
A Certain Magical Index
NT
4
Kazuma Kamachi
illustration by
Kiyotaka Haimura


"Nobody's here, but that just makes it even creepier, doesn't it?"
Girl in maid clothes from Academy City who's looking for someone
Mari Kumokawa
"…All right. Outfit looks perfect."
Contestant in Natural Selector, a martial arts tournament sponsored by the Anti-Academy City Science Guardians
Saflee Opendays
"I need to find a way to lift the Koga up, and I will."
Kunoichi participating in Natural Selector to win a treasure
Shuri Oumi
A Certain Magical Index
NT
4
KAZUMA KAMACHI


ILLUSTRATION BY
KIYOTAKA HAIMURA

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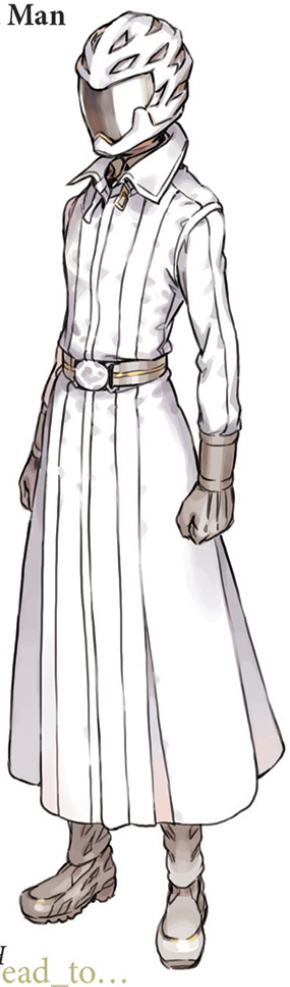
CHAPTER n *EVEN IF THERE IS DEATH*

SERIOUS DAMAGE

“And to be honest, fighting you wouldn’t benefit me. I’m specialized for Kiharas, after all.”

Mysterious figure observing the fight between the Kiharas and Gremlin

Helmeted Man



Dead_to…

ru9ni1bkakersa991ma


"They should have just kept it simple. I *wish* they had just kept it simple."
Sorcerer and official member of Gremlin, an organization fusing science and magic
Sigyn
"Is this *seriously* it...? I've heard so much about Academy City... I'm a little disappointed, to be honest. How did you all actually win World War III?"
Dvergr and official member of Gremlin, an organization fusing science and magic
Marianne Sringeneier
"I don't care much one way or another, so long as it hurts Academy City."
Sorcerer and official member of Gremlin, an organization fusing science and magic
Utgardaloki


"Oh no. You've... Well, you've found me out, haven't you? You leave me no choice!"
A member of the Kihara family who presides over resignation
Byouri Kihara
"Huh? Who are you?"
A girl who doesn't receive passing marks as a Kihara
Enshuu Kihara
"Okey dokey! Let's start the killing, heh! With some Russian roulette! It'll be a bit irregular, but let's do it!"
A member of the Kihara family who presides over physical experiences
Ransuu Kihara

A Certain Magical Index NT

VOLUME 4

KAZUMA KAMACHI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KIYOTAKA HAIMURA

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NEW YORK

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A Certain Magical Index NT
VOLUME 4
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Translation by Alice Prowse
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Afterword
Yen Newsletter

Just three from Kihara.
Just three from Gremlin.
And a terrible disaster that encompasses far more than just them.

The Opening of the

Martial Arts Tournament

NATURAL SELECTOR

Sponsored by the Anti-Academy City Science Guardians

MAIN.01

Starting on November 13, the twenty-seven companies in the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians will be hosting a martial arts tournament in Baggage City in Eastern Europe.

The rules are as follows:

Contestants will contend for victory in a tournament of one-on-one fights.

The arena will be a circular stage thirty meters in diameter, and all entrances will be closed off when a match begins, preventing any means of escape. While you will not be penalized for destroying walls with your attacks, if you use the holes to exit the venue, you will be disqualified.

To win, you must either knock out your opponent or force them to signal their surrender. Victors will not be punished if they happen to kill their opponent in the process of knocking them out.

Each match will last fifteen minutes with no breaks. If this time elapses without a winner, the tournament's doctor will determine the victor based on the level of the contestants' physical damage.

The upper limit on equipment you may bring to a match is eighty kilograms, clothing included. Additionally, you must either be wearing your equipment or holding it in both hands when the match starts. Placing pedestals, tripods, etc. is not allowed.

The use of any explosives, poisons, microbes, radioactive matter, etc. specified in the Second Frankfurt War Treaty is forbidden. Weapons that do not appear on the treaty, however, are exempt from this stipulation.

Any participant found to be in violation of one or more of these rules will not be allowed to participate. Should any contestant be found to be in violation of one or more of these rules during the competition, their results will be voided, and they will be disqualified.

If a contestant who breaks one or more of these rules does not comply with the tournament administration's command measures, we will use the newest unmanned drones to remove them by force.

The contestant who is crowned Natural Selector will receive only one prize for their achievement—a Proof of Global Standard Equal to Academy City Psychic Power.

We know there are many who have had the misfortune of being labeled "unscientific" for simply engaging with concepts outside of Academy City's system, like UFOs and OOParts. We feel this is an outrage.

Use this opportunity to prove you are the real deal.

SUB.02

“Look at this freak show.”

Schall Berylan’s voice was full of contempt.

A tall white man in his mid-twenties, he wasn’t a contestant in Natural Selector himself. Even being mistaken for one would have made him want to throw up. No, he was a security guard dispatched here to Baggage City by the twenty-seven companies that had broken off from Academy City and were now calling themselves the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians.

This was just a part-time job—one that came with a bulletproof vest, a carbine, and a few hand grenades.

“Did you hear? It’s not just UFO crazies—it’s also people who are obsessed with Atlantis and forever-alone types who keep talking about bacteria we found on Mars or whatever. The kind of nutcases who trample other people’s wheat fields and make weird noises at the night sky. Why ask *them* for advice? I just hope they’re not planning some kind of mass suicide.”

Several other security guards were here with him, all decked out like he was. They were on the interior perimeter of the domed facility housing for the competition, at gate number 17. The security detail would have normally been stationed outside the dome, but unfortunately, it was a white, negative-twenty-degree hellscape out there. There were unmanned drone weapons outside anyway; nobody would want to venture out unprepared. The execs’ brains must have been baked by their heaters and fireplaces, as they’d forgotten the simple fact that human body fluids froze at zero degrees Celsius.

One of Schall’s coworkers, who was also slacking on keeping watch, looked around nervously. “But the psychic powers they’ve got at Academy City are just as freaky, right? The only

difference is whether you can see ’em or not.”

“Basically, these people are all like skunks,” said Schall. “They don’t want to fight. Or get involved. They don’t want enemies *or* allies. Poke ’em, and they spray their stench everywhere. Beat ’em in a fight, and you still won’t be happy.”

Just then they heard the sound of a suitcase rolling along on small wheels. The venue didn’t have enough fluorescent lights for a building of its size, so patches of darkness dotted the hallway. And from the other side of the passage emerged a very attractive woman.

“Where’s the waiting room?” she asked.

“Farther down this hallway, Contestant Opendays. You’ll see another security guard—that’s the one you want.”

“Thanks. I’ll ask them,” said the woman before she whispered in his ear, “And this hallway is like a tunnel. I’d be careful—voices carry far.”

A few beads of sweat formed on Schall’s back. Nervously, he turned around, but the Opendays woman had already gone farther down the hallway.

“Fucking skunk,” he swore.

“Bet she heard that, too. Anyway, I’m surprised you remembered the name of a contestant.”

“She’s one of the relatively sane ones,” he muttered in reply. “Hey, let’s go somewhere else. We’re in the way of the freak parade. We stay here and some pajama fortune teller or bandaged-up blood-type diviner is bound to accost us.”

“Let’s find a vending machine with some coffee in it. God, is the heat here even working?”

But just as they all began to move, they heard a *squick*.

It was coming from farther down the dimly lit hallway.

They only realized it was a footstep after hearing it several more times, although it was irregular. Without that, they never would have guessed the sound was coming from a human.

But it was very strange.

The sound itself kept repeating, but it seemed to be coming from multiple sources. They would hear one *squick* from down

the hallway, then others from the walls or the ceiling, and even some that were right in their ears or behind their backs. Schall turned around to check behind him several times, but nobody was ever there.

Eventually, a figure appeared in the hallway.

The two guards couldn't tell if they were a man or a woman. A rag was hanging over the person's head, hiding not only their features but also their entire body. Did they actually have two eyes and one mouth? There was no saying for sure.

"……, ……"

The face under the rag stirred, producing a strange noise. Schall recognized it as something like a voice at least, but he had no idea what language the words were from or the meaning they held.

The figure trudged past them, their footsteps echoing off the walls and ceiling. Schall was proud of himself for not immediately aiming his carbine at them. Eventually, they disappeared down the other end of the hallway, just like the Opendays woman, heading in the same direction as her. He (?) was another competitor in the Natural Selector tournament—one of the freaks who had gathered here to fight back against Academy City.

Schall's coworker exhaled suddenly as if he'd just remembered to breathe.

"…What was *that*?" he asked, glancing around.

"One of the favorite weirdos to win," Schall replied, voice full of scorn. "Grecky Reletsman. People say he can use sorcery. Guess he's gonna pull a rabbit out of a top hat or something."

The martial arts tournament known as Natural Selector would start without delay—once all the freaks had gathered.

Unbeknownst to them, however, *something* had joined the fray—something that not even Academy City could fully manage.

SUB.03

Saflee Opendays was a participant in the martial arts tournament Natural Selector. She was around twenty years of age. Her shoulder-length blond hair and fair skin were distinctive, and her figure was by no means unattractive. She looked like someone who could have been doing modeling work for some magazine or other, but she much preferred fistfights to striking a pose.

In the contestant waiting room filled with lockers, Saflee double-checked her outfit. For a competitive sports complex, the accommodations were fairly austere. She felt a chill creeping up through the soles of her feet despite the heating—perhaps it wasn't enough to stave off the cold of this snowy Eastern European region. Or were huge arenas simply frigid as a rule?

That all aside, her outfit was another reason she was feeling the cold. While it resembled a deep blue cocktail dress, the material itself was much different, as was the sturdiness of its construction. She also wore leather belts along her upper body, restricting it.

The belts weren't some sort of trick to give her a tactical advantage, though. First, this was a martial arts tournament—meaning, show business—so the competitors needed to look at least somewhat striking. Second, the belts would give her opponent easy handholds with which to perform grabbing techniques on her.

Despite Natural Selector's eighty-kilogram armament limit, Saflee had kept her nonclothing gear to five hundred grams to give herself an advantage. Her only gear was a pair of fingerless urethane gloves that would keep her from hurting her fists when she threw a punch.

"…All right. Outfit looks perfect," she murmured.

Talking to oneself was the prime example of mental abnormalities manifesting externally, but on the flip side, it could be an easy path to autosuggestion. Obviously, stabilizing your mental state was hugely useful when it came to sports and fighting.

That said…

"I wonder when that spiky-haired Asian is going to explain why he suddenly burst in on me while I was changing."

This time, however, it *hadn't* been a one-woman show—she wasn't just trying to get her emotions under control. She was actually talking to someone.

The spiky-haired boy hadn't been slapped and gotten away with an adorable reddish mark on his cheek. No, he'd been beaten to a pulp by the expert elbows and kicks of a master martial artist. He now lay limp on the competitors' bench, his face even more tragically swollen than it would have been if a bunch of wasps had stung him in the cheeks.

"…I-I'm Touma Kamijou," he managed. "Pweeved to meet youph…"

"I'm Saflee Opendays. My hobby is anything involving strikes. Sorry if I broke a few teeth. I can't do anything more than apologize, though."

"I, uh, fink I'm ofay."

"…You know, I've been acting cool, but I'm actually kind of worried about you. You've got some muscle, but you're an amateur, aren't you? Seriously, do you need me to call the doctor or something?"

"A-actually, could we just keep talking…?"

"I heard you while I was changing." Saflee leaned back against a locker, folded her arms, and sighed. "Natural Selector—or should I say, the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians—didn't just spring out of thin air. Someone is behind it. And you want to crush their ambitions and restore the relationship

between Academy City and its partner organizations. Does that sound about right?"

"Leivinia Birdway," said Kamijou, still mumbling somewhat. "She used the incident in Hawaii to strike fear into the leaders of those organizations, making them split off and go independent. I don't know how she's linked to the sorcerer's society Gremlin—er, they're like a terrorist organization—but I'm pretty sure Gremlin is gonna try to join forces with the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians and do something bad."

"And Natural Selector is the public portion of their scheme?"

"Yeah, probably." Kamijou took in a breath. "I don't know what they're after, but Natural Selector has gotta mean more than they're telling everyone. And I don't think it'll benefit any of the contestants, either."

"You mean they'll, like, throw us all into a big fridge to use as human experimentation materials or something?"

"…That might actually be possible."

Saflee was taken aback. She had only suggested it as a joke, but the boy had repaid her with seriousness.

"Not that I know what Gremlin's actual goal is," said Kamijou quietly. "But looking at Radiosonde Castle and the landing operation in Hawaii… No matter what they're after, the things they end up doing in public to achieve their goals will hurt a lot of people. I can't ignore that—not when I know it will happen. And I'm part of why things got so out of control, too."

He wasn't overdoing his explanation in an awkward attempt to get her to agree with him. Instead, his added footnotes made the whole thing seem strangely more real.

Personally, though, Saflee had her own reasons for taking part in this competition. "Why are you telling me all this, then?" she asked.

"No reason, actually… Sorry. I kind of just wandered in here by accident. Baggage City is one big confusing place to me. I'd accept any help you want to give, but it'll be dangerous, so I don't recommend it."

"So I shouldn't be in the contest, but I shouldn't try to stop it

from happening? Then what do you want me to do?”

“Uh, just run away if you could.”

“That’s the *last* thing I want to do.”

“I thought so.”

“I might think about it, though—if you can take me down in a single three-minute round.”

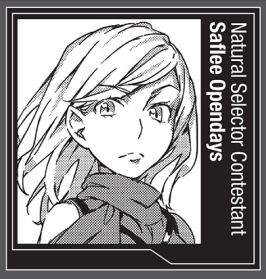
Kamijou quickly raised his hands to cover his face, having already been beaten up when she reacted to him entering the locker room.

Saflee grinned a little. “Anyway, I’m not with you or against you. I just have an objective of my own. I don’t really care if Natural Selector gets canceled after I accomplish it or if the Guardians get disbanded.”

“An objective?”

The shrill buzzer in the contestants’ waiting room suddenly went off. That was the signal to head into the arena—an invitation to a deathmatch. Saflee Opendays pushed off the lockers, her motions cool and relaxed. Then, in a leisurely tone, she answered Kamijou’s question.

“I want something—something you kids in Academy City all take for granted, but people like us can’t ever get, even if we try till we’re blue in the face.”



Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays

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SUB.04

Baggage City was formerly an average municipality in Eastern Europe. It mostly consisted of rectangular concrete buildings, and despite being located in Europe, it didn't come across as very historic. That lack of historical character could be explained by the fact that it was a relatively new city trying to protect itself from cold waves. The military had seized it during World War III, expecting its shipping capabilities—centered around its railroad network—would prove valuable in the conflict. In reality, however, the war ended just after they smashed up the buildings in the urban center to make room for the construction of military facilities, leaving their base of operations forever incomplete.

Under normal circumstances, the city would have been turned back over to its original residents. But that didn't happen. Instead, Baggage City changed hands to the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians in an opaque deal that seemed to involve the interests of the military.

The city's symbol was its four domed sporting facilities. High-rise buildings filled the gaps between them, forming a cross shape. The many goods and barricades brought in during the war gave the cityscape a strange quality, and there were also unmanned weapons all over the place that had been supplied by Academy City.

That being said, the original owners of the incredibly valuable city didn't seem to be complaining much. That, plus the dangerous weapons littering the scenery, gave the environment around Baggage City a disquieting air.

It was almost like the place was trying to confront the incomprehensibility of Academy City's science and technology.

…Doesn't matter to me, thought Saflee Opendays, walking down a tunnellike hallway toward the ring. *As long as I can achieve my objective, I don't care* whose *power I borrow.*

Saflee exited the tunnel, stepping into all the lights.

Boom!! An explosion of sound—the loud music the tournament was playing, the cheers of spectators filling the seats along the perimeter and the fenced-in outer edge of the ring, and the announcer's cries coming over the speaker system. The enormous din formed into a massive whirlpool that engulfed the huge arena, exciting the people whether they liked it or not… In Saflee's opinion, the vibrations in the air were not at all something an athlete, who wanted to remain calm, could ever be grateful for. However, the people creating the vortex of sound probably *wanted* to see enraged berserkers, not calm competitors.

There was enough space in here to fit a baseball or football field, but Saflee and the others would be fighting in a giant cage in the very center. The arena was a circle about thirty meters in diameter. It was quite a bit bigger than a normal fighting arena, but compared to the entire facility, it looked like a birdcage. Several gigantic screens hung from the domed ceiling, which seemed to be showing the matches in progress. The screens were meant to compensate for the distance between the spectators' seats and the ring, but their presence also undermined the event—what was the point of watching it in person if you still needed a screen to see everything?

The edge of the arena was completely blocked off by wire fencing, and the moment Saflee stepped through the entrance, bathed in cheers and light, a thick grated barrier dropped behind her like a guillotine, blocking off any avenue of escape.

Contrary to her graceful dress, Saflee planted her feet firmly on the floor, frowning as she evaluated the material underfoot through the soles of her sneakers.

…We're standing on reinforced concrete? Are these people sane? One throw would rip all your organs from your body. The floor itself is a weapon—more lethal than a clumsy knife or gun.

In the meantime, the roars of the commentator, who was firmly in a safe area, boomed out across the venue, amplified by huge speakers.

"We've already reached match thirty-five of the first round, people! And there are still over twenty left to go! Now that's a tournament for you! We're currently at the bottom of the bracket, so the first round will be the longest! Let's move right along to our next bout!"

What an awful performance, thought Saflee, knotting her brows in distaste.

"And there she is! Our next competitor—Saflee Opendays! The other contestants came equipped with all sorts of freaky stuff that rival Academy City's own, like ninja weapons, UFOs, and parasites. But this lady's different! She's gunning to become the Natural Selector using martial arts and martial arts alone! Is she nothing but a reckless challenger, or does the fact she's come this far unarmed speak for itself? It's time to see what she can really do!"

The stage was already blinding, but now with all its lights shining on her, Saflee had to narrow her eyes slightly and put a hand to her forehead. Still, the spotlights didn't hang on her for too long. Instead, they swung over to the other competitor stepping into the circular ring at the same time.

"Facing off against her is Orthid Flakehelm! And this one's your standard freak here at Natural Selector! Not only did he independently shed light on implant technology using aliens, but he also even implanted the stuff in his own brain. Will this champion of electromagnetic wave attacks win the day with his countless antennae?!"

While the shirtless man was enormous, close to two meters tall, his weapon would be out of place at both a martial arts tournament and a street fight. In his right hand, he held a silver umbrellalike object, most likely a foldable radar dish. And in his left hand, he clutched several TV antennae, which were easier to understand. He was also wearing a backpack, out of which extended several arms, with strands of what looked like fishing

reels attached to them. These metallic wires were probably part of his antennae setup.

With both contestants in the ring, the audience exploded into cheers, drowning out individual voices. But Saflee could vividly make out the nuance hidden within the screams. The audience members weren't just excited—there was a good amount of scorn in there, too.

...Can't blame them, thought Saflee quietly, opening and closing her fists. *Soon as you tell someone something wasn't made in Academy City, they automatically think it's fishy. And even if someone does accept it, they'll always reframe it in Academy City terms. Always pushed to the fringes, always viewed as lower beings by people with a standard deviation of fifty who pretend to know everything but aren't experts in the slightest... Yeah, I can understand them wanting a surefire way to turn the whole world on its head.*

Orthid started to aim multiple antennae at her, though what this was supposed to mean, she couldn't tell.

So I can take advantage of Natural Selector. By reaching the top of this tournament of freaks, I'll show everyone there's more underpinning this world than just Academy City. They drove us to the ends of the earth, but we won't sit there and watch. I'll personally rip it from their hands—a global standard for the world.

"I hereby declare," said Orthid, the expert of invisible attacks, barely moving his lips, "that five seconds into this match, the endolymphs inside your semicircular canals will be broiled by microwaves. Not enough that you can't put up any resistance, but you should be prepared to vomit. Don't try to keep your head up and endure it. I'll attempt to knock you out swiftly, but this runs the risk of blocking off your trachea."

"...Surely and swiftly, huh?" Clapping an open hand to her fist, Saflee smiled. "I don't usually criticize other people's styles, but isn't that just *dreadfully* boring? You can make it sound good—ooh, EM wave attacks—but their effects are plain as hell. And you can't even see them. There's power in something being easy

to understand, you know. Your fighting style is clearly unintelligible, though. Maybe that's why people treat you like some kind of fraud."

"I don't like needless destruction. I thought the world agreed the less collateral damage caused for the sake of a goal, the more praiseworthy the act is."

"Sounds like a stilted worldview to me. At least, common sense like that ain't gonna work here in our tiny little world—where everyone wants us to duke it out. And you imply all destruction is *bad* or something. Which is dumb. Treating everything like it has value will only make you a big hoarder."

"Are you telling me to take pleasure in destruction?" asked Orthid, clearly not understanding.

Saflee nodded, completely serious. "I am. If you enjoy it, then you start chasing the thrill. Then when you start seeking purer destruction, your whole world changes. You say you hate destruction, but that's like saying you know the owners of a big restaurant chain after eating some of their frozen pizza from the supermarket. Look, I know you didn't mean anything by it. But to be honest, it still pisses me off a little."

"What are you talking about?"

"What I'm saying is, the essence of destruction changes based on what you're destroying. Take babies, for example. So annoying with all their crying, right? You could wreck a giant robot or crush an entire mafia family, but if that crying keeps on going, none of that is worth as much… But taken the other way, if you seek the thrill, then no matter what you do, you'll try to avoid those things. That way, your destruction will be purer and strike people with awe instead of fear."

Saflee paused there.

"So I looked into how you *threatened* the doctor responsible for measuring damage to competitors."

Orthid's eyebrow twitched slightly.

“And I know how your *daughter*, who’s turning three this year, is being held captive by some profiteers calling themselves men in black, too.”

Orthid’s entire body shuddered. That could only mean one thing.

“It’s all just such a pain, so I *went ahead* and knocked around all those profiteers.”

Saflee Opendays pointed over her shoulder with her thumb. When Orthid spotted a familiar face among the crowd, he froze up on the spot.

“…But why?”

“Because this is *true* destruction. Didn’t I say? Thrill seeking. Destruction in pursuit of thrills can never become such cheap evil. Though I doubt guys who love verbal violence—the kind lumping every sort of destruction into one thing and mixing it together—would ever reach that point, no matter how hard they tried.

“Though this is right after I messed up big-time by getting peeped on while changing,” added Saflee, squeezing both her hands back into fists. “I gave you the tutorial. So let’s have some fun, shall we? It’s time to spice things up—with the thrill of destruction on another level entirely.”

The gong, in the form of a huge electronic buzzer, rang.

The two beasts possessing reason and intelligence were thus unshackled—then collided head-on.

SUB.05

Many sections of Baggage City were off-limits, but in one of those areas in particular was a single room whose development costs seemed to match that of all the unrestricted areas combined. The top floor of this super skyscraper was clearly a throne room, but that was only an easily understood facade. The many leaders and executives would assemble in an underground facility a good distance away.

Maybe Weissland Strynikov was purposely using this easily attacked dummy facility because this was his stance. He was in no position to whitewash, but he just couldn't allow civilian sacrifices in situations where they ended up meaning nothing. The place was contradictory in that way—if he was actually attacked while here, he would be putting civilian lives at risk—but that wasn't the core of Weissland's perspective.

He only wished to avoid purely unnecessary deaths. If deaths were necessary, the elderly man wouldn't hesitate for a moment. He also believed adding necessity to those who had already died was a form of salvation.

He was the administrator of Baggage City. The leader reigning over one of the three groups overseeing the twenty-seven companies in the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians. The "giant elder," who had a simple source of funds centered on food resources, who possessed an understanding of applied fields such as biofuel and microorganism engineering, and who had once supported Academy City before turning to those who rebelled against it.

"…While easily misunderstood as destructionism, it is still in my nature to want to avoid tragedy."

Weissland spoke as he sat in a soft chair in front of a large

ebony desk. The landscape outside was sheer white, amply demonstrating the special qualities of one of the most heavily snowed-in parts of the world, but the interior of the room was separated from it by thick panes of glass and filled with the gentle warmth of a heater.

“And yet all people oppose one another in their pursuit of happiness, giving rise to clear losers. Just like the competition happening now—Natural Selector. If we still wish to do something about it, then we must construct a doctrine that allows for such tragedies to occur.”

“For someone tryin’ to avoid tragedies as much as he can, you sure did pick one hell of a black box to gamble on.”

Sitting on the ebony desk was a frivolous-looking man with blond hair. A single suit was all it took to give completely opposite impressions of the older man and the blond one. Though perhaps the blond man’s stance of never taking anything seriously displayed his doctrine.

Utgardaloki—An official member of the sorcerer’s society known as Gremlin.

“The Anti–Academy City Science Guardians have a lot of power to throw around. Both in terms of fragmentary technology and in terms of all those unmanned weapons the city gave you, then left here. But are you sure you can use ’em all? Making the tech in your imagination into a weapon, researching and developing it, mass-producing it, running live tests on it, distributing usage guides to their users—that all takes time. You don’t actually think you’ll be able to deploy even those unmanned weapons without Academy City’s support, do you? You might be able to turn ’em on, but I bet they’ll just stand in place or waddle around awkwardly.

“That goes for this Natural Selector thing, too,” added Utgardaloki, without seeming to care much about it.

Yes.

Even if they were able to dig up *something* that could fight against Academy City’s psychic powers, it would take time to analyze it and create a system that would allow for its

production en masse.

Weissland seemed to acknowledge this. “Naturally, Academy City will not afford us the time. If they come, it will be swift and decisive.”

“Yeah. The city did entrust a little something to its partner organizations, after all.”

Not the unmanned weapons.

In a way, something even more valuable.

Something cheaper and more advanced.

A weapon—albeit one that was clearly in violation of international law.

“You mean the third-generation mass-produced military clones. If we could have captured even one of them, this conversation might have been very different.”

“But all ten thousand or so suddenly disappeared. It’s like they knew it was coming. And they staged that small fire in their old living space as a camouflage—all to use a powerful acid to deal with the specimens for DNA map analysis and electronically destroy the records on all their storage devices.”

“…I assume that someone gave a tactical instruction to them through their network. There’s no physical evidence, and the data was all lost. Independent research has been rendered impossible. Now that their sin of clone manufacturing was exposed, they’ll abandon the whole thing and brand it as one of their usual urban legends.”

“But Academy City isn’t gonna rest easy just from that.”

“…Which is why I responded to your initial contact. We share a common goal with Gremlin—to destroy the overconcentration of Academy City systems.”

“We’re not gonna use human wave tactics to run interference for you, you know.”

“Nor would I want you to. In fact, we would be grateful if you didn’t take any real action at all. That will spook them.”

Weissland spread out the pile of paper reports in a fan shape on the desk, like a deck of cards.

“And the more spooked the enemy is, the more information

they'll try to obtain before attacking. In other words, your inaction will buy us time. And once we have enough, we can shift into a combat-ready state. That's what we want Gremlin here for, why we're putting on Natural Selector, and why we're giving them false information by bringing in large quantities of empty containers."

"Until you're able to fight a war with them on equal terms?"

"No matter how much technology Academy City has, no matter how much they implement reused tech, they are fundamentally short on resources. We make known the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians' chance of winning throughout the world, then draw them into as wide a space as we can—by force, if need be. Letting their resources and foodstuffs dry up will be our masterstroke in preventing them from continuing a war."

"So you're going with fake electronic warfare?" Utgardaloki gave an amused laugh. "That's the kind of plot twist I like to see. It's why I came all the way here in the first place."

"It isn't what I like to see, though, despite my opting for this plan. I hate empty wars of numbers. By driving up the price of foodstuffs, we subject real people to starvation."

"And this big pile of paper is for all that stuff, eh? You know, everything would have fit on a flash drive the size of a stamp if you'd used the science side's recording media."

"It's a simple security measure. A meaningless one perhaps since others beside me don't approve of this."

Weissland had a laptop on the desk, too, but apparently, it only contained numbers showing where necessary information was stored in real life.

It was clearly inefficient, but perhaps spending paper resources was a concrete plan to save someone else from starving. Maybe there was a butterfly effect going on, and a long, seemingly unrelated chain of events would do the trick.

But now that he'd imagined it, Utgardaloki curled his lips into a scornful smile. "I've been involved with a lot of people's deaths myself," he said. "But I've never been burdened with

anywhere near as many people's fates as you are. Like, want cars to start running on corn oil? You'll cause several countries to starve. Try to stop it from happening, though, and financial difficulties could starve a completely different country."

"……"

"Can you even *really* want to save people when you're that tied up in their fates? I've got no clue what it must be like in your world, to be honest."

A mother unable to produce milk to feed her young, starving child and the hard fact it was more environmentally friendly to power machines with carbohydrates. The elderly man had a proper understanding of both situations, and his eyes were perhaps more fathomless, more filled with darkness than even Gremlin.

And yet he could still see a glimmer of light in the dark.

"I'm simply searching for how to use our resources fairly so that people can survive. Once, I sought that support from Academy City, and now I seek it from something else. If you knew how many people's lives ended with each passing minute on this planet, then you would understand there is no time to waste."

"Well, we can't do much. But if we limit the scope to just that, we should be all right."

"I can ask for nothing more. I'm not much different."

"I don't care much one way or another, so long as it hurts Academy City."

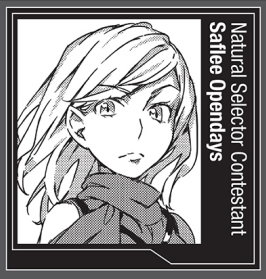
"…I doubt such a simple desire is the only thing that moves you, but I suppose each of us is using the other anyway."

As Weissland said that, a window popped up on his laptop. He frowned.

"It looks like I already have something you can do."

"A little more specific, please?"

"I'd like you to eliminate an intruder."



Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays



Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki

CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS

SUB.06

After getting beaten up by Monsieur Microwave's ferocious attacks, Saflee Opendays had to drag herself back to the waiting room, keeping one hand on the wall. The spiky-haired boy was nowhere in sight; he must have gone somewhere. She was the only person in the room.

Her first match had been hard-won.

"Turned out that guy knew how to fight," she said to herself, raising a plastic bottle of mineral water to her mouth. Then she scowled at the metallic taste and spat it back out into the sink. She still didn't know how an EM wave could cut up the inside of her mouth, even though that's exactly what the one attack had done.

...And my opponents are all gonna be that good? It's not my style to pay attention to how much of a beating I take, but maybe that needs to change.

She didn't quite have the energy to change back into her normal clothes, so she sat down on the bench, still wearing the dress she'd worn for the match, and took a deep breath. The Natural Selector tournament was structured so that all the matches in the first round would occur on the first day, all the matches in the second round would occur on the second day, and so on. It was set up this way to prevent contestants from having to fight more than once per day. With her first match behind her, Saflee was free for the rest of the day...but could she really recover from the wounds she'd sustained in just twenty-four hours?

Then she saw something appear on the lock panel next to an unfamiliar door. As she was wondering about it, she heard a pattering of footsteps, and several Baggage City security guards

ran inside. For all their hatred of Academy City, they acted pretty much the same as it. Given the wet spots on their clothes and the patches of snow on their shoulders, these guards must not have been stationed inside the facility. That meant they had come in from the blizzard outside.

"Are you all right?" one asked.

"All right?" Saflee repeated. "I mean, sure. What, will I get shocked from an electrical discharge if I touch that panel or something?"

"No, there's apparently an intruder. We're going around to all the leaders and competitors to make sure everyone is safe."

The spiky-haired boy and Monsieur Microwave came to mind. "Well, that sounds like a big job. Aren't there, like, a hundred competitors?"

"There are more of us than that, so it's not an issue."

"And yet you didn't respond to those self-styled 'men in black' at all."

"They're not the same, apparently. Broadly speaking, the intruder could be connected to Academy City."

"……" Hearing those stiff words, Saflee exhaled deeply in spite of herself.

Figuring it would be a waste of time to give them the whole destruction spiel, she once again turned her thoughts to that spiky-haired kid. How had an amateur like him made it into Baggage City anyway?

…Those "men in black" infiltrated, too, she thought. *Maybe the boy happened to find a hole they left open. If he waited for those guys to do all the work, then he'd be a pretty bad dude…but that doesn't smell right, either.*

And.

What was the reason he'd given for sneaking into Baggage City again?

No matter what they're after, the things they end up doing in public to achieve their goals will hurt a lot of people.

Saflee heaved a sigh. Then she slowly rose from the bench. “What will you do with the intruder?”

“Shoot them dead.”

“What should I do?”

“Please wait here until the danger has passed. We’ll be standing watch for you.”

“Gonna say this a second time, but you didn’t do anything about those self-styled men in black.”

“We’re not protecting you all to try to ensure a fair contest. We’re protecting you to prevent the *technology* that might be the bedrock of the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians from falling into the wrong hands.”

“……”

In her humble opinion as a blockhead who lived to test her martial arts against others, none of that seemed very thrilling. Especially not the part where these guys had to wonder if they should abandon someone in need just because they might not have a responsibility to help. People who worried about something so trivial would smugly tell her that destruction was a bad thing, and she always thought people like them were the reason the world was so messed up.

Saflee looked at the Baggage City security guards again. There were four of them, clad in military uniforms and helmets and holding pump-action shotguns.

“Looks like the wise choice would be to do as you say,” she remarked.

“You don’t have any reason to get violent,” one guard said.

“The thing that bothers me is that you’re wrong.”

And so…

With a chop to the neck…

With a fist to the center of the gut…

With a throw to the floor…

With some pressure to the carotid artery…

…she swiftly disabled all four of them. She put her hands on her hips and sighed.

“Isn’t it weird how saying you went easy on someone makes

you look like a nicer person? It's not like saying that makes the violence any different."

Even though the men were unconscious, she didn't feel like getting changed in front of them, so she left the waiting room in her dress.

"Yikes! It's so cold!"

The next instant, she turned back around and swiped the jacket off one of the security guards. It was cheap, but after being in a heated environment for so long, she'd completely forgotten how little her totally impractical cocktail dress actually did for her. She haphazardly pulled the jacket over her shoulders to stave off the cold, but that didn't stop her from hugging herself.

"…Shit. This thing's soaked from the melted snow. And they call this cold weather gear?"

She'd gone to the entrance of the dome, but outside the glass door, all she could see was white. Only the heated paths stood out, their black asphalt distinct against the snow. For some reason, the squarish concrete buildings lining the streets made the whole sight even colder.

For a moment, she wanted to drop everything and leave. But she couldn't afford to.

When she opened the glass door, she immediately regretted it.

"Nooo!" she wailed. "This is even harder than fighting military hounds! In fact, I *wish* there was a dog around—then I could put it in my coat!"

The boy had told her that he was looking for a connection between Baggage City's higher-ups and Gremlin. And without any hints about Gremlin, simple thinking would lead him to search the neighborhood of the former. No wonder he'd tripped security.

And so Saflee began her search for the spiky-haired kid. Her current goal was only to prevent him from being shot by security guards for sticking his neck into the wrong place. The whole matter of exposing Baggage City's secrets—what he

personally seemed to be after—was another story. She would figure out whether it would be thrilling or not, then decide. And so…

“Guess I’ll knock him out when I find him. That would be the fastest way—both to get him out of danger and to hide him from security.”

Saflee had come up with a plan to keep it simple.

She headed toward the closest off-limits area to the domed sporting facility. The place was formerly a resort hotel, and now it apparently served as office space for the execs. On the way, she used her fists to take care of three or four security patrols trying to stop her. Eventually, she entered the hotel from the commercial use loading docks and discovered she’d already caught up to the young man in question.

“Huh? What are you doing he—?”

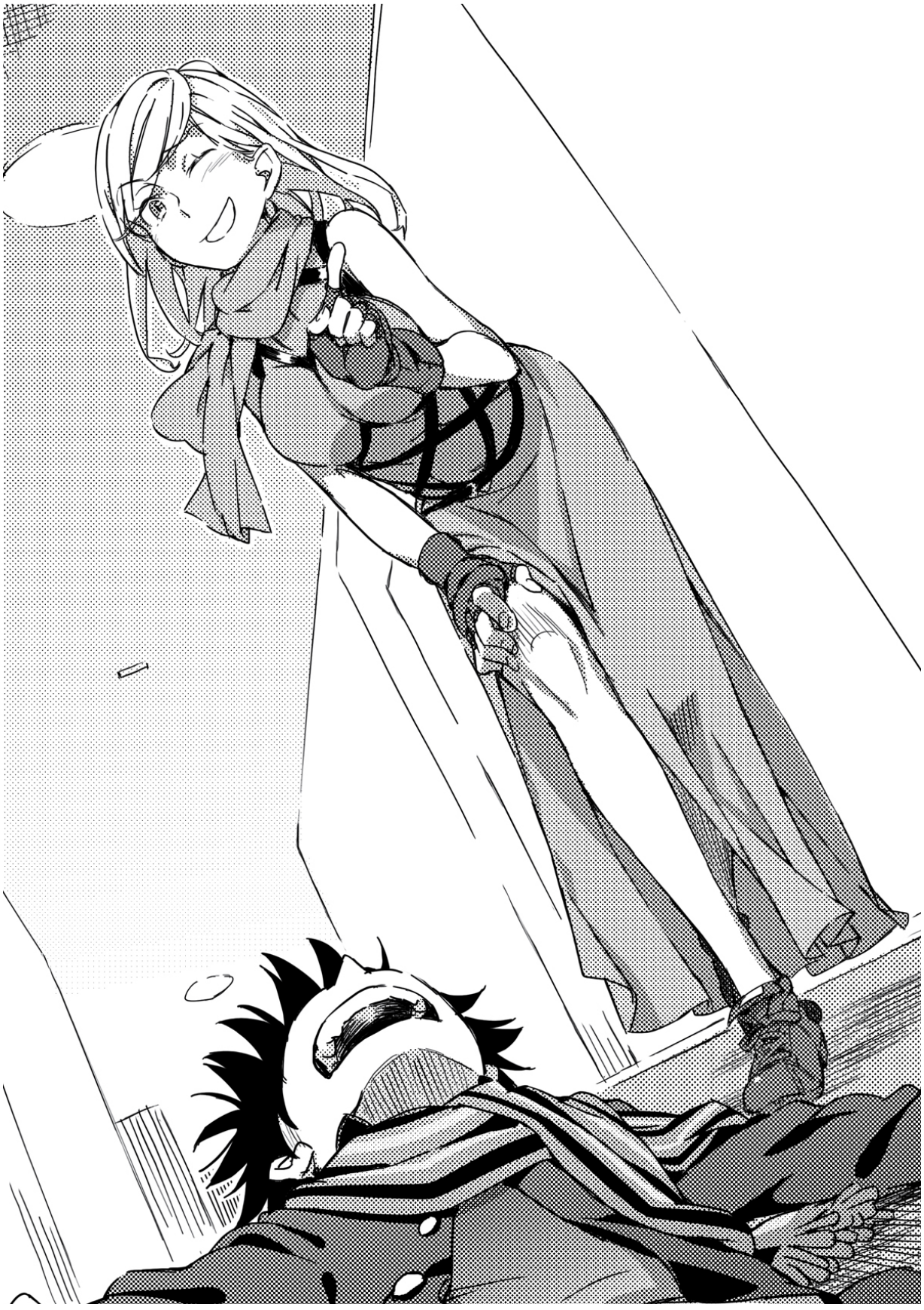
“Clothesline *boom!*”

With the same casual air as someone waving at a friend, Saflee immediately threw out a punch. It was an attack in bad taste—aside from its simple speed, she’d thrown it at the most surprising moment possible. Kamijou, who had taken the headless rider–level upper arm directly to the neck, tumbled to the floor, spinning and slamming into it.

As he lay sprawled out, mouth opening and closing, Saflee put up her index finger.

“Well, that’s just great. My hair’s getting a little frozen. You’re really putting me through a lot of trouble, you know. Oh, and you should be grateful that little number was all it took. I’ll hear you out on the details, okay? So let’s just get out of this area first. It’s off-limits… I can’t believe you seriously tried to just walk into the sponsor’s private area.”

“B-brph…”





“Did that hurt? Well, a 12-gauge wouldn’t have even given you the time to feel pain. Gotta be careful. Ugh. The *last* thing I want to do as a competitor is pick a fight with the sponsor. So don’t make me rescue you again, got it?”

Grabbing Kamijou’s still-rigid arm, Saflee began dragging him along behind her like a stuffed animal. Not toward the *mystery*, obviously, but in the other direction. She had to get them both to safety before figuring out what to do next. Avoiding tragedy was harder than creating it. She’d need appropriate time to prepare for her thrill seeking.

“Competitor Saflee Opendays?”

Saflee heard the voice of an old man, and her face instantly soured. She turned around to see an executive accompanied by several guards.

Weissland Strynikov. You didn’t need to open a Baggage City pamphlet to know who *he* was—one of Natural Selector’s sponsors. He led one of the three major groups comprising the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians. It wouldn’t have mattered if she’d already accomplished her goal but angering him *now* would not be a good idea.

“I thank you for doing your part as a civilian to keep the peace around here, but you’re trespassing on private property. How we deal with you will depend on how you respond. Is that all right with you?”

“…Are you going to ask me to hand over the boy? Is that the idea?”

“If you have anything else to make a deal with, then you’d best tell me now.”

Saflee clicked her teeth in annoyance. “I took him out. He’s not a threat anymore. But you still want to land the finishing blow, eh?”

“Should he be handed over *safely*, then that possibility can be eliminated.”

Personally, she didn’t have any reason to be stubborn about this Touma Kamijou boy. She had several rules when it came to getting her kicks from destruction. One of them went like this:

Never let it leave a bad taste in your mouth.

That was the premise underpinning almost everything. In all honesty, Touma Kamijou had been the one to sneak into Baggage City unannounced, so she'd have had no hesitation handing him over to the authorities, if not for…

"Is it still possible that once the handoff is complete, then the muzzle of a gun might be stuck through the portcullis *afterward*?" asked Saflee.

Weissland didn't answer that. However, his guards all took a few steps forward. And that frivolous-looking blond-haired man continued to grin at her in glee.

"…Great," she said. "This would have been so much easier if you'd lied and promised me otherwise."

"If I had, would you have lied to yourself and handed him over?"

"Nope. But it *would* have given me an excuse to label you a bad guy and beat the crap out of you."

"Then am I to assume there are not one but two trespassers on this property?"

"I mean, it wouldn't be a lie. So go for it," said Saflee, giving him the go-ahead nonchalantly. "But that would mean my fate is now linked with the boy's, so we'll have to run away like our lives depend on it."

"And what about Natural Selector? You came all this way—I know you must want something from winning."

"Then I'll put on my best 'mysterious masked beauty' act and dive right in. Ignore tournament regulations, stir up trouble—all that. I mean, I only have to prove I'm the best. That'll get me to the finish line. And there are plenty of ways to do it."

"You're a strong one."

"I wish you would have waited until you saw the results to say that."

"My last question to you, then. Is using your strength to help an intruder endangering Baggage City and the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians not a crooked act?"

"Oh? Actually, I think leaving this kid here to die would be

much more crooked of me."

A distinct bloodlust emanated from Saflee and the security guards. Common sense would say that someone holding a limp man in her arms wouldn't stand a chance against multiple people wielding shotguns. On the other hand, though, Saflee *was* one of the candidates for facing off against *the* Academy City's psychic powers. She was a freak, and she'd been invited here because everyone was hoping she could defy common sense.

However, before the two sides could actually clash, something else happened…

…courtesy of the fallen Touma Kamijou.

"…Gah…gah."

"?"

"You're wrong. I don't think…that *I'm the intruder you're looking for.*"

His remark was incomprehensible. Saflee had her attention on him now, of course, but even Weissland, who had just been dominating the space around them, was looking at the boy.

"I came here to stop that intruder you guys are talking about."

Eventually, Weissland opened his mouth to speak. "Are you referring to Gremlin, perhaps?" he said. "Judging by your actions in Hawaii, you seem to be on opposing sides. But our webs of interest are separate from yours. Whatever *their* ultimate goal is, there will be no attacks on the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians or Baggage City until it's achieved. And it's fine that way. Not one bit of me wishes to remain allied with Gremlin until the end."

"…That's not it," said Touma Kamijou sharply. "I mean, yeah, we gotta address Gremlin, but something else got into Baggage City already."

"I… What?"

"…Did you really think Academy City would sit around waiting for you to start doing things? Of course not. This is too big for the city not to come straight here to settle things. They'll

throw their best into this. Do you really think that's some high school kid who gets knocked out by a single clothesline?"

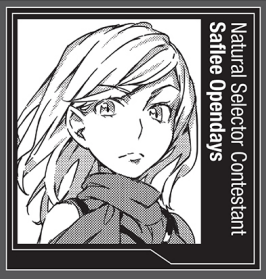
"……"

"They're coming," he said quietly. "They're coming here—your real enemy. Number 990910991, from the city's darkest shadows."

"…Eh?" said Saflee, looking at him dubiously.

And then, a moment later…

…they were here.



Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays



Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki



Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara

CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS

PERIOD.07

Weissland Strynikov's eyes went wide in shock. He'd thought he and his guards had cornered Touma Kamijou and Saflee Opendays at the commercial entrance to the off-limits resort hotel. Now, however, he wasn't even standing.

On the top story of the high-rise hotel he often used, in a large room with piles of papers stacked high, Weissland lay face down on the floor.

What…just…?

He could barely move. Every time he tried, his joints would twitch awkwardly, as though he'd been stuck in a refrigerator for a long time, cooling all the while.

And then an unfamiliar, grating voice pricked his consciousness.

"Oh, great. Just great. Just great! This won't do. No, it won't do at all. Spent all that time making sure the compound was just right. But in the end, there were too many contradictions, and he woke up?"

A young man's voice. Not like Urtgardaloki's.

To begin with, this one was speaking *Japanese*.

"Hello, hello! It's me—Ransuu Kihara. I came all the way here from Academy City. You predicted this would happen sooner or later, I'm sure. So… You obviously don't need me to explain, do you?"

Kihara sat on the large desk and spoke, but Weissland wasn't listening. Something disturbing had entered his vision. Just past the high-rise hotel's windows, in the white scenery of the sprawling Baggage City, something ominous swayed—a bright red light. The scene should have been white and white alone, but a strange color was mixed in with it. And not just in one

place, either, but several.

Despite scarcely being able to move, Weissland still managed to snap at the man. “What did…you do? What the hell did you do?!”

“Hmm? Uh, you mean, like, to you personally? Or y’know, to… What was this place called again? To Baggage City?”

“Tell me what you’ve done with the innocent civilians and unrelated spectators in the city, damn it!”

“Oh, come now. You silly thing, acting like a righteous superhero. Just drop it. I bet you don’t even know the difference between justice and a *sense* of justice. Not that I like either, mind you.”

“What…are you…?”

“Innocent civilians? Unrelated spectators? *No such thing.*”

Ransuu Kihara’s tone was casual, but his words were biting. His was a frivolous wickedness—the kind you could find lying around just about anywhere. But it was like all of that had come together and congealed into a single whole, creating an even deeper, more incomprehensible man.

He smiled.

“The members of the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians are in constant fear of retaliation and retribution from their progenitor—Academy City. Some of them only joined under the condition that you’d protect them from the city… But there lies the rub, eh? Getting rid of one or two people—easy. Moving several million at once? Backbreaking work, let me tell you. Costs time and money, and no matter what you do, word will get out. Get attacked on the way there, and it’s all over.”

Behind Kihara and outside the big windows, a red blaze had risen, disturbing the white scenery once again.

“What I’m saying is this: Everyone spectating the Natural Selector martial arts tournament is either a member of the Guardians or their family members, friends, and lovers. *Nobody there is unrelated.* Including the civilians that you’re *claiming* lived here from the start. First, you brought millions of people into one place for the tournament, and now you’re assigning

personnel to the Guardians' fortress under the pretext of bringing them back home. Obviously, those of us over at Academy City got *real* suspicious about that. But before we can find proof, you can just load everyone up into the fortress."

Kihara crossed his legs and grinned.

"Anyway, the details don't concern me. I hear they let a few other Kiharas loose besides me, too. Bet they're really up in your business now. Not that I care. I had—what was it?—a quota to fill, so I attacked this block, only to have it end in seconds! The other Kiharas will probably need more time for their jobs, so now you have the honor of letting me kill some time."

"It ended…in seconds…?"

The meaning of those words wasn't sinking in for Weissland. It wasn't that he was rejecting reality. His understanding just hadn't caught up yet. And yet Kihara's words rang so terrifyingly ominous that he found himself unable to discount them.

Meanwhile, Kihara spread his arms and shrugged theatrically. "Yeah, that's right! You heard me! I thought you Anti–Academy City Science Guardians would be a little more dangerous, considering they put all these Kiharas to work on it. But what the hell is this?! I'll tell you what it is. Full of holes. It's like a damn colander! It doesn't even count as *security*. It's just an obstacle course. Something to enjoy, something to laugh about and have fun with. Look, I gotta ask. Are you *underestimating* us? We sent a bunch of Kiharas here to eliminate all the rebels—the regulars, the substitutes, the spectators, the guests, the organizers!"

"Wh-where's Utgardaloki…?"

The man dispatched from Gremlin. He wasn't part of their fighting forces per se, but rather a powerful individual whose true worth shone through when irregulars like Kihara showed up. But the man calling himself Kihara frowned, casual as a kid talking about how they weren't interested in legendary musicians of a genre they didn't care about, acting as though

they knew all of humankind like the back of their hand.

"Holy shit, *what* was that word you just said? Some weird term for experts? Wait, is it supposed to be someone's name? That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard! And I don't care, either! I probably took him out with all the other goons! Hmm. Was there anyone like that? Maybe, maybe not. I heard some of Natural Selector's competitors use sorcery. And I definitely remember crushing one of them. Didn't catch their name, though. The way he begged for his life was pretty unique—I thought he was a decoy. Wait, maybe he wasn't the one after all."

"……"

"Well, none of it matters. Either way, I killed him. Same as those other so-called *authorities*. If they died here, that just means they were weak."

It was so casual, the way Ransuu Kihara talked about the end of one of Gremlin's official members, scratching his head about it in mild confusion. No, it went beyond that. When he said *authorities*, he meant he'd already laid hands on the representatives of the twenty-seven corporations that comprised the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians.

With casual ease, he'd overturned the basic premise underpinning everything.

"Impossible… How the hell did you…?"

"I mean, hey, I don't know how the other Kiharas are doing. This is all *my* job is. Get it?"

Ransuu Kihara waved his fist in the empty air for seemingly no reason.

"My actual specialty is world peace, you know. Or is that too hard for you to wrap your head around? Let me give it to you nice and simple. You know that famous international tournament for track-and-field and soccer and whatnot, yeah? While people are all getting their kicks from global rules, they can feel released from issues like race, ideology, and national borders and feel at one with everyone. So what if you created that sense artificially?"

“I don’t…follow what you’re saying. Does that have anything to do with what’s happening here?”

“Ugh, you *still* don’t get it? Man, are you stupid. It comes down to chemical substances. They’re supposed to control the ebb and flow of individual emotions. We’re attaching tiny particles with the same effects as your brain secretions to mold, then scattering it on the wind. This kind of tech is an offshoot of Number Five from the Five Over series—and it’s *big* now.”

“Five…Over…?”

“If you’ve never heard of it, then whatever. It’s not exactly *hard* to control the wind or temperature changes or static electricity once you get used to it. You only need one computer program to scatter it in the direction you want or to create a safe zone. But while they’re having their sweet, sweet dreams, everyone just ends up standing there doing nothing. Do you get how it works now?”

Hallucinations.

When put like that, it was simple. But showing the desired images to the desired people—how much tech did they have to use for that?

“But it’s still pretty tough, you know. The chemicals are all called stuff like Red Fury 03 or Blue Fear 07—easy to understand what individual emotions they can stimulate or suppress. It’s backbreaking work to use the right combinations to create an actual *experience*. And when several people have to be affecting each other, *that* experience needs a master chef. It’s like how what you eat influences your body odor. The matter inside your blood affects you on the outside, so we’re literally working off of zero hints.”

That wasn’t right.

If Ransuu Kihara’s words were true, then when had Weissland started hallucinating? What about his confrontation with Saflee Opendays? His conversation with Utgardaloki? Or maybe that was information being exchanged through a larger experience, all the hallucinations interacting with one another?

“Still, I gotta say. Touma Kamijou showed up at a *very*

convenient time. At first, it was a tough fight—but in the end, he said he'd save everyone? Enemy and ally alike? Doesn't that strike you as strange? You're the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians, right? You're *definitely* on different sides. The world isn't so optimized that an irregular human like him could suddenly show up at the perfect moment. And besides, Kiharas like us don't have a place to go back to anymore."

By spreading mold containing chemical substances that scrambled people's brains, Kihara could cause Baggage City's security forces to hallucinate, rendering them passive. Once they were temporarily disabled, he could kill them all, one at a time.

Weissland didn't know how much of this was true. Maybe it was *all* a lie. But whatever the answer to that, the facts remained: Baggage City was being attacked, Weissland had been trapped in a situation where he could barely move, and an unknown aggressor was now right in front of him.

His back was against the wall.

Ransuu Kihara, the man controlling the situation, slowly lowered his feet to the floor. He was holding a smartphone. Was he using it to command the mold he'd mentioned? But there wasn't a complicated control panel on the screen. It was just a video recording app.

"All right, let's get this started."

"What…what else do you plan to do to Baggage City?"

"Like I said at the start, the other Kiharas are in charge of that. My job ended pretty quickly*, so I'm just killing time since I have nothing else to do.*"

"……"

This wasn't even a battle.

He had procured a member of Gremlin, but the man had been useless.

As Weissland started to lose his grip on the reality of their huge difference in combat power, Ransuu Kihara came even closer. When he got to Weissland, he squatted down, then showed him what was on the phone.

“Look familiar? It’s your wife, your daughter and her husband, and your two grandchildren.”

“…?!”

The enemy already knew they’d been plotting the mass movement of several million related parties during the Natural Selector martial arts tournament in Baggage City. Weissland should have imagined a scenario like this transpiring.

Nevertheless, he felt a shock to the chest as he came face-to-face with the undeniable reality of the situation.

“Okey dokey! Let’s start the killing, heh! With some Russian roulette! It’ll be a bit irregular, but let’s do it!”

On the screen, there were five chairs sitting in a row. Someone very familiar to Weissland was bound to each one, and there was a gun attached to a pole aimed directly at each of their faces.

Every gun had a slip hanging from it with a number on it.

“Presenting our quiz contestant: Weissland Strynikov! Allow me to explain the rules! Only one of these five guns is loaded! You can only choose one. And if it’s not the bullet, everyone gets to go free! Oh, how nice of me. Now then! Can you safely choose the wrong gun and reclaim your bonds with your family members?!”

“Wh-wha…?!”

“You can try to gauge the answer from the questioner’s mental state! You can try to look for hints in the picture itself! You can pray to God and pick at random! Or you can even choose a family member you’ve always hated! But be careful, Weissland! You only have one minute to decide. If you don’t make a choice within sixty seconds, your time will be up, and the *real* gun will fire—just to show you which one it was, you know!”

“Was this…all a sideshow to them…? Did Academy City… How did they do all this in such a short time?!”

“Not that I care, but c’mon, make your choice. Though I guess if *you* die, it’ll just mean another seed plot, so I wouldn’t mind that, either.”

Those incomprehensible words seeped into Weissland's ears like a thick liquid.

"If a person scrubs themselves too much and gets rid of the good germs, mold will start to grow. Did you know that? But if you write a person's flavor into mold, it has a different way of sticking to you. Not that any of this has scientific backing, of course. It's just that the *cultures* fed to living humans survive better than those fed to corpses, which is the only drawback."

"……"

This man is serious, thought Weissland.

This was no empty threat. He was acting way too casually. Ransuu Kihara had no qualms about covering a living person in mold.

If he chose someone to shoot, the trigger would be pulled.

In one of those guns was a real bullet.

In terms of simple probabilities, there was a much greater chance the members of his family would survive than not. However, the chance of picking the one in five paralyzed him. But he couldn't afford to do nothing, either. If the time limit elapsed, someone would *definitely* die.

"C-can I have a hint?"

"You'll have to look for one yourself."

"Shit! Anything, please! You can have an arm, or an eye, or *anything* in exchange. Give me a hint!"

"Twenty seconds left! Looks like we may need a countdown soon!"

No time. Someone in his family would die. That was Weissland's thought as his eyes welled up with tears like a child's. He didn't even have time to think anymore. Funneling his strength into his already near-petrified arm, he used a trembling fingertip to touch the smartphone's screen.

"Number three, eh? That your lucky number?"

"……"

"Can't say I'm surprised to see you pick your son-in-law, though. You must be one of those types who cares most about his bloodline. Or were you *always* against your daughter's

marriage?”

“G-give me the answer.”

“You want to know? Wait, are you hoping he’ll live or die?”

“You know damn well which!”

“Well, all right. I do have to answer you, after all. Okay, time to reveal if you got it right!”

Ransuu Kihara twirled the smartphone in his hand, then showed the screen to Weissland again.

“This smartphone video wasn’t a live recording at all. Got you! *It’s already been filmed!*”

“Wh-what?!”

“But touching the screen *was* actually linked to the real trigger! In other words, that trigger has actually been pulled in the real world!”

Weissland felt a chill. His finger began trembling something awful, as though delayed, his resolve having missed its proper timing.

But Ransuu Kihara’s horrific game didn’t stop there.

“And now presenting the greatest climax of all time! I gotta level with you, buddy. When I told you only one of the guns had a round in it, that was a big fat lie. The answer to the quiz is that *every gun has a bullet loaded!* Gosh! That was such an easy quiz that you’d have to get it wrong on purpose! You really went for the shock value, didn’t ya?”

“???!!!”

“And so with that, Weissland Strynikov has pulled the trigger, killing his own family! One hundred percent! There’s a one *hundred* percent chance of your son-in-law’s head exploding! Tell us how you feel!”

Overwhelmed by the situation, Weissland let his jaw go slack. Eventually, Ransuu Kihara gave a smile that implied he’d finally achieved his goal of killing time.

“It seems our contestant is trapped in a swirling storm of emotions and can’t properly form words. Now, let’s go to the video…or rather, the live stream for the answer!”

“No… Stop…”

“By the way, all we said to the family was that our contestant would be choosing one of them. Pay close attention to the faces of the ones who survive! Do their familial bonds remain unbroken?! Could the contestant’s four-year-old grandson remain sane after seeing his dad’s head blown off right in front of him?! And now presenting the shocking video you won’t want to miss!”

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo oooooooooooooooooooo!!”

Too much blood had gone to Weissland’s head, and the capillaries in his eyeballs had burst. He screamed, literally crying tears of blood. But his wails didn’t get to Ransuu Kihara. Or rather, they did but didn’t stop Kihara from fiddling with his smartphone in amusement.

The phone then displayed the post-tragedy reality. And there they saw…

“…Huh?”

Ransuu Kihara made a different noise this time—he sounded *confused*. And the screen of his phone was to blame. Ordinarily, it would have shown fresh, red blood and hysterical civilians tied to their chairs. It would be *strange* if anything else was there.

But things had played out differently in reality. There was a line of chairs. The guns were all in position. But the hostages, the most important part of this setup, were nowhere to be seen. Not just Weissland’s son-in-law—*every single one of them* were gone. The ropes they had been tied up with now lay on the chairs and floor, but there was no sign of any people. Something had happened after Ransuu Kihara looked away. But what?

“Who…who the hell just ruined my leisure time?! Giving me a problem to solve like this—you think you’re some kind of famous MC, you…you…?”

His yelling turned into an expression of doubt.

Something had appeared in the corner of the smartphone’s screen. A person, only partly visible. Likely whoever had set

Weissland's family free.

And that person was…

…an Asian boy with spiky hair.

"Hey, if you're still in a state to watch this, then don't worry."

On the stream, someone spoke. A boy who had proven his character not by talking about doing something but by actually doing it. And he was ignoring Ransuu Kihara, whom he knew would be at the center of all this, speaking directly to the captive Weissland Strynikov instead.

"I'll knock the lights out of the guy with you real soon. That'll fix everything."

The image shook. After some terrible static, the signal dropped. He'd probably grabbed the camera and crushed it.

Naturally.

As he'd declared, the boy would be here soon.

"……"

Ransuu Kihara stopped thinking for a moment. Once he'd finally considered the possibility someone had actually gotten in the way, he shook his head.

"No. No, that's not possible…," he muttered before reinforcing that idea in his head. "No! It's too convenient! This timing? With no context?! A hero swooping in to save the day?! Not possible! So then… Then what is this?! How is any of this ridiculous bullshit even happening?!"

And then it hit him.

The only reason why Touma Kamijou would show up in a place he shouldn't have been able to.

The trick Ransuu Kihara had personally used to launch his attack on Weissland's group, Baggage City, and the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians.

He could think of only one possibility.

And it was certainly more realistic than Touma Kamijou *actually* coming here.

"*…Could this…be an illusion, too?*"

“Bhahh, hah… Ha-ha…!”

And then the Gremlin sorcerer Utgardaloki slowly got up, knocking over a few piles of papers as he did. He was covered in blood, as were the fallen documents. Ransuu Kihara had pushed him to the brink of death, but in the end, he had succeeded in inducing a hallucination.

Utgardaloki’s namesake was a giant from Norse mythology. In his original story, the giant is an expert in all kinds of hallucinations. He even manages to get one over on the god of thunder, Thor, a major character in the myths. Naturally, if a sorcerer had chosen to name himself after the character, he would obviously be good at one thing in particular.

“That…that was close… That asshole pulled out some crazy moves right at the start…!”

One of his front teeth was broken, and he couldn’t see out of one eye because blood had gotten into it. And yet he’d survived. The magic he used could shift the information acquired by one of your five senses to another of your five senses. Broadly speaking, he could show someone a photograph of flames to make someone experience the pain of burning. It could be incredibly powerful, depending on how he used it. But in order to induce a long-term, more intricate illusion, he needed a lot more raw materials to do it right.

And yet he’d survived, for the time being.

Utgardaloki wasn’t sure if Weissland, who was in the same room, was alive or dead. But getting himself to a safe zone came first. For that, he’d need to do something about Ransuu Kihara, who stood stock-still in the middle of the room. He didn’t know how long the illusion would hold.

“And you know something?”

His movements sluggish, Utgardaloki grabbed a random pile of papers. They were A4-sized, and the stack was about ten centimeters thick. It had a good weight to it—heavier than a brick.

Without any hesitation, he swung the blunt weapon.

“I’m an illusionist! I’m intelligent! How dare you! How dare

you force me to do manual labor!”

Crick, crack, crush, thump, smash, crack, shrick, shhhk, crshhh!

Swinging to the side, he knocked the man to the floor, then straddled him and swung the stack down again and again. Part of the way through, the sound changed to something stickier, and Ransuu Kihara began to spasm, powerless to resist. Utgardaloki tossed aside the papers, which were now damp from all the blood, and picked up a new stack nearby.

“Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I won, damn it. Finally, I’m in a safe zone. I’ve returned to the world of the living! I’m…I’m aliiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiive!”

He had no idea how valuable the information printed on the documents was, but he used them to wipe off the blood stuck to his hands, then did the same for the splatters on his face. The paper was rough and painful, but it also proved to him that this was real, that he was alive.

Then someone from behind softly tapped Utgardaloki on the shoulder.

The illusion expert turned back—and then laid eyes on him.

Standing there.

With spiky hair.

An Asian.

A boy.

SUB.08

“What is this? What the actual living hell *is this?!*” Security guard Schall Berylan shouted face-first into the white snow.

Though this might have seemed like suicide in the negative-twenty-degree weather, he could easily imagine himself dying much quicker than to the cold if he picked up his head right now. To keep himself hidden, he couldn’t go out onto the main road, snow-free and heated though it was.

“Didn’t they say we could use those unmanned Academy City weapons to push back against their hegemony?!” he cried out into his radio but got no response. He couldn’t reach anyone on cell, either.

Right in front of him, a huge clump of metal fell to the ground. The wreckage of a powered suit with autopilot capabilities, the kind that had destroyed Russian tanks and armored cars like they were paper during World War III.

Yes—the *wreckage*.

Its thick composite armor looked like a piece of cheese partly eaten by a mouse—full of holes. This was armor that would probably withstand an antitank land mine being strapped to it and detonated. And it wasn’t just this one pile of wreckage, either. If Schall had had the leeway to get up and look around, he would have seen the ground covered in so many of them that even the blizzards couldn’t bury them completely.

“…This is insane,” he murmured, stupefied.

Meanwhile, giant weapons with praying mantis–like silhouettes were still swaggering about. Their two front legs appeared to have been made into Gatling guns, but they were clearly far more destructive than that. Could firing a tank’s smoothbore cannon thousands of times per minute have even

caused this level of catastrophe? Frankly, he didn't understand why they'd bother linking so many gun barrels together to improve their shot grouping—aside from, perhaps, the designer having very unpleasant tastes.

Five_Over.

Model case_"RAILGUN."

Schall didn't know what the two rows of letters on the mechs meant, but he knew these things were a real freak show. And that freak show was currently spraying bullets all over the place, walking along the snow and flying through the air. There were easily twenty of them around, and that was just what he could make out.

They were clearly from a different generation.

It was like sending stealth bombers to fight a military general marching into a skirmish with horses and katanas.

Supernatural abilities weren't even part of the picture. Academy City's weaponry went beyond them. A lot of freaks seemed to have assembled for Natural Selector, but none of them would hold even the tiniest candle to these giant mantises unarmed.

Schall's honest opinion was that this was unwinnable. Totally unwinnable. Even thinking about outwitting them didn't make sense. He couldn't imagine a single world in which they got away with their lives, much less defeated the things. He was keenly aware that his only two choices were to die fighting against them or die *not* fighting against them.

Which would hurt more?

Which would be more honorable?

Which would make him feel better?

He thought about it in terms of security software. One click of a button in some far-off country and—without needing any further instruction—dozens of unmanned weapons would discover everything hostile. And delete them, too. It didn't matter *what* was moving inside. They wouldn't be satisfied until they learned there were no enemies remaining. That was what this battle was like.

They'd picked the wrong opponents to fight.

They'd picked the wrong methods to fight them with.

They were enemies, so they would die. That was the extent of this fight. They should never have drawn the line between Academy City and anti–Academy City. Once the security software's virus list got updated, there would be no more saving them. Schall and the others had just updated themselves into the enemies' latest version.

That's why they'd been found.

That's why they'd been attacked.

And that's why they'd be killed.

"……"

That very moment, Schall Berylan stopped breathing.

All the sounds around him had stopped.

Realizing what the unnatural silence meant, he clenched his teeth. Keeping himself face down on the cold snow, he slowly lifted his head. The strain on his neck caused it to sting with pain, but he couldn't afford to think about it.

They'd jumped into the air.

And stopped.

The giant mantis mechs were right above Schall—stopped dead in midair, like a wasp or a dragonfly. The barrels of the scythe-like Gatling gun arms were now pointed at him. As he watched the linked barrels spin around, things finally clicked. *Ah. It wasn't that things went quiet—it's just my mind playing tricks on me.*

But he couldn't do any more than that.

Those monsters could even shoot down fighter jets and air-to-ground missiles, as though they were linked up with some sort of movable radar setup. Lying here on the ground like in some action movie wasn't going to change how this turned out.

It was over.

He'd be removed. Chalked up to a statistic.

But right as that thought crossed Schall Berylan's mind, something happened.

Something strange.

The mantises made a different move. It wasn't just one of them aiming at him; as far as he could tell, over twenty had taken aim at him. Clearly, they were on alert. Before they'd been searching one by one, destroying one by one—all very systematic. But now they were being wary of how their enemy was acting.

What…?

As even his sweat continued to freeze, Schall's eyes darted up. He could see someone in the corner of his vision. The silhouette towered over the white hellscape.

A long coat.

A helmet covering their face.

He couldn't tell if they were male or female or if they'd be able to turn this situation in his favor. It was very strange, in fact, that the mantises around them had all focused on that one person.

"……"

The stranger said nothing.

They simply clenched their right hand into a fist again.

SUB.09

Shuri Oumi.

One of the contestants in Natural Selector. A kunoichi from the Koga school. Thorough physical modifications had given her the appearance of a ten-year-old, but she was actually over thirty—truly a woman with a nonsensical identity. That said, several diseases could be responsible for the body stopping its maturation process, so it wasn't impossible. While that alone would still cause one to age properly despite their body being so small, even that could be overcome with things like botulinum toxin to make adjustments to one's skin, allowing them to retain the appearance of a child—on the surface, at least, if not on the inside.

She'd changed from her normal clothes into a flashy outfit for the official matches, but their basic *function* hadn't changed much. Her appearance was a cluster of incongruities—a cheerleader-like outfit plus a student bag on a shoulder strap. But considering her position as the "initial actor," the strangeness actually worked for her.

It was a fakeout—like sleight of hand.

She'd draw everyone's attention, purposely created blind spots for herself, and then—in that sphere of safety—her other friends would use all kinds of little tricks to toy with many enemies at once, making it look like a ninja's miraculous tactics. In other words, if she failed here, everything else would come crumbling down, too. She was the core, without whom there could be no recovery.

A flashy, conspicuous ninja would obviously stand out. But it was the most important role of them all, something linked to the very life and death of whatever team was on the mission

with her.

She was obviously conspicuous, but the initial actor was a target for enemy attacks, too.

But even in a situation as bad as that, she wasn't a disposable pawn—she always returned alive. That fact alone pointed to her incredible abilities.

Unlike most of the other freaks here, Shuri Oumi of the Koga knew the fundamentals of tactics—enough to lead a team into a mission like this—but the reason she wanted to participate in Natural Selector was incredibly simple.

She wanted to perfect *real* ninjutsu, using *real* preternatural powers, just like they did in movies and TV shows.

This would give her the technical foundation to do so.

…Frankly speaking, she (or more accurately, *they*) never wanted the honor of winning Natural Selector. That was because they knew their "realistic ninjutsu" could only go so far—it would never approach actual supernatural abilities. Instead, they would fight the other contestants for real to ascertain whether their ninjutsu techniques were beneficial or not. Then for all the "raw material" that seemed useful, they'd employ all kinds of methods to analyze the data and mechanisms behind them. No matter how gaudy they were in the spotlight, their true endeavors were all behind the scenes, and it was in that pursuit that Oumi and the others had continued the Koga name into the twenty-first century.

Perhaps some might think that to analyze supernatural powers, it would be faster to infiltrate Academy City in Japan. That was exactly what another faction, separate from Oumi, had tried to do.

But they'd failed.

Academy City had been unyielding. They didn't plan to go to that military gate and ask nicely for their dropouts. While the ninjas of the Koga were global now, no longer having a conception of national borders, the underbelly of Japan was still their most familiar territory. Because of the power structures in place, Shuri Oumi and the others didn't want to

get too close to that city.

Hence why they were in Baggage City.

Hence why they were taking part in the Natural Selector martial arts tournament.

Hence why they had joined the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians.

However…

"…How on earth did Baggage City get destroyed on the very first day of the tournament?"

Oumi murmured those words as she dashed through a complex web of narrow passages. She was in the Baggage City underground right now. Since the city was located in one of the snowiest places in the world, its water-heating facilities were its very lifeline. Every single building in the city was connected by a network of hot water pipes, and to maintain them all, a labyrinthine underground had been built throughout.

It was all off-limits, of course.

But there was nobody left to blame her. Deftly using her hands, which she'd purposely left small, she whirled around a shining silver bladed object. It was a spade, a one-handed gardening implement, but kunai had their roots not in throwing weapons but in digging tools.

…I doubt the other contestants will consider the fight over even if the tournament is. Every last one of them, including their support crews, has their own goals here. Until they use Baggage City to accomplish them, the battles will continue—even with a broken ring and shattered rules.

Cloaking her presence and keeping an eye out for her surroundings, Shuri Oumi continued her train of thought.

The only difference is whether the fight happens in the ring or not. Even without a sponsor, our Natural Selector will keep going. I'd better assume that the moment I encounter any other contestant, we'll start fighting.

At that point, there was one thing she needed to concern

herself with above all others.

Their mortal enemies.

Enemies they needed to know everything about in order to survive this competition.

Ironically, they weren't registered competitors in Natural Selector.

Baggage City—or rather, the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians running it—were being smashed by an elite group called the Kiharas. They had been let loose by Academy City, and they were essentially personifications of the entire science side.

That alone was threatening enough. But Baggage City apparently had a trick up its sleeve. She'd barely made out the term *Gremlin* from their conversations, but she still didn't know what it meant.

She was using *a myriad of methods* to analyze the situation—such as eavesdropping on the conversations and dying cries of the men and women defending Baggage City as it fell. But all of those had been unbelievable. Enough to make her wonder if she shouldn't be interpreting them straight—that they were all speaking in some sort of code.

The irrational and the irrational.

They were clashing.

It didn't even matter anymore if supernatural abilities were at play—it was a whole different world. They whittled each other down incredibly fast, even destroying the hearts and minds of the people who were in danger.

Could she learn from any of it?

Should she learn from any of it?

Wouldn't involving herself lead to the demise of the entire Koga organization?

Despite the vague worries in her mind, Oumi kept running through the complex network of passages, searching for a good place to safely and efficiently gather information from.

Even now, she could hear explosions and feel rumblings coming from multiple directions at once.

She couldn't even predict if Natural Selector would continue like this. But that didn't mean they would call off their mission. Instead, they could just get tidbits of information from whoever was powerful enough to destroy the entire tournament.

Close to the epicenter of the shaking, Oumi reached a corner. She pressed her back up against the wall.

Using a small microphone, which was hooked up to her transceiver with a cable inside her clothes, she got in touch with her fellow ninja.

"Sakata, Asai, Yasu, can you hear me? I encountered the 'treasure' in Area 32 West. There's no guarantee I'll survive on my own, though. I want to get recordings from several angles as a backup. Can you position yourselves in time?"

After a burst of static, voices she knew well came back.

But they were filled with emotions she'd never heard in them before.

"Damn. I can't shake him!"

"What? Damn it! This…monster…?!"

"It's gonna catch up to—"

Then a high-pitched crunching pounded on Oumi's eardrums. She thought it was radio static, but something was different about it. A strange, unknown phenomenon was happening on the other end of the transceiver.

"Mm-hmm, yes… I don't like this, but I suppose there's no real choice…"

She heard a frail girl's voice.

The only voice of the bunch that Oumi didn't recognize. The girl was likely the source of the madness on the other side.

"I understand, Uncle Amata. This is how a Kihara should act, right?!"

Ga-krrrrk. Greeeesh. Zhhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-jjj-jjj-jjj-jjj-jjj-jjj-jjj-grkk-grkk-grkk-grkk-grkk-grkk-grkk-grkk-shrrrk-shrrrk-shrrrk-shrrrk-shrrrk-crsh-crsh-crsh-crsh-crsh-crsh-skreeeeeeeeeee-crsh-crsh-crsh-crsh!!

There was a series of booming noises, like hard objects being crushed, along with wetter ones, like soft fruit being squished.

It was almost like something huge devouring a person…

“Damn it!” swore Oumi as she tried to get in touch with her other teammates.

She didn’t hear anything good from any of them either, though. Some were confused, crying out for help, and others were wailing their last words as everything ended. And those were the *good* ones. Most of the others didn’t respond at all.

The situation was well beyond human understanding. She’d have to assume the Koga unit had been caught up in it and wiped out.

…I can’t die for nothing.

Keeping her back against the wall next to the corner, Shuri Oumi focused hard on the tempest of monsters, of the Kiharas and Gremlin, all of whom were farther down the passages.

…I need to bring the treasure back at all costs. I must liberate the Koga from the notion we can’t go further. I must dismiss the idea we can’t keep up with these threats—so I’ll confront those threats on purpose!

The decorative student bag on her back had a crime-prevention beeper on its shoulder strap. After making sure the camera lens in the tiny device was functioning, Shuri Oumi steadied her breathing.

She didn’t have to win.

She didn’t even have to fight.

She just had to watch in secret. If she could record even a fragment of this wisdom, this knowledge, it would benefit the Koga as a whole. The important thing was not to show off like a hero or a monster. That could come afterward, once she’d used the treasure to her benefit.

With that thought in her mind, she would wield all the power she had.

To become but a pebble on the roadside.

One named Shuri Oumi.

Then from right behind her, she heard a shuffle.

Since she had her back to the hot water heater maintenance passage wall, trying to look around the corner and observe, that was exactly her blind spot. And worst of all, she'd been caught in a pincer formation—she didn't even have a way to escape anymore.

"?!"

Instantly, she whipped around. A man in a military uniform was approaching from a few meters away. He seemed surprised to have bumped into her, too. What had appeared to be a row of lockers along the wall had actually been a separate passage in the gap.

Was he a Baggage City security guard? A Kihara? Or Gremlin? She couldn't figure out who he was with, but there was only one thing to do.

I have to kill him!

She focused on the gardening spade kunai in her dominant hand, but her opponent made the first move. He was already swinging a bladed object—more a billhook than a knife—up into the air.

If she tried to attack now, she wouldn't make it in time. She might be able to kill the uniformed man, but she'd be gravely hurt or killed in the process. Instead, her only path to survival was to avoid her opponent's opening strike, then counterattack.

But with how long his gait and weapon are, his kill range must be three meters. I'll be in range if I try to step in. I can't—I don't have the space to jump backward because of the corner!

Swearing under her breath, Oumi quickly groped for the powerful light attached to the inside of her spare weapon pouch—which was disguised as a lunch box—hanging by a cord from the clasp on the schoolbag on her back. Backing away as though putting up a final act of resistance, she flicked the switch, causing a flash of light to go off at the wall right behind her.

A moment later, the blade came swinging down. *Whooosh!* As it cut through the air, her pulse quickened in spite of herself.

However…

“?!”

“You missed. Nice try.”

The sharp blade’s tip passed not a centimeter from her face, but she didn’t even blink her youthful eyes. She had a clear understanding of where she’d be safe.

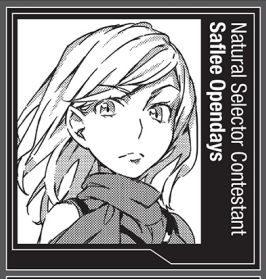
He’d just misjudged the distance. Or more accurately, she’d *made* him. Human eyes couldn’t properly gauge the distance to an object that was against a completely white background. Oumi had flashed a powerful light at the wall right behind her to make it bounce off at her assailant, serving as a pseudo-screen to protect her.

And now that she’d dodged the first attack, she had a chance to strike back. Before her opponent could make another strike, she charged at him, the tip of her garden spade kunai aimed at the uniformed man’s stomach.

She thought her victory was guaranteed. But in reality, the tip of her kunai never reached the man’s clothes.

She’d been blocked. And not by the man.

But by a truly irrational, preternatural ability—the kind Oumi most yearned for.



Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays



Natural Selector Contestant
Shuri Oumi



Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki



Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara

CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS

SUB.10

Whatever *it* was, it had its black hair in sausage curls and wore a maid outfit. Not the kind of outfit used for doing work in an old castle in France, mind you, but the dubious kind that people handing out flyers in Akihabara would be wearing. It was a maid outfit in fluorescent yellow. Psychedelic, as if cut out of a page in history, complete with a miniskirt, frilly knee socks, and a black corset.

But more ridiculous than *its* outfit was how *it* had appeared.

It had emerged from directly under the man in the uniform.

As if slipping underneath his legs, the girl in the maid outfit, her posture lowered, charged straight at Oumi.

With a hard *glunk*, the girl grabbed Oumi's garden spade kunai, holding it in place. Then she actually *smiled* and murmured to Oumi in a quiet voice, "The dangerous stuff stops here. If you claim you have to kill this guy to survive, then I have a smoother way of settling things."

A moment later, still holding Oumi's kunai in place, the girl swung her leg straight up toward the ceiling. It wasn't a kick aimed at the uniformed man's face. When she bent her slender leg, she folded the back of her knee around the man's wrist, as if handcuffing it.

And then she turned.

With her other leg, which was still on the floor, she launched herself into a jump. Using Oumi's kunai as a pivot, she spun her legs around like a bamboo-copter. Oumi reflexively dropped her kunai from the pain in her wrist, while at the same moment, the girl in maid clothes turned the back of her knee around the

uniformed man's arm. In the blink of an eye, the girl brought her head into a higher position than the man's. Then she buried the knee of her free leg deep into his jaw.

"Oh."

She moved away the knee she had slammed him with, then put the knee of her other leg—the one pinning his arm down—onto the man's shoulder. In complete disregard for her miniskirt, she then put all her weight on him. With the man's face between her thighs, she pushed him straight backward.

"There we go."

A sharp noise.

The girl was now sitting right on top of the uniformed man, squeezing her target between her butt and the floor. After seeing him lose consciousness, she stood up, toying with the knife and kunai in her hands.

"…Hmm. Maybe I gave him a little too much for free. I tried going for the embarrassing thing to hurt my pride, but that just gave him an ample life experience… This talent of mine is always so annoying."

Oumi carefully reached behind her as she watched the girl mutter to herself. At a glance, it appeared she had employed a tricky form of martial arts where one used their hands to run and their feet to throw. But that wasn't enough to explain how the girl had just moved. Oumi could tell—because she was a Koga shinobi pursuing rationalization within the scope of common sense. You couldn't have pulled off those motions with human muscles alone. It was so clearly contradictory, and yet those contradictions kept zooming toward the finish line.

This girl's power was obviously supernatural. She wielded that which Oumi herself sought.

"Who the hell are you?" demanded Oumi.

"Hmm? Maria Kumokawa," said the girl in the dubious maid outfit, readily revealing her identity. "I'm from Academy City, but don't worry—I'm not with the people attacking the city. I'm also not a competitor in Natural Selector, but my goal isn't much different. Just like you, I came here to steal a peek at how these

monsters fight each other. Of course, in my case, it's only because I'm searching for someone."

"……"

The girl made it sound like nothing, but she possessed far more resolve than Oumi.

Oumi had tried to acquire information on supernatural powers safely, by smoothly assimilating into Natural Selector. But Kumokawa had known from the start that Academy City and the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians would clash, and she'd *still* entered the fray. To be honest, if Oumi had foreseen these risks, she might have chosen another method entirely.





Whatever the case, though, this girl knew why she was here. That was bad.

Oumi channeled strength into the hand behind her back, but Kumokawa cut her off. “Don’t,” she said. “A bright red water gun with red pepper in it won’t be able to blind me. If you really want to wound my pride, you should have brought a flamethrower.”

“There’s yellow mustard paste and fresh green wasabi in there, too.”

“Oh no… Red pepper is one thing, but wasabi carries the actual risk of blindness. And is that stuff even JIS certified? I bet it’s not. But anyway.” Kumokawa paused for a moment. “A fight between us will end in your defeat. If you’re all right with that—well, far be it from me to refuse. But I don’t want to fight for no reason if I can help it. I went through the trouble of saving you—killing you now would leave a very bad taste in my mouth. Frankly, my very carefully wounded pride could end up snapping in half.”

“How can you be so sure…?”

“You can only fight with your two hands. But I make full use of my hands *and* feet in melee combat. I really doubt I would lose. I can walk on my hands and even do a long jump with them. Here, I’ll give you a moment to calculate how ginormous the gap between us is.”

Oumi thought for a moment. “You’re lying.”

“Ack, you got me. I can’t do long jumps with my hands. But I can use my right hand and right leg to throw and pin. Plus, my right leg can do kendo, and my left leg can throw javelins. But I bet real kendo practitioners would get really angry if I held a *shinai* with my foot. Never lost, though.”

“……”

Just as a test, Oumi took the red pepper water gun from underneath her skirt and immediately pulled the trigger. But a moment later, Kumokawa’s head had *already* done a one-eighty-degree rotation, and now it was where her knees used to be. Pointing one leg straight up toward the ceiling, not caring that

she was wearing a miniskirt, she now stood straight up on her right foot and right hand.

“As you can see, not only does my flexibility afford me a wealth of different attacks, it also lets me drastically shift where my vitals are. That by itself is enough to mess with any combat techniques optimized for fighting people standing normally.”

Kumokawa rotated, twirling tightly like a ballerina. *Whoosh, swoosh.* Eventually her head and limbs returned to their former positions.

“On any other day, I would have grabbed your leg with a hand while you were caught off guard, then drop-kicked the crown of your head. I’ll overlook that since we’re still in the trial period here. Think of it as a free service I’m offering you—one that’s about to end.”

Her technique must still have drawbacks, Oumi thought, analyzing the other girl.

In general, strikes, pinning techniques, and throwing moves depended greatly on the body weight of the parties involved. Trickier motions would normally get in the way of weight transfers, but Kumokawa seemed to be using unique rotational motions to give herself—and her opponents—a boost in that regard.

Maybe her martial arts utilized a supernatural power that couldn’t be explained by that alone. The energy produced by an object in motion—centrifugal force.

“So?” said Kumokawa. “What’s your decision? Should we fight?”

“No thanks,” said Oumi, holding out a hand.

Kumokawa tossed Oumi the garden spade kunai she’d confiscated. With her weapon back in her possession, Oumi mulled things over again.

What she needed to do right now was not to parade herself and march onward to victory. Rather, she needed to acquire a treasure—supernatural abilities—and use that to bridge the gap to victory. To lift the entirety of the Koga to that level.

Thus, someone condescending to her didn’t pain her in the

least. How pathetic would it be if she was defeated and stripped of everything she had as a result of stubbornly clinging to trying to win for no reason and no real benefit?

"What are your plans now?" asked Kumokawa.

"My, uh, plans?"

"The corner there. I was asking if you still wanted to sneak a peek."

Explosions and quakes. The Kiharas and Gremlin still seemed to be duking it out just around the bend. A battle between people freely wielding things that went beyond human understanding—things the Koga wanted.

Sneaking a peek was the very limit of what she could do. She'd die if she got involved. She couldn't even deny the possibility that she'd be swallowed up the very instant she challenged them, before she even figured out which side was which.

And knowing all that, Oumi still said this.

"…Of course I'm going."

She was an elite, tasked with the role of initial actor, though all the physical modifications meant she'd never look anything more than ten years old. But her eyes alone retained their original light—a light that would never be lost, no matter how much she changed her body.

"I need to find a way to lift the Koga up, and I will. It doesn't matter if Natural Selector had to be called off. Someone has to do it, and I'm sure that if I do, someone in the future won't have to live under threat. So yes, I'm going. No matter what happens."

"Sheesh," said Kumokawa with a sigh. She shook her head.

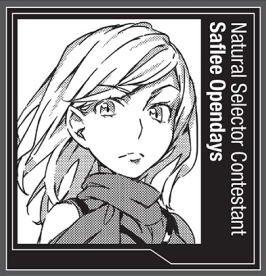
And then…

"I suppose I have no choice. I'll wound your pride to keep you from dying."

Oumi didn't even have time to ask a question.

An instant later, all four of Kumokawa's limbs whizzed, and

Oumi fell completely unconscious.



Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays



Academy City Maid Girl
Maria Kumokawa



Natural Selector Contestant
Shuri Oumi



Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki



Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara

CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS

MAIN.11

“<Fuck, fuck, fucking fuck.>”

Singing an absurd song to herself, a girl spread fresh crimson blood all over Baggage City. Right now, she was in the city’s garbage disposal facility. The water-heating pipes and passages ran through here, too. In fact, they reused the heat from burning garbage to work their water-heating facilities, so this place was essentially the core of the whole city.

Baggage City had several keys to unlocking hot water, such as thermal power stations and oil refineries, but if they lost all of them, it—and its people—would be dropped into a negative twenty degree Celsius hellscape.

Indeed, the main battlefield was shifting like an amoeba.

It had begun in the circular arena, set up for safe competition, and now it had come to the single garbage disposal facility in the world with so many lives riding on its continued operation.

While it was difficult to tell, given the mass-produced red color signifying aggression, the girl was actually committed to the facility’s defense.

Silver braids. Dark skin. Red-framed glasses.

Her overalls-on-bare-skin look was a little odd, whether for walking around town or traveling through a region with heavy snowfall. She had a hammer in one hand and a saw in the other, both made of gold. Generally, while pure gold was resistant to corrosion and oxidation, it was relatively soft—too soft to be that good of a metal for bladed objects. That was what textbooks would say. But textbooks didn’t apply to this dark-skinned girl. Her golden tools severed steel, crushed concrete, and “modified” other humans in very psychedelic ways.

She was an official member of Gremlin. A *dvergr* living in modern times.

Marianne Sringeneier.

Her movements weren't all that fast. She was slow, in fact. As slow as a normal girl killing time on her way home.

However…

"Roar, roar, woof, woof."

Muttering randomly to herself, Marianne shoved her golden saw into the wall. For some reason, it went through and lodged itself there. She let go, and as she did, the saw raced toward the enemy formation as fast as a car. The assassins sent from Academy City, so sure they knew how far a saw could reach, went stock-still in surprise, and…

…then the blood splattered.

"Gah?!"

"Argh!"

"It's the grease?! The blade's going along the grease spread all over the wall!"

"Too late."

The golden saw leaped off the wall; shot off at a complex, winding trajectory; and shaved apart several of the soldiers all gathered in that one place. But a moment later, all their limbs—and heads—were attached again. There wasn't even any blood.

"What…what happened?"

"Hmm? For that, you'll have to pay attention to your hands and feet." Marianne grasped the saw as it came back to her along the wall, then twirled it around before pointing the weapon's tip at the soldiers. "Doesn't it look like they were hastily reattached? Like, say, a bunch of jigsaw puzzles mixed up into one?"

"No… It can't be…"

"And I didn't even screen you for transplant compatibility! If you don't do something quick, your immune system will start to reject everything. Don't want to die? Guess you'll have to steal your own body parts back from the others."

"*Rgh… Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*

hhhhhhrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr rgh?!”

It wasn’t actually clear whether they *wanted* to fight one another. But they responded nonetheless. The “unharmed soldiers,” infected by the strange mood in the air, began to believe that the *others* would definitely do it. They began to believe they were all enemies. And they began to spray one another with lead bullets.

“Such a tragedy,” murmured Marianne, using her escape from their terrified stares as an opening to close in on the soldiers who were still alive.

But then something happened. One of the attackers—he’d been playing dead amid several corpses—suddenly thrust a gun in her face at close range.

Marianne didn’t even glance his way, though. She just swung her golden saw. A moment later, both of the attacker’s hands were gone. But she hadn’t cut them off. She’d replaced everything from his wrists down with a golden faucet—but only one. It was like he was handcuffed now. Perfectly normal arms that ended in a perfectly normal faucet. It was an utterly grotesque sight.

Human modification. The technology of the *dvergr* had escaped the realm of surgery and made it into the realm of battle.

“Ah, ah…,” the attacker moaned, dazed, as he looked at what had become of his hands.

Marianne patted his shoulder. “You tried your best,” she said with a smile. “But you didn’t get results, so I’m gonna have to give you a zero. So sorry.”

Without hesitating, she turned the faucet. With the whooshing of liquid, the dark red, life-maintaining fluid began to rush out of his body with the utmost ease.

“*Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrgggggggggggggggggghhhhhh hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!*”

“You could always turn off the faucet—oh, but it looks like

your hands are tied. Too bad for you, huh? Now, I forget how much blood a person can lose before it's fatal. Whatever. I'm sure a bucket's worth will be enough to—Huh? Wait, you passed out already?"

The attacker spasmed as he sank into a pool of his own scattered blood. Marianne turned her attention away from him and started walking again.

"…I'm not actually meant for battle. I thought I'd have a harder time, but oh well. Baggage City's really getting turned inside out by guys like this? The Guardians are such a letdown. At this rate, I won't even *need* to 'buy time' or whatever."

Her tone was annoyed as she pointed the golden saw's tip at the floor. Before the hidden attacker could pelt her with rifle shots, the floor caved in. The soldier was barely breathing, though, so she did a little work on his throat.

Immediately, there was a scream—a soprano, like a small child's—that exceeded human vocal range. A screaming baby. The frequency humans hated the most. As the *other* hidden attacker froze up at the ear-splitting noise, Marianne strode straight toward them with large steps. Then she swung her golden hammer like a baseball bat.

"Time for a grand slam!"

The attacker's torso was gone a moment later, a cannonball of human flesh now rocketing off. It slammed into another attacker a short distance away.

"Brgh, urgh—"

"Still not dead yet, eh?" Marianne scratched her head. "If only you'd died. Then you would have gotten into your grave looking all right—*without* me messing with you."

She strode toward the other attacker, who had been struck by his colleague's torso, as though a piece of a toy that had broken off. He was still on the floor. Giving up on the rifle he'd dropped, he tried to pull out his gun, but she stomped on his arm, crushing it, then brought the saw through his legs in one clean stroke.

His two legs became two wheels.

The attacker screamed, horrified at the painless transformation. Marianne whispered to him like one would a lover.

“It’s a straight line to the compost tank, babe. Hope you suffocate in all the raw garbage!”

“Gyah, *gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh hhhhhhhhhhhh?!*”

He tried to dig his nails into the floor, but he was too late. He was dragged along the floor at a superhigh speed, eventually vanishing deeper into the passage. It made Marianne think of a disaster film where a giant shark drags its victims out to sea.

“Is this it?” she complained, twirling her golden weapons around.

Then she noticed all the noise had stopped. Silence dominated. The attackers hadn’t been annihilated—only one-third, perhaps even only one-fourth, had actually died. But even the people still in possession of all their own limbs had now fallen to their knees at the miserable sight of the corpses she’d created, of the utterly modified human flesh, and had dropped their guns.

A fate worse than death.

A cliché quote from movies and books but seeing it like this caused the basis of one’s thinking—the desire for life and avoidance of death—to collapse out from under them. When that malfunctioned, their other thought patterns would fragment.

“Is this *seriously* it…? I’ve heard so much about Academy City… I’m a little disappointed, to be honest. How did you all actually win World War III?”

Everyone was holding their breath, desperately trying to hide even their heartbeats. But their tiny exhalations caused Marianne’s eyebrow to twitch in displeasure. Wielding her golden saw and golden hammer, she killed some and swapped the limbs of others for objects. Even as she did, the remaining assailants couldn’t bring themselves to move. Their hearts were

completely and utterly pacified. Nobody was brave enough to run—or more accurately, to put themselves squarely in Marianne's attention.

So Marianne didn't hesitate. If they resisted, she would pursue them and kill them. If they didn't, she'd mow them down like weeds.

She sighed. "It really would have been easier if you'd just fought one another… But I never end up actually fighting in these situations. That's why I don't get combat experience. Hmm… I'm a little worried about my diet."

Reaching one hand inside her overalls to scratch her belly, Marianne used her other hand to swing her golden hammer around languidly. She would pinpoint internal organs, harm them, and then immediately close up the wound. With the internal bleeding causing the soldiers to inflate like water balloons, she went on killing them, all without making a mess.

Once the noise was gone and Marianne had some peace of mind back, she suddenly heard the creaking and groaning of metal.

"?"

"Ohh? This place… Oh my. Where in the world am I?"

It was a woman wearing pajamas. She was in a wheelchair, so she must not have had freedom of motion in her legs. A button device with a wire extending from it rested in her lap. Maybe she was a patient who had checked into a Baggage City hospital and had escaped during the chaos of Academy City's attack—not that she knew where she was going.

The woman's expression was meek. Probably because she hadn't seen the *things* Marianne had just created.

"And who are you?" asked Marianne.

"Oh, you… Is that really what the garbage disposal facility uniform looks like?"

"No, the furnace I use is a little smaller. Though it just produces high heat—that's all." Marianne scratched her head with the hand holding the handle of her golden saw. "If you're looking for an exit, just turn around and head two hundred

meters that way. There should be a door. And you might want to be quick. It's a little dirty in here."

…While her actions were very much grotesque and hard to picture, as Marianne had said before, she was a *defender* of Baggage City. At least for now. So she didn't have any reason to modify someone who lived here.

Meanwhile, the woman in the wheelchair bowed. "Oh my. Well, thank you… Hmm? Oh, I'm caught on a floor cable? There's an elevation difference… Ohh?"

"Ugh, geez. What a pain."

Marianne casually went over to the pajama-clad woman and stepped behind her wheelchair. She gripped the rear handles, then used her body weight to get her wheels over the thick cable.

"Ngh… Your wheelchair is pretty heavy," she said. "Is it a power chair?"

"Partially, yes. If I don't move at all, I'll get weaker very quickly, so I set it up so that it's not *too* easy. See? This box here is the controller."

"I can see that. I'm an indoor type myself. Then again, I do work with hammers. I've got biceps. If I wanted to, I could really make them stand out."

"Are you a carpenter?"

"Close, but no. I'm not into building castles," explained Marianne as she pushed the wheelchair. "By the way, isn't it hard being in a wheelchair all the time?"

"I suppose. But it means I can experience the kindness of others more often. Like yours right now."

"Right. So here's my question. *How did you get your wheelchair all the way through this garbage disposal facility when there are so many cables and differences in elevation?*"

"…Ohh?"

"It's very strange, you see. It seemed to me like you got stuck on a cable on purpose. Like you were waiting for me to come over."

"……"

Marianne narrowed her eyes, channeling her strength into her grip on her golden saw.

In response, the pajama-clad woman kept smiling.

Krr-sheeeeng!!!!!!

A moment later, the shrill clang of metal against metal echoed.

Marianne had done something simple—she'd swung her golden saw downward.

It wasn't clear exactly what the pajama woman had done.

The wheelchair handles suddenly bounced out of Marianne's hands, and the whole wheelchair spun around one hundred eighty degrees. That much, she could figure out. But that was all. Something had batted her saw away, and she had no idea what it was even after the fact.

She found herself careening away, then smashing into the wall back first, as if to crush the machines along it.

The pajama woman's wheelchair had left a perfect circle of skid marks on the floor, and it was faintly smoking. She grabbed the wired box on her lap and pressed a button.

The next instant, armlike submachine guns came out of the back of her wheelchair, their barrels (cannons?) big enough for a human arm to fit through. How had she stowed that away? Where? Did this thing even obey the law of conservation of mass?

Engraved on the side of each of the barrels were English letters.

Made_in_KIHARA.

"Oh no. You've… Well, you've found me out, haven't you? You leave me no choice!"

Blam-blam-blam-blam!!!!!! The guns thundered so loudly, their sound alone might have ruptured internal organs. A storm of steel danced through the air. Marianne, buried under the

broken devices, seemed to collapse. Her upper body became a spray of bright red fluid. And as for her lower half…

"Come on now. Is this some kind of popular one-off joke in Academy City?"

"?"

She heard the voice come from that lower half. No, that was wrong. There was *another* Marianne there, stooping at the feet of the ruined one.

And that *still* wasn't the proper perception. The pajama-clad woman using the "Kihara" swiftly brought her gun barrels—cannon barrels—back around.

"Is that the real one?!" she cried.

"*That's a decoy, too, idiot.*"

She heard *that* voice from right beside her.

Before the pajama woman could turn to look, a third Marianne, this one stark naked, swung down her golden saw, the tool she'd used to *seamlessly create a girl out of* one of Academy City's strong soldiers.

However, just like before…

Graaack-graaack-graack!!

…the wheelchair moved so fast it blurred, and some kind of machine caught Marianne's saw, sending orange sparks flying. More tire tracks were on the floor now, smoking from the heat of friction.

Marianne made a conjecture. The woman could probably win a fencing competition in her wheelchair, though it wasn't clear if she was actually using a saber or not.

Ugh. This is why I hate freak shows. I keep saying I'm not cut out for combat!

As if she had them lying about all over, Marianne grabbed a new pair of overalls from behind a nearby machine and put them on.

With little squeaks, the wheelchair backed away, seeming not to care one bit about the height differences or the cables. The movement was almost scarily smooth.

Setting a glare on the ever-smiling pajama woman, Marianne

murmured, “Well, look who it is. Someone *pretending* to be sick. You don’t even have to stand up to kill.”

“I, Byouri Kihara, am an expert at giving up. I’ve given up on plenty of things myself. I’ve even made plenty of others give up on things. I think you should give up, too, Ms. Gremlin.”

“Hmm, yes, I see, I see. Must be an easy life for you.”

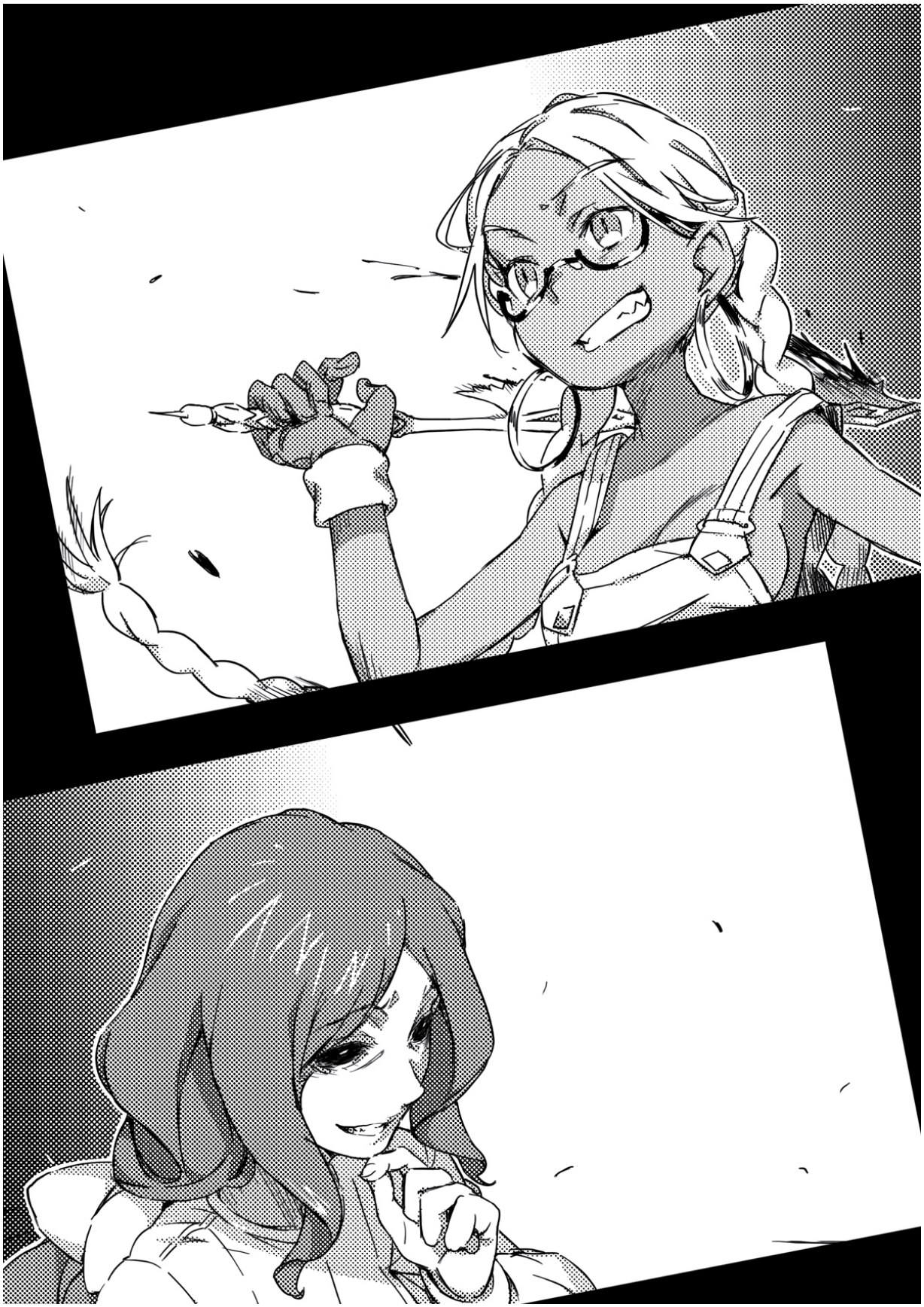
“Well, I don’t think it’s all that strange really. In fact, I think *most* people have faked an illness at some point in their lives. The whole of humankind giving up—doesn’t that sound like a monumental ambition to you?”

That was how Byouri Kihara fulfilled her duty to uphold order. She made terrorists *give up* on plans to destroy Academy City. She made people *give up* on trying to bring information on Academy City tech to the outside world. She made people *give up* on negative innovations, such as the development of new kinds of weapons of mass destruction. She made others give up, give up, and give up… The accumulation of those resignations was Byouri’s trophy. She twisted, she broke, and she crushed, building a mountain of debris from the ambitions of others.

Of course, that was nothing but the result of trying to fit Byouri’s original *characteristics* into society—Byouri herself giving up on things.

As she gazed at the wheelchair, hard-coated in lies, Marianne licked her lips. “*Kihara*, was it? There must be more of them. Like a procession of ants coming to be squashed.”

“I’ve given up on poor Ranny. But En is with us, too, after all.”





“…So there are three of you at minimum. But there doesn’t seem to be a thousand of you or even a hundred of you. Otherwise, you’d have done things differently.”

“I could say the same for you.”

“Well, if we invited five or ten battle-crazed loons here, *the entire plan would implode.* It’s so much trouble, in so many ways,” said Marianne. “Anyway, you won’t have a problem if I crushed you with all my strength, right?”

Vwooosh! She gave a light swing of her saw.

The wall it cut into leaked blood. No, that wasn’t right. It was one of the soldiers, remade to look just like a wall. Their blood and fat spewed over the floor and walls like a popped balloon. It was probably a ritual to allow Marianne to use her golden tools to her advantage.

In fact, she’d just spread the fresh fat and grease splatters on the walls earlier, letting her saw rush along them to attack the soldiers.

But Byouri retained her smile even at the grotesque sight. “And will your full strength be good enough? Because to be honest, I’m real freakin’ bored over here.”

As Marianne brought her golden hammer into position, Byouri pressed a button on her lap in response.

Gshhhak!! The wheels of the power chair disassembled themselves. Then the spokes reemerged in a different way, bundling up into several pieces. Eventually, they formed into several legs that pressed into the floor with rubber wheels that had been evenly divided from the original two. The unit looked like a spider.

Marianne whistled as though it tickled her handicraft fancies. “That’s pretty elaborate. Like one o’ them baby strollers.”

“Oh no. This is a baby *carriage*.”

As their mild exchange finished, the two monsters clashed at top speed.

Kihara Clan
Byouri Kihara

Academy City Maid Girl
Maria Kumokawa

Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays

Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara

Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki

Natural Selector Contestant
Shuri Oumi

Official Member of Gremlin
Marianne Sringeneier

CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS

MAIN.12

Oumi gave a little groan. She could tell she was lying on the floor. The very person who had knocked her out, Maria Kumokawa, was peering at her face. In the girl's hand was a lemon cut into round slices. Apparently, she'd used it to wake her up.

They were no longer in the corner of the hallway from before. Now they were in a large space with desks set up in concentric circles. And lots of monitors. It could have been the control room meant to supply hot water heat to the rest of Baggage City, but strangely, nobody else was here except for the two of them.

Maybe it was okay for the place to be empty if they weren't having any system troubles. Though perhaps all the employees had abandoned their posts and fled. Or maybe the attackers had already disposed of them all.

None of that mattered to her, though. What mattered was that she was now far away from that battle between the Kiharas and Gremlin.

She'd lost her once-in-a-lifetime chance.

"Ngh!"

As she got up, Oumi tried to shove her garden spade kunai into Kumokawa's throat, but the girl effortlessly held it back. And then, as she assumed an upside-down position around the kunai, she spread her legs wide and whirled like a helicopter.

This maneuver yanked Oumi's weapon out of her hand.

Kumokawa, who had her right foot on the floor, twirled the bladed weapon around in her hand. "I told you. You can't beat me. And if this is enough to hold you back, then you shouldn't be peering into the depths. You'll find more than your pride

shattered. Nobody who can't physically feel the danger would be able to function properly. Or are you not even on a level to comprehend what I'm telling—"

Her words cut off part of the way through. The reason was simple.

Because without any forewarning whatsoever, a bazooka had been fired into the room from the entrance.

Kumokawa instantly put just her left foot on the floor, then bent over backward like a bridge. The shot passed through the area her upper body had just left, but it crashed into the wall on the other side of her, detonated, and sent shock waves in every direction—which she had no way of dodging.

"Ngh…urgh…?!"

Kumokawa lost her balance, then was thrown over. She rolled up as she smoothly slid along the floor. By not going against the momentum, she avoided direct hits from the shell's fragments and wall debris. Even as she rolled, she immediately tried to recover—

Grooong. A dull sensation.

At some point, a third party had entered the communication control facility. Kumokawa, still rolling, collided directly with their leg and stopped.

Oh no. The bazooka was just to distract us while someone else ran in here?!

The woman looking down at them reaffirmed her grip on the giant tube that rested against her shoulder. It was the bazooka she'd clearly just fired—and her stance made it look like she was about to use it as a blunt weapon.

For the first time.

Kumokawa had immediately taken evasive maneuvers when the bazooka had been fired into the room, too, but for the first time, she felt a chill crawl up her spine. And that caused a subtle but definite pause in her movements.

Instantly, her consciousness flashed and exploded.

"……"

Oumi heard a heavy *clunk*. It was the assailant tossing away her blunt weapon, its usefulness at an end. It had taken less than ten seconds to get rid of Kumokawa, despite how the girl had had an upper hand the entire time. The threat level of the situation setting in, Oumi recounted the number of weapons hidden inside her clothes. She was just trying to calm herself down, but it had the opposite effect, as she realized none of those weapons could bring her to victory.

The assailant, on the other hand…

"Umm. Yeah, I really don't like this. It would be best if we could settle this without fighting…"

It was a short girl, probably about middle school age. Her black hair was tied into a bun on either side, and she wore a fluffy, baggy sweater, a miniskirt, and black stockings. None of it quite fit together, like she'd just bought everything the store clerk had recommended—and that strangely suited her somewhat nervous aura.

The thing that most stood out about her was the rope hanging from her neck. From it dangled all kinds of precision devices with tiny screens, like a cell phone, a small television, and a tablet.

"*But I'm a Kihara, so I guess I don't have a say in this.*"

Then she heard a sound. *Bhhh-yoo!*

It was the sound of every last monitor in the communication control facility turning on at once. Graphs appeared on them, each changing by the millisecond. Oumi couldn't understand any of them at a glance, and the assailant's pupils seemed to suck in their glow. In her eyes, the innumerable hordes of graphs continued dancing like living creatures.

"*I know, Uncle Amata. It hurts. It really does, but a Kihara would do it like this!*"

Her movements clearly changed.

With a smooth, swift motion, the female assailant charged at

Oumi.

Ngh! What? Is she getting some kind of information fed into her?!

Oumi shot to her feet, her index finger coming out of her sock. She'd pulled out something—a couple of metal plates, sharp on both edges, about the size of nail trimmers. They were throwing weapons but not bo-shuriken. She directed her aim at the floor between herself and the assailant, then threw several of them. They lodged into the ground. Typical caltrops. While she doubted her attacker would be dumb enough to step on them, the girl would still need to avoid them, which would slow her down. Intending to wait for that moment to land a mortal blow, Oumi took out a new garden spade kunai.

But the situation did not play out according to her expectations. Not only did the assailant maintain her speed, but she also perfectly kicked one of the foot spikes straight at Oumi's face.

"Rgh?!"

Oumi immediately tried to guard her face with the kunai, but the assailant bent her leg, then kicked the airborne caltrop a second time. The metal plate, now on a very different trajectory, stabbed into the center of Oumi's gut.

It wasn't a fatal wound—the thing wasn't exactly a chef's knife—but the intense pain still caused her to tense up. In the meantime, the assailant got past the caltrop danger zone easily, then advanced into close range.

"Yup. Yup, I got it."

The swarm of graphs on the nearby monitors began to squirm and writhe even more madly as the girl's eyes absorbed some kind of information from them.

"*I'll compress a hammer's level of destructive force to a microscopic size. Because that's the combat pattern you would use, Uncle Amata!*"

…Am I done for?!

Wham! Then came the girl's right fist.

Oumi had raised her kunai out of a defensive instinct, but

the attacker had smashed into her arm, sending the tip of that kunai plunging straight at Oumi's own face.

Her throat dried up. She couldn't stop the blade.

Wanting to at least avoid a mortal wound, she brought her head down slightly so the kunai would hit her harder forehead, and—

Another right fist was thrown.

And it belonged to neither Oumi nor the assailant.

It was from a complete outsider.

A white ankle-length coat and a white full-face helmet. Neither of them knew when the person had even gotten that close.

The outsider struck Oumi's kunai with their *right fist*, knocking it away to protect her skull at the last possible instant. The girl assailant changed her target, delivering an accurate, precise punch straight to the outsider's face.

But it didn't make much of a sound.

Realizing it wasn't possible to defend, the helmeted man had thrown out a kick at the same time the girl had punched. Without the assailant's weight behind it, her punch misfired, only tipping the man back a few degrees.

On alert now, the girl backed off in order to put distance between them.

"…Enshuu Kihara, eh?" murmured the helmeted man. "I thought I heard you weren't even given passing marks as a Kihara."

"Huh?" said the girl. "Who are you?"

"If you want to kill these two girls, then that makes you my enemy."

"If you want to save these two girls, then we've gotta be enemies, huh?" The graphs in the girl's eyes wriggled and squirmed. "*Can I have some advice please, Uncle Amata?*"

In time with her remark, the patterns on the graphs began to change. They'd already been changing color each instance

Enshuu Kihara had said that person's name.

"*No, no, Uncle Ransuu, Konny, Soku, Auntie Kaihou… No, no, not that, not that. Yeah, I don't mean that. Umm, umm! Right, that's right, Yui!*"

"…Ah, so you're compensating for your dull thought processes with external scripts. Bet that came from the same field as Testament. The big question is whether your personality retained its original form."

"*Yep, yeah, Yui. At a time like this, a Kihara would do this!*"

Zrrk-zrrk-zrrk-zrrk! All the graphs in the room began to change dramatically. As they reflected in the small girl's eyes, she stuck up her middle finger.

"Right, so I'm gonna fuck up all the carbon dioxide in your body and rip all your blood vessels to freakin' shreds! …Well, apparently that's how a Kihara would say it, so there you go!"

"Not exactly."

As Enshuu charged him, the helmeted man calmly placed his hand on his coat button. Then from out of his coat came…

"A convex…directional land mine?!"

"*This is what a Kihara would do.*"

Without hesitation, he triggered it.

A directional land mine was a type of land mine with a set direction for the blast. For example, if one wanted to penetrate an armored weapon like a tank, they could attach an explosive to a concave—or craterlike—plate, thus directing the entire blast toward the tank and multiplying its destructive force. Conversely, to spread the blast over a large area, they could attach the explosive to a convex—or hill-like—plate to cause the blast to disperse out in a fan shape. This variety was usually used for antipersonnel land mines, which took lots of people out at once, so they were mostly filled with small metal balls.

The helmeted man had a convex directional antipersonnel land mine set up inside his coat.

The blast fanned out three hundred meters, with a

maximum breadth of two hundred meters, sending five hundred pellets spraying through that area.

That's…insane…! Even though the Koga were well-versed in explosives, Oumi still gasped in awe.

By adjusting the direction of the blast like that, a directional explosive pointed destructive force at a target. In other words, one could be close to the explosive and not be hurt as long as they were outside that range. That said, everything had a limit. Carrying the land mine *inside your coat* and setting it off there? The man couldn't possibly emerge unscathed.

Yes. As long as this was an issue of common sense—and not supernatural powers.

"…She got away," murmured the helmeted man, the edges of his coat blown away. He'd been wearing a metal sheet on his chest almost as an excuse. Now it was twisted, and it fell to the floor with a *clunk*. Naturally, that wouldn't have been able to absorb the impact alone.

"Maybe there was too little distance. Did I have it too far back? The lethal zone wouldn't extend far to the sides closer to the base of the fan…"

The helmeted man turned to look at the still-unconscious Maria Kumokawa, then at Oumi, who put her kunai back up out of reflex.

"Don't bother," he said. "You wouldn't be able to beat me with that."

"……"

"Not that I'm making light of you. *What I mean is it's too powerful to kill me.*"

His reasoning was incomprehensible. Or maybe she didn't even have the right to stand on the battlefield if she didn't understand it. She was struck by a sensation much like getting the answer "Don't be nervous" when asking a major-league player what the secret to victory was.

It was her very goal to eradicate such irrationality. And yet…

"And to be honest, fighting you wouldn't benefit me. I'm specialized for Kiharas, after all."

…So we have the Kiharas, we have this "Gremlin" group, and now there's an expert on Kiharas separate from them? How many factions are even in Baggage City right now?

As the seething rage in Oumi's eyes grew stronger, the helmeted man kept his tone casual, like none of this meant much.

"Since neither of you has a reason to fight, I'll tell you how to survive. Prioritize this above all else: *Find Touma Kamijou.*"

"…?"

"He's here in Baggage City, too. Getting tossed around, of course, the situation being what it is. Your ability to get to Touma Kamijou is directly linked to your lives continuing. To give it to you short, find him or die."

He spoke so smoothly. So nonchalantly.

"Enshuu Kihara attacked you two because she doesn't think much like a Kihara. She was only being considerate toward Byouri Kihara, trying to eliminate any uncertain factors near her. That said, now that they've perceived you two as characters in this story, you'll need more than normal methods to survive. You need someone of Touma Kamijou's level."

"And who is this…Touma Kamijou?"

"Just a normal boy. He can't solve every crisis, and he won't be able to stop Baggage City's downfall—not with the Kiharas and Gremlin fighting. But on the other hand, he has the ability to save every single character he sees—just like how the Kiharas will destroy every character they see. To escape the Kiharas, you need to use a person of his level… Normally, Accelerator would be the best to fight the Kiharas, but if he's not here, then there's no other choice. You'll just have to hit them with another factor."

The helmeted man squatted down next to the unconscious Kumokawa and checked her pulse and breathing. Once he knew for sure there were no major problems, he looked back at Oumi.

"Tell her that, too, when she wakes up. You'll have a high chance of death otherwise."

“…And what are *you* going to do?”

“Unfortunately, I have my own objectives. I mentioned I was specialized for fighting Kiharas, right? Most importantly, I’m not confident I can ensure your safety,” answered the helmeted man, his ragged coat dragging behind him as he walked toward the exit.

His voice was at most a murmur, and yet it seemed to ring clearly in Oumi’s mind.

“After all, I’m a Kihara myself.”

Kihara Clan
Enshuu Kihara

Kihara Clan
Byouri Kihara

Helmeted Man

Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara

Academy City Maid Girl
Maria Kumokawa

Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki

Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays

Natural Selector Contestant
Shuri Oumi

Official Member of Gremlin
Marianne Sringeneier

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SUB.13

With a soft groan, Maria Kumokawa woke up.

After hearing an account of events from Shuri Oumi, she clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“Do you know him or something?” asked Oumi.

“He’s the guy I’m after, Kagun Kihara. But this isn’t worth letting my pride be wounded. I know he’s here, and that’s more than I could say before. The eyewitness reports were correct.”

“I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but we should get moving. That bazooka girl is still alive. She may come back to finish us off.”

“Yes… But before that.”

Kumokawa got to her feet and dusted off her gaudy maid outfit. She twisted and turned, looking over every part of herself for some reason, but Oumi didn’t see any dirt on her or anything like that.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Making sure there aren’t any bugs or transmitters on me. Who knows what could have happened while I was out cold. If Kagun Kihara knows where we are or what we’re saying, he’ll be able to run away as long as he needs to, even if we’re physically close.”

“I don’t see any chips on your clothes or anything.”

“It might be too small for the naked eye to see. He could have used a nanodevice—those can get in between the fibers of your clothes.” Kumokawa swore to herself. “I won’t be able to say for sure like this. I’ll have to strip down and put everything through a high-heat hair dryer. That should be enough to destroy the circuitry of any invisible devices.”

“Well, if it’s a bug or a transmitter, couldn’t we examine the

electronic waves in the immediate area? If there's a difference, you could even spot it with a radio."

"Do you know how an ant who's found a big meal tells its friends where it is so they can form a line to go there?" asked Kumokawa offhandedly. "Pheromones. A scent. Information can be carried on things other than EM waves. If it's a chemical substance, it wouldn't even need to use electronic circuits. After all, plenty of people in Academy City can control electricity or magnetism or what have you. Obviously, people have been developing machines to get around all that."

"What would happen to a chemical substance if you heated it with a hair dryer?"

"The data pheromone's organizational structure would break down. It's kind of like what would happen if you exposed fresh paint to a hair dryer. The paint itself would still be there, but the coloration would be totally different than if it had dried naturally—it would be warped. The data inside would break apart. It's strong against the cold, though."

With that, they left the control room and walked down the hallway, checking several doors as they went. After finding an employee locker room, they also found a hair dryer—just what they were after.

Kumokawa wasted no time shedding her gaudy maid outfit and spreading it out on the floor. Getting down on her hands and knees, she began to blast her clothes with the hair dryer.

As she did, she rubbed her inner thighs together—while the room was heated, even she must have felt cold wearing only her underwear.

"…These are made of chemical fibers, so I'm just worried they'll end up rough as a vinyl bag."

"How long will it take to do this?"

"If I'm thorough, somewhere from ten to twenty minutes. What about your clothes?"

"There won't be any problems on my end," said Oumi casually. "Ninjas have always dealt with chemicals for combat and espionage. There are reagents for telling them apart. If a

section of my clothes were tampered with, the right reagent would make it show up as a different color."

"Like a better version of a white lab coat?"

"Basically, yeah. If some sort of micro-sized device were really on your clothes like you say, it would probably be destroyed just from exposure to the weak acids we use for the reagents."

They continued to chat, and eventually Kumokawa finished blasting her maid outfit with the hair dryer. She then tried to put the clothes back on, but…

"Ow, it's hot! That's as scorching as a bath someone turned way up as a prank!"

"I have no way of converting that statement into actual numbers."

"The Ichihanaran Festival—Academy City's culture festival, that is—is *very* stimulating. Damn it, it's even hotter since I've been chilling in my underwear the whole time!"

Tears came to her eyes, and her voice rose to nearly a shout as she managed to grit her teeth and get the gaudy maid outfit back on.

SUB.14

Byouri Kihara was crooked.

Her legs, made from her disassembled wheelchair wheels, had been twisted by powerful impacts and no longer functioned properly. Several firearms and wires extended from her backrest, but those appeared unreliable as well.

Marianne Sringeneier. A sorcerer of Gremlin. With her golden saw and hammer, she had taken complete control of the battlefield. She'd already driven Byouri Kihara into the incinerator section of the garbage disposal plant, a big pool made of steel where the burnable garbage would be temporarily held.

It was probably set up to allow its contents—wood, paper, and anything else that couldn't be composted, like big bones and other raw garbage—to dry before they were burned all at once. And the stench was horrible. They'd likely extended the definition of "burnable garbage" because Baggage City, situated in a place with such heavy snowfall, demanded it for the heat.

As Byouri sat by the edge of the steel pool, Marianne twirled her saw around. "Guess that's as far as you go, huh?" she said. "I've gotta take care of all the other 'Kiharas,' or what have you. I'll be quick. It's time to modify you into a piece I can use."

"My, my, my. It would seem I've been driven right to the edge."

"You won't have to worry about much. If I'm making you into a tool I can use, I'll optimize you. You can't move your legs, right? I could give you eight working ones. Or even ten. In fact, you want 'em to spin like a helicopter?"

"I'd just like to ask one thing to be sure. I don't think I have any reason to surrender yet—do you?"

“Yeah, I figured you still had some weapons left. That’s what your wheelchair’s for, right? It’s totally busted now, though. If you can’t move, then how will you fight?”

“Like this, I suppose.”

Snap! A dull noise, and then suddenly the bottom half of Byouri’s pajamas ripped wide open. From out of them came not the soft, bare legs of a woman…but instead a synthetic resin machine that covered her legs entirely, extending around them from the backs of her knees. It wasn’t like armor—it was more like ribbons.

And as the motors behind her knees began to whir, Byouri smoothly stood up.

Marianne clicked her teeth in annoyance. “Right, so you were even lying about not being able to walk.”

“I’ve given up on so much, you see, that I didn’t want to bother trying to stand up using my own strength.”

“…Hence the motorized casts for hospitalized patients. A car company made those, if I recall. They reused the tech from that dancing robot. I saw it in a commercial.”

“Well, that by itself is something you can make even with outside technology. But I highly doubt anyone outside could boost the power to the point where an infirm person could kill a tiger with one kick.”

Grrrk-grrrk-grrrk. A grating noise echoed through the facility.

It was the sound of Byouri removing a billhook-like bladed object from her wheelchair’s backrest.

“I must say, though, that *you* seem to have exhausted many weapons to bring me to this point. Shall I say it? You’re out of ammo. Nobody else is here—and you need people for your tricky tactics. And it seems like that grease you use for sliding around your saw needs to be pretty fresh to work. Meanwhile, you don’t seem very suited for close combat without them… Which means I’ll make you give up now.”

Marianne glanced at the saw and hammer in her hands. Then she sighed a little in resignation.

The things she carried were no more than tools. They weren't weapons in and of themselves. You could kill people with them, of course, depending on how you used them, but they'd be far from 100 percent capacity. The fleshy debris littered around the area had been so fundamentally destroyed that she couldn't alter the shapes anymore.

Marianne's entire field of specialty was working with raw flesh. Using the dead was not the field of the *dvergr*—it was the realm of gods and giants. And she could only functionally use the blood and grease that spewed from people's bodies for about twenty or thirty seconds before they "died," at which point the fat and fluids would become worthless.

"Looks like you got me," she said. "I doubt I could beat you in a brawl. I do feel like you have way too many transformations, though."

"Oh, but that's just part of Japanese culture. And for someone so hated to live this long—it takes a lot more hard work and real ability than popular people need, don't you think? People naturally grow when faced with adversity."

"Must really suck, having people hate you even if you're really strong and better than them."

"You don't know the half of it. That's what led me to give up on so much. Then again, I've made others give up on just as much, so it's not as though I have a grudge against the entire world or anything."

One step. Then another.

Byouri was closing in. Marianne backed away, stepping on the flesh-colored debris littering the floor as she did, but she doubted she'd be able to escape. If the mechanically enhanced Byouri got serious, she could easily speed right at her faster than a tiger or a lion.

"So will you give up now? For me?"

"Not quite yet."

"Then resist like your life depends on it—because it does. I'll crush all your hopes. When I do, please give up on this."

"Far be it from me to refuse."

Right as she said that, Marianne used her heel to kick the thing at her feet up into the air. Like a tricky soccer keep-up, it launched from her heel to her head. Then she grabbed it—a small device.

A machine.

Something one of those flesh-colored stains on the floor had once held.

A radio for contacting the shadowy combat personnel led by the Kiharas.

"Testing. This is the underground waste disposal plant. I've cornered my Gremlin target. All nearby combat personnel, assemble at my location at once and provide fire support."

She had purposely called in additional foes.

But Marianne didn't see them that way. Any hostile elements under a certain power level were just fuel for her weapons.

Byouri's face tensed a bit.

"…I see what you're doing."

"I wonder how long it will take for your talented subordinates to come running. The more adept they are, the sooner they'll arrive, I'm sure."

Marianne tossed aside the radio, then adjusted her grip on her golden hammer and saw.

"After all, they're serving you, their super-scary boss. If they mess up, they'll be in for some discipline, won't they? As long as they've been trained in fear, they'll run here as fast as they can."

"……"

Roar! Byouri, still gripping her billhook-like blade, charged directly for Marianne at full speed.

But the well-trained subordinates' swift arrival worked to the boss's major disadvantage, putting her in a predicament.

Byouri's blade got within three centimeters of Marianne's throat.

The *dvergr* swung her golden saw, and the pitiful honors

students' right arms suddenly inflated to twice their size. At her instructions, the onetime-use pitching machines grabbed fire extinguishers, then twisted around so hard they'd break themselves—and as they did, they fired their "bullets."

Boom, boom, boom!!!!!!

With a series of dull sounds, Byouri was knocked into the air and dropped into the garbage disposal pool.

"Boy, did I make a mess out of her…," muttered Marianne as she returned her golden tools to her overalls. Now that no enemies were visible, she could finally react to the damage warnings going off throughout her body—to the pain, in other words. She staggered, putting a hand on the wall before following the path along like that.

Marianne's primary objective was to defend the core of the water-heating facility, so she wouldn't be leaving the waste disposal plant. Despite how it sounded, though, the workers here had rather nice living quarters. She had taken one such room and modified it into a hotel suite, essentially renting it out.

Normally, her room would have been protected by a sorcerous barrier, but it seemed the building's entire structure had been damaged, thanks to all the rampaging the Kiharas and Academy City were doing. They'd used brute force to mess with the positioning of the symbols, cutting off their effects entirely.

"Well, I can protect the building, but if they start rocking the foundation, it's gonna take *some* damage."

As she'd suspected, it wouldn't be enough for her to do her work at the behest of Baggage City—or rather, the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians controlling it—and expect that things would take a turn for the better. She was just operating on far too small a scale. The Guardians had lost to Academy City in the planning stages.

So now she would be taking the initiative on her own.

And if she was, then a little barrier around one room wasn't

something to worry about at the moment.

She'd have to get tools that were a little more heavy-duty now.

"Where'd I put that thing? Ah, here."

She removed the lid from the wooden chest in the corner of the room, but as she was about to reach inside, she stopped. She then pulled a pair of metal tongs—they looked like giant pliers—from her overalls and used them to grab the Soul Arm.

As she brought it out, the tip of it cleanly sliced through the chest.

"…Why let them rock the boat even more, right? I think it's time for a little counterattack."

Kihara Clan
Enshuu Kihara

Kihara Clan
Byouri Kihara

Helmeted Man

Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara

Academy City Maid Girl
Maria Kumokawa

Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki

Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays

Natural Selector Contestant
Shuri Oumi

Official Member of Gremlin
Marianne Sringeneier

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SUB.15

Deciding that the hot air from the hair dryer had destroyed any bugs or transmitters that could be on her clothes, Kumokawa resumed operations, with Oumi in tow. They left the employee locker room and walked down a long underground passage.

"Is there a real way to get out of here? Or even anywhere safe?" Kumokawa wondered aloud.

"I'm after Academy City's technology. You're after that man, Kagun Kihara, who contacted us earlier… That means *there's no reason for us to stick to Baggage City, especially when it's so dangerous.*"

Kumokawa and Oumi peeked around a corner of the passage. They both realized this place required as much careful attention as a shopping mall filled with zombies.

And yet.

"Nobody's here," said Oumi in a low voice.

Kumokawa agreed but added, "That just makes it even creepier, doesn't it?"

No living humans. No dead humans, either. Nevertheless, military-grade helmets, bulletproof vests, and assault rifles littered the floor. There was no telling where their users had gone or if they were even safe anymore.

"Either this was Academy City or the Guardians…," remarked Kumokawa.

"Both would be very dangerous."

From Oumi's point of view, they were the same—they both wielded unknown technology. She couldn't get a handle on the situation, and it was setting all her nerves on edge.

Kumokawa, however, thought there was more going on here.

"…But the corpses and bloodstains have all been taken away

and cleaned," she pointed out. "What could it mean?"

"Now that you mention it, neither of them is the type to go wipe up the bottom of their soup bowls with bread."

"Hmmm-hmm-hmm-hmmm!"

Suddenly, the humming of a girl echoed around them.

This place was empty but reeked of death. The girl's pretty, ringing voice was out of place here.

Kumokawa and Oumi slowly went around the corner.

The ninja, who was no taller than an elementary school girl, pointed to one of the assault rifles on the floor with her little finger. "Who do you think the gear belongs to?"

"Academy City, I think… The attackers, in other words. I can tell by the tech they're using."

"But weren't the Guardians using cutting-edge weaponry, too? The stuff Academy City gave them?"

"Are you sure you realize how fast 'cutting-edge' evolves in Academy City?"

Kumokawa bent over to pick up an assault rifle, but Oumi grabbed the maid by the arm, stopping her. "Then I may know what they're after," she said.

"Hmmm-hmm-hmm-hmmm-hmm-hmm!"

The humming was getting closer. Strictly speaking, its source was a girl. And naturally, she was the very one who had created this incomprehensible mess of Academy City gear on the floor—all these helmets and bulletproof vests and such.

Her goal was simple: Create an incomprehensible situation, then wait for a certain someone to be drawn out.

In other words, it was a trap. Nobody would come near if they saw a ton of corpses surrounded by rivers of blood. They'd sense the danger and get away from the place.

But what if only their brand-new gear was left on the floor?

That would be eerie, but people wouldn't immediately decide to run away. People were drawn to that which they couldn't understand—they'd investigate it. And the bulletproof vests and assault rifles.

In a situation this dangerous, even the most pious saint wouldn't balk at grabbing a couple of them.

Oumi went over to a bulletproof vest on the floor, squatted down, looked around, and then sighed.

"I knew it seemed too bulbous. There's hand grenades hidden underneath. They're set so that the pin gets pulled out when you lift up the vest. Pick it up and *boom*."

"I'm impressed you noticed that."

"I'm not looking at the view—I'm looking at the intentions of the person who created the view."

If that was the case, then the other pieces of gear were probably also booby-trapped. There was always a possibility the rifles' internals had been messed with, even though one couldn't tell by looking at their exteriors.

Kumokawa put a hand on her hip and shook her head. "In that case, we should get out of here… What are you doing?"

"This is Academy City technology, right?" said Oumi. "It's not linked to psychic powers, but there's no harm in picking up a few pieces of gear."

"…Didn't you just explain it's a trap?"

"Even traps can be a valuable resource. When you're low on ammo on the battlefield, looking around for land mines or wired-up hand grenades is an old trick."

"Are all ninjas these days into FPS games or something?"

It seemed like the pint-sized Oumi seriously intended to disengage the traps. Kumokawa waved her hands around, flustered, but didn't want to stop the girl, lest she mess up the process somehow.

"I really think getting greedy at times like these never ends well," she pointed out.

“This isn’t a Hollywood movie,” Oumi assured her. “Bombs that complicated never show up in actual fights. At basic level, a good weapon is easy to set up and easy to break down. Hand grenades are safe as long as you’re holding down the lever. If you do that and stick something else into it in place of the safety pin, like a clip or something, you can disable the trap.”

“Remind me again how close you have to be to a hand grenade for it to be lethal?”

“There are a bunch of different kinds of antipersonnel frag grenades, but most have a radius of over ten meters.”

“I’m gonna be honest with you—I *really* want to run away!”

“Don’t push me. Don’t even sneeze. This is a simple task, but the price of failure is fatal. This is no time for jokes—not if you don’t want to end up in pieces.”

“Hmmm-hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm-hmmm.”

“Just stay still.”

“Look, come on!”

“What?”

“Don’t bend over like that—just sit on the floor. I’ve got an unimpeded view of your panties from here.”

“Who cares about that?! Just don’t do anything!”

“Hmm-hmmm!”

“Stay perfectly still. Perfectly still!”

“I feel like you’re the one shaking harder here. Why’d you start right when you sat on the floor?”

“It’s colder than I thought. And if you want the honest to God truth, I really need to go to the bathroom!”

“Uh, you’re literally holding down a hand grenade lever right now!”

“Shut up! Just don’t move at all, got it? Otherwise, this thing is gonna blow!”

“Hmm-hm-la-lahhh!”

And then something bad happened.

“Hmm-hmmm… Huh?”

Enshuu Kihara stopped skipping and humming as she arrived. She was confused.

There was nobody in the passage where she’d laid the traps.

In fact, there was no sign anyone had even triggered a trap.

Just to be sure, she shined an ultraviolet light around, but there were no footprints or anything on the floor, either.

“Aww, man. Too early?” A troubled look came to Enshuu’s face. “Well, I set up twenty cockroach traps. Maybe a different one went off.”

Meanwhile, Oumi tossed aside the bulletproof vest in her hand.

“The fibers and plating inside are all melted! This is useless! I can’t even analyze this!”

“Paint splatter gimmicks are used for shoplifting prevention these days. There’s no reason the inside has to be paint, though—I heard they developed a chemical that can melt aviation materials but is safe for humans to touch for storming into places. They probably strung it out like blood vessels on the inside of the plate, I think.”

“Argh! Nooo…”

“Look, I know you just wasted the effort, but… Anger or disappointment—pick one, please, Little Miss Inner Thigh Nuzzler. I have to say, if we got attacked right now, it would probably be the most pathetic way in the world to go out.”

SUB.16

The HsB-07.

An updated version of the Academy City supersonic bomber fielded during World War III now shot through the skies above Baggage City.

Its pilot, Ryuuichi Rokudou, was mostly in a state of cryofreeze in order to protect his body from the enormous g-forces. He used neither his fingers to operate the giant machine nor his mouth to communicate his intent to allies. There were plenty of ways to get information directly from the brain itself—the blood distribution in the organ, the secretion rates of various chemical substances, the flow of electric signals, and sonar measurement of what brain regions were active. While each individual method was unreliable, combining multiple improved things. They'd started to use the technology not only in weapons control but also on a trial basis for espionage and searching.

"Francisca Three to all units. We attack the airport on our next turn. Francisca One, Francisca Two, target the elevated roads. Our first job is to take out every long path the enemy could potentially use to launch fighters."

Dozens of the mantis-like Five Overs had already dispersed, and the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians' unmanned weaponry stood no chance against them.

But the Five Overs had a weakness: They were designed specifically to go after surface targets. While they could fly, it was only in the capacity of an attack helicopter—mowing down surface enemies from the air. They weren't made for dogfighting multipurpose combat jets flying at supersonic speeds.

The voices of Rokudou's colleagues continued to reach his ears—or at least, that was how he perceived them.

"Are those unarmed morons risking their lives to protect the unmanned weapons? They're crazy. Can't those toys shoot air-to-surface missiles out of the sky?"

"If chemical weapons were loaded into the warheads, then even if they did get shot down, the inside would spray all over everyone… They're overreacting now that they know the weakness. I highly doubt the Guardians will be able to come up with an effective countermeasure to the Five Overs—not when this is their first time seeing them."

As they bantered, communicating quicker than mouths could produce sounds and ears could perceive them, they zoomed through the air at seven thousand kilometers per hour straight over their assigned targets.

They less *dropped* bombs and more *placed* them in the air.

All in all, they placed 120 precision-guided bombs over the runways at even intervals, almost like streetlights lining them. Then gravity took hold of the blunt instruments, which used their tail fins to adjust their direction before dropping toward the vital parts of the airport with seven-millimeter precision.

Frozen in place as he was, Rokudou didn't have the ability to turn around to look. Instead, he watched the destruction on a window displayed on the edge of his consciousness.

"Runways one through nine, all taxiways, and all radar facilities destroyed. Surface-to-air missile installations one through thirty-two, anti-air machine guns one through twenty, and antiaircraft guns one through seventeen destroyed. Airport has ceased to function."

An impressed whistle came back. *"Approximately forty-eight straight roads over thirteen meters wide have been destroyed. Imma turn around and get the other fifty-two."*

"Confirmed five tunnels that could be used as runways. I'll blow up the entrances to bury them."

Their results were just what the armchair theories had predicted.

Academy City's supersonic bombers had been designed with high enough specs to charge onto front lines without any fighter escort. Neither counterattacks from the surface nor enemy jets were a match for the bombers' overwhelming speed and mobility.

The biggest thing Academy City had to worry about on this mission was their bombers experiencing mechanical trouble due to improper maintenance; the Guardians stood no chance against them.

Sure, the Guardians had all the unmanned weapons Academy City had given them on their side. Those, however, were mere borrowed goods. And for a city whose pace of scientific and technological innovation was staggeringly swift, even those weapons were now just old, outdated models.

A victory without any wounds. A conclusion in accordance with the theories.

The winners of World War III, their weapons crowned with the descriptor *hard science*, intimated at beautiful equations within barbaric combat. Using their theories, they crushed even the idea of enemies launching counterattacks.

At least, that was how it should have been.

However.

"What…what is that?"

Suddenly, the radar lit up with multiple points of light. There was no stealth at play here. Rokudou checked for more details using the camera on the bomber's underside, then saw what looked like large missiles being launched from the surface in the distance.

"No… Those aren't missiles. They're changing shape!"

Wha-shoo! Whatever it was, it moved. And not in a gentle projectile arc like normal planes would have. It was like a bolt of lightning but horizontal instead of vertical. And as soon as it

passed by a towering skyscraper, the top of the huge structure was sliced through diagonally, as though by some sort of paranormal phenomenon.

Before the massive chunk of matter could fall to the ground, Rokudou's thoughts exploded into white noise. His extreme tension and fear had damaged his connection to the machine.

The reason was simple.

Because whatever those things were, one had gotten *very* close to the HsB-07, which could itself pull off sharp maneuvers at seven thousand kilometers per hour.

"This is insane! What the hell is it?! Sure ain't one of the drones we gave 'em!"

As it approached, Rokudou finally got a close look at the object.

It reminded him of an attack jet made of complex surfaces, kind of like early stealth planes. But he only thought that because he was so knowledgeable about aircraft. Another person might have seen it as a javelin with an enormous tip or a jewel cut extremely precisely.

But anyone who looked at it would have seen one feature in particular.

It was a wireframe.

No—the machine was made out of multiple wireframes, all interconnected. This wasn't normal non–Academy City technology, and Rokudou was already an expert in that. And yet this enemy was incomprehensible to him. Then all around the object, unnatural orange letters emerged.

We, too, love the latest technology.

But it wasn't just one sentence. Those letters all vanished, and then another set appeared.

It isn't your right alone.

“Bastard! Francisca One, Francisca Two, lure it in, then shake it off. You two cross over and ‘place’ bombs in the air! And then we blow it—”

Rokudou found himself cut off before finishing.

On his camera, he saw the moment the transformed wireframe cluster collided with Francisca One, and the bomber began to plummet toward the white city. Francisca Two seemed to have barely avoided getting tangled up in it, but the slender wires still sliced the ends off his bomber, rendering it unflyable.

They had no way of knowing this, but their enemy was a Soul Arm called Loki’s Net. Loki was a trickster god, always using off-the-wall ideas, breaking taboos, and wielding his silver tongue to evade the laws of the gods, find the way out of labyrinths, and defy fate. He had personally created this restraint for himself—the idea that he was uncatchable—after thinking about what someone would need to really catch him. And a genuine *dvergr* who had survived to the present day had imbued the Soul Arm with more modern capabilities.

For a magical fishing net that could block off even the loopholes of theories and fate, mere speed was no issue.

Rokudou desperately flung his machine into an evasive maneuver, but he was deathly aware that he was being whittled down little by little. The other parts of the wireframes, now finished taking down his allies, converged instead on Francisca Three, too.

“Francisca Three to AWACS! Deploy Francisca Four through Nine—they’re near the Baggage City outskirts, and they have onboard ABL. Use their ballistic missile-tracking lasers and see if the light can trick these trump cards of theirs into chasing after them!”

He gave the command, but it was too late.

Either he wasn’t able to aim at the thunderbolt-like enemy aircraft because of the way it was moving, or he was in the middle of finding a position to get out of their range—whatever the case, Rokudou realized those wasted seconds would prove fatal.

“AWACS to Francisca Three! Eject! Your engine’s about to blow!”

“Do these bastards look like gentlemen? They’ll use their sharp nets to cut me and my parachute to pieces!”

His altitude rapidly dropped. He wasn’t even flying anymore, really—just falling gradually.

Rokudou turned the nose in a wildly different direction, setting it on a course straight for the place the wireframe planes had originally been launched from.

…A waste processing plant? he thought. *Wait, someone’s on the roof.*

It was one of their priority targets. Standing next to the building’s huge smokestack was a silver-haired girl with dark skin. A girl whose outfit, consisting only of a pair of overalls and glasses, had no place being in the Arctic Circle. She smiled calmly, staring directly at Rokudou.

She knew the supersonic bomber was coming after her. But she raised a slender finger in front of her, then curled it, provoking him.

“That bitch… She must be with Gremlin, our top priority!”

Ignoring the pieces of his bomber flying off, Rokudou went full throttle, charging straight at the roof of the waste processing plant.

Several orange sparks exploded on his camera.

And then the camera, too, was sheared away, leaving only gray noise on his display.

The plane kept getting thinner and thinner, like a pencil shaved down by a pocketknife, but Rokudou wasn’t thinking anymore. He only kept the target in the middle of his vision.

And then…

Atop the roof of the waste processing plant, Marianne Sringeneier stuck a hand into her overalls and pulled out a golden tool. They were tongs—metal implements for handling things like heated blades inside furnaces. Perhaps easier to

envision would be a pair of giant pliers.

She gave the two grips a light swing as though they were nunchaku, then, in front of the enemy, closed them.

The tips clamped down on a small thirteen-centimeter fragment of sharp aircraft material.

That was all that remained of Rokudou's last-ditch effort.

Shhhhh. The fragment was evaporating the raging blizzard around her. She glanced at it, then whistled. "That was a close one. I almost grabbed it with my bare hands, but this thing must be over a thousand degrees Celsius because of the friction."

Marianne started sticking the aircraft material shard, metal tongs and all, into the snow piled up on the roof to rapidly cool them off. A blacksmith by trade, she was well accustomed to the act. Once the sharp fragment's temperature was sufficiently lowered, she plucked it out of the tongs with her fingers.

"Pretty easy, though. That Soul Arm is classified as supplementary, the kind that diverts a curse using a puppet—all it can do is block off escape routes. Though I did add on that fun little extra effect to make it match the opponent's speed."

Still, there was no harm in going that extra mile if it meant she could wipe out their airpower. She was focusing on that first, instead of the Five Overs rampaging through the city, in order to prevent any extra Kiharas from being dropped on them.

"A reckless attack, indeed!"

She gave the sharp fragment a little kiss on the side, then stowed it in her overalls as a souvenir. Then she snapped her fingers, and several more Loki's Nets launched into the sky.

But there came a tremendous *whooom*, and a flash of light exploded overhead, interrupting her big display of attitude.

A laser weapon on an aircraft, incredibly far away—well outside Baggage City—had just fried one of the Loki's Nets. The brilliant white flash was like the light from welding, leaving nothing but fragments that were glowing orange with heat.

"Oh, crap! I knew I'd have to get creative!"

Marianne frantically evacuated inside, then ordered the rest

of the surviving Loki's Nets to continue obliterating Academy City's air forces.

And so the off-the-rails conflict calmly expanded, even in an environment unfit for human survival.

SUB.17

Kumokawa and Oumi walked down a clean underground passage, though they didn't know where it led. Occasionally, the passage would shake, though not at regular intervals. Was there a large-scale battle happening up above?

As they went, Oumi said in a quiet voice, "Mind if I ask something?"

"No, what is it?"

"Have you ever heard of this individual named Touma Kamijou?" She continued, not particularly changing her expression, "The man in the helmet and coat… That was the name he gave—the one you're probably after. Now that we're involved in all this, finding him is our only way to make it out alive, apparently."

"…I've only heard the name. My older sister would probably know more."

"So it's safe to assume he's from Academy City. If he can deal with a situation like this, he must live pretty deep in the underworld."

"Actually, I've heard he doesn't have ties to anything shady. Adorable, right?"

"?"

Oumi frowned, but she didn't get a clear answer from Kumokawa. And it wasn't because she was putting on airs—but because the situation changed dramatically.

Boom!

All of a sudden, right in front of them, the ceiling of the hallway collapsed. A heavy tank fell in amid a deluge of sand and dirt.

Kumokawa started coughing madly from the scattered dust. “What was that?!”

In contrast, Oumi—accustomed to chemicals and smoke screens—had a calm look on her face as she gave her reply. “A fifty-ton Russian bento box. The ground must have given way. Those things were never designed to be used in cities!”

“Russian…? Would that make it Baggage City’s?”

The hatch located under the machine gun on the turret had been open the whole time. Kumokawa approached the tank, meaning to drag out the wounded soldiers, if nothing else.

“Don’t, you idiot! Do you have a death wish?!”

Oumi pushed Kumokawa to the floor and covered her with her body.

A moment later, there was an explosion on the tank’s outer surface. It didn’t seem like the fuel or munitions had ignited—it was more like a huge shotgun blast.

“That thing’s covered in explosive reactive armor,” she explained. “It’s like one big bomb waiting to blow. If you get too close, you’ll get caught in the blast.”

“I see. Then it’s time for static electricity.”

“?”

“I’ll force the fuses to react and explode from a safe distance. There’s dust all over, so it should be easy to get as much charge going as in a science class experiment.”

“Like lightning bolts in volcanic ash?”

“Was that written in one of your books of ninja secrets?”

Kumokawa would have to artificially produce static electricity—but they didn’t have to look around for anything that could produce it. The friction from the dust in the air would do the job nicely.

They did need, however, a tool to move the dust in a specified direction with a specified force.

In other words, a fan of some sort—electric or otherwise.

“Which is why I took my maid clothes off.”

“…Couldn’t you have just used the apron?”

“It’s impolite to point that out when I’m already stripped

down, you know.”

Now only wearing her underwear, Kumokawa waved her maid outfit up and down as hard as she could, as though trying to dry washed sheets.

Swoosh! The light gray dust all moved at once.

Lights twinkled bluish white, and a moment later, small bursting noises began erupting from various parts of the tank blocking the passage. They sounded like oversized firecrackers.

“The popcorn’s all popped now? All right, time to save some lives,” said Kumokawa, gleefully putting her maid outfit back on.

But before she could peer into the open hatch right under the machine gun emplacement, Oumi frowned.

“…It might be empty.”

“What? Empty?”

“There’s a motor attached to the machine gun. The cable goes down inside the tank. There’s an antenna, too—you wouldn’t need that for search operations.”

“Well, then I suppose there isn’t much point rescuing anyone.”

Kumokawa looked down into the hatch with Oumi and saw the kunoichi was right—nobody was on board. The control panel covers had been removed, with a tablet attached via a cable to the internal circuitry.

The words S. Berylan were displayed on the screen. Was that the operator’s name?

“…Looks like they hacked the controls to operate it mostly remotely,” observed Kumokawa. “But the machine gun is outside the program’s control, so they needed to put a motor on it.”

“I don’t know much about Academy City technology, but that seems pretty cobbled together,” said Oumi.

“It makes sense. This thing came out of a thought experiment about how to reuse older weapons—basically, it’s just a product version of one of those ideas that people argue about on message boards. They’re basically messing with something

that's already been messed with, and that means it's easily hijacked, so Academy City wouldn't use something like it."

"Then Baggage City's using it, huh? What do you think of that?"

"I think that maybe they had less actual combat forces than they advertised."

Whatever the case, the underground passage was now crowded with sand, dirt, and a tank. They'd have to go up to the surface using the big hole the tank made in order to keep going.

But two seconds after crawling up there, they regretted it. There was a fierce blizzard outside. It was hell out there—negative twenty degrees Celsius.

"Ack, that's cold!" exclaimed Kumokawa. "I can't move around in maid clothes out here!"

"I'm not sure where you *could* move around in clothes like those," remarked Oumi.

"What was that, Cheerleader Kunoichi? I'm not sure I heard you. Anyway, let's just get to the nearest building—I don't care what it is! We can make a plan once we're inside!"

But the gas station Kumokawa pointed to almost immediately exploded with great force. The flames had a stickiness to them, like a Molotov cocktail, and they rained down on the other buildings nearby, too. Kumokawa, capsized by the shock wave, finally spotted the line of black smoke cutting through the air overhead. She couldn't see what was causing the smoke, though.

But she *did* see some kind of incomprehensible aircraft—it looked like an amalgamation of wires—zooming through the air along with the smoke.

She decided to give voice to her speculation. "Is that smoke from an Academy City supersonic bomber flying through? It must be really busted up. It's spraying fragments and bombs all over the place!"

"Well, we won't want for warmth now," pointed out Oumi.

Kumokawa spotted a soldier a short distance away tossing aside a tablet and fleeing. She didn't know which side they

belonged to, but maybe they were the one remote-controlling the tank before.

“You mean this hot wind? It’s just kind of hurting my skin. It’s not warm at all. That’s bad. There—it’s coming! That building is collapsing!”

The two picked themselves up out of the snow and rushed away from it.

Unlike the controlled destruction of a building explosion, this structure was just falling over, some of its support beams having been severed. Since the lower floors couldn’t hold up the rest of the building, it looked kind of like a giant falling to its knees, toppling over in stages toward them. They just barely managed to get far enough away from it in time.

However, they’d just been traveling through the sprawling passages right under their feet.

And so, unable to endure the massive weight, the ground caved in, sucking in Kumokawa and Oumi.

The former started coughing. “The surface is awful, too!”

“We should count ourselves lucky the underground isn’t a sewer system or something,” said Oumi.

They crawled through the gaps in the destroyed underground passage, managing to get to a safe place. Oumi took a seat, her back against the wall, and asked an abrupt question.

“So this Touma Kamijou guy,” she said. “What on earth is he doing in a place like this anyway?”

“I, uh, I don’t know,” said Kumokawa. “Let’s just pray he didn’t randomly die. Anything’s possible in this city.”

There was no spare time to rely on others. If they wanted to survive, they’d have to use their own feet to do so.

SUB.18

“Phew! I thought I was dead. This has got to be a joke. Maybe we really should have brought someone purely combat oriented—even if it inconvenienced the plan. I’m definitely not cut out for war.”

Marianne headed back to her private room inside the waste treatment plant, whose magical barrier was still broken. The battlefield was too chaotic for her to use the Loki’s Nets optimally. Instead, she decided to reach for her secret weapon.

Taking a seat on the chair in the room, she picked up a clear jar on the table. Inside it was a juice made from wheat. While the stuff was perhaps unusual in Japan, Scandinavian sorcerers had an affinity for it. Naturally, beer was both easier to get and more appropriate as a symbol, but Marianne was well aware of her low alcohol tolerance and stayed away from the stuff.

She put the jar to her lips and took a gulp of the wheat juice before pulling out her smartphone. While she didn’t need the device, she *did* need to adjust her mouth and ears, which were responsible for sending and receiving signals. Only after applying a perfect encryption—one specialized to handle contingencies where her voice was digitized—did she dare to use this technology belonging to the science side, her enemy.

“Mind telling me where you are right now, Sigyn?” she asked.

“Umm. Where am I? I’m not sure myself. Baggage City is so big, it’s easy to get lost in. They should have just kept it simple. I wish *they had just kept it simple.”*

“Never mind that. Could we meet up as soon as possible? I told you so many times that I’m not cut out for battle. Why pick me anyway? Aren’t there better users for Mjölnir?”

“They’re very busy right now. Don’t bother them. You

understand exactly why."

"Yeah, so join up with me!"

"Like I said, I don't even know where I am. You know I'm useless on my own. Just like you, Mari—you can't modify your own body."

"And your advice is the same?"

"That's right. My sacrifices generally need to share something I have with someone else to make up for what they lack. If I try to make up for what I lack—well, I don't have anything for that."

Sigyn was the name of Loki's wife.

The sorcerer who had taken her name offered advice that may not even be magic at all—Sigyn didn't know. Thus, it was a mystery whether Sigyn was a sorcerer. But it didn't matter. Gremlin would gobble up anything that they could put to use, no matter what it was. That was how they expanded. Grew.

The Norse goddess name gave it away—just like Utgardaloki, Sigyn was an official member of Gremlin.

"All right, then why not give me some advice? Y'know, something that'll let me find you."

"Oh! Wait, that's a good idea."

"You're hopeless at using your power, you know that? The advice you give is *always* one hundred percent correct. If you used it for yourself, you might even be strong enough to be a magic god."

"Oh, I don't care about that. If someone uses my suggestions to succeed, then I share in their success."

"Just give me your advice already!"

"All right, all right. Here's what you should do…"

Neither Marianne nor Sigyn were the type of person who could accomplish much on their own. But with someone else's intervention, their power would explode to the point where they could slice through history itself. They didn't know how many of the Kiharas were left, but if Sigyn could make up for what Marianne lacked—the skills she needed to get involved in direct combat—then she would have some leeway, unlike her perilous fight with Byouri Kihara. She would need real-time

advice matching the changes in the situation, but with it, she could obliterate all the Kiharas without issue.

Thanks to Sigyn's advice, Marianne now had a search skill she could use to meet up with the lost sorcerer. Just then, Sigyn said something.

"I'm sorry. It sounds like it's been tough for you."

"Yeah. Definitely put the wrong girl on the job. I'm super beat. You know, I was even thinking about calling Bersi here."

Marianne leaned back against her comfortable chair, swishing her legs under the table, as she took another sip of her wheat juice.

"And going back to the very start. This whole, uh, Natural Selector thing? It's a tournament, right? We shouldn't be defending it at all. The cost is clearly way too high. I can't even get pumped for this."

"Yeah. What did they call it—the Proof of Global Standard Equal to Academy City Supernatural Ability Development? That was a lie, right*?"*

Despite Sigyn's bombshell, Marianne's tone remained casual. "Yeah, but I think I know what those old sponsors were thinking—not that they can tell us, since they're basically mincemeat now. Basically, the way the competitors in Natural Selector participate reveal their reasons for fighting. Like, fighting for a sickly family member, or for protecting your research team in an academic clique war, or for getting money to your famine-wracked home country. Anyway, it tells them what those people *would* gain by getting the Global Standard."

A goal they could never give up on—every contestant had one. And their objectives wouldn't simply vanish forever if they lost in the tournament. They would stick around. They would simply be quietly absorbed, somewhere out of sight—a hell that forced you to watch that which you truly wished to keep ground to dust.

And that was why…

"And as long as the organizers know that, they can control all the competitors by threatening them. Whoever wins Natural

Selector gets the Guardians' full support and a cooperative relationship. Meanwhile, the organizers turn around to the losers and tell them that they'll never accomplish their personal goals unless they do something. Then they can clamp another collar on them—the hope that they can turn things around."

In other words, it just was the opposite. They weren't trying to have the masses fight to select the strongest from them. They would gain connections to *everyone* in the tournament, regardless of if they won or lost. Support, threats—they'd use every means at their disposal to force the fighters to work for the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians' fold and make it impossible for them to escape.

UFOs, dinosaurs, OOParts, EM waves, microorganisms, cryptids, subterraneans… While the modern world called these things preposterous, there were still people out there researching them and organizations funding that research. And those funds were a much more useful power. The Guardians had put on the martial arts tournament to cast a net and reel all of that in at once.

In other words…

"The Guardians don't want the hundred-odd competitors in the tournament. They're after the hundred-odd organizations backing them. They just want to add as many new groups into their circle as possible. They just want to expand their influence to fight back against Academy City. Natural selection? Ha. They reached too far, and now they're piles of mush."

"And that gives us the opportunity to bring our own goals into the mix*."*

"Yep. At least there's a silver lining to this stressful work." Marianne sighed, then collapsed over the table. "Ugh. I'm glad I brought something to cheer me up. Without it, I think I'd be totally off the rails now. Gotta satisfy the body *and* the mind, right? Especially for people like us doing intelligence work."

"A piece of advice—your *work is in poor taste."*

"You think so?" Marianne wondered aloud.

"Come on, of course it is. You dismantle living people and

remake them into furniture. *Try putting yourself in the shoes of your tea party guests for once."*

"You think so?" Marianne repeated, tilting her head in confusion, not really following.

Her chair had a name. It was Telerie. Her lamp had one, too—Frank—and her table was named *Cendrillon*. Occasionally, she'd hear something akin to a moan come from them. The furniture-shaped objects still had all their insides. They had faces on their surfaces, and they breathed, ate food, and took naps… *They were all alive, in other words.* She hadn't just broken them and split up their corpses. No, she'd kept these people alive after retooling them into furniture—such was her skill as a craftswoman.

Marianne ran a finger over an expensive piece of skin-colored furniture and smiled thinly. "I'm only optimizing their forms to meet my goals. In this case, it's a punishment. You only have one life, right? So how is it fair that *any* crime above a certain severity warrants the death penalty? It just encourages criminals to kill a hundred people instead of just one. You get your money's worth that way. *So I retooled these three into forms that would let them atone for their sins.* Though I suppose I did *also* make sure they were naturally soothing for me. Can't deny that."

"And it's in poor taste."

"You think so?" wondered Marianne.

"Yes. And now you have me concerned that Utgardaloki is one of them."

"I mean, yeah, I'm annoyed he slipped up and things ended up that way. But there's no need to go *that* far, is there? It's not like he turned traitor and hurt us somehow. Faeries like me don't go after hard workers and honest folk, you know."

Sigyn always gave ultimately appropriate advice, but it was just that—advice. Apparently, she didn't care how the person used it—or even if they *could* use it.

"Anyway, you're my secret weapon, Sigyn," Marianne continued. "So stop wandering off on your own. I was supposed

to be fighting with your support all along. If they take you out first, the balance of power falls apart—”

And then.

She stopped speaking abruptly.

Her expression evened out, too.

A moment later, the *dvergr* smiled—very thinly.

“…But I have to wonder why poor victims always come stumbling to me at times like these. It’s not like my voice encryption works if it isn’t going through a communication device, you know.”

Marianne took the jar of wheat juice and threw it at the door to the room. As the glass shattered, the half-open door swung open the rest of the way.

Two people appeared: Maria Kumokawa and Shuri Oumi.

Marianne took her golden saw out of her overalls and, twirling it, said to them, “You know, I’ve been wanting a footrest for this chair and a mini fridge for my drinks. I’ll let you decide between yourselves who will be which.”

CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS

SUB.19

“They’re not here,” said Enshuu Kihara in an utterly innocent voice.

Her clothes were soaked with splotches of melted snow and mud. Meanwhile, the screens hanging from her neck—her smartphone and her one-seg TV, among others—showed complicated graphs as they reflected the building’s walls and windows before being absorbed into Enshuu’s eyes.

“*Yeah. Yeah! The situation is outrunning the damage being caused. I’m really sorry, Uncle Amata. Now this will look like a safe space even though a Kihara is here.*”

She was in a large condominium district, with nearly identical rectangular buildings lined up like library shelves. The gate had an auto-lock on it, for whatever that was worth, and the hallways didn’t lead to outdoor spaces like balconies but instead through the center of the buildings.

But that was all they were.

Ram a snowplow with a thick blade attached to the front into that gate, and the gate would be destroyed, lock and all. The front doors to each dwelling were even weaker than that. One could shove an electric drill into the gap between a door and the wall, pull the trigger, and slice right through the dead bolt.

After prying open one door after another and checking inside, she kept finding rooms that didn’t look very lived in. A lot of the furniture was identical across all the dwellings, too. Maybe this place doubled as a hotel that people could rent a room in for a week at a time or so.

“I’m supposed to do every single one. But now everyone’s going to be mad at me. They’ll say I’m not a true Kihara.”

In fact, the faint lingering scents of people who had been

living in the units was actually eerie. It called to mind *Mary Celeste*.

"…Five hundred thousand normal residents. And three million others, here to watch Natural Selector or just stay here for a while. Not that they're any different—they're all people related to the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians, just dressed up in disguises. But where did they all go? I wonder. You would think it would be a big to-do if they were all to move out at the same time."

Her odd mutterings echoed in the empty spaces.

She was reorganizing her thoughts—shifting data from short-term memory to long-term memory. Talking to herself like this helped her with it.

As she continued to murmur, she pried open the next door, then the next.

"Philanthropists? No, they're not those. Academy City soldiers invaded the city, but now they're lying all over the ground. That means the Pied Pipers of Hamelin are only picking the people on Baggage City's side to help."

But 3.5 million people couldn't possibly all be hiding in the same place. She couldn't even think of any building big enough to fit that many.

"And they couldn't have left the city limits. Not when the Five Overs are automatically looking for people to eliminate. Besides, it's negative twenty degrees Celsius outside. They'd all freeze to death before getting to the next city."

Which meant they all had to be somewhere in this city. In several different, smaller places. Still, places that were obviously meant for fitting tons of people inside at once—like the dome—were out of the question.

For example, if you were to ignore this mammoth housing complex's livability, you could squeeze forty-five thousand people in each building. And that was what the pipers were doing—hiding an absurd number of people somewhere one wouldn't think so many could fit.

"…Maybe I'll request a bombing run. It would be so easy just

to level the entire city. Even if they survive the blasts, they won't have anywhere left to hide. Then they'll freeze to death."

And that *would* be the simplest solution.

Even if bombings alone couldn't bring down the Guardians, they would pave the way for a head-on clash with them. The enemy had facilities, weapons, and cover they could use. Attacking and destroying them all from a distance first was the standard, tried-and-true approach.

But there was a simple reason they couldn't do that.

"Yeah. If Gremlin plays dead after that, it'll be a big mess."

Academy City versus its cooperative organizations—it was very clear who would win there. But Gremlin was different. They could burn down the whole city with wave after wave of cluster bombs, but the Gremlin sorcerers could potentially survive it. If the attack created millions of barely identifiable corpses, it would be easy for Gremlin to take advantage of them to get away.

First, they had to make sure the Gremlin people were dead. They could wipe Baggage City off the map after that.

"I wish it could be the other way around. It's so annoying. It means I have to fight regular soldiers, too."

Ordinarily, Enshuu's search for civilians in Baggage City wouldn't have been part of the objective.

But now that Gremlin had joined forces with the Science Guardians and were plotting something, the Kiharas wouldn't want the city destroyed—in form, at least, if not function. They needed people living here, going about their lives. So if they started killing unrelated civilians at ground zero, Gremlin would have to show up to stop them—not out of goodwill or a sense of justice but out of their own interests.

That was the reason for her search.

That was the reason for her massacre.

…Unfortunately.

"Well, this is a problem," said Enshuu, her expression making her look like a lost child.

The smartphone and one-seg TV hanging around her neck

continued to display complex graphs.

"*Yeah. Yeah! I know, Uncle Amata. At a time like this, a real Kihara would do something like this, right?*"

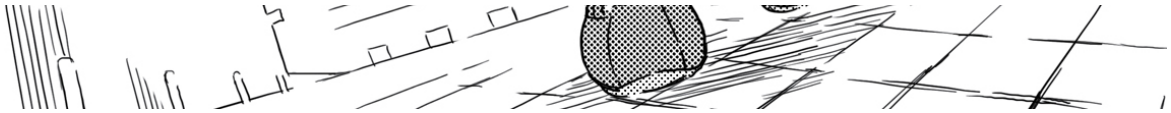
She grasped the hem of her skirt with her little hands, then flipped it up.

Then after waiting about ten seconds, she crooked her head to the side.

"…Wait, nobody's coming."

She shivered—her belly had gotten cold—and then set off for her next destination.





MAIN.20

Neither Kumokawa nor Oumi really *wanted* to dive headfirst into a sea of blood. Regarding the helmeted man, Kumokawa had this to say.

"Kagun Kihara." His name. "A man thought to be deeply involved with the death of a minor at an elementary school in Academy City. I *must* track him down. I'm very particular about my pride, but I'd gladly destroy it if it meant catching him."

On the other hand, they were well aware that the situation in Baggage City was not normal. They knew how risky it would be just to stay in one place for too long.

Kumokawa was after Kagun Kihara. Oumi was after information on supernatural abilities. Neither of their objectives *had* to be accomplished in Baggage City. Whatever the Kiharas or Gremlin were doing, once the fighting was over, they'd have a chance to leave. They could wait for the calm after the conflict, then start undercover investigating again. They could still achieve their goals that way. So the two had made the decision to escape Baggage City for now, get somewhere safe, then start from square one, beginning with building a new information network. However…

Sometimes, pure beginner's luck led amateurs to the truth. Even if they didn't want it to. It would make Oumi and Kumokawa tragic witnesses—like those who would be drowned at sea or buried in the mountains.

"……"

Neither of them had been trying to get to the truth of the matter. They'd been trying to get out of Baggage City as fast as they could. They'd already dropped out of the running. They knew that was the wise decision. And yet on the particular

escape route they'd happened to choose was Marianne Sringeneier's room, whose door was slightly ajar and whose magical barrier was still down.

And so they'd arrived at the truth.

Despite it sealing their fates.

And…

They'd run down the labyrinthine maintenance passages for the water-heating pipes and had reached the waste treatment plant at their core, then somehow ended up walking through it until they'd come to this one room. They hadn't intended to peer past the slightly opened door.

"…But I have to wonder. Why now?"

They'd simply overheard a voice. And then from the gap in the door they should not have looked past, darkness erupted.

…I don't know about that maid, but I think the other one's a Natural Selector contestant. I haven't been going out of my way to kill anyone from Baggage City, but that information about Sigyn is extremely important. Which is what makes this so unfortunate.

Marianne, surrounded by psychedelic skin-colored furniture, took her golden saw in hand, smiled thinly, then addressed them.

"You know, I've been wanting a footrest for this chair and a tiny fridge for my drinks. I'll let you decide between yourselves who will be which."

Hell had broken loose.

Kumokawa and Oumi certainly didn't opt to fight. Immediately, they turned right around and ran away as fast as they could. They dashed through the waste treatment plant, down the maintenance passage from which they'd come. It wasn't a particularly good option—just encountering something like *that* meant this was the worst possible scenario.

"Wh-what? What the…? What the hell was that?! Some kind of cyborg?!"

Despite being accustomed to supernatural powers, even Kumokawa was panicking after what they'd just seen.

Oumi, however, seemed used to corpses created through normal means. "There's a tactic where one side will purposely destroy someone physically but keep them alive, then discard them. This strikes fear into the enemy and costs them a fortune to fix. Like spreading mines that will only blow off one of your legs. That had to be what we just saw! That woman's just coming at it from a different angle by modifying their corpses!"

"Are you sure it's that digital?! You saw it on her face! She thinks of it as a hobby! As entertainment!"

It was so far beyond. This was so much more than just a grotesque mental image.

They had no idea what on earth one would need to do in order to convert a person with all their limbs attached into a living table, but they doubted they could fight someone with free control over such technology. Perhaps they could win, but there was no telling what would happen to their bodies in the process. They could end up with a drill for a right hand or jet boosters on the soles of their feet.

"No, no. Didn't I just mention it? You heard about Sigyn—our ace in the hole. My only choice is to silence you!"

Shkreeee! A shrill, metallic noise went off. Kumokawa looked behind her as she ran and saw the girl chasing them, pressing a bladed object to the wall of the passage. About fifty meters separated them. That would have been close enough to threaten them with a gun or something, but she was carrying golden tools—a hammer and a saw.

"Isn't our way out blocked by the tank and the building that collapsed?!"

"That's actually our chance. If we can slip through the rubble, then bury her, we can slow her down. We'll need to get aboveground—and it's still below zero out there—but it's better than trying to confront her in a fair fight."

They had a finish line. They had distance between them and the opponent. This battle wasn't unwinnable.

…We can manage this! We can shake her—

Just as Kumokawa felt a tiny bit of relief, it happened.

Boom!

The wall directly to their side suddenly swelled toward Kumokawa, as though trying to squish her.

"Wha—?"

Had a partition wall triggered? It reminded her of the trap in ancient ruins in action movies, but that wasn't the right answer.

"A…person?!" shouted Oumi.

With the same texture as the wall, the same colors as the wall, the same sheen as the wall—a modified "human." Who or what it used to be was unknown. But this human, modified into the shape of a rectangular pillar, had just launched itself at Kumokawa's flank.

"Ngh!"

She quickly twisted, lightly touching her right arm to the pillar's side as she whirled around and completely avoided the car crash–level impact. That wasn't the core of the issue, though.

Because they kept coming—horizontally *and* vertically.

Another squarish pillar shot up from the bottom of the passage to block it. In a matter of seconds, the floor and walls were completely covered in obstacles of the same color.

Their escape route had been cut off.

"It's really hard to keep them alive in that state, you know. I mean, look how square they are," said the dark-skinned girl with a grin. "I keep them here and there, ready to fight at a moment's notice. But since it would be a waste otherwise, I'm having their sensory organs act as sensors for me…not that it seems to be working that well—the Kihara wheelchair lady snuck past them earlier. They should still be seeing and hearing, so it must be that their egos, responsible for processing information, are refusing to see themselves as they currently are."

Then this wasn't all. And she wasn't tampering with them because she had to.

It was simple. She used her environment…

…to hold on to a set amount of victims, preserving them, treating them like dried bread and instant noodles kept around for emergencies—the kind that eventually hit their expiration dates without ever being used.

"…These people can still…see and hear?"

"If you want to get out of here, you can just destroy the obstacles, though you'd be slicing living people's bodies in half, of course. It might be just a bit difficult—enough to chip a supermarket cooking knife or two, I'd guess. Mostly because of the bones. You'd be better off shattering the bones with a blunt instrument first, but then your blade won't be as sharp because of all the slick grease."

Chilling words. They seemed to cut straight to what it meant to live—and what it meant to die. And this girl who violated those concepts the most did so with an air of nonchalance. It was a proposition that nobody ever took note of, but once one did, it would weigh on their mind something awful.

Was it right to destroy these rectangular, pillar-like obstacles to save themselves?

Was it right to perceive them as fellow humans and save them instead of finishing them off?

Was what seemed to be wrong actually right?

Was what seemed to be wrong actually wrong?

"…What should we do?" Kumokawa asked Oumi.

"Take down the hostile and secure an escape route," she replied, "loathe though I am to try."

As she saw the two of them make up their minds, the dark-skinned girl—Marianne Sringeneier—twirled her saw around and smiled thinly. "Your answer is to postpone the choice, then? I guess that's the model answer. That's just how humans approach their own lifespans, after all.

"However," she added.

“If your thinking patterns are that plain and boring…you’ll never reach those of us in Gremlin.”

Marianne ran. Straight ahead. No feints. As if aiming for the first thing she’d set eyes upon, she fixed her gaze on Oumi and dashed toward her. It seemed a relatively defenseless act, considering both of the girls were skilled in close combat, but the issue was her golden hammer and saw.

Oumi took out her garden spade kunai.

“It’s too slow!” exclaimed Kumokawa, sticking out her leg toward her.

Instead of attacking Marianne, she kicked Oumi as hard as she could. The golden weapons sheared through empty space. Kumokawa moved herself around Marianne, keeping her distance, then called out to Oumi, who was now on the floor.

“Never rush an esper without knowing the conditions for their power! Don’t let it come to blows! Even if you *can* land an effective strike, if she hits you back, you’ll be a human table!”

“Wait, you figured out my special trait already? …You’re used to it, aren’t you? The strange, the incomprehensible. Are you from Academy City? Because if you are, then I *definitely* can’t let you escape.”

Swish, swish. As she twirled her saw around, she smiled, without turning around to look at Kumokawa.

“My goal’s not to slash you with the saw or hit you with the hammer. My tools are just the optimal forms for conveying my intent to modify things. They’re just the seven I scraped together—one for each necessary operation. As soon as the gold touches you, your body will have already been modified.”

“Nanodevices that go into the skin? …No. Do they take advantage of cell osmotic pressure to conduct a chain modification on single cells? That would let it get deep inside with just an external touch. That’s a high-tech healing device.”

“You’re way off the mark, bitch. These things aren’t made for human bodies. I’m just using their functions to mess around with them. But I guess you’re right about the results if not the

process. That counts for something, right?"

One hit, and one wouldn't just lose one of their limbs—or head. In the worst case, they'd run the risk of suddenly turning into a chair or a table.

…If I land a grab or a throw, I could end things with a single counterattack. Which means I'll have to rely on physical strikes!

"That's a half-hearted plan."

But Marianne saw right through her.

"If you want to escape my tools, then it's best to just get away from them. But are you sure you can take me out in one hit while maintaining your distance? That strategy relies on counters or accumulated damage, doesn't it? Of course, I guess it's different if you're gonna pull out bigger techniques like high kicks, but… Well, you know what I'm going to say."

In a fight without rules, high kicks aimed for the head always ran the risk of getting one's leg grabbed and the rest of them slammed on the floor. And even if it worked, they'd be supporting themself with one leg—if they wanted to reach for it with that kick, they'd have to pause their fast footwork.

In other words, one ran an increased risk of an easy counterattack.

"Ultimately, if you only ever discard safe cards, you'll just drive yourself into a corner slowly but surely."

Marianne abruptly stopped twirling her saw, then pointed it at Kumokawa's face. She licked her little lips.

"Like I said, this isn't a matter of actual combat strength. You don't think uniquely enough to reach Gremlin."

A moment later, the situation progressed dramatically.

Whoom!

Marianne and Kumokawa both charged each other at the same time.

"Eh?" grunted the dark-skinned girl as she plowed forward, a little confused.

Kumokawa, meanwhile, went toward the floor as though

jumping into a pool, then used her hands to walk on it instead.

"This is just a chess problem." *Whirl!* Kumokawa, currently upside down, bent and twisted around. "Getting farther away from your opponent's pieces doesn't make you safe. The trick is to move into squares those pieces can't!"

The golden saw passed Kumokawa's leg by mere millimeters as she shot her heel up at Marianne's jaw. A dull sound rang out. The golden saw and hammer swung around, trying to hit her leg, but it was already somewhere else. The weapons swished through empty air.

"Ngh!"

"Your vision's blurry; your brain is rattled. How are you still following?!"

Kumokawa, still in her handstand position, had her legs folded up like a spring, coiling to charge up power. Marianne desperately swung her upper body to the side, hearing her spine crack in the process.

Another one—at my jaw—

"Think so? Then this is gonna inflate my ego!"

Whirl! Kumokawa spun, still upside down. She lashed out with her legs, coiling them around Marianne's right leg.

It was beyond any possibility she'd considered. The golden tools. If Kumokawa had been afraid of them, this attack wouldn't have been possible.

It wasn't a strike at all. It was a joint lock.

Kumokawa hadn't tried to slam Marianne into the floor—instead, she left the sorcerer standing, putting all her energy into breaking her right leg.

A dull sound rang out, rattling the dark-skinned girl's insides, right to her brain. But before the bones could completely shatter, Marianne swung down her golden hammer. Kumokawa didn't cling; she removed her legs, then evaded by rolling directly backward. As Marianne tried to pursue, however, her right leg acted up. She lost her balance and had to put a hand on the wall.

"I might not have gotten your bone," said Kumokawa, doing

a breakdance-like maneuver to get herself back to her feet and wiping the nervous sweat from her brow. “But I think I did good damage to your tendon.”

“You… You *unclassified*, with just two arms and two legs…!”

“I guess four strike points must not be enough for a decisive blow,” said Kumokawa, folding in her outstretched arms.

It made her look like she was defending herself, but she wasn’t. She was preparing for an elbow attack.

“Then I’ll add my right elbow, left elbow, right knee, and left knee—that’s four extra points—for an eight-point strike!”

“Ngh!!!!!”

“Oh? Figured out how much that expands my tactical options, did you?”

Boom! Kicking off the floor, Kumokawa charged at Marianne using the shortest route, attacking her with an irregular eight-point strike, one could only be executed via highly irregular martial arts.

The dark-skinned girl didn’t know her way around a close quarters fight as well as the other members of Gremlin. Plus, the pain in her tendon was stopping her from dodging the way she wanted.

However…

“Sure, I can’t do much without the raw materials…”

Marianne swung her golden saw—but not at Kumokawa. She swung it at the floor, and the wall, and the ceiling. She whirled it around in a big circle, damaging everything it hit.

“*…but why didn’t you assume I had other humans in stock?*”

They writhed. The humans she’d ordered to stand by in the form of construction materials all began to spew yellowish grease everywhere. It was a directed stream, like a high-pressure water cannon, firing nuts and bolts like cannonballs.

With her right fist, left elbow, and right knee, Kumokawa batted them away. Then she dodged the golden hammer with her upper body—it had come flying at her in the chaos—before diving for Marianne. She leaned her head way back…

“And a ninth!”

…before she swung her forehead down, trying to knock out the dark-skinned girl. Unfortunately, Marianne simply shifted her head slightly to the side.

Whoom!

Another bolt, this one coming from directly behind Marianne's head, shot forward. It struck Kumokawa right in the forehead, causing her to reel backward and fall to the floor. She showed no signs of getting up after that; it seemed like she had a concussion.

"And that's that."

Marianne cracked her neck from side to side. The saw that was in her hand had disappeared. The reason was simple—she'd thrown it straight backward. She'd converted the shape of one of the "obstacles" blocking the passage and had used it to attack Kumokawa.

The dark-skinned girl walked ahead, covering her right leg. Keeping Shuri Oumi in sight—the girl had fallen to her knees, unable to keep up with the battle—she retrieved the saw and hammer she'd thrown. In the process, she took out her smartphone and dialed Sigyn's number. She scowled at the pain in her leg while listening to it ring.

"…Damn it. Maybe I shouldn't have pushed it. I thought that girl was a regular civilian, but I should have given her more credit. Come on, Sigyn—shit! Pick up already. It's gonna be a real pain in my ass trying to beat these Kiharas without your advice."

But she waited and waited, and Sigyn never picked up. And that was when Marianne noticed something. Oumi, who was still on the floor, was muttering something to herself.

At first, Marianne thought she'd gone crazy.

But that wasn't the case.

"…Mari… Get…"

Her mutterings had a clear regularity to them.

"…Get out of there. Just run away for now. We don't know for sure that these two were working alone. If they have more coming, your right leg will be a major weakness. Get away from

there for now; then tape up your leg to help it first…”

Her voiceprint was different. But the way she emphasized certain syllables, the rise and fall of her voice, the timing of her breaths…and most importantly the words she spoke clued Marianne in.

“Si… Sigyn? What? How are you imitating…?”

Oumi had definitely heard her phone conversation earlier. But that wasn’t nearly enough to allow for such a precise impression. She might scratch the surface, but she’d never get down to the essence like this.

Which meant…

…that the Sigyn on the phone before was… No, Sigyn was in a different place as this girl when she overheard. That means…

“…Sigyn’s fear was…an act? You or your allies have already captured Sigyn!” said Marianne, closely examining the possibilities in her head. “And then you held a blade to her throat, or made her wear some kind of device that would strangle her when it receives a wireless signal, and made her talk to me? How much of our affairs would you have us tell… tell…?!”

Part of the way through the sentence, she bit her tongue.

She couldn’t form words properly anymore.

“Mmf…?! …Ngh!”

“*Your supernatural power is such a disappointment. I doubt the Koga would have any use for it.*”

As she spoke, Oumi took a small item out of her pocket and threw it. It hit the wall with a squelch and stuck there. It looked like a disposable pack of tissues.

It took too long for Marianne to finally realize what it was.

“…Alcohol…?”

“About seventy percent ABV. The properties of ethanol can change drastically depending on the distilling method. This one’s basically kryptonite against people who can’t hold their liquor. A full glass of this could drop an *elephant* to its knees. It was originally a ninja tool for throwing off scent-tracking hounds.”

"Ngh!"

Her head spinning, Marianne still swung her golden saw at a nearby wall in order to remake the person who had been fused with it into a spear to hurl at Oumi.

But it didn't activate.

She hadn't failed to modify the person—the spear that was supposed to have been modified hadn't listened to her command.

"You're an added bonus," said Oumi smoothly, taking out her garden spade kunai. "The reason I used alcohol was to get all the 'raw materials' in the area drunk at once. That's their weakness, isn't it? You modify people but keep them alive, which means your weapons are embedded with human thought processes. Get them drunk, and they won't change shape the way you want them to, and they won't listen to orders. *It was Sigyn who told me that.*"

"Rgh!"

Marianne immediately made up her mind. She whirled around and began to run away without hesitation. From someone she'd taken for a mere civilian. From someone she'd considered beneath her.

As she ran, clutching her pained right leg, cold words stabbed into her from behind.

"Show me more. Show me the kind of supernatural power *worth* absorbing into the Koga."

The words of a ninja who had survived to modern times.

Of Shuri Oumi, the one who served as the initial actor with her conspicuous deeds.

"If you can't…*then I'll just decide you've served your purpose.*"

Zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh!!!!!!

Oumi closed in on Marianne Sringeneier.

CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS

PERIOD.21

Black hair done up in buns on either side of her head and a baggy sweater. A miniskirt and black stockings. Aside from the smartphone, the one-seg TV, and *other precision instruments with small screens on them* dangling from a string around her neck, she was a completely ordinary girl. If you told someone she was actually a Kihara shaking the world right now, they almost certainly wouldn't believe you.

Enshuu Kihara.

And in fact, this girl—who was always nervous and unsure of herself—had not been given a passing grade as a Kihara. She could neither form the characteristic thought patterns or produce positive research results that would allow a Kihara to continue to be a Kihara.

"Heeey! Over here. Over here…"

"Auntie Byouri!"

Enshuu's face lit up as she heard the familiar voice. That part of her was what had been deemed "uncharacteristic," but it was a weakness she didn't realize she had. The voice had come from inside the waste treatment plant, but Enshuu unflinchingly ran into the mountain of stench.

As she turned over all the garbage, her clothes dripping in black goop, she eventually turned up a crushed-up wheelchair. She dug some more until eventually a familiar face appeared.

Byouri smiled helplessly. "As you can see, I lost. These people who are 'outside of science' really are powerful," she said, tapping on her leg with a weak motion.

The leg had been completely crushed, transformed into something that resembled a twisted metal bat. Not only that, the robot parts bolstering her leg strength had dug deep into her

flesh. If one's leg and a metal pipe got caught in a pressing machine, this would probably be the result.

"You lost?" repeated Enshuu. "But how?"

"I'm not fully sure myself," said Byouri. "But more importantly, could you let me borrow your communicator? I want to open a port to Academy City and do some readjustments."

"What are you going to use them for?"

"Well, the wheelchair is broken. And so are my leg strength–bolstering robots. That's the only thing left."

"I'm scared it'll hurt you."

"It's fine. Just give it to me."

At Byouri's insistence, Enshuu took the smartphone out of the array of precision devices hanging around her neck. It was supposed to be Enshuu's ace in the hole, but she didn't hesitate to lend it to someone else.

Byouri removed a ballpoint pen from her pocket as she fiddled with several of the smartphone's settings. Without a second thought, she shoved the pen into her twisted-up thigh, but no blood came out. Instead, its tip began to glow with a faint blue light.

"…Signal reception and transmission confirmed. Beginning form change into the Number Two Level Five, Dark Matter."

There were seven Level Five espers in Academy City. Of them, Number Two had sustained major wounds in a battle with Number One, having been quite literally sliced to pieces. Despite his body being subdivided in several pieces, though, they were all hooked up to an enormous life-sustaining machine, meaning he was still hanging on by a thread.

But no matter what state he was in, as long as he could use his ability, he could still function as valuable research material. In fact, it was more convenient for the Kiharas that he lacked a sense of self and could be made to use his ability by sending him electrical signals.

"Is there a chance you could go out of control if you integrate Dark Matter into your body?" asked Enshuu.

“It’s a possibility,” replied Byouri. “That’s why I typically carry it along with me, like a normal piece of equipment. Separate from my body. But I couldn’t call myself a Kihara if I let the basic theory hold me back. A Kihara would step into the mists. A Kihara would forge a path through the darkness of the unknown!”

Krrrrick-krick-krick-krick! Strange noises began to come from Byouri’s legs. They weren’t something flesh or bone would make—it was more like plastic cracking.

Her legs, twisted and deformed, started to crack back into place from the inside. The debris from the robot parts, which dug into not only her flesh but also her bones, was ejected from her body by the force. Dark red blood flowed, but only briefly before stopping. It was as though her body had just expelled the impurities within it.

What was left were two pretty legs without a single wound on them. In this situation, though, the fact that they were pretty was utterly off-putting.

Even as all the protrusions came out of her knees and thighs —things that looked like blades and wings—Byouri slowly, placidly stood up. She’d disengaged the limiters in her Dark Matter legs in advance—the function that normally prevented her body from being eaten into.

“Ranny and Utgardaloki took out each other,” Byouri mused. “And I lost to… What was her name again? Marianne something? That makes one loss and one draw. Not exactly fitting results for the Kiharas.”

“I just remembered!” exclaimed Enshuu. “I saw someone who looked like *Uncle Kagun*.”

“…Kagun Kihara? He did vanish from Academy City. But what’s he doing here?”

“It’s, um, not good, right?”

“Oh? I don’t think it’s that much to worry about. The Kiharas will almost surely never be annihilated. Perhaps if the rest of humanity died out, we would, too, but that isn’t the case.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not Kihara enough, En, so I suppose you don’t have a good understanding of it yet. But that’s how the Kiharas work. There are many different forms of Kihara, aren’t there? Little Noukan is a golden retriever with an external processing circuit. And the way you work is the same—‘that thing’ can be replaced with Kihara thought patterns, which are like parasites in human thought processes, in order to acquire ideas that simple AIs wouldn’t be able to replicate… You see, the Kiharas aren’t restricted by blood ties or even human forms.”

The wicked thing that appeared when science lost its purity.

The thing that had distorted history many times in the past—*that* was the essence of the Kiharas. Thus, while the whole world might hate them, they would never disappear. A Kihara disappearing was the same as people rejecting human civilization.

At the moment, the main school of the Kiharas *was* supported by a common bloodline, and Byouri and Enshuu were part of it. But the example she’d given showed that bloodline wasn’t everything. Even if the Kihara bloodline died out, another bloodline would surely take up the Kihara name.

Even if nobody decided on it. It would happen on its own.

For as long as humans clung to the blessing called *science*.

“So there’s nothing to worry about, En. The Kiharas losing would mean the end of civilization on this planet. I doubt the people we’re fighting against have as much strength as we do. Therefore, we won’t lose. No matter what happens, we will triumph in the end. Simple, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, Auntie Byouri. Anyway, what should we do now?”

“We’ll start with what we know for sure. That’s the golden rule. First, we’ll destroy the burnable waste treatment plant the city uses to get hot water for heat. Then we’ll pursue Marianne and defeat her. Whenever you have a complicated problem, it’s best to take it one hurdle at a time.”

“Okay! All right. *Then I’ll help you and fight with you.*”

That was a fairly un-Kihara-like thing to say. Enshuu took her “treasure” out of her pocket—a photograph of several people in

the same family. “Uncle Amata, Uncle Ransuu, Auntie Byouri, Auntie Telestina, Uncle Kagun… Not everyone is here anymore, but it’s okay. If all the Kiharas work together, we can overcome any problem. I just know it!”

Byouri smiled to herself as she heard those words. On the side of her leg, letters appeared in orange: *Equ. Dark Matter*.

Originally, while they had all been categorized as Kiharas, they had lacked a sense of camaraderie.

And that lack of camaraderie was proper for a Kihara.

…Well, I do want to be the only one who knows what the subtler control conditions for Number Two are.

As Enshuu calmly turned her back, Byouri stepped toward her.

Pretending to come up alongside her, she positioned herself for a single attack that would kill the girl instantly.

Like I said, the Kiharas come in all shapes. The loss of Enshuu Kihara could well lead to the birth of a new and better Kihara.

She had no hesitation. She launched her surprise attack.

Whoooooom!!!!!!

Her white legs, made of something that was clearly *not* human flesh, suddenly snapped around Enshuu’s neck faster than the speed of sound like a guillotine.

A moment later…

Whirl!

Enshuu swung her upper body in an unnatural direction, effortlessly avoiding the killing blow.

Only the photograph she’d had in her hand fluttered into the air.

“*Yep. Uh-huh. I get it, Uncle Amata.*”

The devices around her neck clicked and banged together, emitting an eerie light. Graphs appeared on them, twisting and turning chaotically, and her eyes absorbed them all.

“*If a Kihara ever says anything like that, it means they’re about to do a surprise attack!*”

"...Shit! Even malfunctioning, she's still a Kihara?! Then take this!"

Byouri shouted as big winglike parts began to extend from her thighs—so that she could pull off movements impossible for a normal set of four limbs.

Amata Kihara's thought patterns, which were currently supporting En-shuu, were mainly used to take down high-level espers in precision brawls. They made for an effective fighting force to be sure, but it obviously had its own weaknesses. As another Kihara herself, she knew it right away. She knew how awful it would be if she was beaten.

However.

Enshuu caught the fluttering photograph between her index and middle fingers, then said something else.

"I understand, *Touma*."

A chill.

This time, Byouri *definitely* felt something awful up her spine. This was different from before. A possibility outside what she'd predicted was about to bear its fangs. Her entire body was engulfed by the fear that a Kihara wielded, that a Kihara could truly bring about.

"*In this situation, Touma Kamijou would do this, right?!*"

Kihara thought patterns were far from the only ones that had been analyzed.

And for someone of the darkness like Byouri, she could imagine nothing worse than what Enshuu had just said.

Enshuu, misusing good for evil purposes—*exactly* how a Kihara would act—brutally attacked.

SUB.22

Kagun Kihara.

Originally, his realm of expertise had been the incomprehensible visions people saw during near-death experiences. In the process of looking into this, he'd ended up researching ways to safely stop someone's heart from beating—and ways to safely get a heart to start beating again. So while he could bring people back to life as a result, the number of times he'd stopped someone's heart was very likely first or second place among the Kiharas who were currently here. The man was a legend.

Getting a read on his personality was an impossible task. Unlike most of the other Kiharas, he didn't show his face to others, which was perhaps a boon to the rest of the world. The psychedelic thoughts were a curse. If they were visible, Academy City could have even transformed into something else entirely.

That was how Kihara he was.

His thoughts, his foul deeds, his accomplishments—all of them placed him in the top ranks of the Kiharas.

Though he'd set new records for Kihara malignance during his teens, he'd also dropped all his research on near-death experiences before turning twenty. Nobody knew why (and even if he explained, people probably wouldn't understand since he was a Kihara among Kiharas), and when asked, he had only this to say:

"The results were there. But the price was too much to pay."

What were the results? What was the price? Even they were

unknown. But those words had delivered a powerful impact to many other near-death researchers, bringing their determination to its knees. But apparently, someone *had* come out and speculated that the answer he'd given had been incredibly normal.

According to that person, Kagun Kihara had merely realized the weight and value of the lives he was toying with.

Did his many experiments finally deliver him to one simple answer? Or had they simply worn him down in the process, causing him to malfunction?

One of the reasons for the baseless speculation was perhaps that after throwing away his research, he'd decided on an utterly normal teaching profession.

Going back through his record would show that Kagun Kihara had worked as a student-keeper for a time. Student-keepers were a safety net in Academy City meant to bring truant students back to school so that their academic abilities didn't lag behind—in essence, they went to dormitories and taught kids there.

In fact, he had brought thirty-two children, both boys and girls, back to school.

Many student-keepers found themselves unable to reach their students' hearts, and so a single teacher bringing that many back was unprecedented.

Some of the topics he brought up to make the students more comfortable were urban legends. But some said he only did so because of all the wild rumors surrounding them—and that he was actually giving the students implied warnings to keep them away from Academy City's dark underbelly.

The major event that had changed Kagun Kihara's fate had happened during the spring of his third year on the job. He'd just successfully convinced an elementary student to return to their studies and had brought them back to school.

It just so happened that a phantom slasher with a blade had passed by at that exact moment.

The name was stricken from the records, but it had

apparently been a boy in his late teens.

School had just been about to start, with many students gathered outside the building. The Anti-Skill officers—peacekeeping specialists—couldn't protect them all at once, as the kids were spread out over too wide an area. The phantom slasher hadn't hesitated. And Kagun Kihara had been the closest one to him.

And so the quietly respected teacher had unleashed his inner Kihara in an attempt to protect his student.

He snatched a big shovel from the nearby flower garden. Without a second thought, he jumped straight for the slasher, delivering a light blow to his jaw to disrupt his consciousness, which had an effect similar to the hallucinations one saw just as they enter a sleep state, thought to be deeply connected with sleep paralysis and ghost sightings. For a brief moment, the defenseless slasher had indeed stopped moving. Just then, however…

…a series of metallic strikes shot out toward him.

The judicial autopsy had found five separate regressions in the skull. It was a perfect death, no pain involved, which had impressed the medical coroner so much he'd apparently said, *Did you do this while looking at a human dissection textbook or something?*

Kagun Kihara had gone to Anti-Skill, still holding the bloody shovel, but the trial found him innocent by way of legitimate self-defense. They had said there was no further investigation or appeal, and they didn't even take away his teaching license.

But he never returned to the post.

Before the day he was declared innocent without appeal was over, Kagun Kihara had sent an e-mail to his workplace informing them of his decision to quit. By the time a colleague visited his apartment, he was already an empty shell of a man.

At the time, the students at his school had considered him a hero—one who had saved their lives without caring about his

position. His colleague had said that perhaps in doing so, he'd prevented others from developing an inclination to kill.

Kagun Kihara's life after that was a mystery.

Perhaps he went so far as to leave Academy City entirely.

SUB.23

“That wasn’t enough at all.”

Enshuu was counting *something* on her fingers. Her clothes were drenched in garbage fluid and blood splatters. The smartphone and one-seg TV continued to display one complicated graph after another.

“*Yep. Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry, Uncle Amata. Yeah. A Kihara would have worn a raincoat or something in that situation. Since this wasn’t something that happened all of a sudden. We predicted Auntie Byouri would try to ambush us.*”

Anyone who happened to see the graphs wouldn’t have a clue what she was actually doing. At a glance, she seemed to be having a conversation with someone, but that wasn’t correct. She was simply receiving inspiration. And when that inspiration reached her mind, she would convert it into language in the form of talking to herself, deciding that anyone calling themselves a Kihara would act in a certain way.

She plodded down the underground passage.

The heating efficiency of Baggage City had dropped dramatically, probably because the waste treatment plant’s burnable garbage facilities had been destroyed. Even Enshuu was shivering despite being indoors. If the city was left like this for a few days, it would freeze over.

But this wasn’t enough.

The innumerable graphs gave her intense inspiration.

They *appealed* to her.

“*Yeah, you’re right. This isn’t very Kihara-like, Uncle Amata.*”

It wasn’t about efficiency.

It wasn’t about rationality.

“*This is a really obvious strategy. Anyone can imagine how it*

ends. It's not very Kihara!"

She traveled through the underground passages until entering a high-rise resort hotel. Security was already gone, so she walked through the lobby and took the elevator up. After reaching the highest floor, she opened a door with a destroyed lock and found the remnants of a battlefield. This was where Ransuu Kihara and Utgardaloki had fought.

Piles of paper were scattered everywhere. Even now, the two combatants in question were lying on the floor. It pained Enshuu to leave Ransuu here—he was a Kihara just like her. But she had to prioritize acting like a Kihara.

That said, the thing she did wasn't all that severe.

She reached into her clothes and brought out a test tube, then popped off the rubber cap. Then she poured in a white powder—similar to the sticks of sugar one got for coffee—and used a pot in the large suite to heat up water and poured that in, too. When she gave the tube a shake, the contents began to grow opaque as the hot water flowed through it. The fluid hardened into a jellylike consistency.

This was something you could buy at the supermarket.

It was just agar. But agar could be used for things other than eating.

It was a perfect culture medium for nurturing microorganisms like viruses and bacteria.

"…I think I'll have it in about thirty minutes."

Leaving off the rubber cap, Enshuu poured the solution into a coffee cup and set it down. With her hands free, she started making something else in a different cup—but this time, it was just instant coffee.

Enshuu sought a mold that could drift through the air.

This was exactly what Ransuu had used to distribute chemical substances. Enshuu was trying to capture the mold in the agar, then culture it on her own to make it into a tool for herself.

However…

"*Yeah, you're right, Uncle Amata.*"

She grasped the cup with both hands and took little sips of the black fluid; she couldn't handle hot liquids very well. And then she waited for the right time.

"*If I cause a violent change in the mold's genetic code, it'll turn into a biological weapon that can destroy all of Baggage City.*"

Weapons always had more than one use.

This was how the Kiharas created nightmares—through ever more heinous ideas.

Kihara Clan
Enshuu Kihara

Kihara Clan
Byouri Kihara

Helmeted Man

Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara

Academy City Maid Girl
Maria Kumokawa

Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays

Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki

Natural Selector Contestant
Shuri Oumi

Official Member of Gremlin
Sigyn

Official Member of Gremlin
Marianne Sringeneier

Key Players in Baggage City

SUB.24

“Ergh, guh!”

Marianne leaned against a passage wall, holding her hand to her eye. From between her fingers flowed a dark red fluid. When she coughed, a fluid of the same color came out. Even she didn’t know how far the damage went. That was how badly she’d been hurt.

Shuri Oumi.

She wasn’t from the science side or the magic side, so Marianne had completely underestimated her. The girl had driven her into a corner. By sheer coincidence, however, she’d ran into some other “human materials” that weren’t affected by the alcohol. Only after she used her golden saw and hammer to modify them did she manage to escape Oumi.

“…Damn it. I knew losing my adviser would hurt. But Dáinsleif is too powerful—use it once, and *everything* will come crumbling down. I *told* them I wasn’t cut out for combat…”

She still didn’t even know who she’d modified or how. That was how chaotic her dramatic escape had been. In fact, she still wasn’t quite sure she’d even gotten away at all.

Passing through the underground hallways, she entered a shopping mall. None of its usual patrons or workers were there, probably because the Kiharas and Academy City were still rampaging around. Marianne didn’t know where the civilians had gone or if they were alive, but she didn’t care about them one bit. She headed for the pharmacy section and looked for bandages and disinfectant.

Thankfully, her eye still seemed to be somewhat intact. After wiping the blood covering it, her vision returned slightly. The blood had been coming from a wound on her eyelid. Still, she’d

probably need to wrap her eye in gauze to stop the bleeding.

"…My right leg… Would taping it be enough?"

Not only had Maria Kumokawa damaged it in her joint lock, but Marianne had also pushed it past its limits during her flight. Her leg throbbed with dull pain, and it even seemed a little swollen. Marianne took some medical tape out of a box, forced her overall pant leg up, and exposed her knee.

She looked at the roll of medical tape, then frowned, tossed it aside, picked up the box again, and read the instructions on the side.

"Ugh. How do I do this? Uhh, *stabilize the joint that hurts…?*"

While Marianne could modify fully intact humans into tables and pillars, she was oblivious when it came to her own body. It was just like how a professional chef and a professional food reviewer had different skill sets.

Once her knee was mostly stable, she put her pant leg back down and checked to see if the leg worked. The pain had gone down a little—that was all. She couldn't really tell if it had worked or not.

Figuring she may as well look for something to dull the pain, she rummaged around the shelves but didn't turn up anything. She found wet compresses, but she didn't know whether to go for the hot ones or the cold ones.

…Including me, there are three of us here. But Utgardaloki is already out of the running. And not only is Sigyn useless, we'll need to purge her—and whatever organization she's with. No idea how many Kiharas are left, but this is starting to get really bad. Why the heck am I the last one standing when I'm not cut out for battle anyway?

And then it happened.

She heard a rustling from the entrance to the pharmacy corner.

"……"

In a flowing motion, Marianne pulled the golden saw out of her overalls, but when she saw the person's face, she relaxed. Then she smiled and spoke.

“Oh, hey, Bersi. What’s up? We getting the party started for real now?”

Kihara Clan
Enshuu Kihara

Kihara Clan
Byouri Kihara

Helmeted Man

Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara

Academy City Maid Girl
Maria Kumokawa

Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki

Official Member of Gremlin
Sigyn

Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays

Natural Selector Contestant
Shuri Oumi

Official Member of Gremlin
Marianne Sringeneier

SUB.25

"…What's going on?"

Schall Berylan, an Anti–Academy City Science Guardians security guard—aka a grunt—scanned his surroundings, white breath puffing from his mouth.

He was squatting near a frozen vending machine outside a building. By disguising himself as snow that had fallen off the roof, he'd created a windbreak around himself to endure the cold. You didn't have to bring up igloos for people to know that air-filled snow had a heat-resistant effect.

In this negative-twenty-degree hellscape, one needed to put in the work like this, even if they were wearing a military uniform designed for cold weather. Neglect that hard work, and all that awaited them was an icy death.

The major roads were designed with heating features to melt snow, but if he tried to warm himself with them, the enemy would find him instantly.

He was close to so many buildings that it just made him feel worse—the moment Schall lost all contact with the command center, he'd stopped trusting Baggage City's security. If one of the thousands of security cameras around the city ever caught him, he would have to assume the enemy had located him and move somewhere else.

…Naturally, if *that* was what he was prioritizing, then he'd already forgotten about the primary objective—to protect Baggage City. Now he was clearly just trying to survive the situation.

Schall then abruptly picked up his head, mostly to get his mind off himself.

…*It's gone awfully quiet*, he thought.

The sounds of battle had long since ceased—evidence that the conflict had been pretty one-sided. But that wasn't all. The crucial sounds this city had, the ones that showed it was a city at all, had vanished. This wasn't a place people could live. It was more like a Martian ruin left by an ancient civilization.

There was nobody here.

And that was why he couldn't hear anything.

He frowned, then asked himself the question. Baggage City had millions of residents. Where had they all gone?

…Did they all flee the city? he wondered. *No, they couldn't have. The nearest settlement is over a hundred kilometers away. And if that many people set out at once, everyone would have noticed. Those immoral bastards from Academy City would never have missed a chance to shoot a group like that.*

He counted that possibility out.

Then did Academy City kill everyone? No, that can't be it, either. We're talking millions of people. Sure, they're defenseless. But killing them one by one—how long would that take? The sounds all disappeared so quickly. That proves no mass killing occurred.

He counted that possibility out, too, but that meant he still didn't have the answer. He was no different from a critic pretending to be an intellectual.

Schall thought for a moment, then crawled out of his homemade shelter.

He wanted to know where the city's residents had gone, but in all honesty, it wasn't because he was worried about their safety. If the battlefield situation was still incomprehensible, then whatever the reason was, it would only eat at his nerves. He didn't want someone flipping this board—not when his life hung in the balance.

"…Screw the higher-ups. Those old bastards better not have evacuated the residents so they could blow the entire city away with a weapon of mass destruction."

Muttering this conjecture, Schall crawled through the soundless white city. No enemies, no allies, no spectators

anywhere. Of course, the blizzard would have buried any corpses within minutes.

After crawling about fifty meters from his shelter, he got some new information.

Spotting figures straight ahead, Schall hid himself behind a truck parked on a narrow road tucked between two buildings with relatively little snow. Only after he got into position did he realize the truck was carrying extremely dangerous natural gas, but he couldn't change hiding spots at this point.

Right in the middle of a large intersection devoid of traffic stood four or five soldiers. Schall saw that their clothing and weaponry was unfamiliar, so he concluded they were from Academy City. In other words, enemies.

They were setting what looked like large beach balls up into the white skies above. The balls had can-shaped objects—like cans of hair spray—attached to their bottoms.

…*Support balloons?* thought Schall. He'd borrowed (or perhaps *stolen* was more accurate) Academy City–made weapons, so he recognized these things. They were informational devices of relatively simple construction, less pieces of tech and more a product based on a single idea.

Essentially, they were helium balloons with cameras attached that one could launch into the sky to get a bird's-eye view. That's all they did. They were used to fill in the gaps in situations and places where Academy City couldn't get information from satellites or recon planes. Their effective duration was about thirty minutes. Once a balloon went up, it kept on going, so eventually the pressure difference would cause it to pop. The balloons couldn't do anything else.

If enemy soldiers saw balloons like that floating, they'd be able to pinpoint the ground troops who had launched it. So normally, one would put a timer on an air tank and have the balloon inflate on a delay…but if these people were being this bold about using them, then they must have been certain that Academy City's forces had already taken control of Baggage City.

But one thing made him curious.

They've already declared their control over the city. What could they be looking for now?

On top of that, these support balloons were made to fill in the gaps when one couldn't get intel from satellites or recon planes. But Academy City's forces had wrested air control rights from Baggage City. They shouldn't need to use support balloons.

And yet these people were.

They were trying to find something that a normal satellite or recon craft couldn't, using as many cameras and sensors as they could. What could they have needed so much effort to track down?

"Millions of city residents maybe? Nah, that can't be. They can't find them, either?" he murmured.

Not much more happened, though. The soldiers were adding more cameras and sensors. At this rate, they would pinpoint Schall's location soon.

Moving slowly, he left the natural gas truck's side, abandoned his former shelter, and searched for his next hiding spot.

Academy City seemed so perfect. And yet *something* was making fools of them.

And that something wasn't a professional soldier or a trained expert—it was millions of people. Schall was mildly impressed.

"…Wish they'd share some of whatever they've got with me."

His boots crunching through the snow, Schall vanished into a corner of the city.

Snow had begun to accumulate on the main roads, implying that the heat was down, but he didn't have time to meditate on it.

The city streets were eerily silent, devoid of all sound.

SUB.26

“Owww…”

Maria Kumokawa slowly got up, rubbing her head with one hand. She was no longer in that underground passage where she’d lost consciousness. This looked more like a medical office, and she was on an examination table. A facility meant for Natural Selector?

“You up?”

The voice sounded casual, belonging to a woman. Kumokawa looked over and saw a lady in a gaudy dress surprisingly close to her. She had blond hair, blue eyes, fair skin, and a figure that would have been good enough to be a magazine model. But Kumokawa knew better. Her lithe physique hid an exceptional set of muscles.

“…Where am I?” she murmured. “What happened?”

“You were lying on the floor in that hellish passageway, so I carried you to the infirmary,” the woman explained. “I don’t know much about what happened myself. Then again, would anyone?”

“Who are you?”

“Saflee Opendays.”

Then she heard a rummaging from the corner of the room. A little girl was stuffing ice into a vinyl bag. Next to her was a tall man—and what kind of freak show was he? If she had to describe him, he was over two meters tall with all sorts of different antennae decorating him.

“I’m a Natural Selector contestant,” continued Saflee. “I’m not a Kihara, and I’m not with Gremlin—just a side character. That pretty little girl is Mistray Flakehelm, and the street entertainer next to her is Orthid Flakehelm, her daddy. Once I

rescued them, I couldn't just leave them alone. So I figured, why not try to be the main character for a while?"

"…And I'm another person you rescued, huh? I can feel my pride buckling under the weight," said Kumokawa, her tone self-deprecating. "There was someone else in that passage—a lady who looks like a little kid carrying a schoolbag. Ring any bells?"

"A lady who looks like a little kid? Is that some sort of riddle?" Saflee frowned. "Nobody else was there but me. But judging from the leftover destruction, it seemed like someone was chasing somebody else. I had to prioritize you since you were wounded, though."

"……" Kumokawa narrowed her eyes.

But Saflee's next words surprised her. "Ah. Right. A lady who looks like a kid? I can't really picture that, but that would mean your acquaintance is short, right? If she's short, then I don't think you need to worry."

"?"

"'Cause I mean, based on the scene, it seemed like the shorter one was chasing the taller one."

"???" *Does that mean that…Shuri Oumi is alive*?

"But you shouldn't be worrying about the winners. You should be worrying about yourself. You'll need to figure out what your next move will be."

"……"

Kumokawa paused at her words. Shuri Oumi was still fighting, trying to reach her goal. What about her, then? What was her next move?

She'd come this far chasing Kagun Kihara. She wanted to know one of the truths behind death that he'd discovered, so she'd disappeared from the public and ventured into the outside world. But the gaping darkness was just so deep that she couldn't make sense of it. It was like she was being forced to play a board game without being able to understand the rules.

This was the world of the Kiharas. Or maybe this was the world they had to fight against *with* the Kiharas.

The girl, apparently named Mistray Flakehelm, handed her the ice-filled bag. Kumokawa pressed it to her forehead. The comfortable coolness permeated her bruise, but it immediately clued her in to something strange. Something was wrong.

"…Awfully cold, isn't it? Your breath is white."

Saflee Opendays smiled a little. It seemed somehow forced.

"The water-heating facility is Baggage City's lifeline," she explained. "It seems like its core has been destroyed—either the waste treatment plant or the oil refinery. The Guardians are desperately trying to protect their last heat source, the thermal power station… That's probably not enough, though. They can't heat all of Baggage City with only that thermal power."

"But…who?" stammered Kumokawa.

"The Kiharas. We only heard the name on a stolen radio, though."

Kumokawa's heart leaped when she heard the name. But she endeavored to keep calm and consider the danger right in front of her.

"Naturally, if push comes to shove, their higher-ups will focus on keeping themselves safe at the cost of others. They won't care if innocent civilians freeze to death," said Saflee, adding, "Not that we know if the higher-ups are even still alive at this point."

Some of the soldiers were still active, but they were all in total panic, and it didn't seem like they'd be able to get any assistance. Considering the Guardian's forces were just barely remaining hidden, if this group tried to contact them anyway, they ran the risk of being sniped by the *true* enemies. And so the soldiers had refrained from making the attempt.

"Freeze to death…," repeated Kumokawa.

It was negative twenty degrees Celsius outside. No matter how thick one's heat-retaining materials were, if they didn't have heat at all, the interiors of buildings would reach the same temperature within half a day. When that happened, it would cause immense damage to all life in the city.

"Actually, get this," said Saflee. "Apparently, there's a pretty

easy way to solve the heating problem."

"?"

"Well, it's something they do up in Northern Europe. They use the heat generated by all the people in packed train stations to heat other buildings. Buildings in Scandinavia, I mean. Residents and spectators combined, Baggage City has a few million people in it. If they all gathered into the dome, for example, they could survive on everyone's body heat."

"…That wouldn't necessarily work long-term. But if they were just trying to hold out for a while…," murmured Kumokawa. But there were problems with that solution, too. "I don't know. Would the people who made this place a battlefield let that happen? If everyone was gathered up in one place, wouldn't they go straight for it?"

"Probably. And they wouldn't care how strategically sound or logical it is. It would just be a fun little detour for them, blowing away the whole thing." Saflee nodded. "So we can't just let time pass without fighting the big bosses—that wouldn't work. We have to take them down first, then buy time to be rescued, not the other way around."

"So what you're saying is…"

"We have half a day at most. Within that time, we take down all the boss enemies rampaging through the city. If we can't, millions turn into frozen food. Get the picture now?"

"…I don't think that would solve anything."

"We'll be lucky if we can even keep fighting them for half a day. Because whether we win or lose, we'll be frozen alive."

The Kiharas. Gremlin. They didn't know if they could beat even a single one of their members, and they'd have to fight them all? The conditions for this battle were insane, pure and simple. But if they didn't make that choice, they'd be taking the path of common sense, the one that would lead everyone—Baggage City and themselves included—freezing to death.

Kumokawa exhaled. "So we don't have a choice at all. Looks like it's time to test how strong my intentionally wounded pride really is."

“Yep, you got it. I’d pegged you for the type who knows her way around a good punch. You in?”

“…It’s the only way to achieve my goal anyway.” Kumokawa nodded in agreement.

She would follow Kagun Kihara. After experiencing this hellish conflict, she wanted to find him even more. Unlike her, he hadn’t come here totally ignorant about all this. The man knew exactly how hellish it would be, and he’d still decided to be here.

Now.

In this specific place.

What had happened? And how did that relate to this madness? Until she knew for sure, Kumokawa couldn’t back down.

Saflee, meanwhile, revealed their current objective. “Right. So our main priority now is Enshuu Kihara.”

“…Kihara?” repeated Kumokawa.

“Yep. Where to begin? A different Kihara brought some mold here for battling, and Enshuu’s using it for herself now. We think she’s trying to force it to mutate abruptly, so she can make a more infectious, more toxic biological weapon and start causing chaos all over the place.”

“Even if it affects the other Kiharas, too?”

“Probably. We don’t know why, though.”

“……”

Artificially causing a sudden mutation in a microorganism. That was a sentence you’d expect to hear from a movie. In reality, though, it wasn’t actually that hard. The influenza virus mutated every year—that was common knowledge. The genetic composition of microorganisms could change relatively easily when they were exposed to external factors.

But making a microorganism mutate in the exact way one wanted to produce particular effects was incredibly difficult. Kumokawa put a hand to her chin.

“Mold is still a living creature, though,” she pointed out. “And it’s only active at suitable temperatures. If the temperature

plummets, that would run counter to her goal of making people suffer."

"So Enshuu kills anyone she can using the super-low temps. And once the temperature comes back up to a point where the mold is active, she'll spread it all around the city. That would kill literally everyone, wouldn't it? You know how stubborn bathtub mold can be. Athlete's foot, too. It deactivates in environments that make it hard for it to live in, but it doesn't die out. It can go into hiding for a long time, and once the environment is set up for it again, it reactivates—like it never went away."

"…But I didn't think Baggage City had any microorganism labs to begin with. At least not publicly. Without any weird conspiracy theories, they'd misuse a public facility, logically."

"Exactly! Enshuu Kihara seems to be headed for a vegetable factory. You know, the container-shaped one. The roots of the plants are soaked in nutrient solutions, and they're kept in temperature-stabilized rooms with lighting that promotes photosynthesis. Apparently, you can get thirty harvests from it in a single year."

"I see," said Kumokawa, sounding annoyed. "Then we go after the ultraviolet light instead of sunlight, eh? Same reason the influenza virus's genetic information breaks down every year."

"Think it's dangerous?"

"Oh, it's more than that." It was simple to say, and it made her realize something. "…Wait. If you don't understand a fundamental principle like that, then how are you predicting what Enshuu will do? It doesn't seem like you've put any equations together to figure it out."

"Oh. Well, actually, I dabble, but someone tipped us off."

"Who?"

"A man in a helmet and coat."

Gulp. Kumokawa froze this time for real.

"*Kagun*, I think he said his name was? He didn't tell us his last name, though."

SUB.27

“It’s so cold!”

That meaninglessly shrill exclamation came from Enshuu Kihara. She cringed as she walked through the blizzard, her feet crunching through the snow. She might have been surrounded by concrete city buildings, but she felt as vulnerable as being lost deep in the mountains.

In this part of Baggage City, boxy containers had been sloppily stacked like toy building blocks. This area appeared to be a spacious parking lot, but it was a shell of its former self. And now all the containers were making it feel cramped.

The containers themselves were not long and thin but short, about the right size to load onto a train, for example. They differed from normal containers in one key way, though—they had electric plugs for industrial use attached to them. These weren’t boxes to put shipments in. They were facilities for raising vegetables indoors.

Vegetable plants.

“Hmm. I wonder if these are from the war. Maybe Baggage City was trying to keep everyone fed on the battlefield. I hear you can get thirty harvests a year from these, after all. But then the war ended really fast. Now they don’t have anywhere to go—so the people of the city probably use them.”

Naturally, it was extremely challenging to cultivate vegetables in an arctic region with heavy snowfall, so the food culture here was meat oriented. There was nothing special about these vegetable facilities, but they were quite valuable for the people of Baggage City.

Enshuu put her hand on the metal doors of one such savior—holding the biological weapon materials inside her clothes.

“Huh?”

All she heard, though, were clacking noises. The door wouldn’t open. The lever for working the fixture wasn’t moving.

“It must be locked after all. Guess they’re trying to protect their food supply.”

Enshuu cocked her head to the side, then simply turned around and headed for the security room where the keys were probably kept.

Ailes Bigant was in a tiny room, trembling.

He’d originally come here to Baggage City to compete in the Natural Selector martial arts tournament, but everything had collapsed right from day one. If he stayed in the city, he’d be attacked by strange, unidentified monsters. But if he tried to leave the city, he would have to fight through a hellscape that was negative twenty degrees Celsius. It was 130 kilometers to the next town.

That meant his only choice was to hide somewhere in Baggage City—somewhere nobody would find him. He had to stay concealed and wait for the police or military to come in and get the situation under control.

At least, that was his plan.

Ka-klunk!

Suddenly, the doorknob rattled. No, wait—it was the metal door itself. It didn’t open, but it was more than enough to make Ailes jump nearly out of his skin. No knocking, no turning the knob. Someone was skipping straight to kicking the door in. Whoever they were, they certainly hadn’t come in peace.

“Shit! What?! What the hell?! Shit!”

Hands trembling as he sat on the floor, Ailes gripped his semiautomatic shotgun. He’d actually forgotten to load the first round, so it wouldn’t fire anything when he pulled the trigger, but he was so confused, so disturbed, that he’d forgotten that basic step.

Someone had found him.

Someone had finally caught up with him.

It didn't matter *who* they were. *Someone* had found him; that was all that mattered. Even if it was some old man with no ties to this catastrophe come looking for help, just running into him meant there was a chance Ailes's whereabouts could have traveled up the grapevine to the true mastermind.

Best if nothing was there.

Safest if he wasn't tied to anything.

And yet.

In that case.

"It doesn't matter who they are…"

Slowly, without making a sound, Ailes got up, still holding his shotgun.

"If they're a threat, I'll get rid of them."

Enshuu arrived at a section of the parking lot with all the container vegetable plants stacked up like building blocks. This building looked like a prefab, but when she tried kicking the door a few times, she found it wouldn't budge.

"I think someone's in there, too," she said. "As far as the noise from inside goes."

She took the smartphone off the string hanging around her neck. She then switched its outer shell for one with a suction cup on it, then stuck it in the middle of the door.

"*Yep. Yeah, you're right. A Kihara would have another trick, right, Uncle Amata?*"

Enshuu booted up a phone app, then looked around. And she spotted several large cranes parked in the lot, probably meant for moving the stacked-up container vegetable plants around.

Who was it?

It was *someone*—that was for sure.

Still gripping his shotgun, Ailes audibly gulped. The door was

strangely intimidating. He wondered if he should just pull the trigger now, but he also felt like that thin barrier was his last line of defense. If he broke it, then it would be all over—but he'd also be certain about who was about to kill him if he did

And then it happened.

"…?"

He heard footsteps in the snow. They grew softer and softer, as if leaving. Had whoever it was not realized he was inside? Had they given up and left? But as the optimistic thoughts crossed his mind, he quickly dismissed them.

He doubted the answer would be so simple. Not in this living hell.

The reality had to be much worse.

For instance, they could have left just to call their friends here.

He had to assume that if he ignored it, there would be at *least* a bunch of people here to surround him.

"Shit!"

Ailes reaffirmed his grip on the shotgun. Flustered, he faced the door. If the enemy was leaving, then their back might be turned. That gave him a better chance at shooting them with his shotgun and winning, no matter what kind of monster they were.

But he wasn't foolish enough to suddenly fling open the door.

It had a peephole.

"Hmm-hmm-hmmm-hmm-hmm-hmm!"

Enshuu fiddled with the device hanging from her neck, humming as she did. Her smartphone was attached to the door, and its screen was showing a vague, obscure image.

An echo filter.

The device used supersonic waves to see through obstacles. In essence, it was a powered-up version of an ultrasound machine. The theory itself was old, and the device had been used for quite a while in antiterrorist operations. Unlike a fiber

scope, like the kind used as a stomach camera, the echo filter had a big benefit: One didn't need to punch a hole in the door or wall to look behind it. That said, the indistinct imagery it produced meant they couldn't tell if the people inside were terrorists or hostages, so after many long years, the device had been retired.

Her smartphone showed her what was on the other side of the door.

An indistinct figure approached.

Then they seemed to press themself against the door.

To look through the peephole.

"Hmmm-hmm-hmm-hmm-hmmm!"

Enshuu continued fiddling with the device at her neck, waiting to see how the person would move—or rather, waiting for the perfect time. She smiled thinly.

And then the time came.

But Enshuu didn't do anything particularly flashy.

She just took the smartphone off the door and dropped to the snow face down.

A moment later, something enormous approached.

Ailes had made several miscalculations. One of them was not expecting an echo filter and assuming whoever was out there knew everything happening in the security office. Another was the footsteps he'd heard on the other side of the door—he'd mistakenly translated the steadily softening footsteps as footsteps growing distant.

Even though the sound could have just been coming through a device, slowly lowering the volume.

Because of that, Ailes had assumed the person was on the other side and wouldn't be near the door now.

However, the cramped room he was hiding in also cut off his view of the outside world. Without information, he'd be anxious. Gaining information would put his mind at ease.

Hearing the footsteps growing softer made him consciously

realize how starved for information he was—it was like a delicious scent drifting from a restaurant's kitchen to the road.

And that was exactly why he found himself pressed up against the peephole—to sate his starvation—without realizing someone had been guiding his choice.

"?"

It happened a moment later.

Whhhuuump!

A dull, bursting noise rang out. Something exploded through the thick door.

"Yep, yep," said Enshuu casually, still face down in the snow.

She was remote-controlling one of the crane trucks, using it to pick up one of the vegetable plant containers by its wire and swing it like a wrecking ball dismantling a building. The enormous object passed right over Enshuu as she lay in the snow and slammed into the door.

It didn't just take out the door. It took out the walls around it, too.

The steel door was buried under the walls on the opposite side of the room, and from the gaps between the door and the walls flowed a dark red fluid. There had been no screams.

"Wow, this room's really messy. Some of these building materials are even broken."

Enshuu stepped into the small security office and grabbed the ring of keys hanging on the wall.

Then she heard a low grunt.

The source of the dark red fluid was still moving.

She looked around the destroyed office, finding a shotgun on the floor for some reason. She picked it up with one hand, then smoothly loaded the first round.

"……"

Blam! A dull noise resounded as the shot went through the door.

Tossing aside the shotgun, she left the office, which now

definitely had nothing moving in it.

"*I feel sorry for them, but a Kihara has to act like this, right, Uncle Amata?*"

She forged through the blizzard, shoes crunching against snow, and opened a random container nearby. The inside was filled with rows of steel racks. Cabbage lined the shelves, illuminated by red and green lights.

"Aw, man… Are they only using LED lights? I need a blacklight or else I can't get the mold to mutate."

She fished around but eventually turned up what she was looking for—a fluorescent light about the length of a pair of chopsticks. Its light, though, was blue. It was a blacklight that emitted ultraviolet rays.

Enshuu gathered up a bunch of blacklights, then started adjusting their angles in complex ways. She used the photometer in her smartphone camera to make the subtler changes to the balance, then set her test tube in the middle of it.

It damaged the microorganisms' genetic information.

They had weak defenses against things like UV rays and space radiation. That said, it was extremely difficult to get them to mutate the way you wanted them to.

"All right, then."

Enshuu took one of the cabbage heads off a shelf and bit into it with an air of nonchalance. But it was bitter, and she regretted it.

"*…Hmm. At this power, it should take about an hour, right, Uncle Ransuu?*"

SUB.28

Kumokawa and Saflee burst out of the domed facility whose infirmary they'd borrowed and into the sheer white outdoors. The next instant, however, rather than the cold stabbing into their skin, one of them felt a splitting pain instead.

"Ow," said Saflee.

"What's wrong?" asked Kumokawa.

"I think it was a paper plane. Like how Japanese ninjutsu uses letters attached to arrows, I guess? Ooh-ryah!"

As Kumokawa frowned in confusion, Saflee threw the paper plane back somewhere. Fed up, she looked to the sky.

"Negative twenty degrees… How long do you think we can survive in these clothes?"

"Just think of it like a cold storage room," explained Kumokawa. "About thirty minutes should be the limit, after which we'll fall unconscious. After an hour, our biological activities will hit dangerous levels."

"Does that go for Enshuu Kihara, too?"

"Not if she has a countermeasure. Don't forget she's the attacker here."

The vegetable plants in question weren't that far away. Apparently, they'd co-opted the parking lot attached to the huge dome for them, and the container-shaped plants were stacked up there like building blocks. She doubted there would be any gigantic fixed cranes like in big ports; she expected they'd mainly be using forklifts and crane trucks.

It was easy to imagine it in her head, but when she actually saw it, she was overawed by the sheer scale of it all.

"…There's hundreds," breathed Saflee.

"And we don't know how many are winners. How annoying,"

muttered Kumokawa. “Looks like my pride will be wounded again.”

“?”

“Enshuu Kihara is trying to use ultraviolet light to destroy the special mold’s genetic information and turn it into a bioweapon. But how many samples does she have? If she’s performing the process in several containers at once, we’ll need to destroy them all. And she’d want to do it that way as insurance to make sure she doesn’t fail. But…”

“But we won’t know how many we need to destroy before we’re done,” finished Saflee, clicking her tongue in annoyance. “…Might as well try destroying *every single one* of them at that point.”

“All of them? Oh. Right. We don’t have time to determine which are the right ones.”

Kumokawa had latched on to Saflee’s self-deprecating words in a surprising way, so Saflee, the person who had suggested it, was taken aback instead of her. “No, no, no! There’s hundreds of them! I don’t know how long it’ll take Enshuu to make that moldy biological weapon, but it would take days to destroy every single one!”

“It’s not like we have to crush them all like empty cans,” said Kumokawa, holding up her index finger. “All of these container vegetable plants run on electricity. The illumination, air-conditioning, and nutritional fluid replenishment happens twenty-four seven. You’d need a lot more than a car battery for that. There’s hundreds of them. They’d have to drag in AC generators to supply them with power.”

When using such things on a battlefield, solar panels were generally employed alongside them. But they couldn’t hope for much sunlight in such a snowy region. They’d need to compensate with electrical cables.

“In that case…,” said Saflee.

“I have our answer,” said Kumokawa. “It looks like my pride will get inflated again. If we destroy the external power source at the root of it all, it’ll shut down all the blacklights providing

ultraviolet rays! Enshuu won't be able to create her bioweapon!"

Kumokawa scanned the surroundings. She couldn't see any power poles or other electric lines, probably because they would have been damaged by the weight of all the snow. The power cables must have been located underground.

Saflee clicked her tongue in annoyance. "I knew it wouldn't be that easy. Want to head back underground?"

"Wait…"

Kumokawa approached one of the stacked-up vegetable plants. There was a caution sign on it written in English.

"The power unit is three hundred volts and fifty amps…," she said. "That's pretty specialized. It's not like Japan, of course—but it's also not the same as Baggage City's own home power. It must be some sort of military format."

"Look, I only understand numbers when they're talking about protein. Don't expect me to know what you're talking about."

"What I'm saying is that even if they brought electricity in on power lines, they wouldn't be able to use it. There must be a transformer somewhere in this facility. If we can destroy that, it should bring all the vegetable plants to a screeching halt!"

The girl in maid clothes looked around, then spotted one area through the veil of white that was surrounded by a square fence. The area was about ten by ten meters, and the things inside it resembled a big crowd of vending machines.

"Found the transformer!" Kumokawa called out—just as one of the doors of the grounded containers was kicked out from inside.

A girl emerged. A variety of devices, including a smartphone and a one-seg TV, were hanging from her neck. She was holding a can of tea in both hands. When she spoke, it was with a troubled voice.

"…Well, a little thought and that *would* be the obvious weak point, right?"

Saflee caught part of Kumokawa's clothes and whispered,

“Hey. The vegetable plant she just came out of…”

“Whether it’s *one* of the right ones or not,” Kumokawa whispered back, “as long as we destroy the transformer, they’ll all stop for sure.”

“I get it,” said Enshuu. “Man, I would have won if you’d just destroyed this one and decided you were finished.” The girl cringed, seeking the heat from her can of tea. “But if you know how important the transformer is, then you must have planned for a vicious counterattack if you did anything to it, right?”

“…I thought *we* were the ones counterattacking.”

“*Yep. Yeah, you’re right. I got it, Uncle Amata.*”

Suddenly Enshuu wasn’t talking to them at all.

The smartphone and one-seg TV around her neck began to show a series of strange graphs.

“*Now that it’s come to this, I can’t avoid fighting by threatening them anymore, right? It’s a shame; it’s a real shame. But that’s how a Kihara works! Now I just have to beat them into paste!*”

Saflee swore, dropping her center of gravity a bit to adopt a fighting stance. “Here she comes! Are you ready to fight a real monster?!”

“Ready enough to correct you—we’re going to her!”

Whoom!

In the negative-twenty-degree blizzard, the three clashed.

And all the while, the countdown on the biological weapon left behind by Ransuu Kihara ticked away.

SUB.29

Even Enshuu Kihara's own family had said she wasn't "Kihara" enough. Her upbringing stood out prominently, even among the other extremely unique Kiharas.

Sensible, on the side of justice—a person such as that had taken away Enshuu at a young age. They didn't do anything to her in particular, just locked her in a dark room with no exit. That was the whole purpose behind them taking her.

Kiharas became more Kihara by learning about Kiharas. So perhaps if Enshuu were removed from them during that period of her life when her brain was taking in basic information like language and customs, she wouldn't turn out like a Kihara—that was their thinking.

In actuality, it was no more than a cheap revenge plot orchestrated by someone envious of the Kihara clan for producing so many bona fide geniuses—albeit twisted ones—and justifying their actions by claiming it was for the greater good.

They weren't trying to kill her. Or to hurt her. They just left her in a room and had her spend the months and years without engaging in any learning at all—in essence, they were trying to make a Kihara stupider than they were. They just wanted to sate their twisted desires.

In fact, Enshuu didn't know her multiplication tables, and she couldn't even write katakana, much less kanji. It was only natural—she hadn't gone to school, so it didn't matter how inherently smart or dull she was.

That was how things were supposed to have turned out.

However.

Their infantile revenge plot had been overturned so, so

easily. One day, when someone was bringing Enshuu's regular meal to her dark room, they'd found drawings on the walls and floor. They were far beyond multiplication tables and katakana. They were strange symbols that she'd created herself, describing rows upon rows of incredibly complex equations. Her kidnapper was only smart enough to raise their own position by dragging someone else down; they didn't find out that the equations were actually the proof for a fundamental theory behind a cryosleep device until later on.

If the person hadn't been dumb, they might have also realized a few other things.

The three crayons scattered about the floor had been depicting beauty transcending a perfect golden ratio, the wrinkles in the crumpled-up pieces of paper were a diagram for a parallel processing chip, and the shadows cast by the light of the lamp functioned as a new type of test to bring the depths of a viewer's psychology to the surface.

A Kihara didn't need any post-birth information input to be a Kihara.

A Kihara was blessed by science just by being a Kihara.

And to begin with, science was not something that existed only in textbooks and reference manuals. Science made up everything regular and normal in the world. So Enshuu had had many ways to learn. So many reference materials lay in this very room. The dust in the air, the texture of the plastic cups—they'd given her all the knowledge she needed. There was no way to rob a Kihara of science aside from destroying the entire world and leaving no trace of it behind.

The ignorant revenge seeker had never realized any of this. The all-too-talented Enshuu didn't need anyone to teach her. She'd kept playing with science—for as long as she liked.

In fact, it was a very pure form of learning—the worst kind. She had nobody to teach her where the line between right and wrong was.

I have an idea.

And that was why.

Enshuu turned to the person who brought her meal and gave them a carefree smile. She understood what would happen to them if she put her idea into motion, and she didn't hesitate one bit.

Nevertheless.

She…

…felt no dissatisfaction whatsoever at having been locked up in a dark room (and to begin with, as someone who had made many new scientific discoveries from just a drop of water, she didn't need other information sources from the outside world, like school, or friends, or TV, or the internet).

She…

…sensed none of the hatred or disgust of the person orchestrating this juvenile revenge plot (she had enough toys to play with in that dark room for a lifetime, so she had no reason to hate them).

She…

…wore an expression implying she just wanted to show off the inspiration right before her eyes (but nobody had taught her how to repay those who had done her good, and she had no concept of owing someone anything to begin with).

She…

…cared not at all about the staggering disadvantage she was in, her ankles bound by metal clasps and chains as they were (and these again were not bindings to Enshuu but just one of her toys).

I thought of a wonderful way to break out of this prison.

She carried out her idea, pure and simple. It was a perfect success. The chains, which she should have never been able to rip off with her hands, fell apart, almost as if melting.

The person had no idea what the girl actually used. However, by the time their corpse was discovered, every part of their body had transformed into a waxy substance, save for their

head. And their face was twisted in an expression of incredible regret.

As if to say that the person who had held her back so much had ascended to the position they'd always wanted, all too easily.

Enshuu Kihara wasn't Kihara enough. By supplementing what she lacked using other sources, she clung to her family's identity—barely.

However, the graphs analyzing other people's thought patterns weren't her only sources of information.

Her true abilities lay elsewhere.

Because despite all her immaturity and idling, Enshuu *was* still a Kihara.

MAIN.30

Kumokawa and Saflee didn't hesitate. They charged straight for Enshuu. The devices around her neck—a smartphone, a one-seg TV—all blinked and twinkled with countless graphs, shaking her side to side as she held her can of black tea in both hands.

"Negative twenty degrees, negative twenty degrees, la-la-laaa!"

Three meters.

One long stride and they'd only be a step away.

Enshuu simply splashed them with the contents of her can of tea.

"Ngh?!"

"Ah?!"

Saflee immediately put on the brakes, while Kumokawa dodged to the side with a big cartwheel. The tea—which had been steaming hot before—was already starting to crackle and freeze in midair. The volume of matter changed when its phase—liquid, solid, and the like—did. If the tea hit them, it could rip up their skin.

But it didn't end up being a mortal wound.

Kumokawa continued her cartwheel, changing directions as she did. As one of her legs moved upward, she wrenched it downward, aiming for Enshuu's head.

In response, Enshuu threw her empty can at her feet—or more accurately, the gap between her hands and the ground. It didn't trip up Kumokawa, but it did force her to adjust her trajectory slightly to avoid it. And that left her vulnerable.

"Too slow, too slow."

Using the time she'd just bought herself, Enshuu brought a hand behind her back. She took something out of her sweater—a multipurpose lighter, a long one. It was an odd one, though, as it had a trigger, and there was about thirty centimeters between her hand and the muzzle.

Enshuu took a smooth step back, putting Saflee, who was trying to go around her, in her peripheral vision. She put her finger on the trigger of the lighter and twirled it around. Then she brought her arm from her side to the air.

"On your marks! Get set!"

She pulled the trigger. A crisp *ka-chak* rang out.

In a position slightly diagonal from her head, in a spot where you could just barely brush a nearby stack of vegetable plant containers, Enshuu held up the flame of the lighter.

"Boom!"

An unnatural flame immediately engulfed the entire container. Obviously, the flame wasn't something a normal lighter could create. Both its size and the rate at which it spread were clearly strange.

Saflee automatically covered her face from the flash and hot wind. "Did she grease it beforehand?!" she shouted.

"That's not all!"

Zunk. They heard the sound of something heavy sliding on the ground.

The vegetable plant. The gap between containers. The second container from the bottom of the stack was steadily sliding away. Despite the dozens, even hundreds of tons of pressure weighing down on it from above, it slid out like it was moving across ice.

"*Skis and skates don't slide so well because snow and ice are slippery. Instead, they borrow the power of the water melted by friction… Isn't that right, Uncle Amata?*"

It slid.

It swayed.

It began to fall.

"*And when the frictional resistance reaches extremely low*

values, they'll still slide, even if there are hundreds of pounds on top of them. Here's a question for you: What happens if you take the bottom card out of a house of cards?!"

Hundreds of vegetable plant containers would come raining down all at once.

One of the many mountains of containers utterly collapsed.

They were like dice, each one by two meters. And they weighed around a ton. But they were now tumbled toward them like an avalanche—a nightmare.

Enshuu laughed and took two steps back.

Containers dropped right in front of Saflee, who had flinched away out of reflex, forming a giant wall. The crates kicked the snow up into the air before being crushed by other containers, again and again, pieces of them like their outer walls and steel racks scattering everywhere.

As the meteor shower of destruction continued, Enshuu twirled her lighter around her finger, then brought her lips to the muzzle.

"*Yep. Yeah. It's embarrassing making so much noise. But this is how a Kihara would act, right?*"

She whispered into the weapon that had caused such a catastrophe as though it were a microphone. And then her tone leaped up.

"*Anyway! Presenting the grand opening of our super-exciting attraction that the viewers can directly participate in! Will anyone be able to win their way to the top and get the grand prize?!*"

As she called out, she swung the multipurpose lighter again. The "essence" of her bioweapon construction wasn't in any of the containers nearby. And now the piles of containers that had barely avoided coming down finally collapsed, crushing the old ones under a second wave, then a third.

Since some of them were falling near Enshuu, too, Saflee and Kumokawa couldn't make out what she was doing with the

naked eye.

But she could use a helicopter toy linked to a smartphone to gather information from the air, and once she caused all the assumed containers to collapse, it would all be over. Enshuu had set it up in advance so that every single container in this area would fall—save for a very tiny safe spot.

How very Kihara of her.

Enshuu didn't care how strong or talented her foes were.

She would rattle the stage itself, destroy the rules everyone was working with, and toy with the "honors students" who got good grades given to them on a silver platter before taking them down.

...There are containers falling around me, too. Which means they'll be giant obstacles for them.

Enshuu smiled as she fired at the nearby vegetable containers, creating watery films with low coefficients of friction to topple even more of them.

They have two obstacles to overcome: the mental one—their fear—and the physical one. When they finally stop moving, I can carpet bomb them until they're dead!

But that was where Enshuu's thoughts cut off.

Boom!

Because Kumokawa had slammed her long legs on the crown of the girl's head.

The obstacles were like one-by-two-meter dice. Kumokawa had gotten a running start, leaped onto the wall of vegetable plants, used her hands to climb up them, rolled over the top of the container, and then wheeled her heel down straight at Enshuu Kihara. When one lays everything out like that, her acrobatic feats seemed reasonably plausible. Someone trained in street performances might be able to smoothly flow through all those motions.

But hundreds of containers were still falling around them, and getting hit by just one would make you into mincemeat.

The situation couldn't be measured with simple probabilities. Normally, it would close around your mind, trapping it. Nobody should have been able to move so athletically.

Yes. Someone bound by their fear of the Kiharas could never pull that off. And yet…

"Gh, gah…agh…! Is it my Kihara? Is my Kihara malfunctioning? Is that why the mental trap didn't work?!"

With unnatural motions, like a toy with missing gears, Enshuu withdrew from Kumokawa, putting distance between her. She voluntarily left the safe spot she'd set up for herself.

In response, Kumokawa realized why Enshuu had been sticking to that position and, now in the safe spot, slowly raised her guard.

"…You're not like any Kihara I know," she said, white breath puffing from her lips. "I doubt Kagun Kihara would ever set up something like this. If he was that clever, that incident would have never happened, and he wouldn't have had to leave school."

"*Wait, you don't think just by beating Uncle Amata that you beat a Kihara, did you?*"

The patterns of the graphs on the smartphone and one-seg TV around Enshuu's neck made a clear change.

Her lips moved.

"Uncle Ransuu, Grandpa Gensei, Auntie Byouri, Nayu, Yui, Jou, Konny, Choku, Uncle Doutai, Uncle Kagun, Bunri, Sai, Auntie Kenbi, Bunshi, Auntie Telestina, Kou-kou."

Enshuu Kihara spread her arms wide and made her declaration.

"*I may not be Kihara enough, but I've got the combat patterns of five thousand Kiharas supporting me! And meanwhile, you can't even step into the darkness of Academy City! There's no way a weed like you could topple a tree like me!*"

New combat patterns entered her mind.

Her Kihara budded.

And as the monster did…

Crrrick-craaack-criiick!

Daring to step outside the safe spot, Kumokawa buried the sole of her shoe into Enshuu's cheek.

"Buh…?"

In that moment, as her cheek twisted and her face twisted, Enshuu wore an expression of pure surprise. Kumokawa ignored her, swinging her leg all the way to the side.

"Bhgohvehgobuhchaeh?!"

Producing a cry that didn't count as language, Enshuu tumbled across the snow. Kumokawa ignored the containers raining down from above and charged even farther forward—to finish her off. To defeat Enshuu and get rid of the biological weapon she was creating.

"Buh, guh!"

Holding her bloodied nose and mouth as she got up, Enshuu retreated farther.

"There are two reasons you lost," said Kumokawa. "I don't know about these 'five thousand Kiharas' or whatever, but how did you analyze their combat patterns? Did you give them psychological tests? Or borrow help from a psychometer esper? Or did you just watch them for a long time like some kind of stalker? Whatever the case, let me ask you something: The combat patterns you *think* you've analyzed—are you certain you did it perfectly? You're only borrowing the strength of others. Are you telling me you got perfect results out of it?"

"Rgh…?!"

"Guess you didn't like that, huh? Then go ahead. Test it out. I'm *very* curious now that you mentioned Kagun Kihara. I mean, if it's true and you *do* perfectly replicate him, then I won't stand a chance."

The smartphone and one-seg TV around Enshuu's neck clearly changed again. Innumerable graphs began to give her power.

"*Yep. Yeah, I understand, Uncle Kagun. In a situation like this, a Kihara would—*"

“Get real.”

Brrkkkkkkk!!!!!!!

Kumokawa stepped in deep and delivered a hard right straight, knocking Enshuu to the ground.

“This is it? You think you’re anywhere near Kagun’s level like this? …Then it looks like the quality of your replication has been proven. You can’t replicate *anyone* with toys like those. You keep throwing out names like Kagun and Amata, but all you’re doing is trying to strike fear into anyone who knows them.”

“*Kamijo—*”

“My older sister is one thing, but I’m not scared of him, either.”

“*I understand! Then Maria Kumokawa would—*”

“Come on, are you even serious?”

Every time Enshuu’s movements changed, Kumokawa used all her limbs in a phantasmagoric attack to swat them away. The look on Enshuu’s face changed a little more with every counter. Kumokawa just kept talking, ignoring her. Or maybe she wasn’t showing any mercy because they were both girls.

“I don’t care if you have five thousand Kiharas or if this is the ten thousandth Touma Kamijou. You’re just collecting all the same cards in the game as your opponents. You can’t become Touma Kamijou. You’re just making the same deck as him. But it doesn’t matter what kind of deck you make. *Because you, personally, are the one deciding which cards to play during battle.*”

And that was why Enshuu couldn’t win.

It didn’t matter how many rare cards she did or didn’t have.

Without skills as a player, Enshuu could accomplish nothing.

“You may have made the right rules, but your table talk isn’t working. That’s why you say things that Kagun Kihara would never. The same goes for battle. The cards in your hand work differently when you constantly misplay them.”

“I can’t…win…?”

“That’s right.”

“Then I… My brain… No matter what Kihara I use, I’ll never

win, even if I can execute the same commands as Touma Kamijou and you…?"

"I'll give it to you straight: I feel like I'm playing chess against a badly programmed computer opponent."

Enshuu's eyes wavered unsteadily.

They even went out of sync for a moment.

But then she forced away the confusion, the hesitation.

The smartphone and one-seg TV hanging from her neck began to depict a far more chaotic series of graphs. Ignoring how Kumokawa shook her head, Enshuu cried out.

"No, I can win! I have a solution! I'm a Kihara, after all! A Kihara is a Kihara just by being called a Kihara! *That's what Uncle Amata and Uncle Ransuu and Uncle Kagun and Auntie Byouri all tell me!*"

"…If you really think Kagun Kihara would say that, then your analysis of him is all wrong. The Kagun I know wouldn't say that."

Her opponent wasn't listening to her, though.

Krrr-keee. The multipurpose lighter in Enshuu's hand produced a strange noise.

Perhaps she had turned it into a weapon by messing with the gas exhaust nozzle and given it flamethrower-like capabilities.

With the strange graphs still in her eyes, Enshuu charged forward.

In that moment.

Enshuu had one chance of winning.

Maybe she couldn't beat Kumokawa using the tactics from the graphs on her smartphone and one-seg TV. But she had one more Kihara. One final Kihara.

Herself.

Since it was herself, she didn't need to go to the trouble of analyzing anything or getting combat patterns from the graphs. She was inexperienced, but she had her own hidden Kihara pattern.

Kumokawa had exposed the weakness inherent in all the combat patterns the graphs had imbued her with, but Enshuu's personal pattern was a different story. If Kumokawa was only certain she could deal with any of the patterns the graphs could produce, then that was a security hole, and Enshuu could go through it and kill her.

So she smiled.

She licked her lips.

She was determined to burn everything with her multipurpose lighter, using it as a flamethrower, so she unleashed her inner Kihara and charged.

And a moment later.

Her train of thought cut off. Her Kihara dissipated.

The cause was Kumokawa's leg. A brutal roundhouse had just struck Enshuu in the temple.

"I said there were *two* reasons you lost," spat Kumokawa as she stopped her rotation, speaking to Enshuu as she careened away and landed deep in the snow. "Through all the decks you've used, I could still detect you, Enshuu. I learned what you were like through your fighting. In essence, I analyzed *your* combat patterns before you even used your Enshuu Kihara deck. So it isn't a problem. It poses no threat. I can intercept your deck—all according to plan—just like I can with all the other Kiharas."

"Urgh…"

Enshuu fired a two-meter spout of flame from her multipurpose lighter.

Her dark eyes, squirming as she lay in the snow, were set directly on Kumokawa.

"Aim that fire at me, and the reflected heat will burn you something awful, too… Not that you're listening at this point."

There had been a charging attack.

A different kind, one without any of the complex combat patterns from before.

Enshuu was prepared to die in the assault but also ready to take her enemy down with her.

Even driven into the corner and delusional, she chose the chance of a dangerous victory over a safe defeat. *That* certainly made her one of the Kiharas.

Kumokawa spun around, attacking her from normally impossible angles with her arms and legs.

With a dull noise, Enshuu bent over.

But she didn't fall.

This wasn't like reason or intelligence. Something more fundamental to the Kiharas was driving her actions. To begin with, Enshuu wasn't even considering normal ideas, like trying to evade or defend against attacks, despite being in pain.

Enshuu reaffirmed her grip on the multipurpose lighter.

She squeezed her index finger as hard as she could on the trigger.

The multipurpose lighter, clearly expelling more gas than it did before, could now keep throwing two-meter flames for thirty seconds straight.

"*Die by fire, whore!*"

Bang! A dull noise rang out, and a moment later…

…something resembling a garden spade plunged into Enshuu's right forearm.

It was a kunai used by the Koga shinobi.

"Gah…?"

The energy drained from her index finger.

Aware that Kumokawa's knee was coming straight for her temple, En-shuu heard a woman's voice.

The voice of Saflee Opendays, who had finally climbed over all the containers.

"I don't know this girl or anything. I was just trying to recruit anyone who seemed useful. Didn't expect a *ninja* or someone with an EM wave obsession would be right behind a maid, did you? Though I sounded out the ninja with that paper plane, I guess."

Enshuu didn't spare a glance at the weapon falling from her

hand.

Her mind was focused on Kumokawa's words as they slid into her ears.

"Friends aren't about combat patterns or decks. This is what they're really for."

A moment later, a hammer-like blow finally knocked out Enshuu for good.

A lot of the vegetable containers had collapsed, but over half of them were still stacked up. The stacks were over twenty meters high, and a person was on them, lying on their stomach, covered in white snow.

"That's one Kihara down. The transformer facility was destroyed, putting a stop to Ranny's mold from being turned into a biological weapon."

Then a giggle.

The owner of the female voice that sounded, at first, to be a gentle one was Byouri Kihara.

Her targets—Maria Kumokawa, Shuri Oumi, and Saflee Opendays—finished tying up the unconscious Enshuu, then bunched up in one place. Apparently, they had calmed down enough that they could trade casual conversation and joke around.

"…Well, if I'm going to target them, this is the time. If I got mixed up in the battle, then I'd risk the unexpected causing me to miss my shot. Above all, if Enshuu knew I was here, she'd probably have attacked me. The most surefire way to make them give up would be to wait until she isn't moving anymore."

Byouri took out a large metal nail.

Her arm produced an awful sound, like plastic cracking.

She hadn't been using Number Two Dark Matter for her leg alone. The modifications affected her whole body. After borrowing Touma Kamijou's power, Enshuu had beaten Byouri's upper body to a pulp and seemed satisfied with that. But Byouri could repair injuries with a single command, even if

her heart was crushed or her liver destroyed.

And her alterations went beyond mere repair work.

“Form change. Reference: skyfish.”

When you threw something lying down, you could only use your forearm, like when throwing darts. Baseball pitchers used their whole body to throw the ball, so normally, this stance limited force and flight distance.

But her physical modifications blew established theory out of the water.

Something frilled had appeared next to her right arm—a skyfish. By incorporating into her arm the speculative construction of an unidentified creature, one that flew around so fast the human eye couldn’t track it, just tossing the metal nail like a dart would allow it to penetrate a container a thousand meters away.

“The main enemy of the Kiharas currently is Gremlin, but the overarching objective is to eliminate the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians controlling Baggage City, along with anyone who would defend them. I’m sure they’ll have plenty of regrets now that they’re part of that category.”

One throw and it would be over.

Perhaps her opponents would flee with superhuman speed. But that wouldn’t last long. To her sniping attacks delivered from a high vantage point, they would need to run through long rows of containers and flee behind cover. She would have about eight chances to carefully snipe them in the meantime, or if she went for the rapid-fire approach, about three hundred. And if they fled behind the vegetable plant containers—well, she had the force to pierce through them.

At that point, it was just about probability.

Imagine loading a revolver with five bullets, then playing Russian roulette for one hundred rounds. If one spun the cylinder at random after every shot, there *was* a chance they could survive until the end, but it went without saying that it was quite slim.

But even though Kumokawa, Saflee, and Oumi were all wide

open, the supersonic nails never pierced their heads or hearts.

Because right before she launched her sniping attack, Byouri heard something.

A *clunk*.

A footstep—from a nearby container.

“Ngh!”

Still lying flat, Byouri twisted herself and fired the nail in her hands toward the source of the sound. She didn’t think for a second about who it was. She just aimed her bullet right between her target’s eyes—and did actually strike them in their vital spot.

The person was wearing a coat.

The person was wearing a full-face helmet.

The thick nail lodged itself in the helmet where the brow would be, causing countless fractures to appear in the visor. It didn’t take longer than a second for the whole helmet to go to pieces. And with the hard helmet destroyed, the person’s face was revealed.

A face without a single scratch.

A face that should have been a disaster, skull destroyed, brain matter splattered everywhere.

And above all.

A face that belonged to a man Byouri knew very well.

“Kagun…Kihara…?!”

The nail that should have shattered his skull bounced away, spinning, then fell somewhere.

The man ignored it and spoke.

“…I went through a lot of trouble for this one moment.”

His vital spot should have been shot through, and yet the man was unwounded. He took a step forward.

“I outwitted Enshuu, reused her and made her bait so I could take down my target—all for this one moment when you were basking in your Kihara’s glee. The same as that which you harbored against Maria Kumokawa’s group. I waited for the very moment the situation stabilized. Your wheelchair, your leg-assistant robots, your legs composed of Dark Matter, your body

—just killing you normally and being satisfied with it wouldn't guarantee all your safety mechanisms had been destroyed."

So he'd waited.

Waited for the moment Byouri was somewhat injured, the moment she had no safety mechanisms left.

Waited for the moment Byouri was utterly exposed.

Waited for the moment she, brimming with confidence, took out her final weapon.

"All out of safeties now?" he asked. "Finished with your transformations? I would really appreciate it if you were. Because now I finally have a chance to kill you."





“…I know you hate the Kihara inside yourself,” said Byouri. “Even if it was to protect those elementary school kids from the slasher, you immediately chose homicide as your solution. I just don’t see why you hate the other Kiharas.”

“I was curious,” said Kagun, his voice remaining quiet. “Yes, I killed the slasher to protect my students. Not that the courts acknowledged my crime. But who was that slasher to begin with? It couldn’t have been… Yes, *it couldn’t have been a villain coincidentally appearing to spur me into action.* Right?”

“……”

“He was a pawn. A pawn serving *you*.”

It wasn’t a question. Kihara was only getting confirmation.

“You’re a genius at making people give up, after all. Burning away a person’s reason at a time of your choosing is easy for you. You could corner some normal kid and make him into a slasher. And above all, if the idea of giving up is fundamental to your actions, then…”

“Well, come on.”

Byouri slowly rose from her prone position and dusted the snow off herself.

“A Kihara helping people? A Kihara respected by children? Think of it from the perspective of someone who gave up right away. The very possibility of a Kihara like that is troubling. As our representative, *I needed you to give up for real, Kaggy.*”

“We’ve compared answers. Nothing exciting. But I’m glad I heard it from you personally. This trigger was more effective than I’d imagined.”

Kihara and Kihara, verifying their answers.

Model answers.

And “hope” was naturally not the solution they came to.

“Ultimately, the kid you made a slasher was just another victim.”

Kagun’s impassive mask twisted slightly, showing reasonable anger.

“…And I sent him to his grave without even thinking about it. I was the evil one. I can never take it back. And now the

memory of the victim's death is stained by the title of 'slasher.' This is just a token act of revenge. And only when the two perpetrators fall—you and I—will this revenge be complete."

The truth had been revealed; that was all. This wasn't over. But he wasn't going to push all the responsibility on the mastermind and try to run away from it.

He'd bring his own deeds to an end.

The teacher Byouri once tried to reject now barred her way.

"Oh, well, that *is* a problem. I suppose you *still* haven't given up yet, Kaggy."

A cracking sound echoed throughout Byouri's body as she laughed.

Clearly, she was preparing to attack.

"The dead slasher isn't the only one you want to protect now, is it? Maybe it's the possibility of Kiharas like little Nayuta existing, or the Academy City denizens like Maria Kumokawa, or even outsiders like Saflee Opendays and Shuri Oumi. It doesn't matter to you. That's the kind of teacher you were before, after all."

Mistakes.

Failures.

The expert at making people give up smiled widely, intending to do a perfect job once again.

"I'll have to break you for good this time. Making others give up is the one thing I never gave up on, even after giving up on everything else!"

And so the clash between Kihara and Kihara began.

Kihara Clan
Enshuu Kihara
Kihara Clan
Byouri Kihara
Helmeted Man
Kagun Kihara
Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara
Academy City Maid Girl
Maria Kumokawa
Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays
Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki
Natural Selector Contestant
Shuri Oumi
Official Member of Gremlin
Sigyn
Official Member of Gremlin
Marianne Sringeneier
CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS

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The vegetable plant containers were all stacked up like building blocks. At a height of twenty meters, Kagun Kihara and Byouri Kihara clashed. The first to move was Byouri with her metal nails again. *Whooom!* The sniper's bullets fired from her right arm, which had incorporated the structure of a skyfish, and pierced Kagun's crown and heart.

Or at least, they should have.

But he was unharmed. Not even bleeding. Kagun had been forced to bend backward, but he'd sustained no other obvious damage. It wasn't that his body was healing—he had no wounds to begin with. Ignoring the strike, he took a big step forward, reaching out with his index and middle fingers and slashing with them, as if to cut the air.

Boom! A dull noise rang out.

Byouri couldn't comprehend what had just happened.

But the facts were the facts—and her right arm had clearly been severed from her shoulder. A bluish-white blade of light, several meters long, now extended from Kagun's fingertips. It was like he had a giant razor blade between his fingers.

"Ha. Ha-ha!"

Byouri laughed.

No blood even spurted from her shoulder. The unnatural cross section began to swell in fits and bursts.

"Form change. Reference: yeti!"

An arm grew out of her, thick and furry, incongruent with the rest of her body. This made Kagun go on guard slightly. The situation had just changed in a way he hadn't predicted. His thoughts lagged behind. Byouri didn't let his confusion slip—she slammed her giant fist into him from above.

And it smashed the entire container underneath them, too.

Brrkkkkkk-ooooooom!!!!!! With a rattling burst, Kagun and the container he'd been standing on both crumpled and sank.

He was dead for sure.

She'd felt it—she'd crushed his flesh, his bones, his organs into a pulp.

And yet.

"Is that all?"

A voice drifted into her ears.

A moment later, all sound disappeared.

Several strands of bluish-white light danced, slicing the crumpled vegetable plant into several pieces. As Kagun appeared from within them and looked up at Byouri from a level below, his eyes said it all—they were mere shackles, annoyances, and he'd removed them.

He was unharmed.

She couldn't even see a speck of blood on him.

"Wh…what?"

"You seem a little too absorbed in your incorporation of the Number Two brand. If your final grade is going to be this low no matter what raw materials you use, then I should be able to accomplish my objective without any difficulty."

"And what did *you* incorporate…? I can't see your Kihara! You were researching near-death experiences. If anything, you *should* specialize in hypnagogic hallucinations. You shouldn't have any of these brute-force techniques!"

Kagun didn't answer her.

Byouri changed her right arm's structure into that of a skyfish and fired three more thick metal nails, but they also failed to hurt Kagun. It wasn't that his unknown blade had knocked them out of the air—nor had he used high-speed movement to avoid them.

They'd struck him directly.

His head, his heart, and his stomach. All of them lethal spots. Nevertheless.

No. Kagun was subtly shifting the position of his own body,

actively trying to get them to hit his vitals.

And then.

While Byouri was confused, Kagun took clear action. Without climbing up from the lower level, he swung his bluish-white blade around, slicing a nearby vegetable container into little pieces. He would cut down the mountain to drag Byouri to his level.

As Byouri slid down with the rest of the metal debris, cautious of Kagun, who was approaching her, she thought:

Strange. I'm a Kihara, so I know that our Kihara is strongly linked to some kind of science. So if one of us has a thorough knowledge of science, that science will bind them. I should be able to predict his tactics to an extent, but…!

With her right arm—now with the yeti structure incorporated into it—she quickly tried to bat Kagun away, but that didn't do anything to him, since he wasn't taking any damage to begin with. He didn't move to avoid it; he took another big step toward her and swung his right hand mercilessly with his index and middle fingers together, sending the bluish-white blade of light at her.

I can't…predict it…! What the hell kind of science is his power based—

Her thoughts cut off.

Her face had been diagonally sliced.

It was out of place.

Her skull, her brain, all of it slid down neatly as if down a bamboo chute.

The destruction of the brain.

It meant death.

And right after that decisive moment, a new development came about.

"*Form change. Reference: Little Gray!*"

Her lips, still hovering around her torso half-heartedly, formed smooth words.

The tip of Byouri's left fingers suddenly swelled, expanding like a balloon. They reached about the size of oranges. Or as

another analogy, the size of a young child's skull.

Its function: to create a brain.

And if it had that function, then anyone living in Academy City would have thought of an additional possibility.

Zh-booooom!!!!!!

A moment later, an incomprehensible ability activated, and an incredible explosion engulfed Kagun.

The monster, whose right hand belonged to a giant and whose left hand possessed five brains, slowly smiled.

Byouri spoke into the gray ash spreading through the blizzard.

"This was originally a side effect of an experiment to see if I could use an esper ability just by creating a brain. The experiment failed, you see. It seems the theory that a brain must be inside of a body is correct. Broadly speaking, I have to use a human form as a medium—my own body, for example—for a brain to function as a brain and use an ability."

As time passed, her rounded face reformed around that broken smile.

"That said, I can only use powers somewhere between Level Two and Level Three. But even an elementary ability like telekinesis can destroy someone if I use five of them at once. Basically, I use waves of attacks to shave flesh from bone. It's pretty efficient as a surprise attack, isn't it?"

Destroying her heart wouldn't stop her.

Slicing through her brain wouldn't stop her.

If she could make it, she could replace it. If she could replace it, she could lose it. Byouri had surpassed the form that made humans human.

"…This is what it really means to be a Kihara. To use the same foundations of science shared by the entire world but apply them in unimaginable ways. I'm sure you understand it very well now—down to your very bones, I'd say."

"*Yes. I get that, of course.*"

The man's sudden voice froze Byouri's smile solid.

And then she realized something.

The gray particles had been blown around. Kagun, who should have been blasted to bits by the explosion, still stood there in one piece. His coat and shirt had been carried away, exposing his bare skin to the negative-twenty-degree weather. But there was *still* not even a drop of blood on his upper body, as if it had been that way all along.

"…When did you repair yourself?" asked Byouri.

"I was never damaged. I can't be. I remade my body for that very purpose."

Byouri felt her footing sway.

It wasn't how strong the man was—it was the fact that she didn't understand what his power was founded on that freaked her out. She was one of the highest-ranking Kiharas there were. She *should* be able to figure out what kind of science was being used at just a glance, even if it was outside her own field of expertise. And yet she couldn't with Kagun. At all. She was staring a nonsensical phenomenon in the face—and couldn't make heads or tails of the trick.

Byouri could mass-produce as many brains and hearts as she desired, but the rules behind this were different. She compared it with every form of science she could possibly think of but couldn't even come up with a hypothesis that might explain Kagun right now.

Then what *was* it?

Was he even borrowing power from something in the first place? If he wasn't, then how was he twisting the divine providence of his own humanity to cause these phenomena?

"No, wait…," she murmured.

There was a way. A set of rules she wouldn't understand, despite how well-versed she was in science. Something outside the massive category of "science" itself. In fact, Byouri had just seen it—and nearly been destroyed by it right here in Baggage City.

Yes.

“Wait. No. You… *You were with Gremlin all along?!*”

Even for the Kiharas, each of them trailblazers on his or her own path of heresy in the world of science, this territory was unprecedented.

The realm of sorcery.

And of the sorcerers who used it.

“What are you talking about?”

In response, Kagun extended his right index finger and middle finger and smiled a little. The bluish-white blade of light reached out again.

“*I am a Kihara, remember? How could I be a Kihara without going beyond my opponent’s expectations?*”

“You… You demon!”

Without thinking, Byouri used the same insult that so many dogs who she had felled had called her in the past. But at the same time, she had a thought. She considered the possibilities that lay outside of her awareness and began to analyze the phenomena before her eyes anew.

If he could actually nullify all damage, he wouldn’t have bothered picking a day like this to attack me. He would have been able to break through Academy City’s front gates and slaughter the Kiharas. Kagun’s barrier has some kind of special property. And I should be able to deduce what it is from the way he acts.

Working under the assumption that sorcery was a supernatural power different from the kinds created in Academy City, Byouri began to rethink everything as a fight against an Academy City esper.

Kagun specifically wanted my attacks to hit his vitals. Which means…

“Rrgh!”

She incorporated a skyfish’s structure into her right arm, then fired a thick metal nail.

This time, she didn’t aim for Kagun’s vitals. Instead, she went for the shoulder. She only wanted to scrape him, to damage him so little he could ignore it, to chip away at his skin with a super-

high-speed projectile.

And she was right.

This time, it hurt him. Blood began to seep out, too.

“I don’t know the mechanisms, but *you only nullify attacks that would be lethal.* That must be how your barrier works! In which case…!”

“So you want to inflict slight, nonfatal injuries on me, let some time pass, and have me die from blood loss?”

Despite revealing his own weakness, Kagun didn’t change his expression.

“Many swords in Norse mythology have stones embedded in their hilts. They’re apparently charms that can heal wounds sustained in battle… As inexperienced as I am, though, I can only replicate it enough to avoid fatal wounds.”

Knowing that an incarnation of science would not be able to understand this, Kagun continued to explain.

“But there are ways to use that, too. Let me tell you about a sword known as Whitting. It was used for a decisive battle, and when the advantage turned against its wielder, a fragment of it broke off and turned the tables… One spell to avoid fatal wounds with certainty and another to sharpen the blade itself the more damage I sustain. Put them together, and its destructive power can grow without limit.”

He slowly leveled the meters-long bluish-white blade of light extending from his right hand, from his outstretched index and middle fingers.

“…If you want to kill me without a single fatal blow, you’ll need at least twelve minutes. But that’s more than enough time for me. I can kill you fifty-two times. And now that we’ve fought, my speculation has turned into certainty. Why don’t you use that power on a regular basis? Or rather, why, when you have so much freedom, are you obsessed with your female human form—the form of Byouri Kihara? …It’s because you’re simply scared. You’re rapidly losing sight of your own form even now, aren’t you?”

“Ngh?!”

“It’s proof you can’t fully control Number Two. You may be forcing it to do your bidding with electrical signals, but the things Number Two creates still have its lingering scent on them. And now, just like a rejected surgical transplant, it’s trying to drive Byouri Kihara’s mind outside of its artificial body. Is your limit one hundred seconds? Five hundred? It can’t be very long. If I keep killing you in the meantime, you’ll be forced to rely on Number Two, even if you know it’s dangerous. The more time passes, the more you fall apart. At a certain point, you’ll have destroyed yourself. I may not be able to kill your physical body, but I can make your mind disappear.”

“…Form change. Reference: Nessie.”

Blorph.

Byouri’s entire silhouette began to wriggle and writhe eerily.

Her body was reassembling itself from within, an omen that she was about to transform into something gigantic.

“Both of us are close to immortal,” she said. “But there’s a clear difference—one of us recovers from damage, but the other one only holds the damage at bay. A small difference, you might think, but it’s actually much bigger. Especially in a war of attrition.”

“……”

“If I win, I can restore my body! If you win, you’ll stay injured! I don’t even need to think about winning. We’ll draw. We’ll kill each other! That will be enough. Then it will be over! But you *need* to win. You need to! The fight won’t end until you do! The difference is decisive. It’s like rock-paper-scissors—I can end the game by winning but also by tying!”

Her body creaked and groaned as it swelled, expanding.

An evil dragon and a knight.

Depicted in so many legends, the setup was favored in Norse Mythology as well. But being ignorant of sorcery, Byouri didn’t realize that.

“…You’re off the mark, Byouri,” said the sorcerer who had manifested the decisive blade Whitting, looking down slightly.

Perhaps he was a Norse hero, this man crowned with the

name Bersi.

“I said at the start that I’m here to get revenge for the boy you turned into a killer. There’s no winning or losing for me. You created him, and I killed him. My only objective is to ensure we both kill each other.”

“Wait… Then…” Byouri groaned.

The man looked up.

There stood the man Byouri had once wanted to crush with all her strength.

A teacher.

“Thank you, Byouri. I didn’t expect you to bring Number Two, but even if you hadn’t, you probably would have found some way to strengthen your body. *I always knew that if unique powers like these clashed, it would bring an end to this battle of attrition. Your heresy was just as I predicted, and it has led me to peerless victory.*”

Zhhhk-slash-bang-gam-slash-bam-kreeeee!!!!!!

The knight clashed with the evil dragon, both of them heading for their deaths.

It was a tragic story, one with no salvation waiting for them.

But when it came to the boy slasher who had been killed instead of saved…

…he had finally been avenged.

PERIOD.32

Maria Kumokawa could clearly see the blast wind from her vantage point on the surface.

The top layer of stacked-up vegetable plant containers had been severed, beaten, and crushed, and even as the destruction happened, the two monsters had fought, shaving away at each other's flesh and blood. It was clearly different than a normal battle. There was no such thing as defense. They were quite literally killing each other—that was the only purpose this fight served. They crushed, they broke, they pierced, they sliced, they shaved, and they crunched. Their duel was an encapsulation of every method of destruction imaginable, driving both participants ever closer to death, like people tumbling down a hill.

Kumokawa called out a name.

But the man didn't answer.

A hopeless roar tore through the air as the battle between the two in the heavens changed form. One of them, a monster that looked almost like a woman swallowed by a dinosaur, had slipped on its foot. It collided several times with the piled-up containers due to the height gaps as it careened down toward the surface, where Kumokawa was.

"Wha…?"

A half word.

The dinosaur, spread out on the snow as if crushed, said something.

The voice was soft and belonged to a woman.

"How could…this be…? I didn't even need to kill him. I even found the perfect thing to make him give up. And yet…"

The thing looked squarely at Kumokawa—it resembled a

plesiosaur. Its giant mouth, lined with teeth in the same manner as a human's, opened wide.

In a blink, she remembered it.

This terror.

She'd experienced it once before.

Right near the gates of that elementary school, when that person with a blade had set his sights on her.

This time, though, that blade didn't strike out at her.

Or rather, not "though" but "again."

From straight above.

The man fell from the stack of containers, his right arm plunging into the dinosaur's head.

He no longer had a left arm, his entire upper body was bloody, and he was covered in wounds from head to foot.

And yet he'd still held fast to his way of doing things.

Having used some technology or other, he thrust his remaining arm through the dinosaur's head until it was buried up to the elbow. And that was the finishing blow. The plesiosaur screamed and writhed but soon seemed to exhaust itself. It fell to the side, sprawled out, and stopped moving. Its skin became a translucent white, and then it began to smoothly melt into the snow.

The man, flung around by the dinosaur's head, ended up careening into the snow as well. None of his individual wounds were fatal, but the sum total blood loss from them was definitely robbing him of his remaining life. Even the placement of his injuries seemed intentional.

"*Mr. Kihara!*"

Kumokawa ran to him, calling him by what she used to. He lay on the ground, eyes unfocused, trying to track where the sound was coming from. But it wasn't certain if he even perceived her there. His recent memories were probably already gone. He wouldn't even have the ability to register where he was at this point.

As he looked up at her face, it was like he was looking at someone else entirely.

His entire body exhausted, he moved his lips a little.

And said this, in no uncertain terms:

“I’m…sorry…”

The man didn’t move again after that.

He’d exchanged his entire life to say those two words.

And if he’d said them aloud, then he must have just been released of the burden he had carried for such a long time.

He’d cast off everything.

He’d worn himself down past his limits.

And after everything, his last words were an apology.

Kumokawa didn’t move for a while.

Eventually, seeing the man’s face begin to be covered in a dusting of negative-twenty-degree blizzard, Kumokawa finally spoke.

“…I know.”

She looked down slightly in this world that froze even tears.

Then she raised her voice, expelling everything that had accumulated inside her for so long.

“Don’t you think I’ve researched enough?! I know you did it to save us! I know you left in silence so we wouldn’t idolize a killer! I know someone set up that slasher, and I know the guilt has been eating away at you this whole time! I…I know who that apology was really for!”

There was no voice to answer her.

Not even a slight nod of acknowledgment.

The only thing on the man’s face as the white snow buried it was the self-satisfied smile of a winner.

“I know things you never knew, too! Everyone you saved is still striving to be the best they can be! They were all grateful. They were all worried about you. This wasn’t all for nothing. I don’t know how much you hated what you did, but it wasn’t a waste! It still meant something!”

His features, his body, continued to disappear as the brutal blizzard kept covering him in sheer white.

“Damn it! Don’t die with that smug look on your face! I’ll punch you! And if punching you would wake you up, I’d beat the hell out of you! You’ve always hated that, haven’t you?! That’s why you stuck to your guns this whole time, isn’t it?! So… So why are you so accepting of your own death?!”

She yelled, she wailed, she cried.

But it wouldn’t change anything.

In a world like this—because it *was* like this—Kagun had settled his score, and Kumokawa would go on living in the world he left behind.

She wouldn’t waste the life he’d chosen to save by abandoning his own.

And so the Kiharas sweeping through Baggage City had gone completely silent.

But one other group was still at large in the streets.

Gremlin.

One of their members.

Dragging one leg behind her, one eye covered with a big piece of gauze, Marianne Sringeneier had witnessed everything that happened amid the piles of vegetable plant containers. She’d seen the certain death of Kagun Kihara—or, to use their name for him, Bersi. Reeling from the undeniable truth, she stumbled and leaned against a container wall.

“This can’t…be happening…”

Her murmur drew the attention of the people around Bersi. Marianne didn’t count how many. She didn’t care how many. She only saw the man being buried under the snow.

“I never thought you’d bite the dust. I mean, that was why I taught you everything I knew. So you wouldn’t. But what the hell is this? This isn’t… How dare you just die as if you pieced together the whole puzzle or something!”

She was acting even more disturbed than how one would

normally imagine her being.

She was, after all, a Gremlin sorcerer—one who altered living humans and made them into her weapons.

But that wasn't it.

The only reason she could do such inhumane things to so many people was because had drawn a clear mental line between enemy and ally. Saving enemies and betraying allies blurred the line, and she harbored no such ambiguities. Once she acknowledged someone as a friend, she'd destroy the world for them.

"Was it me? Did I bring all the pieces together…? No, that's not it. You're not like that. Even if I'd never given you anything, you would have found other pieces to finish your puzzle with. That's how you always were. That's why I wanted to avoid you! I *should* have avoided you!"

And now Marianne was face-to-face with it—the death of a friend.

"What…what is this…?"

No.

It was right in front of her, but she couldn't accept it.

"What the hell is this?! Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Something changed.

Marianne's surroundings—supposedly empty space—began to produce odd creaking and cracking noises.

Her smartphone beeped. She didn't answer it, but then it cut to a magical transmission on its own.

Othinus.

Another name for the chief god in Norse mythology. The voice of one known in Gremlin as a "magic god" reached her mind.

"Don't do it, Marianne! You're outputting too much power! If you keep going, the entire experiment will come crashing down!"

"…Shut up."

Two words.

That simple phrase, steeped in hatred, was all she needed to dismiss the words of a magic god.

"*If I hadn't pulled my punches to start with, this never would have happened. If someone with your power had shown up, Bersi wouldn't have died. And I'm…I'm just as much to blame.*"

"*You… Don't tell me! You can't use that!*"

"*Oh, I can. And I will. Even if it's too late for everything else, I'm not about to back down. I won't let it end like this! Who cares about the experiment? Who cares about Gremlin? Who cares about magic gods?! Huh?! If I don't slaughter everyone in Baggage City who killed Bersi, I'll never be satisfied!*"

Screaming, Marianne reached into her overalls.

However, she did not pull out a golden tool.

No, it was a sheathed sword.

Dáinsleif.

One of the signals of Ragnarok, the final war in Norse mythology. A legendary magic blade that could bring about untold catastrophe when used by a human. The war started by the king who wielded it was said to continue until Ragnarok itself.

As the sword's creator, as the one who had named it, Marianne knew more than anyone how dangerous it was, yet she grasped the sheath without hesitation.

Gripping it, she shouted.

"*Vengeance! I will use your skulls and millions of others to build Bersi's grave!*"

Kihara Clan
Enshuu Kihara

Kihara Clan
Byouri Kihara

Helmeted Man
Kagun Kihara

Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara

CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS

Academy City Maid Girl
Maria Kumokawa

Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays

Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki

Natural Selector Contestant
Shuri Oumi

Official Member of Gremlin
Sigyn

Official Member of Gremlin
Marianne Sringeneier

SUB.33

Kagun Kihara had first met Marianne Sringeneier about three years ago. At the time, there had been no World War III, so the framework of Gremlin—which had sprung up as a result of the war—naturally didn't exist, either.

In a way, Marianne was closer with him any other sorcerer in Gremlin.

"He's just like you, Mjölnir. I just can't seem to get away from him. Neither of you can eat raw shellfish, either."

At the time, Marianne wasn't creating divine armaments as a *dvergr* but rather striving for advancements in *dvergr* tools. The *dvergr* had nearly gone extinct in the past. But just as the steam engine had brought about the Industrial Revolution and had taken warfare to explosive heights, Marianne wanted to improve her people's tools enough that the whole world would come to know their strength and technology.

To fulfill her objective, she needed the right people. The one she'd chosen had been Kagun Kihara, who was a wanderer at the time.

As for how that worked out…

"I don't really understand how her technology works, which is *exactly* why I'm so curious about it. But as far as I can tell, she's already perfected the golden ratio in machine form. A Kihara I know could add to it, but its purity would only decrease."

And so Kagun had turned her down.

That said, being able to calmly point out an error in somebody's goal in life was a kind of talent—especially for a psychopath like Marianne. Perhaps Kagun's previous post was at play.

Marianne had taught Kagun very little. Once he was convinced that sorcery did, in fact, exist, he began learning how to refine his magic power and assemble spells almost completely on his own.

Marianne once confessed this to Mjölnir:

"Why even teach the guy? There's so many things for him to learn. But as soon as I try to teach him something by the book, it transforms into something different in his mind. He'll just have to figure it all out for himself. The only thing I can really do is correct him. It's like I'm not giving him the power to blow things up like a missile—I'm just correcting the explosives' trajectories by adding wings to them, I guess? …Ha-ha. He must have infected me with all that tech talk."

After he joined Gremlin, Kagun made many achievements not as a sorcerer but as a nonconforming researcher from the science side. In fact, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that his knowledge was the reason that Gremlin's sorcerers were trying to use both science and magic in the first place. In all likelihood, his knowledge would continue to be useful to Gremlin even if he died.

Kagun may have abandoned Academy City, but he was never able to abandon science.

How powerful a sorcerer was he, then, as someone who had voluntarily left Academy City in search of new power? Marianne had this simple comment on the topic.

"He might be strong, but he has zero use cases."

Kagun's only goal was self-destruction. He didn't want to win or lose against the object of his revenge. He wanted to assure

their mutual destruction. That was what all those spells he created and sharpened were for. Gremlin had a lot of twisted sorcerers in its ranks, but nobody was willing to try and learn from *his* methods. Everyone thought them to risky to mess with.

In truth, Marianne had brought him into the fold as part of a larger plan. If they needed Kagun the scientist rather than Kagun the sorcerer, then maybe she'd be able to stop him from carrying out his reckless—that was the only word Marianne could think of to describe it—revenge plot.

Ultimately, though, that wasn't how things had played out.

Kagun certainly ended up busier, being one of the very few cores of the Gremlin operation's science field. But whenever he had a free moment, he would improve his own spells and learn from other sorcerers' techniques, honing his already risky magic to a razor's edge.

He clearly wanted to carry out this vengeance at all costs, and he never stopped thinking about it. He could come across a baby bird and wonder how he might use it to further his goals.

At that point, Marianne switched tactics. She couldn't stop him from trying to exact vengeance. Instead, she began throwing her full support behind him, trying to make the man incredibly powerful. Strong enough that even if this reckless revenge plot worked, he would still survive and come back. She would distort the very ending of the story of vengeance in his mind.

She thought that would be enough. She thought she'd be able to save this person she considered a friend from his deep-seated obsession with revenge.

"If you end up surviving somehow after everything, and you don't see a point in living anymore, just come to me, all right?"

She'd said it half-jokingly, but it wasn't a joke in the slightest. Kagun had smiled vaguely at her but never nodded.

Because the answer was already set in stone.

She couldn’t change anything.

She couldn’t save him.

In the end, all Marianne had been able to do was watch her friend meet death.

Kagun had settled things with the person who’d caused the incident he’d gotten caught up in. His vengeance was complete.

So she, too, would stay true to herself.

Even if it was pointless.

Even if it would help nobody.

Marianne bared her fangs at everything that had driven Kagun to his death—herself included.

A CARDINAL ERROR.34

Kumokawa, Oumi, and Saflee all realized something was wrong. The new person who had shown up—Marianne Sringeneier—was dragging one leg behind her as if wounded, and she had a big scrap of gauze taped to one eye. It hurt just to look at her.

But those things weren't what drew the girls' attention. No, it was the sheathed sword in her hand.

That's very bad, Kumokawa thought, not beating around the bush.

She'd fought many opponents in Academy City who used strange, mysterious items or incomprehensible abilities. But that sword was so intimidating, so oppressive, that it terrified even *her*. As they stood at the foot of the mountain of vegetable containers, she audibly gulped.

"…I don't think we're going to get out of this one by talking," she said.

"We're in the danger zone now," murmured Oumi. Though the ninja had beaten Marianne once before, she realized the sorcerer's stats were now completely different than they had been before—all because of that sword. There was just *something* about it.

Despite this, Oumi said, "It's still shaped like a sword. It can only reach so far. We split up and throw off her aim. While she's chasing one of us, the other two will get behind her for a surprise attack. We can still win."

"You mean we need throwing weapons? I'm terrible with those," said Saflee with a smile. Her cheerfulness looked forced, but a little auto-suggestion could work wonders. Better than being petrified in fear.

Kumokawa kept Marianne squarely in the center of her vision and Saflee in the corner of her eye. “What *can* you use?” she asked.

“An Australian hunting tool. I’m not good enough to call it a martial art, though.”

“A boomerang?”

“No, simpler. A rope with a stone on each end. You throw the rope so that it spins. It’s for tangling up birds’ legs, but you can throw it at someone’s head, too.”

“Centrifugal force, huh?” murmured Kumokawa. “…That should work well with my ability.”

“What about you?” Saflee asked Oumi.

Oumi twirled the garden spade kunai in her hand. “Guns and explosives made it to my country later on. So we’re *very* specialized in things like these. Not that they haven’t been rusting ever since firearms were introduced, of course.”

They had a plan. No matter what their opponent came at them with, their first move would be to avoid being in Marianne’s range at all costs. It was a basic concept, to be sure, but managing your reach was the key to living through any fight. And ranged weapons would eventually bring Marianne down, no matter how weak or primitive they were.

They could win. As long as they didn’t choose the wrong escape route—such as getting caught between her and the vegetable plant containers—they would have the advantage. At least, that was how they thought about it to force themselves to stay positive.

But then Marianne said two words: “*Loading ammo.*”

Casually, she brandished the golden sword, keeping it in its sheath.

And that was all she needed to do to instantly crush any hope they had.

Boom!!!!!!!!

A flash of light came down from the heavens, plunging into Marianne’s golden sword.

There was an explosion.

The massive light centered on Marianne burst, sending a shock wave in every direction. The asphalt ground rattled strangely, and the vegetable plant containers—already unstable—began to collapse, as if the finishing blow had been delivered to them. The accumulated snow all whipped up into the air, then was scattered by the shock wave. It was all Kumokawa, Oumi, and Saflee could do to get their hands up to protect their own upper bodies.

"Wh…what…?"

The sky was distorted.

The thick clouds responsible for the blizzard had blown away, yes. But that wasn't all. Since the clouds had been blown away, a circle of clear sky was now peeking through. However, something about it was wrong. The sky should have been blue, but it was somehow blurred and damaged, like a TV screen riddled with white noise.

It was as if that light had pierced the sky from another dimension.

"What in the world…?"

"I could explain, but you're too dumb to understand it," spat Marianne.

She brandished the sheath overhead, and it spewed out bluish-white sparks.

It was coming.

Kumokawa, taken by a terrible—and terribly unidentifiable—premonition, immediately shouted to Oumi and Saflee. "Spread out! She's still using a sword! Stick to the plan and throw off her aim—"

She didn't have time to finish the sentence.

Using only her thumb on the sheath, Marianne gingerly pushed up the guard of the sword.

By just a few centimeters.

The horrible red and gold blade touched the outside air.

That was all it did.

There was no easy-to-understand attack, like that terrifying

flash of light or a huge explosion they couldn't do anything about.

No.

She just showed a few tiny centimeters of the blade.

Ba-bump!!!!!!

Without any forewarning, Oumi's heart stopped.

"Huh…?"

Kumokawa, standing right next to her, had no idea what had just happened.

All of a sudden, Oumi went completely limp. She started to sink down into the white snow. No blood loss, no broken bones, nothing obvious. She practically looked asleep—but in a negative-twenty-degree hellscape. In the cold, you could tell at a glance if someone was breathing from the white puffs of air coming from their mouth. Oumi clearly wasn't breathing. She wasn't *alive*.

What…? She died? That quickly? That easily?! What happened? Poison or something? No, we're upwind. She couldn't have used a trick like that!

Kumokawa heard a hard *clink*.

The sound of Marianne once again moving her thumb to lock the sword back into its sheath.

Then she brought her right arm straight out, holding the sheath out in front of her.

Not even a word. Her thumb simply moved.

It was about to reopen whatever horrible thing was locked inside the sheath.

"Shit… Shit! I don't know what's going on, but for now, just hide some—"

She found herself interrupted again.

Because right at that moment, Saflee collapsed into the snow, her eyes rolling back. Her heart had stopped. A clear cause of death. Their lives, their very dignity, had been stripped from them ever so easily.

A devil of a few centimeters.

A red and gold blade peeking out from the sheath.

"……"

The soft *clink* rang oddly loud in Kumokawa's ears. Without saying anything, Marianne resheathed the sword.

She was beyond them. Far beyond them.

They were in a different dimension now. Their strength, their wit, their tactics—none of them worked. This wasn't even a proper battle. Marianne's sword was too powerful for that.

And then, without a word, the sorcerer pointed her blade at Maria Kumokawa.

The sword was sheathed, and there was distance between them. Strictly speaking, she wasn't "aiming" anything. But Kumokawa naturally felt like she was being targeted—like the tip of a blade was being held to her forehead. Like wires were wrapped around her spine, preventing her from moving.

The clarity of it all, however, finally made her realize something.

She'd figured it out.

She knew why Oumi and Saflee's hearts had stopped.

She knew the cause.

"…That sword didn't do anything," she murmured vaguely, eyes wide.

Marianne hadn't removed the blade from its sheath yet, but something was already eating away at her. And she just barely managed to put it into words.

"It was just making us afraid. The very last thing we want to do is stand in front of that sword now that it's unleashed its full power. It makes us think that if we have to face it anyway, *we might as well just let our hearts stop right now*."

"One hundred points."

This wasn't the same kind of technique as Enshuu's, who had tried to effectively elevate fear levels through logic. This was pure fear, welling up from something much more primitive—her instincts, her soul. She couldn't use her mind to do anything about it.

The terror was unavoidable.

If she was intelligent enough to feel fear, then that fear would erase her very existence.

That meant the sword had the ability to kill every last human on earth before it was even pulled from its sheath.

What would happen, then, if it was fully drawn…?

“All right, enough of that.”

Marianne’s lips moved.

She placed her thumb on the sword guard.

“You’re the responsible for this. Time for you to die.”

The sheath slid over the blade. There it was. The glimpse. The blade that made you think dying outright was less terrifying than the prospect of resisting it. Kumokawa was helpless. It was the very pinnacle of terror. She was helpless to put up even the smallest form of resistance, like running away or shutting her eyes.

And then.

Something

clearly

went

wrong.

“…Ah?”

Kumokawa’s mind blurred. Her short-term memory was wiped. Brilliant colors leaped before her eyes. She lost her sense of up and down. She couldn’t feel heat or cold. She stood stock-still as everything mixed into one jumbled mess.

And then she came to a realization.

She didn’t know what had just happened, but the fact that she had questions meant she was still alive. The terror hadn’t stopped her heart without her knowing. For some reason,

Marianne's sword hadn't activated. Actually, it wasn't as if the sword itself had done anything to begin with. It was the fear it made you feel that forced you to give up on living. But that meant…

Kumokawa's mind had focused on something else. Not the sword.

Something even more abnormal.

That was why the grip of terror on her had weakened. Why her fear had dulled and why she'd avoided death.

But what was it?

The cause was right next to Marianne.

Bkk-wnnnngggg!!!!!!!

In what should have been empty space, a black fissure appeared.

And from out of it…

…a boy's right fist burst through.

"Damn it!"

For the first time, Marianne was acting differently. Clear panic was in her eyes—despite the sword being in her possession. She was scared even *with* that sword. The boy had clasped his hand over Marianne's right wrist; maybe she was worried about her weapon being stolen. She violently shook off his hand, then took a big jump back to get away from the black fissure.

"…I finally caught up."

She heard the boy's voice from the fissure.

He balled his hand into a clear, tight fist.

"I might have been a little late. It might have taken me too long to get inside. But I've got you now, Gremlin. The distortion in space you created gave away coordinates. And now that I'm here, you won't have your way anymore. Because this right hand of mine has the power to destroy the things you and your friends control."

The black fissure expanded.

Something peeked out from within.

“This is where the line is. This is the furthest point of the world your rules dominate.”

It expanded. Expanded. Expanded.

As if to reject something. As if to overturn a basic premise.

“Let me tell you something…”

A single step out of that wide-open fissure.

And into this world.

“…from this point on, you’re playing by my rules!”

Touma Kamijou appeared.

A moment later, cracks appeared over everything else in sight, and it all shattered.

As though everything Kumokawa had seen before now was one big illusion.



CONNECTION PROCESS

Scientific supernatural ability development, a field spearheaded by Academy City, had been created based on quantum theory. Quantum theory is a field of science that attempts to figure out how the world worked on extremely small levels—a strange field in which Newtonian mechanics, which stipulate that letting go of an apple makes it fall to the earth, don't apply.

Matter exists. That much is certain. But when someone observes matter, it goes away somewhere.

An object in a box can only be expressed with possibilities and probabilities. It's not either inside it or not—one can only express its existence as a 70 percent chance.

If you try to think about that in the bigger, utterly normal world of science, with its cans of juice and oranges, quantum theory sounds like a load of mumbo jumbo. But by expanding on its principles, by messing with the minds of those who observe the incredibly microscopic world—humans—one might be able to control the macroscopic world—the big one, visible to the naked eye. That was the basis of Academy City's esper abilities.

But there is another theory that stands alongside this microscopic quantum theory.

Holism.

A theory that starts from the largest perspective one can think from, holism treats the entire expanding universe as a single huge system or network.

Long ago, it branched into other things like the Gaia

hypothesis, which states that environments and biospheres were structured from an Earth-scaled point of view…but creatures on Earth are affected by solar winds and the moon's gravity, too, and when it came to the conversation of a massive world including a time axis and other dimensions, the problem expands outside the scope one could use a single planet to explain. Partly as a return to square one, recent times have seen more and more people talking about the "whole" again as a scientific field.

Gremlin had used supernatural ability development, which in turn used this theory of holism, to try and complete a fundamental theory using the massive experimental test site of Baggage City.

The theory itself was simple. It was the opposite of the butterfly effect, where a butterfly might flap its wings and cause a storm. In other words, it said that if one created a major change on a *world* level, it would let them produce flames from their palm.

Perhaps it's difficult to understand how a change in something large could affect something small. But we ourselves are on the receiving end of changes in huge systems all the time.

Take the theory of relativity. Setting the detailed definition aside, we'll just look at the part that says that when an object is approaching the speed of light, the flow of time slows down. While the difference between someone driving a car and someone flying in a plane are so small as to be nearly impossible to measure, technically, the two people are still living in separate "times."

In that case, let's expand the scale. What about the difference between someone on Earth and someone on the moon? Someone on the moon and someone on Mars? In these cases, too, the difference between the heavenly bodies' revolutions and rotations on their axes would result in the two people having different speeds. These people, too, would be living in different "times."

Finally, let's examine things on a scale more akin to holism. This universe, which was created by the big bang, is still expanding every single moment. Naturally, humankind exists within that universe; each of us is within that "speed" of expansion, thrown into that "relativistic time" created by the big bang.

Now for a little thought experiment. The universe expands in all directions equally. But what if one could cause a localized change in the speed of expansion? The change in speed would cause a change in time. The idea of time would fluctuate, and it would travel down from that enormously huge phenomenon all the way to us tiny little humans.

This is just an example. But if one could fold the whole universe, or roll it up, then they would also be able to use that force to affect incredibly microscopic phenomena that couldn't be observed even with electron microscopes.

Does that seem roundabout? If one had the power to mess with the universe's rate of expansion, they could just use that power to destroy whole planets or galaxies.

But holistic espers were aware only of producing a flame in the palm of their hand. Even if some galaxy far away had to be rolled up to let them do that, the esper wouldn't be able to grasp that concept—just as someone driving a car on this Earth can't be aware of living in a different time than other people.

Therefore, these espers created from holistic theory, in Academy City conversions, may not get beyond Level Two or Level Three. Even if something crazy happens in reality, if nobody is around to notice it, then it's as though it never happened at all. Although ironically, that's none other than the concept of zero in quantum theory.

Gremlin had accomplished the preliminary step to all that—before actually creating holistic espers. This was an experiment to see if they could distort the wider world to cause a smaller supernatural phenomenon.

Yes. The martial arts tournament held in Baggage City, the clash between the Kiharas and Gremlin, the war between

science and sorcery—each of those movements was no more than the work of seeing whether an enormously large-scale battle could create an anomaly on an incredibly microscopic level.

To Gremline, even Academy City's response was just another piece of the plan. Kagun Kihara—who was from Academy City and had been close to the center of its underworld—had secretly intercepted intel about the size of the force Academy City would dispatch, then made some final adjustments in order to deliver results that would benefit Gremlin.

However, this scenario was kept a secret from the rest of Gremlin. Knowing the scenario beforehand would have skewed the results they were after.

A supernatural ability development experiment that needed real battle to happen. If completed, it wouldn't just create something all-powerful—it would create an entirely new *system*. The quality would likely be on par with what Number One had once been able to do. And if that was where he'd ended up after all his hard work, then no matter how much Kagun hated himself, perhaps he had never really escaped the curse of the science in Academy City's underworld.

(However, when he learned that Byouri Kihara would be an active participant in this operation, he seemed to have exploited fact that he hadn't told anyone about the scenario, making major changes to the plan right before its implementation.)

If he could confirm that a small phenomenon had been created by a larger distortion, then he would finally mess with the brains of those who seemed capable and begin working on holistic supernatural ability development in earnest.

But how did it turn out?

The answer was clear.

If Touma Kamijou's right hand had erased something, then something that needed to be erased must have existed.

Assume that originally, the “present time” Kamijou and the others were supposed to be in was zero, and the “future” created by the holistic experiment’s results was one.

Gremlin almost certainly would have been convinced that they were in control of the holistic experiment. And until partway through, at least, that would have been correct. It was true that when Gremlin’s members had gone through with their exaggerated preparations here in Baggage City, a distorted phenomenon that never should have existed—the result of an experiment connected to supernatural abilities—was in fact activated in the “one” time, the future.

But as soon as that little distortion appeared, the holistic result that should have been in the future, too, began to exert force on Gremlin and Baggage City in the present. It was like scientists who had lost control of a black hole they’d created.

Which was why the distortion had happened.

If the present was zero and the future was one, then until Kamijou arrived, Baggage City should have been at zero. But time and space would have been distorting in the direction of the future, pulled along by one to values like 0.5 or 0.7.

That was why the place where the Kiharas and Gremlin clashed was within Baggage City, but *off* somehow.

The *usual rules* didn’t apply. They’d been bound by rules that, for some reason unbeknownst to them, *made it easier to cause tragedies.*

At the same time, what did it mean that Kamijou’s right hand had destroyed that distortion?

The answer was simple.

The cold rules of the past no longer applied.

The tragedies that had already occurred couldn’t be fixed, and those who had died wouldn’t come back.

But from here on out, Touma Kamijou’s right hand would conquer everything before it.

Kihara Clan
Enshuu Kihara
Kihara Clan
Byouri Kihara
Helmeted Man
Kagun Kihara
Kihara Clan
Ransuu Kihara
Touma Kamijou
CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS
Academy City Maid Girl
Maria Kumokawa
Natural Selector Contestant
Saflee Opendays
Official Member of Gremlin
Utgardaloki
Natural Selector Contestant
Shuri Oumi
Official Member of Gremlin
Sigyn
Official Member of Gremlin
Marianne Sringeneier

CHAPTER n: EVEN IF THERE IS DEATH

Dead to…

1

Kumokawa saw it.

Beyond the world that had shattered like glass was still the same Baggage City located in Eastern Europe. But it was different from before. The oppressive stench of death was no longer present. The pressure the Kiharas and Gremlin had been enacting upon it had been lowered.

The world had changed.

Thanks to the mere existence of a single boy.

In addition to those invisible changes, there were visible, more comprehensible changes. They weren't outside on a mountain of vegetable containers; instead, they were inside a facility—a domed sporting arena, in fact. It must have been one of the four made for the tournament. They were in a ring surrounded by metal fencing, where Natural Selector was originally supposed to be held. That was where Touma Kamijou, Marianne Sringeneier, and Maria Kumokawa stood.

"What…is this…?"

"This isn't about which one is correct. The coordinates of the place you were in before and the place you are in now were the same—but just like black holes warp the space around them, *the same location ends up being out of alignment from before*."

There were no spectators. Aside from the three of them, the domed sporting facility was empty. It hadn't always been this way; there were traces of many people having fled, and they

could make out crushed pamphlets scattered on the floors. Had the crowd realized something was wrong and ran away? Or had they not made it in time, leading to a tragedy? Kumokawa could only speculate.

"……"

Marianne was silent.

The horrid sword in the golden sheath, Dáinsleif. An insane weapon that could, with the mere nudge of a thumb to lift its sheath and expose a few centimeters of the blade, induce such terror in someone that their heart gave out. Casually, Marianne brought the sword out in front of her. Despite not even a millimeter of the blade being visible, Kumokawa froze in place.

"…Why now? After all this?" said Marianne, ignoring her.

"I tried as hard as I could just to get here this early," replied Kamijou.

"Bersi…Kagun Kihara is dead."

"I couldn't stop it. I won't deny that. I don't have the words to."

Despite Gremlin being connected, in a way, to the current chaos *and* that man's death, Marianne put her own interests aside for the moment and continued.

Perhaps it was because she understood who Touma Kamijou was. She'd known about his unique traits since before meeting him, as Gremlin needed to create a countermeasure against Imagine Breaker. And because there was someone who couldn't be saved even *with* those traits, *maybe she was denouncing something other than Touma Kamijou himself—something bigger.*

Either way, she didn't hesitate. As if to curse him, she pushed up the thumb on the magic sword's guard.

Just a few centimeters of that horrid blade appeared, its seal undone, exposed to the world.

Ba-bump!!!!!!

Though Kumokawa knew Marianne wasn't aiming for her, even *her* heart leaped.

That wasn't Dáinsleif's true power. Marianne was simply making her target die of their own accord, forcing their instincts to stop their heart rather than try and take the brunt of the sword's full strength. How was anyone supposed to resist an attack of that level?

It wasn't as though the sword was shooting out some kind of projectile. One couldn't swiftly dodge out of the way, and there was no point in trying to dive behind cover to protect oneself. No matter where one ran or what they used to defend themself, they would be killed instantly by the terror welling up inside. The attack was inescapable. Undefendable. There was no point in resisting. One was dead before they could do anything—before one could even decide to fight back.

The sword stripped the meaning from all action. It nullified the very meaning of all combat.

Since Touma Kamijou had been targeted directly, his heart should have stopped. Before Dáinsleif actually did anything, before the sword came out for more direct combat. It didn't need logic. The blade was merciless as it reaped anything capable of feeling fear. This ordinary boy should have died in an instant, without sustaining a single wound.

And yet.

He didn't fall.

Touma Kamijou remained standing.

In defiance of the world-destroying Dáinsleif, his mind repelled the fear, and his heart continued to operate normally.

Marianne's brow twitched. In response, Kamijou readied his right fist—as if to fight back against her as she pointed the sheathed magical sword at him.

"…If that attack exploits peoples' fear of getting hit by powerful magic to work, then it won't have any effect on me. Because I know that magic isn't something you need to just take. As long as I have this power in my right hand—no, as long I keep wanting to clench my fist—I know that I can repel magic

or even cancel it out."

Touma Kamijou could destroy magic. He could banish illusions. He knew these things, which alleviated the fear. As long as he knew this wasn't a one-sided battle, that it was an even match, then he wouldn't have give up and die before the fighting even began. That was why he could fight. That was how he could stand firm against a magical sword of the highest caliber, one that caused the final war, Ragnarok, in Norse mythology.

Meanwhile, Kumokawa noticed something—she had been able to calmly observe this entire sequence of events. She hadn't fallen into a state of derangement, bound by the overwhelming fear the magical sword produced. She didn't know who the boy was or what Imagine Breaker was. But *the possibility that this world contained something that could resist the magical sword* was lessening her instinctual fear, keeping her heart pumping.

She was being protected. She was being helped. She was being rescued.

Somehow, she knew Shuri and Saflee had woken back up somewhere else—because there was something that could push back the fear the sword was imparting. The girls' hearts hadn't stopped because of an injury or an illness. Now that the terror in the air of Baggage City had lifted, they would revert to normal.

This was Touma Kamijou. This was Imagine Breaker.

He didn't do anything special. Just by being there, just by standing there, just by acting to try to avert a tragedy and save someone, he created something naturally.

A safe zone.

A main character.

"…So what?" mumbled Marianne.

Whh-shing! She gripped the golden sheath tighter, and it let out an eerie noise.

"Bersi is dead. He was like you, a main character—but a different kind. So I will honor his legacy! Both the fake, cruel

world destroyed right in front of me, and the way he passed on with that satisfied face of his. I'll destroy all the friendly rules that get wholly denied by the *valued opinions* of people who look down on others!"

Had Kamijou been involved with this from the beginning, then maybe Bersi—Kagun Kihara—wouldn't have had to die. Maybe Kamijou would have been able to solve the man's problem and keep him alive in the process.

Marianne would dare to reject that possibility and eliminate it.

To convince herself that it was good that Kagun had died, that it was the best thing that could have happened, she would attempt to erase the boy destabilizing his monumental achievement.

Kamijou had his rules, and Gremlin had theirs. That was what this battle came down to. Knowing deep down that nothing she did would reach the dead, Marianne still readied her magical sword for the sake of her departed friend.

"Let's get started, you foreign substance. Battles involving the dead are deadly serious. Bersi couldn't put on the brakes, and he abandoned the girl who stood by him. Now my grudge against you is the only thing I have left!"

Zrk-zrk-zrk-zrk-shhh-shhh-shh-shhh!!!!!! The storm of hatred whipped around the dark-skinned girl in every direction. Just like the magical sword, it was the power of fear that could dominate battlefields and pin soldiers' feet to the ground. But even as she found herself exposed to the disturbance, Kumokawa heard Kamijou say something.

"…I know," he said.

"But I've fought plenty of people who have given up and gone crazy like you have," he said.

And then the battle began—in a world where it was all too late. In a situation where not everyone would make it back alive anymore. A battle between someone trying to protect the

dignity of the deceased and someone trying to put a stop to further tragedy.

How ironic it was, then, that it would all play out in a ring at the Natural Selector arena.

2

The ring was thirty meters in diameter. Inside it, Touma Kamijou and Marianne Sringeneier stared each other down, a distance of about ten meters between them.

The terror from Marianne's Dáinsleif no longer worked. The coming battle was bound to be a violent one because of that. Kamijou, for his part, couldn't deal any effective damage unless he got close enough to reach her with his right fist. Naturally, one would expect them both to clash at close range.

"…?"

But that wasn't what happened. Instead of advancing toward Kamijou as he rushed her, Marianne actually took a step back. Then she thrust the sheathed magical sword out in front of her.

A soft *kriiing*.

It wasn't the sound of her thumb pushing up the guard. It was the opposite. She'd put those few centimeters of exposed blade back into the sheath.

It was both proof that she'd given up trying to terrorize him—and a ritual to unleash the magical sword's *other* power.

The wind moved slightly, ignoring the flow of air, heading toward Marianne from all directions.

Bwoooom!!!!!!

A moment later, the giant sword sliced through the ring hemmed in by metal fencing.

Something seemed to have erupted from the bottom of Dáinsleif's sheath. It was gray, slender, and straight—a long blade, which had cut through the fencing behind Kamijou.

When Marianne swung the sheathed sword, the long,

slender sword followed. It moved.

And it destroyed.

“Shit!”

Kamijou stopped running and focused on defense. In response to the large sword coming for his neck, he quickly stuck out his right hand and tried to erase Marianne’s magic.

But as he did, he noticed something. A small cut had formed right between his palm and pinkie finger. The meaning behind the tiny trickle of blood was clear.

“Imagine Breaker can’t fully block the sword…!” he exclaimed.

“We’ve been working on countermeasures, idiot,” replied Marianne.

Feeling his spine and muscles groan under the stress, Kamijou forced himself to stop what he was doing and pulled himself onto a different course. Keeping his hips in place, he swung his upper body into a lower position.

The gray greatsword passed right above him. The fencing behind him was ripped to shreds. The blade, however, took a long time to come back at him. It seemed to take about three seconds per attack for the big sword to appear.

But Marianne’s assault didn’t end. If a single attack was restrictive, she could just do it over and over again.

Damn it! thought Kamijou. *I shouldn’t have stopped to focus on defense. Keeping me at a distance where I can’t protect myself is perfect for her, but my only option is to get in deep and pummel her!*

Whh-shoom! Shoom-boom-shooom-boom! Marianne’s slashing attacks came at him one after another. Each individual swing was simple, but their power and range were ridiculous. She sliced away at the scenery as easily as one might take a pair of scissors to a photograph. Nevertheless, Kamijou didn’t sustain any fatal wounds.

In line with the scope of the destruction, the metal fencing, the concrete floors, and even the spectator stands went to pieces. The sword sent fine particles and dust flying into the air.

That dust showed odd silhouettes, which in turn revealed the source of Marianne's power: the process her gray blade underwent to materialize. Now, Kamijou could figure out how to avoid it.

Realizing she'd made a mistake, she stopped her attacks for a moment and glanced around.

"…That sheath," said Kamijou in the gap between attacks. A translucent sphere about three meters across floated at the tip of the sheath housing the magical sword. It looked a little like a giant balloon, but its essence was probably different. "I don't know what kind of properties it has, but it's gotta be powerful enough to seal away that crazy sword of yours. If you change what it's sealing, you could use it to bind something else hand and foot. For example—"

"—gravity, perhaps?" said Marianne. "When you're Earth, gravity is exerted on everything equally, but I'm not letting it escape outside. So as long as I'm on Earth, gravity rapidly gets added into the sphere. The law of gravity doesn't apply here—it all gets reflected and diffused inside the sphere. And if I open up a tiny little hole as all that force bounces around, looking for an exit—"

"—then all the vectors get grouped together, and they burst out in a straight line. Along with all the dust and dirt in the air that the sphere took in. Just like when a machine tool shoots high-pressured water mixed with man-made diamond particles at a metal plate to slice through it!"

The three-meter-long translucent sphere immediately shrunk to the size of a golf ball. Cutting through the thin layer of dust, the gray claymore shot out. Kamijou twisted himself as far as his body would go. The only part of the blade made with magic was the sheath's magical extension—the sphere. The sword coming from it was nothing more than a physical phenomenon created when the warped flow of gravity pushed on the dust. He couldn't block that with Imagine Breaker. If he held up his right hand, it would just get cut off.

Contrary to his expectations, though, Marianne didn't swing

the blade. As Kamijou compromised his stability trying to avoid it, she instead kept her grip on the magical sword's sheath and thrust it straight forward, reaching striking distance in the blink of an eye. The next step beyond just remaining at range and using only the sheath to attack—her next move, more dangerous than the first, rushed at him.

Without creating her gravity claymore, Marianne swung her hand hard, sending the sheath in a diagonal strike from lower right to upper left. The bottom tip of the sheath was aimed at Kamijou's temple.

If she created a claymore a few centimeters from him, it wouldn't just cut off his right hand—it would destroy his whole body. So he clamped down on his instinct, born of pure fear, to immediately protect his face with his arm and instead focused on trying to dodge Marianne's strike.

But then suddenly, everything around him was wrapped in darkness.

Kamijou fell into confusion. His mind went blank for a moment. But he quickly realized what was going on.

…She didn't trap air in the sphere this time. She trapped me?!

If that was the case, then the next thing he could expect was intense pressure from all directions produced by the rapidly building gravity, or Marianne creating a small exit for the energy and squeezing him into spaghetti or jelly to force him out.

That meant his only choice was to destroy the sphere.

The claymore made from the force of gravity was one thing, but Imagine Breaker should able to destroy the sphere—the sheath's extension.

But since it was completely dark, he couldn't get a sense of how big the sphere was at this moment. It was very possible Marianne would launch her attack before he could run to touch the outer section of the sphere.

He needed to be much faster.

So he didn’t glance around.

He aimed directly down.

No matter how big the sphere had become, his feet had to be at its bottom. So as fast as he could, he bent over and used the force of the movement to slam his right fist into the spot at his feet.

The darkness shattered.

The sliced-up circular ring leaped back into his vision. The abrupt change in scenery momentarily scrambled his vision.

That was when Marianne charged him.

Using her free hand, she brought her golden saw down on Kamijou’s head as he squatted.

He moved his right hand.

The human-altering Soul Arm fell to pieces, its fragments dancing through the air, reflecting light.

Marianne grinned.

Kamijou was wide open now that he’d swung his right hand.

She tightened her grip on Dáinsleif’s sheath.

Another three-meter translucent sphere appeared at the end of the sheath, filling itself with the dust and gravity it needed to make a sword. Kamijou tried to scramble to his feet, but he didn’t get all the way through the motion.

Because that was it.

The sword appeared, about to slice him in half through the torso.

3

A little before that.

Kumokawa could only watch in awe at Kamijou’s battle with Marianne. After all, the scale of the fight was on another level entirely. The clash between the Kiharas and Gremlin throughout Baggage City had already been absurd, but these two were so strong they put that battle to shame. Kumokawa was no longer frozen in place, but she stood in the same coordinates regardless, not doing anything. She’d been made to

feel like she was reading a report. She could understand the contents well enough, but she couldn't intervene. It was only natural. The idea of struggling against it was a mistaken one. So intense, so overwhelming was the battle that it seemed like it would warp reality itself, removing even the gears that kept the world spinning and changed the future.

However.

People frequently groaned and moaned in spite of themselves, even when reading a report or watching a video of something that had already happened. They knew it wouldn't do anything; it wouldn't change anything—but the sounds would still slip out.

Having sank to the floor, Kumokawa spoke, as if wringing the words out.

"…Maybe the teacher I was searching for disappeared a long time ago. Maybe my image of him was wrong to begin with."

Words out of place, ignored.

Words that couldn't change anything.

"The man who used the name Bersi to work for Gremlin might have taken on a variety of dirty jobs to further his own ends. He might have hurt a lot of people and allowed many more to be hurt."

But she couldn't stop the words. She couldn't. Her mouth continued to move, knowing it was futile.

"But Kagun Kihara was more than that."

Her words turned into a shout. Their strength grew *because* they would never be rewarded.

"He had a life before taking the name Bersi. His past involves more than just Gremlin. Even if Bersi was on the side of people who want to destroy the world, even if Kagun Kihara had an awful record to his name, I don't care. He was a teacher once! He always listened when we needed an ear!"

She didn't care what was happening with her pride.

Even if she hurt it by shouting, it would never break.

Even if it was meaningless. Even if it was worthless. Even if it changed nothing.

She knew she wasn't twisted enough to think it was disgraceful.

"Please. Please!" she cried. "Don't let the word "teacher" be erased from his headstone! Don't fill it in by saying he found comfort in the sword, or that he was an unknown enemy only after destruction and murder!"

And then the time came.

Touma Kamijou fell, and Marianne was prepared for a surefire attack. Naturally, the dark-skinned sorcerer wasn't hesitating. She immediately swung her blade to cleave the boy—her obstacle—in two.

But Kumokawa heard something.

Heard it within this disturbance of an incomprehensible scale, the one she could read and listen to but not intervene in, like a report of past events.

A response from the boy, who seemed to be hanging on by a thread.

"Okay."

It was right after that one short word.

Kamijou and Marianne—both of them moved.

4

Kamijou had lost his balance.

He couldn't dodge at this point. He couldn't step in and ram Marianne with a punch, either. He couldn't shift his center of gravity and make any forceful movements—not when he was in the middle of standing up.

Instead of his right hand, he immediately moved his left.

He reached for the golden radiance drifting around them.

The remnants of the human-altering tool Marianne had been using. Imagine Breaker had already destroyed it, and now it was just a cloud of shards, no longer possessing the power of a Soul Arm. As Kamijou grabbed at the shards, still unable to shift

his weight, one of the sharp fragments sliced his clothing. He grabbed the part of the sleeve that had been cut off.

And threw it.

Precise control was crucial.

The rag he threw with an amount of force equivalent to tossing an eraser as a joke wasn't aimed at Marianne.

Instead, it was aimed at the sheathed magical sword she held—specifically the translucent sphere, which had expanded quite a bit.

Marianne's countermeasure to Imagine Breaker created a large sword using gravity—a purely physical phenomenon—to slice Kamijou and his right hand—which worked only against preternatural powers—in half.

In other words.

As long as the sword is a purely physical phenomenon, even Marianne couldn't can't completely control it. After all, she can only manipulate magic.

By manipulating the size of the balloon's mouth and the position at which she opened it, she gained fine control over the size, power, and direction of the giant sword. But she *only* had control over those things. What she controlled was the hole—she couldn't perfectly bend the locations of the fine dust spurting from the hole, pushed out by gravity, to her will.

In which case, if he interfered with the hole she was controlling…

If he changed the shape of the "muzzle" by covering it up with a layer of something thin, because it wasn't a matter of strength…

…then if Marianne tried to activate her gray greatsword in that state, the rag would alter the dust spilling out of the hole the same way attaching a showerhead to a faucet would.

In other words.

The unstoppable greatsword she created would be unable to retain its form as a weapon, betray even Marianne's expectations, and cause devastation.

"…Eh?"

In that moment, Marianne, certain of her victory, glanced dubiously at the sheath of the magical sword.

Perhaps that was a bad move. If she'd had time to do that, she should have used all her might to get rid of the translucent sphere.

To use an analogy, it was like someone putting their thumb over a shower hose.

The bundle of dust and other fine particles lost their stable escape route, bursting out from the many tiny gaps that had opened up instead.

Then, a blast that embodied the very word *explosion* echoed through the air.

Graa-booooooom!!!!!!

It was strong enough to send Marianne's small body careening several meters away without bouncing.

"Gahhh?!"

She slammed back-first into concrete, and the wind was knocked out of her. Yet still she clung to Dáinsleif's sheath.

Meanwhile, Kamijou didn't get ahead of himself to try to attack again. If he attempted to close the direct distance between them, completely unguarded, he'd just be doing the same thing all over again. There was a much better way of leveraging his success to cut a path to her.

"Once you know the trick, it's easy." Kamijou used the golden fragment to slice his clothes some more, preparing several rags to use. "Fire and swing. Your attack has stages. I guess to suppress the recoil? So you stop for a moment when you open the hole. Not just you—the sheath you're carrying and the translucent sphere on the end of it, too… It makes you an easy target. Scraps of fabric don't weigh much. Even while using my off hand, I still got one to hit. If I use my whole body and throw with my right hand instead, my accuracy will simply increase. I'm guessing you *reload the dust and stuff like a vacuum cleaner*, right? So I can just throw my rag from *anywhere,* and it will head straight to the hole automatically. I can always plug the

hole. We won't know what form the exploding sword will take, so I run the risk of taking us both out, but that's your limit. In rock-paper-scissors terms, you'll only ever lose or draw. You have no chance of winning."

"No… Not yet…"

Krrrsshh. Marianne slowly got to her feet, dragging the sheath along the concrete floor.

"That was still just the sheath. I haven't…even drawn the magical sword yet. Dáinsleif can cause a war to end the world. It was made to wipe out all of humanity. There's no way a single kid can stop it!"

She pushed up the guard with her thumb. Just a few centimeters of that horrid blade contacted the air.

Drawing the whole sheath at once would probably unleash its true power.

Everything before now was just setting the stage. The terror that could stop hearts, the sheath that could create greatswords to cut up the circular arena—all of it was just like the rings of Saturn drifting around the magical sword.

He didn't know what would happen if she used it.

Maybe it was beyond anything he could even imagine.

Even so, he set his gaze straight on her and spoke.

"…You can't draw it."

"Wh-what…?"

"If you could use all that power whenever you wanted, you would have done it a long time ago. I'm not talking about this little brawl we're having. Before that—even before you launched Radiosonde Castle into the air to advertise Gremlin. *You could have ended the fighting before it even began and claimed victory all for yourself.* If you could bear to sacrifice everything but yourself, that is."

"……"

There was a chance Marianne herself wasn't confident she could control that much raw destructive force. Or maybe she was just afraid. The magical sword could stop someone's heart when just a bit of its blade was exposed. Maybe if she drew it

completely, the terror would bind her, too.

However.

There was one more thing.

“You didn’t *want* to draw it.”

“What are you saying?”

“That magical sword—Dáinsleif or whatever. That Soul Arm of yours, the one that’s way too powerful.”

“Why wouldn’t I?!”

“I’m not sure how much of the world it would destroy, but I know it would destroy parts you’d rather stick around.” Consciously catching his breath, he clutched the scraps of fabric in his hand. “And sure, after that guy—Bersi, or Kagun Kihara, or whatever his name was—died here, maybe there aren’t any parts like that anymore. But that isn’t true. You brought out Dáinsleif, but you still haven’t drawn it from its sheath… I bet that even with your friend dead, you still don’t want to lose the places you spent time in together.”

Krrrshhhh! A shrill noise cut Kamijou’s voice short. The bottom edge of the sheath was scraping against the concrete floor.

And then, for the first time, Marianne brought her other hand to the magical sword’s hilt. She grasped it tight.

“Loading ammo.”

Right after she said that, a huge beam of light fell from the skies, piercing through the roof of the domed sporting facility and creating a shock wave that traveled in all directions. The perimeter of the dome creaked. Immense power flowed into the magical sword’s sheath. Little by little, the power she’d expended filled it up again.

She was preparing to use the power to destroy the world.

“I’ll draw it.”

“Do it, then.”

“I’ll rip it out of its sheath, even if it’s just to win this!”

“*If you do it like that, you won’t actually win.*”

Kamijou said nothing more after that. He took one step forward. He approached, exploding into a run. He ran straight

up to her. He jumped.

There should have been time.

Marianne should have been able to draw Dáinsleif.

And yet.

“Gh, gah…!”

“See? You can’t,” spat Kamijou, clenching his right fist. “That’s because you’re strong. It’s nothing to feel guilty about. If you’re not around after getting your revenge, if the whole world goes away, then who would be left to mourn Bersi’s death?”

Nothing more was necessary.

The golden sheath and the boy’s fist crossed.

A dull noise rang out, and then it was over.

5

“Is it…over…?” murmured Kumokawa, having slumped to the ground.

The circular arena had been torn to shreds, and huge holes had formed in the ceiling of the domed facility. If she recalled, the ceiling was supported by artificially raised air pressure, but at the moment, the framework and other pieces seemed to have barely stopped the whole thing from caving in. No telling how long that would last, of course.

She very quickly began to feel the cold on her skin. Was this due to the negative-twenty-degree air coming in through the damaged roof, or was it just that her senses had finally gone back to normal? The battle was enough to make her suspect the latter.

The clash went wildly against the standard of Academy City, and in all likelihood, it was removed from any standard procedure when viewed from those outside Academy City, too. Touma Kamijou, the one who had created it, casually crossed the damaged arena, walking toward Dáinsleif, which had fallen out of Marianne’s hands.

“What…what are you going to do…?” groaned Marianne.

“Gonna destroy it, if nothing else,” said Kamijou without turning around. “You couldn’t draw it, Marianne. But that doesn’t mean someone else couldn’t. Maybe someone else could push away their fear and control it—so I obviously can’t just leave it here. I have no idea how much destruction it could cause.”

As he answered her, he walked over to the magical sword without hesitation, the source of the terror. *Once that thing is destroyed, it’ll finally be over*, thought Kumokawa—it would end the whole chain of superhuman battles between the Kiharas and Gremlin happening inside Baggage City. As Kamijou knelt beside the sword, Kumokawa asked him a question.

“…How did you get here? How did you figure out what Gremlin was doing? This is all different from Academy City theories.”

“It was Bersi.”

Kumokawa felt a pang in her heart at the short answer.

Kamijou continued, “He didn’t just stand there and answer all my questions or anything. But he did leave a few hints on my way through Baggage City. I’m just a high school kid. Now that I think about it, my own hard work probably wasn’t the only thing that got me from Hawaii to Baggage City.”

How far had that man’s plans gone? By intervening, maybe Kamijou *had* avoided the worst outcome for Baggage City. At a glance, it could have seemed like a certain sorcerer, having accomplished all his goals, had entrusted Kamijou with cleaning up the loose ends.

But what if Kamijou had been able to end this whole thing sooner? What if he’d been able to kill the illusion? The ending might have been different, then. He could have even dismantled the goals Bersi had set for himself, bringing them to a world free of this tragedy.

Kamijou had been made to dance in the palm of Leivinia Birdway’s hands, and he’d wanted to escape that. But had that really been the right move?

As someone who hadn't even been able to dance in anyone's palm this time, he had no way of answering that.

That was how perfect Bersi had been. If Kamijou succeeded, then great. But even if he'd failed, Bersi would have had his own conclusion about it. Birds didn't foul the nests they were about to leave, after all. Was that Kumokawa's pure, idealistic image of him? Should she be angry about how cleanly it all wrapped up?

"This Bersi guy," said Kamijou. "Kagun Kihara. Do you know what kind of person he was?"

Kumokawa steadied her breath for a moment before answering. "Yeah."

As stated before, Kamijou was an outsider in this affair. Maybe he wanted to know more about the man who had driven Marianne to this state, the one he'd helped without realizing it.

"I don't know much about him," she clarified, "but I do know some things. I may not know if he was even a good guy or a bad guy. But I still know some things. He saved many lives, including mine. From my perspective, he was a teacher whose mystery was worth following."

"I see…"

Kamijou stopped for a moment. His tone was soft as he gave voice to the reality they could no longer change. But instead of simply yelling about it, he said this as if to engrave the words into his soul.

"I couldn't save him."

But he could, at least, learn from his failures. Swearing to learn as much as humanly possible, he said it again.

"I couldn't save him."

"It's all right," replied Kumokawa without hesitating, as if to get over it. "The way he went out—it was really dumb. He was smiling like he was satisfied at the end. It was probably the best moment of his life. If we'd tried to force him to keep living, the purity of that happiness probably would have just gone down."

In reality, it wasn't that easy, just putting it down to that. It wasn't something she *should* put down like that.

Kamijou remained motionless for a few moments. But stopping wouldn't change anything. He had to move forward, or the conflict that had started in Baggage City wouldn't end. So he did. He brought his right hand to Dáinsleif. To put an end to things, at least for now, by destroying the immense power it contained.

However.

The skinny arm of a woman grabbed his right hand as if to stop him.

He couldn't comprehend it. When had they showed up?

"What the…?"

The question bubbled up. There stood a girl of about thirteen or fourteen years old, close enough that he could feel her breath. Her fur coat was open in the front, and beneath it was a black leather outfit and pale skin. But there were two other things about her that drew his attention more than her outfit.

The first was the pointed, wide-brimmed hat that made her look like a witch.

The second was the showy patch over her right eye.

Deciding that whoever she was, she had to be with the sorcery side, Kamijou felt his caution spike as she held onto his right wrist.

But she went far beyond what he expected. The one-eyed girl whispered the next words to him.

"*…It's not over.*"

Then a moment later.

She didn't hesitate.

The sheer force of her grip crushed his right wrist and severed his hand.

SERIOUS DAMAGE

ru9ni1bkakersa991ma

Thie instant his right hand was destroyed, intense pain, beyond anything he could tolerate, stripped away Kamijou's consciousness. He fell surprisingly easily to the floor. So much fresh blood splattered from the crooked wound—nothing like his wrist having been slit with a knife. He didn't move after that. He didn't even writhe in agony or fear or scream.

He just fell.

And his right hand, its purpose served, fell to the floor as well.

"Ah, ah…"

Kumokawa couldn't move. The sheer amount of red was making her lightheaded.

But even more than that, the one-eyed witch terrified her. It wasn't like the fear she had felt from Dáinsleif, either. That was an understandable, surface-level fear. This was something altogether different. The terror wormed its way into the deepest part of a person, unbeknownst to them, and when they finally noticed it, their arms and legs were already limp.

It was like a constant lifestyle of domestic violence behind a locked door—violence that even the victim accepted. It was like a heated debate in a mountain cabin during a blizzard where being rescued was a hopeless prospect for days, as the victims decided who would eat whom in order to survive.

While the fear was immense, it wasn't like when you put your hand into a flame and reflexively pulled it back out—it wasn't something Kumokawa could reject on a surface level. It

permeated every fiber of her being, creating a cycle where she'd immediately know it was abnormal if things seemed normal. Just by standing there, the one-eyed witch could crush the minds of every person nearby and destroy their morals.

Frankly speaking, if the one-eyed witch needed to be fought, the discussion could definitely devolve from "who will confront her—who *needs* to confront her" in an effort to push responsibility onto others, to the soldiers just killing one another instead.

"Hmm."

Meanwhile, the one-eyed witch didn't spare a glance at Kamijou, instead picking up Dáinsleif, which Marianne had used. Then she crushed the entire magical sword, sheath and all, in her grip. She dismantled it. Like a weapon made of chocolate, the pieces of Dáinsleif fell to the floor and lost their golden luster. And then they rusted—which shouldn't have happened to pure gold. Even Kumokawa knew that, and she didn't know much about the world outside Academy City. She grasped that the sword's power was completely gone.

"You really created something dangerous, you know that? I know it's a *dvergr* thing, but still, I wonder why Gremlin insists on neglecting organization… And now everything was for nothing. I wish you'd put yourself in my shoes for a second—figure out why I've been enduring so patiently."

Her idea: It was dangerous, so she would destroy it. That was the same thought pattern as Kamijou. Why didn't she just leave it to him, then? She'd so casually destroyed him instead. Why?

Kumokawa doubted there was any reason. The witch had destroyed the first thing she'd seen. And there was still a problem, so she'd destroyed that, too. That was the casual way she wielded her incredible strength. Maria didn't sense any stable directionality from her actions—it was almost as if she was saying there didn't need to be any.

As an individual, the power she wielded was the extreme limit. And she didn't give a single thought as to how using it might affect the future.

“Who…who are you…?” Kumokawa stammered.

“Othinus,” said the one-eyed witch, offering a god’s name. “Unlike a certain failure, I suppose you can call me a *pure* magic god. If that’s not enough to make you understand, then no explanation will suffice. You’re better off abandoning any hope of comprehension.”

Was there any point to her saying all that? She seemed bored, like she had done so on a whim, offhandedly. And with the same attitude, she killed, let live, and saved. Easier to understand than a simple king of the hill—*so* easy to understand that it instead obscured her true character.

But then something strange happened.

From the severed portion of Kamijou’s right arm, something invisible began to whip around. *Bwoooooom!* It swirled and whirled, not taking on any specific shape, rushing straight for Othinus.

However.

“…Is this it?”

Othinus grabbed hold of something with her bloody hand. The one-eyed witch even cocked her head slightly.

“You did quite a bit at the end of World War III. But now that I see it in person… Is this really all it is?”

Then, casually, she crushed it.

The unseen force seemed to writhe, trying to escape from Othinus’s grip. But it was too late. She put more force into her bloodied fingers, and this time, the force shattered and vanished into the void.

She was overwhelming. She had the raw power to bend something unidentifiable to her will without ever identifying it. And she didn’t think for a second about how it might affect those around her.

Othinus slowly stretched out her bloody fingers. Then she grabbed Marianne, who was still lying limp on the floor, by the back of her overalls and began dragging her away.

“I’m doing you a favor here. Be a little more useful,” she said, turning her back to Kumokawa.

But then she stopped abruptly.

Had the magic god, after deciding to overlook Kumokawa on a whim, changed her mind and decided to kill her on a whim instead?

That was what Kumokawa thought, but the answer was different.

"*…Your failure.*"

Right after Othinus said those words, it happened.

Someone else, someone she didn't know.

A blond-haired man was now standing in the circular arena.

There was nowhere around to hide. No sign of any Academy City esper power having been used, either. And yet the man was there in the middle of the arena. Not *appeared*—Kumokawa couldn't express it in the past tense like that. She didn't know when it had happened—didn't have a handle on the time.

And the strangest thing of all was that blond man was confronting Othinus, who wielded such incredible might, practically spitting his words at her. At a magic god. As if to put himself on the opposite end of such a being.

"I have no use for you this time," he declared, pointing to the exit, which didn't mean much now that most of the fencing had been destroyed anyway. "Take the *dvergr* and leave at once. I only have a use for Imagine Breaker."

"……"

Othinus fell silent for a moment.

And then.

Booooooooooom!!!!!!

A massive explosion rocked the space between her and the blond man.

Actually, it was thousands, even in the tens of thousands, of explosions Maria heard within a very short time frame, so they'd all blended together. Despite the blast, though, she had

no way of knowing what was going on. There was no phenomenon for her to see.

But she knew one thing for sure: This blond-haired man was a rival to the magic god Othinus.

“Just stop. It’ll never end,” said the man.

Othinus had probably only meant it as a gentle prod anyway. The bursting noises, which lasted only a few seconds, ceased abruptly. “And why,” she spat, “is a failure like you standing before a pure magic god like me?”

“Well, I can’t beat you. If I could beat you, I would have killed you a long time ago. If I haven’t killed you, then it means I have no *way* of killing you.”

“…Then you’re here to let me kill you?”

“No, that’s not it, either. *Don’t act like you don’t understand.* You say you’re a magic god, but you’re not perfect. Or should I say, you’re *so* perfect that you have some problematic traits, too. You understand that, which is why you’re setting up this overblown step-by-step process—to release yourself from that dilemma.”

“……”

“The phrase *infinite possibilities* sounds nice, sure, but that just means you possess both every possibility of success and every possibility of failure—you have both sides of the coin. It’s a little like matter and antimatter. When it comes to a problem, you possess the possibility to successfully handle it *and* to fail. No matter how much power you accumulate, it’ll only ever be a fifty-fifty chance. In Russian roulette terms, it’s like loading three bullets and firing one… And to be frank, Othinus, *it means that you have both the power to destroy the world and a fifty percent chance to lose to a child at rock-paper-scissors.* It’s almost a miracle that Kamijou lost not once but twice. He must have godawful luck. Still, though, as you are, you can’t wield your power blindly at full strength. You’d want to search for a way to control the possibility space. Naturally, you’d want to increase your ability to win, but even if you wanted to increase your ability to lose, you could create a foundation for that, too.

That fifty-fifty chance is your worst enemy."

Then the man pointed to his chest with his thumb and continued.

"I should have been a magic god, but I stopped—I'm an impurity. That means while I lag behind you in total power, I don't have your fifty-fifty dilemma. After all, I'm incomplete. You maintain a perfect balance, but I have a higher chance of winning."

"Do you think that will let you win?"

"No, I think it's impossible. If I could, I would have killed you a long time ago," repeated the man. But then he smiled and added to that. "But if it's just a little, tiny bit, I do have an idea on how to drive you back at the moment. And it's because you so casually destroyed Touma Kamijou's right hand."

"…Yeah, I'm sure."

"World War III was started by a man who had the power to save the world inside him. But although he had it, without the right hand to output that power onto the external world, he couldn't save the world. So he used every means at his disposal to try to acquire that right hand. Yes—*the very right hand you just cut off is the only one of its kind in the world.*"

Bang! A metallic noise rang out from above.

It was one of the pillars holding up the fencing surrounding the circular arena. At some point, a man dressed in red had climbed atop it. His right arm was missing from the shoulder down. From it came an unnatural distortion in space—it looked like a saline solution.

"Fiamma of the Right, with the power to save the world. And me, who wields a magic god's power, albeit an impure version… Now then, Othinus, how will you and your fifty-fifty nature react to the change in possibilities? Each of us has an even chance of steamrolling the other now."

"Hmph," sniffed Othinus. Still holding Marianne in one hand, she turned her back to the man—essentially taking up his opponent on his offer.

But after walking a few steps, she suddenly stopped. Then

she casually tossed Marianne to the side and said something.

"…Actually, I think I'll kill you."

Booooooom!!!!!!

Something beyond Maria's perception began to whip through the air.

Natural Selector—its contestants, the Kiharas, Gremlin, Touma Kamijou, Marianne Sringeneier… On the stage where they had all fought, another battle, one for the same exact reason as all the rest—this one in a completely different dimension—unfolded.

There was a certain small hospital in Northern Europe. Lights-out time had long since passed, and normally, visitors weren't allowed here this late. Nevertheless, a non-patient still stood in one of the rooms.

Brunhild Eichtbel.

She was a rare woman, possessing both the nature of a Valkyrie from Norse mythology and a saint from Crossism at the same time.

Of course, they didn't necessarily seem to synergize with each other. Instead, Brunhild's power was like the phases of the moon—her characteristics and strengths changed on a regular cycle.

As stated before, she was not a patient here. The room's original occupant was a boy, about ten years old, who was currently lying on the bed.

"I want hot chocolate."

"No, you already brushed your teeth."

"But I can't go to sleep without it!"

"Then I recommend counting sheep in English."

Anyone who heard this exchange would have thought it peaceful, but Brunhild had once enacted worldwide magical terrorism in order to get revenge on the ones who had harmed

this boy. In the final battle, she lost to the English Puritan Church and was imprisoned. In exchange for her cooperation with war efforts during World War III, her crimes had been wiped from her record as an exception. She was finally able to reunite with the boy again.

And now her senses were telling her that this peaceful moment was at an end.

Casually, she put her right wrist alongside her left hand, then tugged on a loop of rope hidden in her sleeve to take out a single wood chip mailing stamp. Runic symbols had been burned into the front of it, and as she squeezed it in her hand, she murmured something under her breath.

A sleeping rune.

Odin, the chief god of Norse mythology, had once used this string of letters to quite literally force a berserk Valkyrie to go to sleep.

It took effect immediately. The boy passed out, swiftly beckoned into a dream world. Brunhild put the wood chip stamp on his forehead.

“You don’t need to see the rest. Sweet dreams,” she whispered slowly, rearranging the disheveled blanket before getting out of the pipe chair next to the bed.

She turned.

At some point, the door to the room had opened. Someone was there—a tall woman. She wore a well-fitted riding suit, and while her jacket sleeves were tied at her waist, hanging there, she had a Western sword on her back and feather-like hair decorations above her ears. She seemed to match the impression Brunhild gave. Brunhild frowned a little.

“…Come to think of it,” she said, “there *was* a magical experiment to see if important parts of the human body could be twisted and instilled with the traits of a Valkyrie post-birth—like how marrow transplants can change your blood type. I heard they canceled it, but I guess the times have changed without me knowing it.”

“……” The acquired Valkyrie took in a breath to reply.

But no words came out.

Wha-bam!!!!!!

Because right at that moment, Brunhild's kick connected with the acquired Valkyrie's stomach.

She wasn't blown backward by it—no, this was a different dimension altogether. She was been blown *up* or smeared all over. Right then and there, the acquired Valkyrie's body burst like a ketchup-filled water balloon, and something dark red slammed into all the walls in the hallway outside the room. Brunhild abandoned all compassion whenever there was a chance the boy might be hurt. She wouldn't hesitate to make six or seven billion people—the whole world—her enemy, and that was no joke.

And her judgment was correct.

The surface of the bright red stains on the walls began to squirm. Some of it protruded, creating a giant face. The brilliantly colored viscous fluid began to create little vibrations, producing a voice that spoke along with the face's mouth movements.

"The intel was correct."

The intruder wasn't dead yet. If she reformed herself, she'd probably be the acquired Valkyrie again. But even Brunhild was unfamiliar with this level of heresy.

"That boy is the bottleneck. If he can be taken away, then Brunhild Eichtbel's secrets will be easy to draw out."

"……"

As if in blatant disregard to all strategy, Brunhild silently walked out of the hospital room to respond to the words.

And then she realized something. There were another ten of them to either side of her in the hallway. All of them were acquired Valkyries, and they were all waiting for her.

"Thanks for the warm welcome," said Brunhild, kicking up the sword on the floor and grabbing it in one hand. She didn't need to draw it from its sheath. A few murmured words later

and the blade cut through the sheath from the inside. This one-handed sword had belonged to the entity she'd already destroyed. While Brunhild was more into superheavy swords like claymores—the kind that could crush an opponent, armor, helmet, and all—she wasn't about to be greedy here.

There was no guarantee she'd even live through this.

In a straightforward deathmatch, maybe she could have won. But these acquired Valkyries knew her weakness. If she needed to deal with attacks coming from more than ten directions at once *while* protecting the boy, the difficulty level would skyrocket.

And if given the choice between her own life and the boy's, she'd choose the latter without a second thought.

Hence this situation, where she couldn't win against opponents she was stronger than.

As Brunhild drew her sword, the acquired Valkyries all drew theirs as well, readying themselves.

And then something happened.

With the force of a dump truck, something crashed into the hospital hallway.

It was an acquired Valkyrie from another unit who had been standing by out front, and she tumbled onto the floor.

Somebody had thrown her using extraordinary strength.

Naturally, everyone turned to where she'd come from. At the end of the dark hallway—just the fact that there was such silence despite all the commotion meant that the other patients and doctors were probably under a magical effect of some sort—there stood a person, illuminated by the light from the emergency exit sign. It was an odd woman, wearing a rough shirt and jeans plus a worker's apron, looking on the whole like a maid of some sort. And Brunhild sensed that she was like her—not on the Norse side but on the Crossist side.

"…A saint?" she said in spite of herself. "What rank?"

The blond-haired maid smiled and scratched her head. "I've

forgotten," she said. "I think I'm higher than you, though."

"For what reason have you come?"

"I like it when things are easy to understand. You aside, the boy you're trying to protect is blameless. All the people who keep coming after him, trying to glean some benefit for themselves—I hate people like them with a passion."

The acquired Valkyries changed their formation. To swiftly deal with the two enemies, some of them changed repositioned their swords.

But the blond-haired maid just grinned in response. "And I'm not the only one who thinks so, either."

A moment later, this time on the opposite end of the hallway, Brunhild heard a devastating rumble. Other acquired Valkyries were being mowed down through the darkness, tossed her way. Then a small girl appeared, walking toward them—the boss of a modern Western sorcerer's society, her staff in hand.

Leivinia Birdway.

"…I invested too much in this," she said. "I need to see results. I'm glad we fished off an official Norse-type member. Unlike Cendrillon and Salonya, we should actually get some beneficial information from her." She twirled her staff. "Not that I have any right to say this stuff. But the way Gremlin is just gallivanting around is really pissing me off. So anyway, yeah. Stick with me for a bit. You'll be able to blow off some of that stress you're feeling."

"……"

The acquired Valkyries paused. It looked like they were hesitating because of the change in the situation, but that wasn't it. And Brunhild was the first one to figure it out.

"Ah," she said. "I see how it is."

She looked up to the ceiling, ignoring the building materials in the way, and gazed up at the skies above.

At the flying assassin.

"There's something else, isn't there? I know now. They wanted to distract me with the battle, then rip the information on Gungnir out of my mind while my defenses were

weakened.”

The spear used by Odin, chief god of Norse mythology. A symbol of the god’s might. The most powerful Norse Soul Arm, which Brunhild had once used for revenge against a certain boy.

“Eh, who cares?” said the blond maid offhandedly. “In exchange, I’m taking a hint about Gremlin. If I chase them down after that and destroy their headquarters, then anything they stole will be mine again.”

The battle’s result was crystal clear. After leisurely exiting Baggage City, the magic god Othinus wore a cool expression, even in the negative-twenty-degree blizzard.

“Calmed down now?” she asked the person walking next to her.

“……”

Marianne was silent.

She wasn’t walking per se. It was more like she was being held over the shoulder like a bag of rice. Marianne was so close that she couldn’t actually see all of who was carrying her. But she could still tell who it was by their familiar skin texture and scent. Something was different, though. Something that separated a sleeping person from a dead person.

Eventually, Marianne opened her mouth and murmured one word: “Bersi.”

There was no answer. The man who had once been her friend walked on in silence through the blizzard, not shaking, not getting goose bumps, not saying a word.

Then Marianne realized what had happened.

The magic god spoke to her in a brusque tone. “Dead, alive—the difference is minor.”

“Then he’s an Einherjar now.”

It was a skill on about the same level as the human modifications Marianne performed. This was specifically for corpses, though. By incorporating gold into the important spots

in a human's body, the body wouldn't rot, and it could be controlled by the user. That was all it was for.

The magic god sounded bored. "Not that I expect you to, but I hope you won't raise hell like the others in Baggage City. You know, saying something like, *How dare you trample on my teacher's resolve to accomplish his goals, even if it killed him.*"

"…I'm not going to."

Marianne no longer had the drive to shout like that. The world had lost something important.

"What about the one who *did* raise hell like that? Did you add her to the Einherjar, too?"

"No, not at all. As always, I experienced interference."

Interference.

Only so many people could possibly do such a thing to Othinus.

"Did the failure… Did Ollerus appear?"

"Currently, any fight I have against him ends with a draw. That's how we're made. I'll need to do something about that soon."

Her one weakness.

A threat greater than Imagine Breaker.

But Othinus's expression remained steady as she spoke. For her, it must have been like looking at a puzzle she already knew how to solve. This wasn't the time to think about it. This was simply the time to act, to work her body—like cleaning up a messy room.

Feeling an unnatural warmth from the corpse that didn't stink like one, Marianne asked, "What happened to the holistic one?"

"If Imagine Breaker destroyed something, then there was something we needed to seek. But… If you try to execute that phenomenon with a single brain, you'd hit several walls. Frankly, I doubt a mere human could pull it off."

"You need someone more than human? Why not do it yourself, then?"

"Even magic gods are a facet of sorcery. I don't want to add

supernatural powers to the mix."

If holistic supernatural abilities were different from Academy City ones, then maybe the side effects wouldn't happen. But Othinus seemed to be cautious—a magic god, one who stood above all others, was cautious.

Marianne paused for a moment, then said, "Then it's on to our next objective?"

"We got the furnace in Hawaii. Information on the spear is coming along smoothly, and we'll probably end up retrieving a model who can use holism—one with traits surpassing normal humans. Nevertheless, it can't be someone who is supported by magic, like a saint or a Valkyrie. It should be someone who has undergone Academy City's version of supernatural ability development… And there are only so many who fit the bill."

"Any leads?"

"Academy City," said Othinus again, then added, "A windowless building. In one of the main structures supporting the giant building, one such model sleeps."

Kamijou faded in and out of consciousness.

His fitful sleep due to the intense pain of having his hand cut off without any numbing agents and the shock of losing so much blood at once. Or at least, that was how it should have been. But something was up. His heart was still beating irregularly despite there being no reason for it to do so. It was gone. Through weak eyes, he looked at his right arm and understood.

His right hand.

It was attached.

He tried to give voice to a question, but only a hoarse moan came out. The damage itself had been done—that was for sure. In fact, it was still wreaking havoc inside him. And yet his hand was attached, as if nothing had happened.

Someone spoke.

"It's really somethin' else. Getting your hand sliced off with a

sharp blade is one thing, but that wound was totally crushed. In that state, you shouldn't have been able to reattach the bone, much less the nerves."

Another person spoke.

"It was the same for me. This must be proof that it has become established as the present world's Imagine Breaker. This right hand attains meaning by being this owner's right hand. More roughly, that which grows from this owner's right shoulder is the right hand."

"Does that mean they've figured it out, too?"

"Who knows? Maybe they actually just wanted to change generations already. Touma Kamijou's nature is difficult for Gremlin to control. Simply moving it into something else would be faster. That is, of course, if their objective *is* the Imagine Breaker."

"That's a hypothetical. But yes, if her nature of being too powerful as a magic god gets in the way, then using Imagine Breaker would be faster."

As he lay there, Kamijou looked up at the ceiling. People were peering at him. He tried to ask, but before that, one of them continued.

"Again, it was the same for me."

"Come to think of it, you lost your right arm, too, didn't you? Seems you've reconnected it, though," answered the other. Then, as though he'd understood what Kamijou wanted to ask from the beginning, he said:

"I am Ollerus. The man who should have become a magic god."

A point of contact had been created.

A distinct connection had been made.

An enormous uncertainty factor—one who it was unclear if Touma Kamijou, owner of the Imagine Breaker, should have even been allowed to meet—had appeared.

Ollerus continued to speak to Kamijou as he lay on the floor.

“Your right hand *repaired itself*. It’ll take a while for it to fully work again. But because of its nature, there isn’t much I—or Fiamma here—can do for you. You’d even cancel anything we used on you to alleviate the pain.”

“…Ah…,” moaned Kamijou hoarsely.

Would he ask to be healed or numbed, even though he knew they couldn’t do that? His right hand had been severed and repaired within the span of ten or twenty minutes, so Ollerus wouldn’t be able to blame him.

But that wasn’t what he did.

In a shaking voice, the boy said this.

“Baggage…City… There should still be…people who need saving here. The Kiharas and Gremlin retreated, but the scars of their battle remain. I have to save them; I have to save the people I couldn’t get to in time…”

Hearing that, Ollerus grinned a little. “In that case, I’ll use you for some hard physical labor,” he said. “First, we have to dismantle and retune the people Marianne Sringeneier left all over the place. With your right hand and our knowledge, we should be able to get some of the soldiers she used—and Cendrillon, who got turned into a table—back together safe and sound.”

Meanwhile, someone who didn’t matter at all muttered to himself.

“…I…survived.”

Standing there in the negative-twenty-degree blizzard was Schall Berylan. He had no idea how many of the troops protecting Baggage City had survived—the very fact that their network was down was strange enough—but he’d apparently been chosen as one of them.

Not even he knew why he was still alive. Maybe it was because he’d stayed away from the eye of the storm, or maybe he was more capable than he gave himself credit for. Or perhaps it was even simpler. Perhaps he was just lucky.

“Suspend combat. Repeat, suspend combat! The higher-ups will sort out the rest. Be warned that any further combat actions are inadvisable!”

The very reasonable statement was coming from his sub-radio, which wasn’t on the network, and it seemed pretty late to him. But if it was an official order from his superior, then it really meant something—that things were finally over. Of course, everyone who had fought so earnestly now lay underneath the snow, and nobody was in a state to open a channel.

Well, I survived, he thought. *Now what?*

No matter what mental gymnastics he tried to do, his employers—Baggage City and the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians—had collapsed. Actually, even if the executives tried to reorganize themselves, Schall vowed that he wouldn’t respond to their summons. Academy City was a monster. He thought the rumors had just ballooned to ridiculous sizes. But no, the reality was five or ten times worse.

Then Schall heard something fall a short distance away. Even in the whiteout blizzard, it didn’t get covered up with snow; it lingered there unnaturally.

“Is that…wreckage from an Academy City bomber?”

Obviously, that meant it was a little bundle of technology. Schall didn’t know if he could cook anything up with it, but the people who wanted it would *really* want it. Not a bad replacement for severance pay. He was in luck. His good fortune had pulled him through that insane conflict, and it was still working.

Schall reached for the bomber, meaning to take about an armful’s worth of the black shards with him.

“Hurry! If that marker goes down, we’ll have to dig through all the snow. Retrieve them before that!”

“?!”

Panicking, Schall hid himself behind a scrap heap that used to be a car. Then several powered suits came stomping in… Or were they? They looked kind of like twisted dragonflies or

scorpion kigurumi. Whatever they were, they walked through the blizzard like it was a joke.

Why were they using physical voices instead of radios? Maybe if the things didn't have a little bit of humanity mixed into their utterly inhuman appearances, the pilots' perceptions would completely collapse.

"Academy City, the Science Guardians, doesn't matter which. Gather up everything that looks usable, even if it's busted. The bombers damaged beyond repair are set to have their data pheromone capillaries explode. Follow the scent before the marker disappears and retrieve them."

"What if someone gets in the way?"

"Get rid of 'em. Doesn't matter if they look connected to any of this or not. Whether they believe they're UFO parts or OOParts, smash them to bits. These markers are weak to high temps anyway. The flames from the explosions might be making the scents weaker. Be careful!"

"……"

Schall pulled back his hand and decided to leave the hiding spot behind the scrap metal and get the hell out of there.

Perhaps his ability to change his mind so quickly was the secret to his survival after all.

A little while after the chaos in Baggage City ended, a person came knocking. A young woman in a cheap off-the-rack suit who looked like she was in the middle of job hunting. But inside the big document envelope she carried was a load of confidential information that was off-limits to *even the leaders of nations*.

She was someone who managed things on a *global* level.

An individual completely ill-suited for the old man trembling in this dark corner of Baggage City.

To begin with, the heads leading Baggage City—of the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians—had all been demolished by the Kiharas. This old man never had the power to decide policy

for the huge organization. Victory had already been a foregone conclusion the moment the young woman visited.

Their executives had been so thoroughly smashed that now this old man had the authority to make decisions.

"Now then," she said. "I think you understand now how dangerous the things in Academy City's possession really are. For that, we ended up losing three—no, four—Kiharas, but as a demonstration, I believe this was a reasonable cost. After all, *Teitoku Kakine seems to have learned how to use Dark Matter to construct human cells.* We've already made up for the damages."

The number of victims wasn't even one one-thousandth of what she had predicted. Thanks to the irregular Kiharas working in the shadows, none of the noncombatant spectators had been killed.

The woman couldn't express that in easy-to-understand numbers, so she was concerned about whether the fear she established would get across, but the old man seemed properly surprised by something else.

"'A reasonable…cost'?"

"Yes. Not only does the idea of being Anti–Academy City pure nonsense have no value whatsoever, it actually works to our disadvantage. This cost was to make you understand that—if not through words, then through experience."

Speaking plainly, the woman pointed to the documents spread out on the extravagant table. A short tapping sound continued.

"You don't actually believe those were the only Kiharas in existence, do you?"

"…In that case, while I'm scared, it would only have the opposite effect," managed the old man, rallying what little courage he had. "If Academy City has more than that, it would be beyond our predictions. It would be a threat to the world itself! If we're to remain in good conscience, we must stand up to you. Especially after you showed us something like that!"

"My, my." The woman in the suit sighed and put a hand to

her forehead, shaking her head. “You have it backward.”

“What…?”

“What do you think the Kiharas *are* anyway? I hope you don’t have some cliché idea of them being an Academy City elite force.”

The woman used her index finger to push several pieces of paper out of the way, exposing one sheet in particular. She explained part of what was written on it.

“They’re a type of by-product. They are executors who appear in a pure field of science when one wishes to use that field for evil. And at present, Academy City has almost all the world’s cutting-edge technology. Kiharas gather there. We gather them—and we supervise them. However…”

“No… That can’t…”

“However, if Academy City’s overconcentration is broken and that science disseminates, then Kiharas will spring up all over the world, too. For now, they’re bound by a common bloodline, but there’s nothing saying they need to be. Simply put, if your Anti–Academy City Science Guardians grow and prosper, then the world will be filled with both science and technology *and* the Kiharas. Plus, Academy City wouldn’t be able to control *them*.”

One such example was easy to understand.

One of the Kiharas, those nonconformists who had appeared here in Baggage City, was working for Gremlin and went by the name Bersi—Kagun Kihara.

Perhaps the fact that he had joined Gremlin meant the organization had created an environment in which they could utilize science and technology.

But that might not have been all it was.

Maybe it was precisely because Gremlin wanted to reinforce their sorcery using science and technology that Kagun Kihara had been fated to join them at all.

“Now then, sir. Regarding the Anti–Academy Science Guardians and their pretense of zero tolerance for Academy City’s tyranny. Are you are prepared to follow through with

your ideals, even if it means flooding the world with Kiharas?”

The woman held out a piece of paper. A contract with simple contents.

With a simple signature, the old man’s fight would come to an end.

In defeat, of course.

Or rather, this was just a ritual to let them know that they had lost long ago.

“…You’re…,” managed the old man, holding his ballpoint pen in a trembling hand. “You speak of the Kiharas so lightly. Who are you?”

In response, the woman gave a thin smile. She grabbed the white coat hanging, folded up, on the back of her chair, spread it out, and put it on. It wasn’t a regular coat. It was a scientist’s lab coat.

“I’m a Kihara myself. Yuiitsu Kihara. Someone fated to appear for as long as humanity uses science.”

The woman, who had written off losing four Kiharas as a reasonable sacrifice, took the piece of paper and left Baggage City.

It all happened so easily—almost like she was making a little fence on a Sunday to keep her dog from getting out of the yard.

That marked the end of the disturbance.

AFTERWORD

Hello again to those buying one at a time and pleased to meet you to those who bought them all at once.

I'm Kazuma Kamachi.

Volume 4! With the main story this time being what it is, I removed the usual chaptering scheme. I used this gimmick to keep you guessing about what would happen next and who was going to live or die, as well as to incorporate the discussion on "rules" revealed in the last part into the structure of the entire narrative.

The theme this time around has to do with the relationship between micro and macro, but without proper chapters, I wouldn't be able to talk about anything if I tried to comment on much smaller episodes one at a time. So as a departure from the norm, I'd like to talk about the major characters. By telling you more about the characters driving the story, I hope to be able to summarize this story.

Ransuu Kihara.

A scientist of chemical substances that affect the brain. I created this character when I thought about what sort of technology would be needed to make a Five Over based on Number Five.

While the techniques he uses are themselves tricky, I think he's an easy-to-understand character, since on an internal level, he's the most standard among the Kiharas that appeared in this volume. His ranking within the clan is probably middling,

skewed toward the lower end. If you look at him as someone who had gotten his ideas from watching sports festivals around the world, you should be able to understand what his Kihara quality is.

In the main story, he used an extremely realistic illusion, but he's primarily a specialist at manipulating certain emotions. For example, he might restrict a target's range of activity with a command like "For some reason, that doorknob is weirdly terrifying, so you can't exit the room," then finish them off with a knife.

In his own words, realistic illusions are for his own amusement, since taking control over someone that quickly would be too boring.

…Of course, as a result, he ended up clashing with an enemy who used a similar power, then got trapped in an illusory loop, just like mirrors facing each other.

Enshuu Kihara.

The failure of the Kihara clan—or so she seems at first, but her intelligence alone is enough to put her in the top rankers. There's one scene where every single one of the monitors around her starts displaying graphs, and that's because the smartphone hanging from her neck hacked into them semiautomatically.

My original idea was to have a Kihara AI, but I wasn't sure about using an AI that could speak perfectly like a human, so I changed things around. (Though in this world, a microorganism on Mars would probably talk to you in Japanese…) If I wanted to make someone who thought like a human, I figured I may as well just use a human. At a glance, it might seem like a human using a program, but if you're a girl who's *not* on Enshuu's level, the program would end up guiding the human—just like how there are people in real life who overuse weight-tracking apps and astrology websites. When all's said and done, I suppose it's like a cursed item.

As a side note, my ultimate impression of Enshuu ended up

being something like “a normally plain girl who borrows the Kiharas’ power to do a wonderful transformation”!

Byouri Kihara.

She gets called Auntie a lot—*obasan* in Japanese—but the pajama lady isn’t actually that old. It makes me wonder what age *obasan* are in light novels these days. She’s a bewitching illness faker and a traditional Japanese transforming boss character. She loves the idea of being a strong enemy who seems to get killed, but then just when you breathe a sigh of relief, she gets you from behind, so her special trait is that she’s made several adjustments to her body to purposely make it seem like she gets defeated. That was why Kagun was so cautious of her. She used Number Two’s power in this book, but even if she didn’t have it, she probably would have made full use of her knowledge and technology as a Kihara to mess with her body anyway.

Because Byouri only assembles transformation stages assuming scientific attacks, though, a surprise attack from outside that realm nullifies her entire “transforming several times and getting stronger each time” thing.

Kagun Kihara.

The joker this time around. Originally, he wasn’t restricted just to near-death experiences. He wanted to remove all occult concepts from the matters of life and the soul and explain it all with science, ultimately reaching a conclusion that every person has life, and their positions or situations don’t change that life’s worth. (Out of all the Kiharas, his objective at least was an admirable one—but *only* his objective.) But when his experimentation produced a technology that could switch a person’s life on and off at a whim, he realized that if he kept going, even if the value of those people’s lives didn’t change, that value would end up fixed very low. And so he retired from the life of a scientist.

In his research days, he killed by far the most people out of

all the Kiharas, but since he also revived them all, he had an insane final tally of zero kills.

Through and through, a kind teacher advancing straight on a path of revenge—he might seem like that, but when you think about it logically, even though it was to gain strength for his revenge, he *was* still involved in the Radiosonde Castle and Hawaii incidents. While we can assume he saved the spectators in Baggage City, he was also the one who put together the whole plan to begin with. His notion that the ends justify the means is actually a trait he mostly shares with the other Kiharas—in other words, the Kihara who unleashed himself to protect the children from the slasher lost the ability to control himself after that.

…Due in part to those circumstances, Maria Kumokawa decided that his final apology was directed at someone else, but in reality, it was directed at her *as well*. The teacher she'd spent so many years searching for was already nowhere to be found essentially.

Bersi.

I figured I'd treat him as a separate character. Because he has such an extreme defensive spell—nullifying only attacks that would normally kill someone instantly—he's a troublesome person whose every action ends up being dramatic, ignoring his own personality and preferences. If he had normal sensibilities, it probably would have destroyed his mind, but the research results from Bersi's past were working to his advantage in that respect.

For all that he can nullify fatal attacks, he also has a sword spell whose power grows with each attack he receives, so if his enemy launches a fierce assault on him, he starts using that spell—its power is limitless. Unlike Accelerator, it isn't a single instance of vector control, but rather, the attack power stays increased until he defeats his enemy or changes targets. He's quite literally the character who breaks power scaling.

But without that bonus, he can't actually do much, so he's

bad at ambushing enemies and using other unilateral attacks. That was why he used his clenched fist in the beginning, too. Which also gives a glimpse of his wish—a battle of attrition where both he and his target fall in the end.

As a side note, Ransuu Kihara and Utgardaloki, who got taken down pretty quickly in the beginning, would have otherwise been Bersi's natural enemies.

Utgardaloki.

A sorcerer and illusionist. Like Sigyn and Marianne, he doesn't normally participate in direct combat. The reason they're all in Baggage City at all should have become clear when their plans were revealed near the end of the story. In short, Gremlin didn't need people to win battles—they needed people to make subtle adjustments to the environment of Baggage City, battles included.

Gremlin didn't necessarily have to use Baggage City for their plans, but since the Anti–Academy City Science Guardians talked big about constructing a global standard for supernatural powers in place of Academy City's, they were oddly interested, and they ended up taking full advantage.

Sigyn.

Someone who was already defeated by the time the story began. Normally, she would not only have provided appropriate advice to allies but also given false advice to enemies so that they would destroy themselves.

She's not so much a sorcerer as she is a master debater, one very good at analyzing someone's logic and plugging the holes in it. Because her ability to plug holes in logic was one that worked with magic as well, she entered the "industry," if you can call it that.

Her position is incredibly irresponsible—she only gives advice, and only when it works out for the other person does she want to take the credit. Because she's defended that position for a long time, even if it doesn't turn out like that in the end,

she has almost no sense of camaraderie and very little resistance to betraying people. It's almost a mystery that Marianne, who I'll talk about next, *didn't* turn her into a chair or a table.

Marianne Sringeneier.

The human modification maniac, the root cause, the one who got way bloodier as the story went on—that's how she may have seemed, but as you might have guessed from how Dáinsleif showed up at the very end, she didn't originally specialize in the field of anatomy.

It's touched on in the story as well, but her human modifications have strategic value, sapping enemy morale by altering soldiers into intentionally grotesque shapes.

She can modify nonhuman objects, too, and even when modifying people, she could still make them beautiful instead. The general rule is that if she just needs a tool, she could use minerals, and if she wanted to give something missile-like calculation functions, she could use life.

…That said, her sensibilities mean she *also* finds solace in using that table and chair, so if she were to make a beautiful man or woman, I get the feeling they would come out looking incredibly ridiculous.

Many of you probably read the explanation for Dáinsleif and thought, *How does it have that much power if it's just using whatever's around?!* But if you can freely make a Soul Arm with power like Stiyl talks about in the main character's short story, for example, I turned the wheel toward *having* to do at least that much or else it won't maintain its balance. Incidentally, Dáinsleif—unlike Gungnir, which was talked about in another story—is actually meant to be used by a human king in the original legends. That means she doesn't need a connection spell a god would need for using a god's weapon or considerations like Mjölnir, a weapon of the gods itself.

Despite all the human modifications Marianne does, she gets quite out of sorts from one of her companions, Bersi, dying.

That said, though, will Bersi's "end" really be something that helps her…?

Saflee Opendays.

The plainest contestant in the Natural Selector martial arts tournament. She uses simple mixed martial arts. Ever since Academy City–made esper powers become the stars of one-on-one combat, though, martial arts as a whole have been in a depression (people watch martial arts for entertainment during events such as the Daihasei Festival), so Saflee came to Baggage City simply to look for a sponsor.

Her goal wasn't to win the Natural Selector tournament, just to stand out enough among all the people with supernatural powers so that some rich company or investor would scout her. Because of that, as the fighting evolved from official tournament matches to street fights to an outright war between science and magic, she wasn't bothered at all.

As you might have guessed from her bent toward finding the thrill in destruction, perhaps in her normal line of work, she's always looking to put on a show.

Shuri Oumi.

She looks ten but only because she's borrowing the power of things like botulinum toxin. She's actually over thirty. Her attributes are all over the place—she's a cheerleader, carries a schoolbag, and is a ninja who uses a garden spade as her main weapon. These are all conscious efforts on her part to stand out and draw the enemy's attention… But once again, I feel I should apologize to the illustrator. If you got such a messy explanation and actually turned that into a messy image, it would affect your dignity—but if you made the design too unified, it would be a departure from the text. It was probably a super-difficult request to fulfill.

Normally, ninja would use low-ranking (read: disposable) *genin* as decoys while the leaders, the *jonin*, safely take all the credit. (Which is how the leaders always survive and

accumulate feats and exploits, thus keeping them in their position.) But not only does Shuri completely destroy that standard theory, she even pulls off the amazing feat of not being disposable and actually making it out alive.

Her essence should be one that places great weight on protecting her comrades and subordinates, then, but by the time she first appears, her whole squad has already been wiped out, and she's started running amok contrary to her usual way of thinking.

…Speaking of the Koga. They exist in Academy City's underworld, too, but their goals are very different. It should show that there are multiple factions of the Koga.

Maria Kumokawa.

Among all the fresh blood, illusions, human modifications, a falsely youthful ninja, biological weapons, a transforming boss, a negative-twenty-degree winter, and a hellscape where everyone is doing whatever they want, she's a precious breath of fresh air and the little sister of the Kumokawas, a service industry panty-flash type. My image of her martial arts was a combination of things like capoeira, breaking, and ballroom dancing, and while that wasn't depicted too much in the narration, her skirt would definitely have been in an interesting state the whole time. The hellishness of the main story could completely change depending on how many illustrations she was in! …Then again, illustrating this girl probably would have been *super* tough. In terms of a sense of energy or movement of weight.

Her ability is called Storm Axle, which allows her to change the centrifugal force produced by her body anywhere from 0.5 times to 2 times. It's a Level Two ability. Because it's so fundamental to all martial arts, it makes them all more powerful. But her bones and muscles don't get any stronger, so it has a downside: She would break her own bones if she *really* punched someone.

Despite all the big talk she does, she doesn't actually end up

doing that much. But the same could be said of her older sister Seria—they both have that kind of characteristic. Looking at the implication in *NT*, Volume 2, of not being able to stop the twenty thousand clones from dying even though they knew about it should give an idea of the sisters' positions.

Touma Kamijou.

As you all know, he's the main character and the safe zone. But since one of the themes of this book was to destroy the rule of him being able to save every ally just from being present, the key word *Touma Kamijou* was misused in a variety of ways. Even in the story, that alone gave more weight to the name.

But I think the boy who appeared in the last section of the book vividly showed how he's different from the Touma Kamijou of the past. Going back to the usual chaptering scheme for only that part, too, was a meta trick to show how the cold rules dominating the world until then had just switched to something else.

…Of course, even more serious damage was waiting for him after that.

I purposely won't comment on the "damaging" character, the boss character who so dramatically appeared. When a series like this goes on, it's best to hold important characters like her in reserve lest I run out of them.

I want to thank my illustrator, Haimura, and my editor, Miki. It must have been pretty tough to decide where to depict the before and after of the gimmicks with the limited pages we had. Maybe they held their heads in their hands and groaned when they saw the needlessly high-cost idea of having an RPG-like transforming boss. Really, thank you so much for this.

And I'd like to thank all of you reading this, too. Since the idea of breaking safe zones can break the very pillars of the

series if done incorrectly, it's a difficult issue—I can't easily execute it even though this is a problem that comes up whenever a series goes this long. I want to thank you all for giving me the courage to take on the challenge.

Now then, as you close the pages,
and as I pray you will open the pages again next time,
here and now, I lay down my pen.

A Valkyrie showed up, but don't worry, she'll be fully explained in the main story.

Kazuma Kamachi

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