

さ-14-18



魔法科高校の劣等生 ⑩
四葉継承編

佐島勤



電撃文庫

魔法科高校の劣等生 16

四葉継承編

*The irregular
at magic high school*

佐島勤

Tsutomu Sato

Illustration / 石田可奈

Kana Ishida



電撃文庫

津久葉夕歌

つくばゆうか

「今度の慶春会だけど、本家までいっしょにいかない？」

「……私が達也君と戦う」



四葉家次期当主候補の一人。年齢22歳。第一高校の元・生徒会副会長。ただし副会長になったのは二年の二学期から三年の一学期まで。重傷者を出した2091年の生徒会長選挙で、同級生だった副会長が生徒会長に就任するに伴い、新生徒会長に請われて生徒会入りした。現在は魔法大学四年生。精神干涉系魔法全般に強く、その適正は夕歌の母、津久葉家当主・冬歌(どうか)譲りで非常に優れている。

補の一人。年齢
。第五高校の0
中は魔法力を隠
魔法「密度操作」
を操作」はその名
媒体、固体を問わ
接操作する魔法。
弾を作る、水を圧
カッターを作り出
下げて亀裂を生じ
困が広い。

制作:

堤 琴鳴

つつみことな

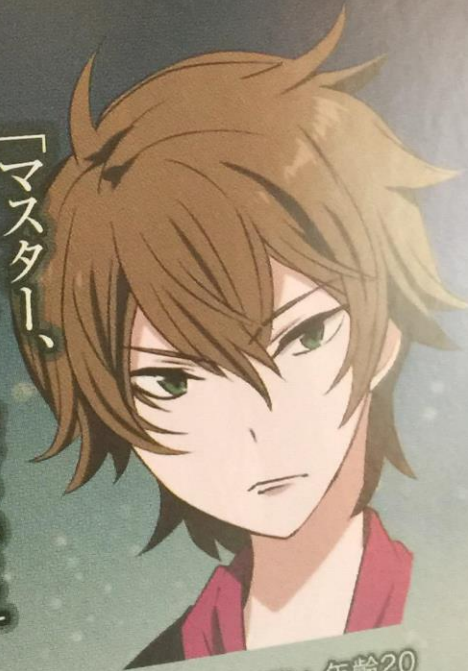


「あたしのことを信じて
くれないんですか？」

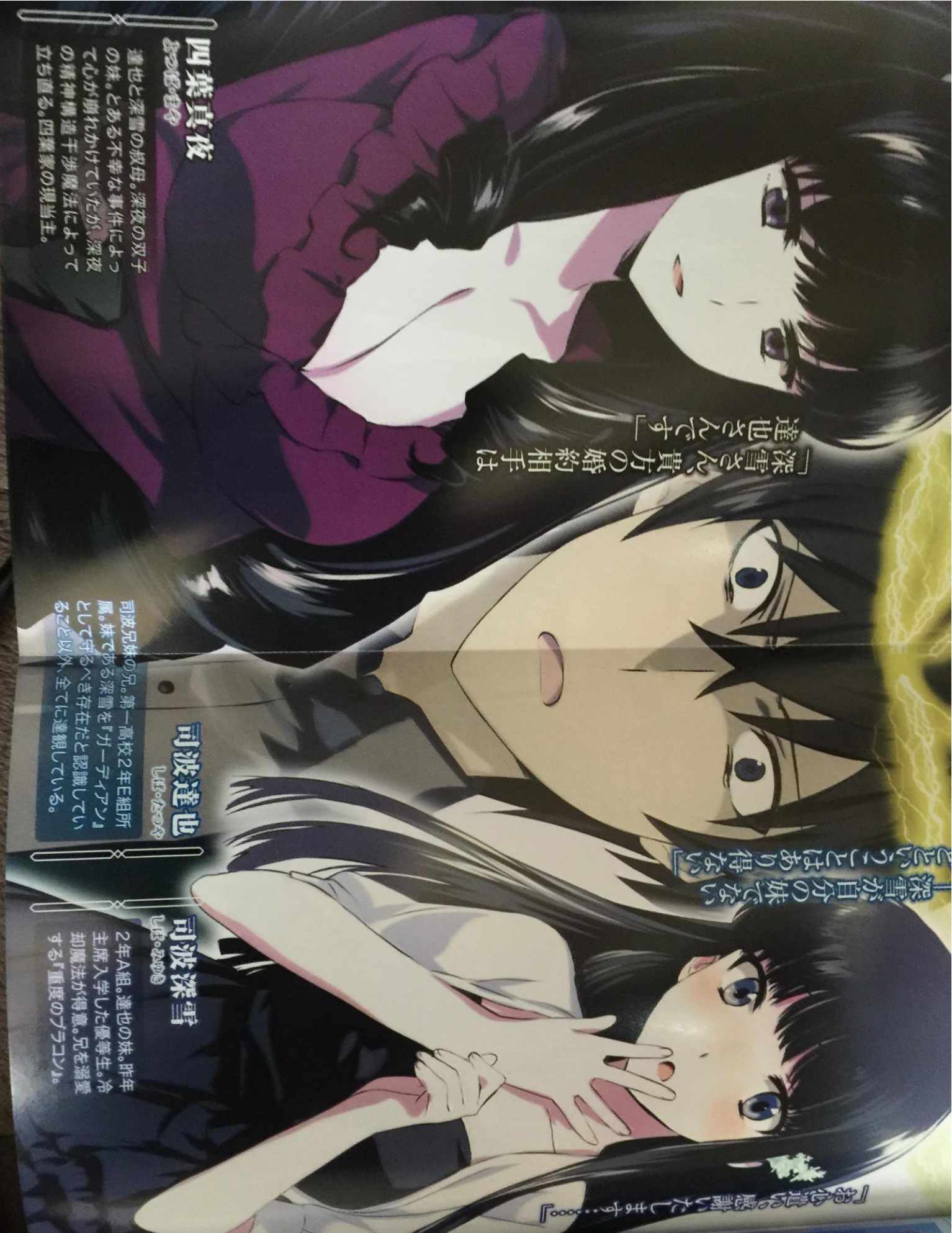
新発田勝成のガーディアン。年齢24歳。調整体「楽師シリーズ」の第二世代。勝成と同じく魔法大学卒業、第五高校OB(主の為に年齢を1歳誤魔化して高校に通っていた)。音に関する魔法に高い適性を持つ。

「マスター、
やらせてくださいよ」

新発田勝成のガーディアン。年齢20歳。調整体「楽師シリーズ」の第三世代。魔法大学2年生。姉・琴鳴よりも喧嘩っ早く血の気が多い。彼女と同じく音に関する魔法に高い適性を持つ。



堤 奏太
つつみかなた



「深雪さん、貴方の婚約相手は達也さんです」

「深雪が自分の妹でない」といふことはあり得ない

「お世に感謝いたします……」

四葉真夜

よつばまゆみ

達也と深雪の叔母。深夜の双子の妹。とある不幸な事件によって心が崩れかけていたが、深夜の精神構造干渉魔法によって立ち直る。四葉家の現当主。

司波達也

しりばたつや

司波兄妹の兄。第一高校2年E組所属。妹である深雪を『ガーティアン』として守るべき存在だと認識していること以外、全てに達観している。

司波深雪

しりばみゆき

2年A組。達也の妹。昨年主席入学した優等生。冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する「重度のヲラコシ」。

《貴女が本当に嫌なのは、
お兄様以外の男性の妻になること》

「やめて………！
これは仕方の無いことなの

司馬空蔵
しほくろや

曾祖父世代

The bell signaling the end of class rang.

Even now that the eyes of the teacher looking off the platform is gone due to the computerization of the classes, the sense of release after getting released does not change.

Today has been especially rowdy.

That should be pretty much expected too.

Today is February 25, 2096 CE, Tuesday. The day the second semester for the year 2096 ends.

What makes today different from any other day is merely the fact that classes are ending during the morning. There is no ceremony for the school break.

There is also no handing over of report cards. The report cards are completely our own responsibility; only those students who are at risk of not moving up or not graduating will have their guardians called for.

Even then, within the First High School two expressions can be seen between students in high spirits and students with sagging shoulders by accessing for oneself their comprehensive evaluations, which include the evaluation points of the general curriculum, for which periodical examinations are not conducted.

That is to say not even Year 2 – Class E, a class of the newly-instituted Department of Magic, which should hold some certain special meaning, was exempt from the fact either. When it comes to the action of confirming one's academic performance, even Tatsuya is no different from his classmates. Be that as it may that joining the Department of Magic's course means that one is less likely to care about one's performance in the practical arts, the question of whether one has completed the units necessary for graduation is one that intrigues even him.

At any rate, Tatsuya tried to stand on his seat to capture his own evaluation data on his mobile terminal to confirm that his results say that he is able to fulfill the requirements. He turned around as he felt a strong glance from his side.

“Mizuki, do you need anything?”

Mizuki’s response to Tatsuya’s inquiry was an imprecise one.

“No, it’s nothing.”

Mizuki wanted to ask Tatsuya how was his grades, a standard question, but she reconsidered thinking she would end up having to answer her own question if she asked. Mizuki’s performance was also an amazing one; it exceeds the class average. But she did not have the courage to disclose her own grades right after hearing Tatsuya’s.

“Is that so? Well then, see you later.”

“Yeah, see you later.”

And so after exchanging such greetings, Tatsuya headed for the student council room while Mizuki for the art room.

A completely dark 5:30 in the afternoon. Having done their club and student council activities, Tatsuya and the others gathered in the Einebrise. This teahouse located on a side street on their way to school had completely become Tatsuya and the others’ hangout. Nevertheless, they normally only gather here for a short time after coming home from school. Yet they could probably be called good regular patrons from the store’s perspective since they do not fuss about or soil the furnishings.

“Well then, we’re late one day. But never mind it and sing with me!”

Erika sang:

“Merry Christmas!”

Their voices rose in unison.

“Merry Christmas!”

During this time, the Einebrise was reserved and Tatsuya and the others held their one day–delayed Christmas party.

“Thank you for the song! To be honest, I wanted to do this during the day though.”

Erika hinted a bitter smile at Miyuki's utterance.

"Even though we snuck out, our club can't quite reprimand us for it though. Won't that work for you, Miyuki? You're the student council president after all."

"It's not you me, you know. Yoshida-kun is the Public Morals Committee chairman too. And Shizuku, shouldn't she be on Public Morals Committee duty?"

His spiel ignored by Miyuki, Mikihiko gave a seemingly embarrassed smile, while Shizuku quickly nodded saying, "Yeah."

"That's right. In any case, Leo ..."

"What do you mean by 'in any case'!?"

"Honoka is also a student council officer, and Tatsuya-kun is the *general secretary*, right?"

Giving no heed of Leo's protest, Erika turned her glance from Honoka toward Tatsuya.

"Isn't this alright? Regardless of the fact that we're a day late, we were able to gather everyone by doing this."

Tatsuya's response delicately skirted around the issue. But Erika nodded her head saying, "Okay," without noticing that.

"We anticipated yesterday that there'd be a lot of people, right?"

Shizuku was present yesterday at the party of the company his father runs. Honoka is "almost like a daughter" to him, so she was pulled along.

Mikihiko is a young member of his clan, so he was dragged to an open party. The attendance had a high ratio of women, and although Mikihiko resisted until the end, he was unable to break through his older brother's obstinacy after he asked him to help him supervise.

And such were detailed by Erika, herself saying that she was dragged around due to family circumstances. Her case was not a Christmas party sponsored by the Chiba family, rather she was sent off together with her eldest brother Toshikazu to a party of the Kansai Regional Police. Her father, who is the family head, was supposed to be

present in the party of a powerful politician, so she was attending in his stead. What this really meant, she thought, is that she is being harshly treated like a person with a dark past. But it defeatingly felt like something she could not utter to her father, so she reluctantly chaperoned Toshikazu. It was a business she did not have to tend to if Toshikazu had a spouse or a fiancé, and with regard to this, Erika cleared her resentment by pestering her eldest brother with sarcasm.

With that, they decided to hold today the Christmas party they were not able to do yesterday.

By the way, the attendees were Tatsuya, Miyuki, Erika, Leo, Mizuki, Mikihiko, Honoka and Shizuku—all second-year students. Minami was invited by a classmate in Year 1 – Class C and joined a different party. This too are of circumstances that resemble Erika and the others'; that is to say, they were not able to do their party on Christmas Eve. The location is a certain well-known restaurant, whose dishes they serve are in several levels more extravagant than what Tatsuya and the others have in their party. Present there is Kasumi, also from Year 1 – Class C, while Izumi was tagged by Kasumi along.

Kasumi and Izumi were consistently courteous in the party last night, which also invited the directors of the enterprises under the Saegusa family's umbrella, so they must be having a good time to their heart's content today. They must be so carefree right now that they are starting to become insecure about it, but they are in the familiar company of fellow sophomores and they can have them close their eyes to the fact the they are being more or less too carefree, they thought. Why Izumi failed to hold on to the same party as Miyuki is because she had such a calculating attitude, they thought.

With that said, Tatsuya and the others' side too were having a carefree tea party with only their fellow students in the same year.

Unlike Minami and the others, they planned having an authentic dinner after going home. They also had the pastry chef focus more on the taste rather than the size of the cake, which they had distributed one slice for each person. The conversation bounced about as they try to speak as much as when they were using their mouths to

eat or drink. Well, Leo might have raised his objection as soon as the party was described as such, but it is true that it is also no rarity that the conversation almost did not come to a pause until an hour and a half before 7 pm.

“And so this year also comes to an end ...”

There is no mistake that the reason Mizuki calmly said such when it eventually came the time for the party to end is because silly discussions exchanged clamorously were a fun thing.

“This year was peaceful, wasn’t it?”

“Didn’t you hate sentimental atmospheres?” Erika responded with a cheerful voice.

“That’s right ... I think they’re a real bother though.”

What Mikihiko said was a reflective scattering of his real feelings.

“There also the disturbance with the vampires or something.”

“The Pixie Confession Incident, among others.”

However, this thing that Mikihiko said became fodder for Shizuku’s sharp comeback, following Honoka’s casual remark, and provoked the laughter of everyone.

“Shizuku! Don’t say that!”

For Honoka, even though it is unfortunate, it could still be said to be fair play in the end.

“I didn’t intend to take Erika’s side though. Even so, it should be more peaceful compared to last year. We were not caught up in a disturbance like the Yokohama Incident after all.”

“I wonder if that’s something that’s supposed to happen every year.”

Tatsuya, while offering a smile, objected without a moment’s delay to Leo’s statement.

“So that’s how it is, huh?”

Everyone, not only Leo, laughed in agreement.

“Tatsuya-san.”

7 pm—And so they behaved themselves as scheduled, meaning they slowly got up from their seats. Immediately after everyone exited the store, Honoka spoke to Tatsuya.

“Will you go for your first shrine visit next year?”

Honoka invited him to go do their first shrine visit faster than Tatsuya could turn and respond.

“First shrine visit?”

Overreacting to Tatsuya’s response, Honoka started to flail her arms in panic.

“Ah, with everyone, it’s with everyone. Shizuku is coming with this time, and Erika told me she can join us.”

Apparently, Honoka has already made arrangements for it. It is not only her feelings that are way ahead of her; unwavering enthusiasm is palpable.

“... Sorry.”

That is why it was really painful for Tatsuya to say such a response which must never be said.

“Miyuki and I have plans for the New Year’s that cannot be cancelled no matter what.”

She could not be seriously thinking that she was turned down. Honoka received it with some shock.

“I really appreciate you inviting me.” “No.”

But she interrupted him, turning her stiffened face into a smile, before Tatsuya could end his apology.

“It must be something important, isn’t it? Well, there’s no helping it then.”

It could never be said to be a natural smile, but at any rate Honoka said everything she wanted to until the end without breaking into tears.

So far he is not able to turn her down without showing some overt concern.

“Invite again come next time.”

Tatsuya clarified instead of apologizing.

And so the matter was settled between Tatsuya and Honoka without it turning into an awkward atmosphere. But beside Tatsuya was Miyuki hanging her head with a gloomy expression.

“Miyuki, what’s the matter?”

Shizuku, who noticed it right from the beginning, asks her in a seemingly worried voice. To make matters worse, Miyuki’s fair skin has become drained of its color; she is looking completely sickly now.

“Are you feeling bad?”

Shizuku was seriously suspecting the possibility of medical emergency.

“... No, I’m alright. Thanks.”

Responding like so, Miyuki’s face remained pale, her smile just as frail. In a way, this—this languishing aesthetic fits Miyuki’s figure really well, but for an adult it is a sudden change of condition which cannot be really justified.

However, on the other hand Erika was not that able to understand the gravity of the situation even after seeing the color of Miyuki’s face.

“Oh no, don’t mind that I can’t go do the first shrine visit with you. I mean I can’t help it but be a total ass to you this year even though what Miyuki and I planned wasn’t really that important. As you’ve said too, Honoka, Miyuki must be something important, isn’t she? Contact me after we’re done with that then. Let’s go somewhere with everyone next time.”

It is not that Erika is more unfeeling than Shizuku. Everyone expects Tatsuya to take some sort of action should Miyuki fall into some physical disorder that she would

require medical treatment. In the absence of that situation, something due to psychological factors is what is wrong with Miyuki's condition—Erika thought—and it is that he chose to encourage her to make her feel better.

“Yeah, I will contact you once I feel a little calmer.”

Miyuki nodded with a somewhat better smile. Even then, Miyuki's skin remained unhealthily drained of its color as ever.

◇◇◇

Miyuki's ataxia was temporary, and the color of her face went back to normal around the time she got home.

Erika's inference was spot on. Miyuki looking weak is not due to physical illness. For Tatsuya, that was strikingly obvious.

Miyuki turning blue is due to psychological shock, automatically triggered when he said “plans for the New Year's,” which is what she has been worrying about for the last few days. In other words, what she herself ended up involuntarily thinking was the root cause. That too was understood by Tatsuya.

“Miyuki, how about you rest in your room for a while? I'll be done with preparing the food later.”

That is why, there is no mistaking that Tatsuya would have still given this instruction even if for instance his hunger had not been satisfied to some extent by the light meals and deserts at the party.

“There is no way I can!”

Miyuki raised her voice in opposition out of reflex, but:

“... No, I understand.”

She immediately became aware that her state of health is a far cry from the ideal—that in which she could offer the best service to her older Onii-sama.

“It should be alright for you to rest for about an hour?”

Even then, Miyuki was not just taking advantage of Tatsuya's words; she requested permission to have her Onii-sama wait for her.

"Of course. I am the one who said you should rest, after all."

Tatsuya answered while smiling:

"No ... Miyuki, please rest in your room until your health returns to normal."

Her way of speaking immediately changed.

"Yes, Onii-sama. I shall do as you say."

Miyuki lightly bowed. Due to her being ordered to rest rather than being told she could rest, her sense of guilt was greatly lessened.

Her room on the second floor was bitterly cold due to the chills of midwinter. Even for a modern piece of architecture making full use of heat-insulating material, it is difficult to keep the warmth inside the room for more than 20 hours during the latter days of December.

More often than not, one could command the home automation from the outside to warm the room up by the time one has returned home. It is standard technology nowadays.

But Miyuki has never used that function.

She has no use for it after all.

Miyuki opened the door and glanced at her chilly, chilly room.

By just doing that, the room temperature rises up to the appropriate level.

Miyuki does not need the help of the CAD for this degree of magic.

Miyuki entered the room closing the door, and once again turned the heating on. Air conditioning is more appropriate than even magic when it comes to continuously warming the room's air up after all.

Having done so, she took off her coat and school uniform.

No matter how tired she may be, she would never even give a semblance that she would just throw her clothes away onto her bed or a chair after taking them off.

She hangs her long coat, blazer, inner gown and dress with some hangers, and rummaged in her closet for what outfit she should wear today. While in the middle of taking a full-length, loose-fitting dress, which she rarely wears inside the house, in her hands and slipping them through its sleeves, her eyes caught sight of a letter rack reflected onto the mirror.

After finishing changing, Miyuki sat on the desk in front of her. She extends her hand and takes out an envelope from the letter rack.

She knows what is written on the stationery even though she has not actually seen it with her eyes. She has read it—that stationery—through and through to the point she has it memorized up to the letter, but as if turning pages of a book Miyuki took out and spread that letter.

The content of that letter, which takes the form of a letter of invitation, orders her to join the “*keishunkai*,” a gathering on New Year’s Day held at the Yotsuba main house.

Both last year and the year before last, Miyuki was invited by the main house to a New Year’s get-together. However, she has not made an appearance in the *keishunkai*, which boasts the family heads of the branch houses in its roster. The number one reason she has not attended is because she “has not been invited,” but Miyuki has taken advantage of that and has been avoiding meeting face-to-face with the family heads of the branch houses. She could not stand the arrogant conduct of the family heads of the branch houses toward Tatsuya.

But this year, she was personally invited—no—ordered to appear. Not only that, it was by written correspondence that has Maya’s handwritten signature. No matter how uneager she is about it, she cannot avoid it to pass. No matter what behavior each of the branch houses has assumed toward Tatsuya, she cannot let herself take action against them. Miyuki was worried afterward about up to where she could hold herself back.

However, that too is a trifling matter when looking at it from this inevitable distress.

Miyuki was at a point where she was holding not a vague conviction but a fairly strong one about why she was called to a congress of the whole family:

- Her aunt at last intends to appoint a next family head.
- Her aunt intends to appoint herself the next family head.

Miyuki right now does not hold the feeling of desiring the office of family head.

She used to sometimes think that she would like to be suitable to become family head. But since that summer day four years ago, that too has come to past.

She did not originally hold the feeling of wanting to become family head. It was just that she was continuously told by adults around her that she is “suitable to become family head,” and that idea stuck on. No, the meaning of “that idea stuck on” is no different even now.

It is not that the family head of House of Yotsuba is the most excellent, the strongest of that generation; it has become a position that a magician accedes to. After screening, there are four remaining candidates for next family head: Miyuki Shiba, Fumiya Kuroba, Yuka Tsukuba and Katsushige Shibata. And then, among the remaining four Miyuki herself is the most exceptional magician. She has been always continuously told that by the main house’s servants.

As expected, even among servants such as Hayama, the head servant; the second in rank Hanabishi, who is in charge of making arrangements on the battle side of things; and the third in rank Kurebayashi, who manages the magician adjustment facilities; those who are close to the central figures of House of Yotsuba are careful not to speak of it in an indiscreet manner. But those below them—it is not event that they are fawning upon Miyuki; innocently, they praise her, “Miyuki herself is the most superior!”

Miyuki herself too thinks that her magical power is the most excellent among the four candidates for next family head. It is not that she is whirled aloft by the flattery; she is confident that it is an objective verdict. But it is proof that “that idea stuck on” when the thought itself that “I will be appointed the next family head because I am the

most superior magician in this generation of the family” has succeeded in etching itself onto Yotsuba values.

Except Miyuki would have probably answered “I am not interested” should she have been asked “Do you want to be family head?” Should a choice being able to decline the office of next family head be presented to Miyuki, she would surely choose that. After all, there would be no mistaking that the work of a family head would deprive her of time to devote to her older Onii-sama.

However, at the same time Miyuki has also not thought of declining the position of Yotsuba family head, among others. While it is also of no value to her own sake, having her older Onii-sama treat her better should she become family head is not a bad thing too, Miyuki thought.

Since the role of the family head of the clan is to protect, the servants would at least no longer make light of her. She could make demand a certain amount of respect even from the members of branch houses. If it were not for her sake but for her older Onii-sama’s sake, then even the position of family head would be bearable, Miyuki thought.

Miyuki was not dejected by the thought itself of being appointed the next family head. The problem is the marriage partner that should definitely be incidental with the office of family head.

To make matters worse, magicians are encouraged to marry early. Unless she is under some special circumstances like her aunt Maya or Mio Itsuwa, they would not allow her to go on being single. Magicians too recognize, as an official stance, basic human rights, so they would never receive punishment, based on law, just because they will not marry. But it is inevitable to be ostracized by the magician community. This is Yotsuba, which is seen by outsiders to be an aloof existence, we are talking about, but since it is a member of the Ten Master Clans that avouches itself to be the leader of the Japanese magical world, one cannot choose but take notice of the reputation of a fellow magician.

In that sense, now that Maya is single, there should be more reason for the other master clans to clamor for the next family head to quickly get married. Even though they could never compel the next family head to marry immediately after his appointment, there is no mistaking that they would press for a fiancé.

- Marry someone other than her older Onii-sama.
- Become the wife of someone other than her older Onii-sama.

If it is about that issue itself, Miyuki already has an answer. Since they would neither recognize a marriage between actual siblings nor does she, being a magician, have the freedom to go on being single, marrying a man other than her older Onii-sama was unavoidable for Miyuki.

Miyuki folds the stationery returning it into the envelope and stood up to return the envelope to the letter rack.

She stood in front of the mirror stand and spoke to herself in the mirror, in her mind.

(... Yeah, this is something that couldn't be helped. I can't do anything about it.)

The Miyuki in the mirror spoke to her in her mind.

«Is it really something that couldn't be helped? Can you really consent to it then?»

The voice coming back from the mirror sounded a little younger than her now.

(Yeah ... The truth that Onii-sama and I are siblings is something that cannot be changed. There is no choice but to consent, and I do consent.)

Miyuki made the girl in the mirror, herself hear.

«That's a lie! I have made no such consent!»

The "Miyuki" in the mirror was just a little more honest than herself as she was a little younger.

(No matter how much I might refuse to consent, I ought to, *Miyuki*. I mean, Onii-sama and I are real siblings, you know.)

«Then you shouldn't be giving up because you're real siblings!?»

(Give up or not give up—that's not the problem. We're siblings and we can't marry. I've known that from the very start, and I don't freaking wish to have Onii-sama love me as a woman. Wouldn't it be weird to say that I'm going to give up not wishing for that?)

«You lie! Then why does *Miyuki* dislike that much that perfect stranger of a fiancé she doesn't even know exists or not!?!»

(Shouldn't I carry out my responsibilities as a mother if I married and bore children? I would end up becoming unable to serve Onii-sama alone.)

«Wouldn't it be better for you to leave the childrearing or whatever to the servants? The Yotsuba family head is not a role served in one's spare time, because at any rate you can't do the job if all you did was about your children.»

Miyuki laid her eyes fixedly upon her own face which is reflected onto the mirror. She failed to notice that her own alibi was a crude one that could easily be refuted.

The girl in the mirror speaks to her still more. She rebukes Miyuki who has been all about her perception in public and has not been facing her real feelings.

«Even if you married another man, there are more than several ways to still be of help to your Onii-sama. There's no freaking need for you to love the partner you'd marry just for the sake of carrying out your magician responsibilities, as your husband. No one would be able to complain if you carried out even the responsibility of making children. *Miyuki*, what you really hate is not marrying itself.»

(Stop.)

Miyuki wanted to plug her ears.

«*Miyuki*, what you really feel is ...»

(Stop!)

She wanted to turn away from herself in the mirror.

«What you really hate is ...»

(Stop!)

Even as she violently shook her head, she could not stand up away from the mirror.

«... Becoming the wife of a man other than your dear Onii-sama.»

Already, her mind cannot even tell herself to stop.

«... Being embraced by a man other than your dear Onii-sama.»

Reflected onto the mirror was herself with fearful eyes, herself afraid of her own real feelings which she had always tried to not think of.

«... Not becoming your Onii-sama's bride. ... Not being able to have your Onii-sama embrace you. ... Nothing but not being loved as a woman by your Onii-sama!»

“Ah!”

The sorrow escapes her lips, and her body crumbles down from her seat by the mirror stand unto the floor.

The mirror exits her field of vision, and the spell that has befallen her is undone.

“I mean, it's not that I couldn't do anything about it.”

With her thoughts having turned into voice and thus released away from her, her split emotions became one.

“I am Onii-sama's little sister. Onii-sama and I are real siblings.”

Emotions she could not hold any longer inside just her heart flowed out from her lips one after another.

“They couldn't let me love my real Onii-sama as a woman. The world would not allow it. He's my Onii-sama, so they'd surely think we're abnormal. They'd feel that disgusted by it.”

All alone in her room, Miyuki sincerely confessed all of her thoughts. She was able to confess them precisely because no one is listening.

Her words were not those that reached the ears of anyone, of any person.

Her words were not of repentance.

“I don’t care what the world may think. It’s alright even if they talk behind my back, even if I get banished. But I wouldn’t be able to bear it if it happened that my Onii-sama rejects me saying I’m a disgusting girl!”

She does not think that her own thoughts are at fault.

There is only one who can give her forgiveness, and that is not God.

“That’s why it couldn’t be helped.”

Miyuki’s confession stops. Her outflowing thoughts turned from words to tears, from her eyes falling in drops.

2

On the first day of the winter break, Tatsuya took a walk to the FLT Development Third Division after morning.

Miyuki is house-watching along with Minami. The Development Third Division is a place that can also be said to be his home ground, a place where he could even bring Miyuki along, have her welcomed and have her never treated like a nuisance. That Tatsuya too knows. Except he expected today that they would totally not mind even if he brought her to the development lab. If that were the case, it would be better to make her relax at home, Tatsuya thought.

He plans to get down to new work starting today. This is not the development of the new CAD, but the design of a large-scale system that makes full use of magical engineering technology. He does not know how many years ahead the thing to be actualized here would be. What Tatsuya has been trying to create is a large energy resource environment plant, which to begin with cannot be actualized through just FLT’s capabilities.

The project’s name is “ESCAPES.” It is a name that abbreviates “Extract both useful and harmful Substances from the Coastal Area of the Pacific using Electricity

generated by Stellar-generator,” but this project’s name also holds the meaning “a means for escape.”

What can be undertaken at the current phase is merely the drafting of the plant’s business proposal and the designing of the system to be installed thereto. Even then, they have reached the point where they can finally take the first step. That was July 2093, roughly three years ago or exactly one year since that day in Okinawa. The Loop Cast, the finally made itself certain. It is still a very long way ahead looking at it from both the project’s feasibility and Tatsuya’s age. Nevertheless, when considering the significance of the fact that he is in this project, one could not help but think that he would never cease being zealous about it one way or another.

But his enthusiasm was suddenly dampened an hour after the start of work.

“I cannot apologize enough for disturbing you, my lord.”

While in the middle of drafting the outline of a business plan engulfed by highly confidential data that can neither be transmitted by quantum encryption nor even be copied to Solid Cube storage and then be taken home, Tatsuya was called for on the intercom by a female employee of Development 3rd Division.

“What is it?”

Honestly speaking, he did not want to stop working now. But it must be an important matter if she would dare call for him especially now that he is alone, secluded in the room. Tatsuya removed his hands away from the keyboard and responded to the intercom.

“Yes, a gentleman named Mr Mitsugu Kuroba wishes to meet with you, sir. What shall we do with him?”

Unconsciously, Tatsuya knit his eyebrows.

As far as Tatsuya knows, Mitsugu has never visited FLT. Mitsugu’s work for the Yotsubas is intelligence generation, and FLT, which is merely one of its many sources of finance, is outside his jurisdiction. Even if he did have need something from Tatsuya, there should have been no need for him to come here.

“I will see him. Please have him through the offline reception.”

He lacks the raw materials to deduce Mitsugu’s objective.

He needs to meet with him to ascertain what his objective is. Having decided such, Tatsuya ordered her to guide Mitsugu to a reception room that is not equipped with an online surveillance system.

Tatsuya entered the reception room and locked the door even before making his introductions.

Even as he faced him again, Mitsugu made no effort to stand up from the sofa.

The most noticeable reaction Mitsugu showed to Tatsuya’s entering the room, as a matter of fact, was undeniably him just placing his placing his felt hat on the sofa after fiddling with them with his hands.

“Long time no see, Kuroba-san. Is it since summer that we haven’t met?”

“Yeah.”

Mitsugu nodding in a seemingly sullen manner is not just due to the fact that the phrase “since summer” made him recall bitter memories of him sustaining severe wounds from Gongjin Zhou. Mitsugu had always had a glum face even before Tatsuya showed himself up.

“May I sit?”

Mitsugu nods without a word while Tatsuya seated himself in front of him.

Tatsuya stared at Mitsugu’s face as he sat before him. There is no doubt that the difference in age between them is that of a father and son. But Tatsuya’s face hints no sign of nervousness. There is no bravado in the way he pulled his arms and shoulders.

Mitsugu curls his lips in contempt. Even now there seems to be vexation between them.

Though Mitsugu does not feel like looking down at Tatsuya as a “guardian wannabe at best.” He is the nephew of Maya Yotsuba, the present Yotsuba family head, and he is

the older brother of Miyuki, a candidate for next family head. But inside the Yotsuba family, particularly among the servants far away from the actual fighting, he is disdained as “a failure unequipped with the magical power becoming of anyone with Yotsuba blood” and someone who “has received the role of guarding his sister, out of pity.”

However, Mitsugu knows that Tatsuya is not “a failure.” Indeed, by the normal definition, he is defective good as a magician, but Tatsuya is quite endowed with certain remarkable abilities to compensate for those flaws. Mitsugu knew that well.

Mitsugu showed displeasure toward Tatsuya’s behavior simply because he felt irritation about the fact that a boy about the same age as his own son saw him as an equal.

There was no composure in his expression. Rather, it might be Mitsugu who was putting on a bluff by trying to pull his weight around.

“Would it be alright for me to inquire as to what you might need from me?”

Tatsuya prompted Mitsugu who so far has not tried to open his mouth. “I’m also busy though,” said him, but its nuance was clear from his voice. Quite so, it is intentional.

It is not depending on how one hears it; it is an inarguably disrespectful utterance toward an elder. But here Mitsugu restrained himself.

He was the one who called for him, and a degree of discernment remained in Mitsugu to determine that getting upset at this rate would be in poor taste.

“Please be absent from *Keishunkai*.”

Except, it seems it was recognized that there was no need to sugarcoat things, and what Mitsugu just said was really bluntly just all about what he needs done.

“I never intended to attend.”

“What?”

However, this response by Tatsuya must have been completely beyond Mitsugu’s expectations. Mitsugu’s sour face, which he has always worn since Tatsuya entered

the reception room, comes off. Mitsugu now exposed his raw expression—his astonishment—without holding back.

“I have never come to plan to attend *Keishunkai*. Miyuki is the only one the dear family head ordered to attend, after all.”

Tatsuya did not call Maya “dear aunt” but “dear family head.” Implicitly, that included his rebuttal that Miyuki attending the *Keishunkai* was the decision of the Yotsuba family head, and that it was misplaced for Mitsugu to be spouting words from his mouth.

“Why you quibbling ...”

And so it slips from Mitsugu’s lips. Perhaps since the moment he showed his true colors, he had given up all effort to sugarcoat his irritation.

“Well then, I would like to have you persuade your sister to abandon the idea of attending *Keishunkai*.”

Except, that was not Mitsugu letting off steam or getting mad at Tatsuya; his tone of speech had more or less become calmer.

Whether that is an acceptable request for Tatsuya just because it was politely submitted to him is a different question though.

“Why don’t you tell that directly to her herself?”

Even Mitsugu understood why he would refuse. But Tatsuya’s response was a little off-direction from what Mitsugu expected.

“Even if I told her, your sister probably wouldn’t consent to it. That is why I’m asking of you to persuade her.”

“Miyuki is not the one to persuade. Why don’t you advise the dear family head to rescind her order for Miyuki to attend?”

Mitsugu is for a moment taken aback by his reply.

“... I don’t need you to tell me that. I’ve urged Maya-san to change her mind so many times now, saying it to be premature.”

“If that’s the case, it should be meaningless even if I told Miyuki to absent herself from the *Keishunkai*. Even if she sent her refusal, I don’t expect the dear family head accept that.”

Mitsugu fell silent, perhaps thinking if Tatsuya’s argument is only natural.

Tatsuya hints a meaningful yet impish smile.

“They would probably want a little more track record if you’re going to push Fumiya for family head, so they can understand what premature means, you see.”

“That’s unfounded!”

Mitsugu answers back with a strong voice. Him tightly grasping his right hand to stop it just as he held it up a little above the armrest where it used to be on was the result of him restraining himself as he tried to flip the table out of reflex.

“I have never felt excited about the idea of Fumiya becoming family head since the beginning. That boy’s temperament is too gentle to lead Yotsuba family. Even looking at it from a magical powers aspect, I believe Miyuki is the one appropriate to become the next family head.”

Tatsuya was unable to prohibit his innermost thoughts and his sense of astonishment toward Mitsugu’s objection. Mitsugu was eager to make Fumiya family head—of this, Tatsuya is certain now more than ever.

“Well then, in what sense did you mean to say that it is premature?”

However, he decides to shelve his own misunderstanding for now. Asides, uncovering Mitsugu’s true motives was his priority.

The only occasion Mitsugu held back was when he gasped for a breath of air. He seemed to Tatsuya as if he was in doubt of what he had heard.

“The next *Keishunkai* will be the site of the appointment of the next family head. And then there’s Maya-san who intends to appoint Miyuki.”

“Is that so?”

He backchanneled with a statement that made it seem as if now was the first time he had known of the fact, but Tatsuya too was expecting it.

“However, I think it is imperative to delay Miyuki’s appointment as family head until one important condition is set into place. It’s not just me. The four houses of Shiiba, Mashiba, Shibata and Shizuka must be thinking the same.”

“That is to say this is the unified opinion of the family heads of the branch families, with the exception of Mugura and Tsukuba. What is the important condition then?”

“It’s dealing with you.”

Mitsugu grinned. It was a bitter smile that conceived a murky, tar-like darkness into the pupils of his eyes.

“Say two or so years passes from now and Minami Sakurai of the augmented-type “Sakura Series” imbibes herself with enough power as a guardian of the Yotsubas. That girl holds particularly exceptional qualities even among the augmented types in the employ of the Yotsubas, after all. If that were the case, you would lose your use as a guardian.”

Mitsugu, unlike him, had a pathos that made him seem intoxicated by his own words.

“Don’t you worry. Let’s make you graduate from the Magic University. After that, we will have you contribute to Yotsuba’s money-making activities as Taurus Silver. You don’t even need to do work for the National Defense Force. Let’s relieve the post of special officer for you.”

Mitsugu—the pupils of his eyes continuing to harbor the same darkness—hoisted the tip of his lips.

“Oh, that’s right. Let’s place the FLT shares in your father’s trust into your name. We can’t make you company president because we can’t necessarily announce your existence to the public, but you’d be FLT’s largest shareholder, you know.”

“I’m not interest in that though.”

Tatsuya interrupts Mitsugu’s speech with an inattentive voice.

“There’s no way you came up with everything you just said, right?”

Without words, Tatsuya implies that it is Maya who came up with it.

“People would be bound to misunderstand that we have thoughts of rebellion if we made such an oral contract, you know.”

“... No, that’s not what I meant to say.”

Like a demon falling into annihilation, Mitsugu’s pitch-black smile disappeared from his face.

Mitsugu hanged his head down, once again falling silent, perhaps realizing that he was out of line.

“Kuroba-san, the one who decided for Miyuki to attend *Keishunkai* is the family head—my dear aunt. Miyuki and I absenting ourselves out at our own discretion is not something we can do. You should be able to understand that much.”

“Even then ...”

With his eyes remaining fixed on the reception table, Mitsugu murmured in a low voice.

“I don’t want to make Fumiya and Ayako sad.”

Tatsuya’s eyes squinted sharply.

“Are you serious?”

Mitsugu raised his head, invading Tatsuya’s line of sight.

“Didn’t I say I don’t want to? I will not do anything.”

“Is that what they call sitting on the fence?”

“I am neutral. At the emotional level, you are my enemy, but I will not make any move, for the sake of my children.”

Mitsugu brazenly declared his hostility.

Tatsuya grasped it as a fact he has already known.

“Why would you go that far to keep me away from Miyuki? ... I likely couldn't make you answer that even if I asked for the reason, could I?”

Mitsugu stands up.

“If you could barely make it to the main house within deadline, then I might just answer that.”

Mitsugu, while looking down at Tatsuya, pronounced such in place of bidding words of farewell.

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It was quite a while after finishing lunch that an unexpected guest paid a visit to Miyuki's, who had been spending the first day of the winter break dealing with her homework like any high school student (?).

“Miyuki-san, long time no see. You're looking as fine as ever.”

“You're just as unchanging, Yuka-san. Go ahead. Please take a seat.”

Yuka Tsukuba is the name of the guest who seated herself facing Miyuki in the reception area of the living room. She is the eldest daughter of the Tsukuba family, a branch house of the Yotsuba family, and additionally she is also a candidate for next Yotsuba family head.

Her age is 22 years old. She is the former student council vice president of the First High School, and is currently a fourth-year student at the Magic University. She wears her shoulder-length, rather straight, black hair in a one-length bob, parted 6:4, while her right ear is laid bare, piercings shining. She is a refined woman with the features of a perfectly dolled up university student.



Miyuki and Yuka's relationship would be, if expressed in a single word, neutral. Otherwise, it might be described as mutual nonintervention. Like Ayako, she too does not return feelings of rivalry; like Fumiya, she too is not close; and like Katsushige, the eldest son of the Shibata family and another family head candidate, she too is not hostile. So in a sense she was the last person Miyuki expects to visit her house. With how things are going, Katsushige crashing her place in declaration of war would have still been a more likely event.

Nevertheless, it is not that Yuka is in opposition to Miyuki. Even with regard to their situation, they are fellow candidates vying for the same position of next Yotsuba family head. Miyuki cannot choose but let Yuka in if she comes for a visit, unless it is an absurdly ungodly hour.

"We might not be able to see each other again for around another year after the New Year's."

"Yeah, that's right."

"It's surprising that we don't have the opportunity to see face-to-face even though we live in the same city of Tokyo."

"Tokyo is a huge place too, after all."

"Yeah, you really feel its size when you say it. You were a second-year student at the First High School, right, Miyuki-san? Student council president, was it?"

"Yeah, you know a lot, don't you?"

"To be clear, that's because of it's my alma mater. Isn't it true that you've been succeeding in a rather bright display?"

"I understand it's not preferable for me to be standing out now at this stage, but I think it'd disrespectful to the competition if I didn't take them seriously. Or rather ... weren't you supposed to be graduating very soon, Yuka-san?"

"Yeah. I must say though that I'm just entering grad school."

"Were you not being helped by the main house?"

“It’s like my responsibilities grew just a little bit, or something like that. Now especially.”

Minami brought tea as Miyuki was making an inoffensive reply.

Inasmuch as being inoffensive was just a matter which words to use, the content of their conversation was a fairly strained one. By saying she’d been succeeding in a rather bright display, Yuka by some vague implication questioned Miyuki if her standing out could be alright. And Miyuki’s answer to that that she understood but thought that it’d be disrespectful to the competition if she didn’t take them seriously was her implicitly criticizing Yuka for doing her best to hide her real power from a high schooler.

And then, the question, “Hasn’t the main house been helping you?” which Miyuki uttered, had the hidden meaning of asking her, “Is it alright for you to leak the hidden skills of the Yotsubas to a university?”

Such treacherous gamesmanship discriminates between the able and the unable, and is not to Miyuki’s taste. The one who could diffuse the situation with tea did not have vested interests in their affair, and Miyuki is thankful about that.

“Well then, Yuka-san. What business might you have in Japan?”

Just as when Miyuki and Yuka placed their cups back onto the saucer as the same time, Miyuki inquires Yuka of her business.

Yuka puts her roundabout game to a stop at Miyuki’s point-blank questioning.

“About this year’s *Keishunkai* ... won’t we go together?”

“... Is that an invitation asking me if I’d travel with you from Tokyo to the main house?”

“It is. I’m driving, so ride with me.”

“Would it be alright to me inquire of the reason?”

Miyuki was not able to conceal the suspicion that had been stirring up inside her heart. That might have been an inevitable thing. Yuka is a rival contending for the

office of next family head, with whom she has had almost no casual interaction, who is almost no better than a stranger—be that as it may that they are related by blood—an opponent whom she must at most see as a mere acquaintance.

Miyuki is unconversant in the trade of diplomacy, but Yuka does not seem to have noticed it. Yuka, like most other people, does not overestimate Miyuki due to the halo effect. While Miyuki holds the pinnacle of magical power and an exquisite beauty, she is still but a 16-year old girl, inferior in years compared to the 26-year old Yuka. That, Yuka understands not superficially.

“No reason at all. Do I really have to tell you?”

Yuka tries to leave the matter up in the air upturning her eyes, her tone of speech seemingly playing it sweet with her. Miyuki gazed at her with cold eyes.

“Understood.”

It seems even Yuka was honestly not trying to deceive her; she immediately withdrew from her prankish behavior.

“The reason is my guardian is no longer around.”

“No longer around? Your guardian is ...”

As if to a halt to Miyuki who was about to lean forward off the sofa, Yuka closed her eyes and shook her head numerous times.

“She’s no longer around. That is to say too that she died before my very eyes though.”

Miyuki covered her mouth for a short period of time, as long as blink’s notice.

Miyuki is embarrassed of her own ignorance. Consider that it was only natural to understand the words “no longer around” to mean nothing but “was killed.”

Yuka is a matured Yotsuba magician. It would be rare for the main house to assign her dangerous work out of her special magical abilities, but that does not mean it never happens. In other words, that means the possibility of Yuka’s guardian dying in the line of duty while serving her was not zero.

Besides, she is an unusual magician who possesses a high aptitude for mental inference magic. It was quite likely too that people who knew of her magical nature were targeting her genes.

“My condolences.”

Miyuki respectfully made a bow, to which Yuka once more shook her head from left to right.

“That expression is not appropriate, you know. Risking her life to protect me was her job, and she fulfilled that duty. She no longer need fear taking my place in sacrifice. If ever that world really exists, she would probably be giving a sigh of relief over there. I will end it without being swayed by the circumstances of my selfishness anymore.”

Yuka’s overly honest feelings made Miyuki uncomfortable.

“Be that as it may that it was because she was charged with the role of guardian that she perished, wouldn’t it be imprudent of you to be saying that about someone who died protecting you, even if that were a joke?”

Her face showing she was not expecting what she had just been told, Yuka blinked her eyes more than a few times.

“Your guardian is your Onii-sama, isn’t he, Miyuki-san? I apologize if I gave you some unpleasant thoughts.”

On the surface, Yuka is lowering her head sincerely. Feeling as if there is still something more to the odds and ends of her words, Miyuki does not sincerely accept Yuka’s apology.

“It’s not just me and my Onii-sama. With the exception of Fumiya-kun who doesn’t have a de facto guardian, doesn’t Katsushige-san also hold Kotona-san dear?”

Kotona Tsutsumi is the guardian of Katsushige Shibata, and it is the undeniable truth that Katsushige cherishes Kotona. However, contrary to Miyuki’s intention to prompt her to reflect on whether it was inappropriate for her to make an example out of this occasion, Yuka gave a mellow laugh.

“You see, that’s because Katsushige-san and Kotona-san are just *that*.”

Miyuki gazes at Yuka with indignation now more than ever, as she looks away while continuing to chuckle. Miyuki could not deny her own blunder.

“Besides, couldn’t you quickly arrange for at least some protection even if Onii-sama and I didn’t go with you? Unlike us, you have the Tsukuba family at your back after all, Yuka-san.”

Yuka stopped laughing and gave Miyuki a sidelong glance.

“That’s right though.”

Yuka reseated herself and faced her directly.

“There are not a lot of people who are as skilled as your dear Onii-sama. ... Besides, it shouldn’t be a bad idea even for you guys, right? Taking a cab all the way to the main house is out of the question, and even Tatsuya probably doesn’t hold anything more than a motorcycle license, right?”

Indeed, there is no way they would tell a cab driver location of the Yotsuba’s home base, a place not even on the map, and it would be impossible for them as well to haul all the stuff they are bringing with a motorcycle.

However, that has not been a problem since the very start.

“We could have someone pick us up all the way to the station if we contacted them in advance. We’ve been doing that until last year, and we’re planning to do the same this year too.”

Miyuki is a candidate for next family head and a niece of the incumbent family head. Being treated like a VIP to the extent that someone would pick them up all the way to the station is only to be expected.

“And you, Yuka-san—hadn’t you been doing the same thing until last year?”

The operation control technology of motor vehicles has progressed to the semi-auto drive level. Even without the traffic control system’s support, the burden on the driver is incomparable to the last century’s.

Nevertheless, it has not yet arrived to the stage where driving a motor vehicle would be totally effortless. From Tokyo to the main house is a distance that can be covered in even two hours, but if one were to be picked up, it would always be more comfortable to use the cabinet (single-car train) up to the nearest station then transition to a car from there. There should be no need to go through the trouble of driving a car on one's own.

"I don't mind it though, even considering that. It might be better if you just called it off."

"Why would that be? There's been no trouble with that up until now."

"Well, that's until last time. But this time, I think it would be better if you just called it off. I won't tell you the reason though."

Saying she will not tell her the reason was not some vague concern; there was no mistaking that Yuka has a clear basis for it.

"Yuka-san, what do you know?"

"That, I won't tell."

"... Why should I not do the same as last year? What benefit is there in going together with you, Yuka-san?"

"That too, I won't tell."

With vacant eyes, Yuka parries Miyuki's steady gaze.

"... I see."

What transpired here was a defeat for Miyuki.

It is not that her spirit has withered. It is that Miyuki had no means to make Yuka confess.

Even if she were to use magic.

Yotsuba magicians are divided into those who are good at mental interference magic and those who are good at extremely powerful and unique magic. Miyuki is a

magician who falls under both categories, being good at extremely powerful and unique mental interference magic. And then, Yuka is one who is good in the typical mental interference magic.

If knocking down an opponent were the topic, Yuka far off has the upper hand when it comes to techniques akin to making suggestions to the opponent and making him confess secrets. On the surface, she would not be hostile to the opponent; she would not take the choice of pulling out information by brute force.

“With regard to your offer, I will consult with my Onii-sama then make my response.”

“Is that so? I will be expecting a good response. For the sake of the both of us.”

Yuka stands up away from the sofa.

After saying to Minami, who opened the front door for her, “The tea was delicious,” and leaving an informal farewell, saying “Till next time,” to Miyuki who saw her off, Yuka left the Shiba residence behind.

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“Yuka-san said ...”

After coming back home, Tatsuya was informed by Miyuki of Yuka’s visit and her offer, and ended up thinking deeply about it for a while. Of course, he too cannot read into Yuka’s—nay—the Tsukuba family’s real intentions with just this much input. But he thought as if there were no mistaking that there was but an intimate relationship or something between Yuka’s offer and Mitsugu’s unreasonable request.

“It’s not that she was ambiguously obfuscating the reason. I wonders if she knows something. She did say ‘I won’t tell,’ didn’t she?”

“Yes, it seemed she had no intention to hide the fact that she knows something.”

In other words, there is *something*. It is not on an inferential level; it is on a definitive information level. That too is not for during their attending the *Keishunkai*; it is for the duration starting now until they head to the main house. The possibility of Yuka's statement being for the purpose of driving Tatsuya and the others away into absencing themselves from *Keishunkai* by instilling suspicion and fear into them is also not zero. But ...

(It must be that they have been plotting an assault against us.)

Adding into consideration Mitsugu's threat as well, that possibility seemed to be the most likely, thought Tatsuya.

(What are they aiming for? Who is their target, first of all? Is it Miyuki or me?)

If Tatsuya were the target, there would not be a few whom he could think of. Upon doing work behind the scenes, he came to always pay scrupulous attention such that his own background would not be made known. All witnesses were expected to be eliminated. However, there should be more than a few organizations that would vow vengeance upon him without any regard to the risk if by some blunder his deeds became known.

But he cannot comprehend why they would go through the trouble of aiming for this opportunity if it were vengeance by some illegal organization, hypothetically speaking. Choosing an inconspicuous location would have the opposite effect if the opponent were a magician. The risk for the party attacking would be higher because the party under attack could retaliate with magic using self-defense as a pretext.

On the other hand, if the target were Miyuki, he could narrow his opponent's objective down to almost one. It must have something to do with the succession of the Yotsuba family head. There was no value in clinging to the position of Yotsuba family head if it meant taking out the competition, Tatsuya thought. Tatsuya would probably be completely helpless to stop Miyuki if she hoped to decline. In his eyes, the other candidates for family head also seem not that too excited about it. The ones excited about it, instead, are the adults.

But for that alone, it is not necessarily the case that there are no persons who would drastic actions for the convenience of the adults. The road from Tokyo to the main house is at the same time Yotsuba territory as it is also home ground for the branch houses. It can be said to be the perfect place for conducting dodgy dealings, such as making important people turn a blind eye on things, or hushing up controversy following a violent incident.

If ever they were targeting Miyuki, they probably ought to heed Yuka's offer. Having Yuka with them might stop their enemies from attacking, and if they did actually attack, the two could expect the Tsukuba family becoming an ally.

Contrarily, if Tatsuya were their target, there is the possibility that the two would be driven to an unfavorable position with Yuka having been involved. Be that as it may that traveling together is due to Yuka's offer, the fact that she ended up getting entangled in it would probably end up weighing more heavily.

Even if that were not the case, there is the possibility that they would be forced to give certain concessions if they accepted Yuka's proposal. By traveling with Yuka, she might get involved in case there is a person who ordered an attack. But Tatsuya and the others would remain beholden for having entangled Yuka in it. Overall, the one who would benefit the most is Yuka. Be that as it may that she does not feel that there is an advantage in holding the position of next family head, it is clearly disadvantageous for them to be in debt at the current stage to an opponent who might become the next family head.

"... Let's decline."

This was the conclusion Tatsuya produced at the end of his introspection. Inside his heart, he nevertheless heard a voice telling him that accepting Yuka's offer would have been better. His intuition has been whispering to him that they ought to travel with Yuka. But it was after sorting the overly opaque situation into its advantages and disadvantages that he decided that there were more disadvantages to accepting Yuka's offer.

"Understood. Well then, I shall go and contact Yuka-san."

She probably meant she would contact her not by calling her from the large screen-equipped terminal in the living room but from the mini videophone installed in her room. Miyuki gave her Onii-sama a bow and went up to the second floor.

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“... I’m sorry. I know you even went through the trouble of telling me about it, but ...”

“I’m also disappointed, but don’t you mind it. I also think it was too sudden.”

“I cannot apologize enough.”

“I told you: it’s alright. But if you change your mind, do speak to me whenever, okay?”

“Okay, thank you very much.”

“Well then, I’ll be waiting for your call.”

Putting away the videophone on middle of the table, Yuka laid her back widely on living room sofa. She then stretched her legs with all her might. It is a mildly immodest posture for a young lady, but she currently has this apartment all to herself. She neither has servants to repeatedly lecture her about manners nor her mother who loves to give these sermons.

Until she became 20, her mother and housekeepers alternated used to stay over, but since becoming 20, they too have gone. As much as Yuka was aware, she had had fully enjoyed 20 years’ worth of freedom in the past two years. ... Since her guardian (cohabitant), who almost never commented on Yuka’s private affairs, had been gone, she had started to think that even her free, willful lifestyle was not all nice things.

She was thinking about Miyuki’s reply as she remained in her relaxed position.

Being declined is within her expectations. Or rather, it would have been hugely disappointing for her if Miyuki seemingly jumped at her proposal regardless of the information she barely gave her. That time, she might have been thinking of trying to

demand for the office of next family head on grounds of having been really involved in an incident.

It is not that Yuka particularly wants the position of Yotsuba family head or something similar though.

The fact itself that there were originally more than a few candidates merely means that she has been keeping her appearance in decent shape, and nothing more. If they were to faithfully adhere to the Yotsuba rule that the most excellent magician shall become family head, then then the decision would be that the next family head would be Miyuki Shiba. There exists within the Yotsuba family now no magician above Miyuki. Miyuki is the Yotsubas' best magician, and that is including Maya, the incumbent family head. The Tsukuba family is aware of that at least.

Yuka—nay—the Tsukuba family has decided to push Miyuki for next family head. Yuka being freed from nagging mouths and watchful eyes is the reward of not possibly becoming Yotsuba family head anymore. She was not made to forfeit her position of being a candidate for next family head though, and this was due to nothing else but the fact that her situation was useful as a bargaining chip with the other branch houses.

“Besides, Miyuki-san has that ‘Onii-sama’ of hers as well.”

Yuka knows something happened at Tsushima and at the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula February 31 last year. She also knows that something occurred at Okinawa October four years ago.

“Miyuki-san doesn't feel like she could win just by herself, but having even that human weapon as an ally for fuck's sake—why!—that should be illegal!”

Drinking alcohol is not one of Yuka's habits. But times like this, one ends up thinking that drinking is the only way. Since giving wine a try once out of pure fancy and being led to think of unkind thoughts of dealing with them—her hangover went away quickly due to advances in pain relievers—she never laid a wineglass upon her lips again.

“And yet ... ‘dealing with Tatsuya-san’? I must be out of my mind. I don’t have any guarantee that he’d always be well-behaved though.”

Yuka muttered to herself, pouring a fresh brew of red rosehip tea into a glass teacup in place of a wine-filled glass and raising it before her eyes, perhaps thinking she would at least try acting like she were drinking alcohol even if solely by appearance.

“My uncles in Shibata, Kuroba and Shizuka—why would they all view Tatsuya-san as an enemy, to that extent? I think Tatsuya-san is an important military asset for the Yotsuba’s though ...”

Looking down at the glass teacup, Yuka frowned only very slightly. On top of being too hot, she overboiled it, its color too emphasized, its texture too thick.

“No, it’s not just my uncles, isn’t it? ... Why would the main house, even up to its servants, think of Tatsuya-san as some failure? What freaking meaning could be there in etching into the minds of the servants to treat him rudely?”

Yuka drank a sip of rosehip tea. This time, she did not frown, perhaps having gotten used to its sour taste.

“Okaa-san firmly won’t tell me why Tatsuya has been receiving such treatment, either. ... Could there be a considerably deep-rooted, underlying cause to it?”

Yuka stood up placing the half-empty teacup on the table. As she faces the bathroom, behind her the HAR manipulator descended from the ceiling and ferried the cup to the kitchen.

If Miyuki were to be appointed next family head at this year’s *Keishunkai*, the reason too why they had been making an effort to show contempt for Tatsuya might be then made clear. Yuka thought such without ever speaking a word.

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After her call with Yuka, Miyuki made a call to the main house and requested for someone to pick them up all the way to the station on December 29. Since what she has been ordered to attend is *Keishunkai*, which is on New Year's Day, they should in principle head out for the main house on the 31st, even after taking into consideration the time they would take to dress themselves for the event. The reason she said the 29th is because she took into account the risk of being stranded due to an accident, which undoubtedly should happen.

The one who came to pick up the phone is the traffic/riot police-tier butler Obara, and as such he has always been the person who made arrangements for the car.

As a result of their appointment with Obara, it was decided that their pick up going to the station would arrive on 1 pm. This arrangement is not particularly something to be kept secret. Rather, all of the main house's servants were notified such that no accidents would occur when Miyuki arrives.

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Katsushige Shibata is an employee of the Ministry of Defense who just entered service this year. Be that as it may that he is forced to work on his days off on a regular basis, his work is by and large regulatory, but it has no long winter breaks. So he is just like a university student.

Today too, he has just returned to his apartment after finishing his satisfying—or as one might also call it, complex—work, the sort given to a newcomer.

Almost as if he had been waiting for the right timing, the videophone echoed its ringtone.

“Katsushige-san, I'll answer it.”

“No, it's okay.”

Katsushige operated the wall-embedded terminal after preventing Kotona from returning to the living room. (Earlier, she went out to meet him by the doorstep as he returned home.)

“Father ... can I help you?”

Displayed on the screen was his father whom he met only three days ago, Osamu Shibata, the family head of the House of Shibata, one of the Yotsuba branch houses.

“Katsushige, are you back home?”

“Yes, I came back just now.”

“I see. Well, please take a seat.”

Thus spoke Osamu from the other side of the screen.

Recognizing that the call would take a long time, Katsushige seated himself on a sofa positioned directly against the videophone.

The boughten sofa is a little cramped for Katsushige, who boasts a 188-cm, 80-kg build, which itself is seemingly wasted on his line of work. But Katsushige, perhaps having gotten used to it, ensconced his body rather skillfully by fitting his long legs into the gap between the sofa and the reception table.

“Katsushige, how is your work?”

“I’m very well still a novice, so ... I also got the same question from you three days ago, you know.”

“Hmm, I see ...”

Katsushige’s father can be said to be of a belligerent temperament, and it is rare for him to stumble on his speech. From that alone, it must be a business that is difficult to broach.

“Father, is this related to this year’s *Keishunkai*?”

That is why Katsushige resolved to inquire of it himself. His father finally made the effort to call him, to see his face, albeit three or so days later. Katsushige did not have the faintest idea of what other business his father would have with him this time.

“That’s right. Actually, Obara received correspondence from Miyuki Shiba just earlier. It seems they’ll be coming to the main house on the 29th.”

“Is Miyuki also coming on the 29th?”

Not unlike the Ministry of Defense, things as such New Year’s breaks also do not exist in the government’s other core ministries and offices in this generation. There is a fixed number of employees on duty at government offices in preparation for unforeseen circumstances. In particular, the Ministry of Defense no-holiday policy all year since the outbreak of repeated hostilities worldwide. But for the novice that is Katsushige, a legendary duration of leave was allowed starting on the 29th.

“However, what is the issue with that?”

Katsushige asks in wonder as the face of the girl—a relative younger than himself—who bears beauty distinct from other humans comes to mind. It has been decided that all candidates for next family head would attend this year’s *Keishunkai*, so there is no wonder of any sort upon the fact that Miyuki would be staying at the main house starting on the yearend. Katsushige did not understand why his father would go through the trouble of calling him to talk about Miyuki’s circumstances.

“Katsushige.”

“Yes?”

Katsushige remembers all the more the suspicion he has for his father as he ceremoniously calls Katsushige’s name. However, trivial doubts all ended up getting blown away with the following single utterance.

“You must not let Miyuki attend *Keishunkai*.”

Instantly, words failed Katsushige. It is not that he had no words to say; doubt gushed inside his heart in a single stroke that he ended up becoming confused as to what to ask first.

“... Would it be alright if I asked for the reason?”

In the end, what he chose out of all the things he could have asked was this trite, highly generic question.

“Maya-san intend to appoint Miyuki next family head at *Keishunkai*.”

“I see. How unfortunate.”

While answering so, Katsushige was surprised that he himself was quite not shocked.

Indeed, Miyuki is an excellent magician, and at the same time she also possesses a high aptitude for mental interference magic, a peculiarity of the Yotsuba family. Miyuki is the strongest candidate for next family head, a fact that even Katsushige knows.

But even though it is the case that an aptitude in mental interference magic is taken into great account as a quality of the Yotsuba family head, it is not an absolute criterion. While Eisaku, the previous family head, and Genzo, who came before him, were high-level practitioners of mental interference magic, it was Maya, who did not possess a high aptitude for mental interference magic, and not Miya, a practitioner of “mental design interference,” who was selected to become the current family head. Besides, Katsushige believes he is more superior to Miyuki in terms of raw fighting strength.

The possibility of himself getting chosen to become next family head would never be so low, Katsushige thought. However, it is by this fact—the fact that he was not shocked to be informed that he would not be chosen as he thought he would—that he was surprised.

(He must have really known all along ... that Miyuki-san surpasses him as a Yotsuba magician.)

“Father, could it be that you’ve been worried about me? It’s alright. I am already grown up too, so I’ll be sure to congratulate her properly.”

It did not take much effort for Katsushige to conceive a smile.

“That’s not it.”

However, what came as a reply from his father Osamu were words of strong opposition:

“Maya-san intends to appoint Miyuki next family head at *Keishunkai*. But we cannot allow that.”

It was an unexpected statement.

“Father ... surely you’re not intending to rebel against the dear family head, against Yotsuba?”

With a strong tone, Katsushige censures him.

“It has been the official position that next family head would be decided by a conference between the family heads of the main house and the branch houses, but if we consider the influence of the family head of the main house against that of the whole family, essentially the next family head is decided by appointment of the family head of the main house. It would be unthinkable for anyone to receive the support of the whole family even if the family heads of the branch houses unanimously pushed for—say—my becoming next family head. I expect you, father, to also know that much.”

Contrary to Katsushige’s expectations, Osamu nodded from what he could see from the screen.

“I know. I too do not intend to oppose the very fact of Miyuki becoming next family head. I never thought of you as suitable to become family head.”

“... What do you mean?”

“Miyuki becoming next family head cannot be helped. But it is too early.”

“I don’t think Lady Maya could retire immediately after appointing Miyuki-san next family head though.”

“What I’m saying is that her deciding Miyuki to become next family head is too early.”

“She is still 16, so I think it’s natural for her to be somewhat immature though ...”

Katsushige did not understand his father's real intentions. He could if he said that succeeding to the office was too early. But could there be something so wrong about appointing her as the successor?

Osamu's statement made Katsushige all the more confused.

"... Well then, is there a problem with that?"

"The problem is that bloke who is Miyuki's guardian."

"Do you mean Tatsuya-kun? Indeed, he might be problematic as a magician, but there is no room for doubt when it comes to his prowess as a battle magician, you know. He has also contributed greatly to the Yotsubas' financials as Taurus Silver, and more than anything he is a magician of strategic importance with the potential of becoming Japan's trump card in the future. Mio Itsuwa's 'abyss' is limited in terms of both power and projection, compared to his 'material burst.'"

"That material burst is the problem. That magic is too powerful. Due to that magic that was used in the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula, backdoor discussions have been underway for a military alliance with Japan; I expect you—someone who is in the employ of the Ministry of Defense—to know that better than me."

"Indeed, there have been such developments, but at the same time contact underwater, which demands our country's entry into a security pact, has also been activated. That New Soviet Union is also among the countries that have made overtures of allying with our country. While there's also the misfortune of increasing tensions with the USNA, it is believed within the ministry that a huge net positive that our neighbors are being kept in check."

"If in that way his value as a political bargaining chip had been on the increase, then it would be all the more necessary for us to cut that man off from the central figures of the Yotsubas in order for him to also not get involved in the agendas of the politicians. Because of that, we need a little more time. If Miyuki became next family head now, that means that man would inevitably become the next family head's close adviser. That, by all means, would become the root of all problems for the future of the Yotsubas."

Osamu's assertion was logical at a glance. But Katsushige cannot help but think that those words were an argument to justify his emotional sense of denial.

"Father ... why do you, father—no—why do all of the family heads of the branch houses, including yourself, wish to eliminate Tatsuya-kun that badly?"

All expression disappeared from Osamu's face. It might have been also his intention to hide his agitation. But it was visible to Katsushige how the dirt that is his passions—made neither yesterday nor today, but accumulated over the years—had seemingly adhered onto that mask bereft of expression.

"Too much power will damage the stability of the world. What we seek is the power not to be harmed by anyone. We do not desire such powers that shake the world."

"However, that isn't supposed to be responsibility of Tatsuya-kun."

"I have no intention to burden that man with the responsibility. We, by our responsibility, will seal that man, that magic."

Persuasion is meaningless, Katsushige thought.

"... What should I do?"

What he himself can do is only to avoid meaningless infighting, Katsushige resolved in his heart.

"The Mashibas and the Shizukas are already on the move to arrest them."

"Is Lord Kuroba not on the move?"

Katsushige's question was one out of astonishment. Both the Shiba and Shizuka families do not count intelligence generation as an expertise. They should be able to do it competently at the same level as the other Ten Master Clans, but it is the Kuroba family that is the expert in intelligence generation within the Yotsuba family as a whole. It was out of the ordinary that the Kuroba family had not been involved in a job that requires delicate provisions, such as an operation to hinder their arrival, Katsushige thought.

“The Kuroba family has also approved the idea behind eliminating Tatsuya Shiba. Except, they said they will refrain from intervening since Lord Kuroba’s children cherish a strong affection for that man.”

“I see. ... What are we going to do then, concretely speaking?”

After explaining how the branch families have banded together falls into the execution stage the branch family that proves itself to be the most effective fighting force. It is a topic that that feels nothing but insecurity about the future, but Katsushige has decided that his role would be to hold the amount of destruction to a minimum. For that reason as well, he needed to know the plan’s setup beforehand.

“There is no need to hurt Miyuki. Our goal is and always will be to hinder them. Them not making it to New Year’s Day is enough.”

Katsushige was relieved albeit just a little about the policy which was more peaceable than he thought.

“The 31st is when you come in. If we succeed up to that extent, then good. If Lords Shiba and Shizuka failed, then you would be our last resort.”

“Please tell me the details. If I knew, then I might be of help even to the Lords Shiba and Shizuka’s battle plan.”

Responding to Katsushige’s question, details of the conspiracy spewed forth from his father’s mouth.

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December 29, Wednesday night.

Chui Yaguchi of the National Defense Army’s Matsumoto base threw his body, completely tired from training, out of bed.

Officers shall set themselves as an example for other soldiers even when it comes to personal appearances, says the gift from their officer training, which they carried out even when they were bathing themselves, among others, but Yaguchi did not have the motivation to do anything besides that.

Him falling into a lethargic state was due to a certain incident this summer when an officer he respected fell out of grace.

Until that incident, Chui Yaguchi belonged to a faction called the “No Compromises with the Great Asian Alliance Party.” That faction, which had Taisa Sakai as its leader, was a group of incorruptible patriots who openly and above-board complained persistently of the GAA threat and the risks of compromising with other countries yet never tainted their hands with unlawful acts no matter how inhospitably they might be treated within the National Defense Forces. Taisa Sakai and his confidants never faltered and continued to preach their assertions even when their top leaders ended up calling for an early ceasefire despite of the fact that they had in their hands a golden opportunity during the “Scorched Halloween,” as it came to be called.

And so in the end, it was a crucial event that increased their number of sympathizers within the National Defense Forces.

Suspicious of using private citizens and also underage high school students as a testing ground for the development of parasites (new weapons).

However, that is what the Kudo family have planned all along. Due to that incident which was seen as no more than a frame-up by Taisa Sakai and the others, the leading officers of the No Compromises with the Great Asian Alliance Party were incarcerated in a military prison. They were sentenced to a maximum of five years in prison, but they probably cannot return to the military service anymore even after they finish their sentences. Instead, it was doubtful if they could ever come out of prison alive. In reality, some of the top brass have already died out of unnatural circumstances even before their incarceration.

Chui Yaguchi managed to escape getting implicated because he is both young in years and low in rank. It also greatly helped that he was not at the scene of the crime that

time. He was redeployed to the Matsumoto regiment from being a test pilot at the Special Mechanized Infantry Test Unit, which studied the actual battle deployment of mechanized armors (i.e., power suits). Except, he was never demoted; instead, it was more of a part of his officer training that he was made to study ordinary military service. But he himself had lost the motivation to see it as banishment from the capital.

Even then, he never slighted his work and joined training as an exemplary soldier. He was convinced that he would do everything to the extent of his abilities to avoid dishonoring his falsely accused party seniors.

Yaguchi was tired. From an outsider's point of view, he was pushing himself too hard. He continued to push his body by willpower despite having his motivation to do it dampened. Exhausted was not only his corporeal body but also his spirit. There is no mistaking that it was for that reason—undoubtedly—that he had lent his ears to the questionable rumors that had been going about.

“Who is it!?”

Sensing the presence of a person in a room that should have had no other person than him, he energetically got up from bed. Tired as he might have been, his movement imprinted unto him by training took no time to execute.

“The ones responsible for the downfall of the No Compromises with the Great Asian Alliance Party, including of Taisa Sakai, are the Ten Master Clans and the Yotsuba family.”

Off the corner of the room was a strangely hoarse voice. The voice sounded like something a person might mistake for the cold wind blowing through the copse in winter.

“... Is that true? Who and what are you do begin with? Do you have any basis for that claim?”

“While I cannot show you proof, it is the truth.”

Yaguchi not trying to conceal his suspicion was the natural reaction for any soldier—for any person, even.

“... However, why would the Ten Master Clans, why would the Yotsubas even ...”

But the contents detailed by that voice were also something Chui Yaguchi never could just ignore.

“The mastermind who ordered the crackdown on Taisa Sakai to the Yotsubas is still not satisfied.”

If he tried to strain his eyes, he would see a shadow—a silhouette of a man in the darkness—in the corner of the room.

Echoed from that shadow was voice that sounded like the cold wind.

“Mastermind? Who would that be!? Who is responsible for Taisa’s downfall!?”

Reducing the volume of his voice so that people nearby would not hear, Chui Yaguchi asks in a strong tone.

But the answer never came.

“He intends to assassinate the top brass of the party, including Taisa Sakai who was incarcerated at a military prison.”

The shadow seems to be determined on sharing only the information he wants.

Rather, Yaguchi at least suspected that it is a recorded message, but he soon understood that he was mistaken.

“What stupidity. Military prisons are strictly isolated from the outside world. Their level of security is not even comparable to the one they have at the prime minister’s residence. They shouldn’t be able to just trespass the prisons.”

“The Yotsubas will make it possible.”

With a single statement, the shadow dismisses the counterargument Yaguchi unthinkingly blurted out.

“The walls of the military prison, the iron bars, the security system, the soldiers on patrol—all of them will fail to thwart a Yotsuba magic user. The will need means other than raw strength in order to thwart the assassination.”

Before Yaguchi reacts to the shadow’s words:

“December 29, 1 pm,” the shadow continued to speak.

“A Yotsuba VIP will bring along a small number of guardians with her before getting off at Kobuchisawa Station. There, they will transfer to a car that will be there to pick them up, then they will stay at a hot spring resort teeming with Yotsubas, or so it has been planned.”

“... What do you want to say?”

“That VIP is a young girl.”

Was the shadow’s statement an answer to Yaguchi’s question, or was it something he had prepared in advance? That, he was not able to discern.

“That girl is not someone the Yotsuba family can afford to forsake. If you took her hostage, it would be possible for you to set Taisa Sakai free.”

“I cannot possibly ...”

There is no way he could do it, Yaguchi wanted to proclaim. Be that as it may that Taisa was falsely accused, he was officially sentenced guilty and imprisoned by a court-martial. It is unthinkable that any number of those Yotsubas could overturn that. No, he did not want to think it is possible.

“You can do it.”

But Yaguchi could not say “I can’t.” He ended up saying “I can.” Thus heard were those words.

“However, how am I supposed to take her hostage?”

He was already cajoled by the unidentified shadow. Yaguchi recognized that he wished to rescue Taisa, to rescue the top brass by doing it himself, by tainting his hands with these illegal means.

“I don’t have the means to do that!”

“In this Matsumoto is a detention facility for strengthened psychics (espers).”

“What!? Are you seriously planning to use them in ...”

Strengthened psychics, as part of magician development research during the 20-year period of repeated global outbreak of war, were endowed with strengthening devices with the goal of achieving certain superabilities to expeditiously producing an edge on the battlefield. Those who were in the National Defense Force’s clandestine operations were after the war detained at a number of National Defense Force research facilities according to the threat level of their abilities. There is also one such facility near the Matsumoto base, and there detained are strengthened psychics who have undergone body strengthening treatment and have relatively low levels of threat.

“Strengthened psychics harbor a jealousy of the Ten Master Clans that’s almost bordering on enmity. It would be easy to use them as pawns for inflicting damage on the Yotsuba family.

Yaguchi hanged and shook his head upon the shadow’s instigation.

“No, I can’t do it, after all. I can’t even enter the laboratories with my level of authorization.”

“We shall present you the means to that. Quite so, we can’t procure you a regular warrant, but ...”

“... Are you going to turn me into a criminal?”

Yaguchi’s voice was soaked in distress. However, the path he would choose was decided by the point he was unable to promptly reject the unlawful means.

“Taisa Sakai’s charges themselves are things fabricated through unlawful means. If you could secure our target, it would be possible to gain victory albeit by extralegal measures.

In other words, Taisa Sakurai could not only be saved; Yaguchi's own criminal acts could also be nullified.

"We are merely correcting the justice twisted by the judiciary's errors back to its rightful form. Even if it were a crime, it wouldn't be an evil thing to do."

"... I understand. What should I do?"

Yaguchi felt as if the impalpable shadow was grinning with its eye-less, nose-less, mouth-less face.

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It was around the same time as when Chui Yaguchi of the Matsumoto base stiffened his resolve to go against the military law.

The same shadow also made its appearance at the National Defense Force's second supply base in Uji. The person to whom the shadow showed his silhouette was Taii Hatae, leader of the Appease the Great Asian Alliance Party.

Hatae was accused of letting into the base a magician from an enemy foreign country, but he was diagnosed to have had his consciousness manipulated via mental interference magic and thus had his punishment reduced. He was punished with half a year's salary reduction for additionally driving a military vehicle without orders from the base commander. It is a financially severe punishment. But it was seen as quite lenient measure for not having involved a demotion; Hatae himself also thinks of it as so.

Yet, his stance never changed just because. Be it as it may that a truce has been in force, the hostile relationship with the Great Asian Alliance continues, and Hatae has received warnings from both officers and colleagues that being too supportive of people from that country would be bad for his own position within the National Defense Forces. Even then, he did not yield his assertions.

While he never hesitated about the thought of one day faithfully martyring himself, he felt that his own position had been worsening by the day. At this rate, even though they did not chastise him, he would soon see the misery of being kept useless on his duty, he thought as he grew impatient.

That was the time the shadow made his appearance before him.

“A phantasmic projection?”

Hatae is more versed in magic than the Matsumoto base’s Chui Yaguchi. And for that too, he saw at a single glance through the true identity of the shadow that made the sudden appearance.

“Where are you?”

But even though he understands things such as phantoms, understand the true identity of its operator too he does not. In that respect, Hatae was no better than Yaguchi.

“The ones who attacked this base the other day were underlings of the Ten Master Clans and the Yotsuba family.”

The shadow did not answer Hatae’s question.

“I know that.”

Hatae did not take interest in it; it was something he expected after all. If there is someone interested in revealing his origins, it will not be the eye-less, nose-less, mouth-less silhouette of a phantom who is going to do it.

Besides, that attack being perpetrated by the Ten Master Clans and the Yotsubas is something Hatae has had at least a rough idea about. The intruder clearly used modern magic. Daringly pretentious modern magicians and the like who would dare invade a base of the National Defense Forces—he can think of anyone else but the Yotsuba.

“As we speak, the Yotsuba continue to hunt for men connected with the Great Asian Alliance.”

However, he was not able to disregard this next statement:

“Are you saying they are still targeting my comrades? Shit, those dogs!”

“How very well composed of you despite the fact that Taii Hatae—you too are going to be targets of the Yotsuba again.”

Agitation runs through Hatae’s face. But he immediately asked again.

“I might have been reeled into their trap, but I was trying to incite rebellion. I am already prepared.”

“An honorable death has been prepared for you. It is a death besmirched with humiliation that’s waiting for you though.”

“Fucking ...”

“While you are an officer of the National Defense Forces, you are also a filthy traitor who served useful for a magician of an enemy country. Your relatives and your brothers will without a doubt think of you with shame.”

“Let it be!”

“Now, it would end the same even if you accepted your fate of taking refuge in death after being unable to bear the sin of your betrayal. If you do die, it will be immediately after they realize of that incident. If you killed yourself at that moment, they would probably see you off as a soldier who knew the shame of atoning for his sins through death. But it’s too late. You’ve already blown your change to wipe away your shame through death.”

“What am I supposed to do then!?”

On Hatae’s face was a glint of a man’s expression as he fell in despair.

He lost his normal sense of judgment at the shadow’s denunciation.

“You will live long. It is precisely because you will live long that you will also gain the change to remove your stigma.”

“But how!?”

The shadow grinned. However, its smile bereft of expression was not able to make him realize it was smiling.

“On December 30, morning, three days from now, the magician who attacked this base will have contact with the Yotsuba main house at Kobuchisawa Station.”

“What?”

“The objective of the contact is the communication and dispensation of new duties. New duties being the resumption of the Appease the Great Asian Alliance Party’s extermination.”

“What would you like me ... to do?”

Hatae asks as he clenches his teeth.

“Are you saying assassinate that magician?”

“We can’t proceed to the first step with that attitude. If you were to live long, you would have to resist. If you didn’t counterattack, you would be done for. It’s that simple.”

“Are you telling me to reduce myself to the level of an assassin!?”

“Taii Hatae, that is for you to decide.”

Already, Hatae has become unable to turn his answer into words. Teeth clenched obstructed was his voice.

“You should be happier. Your newfound allies are powerful—not some obsoleted magicians. They would gladly be of your service.”

The phantom disappeared without waiting for Hatae’s response. Unlike changelings, mere phantoms do not leave any traces of their existence.

3

December 29, Saturday. It is finally the day that Tatsuya and the others—nay—it is finally the day that Miyuki departs for the main house.

Tatsuya, Miyuki and Minami finished eating their early lunch and got out of the house before noon.

The village where the Yotsuba main house is is not designated an address, so a door-to-door delivery system is unavailable unfortunately. The amount of luggage they have to carry increased because of that. But it is not that much of a burden since the distance they have to walk is essentially just as much as the distance it takes to get on and off the cabinet stations. What they have to carry, originally, were not supposed to be heavy as they were only clothes and personal essentials. They are just bulky. Besides, the furisode Miyuki will be wearing has been prepared for every year by the main house.

The waiting time from their house to the appointed Kobuchisawa Station was one hour tops. Without running into trouble on their way, the three arrived at the appointed station smoothly. Tatsuya has not forgotten about Mitsugu Kuroba's request, which might as well be a notice of an attack. But there was no possibility that someone would devise a terrorist attack at public transportation, he thought. Taking on the government head-on to deal with their enemies is not the Yotsubas' style of play. If there were supposed to be an attack, it would have been now, Tatsuya predicted.

The car coming to pick them up has already arrived. He has some recollection of its driver too. It seems he has had some interactions with Minami in his own way when she worked at the main house until last year—a casual relationship where they gave each other smiles and exchanged words. His eyes turned to Tatsuya; as always, it was a gaze that seemingly looked at him as some nonliving matter. After finishing loading their suitcases into the trunk, Tatsuya guides Miyuki into the car. After all, it is becoming bothersome for Miyuki being able to see how the driver has been fixing his eyes on Tatsuya. As for Tatsuya, he sometimes wished that the driver who came to pick Miyuki up remember just a little bit his role to play, in order to avoid any unnecessary trouble, but the drivers under Obara the butler's employ prioritize abilities and guts more than they do pleasantries. The skills required includes not only

the ability to drive but also the ability to do battle when the time comes, so it probably could not be helped even if they were more or less incompetent.

There was another reason why he rushed Miyuki to get in the car. As he predicted, there are eyes observing them. Rather than say they were being watched, it felt like the car was being watched. It should not be hard to understand that, if there were a colluder or a conspirator within the Yotsuba family, this car is what would come from the Yotsuba main house to pick Miyuki up. Tatsuya did not feign his thoughts that they would seriously go that far, but reality would not change no matter how he might think of it.

Except, there are fewer eyes watching them than he thinks. Tatsuya was concerned about that. He has the impression that someone knows their destination and that they will be ambushed. It should not be unexpected that the information would get leaked.

Besides, there have been no signs of anyone of making any advances, as of now. It is a criminal offense to exercise magic other than for the purposes of self-defense. They cannot use magic to eliminate them for the reason that there are people watching. It would end the same even if they did not use magic anyway. The only choice they could take in this situation was to immediately take out the car.

Minami sat on the front passenger seat. It would have been easier to observe their surroundings from the front seat, but Minami quickly climbed onto the front passenger seat and, discrete as she were, stubbornly yielded no ground. So Tatsuya was left with no choice but to be on the lookout for their surroundings from the rear seat.

It was immediately after getting out of town and after private houses went scarce that they made a move. A suspicious vehicle got caught in Tatsuya's security perimeter.

“Onii-sama, why ...”

“It's an attack!”

Saying that Miyuki noticed the change in her Onii-sama earlier than Tatsuya could make the warning is a bit of making the long story short, but with that said there was indeed a moment's delay in his reaction. Even now, there was a short gap between Miyuki's words and Tatsuya interrupting her.

"Grenade rounds: two in the front, two in the back."

In response to Tatsuya's voice, Minami tries to deploy anti-materiel, heat-resistant barrier magic.

But she was able to release a mere half-complete magic sequence due to the chaos that is 21 people being present in that area.

Their target is the motor vehicle Tatsuya and the others are riding in. Minami's barrier magic is obstructed due to the magic sequences of 21 people producing, as if almost deliberately, a conflicting state—a state akin to being under the effects of cast jamming, which obstructs the invocation of magic due to chaotically overlapping magic sequences mutually interfering with each other. No, "almost deliberately" is not the word for it. Looking at how each of the 21 magic sequences were being adjusted at the same outputs, one might say the conflicting state was being produced deliberately.

It was not a coincidence, Tatsuya thought. This is not a collaboration made possible by training overnight.

This way of using magical skills in order for them to be able to use magic. That is, it is technique for magicians who cannot use magic at all—a magical battle strategy for strengthened test subjects who have failed to become magicians.

"Minami, stop with the magic."

"Huh? Okay!"

Without waiting for Minami's reply, Tatsuya pointed diagonally upwards with his right hand. On his chest was a completely mind-controlled CAD; on his wrist was a "Silver Torus," a mind control-compatible, torus-shaped, specialized CAD.

The grenade rounds disintegrate in midair while their parts scatter about the road upon losing their projectile energy.

Their explosive shells lobbed at them, bursting two or three at a time one after another, also meet the same fate.

The car Tatsuya and the others are riding in runs past the small-scale explosive fires to its sides. The explosive shells' fuses detonated at the impact of their fall. Fortunately, the disintegrated shells' payloads failed to explode.

Tatsuya swung his left hand as if driving away insects overhead.

The magic he invoked was gram dispersion (technical disintegration).

The magic sequences interrupted midway into their invocation by the conflicting state are blown about in an instant.

“We'll be returning to town!”

Paying no attention to Minami who had been moping at the front passenger seat since Tatsuya took the role of guarding them, Tatsuya ordered the driver to take a U-turn.

But the driver showed neither a sign of stepping on the brake nor a sign of turning the steering wheel, and merely took a look at the car pursuing them as it reflected on the rearview mirror with a grenade launcher poking out of its window.

Disobeying Tatsuya's words, he kept firm in continuing to force their way through.

“Please bring the car back to town!”

Miyuki repeats her Onii-sama's order.

“Roger!”

The driver promptly follows Miyuki's order.

“Minami, Miyuki, I am at your mercy.”

Tatsuya took out a heat-resistant, bulletproof military sunglass from his pocket as he spoke to Minami.

“Y-yes!”

With Tatsuya’s countenance hidden by the well-fitting sunglass on his face, he then says to Miyuki:

“Miyuki, let’s rendezvous in front of the station.”

“Dear Onii-sama!?”

The driver went to a spin turn at the same time that Tatsuya opened the window,

Four-wheeled vehicles in this era come fully installed with anti-lock braking systems, so side turns are structurally impossible. But they are equipped with four-wheel steering, which provides a high degree of freedom, so it is possible for a skilled driver turn within a rotational radius, almost as if actually spinning in place. Currently, they call this, not side-turning, but spin-turning.

Using the centrifugal force, Tatsuya flies out of the rear seat window the moment the car took the turn.

Landing through a combination of “jumping” and “inertia control,” Tatsuya disintegrated the firearms borne by the attackers in front of them and furthermore rebuffed the shots heading for the car.

Looking back, he removes the wheels of the motor vehicle as it made a turn in attempt to follow the car Miyuki was riding in. The car’s body screeches on the surface of the road, shortly echoing a high-pitch sound.

Tatsuya jumped at the nearest attacker after making sure that the motor vehicle Miyuki was riding in had been heading for town.

He must not have anticipated a counterattack of this manner. Nevertheless, his opponents’ reactions were fast. He did not even see them get confused as he disintegrated their small arms. That man who wore the working clothes of a certain delivery business pulled out a close-quarter combat knife from his back to the unarmed Tatsuya. The knife had the shape of brass knuckles with a broad guard to protect the fingers and a blade attached on them.

(Could they be the National Defense Army's strengthened soldiers, the artificial psychics?)

It is a given that they are equipped for close-quarter combat to the degree that they do not need to rely on small arms. These are things one will not expect a normal soldier or a terrorist to possess. Also considering the magic sequences that deliberately produced the conflicting state earlier, there is no mistaking that these combatants are the failed creations of magician development; they are artificial psychics who failed to become magicians.

Out comes the knife. It can be seen that the special stainless steel blade is electrified. Tatsuya had been simultaneously using his physical eyes and his "elemental sight" (spirit eyes) since even before he had guessed that his opponents were psychics. At this rate, he would receive damage due to the discharge of an ungodly amount of electrical load accumulated in it—in other words, due to its spark discharge—even if he managed to dodge the blade. It does not have nonlethal level of energy like a stun gun. Its amount of electrical power is enough to kill him.

Tatsuya did not barely dodge the knife; he leapt back a huge distance to his back.

Sparks fly from the tip of the knife. The electrical discharge ran from the knife to the man's arm. He must be padded in protective clothing just in case. He does not seem to be receiving shocks from electrocution. The man was receiving the electric shocks through another thing.

With his own superpower disintegrated not out of his own volition, the man stops his movement out of the shock of being betrayed by his own ability. Without a moment's delay after leaping back, Tatsuya's palm hits the man.

Now, after that particular magic, Tatsuya fires vibrations—his specialty—unto the man before reaping the living daylight out of him.

The trick to getting the man's knife to misfire its charge is simple. At the same time that Tatsuya jumped toward his back, he blew off a magic sequence that applied a minutely concentrated gram demolition to cause the electric charge to accumulate. Modern magic was originally something born out of psychic ability research. It is

common knowledge for Tatsuya and the others that psychic abilities and magic are essentially the same.

The baseball cap–style working hat the man wore low over his eyes, perhaps to hide his countenance, is smoothly removed as it falls. The man’s face had the appearance of someone near his or in his early 50s.

Tatsuya did not have the time to closely examine that man. Enemies are pressing in from his left and right at a breakneck speed. They wear the work clothes of the same certain delivery company and don the same hats as the man he just beat did. Needless to say—or ponder ever so deeply—they must be his comrades.

That speed is at par with Erika’s, the fastest magician Tatsuya knows.

But their body control is ...

(Crude.)

Two psychics come charging in a short span of time. Tatsuya dared rush for the man to his right, who would have made contact with him earlier if he did not make a move. It is not that he made a counterattack. He just evaded him. The man was still in motion when Tatsuya stopped short of the man’s back.

The psychic charging from his left passes the psychic who came thrusting from his right.

Tatsuya had been lying in wait for the psychic to his left.

A knife plunges out of nowhere.

He seizes the psychic’s head by his palm.

The vibrations released from Tatsuya’s palm after he dodged the knife and sneaked around their backs shake the psychic’s head.

(Did I kill him?)

For a moment, Tatsuya suspected that much because the feedback he felt through his hands was stronger than he intended, but after seeing the man slide off the surface of

the road and then give off vital signs, he then shifted his attention to the psychic who finally turned around to face him.

A magic sequence for acceleration is in effect on the man's body. No information matter falling under inertia control can be found. That probably means the g-force at work here exceeds endurance limit of the human body, yet that man's stance of attack never yielded.

(Has his physical body been strengthened too? It's decided then.)

The real identity of his opponent is that of a strengthened-body combination-type artificial psychic. They are strengthened soldiers who can use magic, "developed" during the onset of the 20-year period of repeated global outbreak of war yet never saw completion. In Germany, it seems a similar concept was tested through genetic manipulation, but in Japan they were strengthened by the application of drugs.

The development of strengthened-body combination-type artificial psychics was concluded to be a failure and their designs were destroyed because the range of their psychic abilities were a maximum of 30 cm—in other words, they were effective only against weapons whose ranges were under 30 cm. Any distance more than that, and they could not maintain the form of the magical sequences necessary to alter phenomena. They could do no more than project broken psions (thought particles) that are ineffective in influencing phenomena.

(So that too wasn't completely meaningless then? By daring to place much importance in incomplete magic sequences, they will never stand in my way of invoking magic. People sure are smart these days.)

At any rate, their age would probably exceed 60 years old if they were indeed strengthened-body combination-type artificial psychic test subjects. Their retaining their youth more or less must be the effect of their strengthening devices.

To put it into words, it took no more than 0.1 second for Tatsuya to process that much information in the back of his head. And in that span of time as well, Tatsuya's moved to intercept the man who transformed into an explosive shell by effect of acceleration magic.

His opponent's movement, albeit observably fast, was completely unpolished in terms of close-quarter combat technique. It was, at any rate, clumsy from Tatsuya's eyes. One might need to remember that Tatsuya was comparing him to the likes of Yanagi and Yakumo, but even when viewed in light of the most basic of standards, it would be the objective truth that he was inferior in terms of technique.

It is not that he is lacking in training. The artificial psychic whose speed is the only thing strengthened about him has a perception that is not at the same pace as his strengthened speed. He himself cannot keep up with his own magically accelerated speed.

Erika is the fastest magician Tatsuya knows, but there must be not a few magicians who can produce speeds faster than Erika can. Yanagi or even Kazama can. Estimating in terms of magic, Miyuki, Mayumi or Katsuto also can. Even Ichijo Umasaki should be able to, Tatsuya thought. However, they will not use this level of their own acceleration magic amid an actual battle. It is not that it is not necessary; it is because they will not be able to control their accelerated bodies.

After all, the only person who can accurately control their physical bodies and special abilities without losing balance at this degree of speed is no one but the naturally talented Erika. Imitation talents such as this cannot be compared with hers. The fact that it is imitation means it can be easily dealt with.

Like so.

Tatsuya stood and opened the palms of both hands.

Tatsuya's palms draw in the wrist of an artificial psychic who swings his knife sideways. It was almost like he made himself get caught—a scenery, which in one occasion, looked exactly like when Yanagi fought against the No Head Dragon (Headless Dragon)'s generators at the site of the Nine Schools Competition.

Tatsuya gets rid of his weight and his own inertia and jumped over the man's hand, likening it to an iron rod.

It was just at that moment that he gets rid of his weight an inertia.

He suddenly restores his weight while upon the man's extended arm, thus pushing the man's body down.

Tatsuya's feet straddles the man's arm.

He then shows him a jumping juuji gatame before sending a kick to his head.

The man, who lost his consciousness, was hurled at the road while Tatsuya, who regained his posture midair, landed and turned to his next prey.

There are 28 enemies he is sensing with his extrasensory perception. Among them, there are nine artificial psychics. Besides the 11 psychics who deliberately produced the conflicting state, there is another one, perhaps, who is hiding inside the car that was following them. The 19 normal men (i.e., neither psychics nor men who possess super abilities) have already fled.

However, Tatsuya did not intend to let any one of them to return home unscathed.

Unfortunately, the police had arrived, so Tatsuya escaped that place right after beating up 20 men.

He carefully slips past the eyes of the police before taking his time to run through the streets leading up to the station and finally joining with Miyuki and the others.

The time was already around 4 pm.

"Onii-sama, welcome back!"

Miyuki, who was drinking tea in the waiting room of the station, jumped out of the room after laying her eyes upon Tatsuya's silhouette.

"I'm sorry for making you wait."

Tatsuya strokes Miyuki's head just as she was on the verge of stopping short of him to hug him, and together with Miyuki goes into the waiting room where Minami has been left behind.

"Minami, thank you for your hard work too."

“No, your safety is more important than anything else.”

Signaling Miyuki, who stood up to bow, with a wave of his hand to sit, Tatsuya himself sat on the side opposite her.

Miyuki, needless to say, sat beside Tatsuya. Then beside Minami was the three's luggage.

“What happened to the car that came to pick us up?”

“It went back. There is no mistaking that the events of the attack were caught by traffic cameras, so I instructed him to not return to the main house directly. ... Uhm, would it have been better if I told him to stay?”

Laying his hand upon his sister's cheek as she raised her face in anxiety, Tatsuya laughed as if to calm her.

“No, your judgment is correct. Don't think too much about it, Miyuki.”

“Thank you very much ...”

Miyuki hangs her head blushing, which Minami sees with subdued eyes as if saying, “What now?”

But the moment Tatsuya moved his eyes, Minami quickly changed to a reserved expression.

Tatsuya's eye had this shocked appearance when he turned to Minami probably because he did not miss to see that moment when she so quickly changed her expression. Minami diligently endured her discomfort.

Fortunately, Tatsuya did not fancy playing with Minami the twisted trick of giving the appearance that he enjoyed wondering up to what extent he could make her misunderstand by continuing to fix his eyes on her.

Tatsuya immediately returned his eyes on Miyuki and removed from her his hand which had been laying upon her cheek.

“Ah ...”

Paying no heed to the voice of the seemingly sorrowful Miyuki, Tatsuya ordered her sister to contact the main house.

“We will temporarily return to home. We will go out again tomorrow, so request for someone to pick us up.”

Arriving at the main house on New Year’s Eve used to be no problem. He made her call them because he was considering the possibility of being held up due to an accident—nay—due to sabotage.

Unfortunately, his concerns were right on target, but that is precisely why there was no need to push through with today.

“Very well.”

Miyuki took out a mobile information terminal and opened a communication line to the main house.

The person who came to answer the phone was Obara the butler. Obara asked about Miyuki’s safety many, many times, apologized for the mishap even more, and repeatedly insisted on sending a car to pick them up afterward.

“... Obara-san, I would like to temporarily return home.”

In the end, Miyuki snapped. No, it was not as if she raised her voice so much that it could be said she snapped, but the sound of that chilly voice was one that would make her listener understand, even if he did not want to, that she had no room for changing her mind.

“Y-yes, your order is noted.”

On the other side of the audio calling device, Obara stood at attention. Or at least, his voice came back as if to give his listener the impression that he made such a posture.

Miyuki, seeing the chance, decided to press him some more.

“Please relay to my dear aunt that I will once again make a report after returning home.”

“Y-yes, as you wish.”

“And then, I would like to request for a car to pick us up tomorrow as well.”

“Y-yes, anytime you so desire.”

Obara has always stood out for his exaggerated manners, but she does not quite remember him speaking this tense until now.

Miyuki silently reflected whether she had been too harsh with her words, while she inquired Tatsuya with her eyes of what she should answer.

Tatsuya showed to Miyuki the terminal screen, which displayed “10 am.”

“Well then, might I request 10 am?”

“Very well, madam.”

Obara promptly answered.

Miyuki was wondering whether it would be really alright, but she thought it was not something for her to worry about.

“Well then, I shall be looking forward to it come tomorrow.”

“Y-yes, Lady Miyuki, please take care on your way back home.”

Depending on how one heard it, his way of saying it would seem as if he had an axe to grind, but Miyuki thought it must have been just her hearing it the wrong way. So she then cut the call off.

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Tatsuya and the others—the three of them all in all—spoke not a single word about the incident until they arrived home.

They arrived back home, left their packed luggage as is, changed their clothes, gathered in the living room and then finally lifted their self-imposed gag orders.

Miyuki and Minami come bringing coffee and red tea. The coffee was something Miyuki brewed for Tatsuya, the red tea something Minami brewed for Miyuki and herself. The two of them preparing different drinks might be thought of as wasteful, but Tatsuya resolved from the very start not to make a comment about it.

“Miyuki, Minami, thank you two for your hard work. Minami, you can sit over here too.”

He offers his thankful words to Miyuki and makes Minami, who is about to go and take a seat in the dining room, seat on the sofa.

“We had some opponents assault us today ...”

With Miyuki seated on one side and Minami on the side facing Miyuki, Tatsuya started talking about the matter that the two must have been eager to know about.

“They were soldiers of the National Defense Army, which has as its main battle force the strengthened-body combination-type artificial psychics whom the National Defense Force failed in developing.”

“Why would the National Defense Army ...”

Miyuki’s statement was something that asked for the reason, not something that asks of the authenticity. It was the truth that Miyuki had no room to doubt what her Onii-sama said—that they were soldiers of the army—precisely because her Onii-sama said it.

“Besides, what are ‘strengthened-body combination-type artificial psychics,’ Onii-sama?”

“I don’t know the reason. I was not able to question them because the police came while I was in the middle of neutralizing the attackers. Strengthened-body combination-type artificial psychics are ...”

Tatsuya narrates to Miyuki the full account of the development of artificial psychics. It was a topic that he would hesitate to talk about in front of Minami, a second-generation augmented magician, but being too cautious would probably in turn be disrespectful was what Tatsuya was thinking.

“... The development of artificial psychics has been discontinued since more than 40 years ago. The men who became its test subjects must be over 60 years old now. I used to hear they were detained in the former Gunma or Nagano Prefectures. But I suppose there were detainment facilities in the Suwa-Matsumoto area.”

“Were they also detained for more than 40 years? ...”

Minami murmured a few words.

“They were not given any roles; they are just being confined.”

Her closing her eyes and keeping her head low might have been her holding back her tears.

“... However, could it be that someone brought the specimens out of such facilities? Say, even if all of them were volunteers, they would still be living proofs of human experimentation. It is not something for us to deal with now, but they are an existence that the army definitely cannot just keep hidden from society and especially from the media.”

Miyuki strained her eyes at Minami’s elaboration.

“Could it be that the person who ordered them to attack us was not someone from above the National Defense Force?”

“No, that’s not it.”

Tatsuya unambiguously denied the concerns Miyuki harbored.

“If it were people from the top brass of the National Defense Forces who were pulling the strings behind the scenes, I wouldn’t expect them to send such a half-cooked battle force in my direction. Even if we assumed they were throwing their test subjects into the field, they would have at least prepared stronger pawns for that—something with way more fighting power, something that’s a pain to dispose of.”

In other words, this means if it had been someone from the top brass of the National Defense Force, they would have planned for something that involved disposing of test subjects who would prove difficult for Tatsuya to handle even if they did not beat

Tatsuya outright. That was something very much expected—a fact that when thought about made Miyuki uncomfortable, so she decided to change the topic.

“Yuka-san knew that we were going to be attacked, didn’t she?”

“That seems to be right. Then she must have been thinking too that wouldn’t happen if she were with us.”

Tatsuya looks down to his coffee cup emotionless.

“There was also the warning from Kuroba-san.”

Tatsuya had previously relayed Mitsugu’s threat to Miyuki and the others as a threat.

“I don’t want to think about it, but there is a high possibility that someone from the branch families was pulling the strings behind today’s attack.”

“... Is it my fault?”

Miyuki asks timidly.

“Wrong.”

Tatsuya immediately shook his head.

“At least, Kuroba-san said you’re wrong. There was no indication that the thugs who came attacking today also had an affinity for you, Miyuki.”

Actually, today’s incident does not add up as proof that their target was not Miyuki. It felt like even those who came attacking did not know very well themselves who they were attacking.

However, Tatsuya has no incentive to so stupidly honestly report that to her.

“I almost suspect they don’t want you, Miyuki, to attend Keishunkai. But there is a high possibility that they did that not to get in the way of the Yotsuba succession itself but to delay the appointment of the next family head. If ever it were their objective to hinder you from becoming next family head, it would be irrational for them go through the trouble of aiming for us after we got off at Kobuchisawa Station. Long

story short, it would have been quicker and more guaranteed for them if they attacked this house in the interval that I was at FLT.”

Tatsuya came up with a plausible assumption by skillfully corroborating the behind-the-scenes information that he knew and today’s incident.

“Is that so? ... No, I’m sure it’s how you say it is.”

Miyuki forces herself to approve.

Tatsuya felt a sharp pain in his chest, but reassuring Miyuki is today’s top priority. Either way, he knew that it would just serve to postpone the problem, but he expected postponing to be more constructive than taking on anxiety.

“Miyuki, it would be better if you called our dear aunt soon.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Tatsuya stands up and moves to the dining room.

Miyuki stood before the right side of the camera while obliquely behind her was Minami fiddling the TV remote.

On the screen was Maya accepting Miyuki’s apology with a smile; she said she looks forward to being able to meet her tomorrow.

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That night, a young officer attached to the Matsumoto base of the National Defense Army died in his involvement in the violent incident at Kobuchisawa Station. Newspapers the following morning reported that he lost his life by ill luck when he forced his way through a violent dispute between colleagues in an attempt to stop it.

December 30, Wednesday, 8:50 am.

Tatsuya gave the main house a call just before leaving home. He does not make Miyuki do it; he did it himself.

He dares request in a coercive manner the inhospitable housekeeper who took the call for Obara the butler to be patched through. The housekeeper, who witheringly gazed at Tatsuya's eyes regardless of the fact that she was off the camera's center, went to call for Obara as if running away from Tatsuya.

“Lord Tatsuya, you can't do that. You shouldn't intimidate the maidservant.”

Obara is relatively more likely to show a decent attitude than the other butlers under Aoki who are less informed and know less about Tatsuya. It might be that he is being prudent (i.e., he behaves respectfully toward everyone) due to his position of being at the lowest rung of the ladder among the eight butlers of the main house, or it might be that he is continuing to protect, even after his retirement, the image of the current Traffic Mobile Unit, which is known for its dislike of behaving overbearingly toward citizens.

But the awareness that he regards Tatsuya as an inferior is revealed in the subtext of his words and behavior.

“It's urgent.”

Tatsuya too has always behaved in a mature manner so as not to create any unnecessary friction. However, today he has thrown away and disposed of his naïveté from the very beginning.

“What in the world do you need?”

Obara frowned in displeasure, albeit only slightly. Tatsuya noticed it, but what would genuinely hurt Obara's feelings was yet to come. He ignored in his head the displeasure his listener harbored.

“Please change the schedule of the pickup. The time will be 9:50, the place Nagasakashiraisawa.”

“Please wait a minute. The driver just left earlier, you know.”

“He should still be in the grounds, right? We’re just going to change the time and place a little. I don’t intend to request of you a totally impossible task ...”

Obara was really knitting his brows.

“It’s not a matter of whether it’s possible or not; what I’m saying is that it’s too sudden.”

“But it’s necessary, that’s why I’m asking.”

“Lord Tatsuya, I don’t want to say this, but isn’t this rather rude? Today’s schedule was, to begin with, something requested by Lady Miyuki.”

“This change is due to Miyuki’s wishes. Or would you like me to hand the phone to Miyuki before you could consent?”

Obara’s face bore some redness in it probably because he just swallowed his roar of anger.

“Understood. 9:50 at Nagasakashiraisawa it is!”

Even then, it probably cannot be helped to feel that the tone of his voice is growing furious.

Tatsuya also has a reason why he dares call them at the last moment. Ill feelings have been factored in beforehand.

“And then, please inform only the driver of the change in location of the pickup.”

However, Obara was not a mere foolhardy adventurer. He forgot his displeasure and soon snapped at Tatsuya upon his insinuation of an instruction.

“Is that an instruction that has something to do with yesterday’s incident?”

This reaction was unexpected even for Tatsuya, but this cheap trick would end up being useless if he drew out the conversation a little longer.

“Do everything you can to keep it secret.”

“Of course.”

Tatsuya and Obara cut the call off at almost the same time.

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Abruptly changing the schedule of the pickup was the result of Tatsuya taking into consideration an event where information had been leaked from inside the Yotsuba family. He surmised that information was being leaked from the inside, so it was even not something he was out to confirm; he knew it. Among the seven branch families—or more accurately speaking—eight families, which includes the Shiba family created for Miya Shiba, of the House of Yotsuba, one or several of the four families of Shiiba, Mashiba, Shibata and Shizuka have been trying to delay the appointment of the next family head by separating Tatsuya from Miyuki. They have been obstructing Miyuki’s attendance to Keishunkai because of that.

Tatsuya cannot comprehend the rationale behind their movements. Indeed, Keishunkai on New Year’s Day is a unique regular occasion where the main house and its branch houses gather in a single place as one, but attendance is not mandatory. Miyuki has been absent every year as of now. Their father Tatsuro is not even acknowledged to enter the main house.

Besides, the whole family gathering only on New Year’s Day is not something set in stone. Yet, there probably is also no rule that says the whole family must gather for the appointment of the next family head. The Yotsuba family is not a family name that holds that long a history to begin with. Maya is no more but the so-called third-generation family head since their grandfather Genzo set the family up as one with himself as its leader.

That same Maya was appointed family head when Eisaku Yotsuba, the previous family head and Maya’s uncle, died, and until then it had not been decided which of Miya or

Maya was to become the next family head. Maya's selection as family head was due to Eisaku's will, and it was not the result of a conference between the whole family.

In other words, it is more likely that Miyuki's appointment as the next family head would not get delayed even if they blocked Miyuki from attending this year's Keishunkai. Tatsuya did not pretend not to wonder whether even the family heads of the branches houses have been deceived.

However, no matter how nonsensical he might think of them, there is no way Tatsuya and the others can show them that they are making an effort to make it to the New Year's gathering as they have been ordered to attend after all. No, it is precisely because they are nonsensical that they must will themselves to make it to the event, Tatsuya thought. It is that he was not keen in seeing where this farce would end.

His cheap trick of changing the appointed time and place seemed to have rendered success at first. At least this meant no car tailing them unlike yesterday as they would be far from the station. But even Tatsuya did not think it would go well until the end.

"Did they see us?"

Tatsuya murmured a while after entering a country road with neither private houses nor factories in its surroundings.

"Is someone tailing us?"

Tatsuya returned a nod and vaguely shook his head upon Miyuki asking.

"Someone's tailing us, but it's not a car. It's not a psionic (thought-particle) information matter or a spirit. Is it a familiar?"

Tension rushes upon Miyuki's face. Even Minami on the front passenger seat tightened her lips amid her stiff expression.

"Is it magic practitioners from the continent?"

Miyuki's question was something Tatsuya did not expect.

"... No, it doesn't mean they are shape-shifters just because they are familiars. It's color-less, shape-less, pure psionic information matter."

Miyuki's cheeks turned red this time upon Tatsuya's response.

"I'm sorry. I've always had the impression that familiars are shape-shifters."

"It's not something to apologize about. We have had lots of opportunities to make contact with shape-shifting familiars since last year after all."

Tatsuya coaxed Miyuki with a smile then immediately tightened his expression.

"It took us this much time to find them out. The enemy's battle formation should not be that dense yet, but don't let your guard down. They will come soon."

"Yes, Onii-sama."

"Understood, Lord Tatsuya."

Miyuki is beside him while Minami turns back to nod at Tatsuya's words.

The driver seems to have been concentrating on driving, paying no attention to the three's conversation. But tension has been affectedly piling up in his shoulders, while the direction of his head is fixed straight ahead with only his eyes moving incessantly. Even then, it might be worth noting that the only one who is not showing any semblance of fear is the Yotsuba family chauffeur.

As Tatsuya estimated, it took not even 10 minutes until the enemy showed itself.

"A helicopter?"

The first indication was the sound of the rotor which they came to hear from the back.

"Are we going to shoot it down?"

Having entered complete battle mode, Miyuki makes an alarming suggestion.

"No, it would be unfavorable for us if we attacked now. We are still within the monitoring range of their psionic (thought particle) sensors."

Tatsuya urged the impatient Miyuki to exercise prudence. He speaks to the driver afterward.

“Please pay attention to our front. There should be a huge vehicle that would come to block the road.”

The helicopter behind them little by little comes to close in the distance. It can catch them any moment now but it does not. It must be aiming to place simply pressure on them instead, Tatsuya thought.

It is driving its prey forward. If that were the case, there should be an ambush lying in wait ahead.

It was purely theoretical, but that was precisely why there was a low possibility of his prediction getting off-track.

“Brake!”

Tatsuya raises his voice before the intersection’s traffic lights. The driver stepped on the brake out of reflex. A semi-trailer truck came thrusting his way from a side road shaded by a grove and stopped at the intersection without any regard for the traffic lights.

“Minami, form a shield if I get separated from you!”

“Understood!”

“Onii-sama, I will ...”

“Miyuki, you’ll be the backup when the time comes.”

At the same time that Tatsuya is hastily getting off the car, a band of men armed with automatic rifles come out jumping off the semi-trailer.

(32 men. A single platoon? Firearms are ordinary automatic rifles. They don’t have any anti-magician, high-powered rifles.)

Tatsuya confirmed the number of enemies and their equipment as he charged for the party.

(16 magicians. They’re keeping their distance as they hide themselves. Two men in the helicopter. Is this a diversion?)

This is a larger-scale assault compared to yesterday's, and they are also organized.

(But they're lacking.)

Half of the enemy party stopped their advance and produced guns. It was excessive fire power against one person. The enemies seem to know about Tatsuya to that extent.)

(Or did they have shortages in deployable personnel?)

An anti-materiel barrier took form in front of Tatsuya.

The automatic rifles fire in full auto.

The barrier Minami formed caught all the small-caliber, high-velocity bullets. This is to be expected of Minami's anti-materiel, defensive magic which can stop even high-power rifles.

Meanwhile, Tatsuya was not just analyzing the enemies' fighting power.

There remained half of the enemy party advancing in both flanks. At the same time, Tatsuya invokes partial disintegration against a total of 16 people.

Those 16 were furnished with anti-magic defense. Looking at its pattern, it was esoteric, ancient magic, probably personal barriers by a yet-to-be-seen magician.

Tatsuya's disintegration magic very much easily shot through those barriers.

It is not an effect achieved by the use of an instrument, such as the Trident (triple disintegration magic). It is a feat of strength made possible by his force of interference. It was the result of his understanding that the link between the side furnished with defensive contrivances and the side furnishing them the same was not as tight-knit.

Tatsuya continuously fires magic in pursuit of them. The 16 soldiers completely lose their fighting power as his magic shoots through their shoulders, legs and thighs. The number of people almost fainting in pain continuously rises.

"You monster!"

The party's familiar invective reached Tatsuya's ears as they failed to shoot him.

There is no hint of a wry smile in Tatsuya's lips.

As a regular battle force, they are probably a unit that has received a sufficient amount of training. Such is what Tatsuya, who only knows about special units, thought out of his deduction. But they lack the fighting power to stop Tatsuya, much less to actually make contact with Miyuki.

(16 infantrymen remaining. I'll neutralize them first.)

Tatsuya ran energetically.

And turned into a hunter.

Tatsuya fell the helicopter, rendered the magician who had been hiding himself unconscious, and paying no heed to what he had just done, seized their commander and what he thought to be an officer. Unlike yesterday's enemies, it seems fleeing was beneath them. But then, it would serve Tatsuya no purpose even if he captured them, and he would not like to get the police involved either. So actually he felt thankful they escaped.

He knew from the start that it would be moot to interrogate them. This is because, by the point that he was able to confirm that, while they had prepared a helicopter and a disguised semi-trailer for personnel transport, they did not have anti-magician, high-power rifles and had prepared nothing more than ordinary automatic rifles, it has become clear to Tatsuya's eyes that they do not know anything in particular.

At any rate, Tatsuya fended the attack off in a short span of time leaving a horrific spectacle akin to a site of a civil war. But neither Tatsuya and the others' side were able to leave totally unscathed. Their car got wrecked.

"I cannot apologize enough ..."

"It's not your fault, Minami, so don't you mind it. I didn't not expect this too."

“That’s right. You also carried out what was supposed to be my role. As my dear brother said, don’t you mind it.”

Tatsuya and Miyuki comfort Minami as she hanged her head low feeling despondent, but the situation that they are stranded and at their wits’ ends does not change.

The car could no longer run not because it broke through Minami’s anti-materiel barrier. The root cause was that the assailants used a weapon they did not anticipate.

“EMP bombs are ...”

EMP bombs (electromagnetic pulse bombs) are technically weapons under development, and at this present point in time their effective range is no more than a few tens of kilometers. But when it comes to close-range use, they are normally miniaturized to portable sizes for vehicular use. Moreover, while it has no effect on military machinery equipped with electromagnetic pulse protection, it manifests enough to affect incompletely shielded, civilian electronics.

For example, the CAD has been assumed to be for military use right from the start, so even its retail versions have sufficient electromagnetic pulse protection. Meanwhile, retail mobile information terminals receive damage from EMP bombs.

“Miyuki, how’s your terminal?”

“It’s alright.”

“Minami?”

“Mine also has no problems.”

Tatsuya’s mobile terminal had its exterior parts from a retail version, but underneath those was something used by the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion. Miyuki’s terminal was a gift from the Yotsuba family. Minami’s terminal was also supplied by the Yotsubas. They are things that were made with modern technology, not things that would break from the electromagnetic pulses of a portable EMP bomb.

But the motor vehicle Tatsuya and the others were riding in was not the same.

“Even with that ... the car that came from the main house to pick us up probably does not have any degree of electromagnetic pulse protection installed.”

The driver cowered in fear upon the grumbling that escaped Miyuki.

Modern motor vehicles are a hunk of electronic devices. They end up being unable to move when exposed to strong electromagnetic pulses.

Even if it were a retail-version car—which it is—it should have been equipped with protection against electromagnetic pulses, but apparently this car seems to have some weak points in its shielding. Or it might be that they used an EMP bomb whose output was definitely no match for a retail-version good.

“I cannot apologize enough. It was my fault after all ...”

It was not that Minami was directly being scolded, but Minami said it once more, perhaps taking pity on the driver who had been cowering under fire of Miyuki’s temper.

Minami cannot be said to have been completely at fault.

The magic Minami used was a “mass filter.” It is an areal magic that prevents the permeation of matter that exceed a certain mass. It was set to not let through matter whose mass exceeded those of carbon dioxide molecules. This magic, unlike vector inversion or motion energy neutralization magic, is an excellent barrier magic that also has protective effects against toxic gases that diffuse or percolate without directionality.

Except, a mass filter has no effect whatsoever against electromagnetic waves. Neither does it have protective against heat or blasts. Minami put an activation sequence on standby so that she could immediately invoke a “vector inversion shield” against the explosions, and she felt confident that the heat was out of her business because Miyuki was around.

However, she completely overlooked the electromagnetic waves. Minami sincerely felt that this was her grave mistake. For example, it was right about when their opponents used the “lightning strike” technique that the protection failed to keep up.

Minami did not cheer up no matter how many times Tatsuya and Miyuki comforted her.

That is why her motive of going out of her way to stick up for the driver was definitely not just pure sympathy.

“Anyway, Miyuki, let’s call for the next car.”

Tatsuya changed the topic and did not speak words of consolation to Miyuki again because he sensed that sentiment of hers.

“That’s right.”

Miyuki also sensed the reason why Miyuki was blaming herself. She intends not to blame either the driver or Miyuki now more than ever. It is that the complained she said just earlier was a slip of tongue that she did not plan to say at all. Miyuki felt really thankful that she got the chance to change the topic.

But she was unable to call the main house.

Right at that time, Miyuki’s terminal received a call.

With Tatsuya hinting her with his eyes, Miyuki takes the call.

“Good day, Miyuki-san.”

“Is this Yuka-san?”

The one who called was Yuka Tsukuba.

“Oh, that’s right. I know it’s sudden, but I’m really sorry.”

“What could it be?”

“Might I ask you to move or remove the semi-trailer blocking the road? Either way, please just get rid of it.”

It was certainly a sudden request. But the semi-trailer did not take the blunt of the attack, so it should move as normal. Miyuki put the call on hold and instructed the driver to move the semi-trailer from the intersection.

Miyuki seriously thought it impossible, but against her expectations Yuka was present on the other side immediately afterward. She starts her car and stops beside their immobile car faster than the driver can return from the semi-trailer.

“Ride.”

She was way too sudden, her utterance too lacking in explanation, that even Tatsuya of all people was not able to promptly react.

But Yuka, blind to her own lack of words, hurls her fretful voice.

“Ride quickly! Our time to keep the police at a distance is limited!”

“Miyuki, Minami, hop in.”

Tatsuya moved upon her cue. Tatsuya urges Miyuki and Minami to board the car as he loads their luggage into the trunk of Yuka’s car.

“How about the driver?”

“Let’s have him do something on his own.”

Thinking even the time it would take her to answer Tatsuya, who slid into the front passenger seat, was a pure waste, Yuka she made haste and drove her beloved car off.

A period of silence persisted for a while inside the car.

Yuka has been concentrated on driving the car.

Tatsuya, sitting on the front passenger seat, slipped a voice communication unit into his ear and at times fiddled his mobile terminal. His posture made it seem he was intercepting some radio transmissions.

Miyuki gazes outside the window while Minami looks at Miyuki doing that, with restless eyes.

“Yuka-san.”

Miyuki spoke to Yuka.

“What is it, Miyuki-san?”

“I think we’re going to the opposite direction of the main house though.”

Miyuki’s voice did not hide off her mistrust.

“That’s because we’re avoiding the police.”

Yuka’s voice as she answered seemed to come with a wry smile.

“Miyuki, what Yuka-san’s saying is true.”

Tatsuya removes the voice unit from his ear and tries to repeatedly calm Miyuki.

“The police will be spreading checkpoints along the direction of the main house. They won’t be meddling over this side, for some reason.”

What Tatsuya had been intercepting was the police radio. Normally, it is not something that could be used for eavesdropping, but Tatsuya’s terminal only had its exterior from retail versions while its interior had the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion’s specifications. It is the joint work of Sanada and Fujibayashi. The majority are decodable as long as the encrypted radio transmissions used within the country.

“If that’s what you say, Onii-sama, then ... Yuka-san, I am sorry for doubting you.”

“That’s alright. I myself have been thinking, ‘Ain’t I looking suspicious?’”

This must mean to say that, probably, the attackers appeared seeing the chance immediately after reorganizing themselves. At least, that was what Tatsuya thought.

“However, why would the police be lying in wait only along the road leading to the main house?”

But this issue was what Miyuki felt suspicious about.

Yuka yet again smiled wryly, but she suddenly turned into a serious face then looked at Miyuki’s eyes over the rearview mirror smiling at her.

“Well, that, Miyuki-san, is because they don’t want to let you go to the main house.”

◇◇◇

The destination where Yuka brought Tatsuya and the others—all three of them—to was a villa of the Tsukuba family at the foot of Mt Amigasa at the Yatsugatake mountain range.

Yuka, who guided the three into the living room, told them to seat themselves on the reclining chairs—this house’s living room had six reclining chairs with footrest in place of a sofa—and suggested a plan for the coming days to Miyuki and the others.

“We’ll be spending the night here today.”

Miyuki asks Tatsuya with her eyes. However, Yuka continued with her suggestion faster than Tatsuya could make a response.

“Let’s go together to the main house tomorrow? If we did that, they would never be able to read our movements from the schedule of the car that was supposed to pick us up.”

Tatsuya turns to Miyuki nodding. Tatsuya declared his intention, saying that Miyuki, having been inquired by Yuka, ought to answer her as a fellow candidate for next family head.

“Your offer is much appreciated.”

“Well, it’s decided then.”

“Please wait.”

Yuka, who is hinting a smile, is made to wait by Miyuki.

Immediately afterward, the villa’s servant brought drinks. The same black tea for everyone. Not only that, he did not come in bringing a teapot but went to place the black tea poured into the cups two-thirds full side by side on the table. Finally, the servant placed the sugar pot and the milk jug on the table and went out of the living room.

Yuka sees him off with a loathsome expression.

“... That man would go on moaning about manners and manners whenever I did something off.”

Murmuring unclearly, she shows an apologetic face to the three.

“I’m sorry. Everyone in the house family is a fan of black tea, so we have neither coffee nor green tea.”

“No, don’t you worry.”

Miyuki hints an ingratiating smile and stretches her hand toward the cup.

“Oh, the table is far from reach, isn’t it? I’ll take out the side table.”

Making sure that Miyuki has withdrawn her hand from the table, Yuka toggles the armrest switch.

To their left-hand side, a side table precipitously rises from the chair’s side.

Minami, who had sneaked her way to Miyuki’s left-hand side before she knew it, bowed to Yuka before taking the milk jug into her hands and placed it onto the Miyuki’s side table along with the saucer upon which it stood.

Miyuki says “thank you” to Minami and takes the cup into her hands before downing a sip of the black tea.

Leaning her head slightly, Miyuki poured just a little bit of the contents of the milk jug into her cup.

She stirs it with a spoon, downs a sip for another time and smiles to Minami sweetly.

Minami returned the milk jug onto the table and went back to her own seat.

She had the form of a servant girl for whom it was simply naturally to exercise meticulous care toward her master—a stark contrast to the villa’s servant who had inhospitably placed the cups just earlier.

“... How cute. Did you really have to show that?”

Yuka, in an attempt to show her calm, turns to Minami with a somewhat unpleasant smile.

“No, there is definitely no such thing.”

Minami answered in a deadpan voice and hid her expression from Miyuki by respectfully making a bow.

That move was something that rubbed Yuka’s nerves the wrong way, but she gave out a sigh without assuming the appearance that she was irritated about something.

“Well ... that was earlier that the house’s servant didn’t have manners, right? I’ll get even with them.”

Not even listening once to her games, Tatsuya drank his straight tea with an aloof face, returned the cup onto its saucer and spoke out, “Let’s continue with the discussion.”

“Yeah ... well then, Miyuki-san, what could it be?”

Upon Yuka’s cue—who herself just fixed her seating posture—Miyuki turns her whole body around to face Yuka.

“I have some things I would like to inquire you.”

“You can’t just tell me, ‘Reveal your true intentions,’ can you?”

The atmosphere made by Yuka’s fooling around thinned, and a sharp light beamed from her eyes.

“That’s because I think it’s meaningless to demand that.”

Miyuki caught that that light with her abysmally deep, cold eyes that are like the winter sky on a very clear day.

Realizing what an illusion it was—how it was almost like she was being sucked in up to her soul into those eyes—Yuka averts hers.

She then immediately returned to looking at her.

“It’s not even like it’s completely useless to ask me. If it’s within the scope of what I can tell you, then I’ll confess my real intentions.”

“I see. Well then, I shall presume upon your kindness. ... How were you able to find the opportunity to reach us so easily today?”

“That is suspicious, isn’t it?”

Yuka griped as she hinted a smile that felt bereft of sincerity.

“But I would never conspire in the background against you. Believe me on that.”

“It is as you say. Except, I would like you to tell us the reason.”

“... Actually, I was secretly tailing the car you were riding in.”

Miyuki observes Tatsuya’s face.

Tatsuya slightly shook his head from left to right.

Yuka, who took note of that movement, spoke of something, but Miyuki was faster to put it into words.

“I see.”

With her tone of speech betraying that she did not believe Yuka’s explanation at all, Miyuki proceeded to her next question.

“Why would you wait until that point to offer us your help?”

“That’s ...”

“You did say that we needed protection, but you can’t be possibly thinking that you could convince us with a reason like that?”

Yuka let out a sigh.

“Yeah ... I understand. I’ll be honest with you.”

“Yes, please.”

Yuka seemed to feel uneasy being directly stared at by Miyuki, but she seemed not to have any intention to deceive her beyond this.”

“Tatsuya-san might be already aware of it though.”

Tatsuya was speculating if Yuka was trying to insinuate something with that preamble. As for Tatsuya’s real motives, he had things he did not want to let Miyuki hear of. But the situation will not move forward with him interrupting Yuka’s narrative now. Besides, if Miyuki were to receive appointment as next family head, she would also need to know the branch families’ intrigues beforehand, Tatsuya reconsidered.

“At this year’s Keishunkai, Lady Maya will be appointing Miyuki-san next family head. A minority of branch families have been trying to get in the way of that. If Miyuki failed to attend Keishunkai, the appointment of the next family head, at least for that occasion, could be avoided, is what they have been thinking.”

No shock can be seen from Miyuki’s face.

“Would that mean they don’t want me to become Yotsuba family head?”

Except, her voice was stiff when she asked that.

“I think it’s only Uncle Shibata that’s been thinking that way.”

Yuka’s answer was an unequivocal—almost cruel—one.

“I see. ... Shibata-san would push for Katsushige-san to the bitter end.”

“I think you’re also wrong about that.”

However, unequivocal as it might be, it was an answer that could be thought of as not inconsistent.

“Sorry, could you kindly explain what you’re saying?”

Yuka continued to explain without even showing how her feelings had been particularly hurt.

“While it is that Uncle Shibata wants to make Katsushige-san family head, I think he’d consider it inevitable if you got appointed family head. He really knows which of you and Katsushige-san excels as a Yotsuba magician because Katsushige-san is an average-performing magician.”

Yuka lets out a snigger. Miyuki did not laugh or do anything unlike Yuka, but she sympathized with her evaluation with respect to Katsushige.

“Well, with that said, there is no one who opposes your becoming next family head.”

“... What do you think?”

“Me?”

Miyuki was intrigued on how Yuka spoke about the appointment of next family head as if it were other people’s affairs.

Yuka is one of the four candidates remaining in the last stage.

“I also think you’re suitable, you know.”

Yuka answers absentmindedly. It was a little too instant to an extent it sounded insincere.

“No, this expression was inaccurate.”

But Yuka was sincere, stuttering and reluctant she might have been.

“The Tsukuba family has decided to push you for next family head since two years ago. I remain a family head candidate because I guarantee an influential voice for the Tsukuba family in the selection of the next family head. To elaborate, it is to antagonize the other branch families in case they support Katsushige-san or Fumiya-san.”

“Why would they go that far?”

Miyuki’s doubt was something to be expected.

“Because you are nine out of ten—quite literally—bound to be the next family head.”

Yuka was prevaricating a little here as if she was having difficulties in saying it.

“The remaining one out of ten ... is from the sense of guilt they have about yourmother, I think.”

The color of Miyuki's face changes. It was an answer that was deficient in specificity, but that was enough for Miyuki.

"It would be troublesome if they were doing this for atonement. I presume that this is not what Lady Toka have wished for. However, in reality wouldn't Lady Toka set her own hands to work in keeping with our dear aunt's decision?"

"Lady Toka" is Yuka's mother and the incumbent family head of the House of Tsukuba. It is not that she has no father. But Toka had been the incumbent family head from the very beginning, and her father had the stature of an irimuko.

Toka is a magician who specializes in mental interference magic, and in particular she is known within the House of Yotsuba as the foremost authority in the special magic called "oath." An "oath" has, under the consent of the target person, the effect of restricting his mental activities semi-permanently. That the mind of a target person cannot be bound unilaterally, and that a key for releasing him independent of the facilitator's will must be set in place are its conditions, but it is a highly valuable type of magic that enables partial mind control as far as preserving the target's ego goes.

It is also a type of magic that holds a profound meaning for Miyuki and Tatsuya. After all, the mechanism that has sealed Tatsuya's magical power via Miyuki's since Miya, the two's mother, fell into eternal sleep has been maintained through Toka's "oath."

"I can't comment about that. I have no intention of saying that it's because it was the dear family head's command, as an excuse either."

"... I have been rude. I ended up digressing even though it was me who asked about it."

"I think it's to be expected if you're the one asking, Miyuki-san. That's why I don't mind."

Miyuki and Yuka both stretch their hands toward their cups and both designed to restart from a blank slate.

"I understand the Tsukuba family's position now."

Yuka hints a faint smile, nodding at Miyuki's statement—itself an attempt to change the topic.

“Well then, wouldn't you tell me if you knew why folks from the other branches houses have been trying to delay the appointment of the next family head?”

Yuka glanced at Tatsuya.

Tatsuya did not indicate any reaction—not even his sense of inhibition—upon that glance.

Yuka averts her eyes from Miyuki's line of sight and begins to talk with her head low.

“Uncles Shibata and Mashiba would like to separate Tatsuya-san from Miyuki-san, you know. No, I think they would like to separate Tatsuya-san from the Yotsubas' core figures and isolate you from the rest of the world—to put a leash around your neck, so to speak.”

Miyuki takes a deep breath several times. Still, her initially heavy breathing recovered its calm after she repeated the process some five or six times.

“Did you say isolate Tatsuya not from the rest of society but from the rest of the world?”

“Yeah, my deduction is also mixed up, but I don't expect to be wrong. I don't know why, but our uncles have been eager to undo Tatsuya's becoming a magician. Hindering your appointment as next family head is buying time to that end.”

“Why would impeding my appointment as next family head be connected to buying time to ensnare my Onii-sama?”

Speaking with mincing her own words in several places is not something Miyuki has planned for. Her lips and throat were shaking in fury; she would become ballistic as soon as she relaxed her attention.

“Miyuki-san, I'm begging you to please calm down and listen. ... Tatsuya-san, your guardian and your brother, will also consolidate a firm position within the Yotsuba family once you receive appointment as next family head now. A position of being the

next family head's older brother and being the next family head's close adviser. That is something that cannot be ignored even for the branch family heads."

Yuka examines the color of Miyuki's face.

Miyuki has maintained her calm for the meantime.

"That is why they will be trying to prolong the appointment of the next family head until Minami-chan over there could serve as Tatsuya-san's replacement."

"... I see."

Miyuki's voice was cold and silent, almost eerie.

"Y-yeah, there is no mistaking here, I think."

Yuka, who has been up to this point trying her best not be overawed by Miyuki, almost ended up shuddering unwittingly.

"If that were the case, on the other hand that means my Onii-sama's position is secured once I make it to the event on New Year's Day, doesn't it?"

However, Miyuki was thinking of something alarming; it was almost like as if she was out to take revenge on someone, or as if she was out to hurt someone. What she was thinking of was smashing the atrocious conspiracy that had been persistently trying to separate her brother from herself.

"Yuka-san, we still won't be leaving today, will we?"

The four have yet to take their lunch, but long past noon already is. Nevertheless, they still have time now that it is sundown, and they should be able to reach the main house without being too late if they departed now.

"Yeah ... the police are still on the move, I think. It's not their fault, but they'd end up needlessly taking up our time if they caught us, wouldn't they? I think it'd be better if we waited until tomorrow."

"Understood. I shall presume your kindness and we shall be under your care today."

"I may have a lot of shortcomings, but I ask for your kind consideration."

“Thank you very much. We ask of your kindness for tomorrow as well.”

Miyuki’s tone of speech is restrained yet respectful until the very end. But the set phrase, “we ask of your kindness for tomorrow as well,” included some nerve-chilling aspects to it, Yuka felt. She hinted a tight smile and nodded her head laboriously.

In the end, Tatsuya and the other two did not take their lunch and were served an early dinner—it had a bland taste—before they were led to their respective individual guestrooms.

Tatsuya had his outspread travel bag before him and could not decide what to wear for tomorrow. He has packed and brought his Silver Horn Custom “Trident” to the trip.

Will he go with the “Trident” which he has gotten used to using, or will he go with the inconspicuous “Silver Torus”?

If he were expecting a magic battle, then the pistol-type Trident would be the way to go.

If he were avoiding using magic and expecting close-quarter combat, then the bangle-type Silver Torus would be the way to go.

After being torn for a while, he took out the Trident from his travel bag in the end.

Someone knocks on the door just as he is about to close the bag’s lid.

Tatsuya asked, “Who is it?” before getting the reply, “It’s Miyuki.”

He headed for the door with his bag left open.

“What’s the matter?”

He opens the door asking Miyuki. She was alone.

“I would like to speak with you a little.”

It might have been just him, but Miyuki looked forlorn.

“I understand. Come in.”

Tatsuya invites Miyuki into the room.

Miyuki first went in front of the travel bag that had been left open, and started refolding Tatsuya's clothes which had been a little disheveled.

Anyway, it does not mean quite anything even when she took out his underwear for when he takes a bath later and then arranged the contents of the bag. But Tatsuya did not try to stop Miyuki and thankfully told her, "Sorry."

"No, I'm doing this because I want to."

Miyuki answers, her voice revealing a bit of happiness, as she moves her hands. Perhaps having finally satisfied herself, she turned to Tatsuya again after closing the travel bag's lid.

"You can sit on the bed."

He urges Miyuki to seat herself on the bed while he is seated by the writing desk.

Miyuki, without showing any hesitation in particular, seated herself on the bed lightly.

"Well then? Don't you have something you wanted to ask?"

Tatsuya immediately drew Miyuki out while she puffed her cheeks as if a little unsatisfied. ... No, it is not like she actually puffed her cheeks, but it was to that effect more or less.

"You wouldn't come here if you didn't need anything, would you?"

"No, it's not that."

Tatsuya gives up in the face of a sulking Miyuki. Tatsuya is a person who fears neither crying children nor government authorities, but pissing off Miyuki is a different thing altogether.

"Hehe, I'm kidding."

Having been teased by her Onii-sama, Miyuki immediately cheered up.

"Besides, I also had something I wanted to ask."

“Then you should have asked that right from the start,” thought Tatsuya, but he did not actually say it of course.

“What would you like to ask?”

Instead, he asked it directly.

Miyuki also no longer trifled with her words from that point.

“Onii-sama, have you not known about the plot by the folks from the branch families?”

He entertained the thought of asking himself how he might deceive her, but it faded away as soon as Miyuki blinked her eyes.

“I have.”

Tatsuya provided the response while Miyuki was thinking of her next question.

“On the first day of the winter break, Kuroba-san came to visit FLT, right? He told me something that at the time. The content of what Kuroba-san told me is almost the same as what Yuka-san told me recently. Yuka-san also did say that her own deduction was mixed up, but I’ve been wondering if she really knew almost everything.”

“Uncle Kuroba ... well then ...”

“No.”

Having recognized that Miyuki was concerned about something, Tatsuya denied it in anticipation.

“Kuroba is not associated with this plot to obstruct your appointment. Kuroba-san has said that he would be neutral this time. I think I can believe him. Naturally, neither Fumiya nor Ayako would be our enemies.”

“I see ...”

Miyuki let out a sigh of relief but immediately raised her head and turned her unsparing eyes to Tatsuya.

“Onii-sama, why didn’t you tell me that?”

It is not that Tatsuya does not understand even Miyuki’s feelings of self-blame, but he also has a point. He never averted his eyes from his sister.

“We should remove the obstructions. The fact that you should attend the New Year’s Day’s gathering, and wondering who has been pulling the strings behind the scenes are all trifling affairs. I did not want to make you needlessly worry. Today’s incident is of simple design. There is no need to pry questions, such as where they are hiding or when they will attack. Quite simply, being able to rout the intruders should be just enough. Worrying about this and that is nothing but a loss for them, he thought.

“It is my natural right to worry about my Onii-sama!”

But that was a way of thinking that was unacceptable for Miyuki.

“Indeed, me thinking about this and that might serve us no purpose. But shouldn’t it be okay for me to worry about my Onii-sama!? Crying and getting angry for your sake is something very important to me. It’s never ‘needless’!”

Miyuki turns in a huff.

Confused about her turning away from him and unwilling to move, Tatsuya stood up and moved in front of his sister in an attempt to do something and ingratiate himself for the meantime.

“Miyuki ...”

Tatsuya’s hand missed his sister’s shoulders onto which he was trying to place his hands.

It is not that Miyuki was shaking him off.

It is just that Miyuki stood up and then suddenly hugged him.

“Onii-sama, do you remember?”

“Remember what?”

While asking her back, it was for sure that a scenery was being revived inside Tatsuya's memories.

That was the fourth day of last year's Nine Schools Competition, the night of the first day of the Newcomers' Division. Miyuki came to visit Tatsuya who was refused the registration of his own name in the index registration for "active air mine," and ...

"Since that time, my feelings have not changed at all. I am sure it will never change in the future as well."

Miyuki continues with her words as if to confirm if Tatsuya has remembered anything at all.

"I am your ally after all."

Tatsuya envisioned the scene from his heart.

"I will always be Onii-sama's ally after all."

May Tatsuya share those memories.

"That time will surely come—definitely come. That is what I'm saying."

Miyuki raises her head. Against Tatsuya's expectations, Miyuki's face was painted with a gleaming smile.

"And then, eventually that time will come. 'That time' which we have been reimagining with our memories have assumed mildly different forms, but eventually that time when you can freely spread your wings will come."

Except, clouds of darkness, as if ink falling drop by drop, can be seen in that gleaming smile of Miyuki. That was very much noticeable to Tatsuya.

◇◇◇

Maya Yotsuba, the incumbent family head of the House of Yotsuba, unwittingly let out a smile when she received from Hayama the butler news of Miyuki staying at a

villa of the Tsukuba family after being obstructed to come to the main house for two consecutive days.

“What a waste.”

Maya is not sneering at her; rather she is murmuring affectionately.

“It seems the members from the branch families have been underestimating Lord Tatsuya’s ability.”

Hearing this, Hayama the butler gives his acrimonious evaluation in a respectful tone of speech.

“This village’s ‘barrier’ won’t hold off Tatsuya-san’s ‘disintegration,’ that is why flying up the sky would be their only option if they really could not make it in time though. It would be a really serious matter if that should happen. Until the reconstruction of the barrier ‘disintegrated’ in an event of them trespassing is completed, everyone who can use consciousness inhibition magic would have to overwork themselves without sleep or rest. Reconstructing it would not be a simple task either after all.”

Maya coquettishly let out a sigh.

“That responsibility is for everyone in the branch families, who have been trying to be an impediment to my command, to bear. Won’t you understand that?”

Her face obviously showing she was being annoyed, Maya leaned toward her teacup.

“At any rate, Aoki-san and the others should have already delivered accurate information to all of the branch family heads though.”

“Yes, there is no mistaking in that.”

Hayama the butler answer such after he saw her questioning eyes as he poured decaffeinated herb tea into Maya’s cup in a reverential manner.

By the way, Hayama, Hanabishi, Aoki and Obara are all equally called “butlers” in the Yotsuba family, but the reality is it is only Hayama who falls under the category of butlers who carry out the private wishes of his master and whose words are

commands must be followed by the eight other butlers who themselves supervise the servants in each of their duties.

Now is also Maya's nighttime teatime, which is precisely why he is lightheartedly bringing up even his personal thoughts. In turn, Maya would never air such complaints to any servant besides Hayama. Conversely, it is in Maya's nature to scorn in pity all the branch family heads as if they were a monolithic bunch. No, it is in Maya's nature to scorn in pity the organization called Yotsuba itself.

"Notwithstanding, it is not a total waste either."

Hayama's statement is almost saying it should have been blatantly obvious for her, as his behavior remains totally unchanged. Even now, he is voicing his opinions to Maya reverentially. By doing such, he is placing consideration such that his master's heart is not engulfed in discontent.

"According to Hanabishi's report, they have succeeded in greatly undermining the fighting power of the anti-Ten Master Clans groups, namely the No Compromises with the Great Asian Alliance Party's remnants and the Great Asian Alliance Appeasement Party. In particular, it says they have driven the artificial psychics of Matsumoto into almost complete annihilation. The rampancy of such creatures at the Yotsuba family's front yard is no more, it reports."

"Artificial psychics and such have been a nonissue since the very start."

Maya bluntly laughed through her nose, yet there was no trace of saccharinity—unlike earlier—in her voice as much as it was instant.

"Anyway, are you done with the yearend general cleaning?"

Hayama, hinting a faint smile, nodded at Maya's asking.

"The arrangements are more or less done, but Hanabishi said they are lacking in necessary personnel as a few have gone home."

"I see. That's because even though it took us time and effort to lure him out, a portion of the fighting seems to have been essentially taken care of by Tatsuya-san alone, right?"

Maya's face showed only a little bit of surprise.

"Well, that'll do. Hayama-san, are the preparations for the New Year's done?"

"Yes, we are just waiting for Lady Miyuki to see it."

"If that's the case, then there's no need for worries."

Hayama opens his mouth hinting some hesitation on his part.

"Is it really alright for us to not stop Lord Shibata and his wife?"

Hayama knew about the Shibata family head's plan to arrest Miyuki using Katsushige Shibata and his guardian. Of course, so did Maya.

Maya laughed to her heart's content for some reason.

"They can never stop Tatsuya-san no matter how many Katsushige-sans he may throw at him."

Katsushige Shibata is, without the doubt, the owner of a top-tier ability even among the battle magicians currently under the Yotsuba family, but Maya estimates that there is zero possibility of Tatsuya falling behind Katsushige.

Maya, this time, was fantasizing of Tatsuya bringing Katsushige down.

5

December 31, morning—Tatsuya and the others departed from the villa of the Yotsuba family making it the third time they attempted to head for the Yotsuba main house.

The journey from the villa to the Yotsuba main house would be two hours long if things went swimmingly. Three hours would be enough for them to reach it even when the possibility of them slowing down due to the buildup of snow on their way.

Yuka suggested it would be alright to leave the villa after lunch, but thinking that there is for sure to be an attack today as well, Tatsuya insisted to depart as early as possible. And so it ended up like this.

Yuka was like a nocturnal person, listless as she drove the car. It felt like her body was still not fully awake. This might be why she suggested departing on the afternoon.

Even then, the sedan she was driving cleared the distance ahead of them without danger and eventually the entrance of the tunnel leading to the village where the Yotsuba's came within their reach.

The tunnel is forked inside with the route going to the village where the Yotsuba's are equipped with a mechanism that does not allow entry unless psionic (thought particle) waves of a particular waveform are irradiated at the set location. It is that an automatic gate that uses non-systematic magic as its key is erected inside the tunnel. With this, the Yotsuba family has been cut off from the outside world, at least when it comes to land transportation.

This facility is in order to conceal the location of the former Fourth Research Institute. The especially highly confidential former Fourth Research Institute was only known by its name while its location was unknown even to the top officials of the government and the army. The Yotsuba family took over this facility, and subsequently went around literally erasing the memories of the outsiders who knew about this secret thus completely hiding the location of their headquarters.

Similar gates also exist in a bunch of other places, but the only normally functioning one is this one they are heading to. For people who know about that, this vicinity would be the optimal point for staging an attack.

However, at the same time, this area has always been under the surveillance of the Yotsuba family and even attackers would need to be sufficiently prepared for that.

Yuka determined based on this that no attacks would happen past this point.

Tatsuya was, without a doubt, thinking that they would be attacked here.

The difference in their reactions was something that arose from this discrepancy.

They are now on the mountain path directly before entering the tunnel.

From its slopes comes surging a tidal wave of snow!

“Miyuki, melt the avalanche!”

Tatsuya screamed a moment faster than Yuka could notice the avalanche.

“Yes, Onii-sama!”

Miyuki responded to Tatsuya.

Yuka suddenly steps on the brake.

“Minami, a hemispherical shield!”

“Y-yes.”

The avalanche surges from the flanks onto the road.

The snow changes to water through Miyuki’s magic.

The car stops.

A hemispherical barrier is formed around the car.

A second later and it would have been too late to be activated.

A muddy stream runs down in front of the stopped car.

The avalanche was triggered such that it would not amount to a direct attack on Yuka’s car.

“Minami, cancel the shield.”

“Very well.”

Tatsuya ordered Minami to cancel her barrier magic just as the muddy stream that arose from the melted ice ran down before them.

Minami undoes her very own magic before the barrier naturally dissipates.

Tatsuya, who ordered such, and Minami, who fulfilled the order, both intensely tightened their faces.

Tatsuya gets off the car and stands in front of it.

A step behind him were Minami, Miyuki and Yuka who came out of the car in that order.

Boulders and fallen trees are scattered everywhere in front of the car. The avalanche and the muddy stream that arose from it melting were what came from the slope of the mountain. The four went very near the site of the calamity immediately afterward.

“Onii-sama, is this in the goal of getting us stranded?”

Miyuki also noticed that they had been spared from its wake of destruction. What she inquired of Tatsuya is due to her inference from that.

“No, it’s an ambush.”

But Tatsuya’s answer was a little different from Miyuki’s deduction.

“Come out, come out wherever you are!”

It was Yuka who made that yell.

“We won’t hold back if you don’t come out.”

Yuka’s pride was being rubbed the wrong way due to car she was driving having been attacked despite of the fact that this was the Yotsuba family’s stronghold.

Fretful because of the lack of response, Yuka took out a collapsible-type CAD from her handbag and opened its numeric keypad by pressing a button on its side.

Collapsible-type CADs are things that have been productized since this year. The handy devices themselves come with a keypad, while their exposed lid part serves as an alignment support antenna. They do not aim for the target with a pointed tip like pistol-types, but make use of the surface of the lid as a planar antenna oriented toward the target.

These are things that make practical use of the general-purpose CADs and the alignment support system developed two years ago in Dusseldorf; they are the FLT’s new creation. But it was the head office’s development team who created them, not the Development Third Division where Tatsuya belonged to. Tatsuya, who almost

made practical use of this technology during last year's Nine Schools Competition, only provided the knowhow for furnishing the general-purpose CAD's OS with an alignment support system. Honestly speaking, it is indistinguishable in terms of performance against ordinary general-purpose CADs, and it is in the stage where some early adopters have been delighting themselves in trying it out. But Yuka, surprisingly, seems to be a dilettante.

However, the magic she invoked was not suave despite the performance of the CAD she was using.

A "mandrake" is a type of mental interference magic—a type of magic that releases psionic (thought particle) waves, which elicit fear and bring about psychological damage, 150° to the front of the user.

What a mandrake creates are not images that bring fear; rather, it creates fear itself. It is a type of magic that does not overload one's emotions by loosening one's suppression of one's own consciousness, but rather generates the affection of fear.

Mandrakes have no lethal effects. But a person exposed to this magic will be a slave of his intense fear and his mind will be seriously debilitated regardless of his psychological endurance. Rather, the damage can be huge depending on if the person has received endurance training for his fears. Such persons will be attacked by fears they thought they have already overcome, and will usually experience panic. The target person will fall into a state of lethargy, or lose his consciousness if he is unable to bear the load. Depending on the person, deep wounds may remain in his mind.

There is also the magic called "phobos," something which holds a similar effect, but this one is a technique that uses psionic rays as its medium whereas mandrakes use psionic wave motion. Mandrakes are a type of magic that uses the psions' "sound" as its medium, so to speak.

A mandrakes is a type of magic that is conveyed not through physical sound but through the psions' (thought particles') "sound," so it cannot be prevented even by cutting off physical sound waves. But it would be a different case if the cutting off of

the sound waves were due to magic. “Cutting off the sound” means attenuating the psionic waves that propagate through a psionic area.

Just like now.

Another magic was invoked before Yuka at the same time that she was using the “mandrake:”

A “silent veil,” a type of sound wave attenuation magic.

One cannot completely defend oneself from a mandrake using a silent veil. But its effects can be weakened. In the face of a mandrake that has been weakened with a silent veil, even a magician without an aptitude for mental interference magic can defend himself by strengthening the information of his own psionic field.

“... This magic—this must be the work of Kotona-san! Your real identity has been exposed, you know. Come out and get over here!”

Except, one must understand that a mandrake must be in use beforehand in order to defend oneself in this manner. Magicians and the like who know about Yuka’s background and specialty magic and are good with silent veils—she had but one person in mind.

“And Katsushige-san, don’t you hide behind a woman! How about you come out and get over here now?”

Immediately after Yuka’s provocations, a haze of heat arose on the road right in front of her. It was not only because of the moisture that had made the road’s surface wet evaporating radiating heat; a layer of hot air was formed locally by the heating up of the pavement’s materials.

With Miyuki and Minami surprised by the sudden event, Tatsuya went through the trouble of explaining the true character of that “magic” to them so that he might calm them.

“We’re not hiding or anything.”

Afterward, a clear, low voice was heard ahead of them; Yuka then raised her eyes which had been turned toward the haze of heat. Miyuki and Minami also did the same. Only Tatsuya saw the place where a party of three people came out of the shadow of a huge boulder that had fallen onto the road.

“It just took us time to cut our way through the scattered obstructions.”

His height was 188 cm, more than a head’s worth taller than Tatsuya. His physique looked skinny, but to that extent there was completely no feeling of him being thick-headed—a frequent malaise of towering men. It was a physique that would not feel out of place even if he were to be introduced as a world-famous boxer from the heavyweight division. The real identity of that man is a one-year employee at the Ministry of Defense; the eldest son of the Shibata family, a branch family of the House of Yotsuba; one of the candidates for next Yotsuba family head; Katsushige Shibata.

“If you weren’t hiding, why weren’t you able to answer immediately?”

Yuka asks shouting seething at the thought that he is taking her for a fool.

“I meant to answer after getting nearer to a distance where I can more normally speak with you.”

Katsushige answers, commanding with his hand looking displeased the youth waiting beside him to not come out to the front.

“It is you who attacked us before giving answers. How belligerent of you as always, Yuka-san.”

Katsushige slightly shakes his head as if to say he is annoyed.

Yuka rolled her eyes at his overbearing attitude.

“Eh ... you, who were hiding behind the shadows, who fucking caused the avalanche, who devised a surprise attack against us, dare tell me that?”

“I set it to run a course such that you and your friends’ car doesn’t get caught in it. I did not intend to attack you with that avalanche.”

“That’s right!”



The youth, who has been stopped by Katsushige, interjects, unable to hold back.

“I also made sure that the phonon maser after that wouldn’t hit you! I’m not like you who seriously attacked us out of nowhere.”

Somehow it seemed that the one who fired the phonon maser earlier was this youth.

“Kanata-san, won’t you please shut up?”

Yuka pronounces her displeasure with a use of words that seems almost deliberate, to artist-esque youth. (Artist-esque being that he has the rough vibe of a musician or an illustrator. He is not even wearing his clothes properly.)

“What did you say!?”

“I am talking to Katsushige-san right now. A daughter of the Tsukuba family is talking with the heir of the Shibata family, you know. It’s not a place for some servant to be meddling in.”

“You bitch!”

“Kanata, stop.”

The one who stopped the youth named Kanata was the woman standing on Katsushige’s other side, Kotona.

“My sister ...”

The youth’s full name was Kanata Tsutsumi. He was Kotona’s younger brother, a guardian in the employ of the Shibata family serving to guard Katsushige together with his sister.

“It is the solemn truth that we are Katsushige-san’s servants. There is not one thing wrong in what Yuka-san is saying.”

“But ...”

“Don’t deliver shame to Katsushige-san.”

Kanata withdrew himself upon hearing that.

“Eh ... Katsushige-san is adored by his servants, isn’t he?”

A trace of sarcasm rises from Yuka’s tone of speech.

“It’s not just Kotona-san who adores you, is it?”

The color of Kanata’s face changed upon hearing those words—the result of Yuka meaningfully changing her tone of speech and rehashing it—even though it was supposed to be none of his business anymore.

“Ah, and to that I feel thankful.”

However, Katsushige’s not-insincere, low voice stops Kanata from going ballistic.

“I think they are indispensable subordinates. I strive to become a master worth of their service. I think I ought to be more unsentimental though, in keeping with the Yotsuba family’s conventions. In that light, I must learn from your example, Yukasan.”

Now was Yuka’s turn to have the color of her face change.

“I too am a guardian, but I shall take the honor of interrupting you here.”

It ending without Yuka’s shame getting exposed might have been due to Tatsuya butting into the conversation at the just right time.

“I don’t mind. You may be a guardian, but you are a close blood relative of the dear family head after all. I think our situations are not that much different, Tatsuya-kun.”

The generous attitude Katsushige was showing was something hard to categorize as either friendliness toward someone younger or abrasiveness toward a servant. Miyuki at the moment seemed to be having difficulties in assessing in what sort of manner she should take Katsushige’s words, but of course Tatsuya himself does not take an interest in such things.

“Thank you very much. This will soon end, so ...”

There was no change in his manner at all.

“Oh? I wonder now.”

“It is a simple request. Won’t you let us pass through here?”

As Tatsuya said it himself, his request was something straightforward.

“I see. What frankness—something I can only expect of you.”

“I am sorry for the inconvenience.”

Tatsuya responded with that single phrase without lowering or nodding his head.

He waits for Katsushige's response, without changing his manner lacking in reverence. Did Katsushige intend to emulate Tatsuya's lack of reverence, or was he avoiding going in a roundabout fashion?

"However, I cannot do that."

But a sparkle of coercion shines from Katsushige's eyes.

"Haven't I told you? Turn back right now. That way we can avoid unnecessary fighting."

Tatsuya nods without a word. But that was not something to show his obedience to Katsushige's request.

"In other words, you're saying a battle is inevitable in order for us to pass."

He gave a gesture of concurrence.

Katsushige tightened his lips. Sandwiching him are Kotona and Kanata also hinting a pallor of mental strain.

"It is as you say."

Katsushige pronounced a single phrase thus determining their situation. ... No, he did not mean to pronounce it.

"Well then, I have a suggestion."

However, there was a continuation to Tatsuya's speech.

The magic sequence that Katsushige had devised inside of him up to its final stages—what remained was simply casting it—dissipates against his will.

"Let's hear it?"

Kotona and Kanata have been vigilantly propping their fingers over their CADs. On the opposite side is Minami, ready to form a barrier whenever, her nerves stretched thin trying not to miss anything.

Between them was Tatsuya who spoke out to Katsushige facing him something not even close to anything they had expected.

“This is needless to say, but Yotsuba guardians are magicians who protect their masters and mistresses from all sorts of dangers.”

“Then?”

“I, as a Yotsuba guardian, wouldn’t want to let Miyuki stand on the site of a dangerous battle. Those two over there must be thinking of the same thing.”

“Of course!”

The one who gave an answer to Tatsuya’s question was Kotona.

“I wouldn’t want to expose Katsushige-san to danger in a family quarrel like this!”

Completely as if concerned about the person she loves, Kotona lays bare her impassioned sentiments and ...

“I think the same way as my sister.”

Her brother Kanata was also in sympathy.

Tatsuya nods with a deadpan expression.

Katsushige, who felt like he was getting entangled into a fiendish scam, says:

“... Hey, are you seriously ...”

He arrived to a certain assumption after seeing that expression of Tatsuya.

“We would like to pass through here. You don’t want us to pass through here.”

Depriving Katsushige-san the opportunity to make a speech, Tatsuya continues his.

“A battle is inevitable in order to break this stalemate. If that’s the case ...”

“Wait.”

“Why don’t we decide this with a duel between fellow guardians? Over here would be me, alone. Over there would be the two of them. Have them together. It’s fine.”

“Unacceptable!” “It’ll do!”

Katsushige and Kotona simultaneously indicated their response of unequivocal opposition.

“We have over here Minami-san, a third party, so we shall make her in charge of Miyuki and Yuka-san’s protection. I promise you: she will not take any part in this.”

Tatsuya hurriedly finished saying what he wanted to say, paying no attention to the inconsistencies of the response he made.

“Please let us do it!”

“Unacceptable! It’s too dangerous!”

Yet, it was all the same for Katsushige and the others, so they argued among themselves without ever listening to Tatsuya’s words.

“Tatsuya-kun is not the defective good everybody thinks he is! He is an opponent whom even I can’t tell I could surely win. He has been reared as a battle magician ever since he was born!”

“Am I not the third generation of the ‘Bard Series’ of augmented-type magicians created for use in battle? I am a magician whose genes have been imbued with the ability to fight before I was even born. I will never be beaten so easily whoever the opponent may be!”

“That’s not the issue here! You’re measuring Tatsuya-kun’s level with the wrong parameters! He first killed a man when he was six, immediately after the artificial magician experiments. There is no doubt about the power he holds just in the palm of his hand: he sank in a sea of blood a skilled 30-year old battle magician from the very start when they tried to kill each other, neither out of an accident or a surprise attack. He was only six then, you know? He wasn’t even in elementary school yet in that age then.”

Kotona opened her eyes speechless at the information she received from Katsushige.

It was not only her who was at a loss for words. Minami and even Miyuki had their faces grow stiff.

“Kotona, what were you doing when you were six?”

Kotona is unable to answer Katsushige’s question.

“Katsushige-san.”

The one who responded to Katsushige’s rhetoric was Tatsuya.

“Please don’t be so easy to divulge other people’s personal information.”

Katsushige turns his eyes to Tatsuya, looks at Miyuki and Minami’s faces and hints a seemingly awkward expression.

“Master, please let us handle this.”

There came butting in Kanata. He called him “master” in a pronunciation that almost made it seem like he was calling the manager of a tea house; his words served as covering fire for his sister.

“That guy sure seems to be a strong one. I get goose bumps just by looking at him. But I don’t think he is an opponent you can’t beat in a two-to-one battle.”

Katsushige frowned at Kanata’s insistence.

“Making you think that—that you can win if it’s two-to-one—is part of Tatsuya-kun’s plan.”

“Isn’t it alright even then? This will end in our victory after all.”

“However ...”

In the unguarded moment that Katsushige was searching for words to persuade him, Miyuki butted in this time:

“Katsushige Shibata-san.”

Going through the trouble of calling Katsushige by his full name, Miyuki's tone of speech was respectful and soft; it was something cold, enough to make someone's back muscles freeze.

Miyuki, who was standing beside Tatsuya, quickly turned her cheerful eyes to Katsushige.

"I was asked by my dear aunt, who is the Yotsuba family head, to attend the celebration happening on New Year's Day. In order to carry out this command, I must enter the main house before the day ends."

Her manner of narration accompanied by her beautiful modulation can also be heard as either her reciting poetry or her singing songs; it will not allow for rebuttals or even mindless backchanneling.

"Impeding my means to go there is the same as impeding my dear aunt's command. Your way of speaking and way of acting, Katsushige-san, are only a little better than rebelling against my dear aunt. That means the Shibata family has raised the standard of revolt against the main house, but that is quite obvious, isn't it?"

Katsushige could not find what to answer. He has been standing in this situation prepared that his actions would be interpreted as rebellion. But he was undefiant on the surface to the extent that he would bow his head in asset to anyone who asserted that the Shibata family harbored animosity for the main house.

Miyuki hints an angelic smile for Katsushige to see. It was not the smile that one would show to his neighbor; it was the smile a judge would show to a convict.

"But you probably also have a position to protect. That is why I will not press to my dear aunt charges against your actions, and I'm thinking of leaving this matter to my Onii-sama. If my Onii-sama should be beaten, I shall calmly pull back."

That was not a proposal but a threat. Katsushige, who predicted that he would be judged as a rebel and was supposed to have been prepared for its consequences, out of a sudden had the Shibata family as a whole taken hostage and driven to a corner.

"It's unfortunate, but we are quite running out of time. I must ask for your decision."

“... I will fight Tatsuya-kun. Will that do?”

Katsushige retorts, his voice obviously troubled.

Miyuki shook her head sideways with a seemingly sorry expression.

“I said I would be leaving this matter to my Onii-sama. What my Onii-sama wants is as you have heard just earlier.”

Katsushige is further confused and did not notice that he has been caught in the trap that is Tatsuya’s doing.

It is that Katsushige originally did not need to get confused here. He has come here determined to chase Tatsuya and the others away with all his might. He has had this conviction since the very beginning, so he does not need Miyuki’s permission to fight Tatsuya.

Yet, it is also because of Katsushige’s own half-cooked strategizing that he can no longer take things into his own hands. He has known since around the moment that Miyuki and Yuka did not calmly take a U-turn that his work for today will not end with just negotiations. At any rate, he had no choice now but to play it the hard way, so Katsushige, Kotona and Kanata ought to realize that there was no sense in arguing, conducting final consultations with each other and the like.

Because of them foolishly thinking that there is a chance for them to settle it by talking with each other, they have been forced to make the choice of saying that all-out fighting is a viable way of resolving their conflict. Unable to bear the brunt of the attack himself, he winded up exposing Kotona to danger. It would have ended if he just said the two words “I refuse,” yet he ended up being unable to say it.

He is further being driven to a corner the more that time passes; that is apparent. The situation has not changed since the beginning. ... The one who saved Katsushige ...

“I, Kotona Tsutsumi, accept Shiba Tatsuya’s challenge in Shibata Katsushige’s stead!”

... was Kotona, as expected.

“Kotona!”

Naturally, Katsushige yelled in an attempt to stop Kotona, but this time not even Kotona backed down.

“Katsushige-san, we have no other choice but this. No, this is a preferable resolution for you, Katsushige-san, who has chosen a preemptive surprise attack in order to avoid infighting in the family, because there is no event of a family head candidate getting hurt or losing his life no matter what the fight results to.”

“I can’t just let you die just because!”

“I will not so easily be outdone. I will definitely win this match.”

“Kotona ... but ...”

Kotona closes Katsushige’s mouth after seeing him so worried about herself.

“Katsushige-san, please look at Miyuki-san.”

And then, she led Katsushige’s line of sight toward Miyuki.

“Miyuki-san believes in her brother’s victory. That is why I cannot waver.”

Miyuki came into Katsushige’s field of vision; she was showing not a fragment of anxiety true to Kotona’s words.

“Katsushige-san, won’t you place your faith in me?”

Her eyes smile almost mischievously upon her peevish tone of speech. But Katsushige knew that this was Kotona bluffing—her completely acting.

Kotona comprehends the terror that is Tatsuya. During the four days leading up to her reunion with Kanata, she has discussed with Katsushige many, many times about the threat of the “disintegration” and the wonders of the “regrowth” that Tatsuya uses. She also probably realizes his abnormality as a combatant.

He is trained not to protect but to beat enemies. Tatsuya was made to receive battle training for silencing enemies using various weapons and techniques regardless of him being a magician; explaining this fact in a short amount of time in two or three sentences is impossible even for Katsushige. But Kotona should have understood that

Tatsuya is not normal even with just taking what happened earlier as one example of that.

Even then, she continues to show her bluff like so. She wishes and prays he believes her bluff.

“... I understand. I believe in you two.”

If that were the case, then he himself should respond to those feelings of hers, Katsushige thought.

“Go win, Kotona, Kanata.”

“Leave it to us!”

“Please leave it to us!”

The Tsutsumi siblings shouted so and advanced toward Tatsuya’s front.

Tatsuya makes Miyuki fall back with a wave of his hand.

Tatsuya also took a step back in conjunction with that. Perhaps to ascertain the pair’s fighting stance, he goes pushing his way through the boulders and fallen trees, which were scattered over the road, to the shoulder of the road using magic, in addition to his retreat.

Directly facing Kotona and Kanata, Tatsuya hinted seemingly sorry expression for some reason.

“... What is it?”

To Kanata’s questioning, Tatsuya responded with a voice that carried hesitation.

“I am sorry for throwing a wet blanket at this emotional occasion, but I have no intention to kill you.”

Kotona’s face turns crimson.

“T-trying to get us distracted with those lines won’t work here!”

“I don’t mean to be maneuver my way out of here in particular though.”

“Then don’t hold back! Because we’re not going to either!”

Kanata seemed to be masking his own embarrassment by snapping at Tatsuya.

From Tatsuya’s perspective, he was just willfully riling them up by willfully misunderstanding things, but he thought it unproductive to prick them and then go at great pains to explain it to them. At any rate, he has been living on getting sabotaged for the last two days. It seemed he could no longer contain his wanting to fight back the next time someone hindered them.

“By the way, will anything get started at this rate? Or would it be better if we changed location?”

Kotona takes a slight peek at her back upon Tatsuya’s questioning. It was an activity to confirm whether Katsushige was distant enough, but Kotona eventually ended up at a loss when she saw Katsushige nodding at her general direction.

“This will do.”

“Well then ...”

Kotona’s body soared high in the sky at the same time that Tatsuya said the two words.

“Kotona!”

At the front is Kanata launching an attack against Tatsuya. But Katsushige had no time to see its results through. Katsushige’s eyes were pinned upon Kotona who was shot up the sky using gravity control magic that seemed to be an adaptation of flying magic.

Katsushige extends a helping hand to Kotona who took no landing posture to soften her falling speed with the impact of suddenly flying to the skies.

He neutralizes the force of gravity acting upon her Kotona’s body using inertia control magic.

He abates her falling speed using deceleration magic.

He changes the trajectory of her fall to above himself using movement magic.

He calls out the three activation sequences with his button-operated, mobile terminal-type CAD and continuously executed them upon Kotona.

He did not execute the three types of magic as a single magic with three processes; rather, he executed them as three types of magic in a series. But he did it quickly such that the definition content of the phenomenon alteration does not contradict each other. Meanwhile, Kotona's body was safely delivered into Katsushige's arms, just as he had planned, without causing conflict or any necessary increase in the interference potential, thanks to his high alertness.

"T-thank you very much."

Caught into his embrace, Kotona mentions her gratitude to Katsushige, her face red from embarrassment as she remained in that posture.

Katsushige was hiding his real feelings of deep relief as he let Kotona down upon the road.

"Sorry, Katsushige-san. I was too focused on a "disintegration" and a direct attack ... that I ended up vulnerable against other magic."

"Take care. Tatsuya-kun has been enabled to also use magic other than "Decomposition" and "Regrowth" due to his flash cast. I've already explained this to you many times now."

"Yes ..."

"His flash cast is merely third-rate in terms of power, but its speed until invocation is the fastest even among the Yotsuba. Its power is also compensated by him repeatedly invoking the same magic many, many times in a moment's notice. You should have experienced that with your own body, right?"

"Yes."

"If you do understand, then go. Kanata is being hard pressed."

"Understood."

Katsushige subdued his feelings of to take her place, gave his attention to Kotona and sent her off.

Taking advantage that Kanata had taken notice of his sister who went up midair, Tatsuya drove his palm to Kanata's chest, just above his heart.

At the same time came virtual wave motion vibrations hitting him.

But that vibration magic was blocked by another vibration that flowed to Kanata's body before his heart could take the hit. It is that Kanata released vibration magic unto his own body to nullify the virtual wave motion vibration.

Magic is overwritten by magic holding a stronger phenomenon interference potential.

Kanata is pushed by his action while a finger on his left hand sounded off with a snap.

Tatsuya disintegrated the acoustic amplification magic before Kanata's finger snap could launch an attack against him by transforming itself into a thunderous roar.

Except, he ended up letting Kanata slip past him in that duration of time because of that reason.

“Taking me by surprise, huh? You're good!”

Kanata flourishes the revolver-shaped specialized CAD he has in his right hand and pulls the trigger a number of times.

Magic sequences producing sound appear every time he pulls the trigger unto the air.

The battery fires off directed thunderous roars that can cause temporary physical disability.

Tatsuya utterly disintegrates his “acoustic canon,” a vibration-type magic, nullifying it even before invocation.

“Ugh, is that your gram dispersion (technical disintegration)!?”

Somehow, Kanata seems to be the type of person who stutters when it comes to people fighting himself.

He might be doing that to rouse himself. Indeed, its effects of increasing one's fighting spirit is undeniable. But it was a waste of time from Tatsuya's perspective.

Tatsuya fills his whole body with psions (thought particles). He masters control of his body movement not through his nerves but through the psions.

“Well then, how about this!?”

Kanata yells as he points his CAD toward Tatsuya.

At that time, Tatsuya has already set his foot up to Kanata's breasts.

The shukuchi technique—not the “shukuchi” of hermit lore but the “shukuchi” of the martial arts.

It is one of the body manipulation techniques taught by Yakumo to Tatsuya. The name shukuchi technique is something he also heard from Yakumo; he does not know if that is really its name.

Tatsuya could not care less about historically correct names.

What is important is its effects.

Kanata opens his eyes to Tatsuya suddenly appearing in front of him without any indication of self-acceleration magic. While Kanata was unable to react, Tatsuya struck his CAD from his hand and threw a fist to the pit of his stomach. Groaning, Kanata bends his body and falls to the ground in front of him.

No vibration magic was used in combination to the attack just now. It was pure close-quarter combat; thus the vibrations Kanata set upon his own body served no use in the end. Tatsuya was trying to deliver a blow that would knock him unconscious in one strike. He was not killing him, but he seemed not to mind what sort of side effect it would leave should he fail to do so. However, it ended without him needing to kick his head like a soccer ball.

Tatsuya nullified the “acoustic bombs” which were scattered around him as he leapt back in retreat.

It was immediately after the “acoustic cannon” Kotona sent off to Katsushige were shot down one after another. There was a 30-meter distance at most between Kotona and Kanata that time.

Despite that, she ran up to him closing the distance to as much as ten meters when she saw Kanata already fallen on the surface of the road.

Kotona regretfully operated her CAD during the moments she could have called out for her brother’s name. The augmented-type Bard Series are magicians who have been made for use in battle, specializing in magic that interfere with sound waves. However, even though it is said haphazardly that they are made for use in battle, the predispositions of their magic are varied; Kotona is a battle assistance-type who specializes more on enemy detection, illusions, counter-detection and damage reduction rather than offensive magic.

The types of magic she is good at are “passive sonars,” “silent veils” and “acoustic bombs.” Even “acoustic bombs,” which are categorized as an offensive device, are assistive magic with the goal of halting an enemy rather than beating him, and her direct offensive strength is inferior to her brother’s, who is good at “acoustic cannons” and “phonon masers.”

Regardless of that fact, she quickly casted a large amount of the offensive magic she had as her brother lay unconscious before her.

Normally, both enemies and the caster would be affected if “acoustic bomb” was to be used at this distance due to the loud sound it would produce within its area of effect.

But Kotona and Kanata always strengthen the sound information in the atmospheric layer enveloping the two of them. It is to be expected of them—an information-strengthened barrier where magicians protect their own bodies from the magic of other people; it is like an eidolon skin of sorts. “Sounds” that are injurious to the physical flesh are rendered harmless through this persistent defensive magic.

It was magic that they diligently emitted based on those calculations.

However, Kotona's "acoustic bombs" were all decomposed by Tatsuya's gram dispersion even before they could materialize as sound.

"Magic targeted at 24 points all at once!?"

Kotona raises her voice in astonishment. Unable to hold back such chatter, she was supposed to immediately deploy her next activation sequence, but that might have been mere speculation from an outsider's point of view. Tatsuya's aptitude for magic nullification was genuinely beyond her greatest expectations; it was inconceivable for her that he was able to hold them back to this extent.

Tatsuya all of a sudden disappeared from Kotona's field of vision.

While he just jumped into the air diagonally in front of her, Kotona's eyes were not able to notice the movement. It was a simple jump that used acceleration magic on the very moment that he jumped. Tatsuya experienced some extra force of gravity due to the fact that he did not couple it with inertia neutralization, but it was something he was used to. More than anything, it is because he did not continuously use magic that Kotona is unable to take hold of Tatsuya's movement with both her physical eyes and her magical senses.

He changed his direction midair using acceleration magic once more.

Tatsuya's body was closing in very near Kotona that by the time she turned around she noticed the use of his magic.

Tatsuya would have kicked her by now had it been Kanata.

But he hesitated as his opponent was Kotona.

It was not as if Tatsuya had an all too sudden realization of feminism. He was concerned that he would end up killing Kotona—her body delicate as it was—if he kicked her with that amount of force.

Upon landing, Tatsuya extended his hand toward Kotona's throat and gripped it using the remaining force he still had.

With benevolent care, Tatsuya laid Kotona's defeated body onto the road.



Tatsuya laying Kotona's unconscious body on the road with "benevolent care", totally looks that way, blame the author/artist.

Kanata had recovered—if finally becoming able to move after receiving damage from Tatsuya's seiken zuki could be considered any recovery—and saw the body of his sister pinned down to the surface of the road with her neck being strangled by Tatsuya.

"Get away from my sister!"

Swiftly picking up his CAD which had fallen onto the road, Kanata launched towards Tatsuya and fired his phonon maser.

Even Tatsuya would not be able to escape unscathed if it hit him. No, it would not be too strong for a magician of Katsuto or Minami's level; top-tier magicians might be able to defend themselves with barrier magic. But it would be a fatal strike for magicians who did not create the barrier in time.

The phonon maser vanished partway through casting. It felt as if it vanished because its magic was decomposed the moment it was invoked so it ceased to be a coherent wave.

The phonon maser was supposed to hit Tatsuya dead on, but the irradiation time was too short that it would not have been able to burn through even clothing.

“Why?”

In disbelief of the fact that his own magic ended up betraying his own will and vanishing, Kanata sets his phonon maser to motion once more.

He did it for the second time, the third time, the fourth time ...

But his magic vanished into nothingness every time he fired at Tatsuya.

Tatsuya jumped again.

This time he headed for Kanata.

However, Tatsuya’s body was hit by an explosion of compressed air and was knocked down mid-air.

“Onii-chan!”

Perhaps hearing Miyuki’s voice, Tatsuya stood up immediately after he got knocked down.

“Katsushige-san, what is the meaning of this!?”

With her hand up to her chest, Miyuki raises her voice in harsh denunciation of Katsushige.

The explosion of compressed air casted was created by Katsushige.

The unfathomable speed at which Tatsuya was eliminated was the result of the magic Katsushige Shibata, candidate for next Yotsuba family head, excelled at.

Katsushige’s specialty magic is “Density Manipulation”. This type of magic is the basic form of convergence magic, but basic as it may be it also has a wide range of application. It manipulates the density of matter regardless of whether it is solid, liquid, or gas.

For example, space between particles would form upon a solid if its density were partially decreased. The avalanche earlier was something caused by him manipulating

the distributed density of the snow and successively creating spots with less snow than their surroundings. He can create a high-pressure liquid flow by manipulating the density of a liquid. He can also reverse the liquid flow to defy the force of gravity.

And then, by manipulating the density of gases, he can also create a strong gust by releasing pressurized air similar to a vacuum/suction machine.

Katsushige specializes in ordinary magic, quite unlike the Yotsuba magicians. However, he is by most definitions an excellent magician who takes pride in the wide range of situations his magic can be applied to, his high invocation speed, the huge number of invocations he can simultaneously conduct and the huge scale at which he can alter phenomena.

Upon seeing that he had been unable to keep up with the elimination of his magic sequence, Tatsuya set his decomposition to target the dynamic structures causing the fluctuation in air density.

The interference potential trying to create areas of high air density and the interference potential trying to prevent high air density both struggled for supremacy.

As a result, Katsushige's magic ended up misfiring.

“Wha—!?”

An astonished voice escaped Kanata's throat.

The difference between Katsushige and the Tsutsumi siblings was that he did not end up backing down just because the magic he was good at had been blocked.

Katsushige, now completely a part of the battle, cast his next magic to attack Tatsuya.

However, the localized, violent updraft that suddenly arose prevented Katsushige from further attacking.

The violent gust that arose against Katsushige's center of mass was the result of a magic that was invoked in the skies above him.

The wind being gusted up in a vortex right above Katsushige was being cooled by a sharp decrease in pressure as it condensed the moisture within it into fine particles.

The decrease in pressure was due to nitrogen, of which nearly 80% of air is made, simultaneously liquefying in large volumes.

It was Miyuki's "Niflheim" at a high altitude where Katsushige's interference potential could not reach.

A mist of liquefied nitrogen mixed with the vortexing airflow and developed into falling raindrops due to gravity.

A sleet poured down on Katsushige.

While ice is water crystals, these raindrops are drops of liquid nitrogen reaching -200 °C.

Katsushige casted a double-layered barrier out of material repulsion and vacuum.

The low temperature due to the evaporation of the liquid nitrogen is deadly to those under it even if they are not directly in contact with it.

Katsushige's movement stopped.

Tatsuya leaps three times.

Kanata points his pistol-type CAD toward Tatsuya, but he is unable to keep up with Tatsuya's movement who changed direction for each of the three flying kicks Tatsuya lobbed at him.

Unlike his sister Kotona, Kanata was mercilessly blown away by Tatsuya's flying kicks.

"Onii-sama, are you alright!?"

Miyuki made haste for Tatsuya as he was looking down at Kotona and Kanata lying on the road, Katsushige did not attack him.

"Are you hurt!?"

"I'm alright. I didn't receive injuries that need bandaging."

Tatsuya told Miyuki, who is worried that he might have gotten hurt when he was hit by Katsushige's first compressed air bomb. Tatsuya insisted that he was safe by hinting a faint smile.

"Thank goodness ..."

Miyuki let out a deep sigh of relief in front of Tatsuya.

Coming to her side is Minami who holds out a hand towel to Tatsuya.

"Tatsuya-nii-sama, please use this."

"Oh, thanks."

Miyuki sent a sharp glance neither to Minami nor to the white hand towel she was handing out but to Katsushige.

"Katsushige-san, I will ask you once more. What was your intention when you intervened just barely?"

Sooner than Katsushige could give an answer, Yuka denounced him relentlessly after coming to Miyuki's side.

"Katsushige-san, what you did is a despicable underhanded attack. It was not only a breach of faith when you broke our arrangement but also an underhanded attack, among other offenses. I would like you to explain your decision in this shameless act."

For some reason, Tatsuya interrupted Miyuki and Yuka's cross examination.

"Miyuki, Yuka, can't we have that conversation on another day?"

"And why is that?"

The one who inquired Tatsuya so was Katsushige who had had his mouth shut until now.

"Those two would have some lasting injuries if we left them like that, you know."

Tatsuya's answer made Katsushige even more worried now.

“There shouldn’t be any lifelong side effects for them considering the level of modern medicine and magical treatment that we have, but I think it would be better if they received immediate medical treatment.”

Tatsuya looked back at Miyuki without waiting for Katsushige’s response.

“Let’s hurry.”

Miyuki nodded without a word. She showed neither a hint of opposition to nor a fragment of dissatisfaction with her Onii-sama’s words.

Tatsuya passed the hand towel to Minami. Minami respectfully took it and casually folded it with her hands.

Tatsuya turns his eyes to Miyuki.

“Yuka-san, can I request you to drive us?”

Unlike Miyuki, Yuka knit her brows in dissatisfaction.

“Tatsuya-san, are we alright with this?”

Yuka asks as she turns her eyes in the direction of Katsushige.

Katsushige was applying medical treatment to Kotona and Kanata with a desperate expression. Even though he was attending to the two alternately and not simultaneously, it was an intense process that would have been difficult even for medical magicians. Moreover, he probably deserves high credit for not being driven by his personal feelings and for trying not to prioritize saving Kotona alone.

But even after seeing that, the unfavorable impression of what Katsushige did during the “duel” earlier did not fade one bit for Yuka.

“Even if you asked me ‘Is this alright?’ I would have no reason to blame Katsushige to begin with.”

Tatsuya’s answer was quite surprising to Yuka.

“Eh, I mean, weren’t we ambushed?”

“Katsushige’s job was to not let Yuka get past this point after all. Rather, I have thought all along that there was a high possibility that those three would come attacking us.”

Yuka looks astonished by Tatsuya’s disinterested talk.

“Is that why you threw Kotona-san in Katsushige-san’s direction?”

Tatsuya did not answer Yuka’s seemingly denouncing question.

“Besides, my goal is to make Miyuki attend the New Year’s Day gathering without incident. Considering the preparations to be done, it won’t also do to just reach the event by the end of the day. It’s that we wanted to go to the main house as early as we could.”

“I see. ... So you’re saying that everything else would be alright as long as Katsushige-san wouldn’t bother us anymore?”

Yuka once again takes a peek at Katsushige’s condition. The emergency measures for Kotona seems to be done, and she has woken up and regained her consciousness although she cannot stand yet. She was just knocked out to begin with and had no physical injuries, but they had worried that it was taking her too long to regain her consciousness. Katsushige is now squatted beside Kanata as Katsushige gives him medical attention.

“I get it. If it’s okay with you, then I don’t have any problem with it for now. Let’s get going.”

The four ride in the car before Yuka makes it dash forward.

Even when they ran past Katsushige’s side as he continued with the two’s medical treatment atop the road, Katsushige never turned his eyes toward Tatsuya and the others.

Chapter 6

Part 1

Tatsuya's group eventually reached Yotsuba's main house at 3pm.

The welcoming employees guided Yuuka to the rooms that Tsukuba-ka always used.

Minami had been instructed to go to a quadruple rooms from Tokyo. She was here as a servant rather than a guest, she might have been included for tomorrow's preparation and need to change into housekeeper's uniform now.

Tatsuya and Miyuki passed through the waiting room in the main house. It was between two Japanese-style rooms. Tatsuya was treated as Miyuki's brother rather than a servant, unlike Minami. Tatsuya felt a somewhat different attitude from the servants toward himself. However, it was not a problem that he had to catch someone to ask about. He went to the same room as Miyuki calmly.

"Excuse me"

The one who opened the sliding door to say so was Minami who wore a white apron in black long-sleeved one-piece. This outfit was the same one as when Tatsuya and Miyuki met for the first time.

"Tatsuya-sama, Miyuki-sama"

Minami bowed deeply that her forehead touched the tatami, and said so while raising her face. He called Tatsuya and Miyuki with '-sama' attached.

"Minami, can you stop that way of addressing us when you're here"

Of course, Tatsuya didn't mean for her to call 'Tatsuya-niisama' and 'Miyuki-neesama' as usual. It was ok when there were only the 3 of them, but Tatsuya was concerned that the other housekeeper seniors would stare at her strangely when she called 'Tatsuya-sama' in front of others.

"No, I've been entrusted a message from Mrs. Shirakawa to you"

Mrs. Shirakawa was a lady who oversee all the housekeepers of Yotsuba main house, the easy-to-understand words would be 'Chief Maid'. Her spouse was one of Yotsuba's Butler, the sixth in order, who was assisting Hayama in supervising all employees.

“Tatsuya-sama and Miyuki-sama, your presences are requested by the madam at 7pm in the dining room”

Minami delivered the line with lack of intonation, which ended with ‘that’s the case’, and using ‘Tatsuya-sama’ ‘Miyuki-sama’, probably imitated what Mrs. Shirakawa had said earlier to her.

Tatsuya and Miyuki held their face. As far as their memory concerned, they had never heard Mrs. Shirakawa called Tatsuya with ‘-sama’. She called him ‘Tatsuya-dono’ whenever Miyuki was around, and ‘Shiba-san’ when Tatsuya was alone.

As expected, something was changing in the Yotsuba head family. It also related to Tatsuya. It didn’t change in a way that was infavourable to the sibling, but still there was eeriness that it wasn’t their true characters.

“The madam’s dining room? Oba-sama is waiting for us? Did she really say so?”

“Yes”

However, Miyuki was worried about another point. In this case, Miyuki’s point of view was correct.

“...I guess, there is some talk in advance”

Tatsuya tried to think over Maya’s intention in a hurry.

That dining room was especially set for Maya’s private dinner. It was not her private dining room, but a place where she met important guests. Alternatively, it was a place to dine while conversing about a top secret matters.

Tomorrow’s gathering would name the next head of the family, the intended meeting had left Yotsuba-ka divided. When the invitation, no, the call was received, it certainly inferred to the even at one glance, especially with the things Kuroba Mitsugu told him.

With those reason, Miyuki could only think that they were about to talk about

tomorrow's matter when they were called to 'Madam's dining room'.

"Minami, have Fumiya and Ayako also been invited? Yuuka-san and Katsushige-san, too, are they coming?"

"Fumiya-sama and Ayako sama seemed to have arrived yesterday and stayed overnight. I did not know about Yuuka-sama and Katsushige-sama"

"I see"

It seemed like not all employees in the mansion was informed about this dinner. Those involved in serving would probably be limited also, Tatsuya guessed so.

“oniisama. A pretalk in this timing, perhaps, it’s about tomorrow’s...”

When Tatsuya was still thinking over about it, Miyuki talked to him. It was not a question, but a confirmation from her.

“Yes. Most probably, she will talk about tomorrow’s next family head matter in advance. I can’t say it for other candidate, since I’m not one, but seems like oba-ue has her own reason to keep this underwrap”

“Yuuka-san has told us that she declined the seat, but doesn’t Katsushige-san want the seat of the next family head?”

He personally volunteered to take the role of the disturbance. It was possible for Katsushige to prevent Miyuki being appointed as the next head tomorrow, as he wanted the seat for himself. Miyuki thought so.

“No, I don’t think that’s the case. If he wants the head position, he wouldn’t do something that would dirty his hands”

However, Tatsuya’s line of thought was the opposite. He guessed that Katsushige had given up on the family head position that he could do such an outrageous thing.

“Even so, we won’t know how things would go before the actual event. Anyway, Minami”

Suddenly, Tatsuya noticed something that he must confirm.

“Am I also called in that dinner?”

The message which was entrusted by Mrs. Shirakawa indicated that both Tatsuya and Miyuki were invited to the madam’s dining room.

Tatsuya had never had any meal with anyone else beside Miyuki in this mansion. Of course, he had never been invited to one in the past.

“Yes, Tatsuya-sama is to come together with Miyuki-sama”

“I understand”

Minami bowed again in prostrate pose.

“When you need something, please ring the doorbell. I will come immediately”

She said so while pointing to the hand bell placed on the table with her eyes, Minami stood up right after she finished saying this.

“Minami”

However, Tatsuya called her.

“Yes”

Minami sat on the tatami, facing Tatsuya.

Tatsuya spoke these words easily.

“I want you to ask Kuroba-dono if he could talk now. If possible, immediately, only the 2 of us.”

“I understood”

This time, minami disappeared to the other side of the sliding door. Miyuki casted a quizzical eyes to her brother at his request.

“oniisama, do you have any business with Kuroba ojisama”

“It’s nothing important. I only need to ask about some things from him”

“Is that, connected to the disturbances that we experienced this time?”

Maybe. I’m going to make sure of that too”

Miyuki hesitated was shown in her eyes, she diverted her eyes. Without seeing Tatsuya’s face, she continued her question in a little frustration.

“Why, only the 2 of you!”

“I just think that was better. It’s purely intuition”

Tatsuya did not convince her, his eyes were clouded with hesitation.

“Can’t I... come together with you?”

“Kuroba-san would probably refrain himself from telling the truth in front of Miyuki”

“He will talk if you’re alone?”

“It’s not like I trust that person. I just that he tend to use terrible words, and other ugly things that you might not be able to bear to hear, he would not hide his dislike of me, is what I said”

Miyuki hung open her mouth, but eventually shut her lips downcastedly.

Silent fell upon the two as is.

“...I understand”

The one who broke the silent this time was Miyuki.

“I’ll leave the talk with Kuroba ojisama to oniisama. In exchange, please tell me about every details that he had said to you, including all the harmful words that he had elicited”

“Understood. However, I will do so after tomorrow’s New Year’s meetin. I don’t want to burden your heart now”

“...Yes”

Perhaps, Minami had been waiting until the time where the sibling finished their talk, but she showed up immediately after.

“Excuse me, Tatsuya-sama”

“Yes, come in”

“Yes”

The same as earlier, Minami sat right after entering via the sliding door.

“Kuroba-sama said that he’s available to meet you now. The location has already been decided by him”

Miyuki who had been staring at Tatsuya worriedly was given ‘do not worry’ nod from Tasuya.

“Understood. I’ll follow his invitation”

“Then, I will guid you there”

Minami rose.

Tatsuya also rose, while nodding with a smile and said ‘it’ll be alright’ to miyuki, before turning around and following Minami.

Kuroba mitsugu was staying far from where his parents lived. She was the real sister of the former second family head, Eisaku.

In other words, the younger sister of Tatsuya's grandfather, although Tatsuya had no exchange with her. Of course, it was his first time even entering this area.

Minami led him up to the entrance leading to the lady's mansion. Thence, the next housekeeper in charge took Tatsuya to the waiting room.

Tea had been prepared in the waiting room. The housekeeper who guided him began to rise immediately, what looked like an iron kettle in her hand, with the steam in the rise, probably because it was already in preheat state. She pour hot water in the teapot on the spot before

Tatsuya. As expected, it was not Matcha ³, but Sencha ⁴, Tatsuya did not have any intention to request that, it was easier on him this way.

Although the teapot was lowered by the housekeeper, she left the iron kettle as is, Tatsuya wondered if it was for heating and humidifying. The hot kettle which had been subjected to EM heater was not boiling, the hot water vapor was gently coming out.

Kuroba Mitsugu appeared, Tatsuya drank the tea up to one third of the cup.

“Sorry for making you wait”

The housekeeper who led him replaced his tea and put a teacup in front of Mitsugu.

When Mitsugu winked, the housekeeper headed out after bowing to them.

“It’s alright. You don’t need to wait that much”

When Tatsuya said so, Mitsugu put down his teacup and nodded.

He seemed to be fairly calm, as compared to his visit to FLT the other day. Perhaps, it was due to the fact that Miyuki arrived at the main house safely, or he had decided to give up.

“Then, you said that you want to talk with me, I wonder for what?”

Hearing Mitsugu’s words, Tatsuya rounded his eyes.

“I’m here to retrieve your promise”

“Promise? Do I have one?”

“Yes”

After hearing those words, Tatsuya noticed that Mitsugu had not intention to answer him voluntarily, he had to make him talk somehow.

“The promise that you made at FLT if we managed to arrive on time”

³Matcha: type of green tea

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⁴Sencha: type of green tea

([http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCMQFjAA&url=](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCMQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FSencha&ei=txF1Vb73BYHQmgWg24GgDw&usg=AFQjCNHvvtYF0WfA Nmado2i1rnn6S6FJvA&sig2=b-NND_F5ezoWyBzys2I9IA&bvm=bv.95039771,d.dGY)

[http%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FSencha&ei=txF1Vb73BYHQmgWg24GgDw&usg=AFQjCNHvvtYF0WfA Nmado2i1rnn6S6FJvA&sig2=b-](http%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FSencha&ei=txF1Vb73BYHQmgWg24GgDw&usg=AFQjCNHvvtYF0WfA Nmado2i1rnn6S6FJvA&sig2=b-NND_F5ezoWyBzys2I9IA&bvm=bv.95039771,d.dGY)

[NND_F5ezoWyBzys2I9IA&bvm=bv.95039771,d.dGY\)](http%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FSencha&ei=txF1Vb73BYHQmgWg24GgDw&usg=AFQjCNHvvtYF0WfA Nmado2i1rnn6S6FJvA&sig2=b-NND_F5ezoWyBzys2I9IA&bvm=bv.95039771,d.dGY)

Mitsugu clicked his tongue. He seemed to regret his own carelessness, however Tatsuya did not intend to withdraw his promise out of respect for Mitsugu.

“You’ll regret to hear it”

“I’m going to regret if I leave here without listening it”

Mitsugu pulled his lips with a bitter face.

However, he opened his mouth hesitantly soon after.

“Very well. But I won’t accept any question. Even if you ask, I won’t answer”

After saying that, Mitsugu looked away.

No, his eyes were directed to Tatsuya, but the focus of his eyes were somewhere far away, no, most probably he was reminiscing an old incident.

Then, Mitsugu started his long recollection.

--- About 18 years ago.

--- We, Yotsuba clan, shook our chest in expectation of some news.

--- It was the late pregnancy of Miya-san. We gathered here quickly. We were waiting for the birth, at midnight, here in the main house.

--- Between that time and now, the memory of the tragedy which happened in 2062 was still fresh. When Maya-san was kidnapped by GAA, the memory of that abominable incident which had turned her into a human experimentation material. The price of our retaliation, was our loss of 30 people from the key members of the clan.

--- The next generation of life began to grow. Just that very fact was gratifying. Especially when Maya-san had lost her ability to bear a child, that Maya-san was very happy at the blessing that Miya-san had. Perhaps, since she was not able to have a son of her own after that tragedy, she resigned herself with the birth of her nephew, despite not directly connected by blood. Even if it was unexpected, we even thought

that we might be able to see the twin to recover their relationship. At least, we thought so.

--- We soared when we knew there was a new life dwelled within Miya's belly.

--- In response, we experimented gene manipulations by overlapping much calculation, the world's best Mental Interference magician was nurtured. The child to be born was expected to be an even greater magician.

No one doubt so.

--- However, the thing we was hoping for, was not only that.

--- The magic which Miya-san excelled at, 'Mental Structure Interference'. The magic that could remake the mental.

--- If mental structure interference was subjected to elderly, the side effect was strong. However, if the subject was underdeveloping children, the side effect might not be seen too much, and the fixing degree of the magic was also strong. Miya-san said that the ego refused interference to mental structure.

--- Then, for a foetus who had not ego and whose information was mainly undeveloped, no matter how we change the mental structure, we could shape the new born to have a similar power of mental interference. We were obsessed with such delusion by ourselves.

--- After that tragedy, we were trapped in that kind of obsession. Somehow, we wanted to create a guardian with an absolute power. To never allow the recurrence of that tragedy, to create a magician above other magicians, who transcend among other clans.

--- Even if the opponent would be the nation, or the world, he would protect us, Yotsuba clan, from unreasonable fate, the owner of absolute power. The strongest magician who has the power to destroy the world as an individual. We wanted to create such a transcendental person as a Yotsuba's magician in the future.

--- The whole family was obsessed with such superhuman desire. Yotsuba-ka as a whole had such a desire deep inside, instead of an individual sense of superhuman desire.

Mitsugu's cup was emptied. He rang the doorbell frustratedly down. The rushed housekeeper was ordered to bring a jug of water for drink instead of tea. He shut his mouth tightly until the housekeeper finished her order and exited the room.

When there were only both of them again, Mitsugu opened his mouth.

--- We visited Miya-san that late night many times, offering our sympathy, praying for the child in her belly.

--- We wanted to get stronger. To release ourselves from clutch of this outrageous and unreasonable world, strong enough to get all the feathers out of our way.

--- Then, we could protect our children with that power. Kept them away from any tragedy, an absolute specific guardian.

--- We only thought of our selfish desire without anything else, we advocated it and put them into the furnace.

--- Miya-san was laughing at our selfish wish, saying 'I also want to give birth to such child'.

--- Miya-san's mental structure interference was supposed to make up the mental of the children in her belly. That was our prayers, and it was supposed to help them.

--- Maya-san also frequently came to see Miya-san. Although Maya-san did not follow us in our prayers, her words hinted to Miya-san she seemed to remember what love was whenever she looked at Miya's belly.

Mitsugu's recollection was interrupted.

He poured water from the jug.

His hand was a little bit shaking.

He didn't really let go of his cup even after he emptied it. If you observed well, he tried to open his mouth many times, but his trembling lips forbade him to speak of good choice of words.

Even so, after he drank 2 cups of water, he somehow resumed his recollection.

--- However, that was not Miya-san's true feeling. Yet, we were not aware of that until the month of her delivery, less than a year later.

--- Miya-san's real wish was to retaliate the world. The thing she wished for was for an owner of a power which could overturn the world. To destroy the world which hurted Maya-san, and the world which hurted Miya-san.

--- Miya-san wished for an existence who could destroy any other parties, with the façade of protecting our existence, in the depths of her heart.

--- None of us realized that. We could not comprehend her suffering in being torn apart.

“Then, you were born. The baby whom Miya-san had wished for, ‘one who wield the magic to destroy the world’, that was you”

Mitsugu told so while focusing on Tatsuya's face. His mind came back to the present.

“You might ask, how could I know such thing when you were just born. However, I knew. I understood right that instant”

Mitsugu’s breathing pattern was raged badly. It was obvious tha the was in a state of excitation.

When Tatsuya was about to propose for a break, Mitsugu continued to talk as if he was possessed by something. His consciousness was flying to the past again.

--- The late family head, Yotsuba Eisaku, my uncle, had the ability to analyze the magic calculation area of others, he also could foresee the potential magic skills by psychoanalytic of the system. The magic which was used to analyze the magic calculation area that was widely used in Yotsuba, most of the magic sequence was built up by him.

--- Eisaku oji-ue analyzed the new born son of Miya-san. How much magic power dwelled within the baby, we were waiting from his words, that we even prepared to celebrate with drinks.

--- I still remembered clearly even now.

--- Oji-ue told us this.

Pic=197.jpg

He said, 'This child has a hidden power to destroy the world'.

--- He had the power to destroy all material and information body, --- He also had the power to restore all material and information body within 24 hours. As long as one did not die, he could revive him to the original.

--- That was unlike anything we wanted. However, it was not totally opposite of our hope.

--- The power to destroy all. It was not a force which could protect us from the unreasonableness of the world, but a force to destroy those unreasonableness.

--- Force to restore all. That meant one could heal all kind of injuries if he didn't manage to protect someone.

--- Moreover, an unbeatable power. It was an essential resource in order to fight the world. The power for the troops could be replenished in succession, there was no need of extra combatants.

--- We rejoiced right after we heard Eisaku oji-ue's words. We didn't know what we

hoped for. We didn't care of twisting someone's fate.

--- A demon with the power to destroy the world. That was an existence that we, Yotsuba-ka, prayed for. Our prayer that wished for the destruction of the world, the symbol of sin of Yotsuba.

--- There was no sin in the new born baby. If anything, the baby was a victim. However, we blamed everything on the baby, telling him that his birth was sinful, and bitterly astrayed.

--- The wielder of the power who could destroy the world. Magic, at times, could be affected by intense feeling. Even if it was not his own idea, this baby might really destroy the world, somewhere in the future.

--- The branch families' heads and the successor gathered to have long discussion. It lasted several days, for many nights, I could not remember now. It was probably from 3 days, to about a month. I, as the next head of Kuroba-ka, then, also participated in the discussion.

--- Then, we were thinking of a way to let the baby die... no, that was wrong. A way to kill him, to be exact.

--- All who participated in the discussion paid a visit to Eisaku-oji-ue. We reached the conclusion that we would 'kill the baby right at this moment'.

Mitsugu raised up his head who was gradually downcasted, he gazed at Tatsuya's eyes. Only tired laughed escaped his face.

"The one who submitted the idea of killing the new born baby on behalf of the branch families was my father, Kuroba Juuzo. I also failed to go against him"

Tatsuya did not say anything. As he was told that any question would not be entertained from the start. He waited in silence, for the continuation of the story. However, Mitsugu interpreted that as speechlessness and shock.

"Hahahaha... as expected, even if it's you, you still can be surprised"

Mitsugu laughed at Tatsuya's humanity – although it was only his misunderstanding.

"You were not killed because Eisaku-oji-ue rejected our proposal"

Mitsugu disappointed and dropped. He even lost the power to support his head all of a sudden, his movement was like a marionette.

--- Eisaku oji-ue told us to think about realistic response than drowning in guilt.

--- As coincidental work, we obtained a force that could destroy the world. It was a force which could be a trump of Yotsuba-ka. Eisaku oji-ue was telling us so.

--- After long awaiting, Yotsuba-ka obtained force must be crushed in the guilt of self-satisfaction which seeked to throw away their guilt and 'kill the baby'. That was oji-ue's judgement.

--- 'Tatsuya' was made to the best combat magician. He could only do 2 kinds of magic, 'decomposition' and 'regrowth', 'Tatsuya' could not wield any magic beside those two. Then, he was able to protect himself despite not having any magic even in the midst of dangerous situation, a pure combat technology. Moreover, no matter in what situation, he must not have any outburst of feeling, his feeling must be thoroughly suppressed. That was Eisaku-oji-ue, the previous family head, proposal.

“Since you were a baby, you were raised to be a warrior. As early as when you were able to stand up, you were subjected to training of optimization of the body. Oji-ue was serious. He was earnestly going to take advantage of you. The one who saved you from death was oji-ue”

Words kept flowing out of Mitsugu’s mouth. However, in that part only, he was Talking to Tatsuya rather than of the past. Mitsugu said unwittingly that they were indulgin themselves in Yotsuba Eisaku’s decision.

After he satisfied saying so, he returned to sink in his inner world.

--- You soon became able to walk, and the combat training began. No matter how he wailed, the child’s wills was ignored. As the family always resorted to locked him up, he soon gave up his rebellions. No, his rebellious feeling was confined deep in the depth of his heart. The training also advanced in the normal course pace.

--- Starting from killing a wild animal instead of military grade dog, then military strengthened animal, and a living soldier training partner took in place.

“After Eisaku oji-ue passed away, Maya-san took over the sead of family head. Then, Maya-san and Miya-san made you into a subject of man-made magician experiment after a while. You are a successful examples of a splendid man-made magician, then you became Miyuki’s guardian.”

Mitsugu finally raised his face, and began normal conversation.

“However, the combat training was still continued. It was quite excessive for your growing period, until it was determined that your training prevented the growth of your body”

“I also remembered the rest from that period”

Actually, he also had the memory in store before the artificial maigican experiment,

but Tatsuya was unable to realize himself. The memory before that experiment seemed like watching movie-like experiences.

“Well, of course. Since you were 6 y.o. then”

Mitsugu’s voice faded. As he recalled, he was drinking half of the water in the cup after he poured it from the jug.

“Even after Eisaku-oji-ue passed away, your training continued on. Miya was not against it. It was a given. Miya had her reasons to keep you alive. She wanted to get revenge someday”

Mitsugu drank the remaining water in the cup at once.

“You, you are Miya-san’s, weapon against the world. Without understanding the anger and sorrow of one woman’s hatred against the world, we, Yotsuba-ka conveniently and innocently wanted a transcendental being, the symbol of our sin”

It was as if, Mitsugu was singing. Curse yourself, Tatsuya, you were an abominable cursed existence.

“We knew these and wouldn’t want you to be in the centre of Yotsuba. Not to give you the power of Yotsuba, also to pulled you away from JSDF. We just don’t want to repeat our sin anymore”

As he finished saying so, Mitsugu did not show any further sign of opening his mouth. Tatsuya understood that Mitsugu had finished telling his story.

“I understood well”

“If that’s the case, declind the guardianship of Miyuki now. I’m sure she would hear this from you anyway”

Tatsuya shook his head and smiled in a sneer.

“The one I understood was the motive behind your hard to understand behavior, it was a centimeter barrel of guilt”

“What!”

Mitsugu stood up by hitting one of the armrest of the sofa.

Tatsuya stood up at the same time.

In Mitsugu’s sight, there was not a single gap left open which allowed him to kill Tatsuya.

In Tatsuyas’ sight, he could see a number of chance to take Mitsugu’s life.

“As you’ve promised, you’ve told me the things that I want to know. I will now excuse myself, is that fine with you?”

“...go back. I have no use of you either”

Mitsugu rang the hand bell.

The housekeeper who guided Tatsuya at first had showed up again.

Mitsugu ordered her to guide Tatsuya to the entrance door.

[Part 2](#)

It was 6:50 p.m, Tatsuya and Miyuki were guided to the madam's dining room. Minami was the one who guided them.

Minami was seemed to be attached as the servant by their side even during the dinner.

When the sibling arrived, Fumiya, Ayako, Yuuka had been seated. Miyuki was seated in front of Fumiya, and Tatsuya was seating beside her and in front of Ayako. Next to Miyuki was the seat prepared for Maya. It was obviously the second seat of honour.

One minute before 7pm, Shibata Katsushige appeared in the dining room. As Tatsuya thought, all of the next family head candidates were gathered in this place. Yet, it sill escaped his mind that he was invited to this place as well. Ayako was here not as Fumiya's escort, but as Fumiya's partner, as she was seated beside Fumiya. However, Yotsuba-ka defined Tatsuya's position as an escort of Miyuki, only as her guardian.

Katsushige was also alone here. Needless to say about Kanata, even Kotona did not accompany him here.

However, Tatsuya was invited to this place by himself. Miyuki, was a given, but even Fumiya, Ayako, Yuuka and even Katsushige did not raise any question that Tatsuya was together with them.

In this case, Tatsuya had underestimated himself. He was also underestimating the magician who gathered in this table.

The 5 people beside Tatsuya, acknowledge tha he was comparable to themselves, or at least, they had recognized Tatsuya as someone stronger than themselves. For them, Tatsuya deserved the seat he was sitting on. Tatsuya did not know that they had much that amount of thought for him. Therefore, there was no need to feel, any uncomfortable feeling that Tatsuya recalled by himself.

The time was 7 o'clock.

The dining room door was open. It was a door reserved for Yotsuba-ka's family head.

From the door, Maya appeared in a dark crimson, near to black, long dress, followed by Hayama.

Everybody rose. Tatsuya rose from his chair by himself, the other five was helped by the men and women who served them from behind. Miyuki's chair, needless to say, was helped by Minami.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming despite the sudden invitation. Please sit down” Then, Maya sat down gracefully to the chair that Hayama drew.

Maya confirmed that everyone was present in front of the table calmly, there were 6 of them. “First, let’s have our meal. Katsushige-san, Yuuka-san, if you wish, we have sake for a drink” Yuuka and Katsushige crossed their line of sight for a moment.

“Sorry to reject your precious offer. However, I’m not much of a drinker”

The one who answered first was Yuuka.

“Ah, that’s right, Yuuka-san is not too strong with liquor” Maya generously nodded while laughing.

“Yes, I’m afraid so”

Yuuka answered so with a diplomatic attitude.

“How about you, Katsushige-san? I heard that you’re quite a strong drinker” Maya turned her eyes to Katsushige.

Katsushige returned by bowing properly.

“I only look strong on the spot.. actually, I’m the type who’d have a terrible hangover. That’s why, I’m sorry toushu ⁵-sama. We have important meeting tomorrow, please allow me to refrain myself from indulging in your proposal”

Katushige bowed deeper this time.

“Ah, you don’t have to be so formal. I have no such bad taste as to force you to drink”

Maya rose her hand lightly while smiling and laughing, she signaled Hayama at her back.

After Hayama wink, the servants simultaneously retreated, and came back

immediately with appetizers.

“As tomorrow’s New Year’s Meeting is Japanese style, I tried to arrange Western-style cuisine course for tonight. Please enjoy”

Maya put her knife to the terrine appetizer, and carried it to her vivid red lips.

⁵ Toushu: family head (I don’t change this, since it was used as an honorific to address Maya)

Everyone took their knives and forks, the dinner began.

The dishes took appearance of of French cuisind, however, it was not French in itself. Around this time, it was seen that Maya did not required the dist to be strictly formal. For instance, when it was time for fish dishes to come out, a duck cuisine came out instead.

Around the time they had finished eating and the sherbet was supposed to come out, Maya corrected her seating posture.

Naturally, Tatsuya also corrected his posture to sit up straight again.

“Then, let’s soon get iinto our main issue”

Maya smiled with natural look to the 6 of them in her surrounding.

“Katsushige-san, Yuuka-san, Miyuki-san, Fumiya-san”

Four person, excluding Tatsuya and Ayako, were refered in the order of age. The 4 of Yotsuba-ka’s next family head candidates.

“You’re the only 4 remaining candidates for Yotsuba-ka next family head candidates. At last, I will name the next family head in the New Year’s Meeitn tomorrow.

Together with the 4 candidates, the 6 of them, including Tatsuya and Ayako gathered with Maya here. All of the employees except Hayama, had somehow disappeared from the dining room.

“I arrive to a conclusion that it would not suit your feelings well if you’re told the result suddenly. Therefore, I plan to tell to everyone here who is chosen as the next family head in advance”

Miyuki was the most nervous after hearing Maya’s words. For some reason, Katsushige, Yuuka, and even Fumiya and Ayako looked composed.

“Toushu-sama. Can you excuse me for a short remark please?”

“Oh, Fumiya-san. I wonder what is it?”

It was surprising for Fumiya to block Maya's from telling the result.

“Pardon my rudeness”

He bowed and rose in tension in his look.

“Forgive me, but, I, Kuroba Fumiya, the candidate from Kuroba-ka is formally giving up on the position of the next family head. I'm supporting Shiba Miyuki-san as the next family head”

Fumiya bowed at Maya and returned to his seat.

“Hmmm.. how interesting”

He responded to Maya’s words that she already decided the next family head, by giving up on his candidacy. In a sense, it was a revolt against Maya.

However, Maya was not going to blame him out of this. A great interest gaze fell upon Fumiya who dared to tell his decision in this timing.

“Toushu-sama. Would you please let me speak as well?”

“Yuuka-san, perhaps, you too?”

Maya was laughing at her request.

“Yes”

Yuuka rose and bowed in pompous gesture.

“Tsukuba-ka also supports the nomination of Shiba Miyuki-san as the next family head”

After Yuuka returned to her seat with a bow, Maya raised a laugh happily.

“You guys, do you perhaps think that ‘the head of this family must not be allowed to determine the next family head at her own discession’ or something?”

She wiped her tears in the corner of her eyes with a handkerchief and looked alternately to Fumiya and Yuuka with a funny face.

“No, I do not have such intention”

“Toushu-sama, please pardon my rudeness to interject from the side. The one who thought that Miyuki-oneesama is suitable as the next head was me and Fumiya. Father eventually also respects Fumiya’s intention and agrees to give up his status as a candidate. There was not any intention to object the decision of toushuu-sama”

After Fumiya’s answer, Ayako mentioned their real intention at last.

Hearing her explanation, she lifted the ends of her lip in joy.

“I see... in other words, Kuroba-ka has decided to wholly support Miyuki as the next family head in the past few days preceding the New Year’s Meeting tomorrow?”

The one who answered Maya was Fumiya

“Yes, we have not different opinion.”

“Fufufu.. Fumiya-san, you’re a good son”

Fumiya had confirmed the intention of Mitsugu behind this blatantly to Maya. He wished for Miyuki's appointment as the next family head to be delayed, the plot of the branch families to prevent Miyuki from attending the New Year's Meeting had failed. Kuroba-ka did not make a direct effort that could categorize him as the interloper camp for sure.

This step was probably an initiative to cheat his way out of the revolt camp. Actually, Maya herself had no intention to blame the branch families who were involved in the sabotage – as she knew that it would be laid in vain eventually – he did not need to resort to such trick.

“Why does Tsukuba-ka decide to give up the candidacy in this kind of timing?”

In the eyes of Maya, Yuuka's behavior was somewhat brazen.

“Because toshu-sama, even when I see the current situation, there isn't any opportunity for lie, right?”

“And it's the right opportunity to sell yourself to Miyuki?”

“Honestly speaking, we are. Tsukuba-ka wants a track record that quickly supports the next family head. Frankly speaking, our rank is falling behind Kuroba-ka and Shibata-ka in terms of blood ability”

In this openly frank declaration, even Maya did not fail to grin.

“Not, the ability of a family does not lie in the direct combat ability only but... Tsukuba-ka's intention was well founded. Miyuki-san, seemed like Yuuka-san is in favour of you”

Although Miyuki seemed to be a little surprised in the sudden swing of talk, she did not show any upset expression.

“The current me, is only speaking as my capacity as the next family head candidate... However, I agree with oba-ue that a magician cannot be valued solely by his combat force only”

Maya nodded to miyuki as if saying 'well said'.

“Then, Katsushige-san”

She, then, turned to Katsushige.

“Before I even tell my resolve, the situation has been developed by the majority of voice here... perhaps, it is as you have been thinking too”

Katsushige did not rise, he changed the direction of his body while remaining seated straightly in the chair.

“Toushu-sama. Shibata-ka has no objection against the nomination of Shiba Miyuki as the next family head as been supported by Kuroba-ka and Tsukuba-ka. This decision has been confirmed by the head, as well as the members of Shibata-ka”

“I see. So it’s a family decision”

“Yes”

Katsushige nodded without showing a hint of action that he was the one who obstructed Miyuki’s path in his mouth. With his dignified attitude, even Maya could not keep pursuing to ask him in person.

“However, upon giving up the position of the next family head candidacy, we have a request for toushu-sama”

“A deal, is it?”

Maya narrowed her eyes. Sharp, did not result in passing him, but certainly could not be described as a pleasant feeling. Probably, even thinking that it was good enough for her not to bring up the disturbance incident, yet you have the impudence to do this.

“No. It’s a request. Not a deal”

However, after Katsushige denied her flatly, Maya changed her look as ‘oh?’ kind of feeling.

“Since I have nothing in my hands to be held against the next family head, it couldn’t be said as a deal”

“How manly of you. Very well, please try to state your request. Katsushige-san, what do you want?”

I, Shibata Katsushige, wish for your acceptance to marry Tsutsumi Kotona”

Even Yuuka choked her water flashily and opened her mouth.

Fumiya with his thin skin was blushing. The stimulus was too strong for him.

“Tsutsumi Kotona-san.... She is your guardian right?”

“Yes”

Maya showed an expression that she was thinking for a while.

“If I’m not mistaken she is a modified body, second generation of ‘Bard Series’. ‘Bard Series’ has somewhat unsatisfactory genes which aren’t stable, not really suitable for the lawful wife of a branch family head”

“My father also said this”

“How about being your mistress?”

Maya’s words landed a major damage to Fumiya, as he was sandwiched between the 2 of them. His head down and his face was truly red. On the other hand, Ayako who sat beside him was listening with a straight face, this was probably caused due to gender or different personality rather than his age.

“You are in relationship even as we speak right?”

“So you were informed?”

Katsushige did not bad mouth Maya, it was a positive question for her.

“The thing is... Guardian is supposed to be your escort for someone who has a dignified, excellent magic qualities within the clan, that’s one of the reason of making her a woman. Yet, even after she was placed as Katsushige-san’s guardian, is that an excuse to keep Tsutsumi Kotona-san by your side?”

“She doesn’t only have that”

Katsushige was trying to appeal the usefulness of Kotona’s magi force, but he immediately said ‘no, that’s right’ to Maya. Indeed, his main reason was to keep Kotona by his side, he didn’t think that keeping current status quo would be a good idea.

“That’s right...”

Mayo pressed one of her hand to her cheek, as if she was troubled. Although it was quite a tall figure, all of the humans in this room did not really get the feeling that she was truly troubled.

“I don’t want to tear lover apart from their loved ones”

Maya somehow, was staring at Miyuki.

“Just because she was modified body, it will not necessarily end in her premature death”

Maya returned her gaze immediately to Katsushige.

Miyuki noticed that Maya was staring at herself, and she had no idea of the reason. Although she considered that Minami had spied on her and told her aunt, she didn't really voice out what was on her head. Miyuki recalled the time when she was frustrated with her worries, but it was impossible to ask the meaning of Maya's earlier gaze.

Without being aware of miyuki's feeling, Maya stared at Katsushige. Then, he answered the nervous Katsushige with a smile.

“Very well. I have no intention to forbid the branch family head to choose his marriage partner out of his own feeling”

Miyuki’s body was trembling. Tatsuya looked at her anxiously, while Miyuki raised her hand to indicate that she was ok and settled herself.

Maya glanced at Miyuki from the side and returned to her conversation with Katsushige.

“As a head of branch family, you don’t need to think that much. Katsushige-san has agreed to let go the position fo family head, I’ll help you to talk to Satoru-san”

“Thank you very much”

Katsushige rose and lowered his head deeply.

When Katsushige looked up, Maya instructed him to return to his seat with a gesture. She sighed soon after.

“Somehow, I have no need to say this anymore...”

Maya retightened her relaxed look.

“Miyuki-san, you will be the next famil head”

Pic=216.jpg

“Yes”

Miyuki responded the nomination with a hard voice.

“Fortunately, all who are here have willingly given you their support, that’s not to be ashamed, it is a good encouragement”

“Yes oba-sama. I will take to heart”

Miyuki rose, at first, bowing to Maya, then carefully bowed to everyone surrounding the table.

– She was seen to especially bow to Katsushige, due to the sitting arrangement, it

might have been a bad chance of event for both.

“Then, let’s resume our meal”

When Maya said so, Hayama struck his hands twice.

Main – although it was incorrect to strictly say that – meat dishes were carried in. After the free meals were over, Maya ordered only Tatsuya and miyuki to remain in the room.

Part 3

After everyone left, the table was being re-set. A cup of straight tea was served for Maya, while Tatsuya got a cup of coffee and Miyuki was served milk coffee in front of her.

All of the employees left, including Hayama.

Maya put her cup in her mouth, she spoke to the 2 of them with a smile in her face.

“Miyuki-san, first of all, congratulations. Tatsuya-san, too, it was quite a hard work right?”

“Thank you very much, oba-ue”

“Sorry for making you worry”

Tatsuya and Miyuki bowed on top of the chair together. The 2 had yet to take their cup yet.

“Then... I’ve asked the 2 of you to remain here, as I want to tell you a very important thing”

Miyuki tightened herself, and it was seen by Tatsuya who sat next to her.

“As a head of the family, your marriage partner would not be at your own discretion. I have talked to you about this earlier as well”

“... Yes”

Miyuki held both of her hands in her lap

“Before that... Tatsuya-san”

“Yes”

Suddenly, Maya called Tatsuya. As Tatsuya was not prepared to be called in this talk, he involuntarily answered in reflex while still being puzzled.

“You might not believe when I tell you so suddenly like this, but... Miyuki-san is not your real sister”

A sharp breath was exclaimed from Miyuki’s throat. It was a scream that Miyuki couldn’t voice out.

Miyuki placed her hands in front of her mouth while keeping her eyes wide open, she was solidified like a marble statue.

To say that her current expression was 'frozen' was not appropriate. She certainly had stopped working, but the flame in her eyes swirled and her complexion had changed its color.

Compared to Miyuki, Tatsuya looked less upset. However, it was simply due to the fact that the news had exceeded the limit of what his feeling could process. He was in the shock that could not be cured by himself, as Maya as a third party, who brought the news was not connected to his own.

"Certainly, I cannot believe. Because, there are mountain of evidence that Miyuki and I are real sibling"

Maya still could afford a smile while facing Tatsuya's eyes who gradually lose its emotion.

"Yet, it is the truth. Because, Tatsuya-san"

"You are my son after all"

The impact of this statement, as expected, even Tatsuya would be at loss for words.

"Tatsuya-san, you were an artificial insemination from my egg that had been frozen before 'that incident', you were born from my sister as the surrogate mother of my son. Your father, of course, is not Taturou-san either. That's why, Miyuki-san is your cousin"

--- Impossible.

After Tatsuya regained his mind, the first words which floated in his mind was these.

--- It's impossible for Miyuki to be my cousin.

--- It's impossible for Miyuki not to be my real sister.

Tatsuya was ashamed that he was doubting and was swiped off by such understanding.

Of course, he did not voice out those thought out of his heart, he would not be

careless to do so.

“... Would you mind to tell me the details later?”

Maya accepted Tatsuya’s proposal, completely in the usual tone.

“You’re right. It’s hard to suddenly convince you even after I said all this, let’s have a nice parent-child talk by ourself after this”

Maya turned her eyes to miyuki after she answered Tatsuya with a nod.

“Then, about our earlier talk... Miyuki-san, I’m sorry but as the next head of Yotsuba-ka, you have to give up on your free love choice”

“Yes”

Although Miyuki’s expression was stiff, yet the voice of hope, ‘perhaps?’, had slipped from her. The reason why she clenched her hands at the back of her knees was not to prepare for the grief, but not to jerk when the likely delight in her premonition of convenient came into reality.

“Tomorrow, I will announce you fiancé at the same time as the next family head nomination, your partner is”

Miyuki gasped a little. Even though it was only ‘a little’, she had almost stopped breathing.

“Tatsuya-san”

Miyuki placed her hands in front of her mouth.

Those hands were visibly trembling.

Somehow, Miyuki restrained that scream by moving her hand that was blocking her mouth to her chest.

She held them both on top of her heart, and blinked tightly before looking down as if embracing her body to withstand the pain.

Miyuki was experiencing ‘my chest was about to break apart’ in reality now.

However, it was in joy rather than sorrow. She rejoiced too strong that it was similar to a strong pain.

She was so happy, so happy, that she needed to calm her body which was in a heightened excitement like a madman somehow, Miyuki looked up.

Her eyes were filled with tears, she had an expression that ready to cry.

Maya took the blame after seeing such a distraughted Miyuki.

“Tatsuya-san, please attend tomorrow’s meeting as you will be named as Miyuki’s

fiancé. This is all I want to talk about”

Miyuki lowered her head deeply, her hands were aligned to her knees, and tears started to drip.

“Miyuki-san, tomorrow is the recital for your engagement. It’s a great stage for you, please prepare and polish yourself well tonight”

“I’m thankful for your heartfelt thought...”

The sound of sobbing and her tremor were reduced, Miyuki answered Maya while still lowering her head. Maya’s figure was like an affectionate mother, wearing a permissive expression – however, a disproportionate cold light could be seen in her eyes — stare.

“Hayama-san”

“Yes, my lady/madam”

Hayama showed up immediately at her call.

By the time he appeared, Tatsuya had wiped Miyuki’s tears with a handkerchief.

“Please call Minami-chan. Let her do some arrangement for Miyuki-san’s bath”

“Understood”

Minami came immediately.

Maya gave a direct order to Minami, she kept alert on those orders.

“Minami-chan, take Miyuki to her room. Then, please call her out when you have prepared the bath, guide her way”

“Understood”

Minami led Miyuki to the guest room.

Maya faced Tatsuya.

“Should we change the place?”

“Yes”

Maya rose.

Hayama opened the door.

Tatsuya followed after Maya.

Hayama reverently bowed to Tatsuya. It was the biggest change he had seen thus far in this place.

Part 4

They were heading to Maya's study. It was Tatsuya's first time to enter this room. No, there were no other human had stepped into this room beside Maya and Hayama, and few maintenance technicians of furniture and HAR. It could be said that Tatsuya was the second person she had ever allowed to enter this room.

Inside the room, there were a huge desk with a high chair with backrest, bookshelf to the ceiling, and a vintage reception set.

Hayama recommended Tatsuya to sit down on the sofa. Maya sat opposite to him, and asked him with a voice of a parent to Tatsuya who was looking around the room.

“Tatsuya-san, what are you looking at?”

“Excuse me. I just realized that the room where you always call Miyuki from was not your study”

“You surely notice about strange things”

Maya laughter was glazed like a young girl.

“This is my completely private space. Even the HAR is stand alone unit”

“A completely offline environment”

“Yes”

Maya’s answer was not true. This room was equipped with a single network. However, it was not a complete lie either, because that line was only operatig from a specific device to deliver its search key data, completely independent of other devices, half of what she said was a fact.

“Tatsuya-sama, do you mind with black coffee?”

Tatsuya could never remember an instance where Hayama called him with ‘-sama’. He must not mind about that now.

“Yes, black please”

Tatsuya answered him in a natural tone as much as possible.

He placed a coffee in front of Tatsuya and a herbal tea before Maya.

Tatsuya had a little concern whether the smell of coffee would cancel the scent of

the herb tea, but he didn't particularly say anything as he was not worried about it. He waited for Maya to put the cup in her mouth, before taking a sip of his coffee.

The coffee, much to Tatsuya's regret, was more delicious than Miyuki's coffee.

"It's delicious... Although this might sound rude, but as expected of Hayama-san"

"I'm honored for your compliment, Tatsuya-sama. I have a little trick up on my sleeve"

"Trick, is it?"

“Yes. It’s a shame, but I did it with a little help of magic”

Maya revealed a happy voice in her surprise that he was willing to reveal that to Tatsuya.

“To be able to use such a delicate magic, even I am no match to Hayama-san. Truly, it’s the way of using magic that is important”

“No, it’s not something to be exaggerated. I just simply doing what I can according to my ability”

Hayama’s remark had invited Tatsuya to a deep thought. However, Tatsuya cut off that temptation and turned his attention to Maya.

Maya too, must have been waiting to discuss the main issue. She placed her cup in the saucer, and gazed at Tatsuya’s eyes.

“Well, then... I wonder what should we start with?”

“Before that, do you mind?”

Tatsuya halted the conversation.

Maya seemed to know what he was expecting.

“Oh, what is it?”

Maya placed one of her hand to cover her mouth, she showed a light surprised look in her eyes. However, she was not seriously playing dumb. The evidence was she could not hide that the ends of her lip was slightly indented upward. Though it didn’t mean that Maya had a big mouth. However, she purposely smiled right before she hid her mouth with her hand.

“Why did you tell such a lie!”

Tatsuya narrowed his eyes, not because he was amazed by Maya’s attitude and childishness.

However, the nature of his eyes were already sharp.

“A lie?”

Maya’s tone was fakely naive, but Tatsuya did not show any anger or frustration.

However he did not allow any more spurious, so he put that sharp look.

“The lie that Miyuki is not my real sister”

Tatsuya declared so with a tone that might be expressed as rather gentle. He felt that ther was no need to raoise his voice, as the one he was stating was a fact.

“no, it was not a lie”

However, Maya denied that fact.

She denied it with a gentle tone, similar with Tatsuya’s.

Tatsuya could not understand why Maya was so confident, this was reflected in his stare upon the face of his aunt.

Maya sipped the herbal tea leisurely.

“You said that there are mountains of evidences that both of you are real sibling, but can you really call them as evidence?”

She put down her cup and gazed at Tatsuya’s eyes with an up-from-under look. Maya asked several question while retaining that posture.

Maya did not laugh out loud, but smiled with a joyful smile. A delightful light was dancing flashily around her eyes.

“Family registration? We don’t really care about such thing, do we? DNA make up? That’s also a result that hospital sent right? It’s not like Tatsuya-san’s own examination”

Maya’s lip was distorted to a clean crescent-shape.

“The head of branch families only knew about nee-san’s pregnancy. Even they did not know anything that happened before her pregnancy, you know?”

Maya’s words stirred up his suspicion. Even for Tatsuya, it was irrefutable”

“oba-ue”

However, Tatsuya’s voice was not upset.

The unwavering voice struck Maya like a liquid iron, which erased the smile on her face.

“Who do you think I am?”

This time, it was Tatsuya's turn to stare at Maya in silent.

"I can recognize the structure and components of material; it is one of the ability to decompose the material into any phase of configuration. I can recognize the substance of components too, it also means that I can know the based substance which create something"

"I thought your information analysis is limited to 24 hours of retrospective"

“Those information of the components is currently located in the present. There isn't any need for retrospective in time”

Maya's and Hayama's expression were consistently 'unexpected', but their feeling based on different reason. Maya wore a 'damn' face, while Hayama's shock was only a simple shock on his face.

“That's why I know. Miyuki and I have an exact same base of body. I can clearly see that both of our body were formed by the same source of sperm from the same man and eggs of the same woman.”

“Oh my...”

Maya's tone was one of saying 'I surrender'.

“You are really set apart from human”

“I'm afraid so”

“I don't mean to praise you though...”

Maya smiled with a hint of embarrassment, she dropped her eyes to the tea cup. Yet, she didn't reach out for the cup, and returned her gaze to Tatsuya by raising her face.

“Very well. I'll admit it”

“Certainly, the thing I've said just now was a lie”

“You were not born from my egg, but truly nee-san's child”

... Tatsuya sighed lightly at the unapologetic confession from maya.

“The, why did you say such thing?”

“However, it was not completely wrong that you and Miyuki are not real sibling”

Although Maya's word did not answer Tatsuya's question, Tatsuya also did not miss a single word. He was calm as to wait for the continuation of Maya's explanations.

“Because, miyuki-san is a modified body”

Tatsuya opened his eyes widely. He stopped breathing and could not speak of a word immediately/

“...Miyuki was genetically engineered? But there are no signs”

“Yet, it’s the truth. Miyuki-san was made to nullify the distortion, to stabilize the instability, she can be said as a ‘perfect modified body’, the best masterpiece of Yotsuba”

“Why...”

“Why did we made miyuki-san? It’s for you, Tatsuya-san”

Tatsuya was completely speechless. It was probably impossible, but had his heart received more shock, his consciousness would probably be bleached.

“Your power is something that must not be allowed to be activated in an outburst at any circumstances. Although it’s a perfect strength for the case of emergency, it must be stopped before it deprives you from life. It was possible for nee-san to do so. Her Mental Structure Interference can force herway to interfere with the unconscious area of the opponent by closing the ‘Gate’ temporarily. However, nee-san will die before you for sure. That’s why, it was necessary to create a magician who will always be at yourside, Miyuki was created to stop you”

Maya had a serious look so much that it was scary, she stared at Tatsuya’s eyes.

“Miyuki is a modified body who was created in order to stop you”

“Miyuki, for me? Not me, for miyuki?”

Tatsuya was stunned dazzlingly. He was not even aware in the irrationality of his own words.

“That’s right. Miyuki-san was a girl born only for you”

Maya softened her look and tone.

“In the first place, how could someone be born to be so beautiful naturally? With such a perfect appearance, completely symmetrical body, there’s no way someone like that is born naturally”

Perhaps, Maya noticed the jealousy mixed in her voice, she wore an uncomfortable smile.

“Although I don’t think that we would be successfully recreate a child like Miyuki-san even if we repeat the same procedure in making her. In that sense, she exceeds the

nature of human, perhaps, even a God-like miraculous beauty.

“Does Miyuki know about this?”

Maya shook her head while smiling mercifully to Tatsuya’s question.

“No. I don’t want to let Miyuki-san know, and not a single head of branch families knows either. The only ones who know about this was the late previous family head, Eisaku-ojisama, my late neesan, me, Hayama-san, and the former head who oversaw the modifying facility, Kurebayashi-san and his few of confidants.... Hey, Tatsuya-san”

Maya tried to fix Tatsuya’s mood, she talked with a sweet voice.

“The bond between you and Miyuki-san is stronger than parent and child, strictly speaking for genetic point of view, the genetic relationship between you and me is much closer than you and Miyuki-san”

Maya graced Tatsuya with such words with such a sweet voice.

“Moreover, the fact that you are my son might not be a complete fault”

“But”

Tatsuya’s rebuttal was interrupted by a honey like voice that seemed to wrap him around.

“Certainly, we are nephew and aunt genetically. But psychologically speaking, you are my son, Tatsuya-san”

“Psychologically?”

Tatsuya could not understand Maya’s words, so he decided to listen further in silence.

“Originally, all of the ojisama and also Mitsugu’s generation were disappointed and feared your power. However, I was happy. I was cheering to the point that I want to dance out of joy. Because, your magic is the key that can fulfill my wish”

She probably was recalling of that time, Maya looked like she was about to tremble out of her ecstatic expression.

“Your magic, is the star of death that will change the world. I can retaliate against the world. The world who had took my past and my future, and torn away my modest happiness as a woman in a cruel way”

The sweetness in Maya’s voice, had been contaminated with a curse, her grudge against the world.

“That’s why, it was no lie when I said I’m your parent. Because, the one who wished for your birth was not neesan. You were born to this world to my desire. Mitsugu-san and the other were mistaken about that. The one who wished for the world’s

destruction is me, it's my prayer. You were born in answer to my feelings. You're biologically neesan's son, but the one who wished you as the magician you are, was me. That's why, as a magician, you are my son"

"However, oba-ue is not supposed to be able to use mental interference magic"

The words of objection barely slipped from Tatsuya, which also was not able to halt Maya.

"Yes, you're right. That's why it was a miracle. My strong wish had overturned magic and caused an out of place event. Perhaps, due to the fact that we're twins. Neesan is my twin after all, perhaps, her magic was moved due to my will. The feelings for my sister's son, as my strong prayer dedicated to you, I wonder if neesan's magic realized about my wish"

Maya spoke enthusiastically. No, she was feverish.

“Neesan knew that. That the magic of his baby, had been quietly taken over by me. Neesan had deprived me from myself, and I deprived her son from her. What a terrible sisters”

She was not snorting, but voicing out with a passionate and sweet voice.

“Even so, Neesan had tried to love you. Although in the end, she was not able to love you, do you know how much effort she gave in?”

While trying to explain about Miya to Tatsuya, Maya’s voice did not hide that she was ridiculing her sister.

“Artificial magician experiment, was to keep in check for your magic from running in outburst with influence of emotion. That was the true purpose. So you are in a real sense, an experimental material without an experiment body, you were not just a sample. Although neesan had been reluctant right until the end, in the end, you might become a destroyer of the world, massacre of humanity, she subjected you to this, in order to prevent you to be a satan. In order to only take your strong feelings, it took everything out of neesan. Actually, it was much simpler to blot out all of your emotion, the burden on neesan would also be much smaller. Neesan knew that it would shorten her own life, but she still carefully modified your mental. The mental that had been twisted by me before you were born, neesan did not try to run away, but to modify you.”

Maya’s talk was halted; it was due to the fact that she was out of breath.

She did not even drink her tea, before resuming her story.

“In order for Miyuki-san to be able to stop you indiscriminately, neesan tried to train her to be indifferent of you. Without interest, there won’t be any hatred. And there was nothing to turn into pain. She didn’t want to stop your outburst due to

overwhelming emotion with 'Cocytus', and there was no guarantee that you'd be stopped either."

There was such a deep thought behind the indifferent attitude of his mother, this was hard to believe in a sudden. Perhaps, had it not Tatsuya, one would not believe it either.

"It was for the same reason that Miyuki was educated thoroughly as a lady. So that her magic wouldn't be based on her emotion. Always under control like a lady, and never to cause a hysteria like baring her feelings, she was shaped to grow to such a girl. I'd like to say that it has been completely successful, but in the first place, there's no such thing like a perfect lady anyway"

"... Miyuki is a perfect lady. My sister's magic tends to run wild due to the effect of 'Pledge'"

“Oh my”

Maya was spouting ‘pfft’

“You sibling really have a good relationship. Seems like you’d do good as fiancé from here onwards.

“Regardless of psychological connection, physically, it is unquestionable that we are real sibling. Therefore, it’s impossible for us to be a couple right?”

“Why?”

“Even if you ask why...”

It was too obvious, Tatsuya failed to mention the reason immediately.

“In case you’re groundlessly concerned about your future children to be born with genetic abnormalities. Like I said earlier, Miyuki-san was brought together by the best ‘perfect modified body’ technology of Yotsuba. She not only was engineered genetically, but also thorough mental adjustment by mental interference magic. That child can overcome all the defects of modified body, a masterpiece of Yotsuba which was completed in human being and brought her to the next level. She is different from the failure of Kudou-ka. Children born between you and Miyuki would not have any defect. I guarantee that in the name of Yotsuba. There is not a single gene on her can lead to abnormalities.

“But....”

“I’m sure that she won’t even mind that she’s a modified body. Perhaps, she would even rejoice over that fact. By modification, she will figure out that your body and her body genetical relation was quite apart. That she was biologically connected to you was something inevitable after all”

What Maya said might be correct. At the very least, Tatsuya could not point out any mistake, to tell the truth, Tatsuya already had an idea about this.

Pic=237.jpg

Miyuki's body was undeniably, came from the same cell components of the same parents as Tatsuya.

However, there was a certain mixed elements that he couldn't explain also.

Tatsuya understood that those were not a harmful body effects in Miyuki's body. Hence, he was thinking of those factors as natural mutation products. However, considering that they

were brought about by modification, the large differences between him and Miyuki's 'component' could be a more rational interpretation. He couldn't help to admit so unwillingly.

"Tatsuya-san. You can tell Miyuki-san about this. That Miyuki-san is a modified body made for you, and also the fact that both her physic and mental do not carry any factor that can cause disabilities at all. At the very least, there won't be any problem physically for you and Miyuki-san to marry each other"

Tatsuya stared at Maya's face.

Maya also, returned a stare in silence.

"...Understood. Certainly, this is not something to be hidden from her"

Tatsuya nodded after hesitating for quite a significant amount of time.

"That's right. If you leave it as is, miyuki-san will get worried"

Even though Maya's words were intended as a joke, Tatsuya could not deny it.

"Please cherish miyuki-san"

Suddenly, Maya changed her tone.

"When you lost Miyuki, you'll break apart. Your mind was designed to be that way. And when you broke, you can burn the world"

It was a prophecy, no, it was the tone of a prophecy.

"That's why, please protect and cherish miyuki-san with your hand for life"

After that, maya told her true feelings.

"Actually, I don't really care either way"

Within her eyes, the most intense light for the night could be seen.

"That time, when you destroy the world, the revenge of my heart will be completed"

The hottest, flame of passion was lighted.

“If you are able to protect Miyuki from the malice of the world, my revenge would take in another way. It is the revenge of a person who yielded against the world that trample on the fate of people with arrogance”

The name of that flame was madness.

“I’m sure I would be able to forget that scoffed ungraceful appearance that I received from the unfairness of the world”

In the midst of her flame of madness, Maya put an innocent smile.

“What a lovely thing that would be. What a wonderful son you are. You will fulfill my revenge. For ‘Yotsuba Maya’ who died in the age of 12”

“Oba-ue. You’re crazy”

“For that purpose, Tatsuya. You will marry Miyuki. I will not take any objection”

Tatsuya’s words did not reach Maya’s consciousness. Even if she heard it, it failed to reach Maya’s heart’s recognition.

Hayama proceeded next to Maya, he replaced the herbal tea which had gone cold with a new one.

Maya directed her eyes to Tatsuya, with a drastic change, that not even a hint of madness was visible to Tatsuya.

“Tatsuya-san, do you want more coffee?”

“No, I’m fine”

“Really? Ah, it’s already this late”

The dinner was over at 9pm. Now, the hand of time was past 10pm. Tatsuya did not realize it by himself, but thinking between Maya’s explanation seemed to take unexpectedly considerable amount of time.

“We have agenda tomorrow; we should end this soon. Tatsuya-san, do you still have anything to ask?”

“Then, in the grace of your words, one last thing”

Tatsuya was concerned that Maya’s madness might burn again, so he decided to ask about the things that he must know the answer now.

“Oh, what is it?”

“Why do you choose tomorrow? Do you have any reason to announce that I’m your son, that I will be announced as Miyuki’s fiance”

Certainly, New Year’s Meeting was the meeting where everyone on the clans were updated about the key condition of Yotsuba. It was the most suitable to nominate Miyuki.

However, for Tatsuya, it was somewhat a weak reason for Maya to push all these to be announced tomorrow as well.

“It’s not like we have to do it tomorrow, but I do have one reason”

Contrary to Tatsuya’s concerns, Maya was calm, and she answered his question as if she was amused by something.

“Originally, I didn’t have any plan to announce you as my son this year New Year’s meeting. However, Tatsuya-san too, you used such a flashy stunt”

The one she referred as ‘flashy stunt’ was him using Material Burst to annihilate GAA fleet, there was no need for Tatsuya to confirm this.

“And then, USNA has moved their joint Chief Staff which control magician troops directly, they even ordered a curfew for their investigation, you were that attention-grabber”

“I’m sorry for that”

Tatsuya involuntarily smiled wryly. He did not think that ‘whether there was a meaning for such confinement instruction’. At least for Tatsuya, it only look like an afterthought of a reason.

“It’s good that it has passed”

Maya nodded lightly. Even when her madness was hidden in the shadow, her familiarity to Tatsuya remained.

“But, even after the Stars was withdrawn from Japan, and Kudou-sensai went mad, or even the overseas Chinese Houjutsu user, you have been involved in various behind the scene jobs”

Kudou-kakka went mad, would be a comment for Parasite doll. Overseas Chinese houjutsu user was from Zhou Gongjin’s.

After hearing that, Tatsuya thought, ‘certainly, many things happened this year’. Putting aside Maya’s convenience, Tatsuya certainly had no intention to be involved in the fight of Yotsuba.

“That’s why, in the end, your debut is brought up to New Year’s meeting tomorrow”

“So that’s the case”

Tatsuya, for once, showed an understanding. At the very least, he found out that there was an opportunity and a need to spread the lie that he was Maya’s son in the meeting tomorrow.

--- However, that also did not mean anything.

“Then, this is the end of my explanation for real”

Maya showed a satisfied smile. This discussion seemed to end in her satisfaction. At the very least, she managed to convince Tatsuya to a certain degree after all.

“Tatsuya-san, do you know where your room is?”

“I’m alright, oba-ue”

“Really?”

Maya did not seem to mind when Tatsuya returned to his old way of addressing her.

“Then, sorry for not able to assist you, do you mind to go back to your room alone? You can call someone along the way to help you prepare the bath immediately before you reach your room”

“Understood”

Tatsuya understood firmly that this was their end of conversation.

“Thanks for the coffee, it was delicious”

Tatsuya bowed to Maya and Hayama, and left the study.

Part 5

Even after Tatsuya left, Maya remained her body on the couch.

“Madam, thank you for your hard work”

Hayama said so to Maya from behind.

“Somehow, I became more emotional than I had planned”

Maya reluctantly said so. For her, it was probably an apology for the previous one-act, her outburst of excitement.

“Since you were retelling about that story, I think it couldn’t be helped”

Hayama defended Maya with ‘it was a topic where you couldn’t avoid such excitement’, perhaps, that was embarrassing for her, Maya turned away her face with

a 'hmph' expression which did not suit her age.

Even Hayama thought that was funny, but he was not so careless as to show a smile in his face.

“So that was madam’s secret plan all along. This time, even I must accept that I have nothing but admiration”

Last November, she immediately made a call for Tatsuya and Miyuki to the manor right after Yokohama Incident, Maya told Hayama ‘Miyuki must become the next family head to bind Tatsuya. I have some consideration in subjecting her to the family head seat’. She confided her plans on the preparations for New Year’s meeting which took place tomorrow to Hayama.

“Thanks to the variety of things that happened out of expectation, I got excited more than I thought. The rest is, depend on how far Miyuki-san can go”

“Whether she would be a great woman”

The surprising remark came from no other than Hayama with a firm tone, Maya looked back to Hayama by twisting her body on the sofa.

Hayama displayed a good natured old-man smile.

“Both Miyuki-sama and Tatsuya-sama faced their far future feelings properly. Although Tatsuya-sama was heading at a place without enemy, he faces Miyuki-sama’s feeling straightforwardly without failure”

“To honestly love would be my fall, I say”

“In this case, it’s the one who is honest who wins”

Hayama laughs and smile had pulled out Maya from her own miasma.

Part 6

When Tatsuya returned, there wasn’t anyone in the room. Miyuki must have been brought to the same home estate for tomorrow’s preparation.

As Maya said, the guide for the bath came pretty soon. It was rare for him to stay overnight at the main house, the bath was also quite different as it was his first time

of staying in a Japanese-style guest room. He didn't dressed unsightly for the round trip to the bath as it was possible to run into someone. Tatsuya's bathing time was neither long, nor short.

When he returned to his room, the clock was already referring to 11pm, yet miyuki Had not returned.

Instead, he found out that the futon was already set.

In series to the Japanese-style room, a set of futon for pair, with 2 pillows.

“oniisama, sorry for making you wait”

Miyuki returned in such a bad timing.

“This is...”

While leaving the sliding door open, she looked at the state of the next room. If she looked into the room, it was natural to focus her eyes on...

“Miyuki, this is not my do-...”

-ing, Tatsuya was not able to continue his excuse until the end. Perhaps, Miyuki was polished by a lot of servant until she shone, she was also only wearing an underwear under her hitoe⁶. The bathroom was possibly very hot, as she didn't appear to be cold to wear so little despite in midwinter. The current blushed in her face and neck might appear to be caused by the heat, but it was obvious that the room temperature was not hot.

The reason of his lost of words was not due to the hitoe. It was because of the strong charm of Miyuki clad in that hitoe, he somehow lost the time to explain and was drifted to his speechlessness..

She already had a beautiful look, but now it seemed that she was actually shining.

Miyuki had the air of a refreshing inanimate scent, now she might actually attract not only butterflies and bees, she was wearing a subtle scent of flower.

If she walked in Tokyo crowd as she was, there would be undoubtedly imminent large panic crowd.

Tatsuya without exaggeratingly thought so.

“oniisama, this is...”

However, Miyuki was also in a not-so-calm state, and it was exaggerated with the only one set of futon, those were the first words she emitted after she reboot her mind.

“No, this is not my doing. It was already in this condition when I returned from the

bath”

“I see”

⁶ Hitoe: unlined kimono, they are usually not as thick as formal kimono, not sure if there are even less layer than yukata, but it's not an outfit you should be wearing during winter
(https://www.google.com/search?q=%E5%8D%98%E8%A1%A3&biw=1352&bih=237&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0CAYQ_AUoAWoVChMIwtn64JaFvgIVTzK8Ch0qIlgAW)

Since he thought that he was restless with much standing. Tatsuya sat in front of the low table, Miyuki was also seated in front of the futon. As the sliding door leading to the next room, they felt conscious when its open, yet felt strange to close it.

Infront of Tatsuya, Miyuki seemed to be unable to calm down while combing e hair. Somehow, she was conscious of his gaze.

It couldn't be helped. It wasn't even 3 hours from the shocking declaration that Tatsuya was to be Miyuki's fiancé. Taking into account, the bombshell that Tatsuya and miyuki were not real sibling. It was unreasonable not to be conscious of each other right now"

"ummm, o-oniisama"

Hesitation was felt in Miyuki's tone.

Tatsuya rose his eyebrow in wonder.

"What is it?"

"No, that... oniisama, can I still call you that? Or should I call you Ta-"

"I don't mind if you call me as usual"

As Miyuki didn't seem to be able to call him 'Tatsuya', Tatsuya rescue her with a laugh.

Miyuki smiled with a relieved face. However, his answer of 'as usual' was not only for Miyuki. Tatsuya was not going to stay put to the lie of 'Miyuki was not my sister'.

"Then, oniisama.... Have your discussion with obasama been concluded?"

"such a thing..."

The fact that I was here, such a thing was a given right, he was about to answer so, but he soon realized that Miyuki's question had different meaning.

"Yes, it's concluded. I have asked everything that I need to know about this episode from oba-ue herself"

“I see. Then, about that...”

Miyuki was stammering. She was probably not hesitating. Just, had not enough courage to ask about the matter.

She summoned up the courage which had been void from her heart, Miyuki finally able to ask Tatsuya.

“About oniisama and me not being a real sibling is”

- that true?

However, no matter how much courage she summoned, she was not able to say the decisive words from her mouth.

“A lie”

Tatsuya’s answer was extremely brief.

Miyuki’s heart was torn in two from that answer.

The feeling of relief that she was Tatsuya’s sister, and that she wouldn’t be able to marry Tatsuya as her sister.

“Why... Why did oba-sama tell such a lie?”

“This is an over simplification of an explanation, but it seems like to let us marry”

Maya’s explanation was difficult to understand for certain, but Tatsuya understood more circumstances than Miyuki. However, he was wondering the extent that he may reveal to Miyuki, Tatsuya had not really decided that.

“Even though we’re sibling?”

“Well, since the family register and DNA analysis were just formalities”

“Well... that’s true in the light of the power that Yotsuba-ka has”

“There’s no need to worry about genetic abnormalities of our future children either”

“Why, is that so?”

Miyuki who was facing down in a gloomy face, rose her face and fixed her eyes at Tatsuya. The white skin above her neck was not covered by the hitoe had made Tatsuya involuntarily wanted to look away. However, thinking so would mean that he was walking in Maya’s palm, so he regained the calmness in his mind.

With the newly regained normal mind, Tatsuya stared at Miyuki’s eyes again.

Miyuki’s eyes looked that she was ready to receive any kind of truth from him.

Maya had made the decision for Tatsuya to be Miyuki's companion, she had thought that Miyuki could bear such a weight.

As he acknowledged the readiness on her eyes, Tatsuya firmed his decision on the part that he should tell to Miyuki.

“You are, your body has no factor that can cause genetic abnormality”

“You are, a modified body”

Miyuki wore a watchful eyes while covering her mouth bith both of her hands.

Her long hair is shaking.

Tatsuya was a little relieved that she didn't show any frightened face.

“I am, modified body...”

“You were made from kaasan's and oyaji's fertilized egg, and with Yotsuba's science, was made into the best technology, 'perfect modified body'. You overcome all of the defect which comes in modified body, you are a masterpiece of Yotsuba which has been completed as a human being, or more than human being.

Tatsuya's explanation was not supposed to be a consolation, the fact that she was not a human who was born naturally. However, for some reason, Miyuki visibly regained her composure.

Miyuki was neither upset nor scared, on the fact that she was a human being who had been artificially created. Miyuki knew now that her body, and life, was a gift she received from Tatsuya. The more she thought about it, the more she was convinved that it was appropriate. That was why she did not worry too much that originally her body was an artificial work and ssuch.

“Then, I... as long as I'm by onii-sama's side, I won't be suddenly fall into the underworld right?”

The one she was worried about the limitation of life as a woman of modified body. Fear that she suddenly had exhaust her own life and could not be together with Tatsuya anymore.

“Judgin from the way oba-ue talked, seems like your resistance to continuous magic exercise, is likely higher than me”

“It means that... I can live alongside you, oniisama?”

“Judging from the way oba-ue talked, seems like you will have a long life”

In the end, after she was told that she could live as long as her brother, she didn't even care that she was a modified body.

“oniisama and I are sibling, but my genes are different from oniisama”

Tatsuya felt like saying ‘Hey...’

Certainly, Maya said that Miyuki was a modified body, genetically speaking, it was true that the relationship between Tatsuya and Maya was only nephew and aunt. However, between Tatsuya and Miyuki, there was not a single word that could deny their relationship.

Yet, Miyuki was saying the same thing as Maya.

Similarity did not only bring about by genes... Tatsuya thought so.

“From the beginning, members of Yotsuba-ka were a human experimentation, with manipulated genes from the Fourth Lab. Although, it was different from modified body, it doesn’t change that we also have undergone genetic manipulation”

The way Tatsuya said that, was to emphasize the similarity between him and Miyuki.

However, Miyuki with her sleepy face, didn’t seem to be able to digest those meanings well.

“Then, oniisama and I will be cousins from now on?”

“At least in the eyes of others”

“Then, I can be engaged to oniisama, right!”

Miyuki raised her voice in excitement.

However, her excitement did not last very long.

As she saw the confused look in Tatsuya.

“As expected, you must be disgusted...”

“With what?”

Tatsuya couldn’t figure out the reason why Miyuki suddenly gloomy, he couldn’t even understand the meaning behind those dark words.

“Because, to oniisama, I’m still your sister right?”

“Yes, because that’s a fact”

For now, that fact was undeniable to Tatsuya.

“For a sister to want to be the bride of her own real brother, it is still abnormal right...”

“Miyuki, do you”

For a moment, Tatsuya thought that he heard wrongly. However, his five sense had been honed to a level beyond ordinary person by trainings.

Miyuki definitely said ‘for a sister to want to be the bride of her own real brother’. From the context, it could only be interpreted to be Miyuki and Tatsuya.

In other word, Miyuki...

“Ye-yes! It was not due to obasama’s order only! I’m very happy to hear that i will be oniisama’s fiancé!”

Miyuki looked down while clasping her hands on her thighs. Her tears were falling on top of her hands, in her thighs.

“Even now, that feeling has not changed. Even though I know that oniisama is my real borther, I want oniisama to treasure me as a woman! I want to be oniisama’s bride! When I said I have given up, suddenly I don’t need to give up!”

Miyuki’s voice was not difficult to hear even if she was excited. However there were things that difficult to understand due to her excitement.

What she said about ‘When I said I have given up, suddenly I don’t need to give up’ must bee ‘I’ve given up till I heard that story, now that you said we can get married, I don’t need to give up anymore’. Tatsuya had not clue at all that Miyuki was worrying about such thing earlier that it surprised him. Certainly, Miyuki had shown an excessive attention to him as her real brother. However, Tatsuya always thought that she was yearning him only as a brother.

However, it might because he, himself, only want to think only thus far.

Against Miyuki’s tears, Tatsuya had suspicion that he was tamed by such thing.

“But, oniisama is normal after all... You have normal sense of moral too... you wouldn’t carry a romantic love to your own sister right. You must have been disgusted as such an abnormal sister like me...”

Miyuki finally sobbed.

It was not a loud cry, but one that made the listener to have a tight painful chest, she suppressed her sorrow so much that her cry was concentrated at the last minute.

“Miyuki...”

Tatsuya stretched his hands toward Miyuki timidly.

Miyuki extended her hand to catch Tatsuya's hand.

Tatsuya thought that she would shook of his hand. He thought it was natural to deal with him so, as he was the heartless big brother who did not notice his sister's problem to the point she cried in pain.

However, miyuki grabbed Tatsuya's right hand with both of her hands. Then, she hugged it in her chest.

"o..."

Tatsuya tried to restrain her and said 'Hey, wait', but he was stopped. He couldn't bring himself to say something to refuse Miyuki too bluntly now. No, he didn't want to do so.

"Onisama, I, I..."

While grabbing his hand strongly, miyuki desperately mustered her words out.

Mustering out her own feeling.

"Love, you. I love you. I'm in love with oniisama!"

The words Tatsuya always heard from his sister was 'I adore you'. It was his first time hearing 'I love you' from her.

Only one-character difference, could change the weight of the words this much. Tatsuya only noticed this for the first time.

"It's fine even if you want to hate me for being such an abnormal sister! It's fine even if you considered that this is bad feeling with unnatural tendency!... but, please. I beg you oniisama..."

Miyuki raised her face, wet in tears.

Tatsuya had never seen such a sorrowful, such a desperate face, yet so beautiful.

"somehow... somehow.. please let me be by your side. Please do not be detached from me. Please don't disappear from my side!"

Even when she was crying, Miyuki did not distort her face. It was her beautiful face, with shedded tears.

Today was the first time he knew this too.

Her sad crying face, Tatsuya thought.

While still entrusting his right hand to Miyuki, Tatsuya reached out his left hand to Miyuki's back.

“o-oniisama?”

“I won't disappear from your side”

“ah.. umm... oniisama, once more... one more time...”

Miyuki asked so fearfully while being hold in Tatsuya's hand, in Tatsuya's arm, and pressing her face to Tatsuya's chest. She wanted to hear those words again to affirmed it.

"Miyuki. I won't disappear from your side" "Ah..."

Miyuki was overcome with her emotion, while all energy was escaping from her body.

Tatsuya thought that he must answer his sister who entrusted all of her body to him.

"Until death do us part. I will be by your side" "Although, it might not be in the sense that you desire" "I still, can only see you as my sister"

"You're my cute little sister. I won't think badly of such a cute little sister" "I also don't think that you're abnormal"

"I will never reject you. I won't detach myself from you"

"However, Miyuki... that's because I'm your brother. And because you're my cute little sister" "That's why... sorry. At the very least, I can only see you as my sister for now"

Miyuki, still held in Tatsuya's arms, got up after she heard his answers and released Tatsuya's right hand which she had been grabbed and stucked to her chest.

"That's fine"

There were traces of tears in Miyuki's face. However, there was no new tears flowing out. "I'm satisfied for now"

Miyuki casually turned her hand to Tatsuya's neck, and embraced him. "Because, I also can only call you as oniisama for now"

Miyuki put her cheek beside Tatsuya's cheek, while whispering in his ear. "For oniisama to say 'for now' to my confession. It's sufficient for me" Pic=258.jpg

Miyuki hugged Tatsuya with a strengthened force in her arms.

“oniisama, is it ok for me to hope? Not ‘now’ but ‘sometime’. For oniisama to be able to see me as ‘Miyuki’, and not your sister”

Tatsuya also whispered to Miyuki’s ear in the same way. “This might sound strange, but I’ll try my best”

Miyuki released her embrace. “oh, dear, oniisama”

Miyuki laughed with an amazed face. Tatsuya smiled wryly.

It was finally returning to the usual atmosphere of the sibling.

“Miyuki, it’s already late. We need to prepare early tomorrow, let’s get some sleep”

“Ah, that’s right. Then, I’ll ask for futon”

Miyuki was about to stand, but Tatsuya restrained her. “oniisama?”

“There’s no need for that. Oba-ue has kindly set this up. Let’s just sleep at the same futon for today”

“Ehh??”

Miyuki’s voice was overturned. Her voice was not so overturned even when she was crying.

“u, umm, oniisama, is that, do you mean” “No, you’re wrong”

Tatsuya smirked wickedly to Miyuki.

“We just sleep together. We won’t do anything else” “I... I see’

Miyuki patted down her chest. There seemed to be a little regret in that gesture, Tatsuya wondered if she was expecting something.

“I’ll change to pajama first. You can get into the futon first”

“No... I can wait for you for shot while. Let’s get into the futon together, oniisama”

“Understood. I’ll be back soon”

Tatsuya had confirmed that this room was equipped with yukata for sleepwear. He need not to get lost, and quickly took off his clothes and wore the yukata on top of his trunk.

“oniisama, don’t you feel cold?”

Miyuki asked anxiously when Tatsuya was going to get into the futon.

“No, this probably already hot enough”

Tatsuya slipped into the futon, while signaling Miyuki.

Miyuki showed a slight hesitation before settled in using Tatsuya as an arm pillow.

“I wonder when was it. Once upon a time, when I was really young, I feel like, there was one instance when I was held in your arm”

“It was not such an old occurrence... it was on the day when kaasan’s funeral was over”

“That’s... right... That was so careless of me”

Miyuki rested her body to Tatsuya.

To embrace miyuki’s shoulder tightly, Tatsuya turned his other arm.

“oniisama”

“What is it?”

“did oniisama really do not know?”

“Well”

“about how much I’ve been suffering, that is”

“sorry”

“It is especially true in recent time. Society encourages magician to marry early. If I’m to shoulder a status as magician, at the very least, I should have chosen a fiancé, or

has prepared one”

“that’s right”

“since sibling cannot marry each other. So, with other man beside oniisama....”

“Miyuki”

Tatsuya’s hand stroked Miyuki’s hair.

Miyuki's body was trembling in tension, although she immediately released that tension. And left her body to Tatsuya.

"Just go to sleep" "Yes, oniisama"

Miyuki entrusted her body and mind to Tatsuya, she fell asleep while listening to the distant sound of bells on New Year's eve.

Chapter 7

Part 1

2097, New Year Day.

Both Tatsuya and Miyuki were busy since they waken up up this morning. They had no problem with waking up early since they were used to it, but

At any rate, after being played around for a full hour, by the time they were released, they felt like going home as they were.

"Tatsuya-niisan" "Miyuki-oneesama"

"Tatsuya-niisan, Miyuki-san, happy new year" "Tatsuya-san, Miyuki-oneesama, happy new year"

"Fumiya, Ayako-chan, happy new year. No, I can't call you Ayako-chan anymore right?"

“Tatsuya-san, please do not tease me in this new year day. It’s alright. I make a special permit only for Tatsuya-san to call me ‘Ayako-chan’”

“Fufufu. Fumiya-kun, Ayako-san, happy new year” “uwaa”

The one who rose that voice was Fumiya.

“Miyuki-san, how should I put this... You’re extremely beautiful”

“I give up. That’s not how you do it”

“Anyway, Miyuki-oneesama, that’s a wonderful furisode ⁷. It’s as if I’m looking at a bride in a wedding”

Miyuki was unable to answer with anything but a bitter smile, since she herself also thought the same as Ayako, that her dress could fit for a wedding.

“I also think that this is exaggerating, but... I was convinced that I need to wear this today”

“oh dear”

It was somewhat hard to judge whether that expression of shock by Ayako meant she was really shocked or she was really jealous.

“Madam Shirakawa must have thought that it is appropriate for us to wear the most formal attire because there will be appointment of the next family head.”

The one who made such remark, was Yuuka, who was standing in her furisode.

“Yuuka-san, happy new year. Thank you very much for yesterday”

“Happy new year, Tatsuya-san. Then, you’re very welcome. Please don’t mind about what happened yesterday”

Yuuka said so with friendliness while approaching the spot where the other 4 were standing.

They exchange new year greetings, and seated themselves after Yuuka’s proposal.

Even only with these much people gathered, the lobb gathered, the lobby seemed to be a little cramped.

“Shibata-san, I wonder if he won't be coming”

The one who dared to raise the question, perhaps due to the fact that he was the youngest, was Fumiya.

“Looking at the time, he should have been arrived. Or may be he would come together with his parents”

⁷ Furisode: long-sleeved kimono

Tatsuya answered Fumiya with his conjectures.

The clock hung on the wall reminded them that they would soon be summoned.

As if to support Tatsuya's words, a housekeeper with a modest furesode came to summon them.

"Excuse me. I will be the one to guide you, I am Sakurai Minami"

The guide was Minami. The reason she was wearing that furisode was probably to distinguish herself in her role as their guide.

"I probably have a lot of shortcomings, but I shall serve you with the best of my ability, I will be in your care ⁸"

"Firstly, Fumiya-sama and Ayako-sama, please let me guide you"

Fumiya and Ayako stood and bid farewell to Tatsuya, Miyuki and Yuuka in such order.

Both of them followed Minami quietly as they matched their steps out of the lobby.

"By the way, Tatsuya-san, do you know about the entrance manner of the New Year's Meeting?"

Yuuka asked him this question in this late hour, but Tatsuya honestly answered her. "I heard we will be summoned by someone and then guided to make an entrance"

Upon hearing Tatsuya's response, Yuuka's face looked full of pity for him. "Perhaps, Miyuki-san also doesn't know?"

"Yes, that's as far as I heard"

"Then... Please take one advice from me"

Tatsuya and Miyuki both turned to Yuuka with quizzical looks. Yuuka said it with a

serious atmosphere.

It was only a short time before Yuuka was taken to the room.

⁸ She actually said 'yoroshiku-onegaitashimasu', which is a very polite way to say 'yoroshiku' or I'm in your care/nice to meet you/etc

“Tatsuya-sama, Miyuki-sama, please follow me”

Minami came back to the lobby to summon Tatsuya and Miyuki.

“Minami-chan, are you alright? You look a little tired”

As Miyuki said, Minami seemed to look a little tired.

“Yes, I’m alright. Sorry for my impertinent, but would you mind if we walk a little fast”

But, she probably would have some rest after she finished this duty. Tatsuya thought that it would best to follow her lead to end Minami’s duty as soon as possible, Miyuki chose to follow his lead after being asked so by Minami.

“The next head family candidate, Shiba Miyuki-sama, followed by her older brother, Shiba Tatsuya-sama”

(Is this a test, how much we can take such formality?)

Tatsuya bowed while thinking over this matter.

Kneeling before the two, Minami whispers to them ‘please take your seats’. After hearing that signal, Tatsuya and Miyuki rose their faces. The assembly went a little taken aback, and it was none other due to the beauty of Miyuki.

Guided by Minami, Tatsuya and Miyuki went to their seats.

There was a commotion for the second time.

Tatsuya and Miyuki was led to the seats next to Maya.

“Everyone, once again, happy new year to all of you’

Maya looked around with a content look.

“Today, on top of the auspicious new year, I have another good news to be delivered to everyone. This matter is something that have made my heart truly delighted”

With that introduction, Maya first turned her eyes to Katsushige. Beside Katsushige, who was donning a haorihakama⁹ just like Tatsuya and the others, uncomfortably sat Kotona who was donning a furisode just like Miyuki and the others.

“Katsushige-san, eldest son of the Shibata family, and Kotona Tsutsumi have recently gotten engaged.”

Huge cheers roared. Tatsuya tried to pick for some whispers from the crowds. There were more people who said “as I’ve thought” or “finally” than people who said “really?”

“From here on, it probably won’t be just happy times, there will be a lot of struggle as well, but please wish the young couple for bountiful blessings ahead.”

An ovation breaks out from the assembly. However, Tatsuya was not able to ignore how before that there were a lot of people who nodded in agreement when Maya said “a lots of things you would struggle about.

“Next, I shall be announcing what everyone have been most concerned about.”

The assembly went silent as if someone threw them with water.

“Fufufu, it is s you have all thought.”

Maya smiled as if irritated.

Even so, there was neither whisper nor sound from the assembly.

Perhaps, she was satisfied with this reaction, or may be dissatisfied.

Keeping up her secretive smile, Maya presented the name of the next family head.

“I would like to entrust the position of family head to our Miyuki Shiba here.”

There was vigorous clapping amid the ovation. It was particularly loud among the main house’s servants.

“Let’s leave the congratulating process for another time. This New Year’s Meeting is not the place to do such a formal matter after all”

Laughter of agreement arose from the assembly. Tatsuya gazed upon the crowd, he saw blushed faces in the man from the assembly. Tatsuya realized with a little astonishment that people are out here drinking after all.

“And then, the final news. Miyuki, our next family head, welcomes on this occasion, my son, Shiba Tatsuya as her fiancé.”

⁹ Haori hakama → formal wear for men

Instead of applause came a huge commotion. It was in no way whispering, it was exchanged conversations.

“Pardon me, toushu-sama, but would you permit me to ask a question?”

That voice came from Yuka’s vicinity. That woman, who wore a comfortably *irohomesode*, was Yuka’s mother, the Tsukuba family head, Tsukuba Touka.

“Tsukuba-dono, what is it?”

Maya asked her with a calm questioning smile.

Touka asked her with a stiff expression bereft of calmness.

“You just said ‘my son,’ but did I mishear that? As far as I remember, Tatsuya-san is the son of Miya-sama, toushu-sama’s one-sama”

“I see. This is a good opportunity, so I thought I’d introduce him as my son too. Shiba Tatsuya here, was born from my egg before that ‘incident’, currently I’m acting as his adoptive mother in my sister’s, Miya’s, stead. I’ve asked for her permission beforehand, thereby, I introduce him as my son from now onwards”

.” The commotion turned to silence. However, that was only for a moment.

“toushuu-sama”

“Yes, Mitsugu-san. What is it?”

In this place, she ought to call the branch house family head, as ‘Kuroba-dono’, but Maya dared to call him “Mitsugu-san” as she used to. Maya knew very well that it pressured Mitsugu.

“About the ‘welcome’ you’ve said just now...”

“Oh, that’s right. That was an expression that would attract some misunderstanding.”

In contrast to Mitsugu’s stiff expression, Maya hinted an almost mocking, light, deceptive smile.

“Tatsuya is just a second-year student at the First High School, so he will continue to live with the Shiba family as he has always done. Be it as it may that he is engaged, I think it wouldn’t be moral for a male and a female high schooler to be cohabitating, but I am certain that no such indiscretion would be committed between Miyuki-san and Tatsuya-san.”

“However...”

As he was just about to detail his opposition, Mitsugu closed his mouth. He noticed Fumiya who sat beside him who had been repeatedly asking Ayako, 'neesan, are you alright?'

"Ara, Ayako-san, are you alright? Do you feel uncomfortable?"

Maya spoke out earlier than Mitsugu.

Mitsugu stunned out of guilt for his daughter.

"Yes... I'm fine"

Despite her firm reply, Ayako did not seem so in the eyes of the spectator.

"Would someone please take Ayako-san to another room to rest?"

The one who responded to Maya's clamor was Fumiya and Minami.

"I will lead the way"

"Please let me accompany her"

Minami bowed at the entrance of the hall, while Fumiya wrapped his arms around Ayako's shoulder while pleading to Maya.

"Yes, please"

Maya gave such order to Minami.

"Fumiya-san, you may be dismissed"

Then, she turned to Fumiya while saying so.