

After finishing some arrangements, Tatsuya traveled to Ikoma[+] with Miyuki and Minami. They journeyed to Nara directly by train but switched into a cabinet after reaching it, since the transportation network in the Keihanshin [++] district wasn't as maintained in areas with landmark architecture or historic relevance.

Miyuki and Minami also had a favorable opinion of the linear train seats this time, so Tatsuya thought it was ok to take this kind of a transport on extended trips in the future. Meanwhile, they proceeded to the Kudou house passing through and enjoying the view of the Ikomayama mountains[+] and the Mount Higashiyama foothills [++][+++].

To this day, the 10MC have no custom for visits between clan houses. Also, it goes without saying that it's notably and frequently seen that this society[*]limits contact between men and women of marriageable age. There's a small chance that this is the case with Tatsuya and Miyuki who have a concealed relationship with the Yotsuba family. That's why it was normal that this was the first time that they visited the Kudou residence. On the other hand,**] there was no chance of getting lost on the way because after leaving the cabinet station there was an automatic commuting service.

Almost as planned, their arrival time was 5:55 p.m.

After leaving the commuter, they rang the bell. On the other side of the intercom was not a servant but Fujibayashi instead.

“Welcome, Tatsuya-kun. Also, Miyuki-san, Minami-chan, thank you for coming.”

“Sorry about this. We kind of wanted to accompany Onii-sama.”

Tatsuya couldn't help but be grateful to Fujibayashi who promptly arrived here from Tokyo and displayed such a lively scene in their first talk.

“Don't worry about it. Come on, guys, please don't hesitate to come in.”

Fujibayashi opened the gate with a smile, and invited the three of them inside.

If no one led the way, one would surely need some form of second sight ability similar to Tatsuya's to get through the vestibule. Minami kept looking around with an admiring expression. While Miyuki with a well behaved manner, fixed her eyes on her brother's back, but she was surprised with the view of a large green wall at the end of their path.

From the entrance gate of the Kudou residence to the front door, there lied a maze made with hedges more than two meters high. There probably was an entrance for cars elsewhere. Also, no doubt there were some forms of traps there, since the entrance for people was a maze with a magic-like pattern, it would be incredible for the car entrance to get a free pass.

(This residence is some kind of a fortress)

Looking from the outside, it was a luxurious three-story Western-style building that seemed to have no peculiarities.

However, this mansion must have a mechanism to reject uninvited visitors who've stepped on its grounds. Or [maybe] it was supposed to look like a fully-fledged fortified manor combined with [some] military [concept] architecture.

“Highly impressive, isn't it?”

Fujibayashi asked with a smile and Tatsuya felt an atmosphere of admiration.

“Originally, the mansion was unable to withstand an attack from the Traditionalists. The findings of the former Ninth Magician Development Research Institute indicated that defenses should be strengthened in small increments. At which point the setup of the mansion was a matter decided by the government”

Fujibayashi [quizzed Tatsuya] with a tone similar to with which children ask questions for a riddle: “Do you know the reason for this?” Regardless of what she expected to hear and whether he didn’t know or had the correct response Tatsuya just wasn’t motivated enough to play along.

“I heard that it was in order to monitor Osaka.”

“It's discouraging... but that’s the correct answer.”

Tatsuya secretly thought "she really seems like a child", seeing the disappointed look of Fujibayashi.

“Onii-sama, what do they need to monitor in Osaka?”

The admiring expression that Fujibayashi displayed as she was asking questions was well deserved, since Tatsuya possessed more than just general knowledge. [Anyhow,] Miyuki was asking her brother, but only this time, Fujibayashi replied.

“Since Osaka is an international commercial city, it’s more tolerant towards the dealings of foreigners and also relatively easy to settle in. No matter what, spies will always escape surveillance, and when events have already happened, it’s easy to fall into a passive situation.”

“In order to promptly respond to it?”

“Yes. Because the secret maneuvering of a magician spy is one of the worst nightmares for a

politician. The Kudou family had the task to inhibit magicians to free reign on foreign espionage missions as an example of best practices in the former Ninth Magician Development Research Institute.”

For now, Miyuki assumed a stance of comprehension. Yet, the impression of a lingering question remained.

“Miyuki-san, don’t refrain to ask [whatever you need][*].”

“Fujibayashi seemed aware of it, so she encouraged Miyuki.”

“Thank you very much [for your concern][*]. I don’t think it’s a big deal but... I was thinking that to monitor a spy whose mission is sneaking into Osaka, shouldn't a base be established on the west side of Osaka, or at the very least not on the east side of Ikomayama?

It was a casual question that seemed to hit a sore spot for Fujibayashi.

Fujibayashi frowned and was at a loss for words. This was Tatsuya’s cue to step in.

“There is the danger that they’d [get into trouble][*] for being too close.”

Miyuki revealed a subtle surprise.

“Something like, ‘betrayal’!?”

“Politicians seem to think so.”

The maze was coming to an end as they saw the entrance. The topic about how politicians perceived magicians stopped without further delving into.

Kudou Retsu was already waiting in the reception room. The time was 5:59 pm. Since Tatsuya and the others weren't late, there was no intention of being apologetic, and they didn’t actually

feel nervous.

Against an elder of the magic world in Japan, Tatsuya's mind and body were in flawless condition as usual.

"[I'd like to sincerely][*] thank you for your time for receiving us today."

Retsu replied with a somewhat bittersweet smile to Tatsuya's 100% formal greetings.

"It's been a long time. The last time we met in person was summer last year, right?"

"Thank you very much for your intercession on the matter of the electronic golden silkworms."

"It was nothing..."

Some hesitation floated in the face of Retsu. However, he overcame that in himself.

"Truthfully speaking, since you proposed this meeting, there was no obligation for me to receive you; however, I'm glad that we meet again.

"I apologize for giving you trouble."[*]

Tatsuya bowed maintaining his social courteousness by gesture to which Retsu waved to prevent him from continuing.

"Shiba Tatsuya-kun. This may be of self-satisfaction but I want to apologize first. The Parasite Doll matter was something that I conceived and planned. I don't intend to make excuses as a loser, but I also don't think the affair was at all wrong. However, I believe that I troubled and caused some grief on you and for that, I'm really sorry."

Saying so, Retsu deeply lowered his head, -sitting down in a cushion sofa used in the reception room. Both Tatsuya and Miyuki watched him with a serious face, but only Minami standing behind Miyuki had eyes revealing a cold light.

“Let's just say that I'm not in a position to ask for forgiveness, but at the very least I wanted to apologize.”

"Your Excellency, please raise your head"

Tatsuya replied with a respectful voice.

“Every person does what they think is best. Even a novice such as myself understands this line of thought. At that place, I deemed that it wasn't possible for me to agree with the experiments that your Excellency envisioned to perform.[*] However, I'm not going to deny that your Excellency's idea of unattended magic weapon development [is certainly needed][**].”

“I'm relieved that you think that way.”

Retsu raised his head and faced Tatsuya. Then, Tatsuya and Retsu looked into each other's eyes.

“——I heard about your [mission][*] from Kyouko.”

The conversation resumed from Retsu's side.

“Capturing Zhou Gongjin. This is a mission from Maya.... no, Yotsuba-dono, right?”

“Yes, that's right.”

Miyuki gracefully sat next to Tatsuya, however, she was concealing that internally she was surprised and shaken. She didn't expect Tatsuya to openly admit his connection with Maya, no matter the circumstances or the high probability of Kudou Retsu to know about it, even if he was to become [an ally in this mission][*].

“Do you happen to know where the request for Yotsuba-dono is coming from?”

"No. I don't know about it and also I think that it's not necessary for me to know.”

“Are you satisfied with being a pawn of the Yotsuba?”

Tatsuya returned a “No” again with an unwavering poker face to Retsu’s test question (-in truth, wanna-be-attempt question)[*].

"[Mainly,] it's because I found out that I shouldn't know."

Retsu only sighed, seeing Tatsuya without an appearance of overexerted words.

I see... so you’ve figured out about “that person” to that extent[*].

Tatsuya didn’t answer anything. His attitude was of "no comments".

“Apparently Miyuki-kun doesn’t seem to know either... No, forgive me for saying something this vague.”

Retsu sighed again, looking at Tatsuya and Miyuki in alternation.

“The 10MC are bound by the rules of the MC. In the rules, a 10MC member isn't supposed to let other 10MC conspire together[. Also,] they can only cooperate in emergency situations.”

“Yes”

Tatsuya didn’t know the minute details of the MC rules. And he just heard of this substantial rule for the first time. He did not dare to give comments of criticism, kept his reply brief, and nodded only with short words.

“The Kudou family can't receive a cooperation request from the Yotsuba family. So I think for this matter it’s Shiba Tatsuya who as an individual asked a favor from Kudou Retsu as individual.”

“Thank you very much.”

With one voice, Tatsuya and Miyuki pronounced their gratefulness to the roundabout acceptance from Retsu.

While Miyuki showed a conservative smile, Tatsuya remained expressionless.

The meeting with Kudou Retsu was over in less than ten minutes; however, it ended up being good enough for Tatsuya. He supposedly requested assistance as an individual, but he obtained agreement of cooperation as a private associate. In the end, it was a plus that the meeting didn't extend for any longer.

Afterwards, Fujibayashi invited Tatsuya and the girls to dinner, so they excused themselves to Retsu and accompanied her. It was an informal dinner without the head of the house being present, so Tatsuya was grateful to Fujibayashi for her thoughtfulness.

The Kudou residence had several dining rooms, so they were guided through them. As they were talking, they heard light knocking sounds on each one as if dishes were being served. They arrived to one that seemed for children, -but in reality [*] it was one where children's parents could socialize.

"Come in."

Fujibayashi invited them in and the door was slowly opened.

"Please excuse us. Grandfather asked me to invite you to dinner..."

Entering the room there was a young man of an age similar to [Miyuki and Minami][*].

Surprise was reflected on his beautiful face.

Minami held her breath with the young man's human-transcending appearance.

Even Tatsuya couldn't help but gaze at the young man's handsome looks in admiration.

In a word, beautiful, but not in the sense of female prettiness. This young man was, excusing the expression, the “ideal bishonen[+]”

Tatsuya only knew of one person that was as striking as this young man.

The person in question is Miyuki, the “ideal bishojo [+]”, who had no comparison amongst males.

“Minoru-kun, how long are you going to stand there?”

Fujibayashi’s words to the young man stunned Miyuki.

“I’m sorry!”

The young man showed an appropriately hasty diligence for his age and stepped in between Fujibayashi and the table of Tatsuya’s group.

“It’s very nice to meet you”

The young man began his self-introduction with a still slightly shaken voice.

“I am Kudou Minoru, the youngest son of Kudou Makoto, the head of the Kudou family. I am a first year student in the Second High School. It’s an honor to meet you Shiba Tatsuya-san, Shiba Miyuki-san, and Sakurai Minami-san”

Minami was surprised upon hearing her full name and even blushed.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Shiba Tatsuya.”

Tatsuya replied to Minoru and got up as a courtesy.

“I’m Miyuki, the younger sister. Minoru-san, you already knew about us, is that right?”

In a split second, Miyuki stood up and smiled to Minoru. Both Tatsuya and Miyuki introduced themselves to Minoru in a friendly manner, without being on guard.

Minoru got seriously embarrassed in front of two such people. Although he blushed and gave off an uncanny, easy to be fond of impression, the “super super” bishonen part didn’t change for a second.

“I saw your accomplishments in the 9SC. Umm, also, just call me Minoru without the honorific and please don’t use keigo [+] with me, because I’m your junior and I’m also happier without them.”

He was as beautiful as Miyuki but in terms of character, he seemed a bit [*] superficial and inferior to Miyuki, almost ordinary. Maybe it was because he was the younger son of the family head and hadn’t received enough heir education.

“Then, I’ll call you Minoru-kun.” [+]

When Miyuki sweetly smiled almost grinning, Minoru averted his eyes in embarrassment. It was finally Minami’s turn.

“Please excuse my rudeness *clank*[*]!”[**]

Minami stood up with a particularly dull metallic sound at the end of her speech. It’s difficult to say it was suitable in the way of manners, but Minami didn’t worry about it for now [, and hurried to fix her introduction][*].

“[I mean][*], I apologize for being late in my introduction. My name is Sakurai Minami. It is a pleasure to meet you Minoru-sama.”[+]

“Oh, yes, that’s very kind of you. However, I’d prefer it if you didn’t use ‘sama’...”

Minoru was a bit uncomfortable in front of Minami’s nervous face and stiff body.

“Minoru-kun, unfortunately, this is in nature a custom of Minami. Will you overlook it?”

This way, Minoru didn't strongly insist following Tatsuya's humble expression.

"Ok. If you put it that way..."

In the end, Minoru gave in and the topic was settled.

In terms of age, Miyuki, Minoru and Minami all were 16-year olds, but in terms of grade, Minoru and Minami were first year high school students. In addition, It could be said that it was difficult for them to talk casually with each other.

"Minoru-kun... this is not a marriage meeting, there's no need to be so tense."

"Oh? That... I'm sorry, Kyoko-neesan."

"You too Minami-chan... Though it'd be unreasonable to act unreservedly all of a sudden, please relax your shoulders a bit more. Being so tense can be uncourteous."

"..... I'm sorry, Miyuki-neesama."

Tension remained between Minoru and Minami, with their conversation cutting off. It seemed to be a situation followed by an uncomfortable air and it was hard for them to continue with an easy-going banter.

"Don't say that, Miyuki. You have to consider that this is the first time for a 16-year-old girl to meet a male of the same age. Not being tense might be too big of a hurdle for her."

For Tatsuya, a way to lessen Minoru's uneasiness was coming up with pleasant banter, before a relative intervenes in front of guests.

“Onii-sama, I’m also a 16-year old girl meeting Minoru-kun for the first time. Would you mean that I’m not included in that category?”

With Miyuki’s sulking reaction, she again proved her oversensitivity to Tatsuya’s words.

“Simply, you’re not an average girl because you’re a sophisticated [+] young lady.”

“Oh, Onii-sama, the things you say...”

Miyuki easily recovered her state of mind and she put her hands up against her pale pink cheeks, while avoiding her elder brother’s eyes.

Then they heard a leaking *giggle* sound like the start of a laugh.

Minoru turned around and put both hands to his mouth in order to control himself. He felt their gazes and blushed as if he was embarrassed. Still, he couldn’t immediately stifle his laughter.

And it took him about 10 seconds to somehow regain composure.

“Pardon my rudeness...”

Minoru’s expression while blushing and apologizing afforded him convincing [*] attractiveness and gave an impression of approachability that was previously concealed.

“We as well, since my elder brother [*] joked too much.”

Miyuki took control of the situation by imposing all of the responsibility on Tatsuya.

Hearing Miyuki’s intervention, Tatsuya made a face as if it was someone else’s business.

“No... You Shiba siblings have a very pleasant relationship, don’t you.”[*]

“A too good of a relationship can be troublesome.”[*]

“I don’t remember it inconveniencing Fujibayashi-san.”[*]

Fujibayashi [intervened] in Minoru's talk teasing him and Tatsuya took advantage of that.

"Anyway, I'm a bit jealous of your relationship. I rarely converse with my elder brothers due to our age differences. I also don't have friends, either."

"Wouldn't you have friends in school?"

Miyuki's question might have lacked some consideration.

"Because my body is naturally weak... I'm often absent from school."

Miyuki made an expression as if to say "my mistake"[*].

Minoru attempted to repel the surfacing uncomfortable air.

"But I'm feeling ok this week. Oh, I know! Will everyone stay overnight today?"

"Yes, we're staying in a hotel near here."

"Why not stay in this house?"

Tatsuya hesitated on how to deal with Minoru who had an air of a child left behind by his playmates about him. He had a very likeable reaction, but improper for the grandson of Kudou Retsu. Tatsuya could not duly assess if it was an act or genuine childishness.

"Minoru-kun, please don't ask the impossible."

Fujibayashi came to the rescue of Tatsuya and Miyuki who had trouble giving an answer.

"Ok, let's wait until we are closer friends." [*]

After being lightly reproached by his cousin, -his so (ostensibly) longed sister, Minoru firmly nodded with a smile like saying "Oh, it's like that".

"Instead of that, Minoru-kun, what about guiding Tatsuya's group tomorrow?"

Minoru's reaction to Fujibayashi's sudden proposal was faster than Tatsuya's and Miyuki's.

“Yes, by all means!”

“Wouldn’t that cause trouble for you?”

Most probably, Miyuki understood that Minoru had goodwill without reserve, but he was the cooperating ally they just met earlier today. Persuasively, Fujibayashi dealt with Miyuki who sensibly tried to decline the proposal.

“However, Tatsuya-kun, Miyuki-san, Minami-chan, none of you are familiar with this area, right? Although Minoru-kun’s constitution is weak; he’s not vulnerable to disease like Itsuwa Mio-san. And also the Traditionalists may be lurking around on the locations you’re going to search.”

Tatsuya’s eyes started shining sharply.

While taking note of Tatsuya’s look, Fujibayashi calmly turned to her cousin stating "Ne? Isn’t that right Minoru-kun?"

"Yes. I'm often absent from school, so I have more confidence than my elder brothers on the details about my Grandfather’s work, Shiba-san."

“Please call me Tatsuya.”

“Please call me Miyuki as well.”

Minoru stuttered, belatedly realizing that he was calling “Shiba-san” to one person but there were two people there, so they noticed and let him know about calling them by their first names.

“Please call me Minami.”[+]

At this point, Minami wanted to take advantage of the situation and timidly be regarded with good intentions and not because of a strong desire for self-expression.

"Tatsuya-san, your job is to look for a magician of the Traditionalists?"

Minoru asked the question with a serious face and definitely not out of a whim. After all, he’s a 10MC magician.

“More or less, something like that.”

The given answer had a nuance to make it particularly different.

“I see.”

Minoru didn’t ask an unnecessary question to find out what was different.

"In that case, I think I can be helpful. Kyoto is the Traditionalists base with the largest concentration of them, although, Nara can be regarded by many as the main stronghold.

Tomorrow please let me guide your way."

Tatsuya considered Minoru's suggestions as very valuable. On the other hand, Miyuki and Minami had an expression of "Eh?" on their faces, so Fujibayashi decided to clear some of their doubts.

"Although the Traditionalists are one large magic association, it's not a single organization, but there are at least more than ten magician groups conforming a Federation, with each group having a stronghold. As you might recall, the 10MC have up to 18 divisions included, all divided into a total of 28, right? It's the same thing here and there.

Indeed, the two girls had a face as if they were convinced.

With the end of Fujibayashi's explanation, Tatsuya wrapped up their meeting.

"Thank you for your kindness. Minoru-kun, we will be under your care tomorrow."

This was a dangerous mission where there were expectations to deliver placed on the abilities of a 16-year old young man. However, neither Miyuki nor Minami objected to this arrangement. Not only Miyuki earnestly followed Tatsuya's decision, Minami also was indoctrinated into not interjecting on her Master's decisions or going beyond the role of a minute maid.

The next day, Tatsuya and the girls checked out of the hotel early in the morning, and again visited the Kudou residence. They sent their luggage straight to the Nara Station to increase their mobility.

Speaking about mobility, Miyuki was wearing skinny jeans which was a rare look on her. Furthermore, it was of resistant fabric more suitable for hiking than for walking around that village. In addition to her pants her top had a long-knitted autumn clothing instead of a blouse. However, that didn't mean she looked plain at all. Both her top and bottom were body-fit apparel which emphasized Miyuki's overall beauty. Not only her face, but without intensely focusing on her body appeal.

Minami also matched Miyuki in that department, dressed in a knitted sweater and pants. Still, there's no point of comparison. Miyuki is more girlishly cute rather than having a mature womanly charm and also she's a bit taller than Minami.

Just past 7 o'clock at the Kudou Residence, Minoru was waiting for the three with a face that didn't resemble tiredness or fatigue.

He didn't seem to pretend any toughness, as it can be said that his condition was fine.

“Good morning. Did you already have breakfast?”

“Good morning, Minoru-kun.”

“We’re fine, thank you. We already had one.”

Tatsuya and Minami replied in a row. As Miyuki anxiously asked a question, a small regretful look surfaced Minoru’s face.

“Have you not eaten yet, Minoru-kun? Could it be that you were waiting for us?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Minoru hastily shook his head.

“I was thinking to invite you to help yourselves if you haven't had your breakfast. In any case, I've finished preparations.”

“I see.”

A relieved smile spread on Miyuki’s face. Minoru only timidly flustered a bit, yet he wasn’t charmed by Miyuki’s smile.

“Anyway, come this way. I have a car prepared.”

The Kudou family’s prepared car was a limousine. This undoubtedly must be very common for them.

Though Tatsuya couldn't discard the possibility that it could be some form of harassment.

The driver was an elderly man. A bit similar to the bodyguard that Mayumi introduced to them some time ago.

Mayumi's bodyguard was certainly an extra number. Tatsuya glanced at the driver and wondered if he too was an extra number.

Tatsuya considered the possibility of Fujibayashi driving for them. As expected she was not available to do so.

It was unreasonable to count on her support. At that point, he also wasn't working for the military.

Tatsuya immediately changed his mind.

It didn't seem to be an exaggeration or a lie to say preparations were complete. Minoru boarded the limousine, followed by Tatsuya who sat across from each other, and Minami who sat next to Minoru. Even though Tatsuya and Minoru sat face to face, they had plenty of space for not touching each other's feet. This is to say, this was indeed a true limousine.

When Minoru boarded the limousine, Miyuki saw in his right wrist a general-purpose model CAD bracelet, partially exposed because his jacket was fit to his body and the sleeve rolled up casually letting her see it. It was unusual to wear a bracelet CAD on the dominant arm (during dinner the day before, they confirmed that he was right-handed). Minoru noticed her eyes were bashful and anxious about it, as if she needed to ask him.

“What is that?”

Upon Miyuki's question, Minoru rolled up his left sleeve, showing that he didn't have anything on his left wrist. When he uncovered his right wrist, the CAD was revealed. Minoru then wrapped the CAD with both hands.

“99 activation types just aren’t enough... I haven’t found an engineer who is considerably good at adjustments according to my style.”

99 activation types can be stored inside the generalized CAD. However, Minoru complained that he can’t get enough of the best usage for all that magic.

“Although it’s hard to operate a CAD with both hands, it became easier thanks to FLT developed thought operated auxiliary device.”

“Minoru-kun, are you using FLT’s complete thought operated type CAD?”

“Yeah.”

Announcing that, this time he showed Miyuki a medal type CAD by pulling a chain that it was hanging from his neck.

“This auxiliary device is a wonderful product. This development of Taurus Silver is no doubt genius!”

Minoru showed his longing with a dazzling voice. Miyuki nodded and expressed an “I agree” while concealing her smiling face. She was delighted in socializing about the praises of her brother while hiding the secret of Tatsuya being Silver.

“Everyone, how much do you know regarding the traditionalists?”

Minoru asked the other three as soon as the limousine started running.

A transparent shielding divided the limousine’s cabin and the driver seat. Also, voice communication could be exchanged via microphone.

The microphone light was off, but the car belonged to the Kudou family.

It wouldn’t seem likely someone else could hear their conversation.

“Minami-chan and I mostly don’t know everything you informed with Onii-sama last time.”

Somehow Miyuki thoughtfully returned a cautious answer. Retsu may have been aware of Tatsuya’s relationship with the Yotsuba, but the rest of the Kudou family didn’t equally know. Miyuki was thinking intuitively to the not so small degree of questioning. Makoto was the current head of the family, and it was known that Retsu was the previous head of the family. With this, Retsu maintained only a certain amount of power inside the Kudou family.

If that's the case, it wasn't a good thing to see Minoru asking for Minami's source of knowledge.

“I heard a few things from Master Kokonoe Yakumo. Ancient magicians couldn't obtain results without depending on participating in the former Ninth Magician Development Research Institute. [Afterwards,] -probably based on a misunderstanding, a group of unjustified resentful ancient magicians inconsistently united after the Institute closed.”

After Tatsuya’s words, Minoru revealed a bitter smile coated with spite and topped with a sarcastic condescending attitude. Just laughing not even raising an eyebrow of surprise. Minoru may be an owner of a “severe mentality”[*] or possibly cynically matched by his outward appearance.

“That is about right.”

Declaring this to this extent, Is this the Tatsuya we know of?

“They claim to be 'Traditionalists', but instead of magicians who inherited genuine traditions, they should be called 'Unorthodox'[*]. Or maybe, the most non-adorned word to call them could be ‘Outsiders’”

It wasn't the first time that Tatsuya heard this information, but he merely listened to it without chiming in.

"There are some who say that Ancient magic hid in the shadows from society until the study of Modern magic got into full swing. The reason was maybe that talented magicians chose to avoid persecution, but there were circumstances in which people in power didn't want ancient magic to become public. Also, magic used to hide material evidence is a strong weapon in the struggle for power."

"A deadly cursed tradition from the ancient times of the Heian period [+]? It's a common view also appearing in history books now, but is there evidence that it's a fact?"

"At least, there's a record left of ancient magicians that participated in the former Ninth Magician Development Research Institute. Anyhow, it wasn't a literal deadly curse directly making life activity stop, however, it's a demonstration record of a material remote control technique to drive a target into a hallucination to commit suicide with a knife."

"Was the killing effective?"

Minami was the one who asked the question with an unyielding voice. In Yotsuba training, she hadn't experienced a long distance killing where no counterattack or resistance was possible, however, she faced an incident where a partner was killed in the [training] process. Likewise, Miyuki had a feeling of disgust but she didn't reveal it with her expression. The only one who remained calm with Minoru's words was Tatsuya.

"The records weren't forged."

“Minami, Minoru-kun didn’t explicitly answer your question, but to some extent you should have understood his answer.”

Tatsuya lectured Minami but did not blame the former ninth research.

Minami had an “Oh no!” expression written on her face. Feeling shaken immediately turned towards Minoru and bowed.

“I’m sorry, Minoru-sama!”

“No, I was insensitive. There wasn’t a need to mention this story. “

The feeling remained stiff in his voice. Remembering the feeling of guilt from the inhumane acts that his relatives were involved in.

However, in addition to Minoru’s mental strength he wasn’t enslaved by it.

“Back to the main conversation. It doesn’t look to me like all members were involved in such dirty jobs in response to appeals from powerful magicians before establishing modern magic. Placing at a distance subordinate magicians from powerful magicians who learned magic.”

Tatsuya raised his question for the sake of advancing the conversation rather asking a question about if there was any significant truth to this.

“Yes. Famous warrior monks from Koufuku-ji and Enryaku-ji. Tatsuya as you say, after the Edo shogunate was established, violent aspects of the religious orthodox school organization were removed.”

“As you can see “sword hunts” were implemented. Strong political forces were not permitted to

have armed religious forces. Of course this was undeniable.”

“However, at the same time to turned a blind eye on the surface even if it was a necessary to have military power to have an established stable political system.”

“The Edo shogunate government was filled with various problems from a modernistic point of view. Because certainly for a time lost large scale rebellions.”

“And thus excluded are people who lost their work and went underground.”

That is so, scarcely there wasn't people who held the “power of Buddhism” used for combat among them.

“Combat magicians soon went underground not casting away any of the military power they held. The casters and their subordinates pushed back at the political forces.”

Minoru made out a big sigh. Letting out his disdain while showing his fatigue.

“The same way the ancient magic magicians participated in the former ninth research Institute. Everyone from ninjutsu users and various onmyoji from Tsuchimikado were dispatched. As expected didn't relied on disgraceful imitations.”

“What's the difference?”

“I think the difference is that you train to control your selfishness.”

Repeatedly blinking, Minoru replied back immediately to the question which came out as if he was speaking to himself.

You would think he would become bewildered by this in this case, yet his appearance was a bit more normal.

“...Sorry. I don't mean to stray off the discussion. It appears I still hunger for conversation with people who are the same age as me.”

“Don't worry about it. It's not like it was an idle chat.”

“Thanks. Umm, how far into the story might it be? ...Ahh about the birth of the Traditionalists.”
Seeing Tatsuya nod in confirmation, Minoru continued on with the main subject.

“Because of the sort of background they had. The base of the orthodox school in which their base are originally close to. Perhaps, sort of preparation of a place may have been better than the reverse.”

“Such as near famous temples and shrines.”

“Yes, that would be annoying to anyone who is seriously religious.”

Tatsuya and Minoru looked at each other and briefly smiled. However, Minoru's striking smile that was beyond the distinction of gender, although similar couldn't be compared to that of a manlier Tatsuya. An atmosphere of mystery remained about the similarities between the two.

“Everyone, I think we should go back to Nara Station.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Miyuki returned a simple reply, up until now Tatsuya was focusing his attention on Minoru.

“Actually, the place I went to is a short distance from the Kasuga Shrine in Nara. Therefore we can focus in Katsuragi by gathering for the latest information. Southern Nara region is surely the loyal traditionalist...”

“That’s right, I’m relying on you.”

“I’m leaving the decisions to you.”

Minoru took the three to a walking road called “Katsuragi Kodō”[+] located at the Imperial Palace City (Goseshi), to the southwest of the Nara Basin[+]. The most probable reason for taking this path in the middle of Ikaruga[++] was that there was no Traditionalist hideout around here.

“Katsuragi Kodo” has a boardwalk that takes approximately 6 to 7 hours to walk around with a leisurely pace, but this time they didn’t have that much time. Minoru indicated that [he had] a limousine waiting for them at the boardwalk exit, so he proposed that they borrowed a standup-type electric robot scooter as a way [to get there].

Although it’s an automatic type, to ride a 1-seater robot scooter, one needs a motorcycle license (this designation hasn’t changed since the last century), and a two-seat motorcycle license for driving the 2-seater type. Unfortunately, neither Miyuki nor Minami had this type of license.

No, for Miyuki it was certainly “fortunately” rather than “unfortunately”, since they inevitably had to borrow two-seaters, because Tatsuya had a large two-seat motorcycle license and Minoru also

[had] a normal two-seat motorcycle license, so the pairings would turn out to be Tatsuya and Miyuki plus Minoru and Minami.

“I apologize, Minoru-sama.”

“Don’t worry about it. Because I’ll be the one driving”.

Minoru didn’t care at all that Minami wasn’t as apologetic [as before][*]. Well, normal high school male students could have [an impression] of benefit for these situations. [But] without a doubt, even though not to the [level] of Miyuki’s “pretty girl” category, boys not considering Minami as a pretty girl should be a minority. [Anyhow,] no matter how [super, super] pretty boy Minoru was, he [just] wasn’t the [unkind type][**].

Then, speaking of the other pair.

A two-passenger robot motor scooter is a vehicle where two passengers line up standing beside each other, the driver holds the steering wheel for [maneuvering][*], and the fellow passenger grabs a safety bar attached to the vehicle frame[**].

However, Miyuki didn’t hold on to the safety bar.

She circled her [arms][*] around Tatsuya’s waist [clinging to][**] him[***].

The robot scooter of Tatsuya and Miyuki followed Minoru’s. They didn’t [advance] side by side, because Minoru was guiding, it was the natural formation and also because there’s some space that had to be left [between the vehicles and the sidewalk][*] to not disturb pedestrians. [Also,] you can say that [in this formation], Minoru and Minami didn’t have to see [the siblings] clinging to each other. [However,] every time Minami looked back and checked on them, she sighed with

an exhausted [expression]. In turn, Minoru who for the first time saw the siblings' physical contact looked undisturbed.

As such, Minami was forced to push away the mental fatigue by observing the scenery throughout the road-way.

[On the other hand,] if [we][*] talk about results, the search in Katsuragi-Kodō was in vain in the end. Although [we][*] say "in vain", Minoru mentioned about the high possibility that it would happen like this so there shouldn't be any disappointment. And of course, there was some time for sightseeing historic and venerable shrines with a touching aura such as Kuhonji, Hitokotonushi, and Takamahiko [+] which refreshed their [souls] (the reason it wasn't a search was that they explored magic from the exterior [of the shrines][**])[***].

Also, there was an unexpected meeting.

"Shiba-kun.....?"

A young man apparently a priest apprentice who cleaned the precincts of the Takakamo shrine[+] called out to Tatsuya. The young man had a white hakama[++] and wasn't wearing glasses. Other than that, it was a face Tatsuya remembered.

"Tsukasa-senpai, it's been a long time."

It was Tsukasa Kinoue, student and those days former captain of the Kendo Club at First High School who in April last year suffered brainwashing magic by hand of the Anti-Magic Organization in the "Blanche incident".

"You remembered me... No, I caused you trouble that time. I haven't been able to properly say sorry. I [sincerely] apologize for [that time][*]."

He replied and genuinely lowered his head. It was a refreshing mood compared to those days.

“No, Tsukasa-senpai was also a victim...”

In reply to Tatsuya’s [conciliatory] words, Kinoe shook his head in disapproval.

“It’s because I was weak that I [allowed my path] to be misled. However, I can say that I feel grateful for your kindness.”

Then, as if suddenly remembering he added the next fact in a tone without contempt.

“Also, I’m not ‘Tsukasa’ anymore. My mother divorced [and took back her maiden name][*], so I’m Kamono Kinoe now.”

“Is that so? By any chance, [is that the reason why] you’ve come here?”

“I didn’t [get to] know you so deeply, but you’re really sharp [+]. Because of these eyes[*].”

Saying so, Kinoe pointed to both of his eyes.

“You see[*], I didn’t know [the main branch of] my family until they contacted me. [Later on][**], some [complications happened], [but,][***] in the end I was [able to][****] study here.”

It wasn’t such an unexpected talk for Tatsuya if he listened to the circumstances. [First, Tatsuya recalled that][*] Yakumo mentioned before that Kinoe had an affiliation with the Kamo clan [+].

[Also,][*] the Takakamo shrine is the headquarters of the Kamo shrines [++] in Japan and also home of the patron god of the Kamo clan. [Furthermore,][*] the case of the Kamo Clan is

particularly mysterious in the world of Magic, where the main branch can take advantage of blood relatives of a non-main branch, -even those branches to the far end from the main-branch, and take care of their exceptional born talent in the Takakamo shrine. [**]

“I’m studying here as a means for expiation, to wash away all the impurity that my body got.”

“Is it like that? Kamono-senpai, please don’t say such [harsh things][*], don’t lose yourself [**].”

“Thanks. Once more allow me to apologize again.”

After saying so, Kinoe bowed deeply once again and returned to cleaning the precinct.

Tatsuya left the precincts with the intention of not disturbing him any longer. He returned to the place where the robot scooter was without saying anything about what just happened, but

Miyuki was [the first to talk][*].

“Onii-sama, [thank god] you’re ok.”

"Yeah..."

Honestly, Tatsuya wasn’t too concerned about Kinoe and didn’t need to remember about him until they met [in the shrine][*]. However, Tatsuya, who suffered the curse of magic, felt a [keenly planned][**] breath of fresh air with the [manifestation][***] of this young man’s effort to try to return to the right path without having to break his relationship with magic, since he could have had his life distorted because of magic[****].

After leaving Katsuragi Kodō, Minoru guided the group by the Kashihara shrine [+] towards the Ishibutai Kofun tomb [++] of the Amanokaguyama mountain [+++]. The idea was to lead them to the Traditionalists’ base, supposedly around this place, but the search ended in failure and turned out to be only sightseeing.

Then, four people arrived to the Nara Park at 3 p.m.

“Is there a magic association base in this town?”

“They say that inside the Mikasayama[+] mountain there is a large-scale base that could be one of the traditionalists’ bases”

“Mikasayama is a sanctuary, -better yet, a worship object, wasn't entering forbidden except for sightseeing through the limited scenic route?”

“The Traditionalists might think that this place is suitable for them because it’s a holy place and people don’t approach it. But, don't you think that one who properly conveys magic has the qualifications to [receive God’s blessing][*]?”

“Understood. A tree is best hidden in a forest, I think... Please continue your guidance.”

Always led by Minoru, the four got off the limousine and begun to walk towards the intersection of the ways to Todaiji[+] and Kasuga-taisha[++] through the Kasugayama boardwalk. Until the 21st century, there was a driveway through this mountain path, but in this era, there was only a sidewalk. This was because with the development of science and magic, the "fear" for holy objects began to revive. Is it possible that there was something left out of the scientific resolution that might have existed to help regain the piety of the heart? As an ancient greek philosopher said: “I do not think I know what I do not know”[+++].

The four walking in order, first, Minoru, leading, next, Tatsuya and Miyuki, behind Minoru, and Minami in the rear, one-step behind the others. But it was only when they passed the Ukigumo Shrine[+], a subordinate shrine of Kasuga-taisha, that Tatsuya and Miyuki began the mentioned formation.

For no particular reason[*]. Also, it can be daringly said that Minoru [started] paying regard to Minami.

“Ara, what a lovely shrine.”

"It can't be said at all that size does not matter, since when having the necessary appearance to deify a god, size is a great asset. It's because God has already decided the height and the weight."

“Heh, the things you say Onii-sama. Isn't that a bit disrespectful?”

“Is that so? Anyway, I'm not going to lie to myself to please God.”

“Fu fu, let's leave it at this.”

The siblings enjoyed their talk while walking. Additionally, the sister's arm held firmly the brother's arm and the distance from each other was approximately zero. Just in case Minami watched in the back, this would have made her very much say profanities.

Anyway, Minami was ashamed to look. Strangely, the impression of it being immoral and unsightly didn't spring out, but she only looked, blood went up to her face, and her body got hell hot [with rage][*]. Still, she couldn't get away from it. She looked down and endured the penance.

This resulted in Minoru getting concerned that Minami was walking with an [enraged] face.

"Is here also Edanomiya [+] of Kasuga-taisha?"

The cheerful conversation of the siblings did not interrupt, -not even with the remote possibility of whether or not they realized or knew of Minami's state.

Yes. [There are two shrines][+][*] where deities are worshipped [in Edanomiya][*], the Atago Shrine where the deity is Kagutsuchi[++] who will protect with outstanding virtue for fire, and the HijiriAkira Shrine, well known because copper were first extracted here in Japan.

“Deities in Kasuga-taisha include: Takemikazuchi no Mikoto-sama[+], Futsunushi-sama[++], Ame-no-Koyane no Mikoto-sama[+++], Himegami-sama [++++], right? That reminds me... Aren’t these four deities the same as Yoshida-kun’s parents' house, too?

"No, I think the one you’re talking about is the Yoshida shrine, but it’s because its name is the same as Mikihiko’s family name, right?, But they’re unrelated. Also, his house isn't a shrine.”

“Oh. Is it like that?”

"Yes. It also isn't a religious corporation. Mikihiko’s parents' home is a private school for the study of magic."

“...Oh, this is embarrassing. I was wrong this whole time. Onii-sama, next time please hurry and teach me sooner.”[*]

Miyuki sulked with a pampered voice.

Even with some reproaching glares around, the distance between Tatsuya and Miyuki didn't change.

Minami kept her gaze to the ground so she wouldn’t have to face the demeanor of those two, and also endured her desperate desire to block her ears.

Next to them, Minoru watched Tatsuya and Miyuki and their aspect seemed to be heartwarming.

Patience time was over for Minami in front of the boardwalk entrance.

Suddenly, Tatsuya stopped and lightly shook his left arm which Miyuki was leaning on and she released it immediately.

Tatsuya wasn't the only one who sensed an impact.

Minoru was slightly late [in detecting it], openly looked around to the right and left with wariness and with eyes dyed by a tender color, embracing a penetrating light.

The day was Sunday. A large number of tourists were also besides Tatsuya's group in the vicinity of a branching point that leads to the Kasuga-taisha Shrine.

But now, Tatsuya's group were the only ones left there, and little by little a silhouette was drawn from the boardwalk up to the entrance[*].

"It's... a Barrier of Mental Interference Magic"

Tatsuya muttered,

"Is it an enemy?"

Miyuki perceptively asked back [Tatsuya] while carefully watching the surroundings. Minami imitated that next to Minoru.

Tatsuya noticed that Minoru also seemed to have sensed some abnormality.

Odd thing that neither Miyuki nor Minami questioned why the silhouette was unnaturally disappearing. Particularly, Miyuki who has solid tolerance to mind attacks due to possessing Outer Systematic Mental Interference magic of the strongest class.

Minoru had the answer to that question.

“The casters of the barrier appear to be of high-level. They seem to have narrowed the magic output down to a minimum to make them barely unnoticed.”

It can be said that it's a limited concept to prevent reveal of the use of magic [since] magic acts instantaneously in conventional modern magic.[*]

Magic to delay activation of the magic record has been developed to the utmost specifically to control technique activation timing, but technology to hide magic activation only exists as individual skills.

Even If the magic power of the opponent is high, Miyuki has a higher power to invalidate phenomenon interference. However, without noticing, this time she was being gradually led to have some weak judgement due to circumstances where she actually got played [into the opponent's] resistance.

“It looks like this kind of technique is pretty common in Ancient Magic.”

“Because we modern magicians give great importance to the ability to properly use various methods to support various situations, unlike ancient magicians who tend to maximize the value of magicians with special [and] unusual techniques.”

“It seems the reason [for this] is the development of the use of special magic combined with secondary techniques.”[*]

Minoru's knowledge was helpful for Tatsuya in various ways. Especially, concerning knowledge about the Ninth Magician Development Research Institute on Ancient Magic, it was refreshing to hear a somewhat different perspective than the orthodox magic knowledge from Yakumo or Mikihiko. Tatsuya wanted to have an exchange of arguments in some more ways to draw knowledge, but unfortunately, this wasn't the time to do this.

“However, for Tatsuya-san to have noticed this technique so quickly, it has been a huge miscalculation from them, hasn’t it?”

Immediately after Minoru said that, there was a sound of leaves shaking in the forest close to them.[+]

“It looks like they are very confident about their ‘Invisibility’.”

The hostility that had been concealed until now revealed itself as a shape of four people surrounded them.

“[I know where they are], I’m going to commence [my attack].”

Minoru daringly voiced aloud [this declaration], as a provocation for the enemies that surrounded them.

It was a question of whether the opponent was short-tempered or if it was meaningless to hide any further.

“Minami!”

“Yes!”

At the same time Tatsuya ordered Minami to build a barrier, a silver light emerged to the surface. The source of the silver light that bordered outside the defense wall was either a thick needle or a tiny arrow like a metal dart bullet emitted by magic (a Flechette bullet)[+].

After doing preparations to generate defense magic at any moment, Miyuki looked for the position of the archer. However, when she found out the location, Tatsuya was already [on] the other side of the trees.

Subsequently, a scream broke out. It was a cry of pain due to a hole drilled in the body by Tatsuya's Partial Decomposition.

Miyuki thought that it was all right to leave that side to her elder brother and set up magic in the opposite direction.

Psion fluctuation, that is, signs of magic activation occurred right over the heads of Miyuki and Minami. Miyuki remembered seeing this many times, since it was like Mikihiko's speciality of lightning SB magic. However, it disappeared instantly because of Tatsuya's speciality of Combat Magic Information Body Decomposition: Gram Dispersion.

"Onii-sama, everything is alright here!"

In order to prove her own words, Miyuki expanded her Zone Interference. At first, she set up [a field][+] around her merely as a thin cylindrical layer, to not affect the magic of Minami and Minoru. Then, she stretched the force field pillar to the top and little by little widened it laterally and into a height that continued not disrupting those two. Then, she solidified the circular force field immediately under the surface level towards the bottom [of the pillar]. Thus, in less than a second, she built a Zone Interference field in the shape of a huge cocktail glass where offensive magic wasn't allowed at all from either the sky or the underground.[*]

"Amazing! It's like the Holy Grail."

Minoru revealed an exclamation, better yet, an impression of amazement. However, he wasn't only appreciating Miyuki's magic. He was walking apart from the side of Miyuki and Minami towards an opposite direction from where he heard a scream of an assailant who was shot by Tatsuya.

But before anything else, Minami tried to stop Minoru's reckless independent action. She thought something like courteously telling him to do it as Tatsuya, who at least quickly moved to the enemy's side instead of walking slowly to the front as he was doing it.

Except that Miyuki prevented her from [trying to stop Minoru][*]. She held Minami's arm who was going to raise her voice, and with an unexpectedly gentle [rejecting gesture with her head][**] signaled Minami that it was unnecessary.

Minami knew the reason immediately.

There seemed to be two types of enemy magicians. Ancient magicians not concerned with sticking to the tradition who adopted the concept of an armed built-in modern magic CAD that fires a physical weapon called "Flechette" bullet. And ancient magicians fixated to the traditional type who set up attacks with SB Magic [enslaving][*] Independent Information Bodies using Consciousness-Induced Outer Systematic Mental Interference Magic.

Tatsuya countered the former type of magician and Minoru headed towards the side of a latter one who was hiding. The enemy didn't understand Minoru's aim and also was in a confused state, but immediately after, they concentrated intense attacks on him. Maybe they noticed the hateful lineage of the Kudous, so [whatever it was,][*] Miyuki and Minami were completely forgot [from the picture].

However, all [enemy's] magic was unsuccessful. Wind, fire and sound magic went through Minoru and dispersed without exception leaving no damage at all. Also magic that could cause direct injury or inner wounds all failed due to absence of target.

"Is it an illusion? I can't believe it..."

Minami's mutter was by no means exaggerated. A magician doesn't have to be Tatsuya to be able to perceive psions like physical light and sound. The body of Minoru which got reflected into Minami's [field of] vision had the same psion pattern just as the real body which was walking next to her until now.

In other words, the person was certainly there, if recognized by a magical sense.

"Parade. The technique of the Kudou Family that incorporates elements of Ninjutsu."

With her comment, a shiver beyond praise dwelled in Miyuki's voice.

"Even so, this is amazing... This precision is better than Lina's."

"When you say Lina, you mean USNA Stars High Commander, Angie Sirius?"

"Yes. That Angie Sirius. Angelina Kudou Shields. We call her Lina. She's a gentle and lenient child a bit inappropriate for military personnel, but her magic capacity didn't shame the name of a Stars High Commander. However, Minoru-kun is technically superior to her, at least with respect to Parade. [I have to say that] the Kudou Family [is home] of such [powerful descendants][*]."

How would Minoru feel once he heard Miyuki's [last remark]? Maybe he'd feel praised with "honor", or he'd be embarrassed and say "I'm still far from it", or he'd express modesty and say "Powerful descendants, that's really out of the question". Or rather he'd be shocked that he was being watched. [Anyway,] he volunteered to be the guide with pure courtesy, so he wouldn't do anything against Miyuki or the others.

Fortunately, Minoru didn't hear Miyuki's [last remark][*]. His consciousness was 100% focused on enemy neutralization.

An activation sequence started on Minoru's right hand and it was absorbed in a moment. Due to the use of a perfect thought-operated type CAD, no buttons were pressed, which shouldn't give any surprise once that is known. There should be a special mention of the activation sequence reading speed, which even if it's estimated conservatively, it should be comparable to the speed of First High School former student council president Saegusa Mayumi.

However, it was still early to be surprised.

Without leaving an interval to be shocked about the activation sequence processing speed, Minoru released his magic.

With one step of his, the ground started emitting light. This was the Dispersion Systematic Magic "Spark". A fundamental [technique] that forces out electrons from a substance and causes an electric discharge phenomenon. The magic target is usually the air molecules within a narrow range [from the substance]. Although ionization of this nature is a relatively common phenomenon, it requires a very high interference power because the magic affects the substance structure altering it. [Also,] ordinary magicians have low density of ionization, that is, the best they can produce is a small number of molecules within a certain volume of gas in a very limited range [from the substance][*].

This is an activation against ground surface limits just about within sight.

[So, this "Spark"] has an electrical discharge range broader than the combination magic "Slithering Thunders"[+] that the former Club Management Group Chief Hattori Hanzou is strong at.

Moreover, as for the degree of difficulty, "Spark" is a better technique, despite Hattori's [magic][*] applies conditions like using a frictional static electricity discharge.

(Above Hattori-senpai and comparable to Saegusa-senpai!?)
As Miyuki watched the scene, she forgot to cast support magic.

Tatsuya looked with admiration at how Minoru's magic neutralized half of the magicians that surrounded them forming a [-supposedly, but accurately depicted] semicircular shape.[*]
In the same way, Miyuki was impressed as well about how [Minoru] made 'Spark', which requires strong phenomenon interference power to act on many target objects. But, [Tatsuya][*] was really paying attention that [the purpose] for this wide area 'spark' wasn't only for preparation to [bring the enemy into the open].
When ordinary magicians, -no, when first class magicians lack interference force, they use magic that would fail for [activation][*] as a sacrificial stone. In that sense, Tatsuya soon proved before his eyes that Minoru was sort of an owner of magic power that compensated his [extravagant] tactics [**].
To stop the electric current from crawling up their footing, the enemy's magicians used defense [techniques]. In modern magic, special conditions for the activation method [*] need to be prepared in advance when using a CAD to invoke magic for a detected attack in order for the magic to have the timing to not miss. Most probably, the SB magic uses a disposable artificial spirit

causing a phenomenon modification to cancel out the "caster's detected magic phenomenon".

Tatsuya guessed this ancient rite magic was called "Oniyarai-jutsu" [+].

In this case, the opponent's magic real nature wasn't important.

Magic was activated automatically, namely, "Invisibility", which was magic instantly released with the purpose of unintentionally hide the enemy's whereabouts.[*] It was clearly [for Tatsuya], to

know the place where the enemy was hiding even without the use of Elemental Sight. However, neither Miyuki nor Minami knew, and of course [not even] Minoru who forced this situation.[**]

Minoru's Activation Sequence in his left hand expanded and his arm [absorbed] it. He had mostly mastered the perfect thought-operated type CAD. It's a good thing for developers, but when considering that only two months have passed since the new product was first sold, in this sense, [Minoru's ability] can't helped but to be terrifying.[*]

An electric current flowed where Minoru pointed at. It didn't form either a luminous phenomenon or any sound of dielectrical breakdown [+], but Tatsuya who used his exceptional talent of information body recognition "watched" it. Minoru's magic produced the same effect as creating an outside interference on an electric current from his body and then poured it inside the enemy magician.

The sound of a human breaking down arrived to Tatsuya's ears. This was the result of an enemy magician being attacked by Minoru receiving an electric shock and losing body freedom.

The body of a magician is protected from the magic of others with an information reinforcement defensive wall that unfolds unconsciously. This does not change even for Ancient Magic

magicians. [In this case,] Minoru broke through the defensive wall easily and directly triggered magic into the enemy.

Even with the magic [Rupture], which Ichijou Masaki was good at, it was difficult to break through an information reinforcement defensive wall in an instant. Tatsuya didn't witness the scene himself, but knew about it because of a detailed battle report about the Yokohama incident.

Minoru's forte is Dispersion Systematic Magic with Electricity Interference, that is, electronic exercise and distribution. [As the circumstances show,] this magic is Minoru's specialty, so it can't be established that Minoru's interference power exceeds Masaki's. On the other hand, Minoru has managed to fuse the Ancient Magic and Modern Magic in a technique called "Parade" and that's why his ability can be said to equal Masaki's Modern Magic.

People fell in succession wherever Minoru pointed his vision straight on.

As for the enemy attacks, they couldn't catch any substance from Minoru.

Did the enemy finally realize the difference in ability that should have called the difference in the status quo? The only thing that could be seen was the shape of the shadow of one magician that hid.

He didn't surrender, because he still held his magic charms. He showed his stance so expressly, so he didn't escape. It was a posture to unveil a desperate attack, or better yet, to go for the sink or swim.

Of course, Minoru's eyes faced that man.

It can be unfair to call it neglect. [Minoru just] was not granted more chances to fight, because his talent was the very top-notch, except he wasn't endowed but with an ailing body.

The enemy that held the charms was defeated by Minoru's magic

At the same time almost simultaneously, a small shadow rushed besides bushes closer to Miyuki rather than Minoru.

It was not a magician. It was a much agile four-legged beast and considerably smaller than a human.

"A Kanko!?" [+] [*]

Whether Minoru's voice called for Miyuki's attention or reflexively expressed surprise, if it was a warning, Miyuki was beyond help. Right then, the small beast was to bounce upon Miyuki with clear malicious intent.

Miyuki watched the beast that was going to attack her without blinking her eyes.

"Miyuki-sama!"

Minami was the one that moved in that moment.

With the object shield that Minami set up, she sensed and started [to reflex] [*] that something had slipped through it rather than broken it.

[Then,] in order for Miyuki's body to be covered, Minami served herself as a shield for her Master.

That said, Miyuki is taller than Minami. For Minami to cover Miyuki, it has to be in the form of "jump and push down".

It'd be unthinkable that Miyuki could have a fragment of expectation that Minami would come forth with this behavior, so she turned her back over at her wits end.

"Miyuki!"

Tatsuya cried out with an indeed impatient voice. But soon after, he regained composure.

Minami rushed to look back at what was underlying Miyuki to grasp an unexpected view of something really frozen.

What was displayed upon Minami's eyes, -and not being a metaphor but real, was the iced up body of a long small animal knocked down.

"It huuuurts..... Minami-chan, quickly move back, please."[+]

Minami stood up in a hurry upon hearing that voice. Miyuki's voice didn't have anger at all, but Minami's heart was just before a panic attack.

"As expected of Miyuki. Splendid reaction you had there."

Tatsuya approached and held out his hand to Miyuki.

Miyuki happily grasped her elder brother's hand, and got up with a move that hardly made her feel any weight.

"I'm Onii-sama's little sister after all. I must be able to do this much."

Neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki seemed to catch sight of Minami who almost fainted with strain.

Meanwhile, Minoru neutralized all remaining enemies.

Tatsuya left the side of Miyuki and Minami for a moment to search the pockets of the enemy they defeated. However, Tatsuya didn't find any clues to his identity by looking at his belongings. [The search] didn't depend on reason so much, so he wasn't disappointed. He just returned to the two girls with a nonchalant look.

Minami and Miyuki kept exchanging lines such as "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" vs. "It's ok, I don't worry about it." and "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,....." vs. "It's really ok, I won't worry about it any

more". Tatsuya judged that it was necessary a little more time until Minami could calm down and paid more attention to Minoru who walked to this place. Tatsuya was going to thank him for his assistance, but the one who talked first was Minoru.

"It is amazing, Tatsuya-san. To think that you have completed the enemy cleanup in this short time."

Tatsuya had a hard time trying to suppress a bitter smile.

"No, Weren't you the one who was amazing? My part was only to be available for surprise attacks, but you brought to the front all enemies that hid and had them under control."

"If I say that, I would be doing a foul play. Would you happen to know about 'Parade'?"

"Yes. But, [that person there][*] must be wondering, why do I know of the existence of 'Parade' and about it".

"It's confidential."

Minoru answered so promptly and with an expressive smile that no bit of malice could be felt. Maybe this was already known, but Tatsuya thought he had a face like an angel and also a good personality.

Tatsuya thought that [it wasn't certain] that he seemed to be prone to criticism and words like "You don't say" from strangers, [but then,] he decided to change the subject before falling into the humility of the loop complimenting each other.

"By the way, how long does it take from here to the Traditionalists' base? We haven't spent too much time in battle, but now that an ambush was set here, the enemy can expect us to know their hiding place. But even if we go now, I don't think we will find any clues left."

“Yes. In addition, we can't leave them here **unattended.**”

“Onii-sama, isn't it better for us to depart soon? We still have plenty of room to catch the train but being seen **[in this place at this hour,]** for too long **won't do any good for us.**”[*]

Miyuki called for Tatsuya's attention even if the reason wasn't being jealous that Tatsuya and Minoru were interacting on good terms.

“Yes, that's correct. We're done here today, right?”

“Oh, well, here I am.... Ahem, I know that I should mind my own business but, around what time is your return ticket?”

“It's for 10:30 p.m. We still have 3 hours.”

Because Tatsuya intended to take more time for searching, he took the return tickets on a reasonably later time. -By the way, the system called ticket always changes form but still survives in this era.

“So, what would you say if we go to an Onsen (hot spring)?”

“Onsen.....?”

Miyuki listened to the conversation of Minoru and Tatsuya on the side and after, she frowned her eyebrows suspiciously. Minami intended to do this in secret, but almost completely exposed to her companions, she opened her [sweater] neck to confirm her body odor.

This of course has an obvious meaning. The women were impatient and thinking that Minoru stepped on a landmine with their emotions.

“No, no, no, you two gracious ladies haven't been touched by any impurity or uncleanness”.

Miyuki pierced a look of “the moon in the water” into Minoru [+].

Minoru's whole body became stiff. The dignified fight of minutes ago now seemed to be just pretense.

Tatsuya probably perceived himself to have to pull someone's chestnuts out of the fire and only sighed in his mind.

"Minoru, that's suicide."

Tatsuya gave first a decisive blow for Minoru to behave more conscious of not extending damage.

"Miyuki, Minami too, please calm down. Minoru just suggested that if we bath in the Onsen we should heal our battle fatigue, that's all."

Beside them, Minoru was speechless of the way that Tatsuya persuaded the younger sisters with a strong tone.

"I think it's not a bad story. What will you do?"

"....If Onii-sama says so..."

Although not having a face of being completely convinced, Miyuki nodded, while, on the other hand, a dangling light of expectation [was reflected] in the eyes of those who would be charmed by her in the Onsen.

Maybe Minami was embarrassed [sitting next to Miyuki], because she held the sweater by the neck with her right hand.

Minoru guided the party to an Onsen location that was on a well-established hotel not far from the Heijōkyō ruins [+]. [It can be said that,] he was guiding instead of [escorting], as Tatsuya [soundly] insisted Minoru to be on that position, so in case of a surprise attack the party could flee leaving Minoru [fighting] alone. Surprisingly, Minoru's personality was of those that can be [compelled].

If Minoru hadn't gone with them, Tatsuya would have been in the position of getting dragged into a family bath with Miyuki. [It's not that he didn't want it], but it was [inconceivable] to be with the [two girls] alone in such a place.

In fact, Tatsuya wanted to talk [a bit more] to Minoru.

Then, without entering the hot spring in the hotel, [Tatsuya and Minoru] stayed in the guest room facing each other across the [tatami-room] table [+].

"So Tatsuya-san, what do you need to know about the "Kanko"?"

"I'm surprised. You have a splendid insight."

Tatsuya praised Minoru quite earnestly, so Minoru took it as a compliment.

"No, I just blurted out some word from memory [of a subject that I don't know much about and] that seemed to attract your interest."

Tatsuya just praised the absence of [perceptiveness] and chose not [voicing it] again[*]. He also decided to [delve into] the main subject.

"What kind of existence is this 'Kanko'? It's impossible not having seen or heard about a creature that holds seamless substance and that appears in the shape of a fox. Also, not an ordinary being is able to slip through Minami's guardian barrier.

For just a brief moment, hesitation was reflected on Minoru's eyes

"Do you already know about the 'parasites', right?"

"Yes. You know about them, too?"

"Yes. Briefly, this 'Kanko' is a familiar created with the same principle as the 'parasites'."

"The same principle...? Is it embedded in the independent information body of the beast?"

"Yes. Just after [a creature] is killed, [they] extract the information body and create an artificial spirit. This [new young congener] beast... [-better said] 'Familiar', is created with the magical ability [of the parent] embedded. This ancient magic rite surprisingly seems to be popular technology."

"So then, this 'Kanko' is [surely] some kind of created 'Familiar'?"

"Yes. But, Is that really what you wanted to hear?"

Minoru seemed to emit an air of malice. He really didn't appear to be [participating in the harboring] of the parasites. He gave the impression of being [cautious] and of only expecting to receive questioning from Tatsuya on the method for breeding parasites. Maybe it was misunderstood that there was an increase of parasites, [and with that, more] humans offered as sacrifices. [Anyhow with this,] tension could reveal the [explicit] aspect of something increasingly superhuman.

However, this wasn't Tatsuya's impression. Because he was accustomed to the superhuman good looks, he really didn't feel any particular pressure.

"No, this is enough for now."

All the suspicious hints on Minoru's face disappeared after getting caught by surprise with Tatsuya's response. He was 'pushed' to give out an innocent voice after this.

"Ss... Sorry about that."

A somehow distorted laughter attack struck Minoru and he couldn't stop it. That was the kind of fellow he happened to be.

“You know what, Tatsuya-san, what can I say, you really are a profound person. I understand now why Grandfather has taken interest in you.”

“No. I’m just an ordinary person.”

Minoru’s laughter continued, with the idea of directing an objection to Tatsuya who as a human being had a dazzling mind.

Right after being guided to their room, Miyuki and Minami decided to go to the Onsen, particularly the big communal bath.

There wasn’t any request from Miyuki for Tatsuya to [accompany them][*]. [On the other hand,] since Miyuki was just too [inquisitive], there wasn’t any [specific] need to hide the ‘talk’ about the ‘Kanko’.[**]

[In the end,] it seemed like a correct choice to make this decision. Also, the Onsen unexpectedly provided comfortable and pleasant feelings for the bath.

The communal bath was quite crowded in its own way. As usual in this date, there wasn’t anyone exposed naked in public. There was a partition to separate the booth to wash the body and the plunge bathtub with the hot water. This was a long-established rather quiet hotel, and despite a considerable number of adults were there, it can be said that the exposure for the people in the bath was controlled, -in fact, censored. Still, Miyuki caught everybody's eye.

There wasn’t any mixed bathing in this place, explicitly only bathing for people of the same sex. Additionally, women present this time were mostly adult and some elderly too. Nevertheless, when Miyuki appeared beside the bathtub, all eyes of the visitors turned simultaneously onto her, putting some quietness in the room as if time stopped at all.

Then, as soon as her white foot was quietly immersed in the hot water, a deep sigh leaked out of nowhere and afterwards time begun to advance again.

Next, Miyuki started to slowly submerge and [the hot water] gently quivered her bathrobe against her body. It wasn't just one or two that felt that a celestial maiden with the robe of an angel [had just descended][*].

Miyuki felt very comfortable and exhaled a captivating sigh. But instead of an exhaling, it sounded as an inhaling. [*]

[Suddenly,] a rough wave hit the surface of the hot water[*]. There were two women that looked like twenty year olds who slightly startled in commotion and immediately got out of the bathroom. This didn't [purposefully][**] mean that the two women provoked one or two people to leave, but [***] without noticing, Miyuki and Minami were left alone in the spring.

“What on earth would have happened, everyone?”

[After Miyuki's words,] Minami secretly exhaled a sigh next to her dazzling [companion].

Minami understood very well the feelings [of the women who left]. Likewise regarding real feelings, Minami also didn't want to take a bath with Miyuki. It was only after she joined the bath that she casually noticed. As if stimulating the inferiority complex of a woman, even her identity was so shaken that she wanted to run away the scene.

This might be no longer [relevant]... [*] but Minami has even become attached to such off the mark concern.

“Well, this is [perfect]. This way we can easily be more relaxed.”

Minami regrettably agreed with this opinion. When Miyuki attracts attention, Minami who is beside her necessarily needs to fit into the picture. Minami is not used to being gazed at unlike Miyuki. She certainly is a beautiful girl, but she does not have the extremely good looks seizing all eyes of the same sex as well as the opposite one. Actually, the fact that just the two of them became alone in the bath somewhat relieved Minami.

“Yes. This is really nice...”

Following that, Miyuki sighed.

Minami's body trembled with fear instead of surprise [+]

"Ara? What happened Minami-chan? Are you cold ?... Is it possible that the water has become chillier?"

Minami wasn't cold at all. On the contrary, she was kind of burning.

"I better immerse a bit more. The thing is that my body [does not much abide by this kind of temperature] and it was already heated enough."[*]

It was a misunderstanding. Actually, Minami wanted to leave the hot water immediately. But she couldn't oppose Miyuki's wishes just like that. So, [understanding Miyuki's hint] and feeling the pressure, Minami immersed her body in the water.

Miyuki smiled looking satisfied seeing a diligent Minami who immersed in the hot water. But Minami's consciousness shook with dizziness [+]. **No matter who one is, if a hot bath is too long, one will be affected with hot water fatigue.**

Tatsuya left the hotel, alongside Miyuki who looked absolutely refreshed and Minami who for some reason had an exhausted face. Actually, the [fare they applied] had dinner included, but it was late and they didn't have enough time for it.

[Later,] in front of the station, Minoru saw with sorrow eyes the parting of [Tatsuya and the two girls], who were about to leave in a limousine.

"Today was really fun."

As usual, what Minoru said was not put into courteous words.

"No. We're the ones grateful for your help."

Tatsuya replied on behalf of the three.

Minoru turned towards Tatsuya with eyes like a puppy this time. This was an expression that would make a woman of marriage age lose sanity.

“Can we meet again later?”

“I’d say that the mission is not over yet, soon [we’ll meet] and that time we’ll be under your care again.”

“I’d be glad to! Please let me know of anything I can assist. If it is something within my capability, I’ll be glad in lending you a hand..

“Thank you. So, we’ll be seeing you later.”

“Yes. Until the time we see each other again.”

Tatsuya and the girls parted from Minoru while exchanging a farewell with the promise of meeting again.



As the three returned to Tokyo, they dined out before returning home. Tatsuya went to his room and entered on his personal terminal instead of the home terminal. He immediately noticed a message on the [answering machine][*]. The sender of the message was Fujibayashi.

Even though he thought that there were lots of opportunities to contact her recently, [he decided this time was proper] to call her on her private number. [*]

“Ah, Tatsuya-kun? Welcome back.”

It was a strange feeling to be called “Welcome back”[+] on a call. Even today, when the addressee was on the other side of the video.

“I apologize for calling this late. Is Fujibayashi-san still at the Kudou’s residence?”

This question was [quite relevant], since Fujibayashi was present when Tatsuya was meeting [Kudou Retsu].

“Yeah, you’re quite perceptive.”

“I’m just guessing ” [*][**]

“Ara, Is that so? Since it's Tatsuya-kun, I thought you'd surely hack some local connection to obtain information.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have the ‘information gathering’ skill set that Fujibayashi-san has. Besides, [I have a question] about the message I just received [*]. What was ‘that’ of today [specifically]**)?”

‘That’. Even though Tatsuya didn’t express his awareness with any weird meaning, Fujibayashi laughed without emitting any sound.

Right. About 'that'...

She used the same word, before following up with the details.

“It’s about the ‘bunch’ that attacked Tatsuya’s group this evening.”

Fujibayashi easily expressed the word that Tatsuya made ambiguous.

Tatsuya didn't raise any complaint about what was mentioned. [On the other hand,] Fujibayashi didn't worry about any eavesdropping, as the safety of the connection was guaranteed.

“Do you know their identity?”

“Yes, though I think it was quite evident.”

“Magicians from the ancient faction of the Traditionalists”.

“Well, you already knew”.

Fujibayashi replied with an apathetic voice to Tatsuya’s correct answer.

“Still, I'm sure this is not the end, right?”

Tatsuya asked confidently Fujibayashi. However, if that's all there to it, she wouldn't go so far as to ask Tatsuya to return her call.

“You’re right. It’s no doubt that the ‘bunch’ that attacked you guys was an execution unit from the Traditionalists and also they involved a monk that was exiled from [the continent][*].”

With this comment, Fujibayashi made a somewhat disagreeable face.

“For the development of the Parasite Dolls, the Kudou involved the presence of this monk who also was protected by them. I knew this monk rushed back to the Traditionalists hideout, but it’s surprising to have found him in this place this time.”

Isn't that to be expected?”

“Well, that's right...”

Following Tatsuya’s comment, Fujibayashi nodded with a sour face as if pained by a bug bite.

“They invited a magician with a high potential of becoming their enemy to the faction, instilled him with fear to do their covert operations, and now they let him escape... Additionally, he was an accomplice to attack civilians, on top of that, minors. [+] I wonder what the hell did the Kudou Clan think for doing this.”

“Even if we put aside the attack on the minors, attacking civilians is unheard of. Anyway, Minorukun was also attacked in the 9SC race, so at least I don't intend to put the blame solely on Kudou Clan.”

“Well, you’re right... It can’t be helped now.”

Fujibayashi somewhat shook her neck with her comment. Also, with the intent of changing the mood she also hand-combed her slightly flustered hair.

“I wanted you to call me because I had to apologize for another matter.”

“Apologize to me, you say?”

“Yes. The thing is that I should have called you [before you did], but I didn’t know when you were going to do it.”

“I don’t mind about it. By the way, you were saying something about an apology?”

Tatsuya did not [feign] ignorance, he really had no idea about it. [In contrast,] interestingly in its own way, Fujibayashi [was wearing] a very uncomfortable face, as if she was expecting [Tatsuya’s remark].

“Actually, it’s a matter about today’s attack incident... This matter has become competency of the unit in charge of the information gathering.”

Suddenly, Fujibayashi’s tone changed to a more formal one from a military officer.

“Is that so? Lieutenant, then how that would concern me?”

By making an effort to make a “poker face” expression, Fujibayashi prepared to answer Tatsuya’s question.

“In sum up, the 101 unit cannot intervene on this case. Needless to say, the Independent Magic Battalion cannot provide you any help”.

Unfortunately, the ‘poker face’ did not come up until the statement was said.

“Sorry about that, Tatsuya-kun”

Fujibayashi apologized to Tatsuya with a truly pitiable expression.

“We have only taken advantage of you when we needed you, but we cannot provide the help you need at critical times.”

However, Tatsuya didn’t quite understand to satisfaction what was what she was worrying about.

“Lieutenant, I think you shouldn’t worry about this matter this much. For the concern that you say that you have taken advantage of me, [on the contrary, I think that] you have lent me your hand in many ways.”

“Except that the situation is different from before. This time Tatsuya-kun [himself] has been completely [marked].”

“It’s neither the fault of you Lieutenant, nor the fault of the Major. Even if there existed any reason, I wouldn’t put any inconvenience to the unit.”

Anxiety emerged in Fujibayashi’s face. She could feel Tatsuya’s thoughts of his own personal safety didn’t matter to him.

“Hey...”

Her tone returned from “Fujibayashi the Lieutenant” to “Fujibayashi the [informal] individual”.

“Couldn’t you ask Yakumo-sensei for his help?”

Tatsuya faced Fujibayashi’s questioning expression on the screen.

“I have already asked Master for his help. [Particularly,] I have asked to secretly watch my school friends’ surroundings.”

“I wasn’t referring to that.”

Apart from impatient, Fujibayashi seemed to start to feel a bit irritated.

“What about asking for your own personal protection? If not, even if you don’t want protection for your own, at least for Miyuki-san and Minami-chan.”

In fact, Fujibayashi was a little frustrated with Tatsuya who didn’t follow [the real meaning of] her concern.

“Lieutenant Fujibayashi might forget, but Miyuki is already well protected because Minami and I are her official guardians.”

Whatever Fujibayashi reflexively started expressing, Tatsuya was ready to [scrutinize it] over the [screen].

“Moreover, I’m not going to involve Master in this affair for any other matter.”

“Why?”

Fujibayashi asked with a tone embracing regained usual composure.

“The relationship of the Kudou, the Traditionalists, and Master is very deep. The more Master is involved, there’s a possibility that Master’s Ninjitsu disciples could cause a mishap. With this, most probably, [the ones at the Hieizan temple] will move. If that happens, a civil war will come to life. Probably, [the Master Clans] might not have control over this.”

[Tatsuya] probably did not consider all these possibilities. He [designed] them as an insurance to prevent any refuting counter-argument from Fujibayashi.

“If anything like this happens, it will needlessly give the chance [to act] to those that are sponsoring the [runaway] Zhou Gongjin.”

“...Did you say that there is a mastermind?”

“That would be very likely.”

After Tatsuya’s remark, Fujibayashi remained lost in thought on the other side of the screen.

“Well, whether the maneuver achieves that the top brass of [Zhou Gongjin’s] organization marches into the field for the final stage, or pushes them into a critical situation... Tatsuya-kun you really think this Zhou Gongjin is not the ‘Mastermind’?”

“The talk about if he’s the ‘Mastermind’ is easy. I should locate his whereabouts and then take care of him. The problem lies with the outcome of this [because it’s like] increasing the overall risk in an attempt to reduce the risk associated [with his capture], -which I think from my point of view it’s a foolish plan...” [*]

“...And of course, I think it’s of priority to think about the safety of oneself...”

“...Lieutenant Fujibayashi”

Fujibayashi lowered her eyes upon Tatsuya’s criticizing.

“Ok I understand. However, if you feel that the things get really dangerous, contact me immediately without doubt. This is because taking action for securing the life of a member in a military unit is allowed by the military discipline.”

“Roger that.”

Tatsuya responded with a hand salute. [It has to be noted,] that this wasn't done as sarcasm, but rather to make his declaration of intention as a member of a military unit and also to make Fujibayashi reassured of this intent.