of the cycle would exaggerate any error in our timing specification such that by the end, if we were off by even a little bit, we would either have taken too little or too much time.

When I heard this, I thought it'd be easy. Poorly timed magic can result in failure to achieve the desired effect, both during sequential casting for attack purposes and when defending from an opponent's attack. I thought I had a full grasp of the importance of specifying termination conditions.

"You must make sure to thoroughly specify your termination conditions" is a basic rule used when casting multiple magic programs in succession, and at Third High, it's pounded into every freshman. I had to admit that I hadn't done a lot of practice that required extremely fine control of those conditions, and I thought that if anything, something that had to be too precise wasn't useful in a combat situation.

A practicum I did at Third High just before transferring was targeting an object with magic when it was on the other side of a wall. It goes without saying that this was a directly combat-applicable drill in aiming a magic attack at an opponent who's obscured behind some obstruction.

In contrast to that, this assignment at First High seemed like a trivial test of dexterity.

I was so wrong.

We split up into groups of two for the drill. The instructor told us to find a partner to pair up with, and I instantly knew I wanted to pair up with *her*.

But I'm an outsider. With me included, Class 2-A has an even number of students. I was sure I'd get stuck with whoever was left over after the rest had paired up.

At least that's what I thought as I looked over the group to see how things were shaking out, but for some reason, nobody was pairing up with her.

So...can I?

I can, right?

So full of nerves, I went up to her and simply asked: "Would you like to pair up with me?"

And she smiled and nodded.

At that point, things were going fine.

Right from the start, she hit thirty seconds on the nose. Not even a tenth of a second off. I won't deny that at that point, I was even surer that this was going to be easy.

I enthusiastically got ready to take my turn, while she counted down the seconds.

I had 0.7 seconds left over.

The acceptable margin of error for this assignment was plus or minus one second. 0.7 seconds might have been passable, but that was only if you did it without any sort of count or timing assistance. And Shiba had already nailed thirty seconds without any help at all.

From next to me, I heard somebody say, "Thirty seconds on the nose. Nailed it, Honoka."

I was getting more discouraged *and* more frantic at the same time.

By the end of first period, I somehow managed to meet the condition of less than one second off without any assistance, but it took me until lunchtime to get over how rattled I was. And even then, it wasn't like I'd magically forgotten. Even now, I feel haunted by self-loathing at how naive I was to think that Third High was ahead of First.

But something good did happen today, which is probably why I managed to get over my discouragement as much as I did.

She invited me to lunch. I mean, it was Mitsui who spoke up, but *she* added,

“By all means!”

Sure, I won't deny that she probably felt obligated to say something, but I couldn't care less. She looked at me, smiled, and said, “By all means!” It's too bad I don't have video of it.

She led me to the dining hall, where I was greeted by wary looks from familiar faces. These were the people I had worked with in Kyoto last year.

Yoshida, Saijou, and Chiba. We hadn't spent long together, but I remembered them oddly well. My impression of Chiba was especially strong.

I could hear Chiba blurt out, “What is that?” almost immediately. Was it that weird for me to be showing up with Shiba?

But the one who should've been the most uncomfortable with me when it came to Shiba readily agreed to me sharing their table, which dispelled the uncomfortable glances.

It wasn't strange in and of itself that he didn't object to me sitting with them. I can't imagine any man in the world being able to refuse a request from *her*. But it was weird that once the guy said it was okay, Yoshida, Saijou, a mature-looking girl wearing glasses (you don't see those much these days), and even Chiba all made faces like if it was okay with him, it was okay with them.

I'd always thought he was the kind of guy his classmates would keep their distance from.

I sat directly across from *her*. My heart was pounding an embarrassing amount, and I had to put a fair bit of mental effort toward keeping a calm expression on my face.

The members of this group probably ate lunch together all the time. Even here, I was a foreign element, and I thought I'd better proactively try to make conversation to avoid things being awkward.

But between how impossible to keep my cool it felt every time I looked at her face and how precious every second felt where I had the chance to look right at her from across the table like that, I didn't have any margin left over with which to make conversation.

Which was when Chiba decided to ask me for a progress update on my mission.

I nearly spit out my miso soup. Doing something so unseemly in front of *her* was unthinkable, so I managed to gulp down what I had in my mouth.

Still, I couldn't believe the audacity of that girl, asking a question like that here where there was no telling who might be listening. Did she not understand the seriousness of the situation? She didn't look that dumb, but you never know.

But this also felt like a chance. The fact that neither *she* nor the other guy tried to stop Chiba meant that it was probably okay to talk about the mission in front of this group. Since I'd just transferred in, I didn't have much common ground with them, so it was a good opportunity for me to start a conversation.

And then—that bastard. He just cut in. And he had the nerve to call me an “outstandingly talented magician”? What the hell was he thinking with that obvious flattery?

But after that, things took a strange turn. *She* said she was “rather envious” of me, which basically froze my brain in place. Was that a compliment? Was she just practicing social diplomacy? Was she genuinely envious of me? Even now after the passage of some time, I have no idea.

And as far as that guy goes, Mitsui started jabbering at him such that I couldn't get a word in edgewise.

I wonder if Mitsui has a crush on him.

I know well enough that love isn't logical, but I gotta say, if she does, she should probably give up.

But thanks to her, I got to talk to *her* quite a bit without that guy interrupting. Unfortunately, I don't really remember much of what we talked about, but I think the distance between us has lessened just a little bit.

Should I thank him, I wonder?

Or should I gloat that he got what he deserved?

Somehow neither feels right.

Wednesday, February 13, 2097

Knowing that I'm going to be attending class with *her* might have gone to my head.

I have no intention of neglecting my mission, but I have to admit that I may not have been taking it seriously enough.

That's how I'm feeling after tonight's meeting, thanks to you-know-who's report.

Last night, apparently, he got very close to cornering our target.

If I were some third party uninvolved with the terrorist investigation, I'd be thinking that it doesn't matter if he fails to catch our target in the end.

But I haven't found a single lead yet. Meanwhile, he's managed to track the mastermind down to his safehouse. The fact that I've only been in Tokyo for three days is no excuse. I don't *want* an excuse. But I don't even know where to start.

School was fun again today. It's pure happiness getting to see her smile. Realizing that something so small could be satisfying to me was like having ice water poured over me.

I want to sprint out of this house right now and go hunting for clues. But I'd just exhaust myself running around blindly. There's no meaning in that. I have that much good sense left, at least.

The first step is to consider what I'm capable of. My father has put all the resources of the Ichijou family at my disposal. They need people to monitor our home, but they're still sending a fair amount of personnel here.

Tomorrow, I'm going to visit the scene of the attack. I'm sure the Saegusa, Juumonji, and Yotsuba families have already thoroughly turned over every rock, and beyond that, the police have surely gathered whatever evidence there might be.

Still, if I go, I might just find something.

I don't think this is any time to be worrying about school.

But that's a betrayal of all the work Principal Maeda did to get me transferred here.

I'll go to class like a good boy tomorrow, but once class is over, I'm heading straight back out to the investigation.

I was given a job to do here in Tokyo, after all.

Thursday, February 14, 2097

Full of determination after my decision last night, I planned to eat lunch alone today. I knew perfectly well that if *she* invited me again, my resolve would crumble instantly, so the moment third period ended, I stood up, intending to hurry directly to the dining hall.

With that timing, I should've been able to get out of the classroom before Shiba could speak up.

If only they hadn't gotten in my way.

Just as I'd gotten as far as the first row of seats in the classroom, two girls blocked my path and called out to me. "Ichijou!"

Before I could even remember their names, the two girls had each foisted off little ribbon-wrapped boxes on me, with the unilateral line, "Please take this!"

Without even waiting for me to reply, they scurried out of the classroom, squealing.

I'm dead certain I had an incredibly stupid look on my face. At the time, I honestly had no idea what was going on. The boxes were carefully wrapped and ribboned and had to be some sort of gift, that much was unmistakable. But, idiot that I was, I couldn't begin to grasp what kind of gifts they were.

While I was standing there like a fool, the number of boxes in my hands increased to seven in a flash. All of them from girls. They said things like "Cutting in!" and "Me too!" as they dropped the gifts off, and I really had no idea what was going on.

It was *her* voice that brought me back to my senses.

"Well, you're certainly popular," I heard her say from behind me, and for some reason, I felt instantly guilty.

I turned slowly around.

Her smile was as brilliant as ever.

But my heart was filled with trepidation, even though at the time, I still hadn't figured out why.

I must have muttered something. Probably something like “What the...?” or “Why?”

Kitayama gave me an exasperated look, and that was probably the reason.

Then she told me: “Today is Valentine’s Day.”

It sounded like the judgment of Death himself.

That’s right, it was February 14.

I’d been so focused on the mission that it hadn’t crossed my mind, but today is indeed Valentine’s Day.

In that moment, I finally understood that all these colorful little boxes could only contain one thing: Valentine’s Day chocolates.

What did I look like to the rest of the class, standing there with both hands full of boxes?

What did I look like to *her*?

I’m sure a cold sweat must have run down my back.

“You’ll probably get even more,” I heard her say, and it sounded like an angel’s trumpet heralding the end of my days.

Mourning the loss of all my resolve from yesterday, I ended up going to the dining hall with Shiba and the others. Or maybe it was more like I was hauled in there by Mitsui? Not that that’s any comfort.

Obviously, I left the Valentine’s chocolates in the classroom.

I mean, I’m a boy. I’d be sad not to get any chocolate on V-Day. Even if it’s just obligatory chocolate, it’s a relief to get some.

This year is different, though. Getting chocolates forced on me by a bunch of girls in front of the one person I have serious feelings for was torturous. I wanted to forget about it immediately.

But no, as soon as we arrived at the lunch table, Chiba reopened my fresh wounds.

“So what’s your chocolate score?” Seriously, that’s what she said.

She should've minded her own business.

"If I'm asking about chocolate today, what could I possibly mean besides Valentine's chocolate?" she said next.

Yeah, I freakin' know, damn it.

"My money's on you being in double digits," she concluded.

I feel like if I were to have murdered Chiba right there, no jury on earth would convict me.

I know, I know. She only meant to tease a little. Valentine's chocolates are a kind of badge of honor for boys, after all. Normally, someone saying they expected you to get a lot wouldn't be meant in a bad way.

Today, though, I was the exception to that rule. My answer of "Does it matter?" to the persistent questioning was completely sincere. In my mind, I was praying that they'd drop the subject.

But the world was not going to be kind to me.

Kitayama and Mitsui blabbed the number of presents I'd gotten to the whole table.

Yeah, I know I have a persecution complex. I know I was probably being too self-conscious.

But in that moment, I was terrified to look *her* in the face.

After the update meeting for the terrorist hunt, I just ran around until nearly midnight, trying to rid myself of the memory of the Valentine's awkwardness.

But in the end, it was a pointless struggle.

Our searching also hasn't been turning up a single thing.

Sigh.

I can already tell I'm going to be short on sleep tomorrow.

Friday, February 15, 2097

The thing magicians have been fearing ever since the terrorist attack has finally happened.

Or no, maybe *started* is a better word.

A group of protesters clashed with the police.

There were reports of rock-throwing and brawling.

If the rioting escalates, it's easy to imagine the targets of violence becoming not just police, but civilian magicians. It's not even unreasonable to suppose that magic high school students could be attacked. I'm worried about my friends at Third High.

To distract myself from all that, I started talking about the news reports on the number of people arrested at the protest. I honestly didn't know how to gauge whether twenty-four people is a lot or not. Ever since the invasion of Sado, antimilitary protesters and propagandists in the Hokuriku district have gone completely silent, and I haven't heard of any arrests being made recently.

You-know-who's reply was "As far as recent history goes, it's a lot."

I guess things really are getting worse.

She, meanwhile, estimated that there were about two hundred protesters in the group shown on TV. That looked about right to me, which means the total number could be twice that, or maybe even more. It might've been a five hundred-person protest.

The mood at First High in the afternoon was very gloomy. It was like yesterday's bright cheer was a mirage.

If I were at Third High, I might've tried to cheer up my classmates. And even if I didn't, I could think of quite a few students who would've said things like *If any of those protesters come at us, we'll make them regret messing with us!* But it doesn't seem like there are any characters like that at First High.

After I got back from the usual meeting, I tried giving George a call. I was worried about the situation at Third High.

Unsurprisingly, I guess, things have been in an uproar there since the afternoon. George laughed and told me there'd been more injuries from club activities than usual.

Our school's kids are a hot-blooded bunch. But I was a little relieved to hear that the Third High I know is still its old self.

Although, I think George was pretty relieved to hear from me, too. He sounded concerned when he asked me if my mission was going well. A visiphone is really inconvenient in times like this. It makes it hard to hide things.

But it also might have been a good thing. It hasn't even been a week since I came to Tokyo, but I have to admit I'm stuck. I'm not sure what I should do.

So I gathered up the courage to ask George what he thought. After thinking about it for a moment, he gave me some very unexpected advice:

I should stop competing in the investigation, huh? When he put it that way, it's obvious that I can't match the steady, on-the-ground investigative progress of the Saegusa and Juumonji families, who are already based in Kanto. This isn't sour grapes on my part; there's just too wide a difference in the resources available to us.

Shiba's near-capture of the target at Zama really has me feeling the pressure. I must be dealing with a serious amount of stress not to even notice that fact. I don't want to make excuses, but the unfamiliar environment is probably why I'm so off my game.

George pointed out that my role will really come once we've found the target. I should leave the investigation to the Saegusa and Juumonji families, who have the manpower and connections to pursue it, and make it my role to pursue and capture the terrorist once they've found him. That division of labor makes more sense, in his opinion.

If there's nothing I need to do until the target is found, then I don't really need to be living alone in Tokyo. I can't accept his advice fully, but I do at least feel a bit better.

I'm sure that was part of why he told me to "stop competing." Man, what a good friend.

Saturday, February 16, 2097

I was in the evening meeting when I heard about the incident at Second High.

The trauma from Valentine's Day had been overwritten by yesterday's bad news, and after talking to George last night, I was feeling a little better about myself, so I'd finally regained enough presence of mind to enjoy the sights of a normal day that included *her*. I feel like conversation both with her and my other classmates has gotten much less awkward.

So I'd had a fairly enjoyable day of transfer student life, and I was looking forward to a meeting where I gave a progress report on my father's subordinates' investigations instead of running around myself.

And then I heard the news that a Second High student had been attacked by humanist protesters.

I never meant to underestimate the seriousness of the situation, but things have gone downhill much more quickly than I expected.

I would never have thought that a group of anti-magician protesters would resort to direct violence and not even bother to try to disguise their motivations.

Or, well—I thought we had more time until something like that happened.

Apparently, the student attacked by the protesters was quite badly wounded.

I hope they make a full recovery and don't suffer any lingering effects.

Saegusa seemed very worried, too. Maybe it's because she used to be the student council president at First High, but she was concerned that First High students would be targeted by the humanist protesters.

I'm worried about that, too.

First High has to be a more likely place for anti-magic protesters to strike than Third High. It might not be in the center of the city, but First High is still in Tokyo, which makes it an appealing target.

No matter how powerful a magician might be, physically, we're still flesh and blood humans. If you take us by surprise, the worst can easily happen.

Obviously, I'm worried about *her*, but will the people back home be okay? Although with my father keeping a sharp eye out, I doubt anything too extreme will happen.

Sunday, February 17, 2097

I spent the morning today at the Tokyo house, analyzing all the information I've gathered so far with my father's subordinates, who are helping with the investigation. They've obtained quite a bit from elsewhere, and hearing their explanations is very helpful for clearing up any misunderstandings I might have.

The main subject is trying to anticipate the terrorist's escape route.

We've known for a while that the freighter the terrorist used to enter the country is docked in Numazu Port. But it's probably a decoy. When he does try to escape Japan, it's hard to imagine he'll use the same vessel. Everyone is in agreement on this.

That said, it's unlikely he plans to remain hiding out in Japan. It's all but certain he'll try to flee the country eventually. This is also a broad consensus.

So will that be by air or sea? And if by air, will he try to use a disguise to board a plane? Or will he pilot a small aircraft himself? It's also possible he'll head north and try to escape to the mainland from somewhere in the Niigata area.

We can imagine a variety of possibilities, but we don't have enough people to check every last one. Unsurprisingly, the general consensus is that we should take a basically passive stance and wait for the Saegusa and Juumonji families to track down the target.

I can't help but wonder if that's really the right move. Is that because I'm young? Or do I just hate waiting?

In the afternoon, I rode my bike along the coast from Irozaki to Inubosaki. It wasn't like I thought I'd find something just riding my motorcycle around, but I think I at least got a sense for the lay of the land. And if nothing else, it was a nice change of pace.

But even if I was able to improve my mood a little, the fact that I don't have any leads to follow did not change. I honestly don't want to get too involved with my family, but after dinner, I ended up giving George a call. He's definitely the most reliable person to go to for advice on this kind of thing.

George's view is that the most reasonable thing to do now is try drawing the

terrorist out. In other words, a decoy operation. Just like the terrorist left that freighter at Numazu as a feint, we need to come up with some bait to hook him with.

The problem is who to use as a decoy. After prefacing it with, “This probably won’t get much agreement,” George suggested Miyuki Shiba, Mayumi Saegusa, or possibly Mayumi’s younger sister.

I can understand the logic behind making girls the bait, but obviously I’m going to oppose anything that might needlessly place *her* in danger.

When I suggested myself as bait, it was George who objected. “That’s too dangerous!” he said in protest, but there’s no such thing as a safe decoy operation. When I pointed that out, George reluctantly said he’d start thinking about the logistical details of the plan.

I’m counting on you, counselor.

Monday, February 18, 2097

I can't believe someone attacked *her*!

Without any exaggeration, when I heard about it, I thought my heart was going to stop.

It was Saegusa who told me that Shiba had been attacked, which was why she was going to be attending our meeting this evening.

Saegusa's younger sister was also part of the group that was targeted, but neither of them were hurt. But until I saw *her* at the French restaurant where we've been meeting, I was beside myself with worry.

When I saw Shiba arrive, escorted by you-know-who, I felt a combination of relief and heart-wrenching pain.

I was jealous.

In an effort to wash away that disgraceful emotion, I asked Shiba how she was feeling.

Yes, I was jealous, but my concern for her safety is bigger and better than that, I'm certain. When she smiled and said she was completely fine, I could literally feel the tension leaving my body.

By the time the incident happened, I had already left school. One of my father's people was going to meet with an informant who'd apparently been one of Gongjin Zhou's underlings, so I was going along. I wasn't particularly expecting any leads to come from it—I was hoping that if I made some obvious moves, I might attract the attention of our terrorist.

There's not much more to write about as far as that goes. All that matters is that when Shiba was attacked, I wasn't in a place where I could help her. And neither was you-know-who. He'd left school even earlier than me to go follow up on the investigation.

And yet, somehow, he managed to appear and rescue her when she was attacked by those thugs.

I didn't ask him how that was possible.

I'm desperately curious, of course, but something makes me hesitant to know the reason.

Instead, I asked him about the truth behind the attackers.

They were members of an international anti-magic organization, carrying not only antinite but handguns as well, and they even used magic.

Well, no—as far as the magic part is concerned, Shiba's attackers were apparently used as weapons by an ancient magician. Assuming you-know-who is correct.

When I asked about the magician controlling them, he said he'd taken a recording of the magic and was going to have it analyzed.

Is that possible?

Do the Yotsuba have that kind of technology?

I'm shocked, and at the same time, somehow relieved.

As far as the prosecution of our duties goes, the reason that he's ahead of me is because of some secret technology the Yotsuba family has. By that reasoning, I don't have to feel like I'm losing to him specifically. I don't have to worry that I'm inferior to him.

That was the petty little thought that occurred to me.

When I asked exactly how he'd taken a recording of the magic, he didn't answer me.

That's not surprising. The Ten Master Clans are both allies and rivals. Revealing how a valuable new technique works so other magicians can use it gives a major boost to a family's reputation. It makes them more influential in magic society. If they're hiding something like that, they must have a reason for doing so, which means he's not going to tell me just because I asked.

But I got the feeling that wasn't the only reason he didn't answer. That somehow, he'd seen through my pettiness.

Maybe I'm overthinking things. Actually, I'm sure I am. But I still preemptively apologized to him so he wouldn't have to say anything out loud.

It wasn't like me. For the rest of the evening, I planned to keep my mouth shut and just listen, to avoid sticking my foot in my mouth again.

But then, after Saegusa proposed that *she* might need a bodyguard, you-know-who asked if there was a plan to use her as a decoy.

He asked *me*.

No! I would never let that happen! If someone's going to be a decoy, it'll be me!

I yelled my denial at him.

Before the Shibas arrived at the restaurant, the rest of us had already discussed the possibility of my acting as a decoy to lure out the terrorist, so thankfully Juumonji came to my defense.

I don't think you-know-who seriously suspected me of that, but the fact that he even suggested it pisses me off.

It's disgusting that he could bring that up even as a joke.

And all of this is happening because I'm not making any progress.

I've made up my mind to go ahead with the decoy operation, even if the Ichijou family has to do it alone.

It's unfortunate that the mood I was left in after that kept me from enjoying a nice dinner with *her*, but right now, completing the mission has to take priority.

I'm going to start working on a plan with George tomorrow the instant classes are over.

Honestly, I want to call him right now, but it's late.

Tuesday, February 19, 2097

I'm tired.

It's past midnight, so I'm just going to write this journal entry tomorrow.

Wednesday, February 20, 2097

Classes are suspended starting today and going through Saturday. First High's classes were actually canceled starting yesterday, but Third High is starting today, so I've been at home since morning.

My mission is basically over as of yesterday. It's unfortunate that I can't claim I finished or tidied everything up, but there's simply no need for me to be in Tokyo anymore.

I only ended up attending First High for just over a week. I didn't even get ten days of being in the same classroom as *her*. I'm more than a little disappointed about that, too, but the whole reason I was living alone in Tokyo was to carry out the duties given me by the Ten Master Clans. With the job over, it only makes sense to head back to Kanazawa.

I expect to get notice from my father sometime today ordering me home. While I wait for that, I'll start writing about yesterday's events.

Yesterday morning in the classroom of Class 2-A, I sat in front of my terminal to attend my classes.

Alone.

First High canceled their classes yesterday, but I'm still enrolled in Third High. I'm just using a terminal at First. So, quite logically, I still had to attend class.

You'd think the school buildings would be closed. I wish they had been. I headed to school hoping desperately they would be closed, but then 2-A's guidance teacher met me. I guess even when it's a day off for the students, it's different when you're a teacher.

Thanks to the teacher's kindness, I ended up being able to use the classroom alone to attend my classes. There's the old cliché about how "no good deed goes unpunished," but this felt even worse than that.

It was nice to get to see *her* when she came by to pick up some personal items while I was studying, though.

Third High's afternoon classes were canceled. I headed home as soon as the notice came up on my terminal, planning to give George a call, since he'd have

gotten the same notice during his morning classes.

Unfortunately, George wasn't home. What I wanted to talk to him about wasn't something that could be discussed outside of the house, so I left a message and waited for him to call me back.

It was a little past two o'clock when a call came in.

But it wasn't George.

It was you-know-who. Tatsuya Shiba.

I wasn't terribly surprised by what he had to say; I think on some level, I was expecting it.

He was calling to tell me that he'd figured out where the terrorist was and wanted to launch the capture operation.

He didn't say *You want in?* or *Give us a hand*.

He just gave me the rendezvous time and location.

That was more than enough for me.

But how did the Yotsuba family get their hands on that information? I didn't ask because I knew I shouldn't, but for the first time, in that moment, I felt the menace of the Yotsuba family, untouchable even among the Ten Master Clans.

The operation started at 6:00 PM.

At first, I was told to take the Ichijou forces to the north and block off the potential escape route there.

But I wanted to pursue the target.

In the end, they humored me and let me join up with a detachment from the Juumonji family's forces.

You-know-who was there, too, which just made me that much more determined.

The car carrying the ancient magician who was our target headed right toward where we were lying in wait for it.

But then, instead of turning off for the port, it headed west.

We immediately tried to give chase, but terrorist lackeys sprung an ambush on us at the turnoff to the port.

I was worried that dealing with them was going to give our target an opening to escape, but Shiba said he'd take care of the ambush and told me to go on ahead.

I won't say I didn't have misgivings. Was it really okay to leave him here alone and have our quarry all to myself?

But time was definitely of the essence. I left the ambushers to Shiba and chased after the target.

It was his magic that had been keeping track of the terrorist, but fortunately, I was able to quickly catch up to the car. It clearly sped up when they noticed we were following them.

The target's car turned off toward a beach.

We followed, and once again—an ambush.

It took the form of a heavy barrage of gunfire from behind us, from high-powered anti-magician rifles. No mere terrorist could have obtained that kind of firepower. It was at this point that I started to wonder if the Hakone terrorist attack had been carried out by covert Great Asian Alliance operatives.

The fighting was intense, but thanks to Juumonji showing up, we managed to defeat the enemy.

And then they self-destructed.

We were stopped in our tracks, and at that point, I half gave up on the pursuit.

No—I was still fully intent on continuing the chase for as long as I could, but our target had already made it to sea. At that point, I was starting to wonder if pursuit was even possible.

I never would have imagined that Saegusa, who'd been left out of the operation because it was "dangerous," would show up moments later in a high-speed patrol boat.

It was like something out of a movie.

But it'd be pretty arrogant to criticize something just because it was extremely convenient for us.

We boarded the patrol boat and chased the target down to within a hairbreadth of catching them.

But in the end, we couldn't.

The target's vessel was destroyed and sank before our very eyes.

A magic blade sliced it clean in half.

Was it Atomic Divider?

At the time, I had no idea what was happening.

Actually, it's not like I completely understand it now, either.

Anyway, at the very last moment, we failed in our mission.

I think we can be certain that the target is dead, but because we didn't recover a body, there's nothing to give the police, which means there's nothing to tell the media.

In the end, the Hakone terrorist case is closed, and as far as the public is concerned, it remains unsolved.

The man behind the attack is dead.

But the case was not solved cleanly.

Now that I think about it, I was part of the chase, but I don't even know what the target's face looked like. His name was Gu Jie, he was an ancient magician and former Dahanese national, and he specialized in corpse manipulation magic. That's it. All we had were fragments of information, not a complete picture of our adversary.

If someone asked me if an ancient magician named Gu Jie really existed, and if he really was behind the Hakone terrorist attack, I don't think I could give them a convincing answer.

It gave me the most profound sense of futility.

I slept in past 9:00 AM today, but still that sense of helplessness is lingering.

I'm glad school was canceled.

I think I'll take it easy today.

In the evening, I got a call from my father.

Contrary to my expectations, he told me not to come home yet. There's probably going to be some details to tie up around the case, so he said I should stay and take care of those.

Come on!

That's exactly the kind of thing he could come into Tokyo to take care of himself when the need arises. It's not like we live at the far ends of the earth.

And class is only canceled for this week. When I asked him what I should do about school, he said that I should stay at First High through early March, like we'd planned.

What is he thinking?

What is he trying to get me to do?

I don't know. I'm so tired it feels like my brain isn't working right.

I'll try talking to my father again tomorrow.

Thursday, February 21, 2097

I was so tired yesterday that I put off arguing with my father.

That was a mistake.

When I called him today, all he said was that we'd settled the matter yesterday.

I know what this is. It's not like he's got some scheme brewing—he just thinks the cleanup is going to be a pain and wants to avoid it. He thinks it's lucky that I'm already in Tokyo, and he has no intention of leaving Kanazawa.

I get that it's hard to be motivated about the cleanup from a losing battle like this. But that goes for me, too! I swear, he's so selfish.

And then he goes and drops a bomb on me.

Akane's coming to stay on Saturday, so show her around Tokyo on Sunday, he tells me.

Like I know what the good sightseeing spots are!

Friday, February 22, 2097

It's probably weird to write this down in my journal at this point, but I have two baby sisters.

The older is Akane, and the younger, Ruri. They both have color-related names, which is apparently a tradition of my mother's family.

I don't think we get along very well.

If you ask George, he'd tell you *They get along great*, but it doesn't seem that way to me.

They used to be cute. And these days, if something were to happen, I'd still want to protect them.

But don't let their sweet faces fool you—they're anything but sweet.

Ruri just straight-up doesn't talk to me. She's always been kind of like that, but lately when I say something to her, a lot of the time she just totally ignores me. And then when she does actually say something, it ends up being some nasty remark that makes me want to just say *Shut up, you*. It's no way to have a conversation.

On the other hand, Akane is just irritating. She's really, really irritating. All I have to do is show up, and she'll make some crack without fail. She'll barge into my room saying *Here, have some tea, Have some coffee, Have a snack*, then just shoot her mouth off with stuff like *Ew, you perv, Disgusting, What a slob*, before making her escape.

A certain friend of mine from school loves to point out how much of a sweet-and-sour type she is, but he can only laugh since he's not the one sustaining the damage. For one thing, Akane's never once acted sweet to me, nor am I the type of guy who wants his little sister to be sweet to him in the first place.

The annoying one is coming to visit tomorrow.

So that's why I'm frantically looking up sightseeing spots.

If I'm not prepared, Akane will absolutely throw a fit.

I'm not so psychologically frail that her verbal abuse will actually affect me,

but I'd like to save myself the trouble.

But it turns out once you start looking up sightseeing possibilities, there's no end to it. Even narrowing the search down to "recommended itineraries" gives me more options than I can count on two hands.

Times like these are when I'd want to get advice from a local.

It occurred to me to call *her* and ask for her thoughts.

But I don't have the guts. I can't bother her with something as ridiculous as this.

Sure, laugh if you want to. There's a difference between courage and recklessness.

You-know-who is out of the question. There's no way I'm gonna end up owing him a favor over something like this.

Yoshida or Saijou would be easy enough to ask, but would they even know spots in the city that a middle school kid would enjoy?

After a lot of thought, I decided to impose on Saegusa. Not Tomokazu, the older brother, but Mayumi. Up until a day ago, I'd seen her every day, and I think she might know the kind of places Akane would enjoy.

And I was right. Saegusa gave me some very helpful information of exactly the sort I needed.

But now I'm kind of regretting relying on her.

It seemed like it would be overfamiliar to call her out of the blue, so I sent her a text. "My sister's visiting Tokyo. I have to show her around the area the day after tomorrow, so I could use some advice about where to go," basically, although I wrapped it in appropriately polite language.

Not even half an hour later, I got a reply. I was grateful for the quick answer, but just then, I realized that unlike its affiliated high schools, the Magic University was still probably holding classes.

The question I had was not off the mark.

In her reply, she said, "There were a bunch of customers all morning thanks to

the cleanup, so I didn't go to class today. I'm not doing anything in the afternoon, so it was nice to get your message." I copy-pasted the text, so I promise that's verbatim.

Was I that close to Saegusa? I remember tilting my head in confusion.

I kept reading. She was happy to help me. She'd tell me everything she could, so could we meet soon? If possible, could I come to her place? That was the gist.

Me, going to Saegusa's place?

That seemed kind of sudden, but I quickly suppressed my misgivings.

When I really thought back, I realized that since coming to Tokyo, I hadn't gone to pay my respects to either the Saegusa or the Juumonji families.

As the oldest son of the Ichijou family, this was not ideal. My father wanted Akane's eventual husband to take over leadership of the family, so I wasn't in the position of being the heir, but in a sense, I'd still come to Tokyo as the representative of our family. They were also part of the Ten Master Clans, and I was technically on their territory. Moreover, even if it had ended in failure, we'd all just cooperated on an important mission.

I considered wearing a suit, but in the end, I settled on my Third High uniform and headed for the Saegusa home using public transit instead of my bike. On the way, I made sure to buy a calling gift of a respectable price. This was for form's sake, so I didn't worry about taste. My mom always says "Price matters, too."

I'd arranged my arrival ahead of time, so when I made it, Saegusa came out to greet me.

Kouichi, the family head, was in, so first I had to go pay my respects to him. He definitely gave off the air of someone who can't be underestimated.

But he didn't seem to me like someone who would happily betray his friends, like my father claimed. He didn't seem unprincipled so much as someone who prioritized his own rules over others. But I also might not be a very good judge of character.

The oldest son, Tomokazu, was out. Saegusa—actually, this is getting confusing, so I'll call her Mayumi. Anyway, based on what I'd heard from her, both of her older brothers live elsewhere.

After giving her father my regards, I was led into a different sitting room. My family's place is big, but the Saegusa mansion is probably bigger. Our place might cover more land, but with its upper floors, the Saegusa home must have more square footage.

There was a sofa set in the room I greeted Kouichi in, but the room Mayumi led me to after that had a simple table and chairs and seemed to be set up for dining. It was probably where they have tea. My sisters were probably going to want to do something like that eventually, too.

While I'd been talking to Kouichi, the table had been neatly set. With a practiced gesture, Mayumi offered me black tea and tea cakes, and she earnestly asked about Akane's age, interests, and tastes.

What a nice person, I thought at first. But as time passed, I started to understand. She was just bored. She was just using me to kill time, right?

There was a large video display in the sitting room. When I'd first entered, it was showing a famous landscape painting. A Renoir, I think. I don't remember the title, but it was a picture of boats on a river.

Via that display, I experienced something called a virtual date. It's apparently a service that lets you use your portable terminal to choose which path to take, and then by picking conversation options or actions from a menu, it displays the scenery you would see along your route.

Personally, I feel that if you used something like this to practice for a date, it'd lessen the enjoyment of the real experience, but apparently, it's pretty popular among girls.

I suppose that since it used super-accurate CG of the various sightseeing spots, you wouldn't run into situations where something looked different than you'd expected it to. But if all you needed to do was make a preliminary inspection, you didn't need all the little theoretical choices, right? I was just doing some tourist stuff with my sister, not going on a date. And I definitely wasn't looking for dating advice here.

And yet, I had choice after choice roundly criticized.

I really think she was just toying with me. Looking back on it, she did say, “I’m not doing anything, so it was nice to get your message.” I was literally just a way to kill some time, I’m sure of it.

Halfway through, Mayumi’s younger sisters joined in, and the criticism only increased.

I seriously thought they were going to break my spirit. No, three or four times, I think they actually did.

But at least I have an itinerary for Akane now. Should I even say thanks to them?

I said my *thank-yous* and left the Saegusa manor, psychologically exhausted.

I felt like I wanted to cut loose just to clear my head.

Still, Mayumi’s younger sisters, Kasumi and Izumi—what was with their appraising looks?

Saturday, February 23, 2097

Today, I got a very nice surprise.

It wasn't just Akane who came to stay with me in Tokyo. George came along with her.

It hasn't even been two weeks, but it feels like it's been a long time since I've seen him.

Akane was pretty bent out of shape at how happy I was to see him, but what can I say? I put good friends before runty kid sisters.

She was muttering inexplicable things like "filthy" and "pervert," but I just ignored her.

If it had just been Akane, I would've just taken her to a random restaurant to placate her, but I wasn't going to give my good friend who'd come all this way some second-rate treatment.

I took George—and Akane, too, yes—to an old sukiyaki place that's apparently been in operation since 1869.

It was just as delicious as you'd expect. George was delighted. "I was gonna make you a home-cooked meal!" Akane complained. Come on, Akane—like you ever don't just use the automatic cooking bots at home.

Even after we got back to the house here, there was so much to talk about.

I couldn't write it all down even if I wanted to, and my writing time is limited and precious.

Sunday, February 24, 2097

On my father's orders, and despite how much of a pain it would be, I had planned to take Akane on the sightseeing itinerary Mayumi had helped me plan.

But thanks to Akane, that plan ended up getting canceled.

Weirdly fired up, my sister said, "I'm gonna cook that meal today for sure," and has been holed up in the kitchen since morning.

Since morning! I couldn't use the kitchen at all, so my breakfast was just buttered toast.

Her cooking was finally finished by noon. Thankfully, the property manager has kept the place stocked with spices, so I didn't have to go running around the neighborhood buying ingredients.

It tasted fine. It wasn't terrible, but it wasn't exactly delicious, either.

I mean, listen. She made curry and rice. With store-bought roux.

"The way to pro-level taste is making it from scratch" only applies to people who actually know how to cook.

They say you can put curry powder on anything to make it edible, so personally, I think with actual curry, the flavor is so strong you can't really tell subtle differences.

Maybe he was being nice to my sister, but George called it "delicious," and Akane looked satisfied, so fine, whatever.

Akane's cooking had eaten up the entire morning, so we had to cut down on our destinations. The plan I had endured so much torture at the hands of the Saegusa siblings to assemble had been a complete waste.

After giving it some thought, I decided the best plan would be to just hit up destinations until we were out of time, then head to the station.

When I told Akane and George to get their luggage ready, my darling sister Akane scowled and said, "Why?" Well, because once they'd left, I'd send their luggage after them with a delivery service, obviously. If anything, I'd like to know why she asked why.

But it turned out Akane never had any intentions of sightseeing to begin with. “When I actually want to do something fun, I’ll do it over spring break or summer vacation with my friends,” she said. Apparently, the reason she came here was to check whether it was someplace she could invite her friends.

Thanks, Dad.

His little misunderstanding got me treated like some kind of play doll at the Saegusa mansion.

As I was silently nurturing grievances, Akane spoke up. “Anyway, there’s somebody I wanted to meet,” she said.

She could’ve told me sooner. What if that somebody isn’t available right away?

But I only got to grumble about that until I found out who the person she wanted to meet actually was.

Akane wanted to meet Miyuki Shiba.

I refused over and over. I told her it was impossible, that she should give it up.

But Akane wouldn’t accept that. “Just contact her and ask,” she kept saying, pestering me constantly. And then she hurled insults: “Are you such a loser that you can’t even call her on the phone?”

“Fine,” I answered, completely falling for her ploy. “If you’re going to be that way, I’ll call her.”

With no path of retreat available, I gave Shiba a call right in front of George and Akane as they looked on.

It was a girl wearing a maid’s outfit who answered.

Her face was familiar. I think she’s a freshman at First High. Did I get the wrong number somehow?

As I was starting to freak out, she spoke. “Hello, Shiba residence.”

Relieved that I had not in fact gotten the wrong number, I introduced myself and then was immediately seized by a different suspicion.

Was you-know-who fooling around with some freshman girl in cosplay, even

though he already had *her*?

When I think back on it logically, I was clearly out of my head at the time. A disinterested third party would definitely call me the more deranged one for having that suspicion in the first place.

Shiba was going to be the next family head of the Yotsuba. It wouldn't be weird at all for her to have a maid in her house. It was a hundred times more reasonable to think that this girl was a real maid, not a cosplayer.

I told the maid that I wanted to talk to *her*, and she connected me without asking any other questions.

From the terminal's speaker, I heard *her* voice. "This is Shiba. Hello, Ichijou. It's been five days, hasn't it?"

I was uncharacteristically rocked by emotion. *She* had remembered how many days it had been since we'd last seen each other?

The display was blacked out, unfortunately, but that wasn't uncommon when you called someone at home. Apparently women in particular tended not to like talking to the opposite sex while wearing their house clothes.

And she's entirely enchanting even with just her voice. I had to make a serious effort to keep my consciousness from just flitting away.

I delivered my shameless request—that my sister was visiting Tokyo, that she really wanted to meet you, that I was sorry it was so sudden but did she by any chance have the time—and she happily agreed. The condition was that you-know-who would come also, but there was no getting around that. Even if the current circumstances around us had been different, I didn't think it was entirely proper for a young woman to go out alone in response to a man's call.

Rather than meeting at either of our houses, we decided to meet up at Einebrise, a café near First High. Considering the speed of modern public transit, the travel time to pretty much anywhere in Tokyo would've been similar, within a small margin of error.

I hadn't seen *her* in five days, and she practically shone. Even the air around her felt different somehow. Akane was at a loss for words upon seeing her. My sister mumbled her way through introducing herself, and I honestly can't even

laugh at her. *Her* charm transcends gender.

Meanwhile, George chatted up her brother. It might be my imagination, but it seemed like he actually enjoyed talking to George. It was all shop talk like “identical phenomena from different processes” this and “modularization of activation sequences” that, but I guess George was having a good time, so that was fine with me.

After all, thanks to George keeping you-know-who busy, I got a chance to talk with *her*.

We spent about an hour with them, then went our separate ways. I took them to the Shibuya/Harajuku area, and then we stopped back at the house for a bit. I’d said I would send the luggage after them, but they wanted to just take it with them.

They said I didn’t have to see them off at the station, so I left Akane in George’s care and said good-bye to them at the door of the house.

That was when I asked Akane what her impression of Shiba was, but her answer was sort of odd.

“Sort of scary,” my sister said. I asked if she meant Miyuki, and she shook her head. Apparently, she was talking about you-know-who.

From what I could tell, he’d treated Akane perfectly politely. He definitely has this keen edge to him, but there are plenty of scarier-looking guys around our place back home. There’s nothing about you-know-who’s face that should’ve freaked my sister out.

“What was scary about him?” I asked.

Akane shook her head and said she didn’t know. She didn’t know, but he was just scary. “Be careful around him,” she told me.

Then she went home.

Monday, February 25, 2097

School started back up today.

Anti-magic activity is getting worse and worse. The terrorist who sparked it may be dead, but that's irrelevant to the agitators causing the unrest. During the time school was closed, pockets of conflict spread nationwide.

But the faces of the classmates I hadn't seen in a week seemed less anxious than they had before the break.

They'd probably just gotten used to things. When dangerous circumstances drag on, it's human nature to grow accustomed to them. Our danger-avoidance instincts get worn down; even when the danger is still present. Nobody can stand being constantly terrified. The numbing of our crisis mentality is itself a method of self-preservation.

Anyway, Class 2-A has gotten back its usual liveliness, and I expect the other classes are the same.

For my part, with my assignment concluded, there was no need to hurry home from school. It's not healthy to just be alone in that house. If I have to stay in Tokyo for a while anyway, I'm going to have to figure out something to do with my after-school time.

Today, I started by shadowing the activities of the disciplinary committee. I'm on the disciplinary committee at Third High myself, after all, so I figure it makes sense to see how things work here before I head back to Kanazawa.

When I broached the possibility of shadowing them over lunch, the disciplinary committee president, Yoshida, immediately agreed.

Kitayama followed him up by saying, "Want to do the rounds with me, then?"

It was then that I remembered what Morisaki had said to me the first day after I transferred here:

Watch out for the junior girls.

Chief among them was the "Shadow Disciplinary Committee President," Shizuku Kitayama.

She looked like the quiet, mature type. Aside from her occasional devastating quips, she didn't seem like she was liable to hurt anyone.

I sort of wanted to know what it was about her that made Morisaki so wary. At the same time, an instinctual warning siren was blaring inside my head.

They might have seen through my indecision. Yoshida asked Kitayama if she wanted to trade cleaning duty with him so he could show me around instead.

Kitayama readily agreed. Had she been trying to get him to make that offer from the beginning?

That was when I noticed that the lunch table was short one of its usual members.

Without really thinking about it, I asked if Chiba had come to school today.

I could tell the six people at the table—everyone aside from Shiba—immediately stiffened.

When I nervously asked if I'd said something I shouldn't have, Shiba gave a brief answer: "She's attending a funeral."

Like an idiot, I'd completely forgotten that Chiba's older brother had been killed in the line of duty during the terrorist investigation.

After school, Yoshida showed me his routine as a disciplinary committee member. The first thing that surprised me was how thoroughly the activities record was maintained. When I asked, Yoshida said he collected the reports himself. He also said he kept the minutes of their meetings. I guess he's really quick at taking notes.

When I asked if he used shorthand or something, he gave me a demonstration on the spot. He had a large notebook that he wrote rapidly on with a brush pen, and while I couldn't really read his handwriting, I could tell he was using a cursive style.

Seeing real calligraphy in this day and age was a shock. I was so surprised that I completely forgot my manners and asked him how he'd acquired such a skill.

Yoshida gave kind of an awkward smile and said it was a necessary ability for making talismans. That was when I realized that, come to think of it, he's an

ancient magician. I wonder if he still uses talismans to work magic. I do have some memory of him using a strangely shaped CAD at the Nines.

My wish to see Yoshida use his style of magic was quickly granted. A fight had broken out behind the smaller gym.

Turns out the First High students have some fight in them, too. There's a big difference between hearing about it and seeing it for myself.

It seemed to be a frequent occurrence. Yoshida's warning to stop seemed purely perfunctory. He clearly knew that nobody was going to just because he asked them nicely.

Yoshida didn't take a talisman out. Instead, he pulled out a folding fan from his left sleeve. When I looked closer, I saw that the fan was actually a stack of metal writing strips held together by a metal fastener.

Yoshida revealed one of the strips in the fanlike stack with his left hand, and with the index and middle fingers of his right hand extended together, he touched the exposed strip.

There was the sense of something moving in the air. Just as I thought I felt a chilly moisture brush past my cheek, a thick mist rose up and surrounded the quarreling students.

From within the mist, I heard cries of "It's cold!" I mean, sure, it's February?

But that wasn't all. I could see that the mist was dense with psions.

It would be hard to read an activation sequence in the middle of that. It wasn't a complete block like Cast Jamming, but it seemed like it would be hard to use magic with a CAD in that unless you could summon a lot more psions than usual.

Yoshida repeated his warning, including a threat that next time he'd use electricity.

The fight quickly ended.

Honestly, it was fun to watch.

As we made the rounds, I asked why some of the boys called him by his first name and others used his last.

It was just something I'd been curious about, but Yoshida politely explained it.

Out of respect for his privacy, I won't write down the answer here.

But I was impressed. Apparently, you-know-who actually does care about his friends sometimes.

Tuesday, February 26, 2097

Today after class, I got to observe the student council's activities.

The student council where both *she* and you-know-who both work.

It was a complicated feeling being there.

Also in the student council room was Mitsui from 2-A, that freshman girl who'd been wearing the maid outfit at the Shiba home, and Mayumi's younger sister.

Apparently, the freshman maid's name is Sakurai, and Mayumi's sister is called Izumi.

Naturally, Shiba took her work seriously, but you-know-who was diligent as well. Actually, what was up with his typing speed? I could barely follow his fingers over the keyboard. Don't tell me he's using some kind of self-acceleration magic to speed himself up...

Aside from their regular administrative duties, the student council is currently preparing for the graduation ceremony and the party that comes afterward. It's the same at Third High. It seemed like you-know-who was handling basically all the administrative work, while Shiba, Mitsui, and Izumi all put their heads together for the party planning.

Shiba asked me what I thought, so I gave her some information about what Third High was planning. She seemed pleased with that, which made me happy.

As we were talking, I noticed that same appraising look coming from Izumi.

Maybe I'm being too self-conscious.

I don't think I'm self-absorbed.

As it was starting to get dark outside, the door to the student council room opened, and in came Mayumi's other younger sister, Kasumi. It had struck me earlier at their house, too, but she and Izumi really are identical twins. Their hairstyles and personalities are different, so I couldn't be certain then, but when they're wearing the same uniform, their faces are so similar that it's just obvious.

Kasumi was giving me the same appraising look, too.

What was going on?

After that, I met up with Yoshida, Saijou, Kitayama, and Chiba, and we all went to Einebrise. Apparently, they're all regulars at the place.

I wasn't sure whether I should offer Chiba the condolences I couldn't give her over lunch.

In the end, I decided not to. I got the sense that she didn't want to talk about it.

Condolences are a lot harder to offer than congratulations, I realized.

Wednesday, February 27, 2097

My transfer period ends next Saturday. My only day off between now and then will be Sunday.

Am I really okay with this?

My mission is over. The cleanup my father told me to take care of—well, there's not really much need for it anymore. Ordinarily, I'd be ready to go home to Kanazawa immediately.

Which is why I've been thinking about whether I'll have any regrets if I leave anything undone.

Today at lunch, the topic among the girls was where to go on Sunday.

"We've been doing nothing but shopping lately, but we used to go to the movies sometimes, didn't we?" was *her* answer. Apparently, the group once had a "cinophile older sister" type.

The box office site is open right now on the left side of the monitor I'm writing this journal entry on. On it is a list of movies that will be running in theaters this Sunday.

Now, what to do?

I've been asking myself this question for a while.

Am I going to just sit here and do nothing?

Will I really not regret that?

This opportunity might not come again, you know?

Yeah, I can't just sit around agonizing about it.

If I get turned down, I just have to accept it.

I just touched the monitor and hit "enter."

A message displays on my monitor, informing me that the tickets have been downloaded to my inbox.

It's a little late to be doing this after there's already been a formal proposal of engagement sent—although that was from my father, not me. Anyway, there's

no going back now, pal.

But I really hope this isn't a bust.

Thursday, February 28, 2097

It was right after the last class of the day had ended.

As usual, you-know-who came to pick up Shiba.

But as *she* was leaving for the student council room, I called out, asking her to wait.

There were a lot of students in the hall.

You-know-who was right next to her to boot.

But I wasn't going to try to catch her alone somewhere. Somehow, the idea of trying to sneak around behind his back felt a lot like I was already admitting defeat, in some sense.

I showed her the tickets on my portable terminal and asked her if she wanted to go to a movie with me this Sunday.

Her eyes widened, and she looked to you-know-who with a troubled expression.

He just asked me straight-up: "Are you asking her out on a date?"

I summoned my nerve and answered, "That's right."

To which he replied, "I can't let her go alone with you."

I mean, to be fair, I can understand why he said that.

But his next words surprised me.

He gave his permission, saying if Sakurai went along with us, he didn't mind.

I immediately said that was fine, and whipped back to Shiba.

After a moment of hesitation, she smiled and nodded.

With her shining smile, she accepted my invitation!

If I'm being completely honest, I guessed that he wouldn't stop her. I have a strong suspicion that he doesn't want to constrain or shackle her in any way.

What surprised me was that he didn't insist on coming along himself.

He chose Sakurai to escort her instead.

Which obviously I'm very happy about. Even if I can't be alone with *her*, Sakurai coming along is far preferable to any guy.

Why would he impose a condition that's so convenient for me?

Is he just that confident?

Well, whatever. If that's what he thinks, then I'll just have to do my best to steal her away.

Don't come crying to me when I do, either!

Friday, March 1, 2097

Today's the first day of March. One more month and I'll be a high school senior.

Today's lunchtime conversation was about career paths.

I plan to attend the Magic University. Everybody else at the table had the same goal. Saijou mentioned that he's planning to go to the National Defense Academy, but apparently, he wants to be a special forces officer in law enforcement.

Realistically speaking, unless I have some kind of accident that damages my magic ability, I'll almost certainly be accepted, and it's even more of a sure thing for *her*.

Once we're both college students, I'll be able to attend classes on the same campus as *her* for four years.

It's possible that it'll be a very difficult time for me. She's currently engaged to another man, after all.

But right now, I'm really looking forward to a campus life that has *her* in it.

Saturday, March 2, 2097

I'm gonna be honest.

I haven't been able to focus on anything since this morning.

Tomorrow's the big day!

I had no idea I still had so much to learn until today.

I never imagined that I could become someone who would be so stressed out about what he's going to wear tomorrow.

Anyway, I have our tickets. I bought one for Sakurai, too.

I've got plenty of cash in my war chest.

I've got my navigation app preset—not that I think it'll be a problem, since I've drilled our meetup location and the location of the movie theater into my brain.

I made sure to set my alarm, too.

Everything's ready. I haven't overlooked anything.

Okay. Time to sleep.

I'm only going to be nervous until I get to sleep.

Sunday, March 3, 2097

There was no chance I was going to make such a basic mistake like sleeping in and being late for our date. I was up before my alarm went off.

I'd slept soundly, and I woke up with a perfectly clear head. Was I nailing this already?

I jumped in the bath and cleaned myself up, shaved, looked in the mirror about ten times to check that I looked okay, carefully blow-dried my hair to get it looking right, put on the clothes I'd agonized over for about three hours yesterday, then headed to our meetup spot.

I was more nervous than I had been during the Yokohama Incident.

I arrived at the meetup spot forty minutes early. Look, that's reasonable, right?

The wait was no trouble at all. I just imagined *her* in a variety of casual outfits, and the time passed in a flash.

Three minutes before the agreed-upon time, she appeared.

The instant I caught sight of her, everything changed.

As far as I'm concerned, the whole world was transformed.

The scenery turned vibrant and colorful.

And at the center of everything was *her*.

I stared at *her*, forgetting to breathe.

Below the edge of her long beige coat, I could see the hem of an elegant gray skirt.

She wore thick tights, and the heels of her light pumps clicked against the ground.

Her handbag matched the color of her coat and cashmere scarf. Overall, it was a very mature ensemble accented by adorable fluffy white earmuffs.

As I stood there frozen in my tracks and unable to move, she walked right up to me. "Did we keep you waiting?" she asked.

I shook my head so vigorously I thought it would snap right off.

Even I know it was a childish gesture.

But I have no regrets, because she laughed.

If it would make her smile, I'd become a clown without a second thought.

My slightly rattled nerves began to relax, and I looked at Sakurai, who stood slightly behind her.

Sakurai wore a short coat, a turtleneck sweater, and slim-cut jeans with high-top sneakers. She carried a faux leather bag and wore a knit cap; it was a boyish look, in contrast to Shiba's.

There was something vaguely combative about the outfit—or was that just my imagination?

They'd arrived right on time, so we headed immediately to the movie theater.

We had reserved seats, so there was no need to hurry.

We bought some drinks and headed inside the theater proper.

Naturally, the interior was heated. Sakurai and I just opened our jackets, but Shiba gracefully removed her coat.

Under it, she wore an elegant gray dress.

How many times had my breath stopped by now? I gawped at her, and she gave me a slightly awkward smile, then with another similarly elegant movement, sat in her seat.

The seating order was me, then Shiba, then Sakurai.

Apparently, a hundred years ago, seats in movie theaters were so close that you could touch the person sitting next to you. You could lay your hand on top of your date's hand if they used the armrest while you watched the movie, I've heard, and apparently, people did it all the time, although I have no idea how true that is.

But these days, it would be totally impossible to touch the person next to you.

Deep bucket seats that can transmit vibrations and tilt angles are an important part of the theatrical experience. Of course, you can disable those

features if you prefer, but that doesn't change the shoulder-hugging fit of the seats. There are even larger-sized seats for audience members of larger stature.

Naturally, there was no chance that Shiba's shoulder would brush mine or that our fingers would overlap on the armrest. I was sort of envious of past moviegoers.

The film I'd chosen was a romance that was supposedly a recent huge hit. I had no interest in the movie at all; I'd just picked the most popular current title from the hopefully safe love story category.

It was from a famous Hollywood studio. The setting was New York, 1990. In an era when the existence of paranormal abilities of any kind, much less magic, had yet to become public, a girl trying to live while hiding her tremendous psychokinetic powers meets an ordinary boy and falls in love. That was the gist of the plot, anyway.

The lights went down in the theater, and the 180-degree wraparound screen filled with light. The 30 degrees' worth of image to the left and right were basically there to increase the sense of immersion, with the main action of the film taking place in the middle section, so that's the only part you actually had to watch, but I hadn't been to a movie in quite a while, so I was impressed enough to murmur a "Whoa."

Before watching it, I'd guessed it would be a pretty standard story with no big twists, but maybe unsurprisingly for a big hit, it ended up being pretty decent. Without relying on a lot of flashy special effects, it used sophisticated 3D cinematography to subtly depict the story of a girl trapped between her secret and her love, and the boy who yearned to understand what she refuses to show him. Despite its tragic ending, when it ended, I felt pleasantly refreshed.

Shiba seemed to have enjoyed it, too. That was the most important thing to me, so when she smiled and said, "That was quite good," it was a huge relief.

Up to that point, things went great.

But then waiting at the theater's exit was you-know-who.

And not just him. The whole lunch gang was lying in wait for us, too; even Mayumi and her twin sisters had shown up.

“Brother,” murmured Shiba with an expression of surprise. Apparently, when she’s not paying attention, she still calls him her brother. As long as she’s still calling him that, I probably have a bit of a chance left. But at the time, that was the furthest thing from my mind.

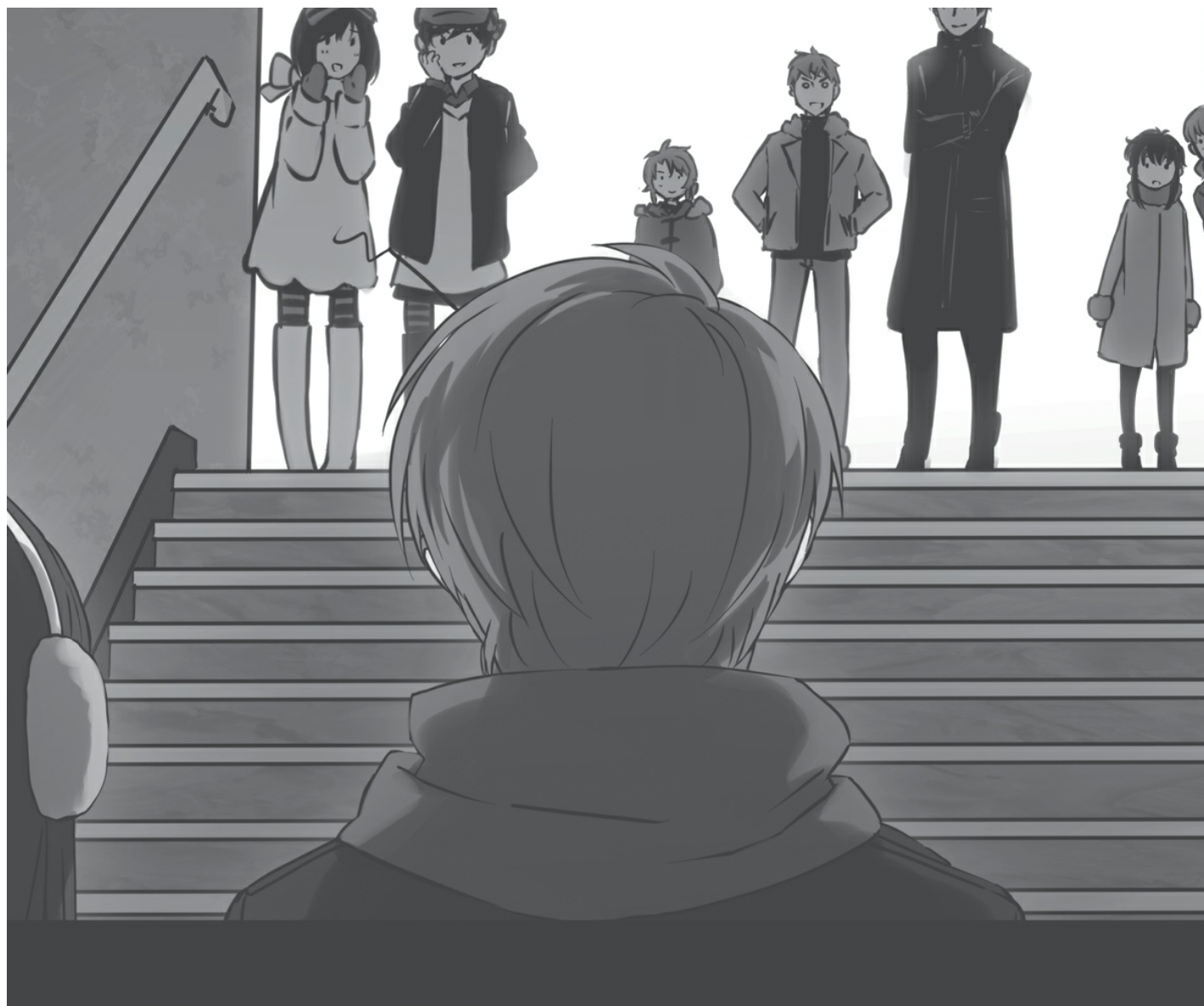
Even though Shiba was right there, I couldn’t help but yell, “What the hell are you all doing here?” Mitsui and Shibata flinched a little bit, but the rest of them didn’t even have the decency to look worried. Chiba was even grinning like an absolute gremlin.

As for you-know-who, all he said—with an infuriatingly deadpan expression—was “I came to pick up Miyuki.” Apparently, the only thing he’d given permission to do was watch the movie.

Come on! Sure, I guess technically I’d only asked if she wanted to go to a movie with me, but after you get out of a movie, you don’t just say, *Well, bye!* You go to a café or wander around town a little bit!

After that, everyone wound up hanging out together. I just didn’t have it in me to object, after the apologetic smile *she* gave me.

With even that smile, she still sparkled.



To be honest, I had a great time. But still, that's not how it was supposed to go, you know?

You-know-who isn't the only one with a mean streak. Everyone around him, the girls included, is the same way.

After today, I'm sure of it.

Saturday, March 9, 2097

As of today, my time as a transfer student at First High has come to an end.

Reading back over the journal entries of the last week, nothing particularly interesting happened after last Sunday.

The exhaustion from Sunday lingered through the week, apparently.

I'm feeling sort of ashamed of myself, honestly.

Today, the lunch gang had a little going-away party.

They told me to go home and change, which I did, and when I came back out in casual clothes, they took me to this retro kind of place called a bowling alley.

Magic was obviously strictly prohibited in the game, which I got to try for the first time.

Because it was my first go at it, my results were all over the place. But fortunately, I wasn't the only one.

Shiba wore a rustic outfit of a long knit sweater and wool pants, smiling bashfully after every gutter ball. It was insanely cute, and it took every fiber of my being to resist trying to sneak a picture or two.

Chiba seemed to have some bowling experience, and she had the best score by far of all the girls.

Meanwhile, you-know-who's score just kept rising and rising.

He claimed it was only his second time. C'mon, man, what's with that score? Would it have killed him to hold back a little for my going-away party?

But his score was so much higher than everybody else's that it freaked out Yoshida and Kitayama, and even Saijou and Chiba didn't know how to react. Serves him right.

After that, we tried another retro entertainment venue called karaoke.

Shiba's singing voice was just wonderful.

You-know-who's was even worse than mine, which was a bit of a relief.

Sunday, March 10, 2097

Today, after dropping by the Kanto branch of the Magic Association, I decided to head home.

I didn't tell anybody that was my plan, though.

And yet, there *she* was, at the station closest to the Magic Association, waiting for me.

It was so unexpected that the first thing out of my mouth was a glum "Is it just you?"

Shiba smiled and glanced back over her shoulder.

At the end of her gaze at a short remove was you-know-who, leaning against a pillar.

Ugh! He thinks he's so cool!

But if he was going to throw me a bone, I wasn't going to pass it up, I thought.

After we exchanged a few pleasantries, I summoned my courage and spat it out.

I told her that getting to spend the past month in the same classroom with her had made me really happy.

Her eyes went wide, and she smiled like a flower blooming.

And this is what she said:

"It was fun for me, too. If we get the chance, I hope we can do something like that again."

I don't care if she was just being diplomatic or saying that to be nice.

In that moment, I didn't care what her relationship with me was, or her relationship with you-know-who.

I swore that I'd go to Magic University, the campus where I knew she would be.

(To be continued when the chance arises)

AFTERWORD

This wraps up the Master Clans Council arc. I hope you've enjoyed it.

The Ancient City Insurrection arc had Gongjin Zhou, this one featured Gu Jie, and starting with the next chapter, we'll have a new nemesis. I imagine some of my readers have already guessed who that will be, but nevertheless, I'll save the reveal for the actual book...

But to give a bit of a preview, I can tell you that a character who's been an ally so far will become an enemy blocking the way forward, major figures we've so far encountered in name only will make some big appearances, and large-scale magic battles will take place. I hope you'll look forward to it.

Oh, but I can promise that Miyuki will never be Tatsuya's enemy. So don't worry about that.

My esteemed editor pointed out that during this arc, our protagonist was different than usual in a variety of ways, and I don't totally disagree. I personally don't think he was at all out of character, but...what do you, the readers at home, think?

Speaking of out of character, I also got asked if this was really the right way to go with Masaki. Personally, I think it was nice to see him be properly teenager-ish.

To tell the truth, I'm embarrassed to admit that I wrote this arc without knowing about the Gut Theory of Consciousness. While the phrase does come up in Google search keywords, I don't know if there actually is a hypothesis with that name or not. I've seen things on TV about people whose personalities, interests, or hobbies change after an organ transplant, so I think that's more than enough to conclude that information can travel from internal organs to the brain, which means that a transplant could have an effect like that... I suppose it's a little late now, but I think I'll do some further reading on the subject.

Incidentally, my personal hope is that the mind comes not from electrical signals in the brain, but rather the soul. That's what I want to be true.

Along with the publication of this 19th volume, I'm happy to announce a recent development from Media Mix. As a writer, it seems too audacious to consider a theatrical movie, but they went to the trouble of asking me to work on it, so along with the rest of the staff, I'll do my very best to bring you something good. I hope you'll look forward to it. It'll be a brand-new story in the *Irregular* setting.

The next volume will be a collection of short stories. It'll include the events of the 2096 Nine School Competition as serialized in *Dengeki Bunko Magazine*, as well as an original short story. Whether or not it will be called Volume 20 is yet to be determined. It might end up as something like Volume 13.5 or Side B.

Again, thank you so much for coming along with me all this way. The next arc will see Tatsuya and his friends entering their last year of high school. *The Irregular at Magic High School* is finally heading toward its climax.

I'll see you in the short story collection, and in the next arc, tentatively titled Overture to Upheaval.

Tsutomu Sato

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